

Parklife: Stories and Spaces in Lockdown

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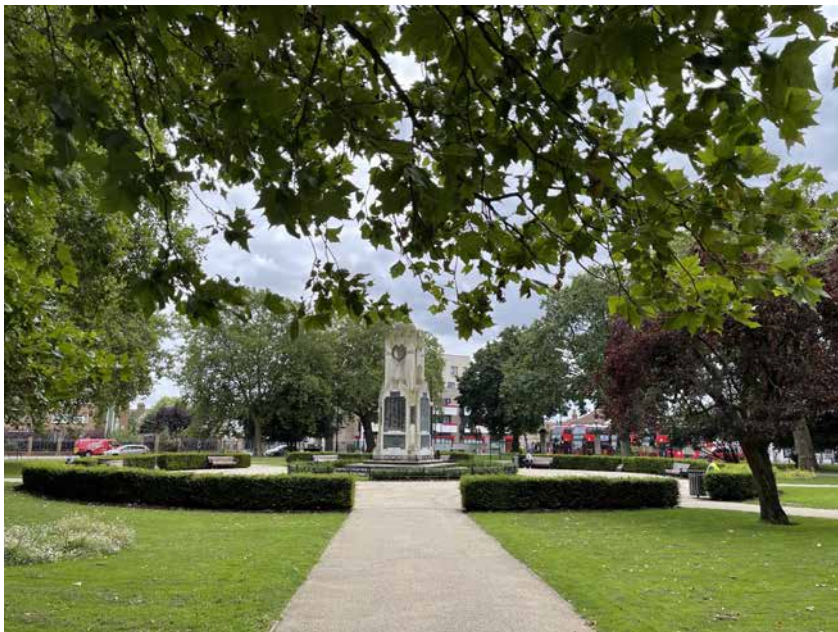
Introduction

The Coronavirus Act received Royal Assent on 26 March 2020 placing all UK residents into a legally enforced ‘stay at home’ order which would last until 23 June. When eventually lifted, it was replaced by waves of localised lockdowns and periods when social distancing restrictions were relaxed and tightened, before two further nationwide lockdowns on 5 November 2020 and 6 January 2021. In total, ‘stay at home’ orders were in place in England for 92 days in 2020, 99 days in Wales, 68 days in Scotland, and 50 days in Northern Ireland (Tatlow et al., 2021). This period of British history will no doubt receive immense academic scrutiny. What is less well-known (until now) is what was happening at a circle of six benches in an innocuous urban park in East Ham, East London.

The Coronavirus Act (2020) permitted one hour of outdoor daily exercise. At a stroke, the demographics of inner-city parks, like my own, shifted massively. Almost overnight the professional classes became home-workers. Many who had benefitted from short commutes to the City of London or Canary Wharf from the relatively cheaper housing prices in the East End of London, faced months of actually ‘living’ in these neighbourhoods. As community centres, pubs, and shops closed, urban parks experienced the greatest increase in use of any public space (Eadson et al., 2020). “At a time when communities were under stress and nobody knew how serious the pandemic was going to become, parks provided a lifeline and a breathing space” (Eadson et al., 2020, p.50).

A new cohort began to partake in what the British band *Blur* described as *parklife*. *Blur*’s hit single conjures up the secret life of city parks. *Parklife* is a place to suspend social norms: public sunbathing, loud music, playing with dogs. In an interview explaining the origins of their 1994 hit, band member Coxon said, “it wasn’t about the working class, it was about the *park class*: dustbin men, pigeons, joggers – things we saw every day” (Sullivan, 2012). My local park became ripe with potential to observe, in Hubbard and Lyon’s (2018) terms, embodied encounters which are essentially unmediated; a place with wonderful potential for ‘mis-meet-

ings' which make cities full of risk and liveliness (Stevens, 2007). Despite the middle-class incursion, I noticed the former regular *park class* of street drinkers retained a distinct space, occupying six benches in a circle around a memorial cenotaph. How had the original *park class* managed this? What was happening at the benches and what stories could those there share about life in lockdown? This small research project was born to discover insights into homelessness and belonging, stories and identity, and the attraction of *parklife*.



