Deciding How to Get By: Subsistence Choices among Homeless Youth in Toronto

by

Tyler Jarret Frederick

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation develops insights into subsistence related decision-making from the perspective of homeless and street involved young people themselves through 39 in-depth and life story interviews. The interviews provide insight into two important and underexplored questions: how the social organization of street spaces shapes street life and subsistence; and how the self is implicated in subsistence related decision-making. To address these questions the analysis develops a conceptual model based on field theory (Bourdieu 1984; Green 2008; Martin 2003) that conceptualizes “the street” as a collection of interlocking subfields—unique social terrains structured at the intersection of various social forces that position actors relative to one another and that orient actors towards particular approaches to street life. The core concepts of field theory—field, capital, and habitus—provide insight into how the unique social spaces of homelessness distribute resources, stratify actors, and provide discourses that frame practice. The analysis demonstrates the strength of this approach through case studies of three such subfields in Toronto. Further, the analysis extends the field framework, and contributes to research on the role of the self in street life, by examining how narratives influence the navigation of street spaces. Actors use narratives to make sense of their circumstances and to invest lines of action with a sense of personal meaning. This narrative perspective is integrated with a dual process approach to action (Vaisey 2009) that states that action is influenced by internalized dispositions formed through experience and upbringing (habitus), as well as through available cultural resources that underwrite and legitimize courses of practice. I extend this approach by considering how these two processes interact within narratives, and how the resulting interplay shapes how the homeless navigate the social spaces of homelessness.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Homelessness is a major social issue in Canada and the US, and in Canada a third of all the homeless are between the ages of 16 and 24 (Raising the Roof 2009). Among this latter group, subsistence patterns vary quite broadly: some homeless youth panhandle while others refuse, some are criminally involved or do sex work while others do not, and some sleep at shelters while others avoid them at all costs. Nevertheless, theories of variation in subsistence patterns among homeless youth remain limited, and how such youth make subsistence choices is not well understood. Although the extant literature includes accounts of how subsistence patterns are shaped by demographic and family-related factors (abuse histories, parental characteristics, drug use, etc.), and street-related factors (time on the street, deviant peers, relative deprivation, etc.), it does not offer a sufficient theoretical account of how the social organization of street life fundamentally shapes subsistence choices and, in turn, trajectories through homelessness.

My analysis draws on interviews with 39 homeless young people in Toronto to develop a conceptual model based on field theory (Bourdieu 1984; Green 2008; Martin 2003) that provides a multi-level perspective on the social organization and negotiation of street life. I argue that the street can be conceptualized as a collection of interlocking fields—unique social terrains structured at the intersection of various social forces that position actors relative to one another and that orient those within the field towards particular approaches to street life. These fields structure practice, including subsistence strategies, by determining the means through which youth can acquire and convert various kinds of resources or capital and by defining particular orientations to homelessness. I provide detailed case studies of three street spaces, illustrating their field structure and how each shapes and organizes street life, including subsistence strategies.

I advance this framework further, and contribute to field theory more broadly, by examining the role that narratives play in the navigation and negotiation of street fields. I argue that self narration is an under-recognized process through which the cultural resources and unconscious dispositions central to sociological field theory shape practice (Swidler 2001; Vaisey 2009). As actors we tell stories about ourselves that make sense of current circumstances in the context of experiences and intuitive feelings about “who we are”, using available cultural
narratives and discourses to construct those stories. These personal narratives shape practice among homeless and street involved young people by orienting them towards particular approaches to street life. Integrating field theory with the concept of narrative identity corrects the focus in the current literature on the transition from mainstream to homeless identity by considering how the self is more broadly implicated in decision-making. Subsistence choices are made in the back and forth between culturally mediated self-reflections and the practical demands of street subfields.

The field framework I advance recognizes the diverse social spaces that constitute “the street”, but it connects these spaces together within a shared analytic framework. It provides a common set of concepts and questions that enable comparisons across contexts and that make it possible to build an integrated and comprehensive body of scholarship around the social organization of street life. The core concepts of field theory—field, capital, and habitus—provide a shared language for identifying and describing the unique social worlds of “the street”, but they also provide insight into how the social organization of street spaces shapes life within them. I examine social practice among the homeless by considering how the unique terrains of homeless social spaces distribute resources, stratify actors, and provide discourses that frame practice and that underwrite particular orientations to street life. A field analysis raises a range of sensitizing questions which extend our understanding of street life, including what are the dominant types of resources or capital at play within a given street space, how does the distribution of capital within a particular street context shape practice within that space, how do the structures of the space underwrite a particular orientation to street life, and how do the skills and dispositions that the homeless bring with them into street life shape their trajectories through the social spaces of homelessness? These questions shed light on a range of issues and practices central to homelessness research, including peer relations, drug use, offending, service use, and health practices. The focus of the subsequent analysis is on subsistence strategies, but the analytic framework has implications for the study of homelessness generally.

I demonstrate the strengths of a field approach through case studies of three street subfields in Toronto—three distinct social spaces that structure street life. Chapter 2 frames the analysis by locating this project within the extant literature on street youth and subsistence, focusing specifically on gaps in the literature regarding our understanding of how the social organization of street life shapes subsistence practices. Chapter 3 details my field approach to
street life. This chapter discusses the main analytic concepts of field, capital, and habitus. I also extend field theory by outlining the role that the self and self-narratives play in the navigation of street fields. Chapter 4 describes the data and method, including recruitment procedures, the interview structure, and the characteristics of the sample. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 contain the case studies of three Toronto street subfields. Within each chapter I focus on how the structure of each space shapes and organizes street life. The chapters examine the structures that define each space, paying particular attention to the nature and distribution of social, economic, and cultural resources, the opportunities for acquiring and converting these resources, the nature of stratification, and the discourses and cultural resources that frame and underwrite the dominant orientation to street life within that space. Chapter 5 focuses on the street field embedded with the social scene of Toronto’s Gay Village neighbourhood and how that space is structured by opportunities for converting erotic capital, as well as discourses that define and emphasize a “glamorous” approach to street life. It highlights, in particular, the unique kinds of capital at play within the spaces of street life, as well as the role of discourses in shaping orientations to homelessness. Chapter 6 examines the social space that surrounds groups of street entrenched youth that congregate in the city’s southwest corner. Comparisons between the two subfields illustrate the extent to which homeless and street involved youth occupy distinct social worlds and the unique structures that shape subsistence choices within each space. Using the example of pet ownership I illustrate how the structural terrain of street spaces organizes street life and gives street spaces their unique character. This chapter also highlights the analytic advantages of distinguishing between subcultures and fields within the study of street life. Chapter 7 examines the unique social world surrounding one of Toronto’s largest and most popular youth shelters and an adjacent drop-in centre. It extends many of the themes established in the first two case studies by examining the opportunity structures for acquiring and converting capital and the discourses unique to this space. This chapter also draws particular attention to how street fields structure peer interactions, as well how race and ethnicity intertwine with field dynamics. Chapter 8 focuses on the task of navigating street fields and the role that the self and self-narratives play in that process. Chapter 9 reviews the main findings and insights and provides policy suggestions.
Chapter 2
Youth Homelessness and Subsistence

2.1 Youth Homelessness

Youth are a sizable proportion of those who are homeless and street involved and their numbers are growing (Robertson & Toro 1998; Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force 1999). Although a precise measurement is difficult, it is estimated that there are around 1.5 million homeless youth in the U.S. (Shane 1989; Robertson & Toro 1998) and that 5% to 7.7% of youth in the US experience homelessness each year (Robertson & Toro 1998). Estimates for Canada put the number at around 60,000 (Raising the Roof 2009). However, if a similar percentage of youth in Canada experience homelessness as in the U.S., the estimate could be closer to 150,000.

The large, and increasing, number of homeless and street-involved young people can be placed in the context of social, political, and economic changes affecting the nature and timing of life events like education, marriage, employment, and children (Hagan & McCarthy 2005; Karabanow et al. 2010). In short, the definition of adulthood is changing. A key dimension of this change is that young people are entering a labour market characterized by low-wage and part-time work and the increasing need for educational credentials (Lowe 2001). This period is also characterized by neo-liberal policies that see the defunding of public education and retrenchments in the social welfare system (Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Fitzpatrick 2000; Mizen 2004).

Young adults are expected to rely on parental support while they acquire the educational credentials necessary to find living-wage work. This pathway puts those young people who are pushed or forced into early independence at serious risk for unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. This increased vulnerability is borne out by the consistent finding that the backgrounds of street youth are characterized by family environments lacking in social support and economic resources, as well family histories of abuse, mental illness and drug use (Hagan & McCarthy 2005; Kidd & Shahar 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999).

Young people leave home for a number of reasons, including neglect, physical and sexual abuse, family conflict, parental drug or alcohol use, parental mental health problems, family dysfunction, desire for independence, and clashes over delinquency and the use of drugs and alcohol (Flowers 2010; Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz 1991; Martijn & Sharpe 2006; Roberts 1982;
Tyler 2006; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999). In some cases the choice to leave is voluntary and in others it is forced. In terms of youth initiated transitions, Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) found that close to 40% of their sample chose to leave home because of abuse and neglect, and that a similar percentage left because of fighting and arguing. In terms of parent-initiated transitions, the conflict that precedes youth being forced out the home often revolves around clashes over rules, alcohol and drug use, sexuality, and problems at school (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill 2010; Ray 2006). Another common pathway to the street is exiting foster care or some type of child protection service (Flowers 2010; Courtney & Dworsky 2006); specific reasons for leaving include conflicts with staff or foster parents, bullying, a desire for independence, abuse, and conflicts with peers in the home.

2.2 Definitions of Youth Homelessness

There are a range of definitions for homelessness and they all emphasize different dimensions of inadequate housing and street involvement (Lundy 1995; Hatty 1996; Hagan & McCarthy 1997; van der Ploeg & Scholte 1997). This includes time on the street (Grigsby, Baumann, Gregorich, & Roberts-Gray 1990), number of nights on the street (Tarasuk, Dachner, & Li, 2005), types of accommodation (Arce, Tadlock, Vergare, & Shapiro 1983), level of adult supervision (Williams 1993), and the reasons youth left home or care (i.e. runaway vs. throwaway) (Zide & Cherry 1992). Other work (Hatty 1996) uses definitions of homelessness that emphasize degrees of social isolation and exclusion; for example, Barak (1994) defines homelessness as a “…marginalized condition of detachment from society and to the lack of bonds that connect settled persons to a network of institutions and social orders” (897).

The literature on youth homelessness and subsistence typically avoids distinguishing between different types of ‘youth’ in terms of specific features of their homelessness or levels of exclusion (as specified above). Homelessness is often characterized as a lack of permanent, safe, and reliable housing (Hagan & McCarthy 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; Fitzpatrick & Kennedy 2000; Gaetz & O’Grady 2002). I prefer this general approach because it implicitly acknowledges the range of reasons that youth end up on the street, the variety of typical and atypical housing youth use, and the often insecure and temporary nature of this housing. It also makes no assumptions about the degree to which youth are detached or excluded from society. I define homeless and street involved youth as young people who “are absolutely, periodically, or
temporarily without shelter, as well as those who are at substantial risk of being in the street in the immediate future” (Gaetz & O’Grady 2002). In this sense, being in the street is defined as a “…state of living in which adolescents [do] not rent, own, or have a customary regular access to a conventional dwelling” (McCarthy & Hagan 1992: 413). Implicit in this conceptualization is the idea that such a state will necessarily involve at least some contact with the social spaces that define street life in a given locale.

The category of youth refers to young people who are somewhere between childhood and adulthood, but there is no agreed upon age range or criteria. Youth can be determined in reference to a range of criteria, including the age of majority (e.g. under 18), age limits set by governments and service organizations, and definitions derived from stages in the life course (Hagan & McCarthy 1997). The present analysis uses a combination of the latter two criteria, and defines youth as anyone between the ages of 16 and 25. In practical terms, this range reflects the age range used by youth focused service agencies in Toronto. Further, 16 is an age when most researchers and ethics board regard youth as being able to provide informed consent. In more theoretical terms, 16 years old reflects an age when young people in most jurisdictions in North America are beginning to gain privileges and responsibilities that distinguish them from children (e.g. being eligible to operate a motor vehicle, make choices about their own education, etc.). At the age of 25 young people are beginning to make the transition into adult roles and responsibilities such as full-time work, children rearing, and marriage.

2.3 Subsistence

In the context of homelessness, and the associated lack of support from caregivers, young people are required to establish strategies for securing basic resources and to provide for themselves. This includes strategies for securing the basics like shelter, food, and clothing. However, research on marginalized youth also emphasizes the importance of consumption to participation in street and mainstream culture, and as a resource for identity construction, including consumption of consumer goods, and drugs and alcohol (Collison 1996; Rizzini & Butler 2003). To this effect, I use an expanded definition of subsistence that includes any legal, quasi-legal, or illegal activity done by street youth to generate income, or to secure valued or necessary goods or services.
Primary sources of shelter include staying at the houses of friends, family, or partners (i.e. couch surfing), staying at shelters or hostels, securing enough money to stay at a cheap hotel, or staying on the street (sleeping on sidewalks, benches, in parks, under bridges, etc.) (Clatts & Davis 1999). Emergency shelters and drop-in services, in addition to providing shelter, are also an important source of other necessities such as clothing and food. Other sources of food include purchasing food oneself, relying on donations from acquaintances and the public, stealing food from restaurants and stores, and dumpster diving (Tarasuk et al. 2005). Research suggests that purchasing food is the most common strategy among homeless and street involved young people (Tarasuk et al. 2005).

Despite being able to meet some of their needs through donations and support agencies, homeless youth need to support themselves by generating an income. Popular strategies include work in the formal economy (typically insecure and minimum-wage); informal work, like recycling, panhandling and squeegee cleaning (washing car windows at traffic lights); crime like theft, prostitution and drug dealing; or receiving social assistance (Gaetz & O’Grady 2002; Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, & Patterson 2011; van der Ploeg & Scholte 1997). Youth also secure what they need through trading, bartering, and borrowing (Hagan & McCarthy 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; Tyler & Johnson 2006). This can include cooperative strategies like pooling limited resources, or more exploitive ones like survival sex.

Although homeless young people are involved in the formal economy their rates of participation are quite low (Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; van der Ploeg and Scholte 1997). Gaetz and O’Grady (2002) indicate that only 15% of their Toronto respondents identified employment as their main source of income. Similarly, Hagan and McCarthy (1997) find that 73% of their sample from Toronto, and 62% of their sample from Vancouver reported no formal employment at the time of the interview (McCarthy & Hagan 1992; Hagan & McCarthy 1997). Reporting a similar level of involvement, Gwadz et al. (2009) show that 30% of their sample was employed in the formal economy (also see Clatts & Davis 1999). These low participation rates are not necessarily for lack of interest. Accordingly, O’Grady and Gaetz (2004) indicate that over 80% of the youth they interviewed desired employment in the formal economy.

The rates for participation in deviant and illegal subsistence strategies vary across studies and contexts. For example, van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) in their study of homeless youth from the Netherlands find that 83% respondents engaged in theft, 72% in burglary, and 18% in
robbery. In comparison, other studies report rates of general theft that range from 19% to 50% (Clatts & Davis 1999; McCarthy & Hagan 1992; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999). Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) report that 30% of their sample from the Midwestern United States sold drugs, which is twice the proportion reported by van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997). Prostitution and sex work appear even more disparate across studies with Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) reporting that around 2% of their sample engaged in prostitution, which compares to 10% reported by Gaetz and O’Grady (2002) and 30% reported by McCarthy and Hagan (1992). Rates of panhandling vary from 12% to 37% (Clatts & Davis 1999; Gwadz et al. 2009; O’Grady & Gaetz 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999). These differences suggest that there are strong contextual influences on subsistence choices.

The term “survival sex” is used in the literature to describe another form of subsistence strategy—the exchange of sex for shelter, food, drugs, or money (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt 1999; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; Tyler & Johnson 2006). The term is inclusive of “hustling” and prostitution, but is meant to acknowledge a broader range of activities; for example, exchanging sex for food or shelter, as well as using sexual relationships as a survival strategy. Studies report participation rates that range from 10% to 50% (Greene et al. 1999), but a more recent review suggests that rates are usually less than 20% (Tyler & Johnson 2006).

Other sources of income include social assistance such as welfare, and financial support from friends and family. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) report that 5.5% and 9.5% of their sample received social security and welfare respectively. McCarthy and Hagan (1992) report that 53% of their sample received welfare payments, and Gaetz and O’Grady (2002) find that 15% of their sample relied on social assistance as their main source of income. As for financial support from friends and family, Gwadz et al. (2009) find that over 75% of their sample received money from friends or family. This compares to around 30% reported by Clatts and Davis (1999).

2.4 Understanding Subsistence Patterns

The consensus within the literature is that homeless young people use a mix of strategies to meet their needs on the street (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn 2007; Flowers 2010; Kipke, Unger, O’Connor, Palmer, & LaFrance 1997). We also know, however, that involvement in subsistence activities is patterned and that the homeless are not indiscriminate in their choices (Hagan & McCarthy 1997; Wasserman & Claire 2010; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999). The following
section reviews the demographic, family-related, and street-related factors shaping subsistence choices. This discussion is followed by a review of the cluster/pathways and the ethnographic literature that draws more attention to the distinct social spaces that constitute street life. The review concludes that despite having some understanding of the forces and factors that influence subsistence outcomes, our knowledge of the specific dynamics through which the social organization of street contexts shapes subsistence patterns is limited.

2.4.1 Demographic Factors

The most prominent demographic factors in the literature include age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Research on the influence of demographic factors is typically focused on understanding participation in “deviant” or criminal subsistence strategies. The influence of age appears to be moderate, and the general pattern appears to be that participation in deviant or criminal subsistence strategies decreases with age; however the findings about the specifics of this relationship are mixed. Baron (2006), for example, finds that age decreases participation in violent crime on the street, but that is has no effect on non-violent crime. In contrast, Hagan and McCarthy (1997) find that participation in non-violent crime decreases with age but that there is no similar pattern involving violent offending. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) complicate matters further by finding that age has a direct positive effect on participation in survival sex, but that overall this effect is counteracted by a negative relationship between age and number of deviant peers, which operates to decrease participation in survival sex.

Our knowledge about the influence of race and ethnicity on the subsistence patterns of homeless youth is limited. This gap can be traced, in part, to samples of homeless young people being predominantly white or European. In one of the few articles exploring racial differences in subsistence patterns, Hickler and Auerswald (2009) describe the different social worlds occupied by white and African-American street involved youth in San Francisco. They find that white youth tend to identify more strongly with street life, engage more in street-based subsistence strategies like panhandling and selling items on the street, and use more homeless services. In contrast, the African-American youth tend to distance themselves from street life both in terms of their identities and in their subsistence choices. They tend to avoid homeless services and to reject activities like panhandling (also see Mallett, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus 2004). The finding that African-American and white homeless youth in San Francisco are
located in different social worlds fits with the concept of field that is being developed in this analysis. Findings about the role of race and ethnicity in structuring street life will be discussed in reference to the organization of each subfield.

Gender is the demographic factor with the largest influence on patterns of street life. The street is widely regarded as masculine social space that disadvantages homeless young women and shapes their subsistence strategies (Hatty 1996, Pfeffer 1997; Wardaugh 1996; also see Maher 1998). O’Grady and Gaetz (2004) find that street involved young women are more likely to panhandle regularly and young men are more likely to squeegee. They also note that young men are more likely to engage in criminal subsistence strategies. Furthermore, O’Grady and Gaetz (2004) report that young women earn less than their male counterparts. They attribute this to a number of factors, including that the young women participate in less lucrative strategies like panhandling, have poorer mental and physical health which makes it more difficult to reproduce their own labour from day to day, they do not always having control over their labour power (e.g. their sex work being pimp controlled), and that street involved young women are more likely to be part of a street family and therefore to share their profits. Other subsistence research reports mixed findings around the influence of gender. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) show that homeless young men engage in more panhandling, theft, burglary, drug selling, stealing food, and dumpster diving. Baron (1999) reports that homeless young men are more likely to participate in violent crime. Other research, in contrast, reports few gender differences (Hagan & McCarthy 1997; Gwadz et al. 2009).

The problem with much of the work on gender and street life to date is that it implies that the street is a monolithic social space dominated by a single set of gender norms and expectations. The field analysis presented here complicates this picture by considering the unique social spaces that constitute street life and how these social spaces favour different expressions of gender. In the gay village subfield, for example, the dominant form of masculinity is less traditional. The social space even rewards more feminine traits such as youth, innocence, and a softer and less rugged self-presentation. Gender dynamics in the subfields will be discussed in the respective chapters.
2.4.2 Family-Related Factors

Family backgrounds also shape subsistence patterns. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) find that young people who maintained bonds with their parents tended to rely on parental support, whereas those who did not were more likely to rely on conventional employment or deviant subsistence strategies (also see Fitzpatrick 2000; Gwadz et al. 2009). Parental bonds, however, did not predict participation in conventional employment. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) indicate that physical abuse increased participation in activities like drug dealing and theft by pushing youth onto the street sooner and more frequently, which operated, in part, by increasing contact with deviant peers. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) report a similar indirect effect, in that physical abuse increases participation in violent and non-violent crime and prostitution by increasing the number of nights youth spend without shelter, as well as by increasing their criminal opportunities. Sexual abuse also operates indirectly through “exposure” or “foreground” factors like time on the street, and has a direct positive effect on prostitution and survival sex (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck, & Hoyt 2004; Hagan & McCarthy 1997; Tyler, Hoyt & Whitbeck 2000; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999). In terms of other family-related factors, Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) find having a parent with substance use problems increases the likelihood of dealing drugs.

2.4.3 Street-Related Factors

A third set of influences relate to the hardships of street life. These can be described as “exposure” or “foreground” factors. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) use a comparative analysis to show how street involvement has an effect on criminal participation even after controlling for other types of influences. They find that foreground factors like poor shelter and hunger lead to involvement in prostitution and theft. Confirming the role of subsistence needs in the choice to offend, Hagan and McCarthy (1997) also find that foreground factors better predict non-violent crimes like theft, shoplifting, and prostitution than they do violent crime (also see Baron 2006). Relationships with deviant peers are another exposure factor related to the experience of street life. Young people are pushed or forced out of the home by negative home environments where they come into contact with deviant peers, all in the context of immediate and pervasive need (Baron 2006; Hagan & McCarthy 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999). Deviant peers provide access to deviant definitions, knowledge, and opportunities (McCarthy 1996). Peers are also a key
source of information about non-criminal subsistence strategies and opportunities (Karabanow 2004; Fitzpatrick 2000).

2.5 Typology and Pathways Literature

The antecedent-focused literature discussed above identifies important factors in understanding subsistence patterns; however, it ignores the social groupings and varied social spaces that can constitute street life within a geographic area. The cluster/pathways research and the ethnographic research both acknowledge how street life varies across contexts and groups of homeless youth.

There is a collection of research on homeless and street involved youth that focuses on establishing homeless typologies by examining how the factors described above tend to cluster around particular types or groups of young people (Adlaf & Zdanowicz 1999; Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, Unger & Johnson 1997; Mallet et al. 2004; Wilkinson 1987; Zide 1992). Adlaf and Zdanowicz (1999) identify eight types of youth based on a cluster analysis of family relation factors like abuse and parental contact, and street lifestyle factors like subsistence strategies, homeless identity, and service use. These types include entrepreneurs who have lower than average family dysfunction and report high levels of street entrenchment and deviance; partiers who are distinguished by their recreational motivation for drug use and low-levels of street entrenchment; and vulnerables characterized by their high levels of family dysfunction, family problems, and drug use. Mallet et al (2004) focus on the daily routines of homeless youth, considering where and with whom they spend their time. Their analysis considers the contexts where youth spend their time, not just their “risk factors.” They identify four groups: partnered, socially engaged, service connected/harm avoidant, and transgressive. Partnered youth spend time with their girlfriends/boyfriends and reported being on the street the longest. Socially engaged youth are characterized by spending time at the friends of houses rather than shelters and tended to be newer to the street. Service-connected harm-avoidant youth spend their days and nights at services and avoided anti-social activities. Transgressive youth tended to spend the most time in transient spaces and engage in activities like begging, stealing, sex work, and drugs. They also tended to be male and white.

A similar type of research uses qualitative research to group youth according to their pathways through homelessness; drawing connections between their entry pathways, their
orientation to street life, and how they exit the street (Fitzpatrick 2000; Mallett et al. 2010). Mallett et al. (2010) identify four pathways in their analysis of homeless young people in Australia: ‘on the street’, ‘using the system’, ‘in and out’, and ‘going home’. Each pathway depicts a different trajectory through street life, with a principal focus on accommodation choices and levels of service involvement. Mallett et al. (2010) do not focus specifically on subsistence strategies, but their groupings imply particular approaches to street life. The ‘using the system’ pathway, for example, consists predominantly of immigrant youth who are using social services in the process of establishing their independence. In this pathway youth are typically framed as service focused and non-deviant. The ‘on the street’ youth come from the most difficult backgrounds, are the most street entrenched, and to tend have the most difficult time transitioning away from street life. Although the cluster and pathway research is insightful for recognizing the varied ways that homeless young people can approach and experience street life, it is more descriptive than analytic. Moreover, it prioritizes the factors that distinguish each group, not the contexts that structure those differences in orientation and experience.

2.6 Ethnographic Literature

The ethnographic research on homeless young people provides a more contextualized discussion of street spaces (Hall 2003; Hatty 1996; Lundy 1995; Pfeffer 1997; Weisburg 1985); however, focusing on single contexts diminishes the comparative insight gained by examining multiple pathways or clusters (see Dordick 1993 and Gowan 2010 for exceptions relative to the research on homeless adults). Ethnographic research contextualizes subsistence strategies by focusing on the features that characterize street life among a particular group of youth or within a specific geographic location. This includes identifying the local service availability, shared norms and language, and interactional dynamics. Lundy (1995) for example describes the social hierarchy that organizes group life among the youth she studies, with the lowest status youth being those engaged in the most risky and demeaning subsistence strategies. Hall’s (2003) ethnography of the homeless scene in a British town focuses on how the structure and availability of services organizes life among the youth in important ways. Pfeffer (1997) describes the gender norms that dominant squat culture and how those norms and beliefs marginalize punk identified young women.
The ethnographic research on homeless youth is limited, but is extensive for homeless adults and dates back to the 1920s and 30s (Bourgois & Schonberg 2009; Desjarlis 1994; Glasser 1988; Gowan 2010; Maher 1998; Snow & Anderson 1993; Sutherland & Locke 1936; Wasserman & Clair 2009). The approach is similar to the studies of youth, focusing on how the homeless interact with the features of their social and structural environment. The space is not available to discuss all of the available ethnographic research on homeless adults so this section highlights studies that develop insights related to my own; in particular studies that highlight the stratification of homeless spaces, the struggle that can happen over available resources, and “the street” as a collection of distinct contexts that shape how the homeless approach street life. Maher’s (1998) ethnography of homeless and drug using women in a neighbourhood in Brooklyn highlights how the discursive and structural features of that area stratify those within it and set them into competition over available resources. Bourgois & Schonberg’s (2009) ethnography of homeless heroin users in San Francisco elucidates how the social space offers opportunities for cultivating and exchanging social and cultural resources. Gowan (2010) in her research among homeless men in San Francisco describes how the different neighbourhoods and networks in which the homeless live shape subsistence strategies and general orientations to street life; contexts that offer different opportunities and discourses on which the men can draw in making sense of their lives and developing subsistence strategies.

The ethnographic research provides important insight into the contextual forces that can shape street life and its lays the groundwork for the insights developed in the present analysis. However, the focus of these studies on describing single social spaces limits the opportunity for comparative insight and risks portraying the spaces of street life as isolated and idiosyncratic. Additionally, limited theoretical nuance and a lack of shared concepts within this research make it difficult to compare and analyze across contexts. In this way, despite the ethnographic research providing insights into the social dynamics that structure street life within specific contexts, it does not provide the theoretical tools and framework necessary for theorizing more broadly about the social organization of street life.

The extant literature has failed to develop adequate concepts for conceptualizing the social spaces that structure and organize street life. The concept of pathways makes it possible to identify and compare different trajectories, but a similar concept is needed for describing and analyzing the social spaces through which those pathways pass. At present, subculture is the
default concept for identifying the unique social spaces of street life. It is used in both multivariate (Kipke, Unger, & O'Connor 1997) and ethnographic analyses (Ravenhill 1998; Gowan 2010). Even though it is useful as a general label the concept has a few substantial shortcomings. First, there is variation in how the concept is employed in the research. For example, Snow and Anderson (1993) in their seminal work on homeless men in Austin depart from the typical understanding of subculture as a set of shared norms and values, instead defining it in terms of a “common predicament” that produces a unique set of behaviours, daily routines, and cognitive orientations. Further, Snow and Anderson (1993) describe a single homeless subculture (also see Ravenhill 2008), which compares with other research that uses the concept to describe specific normative and stylistic groups within street life, such as punks, travellers, or recyclers (Gowan 2010; Karabanow 2004). Second, in its typical formulation, subculture refers primarily to a system of shared norms and values that actors are socialized into. As is acknowledged by Snow and Anderson (1994) this formulation leaves the role of more “structural” or “practical” factors in shaping action unconsidered. Further, the classic value-centred model of human action central to subcultural theory has come under increasing fire from research in sociology and the cognitive sciences, which emphasizes the more practical and non-ideological roots of action (Swidler 2001; Vaisey 2009).

