‘Near and Far’: Social Distancing in Domiciled Characterisations of Homeless People

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Abstract

For domiciled individuals, homeless people provide a disturbing reminder that all is not right with the world. Reactions to seeing homeless people frequently encompass repulsion, discomfort, sympathy and sometimes futility. This paper considers domiciled constructions of homeless people drawn from interviews with 16 participants recruited in the central business district of a New Zealand city. It documents how, when trying to make sense of this complex social problem, domiciled people draw on shared characterisations of homeless people. The concept of ‘social distance’ is used to interrogate the shifting and sometimes incongruous reactions evident in participant accounts. ‘Social distancing’ is conceptualised as a dynamic communal practice existing in interactions between human beings and reflected in the ways that domiciled people talk about their experiences with homeless individuals.

Introduction

Distances and tensions between human beings and how these are played out in particular urban spaces have perplexed geographers and psychologists for some time (Dixon and Durrheim, 2004; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Lees, 2004; Mitchell, 2003; Sibley, 1995, 2001). This paper applies insights from both disciplines in order to develop an understanding of the ways in which domiciled citizens characterise street homeless citizens...
(known in New Zealand as ‘streeties’). In doing so, we propose that social distance is more fluid and context sensitive than is typically reflected in research into cross-cultural relations (Frey and Powell, 2005; Triandis and Triandis, 1962), racial segregation (Rockquemore and Brunsma, 2001) and the functioning of social networks (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). It may be more accurate to talk about social distancing as an everyday practice, rather than social distance as a cognitive construct. The remainder of this introduction conceptualises social distancing, reconsiders the nature of domiciled accounts of homelessness, incorporates social and spatial dimensions of distance, and considers the implications of domiciled constructions for homeless people.

The concept of social distance has a long history in research into the ways in which individual preferences, based in a person’s membership of specific social in-groups, influence social relations with people from other out-groups (Bogardus, 1925; Lewin, 1936; Park, 1924). These judgements are often measured along a continuum with nearness, intimacy or familiarity at one end and farness, difference and unfamiliarity at the other end (Triandis and Triandis, 1962). Emory Bogardus was asked to create a scale for measuring social distance by Robert Park, who himself drew the concept from his own teacher Georg Simmel. For Simmel, social distance is the strength of the lack of intimacy and distance that people feel towards others from ethnic, occupational and religious groups different from their own. The concept derives from Simmel’s (1908/1921) work on ‘the stranger’: an ideal type of individual or group that is distanced socially from others, who is only partially a member of society and who often transgresses social conventions. The stranger is not there one day and gone the next, but remains in our midst. According to Simmel (1950, p. 402), “Distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near”. Strangers can come into contact with other groups, yet they are excluded from membership, so that they embody a “combination of the near and the far” (Park and Burgess, 1921; cited in Levine et al., 1976, p. 836). The stranger embodies social distance, their presence invoking a lack of involvement as well as a measure of indifference, even when such people are in close proximity to ‘us’. This description can be applied to many situations in which domiciled and homeless people meet together in the city.

The scale that Bogardus created has come to operationalise social distance in a somewhat rigid way for subsequent generations of scholars (Wark and Galliher, 2007). Triandis and Triandis propose that social distance constitutes that distance that is indicated by a person to exist, between himself [sic] and another person, by means of endorsement of certain statements. Minimal social distance would include endorsement of the statement, “I would like him as an intimate friend.” Progressively larger distances are implied by endorsement of, “I would like to go dancing with him (her)” ... “I would exclude him from my neighbourhood (Triandis and Triandis, 1962, p. 1).

As a form of Guttman scale, unidimensional and cumulative, this measure projected a linear view of how near or far a person believes any social group to be from their position in society. While this scale might be useful in providing a snapshot of a person’s social perspective at one time, the definition of social distance that it establishes is more limited than the one on which it was originally based. Despite the usefulness of this concept, the scale operationalises social distance as a static attitude held by individuals (Frey and Powell, 2005). This oversimplifies the complexity of human relationships involved in cross-group perceptions (Pahl and Spencer, 2004) and, as we will show, can gloss heterogeneity and movement within groups.
The original combination of the near and far in Simmel’s (1950) notion of social distance, when applied to the situation of a domiciled person meeting homeless people, suggests that we need to understand how the mutual presence of these different actors gives rise to varied responses and accounts. Domiciled individuals meet homeless people both as members of a group (for example, streeties) and as individuals, in places that are open to the public (for example, town squares) and in places that are more restricted (for example, libraries). The issue of the near and the far is to be understood not just as a psychological issue, but also as something that happens between people, in places, over time, with greater or lesser regularity. Prime public spaces in which domiciled and homeless people come into contact are not neutral. These spaces are products of contestation over rights to the city (Mitchell, 2003). Homeless bodies are often deemed to be out of place through the contestation of such spaces (Hodgetts et al., 2008). The experiences we have of particular others in such settings are socially produced (Lefebvre, 2000) and this is no truer of the experience that domiciled individuals have of homeless people.

