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Imag(in)ing 'homeless places': using auto-photography to (re)examine the geographies of homelessness

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Despite its growing popularity as a method across the social sciences, the methodological literature on auto-photography is remarkably sparse. In an effort to begin redressing this gap, this paper provides an account of the ways in which auto-photography was used to complement other research methods in a (re)examination of the geographies of homelessness. It describes how auto-photography illuminated 'hidden' spaces that do not typically feature in public (or academic) imaginations of homelessness, and provided more nuanced understandings of the use, meanings and dynamics associated with other, apparently already 'known' spaces. It concludes that whilst auto-photography presents a number of logistical and ethical challenges – particularly when used with such a vulnerable group – it is nevertheless a powerful heuristic tool.

Key words: *homelessness, auto-photography, research methods, methodology, visual methods*

Introduction

A significant amount of research has been devoted to the ways in which homeless[1] people utilise public space. This literature typically portrays the city as a continuum of social spaces ranging from 'purified' locations that actively utilise legislation and urban design to exclude homeless people at one extreme (Amster 2003; Davis 1992; Mitchell 1997), to the service-rich 'ghetto' that offers a space specifically 'for', but arguably also serves as a space for the containment of, homeless people at the other (Dear and Wolch 1987; Dear *et al.* 1994; Rowe and Wolch 1990; Ruddick 1996). Such research documents the range of strategies used to control and contain homeless people, and the tactics homeless people themselves adopt to survive in such environments; for example, by minimising their visibility so as to avoid attracting the attention of those who might potentially expel them from particular settings (see, for example, Duncan 1983; Knowles 2000; Wardhaugh 2000). A parallel body of work explores the experiences of homeless people in the more (quasi) private service environments of hostels (Baker 2001; Garside *et al.* 1990; Ham 1996; Neale 1997), day centres (Llewellin and Murdoch 1996; Waters 1992), and other forms of temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast hotels (Carter 1995; KCHP 2002). Such work provides detailed accounts of the services offered to homeless people in such environments, the meanings and identities ascribed to them, and homeless people's views of the quality, safety, 'homeliness' and so on of each setting.

This paper argues that the use of auto-photography – that is, photography conducted by research participants themselves (Ziller 1990) – complements (or arguably has power over) other (more orthodox)

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research methods by providing additional and more nuanced insights into homeless people's use of these, and other, spaces. In doing so it goes some way in responding to Thrift's (2000) earlier critique of (cultural) geography's methodological conservatism and unwillingness to move beyond the canonical methods of in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation (see also Latham 2003).

The paper comprises four parts. The opening section provides a brief overview of how auto-photography has been used within (and beyond) geography, before describing its use as part of an investigation of the geographies of homeless people's everyday lives in two English cities. Part three offers an overview of the spaces portrayed by homeless people participating in the exercise, highlighting the ways in which the use of auto-photography augmented analysis. The paper closes with a discussion of some of the logistical challenges and ethical considerations that are likely to be encountered by those seeking to use this method.

Introducing auto-photography as research method

Auto-photography – sometimes also referred to as 'self-directed photography' – is an increasingly popular research method in the social sciences. The documentary ethnographer Sol Worth has been credited as its pioneer (Ziller 1990) after asking a group of Navajo Indians to film and edit images depicting who they were and how they saw themselves (Worth and Adair 1972). Ziller and colleagues subsequently used instamatic cameras to explore aspects of self-identity and orientation (Ziller 1990; Ziller and Rorer 1985; Ziller *et al.* 1989), and constructions of the self remain the predominant focus of auto-photographic research within psychology (particularly identity and self-esteem studies) (see, for example, Campos Monteiro and Dollinger 1998; Dollinger 2001; Dollinger and Clancy 1993; Dollinger *et al.* 1996; Noland 2006). Geographers and academics in related disciplines have however begun to realise the method's potential utility in examining how participants understand and interpret the world and their place within it. Examples include investigations of the interactions between children or young people and the urban environment (Aitken and Wingate 1993; Dodman 2003), cultural constructions of the home (Ellis 2003) and, closer to the topic of interest here, the survival tactics employed by homeless people and their relationships to the domiciled public (Radley *et al.* 2005). Despite its growing popularity, however, the literature dealing specifically with visual data generated through auto-photography is surprisingly sparse (Ellis 2003; Noland 2006), at least when compared with the burgeoning literature on visual methodologies more generally (see, for example, Banks 2001; Crang 2003; Emmison and Smith 2000; Holliday 2000; Pink 2001; Rose 1996 2001).