A quiet day at the circle of benches



G 'claiming space' at this bench more than four times a week

Method

After months of casual observation during the first and second lockdowns, I began a formal small-scale research project. I spent at least one afternoon every week at the six-bench circle, often more frequently. At first, I simply observed interactions there and chatted to people. I noted the socio-spatial regulation of the area. I recognised that the physical spaces for *parklife* vitally 'set the stage' for social interactions, and later investigated their different meanings to the variety of cultures using the same space – “the litter, lights, trees, wind, buildings, pavements, billboards, cars, kerbs, dogs, drains and so on” (Amin and Thrift, 2002, p.292). The park's geography shaped both the interactions I observed and my personal sociological imagination as I moved into them. Mobilities matter too (Sheller and Urry, 2006). I noted the time people spent in different spaces and the speed at which they moved through them.

Later, when I had become a familiar figure, and formal research agreements were in place, I began to interview those who came over to talk to me, building a picture of what this place meant to the regular bench sitters. This project was happening in a new context for me, but I already knew many of my participants. For the past seven years I have volunteered in local grass-roots projects addressing homelessness and food poverty. More recently, through a methodology of walking interviews,

I had begun to interrogate what keeps people street-sleeping and what it takes to transition into settled accommodation and a new identity (Mann, 2019). In terms of Covid protocols, ethnography does not sit well with social distancing. Thus, I adapted my approach and undertook a biographical *sitting* method rather than a walking one. I was outside once again with all the benefits of an intentionally embodied interaction, drawing attention to the physicality of the location. This method was similarly time-intensive to enable genuine participation in the co-production of knowledge and grounded in a narratological epistemology. Knowing a few of the 'locals' facilitated a snowballing method, whereby I was introduced to others with stories to tell. It seemed that my willingness to listen was appreciated. I did not approach potential participants. My bench conversations were directed by the participant and, once we got past the processes of research consent, felt genuinely like informal chats about life. The data produced was transcribed and thematically appraised.

Undoubtedly, being a familiar face within local advocacy projects helped foster trust with the *parklife* participants. A similar ethnographic approach is adopted by Moran and Atherton (2020) who describe themselves as 'participant observers' within homeless communities in Chester. They collect accounts of individual life courses, including the hopes and disappointments of a cohort they came to know well. Moran and Atherton found that with such a long-term involvement with these communities they became passive actors in the 'practice stories' they collected over five years. Their research frames the narratives they collected in a series of philosophical reflections proposing a philosophical exploration of homelessness as the ontological state of 'being without'. There are even greater similarities between my paper and Atherton's earlier study (2016) of a group of people experiencing homelessness who gathered regularly at 'The Cross' – a cluster of benches outside St. Peter's Church in Chester. Her findings on social disgust chime with the practices of social exclusion and invisibility I witnessed in my own local park. Although my research project is small, its findings confer with many others from a rich field, including that of Padgett (2007) and Waldron (1991; 2000) who both suggest that the experience of acute homelessness disrupts the secure basis for identity construction. In each of these studies, 'being without' is not only an experience of the lack of basic material provisions, such as having shelter, a place to wash, and somewhere to prepare meals, but it is also a lack of "meaningful agency; without being able to participate in society... without identity or prospects; without 'ways of being' that we (the housed) routinely take for granted... and significantly without the 'right to be'" (Moran and Atherton, 2020, pp.2-3). These deficits combine to undermine an individual's 'ontological security' (Padgett, 2007). This goes

someway to explain the pull of communal street culture in familiar spaces which take on some of the attributes of 'home'. These existing studies have helped situate my own investigation into *parklife*.

I appreciate Jones' paradox of *everyday* and *exceptional* in researching street life (Jones et al., 2008). Six months of fieldwork offered the opportunity to study huge numbers of everyday interactions and some exceptional ones. Exceptional moments are "numerically rare, but often provide illumination of more mundane phenomena, by throwing the latter into sharp relief and by providing important information based on how social actors respond to them" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.169). This is a study of everyday life in an exceptional time; a snapshot of *parklife* which may well have been replicated internationally, but which confines its scope to the particularity of a place and the stories of a certain group of 'the park class'.

Twelve participants, nine men and three women, took part in the *parklife* project. Two of the women had their children with them. All 12 had experienced homelessness in the last 18 months according to the UK Government's definition (Gov.UK, 2021), which includes:

- Rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping on the street);
- Houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary, in institutions or a shelter);
- Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence, or staying with family and friends known as 'sofa surfing'); and/or
- Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).

