

Perception of time and space of (former) homeless people

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1. Introduction

When at some stage in life people end up in different circumstances, or find themselves in another frame of mind, they will as a rule adapt their perception of the world and their place in it to these changed circumstances. This psychological mechanism enables them to cope with change (Levi 1992). The same psychological mechanism can be observed in (former) homeless persons: as soon as they end up on the streets they find themselves in a different situation. They react by adapting their perception of self and their surroundings in order to be better able to cope with the new situation. This paper focuses on the changes that occur in homeless and former homeless persons regarding their perception of *time and space*. Firstly in paragraph 2 it is explained how perception of time changes gradually in former homeless persons. Paragraph 3 describes changes in their perception of space. Then paragraph 4 outlines how the perception of time and space of former homeless persons is gradually being brought in line with prevailing notions in dominant society.

In this context findings will be presented of a longitudinal study of (former) homeless persons, conducted in the Netherlands between 1994 and 2000 (Van Doorn 2002). This was a qualitative study in which over 80 (former) homeless persons were interviewed several times and in which use was also made of the method of participating observation.

2. Perception of time in homeless persons

Notions on time are firmly embedded in culture. Modern society links perception of time to hours, weeks, months and years. In addition, clocks and calendars are the main standard measures of time, as is the rhythm of working from nine to five. This globally standardised perception of time is called 'linear time'. Its opposite is 'cyclic time'. This concept of time stems from ancient times and can still be found in isolated communities in non-Western cultures. In the cyclic perception of time one day flows into the next and weeks, months and years are threaded together in one fluid motion. Points of reference for determination of time are mainly linked to nature: position of sun and moon, the turn of the seasons and the cycles of sowing and reaping, birth and death. Cyclic time is a less demarcated, more diffuse concept of time. Its focus is more on the 'here and now' than on the future. There is less planning, less goal-orientedness, a less marked hierarchy of tasks that have to be performed within a certain span of time (cf. Elias 1985).

As homeless persons spend more time on the streets and as their bonds with the main social institutions become looser, their perception of time tends to move further away from the linear perception of time. Their awareness of units of time hours, days and months fades, as does their knowledge of which day of the week it is. They begin to live 'in their own time'. Their perception of time moves towards the cyclic perception of time. When they lose their jobs and their homes there are hardly any points of reference left by which to measure the passing of time. Homeless persons carrying a diary are the exception rather than the rule. And whereas the recently homeless often possess a watch, the long-term homeless as a rule do not: it broke down and was not replaced, it was stolen, sold or got lost. Clock and calendar units hardly matter on the streets.

See, each day is the same as the day before and after. Only Sundays, those are even more difficult than all the other days. You lose all sense of time. Several lads told me this. It doesn't matter on the streets, you don't miss it for you don't use it. (woman, 26 years of age).

Not only does the distinction between working and leisure hours and working days and weekends fade, the day and night rhythm of homeless persons becomes disturbed as well. Usually they are forced to lead irregular lives with not enough sleep

and some will stay awake at night and try to catch up some sleep during the day. Simultaneously time demarcation of time of the turn of the seasons increases, because due to being exposed to all weathers they experience relatively great differences between summers and winters. In addition, standard measures such as the main holidays -Christmas and New Years Eve- and for some their birthday, are markings of time. In the words of one respondent who does not know exactly how long he has been living on the streets: "I've spent four Christmases in prison." The shift in the time perspective of homeless persons towards a cyclic perception of time has several ramifications. Six aspects are distinguished: time horizon; time and directive goals; structuring of time; time between need and gratification; time and chronology and time between significant activities.

Time horizon

A first aspect of the changing time perspective is that the time horizon of the homeless is gradually shrinking. This does not apply to the recently homeless, usually. They still focus on the long term, make plans for the future. However, in due course the future-oriented perspective fades to the background. Under pressure from negative experiences in the attempts to realise their plans, their confidence of being able to maintain a grip on their future decreases. By way of response their time horizon is focused on the 'here and now' more while the future is restricted to tomorrow. They crossed out the past, as it were, whereas the future perspective also fades. They start to live 'from one day to the next' and this consumes all their energy.