The escalating use of auto-photography derives in part from acknowledgement of the ways in which the language used by researchers in interviews and questionnaires creates frames within which knowledge is realised (Walker 1993), and the desire to avoid influencing the structure and content of narratives in ways that could potentially impinge upon the breadth and depth (or 'quality') of data collected. Its increasing popularity is also motivated by dissatisfaction with a continued reliance on researcher-generated images – which, in the case of studies of 'exotic' or vulnerable 'others' have been accused of perpetuating negative stereotypes (Crang 1997; Madden 2003) – and which, though often taken with certitude and technical skill, can too easily become:

> merely illustrative of the material culture that the academic finds of interest, rather than a consideration also of the practices of the researched that lead to particular framings of these representations. (Ellis 2003, 5)

The auto-photographic studies cited above are thus indicative of a move away from a reliance on 'perfect' images composed and recorded by researchers, toward approaches that place 'the researched' behind the camera. Such a move goes some way at least in challenging the unequal power relations between researcher and 'researched' that have been so prominent a feature of methdological debate in recent years, especially in the field of visual methodologies (Rose 2001; see also Cook and Crang 1995), and towards a situation where the comparatively 'powerless' are able to construct and articulate the meanings ascribed to images of their own production.[2] Used in such a way, photographs act as tangible resources helping research participants tell a narrative about themselves (and their everyday geographies) that retains a concrete sense of social and personal context (Latham 2003 2004).

Logistically, auto-photography has been conducted in a wide variety of ways – perhaps due to the dearth of literature regarding the various means of eliciting, interpreting and reporting such data. Sometimes participants are given quite specific

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instructions regarding the purposes of the exercise and the kinds of photographs to take; at other times instructions are (intentionally) more vague (compare, for example, Aitken and Wingate 1993; Radley *et al.* 2005). In some studies the data 'output' is confined to the photographs alone. In others, photographers are asked to provide written captions for each picture and/or take part in a face-to-face interview held either before or after the photographs are taken (see, for example, Dodman 2003; Ellis 2003; Latham 2003 2004; Noland 2006; Radley *et al.* 2005).

The most fundamental difference in auto-photography approaches, however, lies in how the data are analysed and interpreted. This is sometimes limited to content analysis – that is, the coding of objects, places, people and symbols captured on film, and the quantitative assessment (usually presented as frequencies) of what is depicted and by whom (see, for example, Aitken and Wingate 1993; also Collier and Collier 1986; Dollinger 2001; Ziller 1990). Approaches based purely on content analysis fail to take into account the meanings invested in different spaces by photographers (Cook and Crang 1995) – leading other researchers to place far more emphasis on the narratives of participants that may accompany their photographs (see, for example, Ellis 2003; Latham 2003 2004; Radley *et al.* 2005). Recent years have also witnessed the increasing recognition of what various 'picturing practices' (Crang 1997) – that is, the socially embedded practices involved in image production (Rose 2001) – may reveal about photographers' relationships to the people and places portrayed in their images. In this vein, Chalfen (1987) explains that the 'kodak culture' endemic to amateur 'snapshot' photography promotes the visual display of 'proper' and 'expected' behaviour, and participation in socially approved activities (and, one might add, occupation of 'acceptable' spaces). Societal norms shape the ways in which people want themselves and their lifestyles to 'be seen', and thereby influence the selection and framing of images for particular audiences. This being so, some of the photographers in Ellis' (2003) examination of cultural constructions of the home, for example, confessed to tidying some rooms, or omitting others altogether when putting together their portfolios, due to concerns about making public the 'messy' realities of their private domestic spaces.

In summary, in contrast to many other visual research methods, when analysed qualitatively auto-photography brings the intentionality of the author to the fore – enabling presentation of spaces that are important to *them*, and explicitly providing room for accounts of whether *they* consider them to be dangerous, mundane, 'homely', therapeutic (or whatever), without having content and meanings imposed by the researcher. To some degree at least, the photographer may also exert greater influence over the *consumption* of images by audiences. Certainly, a researcher's (and other audiences') overall interpretation of the images will inevitably be shaped by their own knowledge and position, but auto-photography ensures that the places of significance to photographers are not omitted from analysis due to a researcher's preconceived notions of what these might include, and that photographers have a tangible opportunity to describe their perceptions of those spaces. Similarly, consideration of the *production* of images, or 'picturing practices' (Crang 1997) exercised by participants – such as why they elected not to capture images of particular spaces and/or why they chose to frame others in the way they did – provides further insight into the construction and dynamics of place.