Four were in the 'roofless' category for some of the time during the project. Of these, three had spent some months in hotel accommodation as part of the *Everyone In* pandemic response in London, which saw 40000 people affected by homelessness offered immediate, temporary accommodation in hotels and 'Bed and Breakfasts'. One of the participants had refused to engage in the scheme and remained roofless or 'sofa surfing' for the duration of the project. Of the remainder, six of the group were 'houseless' for most of the project and living in temporary hostel accommodation. Another two were currently living in insecure housing, for example one woman and her child were living with her grandparents and sister in a two bedroomed flat. Alongside the formal participants of this project were a wider group of mainly 'street drinkers' whose housing classification I did not come to know; the majority of whom appeared to be migrant workers who came to the park after their shifts. This group did not give formal consent to participate but had

stories to share, which due to ethical guidelines cannot be included here. Nine of the 12 participants reportedly spent at least part of everyday (defined as more than five times a week) at the park. The rest spent at least part of more than one day a week there. Most were recurrent contributors to this project, meeting me repeatedly, and adding new chapters to their stories or sometimes just passing time and watching people use the park with me.

Importantly, the park bench users, who are the focus of this study, represent a small subset of people experiencing homelessness in the UK. This cohort often have complex needs, including problematic substance use and/or mental illness, alongside often persistent or recurrent experiences of homelessness. Their visibility results in the public and media treating this form of homelessness as representative of all forms of homelessness, which is far from the case.

Parklife, Stories, and Identities

My methodological decision to listen to stories was quickly confirmed as an appropriate way to enter *parklife*. I soon learned that stories were currency. Many people were introduced to me as ‘having a good story to tell’. Over the months, some stories were repeated, and I noticed how aspects of them were rehearsed – the repetition of exact phrases, and even pauses, especially in stories intended to be humorous. Some at the benches had previously heard the stories I was being told. They would interject to complete another’s sentences and were often corrected “I’m telling this. Who’s telling this story?” Telling a good story was a status marker.

The narratives had two prevalent themes: stories of victimisation and heroism. Stories of battling ‘the system’ were expected. I have heard many of these accounts in my voluntary work. Here, I was struck by the personalisation of systems and governmental departments – ‘the social’, ‘the housing’ – and how the narratives inferred the storyteller was pitched against a personified adversary, one which both knew and cared about aspects of their life and was bent on denigrating them:

“Don’t tell the social I’m here”

“They didn’t win. I got that claim”

“Four and half years they had me”

Encounters with statutory systems seemed to frame many of the life-stories I was told. Stories of other conflicts were abundant too and while I did not witness a single act of violence during my fieldwork, I did meet people with noticeable injuries which they explained to me had come from fights. There was an acceptance of violence

as part of their everyday life. These incidents were not usually defined under the 'victimhood' category but usually shrugged off as 'one of those things' or not explained at all.

Almost as prevalent as the victimisation narratives were the heroic ones. I heard of how individuals had 'saved the life' of others by preventing or joining in fights, lending money, and sharing accommodation. These stories were usually told in groups, "Remember that time when I saved his life...." Or where the recipient could be pointed out, "See him, I saved his life...."

The stories seemed 'larger than life' and were often retold to me as others arrived in the group. It reminded me of the self-authoring narratives theorised by Ricoeur (1984; 1985; 1988). The active interpretation of the narratives evidenced how the participants organised their sense of time – these were the important and framing events of their lives, and they could be cast and recast in ways which helped them understand themselves. Ricoeur's 'emplotment' was at work as people drew together disparate events and created meaning and identity from them – as people who took on systems, who won against the odds, who helped each other. This narration may not have been wildly accurate, but importantly, as Ricoeur identifies, the narratives imply autonomous acts of moral responsibility, which casts the individual, at the point at which they tell the story with opportunity and potential for an 'inchoate narrativity' – if they were heroes or over-comers once, they might well be that again. This is Ricoeur's 'semantics of action', whereby actions and their consequences are woven into stories which are rich with meaning and provide worldviews which help situate us. Ricoeur himself noted the power of hero and princess stories (I did not encounter the latter at the benches) and make up a sense of self that is illusory. However embellished these tales may be, they are used to provide a sense of subjectivity. The ability stories have for 'emplotment' can shift the subject's actions in the future. This was something I had seen for myself in previous walking interview's whereby Dean retold his five-year journey of moving from street sleeping to settled accommodation and integration into wider society through becoming a 'tea angel' – a volunteer in a charity which gave him purpose, belonging, and the pull of a new identity (Mann, 2019).