I won't be making any plans. "Boast not of tomorrow, for sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof". So I live from one day to the next, I don't think about tomorrow. I'm not saying, tomorrow I will do so and so and I will succeed. For you never know what lies ahead. (male, 54 years of age).

I am not one for making plans. I live from one minute to the next. I have made so many deals with people that never were met, I did feel cheated. And then I think, I may hit my head once but I won't do it twice. That is why I never make deal with people. For instance, I made a deal with the homeless team twice and twice I stood them up. It's difficult for me, making deals with people. Now I settled it that I can just walk in. I'm like: I make a deal and then I smoke a joint and then I feel very different about it all: come off it, I'm stoned, I'm fine as I am. For I live from one minute to the next. (male, 20 years of age).

A perspective, focusing on the short term, is functional to homeless persons for a number of reasons. They adapt their behaviour to their possibilities and limitations. If they are only able to experience the future in terms of uncertainty, a lack of perspective and a lack of socially significant activities, then living from one day to the next is a functional way to act. By focusing on the short term they protect themselves mentally from disappointments. If you don't make plans and don't have expectations you minimise the risk of disappointments. The discrepancy between expectations for the future and the limited chances of their realisation is diminished by focusing on the immediate future only (Tazelaar 1980). Due to the pressure of their way of life few plans are actually realised in the end. The step to realise plans becomes larger and many homeless persons use 'procrastination and excuse tactics' to account for this to themselves and others.

You hear these stories all the time: 'Tomorrow I will get a job and tomorrow I will find lodgings.' If I have heard it once I've heard it a hundred times. They keep saying it and they never get round to it. (male, 39 years of age).

In addition, a mental attitude in which the perspective of time is focusing on the shorter term ties in with the time cycle inherent to the homeless way of life. This is controlled by daily recurring repetitions of fulfilling some elementary needs: how do I get some money and where can I spend the night? These needs are acute. From a perspective of time they are needs of a relatively short duration. They get resolved within 24 hours and then they present themselves again.

In the mornings I don't know where I will sleep at night, and as early as the next day I know whether I solved that problem or not. I haven't got any money, I must eat, how do I manage that? Perhaps I didn't eat, or I stole something, or I was given something, or I managed to buy something on credit. The problem is solved in a way that's either good or bad, and the next day it's the same thing all over again. (male, 39 years of age).

Another function of the short-term perspective is related to the large degree of flexibility that homeless persons must be able to show. They cannot always count on a place to sleep, for hostels may be full. Good or bad luck on the streets in actual fact means the difference between a full or an empty stomach. Making plans and adhering to them is hardly functional because it seriously hampers flexibility. A perspective focusing on the short term is a way for homeless persons to manage daily problems. However, it has other effects. Contacts with regular care services is hampered. For homeless persons find it difficult to stick to agreements, to meet them, and to recognise themselves in a support plan that focuses on the distant future. Maslov (1943) already described that people can only focus on the future if and when primary bare necessities are met in a structural manner.

Time and directive goals

A second aspect of the changing perspective of time is that homeless persons –as perspectives of the future fade- also lack directive long-term goals that are usual in the dominant culture. Focusing on the short term makes them out to be

'disoriented or aimless'. They don't follow a line to the future in which perceptible progress is to be expected. In the city centres, each day on the streets they are surrounded by passers- by that radiate goal-orientedness: people that walk with no uncertain steps from A to B –to work, to a shop, a meeting, a client, to friends or to their homes. The homeless on the other hand simply walk on the streets and do not seem to have a goal beyond passing the time.

Would you like to know what a homeless person is? It is someone who stands on the pavement and it makes no difference to him if he turns left or right, to one town or another. It is all the same to him. (male 46 years of age).

I simply roam about. I have no set route, anyway the wind blows. (male 62 years of age).