'Doing' auto-photography: (re)examining the geographies of homelessness

Auto-photography was employed as one (small) component of an extensive project examining the experiences of homeless people in seven different towns and cities across England.[3] Within this broader project 17 homeless people in two of the case study areas (one metropolitan city and one seaside town) participated in the auto-photography exercise.[4] All the participants self-identified as white British, eight were female and nine male, with ages ranging between 20 and 53 years. At the time of participation, eight were living in a homeless hostel, three in a bed and breakfast hotel, one was staying temporarily with relatives, one was living in a tent, and one was sleeping rough. The remaining three had very recently been rehoused into more permanent accommodation by their local council, but these individuals, like the other participants, were still utilising the services of homeless support agencies.

Participants were only asked if they would like to take part in the auto-photography exercise after an in-depth interview that explored their homeless 'biography' (personal history and route into homelessness) and experiences of service settings in different towns and cities. If they were willing to do so, they were given a disposable (flash-enabled) camera and, if necessary, a simple lesson in its

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operation. They were then simply asked to carry it with them for one week and to take pictures of the places that they utilised in daily life and/or that were in some way important to them. The individuals involved adopted very different approaches to this exercise – reflecting varying degrees of interest in, or concern regarding, the way the resultant images would or should be consumed by the research team and other potential audiences. Some compiled a photographic diary of places and people they encountered during the course of the week: sometimes in a relatively spontaneous manner, sometimes in a rather more reflexive or strategic way. Others invested a significant amount of thought in determining what to photograph – electing which aspects of their lives and places they would share with the research team – before venturing out on a pre-planned photographic mission.

Upon return of the cameras, two sets of photographs were developed – one for the photographers to keep, and one for the research team's records. As soon as possible thereafter, a member of the research team re-'interviewed' the photographers, discussing in detail each of the images generated. These discussions were relatively unstructured – and normally photographer-led – but the researchers prompted participants as appropriate to ensure that they had ascertained:

- where each photo was taken;
- what that place was used for, by whom and when;
- how photographers felt in that space (e.g. safe, intimidated, relaxed, 'at home' etc.); and
- how the use of that space was negotiated with other homeless people, members of the public, local retailers, the police and so on.

These conversations concluded with a discussion regarding why these particular images had been chosen, and whether there were any other places that participants could have photographed but did not and, if so, why this was, in order to learn how the 'picturing practices' employed by photographers might further inform analyses. All photographs were numbered, and the interview narratives accompanying them were transcribed in such a way that transcripts could be cross-referenced to the individual images referred to. More than 300 photographs were produced in total, accompanied by the transcribed interview narratives of the 17 participants.

As has been noted by others using this method, all the participants in this study reported that they had, without exception, enjoyed the experience (see also Bagnoli 2004; Dodman 2003; Radley *et al.* 2005). Many were appreciative of the opportunity to make a visual record of their lives at a time when the cost of a camera and photographic development would otherwise have been prohibitive. Most expressed pride in their work, and many spent significant amounts of time 'showing off' their photographs to other service users and staff within the homeless services.

The auto-photography exercise was not just a fun adjunct to the more conventional methods used in the study, however; and whilst forming a comparatively minor part of the research project overall in terms of the number of participants, its contributions to understandings of the geographies of homelessness were significant. The following section discusses what the choice and framing of images collected tells us about the geographies and identities of respondents, before outlining the new insights that auto-photography provided regarding the spaces utilised by homeless people on a day-to-day basis.

Auto-photographic insights: filmic representations of homeless spaces and places

Everyday geographies and presentations of the self: the choice and framing of spaces

Notably, the vast majority of images constructed by participants depicted spaces used for 'everyday' activities, such as sleeping (e.g. hostels, squats or rough sleeping sites), eating (e.g. soup kitchens), bathing (e.g. public bathrooms), earning (e.g. begging 'pitches' or *Big Issue* street magazine vending sites), and socialising (e.g. day centres or street drinking sites). The auto-photography exercise thus emphasised that the day-to-day needs and activities (subsistence, ablutions, socialising and sustaining themselves financially) of homeless people were, in many ways, no different to those of the housed public. Indeed, in selecting what to photograph, participants (intentionally and/or unintentionally) refuted what some considered to be a widespread stereotype that the homeless population is primarily comprised of (elderly and male) antisocial alcoholic 'vagrant-types'. In this way, they highlighted similarities between themselves and the wider public by, for example, emphasising that they enjoyed spending time with family and friends, and shared the pain of other parents separated from their children through relationship breakdown. In one particularly poignant case, a participant had

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Plate 1 Photographer: John

photographed a Father's Day card from his daughter, and in the subsequent interview described how much he missed her and how this card had helped him maintain hope that he would, one day soon, be able to re-establish contact with his children.