Alongside the victim and hero stories were others of loss and bereavement. There was a quietness to these, and they were usually told to me on my own. These stories were often prefaced with "Do you remember..." or "You know... (this person)?". It was clear that the loss might only be shared if I knew who they were speaking about. I heard stories of three deaths in the duration this project – of people's close friends, all of whom seemed to have died from the long-term health effects of problematic substance use. These stories seemed less rehearsed, and I could not tell how they were being incorporated into any larger system of meaning. They were

sad stories. I did not experience them being cast in the victimisation narratives. The deaths were not explained in that way, but simply as sad losses. The context of these deaths needs to be situated in the fact that homelessness and street life too often have fatal consequences. The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that 726 people experiencing homelessness died in England and Wales in 2018. This is a 22% year-to-year increase and the highest since estimates began in 2013. Data suggests that most deaths among people experiencing homelessness were caused by drug related poisoning, suicide, and alcohol-specific deaths (Aldridge, 2019).

There were many other stories gathered from the six benches. A few were childhood and teenage recollections, sometimes prompted by the presence of children among the group. But the prized stories were the ones about taking on systems, and of being a 'face', a known figure who resolved other's problems and kept things in order. Who knew the park had so many sheriffs?

Claiming and Maintaining Space

Among its claims for the enormous contribution urban parks made to wellbeing during lockdown, the 'Parks for People Report' (2020) found some felt their local green spaces had become overcrowded. Some respondents reported feeling their park was characterised by incidents of antisocial behaviour such as outdoor drinking and drug-taking and said that their access to the park was limited by fear of it. I felt this deserved further interrogation. Since its inception, the sociology of deviance has pointed out that it is the social status of the drug user, rather than the threat posed by any drug, which leads to its use being labelled as deviant (Becker, 1955). Attitudes to 'outdoor drinking' are ultimately contextual. Public fears of 'outdoor drinking' in parks coexisted with widespread calls for pub gardens to be allowed to reopen, and an increase in the private consumption of alcohol among single adult households, households with three or more adults, and students (Stevley et al., 2021). More than one in three adults in the UK increased the amount they drank during the first lockdown and the greatest indicator of increased alcohol consumption was stress and enforced isolation (Sallie et al., 2020). People with no access to private space, or living in very crowded and chaotic environments, undoubtedly experienced more stress during the 'stay at home' order. Fears of 'public drinking' are therefore complex and most likely fears of aggression and the othering and pathologising of street cultures. I became interested in the relationship between deviance and claiming space in parks.

Accessing green space is complex and may even bring social groups into contest. There is much evidence that lower socioeconomic groups have access to fewer acres of parks per person, and that that these are of lower quality with poorer maintenance and safety than privileged groups (Rigolon, 2016). In Great Britain, one in eight households (12%) had no access to a private or shared garden during the coronavirus lockdown. Regional and ethnic differences are also relevant. In London, more than one in five households (21%), have no private or shared garden; easily the highest percentage of any region in Great Britain. Moreover, in England, 37% of Black people have no access to outdoor space at home, whether it be a private or shared garden, a patio, or a balcony, compared with 10% for White populations (ONS, 2020). Furthermore, proximity to green space does not always equate with access. ONS data suggests that more than a quarter of people (28%) in Great Britain live within a five-minute walk (300m as the crow flies) of a public park, while 72% live fewer than 15 minutes away (900m) (ONS 2020). Jones et al. (2009) discovered that while British people living in more deprived areas lived closer to green spaces, they reported having poorer access to parks, felt less safe using them, and therefore visited parks less frequently than other groups. Holland (2021) suggests that some groups dominate the use of parks and keep its benefits to themselves. This can involve claiming space through harassment. Self-exclusion also happens when groups fear other's anti-social behaviour, such as adults avoiding parks they feel to be dominated by young people. In this, parks can amplify social divisions and hierarchies.