The homeless are continually looking for spaces suitable for passing parts of the day or night. Moving towards other spaces, much walking and walking great distances is characteristic to them. This is reflected in their language. The homeless lifestyle is defined by them as: 'walking the streets', 'being on foot' or 'taking a stroll'. Returning to the circuit several times they term: 'keeping on walking'. Most homeless people alternate continual motion with lengthy periods of waiting. Life on the streets consists for a considerable part of hanging out: for the opening hours of daycare or hostels, for the arrival of their weekly or monthly benefits, for the rain to stop, etcetera. Many homeless people complain about this aspect of street life: endless boredom in which the days are empty and the hours crawl slowly by. On closer inspection however it turns out that waiting as a way of passing the time is by no means insignificant, as Michael Agar (1977: 149-15) rightly concludes in *De sociologie van het wachten* (The sociology of waiting):

'The general impression received was that hanging out was kind of a non event, a time filler with minimal constraints on behaviour while an individual waited for more important events to occur. In the streets I learned that, though hanging out placed minimal constraints on behaviour, it was far from insignificant.'

Hanging out is often accompanied by socialising with other homeless people. By being with others they keep abreast of developments in the circuit and thus enhance their options. Then critical information is gathered and exchanged: who is out on the streets, what is going on? They exchange information on places to stay or meal services in other towns or pass around some money. That is how the latest news of the scene is distributed. There are several meeting places in town where homeless people seek out each other's company and exchange information. One respondent defines this as follows:

Sometimes it is just like a community on the move. They all follow each other around. If a few of them are sitting down, others will join them. And after a while they will leave again, have a look elsewhere. They want to see a lot of other people, right? See who is in town, if someone is around who owes them money, if someone is handing out things. They will walk around all day. (male, 53 years of age)

With the disappearance of future-oriented goals obligations disappear also. Once homeless people are used to so free a lifestyle and living from one day to the next, this will have a certain appeal to most of them.

Structuring of time

A third aspect of the changing time perspective is that for the homeless the possibilities of structuring time are lost. Absence of order makes their lives (more) chaotic and leads to disorientation, in the long run. Some homeless persons derive a certain structure from contacting agencies or law enforcers that are ruled by the clock. The daily trip to daycare and night hostels –where a time schedule is used with start and finish terms in the form of opening and closing hours- provides structure to their lives. To addicts the daily trip to the methadone bus provides a strong sense of structure. And for the ones that sleep out, the so-called waking rounds generate some structure. In the inner city of Utrecht police and security service will hold waking rounds at the crack of dawn to wake up homeless people that sleep in full view and help them on their way before the stream of commuters gets going. These waking rounds have a structuring effect, but they are detrimental to one's night's rest. One respondent who frequently spends the night in Hoog Catharijne says: 'You never get to sleep late. Only on Sundays will they let you have one more hour.' Some homeless people, in particular the recent ones, will try to provide some structure on their own by playing the guitar each day, by keeping a diary or reading the newspaper in the library. Also a daily trip to the coffee shop or the park will provide a certain rhythm to the day. Some will try to arrive at set agreements with other homeless people, but these are hardly ever maintained.

Time between need and gratification

A fourth aspect of the changing time perspective is the way in which homeless persons cope with the mechanism of 'deferred reward'. Analogous to their increasing focus on the 'here and now' the present, they also tend to focus more on immediate fulfilment of their needs: to an immediate reward for efforts made. In his classic *Tally's corner*, Elliot Liebow describes a similar phenomenon and uses the term 'deferred gratification' for it (1976: 64). The economy of street trade and selling of street newspapers –which provides a fast buck or other immediate gratification- ties in well with the short term focus. This focus on immediate fulfilment of needs is also expressed in the patterns of expense of homeless persons: 'keep

money moving'. Geert Mak (1992: 108) describes this very well in his essay compilation *De engel van Amsterdam* (The Angel of Amsterdam):

'In a world that haggles all day long about coins and the occasional bill, a benefit grant of one thousand to fifteen hundred guilders is an amount far beyond the usual scope. This irregularity in existence is therefore removed in no time. In the pubs and bars in the centre all the blokes play at being the mayor and in May it's a double party because then you get holiday benefits as well. After approximately four days everyone is back to their former level: that of dimes, 25 cents and the occasional tenner.'