Although highlighting the similarities between themselves and the housed public, many homeless photographers also drew attention to differences between the spaces within which many of their day-to-day activities take place and the spaces utilised by members of the housed public. Thus they frequently described in detail the volatile atmosphere in some hostels and day centres, and/or the dirty, dangerous and often cold environments in which they slept. For example, when discussing Plate 1, John explained that he preferred to seek safety in numbers with a group of other rough sleepers in a car park than sleep alone and/or in a more public place, either of which would place him at greater risk of attack:

> Everyone sleeps there [pointing] or at the end of this little bit down by these stairwells here [pointing] . . . That was the best place to be in. It's underground. That's where everybody goes. Safety in numbers.

Many of the photographs included people – participants themselves, other homeless people, support service staff, and/or members of the public. Plate 2[5] – a street drinking site favoured by Gareth because it was sheltered from inclement weather, enforcement agents' fields of vision, and the 'condescending' views of the public – is a case in point:

> It's like a cul-de-sac with a brick wall around. We drink around here and no-one upsets us 'cause we don't bother the public and this that and the other . . . We're out of the way of the [closed circuit television] camera . . . Nobody bothers us whatsoever so we're happy to sit there.

The frequent inclusion of people within photographs stands in stark contrast to those taken by the (housed) participants in Ellis' (2003) study of cultural constructions of the home – who almost exclusively took photographs of pristine 'unpeopled' (empty) rooms that only rarely showed traces of recent human activity (such as coffee mugs or newspapers). Rather than distance their images from lived experience, most of the homeless photographers included people in at least some of their frames, but also used the photographs as tools to emphasise the effect that some of these spaces had on their everyday lived experiences – commonly drawing attention to detrimental effects on health, safety and feelings of self-worth. For example:

> That's X car park. I spent many a night in there. We used to stay on the third or top floor. There was a crowd of us. But the security people there used to wake us up at about five in the morning, 'get out', banging gates about and all that. It was freezing, bitter cold there. (James)

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Plate 2 Photographer: Gareth

> That's X . . . Four or five of us used to sleep there . . . We used to get a lot of drunks come through, throwing abuse and chucking bottles and stones and all that. (Nick)

> This is what happens if you get off the street and move into the X [hostel]. A room, six by twelve . . . You've just got a light, a bed, and four walls. You're not allowed to put pictures up. You're not allowed to do anything! So technically you'd be better off going to prison. I mean it's a six by twelve room . . . 'Here's your room, get in your cell!' (Mike)

Rather than of everyday spaces, a small number of photographs were taken specifically to make a political point. Mike, for example, photographed statues recently placed in his city's civic centre which, he argued, represented irrefutable evidence that the council was using taxpayers' money inappropriately:

> This is where the council have built silly things like bronze statues to improve the city. These are projects the council has done to try and tidy the city up instead of addressing the *real* problem in the city itself – which is empty premises going derelict and people actually living on the streets.

In this way, some of the participants not only sought to challenge stereotypes by revealing what they and their lives were *really* like and by providing evidence of their (often dire) living circumstances, but also drew attention to the inequities of current urban developments in the hope that it might mobilise policymakers and funding bodies (as potential audiences) to improve their situation.

Omissions from the collections were also telling. For example, two of the participants apologised for having failed to take photographs of particular spaces (a squat and rough sleeping site), for fear that doing so might potentially make public the 'secret' spaces used by, and hence anger, other homeless people (see Cloke *et al.* in press). In a similar vein, given his recent successful detox and attempt to remain 'clean', James explained that he had elected not to photograph some of his old haunts for fear of coming into contact with his former drug-using peers:

> [I avoided] the night shelter, a few squats that I know of where I stayed . . . [There's] people using. And they're good friends of mine as well, so the best thing I can do is keep away from them. I'll be tempted.