I wondered if the competition for space in urban parks would exacerbate the tendency to label and marginalise those at the six benches in my own, or whether the social changes brought about by the pandemic might create new bonds of social cohesion. Before the pandemic hit, Dobson et al. (2019) made an optimistic proposal in their report *Space to Thrive*:

Parks and green spaces can create opportunities for social interaction, inclusion and cohesion, which may be particularly valuable for marginalised groups. (Dobson et al., 2019, p.20)

Given the issues around contestation of space, I investigated social interactions in the park between the *parklife* regulars, and between this cohort and other users. The data divided into several categories. Firstly, there was the outright avoidance of the group by other park users. Paths criss-crossed the circle of six benches, but these were rarely used by other park visitors. The circle of benches acted as a shibboleth. As well as circumventing the physical space, other avoidance techniques included not looking in the direction of the benches, passing by quickly, and avoiding eye contact. These were very apparent to me but not commented on by any of the bench participants. Despite this, I believe that their behaviour at times

might be best understood as a reaction to practices of social marginalisation, and most particularly that of social invisibility, which is a persistent, stigmatising, and dehumanising phenomenon affecting people who experience homelessness and other severe deprivations. There has been much written about social invisibility (Omerov et al., 2020) and how it contributes to the potentially fatal effects of exclusion through increasing the likelihood of unnatural death (Slockers et al., 2018). I witnessed ostracising practices many times in the park. Perhaps the very act of gathering as a loosely defined group countered this to some extent? It is much harder to ignore a group of a dozen or so people. I wondered if the loud greetings among the group, which seemed exaggerated at times, and the frequently shirtless chests of the men, went some way to counter feelings of invisibility.

Alongside the active avoidance of interactions, much of what I observed in the park might be described as a separate but calm co-existence as park bench regulars and the newer visitors carved out their own spaces and practices alongside each other. I was aware that the spaces in the park held different meanings for its users and that this was especially noticeable in the length of time people spent in given areas and how quickly they passed through others. For many of my afternoons in the park, the six benches were fairly quiet places with people scattered, often equidistantly, frequently alone, or in pairs. Dramaturgically speaking, it was often a place for 'backstage' relaxation. People experiencing homelessness may not have the physical boundaries between the front and backstage settings Goffman (1959) describes. Their performance of identity may take place in the same physical and often public spaces. The boundaries between being 'front stage' or not, therefore relies on other means of separation, such as marked differences in *habitus*, to enable an individual to rest from the performance of their identity. This adds to the experience of stress and is just one of many less-considered ways that people experiencing homelessness are excluded from "ways of being" that people with adequate housing routinely take for granted (Moran and Atherton 2020, p.2-3). The lack of the ability to withdraw at will into a private 'backstage' site is another example of how people experiencing street homelessness significantly live without the 'right to be' (Waldron, 1991; 2000; Moran and Atherton, 2020).

The ability to 'get away from it all' may well rely on strong social cues prohibiting interaction, or of course, through inebriation. I saw how thresholds for 'backstage' and fully 'front stage' performances of identity were maintained through social cues which invited or prohibited interaction, and these were usually respected. Much of the time at the park seemed to be spent visiting others' benches and retreating again to one which seemed to serve as a 'home base'. Music and rowdiness seemed to work as an invitation to gather, as did the new arrival of friends. The usual social cues of eye contact avoidance seemed to maintain space for individuals at other times. There was some sleeping and private drinking, but smoking seemed

to be the usual way to fill quieter times. I followed these cues for space and waited for people who recognised me to come over and start chatting and allowed them to call others over in a loose snowballing technique to find participants willing to share a story and a bench with me.