Spatial and relational dimensions require us to reconsider some of the underlying philosophical assumptions embedded in contemporary social distance research. In particular, the social cognitive approach to social distance relies on a Cartesian mind–world dualism. This dualism contributes a focus on intrapsychic exchanges between individuals as ‘lonely knowers’ (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Central are splits between individuals and society, and individuals and objects and places ‘external’ to their own bodies. Contemporary social psychology has moved beyond the separation of mind and world because human thought involves much more than individual cognitive processes. People live somewhere and their very ideas are often based on shared norms, values and practices of their social groups and social spaces (Dixon and Durrheim, 2004; Hodgetts, Stolte et al., 2010). Ideas, social categories and experiences exist in language, physical actions and institutions such as mass media (Hodgetts, Drew et al., 2010). Such a shift in focus allows us to engage with material and spatially located social distancing events such as when a domiciled person crosses the street to avoid a homeless person.

This paper pays attention to places where participants meet and recognises that the overcoming of distance can be both a psychological and physical matter. A more emplaced approach to social distancing informs our exploration of spatially located bodies and encounters between local domiciled and homeless citizens. We note that, within the geography of everyday life, social distances are situated within dynamic social relations that enable domiciled people to manage their relationships with homeless people in their urban environments (de Certeau, 1984). From the perspective developed in this article, social distancing is one of many processes through which human beings make and conduct their lives, their relationships with others and their cities (Lefebvre, 2000). These constructions and associated daily practices take shape across both physical and representational spaces (Hodgetts et al., 2008).

This final point is important because homeless people are regularly subjected to public deliberations and featured in the representational spaces provided by media reports. The presence of homeless people on our screens and in our pages, often sparks further considerations regarding laws, policies and responses to the presence of homelessness in various physical settings (Forte, 2002; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Laurenson and Collins, 2007; Tompsett et al., 2006). Mediated public deliberations provide a symbolic backdrop for personal and institutional considerations of the place of homeless people in our midst (Williams, 2003) and contribute to social
climates that advance punitive measures to displace vagrants or efforts to ensure tolerance and social inclusion (Hodgetts et al., 2008). Research suggests that media coverage and public opinion regarding homelessness promote both proximity and dispersion in that they are mixed in terms of sympathetic and stigmatising depictions of homeless people (Hodgetts et al., 2005; Lee et al., 1991; Link et al., 1995; Tompsett et al., 2006; Williams, 2003). In general, public deliberations carry a polarising tendency where homeless people are often constructed as strange and unlike us or as people just like us who have suffered misfortune (Kingfisher, 2007; Schiff, 2003; Widdowfield, 2001). More sympathetic and less distant accounts arise when the degree of hardship and suffering endured by homeless people is acknowledged (Bunis et al., 1996; Hodgetts et al., 2005). Less sympathetic accounts arise when emphasis is placed on difference and the unease some domiciled citizens feel about sharing public spaces with homeless people (Mitchell, 2003; Hodgetts et al., 2008). Briefly, researchers have explored domiciled perceptions of homelessness (Williams, 2003), interactions between domiciled and homeless people (Duneier and Molotch, 1999) and contestations of public spaces between these groups (Mitchell, 2003). We extend such work through the use of the concept of social distancing.

The Present Study

This paper considers domiciled respondents’ views about homeless people, drawing attention to specific occasions on which they met. While the respondents have different degrees of what one might term ‘social distance’ from homeless people as a group, it is the way that they interpret and respond to these occasions—as experiences—that shape how close or far they feel from them. Degrees and kinds of experience have been shown to be important in people’s readiness to give to groups of needy people (charitable giving) (Radley and Kennedy, 1995). However, amongst our respondents, this was not a simple matter. Their experiences of meeting homeless people were partly interpreted through the worldviews of groups to which they belonged. This means, on the one hand, that experiences of meeting homeless people are subject to interpretation according to existing group membership, including the perceived distance of the domiciled person from the homeless individual. On the other hand, an experience of meeting a homeless person might affect a domiciled person’s social perspective, overturning previous views about how far or near they perceive the former to be from their social position. This paper throws light on these conditions.