2.7 Self, Identity and Street life

Although not specific to questions of subsistence, there is an increasing interest in self and identity among the homeless that is relevant to understanding the relationship between subsistence and the social organization of street life. The literature on the self and identity can be divided into two main branches. The first examines the two constructs in relation to stigma management. This research focuses on the social stigma of homelessness as a threat to self. It examines the identity techniques that the homeless use to manage the stigma of homelessness (Boydell, Goering, & Morrell-Bellai 2000; Hatty 1996; Osborne 2002; Snow & Anderson 1987; Wardaugh 1999;). For example, Snow and Anderson’s (1987) influential article on identity work among the homeless describes the verbal techniques that the homeless use to manage the threat that homelessness poses to identity. They discuss strategies such as role distancing in which the homeless emphasize how they are different from other homeless people and role
embracement in which the homeless emphasize their attachment to the homeless community and to a street-based lifestyle.

This literature highlights one dimension of how the homeless use narratives to manage street life. However, in framing narratives as a coping mechanism this research downplays the more productive aspect of narratives and how their content and construction underwrites and forecloses particular lines of action. The second, related, branch of research is about enculturation into a “homeless identity.” This work focuses on how identity is implicated in transitions in and through homelessness (Karabanow 2006; Rew & Horner 2003; Auerswald & Eyre 2002). For example, Karabanow (2006) identifies identity building as stage in the entry process among youth, noting that identification with a homeless identity can be an indicator of entrenchment and that those who identify as non-mainstream often have more difficulty transitioning away from street life. This literature outlines a gradual process of identity acquisition (Snow & Anderson 1993; Auerswald & Eyre 2002; Beazley 2003; Rizzini & Butler 2003). Identification begins as individuals develop relationships with individuals who have been on the street longer than they have, and who are able to provide practical and emotional support. These relationships are often welcomed because newcomers are lonely and unfamiliar with street life (Snow & Anderson 1993; Auerswald & Eyre 2002). Despite this pressure, those new to the street are often reluctant to socialize with other homeless people in an effort to preserve a sense of themselves as “not homeless” (Snow & Anderson 1993). However, Snow and Anderson (1993) argue that over time this resistance breaks down and that the longer a person is on the street, and the more embedded they are in street oriented social networks, the more likely they are to acquire a homeless identity. This acquisition is associated with a cognitive and social shift away from participation in “mainstream” life, towards an almost complete focus on day-to-day living and the fulfillment of immediate needs (Snow & Anderson 1993; Auerswald & Eyre 2002).

The link to subsistence strategies here is clear. Snow and Anderson (1993) find evidence in their sample that those who are newly on the street are those most interested in finding employment. However, as they continually encounter structural barriers, and develop more friendships on the street they become increasingly focused on routinized acts of daily survival. This includes increasing reliance on a range of legal and quasi-legal subsistence strategies, including institutional support (Snow & Anderson 1993; Auerswald & Eyre 2002). This process,
however, is not linear or inevitable. The literature also mentions events that can disrupt a “homeless identity” (Auerswald & Eyre 2002; Rizzini & Butler 2003). Aueserwald and Eyre (2002) note how negative experiences on the street can lead to periods of “disequilibrium”, in which individuals become reoriented towards “mainstream” life.

A limitation of work in both these branches is that it focuses on the transition from mainstream to homeless, ignoring how the self and identity are more broadly implicated in decision-making and street life (including decisions around subsistence strategies). More specifically, this work adopts a role approach to identity (Stryker & Burke 2000). This type of perspective models identity formation as a process of categorization in which we understand others and ourselves through placement in socially prescribed roles (e.g. the homeless role). The limitation of a categorization approach is that it loses sense of identity as ongoing and continuous process of organizing and integrating social experience. This results in the split described above where identity gets divided into two, stable roles; identity before the loss of housing (“mainstream identity) and identity after the loss of housing (“homeless identity”). The current project speaks to this shortcoming by exploring how homeless and street involved young people consciously reflect on themselves and their life stories in the course of navigating the fields of street life. It examines how young people actively engage with homeless social spaces through culturally influenced self-reflections about the kind of people they are and want to be.

In the next chapter I address the identified gaps in the literature by developing a field approach to street life. A field perspective examines how “the street” is not monolithic and is actually constituted by a collection of overlapping social spaces. Through the concepts of concepts of field, habitus, and capital this perspective goes beyond a subcultural approach to street life and provides the theoretical tools necessary to understand how the social organization of street spaces shapes practice, including subsistence strategies. Further, I integrate this field framework with research in the cognitive sciences and narrative theory that provides an expanded view of the role that the self plays in the navigating of street life. This perspective contributes to the research on homelessness and identity, as well as to broader questions about the nature of practice, particularly in challenging and unsettled situation.
3.1 A Field Approach

The field framework that I develop here uses Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, and habitus (1977; 1984) as heuristics for analyzing the social organization of street life. At present the literature on homelessness lacks an adequate conceptual language for understanding how street spaces shape and structure life on the streets. As I demonstrate above, subculture, one of the few available concepts for identifying distinct social spaces among the homeless is inadequate for the job. A field approach to homelessness extends our understanding of street life by conceptualizing “the street” in any given locale as a set of interlocking “fields”; or more precisely, as set of interconnected subfields within a broader field of homelessness. The broader homeless “field” refers to the full complement of social spaces in which the homeless spend their time and interact, usually within a particular city or town\(^1\). The physical sites of this space include social service agencies, parks, encampments, neighbourhoods, coffee shops, and street corners. This “homeless field” is constituted by a set of interconnected subfields, each with its own distinct structural terrain and character. The subsequent analysis focuses on three such subfields within Toronto’s homeless field: the gay village subfield, the sleeping rough subfield, and the shelter subfield. Each is named for a distinguishing characteristic that will be discussed in more detail below. These are youth dominated spaces and tend to be distinct from the social spaces of the adult homeless although there is overlap.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of these three subfields, illustrating the extent to which they intersect with each other. The gay village subfield has many of its physical sites in the gay village and is structured in large part by the availability of opportunities for converting erotic capital into economic, social, and cultural resources through sex work and relationships with older men or “sugar daddies” in the community. The youth involved in this space are primarily gay identified men or transgender women; heterosexual men are also embedded within this subfield but they tend to have a more marginal position. It overlaps with the shelter subfield

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1 Research is most likely to focus on the homeless field that defines a given city or town, but elements of common experience, as well as mobility between cities, links municipalities across Canada and the United States meaning that some analyses may benefit from thinking about what defines the field of homelessness at a regional or national level.
in that many of the young people who spend time in the gay village spend time in the shelter and drop-in that anchor that social space. The sleeping rough subfield is the social space surrounding a fluid collection of youth who congregate in the southwest corner of downtown and who tend to avoid shelter life and participate in street based subsistence strategies like panhandling and squeegee cleaning (cleaning car windows with a squeegee for donations). This subfield overlaps the least with the others and the young people in this space are relatively segregated in their own social and physical spaces. Some of the young people of this social space will occasionally use the services of the drop-in or stay in the shelter temporarily if the weather is bad, but they try to stay outside the social relations of those spaces as much as possible. As Figure 1 shows there are locations outside of these respective subfields, including spaces that might be usefully classified as additional subfields but for which the present analysis lacks the adequate data.

Figure 1: The homeless field and subfields

The field heuristic is useful for identifying and analyzing a particular kind of social space. Fields (and subfields) are social spaces with recognizable boundaries in which actors are positioned relative to one another and oriented towards a dominant logic or pursuit. A field analysis focuses on how the structure of the field positions actors and directs practice. As the name suggests, actors are positioned in a field of relations (rather than a strictly vertical hierarchy), which calls to mind the image of terrain or a playing field. The structural “terrain” that defines each field determines its primary orientation and distinct character. This structure includes the distribution
of resources, discourses that frame perception and action, and opportunity structures and constraints. For example, the shelter subfield is structured in large part by social service sites that bring homeless young people into regular and sustained contact with one another. This structure creates a unique social world that young people moving through the subfield must contend with. Bringing a field analysis to homelessness underscores the unique social spaces that constitute street life in a given locale, while linking those spaces together within a shared conceptual framework.

The broader homeless field has two dominant logics or orientations; subsistence and social integration. The quality of one’s subsistence experience is determined by a number of factors, including the extent to which material needs and wants are being met, and the quality of the subsistence activity, as it relates to safety concerns, as well as individual preferences. Social integration depends on the extent to which actors feel they have social status, social support and positive social interactions. The structure of each homeless subfield shapes the value placed on each of these logics and orients actors towards particular approaches to them. For example, within the gay village subfield young people are directed towards sex work as a subsistence strategy and as a means of securing social status and acceptance within the party scene. This contrasts with sleeping rough subfield which orients youth towards street based subsistence activities and social integration through a mutual pursuit of daily survival.

Fields are stratified social spaces and the homeless are positioned within them based on the distribution of resources or “capital”. The structures of fields determine what resources are most valuable and how those resources are allocated. They also determine the relationship between different types of capital and the extent to which resources are intra-convertible. Bourdieu (1986) alerts us to four main types of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital describes financial resources and economic wealth. In the case of homeless use this refers to the money or goods that youth might bring with them from home and the money they access on the street through legal and illegal subsistence strategies, family support, and social services. Social capital includes the resources embedded in interpersonal networks, like “connections” or “contacts.” For street involved young people these resources are often peer based, but as the analysis will illustrate these connections can also be with social service staff or with the housed. Cultural capital describes skills, credentials and artifacts that are valued within a particular field, including markers of style like clothing or specific types of knowledge. Other
types of cultural capital include knowledge about street life, often referred to as “street smarts.” Symbolic capital refers to social status and prestige, and the deference associated with them. Capital, however, is defined within fields and there are, arguably, as many capitals as there are fields. For example, in the gay village subfield the actors are stratified by the definition and distribution of erotic capital—those characteristics deemed physically attractive and that elicit an erotic response in others (Green 2007). This type of capital comes into play in “sexual fields”; social arenas organized around collective sexual life (Green 2007; Martin & George 2006). But it is also relevant for homeless youth who may use erotic capital as a way of acquiring resources in the context of their homelessness. The homeless use the capital they have (what they bring with them and what they cultivate) to navigate the fields of street life and in their pursuit of subsistence and social integration.

The final concept of a field framework I want to discuss is habitus. Habitus is quality of fields and individuals. As it relates to fields it refers to the habits of perception, taste, and action that are favoured within a social space. As it relates to individuals it refers to an intuitive and practical sense of the world that predisposes actors towards particular thoughts and actions (Bourdieu 1990). Actors will feel more comfortable and have a better intuitive sense of a social space to the extent that their personal habitus corresponds with the habitus emphasized within the field. In this analysis I focus on how the homeless engage with street spaces in the context of dispositions towards thought and action and how their dispositions influence the ease through which they navigate a particular subfield. If a young person comes to a street space with an intuitive sense of how that social space is organized they are said to have a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu 1990); however, the converse is true in that youth will feel “out of place” if their practical sense of the world does not correspond with the subfield in which they are positioned. Youth will often self select into the spaces in which they feel most comfortable, but the unique structural challenges that define each space (sleeping in a shelter vs. sleeping outside) also play into this decision. For example, a young person may feel more comfortable with the punk and alternative inspired tastes and style of the sleeping rough subfield, but end up choosing to spend more time in the hip-hop influenced social world of the shelter field because they are reluctant to

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2 Applying the concept to homelessness, Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) use the concept of habitus to describe personal patterns of survival and coping that emerge in response to early life experiences and that are structured by macro-level forces like gender, race, and class
sleep outside—a choice that will influence their relative success in acquiring resources and pursuing subsistence and social integration within that social space.

Conceptualizing the street as a set of interlocking “fields” is valuable because it recognizes the diversity of street spaces while simultaneously integrating them within a shared conceptual framework. Further, a field framework highlights aspects of street life that are underdeveloped in the literature. For example, it foregrounds the social organization of street life and examines how the structure of social relations within street spaces shapes the nature and experience of homelessness. The framework also considers how the homeless are stratified in street spaces based on the varied resources and dispositions that they have; this includes material assets, but also social and cultural resources. Finally, a field framework is valuable because of how it conceptualizes action—the homeless are not simply acting out a set of norms and values that they have been socialized into, but responding practically to the complex social-structural terrain in which they are embedded. This practical response represents their agency, but it is also shaped through their contact with the structures of social life. I now turn to a more detailed discussion of this process.

3.2 Navigating Fields

This analysis argues that actors navigate street fields at a practical level—responding to the shifting demands and configurations of the fields in which they are positioned. However, these strategies are not formed in a social vacuum but are structured by social experience, and culture, defined here as socially constructed symbolic systems, images, ideas, and schemas. I follow Vaisey (2008b; 2009) in arguing that culture shapes practice through the dual processes of dispositions formed in the deep internalization of cultural schemas, and the use of culture as a tool for building capacities and supporting action. I argue, however, that self-reflection and narration are under-recognized processes through which actors engage with the dual processes of culture and orient themselves towards particular courses of action. This process is particularly visible among homeless and street involved young people as street life is exactly the kind of unsettled situation that encourages self-reflection. Homeless youth also often have experience constructing narratives because of their histories with the mental health and criminal justice systems, as well as a part of accessing services (intake interviews, assessments, etc.). Next I will discuss the relationship between dual process theory and narrative.
The idea that deeply internalized cultural schemas motivate practice or action is supported across the social sciences, including anthropology (D’Andrade 1995; Straus & Quinn 1997), sociology (Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1984) and cognitive psychology (Evans 2008; Haidt 2001; 2005; Kahneman 2011). For continuity I focus on Bourdieu who conceptualizes these internalized practical dispositions as habitus. His formulation calls to mind the image of the soccer player responding to the rhythm of the game without having to deliberately plan and strategize his or her movements. The skills and knowledge that produce capital can also operate at a taken-for-granted level—the way a soccer player moves across a playing field is shaped by a ball handling ability and knowledge of positioning that is deployed on the fly, often without the need for deliberate reflection and calculation. Together these internalized skills sets and dispositions open up certain avenues for action and close off others. As it relates to navigating street life, these internalized dispositions direct young people away from certain activities because those activities “just don’t feel right.” Habits of speech or comportment also shape the extent to which homeless and street involved youth feel like they belong within certain street spaces. For example, young people differ in their feel for the swagger and tough self-presentation valued within the shelter field.

Bourdieu’s emphasis on intuitive and non-reflexive practice is not to deny instances of strategic and conscious thought, but to emphasize that our everyday practice is largely routine and taken-for-granted (also see Haidt 2005). Cognitive science frames these dispositions as well-worn neural pathways that predispose us to patterns of thought and action. These pathways make daily life possible by freeing us from the impossible burden of planning every action with careful, deliberate thought (Vaisey 2009; Haidt 2005). Bourdieu connects the internalized skills, knowledge, and dispositions that inform our everyday practice to the reproduction of class position by focusing on how they influence our cultural tastes and our affinity for and ability to navigate the varied fields of social life. However, patterns of thought and action are not exclusively class based and they develop through contact with the structures of social life more broadly, including family dynamics, national cultures, and religious beliefs (Lau 2004; Sayer 2005; Shweder 2003).

The second process behind a dual process theory of culture in action—culture as a toolkit—also has wide support (Kaufman 2004; DiMaggio 2002; Swidler 2001). Culture in this formulation is a resource that actors draw on to make sense of and justify their actions. It
provides a set of schemas through which we approach and understand the world. Swidler (2001), one of the most well-known proponents of this perspective, uses cases from the world of love and relationships to illustrate how actors draw on culture in developing beliefs, ideas, skills and sayings for managing the “practical problems generated within an institutional order” (Swidler 2001: 198). Culture in this formulation is not a cohesive belief system that actors hold in their minds, or a cohesive set of dispositions, but a set of tools that actors draw on in practical, and sometimes non-cohesive, ways according to the demands of the situation. Actors are directed towards course of action for which they have the culturally appropriate skills and justifications. In the context of street life, this happens when young people make sense of their experience through available cultural resources. Within the glamorous field, for example, it was common for gay and transgendered young people to make sense of sex work through the phrase “a girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do.” This discourse communicates a certain way of thinking about sex work and contains rich layers of shared meaning; referring simultaneously to their limited range of choices, but also to a sense of empowerment that comes from supporting themselves and meeting their own needs. A phrase like this does not “cause” involvement in sex work, but it does shape how sex work is experienced, which in turn influences choices about how it is done and under what circumstances.

Vaisey (2008b) articulates a basic framework for understanding the relationship between the dual processes of dispositions and cultural repertories. He argues that to act, actors must have certain cultural skills and repertories and that the deployment of those skills is triggered by the demands of the situation. However, dispositions and moral intuitions interact with the environment to make it that some skills have a better chance of being deployed than others. Our dispositions also shape the situations that we select into and the ongoing construction of our cultural repertoires. This formulation, however, downplays the importance of sense making and self-reflection and that at the heart of action is an actor who feels him or herself to be acting and making decisions. It also under theorizes planned action by overemphasizing immediate decision making. The dual process theory advanced by Vaisey (2008; 2009) applies best to situations where actors use gut reactions and cultural scripts to make and justify quick decisions, but it speaks less to instances of more deliberate and careful consideration, including action that incorporates a conscious recognition of one’s habits and dispositions. I speak to these gaps by considering the role that narration and self-reflection play in planning and deliberating lines of
action and how these processes rely on the interplay between dispositions and cultural repertoires.

The main contributors to dual process theory do recognize the self but the construct remains underdeveloped. For example, Vaisey (2009) does acknowledge that dispositions often run through the self in that they are experienced as deep personal feelings and expressed in the language of the self; “I am just not that kind of person”, “I would just never do something like that.” For Swidler (2001) cultural resources are an essential tool in how actors construct their sense of self and become particular kinds of people—this includes the very notion of self. She also suggests that identity plays a part in the choice of what repertoires to deploy in a given situation (Swidler 2001; 2008). However, the precise role of the self in a dual process theory of action remains under-theorized.

I argue that street involved young people engage with the various subfields of street life in an active and self-reflexive way through the construction of personal narratives. Narratives are fundamental to human existence and action (Polkinghorne 1988) and are central to how we think (Bruner 1986), make sense of our own existence (Polkinghorne 1988; Somers 1994), and how we interact with and relate to others (Linde 1993). At the perceptual level narratives are key processes through which we make meaning and organize information. Bruner (1986) argues that narrative is one of two basic modes of cognitive functioning and that it organizes information by placing it into causal sequences or stories (the other mode, paradigmatic thinking, involves categorization). This puts narratives at the very heart of how we perceive and organize the world and our experiences, and it extends to how we make sense of our ontology and ourselves. We establish a continuous and coherent sense of self by linking the information we have about ourselves, from our interactions with others and our own experiences, into a coherent whole—a person with a past, present, and future. This process is inherently social in that we build our narratives from the larger public narratives that surround us; drawing from familial, institutional, and national stories, as well as the reoccurring plotlines of literature and popular media (Somers 1994). Narratives are also social because telling one’s life story is a prerequisite of social interaction and is central to group life (Linde 1993).

Narrative shapes the process of navigating fields because actors use narratives to make sense of situations and create meaning. Actors reflect on their choices by considering events in light of their personal stories. I focus on two primary ways that narratives influence practice
among homeless youth and demonstrate how both involve the interplay between dispositions and cultural repertoires. The first is that homeless and street involved young people use narratives to recognize and mobilize cultural repertoires and skill sets. In making choices about street life young people work to connect their current circumstances with their past experiences, trying to establish parallels that they can use to assess and support particular lines of action. They are more likely to adopt a particular line of action to the extent that they are able to establish a connection because establishing these links creates a feeling of ontological continuity, helps the present circumstances seem manageable, and invests decisions with personal and moral meaning. This process incorporates dispositional influences in that the skill sets that are being recognized and narrated are likely habitual and taken for granted in other circumstances, but through the process of narration they are recognized and brought to bear on new circumstances. This process incorporates cultural repertoires in that the narratives being constructed to mobilize these dispositional skill sets draw on available cultural imagery and scripts.

The second way that narratives influence practice is that homeless and street involved young people use the self and self-reflection to construct boundaries and to decide on courses of action. The self is a meaningful construct and decisions are considered in light of the kind of people that the homeless feel that they are. This self has a narrative structure in that we support and justify the self by creating a story about it and locating it in temporal space. This process creates the basis for conscious action and deliberation in that we construct ourselves as characters in our own stories—capable of undertaking action and realizing change (Polkinghorn 1988). Constructing boundaries, like the process of recognizing skill sets, influences action by investing certain choices with a sense of personal meaning and creating feelings of subjective continuity. Central to this particular process, however, is that we use narratives to actively engage with our dispositions, using our cultural resources and personal histories to sustain, rework, and challenge them. This process includes using narratives to convert our dispositions into more consciously deployed frames that we use for thinking about and planning future courses of action. Boundary construction incorporates cultural repertoires in that we use cultural scripts and imagery in constructing our narratives and in engaging with our habits and intuitions. Further, as Swidler (2001) points out the very notion of the self is part of our cultural toolkit.

I explore processes of self-reflection and narration through a study of how homeless and street involved young people navigate the fields of street life. Homeless youth are an interesting
case-study for observing the incorporation of dispositions and cultural toolkits into the reflexive navigation of fields because homelessness is the kind of “unsettled” situation that encourages actors to mobilize culture in order to make sense of their circumstances and to underwrite available courses of action (Swidler 2001). Also, street life fields are the kinds of informally organized arenas that encourage actors to fall back on the dispositions of habitus in the absence of formalized rules of conduct. Further, the nature of homelessness encourages self-reflection and narration. Homeless young people are in constant contact with researchers, mental health professionals, and social service gatekeepers, all of which require the youth to account for their actions and to construct integrated and cohesive accounts of their lives. Lastly, an analysis of how self-reflection shapes the navigation of street life speaks to the shortcomings in the literature on homelessness and the self-identified in Chapter 2. There is a tendency in research on the homeless to focus on the transition from mainstream to homeless identity, ignoring how the self is more actively and broadly implicated in decision-making. In contrast, my analysis highlights how homeless young people navigate street fields in the context of their personal narratives; narratives that actively engage with the affective and difficult to articulate dispositions described by Vaisey and the cultural resources and repertoires emphasized by Swidler.
Chapter 4
Data and Methods

This project draws on data from 39 in-depth qualitative life-course focused interviews with homeless and marginally housed youth in Toronto, as well as approximately a 100 hours of field notes gathered during the recruitment and interview process. Data collection took place between May and December of 2008. The majority of the respondents were recruited from agencies serving homeless and street involved youth in-and-around the downtown core (N=30); however, a sub-group of respondents were recruited outside of a social service context by approaching youth in parks and at popular panhandling locations (N=9). All recruitment, interviewing, and information storage and management procedures follow the guidelines outlined by the Tri-Council Policy Statement (PRE 2003) and the University of Toronto (Office of Research Ethics 2007).

4.1 Research Sites and Recruitment

To be eligible to participate in the study youth had to be between 16 and 25, and either be without regular access to a safe conventional dwelling or feel that they were at risk of losing such access in the immediate future (O'Grady & Gaetz 2002). The recruitment of participants was designed to maximize variation along axes of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual identity in order to ensure that a diversity of experiences was represented. For example, efforts were made to recruit relatively equal numbers of males and females, as well as to include representation from individuals that identified outside of the traditional gender binary (e.g. transgendered). An effort was also made to recruit across categories of sexual attraction.

Participants were recruited from four social service sites and from various public locations in the downtown core. These agencies were purposefully selected from a pool of nine organizations serving homeless and street involved young people to ensure recruitment across a range of experiences, identifications, and subsistences strategies and to allow for geographic variation and different modes of service delivery. They are:

- Mobile outreach van: The outreach van is midsized motor home operated by a large religious organization. It stops at three different locations in the downtown core frequented by homeless youth. This van is typically staffed by two workers and in
some cases a volunteer. It provides food, clothing, and water; as well as, social and spiritual support to homeless youth aged 16-25. It advocates an abstinence-based recovery model and does not offer public health supplies like condoms, clean needles, or crack kits. I worked as an informal volunteer on the van and would approach potentially eligible youth for off-site interviews in a public and neutral space, such as a coffee shop.

- **Drop-in and outreach organization:** This service is a small harm-reduction, drop-in for youth aged 16-25 who are at-risk or who are already involved in prostitution. It is located along a major thoroughfare in the downtown core. It provides snacks, laundry services, condoms/lubricant, workshops, counselling, and housing and employment services. I spent time at the drop-in and was introduced to eligible youth by the staff. I also volunteered as an outreach worker. Interviews were conducted on-site in a private room.

- **Drop-in:** This service is a large, popular drop-in for youth aged 16-24 located along a major thoroughfare in the downtown core. It provides a lunch and a dinner meal most weekdays. It has a large space for youth to spend time during the day. It has a dedicated employment resource centre, counselling and life skills programming, and a range of legal and health services that are available on a semi-regular basis, as well as some recreation activities (i.e., pool and foosball tables). I spent time in the drop-in and was introduced to street involved youth by the staff. Interviews were conducted in a private room on-site.

- **Emergency shelter:** This service is a 32 bed emergency shelter for youth aged 16-24 located in a residential area close to the downtown core. They offer a range of employment, housing, and counselling services. I was introduced to eligible youth at their weekly house meeting and at the drop-in centre. Interviews were conducted in a private room on-site.

- **Public areas:** I recruited participants from public areas in the downtown core where street involved youth were known to congregate, particularly around a busy shopping area on in the southwest corner of downtown (opposite end of the core from other recruitment sites). I would recruit in this area by walking the major streets and by spending time in a park frequented by homeless and street involved young people. I
would approach youth you were panhandling or who I suspected of being homeless and ask about study eligibility. Interviews were conducted in nearby parks and public areas as they provided a private, safe, and neutral space.

During recruitment I identified myself to each participant as a student researcher affiliated with University of Toronto and explained that I was interviewing homeless and street involved young people about their subsistence choices. I initially asked them to tell me their age and their housing status. If an individual met my eligibility criteria I explained that the interview took approximately an hour and a half and that they would receive an honorarium of $20 for their time. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. This involved explaining the rationale of the study, risks, benefits, the confidentiality policy (including limits to confidentiality), and data storage procedures (see Appendix A). Respondents were only required to provide verbal consent as to eliminate the need to manage and store paperwork with identifying information.

In all but one interview, respondents agreed to have the interview audio recorded. I transcribed half the interviews and the other half were transcribed by a professional transcription service that signed a confidentiality agreement. In the case of the respondent who did not want the interview audio recorded their responses were written by hand and transcribed after the interview. Transcripts were anonymized by providing each respondent with a pseudonym and changing or removing personal identifiers such as names, places, and reference to identifying characteristics like tattoos. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Atlas qualitative software.

4.2 The Sample

Thirty-nine young people were recruited for participation in this study. The exact response rate is difficult to determine because staff assisted with recruitment at the two drop-in services and I was not privy to who accepted and who declined. Further, the staff were likely to approach young people known to them and who they felt would be willing to participate in the study. This introduces some bias in that it suggests that within a social service setting I was more likely to speak with youth who were on good terms with the staff. When I was recruiting respondents directly there were 6 individuals that actively declined to participate. Four out of the six were approached outside of social services and the remaining two were a pair of friends that were
visiting the mobile outreach van. This number does not include a set of approximately 5 young people who passively declined to participate by not volunteering following a presentation I gave about the study at the emergency shelter. A factor when approaching groups of young people was that I could only interview one at a time and so youth might be less willing to participate if they knew they had to wait for a couple of hours or if they did not want to go through the hassle of scheduling an interview for a later day and time. It is difficult to know the precise reasons that youth declined to participate or how they might differ from those who did agree to an interview. There was no clearly visible difference between the two groups in terms of characteristics like personal style or level of marginality (as assessed informally according to self-presentation and personal hygiene). Often the reason seemed to be a matter of timing; young people were reluctant to participate if they had plans or were on route to doing something else.

The main source of information on the gay village subfield comes from in-depth interviews with 10 homeless and street involved young people. These youth were recruited from the two drop-in agencies. All ten youth identify as LGBTQ. Six of the youth identified as male, and four as transgendered. One of the male youth identified as bisexual with the rest of the youth reporting an almost exclusive attraction to men. The average age is under 22 years old. Respondents left home for a variety of reasons. Five of the youth cited reasons directly related to their sexuality, such as conflict in the home over their sexuality and wanting to explore their sexuality outside of the smaller cities and towns that they were living. In terms of race and ethnicity, two of the respondents identified as Filipino with the remainder identifying as white/European. The average age when the youth first became homeless was just under 18 years (youngest was 12 and oldest was 20), and the average time on the street was 36 months (ranging from five years to 11 months). At the time of the interview three of the respondents were housed, but all had relatively unstable housing situations. All, but one, of the respondents’ family backgrounds were characterized by conflict and instability, including physical and sexual abuse, abandonment, and contact with child protection agencies. Six of the respondents reported struggling with addictions at some point in their life, and four reported suffering from mental health problems.

Information about the sleeping rough subfield comes mainly from 9 youth. All of these 9 young people were recruited from outdoor spaces where street youth congregate or while panhandling. Seven of the respondents were white/European; both the non-European
respondents were Aboriginal. Four of the nine participants were women. All of the respondents reported primary attractions to the opposite sex. The average age of the respondents was 21, the average age of first ending up on the street was 16 (with a range from 12 to 21), and the average amount of time on the street was 5 years (with a range from 33 months to 12 years). Seven of the nine reported struggling with addictions at least at some point during their time on the street.

Eight of the nine of youth describing this field slept on the street regularly, with one respondent renting an apartment he shared with a rotating group of about six people. There was one person from the larger sample who slept outside regularly, but their social ties more closely aligned them with the shelter subfield. Most of the youth left home because of family conflict and in a number of cases the conflict was a product of the respondent’s heavy alcohol and drug use. Four of the respondents spent time in group homes or foster care.