The third category of encounters occurred when the group made their presence felt through, it seemed, intentional displays of deviant behaviour, primarily rowdiness, which appeared to be used to claim and maintain space within the park. Although infrequent, these disturbances forced other park-users into interactions with those on the six benches – by their noise or the way they dominated space there. Much of what I witnessed at these times reminded me of Downes and Rock's "flowering of expressive deviance" (2003, p.178). Public drunkenness, appearing to teeter on outbreak of a fight or other forms of rowdiness received the expected informal sanctions from other park users. I did not witness any formal sanctions, nor did anyone approach the group to complain about their behaviour. Being bare-chested was another expression of deviance, as were the sporadic loud shouts across the benches and occasional bursts of dance. What was clear, however, was that deviant behaviour seemed to be expected from the group, who were largely avoided by other park users, even when everything was very quiet. I witnessed other park visitors strike up interactions and conversations between themselves: at the park gates, in the playground, at the tennis courts, or as they passed each other on the paths. It was noticeable that the group at the benches were left, almost entirely, to interact only with each other (and sometimes, me). And yet there were good conversations to be had there. This confirmed that being identified as "one of the homeless" (as the group were described to me by an onlooker who enquired about my research) or as a 'street drinker' is indeed a *master trait*, just as Becker described (1963, p.32). Other traits such as being a mother, a worker relaxing after a shift, or a local seeking company, were clearly auxiliary traits. Even sitting quietly alone did not remove the master trait identity. I noticed this most profoundly in the behaviour of the two women participants who brought their children to the benches quite regularly (one was there with her son for part of every day). She rarely took her son to the playground and I did not see her interact with any of the many other parents there. Instead, she stayed at the benches and limited her interactions to that group. Homogenising, excluding, and labelling people who experience homelessness, or are otherwise part of street culture, was very noticeable to me, although not once commented on by the participants themselves.

***Everyone In* and Importance of Particular Place**

At the beginning of the pandemic, the UK Government charged local authorities with getting *Everyone In* and initially committed £3.2 million to this. This saw nearly 15 000 people experiencing street homelessness housed in emergency accommodation such as hotels (Gov.UK, 2020). More recently the UK Government announced a further £105 million in dedicated funding for emergency accommodation for people at risk of people experiencing street homelessness, and support to find alternative housing, under a taskforce led by Dame Louise Casey. The national picture was one of resolve and described as an 'extraordinary opportunity' to tackle the crisis in homelessness:

However this terrible crisis has also given us an extraordinary opportunity to build on the success of bringing 'everyone in' and to try to make sure they don't go back to the streets. (Dame Louise Casey, Gov.UK, 2021)

At my local park, three of the four *parklife* participants who had been roofless at the start of the pandemic were moved into accommodation as part of *Everyone In*. One man had decided not to engage with the effort and spent the whole of lockdown in a mixture of homelessness states – sofa surfing and street-based homelessness, sometimes in the park itself. This young man in his 30s had been homeless since he was 16 years old. It was difficult to tell why he had not engaged with the national programme. It was similarly hard to keep track of how and where people were being accommodated during lockdown. One participant told me about the extreme restrictions in place in their hostel where they had to comply with a curfew and had very limited social interaction. Another was relieved to be offered somewhere away from the streets and saw this as an opportunity. I learnt that some of the park regulars had travelled across one or more London boroughs to continue their *parklife* during the *Everyone In* months. The benches seemed to be more than a replacement for accommodation. Were they providing something more akin to 'home'?

'What happens here?' became a useful opening question for my fieldwork. Invariably the theme of meeting and 'being with' emerged as the most important function of the six benches. It was a place of belonging: 'meeting', 'seeing who's out', and 'banter'. It was also a place of escape: 'getting away', 'can't be stuck indoors', and 'clears my head'. It was a place to return to see the same faces daily and sometimes 'things happened'. Much of this fits with prominent themes from the phenomenology of place first codified by Relph (1976; 1996; 2000). Relph states that spaces should be explored in terms of how people experience them. The process of memories and repeated encounters build a social form of place identity – the identity of groups *with* places. Relph's phenomenological approach describes why a particular place is special and can be used to *prescribe*, through practices of place-making, ways to provide spaces which foster a sense of belonging, and so turn spaces into