This article is part of a three-year project investigating relationships between homeless and housed people across material, symbolic and spatial contexts (Hodgetts et al., 2008; Hodgetts, Stolte et al., 2010). Along with homeless people recruited from service agencies, we recruited a convenience sample of domiciled people via face-to-face requests within two urban locations (the indoor public space of a municipal library and a town square) also frequented by homeless people. We spent time observing and taking fieldnotes in these locations over a six-week period. The library and square had been identified as pivotal and contested public spaces by homeless participants in the larger research project (Hodgetts et al., 2008). This article draws primarily on 16 recorded interviews with nine domiciled women and seven men ranging in age from 18 to 55 years. Interviews explored participants’ awareness of homelessness, interactions with homeless people, information sources and understandings of causes and solutions for homelessness. Variations in distance between domiciled selves and homeless others constitute an emergent analytical category in this research.
Our analysis moves beyond the investigation of people’s attitudes as stable individualised cognitions to investigate the ways in which participant understandings of homelessness are negotiated through social interactions within specific settings. This involved a shift in focus from the internal cognitive structures of individuals to the wider social processes, belief systems and cultural practices through which people construct their perspectives. After all, each participant is not the first to try and make sense of homelessness and when articulating their thoughts often draws on shared ways of defining, characterising and understanding homeless people evident in the language, images and social practices of his or her primary reference groups (see Billig, 1996; Dixon and Durrheim, 2004; Forte, 2002; Hodgetts, Drew et al., 2010). In the process of articulating their own views, each person draws and elaborates upon common knowledge consisting of collectively constructed, fluid and changing networks of ideas, values and practices (Jovchelovitch, 2007). From this perspective, domiciled accounts are explored as incomplete communally based projects that are worked through as people employ various socially shared explanations to make sense of homelessness. When drawing on these explanations, people accept some ideas, reject others and create new ideas as a means of making sense of events in their lives, such as their encounters with homeless people. Some come to view ‘the homeless’ as being lazy, defective and incompetent. Others come to view homeless people as victims of social circumstances, misfortune and injustices. People who align themselves predominantly with one such perspective also voice ideas associated with another. We will show that, when drawing on different social repertoires (Billig, 1996) and associated characterisations of homeless people, social distances between the housed self and the homeless other shift.

The analysis documents how participants offer multiple characterisations of and distances from homeless people. One primary concern is to tease out how the different characterisations expand or contract expressed distances between groups and individuals. Our exploration also relates to the ways in which urban spaces are rendered socially meaningful and the functions of estrangement in discussions regarding who belongs, as well as the nature of interactions across homeless and domiciled groups. It appears that our participants achieve social distance by claiming domiciled group membership and positioning ‘the homeless’ as a distinct group of strangers. This is particularly prevalent for participants who lack regular interactions with and experiences of homeless people. However, such distance is diminished when participants recharacterise homeless people as neighbours and in some respects as legitimate members of the local community. In the process, the nature of homeless people is changed and ‘they’ are made to be more acceptable, recognisable and familiar as one of ‘us’.

### Distancing Oneself from Defective and Dangerous Strangers

In the course of our interviews, respondents provided a wide range of characterisations of homeless people, including descriptions of them as ‘dangerous criminals’ and ‘defective’ and ‘mentally ill addicts’, which invoke considerable social distance from the speaker. In some cases, the characterisations had been initiated by direct contact or observations of individuals, such as drunks slumped on seats in the square. Such encounters spill over from the individuals’ concerned and taint urban settings. Participants such as Asif, Karen and Lisa expressed reasonably consistent views about homeless people as being ‘irresponsible’, ‘dangerous’, ‘scary’ and ‘repulsive’. These participants had not spoken with or
had any meaningful contact with homeless people. Supporting the contact hypothesis, the tendency to view homeless people as the tarnished ‘other’, and as not belonging in central-city spaces, and who should be avoided, appeared stronger amongst participants lacking in close interactions with homeless people (see Lee et al., 2004). For example, Lisa (18-year-old woman, European/Pakeha student) invoked images of drunks and glue-sniffers, expressing fear of these people when she is in the CBD.