The shelter subfield is the most represented in my data with 20 respondents providing information about shelter life (most of the respondent’s within the gay village subfield also provided some information about shelter life). The average age of the respondents is 21 (with an age range of 18 to 25). This field is the most ethnically diverse; 35% of the respondents are non-white (six African-Canadian and one Aboriginal youth). In contrast to the typical gender composition of homeless youth, the majority of the respondents in the shelter field are female (67%). This difference is an artefact of trying to recruit evenly across men and women within the whole sample and the fact that the urban-gay enclave is predominantly male and transgendered. Although the shelter system is a common first stop when young people are leaving home most of the nineteen had been on the street for some time. The average time on the street was 48 months. Five of the youth had been on the street for a year or less, nine of the youth for 3 to 5 years, and six for 6 years or more. The average age that the youth came to the street was 17, with a range from 12 to 24. Reasons for leaving home were varied, but typically centered on family conflict. Six of the respondents spent time in the care of Children’s Aid and five respondents reported some kind of sexual or physical abuse. While on the street eight of the respondents reported struggling with addiction and six described mental health problems.

As the summaries illustrate, the youth in each subfield have similar demographic and background characteristics. As the subsequent analysis will show, the youth within each subfield have a unique experience of street life despite these similarities—a finding that speaks
to the need to go beyond background factors and to consider how the organization of street spaces shapes the experience of homelessness.

4.3 Method

My interest in youth homelessness began when I worked as an interviewer on two prior qualitative research projects. I was particularly struck by the diversity of approaches that young people take when confronted with homelessness—there is substantial variation in orientations, strategies, and styles. There is also significant diversity in the ways homeless young people talk about homelessness and make sense of their experiences. I wanted to know more about the source of these differences, particularly from the perspective of the young people themselves. Within the existing literature on subsistence there is a black box between the background and situational factors found to influence subsistence strategies and the subsistence practices themselves. I wanted to understand more about what was happening inside that black box; especially about the role identity plays in this process given that it was common to hear statements like, “I am just not that kind of person”; and “I would never do that, that’s not who I am.” My focus on subsistence choices also emerged in light of a view that the subsistence literature’s implicit portrayal of homeless young people as desperate and survival focused was missing something more nuanced about how homeless youth actually think about and approach their subsistence choices (although I can appreciate the need this literature is trying to highlight). In this context, the basic questions guiding my research became: What factors shape the subsistence choices of street youth? How do homeless youth make sense of these factors and their choices? And what role does identity play in their decision making?

With these questions in mind I designed a project that asked homeless and street involved young people directly about their subsistence choices. My approach to qualitative interviewing combines in-depth (Johnson 2002; Miller & Crabtree 2004) and life story (Atkinson 1998) interviewing techniques. In-depth interviews use open, direct, verbal questions to elicit stories and topic-specific narratives in order to gather detailed and nuanced information (Miller & Crabtree 2004:189). I use in-depth interviewing to gain “deep” information about elements of lived experience that are personal and often taken for granted (Johnson 2002). This includes information about personal experiences, values, interpretations, and perspectives. Gathering information about how homeless and street involved young people make sense of their actions
and experiences, and the factors that they see as most relevant to engaging with street life, requires moving beyond an individual’s standard “script.” As a group, homeless youth often have extensive experience providing their personal histories as part of the various assessments and intakes that they are required to go through as part of receiving services (before and after leaving home). In-depth interviews probe beyond pat or routine answers in order to gain insight into meaning making and taken for granted assumptions and interpretations. There is evidence I was successful in this goal as the young people I spoke with often contrasted our interview with previous ones they had done, commenting that they felt that we explored elements of their experience that they had never thought of before.

My approach to self-disclosure reflects a feminist approach to qualitative interviewing (Kirsch 1999). Oakley (1981), for example, questions the traditional approach to interviewing which calls for objective distance and that cautions interviewers not to reveal too much about themselves. Her view is that doing so is difficult and not necessarily beneficial. Further, she argues that it is problematic to assume that objective distance is possible or fair, especially when questions require that participants reveal personal and sensitive information about themselves. This approach is less concerned with creating a strict researcher/subject barrier and involves the researcher sharing details about their own life when appropriate.

The life-story interviewing technique that I use follows the work of Atkinson (1998). Life story interviews are a “qualitative research method for gathering information on the subjective essence of one person’s entire life” (Atkinson 1998, 3). The aim is to work with respondents to construct a comprehensive and detailed life history. A life story provides information on historical experiences and factors, but also on meaning making and lived experience. Respondents were asked to narrate their life history with a focus on their home life and family relationships, their pathway to homelessness, and their experiences and choices once on the street. Constructing a narrative is not simply about recounting historical facts, but involves selecting and organizing events in order to make a personally meaningful story. This process can be a source of personal insight for the storyteller and offers the listener a window into the teller’s subjective experience and self-perception.

The subjective quality of narratives and life-stories can raise concerns about validity. I am confident that despite their subjective nature, interviews can provide valid insights into the nature and experience of street life, including honest information about subsistence choices.
Information about context and the nature of street life can be validated through triangulation and field observation. Validity is less of a concern when it comes to personal narratives as the main goal is to understand how respondents make sense of their own experiences. The most significant threat to validity is a respondent providing a narrative that even they do not believe. This type of overt deception is a challenge for all types of interviewing, but can be ameliorated by creating an open and non-judgmental space in which respondents feel comfortable being honest and truthful to their experience and interpretation. The willingness of respondents to disclose personal and unflattering details about themselves and their lives suggests that I was successful in creating this kind of connection.

Information also came from approximately 100 hours of field observation, including informal conversations and interactions. These observations took place while spending time in drop-ins, parks, and shelters during the recruitment process, as well as during my time volunteering as an outreach worker. Fieldwork is valuable because it raises unanticipated questions and topics that can be explored and refined throughout the research process (Duneier 1999). Though most researchers go into the field with at least some conception of themes and topics of interest, fieldwork can help the researcher to elaborate on those themes, as well as to generate new insights. Observations were collected in detailed field notes that were written after returning from the field.

The data were first analyzed using an open coding technique within Atlas qualitative software. In the process of open coding I came to realize that the subsistence strategies of homeless young people were being shaped by the spaces in which they were embedded. However, when I turned to the literature to help make sense of this relationship I struggled to find an adequate framework or set of conceptual tools. This realization coincided with an introduction to field theory and the realization that the concept of field—as structured terrains that actors engage with and navigate in the context of their economic, social, and symbolic resource—helps make sense of these spaces and their impact on subsistence strategies. This led to a second, more purposeful round of coding focused on exploring a field analytic within my data and identifying the unique subfields in which the young people in my sample were positioned. I identified the three subfields by looking at differences in where the youth spent their time, how they talked about and made sense of street life, the basic opportunities and
constraints that they reported engaging with, and the types of economic, social, and symbolic resources available to them.

4.4 Locating Myself in the Research

Given that qualitative interviews are collaboration between the respondent and the interviewer it is necessary to locate myself in this research. I have no personal experience with homelessness and so approach the topic as an interested outsider. I was introduced academically to the topic through interview work with two previous projects. My approach during the interviews was to be honest about my inexperience and to cast the respondents as the experts. Most participants seemed receptive to this dynamic and were happy to fill me in on the nature of street life and their experience. Given the histories of abuse, maltreatment, and violence in many of these young people’s live, as well as the stigma of homelessness and related activities like drug use and sex work, I had to be careful about my own reactions. I made every effort to communicate interest and empathy and to avoid sympathy and shock. Although the level of connection did vary, I feel like I was for the most part successful in building rapport as most interviews ended with respondents feeling positive about their experience. This was confirmed for me when a service provider remarked on how she was happy and surprised to see respondents leaving the interview room smiling and in good spirits. The success of this experience can be largely credited to the youth I interviewed, as they were incredibly gracious about sharing details of their lives with me. I felt them to be candid, open, and honest in a way that never failed to surprise me.
Chapter 5
Homeless and Fabulous

The following discussion will analyze four themes that characterize the gay village subfield that is shaped in large part through its connection to Toronto’s gay village neighbourhood. These include, how the youth come to recognize the opportunities this subfield makes available for converting capital, in this case, the parlaying of erotic capital into economic, social, and symbolic resources; how discourses within the gay village subfield define and shape a particular orientation to street life; how the subfield is an inherently stratified space in which the youth are positioned according to their access to various types of capital; and how this space reproduces the marginal position of the young people within it.

5.1 The Field as a Site for Capital Conversion

A central insight of thinking in terms of fields is that each subfield is a uniquely structured social terrain that the youth within it must navigate. In this section, I explore how the youth come to recognize the unique structure of this particular social space. Specifically, I focus on recognition of the “sexual field” dynamics operating within Toronto’s gay sexual district and the opportunities they present for converting erotic capital.

Pathways into the social scene of Toronto’s gay neighbourhood were varied. For many, it happened at around the same time that they became homeless. In some cases, the youth left home for the purpose of moving to the gay village, whereas others were introduced to social life in the village through friends they met in more typical homeless spaces, such as shelters and drop-ins (Prendergast, Dunne, & Telford 2001). It is relevant that many of Toronto’s busiest shelters and drop-ins for homeless youth run along a corridor one block West of the main drag of the village—Church Street.

Regardless of the way the youth came to start spending time in the gay village, it did not take long for them to learn that within the sexual field of the gay village they possessed a certain level of erotic capital. Mike describes this:

I happened to come to the village, I stayed at [a shelter], so I was actually also going through my whole transition of sexuality, so that was like, it was like everything at once, so it got nuts, so when you’re young, you’re fresh, you become subjectified, you become like a piece of meat. (Mike, 22)
Importantly this recognition of erotic capital came at a time when the youth possessed few other resources. Rob acknowledges this:

I was walking around. . . the gay community and someone propositioned me and I was like no, no, no, like I don’t know how to do that, whatever that is, you are a freak blah, blah. Then later that night, I ran into him again, and that was when I was realizing it was getting late, it was cold out and I got nowhere to go, I needed money, I need to do something. So hence, the first exchange for money, so that was my first time earning a dollar. (Rob, 24)

Rob describes first realizing that he is desirable in the context of having run away from home and needing a place to stay for the night. Rob is motivated to convert what capital he has in order to meet his basic needs.

Lacking the financial support of their guardians, homeless youth must find a way to provision for themselves. Social service options like shelters and drop-ins can help to provide the basics of food and shelter, but they leave a significant number of other needs and wants unmet. Furthermore, trajectories into homelessness, as well as the realities of street life, often mean that youth are not well positioned to support themselves through paid employment because of limited work experience, difficulties in the reproduction of labour power, lack of permanent address, and difficulties in maintaining a work appropriate appearance. Mike captures the connection between this position outside of higher education and traditional paid employment, and recognition of erotic capital:

You know what I mean, you are basically looked at like, okay you live in a shelter, you’re not working, you’re not going to school, you know what I mean, so like what else do you have to do except like hang around older guys, or like you know what I mean, like get guys to buy you stuff for like your time. (Mike, 20s)

Mike describes the strategy of hanging out with older guys as one that emerges in response to having few other commitments or prospects. This subfield offers a particular set of opportunities for acquiring resources in the context of a marginal social and economic position.

The transgendered youth in the sample were at a particular disadvantage regarding employment opportunities. Laws in Canada do not offer any specific provisions against discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression (except in the Northwest Territories)\(^3\). Furthermore, finding traditional types of employment was difficult for the

\(^3\) In some cases legislation has been interpreted to offer some protections to transgender people under “sex” discrimination in provincial human rights codes (Nixon v. Vancouver Rape Relief Society [2002]; Sheridan v. Sanctuary Investments Ltd. [1999])
transgendered young women for reasons that extended beyond employment discrimination. The following quote from Annie illustrates this:

T: …Do you mind me asking how you got into [escorting]?

Annie: I got into it because I grew up in foster care so I never got a good education. Being who I am and the way I am in foster care, I got bounced around a lot, gone to 16 high schools in 4 years. So transitioning early in life without an education, odds are it’s going to hard to get an education while you’re having to find a job to support yourself at the same time. (Annie, 22)

Annie describes the challenges of acquiring an education while being bounced from foster home to foster home because of her flamboyance and feminine self-presentation as a young boy.

The organization of the gay sexual district around the distribution of erotic capital and the pursuit of erotic experience present the youth with various opportunities for converting their erotic capital. The youth identified three main types of strategies. The first and most common set of practices consisted of typical sex work activities like “walking the stroll” (street prostitution), stripping, escorting, and pornography. The area around the gay village contained a male and transgendered stroll, as well as gay and transgendered strip clubs. The second set of strategies includes relationships with older, financially stable men, often referred to as “sugar daddies”. This was alluded to by Mike in his mention above of hanging around older guys and getting them to “buy you stuff for like your time”. These relationships could be brief encounters or could be more long-term quasi-dating relationships. These relationships were complicated in that the older men might provide social and financial support without it being a strict sex for money exchange (Leary & Minichiello 2007). This might include clients letting them stay at their houses, taking them out for dinner, or buying them clothes. Even if there were no exchange arrangement these “gifts” would typically ingratiate the young men to the older men, making it difficult for the former to refuse sexual advances. A third approach, and one given less attention in the literature, is a traditional dating relationship with a partner who was closer in age, but who still acts as the main financial provider. This was described by one of the male and one of the transgendered respondents.

The techniques described allow erotic capital to be parlayed into material, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. For example, erotic capital could be converted into material

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4 It should be noted that despite these barriers, and the opportunities available through sex work, most of the youth did report working on-and-off in traditional types of paid employment, like fast food, telemarketing, salons, clothing stores and bathhouses.
goods in the form of cash, food, or drugs. This more strict economic conversion was typical in practices such as stripping and “walking the stroll”. However, erotic capital could also be converted into social resources through the formation of connections and ties. Youth might receive this in the form of social or instrumental support from a “sugar daddy” or regular client. Jesse provides an example:

The only reason that I got the job was because I started dating this guy, um, who is actually very well known all over the place—he is older, he’s this fat, old man with long hair. And he was the manager of [this bar] so he got me the job. . . .Um, him and I were together for a little while but I could never sleep with him, like I could never have sex with him. He would always try and I would always be like ‘don’t touch me.’ (Jesse, 21)

Jesse describes how his relationship with an older man in the community helped him find mainstream employment by giving him access to a job as a server in a bar. To be clear, these opportunities were often made available in the context of exploitive relationships and job prospects were definitely the exception rather than the rule. However, it is significant that the structure of this subfield does provide some opportunities for acquiring mainstream social resources. This feature distinguishes this street subfield from the others and differences in the type and nature of social capital within these social spaces have important implications for thinking about transitions away from street life. Cultural capital and status are also available within the gay village subfield; primarily through participation in the broader social scene of the gay village or through the possession of status markers such as fashionable clothing. I will discuss cultural capital and status acquisition in more detail in the next section.

The different types of capital within this subfield are interconvertible. For example, economic capital can be used to purchase cultural capital in the form of fashionable clothing. Money can also be used to purchase personal grooming services like haircuts or waxing, which along with items like clothing, increase an individual’s level of desirability, and thus erotic capital. Further, cultural and erotic capital can be converted into social status in that they enable youth to create peer networks with other high status individuals both within the specific social space of the subfield, as well in the broader social scene of the gay village. Being popular and having high social status further increases ones erotic capital, which leads to more favourable capital conversion and so on.
5.2 Homeless and Fabulous

Street subfields are organized by discourses that shape orientations to street life in that young people draw on these discourses in justifying and underwriting particular courses of action. Further, these discourses mark particular practices and artefacts as valuable. The dominant discourse in this subfield emphasizes the importance of living a “glamorous life” and frames sex work and relationships with older men as legitimate means of achieving that lifestyle. The glamorous life is associated with having fashionable clothing, eating at restaurants, “partying”, and being sexually desirable. The capital associated with these status markers is captured by a number of the youth in the notion of being “fabulous” or “fierce”. The following quote emphasizes the strength of the glamorous life as set of specific status markers and the capital that accrues to them, Mike says:

You had to be “fierce” [making the quote sign with his hands and smiling]. It was all about glamour. You had to know the right people, know the bouncers and the bartenders, be popular. Everyone has to know you. You had to wear expensive clothes, you know, drinking drinking drinking and then eventually drugs. (Mike, 20s)

In the context of this discourse, sex work becomes a means by which youth can achieve the “glamorous life” and participate in the social world of this subfield. Mike further illustrates this theme:

And that’s when I found out the more darker, deeper secrets of the crowds that I hang out with, most of them were escorts and prostitutes and stuff like that--and so I was like, ‘so that’s how you keep up the whole glamorous lifestyle’, you know what I mean--you get sucked in, it’s crazy. (Mike 20s)

Mike describes being “sucked in” into the “glamorous” lifestyle and how participation was normalized by the involvement of friends in his immediate social circle. The orientation of Mike’s friends towards a particular orientation to street life normalizes it and lends it credibility and status.

In addition to sex work providing the money to buy the markers of a glamorous life, relationships with men could also provide direct access. In speaking about his relationship with an older man Jesse comments:

He showed me this glamorous side of life, always take me out for dinner, he did everything I would want a boyfriend to do--we would hold hands while walking down the road, that kind of stuff. It was cute. But I was just known as the young kid with the old man. I was pretty much a show piece. He loved showing me off, and all that kind of stuff. He would just show off his young boyfriend. (Jesse, 21)
Jesse describes how a relationship with an older man provided him with the type of lifestyle he wanted—including the “glamour” of going out for dinner. The poor labour market position of the youth means that employment options are quite limited, and usually involve low-paying, low-status service work. Given the limited options the youth have for obtaining a glamorous life through low-wage, formal employment, sex work and relationships with older men emerge as relatively attractive options. In this context, for some, sex work can offer comparatively “easy money,” a point captured by Amy:

So, the stroll really it’s easy. You get paid, you know, like a $150 in 15 minutes and it—you know, it rolls in quick. So, it’s different for me like I don’t know if I can go and stand for an hour flipping burgers for seven dollars an hour while I make like a hundred times more than that in 15 minutes. The difference is like 15 minutes and 150 and then if you’re working behind a counter what $8.50 maybe $9 like in an hour. I don’t know if I could do that. I don’t know if I could.

(Amy, 19)

Amy compares the time and effort it takes to make a $150 in street prostitution with working in a fast food restaurant, and in doing so highlights the appeal that sex work can have in a context characterized by need and a discursive emphasis on consumption and casual spending.

The discourse on living glamorously did not express itself as a universally shared value, but rather as a cultural frame underwriting a set of understandings and practices that youth within this subfield engaged with in making sense of their actions and experiences. This formulation fits with Swidler’s (2001) views on culture as a resource that actors use to establish capacities and to justify courses of action. An excellent example of how youth reflect on their choices in the context of the glamorous discourse comes from Jesse in speaking about the choice to transition:

Jesse: And, um, I think that’s one of the reasons I’ve been going in and out of transition for being transgendered for awhile and um, one of the reasons that one my friends became transgendered, which I thought was really interesting and I almost totally agreed with it, was that gay people when they are young are fabulous, they are amazing, they have tons of fun, they live the lifestyle, the party lifestyle, you have your job, it’s great. When you’re old nobody wants you anymore, like nobody. . . . Jeez, I just don’t want to be one of those people that grow up to be nothing. Most of [the men I met at the bar I worked at] seem to be living off welfare, they don’t have jobs, they don’t have nothing. If they do have a job, it’s some busted one, like this one guy was a telemarketer. You’re 47 years old and you are a fucking telemarketer. . . .

T: So your friend being transgendered, how does that get them out of that trap?

Jesse: Because he wouldn’t be--being a tranny you can live a great lifestyle, but you can only be a hooker pretty much being a tranny, but you meet amazing people. Like I know people that met,
like, owners of [international fashion house]. Not the owners, but like people underneath them, that they like slept with and they got connections and all these free clothes. And they got this, and diamond necklaces are sent to them by mail. Just like crazy stuff that you wouldn’t think would happen. (Jesse, 21)

In this quote, Jesse contrasts the exciting life of transgendered women with the unglamorous life of low-level service work and declining erotic capital that Jesse associates with being an aging gay man. In this way, Jesse describes transitioning as way of remaining attractive and of continuing to live a fun and exciting lifestyle through sex work. Jesse’s thinking on this strategy exists in the context of a marginalized position and poor labour market, but it is also in the context of a discourse—argued by his friend in this case—that emphasizes the importance of living a glamorous life and that supports sex work as a means by which to achieve that life.

Another example of how youth engage with the discourse around living the fabulous life comes from Monica who explicitly distances herself from what she sees as the overly casual approach to sex work demonstrated by other youth in the field:

Monica: You won’t see me downtown or the corner when I am not working. What’s the point of going there? I don’t go there to make as much money as I want. For example, I need to pay my cable bill and I don’t have money, I would just go and make enough money to pay for my cable bill, that’s about it. If I make a $100 for example, I’m not going to stay there for another 20 hours to make another $300, $400 because I’m not greedy with money like that. I just go there when I really need the money, bills and food. Those are the only two times that I go there. I’m not going to go there, ‘oh my friend’s birthday is coming up I have no money I need to go get her a gift’…. It’s like I don’t go whoring myself for anyone, I whore myself for me. For my name, for my credit.

T: Where did that rule come from? Do you remember? Do you know why you have that rule?

R: It’s just because the way I made it, because when I met people they are like whoring themselves for drugs, for tokes, for drinks, and I’m like ‘not me, not me,’ it’s just not for me. (Monica, 21)

Monica makes sense of herself and her approach to subsistence in direct response to the idea of using sex work to afford a party lifestyle. Recognizing how youth engage with discourses in making sense of their choices illustrates the benefits of thinking of street life in terms of terrains to be negotiated rather than as a system of subcultural norms and values youth are socialized into. Monica’s comments also foreshadow the discussion in chapter 8 about the role of self-reflection and boundary drawing in making subsistence choices. Here Monica expresses her personal rules around sex work in terms of the kind of person she sees herself as.
There are two additional points about the “glamorous” life that need highlighting. The first is that the discourse draws from wider cultural images that strengthen the connection between the glamorous lifestyle and gay men by the continued casting of gay men as the official authorities on all things “fabulous” (see Clinton Kelly’s book *Freakin’ Fabulous* (2008) and the television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*). Being fabulous is constructed as an inherent aspect of a gay male identity, but is defined in many ways through consumptive practices like high-end clothing and interior design (Gluckman & Reed 1997). In the context of this subfield, sexual exchange emerges as means by which the youth can access the appropriate status markers in pursuit of realizing their fabulous potential as gay men and transgendered women.

Second, the emphasis on a specific style of appearance and body suggests that those youth who come to the social space around the village with a disposition and comportment that most conforms to this particular “fabulous” ideal are at an advantage in negotiating this subfield. In the following quote, Rob describes coming to the social space surrounding the gay village with a “feel for the game” in that his habituation of confidence and flamboyance enable him to accumulate social and symbolic capital:

I was independent and I was my own person. I stood out, so I was fabulous on my own and people drew themselves to me. You know they wanted to know who I was, they wanted to become my friend. You know they wanted to be a part of me. Not me being a part of them. So for me it was very easy to break in. You know before I knew it I was part of every group, every [clique], and you know every after hours. There was no, you know, place that I wasn’t able to go without knowing somebody or somebody knowing me. (Rob, 24)

Rob describes how his inherent “fabulousness” helped him to acquire social capital and status. This intuitive sense puts him at an advantage relative to youth whose internalized dispositions and demeanour do not correspond as closely with the dominant discourse of this subfield. However, as will be illustrated, a “fabulous” disposition is a liability within the other street subfields. This pattern suggests that youth will seek out those spaces that correspond most closely to their own dispositions, but often the structural realities of a particular approach to

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5 Being “fabulous” is associated with particular interpersonal styles and bodily dispositions. Green (2007) describes how urban gay enclaves are subdivided into arenas of desire that mark out particular styles and bodily comportments as desirable (i.e. leather daddy, bear, twink, etc.). A preppy or “twink” style appeared to be favoured in this subfield—one that emphasizes a more effeminate self-presentation, preppy designer fashions, and a trim and manicured body. Understanding the connection behind homelessness, sexual exchange, and this particular style and bodily practice will be an important avenue for future research.
street life encourage youth to stay within a less than ideal subfield and to manage the consequences of homelessness within that space.

5.3 Stratification and Competition

Fields by definition are stratified social spaces and a key strength of a field analysis is that it draws attention to how the homeless are positioned relative to one another within the subfields of street life. This discussion will focus on a few key dimensions to this stratification: the availability of particular conversion opportunities, involvement in risky strategies, and popularity and social belonging.

The different conversion options available within this subfield are not identical in terms of their inherent power dynamics, the nature of the exchange, or the associated risks and rewards. For example, having a supportive, long-term partner is obviously much different than selling sex on a prostitution stroll. The opportunities available to youth depend, in part, on their position within this social space as determined by the capital they possess. For example, stroll work was the most democratic of the strategies in that all of the youth reported some participation. Converting one’s erotic capital through a relationship with a financially supportive partner, in contrast, appeared to be reserved for those youth with the highest levels of erotic capital. This was evidenced by the finding that though most youth admitted to wanting this kind of relationship, and the two respondents that were successful in finding them were self-identified as high status at the time of the relationship; Annie, for example, had a large friendship group and was a popular personality on a well-known transgendered pornography website.

Beyond the availability of certain opportunities, youth were stratified within particular practices in terms of their relative level of success. This was most apparent in terms of “working the stroll” in that those with lower levels of erotic capital tended to make less money or had to engage in riskier practices. For example, in response to a question about why some people charge more than others for sex work, Cameron comments:

Ah, yeah, like for instance I’ve even had, sort of, crushes on the other stroll people because they were so good looking, the ones that had the abs, you know, and the school boy kind of look they made more money than anybody. . . . They would make more money, while the other people that were a little chubbier made less money, and that’s why a lot of people that were more of the chunk, more of the pear shaped size would do things for lesser money to get more clients. (Cameron, 24)
Here Cameron underscores how subsistence practices within this subfield are shaped by the distribution of erotic capital, with those youth with lower levels of capital having to adjust their practice accordingly. Importantly, differences in practice translate into differential exposure to very serious risks, including HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases, in that youth may be willing to forego protection at a client’s request or be reluctant to discuss it. Youth working the transgendered stroll also described unequal distribution of erotic capital relating to the desirability of a more feminine body type and self-presentation. For example, Jesse described being at a disadvantage because of his muscular legs and Amy because of her tall and stocky build. The transgendered young women described using clothing or make-up to minimize these masculine features, both as part of a personal identity project and in order to increase their erotic capital. A number of the youth had plans for plastic surgery as a more permanent solution.

Youth were also stratified in the extent to which they enjoyed popularity and belonging within the street subfield surrounding the gay village. This can be understood in terms of unequal amounts of social capital and status. Youth classified as “gay for pay”—straight-identified youth that engaged in sex work—are a good example of a group with low status within the field. Mike describes the differences between the straight-identified and the queer-identified youth:

You know what I mean, not all of them were—some of them were very decent and respectful people who did it because they had to, you know, like everybody, like other people, but again also with the drugs, they were doing it to support their drug habit, versus us homos we’re all about the glamour. We’re doing it all to get clothes and have money and go party and look best, and get our hair done, so it was like different so it was why those people were kind of looked down upon because they were only doing it to support their drug habit or so they can stay in the bathhouse or the motel so that they could deal drugs out of the place, you know what I mean. (Mike, 20s)

Mike describes the straight-identified youth as socially marginal to the gay and transgendered majority within this subfield in terms of two separate trajectories. He sees the gay and transgendered youth as primarily oriented towards participation in a glamorous life, and the straight-identified as engaging in sex work primarily to support drug habits. By not participating in the glamorous life, the straight-identified youth are unable to access much of the social capital and status that is available within this subfield. This difference can be understood

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6 I observed more overlap between the two trajectories than Mike admits in terms of gay and transgendered youth that engaged in sex work to support their drug habits, straight-identified youth that were not primarily concerned with supporting a habit, and gay and transgendered youth that were uninterested in living the glamorous life.
in relation to the dispositions and identities that these young people bring with them into this social space. Participating in the “fabulous” life connects more easily with a stereotypically gay identity and disposition, but feels less comfortable and “natural” for those whose identification and comportment is stereotypically straight. Both sets of youth may be engaging in sex work because of poverty and blocked opportunities, but the straight youth have less access to the rationalizing discourses and capital that participation in the “glamorous life” makes available.

There is indication that distribution of erotic capital in the gay village subfield is racialized. Green’s (2008) work on the sexual fields of New York’s gay enclaves finds that men from Asian ethnic groups had typically less erotic capital and had more difficulty finding high status sexual partners. For young homeless men from Asian backgrounds involved in sex work this could mean more difficulty attracting clients or sugar daddies. This possibility is supported by comments that the more desired look on the boys stroll was a muscular schoolboy kind of appearance—a hegemonic image that privileges Caucasian skin-tones and body shapes. In contrast, my interviews indicate that young people from Asian backgrounds were at an advantage when it came to transgender sex work as their smaller frames and body characteristics made them appear more feminine and therefore more desirable. Young people from Latin backgrounds were also singled out as being particularly feminine and beautiful. For at least some of the young people from Latin backgrounds their route into homelessness is as refugees fleeing countries where homosexuality is routinely met with severe violence—a trend that globalizes the field dynamics that structure this social space.