Unlike the middle class standard of saving up the homeless as a rule spend their restricted means immediately. To them this is a way of demonstrating that they 'hold the strings of their own purses'. Their pattern of spending is one of the few areas in which they have any autonomy. To them, a say in one's own income is synonymous with 'controlling their own lives'. Spending a month's benefit in one go is a way for some homeless people of 'purchasing' a (short-lived) treatment of respect. They will spend it on one night in a luxury hotel, by driving to the entrance of the hostel in a taxi, by spending it in a casino or sex club or by buying meals and drinks for other homeless people, generously. This phenomenon is not restricted to the homeless. Other categories that have low status in regular society –such as loitering teenage drop-outs and bank robbers- appear to act in a similar way. (cf. Coffield et al. 1986; Kroese and Staring 1993).

Apart from these functions it is extremely advisable for homeless people to spend money at once. For keeping money in one's pocket increases the risk of becoming the victim of robbery or extortion. Furthermore, if they save some money, they are more or less obliged to share it with their peers. If they want to spend their money themselves, they had better do it quickly. It goes without saying that saving up is no easy matter under such circumstances.

Time and chronology

A fifth aspect is that –since on the streets the time goes by without clear markings- the homeless gradually lose sight of the order in which events took place. Remembering events that took place on the streets and setting them in a chronological order presents problems. The following quotation of a former homeless woman illustrates this.

'I have forgotten much about the years I walked the streets. It is a blank spot in my memory.' (women, 26 years of age)

An additional consequence is that the long-term homeless gradually lose track of cause-and-effect relations in their everyday actions and in the greater perspective of the course of life.

Time between significant activities

Finally, there is another aspect to perception of time on the streets. On the streets time seems to stand still, and at the same time it seems as if time flies. I have always wondered, after I had been away for a while and came back to the streets to find certain homeless persons, how easy it was to catch up with the developments in the lives of these homeless people. As if somehow time on the streets had stood still or passed at a slower rate. Not only I wondered at this, the homeless did, too. Some respondents indicate that in their perception one year on the streets seems like a month, but it might just as well seem like ten years. A lot goes on in the streets, and then again it doesn't. It is as if the homeless live in a pressure cooker. They lead very intense lives and emotions are strong. Each day many minor and major events occur but they are mainly restricted to the 'issues of the day'. In the long run they hardly ever result in essential change. In this respect streetlife is not unlike a soap opera, even if this is a rather disrespectful comparison. The viewer who missed a few episodes of the series can easily pick up on the line of the story because although all sorts of intrigues and developments took place, in actual fact little has changed since there are still the same characters in it and the same issues are still relevant. Perhaps this phenomenon can be explained by Sorokin and Merton (1937) who define experiencing time as 'the relation between significant activities'. To many homeless persons significant activities have been reduced considerably, or have become of a different nature, as a result of which developments in their lives no longer take a linear course towards the future, but rather a cyclic one with advance and return, in which the starting point –the situation of homelessness- often remains unchanged.

3. Perception of space

In homeless persons perception of the space in which they find themselves also changes, in due course. Modern society is characterised by a considerable contrast between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of the outside world (Burgers 1988). The cultural significance that people attribute to public spaces, differs. As Spradley (1970) phrases it: 'To the extent that the physical space and the objects in it are socially constructed, we can be sure that people that live in the same city find themselves in cultural worlds that are totally different.' This finding certainly applies to the homeless. Their perspective of public space differs from that of the conventional users of that same space. When they loose their home they no longer possess private space. Therefore they rely exclusively on public space and in that space they must perform the functions that are usually reserved for the private sphere. Whereas other citizens associate private sphere with a place that

provides shelter and a place to sleep, the homeless will screen physical public space for its suitability to provide shelter or a place to sleep. They will see their environment in a different light and judge public space for the options it provides them to survive. In other words: they adjust their perception of public space to suit their needs. The following six aspects can be distinguished in the perception of space: space and demarcation; space as a safe haven; privacy in public space; space and the filtering of impressions; space and relations of ownership and autonomy, and nuisance in the public space.