places. His original work (1976) and later critical reflections (1996; 2000) throw light on much of the data around the particularity of place and the draw of the six benches. The persistent pull to gather there is based perhaps on the way in which this familiar place provides a thread of continuity in lives which are otherwise chaotic. Relph refers to the “persistent sameness and unity which allows that [place] to be differentiated from others” (1976, p.45). Relph describes the implications and potential of a place to build individual and group identity in three ways: firstly, there is the stability and influence of the place’s physical setting; secondly, the activities and events which happen there; and thirdly, the meanings created through people’s experiences in regard to that place. One outcome is that a chosen, familiar place, as opposed to a place where an individual feels like an ‘outsider’, provides a sense of safety rather than threat, of being at ease rather than stressed. The more profoundly ‘inside’ a place a person feels, the stronger her or his identity with that place will be. This can lead to a sense of ‘existential insideness’ where a person feels unselfconscious and at home in their own community and place. The opposite is ‘existential outsideness’—a sense of strangeness and alienation. All of this is immediately and obviously relevant to the experience of homelessness and dis-location. Relph himself (1996; 2000) corrected some of the dualism inherent in the dialectical opposites in original work and stressed the spectrum of ‘placedness and placelessness’ and how an individual can journey between these experiences within a very small setting. I believe the mothers at the six benches were experiencing just this: a sense of belonging and ‘insideness’ at the benches but an ‘existential outsideness’ at the playground. The use of the benches as a place to confer a sense of belonging is very close to the notion and characterisation of ‘home’. Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* claims that “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (1994, p.5 [Orig. 1958]). Spaces which provide a sense of belonging and a shared way to confer meaning from shared activities are homely. Similarly, Liotta (2009) writes: “A place takes on meaning as a result of the sensations and emotions elicited and the consequent attachments formed... External space becomes interior space, a subjective space and time of experience, memory and emotions” (p.6). Shared, familiar places have psychic content. While the *parklife* participants described the place they gathered in everyday terms ‘hanging out’, ‘being with’, and ‘seeing who’s out’, they acted in ways which conferred deeper, psychic, and social meanings; all of which can be summed up in the word ‘home’. This explains why so many participants spent some part of each day there, even when ‘housed’ elsewhere. Tenuous attachments and chaotic histories can make place of belonging more attractive. While there are positives to this in the sense of identity and countering social invisibility, the ‘pull factor’ of street culture can prevent individuals transitioning to new identities (Ravenhill, 2008; Mann, 2019). This may have been the case for the man who refused accommodation through the *Everyone In* initiative and explains why many participants travelled significant distances when they were relocated to return to this

significant place. Its attraction is in the sense of identity and belonging but also because other places may signify what Rose (1995) describes as 'identification against a place' – places which are 'we' verses 'them'. Rose also describes the 'non-identification with places' with its feelings of estrangement and displacement, which may be powerful even where accommodation is offered if it is in an unfamiliar area or where a person has opportunities to make new, replacement connections.

Conclusion

As the UK moves out of national lockdowns, and the *Everyone In* programme is phased out, there is a genuine risk that street-based homelessness and other forms of homelessness will dramatically increase in the UK. This is not only because those receiving temporary accommodation may not receive sufficient support or opportunity to transition into more settled housing, but also because of job losses or reduced pay caused by the coronavirus crisis, particularly as the furlough scheme and legislation banning evictions end. Furthermore, the charity St Mungo's (2021) warns that a high number of people currently in emergency accommodation will be unable to access ongoing support due to their migration status. A perfect storm is brewing if the call to seize the 'extraordinary opportunity' to end street-based homelessness which Dame Louise Casey (2021) described is ignored. The findings of the project reported here suggest that there is far more to successful transition from street-based homelessness than appropriate accommodation. Intentional place-making to support communities to be resilient, hospitable, and have safe spaces to interact are all part of the equation. Furthermore, the contribution of grassroots charities to provide long-term therapeutic communities of healing and transition should not be overlooked; wisdom from these contexts needs a better hearing in policy decisions.

For this research I listened to the stories of those already caught up in the crisis of homelessness in the UK and witnessed their social invisibility and marginalisation in the context of one specific urban park in the East End of London. But I also witnessed their communality in a site over which they managed to retain a level of control. There is conviviality here, as well as the constant black-marketing transactions of goods and information. There are many reports of violence, none of which I personally witnessed, several arguments, and a surprising number of interventions to settle and resolve them. There is drama and rest. As I watch and listen, I am becoming convinced that many people fail to make the transition from street-sleeping because 'mainstream' society is lonelier, less liveable, and altogether less fun than *parklife*. The vital importance of being in a place where you are seen and known is the strongest lesson from my time listening to stories at the six benches. The research project provided me with much needed social contact and a summer of listening to stories. In Blur's words, there is more 'hand-in-hand' about *parklife*.

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