The distribution of capital in the gay village subfield is also gendered. The masculine self-presentation that is valued within this street space is different then what is valued in the other subfields. This finding underscores the value of a field framework for the study of street life—it emphasizes the heterogeneity of street spaces and cautions against generalized statements about the nature of street life. “The street” is typically regarded as a masculine space that rewards hegemonic traits such as dominance, aggression, physical strength, and emotional hardness and detachment. In contrast the dominant masculinity within the gay village subfield is less hegemonically masculine and the subfield rewards traits such as youth, freshness, innocence, and a clean-cut appearance. However, in complex social spaces gender norms and expressions are never monolithic. More traditional masculine traits were also desirable within this street space. On the boys stroll the favoured look was regarded as being a traditional schoolboy
demeanour and appearance. The youth also discussed the role that aggression and an invulnerable self-presentation can have in this space for protecting oneself from violence and victimization at the hands of clients and fellow young people. The nature of this space demands layered and complex expressions of gender.

Theoretically it is interesting to think about the relationship between crime and alternative forms of masculinity. In some of the first theories on the subject, crime is regarded as a way of accomplishing a traditional masculinity of daring and toughness (Messerschmidt 1993). Recent discussions have complicated this explanation by focusing on some of the complexity that can surround masculinity, femininity and crime (Miller 2002). The young men and transgendered women in this subfield illustrate that crime can occur in the course of accomplishing less hegemonic forms of masculinity and that criminal participation can be made easier and more lucrative through a more traditionally feminine self-presentation.

Another gender dynamic worth noting is that both Filipino transgender respondents first dressed as women through their involvement with the transgender prostitution stroll. These initial experiences sparked a deeper realization that they wanted to live full time as women. It was not uncommon for cisgendered respondents to work the transgender stroll because by all accounts it tended to pay better and have better working conditions. The improved working conditions were traced to the use of chivalrous erotic scripts meant to emphasize the femininity of the workers. These scripts contrasted with the “rougher” more masculine erotic scripts that were favoured among clients of the boys stroll. The process of identification described by these two respondents illustrates how field structure can shape something as deep and personal as gender identity.

5.4 Risks and the Reproduction of Inequality

An important dimension of a field analysis is recognizing how fields reproduce stratification and inequality. The following discussion focuses primarily on how dynamics within this subfield reproduce the marginalized position of the youth in wider society. A central reason that the marginal position of the youth gets reproduced within this subfield is that the capital they

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7 Cisgendered is a term coined by Schilt and Westbrook (2009) to refer to individuals whose gender identity matches their sex category. It is in contrast to transgender individuals whose gender identity does not match their sex category.
accumulate is inherently precarious and unstable. In one respect, this is because erotic capital, as grounded in physical appearance, is inherently fleeting. In her narrative, Amy talks about how the stroll cannot be a long-term strategy for her because of the constant demand for what is “young and fresh.” In another respect, social status in the subfield is unstable because sex work is something that is simultaneously accepted and stigmatized within this social space, meaning the youth were vulnerable to stigmatization and the loss of status. Mike comments:

Everything has its 15 minutes of fame in this street life. It’s the same if you know what I mean with me, I went from cute, fresh, little boy and all of a sudden you are like, ‘oh, he’s a whore and what a faggot’ and this and that and it changes so quickly. (Mike, 20s)

Mike describes his loss of status when he went from being cute and fresh to being openly criticized. Lastly, the social capital the youth accumulate is vulnerable because of the precarious, fleeting, and fragile nature of the relationships formed within this subfield. For example, relationships with other youth were vulnerable as youth moved in and out of the lifestyle. Relationships with “sugar daddies”, regular clients, or financially supportive partners were also fragile in that relationships were often superficial and organized to the benefit of the more economically secure party. Rob’s experiences are telling. Despite being homeless at a young age Rob, after doing sex work for a short time, was able to find social support and status in the gay community. Through a dating relationship with a successful partner Rob was able to get enough financial support that he did not need to work. However, this relationship turned violent and in leaving this relationship Rob ended up homeless for a second time. Shortly after arriving at a shelter in Toronto, Rob formed a relationship with a successful man that he met at a men’s group that allowed him to move out of the shelter temporarily. This new relationship ended shortly after it began when the partner moved out of the country. This dependence is often magnified in the case of “sugar daddies” or regular clients because they have significantly more social and financial power than the youth, creating inherently unequal and exploitive relationships over which the youth have very little control.

Another central reason that the field reproduces the marginal position of gay and transgendered youth is that the “glamorous life” emphasized in the field is relatively incompatible with the two primary pathways into self-sufficiency emphasized by the current state of homeless social policy; long-term employment in the service economy and education. For homeless youth in general, there are significant barriers to both that extend from their impoverishment, the absence of a home, and few stable sources of support (to name only a few
reasons) (Gwadz 2009; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999). Further, this social space is structured in such a way as to orientate youth away from employment and education. For example, the emphasis within the notion of the “glamorous” life on immediate gratification, flamboyance, and excitement clashes with the more subordinate, reserved, and self-sacrificing disposition required for employment in low-level service economy, as well in the pursuit of education. The glamorous life also cultivates a flamboyant presentation of self (Goffman 1959) that can elicit a homophobic response in work and educational settings, thereby further impeding mobility out of homelessness. And finally, keeping up a glamorous lifestyle can mean spending much of the youth’s earnings on drugs, clothes, and partying. Jesse acknowledges this theme:

Like I would spend my money on stupid shit, like when I wasn’t doing drugs, I would go buy myself a new dress for hooking that night, like what the hell? I should be buying myself guy clothes, but at the same time I had so much fun shopping for girls clothes. Like me and my friends, we would make that money, like $150 to $200. And we would be like, ‘all 3 of us have $200 guys, do you know how much drugs and clothing we can buy with that’ and that’s exactly what we would think too. Like we don’t need food, we never ever ever had food in our fridge. (Jesse, 21)

The pressure to spend money on valued status markers like clothes served to continually reorient youth back towards the subfield itself by making it difficult to save the money that they did manage to accumulate, money that might assist in making transitions off the street.

Another dimension to this re-orientating effect of this social space is that this subfield exerts a “pull” effect in that it offers tangible benefits to those involved. In addition to providing opportunities for acquiring money, social life in this subfield also offers acceptance and belonging—something that the homeless young people lack in general, but that is made extreme in the case of sexual minority street youth who face homophobia and transphobia on and off the street. Participating in the social world of the field can also provide excitement and fun. Mike captures this sentiment in describing his transition into the lifestyle:

Mike: There was like some of the people I knew were like in shelters, some of the people I knew, again, meet at bars and then we would start chilling together or like they would be hanging out in the parks like smoking weed and drinking, so do you know what I mean, I don’t know it just kind of happened, really quickly, you kind of get thrown into the fire

T: And did you end up kind of liking it at the time?

Mike: Oh for sure . . . . know what I mean, the glamour of it takes over, you know what I mean, you think ‘oh cool, I can live the rest of my life like this.’ (Mike, 20s)
Mike describes how the “glamour” of the lifestyle takes over, making it difficult to struggle into low-wage service work or education in addition to the practical barriers that homeless youth face in making those transitions. Recognizing what the homeless get from their involvement in various street spaces has implications for what the homeless are being asked to give up in making transitions off of the street. The subfields of street life provide opportunities for youth to acquire economic, social, cultural resources during a time when they have limited access to any of these resources in more mainstream social spaces. Transitions away from the street require that youth give up these resources in exchange for uncertain and often modest rewards. Further, the youth must often pursue these modest education and employment opportunities in contexts that feel alien and uninviting, and for which they lack a practical feel.

5.5 Conclusion

Applying a field analysis to street life and the question of subsistence conceptualizes the street as an overlapping collection of uniquely organized social worlds, each shaping pathways through homelessness. Fields and subfields are organized and stratified social spaces in which actors are positioned based on the economic, social, and cultural resources they hold. My analysis is practice focused and looks to how the homeless negotiate the street in the context of the particular terrain they encounter and the skill sets and dispositions that they cultivate and bring with them into the varying subfields.

As demonstrated, street fields are sites of capital conversion. The subfield surrounding the gay village provides opportunities for the youth to convert their erotic capital into economic, social, and symbolic resources. Conversion opportunities include street prostitution and escorting, but also participation in the social scene of the gay village. The availability of these opportunities for the youth orients them towards particular subsistence strategies, which differ to the dominant strategies used within other subfields of street life. I also highlight how fields are organized by the availability of specific discourses. For example, youth in the subfield surrounding the gay village drew on a discourse about the value of a “glamorous” life. Youth engaged with this discourse in making sense of their own practice, including decisions about their involvement in sex work. This subfield, as an inherently stratified space, shapes trajectories through homelessness. For example, I discussed how youth with lower levels of erotic capital were often required to charge less money for their services or to participate in high-risk sexual
activities. Further, the most desirable conversion opportunities, like a relationship with a financially supportive partner, were only open to the most well positioned individuals. Finally, the analysis examines how this subfield operates to stratify the youth relative to mainstream social spaces and definitions of success. This process happened primarily through the unstable nature of the capital the youth accumulate, as well as in how the “pull” factors of the subfield tended to orient youth towards street life and away from education and mainstream employment.
Chapter 6
Sleeping Rough

This chapter explores the social world surrounding a mobile and shifting group of street entrenched young people in Toronto’s southwest corner. There are two overlapping groups of youth represented within this social space; homeless young people who identify themselves with alternative subcultures like punks, hippies, and travelers, and young people who have drug and alcohol addictions that interfere with their ability to stay at shelters. The youth in the sleeping rough subfield share a position outside of emergency shelters that creates a specific set of challenges and opportunities that structure the nature and experience of street life. Youth in this social space are stratified according to their access to street-based peer networks and cultural capital in the form of knowledge about subsistence strategies like panhandling and squeegeeing (cleaning car windows at stop lights). Discourses in the field reinforce a particular approach to homelessness that emphasizes street involvement as a means of achieving independence and autonomy.

The main sites of this subfield are clustered around a busy three kilometre long stretch of Queen Street; a main thoroughfare running east-west in downtown Toronto’s southwest corner. The main sites of this subfield include panhandling spots along Queen Street, a number of parks in the area used for sleeping and congregating, a harm-reduction youth shelter, a popular squat located under a bridge to the south, and a harm-reduction drop-in located in an alley just off of Queen Street. The geography of these sites reinforces the distinctness of this social space, as the other two subfields are located on the opposite side of downtown. Ian acknowledges the geographic and social distinctness of the area around Queen Street where he spends his time:

T: And you were kind of saying before that you stay around this area around these people more so than up near…

Ian: Yah, on yonge? I don’t know, it’s just how things happen. I didn’t--the vibe is different, I am much more of a hippy person, a hippy punk kind of person than I am of a gangster or of a poser [laughing], so I really enjoy the people here they are all people in the same kind of mindset, same kind of ideas, same goals, same views. Same pastimes. We are like a family. (Ian, 22)

Ian distinguishes the social space around Queen Street from the space around Yonge Street where the main sites of the two other two subfields are located. He even suggests that the spaces
are characterized by different mindsets, goals and pastimes\(^8\). This sentiment fits well with the notion that field structures produce their own orientations (Bourdieu 1977; 1984).

The subsequent discussion adds to the insights established in the previous chapter by examining the unique structure of this subfield, in particular differences in the nature and distribution of capital and the content of the dominant cultural scripts. It illustrates how these unique structures orient youth in this social space towards a distinct approach to securing subsistence and social integration. This chapter extends the analysis by using the example of pet ownership to illustrate the way in which structural terrains shape practice and distinguish street subfields. The chapter also uses a discussion of the various subcultures within this social space to demonstrate the analytic advantages of distinguishing street fields and subcultures.

\section*{6.1 A Life Outside}

A street subfield exists where young people are brought together within a structured social space and set into pursuit of a particular logic or orientation, as well as into struggle over available resources. Young people in this subfield are brought together through a shared position outside of the emergency shelter system, and a shared geographic location within the area along Queen West. It is hard to speculate on exactly why youth congregate in this particular area. Practically speaking, some possible reasons are that the area has alleys and overpasses that are good for hanging out and squatting, it is close to a busy shopping area well-suited to panhandling, and there is a harm reduction youth shelter and drop-in in the area. However, one of the best explanations for why youth congregate in this area is because youth congregate in this area—it is a self-sustaining destination because a particular kind of homeless young person spends time here. It attracts young people through existing ties and networks, as well as newcomers who connect to the shared orientation to street life described by Ian when he comments that people in the area around Queen Street share a mindset and pastimes.

For this collection of young people, not sleeping at shelters means typically sleeping in squats or on the street (e.g. sidewalks, doorways, parks, or under bridges). This is a group who can’t or won’t stay at emergency shelters, but is also unwilling or unable to return home, couch

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\(^8\) Ian also describes the social world around Queen Street as a family. Homeless youth do describe membership in “street families,” tight knit friendship groups where youth might even cast themselves in traditional family roles (e.g. the mother of the group) (Hagan and McCarthy 1997). Ian was not a member of such a group and is presumably using the term “family” in a broader sense to refer to a kinship among youth in the area.
surf, or secure an apartment. The youth in this social space will sometimes stay at the harm-reduction youth shelter in the area, particularly when they need a break from sleeping outside or when the weather is particular bad. During the winter months some of the youth return home if one was available or they find shared accommodation at a communal or “punk” house. Multiple individuals squeezing themselves into small, often run-down, apartments characterize these communal houses. These apartments are often chaotic places characterized by high amounts of alcohol and drug use. This strategy is confirmed by the finding that all of the youth that had experience in this space reported some history with collecting social assistance. Usually the case was that they used the money to get an apartment during the winter months before returning to the street in order to travel around the country or because of heavy drug use, or both.

Understanding the particular reasons behind these choices is difficult. Like the other subfields, this social world is defined by a shared structural predicament, but also by the availability of discourses and frames that makes sense of that predicament and give it meaning. These reasons are intertwined and can be difficult to isolate and disentangle.

The practice of not staying at emergency shelters was both voluntary and forced. One of the most commons reasons for avoiding them was a strong dislike of shelter rules and their often unpleasant living conditions. Tim captures these reasons:

T: Have you stayed at shelters much in the past?

Tim: No, not really, no. Never too crazy about shelters. Too much rules. I would rather have a squat. If I want to write on the wall, I write on the wall. If I want to come in at 4 in the morning, shit faced, with two girls--and a goat. Go for it. Try to do that in a shelter. Tell you, ‘what? Girls? No. The goat is okay.’ [mutual laughter]. Shelters suck, you get ripped off from there from other guys that sleep there and use too much drugs. There is always fights, quarrels. It is not good. (Tim, 24)

Shannon puts it a bit more softly, but describes the same feeling:

It’s just some of the people in shelters too are a little bit sketchy sometimes. Like you just have a lot of different colors of people, like just alcoholics or crackheads or whatever. When you can go and find your own place to sleep especially the animals, like a lot of shelters don’t accept animals. I just would rather prefer like…it’s like an adventure almost, where am I going to sleep next kind of thing. Oh, this little alley looks fine, like comfortable. I don’t know. Shelters just don’t really appeal to me as much as being out like I’d prefer to sleep in a park if anything. I mean you have to deal with the weather and stuff like that, but I don’t know. I just find it a little bit more convenient I guess because a lot of shelters do have hours of operation too, so you have to be there at certain times. I don’t know. I like to pick my own bedtime. (Shannon, 21)
Tim and Shannon identify concerns about other residents, curfews, and the risk of experiencing violence or having ones possessions stolen. Shannon foreshadows my discussion about the availability of particular frames and discourses that youth in this space use to make sense of their experience when she describes the search for housing as an “adventure.” Other problems with shelters that were noted were not being allowed to sleep in the same bed as their partner, prohibitions against even moderate drug and alcohol use on site, and the risks of getting sick or contracting bed bugs. All of these reasons for avoiding shelters are echoed in interviews with homeless adults (Wasserman & Clair 2010; Dordick 1997).

Another reason the youth avoided shelters was because of serious alcohol and drug addictions. Sleeping at shelters is not conducive to regular substance use as most shelters typically prohibit drug and alcohol use on site, have restricted in-out privileges, and have early curfews. Harm reduction shelters are typically more tolerant of admitting people under the influence, but the more mainstream youth shelters have strict no-admittance policies for intoxication. These policies mean that youth might try to seek shelter services only to be discharged or that they will avoid them altogether, seeking alternative accommodations in places like squats or parks. Anthony a heavy drinker comments, “you get kicked out of shelters in the summer time, and it’s like why go to another shelter if they are just going to kick you out.”

Although heavy drug or alcohol use was only given as a reason by three of the youth at the time of the interview, a number of other young people described this as part of their initial decision to avoid shelters. This finding suggests that what might begin as a practical response to an inability to stay at shelters develops into a preferred strategy. I will discuss this orientation to street life and the scripts that support it in more detail below.

The position of the young people outside of emergency shelters defines the social world of this subfield by creating a set of risks and opportunities that the youth must manage and negotiate. In particular it sets the young people into an acute and shared struggle over daily subsistence needs. Not staying in shelters means that youth do not have access to the two main avenues of material support relied on by those within the shelter system; Personal Needs Allowance (PNA) and regular meal services. PNA is a provincially funded welfare payment that is paid out on a daily or weekly basis to those living at emergency shelters in lieu of standard welfare payments. Youth and adults living in emergency shelters receive $4.20/day or $29.40/week. Though small, this source of income shapes life inside shelters in important ways.
and will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. In addition to PNA, most youth shelters provide meal services which are an important source of nutrition—albeit a limited one (Tarasuk, Dachner, & Li 2005)—that youth in the shelter system rely on. Not being able to take advantage of shelter meal services or PNA means that even though youth get some help with basic needs from drop-in programs, most provide for themselves through street-based strategies like panhandling, squeegeeing, and dumpster diving.

In addition to the general challenges that homeless and street involved youth face in accessing the paid labour market, sleeping rough creates additional practical barriers to formal employment, including maintaining a work appropriate appearance, providing a current address on application forms, and reproducing one’s labour in terms of adequate food and sleep. Street based subsistence strategies are attractive because they can be relied on to meet daily subsistence needs and they can be done on a flexible and as-needed basis. For example, Marc comments:

If you panhandle for 8 hours here, you can probably make like $200, but the thing is that I don’t panhandle for 8 hours, I panhandle for what I need, which is an average of $25 to $35 per day. Once I’ve got my $25-$35 then I just go away down my bridge and go chat with the rest of the people that make their money and meet me back under the bridge right. And you know, so we put the--the essentials first, food for the dog, food for us, and then fucking cigarettes we don’t even need to buy because we bum from people and we accumulate them, but it’s still hard sometimes. (Marc, 20)

Marc describe how panhandling can be counted on to provide the $25 or $35 needed to get food for himself and his dog. Julie echoes this in regards to squeegeeing:

Julie: Squeegeeing is the best money for me sometimes, because you go up and you know get a car a light, get how many lights an hour and that’s $40 or $60, whatever. Give or take.

T: So you can make pretty good money that way?

Julie: Well you make enough money to live off of. You don’t want to be out there all day. When you have a habit to feed you see people out there all the time, all the time, out squeegeeing--you know, like, if you are only trying to get food and booze you don’t need that much. (Julie, 20)

Julie, like Marc, points to the reliability of activities like squeegeeing and panhandling to provide the minimum amount she needs each day. Julie and Marc also acknowledge the flexibility of street-based subsistence strategies as they can be done on one’s own schedule and do not require the same level of commitment as paid labour. This characteristic is important given the

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9 Those sleeping on the streets or in squats can take advantage of a similar program that pays them a “street allowance”, but many do not most likely because they may not know it is available or because of bureaucratic barriers.
instability and unpredictability of street life, particularly for individuals with drug addictions, as street based subsistence strategies can be done as needed and while high or intoxicated.

6.2 The Nature and Distribution of Capital
The social spaces of street life can be distinguished by the types of capital that are most central to street life and that are main sources of internal stratification. The main sources of capital within this social space are social capital in the form of connections with street entrenched peers, and cultural capital in the form of knowledge about street based subsistence strategies like panhandling, flying-a-sign, and squeegeeing. This compares to the importance of erotic capital in the gay village subfield, which is not a key source of stratification among the sleeping rough youth. The social and cultural capital available within this subfield is important because it helps young people meet the unique challenges of street life within this space, but like erotic capital it is not equally distributed.

Peer relationships and knowledge about street-based subsistence strategies are important in this subfield because of the shared position of the young people outside of emergency shelters and the pressure that puts on them to meet their own daily subsistence needs. Street entrenched peers are crucial source of practical and emotional support. Peers provide information about subsistence strategies, access to squats and places to sleep, protection when sleeping outside, they can keep an eye on belongings, and through sharing they can be an important source of essentials like food, clothing, drugs, and cigarettes. The importance of street entrenched peers is reflected by youth within this subfield being the least likely to have connections with conventional peers and adults. In the street spaces surrounding the gay village and the shelter (discussed in the next chapter), the structure of the field promoted access to social ties with mainstream individuals—shelter staff in the case of the shelter youth, and “sugar daddies” and older companions in the case of the gay village youth. The differences in types of available social capital have implications for transitions through homelessness, in particular contact with pro-social attitudes and access to the paid labour market. As discussed in the previous chapter, relationships with “sugar daddies” though often exploitive can provide access to mainstream opportunities. Similarly, youth in the social space surrounding the shelter describe the importance of relationships with staff for connecting them with resources and being a stable source of social support.
Although street entrenched peers provide limited access to mainstream opportunities they are essential for managing the challenges of life outside the emergency shelter system. Shannon describes the sharing that is essential to surviving on the streets:

Like that’s the thing like when you’re panning and stuff like you go back to wherever you’re sleeping and it’s like, ‘Oh, we have this much money or whatever. You want to go in on some beer or something?’ Like their money is your money and vice versa and for a little while because a couple of my friends got bum check or whatever from like from welfare and they bought like 10 boxes of Kraft dinner. Yeah, we have a fire pit so they’re just like whatever like just pay us back in food or whatever. Whenever you guys have the means to provide then do so or whatever. . . . It’s just really easygoing I guess. I find to feel more comfortable around street kids than anybody else. It’s just like we just share everything pretty much, which is awesome. It’s needed especially when you have so little. (Shannon, 21)

Shannon highlights the importance of peer networks for sharing and pooling resources, particularly in the context of having few other resources. Peer relationships are also an important source of companionship and acceptance. Both Ian and Marc described the street as a space of inclusion. Both young men left home at a time when they had few friends and were feeling lonely and isolated. Through their participation in street life both were able to find acceptance. Ian in particular describes his time on the street as a life changing experience:

I had, um, very secluded, computer, you know technology-oriented kind of life for most of my life. I mean at one point I just couldn’t bear the uselessness of my life. . . . one day I woke up and I was like fuck this shit, I don’t believe in work, I don’t believe in education and I don’t believe in the futility of the life I have been living so let’s go and fucking live it up man, so I started to hitchhike two years ago, met some random hippies that saved my life because I had no resources, I had no money, no nothing, no work and I was at the other side of Canada alone, no friends, nothing, so--these guys came along and fucking showed me the ways. Introduced me to squatting, to make shelters, to living naturally, living in nature, you know, being respectful of nature, showed me how to dumpster dive. They opened my eyes, you know, made me realize a lot of shit that is going on in the world, yah. My life today is pretty much an extension of that day. (Ian, 22)

Ian describes the practical information he received, but also the companionship and support that had been missing from his life.

The structure and nature of this subfield is important to who will find acceptance here. Ian’s views about the uselessness of a “technology-oriented” life and his rejection of mainstream employment and education find a particular correspondence with the discourses and practices of the street entrenched social world. This contrasts with Rob from the previous chapter who described a particular correspondence between his “fabulousness” and the dominant orientation towards street life in the gay village subfield. Arguably Rob and Ian would not find the same
levels of acceptance if their positions were reversed. The search for acceptance is important because it influence the subfields that youth gravitate towards; however, this dynamic is complicated by the structural differences that distinguish street fields. Structural considerations may direct youth towards subfields in which they feel uncomfortable or are unlikely to find acceptance. Consider the case of a gay identified youth who wants to avoid the emergency shelter system, or a young punk who does not feel safe sleeping in a squat. In both cases the space in which they are likely to find acceptance is different from the one that they are directed to for more practical reasons. This dissonance requires them to privilege one set of reasons over the other and then take steps to manage the practical or social consequences that extend from that choice. Jason, an African-Canadian youth, felt more comfortable in the social world surrounding the shelter and drop-in than among the sleeping rough youth subfield despite preferring to sleep outside. In this way Jason straddled the two subfields, not feeling entirely comfortable in either. In another example, Kim describes the complex reasons that shape the search for social space on the street:

You know like the street punks? I wanted to be them, I met my first one when I first started drugs when I was 16. But I remember like seeing these two street punks and they were sitting on the side of the road across from [this TV station]. And they just -- like they looked so high and they just looked so happy. And they were so dirty and you know what I mean, they just looked so cool and it was like I wanted to be like them. I don’t know. I just kind of got into like the punk rock scene and shit . . . but I never like, ever hung out with them, like I always hung out with like I guess the gangsters. Like they were the ones that were selling drugs and shit like that. So I never--like they seemed happy and I wanted to hang out with them, but it was like, I never ever hung out with them because they were drug addicts, you know what I mean, and they could never supply me. So I always hung out with like the gangsters who had stuff. (Kim, 21)

Despite feeling more of an affinity towards the street punk scene Kim spent time with the “gangsters” of the shelter subfield because they could give her better access to drugs. In the search for social space Kim prioritized practical concerns relating to her drug use over the personal connection and attraction she felt to the social world of the sleeping rough subfield.

Shannon’s story speaks to the difficulties that youth face when they struggle with managing the social realities of street life. Shannon was punk identified, and so found correspondence in that respect, but she struggled with making friends and being social because of her bipolar disorder and depression:

I’m sort of a sad person a lot of the time. I don’t know why but--so, I think a lot of people are kind of deterred from me . . . I’m just a sad person and I try not to be like that . . . . I met a few kids the other day and they asked my boyfriend, ‘does your girlfriend not like us? Like what did we do?’ And he just said, ‘no, she’s just having a rough time. She’s just a pretty antisocial.’
And I don’t mean to be, it’s not like I want to be antisocial. I just always have a hard time dealing with my emotions. I try and be as best as a person as I can be, but it’s hard . . . . That’s one thing that I don’t think a lot of people understand though is me crying all the time and stuff because a lot of punk girls, especially, are really tough and really strong. I am for the most part but I’ve never seen a punk girl cry as much as me [laughing]. I feel sort of like, oh, my God! Like I’m such a whiner, I’m such a baby. (Shannon, 21)

Shannon’s difficulty in making friends and fitting in made her reliant on her boyfriend for practical assistance and as a link to peers. Shannon’s dependence made her vulnerable and she struggled earlier that year when her boyfriend ended up in jail. This kind of reliance also has implications because it might make Shannon reluctant to end a negative or abusive relationship and limits the extent to which she can be independent. In contrast, Tim who had been street involved for close to 12 years and whose trajectory took him through multiple street subfields, was adept at making friends. Tim was surprised to find that after knowing a couple he met on the street for a week they were offering to watch his stuff, letting him borrow their expensive bikes, and offering him a place to stay for the upcoming winter. His ability to make friends gives him access to resources and help unavailable to Shannon. Young people come to street spaces with varying levels of skill in cultivating the social capital that is essential for managing the unique challenges of that space, in this case the challenges of sleeping outside and meeting daily subsistence needs. These differences shape trajectories through street life by promoting particular kinds of strategies. Shannon, for example, responded to her social difficulties by returning home when her boyfriend was in jail. The choice to go home is not without its risks and consequences for many street involved young people and for many it is not even an option.

The other main type of resource at play within this subfield is cultural capital in the form of knowledge about street based subsistence strategies. This includes information about how and where to panhandle and squeegee, strategies for dumpster diving, and information about available squats. This type of knowledge helps young people earn more money, avoid harassment from the police and the public, get connected with services, find out about alternative ways to make money like research opportunities, and find good places to sleep. Peer networks can also provide access to knowledge and rationalizations that facilitate participation in subsistence related street crime like theft, prostitution, and drug dealing (Hagan & McCarthy 1997). Peer networks are the main source of knowledge about subsistence, legal or otherwise. This relationship represents the conversion of social capital into cultural capital, and young
people who lack access to peer networks are at a disadvantage when it comes to acquiring valuable knowledge about street based subsistence strategies.

Subsistence related knowledge also gives homeless young people in the sleeping rough subfield a competitive advantage in the struggle over public donations. Youth develop techniques and strategies for maximizing the money they make. Strategies include choosing the best spots, developing the best pitches, and managing public impressions (Lankenau 1999). For example, following an interview Marc was careful to rip up the sign he was using for panhandling before stuffing it in the garbage, pointing out that a good slogan could make all the difference and that he did not want someone to steal his idea. Another example comes from Diana:

My girlfriend, I don’t know if she enjoys doing it . . . but the summer before, she made $600 in one day panning outside Union Station in the summer. . . . If you’re panhandling, the cleaner you look the better because people think, okay, you’ve got these scrubs on, you’re dirty and you’re going to do drugs. Now, in my girlfriend’s case where she looks young, she’s got little pigtails she puts on clean clothes and had a sign going, ‘I’m stranded,’ and because she looks so young they don’t want to see a young girl traveling because shit can happen. So the cleaner you look and quite possibly the younger you look, the more money you make. (Diana, 24)

Diana’s girlfriend’s knowledge about panhandling helped her to earn a substantial amount of money. Her particular strategy, like cultivating a younger and cleaner cut appearance, are valuable pieces of information that she may be reluctant to share with others. The approach she describes relies on the trust of the public and its success could be reduced if done poorly or by too many people. Knowledge about techniques like the best type of sign, the right way to dress, or the best location to sit all have real value within this subfield because they can provide competitive advantage in the pursuit of economic resources.