Space and demarcation

First of all: whereas for other citizens the physical living space of their homes is demarcated by walls and ceilings, the physical living space of the homeless –public space- is undemarcated. The action range of the homeless is relatively wide.

If you live on the streets you have dealings with the entire street, with the entire location. Your horizon is wider than when you live in a house. (male 46 years of age)

Gradually the homeless become accustomed to living in a relatively wide Umwelt (environment). In the long run a number of them will associate this with a sense of freedom. This freedom however proves to be relative, for the majority of the homeless will cover but a restricted geographical area in the long run: when moving around the city they tend to use the same routes from one regular place to another, from day care to hostel, from the park to the coffee shop and back again. And some cover similar, fairly predictable routes between several cities (cf. Van Doorn 1994: 71-85).

In street jargon the distinction that the homeless make between staying in a restricted or in an unrestricted Umwelt –or ‘inside’ and ‘outside’- is aptly expressed. The homeless define their situation of homelessness as ‘walking outside’. They will say, for example: ‘I’ve been walking outside for twelve years.’ Spending some time in prison, being admitted to a care institution or a hospital is termed in their vocabulary ‘staying inside’.

Space as a safe haven

A second shift in the perception of space is connected to safety. Lacking the private sphere of a home, the homeless no longer possess a safe haven in which they can deny access to uninvited guests. The stay in the public space is perceived by most of them as very unsafe. In this environment they lack protection and cover. This is reflected in their behaviour: they are always on their guard, wary of danger and are always looking ‘over their shoulder’ to watch the area outside their immediate field of vision.

I was always looking over my shoulder, always living in fear. You are never safe on the streets. You can get hit any time. You are continually aware of this. (woman, 37 years of age).

Sleeping outside is particularly perilous for many homeless persons (cf. Rensen 2001). When people feel unsafe they tend to be light sleepers. In case of danger they immediately awake from their catnaps and become alert, which causes lack of sleep and fatigue.

Privacy in public space

A third aspect of the shift in the perception of space is the creation of privacy. Since the homeless lack a private area they can withdraw to, they are obliged to create privacy in public spaces. At first sight this seems a contradiction in terms. Amongst each other homeless people have resolved this problem more or less by means of the code of conduct that dictates that they shall leave one another alone as much as possible. This creates –at least in overcrowded care and shelter provisions- a certain amount of privacy. It requires the necessary flexibility and skills in conflict handling to restrict the number of clashes in social interaction with other homeless persons and thus enlarge personal privacy (and safety).

On the streets I learned a lot about tolerance and to practice it to utmost capacity. For if you sleep in night hostels with fifty others and if you must share that space with all of them, each with their own problems, you must be ready to put up with a lot. Avoid conflicts, look for solutions and such. (woman 38 years of age).

In their craving for privacy homeless people often try to sleep in the same bed each night in hostels, preferably with a club of regulars in the same dormitory, thus creating a private space together. Or they will withdraw to the shower or toilets of the care provisions for long periods of time and thus create some privacy behind closed doors. Occupying these facilities for longer periods of time is at right angles with organisational goals of ‘manageability and control’ of the provisions and is therefore not allowed by the staff as a rule.

Even if they are not very welcome in public spaces, the homeless will try to find a home on the streets. Public space objectively seen does not provide a home replacement, but in the long run many connect a subjective association of *home* to it.

Under the escalators of Hoog Catharijne, that's where we used to be and we called it our living room. There was this wall, and it was not in full view. You could sometimes sleep there without being spotted by security and being sent away. We called it our bedroom. (woman, 26 years of age).