It is also interesting (although perhaps not surprising) that places associated with the purchase and consumption of alcohol (e.g. off-licence stores and street drinking haunts) commonly featured in photographs, whilst spaces associated with the acquisition and use of illegal drugs (notably, heroin or crack cocaine) did so only very rarely – despite the fact that a number of participants were addicted to both. Absence of the latter speaks not only of

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Plate 3 Photographer: Stewart

their illegality, but also of the stigma and 'deviance' associated with such substances.

Thus, the choice and framing of images, or 'picturing practices' (Crang 1997), of the photographers reveals a lot about the identities of homeless people, and the similarities and differences between their day-to-day geographies and those of the general (housed) public. The following sections outline how a reading of the content of, and narratives accompanying, photographs of particular spaces – some new to academic accounts of homelessness, some apparently already 'known' – can tell us more about the geographies of homeless people's day-to-day lives.

'New' spaces of homelessness

By putting homeless people behind the camera, the auto-photographic exercise provided important insights into a range of spaces that rarely feature in either academic or policy discussions of homelessness. For example, very little is known by academics or homelessness practitioners about squatting,[6] but photographs taken of squats previously occupied by our photographers – such as that depicted in Plate 3 – commonly led to in-depth conversations about the reasons for squatting and the cultural dynamics associated with the occupation of these settings. Ben and Matt, for example, described conflicts arising from (housed) heroin addicts' appropriation of their squat during the daytime as follows:

> Ben: Some users . . . just go in the squats where they know damn well people need to sleep there, right, and they chuck their pins all over . . . They chuck it on the floor 'cos they think, 'Oh, it's just a disused building, chuck it'.
>
> Matt: They're not bothered 'cos it's not their house or owt . . . 'cos they've got somewhere to live anyway at end of day, so they're not bothered.
>
> Ben: Whereas . . . we'll dispose of our equipment in a clean way.

Mike had photographed a homeless person's camping site, which had been destroyed by members of the public (Plate 4). In discussing this image, he emphasised the barriers facing homeless people as they tried to access hostel accommodation (particularly shortages of immediately accessible beds) and the fear many held of other potentially dangerous hostel residents, explaining that strategies such as 'camping' were not infrequently preferred to hostel accommodation. As a tent 'resident' himself, Mike went on to give a detailed account of the tactics used to minimise the likelihood of his encampment being seen by the public, and of his endeavours to ensure he did not leave an imprint on the landscape when moving elsewhere (see Cloke *et al.* in press).

Given both its absence in the existing homelessness literature, and that those using tents tended to

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Plate 4 Photographer: Mike

see themselves as quite distinct from other 'rough sleepers', explorations of 'camping' would not necessarily have been included in interviews structured around a discussion of emergency accommodation options or people's experiences of street homelessness. Further, even if discussions of squatting and camping had emerged in interview, it would not have been appropriate for members of the research team to access such spaces directly in the normal course of participant observation: both because of the potential danger inherent in doing so, and the significant risk of transgressing the privacy ascribed to these spaces by the individuals living there (see Ruddick 1996). The auto-photography follow-up interviews thus gave important insight into the dynamics associated with the occupation (or appropriation) of spaces previously unreported by academics, their day-to-day governance and 'place' within the contours of charity, (in)tolerance and fear that characterise the homeless city.

Re-examining 'known' spaces of homelessness

The auto-photography exercise also cast new light on spaces of homelessness that already feature in the homelessness literature, providing participants with an opportunity to reflect upon the 'taken for granted' aspects of their lives (Latham 2003) in these apparently already 'known' spaces of homelessness. For example, photographs of rough sleeping (or 'skippering') sites promoted in-depth discussions about an unwritten code of conduct associated with the use of these spaces, particularly the tactics employed to ensure that the goodwill of premises owners or managers was not transgressed – as Jane explained of one particular car park:

> the staff are lovely in there, they're real nice. They tell us where to sleep and where to put your stuff. But only if you've got their respect and you keep the place tidy. I always instigate a tidy up where we've stayed. I won't let people leave a mess.