Just as social capital can be converted into cultural capital, the opposite is also possible. Knowledge about street life is a valuable commodity that can attract friends and acquaintances, particularly those new to the subfield. As holders of valued information youth can gain popularity, deference, and respect. Marc describes this process:

Well, when I was [new], the first guy that learned me the way of the street [I wanted to be like him]. Then I went somewhere else and I wanted to be like this guy, and then I wanted to be like this guy, and then nothing. Then I wanted to be like me. Then I got some kids come to me and they want to be like me. And it’s kind of weird because like before when I was like them, I wanted to be like some guy, now I am the one that they want to be. (Marc, 20)
Marc describes looking up to the people that first showed him how to survive on the street, but now he finds that he is one being idolized for his knowledge. Ian describes a similar process in that he now considers it one of his main responsibilities to pass on to other youth what he has learned about surviving on the street. Ian is surrounded by a group of young people that rely on him for his guidance and support. These social resources are an important source of social status for a group of youth that are stigmatized and excluded from mainstream avenues of success.

Youth used the concept of “street smarts” as shorthand for the cultural capital that makes living on the street possible. Youth within this social space were not the only ones to talk about “street smarts”; however, there is indication that the term “street smarts” within this subfield places more emphasis on the practical skills and knowledge necessary to meet daily needs. This contrasts with a greater emphasis among those in the shelter subfield to describe a person’s ability to manage interpersonal conflicts and dangers, and to describe knowledge about sex work in the gay village subfield. These differences highlight how the value assigned to a particular practice varies by subfield and underscores the distinctness of these social spaces. In this sense, there is no single set of “street smarts” because what is useful depends on the contexts in which the homeless are embedded. This point underscores the limitations of research about a general subculture of homelessness. It also acknowledges that the strategies chosen by an individual depends on the knowledge that is available within any given subfield. This insight extends Hagan and McCarthy’s (1997) ideas about the role of “criminal capital” in offending. They argue that the likelihood of offending depends on the availability of information about techniques and moral neutralizations. A field analysis contributes to this argument by analyzing how the availability of criminal capital and its transferability depends on the street subfields in which the homeless are embedded.

### 6.3 An Independent Life

Street subfields are characterized by distinct sets of cultural resources that are available within each street space and that young people draw on to make sense of their experience and that underwrite their orientation to street life. In the social space surrounding the street entrenched youth, these cultural resources frame life outside the emergency shelter system as one of independence, autonomy, and self-reliance. If the idea of living “glamorously” shaped the
subfield surrounding the gay village, than a discourse of living independently is its counterpart in the sleeping rough subfield. Marc comments:

People think they are just like 'get a job!' or 'fucking do something with your life.' First of all, we are doing plenty with our life, we’re enjoying our own life, you know. Other than trying to make everybody else happy, like your boss, or like, yup, pretty much—we are just trying to make ourselves like happy. (Marc, 20)

In justifying his approach to street life, Marc draws on frames available within this social space that emphasize the value of being independent and of not submitting to the drudgery of mainstream employment. Similarly, Shannon comments:

I just think, I like being free and that’s all I can say is just I like having a freedom of choice. You know, I think I’m going to sleep in until 6 today or something, like the boss isn’t going to get mad or that kind of thing or whatever. (Shannon, 21)

Here Marc and Shannon make a case for living on the street as the pursuit of an independent life, one not ruled by the demands and expectations of other people, like a boss. In the context of these frames, street-based subsistence strategies like panhandling and squeegeeing become empowering strategies for achieving personal freedom. Self-reliance is a related discursive theme within this social space. This theme was most prominent in conversations with youth about what they believed they had learned from their time on the street. Youth in the sleeping rough subfield tended to emphasize how life on the streets had taught them survival skills, for example Ian comments:

If I went the other way and worked a job, anything, maybe I would have a house, maybe I would have a job, maybe I would have a kid at this point, you know, but it doesn’t mean that I would have this confidence, it does not mean that I will be able to go and sleep outside at night, stand and be happy, go and find food the next day and survive everyday no matter what happens, you know. (Ian, 22)

The happiness that Ian describes is rooted in feeling that he is self-reliant, that he has the skills and know-how to survive in any situation. This emphasis on self-reliance was also evident in the youth consistently downplaying the extent to which they utilized drop-in services. Though most of the youth did mention taking advantage of drop-in services their narratives tended to minimize their use and emphasize the extent to which they were responsible for their own survival through subsistence strategies like panhandling and squeegeeing. Their narratives also tended to avoid the contradiction presented by the dependence inherent in subsistence strategies that rely on public donations.
Examining how homeless young people draw on cultural frames also extends the existing research on stigma management among the homeless. The concept of “identity talk” is used in the literature to describe how the homeless use verbal strategies help to manage the stigma of homelessness. Ian in the example above is demonstrating what this literature describes as a “role embracement” strategy where the individual adopts and defends the stigmatized identity (Snow & Anderson 1984). Swidler (2001) offers another way of conceptualizing language like Ian’s about the happiness and satisfaction of street life—as cultural toolkits in action. This approach asks questions about how homeless young people use the ideas and images available to them to make sense of their lives and to develop capacities for practice. This differs from a subcultural approach in that culture is not a cohesive belief system that actors hold in their minds, but a set of tools that actors draw on in practical, and sometimes non-cohesive, ways according to the demands of the situation. This non-cohesiveness comes across among this group in the contradiction between statements about street life as excitement and independence, and street life as a difficult and lonely struggle. Cultural toolkits inform practice because they justify and sustain particular courses of action. The dual process approach that I take in this analysis, which includes cultural repertoires, recognizes the practical roots of action and avoids reducing it to the expression of shared norms and values. It also recognizes how these frames shape decision-making rather than seeing them only as a verbal strategy for deflecting stigma. In short, cultural repertories and frames matter to how street involved young people manage street life.

The value placed on survival and independence also shapes the expression of gender within this subfield. The dominant gender expression for men is a tough and aggressive masculinity that, for some, is influenced by punk culture. Interestingly this gender expression is also available to young women and can be a source of respect. Marc described his girlfriend with some pride as, “really rank, and she is a tomboy, and she is going to beat anybody that gets in her way, even if they are like fucking 10 times her size.” In fact, Marc goes on to say that he saw himself as being more physically vulnerable than his girlfriend because he did not have her tough reputation and he has a smaller physical build:

She is big and tough--well, she’s not big and tough, like she got some muscle and she know how to fight and she know how to defend herself because she has been around since she was 14, and I don’t think she needs to worry about a lot because most people are afraid of her. I need to worry because I am a fucking rack of bones, you know. Everybody is going to try to pick a fight with me because they think I can’t defend myself. (Marc, 20)
Similarly, Shannon spoke with envy of the tough street-punk girls that never cried and knew how to defend themselves. This tough gender expression can be seen as a kind cultural capital that male and female youth can exchange for status and respect. It also differs markedly from the gender expressions valued within the gay village and the shelter subfield. Within the punk and traveler subcultures respondents spoke specifically about how youth did not differentiate between men and women and that everyone was treated equally. Shannon mentioned that this meant that young women in the space were treated as equals and were not prone to harassment or sexism. Marc made a similar point, but added that this also meant that the young women did not get any special considerations in conflicts; “equal rights, equal fights.” The common view was that the primary threat to young women in this space came from strangers and older homeless men not a part of this scene. This contrasts with the view in the shelter subfield that that the primary threat to young women in that space were predatory peers (I will discuss this finding in more detail in the following chapter). This points to some real differences in how men and women are treated in these street spaces, but it also suggests that how youth view this space is influenced by discourses that support a “one for all” imagery.

Research on groups of punk and traveler homeless youth in other cities (Hatty 1996), as well as stories and field observations from this space indicate that this social world is perhaps not as egalitarian and gender neutral as some might suggest or want to believe. There were stories of young women having to fend off romantic advances when travelling with young men, or of young girls being pressured into drug use by their boyfriends. In another example, Marc talked about a group of young women he labeled “pet twinkies.” Because young women were often able to earn more money panhandling than their male counterparts some men were encouraged to find young women willing to panhandle on their behalf. Marc comments: “Pet twinkies are the girls that are going to come to you, they are not in the street at all, they are going to pretend they are and they are going to make your money for you.” His comments suggest that young men in this space are able to use their cultural, and perhaps erotic capital, to find young women who are straddling home and street life to help them to earn money. There was no indication that the young women in this space were able to take advantage of similar opportunities. Evidence of sexism in this subfield suggests that a tough and aggressive self-presentation may help young women in this space demonstrate their legitimacy and help protect them against exploitive behaviour and unwanted sexual attention from their peers and from housed men.
6.4 The Subcultures of Sleeping Rough

Young people in this social space identified with a range of subcultures, including punks, hippies, travelers, and train riders. Despite differences in the specifics of identification, the subcultures that these youth draw on are characterized by a shared emphasis on non-conformity, independence, and autonomy. This affiliation came across in Ian’s comments above about fitting in because he saw himself as “more of a hippy person, a hippy punk kind of person.” Further, Sarah in describing who she hangs around with comments:

There are a few hippies who wonder around . . . . And lots of punks ride trains and shit, but then there are the train riders who hang out with each other mostly, and then there is the fucking street punks. The squeegee punks and shit. But they all kind of hang out together once they are in a city. (Sarah, 19)

Sarah describes the different subcultural affiliations claimed by people in this subfield, including hippies, punks, and train riders. Her last sentence is particularly important because she underscores how all of these subcultures are brought together within this unique social space. This finding highlights the need for a concept like field that conceptualizes a shared social space in which youth with different subcultural affiliations are brought into interaction with one another. Further, involvement in the sleeping rough subfield extends beyond membership in a particular subculture. Evidence for this point comes from individuals in this space who claim no subcultural membership or who were members but have since drifted away. This point comes across in an exchange with Margaret:

T: Is there a style that you sort of identify with?

Margaret: I used to be, boots up to here [just below the knee], and like a chelsea mohawk [bangs in the front shaved in the back], now I have dirty ass dreads and everyone calls me a dirty hippy now, but I am not.

T: You don’t think of yourself as a dirty hippy?

Margaret: No. Maybe dirty but not hippy. No patchouli loving for me. I don’t know, I am just kind of myself now. I used to be all like, ‘rah, rah, punk rock’ patches and everything, kind of train-core for awhile . . . . I used to hang out with them, they are very--some are just dorks anyways. If you see someone wearing Carharts, they usually have a dog, really geared up and they have a cup on their pants or whatever, it is like the train rider kids, maybe a couple of face tattoos in the mix--they are kind of pricks though. (Margaret, 21)
In this example, Margaret describes her past identification as a punk and a train-rider. Even though she is no longer a member of those subcultures she is still embedded in this subfield. Further, her comments highlight that even though involvement in this social space cannot be reduced to membership in a subculture, these subcultures are a structuring force. In Margaret’s case, her past involvement with a group of train-riders shapes the interpersonal terrain she has to negotiate in terms of old friendships and conflicts. Additionally, the availability of subcultural labels shape how people perceive and categorize her (e.g. as a dirty hippy).

6.5 The Terrain of Street Life: Animals and the Demands of Sleeping Rough

Pet ownership, like street-based subsistence strategies, is a good example of a dynamic which is both structured by the particular demands of the field, but also structuring in that it reinforces a particular orientation to street life. The example of pet ownership illustrates the terrain of interrelated structures that distinguish street fields. It also underscores Snow and Anderson’s (1994) view that the homeless share a “common predicament” that produces a unique set of behaviours, daily routines, and cognitive orientations. The present analysis extends this insight by recognizing that “the street” in a given locale is actually made up of a collection of distinct social spaces and that this predicament differs depending on the subfield in which homeless young people are embedded. Each subfield has a structural terrain that defines it but the case of animal ownership among sleeping rough youth places this terrain in high relief.

A number of the youth traveled with dogs and less frequently cats, rats, and other animals. Having a dog is a practical solution to many of the challenges and problems faced by youth in this subfield. The risk of victimization on the street is well documented (Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, Unger, & Iversen 1997). Sleeping on the street makes the youth vulnerable to victimization from other homeless individuals, the public, and the police. This concern seemed to be particularly acute for the young women, stemming from a particular fear of rape that was heightened by the frequency of harassing behaviour and comments they received from strange men often while panhandling. Additionally, despite its highly social aspects, sleeping on the streets was often described as lonely, stressful, and isolating. In the context of this experience, animals, particularly dogs, were regarded as important protectors and companions. Sarah sums
up this sentiment perfectly in response to a question about how she felt about having a dog around:

Oh, it’s great. Honestly, I don’t even feel the same without him. Like I am so constantly use to him being with me that I don’t even feel safe right now because I don’t have him with me, right. I don’t know. It’s really a safety thing for when I am hitchhiking and shit, and a companion, like ever since I got my dog my reasons for getting a dog were: A) safety, because like you know, if you are sleeping somewhere, like a stairwell or a park or something, and some crackheads come around, or some home-bums and something, your dog is going to start barking and growling and they are just going to go away, it’s really good for that. [B] I got him because I had really bad depression before and I felt like the world is against me, everybody hates me. I feel like I shouldn’t even be here. I know that my dog is probably the only one thing in my life that could never possibly stab me in my back. I need to have that dog, and it’s retarded because people try to take your dog away from you all the time. (Sarah, 19)

It is clear from Sarah how important animals are to dealing with the specific challenges of living outside of shelters with little social and emotional support. However, animal ownership also reinforced and defined other elements of this subfield. For example, there was only one shelter in Toronto that allowed pets, which made staying at shelters very difficult even when the weather or some other factor might make that a preferred option. Marc describes this:

Hostels don’t take dogs, there is nowhere they take dogs, so if you have a dog then you are on your own, you are living under a bridge most often. (Marc, 20)

He points to how having a pet limits ones accommodation options and encourages youth to sleep outside, thereby reinforcing the rejection of mainstream shelter life.

Pet ownership also had the pro-social effect of directing youth away from illegal subsistence strategies. Youth with dogs cited the well being of their animals as a reason for avoiding criminal activity or unnecessary risks, including the choice to participate in activities such as theft and drug dealing. They saw any chances they took as putting their animals at direct risk of being taken away from them. This choice strengthened the commitment of the youth to activities like squeegeeing and panhandling as they were seen as relatively low risk strategies for making money. Margaret speaks to this:

I don’t know, I used to sell pot, but not anymore. It’s kind of risky, and I have dogs right so I don’t want to get like put in jail, not even for like an hour because I don’t want my dogs to go to the pound. (Margaret, 21)

Here she directly links her choice to avoid selling pot to concern for her pet. Dogs influence subsistence choices further in that they require constant supervision because homeless youth lack a home in which to leave them during the day. This situation reinforces participation in activities
such as panhandling, squeegeeing, and flying-a-sign because it allows them to stay with their animals. Animals also acted as a barrier to paid employment in the absence of a place to leave them while at work. As Marc puts it, “so getting a job is more hard than some people think because if you’ve got a dog with you then you can’t have a job if you don’t have a house first.” This situation creates something of a catch-22: dogs are an important part of feeling safe in the context of having no home, but having a dog acts as a barrier to engagement in the mainstream labour force which is one of the primary pathways into stable housing. In addition to animals being a practical response to the challenges and risks of street life for these youth, animals also restrict and shape subsistence strategies—encouraging the choice to sleep outside and the use of street based strategies like squeegeeing and panhandling.

Tied in with the practical benefits of pet ownership in this subfield is a system of relations that support pet ownership, establish norms and rules around it, and create opportunities to obtain a pet. In terms of the importance of dogs Marc comments:

The street dogs, the street kids and travelers that have got dogs, like, they are everything, the dog is everything to you, it’s more than my girlfriend because my girlfriend can go cheat on me somewhere, I don’t know. My dogs not going to go cheat on me, he’s not going to say ‘pfft, fuck you’, you know. So some people too, they, they think we don’t treat our dog well, they think because he is skinny and stuff, look at my dog, do you think he is skinny? I got some people telling me, ‘oh, your dog look like he is dead,’ and he look like that. That was a couple of days ago. Dogs always come first in our world because that’s all we’ve got. Plus they are 24 hours 7 with us, [leaning into the recorder and yelling], please people stop bitching about our dogs, they are well! It just piss me off man, people walk and they look at our dogs and they are like ‘you should feed these dogs.’ This dog eats more than I do. (Marc, 20)

Marc describes the importance of animals to youth that are sleeping rough. In another example, Margaret acknowledges both the rules around dog ownership and the opportunity structures for getting a dog:

She belonged to this other guy but I took her, well this guy…took her, he is like “[Margaret] do you need a dog?” So we all said no, you can’t have your dog back because you are abusing it, I found like burn marks on her legs and she was getting kicked in the ribs and she was just the tiniest little thing, she was just two months, just tiny as all hell. I couldn’t understand how you could do that, you should get beat up. I didn’t even realize he was abusing her, he just wasn’t feeding her. We woke up and she was running around, flailing…I don’t know, it was ridiculous so we took the dog from him. (Margaret, 21)

Margaret describes how she got her dog when she was taken away from someone that was abusing her. All of the youth I spoke with got their dogs from other homeless youth, either as puppies when someone’s dog had a litter or in an event like the one described by Margaret where
a dog is either taken away or given away because the original owner is unable to handle it. The youth also spoke passionately about the general respect that street youth show for their animals and the resentment they felt when the public or animal protection agencies suggested otherwise.

The example of pet ownership illustrates the type of social terrain that constitutes street fields and that homeless young people must contend with. One choice, like to avoid shelters or care for a pet, leads to a specific set of interconnected challenges, opportunities, rules, discourses, and cultural frames that structure and shape the experience of street life further. In the specific example of pets, the choice to have a pet on the street leads to a particular set of constraints and influences that direct future choices all in the context of frames and ideologies that make sense of that choice. Each subfield has a unique terrain that distinguishes it from the others and lends its own distinct character and feel.

### 6.6 Risks and the Reproduction of Inequality

Youth in this subfield face significant risks. A number of them spoke about the routine violence they experienced while sleeping on the street, including violent episodes involving the public, other homeless people, and the police. Sleeping outside also puts the youth in danger of getting sick and of experiencing issues related to exposure like frost bite. The stigma, loneliness, stress, and instability of street life also take their toll on mental well being. This is exacerbated in the case of those with mental health problems and made even worse through the inconsistent delivery of mental health services to this population. Further, those youth who regularly used drugs and alcohol are also at significant risk of experiencing a number of issues including serious infections and overdose. Tim, for example developed a serious heart problem from his years of injection drug use.

Beyond these more immediate risks, the subfield is also structured in such a way as to reproduce the marginalized position of these youth. The main mechanism by which this social space reproduces inequality is by continually re-orientating the youth towards the subfield itself. Both how the subfield is structured, as well as discourses that circulate within it, create additional challenges to the two primary pathways off the street—education and low-skilled service work. One significant factor influencing the transitions off the street among youth in this social space is their lack of work experience. Across all the other subfields youth in the sleeping rough field were the least likely to have recent work experience in the mainstream economy.
This can be traced to a number of factors related to the structure of this subfield. Most obviously is that sleeping on the street or in a squat heightens problems for securing and maintaining paid employment, including difficulty in maintain an appropriate appearance, a lack of adequate food and sleep, and the lack of permanent address for applications and employment records.

Pet ownership also affects employment experience as it limits formal employment options in the absence of a place for the youth to keep their animals while they are at work. In the absence of other types of supports and protections, a pet as a practical solution to the demands of the subfield ends up feeding into the reproduction of the youth’s marginalized position. Furthermore, the position of youth outside social service agencies (something also reinforced by pet ownership) means that youth are less likely to take advantage of the employment assistance and work placement opportunities that many of those agencies offer.

Generally, these youth are orientated away from things like education and work experience by the discourse of “living independently.” As a discourse it emphasizes and celebrates characteristics that are incompatible with the demands of education and low-level service work. The rejection of rules and structures in favour of independence and spontaneity orient young people in this social space away from education and paid employment. For example, Shannon, in response to a question about if she wants to stay on the street longer, comments:

Yeah, I think so. I just really like not having a time schedule, I can do whatever I want pretty much. I can do whatever I want. I can go to bed when I want. It’s like whatever, it doesn’t matter. I can, if I wanted to, on a dime I could go out east. I think just having--that’s the main thing, I just like having freedom and when you’re tied down to work or something, and I just don’t--I’m kind of like one of those, ‘oh corporate--I don’t want to work for a corporate--for the man.’ (Shannon, 21)

Shannon draws on the notions of freedom and independence in justifying and rationalizing her continued involvement in street life. In this way, the discourse of independence reinforces the practical barriers to moving off of the street and underwrites a particular approach to thinking about work and life transitions. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter 8, homeless and street involved young people construct narratives in the context of the cultural frames available to them. These narratives combine cultural resources and life histories in a way that invest lines of action with meaning and personal weight. These personal narratives influence future choices in that the youth make choices that maintain a sense of narrative continuity.
Capital accumulation also lends one's approach to street life a particular momentum because the resources and capital accumulated in this street space are not transferable outside the subfield. Leaving this particular social space and transitioning into a shelter or an apartment means giving up the cultural, social and symbolic resources and moving into a lonely and unfamiliar environment.

6.7 Conclusion

This subfield is defined in large part by a shared rejection of shelter life and cultural resources that emphasize independence, autonomy, and self-reliance. The structure of the subfield creates an orientation to street life that is distinct from the other two social spaces I discuss. The dominant dynamic in the sleeping rough subfield is more firmly rooted in homelessness per se, and is defined in large part by youth experiencing homelessness in a particularly marginalized way. Youth in the sleeping rough subfield are oriented away from mainstream social life to a greater extent than youth in the other two fields. The demands of life on the street promote a specific set of shared practices, including pet ownership and subsistence strategies such as panhandling, squeegeeing, and flying-a-sign. These practices are underwritten by a discourse of “living independently,” which the youth also use to distinguish themselves from youth in other subfields—namely those in the world around the shelter and the drop-in. Similar to other social spaces, structures and discourses within this subfield reproduce the marginalized position of the young people within it. The main reasons for this are that the capital accumulated inside the field is not easily transferred out, and the discourse of “living independently” has the effect of orientating youth away from education and paid employment, the two primary pathways out of street life.
Chapter 7
The Shelter Life

The final street subfield I discuss is the social space surrounding a popular youth shelter and drop-in located in a busy shopping and tourist area in downtown Toronto. The social service sites that anchor this space bring young people into sustained and regular contact with one another creating a social structure reminiscent of a high school; a peer-focused space organized around cliques of young people struggling over control of the social and physical spaces of the shelter and drop-in. Young people are stratified according to the cultural resources they possess and their ability to navigate the constantly shifting landscape of peer relations that defines the subfield. This structure orients the homeless young people in the shelter and drop-in towards a street life characterized by a pre-occupation within interpersonal “drama” and peer politics. The availability of meals services and the handing out of a personal needs allowance (PNA) further structure this space by removing much of the pressure for the young people to meet their own daily subsistence needs—the main focus within the social space discussed in the previous chapter. Further, for the youth not in employment, training, or education, this means that large parts of their day are spent in unstructured peer activities in the common spaces of the social service sites and the surrounding neighbourhood thereby reinforcing the focus on peer relations.

The shelter that serves as the physical and institutional base of this social space is one of Canada’s largest youth shelters with 94 beds. It provides a range of services including a school program, counselling, life skills workshops, and housing and employment services. The adjacent drop-in is also large and it provides a lunch and dinner meal service five days a week, employment resources, counselling, workshops, and medical and legal clinics. Although primarily situated around the two social service agencies, the broader area in which youth in this field congregate extends approximately three-quarters of a kilometre north and south from those adjacent sites, and maybe half of a kilometre to the east and west. Danielle describes the boundaries of this space:

*When you are in [the shelter] you know the boundaries like how far you should go . . . . so, if you are looking for someone you’re always on that same path. To find anyone from downtown like you could go up to [Western boundary] - nothing past [there], like the hospital. To the hospital, no further than the hospital and then back towards the east you would go as far as [a park forming the eastern boundary], no farther than that. So go their drink, whatever. And then south going down, you don’t go past [southern boundary], because that’s where the mall is. You can go*
through the mall but you never leave the mall. You go that way, that way, that way [pointing in different directions]. You don’t see them, they are not on Yonge Street. It’s horrible sometimes you find yourself in the routine. (Danielle, 20)

Danielle describes the social space surrounding the shelter and drop-in as having relatively clear geographic boundaries—there is a distinct physical space in which social life plays out that is separate from the other street spaces I have discussed. To this point, note how Danielle’s “downtown” does not include the area to the southeast where the sleeping rough youth tended to congregate. The most frequented sites other than the shelter and drop-in include two large parks, a number of popular street corners, and two shopping complexes. Owing to stylistic differences, and the avoidance of street based strategies like panhandling and squeegeeing, youth in this subfield are less easily identified as homeless or street-involved than youth in the sleeping rough subfield, and many of these youth are particularly adept at blending into the bustle of everyday life in this area.

Pathways into the shelter field are varied. The size, popularity, location, and public profile of the two main service sites means that they are often the first stop for youth looking for emergency or drop-in shelter services in Toronto, including youth who are leaving home for the first time or who are new to the city. The shelter has a reputation for having relatively strict policies, including no tolerance for drug use or intoxication, and for also being one of the cleaner and more orderly youth shelters in Toronto. This reputation attracts youth that are new to shelter life or who want to take a break from more chaotic street environments. For example, youth might use the shelter when trying to get away from scenes of heavy drug use in an effort to cut back or quit; similarly, Julie who preferred to sleep outside described staying at the shelter when her sleeping bag got stolen. Five of the youth in this social space were housed at the time of the interview, but would spend a significant amount of time at the drop-in both in order to take advantage of available services, but also because the drop-in was the centre of their social life. This situation and the difficulties it can pose for transitioning off the street will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

In this chapter I show how this street subfield is shaped by the institutional contexts in which it plays out and how its unique structure stratifies the homeless young people within it in particular ways. I also examine how a young person’s field position shapes their trajectory through the social space by structuring their access to practical know-how, staff support, and
social status. Finally I show how the social service sites that anchor this space shape the dominant subsistence strategies, as well as how this street space reproduces the marginal position of the young people within it.

7.1 The Structure and Stratification of Shelter Life

The social world surrounding the shelter and drop-in is characterized by the division of the youth into loosely formed cliques that struggle for control over the social and physical space. The unique structure of this subfield puts particular emphasis on peer interactions and clique membership. Listing these cliques, Natalie comments:

In the shelter system you got your little like cliques. You got the cool people. You know then you got the gangsters--the thugs, and then you got the smart people and then you got your gay group--gay, lesbians, bisexual group and then you just got everybody else. (Natalie, 22)

Natalie describes what she sees as the main social divisions. Although there was no agreement on the exact labels or boundaries that defined each of the groups, the social space around the shelter and drop-in was unanimously described as one defined by hierarchical peer relations. This type of social organizations resembles the social environment of the high school and differentiates the social space around the shelter and drop-in from the others I discuss.

Eckert (1989) comments that a high school is unique because it “assembles people from diverse segments of the community that might otherwise remain separate and engages them in a competition to control their environment, to define their age group, and to set norms for interaction among themselves and with adults” (p.22). The youth shelter and drop-in are similar in that they also bring disparate groups of youth into contact with one another within a shared institutional space for extended periods of time and set youth into struggle over control of the environment. James comments:

So like, then I walked in there and I was like, it’s just like a different thing, but it was pure gangsters, it was all gangsters and then it was like the skater kids stayed to the back, so I hung out with the skater kids because the gangsters were like, they would like watch BET and they would sit right in front of the TV and make sure that it was their area, it was like, I swear, it was like, they were the lions, we were like the zebras, trying to stay quiet, tip toeing around them. (James, 20)

James uses the analogy of zebras and lions to describe how the “gangsters” took control of the TV room and how they managed to maintain that control through intimidation. The transience of homeless young people influences peer relations within the shelter and drop-in in that they are
less clearly defined than they might be in a high school. It is not a space of distinct and relatively stable social groups, but rather a multitude of small, constantly shifting peer groups organized within a loose, but durable, hierarchy of broader social divisions based in general subcultural differences (e.g. gangsters, skaters, gays, etc.). One’s position in these broader subcultural divisions is shaped by very general markers of stylistic or musical preference (e.g. hip-hop, heavy metal, top 40) that then embeds young people within a constellation of smaller peer groups and networks. There is also significant intermingling between the subcultural groups and the smaller peer networks within them. Further, although the broad subcultural hierarchy is durable, the fluidity of the social space means that it can shift with changes in the composition of the youth. For example, Monica, a transgendered respondent, describes a particularly exciting time when the shelter had an unusually high number of gay youth staying there.

There was a time when it was a one-to-one ratio, one straight guy and one gay guy. We stuck together. We didn’t let no one tell us what we could do . . . . if someone told us we’re faggots, we’d be like, ‘what the fuck did you say?’ like, because we run the place, cause like I’m not saying that we have more rights, but we do have more power because one little flick like that and we could call it gay bashing and we can absolutely get someone in trouble . . . . so we know we had power and that was like the best part. It only lasted for four days [laughing], cus of course all the gay people decide to go get drunk and high after PNA, and I was like ‘wow. Very exciting’ [sarcastically]. (Monica, 21)

Monica describes a brief period when compositional parity between the gay and straight youth, in combination with their ability to exploit institutional protections, put her network of gay and transgender friends in a position of social dominance. Her comments underscore the competition that occurs between the different social groups within the shelter and drop-in, but also how group relations can shift under the influence of external structures and patterns, like group composition.