Space and the filtering of impressions

A fourth aspect is related to the filtering of impressions. Usually the private sphere of the home acts as an operating base from which participation in the public sphere can take place. In the home one can shut out impressions from the outside world and one can be at piece with oneself. The homeless however find themselves continually in surroundings full of stimuli: they alternate between the crowded noisy city centre and the overcrowded shelter provisions. They are confronted with an incessant flow of impressions from which there is practically no escape. The bombing of unfiltered impressions makes them restless and affects concentration and leaves hardly any room for rest and reflection. The following quotations clarify the implications of this:

I can't shut out anything. If things are going on around me I respond at once. If someone says: come on, let's do so and so, I immediately forget my own business and I'll come along. It drives me crazy. I'd love to take up tai chi or meditation to learn how I can stay closer to my own core. (male, 46 years of age)

I couldn't even read anymore. I saw the letters all right, but not the connection between them and the words they composed. It no longer got through to me what the text actually said. I couldn't focus on it. When I got a home of my own again, I learned to read all over again. (male, 32 years of age)

Space and relations of ownership and autonomy

With the loss of a private home relations of ownership and autonomy change, as well. In the spaces they stay in homeless people have only the status of guest. It's for this reason that shelter provisions usually call them 'visitors'. In the public domain they are often regarded as unwelcome guests. In regular society, in the protected privacy of their own homes people can decide for themselves how they choose to behave. On the other hand, the homeless -in the spaces that they stay in- are constantly subjected to rules of conduct drawn up by others. Their behaviour can be seen by everyone. As soon as they display behaviour that is considered to be undesirable by owners, care workers, night watchmen, supervisors or other authorities, this is punished.

If you walk the streets, nothing belongs to you. Everything you see around you belongs to someone else. You can't make any decisions, everyone decides for you. (male 56 years of age)

The only territory whose ownership rights belong undisputedly to the homeless, is their bodies. In particular for long-term homeless people this has gradually been given a special meaning: they avoid physical contact and tend to observe a larger physical space towards other people than is usual in social interaction. The need of many homeless people to observe this greater distance is reinforced for some by the need for privacy, by the constant presence of feelings of insecurity, due to a gradually developed distrust of their fellow men or from a deepseated fear of attachment.

Nuisance in the public space

Finally the physical aspect of the public space is relevant to homeless people. Just like ordinary citizens the homeless are confronted with nuisance in the public space. They frequently complain about dirt and waste and junk, dog excrements and pigeon droppings, discarded chewing gum and they are irritated by urinating in public.

The streets are so dirty. There are dog turds and junk everywhere. That is especially hard for me for I am a very cleanly person myself, I would take three showers a day if I could. (male 29 years of age).

Discarded dirty needles cause fear because of the risk of HIV infection. And homeless people are also bothered by the risk of contracting vermin (lice) and infections (scabies) on the streets. And this while the recently homeless in particular try all the time to observe personal hygiene and look well groomed, thereby hiding from the outside world their identity as homeless persons. An untidy appearance will in any case result in their being expelled from even more locations. It is precisely because the homeless have practically lost in advance the struggle against the advancing dirt, that it is very frustrating to many of them to have to make do with the dirtiest places of the city for a place to sit or sleep (cf. Baxter and Hopper 1981).

4. Perception of time and space by former homeless persons

For respondents that succeeded in establishing themselves and attempt to build a more structured way of life after a period of homelessness, this process is usually accompanied by changes in the way in which they handle time and space. First it is described which changes occur in homeless people regarding their perception of time. Then changes in perception of space will be discussed.

Perception of time

The tendency is that after having settled, perception of time of former homeless persons, shifts from a cyclic towards a linear perspective of time. In the process their perception of time will be more synchronous with prevailing notions in dominant society.

The former homeless will as a rule buy a watch and a diary. Thus they once more avail themselves of standardised measures of time. The time perspective of short-term focus, functional in street life, is hardly sufficient to former homeless persons. The time horizon is gradually stretched: they cast their eyes once more to the past and the future. Tentatively plans are made and steps are taken to realise them. It is essential again that they are prepared and able to postpone gratification for efforts. Especially in the initial stage former homeless persons are strongly inclined to yield to every impulse.