You see them mostly around the square. Once I was sitting down here and waiting to go to a thing and they came and sat down and started sniffing glue. I was ugh! And I didn’t know what to do! You always just see them walking around and sniffing glue in their sleeves—it’s kinda gross.

Lisa admits that she has never actually talked with a homeless person. For participants such as Lisa, homelessness is not within their own realm of possibility; it is something that happens to other people. Partly for this reason, homeless people are rendered strange, distant and dangerous.

The accounts of most other participants were more varied. Even when stigmatising characterisations anchored their accounts of homelessness, distances created between domiciled selves and those who were violent, criminal, mentally unstable and drug-users varied and were not established consistently. We should not expect characterisations of homeless people to be unidimensional in a world where people are used to making arguments to justify their own sense of fairness and safety (Billig et al., 1988, p. 114).

Several of our participants who were familiar with homeless individuals and sympathetic in general to their plight also mentioned that there were homeless people whom they avoided and feared. Karen, a 40-year-old American immigrant, said that she had witnessed a homeless man push another person in front of a train. This unexpected and traumatic display of violence in a public place meant that Karen was more likely to characterise homeless people as potentially violent threats to public safety and, therefore, needing to be kept at a distance. Several participants were more fearful of homeless people, particularly when they appeared in groups or seemed to be wearing gang colours. Thomas (43-year-old, European/Pakeha, librarian) expressed compassionate views of homeless patrons in the library with whom he interacts on a daily basis. However, when he commutes home in the evening, he is less comfortable with groups of homeless people he sees milling around the bus station. When asked whether the presence of homeless people affected him in any way, Thomas replied:

Individually no, but when I come across large groups of them I probably start feeling a bit nervous ... It’s more the youth gang type groups. They are slouching. Often it’s the way they look or, or look at you. It can be intimidating.

In this quotation, Thomas raises a dilemma through references to his nervousness about gangs of young homeless people, as opposed to individuals with whom he is familiar. In addition, he created a distinction between his interactions with older homeless individuals he has come to know reasonably intimately as library patrons compared with groups of youth with whom he avoids contact. In short, Thomas exemplifies how one’s distance to homeless people can vary and situational factors such as experience, familiarity, age, behaviour and whether people are alone or in a group appear to influence social distancing across specific points in time and contexts.

Several other participants differentiated distance in relation to whether discussing individuals or groups of potentially dangerous gang members. For instance, Rob (27-year-old, European/Pakeha, student)
spends time in the town square socialising and playing hacky sack with youth in homeless gangs. At the time of the interview, Rob took a break from the game. An interesting contrast emerged in that Rob was involved in a shared activity with young homeless men, but also stated that he recognised these men as potentially dangerous and involved in criminal activities. At different points in time he establishes more social distance from them.

Most of the time it’s okay, because I share a cigarette with them and that ... Most of the time it’s cool, but sometimes it makes me a little nervous. If they’ve had a few drinks some of them can get a bit pushy. It’s alright though, but sometimes it’s not a good idea to hang out with them.

Rob takes care to avoid these young men when they are drinking in a group. Encountering homeless people who are intoxicated was frequently mentioned by other participants as a reason to keep one’s distance. Sue (41-year-old, European/Pakeha, photographer) also emphasised distinctions between specific individuals and groups of homeless people. She lived above her studio in the CBD and said that she gets frustrated by the homeless people who come to the park, get drunk and leave a big mess. When Sue was asked about homeless people in the area, she replied:

Three or four distinct groups use the park and who they are determines on a scale of 1 to 10 how pleasant or unpleasant they are—you know—some are kind of easier to co-exist with than others. Usually the square is a daytime congregation point for people to drink. The worst kind of outcomes of that are scary behaviour, shouting ‘fuck off’, you know, and just generally unpleasantness. Intimidation on that level and just a huge mess in the park, which I end up cleaning quite often because I have clients that come up here and it’s just kind of upsetting to be constantly awash with the Woodstock [Bourbon and cola] cans and that. Those are the downsides.

Fear of intimidation is the reason Sue cleans the mess herself rather than confronting the drunks. Here, we see social distance grounded upon the transgression of social conventions and as a result homeless drinkers are positioned as out-of-place strangers who taint and disrupt the local setting. While Sue was clearly concerned about the illegitimate activities of some homeless people, she also expressed an understanding that such behaviour came with the territory when one lives in urban settings. In the process, she qualified her separation from such people and positioned herself and them as city dwellers. In the process, her expression of tolerance functioned to contain the distance.