The nature of this social world was frequently summed up with reference to the predominance of “drama”, for example: “street life is based on drama”, and “at [drop-in] there’s so much drama.” Further, youth who chose not to stay in the shelter system often cited high levels of “drama” as a reason for avoiding it. Drama refers to the full collection of ongoing interpersonal conflicts, affinities, breaks, and alliances that mark relationships between individuals and cliques within this space. James describes a typical example of drama:

Well yah, there was a lot of drama last weekend with that--some girl came in, ‘oh I am pregnant with his…’ ‘I already have his kid’ I am just like ‘holy, these two are fucking the same guy,’ and the week before there were two other girls that were here that were fighting over him, and one
was saying, oh he’s the baby father, they’ll find next month when she has her baby. I was like, ‘wow, this guy is serious.’ You just hear little things, it seems big but once you’ve been down here for a long time it becomes nothing. (James, 20)

As this example illustrates, drama in this social space is largely concerned with heterosexual dating relationships, including an ongoing set of hook-ups, break-ups and infidelities. The important of heterosexual relationships in this space can be compared to the focus on gay sexuality within the gay village subfield.

The process of being positioned within this field of relations happens during the first couple weeks of being at the shelter or drop-in. Danielle reflects on this process:

You are in [the shelter], you are just sitting there and you see someone come in. You already know what they’re going to be. They’re either going to be the cool group or the group that kind of drifts around from cool to losers and the people that are just like you don’t even notice them, they just fill up space. That’s it. Like me when I came, I just like tried not to talk to anybody. I tried to be myself and just sit and try to like just not pay attention to anybody and then it’s like all of a sudden they start doing something that like sparks your interest and they sit down and have a conversation and it’s like ‘duh, duh’ you are like ‘yah, duh duh’ and then you automatically become one of them. I’ve see it happen. They should have one of those people, like when you go to college. They stand there and tell you all about the campus. They should have someone like that downtown, because some people come and they just fall into the category and they are gone. They are gone. (Danielle, 20)

Danielle had an initial period of trepidation when she first arrived in the shelter but she was eventually incorporated into a social circle as chance encounters and shared interests developed into friendships. In noting how newcomers can just disappear into a particular group, she also captures how the initial sorting process can have a lasting impact. Liz’s experience confirms this point:

Coming downtown--when I first came into the shelter system I had just got released from prison, so I was in the jumpsuit, I had the look even though I was scared shitless. When I showed up at the first shelter I'd already made a name for myself and I just went with it. Biggest mistake of my life. (Liz, 24)

By showing up in a jail uniform Liz developed a reputation as being tough and willing to fight. In addition to exposing her to the risks of violence, her reputation had the effect of drawing her deeply into the interpersonal politics of shelter life, a role that she found to be time consuming and distracting. Having a tough reputation could be a source of status and social capital, but it was also risky in that it put young people at the centre of the conflicts and drama.
Homeless young people are positioned in the peer relations of this street space by the erotic, cultural, social, and economic capital that they bring with them into the shelter and drop-in, as well as their skills in managing interpersonal relationships and cultivating these social and cultural resources. Heterosexual dating relationships are a central aspect of social life and a key avenue through which youth establish relationships and cultivate social resources. In the following exchange, Danielle describes how young women in this space are able to convert their erotic capital into group membership:

T: What is it like for women downtown, like on the street down in this area?

Danielle: It goes by looks because first impression is all you have, because no one really takes the time to really get to know you. All the guys down here are so stupid, they will lie to them. It’s the girls that need something so when a guy is talking to them and it is like, ‘I am new here,’ ‘I’ll walk around with you, you seem cool, nobody seems to be bothering you.’ They’re gone.

T: What do the girls need?

Danielle: They need to establish a clique. . . . If I was hanging out with a guy and it’s like I just go around with him and meet his A, B, C’s, and just associate with them, or I could just be by myself and wait for somebody to find me, they are like ‘oh, come hang out.’ Or if you are not attractive, if you are not attractive you’re going to have to be by yourself. I think the unattractive people have it easy, unless they have low self-esteem they are going to get screwed up, but if they have good self-esteem they are going to make it through this. But like the attractive people--like coming down for the first time they don’t know where they are going so they dress up really nice, and sometimes the only thing they have on they look really good. So the guys will be like, ‘come here, come here’ and boost up their self-esteem, ‘oh you look really good, come chill with me,’ you know, they will introduce them. . . . I don’t know, it’s just--it’s all first impressions. (Danielle, 20)

Danielle describes how young women new to the social space around the shelter and the drop-in feel pressure to establish a clique. One way to do this is to start a relationship with a young man with shelter experience. The young men, recognizing an opportunity to meet new young women, encourage this process by offering to show the young women around. Establishing these relationships is easier for women with higher levels of erotic capital, but attractiveness is a double-edged sword in that it can lead to unwanted attention and increase the likelihood of being pulled into the drama of peer relations. In this way erotic capital can be converted into social capital but at a price. Stories of women being taken advantage of by young men looking to exploit their need for social connections and tutelage were common as well. Rebecca was taken advantage by her first boyfriend in the shelter, a man that she met within the first few weeks of arriving in Toronto. He took her to the suburbs where he forced her to panhandle and tried to
push her into prostitution. Natalie describes this dynamic as occurring primarily between black men and white women:

Like this may sound like racist or bad or something, but it’s always like the young white females who are usually kind of caught up like that. I don’t know if it happens now but like a lot of the black guys that I used to hang out with, they usually just like target young white females because they think it’s just easier to get into their heads and stuff like that. (Natalie, 22)

Natalie describes a deliberate strategy on the part of some black men to target white women who are regarded as being more vulnerable. That said the only male respondent I interviewed who ever engaged in this kind of behaviour was white.

Young women in the space surrounding the shelter and drop-in are in a complicated position. On one hand it was argued that they were at advantage because there more services and programs available for them than the young men (i.e. girls groups, etc.). It was also argued that navigating the social world of shelter and drop-in could be particularly difficult for young men because of the emphasis on being tough and macho—meaning that they had to work harder to maintain a particular self presentation and it was harder for them to find social and emotional support through their peers. The young women in this space were seen as being more successful in moving themselves away from street life, which was attributed to their more responsible and caring “nature” and because of more supports and housing opportunities. On the other hand, as mentioned, women were seen as being vulnerable to the manipulative influence of the young men in this space—in part, because their success at securing help and resources made them appealing targets. David comments:

And I'm telling you, people who are here, man, like the guys, man, they rely on females, man. They rely everything on a female because a female, you know, a female is compassionate and understanding, you know what I mean? Like a lot of people are like, they're misusing that. Misusing females and by, you know, what I mean, making them fall in love with them so they don't have to do shit all, and they bring in the money. I mean girls can have it, but then there are guys that bring them down, you know. Most of these girls here, they do have a lot of options, but they're just emotionally stressed. But, I mean then I guess there's risk of being taken advantage of that happens a bit more to them. (David, 25)

In terms of comparison across social spaces, it seems that in both the sleeping rough and the shelter subfield young women are vulnerable to being take advantage by their male peers. This theme was particular acute in the social space around the shelter were women were seen as being specifically targeted by predatory young men.
The heteronormativity of shelter life poses unique challenges for LGBTQ in the shelter system when it comes to acquiring social capital and finding a network of peers. For example, Jesse describes the challenge and his strategy for engaging with it:

I always fit in with the girls and everything so I used to hang out with the girls and hang out with their boyfriends, stuff like that, there was always a connection . . . . I think [the gay youth] fit into the girl part pretty much, because girls love fags, and every fag has a fag hag, I think that’s how we work it out, because girls are always like, ‘oh my god, do you want to go to the mall and pick up boys and go shopping?’ Like, I heard that my whole life, from high school on, if they’ve never met a gay person they are like ‘do you want to go shopping, go to the mall pick up boys’ [in a shy voice], ‘like yah’ [sarcastically]. I don’t know, gay people, I think they have it hard, a little bit more in certain shelters, um, I think it’s easier with youth shelters, but if I was in an adult shelter I would probably be dead, that’s why I have to be out of all of this because it’s so scary. (Jesse, 21)

Jesse describes being vulnerable in the shelter system because of his sexuality. He manages this risk by playing into the stereotypical relationship of the gay man and the “fag hag” and using that dynamic to establish friendships with heterosexual women and their boyfriends. Jesse’s experience underscores how homeless young people actively manage the social terrain of street life – in this case by using the cultural construct of “fag hag” as a strategy for establishing social resources in a heteronormative space. Comparing across street fields we can see that the specifics of this terrain and the strategies that it inspires varies across contexts. Most of the homeless gay men and transgendered women moved between the street space surrounding the shelter and the one surrounding the gay village. Each of these spaces has a unique character, as well as challenges and opportunities, which prompt different strategies for managing field position.

Lesbian and bisexual young women in the shelter and drop-in were also marginally positioned because of their sexuality. The bisexual young women I interviewed were all in relationships with men and none of them described ever having an “out” relationship with a woman in the shelter system. Diana, one of the only lesbian identified women in the sample speaks to the low-visibility of non-heterosexual identities in noting how nice it was to connect with a lesbian staff member:

T: Are there any people that have been a big influence on you?

Diana: Actually a couple of workers. There was my worker at [transitional housing program]. She was also a lesbian which was super cool. We would sit down and watch The L Word together on Thursday nights. We had to book the TV. She’s good people. (Diana, 24)
Diana singles out the connection she had with a lesbian staff member as particularly influential. The marginality of the sexual minority young women is pronounced in that, unlike the sexual minority young men who might find acceptance among other gay men in the shelter system, as well in the nearby gay village neighbourhood, none of the sexual minority young women reported friendships with other lesbian or bisexual identified women. The lack of a social space in which they could openly express their sexual identity may be responsible, in part, for the particularly high levels of mental health and substance abuse problems reported by sexual minority young women on the street (Frederick, Ross, Bruno, & Erickson 2011).

7.2 Cultivating Capital

The transience of homeless young people, as well as the high amounts of interpersonal drama that characterize shelter life, shape the nature of friendships within the social space surrounding the shelter and the drop-in. The types of friendships that develop require a specific set of interpersonal skills and strategies. Elisa succinctly describes friendships within the youth shelter system:

When you’re like—you’re on the street, like it’s so unstable and the turnover rate is ridiculous like, honestly, if you’ve been friends here, friends with somebody here for a month, that’s considered like a long-term friendship because people just come and go, come and go. Some people have been around here for years, I’ve been here for four months and I feel like it’s been a lifetime. That’s one of the harder things, you make connection, you make different connections with people quite a bit faster than you do . . . . in a normal situation because the turnover rate is so much, and because, you are in such a vulnerable state. (Elisa, 18)

Elisa describes the transitory nature of friendships that come with the mobility of street life and the constant shifting of interpersonal connections and alliances. This structure mitigates the formation of long-term relationships and defines social capital primarily in terms of short but intense friendships. Kim describes her strategy for establishing relationships given the unique interpersonal challenges of the shelter system:

I’ll go in. When I first go to a shelter, I am like the new girl. So it’s like they are like I’m--like people are mean, girls are mean. Once you’ve stayed there a bit it kind of works in your favor because now with the new girls coming in you are with the other girls right. . . . I don’t manipulate people but I have like a very big influence on a lot of girls because I can like change my personality I guess, like I can go in being like very, very shy and shit and have people think that, and then when they least expect it I just can just totally change and then they think one thing. I don’t want to say manipulate because it sounds so wrong. I take the leader role, I’ll say that, I take the leader role. I get along with a lot of people and I have no problem like singling one person out. . . . I like talking to people and I like making friends and shit like that. You know what I mean. I don’t stay their friends. I might say that when I am drunk to them like, ‘oh we’re
going to be best friends,’ but the only person I ever stayed in contact with was my long time friend. But well I am there like, you know what I mean, I can get very, very close to people. And then I kind of like can ditch them like that. Like the minute I get out of a shelter I don’t want to talk to them. (Kim, 21)

Kim’s ability to establish quick relationships is a real benefit in a social space characterized by high mobility and short but intense friendships. When it comes to cultivating social resources, Kim is at a distinct advantage relative to someone who comes into the shelter system without leadership qualities and who lacks the ability to draw young women into their peer network. James’ experience with managing his social position further underscores how young people in the shelter and drop-in actively manage their relationships, and it illustrates how this social space favours young people who are able and willing to play the interpersonal game:

I stayed upstairs in the quiet lounge where people drink coffee and read their books and stuff like that, and then I just stayed up there and chilled, just lied on the couch, and then people would come up and we just talked, they would bring up a conversation and we would talk, talk, talk and then we would become friends with them. And then I just became friends with the right people, and then became friends with the wrong people, like it was just weird. Like I was friends with all the cool people and then I was friends with this person, really good friends with this person, but they were like a loser and I had to ditch them, so other people didn’t know and then he would get mad, ‘oh, I see how you are, you are not…’ ‘Okay, whatever.’ And then recently I cut them off because they are idiots, they are just stupid, they just slow me down, they make me feel stupid. (James, 20)

James describes managing his position in the field by ditching a less popular friend and how this continued when he distanced himself from the more popular group because he felt like they were holding him back.

Youth are also positioned in the field by the cultural resources they possess. Even though the shelter and drop-in bring together youth with different subcultural identifications the most popular style takes from hip-hop and urban street culture. The relevance of hip-hop culture within the field marks a knowledge and appreciation of hip-hop music, as well as urban clothing and style, as particularly valuable. This compares to the influence of alternative and punk culture in the sleeping rough field, and mainstream gay culture in the street field surrounding the gay village. Danielle speaks to the importance of having the right kind of clothes:

Even though I was in the shelter system -- my shoes had to cost $250 at least. Like I would have to have the best shoes […] but like you just have to best of something. So you could say, “Who has the best shoes?” “She does”. “Who has the best hat?” “He does”. Who has the best that? I had the best shoes.” Like yeah, “It was like so, “Well, how much money you have?” “I’m broke.” “Those shoes look good though?” “Yah they do.” (Danielle, 20)
Danielle makes the point that clothes are way for youth to distinguish themselves and to secure status. The status rewards of having nice clothes encourage young people to invest the money they do acquire into their appearance. Brand name clothing is also valued within the street space surrounding the gay village, but disparaged among those who sleep rough because of a rejection of mainstream consumerism. Within the social space surrounding the shelter and drop-in the emphasis on hip-hop culture means that youth subscribing to a more alternative style, like “skaters,” “punks,” or “goths”, have less cultural capital and tend to be more socially marginal. These young people have access to cultural resources within their own smaller cliques, but less access to the broader reserves of social and cultural capital. This situation creates a dilemma for a young person who identifies with punk or heavy metal within the shelter. If they want to improve their social position they can choose to bring their personal style more in line with hip-hop culture, or they can move to the social space surrounding the sleeping rough youth where there sense of style is perhaps more valued. However, they have to make this choice in light of the structural realities that define each street space, which in the case of the social space surrounding the youth that sleep rough, means having to sleep outside or to panhandle.

Cultural capital within this street subfield is racialized. The high status youth were those that could most successfully accomplish the image of the well dressed and swaggering hustler celebrated in much of mainstream hip-hop. This group consists of not criminally involved youth, as well as those whose involvement with gangs and the drug trade help them to purchase status markers like brand name clothing. The image of the swaggering hustler is racialized as youth from African and Caribbean backgrounds are seen as the most authentic performers of hip-hop culture. These youth were also more likely to come to the street with a subfield appropriate habitus in the form of a disposition towards the swagger and comportment of stereotypical hip-hop star or urban drug dealer. Danielle describes the cultural capital that accrues to criminally involved black men in this subfield and how others within the space attempt to emulate them:

T: You made it sound like black kids are the most trouble?

Danielle: They are--because they like--I don't know people want to be like some of them. Some of them have this thing about them, like they always wear the nice things because they sell drugs and they are good at it. So it’s like they move around easily--and all the girls flood to the crack dealers. . . . So, it’s like they try to act like the crack dealer and the crack-dealer is usually--it’s everybody, right? The Filipino guy, the White guy, the Chinese guy everybody, but the people that I can identify with the most because I know them are the black guys, not all of them, but the majority of them, African guys and then everyone wants to be like them. So they use their last personal needs allowance to buy the clothes that they have and to pretend that they are like them.
to get the girls, to hang out with them, sell drugs, to make money, do the same thing. And then the people that come downtown and have never been downtown, they are like okay, that guy is really flashy. (Danielle, 20)

Danielle describes how the crack dealers in around the shelter and drop-in, who are often black, are looked up to because they have cultural resources in the form of nice clothes and attention from young women. Further, these men have a habitus that corresponds to this subfield in that they are able to “move around easily” and they “have this thing about them.” Recognizing their status, newcomers to the shelter are inspired to acquire those some status markers and to affect those same dispositions.

Both James and Danielle described how being black gave them access to a certain amount of social and cultural capital. James credited being African-Canadian for his acceptance into the “gangster” group. This association gave him some status, but it also tended to get him into trouble. Danielle describes how the image associated with the black youth shaped how people in the subfield interacted with her—often attributing a level of social and symbolic capital to her that she did not always want:

Danielle: I don’t like when people stereotype me, and sometimes I like have to play into the stereotype. ‘It is like oh you’re cool, duh, duh.’ It is just like, no I’m not, like I am not cool. Or it’s like, ‘you’re bad.’ I draw negative attention to myself just by like my appearance sometimes, it’s like they will just assume and then it’s like they will be pushing it on me so much, but then I know it and I try to deny that I know it, it’s like ‘do you know where I can get weed?’ You are just like, ‘say no, say no, say no.’

T: So when you say you have to like play into the stereotype what does that mean?

Danielle: It’s like people stereotype me, a kid will be like, ‘oh you know where the drugs are at,’ or ‘you know who is hot or who is cool.’ (Danielle, 20)

Youth in the shelter would just assume that Danielle was part of the popular crowd or was able to get drugs because she is black. This stereotyping helps to elevate her position within the social space of the shelter and drop-in but it also draws her into illegal activity and the peer politics of shelter life. Jason, another African-Canadian youth, also tried to distance himself from some of the other black youth in the shelter and drop-in:

Jason: That’s the thing at the shelter, there are a lot of black people there, who you know, they show up with like these $200 or $300 shoes, $200 pants, all this shit, and try to boss everyone around and act all tough and everything. Complete idiots.

T: A lot of the black kids came down and did that? Did you notice that more with them then with other people?
Jason: It’s always the black kids either that or they always stick out because they are so obnoxious. You know, I’m not saying I hate black people, like I have some black friends--like, maybe it’s just me--like I had this other guy that I used to hang out with, black guy, he went to university, he dressed like I dressed at the time, you know all professional like. I don’t know, if I hang out with [black youth] like I’m careful who I hang out with, because a lot of people I see there are cops always around them. (Jason, 21)

Jason underscores the cultural resources and the swaggering disposition displayed by many of the black youth in the shelter in noting their expensive clothes and tough attitude. Their self-presentation is at odds with his own sense of style and habitus and for this reason he prefers to avoid many of them. Jason is pushed to reflect on and manage his racial identity in light of the racialized distribution of cultural resources within this particular street space.

White youth also have to engage with the racialization of status markers and habitus within the social space surrounding the shelter and the drop-in. Elisa comments:

The fucking stupid lingo, like that I hate, yet I have no choice but to use and you know what, I think all of us do that--for the people that you do make connections with, you are who you are in front of them, right? But for the people that you don’t so much make a connection with its bullshit, you create this alter ego, that when I’m out there I’m not vulnerable, you can’t hurt me. Because it can be dangerous and people will talk shit and you will get into fights, so when I walk through those doors, I’m impenetrable, I’m a bitch, I’ll stomp on you if you come near me, I’ll break your fucking face and I’ll kill your fucking family and laugh about it. I’m not like that, I’m not like that at all, I am not a gangster. I would never speak the way I do with people here, with anybody, with any of my other friends or any staff or anything like that because I am white. (Elisa, 18)

Elisa suggests that it is necessary to act and talk tough to avoid being victimized, but she also notes that the specifics of this performance draw from the “cool pose” of black urban street culture. Maintaining a veneer of toughness was also important among the young people who chose to reject shelter services, but their performance was more likely to borrow from the language and cultural resource of the punk subculture. Elisa comes from a relatively stable and middle-class European-Canadian family in a predominately white, suburban city. She describes having to adopt a self-presentation that is distinct from the one she grew up with in order to fit into the social world of the shelter. This performance requires a veneer of invulnerability and toughness, a way of being that she equates with being a “gangster” and not white. As these examples illustrate the distribution of cultural and social capital are shaped by race and ethnicity. Within this social space African-Canadian youth are the most authentic holder of valued cultural markers, as well as have improved access to the dominant social networks. This dynamic
partially explains the overrepresentation of black youth within this space, and their underrepresentation within the other street subfields.

7.3 Navigating Shelter Life

Connecting with peers and participating in the drama and social life of the field gives youth access to social, cultural and status resources that are important for managing the challenges of shelter life and homelessness more generally. Peers are an important source of social capital because they provide information about the routines and rules of shelter life, as well information about how to navigate social services, like accessing food, health care, welfare payments, PNA, employment programs, and paid research opportunities. Peer tutelage is an important to street life across street subfields (McCarthy 1996), but as noted in the previous chapter, the content and focus of the information and instruction varies across contexts. Within the social space surrounding the shelter and the drop-in peer tutelage is largely directed towards the task of managing life within the context of social services. Jason describes when he first entered the shelter and how more experienced people showed him the ropes:

T: Do you remember what it was like when you first entered the shelter?

Jason: I don’t know, I guess just being cautious because it was like I didn’t know what to expect so I was just observant, I didn’t really say anything or talk to anyone, I was just looking to see what the routine was, how everything worked, what everyone was doing. Yah and then I met some people, got some friends from there. I just started talking to people because, you know, I was kind of curious what the hell all these people were doing here. ‘So how long you’ve been here?’ So on and so forth and I just started with some people and some of them I started talking more with, and then we started hanging out and then they started showing me other places in Toronto, things to do, places to get food and stuff because I didn’t know anything. So they showed me the different drop-ins and stuff like that.

T: And so are you friends with any of those people anymore?

Jason: Those original people? I don’t think so, I don’t think I see any of them around anymore. People tend to disappear every few months. (Jason, 21)

The shelter and drop-in system represent a new and alien world to those first arriving on the street. Peers are an important resource for learning about the services that are available in Toronto, as well as about places to go and things to do for fun. Further, as has been discussed, interpersonal currents that can be difficult to recognize govern daily life. Peers are an essential
resource in making sense of this social world and of figuring out how to negotiate one's way through it.

Social capital in the form of peer relationship is also important for managing conflict. Within a context high on interpersonal drama, youth are prone to getting drawn into peer conflicts. Rebecca provides an example:

This girl gave me a jacket to wear, and she stole something from me, right? And she’s trying to get the coat back, I’m like, ‘I’m not giving it to you.’ And then her next friend comes up and I never met this girl and she’s like, ‘I’m gonna fight you if you don’t take the coat off.’ I’m like, ‘What? Okay,’ and then I’m like, ‘I’m not giving you the coat, you have my bag.’ And then I like book it away from the thing. It’s intense, girls want to fight me over stupid things. I don’t know. I don’t know why. (Rebecca, 18)

Popularity can be an important defence against a conflict like the one described by Rebecca. For example, Diana who had been street involved for over 6 years noted how as a veteran of the shelter system people were unlikely to start fights with her. Jason elaborates on the importance of seniority and reputation:

The only thing [people] care about is how long you’ve been [on the street] . . . . like what’s your seniority and how many people you know, and how many people you’ve screwed over . . . . I’ve been here for so long I know so many people and because I’ve been through so much and I’ve handled it a certain way, and you know, sometimes rumors get told, like, what actually happens gets twisted, usually in my favour it doesn’t matter. So people just respect you, and don’t try to start anything. You know, I don’t worry about anything now when I’m downtown, I have a feeling that nobody is going to try to start anything with me, you know. Unless they are, what you they call a twinky, which is that they are new on the streets and they don’t know anything, in which case they will try to start something and get their ass kicked by like dozens of people. (Jason, 21)

Jason describes the seniority he accumulated in his over five years on the street as providing him with social status and protection. However, having a large number of friends is a double-edged sword in that it increases the chances of being drawn into additional webs of drama and conflict. Jason illustrates this tension in that at one point he moved away from Toronto because he was exhausted from being at the centre of group life, only to move back a couple of months later because he missed his street friends.

Social capital in the form of relationships with staff is also important for navigating the social space surrounding the shelter and the drop-in for many of the youth. One aspect of these social resources is that staff are an important source of practical and emotional support. Liz
struggled with an addiction to crack cocaine and relied heavily on the shelter and drop-in during various attempts to get clean. In response to a question about influential people she comments:

    Mike. Mike and his wife are my pillars. John that works here, but Mike and Josh are my, they’re my foundation. You know when I'm in a hotel over at Spadina and College getting right fucked up and some guy's trying to rape me, and I don't know what to do, and I'm calling at four in the morning going ‘Can you come get me?’ They don't even hesitate. It's ‘we'll be there in 15 minutes.’” (Liz, 24)

Liz describes an exceptional level of support from staff at the drop-in, owing, in part, to her long time relationship with them. It is not typical for youth to call staff at home, but Liz’s experience highlights the extent to which agency staff can be an important source of social capital—particularly, given that most youth (despite comments about street youth being one big family) reported having few people they could trust. This is a type of social resources less available to youth outside of the social service system, and has implications for how they negotiate street life. For Leslie, what the staff provide is simpler. In describing important people in her life she comments:

    Leslie: Staff [at drop-in], and staff at [the shelter]

    T: Why?

    Leslie: They give words of wisdom and support. I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. They say hi and ask me how I am doing today. They have just done so much for me. (Leslie, 20)

It was clear from Leslie’s comments and experiences that she had few people in her life that she could count on to check on her and the workers at the drop-in and shelter were an important source of support. Elisa also valued her relationships with staff but connects it to how the staff give her a break from the “drama” of shelter life:

    All we do is like talk about bullshit drama, who’s fucking who , who did this, who did that, who’s in jail right now, its bold but it’s the truth, compared to sitting there and actually like just talking about meaningful things, which is part of the reason why I cling to the staff of both [the drop-in] and [the shelter] so much because they are the only people that I really feel that I can have an actual discussion with, and not have to sit there and be like, oh Cindy said this about you, and Shannon did that about this, you can actually sit there and be like, so what do you, like how do you feel about Prop 8, like how do you feel about this, like actually sit down and have a discussion. (Elisa, 18)

Elisa points to how the staff help manage the unique challenges of a context dominated by interpersonal conflict. In another example, Monica describes how relationships with staff can be helpful in securing special treatment:
It was just like that when I stayed there, everyone knows me there, so like, if I tell them, “I need a wake up…” because you need to be off the floor by 8 during Monday to Friday right, but sometimes I was like I don’t have a first period class, I don’t need to wake up until 9:30 right, so they would wake me up at 9:30, but there was someone else there when I was staying there and they didn’t have to go to school until 3, but he needs to be up and awake by 8 and he needs to leave the floor by 8, and I don’t need to be at school until 11, but I can sleep until 9:30. I don’t know, I guess I felt more special when I was there. (Monica, 21)

In this example, Monica’s relationships allow her to skirt the rules and to sleep-in. These little perks were central to making shelter life bearable in spite of its numerous challenges. Examples like this illustrate that social capital (in the form of relationships with staff) provide practical and emotional benefits that are important for negotiating the challenges of occupying shelter and drop-in spaces. These relationships are a potential source of stratification because not all residents are equally interested or capable in cultivating these kinds of social resources. Further, Marvasti (2003) in his work on homeless adults describes how social service contexts require clients to meet their expectations for what defines a “worthy” client. Similarly, Gowan (2010) finds that service providers construct the problem of homelessness through different discourses and that the homeless have to fit themselves into these discourses in order to be eligible for support. Future research should combine these insights with a field analysis by focusing on the differential abilities that homeless young people have in managing these expectations and how they shape their access to services.

Beyond the practical benefits of cultivating social resources within the space surrounding the shelter and drop-in, participating in the social world of this subfield also provides youth access to social status and excitement. Danielle captures this dynamic:

They have to impress each other, so it’s like they have to do something to impress the mass majority, like have a story, this is like Hollywood or like gossip central so if something happens, everybody knows. So if you do something--there is always this one guy I know, he is at every party, every situation he is there, he is there to tell you what happened, I am just like, ‘oh I missed that guys party’ ‘Oh, it was so cool, yah man I was there, I was like wooo’ I am like ‘yah dude?’ He’s like ‘yah man, they were drinking and smoking, I passed out, this guy was doing this, fucking this girl, duh, duh, duh’ You are like man, ‘who else was there?’ You got his version, you ask this guy, it’s like ‘yah, duh, duh, duh, that guy was there?’ ‘Yah that guy was there, what happened?’ ‘Yah, duh, duh, duh.’ Big discussion. As soon as you get into the discussion you are a part of history, so if you are a part of history people are going to be talking about you, and you can either be popular or unpopular, sometimes people have their popular moments, sometimes people don’t, some people shine some people don’t. Some girl had a baby and she lost it, and she is the talk--everybody has been talking about her for three days, can’t get her off your mind-- ‘where is she?’ ‘There she is.’ ‘What’s she wearing, what’s her haircut.’ It like diverts your attention to the new person and ‘oh look at her,’ ‘what do you think,’ ‘let’s go talk to her.’ It’s sick. (Danielle, 20).
Danielle’s describes how participating in the social world surrounding the shelter and the drop-in is a means by which youth can achieve status and notoriety—something that they may lack in the world outside of the shelter. Jason provides another example, noting how he was able to cultivate a positive reputation as a go-between and as someone that could be trusted to help and support his friends:

I get along with everyone. And I know what I’m talking about. People don’t put themselves out there to be approached, and the only people that they could talk to are the volunteers at these different places, you are either adults or are going to call the police or something . . . . Come talk to me . . . . like I always present myself—dress myself, like I have things together. Compared to a lot of them I did have all my stuff together. So you know they come talk to me cuz—plus if they needed help with anything I would always help them out, either because I had money, or could get money, or talk to other people. Whereas this group and this group don’t like each other, they both like me. One comes to me, I go to the other. (Jason, 21)

In the social space of this field Jason is able to establish a reputation as someone trustworthy and helpful. Through his social ability and willingness to help he is able to carve out a niche as a source of advice and support to his peers. Jason is able to use the maturity and sociability that he brings with him to cultivate social resources and status; just as the young person described by Danielle is able to do so through a knack for being outgoing at the centre of the action.