It's still very hard for me, that I have to wait, that I can't get things done the moment I want to. If I want something, it must come at once or I will lose patience. I must learn that, you can't have things your way at once. On the streets you can give in to anything immediately. I eat a lot now. I gained about 30 kilos. And I smoke a lot, see? (women, 37 years of age)

Gradually the principle of postponed reward of efforts made –deferred gratification- begins to take root again. This is expressed among other things in their patterns of consumption and spending. Income is no longer spent in one go. To the best of their ability they try to set money aside for recurring expenses and they try to distribute their money to live on evenly over the month. Since they are tentatively making plans for the future, there is a growing need to save up. Also the fear of theft or extortion –a major reason for the homeless to collectivise their money- has vanished almost completely for the former homeless. In spite of their restricted financial situation some former homeless persons will in due course succeed in having modest savings and they derive pride from it.

Another aspect of the shift from the short to the longer time perspective is making agreements and adhering to them. On the streets agreements were rarely met. In particular in the initial stage when they have only just settled in most former homeless people have great difficulty in adjusting to this. The following quotation shows that learning to meet agreements can be regarded as a process of discipline. Parties involved are corrected by others, until the behaviour deemed socially acceptable in their new surroundings becomes a habit.

In the night hostel in Self management I saw this first, I had to stick to an agreement. That is very difficult. They would say to me: 'Are you coming to the pub for a pint?' And I say: 'Sure, let's go.' But then you think: no, I can't go now for I promised to do something else, and then you do that first. But before I was ready to do that I must have been ticked off six times for being late or for not showing up at all. It takes time before you are able to do that. After a while you get used to it. They tell you off and you see they are right. That it isn't normal, the way you act.' (male 43 years of age)

The former homeless must also cope with the obligation of adapting their time structuring to new circumstances. They will have to find a new day schedule, develop a day and night rhythm, and divide their time by finding the balance between efforts and relaxation, working and leisure hours. Especially in the initial stage the former homeless will usually have a chaotic household into which some structure is gradually being introduced.

There are no habits, you have to get used again to making yourself a cup of coffee, going shopping. You had lost that completely, you have developed another rhythm and that doesn't work in the home. Even before I got this house I started to keep a diary, to make plans and fill in the week. (male 42)

When I got my home I started doing things to maintain some order for myself. Cooking, no skimping, proper meals, laying the table and sitting down to dinner. (...) And now I've decided that Mondays are days for cleaning. So I keep my house clean. In fact I now lead a middle class life, more than I ever did. (male 62 years of age)

The long-term focus and the setting of goals is accompanied by another aspect that as a rule had slipped to the background in homeless persons: achievement orientation. Some former homeless people are quick to use achievements as a way to colour their new identity and get away from stigmas. Achievements performed are standards measures by means of which others can judge them: not on the basis of their past but on the basis of present deeds.

In other areas too the perception of time of homeless people will become more synchronous with the usual time markings of mainstream society. They will gradually participate in traditions of celebrating official holidays. Such traditions are standards in regular society in the course of time and promote solidarity. They provide respondents with something to hold on to in times of uncertainty. In due course respondents will liven up the Holidays season with decorating a Christmas tree, having doughnut balls and fireworks on New Year's Eve and chocolate eggs on Easter, and Muslims will observe the Ramadan tradition again. A number of respondents will –for the first time in many years- celebrate their birthday. And some will, if their

means allow it, plan a vacation again. Most respondents find these traditions remarkably important. They have a great symbolic value to them: they are synonymous with being a part of mainstream society again, 'belonging'.

Many former homeless persons try to get a grip on the misty –as they remember it- interval of the period of street life behind them, by reconstructing the chronological order of events that took place then. This stems from the need to fill in the gaps in the biography of their lives.