Another participant Barry (44-year-old, Māori), who drives his truck at night emptying bins in the CBD, had a more muted view of the dangers homeless people pose. He talked about violent homeless individuals as the exception rather than the rule and, in the process, did not distance them as a group but rather isolated a particular individual who was deliberately disruptive to fellow city dwellers. Barry positions himself as someone who is not at risk of violence, but who acknowledges that his fellow domiciled citizens might be

We know who’s who. I sit down and talk to them ... In my view they are not so aggressive ... They might be to other people. They might be intimidating and they do stupid things. I know one of the homeless, he will walk down the main street and deliberately bump into people. He will just walk away for a laugh ... He’s just being an idiot ... It freaks people out.

Barry invokes his own close proximity to homeless people when discussing the unfamiliarity of many other domiciled people with homeless people. He positions domiciled people in general as more distant from homeless people than he is himself. In the process, Barry acknowledges fears and
Concerns regarding anti-social behaviour, while also qualifying the blanket application of such concerns to homeless people as a group. He does this in part by singling out a trouble-maker. A logical inference here is that all groups have trouble-makers who can spoil things for others. In this, there are similarities across social groups.

Several participants distinguish individuals from broader groups. In her study of understandings of homelessness amongst case-workers and housed people, Williams (2003) proposes that the issue of homelessness evokes strong and often incongruous emotional reactions evident in talk that shifts between deep distrust, fear, pity, anger, blame, guilt and compassion. In the previous extracts, expressions of social distance came to the fore in reference to anti-social behaviour, violence and substance misuse. These are features of social deviancy that are used to characterise some, but not all, homeless people. Our participants invoke the need for social distance as a means of avoiding danger and the anti-social actions of some homeless people. The flip-side of such accounts is that homeless people who are sober and positioned as library users or acquaintances to play hacky sack with can be brought closer, making for accounts that have a dilemmatic form (Billig et al., 1988).

Reducing Distance: From Outcasts to Victims, Neighbours and Fellow Citizens

Characterisations offered by our participants were drawn from a range of sources including media reports, second-hand knowledge and face-to-face interactions. In the process, a core feature of participant accounts was the shifting of social distance between themselves and homeless persons. As illustrated in the previous section, social distance can be increased by tarnishing the character of homeless persons as somehow flawed, deviant, mentally unstable, diseased and substance-dependent. Conversely, social distance is diminished through accounts of similarity, common humanity, neighbourliness and affinity. Distance is diminished when a domiciled woman is mistaken for a homeless person or others play football with homeless people or simply wave to a homeless man living in the park by one’s building. It is these instances of contracting distance set in particular spaces that provide the primary focus for the remainder of our analysis. These extracts need to be seen against a broader symbolic or extralocal context in society where distance is maintained through policy, ideology and institutional practices, including the policing, displacement and regulation of homeless bodies in urban settings (see Mitchell and Heymen, 2009). This punitive backdrop is also invoked and questioned by participants. In doing so, a shared humanity that collapses social distance is conjured into our discourse.

Spatial dimensions are central to domiciled and homeless interactions and featured prominently in accounts where social distance was shifted and often diminished. For instance, Barry recounted several instances where homeless people become victims of negative perceptions by being unfairly typecast as criminals or nuisances. On one occasion, Barry witnessed a homeless man being assaulted by a police officer and apprehended
for carrying one bottle of beer. Although the man was in an alcohol-ban area, there were six other domiciled people drinking from boxes of beer within view. As Barry saw it, the police tend to pick on homeless people as easy targets. Barry also proposed that, in the square where we conducted the interview, it is usually the local public who make the most mess, not homeless people. Barry thought streeties were being unfairly blamed for tainting this public space. The sense of injustice articulated by participants such as Barry brings ‘them’ (homeless people) closer to ‘us’ (housed people) and this is evident for some in recourse to the universal notion of fairness and dignity (Hodgetts, Drew et al., 2010)

They want friendship. They need places to meet ... Not so much about drinking, but getting back into sports again. I used to watch them play sports. I would jump out of my truck and have a game with them ... Other people could be standing next to them and would not know because they are dressed just the same. But we know who’s who ... Nobody has a right to kick them out. Drinking and all that might be an issue, but they don’t make a mess. The ones that make a mess are the picnickers ... The streeties they put the bottle in the bin. It’s the housed people who make the mess—not the streeties. The streeties will come here and look after it like it is their home. And there’s the young ones with their flash cars that come in and make a nuisance of themselves. These are school kids, but once they take their uniforms off they dress just like streeties with their beanies on—so people actually think they are streeties and they go tagging and stuff. And who gets blamed for it? The homeless. Moral of the story is to look before you think.