Homeless and street involved young people draw on their unique skills sets and abilities in trying to acquire the social and symbolic resources available within a given street space. The social world surrounding the shelter and drop-in favours young people who are skilled at managing a context dominated by peer relations and interpersonal conflict, but as the discussion has illustrated there are different tactics that homeless young people can take in navigating that kind of space.

Another dimension to participating in the drama of interpersonal politics is that it can provide opportunities for fun and excitement in what is often a routine and boring day-to-day. A central aspect of participating in the social world of this street subfield was the constant search for small adventures in the form of interpersonal drama, criminal schemes, and recreational drug and alcohol use. This compares to the focus on meeting daily subsistence or of participating in the “glamorous” life among young people in the other subfields. Danielle captures both the focus on these types of activities and their attraction within this social space:

Many people don’t have a life, this is their life. Like they come here, they get their food, they can shower, they can do their laundry. They meet people, they hear about gossip, they come here to
do something, find something to do, you sit around, someone will have money, they will be like lonely needing someone to party with, they’ll be like ‘oh, we are going to go smoke a spliff, who wants to come?’ ‘You got to pitch, you got to pitch, you got to pitch’ and they go way out and then that group is gone--and it’s like whoever is left, someone walks in and says ‘let’s do this’ or ‘did you hear about so and so’ they just sit there all day talking about so and so and you just sit back and just listen to so and so’s story and you are like ‘okay.’ And it relates to something that you are going to do later, you are walking down the street and you hear fight about so and so, and you say ‘no don’t fight, that’s not what happened, duh, duh.’ And they drag you, because it’s like, you know, ‘she knows the truth’ and they bring her all over there, it’s like ‘that’s not what I said, who said that?’ ‘You did.’ It’s like, ‘I didn’t say that,’ ‘Yah you told them that.’ ‘It’s like no I heard it from this guy.’ You are like traveling up there and it’s exciting, it’s really exciting, its time consuming and its bad. Addictive. (Danielle, 20)

With many of the youth not in education or formal employment, and with basic needs met through meal services and PNA, getting into trouble can be as much about passing the time as it is about securing economic resources. James captures this dynamic when describing the lead up to a robbery:

So there was like these 5 girls and I knew them all . . . . They were so bored and they were walking up the street and they were good people and they were just walking up the street, and they are like, ‘guys, what do you want to do?’ They are like ‘let’s rob somebody.’ I was like ‘I will watch.’ ‘I’m like okay [in a suspicious tone], I’ll watch, I am not trying to go to jail.’ So we are walking, walking, walking up the street and there is this Chinese girl walking and she looks like she is rich, so they are like we are going to rob her, so they go over there, and . . . . they are like ‘oh can you give us your purse?’ She is like ‘no,’ so obviously they had to assault her, they had to mangle it off her. (James, 20)

In this example, boredom is cited as a motivating factor behind the robbery. The role of economic need in encouraging incidents like these cannot be downplayed, but neither can the role played by peer dynamics and the search for excitement. Danielle gives another example in describing the attempted theft of an ATM after a set of master keys was discovered in one of the machines:

There is like a bank machine and it was like we were sitting there a couple of people and then some individual . . . . had forgotten the key in the machine and he went off. And we were just walking by and certain people saw the key and they took it out. And then we walked and then we are like let’s just see what happens.’ So we went back later on that night in like a car. Was it my idea? No. Someone said, ‘Hey, you got [money with that bank].’ I am like, ‘No, no. Let’s wait for reward. They were like, ‘No, no let’s use the key.’ And I went, ‘Okay, whatever.’ So, they got a car and they got all the black clothing and duffle bag. Okay, look out, let’s do this. And then they had lots of security that walk around in suits. So we were going to plan it out. So, then the initial plan is to get a whole bunch of people from around Yonge Street to kind of walk through and just kind of fill up the space so that they couldn’t really tell what’s going on. So, then we got a couple of people to walk through decoy and then like we went to the machine. Do one--one key we open the whole machine and then there were two more keys then we open the
one machine and we pulled it out. And there was another key and we couldn’t find the key on the
ring fast enough because they were like, ‘what’s going on with the machine?’ The security. Like
they’re coming and walking. They were like, ‘What’s going on?’ We just left it and it was really,
it was a real good story. (Danielle, 20)

Danielle’s description frames this incident as a social event that engages multiple youth from this
social space over multiple days. She also speaks to the social nature of these small adventures in
describing her tale as a “good story.” Stories like this become a form of cultural capital that
young people can convert into social resources and social status. In a space that emphasizes peer
interactions, knowing the gossip and goings-on is valuable because stories allow those who were
not present themselves them to participate in the interpersonal events that drive and shape day-to-day life.

7.4 Shelter life and Subsistence

Subsistence strategies, like social life, are shaped by the social service environment in which
they play out. The two main influences are the availability of meal services and the handing out
of a government-funded Personal Needs Allowance (PNA) of $29 per week. These two
subsistence sources reduce the need for the street based subsistence strategies, like panhandling
and squeegee cleaning, which are central to life among those outside of social services. The
typical subsistence pattern was to rely on daily supports provided by the shelter and drop-in and
to wait for PNA at the end of week. Some youth had jobs in the low-wage service economy. For
those who did work, employment was often sporadic as the challenges of street life led to
frequent job loss. This employment was often secured through programs within the shelter and
drop-in which points to another way the social service context shapes available subsistence
strategies.

In addition to shaping individual subsistence choices, the availability of PNA structures
the social space around the shelter and drop-in by creating a micro-economy organized around
the small, highly-disposable income that PNA provides—every week youth within this social
space simultaneously end up with the same small amount of money. David captures the
challenges of receiving support in small increments:

So like money, like when you give me $20, $30 it’s not going to do much, but it’s still
appreciated and it is something, it will help me pass through the day, you know. And I am saying
like shit, I'm stuck here, what is $15 gonna really do? . . . . So it's like, fuck, $15, well it's next to
nothing. ‘Let’s smoke a joint bro,’ ‘well here's five bucks’, ‘no ten bucks’, ‘alright, ten bucks,
alright.’ Okay, I got [five] bucks now, what am I gonna do? Because I know that’s what’s gonna happen. I know, I just know. I'll been doing it until I get a home. (David, 24)

David suggests that as much as youth might want to save, it is difficult because the money they receive is usually less than $30 at a time. This inclines the youth to spend their money on small items like drugs or alcohol that make street life more enjoyable. For this reason, PNA is sometimes referred to among youth in the shelter system as Personal Narcotics Allowance.

Entrepreneurial youth were able to capitalize on the limited purchasing power offered by PNA by selling items at a price point that youth could afford. Drugs were a common commodity because they could be purchased in varying amounts for varying prices. None of the youth I interviewed dealt drugs on a regular basis within the shelter system. A few key drug dealers that did not stay at the shelter themselves largely controlled the drug trade. However, the drug economy did provide youth with less risky work opportunities. In the following quote, James describes first recognizing these opportunities:

When PNA came out the drug dealers would just stand outside and wait for their money. They were like, ‘yo, you, you own me money,’ ‘you…’ I went outside and I was like oh my god, I can’t owe anybody any money, I don’t owe anybody any money, and they were like ‘hey you, come over here.’ I was like ‘oh shit, they are going to rob me.’ I am like walking over, I am like walk like your bad and I am walking over, and me and my friend, we are just like walking up, like ‘yo, ahh.’ We become friends with them and they are like telling us, ‘oh, yo, go back in [shelter]’ because they weren’t allowed in, ‘get these people, bring them outside, trick them to come outside and we will give you some money.’ ‘Oh okay, okay,’ so we go inside and we are like this person, ‘yo, come outside, we are going to smoke, we have cigarettes so come outside,’ they come outside with us and then the guys just swarm them and they are taking their stuff and I am like, ‘oh my god, what did we just do,’ [my friend] is like, ‘that’s the circle of life’ and I am like, ‘what do you mean the circle of life?’ She is like, ‘oh, it’s like the Lion King, like they are the weak and they are the strong, and we are trying to be the strong so we have to like, you know, kind of like get them and then like…’ it was bad, it was really bad. (James, 20)

James was able to earn money by helping drug dealers to collect on their debts. His comments also illustrate how young people can convert their social resources for opportunities within the grey economy. In this case, James’ acquaintance with a drug dealer gave him an opportunity to earn some additional money over and beyond his weekly PNA. In another example of the money available within the drug economy surrounding the shelter, David describes working as a middleman in drug transactions:

I like to be smart, like a con artist. You know what I mean? Like when I go places like I'm starting to become this person that I'm not. I start to trick people into doing things, you know what I mean? I go places and I like I trick people into buying things. Like I have like clothes, like before people start stealing my clothes, right, and I would sell it to them in order to get some
money and I would like lie to them and, you know, like other little things, you know, without getting too detailed with it, like um, like when I went--okay, like for one is like when I was like, when somebody wants to buy like--[marijuana]--I always try to come in the middle, try to get in the middle, you know what I mean, you try to make money off of it, you know what I'm saying? So I start tricking people and I've--like I'm ashamed of some of the things I've done because like, you know what I mean, like I took off with people's money and never came back. (David, 24)

David also describes how he “hustled” shelter mates by selling clothes that he brought with him from home at inflated prices. The selling of used or stolen clothes was another common entrepreneurial strategy that took advantage of the grey economy within the shelter and the drop-in. These types of strategies were much less common in the other subfields of focus. James provides another example:

He goes to [the department store] and he comes back and he has like 20 coats from [the department store], this is like 2005 so he has like 20 coats, and we are like, ‘how did you get all those coats?’ and he’s like, ‘oh I went put the coats on, went to the bottom part because the bottom floor doesn’t have the security thing so you can walk out and it won’t beep, so he does that and he does it a couple of times and the next minute everyone around town is having Columbia for like PNA, because PNA they only like give you $25 a week so everyone is buying coats off of him and they are like giving him $20 for like a $500 jacket. (James, 20)

James goes on to describe how he placed his own order for a jacket, but later the seller returned claiming that he had been caught and that his money was gone. James losing his money may represent the cost of doing business in the micro-economy of the shelter or it might be a good example of the kinds of “hustles” that were commonplace. The young man selling the coats may have simply lied to James about being caught so that he could keep the money that had already been given to him. As James and David both illustrate young people entering the social world surrounding the shelter and the drop-in quickly learn about the particular opportunities available for acquiring economic resources.

Another subsistence-related dynamic connected to the handing out of PNA is the practice of pooling resources. In receiving only small amounts of money each week, youth were encouraged to pool their resources together in order to purchase entertainment like drugs, alcohol, or food. This practice intertwines with the peer dynamics described above in that having a peer network is prerequisite for pooling resources and the act of pooling is a means by which youth establish and maintain their peer networks.
7.5 Risks and the Reproduction of Inequality

This next section focuses on how the space surrounding the shelter and the drop-in is structured in such a way as to reproduce the marginal position of homeless young people. As with the other two subfields one of the main ways in which inequality is reproduced in the shelter subfield is that it contains mechanisms that orient individuals back towards the subfield itself—this pull towards the social space was describe by a number of the youth as an addiction.

In particular, youth described being addicted to the “drama” of street life. Elisa captures this:

Elisa: Street life is based on drama.

T: This is all I hear, it sounds that way.

Elisa: Oh, my sweet Jesus, it’s like we thrive off of it, because it’s deflection, it gives us something to concentrate other than the issues that are actually important, so instead of me sitting here going shit I should really get another job, I’m sitting there going, like what you fucked my friend’s boyfriend? It’s complete total deflection. (Elisa, 18)

Elisa describes a pre-occupation with the drama of interpersonal relationships. She suggests that the youth participate in these interpersonal politics because it provides a distraction from the harsh realities of being homeless. Within the social space of the field youth are able to achieve status and notoriety, and to experience camaraderie and excitement. This opportunity is significant because homeless youth often lack status and power in other spheres of their life. It is also relevant that in leaving home, youth leave behind or lose touch with non-street friends. These relationships and opportunities serve to draw youth back towards street life in that leaving the social space they have on the street means having to give up what little excitement, support, and status they do have.

The pull of street life also has the effect of orienting youth away from the two main pathways off the streets, education and employment in the service economy. Some of the youth who had been in the shelter system the longest commented that the time they had spent on the street, away from education or regular paid employment, was leaving large gaps in their resumes. Now at the age of 23 or 24 they were trying to apply for work often without a high school education and with little work experience. For example, Natalie comments:

I first decided . . . oh I’m in the shelter, let’s have fun and whatever. But now it’s like after almost seven, eight years of going shelter hopping, it’s like it’s kind of tiring. It’s just like ‘Whoa, what am I doing with myself?’ Yeah, whatever, got to learn sometimes, I’m learning now, like, I’m glad that I found that I need to do something with my life because now I’m 22 and
then after 25, it’s like all these services are like gone to me. That’s the only thing, I wish I had taken advantage of all the programs and stuff sooner rather than later. (Natalie, 22)

Natalie describes getting caught up in shelter life and only recently deciding that she wants to take more advantage of the services and opportunities that the shelter system does make available. Drawing attention to the pull of shelter life is not to minimize the numerous other barriers that homeless youth face in exiting street life like discrimination, poor labour market opportunities, learning challenges, and mental health problems. Recognizing the attraction of the social world of the shelter and drop-in is about identifying an additional barrier that makes meeting those other challenges even more difficult.

A second way in which the field reproduces inequality is that the capital the youth accumulate is not easily transferred out. First, the small amounts of economic capital that are available through PNA or small hustles are difficult to accumulate, particularly when there are opportunities and pressures to use those resources to participate in the peer dynamics of shelter life. Second, any reputation or status that a person manages to establish within the field is more likely to be a liability outside of this subfield given the stigma associated with homelessness. Finally, these social and cultural resources are among a group of people who are similarly stigmatized and who have few social or economic resources. Relationships with staff are one of the few social resources that youth may be able to draw on within more mainstream fields like school or work environments.

7.6 Conclusion

A popular youth shelter and a drop-in anchor the shelter subfield. These social services bring youth into sustained and regular contact with one another and set them into struggle over the available economic, social, cultural, and status resources. Central to this struggle is the membership of youth in shifting peer networks and cliques. Popularity in the space is shaped in large part by the types of cultural capital that the youth possess, as well as their ability to cultivate social capital in the form of short-term friendships.

Social and cultural resources are central to navigating this subfield in that they provide access to information about subsistence opportunities, protection against conflicts and

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10 The youth themselves were often reluctant to recognize these barriers preferring to describe their predicament more in terms of personal failure. But recognizing the pull of street life provides further insight into why those barriers are so difficult to overcome.
harassment, and they can be a source of status and prestige. The social space surrounding the
shelter and the drop-in also structures the distribution of economic resources. The availability of
meal services and handing out of a small weekly allowance orients youth away from street based
subsistence strategies like panhandling and squeegeeing. The handing out of the personal needs
allowance further structures the distribution of economic resources in that it creates a mini-
economy in which youth can buy and sell goods like clothing and drugs. Social capital is useful
in this economy in that it provides access to money-making opportunities, as well as gives young
people the opportunity to pool their PNA. Like the other subfields, the marginalized position of
the youth is reproduced because youth are orientated back towards the social space itself and
because the main forms of capital are not easily transferred outside of the shelter and the drop-in.
Chapter 8
Navigating Street Life

This chapter provides a more focused discussion of how homeless and street involved young people navigate the fields of street life, focusing on processes of self-reflection and narration. In particular it explores how homeless youth navigate fields in the context of internalized skill sets, and how they make sense of street life and underwrite lines of action by identifying those skills and locating them within personal narratives. It also examines how homeless youth construct boundaries and determine lines of action using narratives that integrate personal histories, felt dispositions, and cultural repertories. These narrative processes extend dual process theory by considering how they influence the navigation of unsettled circumstances. They also illustrate the interplay between dispositions and cultural repertoires by focusing on how homeless and street involved young people actively engage with their dispositions, using culturally relevant scripts and narratives to underwrite, modify, and reflect on their habits and dispositions.

Self-reflection and narration influence the navigation of street fields because actors use narratives to make sense of their circumstances and to invest their choices with a sense of self and agency. Narratives are particularly relevant in unsettled circumstances when actors are more likely to be deliberating about courses of action. Narratives help to clarify and support lines of action by making them meaningful to the actor and by connecting them with their sense of personal history. Using an example from homelessness, a young person may “just feel” that panhandling is not for them, but then they use their personal narrative to support, rework, or challenge that feeling in light of present circumstances. Specifically this chapter examines how narratives underwrite particular courses of action by investing those actions with meaning and the weight of a personal connection, and also by establishing a feeling of subjective continuity. Narratives incorporate dispositions in that we use narratives to engage with our intuitions and habits. Often this process simply justifies or sustains a dispositional course of action; however, narratives are also central to the process of recognizing and modifying our habits and dispositions. In difficult circumstances we reflect on our habits and can choose to keep, modify, or challenge them. We also use narratives to develop personal frames for thinking about and planning future courses of action. This process folds dispositions into a more conscious approach to action. These processes of narration and self-reflection incorporate
cultural repertories in that we use cultural scripts and imagery in constructing our narratives and in engaging with our habits and intuitions. Further, as Swidler (2001) notes the very notion of the self is part of our cultural toolkit. The process of narration and self-reflection is particularly evident among street involved young people because the nature of street life encourages self-reflection as a way of making sense of an unsettled situation and locating oneself in social space. Adolescence and young adulthood are also times of intense self-reflection.

Considering how homeless and street involved young people navigate the fields of street life also contributes to the research on homelessness by broadening our understanding of how the self influences street life beyond the categorical notion of a homeless identity. Rather than focusing simply on the impact of a shift from a “mainstream” to a “homeless” identity it provides insight into a more active process where young people engage with the spaces of street life through an ongoing process of self-reflection and narration. I begin this chapter with a discussion of how homeless and street involved young people provide a unique case for studying the role of self-reflection and narrative in the process of navigating fields.

8.1 A Unique Case

Homeless youth are an interesting case study for observing the incorporation of dispositions and cultural toolkits into the reflexive navigation of fields for a number of reasons. First, homelessness is the kind of “unsettled” situation that encourages actors to mobilize culture in order to make sense of their circumstances and to underwrite available courses of action (Swidler 2001). Even for the youth with unstable childhoods, homelessness represents a significant departure from the patterns and routines of daily life. Young people find themselves confronted with unfamiliar situations, experiences, and problems. For Swidler (2001) actors look to available cultural resources as a means of locating themselves in such situations, a process she likens to echolocation. Actors “bounce” cultural resources off of the social environment in an effort to make sense of it and position themselves within it. The more unsettled and unfamiliar the situation is, the more active and visible the use of culture. Faced with the unsettled situation of homelessness, young people can be expected to draw noticeably on available cultural resources as a means of making sense of their circumstances.

Second, the fields of street life are the kinds of informally organized arenas that might also encourage actors to fall back on the dispositions of habitus in the absence of formalized
rules of conduct. In addition to being unsettled, the fields of street life tend to lack clearly defined rules of interaction or behavior. The one exception in the subfields is the social space surrounding the shelter and drop-in because it is structured in part by institutional rules; however, a significant amount of social life within this field not covered by formal rules and procedures. In the absence of clearly defined norms and rules actors return to the taken-for-granted orientations of habitus, but new situations may render those dispositions less appropriate and draw them more into consciousness where cultural resources may be employed to shore them up or to begin the processes of reworking them. This process is particularly acute when significant change brings the old habitus into conflict with the new social conditions.

Third, the nature of homelessness encourages self-reflection and narration. Homeless young people are in constant contact with researchers, mental health professionals, and social service gatekeepers, all of whom require the youth to account for their actions and to construct integrated and cohesive accounts of their lives. As an example, I made a point of thanking respondents for being open and candid with me about their experiences, the typical response was to reassure me by saying that they did these kinds of things all the time and that that they were used to telling their story. Giving a narrative account of their lives is a central aspect of the various intakes, assessments, evaluations, and counseling sessions that the youth go through as part of receiving services. Further, many of the youth had extensive experience with workers and mental health professionals before coming to the street, whether it was in the context of the legal system, children’s aid, or education. An exchange with Liz speaks to this:

  T: Some of these insights that you have, some of these, you know…

  Liz: I am so self-aware, it's sickening.

  T: Yes. Is this something you've just always been like or did you learn from…

  Liz: I've been seeing counselors since I was six. (Liz, 24)

Liz sees her experience with counselors as making her self-aware. Liz was not unusual in this regard; most of the youth I interviewed had a long history, on and off the street, of telling their story and reflecting on how the facts of that story shaped their lives. For all of the above reasons, homeless and street involved young people are ideal for examining the role that self-reflection and narration play in the navigation of fields.
8.2 Skills and Narratives

The previous chapters exploring the fields of street of life have illustrated how the skills and dispositions that homeless and street involved young people bring with them to the street shape how they navigate street spaces. Here, I examine how homeless and street involved youth use self-reflection and narratives to mobilize their internalized skill sets and to connect them with the demands of their circumstances. Narratives facilitate lines of action by creating a connection between past and present that makes what is new and scary feel manageable, and helps the youth maintain a coherent sense of self and positive self-concept. By reflecting on their choices in the contexts of their narratives young people underwrite courses of action by creating a sense of personal continuity and by personalizing decisions and investing them with moral and personal weight. Young people will be more likely to take up a line of action to the extent that they are able to make a particularly line of action meaningful by establishing a connection to their personal history.

David provides good example of how homeless and street involved young people use personal narratives to draw on their past in managing the challenges of street life. David was embedded within the shelter field described in chapter 7. This space was characterized by an orientation towards “hustling” that was encouraged by the handing out of small weekly allowance (Personal Needs Allowance). In this context, youth struggled to acquire the PNA of their shelter-mates. David describes this challenge and his approach to it:

And that's the thing about me, and that's why like a little guy like me is surviving on the streets. You know what I'm saying? If you're gonna be on the streets you gotta have some sort of talent. You are gonna go over there and draw on the floor, or go over there and start doing backflips, you know what I'm saying . . . . I've dealt with a lot of people that have power, right, and I just learnt off the way they talk, you know, like sales representatives, you know, this and that. So I caught up with that, and now that I'm actually like in the streets now I'm like you know what I'm going to use it for the bad instead of for the good . . . . I worked at [a retail chain selling clothes], because I was working on commission, so I made sure I had--because everything when I used to go to work, right, like [the store] has this goal, okay, everybody has to have over like at least $1,000 worth of sales. You know, that was always these goals and aims every day, right, and me being hustling for that, I altered it into being a hustler on the streets. Yeah. And there was others that unfortunately that doesn't understand, you know what I mean, the concept, the game of it. You know what I mean? They're the ones that are victims. Well, you just gotta know your role and how to do it well. (David, 24)

David describes “hustling” in the shelter system as a game and he sees his sales experience as giving him an advantage in playing that game. This characterization corresponds with
Bourdieu’s description of fields as games, and cultural capital as skills or knowledge that allows actors to compete. David’s sales experience is a form of cultural capital that corresponds with the shelter field in which he finds himself and this orients him towards a set of subsistence strategies. These strategies include extracting small amounts of money from other youth through minor scams, selling personal items for more than they are worth, and being a middleman in drug sales. All of these activities require elements of salesmanship and are facilitated by David’s sales experience.

David’s comments illustrate how narratives facilitate the process of recognizing and mobilizing capital. David uses his narrative to redefine something mainstream and distinctly not-street, like working at a preppy clothing store, as providing him with a set of skills that are valuable for managing and negotiating the demands of homelessness. This redefinition provides David with a sense of mastery over his situation. Street life is made more manageable by establishing a connection between his past experience and his current circumstance. It also helps him to maintain a positive self-concept because it reaffirms for him that he possesses practical and transferable skills. The connection that David draws between his past and present also establishes a sense of subjective continuity—despite the radical change in his situation he is still the same person; a good salesman. In this way, the psychological benefits that David gets by being able to link his sales experience with his current challenges underwrites his use of “hustling” as a subsistence strategy.

Another illustration of how homeless youth recognize and mobilize capital through narratives comes from Mike. Mike was embedded in the social space surrounding the gay village discussed in chapter 5. A central feature of this social world is the ability to participate in the “glamorous” life of partying and knowing everyone at the clubs. Participating in the party scene was a source of social and symbolic capital in that it provided youth with status and popularity, but it could also be a source of economic capital as it was a good place to meet men who could offer financial support. Mike uses his narrative to link his present with his past by describing how his experience in the foster care system helped him manage the superficial social world surrounding the “glamorous life”:

T: So how did you first end up going to the bar?

Mike: I got in with the wrong crowd--well not really the ‘wrong crowd,’ but a crowd, you know what I mean—I became a part of something, so I was like you got to look like this, you got to go to these parties, these clubs, you gotta talk to these people, you have to act this way, you know
what I mean, for the longest time I was like mask after mask after mask in terms of personality or in terms of what I held as principles, and morals, you know what I mean, you literally had to change yourself to appeal to other people.

T: Were you good at that, like were you popular?

Mike: Well yeah, I happened to be in a crowd that already had themselves in the swing, so it was really easy for me, like, to get introduced because I was like new, so everyone was like, ‘so whose this little one?’ You know what I mean, like again, living in the [Children’s Aid system] you put up walls and defenses. You know, it’s almost like acting, you know what I mean, you learn to become like a really good bullshitter, which is acting. But yeah I found you’re really in a situation where you are desperate, so you have no choice but to just like conform. At least like you feel like you have no choice. (Mike, 20s)

Mike describes how his time in the Children’s Aid system taught him how to manipulate his self-presentation to appeal to others. He describes this in terms of wearing different masks. He found that this same set of skills was helpful for navigating the field of street life surrounding the gay village in that his ability to conform helped to him be popular and to meet men. Mike creates a sense of continuity between his experience in children’s aid and his experience in the social world surrounding the gay village in seeing himself as someone who is adept at impression management. This continuity carries forward and Mike’s mask analogy is influential in how he makes sense of his transition away from street life; he comments:

Mike: I basically had to pick myself up and reinvent myself, not really reinvent myself . . . . now it’s like I just have to stay true to myself, and that’s the hardest part about it, staying true to yourself and looking more so long term, because again everything was, again, 15 minutes of fame, quick fix, it’s like instantly gratifying and all that stuff, but in the long run you’re screwed, so like yeah.

T: So having that long-term view is that the same thing as being true to yourself?

Mike: Oh yeah--yeah--like having goals now and working towards things--you know finishing school, going to college, working, having my house, not living or bunking with somebody, you know what I mean, being able to say, I am independent, you know what I mean, and not caring really about how you are going to be viewed, or what’s going to be said about you. (Mike, 20s)

Mike frames his transition away from street life in terms of wanting to be true to himself and to stop the superficiality that he associates with being in children’s aid and the gay village subfield. His comment also highlights how the self is a meaningful construct to homeless and street involved young people and how they use it to make sense of street life. Mike’s narrative puts a particular frame around his past experience, but this frame also influences how he makes sense
of and approaches the future. Through self-reflection Mike recognizes his knack for impression management as a disposition that was once useful but that he now wants to change. Further, he takes cultural resources in the form of advice from counsellors and social workers about being responsible and he runs it through his narrative, turning a therapeutic discourse about delayed gratification and hard work into a personal identity project (see Foucault 1978, 1979 for a discussion of this process as a form of discipline). In doing so Mike invests his plans for the future with a personal and moral weight that they would lack if they were not embedded in his narrative about the kind of person he is.

Julie provides another example of how homeless and street involved young people use narratives to establish a connection between their past experience and their current circumstances. Julie’s narrative is particularly illustrative of this process in part because it is less successful than David’s or Mike’s. In response to a question about college programs she comments:

Julie: I was going to start my course in October but not enough people registered so they are postponing it, but I don’t know it was for fitness and health promotion. I don’t--it was a cool course like, for a sort of like an instructor, a fitness instructor like nutritional wellness coach kind of thing. What I wanted to do was environmental sciences, but this year I am just going to do upgrading and next year go for my environmental sciences. Either ecological restoration or like an environmental technician.

I: That would be cool. So what attracts you to that?

Julie: I figured I’ve always lived outside so I might as well give back to it. It’s the only place I have, I’ve got to keep it nice.

I: Yah seriously, that’s funny. And the fitness thing, how did you get turned on to that, where did that come from?

Julie: The money aspect of it, and like, you know, I was always a little bit of a hippy with doing yoga and shit and trying to stay clean, stay healthy, whatever and like. I figured if I could work on that at the same time and like get a fucking diploma, get 3 fucking certifications from it in only a year course. (Julie, 20)

Julie makes a clear effort to draw a narrative connection between her past experience and her educational choices. She comments that she is interested in being a fitness instructor because she is a bit of a “hippy” and has done yoga in the past, and that she is interested in environmental sciences because she has lived outside. Julie tries to connect with post-secondary education from the experiences available to her. Her experiences limited in this regard given that high school was a negative experience for her and that she has been street involved since she was 14.
Compare this to a young person with a more traditional trajectory who might have experiences with athletics or outdoor leisure to draw on in establishing a sense of self-continuity and of investing the choices available to her with a more substantial personal weight. As these examples illustrate, homeless and street involved young people use their narratives to make decisions about street life. They work to draw connections between their current circumstances and their past experiences, and in doing so they recognize and mobilize skill sets and cultural capacities. Youth are more likely to take up lines of action to the extent that they are successful in making the connection between past and present and in establishing a sense of personal continuity.