Similarly, whilst there already exists a relatively extensive literature on begging – focusing mainly on the characteristics of people who beg and public responses to begging (see, for example, Dean 1999; Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2000 2001) – far less is known about the spatial politics of begging encounters (although see Duneier and Molotch 1999). Yet, with the aid of photographs such as that depicted in Plate 5, the auto-photography exercise revealed the complexities surrounding the choice of begging sites – choices that required people to position themselves strategically so as to optimise earnings but also minimise risks to their personal safety and the likelihood of being moved on or arrested by police. Thus, whilst Rob preferred to beg outside a club late at night because the compassionate impulses of 'punters' were apparently lubricated by alcohol –

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Plate 5 Photographer: Rob

'when they've had a bit to drink they become a little bit more generous' – Jane explained that she would never beg in certain places at night because of the presence of 'lager louts':

> I don't beg on this street. Because there's lager louts. This is lager lout territory. That's why I don't go there . . . because I just get the piss taken out of me *mercilessly* in this area . . . Young members of the public in particular. They give me a lot of grief.

As with rough sleeping, an established begging 'etiquette' was also described by many photographers, who emphasised the importance of being polite to punters and the proprietors of nearby businesses at all times – even if these members of the public insulted or abused them – as Rob explained:

> Everyone down at X knows me. If you treat them with respect then, you know, you get the same respect back. I'm always polite, and I always clean up after myself.

Discussions regarding 'pitch politics' also revealed that some individuals had a greater claim on the more lucrative sites than did others, and that the right to 'work' these had to be defended – by violent means if necessary – particularly when competition for custom was heightened:

> I had to defend [my pitch] a few times. The X [row of bars] is quite long and normally from the beginning to the bridge there's normally only three begging spots. But at Christmas and New Year's you'll have seven people begging. (Mark)

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In a similar vein, whilst the existing homelessness literature documents the difficulties that homeless people frequently encounter when trying to find safe and warm spaces to sleep or 'hang out' when they have nowhere to call their own (see, for example, Knowles 2000; Wardhaugh 2000), the auto-photography exercise illuminated very clearly the inequality of access to such spaces. For example, several participants who had slept rough reported spending time in train stations or shopping malls when local day centres were closed, and emphasised that attempts to do so involved careful attempts to look and act 'normal' when entering and exiting premises so as to avoid being ejected from such facilities by security staff. In contrast, 'acting normal' was particularly problematic for night shelter residents who had to carry their belongings with them during the daytime,[7] and who thus tended to find themselves subject to the suspicious scrutiny of security staff and, sometimes, the humiliation of having their bags searched publicly:

> I was . . . stopped by a police officer . . . just because I had a carrier bag on me, like, you know . . . there's nothing more embarrassing than being stopped and searched in the middle of town, especially for no reason. People walking past and staring at you, they would just draw the wrong conclusions wouldn't they? (Sam)

The 'acceptability' of homeless people in such environs is based on their aesthetic appearance and behaviour, both of which are also closely related to the biophysical effects of, and cultures associated with, different forms of substance misuse (see Emmett and Nice 2006; Mental Health Foundation 1996; Segal 1991; Tyler 1995). Consequently, whilst those with no substance misuse problems were usually able to 'blend into' the crowd in places such as train stations, shopping malls and public libraries, this was not easy for individuals with serious drug and/or alcohol addictions whose presence is significantly more likely to appear 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996) and potentially lead to expulsion by security staff. As the accounts of the photographers make plain, the contours of control and containment are highly uneven – as different homeless people are more or less able to make a 'home' for themselves on the streets and in the quasi-public spaces of the city.

Logistical challenges and ethical considerations

Though our examples are necessarily brief, the previous sections illustrate how the use of auto-photography can add to understandings of the geographies of homelessness, illuminating new aspects of those geographies and providing additional insights regarding aspects of those geographies that are apparently already known. Yet the method also poses significant logistical challenges and can raise difficult ethical questions. Because rarely dealt with in the more general literature on visual methodologies it is useful to consider some of these in more detail.

First, auto-photography proved to be a very *resource-intensive* method. For street homeless people, and those with a drug or alcohol addiction in particular, the need to find somewhere safe to sleep, eat and/or feed a 'habit' inevitably outweighs any desire to complete such research exercises, regardless of the genuineness of their intentions at outset. Indeed, there were many opportunities for things to go 'wrong' during the exercise reported here. Most obviously, several participants failed to return their cameras[8] and arranging follow-up interviews was often extremely difficult. Some participants were very apologetic in explaining that their camera had been lost or stolen (and it is not unrealistic to assume that some may have been sold). But it was not just the cameras that went 'missing in action'. Life on the street is dangerous and unpredictable (Ballantyne 1999). Accordingly, a small number of our participants disappeared from the local street scene before completing the exercise and were not seen again by other homeless people or street outreach workers during the course of our fieldwork.[9]

Inevitably, vast amounts of time were spent following up participants wherever possible, and whilst the assistance of supportive homeless service staff and the virtues of one-hour photo development centres[10] went a long way to avoid the potential pitfalls described above (as did the removal of packaging to minimise the likelihood of the cameras being 'flogged' (sold)), the 'failure' rate was nevertheless high. Though this should not deter researchers from utilising the method, it would be wise to avoid underestimating the resource intensiveness of such an exercise, especially when employed with vulnerable and/or 'chaotic' groups.