Barry transcends the distinction between his domiciled reference group and homeless people who use this public space. Recounting an experience of meeting particular homeless people on shared ground enables him to transcend distance and presents a sense of being together with homeless people in this space. He can also create some distance between his own experiences and those of domiciled people in general.

Several participants proposed that homeless people themselves are also likely to be victims of violence and prejudice (see Bunis et al., 1996) and, in the process, paint a more heterogeneous picture of homeless people depicting less social distance. These participants often referred to media stories about homeless people who had been murdered, raped or assaulted on the streets. In one account, Pam (56-year-old, European/Pakeha, verger living in a central-city apartment adjacent to her church) talks about several women whom she presents as both mentally ill and having addictions. However, Pam uses the apparent defective individual characterisation in a different manner. She saw the women as being victims of circumstance and as being subject to the anti-social actions of domiciled people (their own families), other homeless people (boyfriends) and society (failure of welfare provisions). Pam was different from most other participants (except perhaps Barry) because she not only had experiences of individual homeless people, but—through the values of groups to which she belonged—saw the homeless as a needy group. In this she acted as someone who is both ‘incorporated’ into social groups and has experience of need, conditions that have been proposed to describe best those people who act out of principle as well as feeling (Radley and Kennedy, 1995). In Pam’s account, homeless people are brought nearer to her in social distance terms—not outcasts, but fellow human beings.

I think because they’ve [the homeless women] never had family life. And that’s difficult because I come from a middle-class background and I’ve had a nice family life. They haven’t got that to look back to and get those ideas of life from. Like I had one of the girls up in my apartment this morning. I said ‘would you like a cup of tea?’ and she said ‘yes’. And I put a teaspoon and a saucer and...
she didn’t know what the teaspoon was for. Now, you know, I’m not judging that, but it’s just tiny little things like this when they come to my home and them asking me ‘why do you do that?’ And it’s sad. I don’t expect people to have the same values as me, but they didn’t start with anything—they don’t have anything. And they’ve really all just got a neat heart and their badness is survival ... We had a girl who lived in the church for six years and she didn’t have any money. I eventually got her on a benefit, but I had to be her agent ... With this particular person, she had the mental age of a 10-year-old, so a huge mental health issue and she was terrified of mental health workers. And the church was her sanctuary. I used to feed her and she smelt dreadful and kept away from the other streeties although they did watch out for her safety ... The middle-class people who come in from the suburbs don’t want to see the homeless people, but I have support from the other staff here as it is important that the church connects with the community around it, which is the homeless people.

This account exemplifies compassion and understanding towards other human beings, while at the same time it maintains Pam’s different background (i.e. she does not appeal to the argument that ‘we are all the same’). Social distance is transformed by reference to a political argument that the situation of homeless people is the product of unhealthy environments. Implicit in this is the argument that Pam herself might have suffered a similar fate if she had received a different upbringing. This extract also introduces an additional dimension to social distancing in relation to how closely one adheres to prominent assumptions held by members of one’s own social groupings. Pam distances herself from other domiciled church-goers, frustrated about the lack of empathy fellow worshipers have for the homeless women she tries to help. She found it ironic that church-goers wanted to come in from the suburbs to attend services, yet they had no idea or interest in the fact that at night the church is transformed to a scene from a Third World country with plastic tarpaulins draped across the archways, lending an element of privacy to the homeless people sleeping on its steps.

While Sue had a less favourable view of the group of homeless people who drink in public, she also referred to an older man who used the park just to sit in and sometimes slept in her doorway. As Sue spoke of this man, a very different characterisation emerged of a neighbour or fellow citizen. Sue has daily contact with the man living downstairs and as a result distinguishes him from other homeless people as a group. This man is brought into her lifeworld and in the process transformed from a stranger to be feared to a neighbour who is nearer to her in terms of social distance than many other domiciled people in her neighbourhood.

He is a pleasure to kind of have here really. He is nothing but courteous to me. I mean, he does drink down there, and so he is louder or quieter depending on how pissed he is. But he and I have worked out a kind of relationship, and he kind of keeps an eye out for me and I give him a fag [cigarette] now and then and a sausage roll. And he doesn’t want anything from me you know. Yeah, we’re on pretty good terms.