I try to discover a sort of line in my past, in what happened, so I can put everything in its proper place. But I find that there are many things of which I cannot remember exactly when they took place and in what order. I write down a lot so I can get things listed (woman 37 years of age)

In addition, former homeless people are forced by their surroundings to retrieve the chronological order of events, for a number of agencies that they have dealings with want information based on facts- with dates and years and all. Respondents are as a rule unable to provide these data. In contacts with agencies this will frequently lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding and distrust in the agency officials in hand.

In the Industrial Insurance Administration Office they wanted to know all about me: when did you work, where, until when, where for the first time, where next. I don't remember. I keep telling them: 'I have no sense of time from the years I walked the streets' and they won't believe me. The Administration Office won't accept it. (woman 26)

Another aspect of perception of time is that the former homeless must cope with the intrinsic speed of the recovery process. This is a slow process that as a rule takes several years. They are usually oriented on the swift and brief succession of events inherent to street life. In comparison, to them –now that their lives have come to smoother waters- there hardly seems to be any progress in the recovery process. Often it requires the utmost of their patience to go through the entire process and to maintain confidence that in the long run their efforts will be rewarded.

Perception of space

As soon as respondents have settled in and spend their time in the confined space of their home, they tend to find it very difficult to get used to this restricted sphere of action. Especially in the beginning the confined space has a claustrophobic effect on many. In their own words, in the home 'the walls are closing in on them'. To many this is a reason to flee the home frequently and seek out the spacious, unrestricted Umwelt of the streets.

I'm falling apart. I can't stand it any longer. The ceiling is so low and the walls are closing in on me. (woman 31 years of age)

To the former homeless the distinction between the private and the public sphere becomes relevant again. When acquiring private space they must regain their balance in the area of tension between the public and the private space. Many respondents, in particular in the beginning, will still perform part of the 'living functions' on the streets. To them the house is a place to sleep and to store things, while the street remains their home. At first, out of habit and a lack of alternatives many will continue to perform the regular rituals of the street. Some will search the dustbins for things they can use in their dwellings, others will go on selling street newspapers (The Big Issue)^{***} or begging, keep going to daycare or try to find entertainment in the park, or spend the odd night in the hostel or out in the open. Adhering to these street rituals provides something to hold on to in the period of transition in which they have not yet developed new patterns of behaviour and daily rituals that suit their new circumstances. In due course they will adapt their notions on which functions people ought to perform in the house or outside, to what is generally accepted. This is illustrated by the following quotation from a man who is now strongly inclined to only order beer and drinks in bars and drink them there from a glass, instead of buying them in the supermarket and drinking them in the streets or in the park from the deposit bottle or the can.

I won't sit outside on a bench with a beer in my hand. I drink my beer at home or I sit down in the pub and order a pint. That has changed. (male 40 years of age)

Such rituals are symbolic to the respondents of the fact that they are now once more part of mainstream society.

5. Conclusion

The mental process in which the homeless gradually shift their time perspective towards a cyclic time perception and in which they adjust their perception of space towards their needs, can be regarded as a functional adaptation to the homeless way of life. The paradox of this adaptation of the perception of time and space is that on the one hand it makes life on the streets more manageable and bearable to them, but on the other hand it contributes to the continuation of their situation of homelessness. It is their salvation and at the same time it creates new problems. For their distance to mainstream society

and the way in which it deals with time and space is increasing. And in their attempts to (re)enter society the ambiguous situation occurs that the adaptations they were forced to make in the perception of time and space during their homelessness, are an impediment to their attempts to build a more regular life. They must unlearn these streets habits. The overall picture is that many former homeless persons –as to their dealing with time and space- will vacillate for quite some time (some of them permanently, perhaps) between two worlds, adhering on the one hand to the way they dealt with time and space on the streets, and on the other adapting somewhat to the more usual notions of the prevailing culture in dominant society. After a few years some of them will succeed in cutting loose from their homeless past. They find a house, a steady job and a partner, extend their social network, arrange their household and may even accumulate some material prosperity. For them perception of time and space will gradually co-incide with the prevailing notions of regular society.

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