Second, auto-photography raises a number of difficult questions regarding participant *anonymity and the ownership of images*. In adhering to pre-agreed ethical protocols, we had determined that all (visual and verbal) contributions of research participants be anonymised, as is standard practice within

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much social science research (particularly that involving vulnerable people).[11] Yet, in (unconscious) challenge of the procedures usually requested by research ethics boards, a number of our photographers expressed disappointment that pseudonyms would be used to attribute authorship of images – arguing that they were proud of their work and would have liked public credit for it in publication. In addition to the question of naming, in auto-photography exercises one must also consider whether or not the faces of those depicted should be obscured, so as to secure the anonymity of those involved – whether the photographer themselves (if appearing in their own image) or of their subjects. Notwithstanding the question of why the authorship of images was apparently of more value to these participants than was the ownership of oral narratives, this inevitably raises the question of whether or not we as researchers were depriving photographers of image ownership – in its wider sense – unnecessarily, and perhaps unjustifiably.

Such issues are far from straightforward. Not least, adding to these ethical dilemmas are broader questions around the politics of representation. For example, a key aim of the project described here was that in providing homeless people with the power to describe 'their' city to 'us' (rather than have that city described for them, as is so often the case) the exercise might also start to close the gap between the 'homeless Other' and wider publics, insofar as readers might see in homeless people's accounts of the city shared rather than radically Other understandings and experiences (of joy and pain, love and fear, for example) (see also Cloke *et al.* in press). Though the more personal accounts of homelessness outlined here may, we hope, go some way towards achieving this aim, it sits awkwardly with the images themselves, in which the pixelated features of the homeless people depicted lends them a decidedly 'Other worldly' or 'alien' air – and hence perhaps reinforces rather than closes the gap between readers and subjects.

Despite such issues we have nonetheless abided by our original 'assurance' of (or, more accurately perhaps, adhered to our ethically motivated 'insistence' upon) anonymity: using pseudonyms and obscuring the faces of all those portrayed (both the photographers themselves and others). Our reasons for doing so (aside from the obvious imperative of retaining researcher integrity) are twofold. First, revealing the real identities of homeless people (even with their permission) is fraught with difficulties – especially where participants have a drug or alcohol addiction. Indeed, it may be that one needs to question the 'legitimacy' of informed consent altogether when substance abuse leading to disinhibition is involved (Emmett and Nice 2006; Tyler 1995) and, in cases of severe and sustained addiction, may even have led to neurological dysfunction (Bonner 2006; Lehman *et al.* 1993; Spence *et al.* 2004). There is also the potential that some respondents may want to disassociate themselves from their 'homeless past' once more integrated into 'mainstream' society. Certainly, a few were reluctant to talk about particular aspects of their personal history when interviewed – such that there remains a chance that they might not want public visual reminders of their life on the streets in years to come. Second, many photographs included images of photographers' friends, family, members of the public, support staff, or other homeless people. Photographers had been asked to explain the purposes of the research exercise and to seek the permission of other people before including them in the frame of any shot, and many were very clearly posed (see, for example, Plates 2 and 5). Yet one cannot be entirely certain that all those depicted would in fact wish to be identifiable or indeed even (given the effect of alcohol or drugs on disinhibition described above) that all would, in other circumstances, have agreed to appear in the photographs at all. In fact, the content of some images (not shown) suggested that permission may not have been sought from the person(s) illustrated at all. For example, one very grainy shot showed a barely conscious elderly rough sleeper immediately before he was loaded onto an ambulance. Whilst he was almost entirely obscured by a blanket, it is possible that individuals with intimate knowledge of the homeless 'scene' in that city (such as street outreach workers or street community police officers, for example) may have been able to identify the individual concerned.