In some respects Sue’s interactions with this homeless man also transcend the divide between domiciled and homeless lifeworlds. The man downstairs is presented as a personable member of her community; a neighbour. The normalcy of her account underwrites her acknowledgement of the dignity of another person as a human being, rather than a homeless person first. Sue takes care not to startle the man if she arrives home late at night. Sue has a fairly accommodating view of her neighbour in the doorway and respects him as a fellow citizen, albeit an eccentric one.

Our research showed that social distance is not a static or fixed concept and that particular situations or experiences can generate
instances where it collapses and where life-worlds can be transformed. Another useful example was provided by Mary (40-year-old, student, European/Pakeha). She was asked what she thought about homeless people being present in the library where she studies and whether this was a concern for her. Mary was largely sympathetic towards homeless people, explaining with reference to a particular experience.

I had been spending time in hospital when I was pregnant and I had to go home, had to catch a bus. And I walked from the hospital into town and the bus wasn’t until the evening ... I was tired so I thought I’d have a bit of a nap down there ... I got moved. I got woken up and told you’re not allowed to sleep there. When I got up and they realised I was pregnant, I can’t remember whether it was a traffic warden or police man or security guard or what, I said ‘look, I’m tired, I have a four hour wait and I didn’t sleep very well last night in hospital’. They went away. I wasn’t homeless, but anyone can get tired or feel unwell and want to lay down somewhere, and you can’t do that out there in winter so you come into the library. They [homeless people] can get drinks of water in here [the library]. There are toilets and they can wash themselves if they want to ‘cos there’s warm water. They’re dry, relatively warm. I can understand the attraction ... They might come in here and want to read, and if they want to do that what the hell is the problem?

This excerpt shows that Mary had an experience which ruptured her sense of self as a housed and ‘legitimate’ citizen. Owing to her situation being misunderstood, and the way she was addressed, Mary briefly experiences what homeless people experience every day. She suffers a transgressive experience through which—for a moment—she sees and feels the world as a homeless person sees and feels it. This experience anchors her understandings of homeless people in a particular place and point in time. Mary relates to the experiences of exclusion faced by homeless people in the course of justifying her actions and thereby legitimating others who might carry them out. Not surprisingly then, she refrains from constructing ‘them’ as different from ‘us’. This has effects upon her domiciled group membership and how she treats homeless people in that setting.

The reflections of Barry, Pam, Sue and Mary epitomised elasticity in social distancing. At different points in our conversations, all participants talked about homeless people with a greater or lesser degree of discomfort, pity, disgust and estrangement. Shifts in distance and perspective appear to be somewhat ordinary as participants grapple with the complexities of homelessness and inconsistent experiences. Shifts are informed by events such as playing sport, interacting with a homeless neighbour or resting on a bench and being mistaken for a vagrant. Such instances are central to shifts in social distance and the transformation of personal views regarding homelessness and the regulation and sharing of urban spaces. In some respects, and to varying degrees, such participants distance themselves from their existing domiciled groups by affiliating with a member of an out-group. In the process, these participants recharacterise homeless people and make them more acceptable in shared public spaces.

Discussion

For many housed people, imagining what it might be like to be homeless can be an uncomfortable proposition. All our participants said that seeing people sleeping in the cold and rain evoked a range of reactions from sadness and concern, to disbelief, awkwardness, confusion, aversion, repulsion and fear. In grappling with their experiences and the significance of the presence of homeless people, participant accounts take on a narrative form and include characterisations set in
plot lines that are played out in urban settings. These accounts give meaning to homelessness in the context of the city and each participant’s own relative distance from homeless individuals and homeless people as a group. Accounts imagine relationships between our participants, other domiciled citizens and homeless people. Although imagined, these relationships are not illusory or unreal. Rather, participant accounts need to be seen against the backdrop of a society unsure of the character and needs of homeless citizens, or how to feel and respond. Knowledge domiciled individuals have of homelessness, the extent to which the different lifeworlds overlap and whether housed people can put themselves in the shoes of homeless people, all have implications for increasing or decreasing social distance, for their being near or far. Participant accounts reveal a range of social distances associated with personal biographies, specific experiences, locality and the use of urban spaces, cultural familiarities, personal ethics, politics and familiarity with homeless people. Domiciled citizens constitute a heterogeneous population defined in terms of ‘not being houseless’. Across this broad social grouping accounts varied not only between domiciled respondents and homeless people, but also between individual domiciled citizens and domiciled people in general. These responses invoke some of the complexities of social distancing.