We do not claim to have any answers to these complex ethical and representational dilemmas. Our aim is instead simply to raise them so as to encourage further debate about best practice in the use of auto-photography, including the role of research ethics committees in striking an appropriate balance between the standard requirements of anonymity and the desire by some photographers (and their subjects) to be identifiable in published work. We would suggest, however, that whatever the answers to these questions are – whether people be identified or not – auto-photography remains a

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valuable tool even if the images produced are never shown. In the case of the elderly man noted above, for example, though ethical considerations dictate that images such as this are never published, the narratives associated with them still prove valuable, as evidenced by the photographer's insistence that the image provided evidence that some of the most vulnerable people on the street were continuing to slip through existing service networks.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the implications of exercises such as this for a photographer's *personal safety*. Just as it was noted above that a few participants had had their cameras stolen, we must be aware that giving 'floggable' items (even as seemingly insignificant as a disposable camera) to a homeless person could potentially make them a target for exploitative members of the street population or wider public. In addition, one participant was concerned that his actions might have been deemed suspicious by neighbouring residents when he took photos of derelict buildings that he had squatted in and, as reported earlier, others had chosen not to take photos in some spaces for fear of potential reprisals. These concerns highlight a clear need to discuss such issues with participants before they embark on any auto-photographic exercise – emphasising that researchers' concerns for a participant's safety far outweigh any desire for images of spaces in which they might feel threatened, and that they should always terminate the endeavour if they feel uncomfortable – just as researchers themselves would.

Conclusion

As used in our (re)examination of the geographies of homelessness, auto-photography proved to be a very time-consuming and resource-intensive research tool that presented a number of practical challenges – not least of which was supporting vulnerable participants in completing an exercise that had the potential to 'fail' at so many stages. Even so, the resultant insights provided mean that every day (and camera) invested was entirely worthwhile. The images generated provided new windows into the worlds of homeless people – offering access to spaces of homelessness previously unreported in the academic literature, and new insights into those apparently already 'known'. Most importantly perhaps, the exercise gave homeless people an opportunity to draw attention to what *they* considered the key similarities and differences between their geographies and those of the housed public, to outline in more detail *their* experiences of homelessness and, at times, to challenge other understandings of homelessness and of the homeless city.

It is unlikely that more than a small number of the photographs collated will ever adorn the pages of published documents. Indeed, the quality of many was too poor to ever be acceptable to publishers (in that they were too dark or grainy, for example), but their true value lies not just in the images presented *per se*, but in the accompanying narratives (regarding the use and meaning of the spaces) and in consideration of the 'picturing practices' that led to their construction in the first place. Far from merely providing illustrative material to augment conventional research methods, auto-photography is itself a powerful heuristic tool that can enhance understanding in new and nuanced ways.

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Notes

1 As used in this paper, the term 'homeless' is used to describe an individual who is sleeping rough or otherwise lacks settled accommodation. This therefore includes people in temporary or insecure forms of accommodation such as hostels, night shelters, bed and breakfast hotels or squats, as well as those staying temporarily with relatives or friends.

2 Such an approach (rightfully) acknowledges that homeless people are the 'authorities' on their geographies – but it would be naive to assume that the exercise celebrates empowerment through 'self-representation', as is sometimes thought (see Crang 1997).

3 Overall, this project involved in-depth interviews with more than 220 key informants, staff and service users in hostels, day centres and mobile food distribution services in seven towns and cities throughout England, as well as participant observation in a total of 18 services for homeless people (see Cloke *et al.* in press; Johnsen *et al.* 2005a 2005b; May *et al.* 2006 2007).

4 Several others began the exercise but failed to complete it for reasons discussed in detail later.

5 The rationale for obscuring the photographed individuals' faces is provided later in the paper.

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6 Although see the work of Reeve and Coward (2004).
7 Many night shelters close during the daytime, hence residents must carry their belongings with them throughout until the facility re-opens in the evening.
8 These individuals are not included in the total of 17 participants reported earlier.
9 Interviews with service providers indicated that it is not uncommon for homeless people to be admitted to hospital after being attacked on the street, arrested, or to have gone 'awol' after a dispute with another member of the street population (regarding monies owed for illicit street drugs, for example). Street outreach workers in particular frequently lose contact with clients (temporarily or permanently) for these, and other, reasons.
10 The research team did in fact establish a relationship with one local photo development store such that our cameras were 'fast-tracked' to expedite a researcher's return to a nearby day centre before opportunities for instantaneous follow-up interviews were lost.
11 Although there are exceptions – see, for example, Duneier (1999).

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