By emphasising fluidity in social distancing—where domiciled people can avoid a homeless person, accept them as a ‘normal’ feature of urban life, greet a homeless neighbour each morning or stigmatised drug-users—we have avoided some of the pitfalls in the use of the concept of social distance (see Triandis and Triandis, 1962). In the process, we have emphasised both the discursive and material acts through which social distancing manifests in public spaces and reproduces symbolic and material relationships between domiciled and homeless citizens. What social distance offers is a concept to invoke processes through which estrangement is cultivated between groups of people and is then challenged. This is also reflected in our repeated lunchtime observations when homeless individuals were isolated in the crowd, sitting alone or in small groups ignored and distant from local workers who did their best to enjoy time out of the office, despite the ‘vagrants’ in their midst. In such situations, homeless people are tolerated while being left alone and nowhere. Sympathy and compassion for others who are positioned as distinct, different and far from ‘us’, are reduced while being present and physically near (Simmel, 1908/1921). In considering distancing processes between ‘them’ and ‘us’, it is important to recognise that group membership and personal experience are not reducible to one another. The woman on the bench has her membership to the domiciled citizenry breached by the experience with the security guards, which overrides the distance between her social group membership and the homeless. Others have experiences that make them feel sorry for homeless people or enable ‘us’ to recognise ‘their’ humanity and to bridge the gap. Several participants, and people we observed in the square, do not keep their distance and in fact participate in shared activities such as playing a game and talking about the events of the day.

Domiciled constructions have material implications and are crucial for the lives of homeless people. The way streeties are defined by housed others influences social policy and official responses, efforts at inclusion or exclusion, personal pathology or social reform, or perhaps some combination of these (see Kingfisher, 2007; Tomssett et al., 2006). Social distancing has implications in terms of social justice. Distancing homeless people as not residing within one’s own moral universe, or as being strangers, allows for policies and practices of discrimination. There are of course nuances in these intergroup processes, in that many of our participants
Social distancing and homeless people. Recent research (Laurenson and Collins, 2007) suggests that measures used to address homelessness are not driven entirely by punitive intent or devoid of compassion. The continuation of welfare services for homeless people also suggests further complexity in social distancing in that people are supported, but often kept at a distance as a distinct class of people (Stolte and Hodgetts, 2010). Regardless, the ultimate product of social distancing is the threat of positioning homeless people as existing outside the scope of justice, which can result in anti-homelessness laws and initiatives that displace them from public life (see Mitchell and Heymen, 2009). The displacing of homeless bodies from public life in the city is legitimated, as is the social distancing central to intergroup segregation through moral positioning. Hodgetts, Drew et al. (2010) use a similar line of reasoning to explain how the inhuman treatment of refugees within so-called developed countries seldom leads to mass protests and demands for refugees to be treated with dignity and in accord with international law. One explanation is that groups such as homeless people and other ‘strangers’ have been situated outside the moral envelope, or scope of justice of a society. If people are placed outside our scope of justice, the normative standards of justice simply do not apply and they can be treated unjustly with impunity. The application of punitive procedures, policies and processes to manage homeless people is a clear violation of the principles of procedural fairness, the fairness of procedures by which outcomes are determined.

In closing, there is much at stake in bridging the distance between domiciled and homeless citizens. Mitchell and Heymen (2009) note that the geographies of survival among homeless people rely on ad hoc coalitions and practices that extend to sympathetic domiciled people. We would argue that such loose coalitions and the survival of homeless people often necessitate domiciled citizens transgressing their distance from homeless people. Since Aristotle, scholars have proposed that a sense of likeness to another person is associated with empathy and recognition of the possibility that one might also find oneself in a similar situation of need (Hodgetts, Drew et al., 2010). Our findings suggest that both personal experience and incorporation of the stranger into one’s own lifeworld as a neighbour or teammate can provide a context for minimising social distance (Radley and Kennedy, 1995). People are more likely to act for the collective good when their shared social identities are brought to the fore and they experience an ‘us-ness’ (van Zomeren et al., 2008) and a nearness. Our research supports the finding that compassion and pro-social acts are not restricted to those residing within our own social groups (Stone, 2008). If we are to ensure the inclusion of homeless people as citizens, we must develop ways to manage social distancing processes in urban settings.

Notes
1. We use European/Pākeha to refer to descendants of the settler society.
2. Hacky sack is a common sight in urban public spaces. It involves keeping a small soft bag in the air as long as possible using any part of the body to pass the ‘hacky sack’ on to other players.

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