8.3 Boundary Construction

In navigating street life and the challenges of homelessness young people are constantly faced with difficult decisions, often forced to choose between the lesser of multiple evils: To stay in a crowded shelter or a dangerous squat; to steal food or to go hungry; to escape through drugs or to say no. A strategy for positioning themselves relative to these choices is to establish lines or boundaries marking acceptable from unacceptable. The self is a central construct in the construction of boundaries, as is the process of self-reflection. In expressing the boundaries the youth make statements similar to those noted by Vaisey (2009) in that these intuitions often emerge as felt and hard to articulate descriptions about the self; “I am just not that kind of person”, “doing that would just feel wrong.” Vaisey sees these statements as evidence of culturing shaping action through the development of internalized moral dispositions; this is a point that supports Bourdieu’s ideas about habitus. Julie acknowledges these deeply internalized moral boundaries in talking about the need to have a strong sense of self in a conversation we had about negotiating condom use:

T: Was the protection thing important to you when you were working in the sex trade?

J: Yah, oh yah. Number fucking one. Like that’s, everything else aside, like that and getting pregnant, I didn’t--I was on drugs on stuff and people like think that you are weak because of it and they will offer you more money and do whatever, you know, and you have to have a strong sense of self to be able to say no, or be able to fucking protect yourself physically, you can’t let people push you around because they’ll just keep doing it and they’ll get away with it and you’ll feel like shit.

T: What does that mean to have a strong sense of self?

J: Being able to know who you are and where your boundaries are. (Julie, 20)
Importantly, Julie equates having boundaries with a strong sense of self. It is relevant that Julie introduces the language of the “self”, suggesting that this construct is meaningful to the actors themselves and not just a conceptual term. In another example, Sasha draws on the language of self-esteem in reflecting on her own experience with being taken advantage of sexually:

I thought I was like the ugliest person out there. I’d go and look at myself in the mirror and I am like I am so ugly, like I am fat, I was like ugly, look at my hair, I was like look at my face. I was always putting myself down and you know, you have no self-esteem so what is going to happen? People are going to treat you like you have no self-esteem. You know they are going to take advantage of the fact that you have low self-esteem. They are going to try to make you feel bad so that they can get what they want. Which is exactly what I found out, and then it was just like two years ago I am like looking in the mirror at myself and I am going, oh my god I am actually really pretty . . . . All of a sudden I am being whistled at and told I am hot and all this and I am like sweet. Yeah, now I have all the self esteem in the world now. (Sasha, 20)

Sasha describes how she was vulnerable to being exploited because she had low self-esteem. In her view having a good self-concept is essential to resisting this kind of mistreatment—it creates the preconditions for safety and survival that ultimately allow for a successful negotiation of street life. Margaret makes a similar point about the importance of maintaining a sense of self on the street.

I don’t know, when you are around really bad people all the time or are on the streets you have to have some amount of morals or you’ll just fall right into it forever. If you lose morals, you kind of lose yourself a little bit. If you lose yourself, you are fucking gone . . . . you have to keep in mind who are to some extent. It’s easy to get lost . . . . Even this summer . . . . I guess I was pretty lost, like wandering around like, ‘what the hell am I going to do with myself, I have no clue’ there was probably days that I could probably barely remember my name. (Margaret, 21)

Margaret describes a particularly difficult time in terms of losing herself and draws a parallel between a moral sense and a sense of self. These examples support the view that action is guided by an internalized moral sense or disposition that is largely felt and that can be difficult to articulate.

That said young people also actively engage with and reflect on their dispositions through personal narratives. These narrative draw on available cultural resources (Swidler 2001), and the respondents use those resources to underwrite, rework, and challenge their habits and intuitions. In explaining her reasons for selling softer drugs like mushrooms and pot Sarah constructs a narrative that frames that decision in terms of her not being the kind of person that can exploit
Sarah draws a boundary around selling hard drugs by grounding that decision in a narrative about how she was exploited at a young age and how she would never do that to someone else. She also draws on her brother’s story as evidence of the soullessness of drug dealers. Sarah constructs her narrative by combining personal experience with the established cultural narrative of the predatory adult drug dealer targeting young children. Although she had experience with sexual exploitation, her own experience did not involve being forced into drug addiction by an older drug dealer but a more complicated story of being drawn into it through recreational drug use and the manipulation of predatory peers. What links her story and the cultural narrative that she draws on is that they both highlight the evils of exploitation. For her selling hard drugs requires an inherent amount of exploitation that she could never see herself doing. The boundary she constructs orients her towards selling less addictive drugs like marijuana and mushrooms, which ultimately leads her to activities like panhandling and squeegeeing as she finds it difficult to make money selling only “softer” drugs.

Sarah’s choice not to sell hard drugs was also likely influenced by some of the more practical issues of getting involved in drug dealing, such as the difficulties in finding a reliable supplier, the constant threat of violence, and the risks of being caught. However, the narrative she constructs makes it into a moral choice that carries the full emotional weight of the exploitation that she experienced. Narrating it this way also reinforces her moral worth. This is
relevant because, as Maruna and Copes (2005) point out, neutralizations matter in decision about desisting from crime. The individuals most likely to desist from crime tend to be those that can neutralize their past doings and establish a positive sense of self. Although this account is retrospective and does not necessarily tell us about the exact reasons that Sarah chose not to sell hard drugs, it speaks to the meaning that she is constructing from her experiences and the narrative framework that she is using to approach future decisions. For Sarah to start dealing harder drugs she would have to reconcile that choice with the narrative of herself as someone who was once exploited. Overcoming this personal boundary is not impossible, but will require effort, and given the personal and moral weight she has attached to this choice, it could come at significant emotional cost.

Other examples demonstrate in more detail how homeless young people do not just use narratives retrospectively but use them to make sense of their current and future choices. They also further illustrate the interplay between dispositions and cultural toolkits. These themes are well illustrated by Jason. Jason made money on the street by fixing computers through advertisements he listed with classified websites. Our conversation about this subsistence strategy begins with his response to a question about why he does not participate in activities like panhandling and drug dealing. He comments:

Jason: I can’t ask other people for money. A person like me, I can’t ask other people for money. I’ve come to realize that, I’m a person who can make money and so I should go and do it, so I did . . . . [I’m] too educated. I don’t need to. . . . I don’t have a record or anything and I’m not going to do something to prevent anything to do in the future, because I am crazily ambitious and always think of crazy stupid things to try to do, like run for Prime Minister.

T: Where do you think that comes from? Any guesses?

Jason: Well because I know I can do it--I’ve grown up reading about 12 years old, 6 year olds, 21 year olds who started a business and what not, and are making all this money and there is this one kid who started this web design company in his basement and became one of the top web design companies in the world, you know. Bill Gates who started his first company when he was 16 I think it was. I have the experience and contacts to be making this much money right now, which I should be doing, but I’m not--so… (Jason, 21)

Jason’s explanation for why he does not panhandle pulls together a few different reasons. The starting point for his decision is a feeling about the kind of person he considers himself to be—a person that just can’t panhandle. This reaction is common and speaks to a widely held and deeply internalized disposition against begging in our culture. Jason bolsters this feeling by
constructing a particular story about him that consider his skills and upbringing. He grounds the self-assessment of his computer skills in a cultural narrative about how we live in a world where tech savvy people, such as himself, can become immensely successful—he cites the familiar dot-com narrative of Bill Gates. Also part of his narrative is his sense of his own class background. He identifies himself as “too educated” and in our wider conversation he refers to his middle-class background and his mom as a hardworking professional. Given that Jason only has a high school education, his statements about being “educated” can be read as statements about his class background and the kind of work that he feels is appropriate to him.

Jason constructs a narrative that uses available cultural imagery to draw a particular set of meanings out of his experience. This narrative supports his moral intuition about panhandling; one grounded in wider cultural prescriptions against panhandling and strengthened by an intuitive sense of class position. His narrative successfully supports his disposition in that by looking back over his life he is able to confirm that he is in fact not that kind of person and that panhandling is truly not for him. He also uses his narrative to construct a future for himself, a narrative that supports his impulse to think big. Through his narrative he constructs himself as destined for success and this orients him away from anything, like crime, that might jeopardize the success he “knows” he is capable of achieving. This is a narrative that is made possible by wide cultural narratives about the success of ambitious and computer savvy individuals.

Dan provides another example of how personal narratives can shape how young people think about their futures and transition away from street life. He underscores how youth can use their narratives to recognize their dispositions and skills, and can construct personal frames that they can apply to decisions about the future. Dan, for example, draws on a particular regional and working class narrative around hard work and morals:

The problem was we moved around all the fucking time, so right off the bat, we were always going back to the small town, I knew old farmers that taught me morals and honour and shit like that. I learned how to work, and I was like that’s how life should be, that kind of deal. It’s when you hit the city that you meet a lot of people that are like fuck that, you know, we can make 500 bucks tonight let’s do this, you know . . . . you know what I mean, you hang out in that crew and it’s not fun, you see these bums on the street with no teeth begging for change, I’m not going to be that guy, you know what I mean. Straight out. Got to make the money, you know what I mean. You actually have to do stuff legit. Get the show on the road, and like I said I come from a decent place, I’m not stupid, you know what I mean, I know what I want to do with my life. I just had a really bad run at it, you know. Getting there, getting to a good place. Come from a good place, get to a good place. (Dan, 22)
Dan creates a narrative around his background as a small town boy growing up on the east coast of Canada. He draws on a familiar public narrative about small towns as bastions of hard work and strong morals. He also taps into more specific narrative about Canada’s east coast as representing this ethos on a regional level.

Dan neutralizes his past criminal involvement by explaining it in terms of him coming to the city and falling in with a bad crowd. He narrates his choice to start focusing on more legitimate types of work in terms of a return to the good place where he started—his small town roots. These comments underscore the role that narratives can play in making transitions through street life and how young people use them to construct themselves as essentially good people who are capable of change. Dan uses his narrative to define himself as a good person with a strong moral upbringing despite his past challenges and mistakes. This finding provides further confirmation of Maruna and Cope’s (2005) work on the role of neutralization techniques in helping offenders successfully desist from crime. My findings have implications for thinking about desistance from street life and suggest that narratives that neutralize past wrongdoings and carve out a positive sense of self might be important for making successful transitions away from street life as well.

Dan uses his narrative to underwrite a disposition towards manual labour. Elsewhere in our conversation he describes his preference for manual work in the felt and dispositional terms described by Vaisey (2009); he just feels more comfortable working with his hand than working on a computer. However, this disposition is not entirely blind to him and he is able to recognize that he possesses a habitus that allows him to fit in on the job site (a habitus that is supported and given moral weight by a narrative that draws on a cultural script about small town work ethic and values). Dan comments:

The beautiful thing about me, that some of these guys don’t have is that I can clean up and you wouldn’t be able to look at me and say that I live in a shelter, you’re from the streets, nothing like that. I’ve got a little ink work, you know what I mean, shirt covers that shit right up, I shave, put on the right clothes. I don’t sound like a black guy, we’ve got some of the white guys in here who are all about the, ‘oh breddern,’ ‘what’s happening, bumbbleclot, ahh.’ You know going off like that, man they never gettin’ no work, I get out there I find the jobs, people beg me to go work for them. (Dan, 22)

Dan describes his ability to “clean up” and fit in on a work site. He describes this in terms of work related skills but also relates it to speech, manner, and appearance. Through his narrative
Dan is able to underwrite his orientation towards construction work, but also to consciously recognize his habits and dispositions and to manage them strategically in order to find work.

Elisa provides another example of how young homeless people reflect on and engage with their dispositions in the context of their narratives. Her dispositions become visible to her because she experiences a disjuncture between her internalized skills and dispositions and the demands of the field in which she finds herself. Elisa comments on the self-presentation she needs to cultivate within the social space surrounding the shelter and how it clashes with her upbringing:

You create this alter ego, that when I’m out there, I’m not vulnerable, you can’t hurt me, because it is, it can be dangerous and people will talk shit and you will get into fights so when I walk through those doors, I’m impenetrable, I’m a bitch, I’ll stomp on you if you come near me, I’ll break your fucking face, I’ll kill your fucking family and laugh about it. I’m not like that, I’m not like that at all, I am not a gangster, I would never speak the way I do with people here, with anybody, with any of my other friends or any staff or anything like that because I am white, I was raised very, like I got backhanded if I used poor grammar in my household. Like that was the big rule, do not speak like you’re on MTV type thing. Actually take pride in how you sound, don’t just take pride in your appearance, take pride on how you sound, on how you come off, and how you present, so it’s this weird change. That’s a really huge contrast between what I was at home and what I am here because here, it’s all we do is like talk about bullshit drama, who’s fucking who, who did this, who did that, who’s in jail right now, its bold but it’s the truth, compared to sitting there and actually like just talking about meaningful things, which is part of the reason why I cling to the staff . . . . Because they are the only people that I really feel that I can have an actual discussion with, and not have to sit there and be like, ‘oh Susan said this about you, and Danielle did that about this.’ (Elisa, 18)

Elisa describes acting and speaking differently than she would with her friends from back home because of the demands that the shelter field puts on youth to act tough or “gangster.” Elisa also describes seeking out the staff because they allow her to have “an actual discussion” about “meaningful things” like she did with her friends from high school. Throughout her interview she describes how her upbringing cultivated in her a strong vocabulary, an appreciation for the arts, and an interest in current events and politics. Elisa recognizes her cultural dispositions and the liability they pose for navigating the interpersonal politics of shelter life. In narrating them she makes her dispositions conscious and visible and is able to adopt a self-presentation that corresponds better with demands of the social space in which she is positioned. Elisa illustrates a more active and engaged process of self-reflection than the one described by Vaisey’s (2009) dual-process theory.
Elisa’s narrative has the added benefit of reaffirming her self-worth as someone intelligent and educated, and it allows her to distance herself from other homeless and street involved youth in the shelter. This process corresponds with the identity management techniques described by Snow and Anderson (1994) in that in doing so she is able to reject the stigma of homelessness. However, the dynamic described here adds a level of complexity in that in many ways Elisa is deeply invested and entrenched in the social world surrounding the shelter. By recognizing how she is different is she able to manipulate her practice and realize the practical and social benefits of participating in the field, while at the same retaining a positive sense of self through a narrative that constructs her as fundamentally different than those around her. Additionally, she brings to this subfield the skills that enable her to successfully accomplish and maintain this performance.

Liz provides further evidence of how homeless and street involved young people use narratives to construct a sense of self and how that assessment influences how they think about and approach the future. She comments:

L: Then I crossed the line and I started smoking crack. When I crossed that line, instantly I knew that this is not who I want to be. This is not who I was sent here to become, like I was not supposed to be a crack head.

T: So what does that mean to say that you weren't who you were meant to be?

R: I graduated high school top ten in my class, okay. I was a straight A student. I could have gone on to university, I could have gone on to college to be whatever I wanted to be, but for some reason I wanted to take a break. I hate school. I hate it, I hate, hate it, and there was nothing I saw myself doing in 10 years. You know what I mean, I didn't really have a passion. Then I got into the shelter system, and I was staying at this one shelter, and they used to let me cook on the weekends. They would pay me to cook on the weekends, and now I realize I could see myself in 20 years cooking--not cooking in a high-end restaurant because that's not my style at all. Do you know what I mean? Like yuppie people, that's not my thing, but just like my parents did. They owned a little pub. Just a neighborhood restaurant, that's my passion, that's what I'm going to do. So like in 10 years--it might take 10 years--I'll own my own restaurant and I'll be my own boss because I don't take orders very well. (Liz, 24)

Liz speaks to a number of the themes highlighted so far. In the first line she speaks to a deeply felt sense of self in that her experiences did not correspond with the type of person she felt she was supposed to be. This sense of self draws on a religious cultural repertoire about one’s life path being preordained by God; “this is not who I was sent here to become.” She then reinforces this disposition by embedding it in a narrative about being a straight-A student; a story that draws on modern cultural sentiment about education as a path to success.
Liz’s plans for the future draw on a dispositional sense of herself as someone just not comfortable with working in a “yuppy” restaurant. She reinforces this class-based disposition with a narrative that emphasizes her background and the kind of work that her parents did—owning a local pub in a small town on the east coast. Again, we see that dispositions do not just disappear behind the scenes but reoccur and become visible in the telling of personal narratives. Liz engages with the limits of her current social position (unemployed, living in a shelter) in the context of a family narrative about owning and operating a respectable working class pub. The narrative that she tells legitimizes and lends moral and personal weight to the opportunities available to her—a very modest position volunteering in the kitchen of a shelter that might otherwise be viewed as unglamorous and disappointing. Liz also provides another example of the role that narratives of self play in establishing a positive self-concept in the context of planning and making transitions. Through her narrative Liz defines herself as a good and intelligent person who just got sidetracked by a drug addiction. Her narrative orients her away from her involvement in a drug scene and is encouraging her to develop relevant skills. Like Dan above, she is aided by being able to establish a correspondence between the options available to her, her personal narrative, and her felt dispositions.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of how homeless and street involved young people negotiate the social spaces of street life. It focuses on the role that self-reflection and narration play in meeting the challenges of homelessness, including decisions about subsistence. Narratives are relevant to thinking about action because they are one of the primary ways that we make sense of our world and create meaning; including how we make sense of our own lives and history. They are also central to social life because we are often called on to tell our stories, both as part of everyday interaction, and as part of therapeutic encounters and interactions with social institutions. In this way, narratives are central to how we make sense of our actions to ourselves and to others.

The analysis is grounded in dual process approach to culture and cognition that argues that culture shapes action through two primary processes: it creates internalized dispositions and it provides cultural repertoires that actors use to justify and make sense of their actions (Vaisey 2009). In this chapter I argue that during difficult or unsettled situations, such as during a period
of homelessness, actors use narratives in the process of deliberating about courses of action. I focus on two main processes: how actors use narratives to recognize and mobilize internalized skill sets, and how they use narratives to construct boundaries. Narratives support particular lines of action by creating feelings of ontological continuity, by helping the present circumstances seem manageable, and by investing decisions with personal and moral meaning. Also, through their narratives actors engage with their dispositions and habits—using their life stories and available cultural scripts to underwrite, modify, or challenge these dispositions. By engaging with their dispositions in the context of personal narratives, actors also turn their habits and intuitions into more conscious frames that they can use in planning and orienting themselves towards future courses of action.

Bringing narratives to bear on the question of how homeless and street involved young people manage street life extends the current research on homelessness and the self. It argues for a more active and ongoing view of the self in relation to street life. In past research the focus is primarily on a categorical approach to identity. Either it is on the process through which actors move from a “mainstream identity” to a “homeless identity” or it is about how the homeless reject the stigma that comes with being labelled as homeless. An exclusively categorical approach to identity loses site of how the homeless actively engage with their sense of self in the course of managing the challenges of street life. The narrative and dual-process approach developed here demonstrates how the homeless use their sense of self to orient themselves towards or away from particular approaches to street life, a process that is influenced by culturally influenced dispositions and toolkits.
9.1 A Field Approach to Street Life

Homeless and street involved young people account for about one-third of the homeless population and their proportion is growing. Youth homelessness is a significant social problem in that it is a source of personal harm through its connection to increased drug use, mental health problems, and victimization and physical harm. It also has important social impacts in that it feeds into cycles of intergenerational poverty, shapes neighbourhoods, influences crime rates, and creates significant costs for the medical and criminal justice systems. Understanding how homeless and street involved young people engage with street life and make choices about subsistence in the context of this marginality is important for developing policies and interventions that minimize the harms of street life and that facilitate safe and successful transitions through homelessness. My analysis also addresses broader questions about the nature of social action in unsettled circumstances; how individuals arrive at decisions in difficult situations, and what is the role that social and cultural forces play in those processes?

The aim of this project is to understand subsistence related decision-making from the perspective of homeless youth through a combination of in-depth and life story interviewing techniques. These interviews focus on how young people make sense of and engage with the challenges that they face, and the subsistence choices that come out of that engagement. The data provide insights into two important and underexplored forces: how the social organization of street spaces shapes street life and subsistence; and a broadened understanding of how the self is implicated in subsistence related decision-making.

To examine these two influences I used a field framework for the study of homelessness, that built on Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital. This framework conceptualizes the collection of social spaces surrounding the street in a given locale as the homeless field—a relational space in which the homeless are positioned relative to one another and to other institutional and individual actors. The homeless field directs the homeless and street involved towards the pursuit of two interconnected logics; subsistence and social integration. Within the broad homeless field are subfields that structure and organize street life further, exerting their own influence and directing the homeless towards particular approaches to the logics of social
integration and subsistence. Each subfield is characterized by a unique structural terrain that defines the nature and distribution of resources; these are the main structures, including opportunities and constraints, and the available cultural resources that actors draw on in making sense of their experience and their choices. This analysis examined these features within three such spaces: the gay village subfield, the sleeping rough subfield, and the shelter subfield.

Approaching street life from a field framework draws attention to the diversity of social spaces that constitute “the street” in a given locale and the varied nature and experience of street life within these spaces.

9.2 The Terrain of Street Life

The nature and distribution of resources varies across subfields. The homeless and street involved are positioned within subfields according to the varied social, sexual, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital that are at play within each space. This field framework was valuable because it enabled a focus on the multiple dimensions of stratification within street spaces. In the gay village subfield, for example, a primary source of stratification is erotic capital which goes on to shape the access young people have to economic, social, and cultural resources. Within the shelter subfield relationships with staff are a unique form of social capital that stratifies the youth and gives those with strong ties to the staff an advantage in navigating the unique challenges of shelter life. Choices about street life are made at a practical level as young people manage their field position (i.e. amounts of capital) in pursuit of subsistence and social integration. They develop strategies in light of their resources and skill sets—strategies that shape their trajectories through homelessness. Recall Kim who succeeded in the clique-filled world of shelter life by drawing on her ability to quickly establish friendships. This form of cultural capital is helpful because it gives her access to the protection and companionship that popularity can provide, but it also has drawbacks in that it pulls her into interpersonal conflicts and drama.

In addition to the distribution of capital, the terrain of street subfields is also characterized by webs of interconnected opportunities and constraints that extend from the subfield’s structural conditions. In chapter 7 I use the example of pet ownership to illustrate this web and how it structure experience. Pets are direct response to the challenges of sleeping outside, but because of structures like the lack of animal-friendly shelters in Toronto, pet
ownership serves to reinforce the choice to stay outside of the emergency shelter system. Pets also push youth away from illegal subsistence strategies and reinforce their involvement in activities like panhandling and squeegeeing because youth do not want to risk their animals being taken away. Another web of interconnected opportunities and barriers is visible in the case of the shelter subfield. The lives of youth in this space are shaped in large part by the rules and policies of the shelter—these include curfews, meal services, and policies about appropriate behaviour. Monica, for example, described how rules prohibiting homophobia gave her and other gay and transgendered young people a modicum of protection and provided them with a tool for managing their position—a feature missing from the other street subfields.

A related feature of the structural terrain that youth have to engage with is the nature of peer relations and networks. Each subfield had a unique peer structure that was both structured and structuring. In the gay village, subfield, young people have a clique of friends which include housed and homeless young people, as well as wider social networks within the broader social scene of the gay village neighbourhood. The sleeping rough subfield is at the other end of the spectrum in terms of how connected it is to mainstream social life. Though young people in social space often have extensive contact with the mainstream public through subsistence activities like panhandling they are in a world apart. This social space consists of small peer-dominated groups that often sleep, panhandle, and travel together. Peer groups in this space are also relatively dispersed and youth have a large amount of discretion about who they spend their time with. The peer structure of the shelter subfield is somewhere in the middle in terms of its connection to mainstream social life. Youth spend most of their time in peer groups in and around the spaces of the shelter and the drop-in. However, the location of these spaces along major thoroughfares, and the more mainstream orientation of youth in this space, embeds them in the fabric of everyday life in a more integrated way than the sleeping rough youth—though in many ways these young people are also a world apart. Additionally, youth in this space have less discretion on who they spend their time with because the shelter and the drop-in bring young people into sustained and regular contact with one another.

The subfields of street life are also shaped and made unique by the discourses and cultural frames that are available. The gay village subfield, for example, is shaped by the availability of discourses that emphasizes the importance of living a “glamorous” life and the legitimacy of sex work to obtain that lifestyle. The frames within the sleeping rough subfield are
distinct in that they eschew consumerism and emphasize the importance of living an autonomous and independent life outside of traditional markers and pathways of success. Importantly, these frames and discourses do not form a set of shared norms and values, but are a set of cultural resources that are available within the space that youth draw on and reference themselves to in the course of navigating each subfield.

9.3 Navigating Homelessness

In addition to providing insight into the organization of street spaces, a field approach to street life is also valuable because of how it conceptualizes action. Street fields shape practice by directing youth towards particular orientations to homelessness. This happens in part because their terrains—including opportunities and constraints, the nature and distribution of capital, and available discourses—encourage particular responses to street life. The concept of field moves the analysis past subcultural theory’s implicit focus on internalized norms and values to an appreciation of street life as a set of overlapping structural contexts. Street life is not just about identifying as a member of a particular group or subscribing to particular set of subcultural norms and values, it is about being positioned within a particular context—what Snow and Anderson (1993) describe as a “shared predicament”—that produces shared orientations and particular frames and discourses that make sense of those orientations. Here action is less about acting out a relatively stable set of internalized norms and beliefs, and is more about responding practically to the constraints and opportunities of street life. I used a dual process approach to action (Vaisey 2009) which argues that homeless and street involved youth people engage practically with their circumstances, but lines of action are influenced by internalized dispositions formed through experience and upbringing (habitus), as well as the availability of cultural resources and repertories that young people draw on to underwrite and legitimize particular courses of action (cultural toolkits). Meaning that in making choices about street life homeless youth use their intuition to assess their options and makes choices, but that they are influenced by the available discourses and cultural repertories that help them make sense of those options and to justify their choices to themselves and to others. Part of this dynamic is that young people come to the spaces of street life with varying degrees of intuitive understanding. Dan, for example, felt relatively at ease within the shelter system—a fact he attributed to the time he spent in shelters with his Mom when he was young. Dan’s experience compares to other
Youth who described feeling entirely out of place and who despite years in the shelter system never developed a feel for it. Internalized habits of thought, taste, and comportment also influence young people towards or away from particular subfields—for example, those who were most successful in the gay village subfield were those who brought with them an inherent “fabulousness” that was valued and appreciated within that social space.

I extended a dual process approach to action by considering the role that self-reflection and narration play in navigating unsettled situations—homelessness being a prime example. I demonstrated how homeless and street-involved young people make choices about street life and subsistence through their personal narratives. These narratives facilitate interplay between dispositions and cultural repertoires in that through them actors can reflect on their dispositions—supporting, modifying, and challenging them in light of available cultural resources. Homeless and street-involved young people use their narratives in two distinct ways: to recognize and mobilize skill sets and to construct boundaries. Through these processes narratives invest lines of action with a sense of personal meaning, and help unsettled situations feel manageable by creating a feeling of continuity. Further, in the process of boundary construction narratives convert the dispositions of habitus into conscious frames that actors can use to orient themselves towards future lines of action.

Experience within subfields can also influence one’s habitus. The structure of each subfield cultivates and supports a field-level habitus—a specific set of tastes and preferences that correspond to the dominant orientations within that space. For example, Marc from the sleeping rough subfield describes a preference among some of the youth within sleeping rough subfield space for “drinking, fighting, and fucking.” This contrasts with the “glamorous” tastes that were supported within the gay village subfield and the hip-hop inspired tastes that dominate within the social space surrounding the shelter. Tastes and preferences that develop over time from experience in the field can be seen as the internalization of field position. Bourdieu describes this process as creating a virtue out of a necessity in that it turns ones social circumstances into a point of distinction. Struggles over distinction within the broader field of homelessness primarily mean struggles over the most legitimate ways to achieve subsistence and social integration. This struggle is complicated in the case of homelessness because debates about who is legitimately homeless and what is the most legitimate way to be homeless dovetail with efforts to manage the stigma of homelessness (Snow & Anderson 1987). This struggle over legitimacy
is most visible when we look at how young people in the sleeping rough subfield challenged the shelter-going youth’s approach to street life, arguing that they were soft and lacked real survival skills. There were also comments that youth in the shelter were too obsessed with interpersonal drama and were less supportive and communal than youth in the sleeping rough subfield. In response, the shelter-going youth tended to reject the overt dependence and visibility that comes with street based subsistence strategies like panhandling and squeegeeing—seeing those strategies, and by implication those who do them, as “too low.” Struggles over legitimacy underscore the social and symbolic resources that are at play within street life. Further, these struggles serve to clarify the social boundaries that divide the subfields from one another, reinforcing my argument that they constitute distinct social worlds.

9.4 Youth at the Margins
There is variation in how embedded youth are in the social spaces of street life. In the analysis I have given examples of youth who have a marginal field position in that they are embedded within the subfield (i.e. in regular contact with its terrain), but who are poorly positioned in the subfield. The best examples of marginal youth are the straight identified youth that participate in the subfield surrounding the gay village, and youth in the social space surrounding the shelter who “just float” because they lack the necessary social skills and cultural capital to connect with a clique. There are also young people at the margins because they are less embedded in the structural terrain of the subfields. In this group, for example, are young people who pop in and out of the social spaces of street life while they couch surf or during periods when they run away from home or care for days at a time. Other youth intentionally avoid the spaces of street life and prefer to keep to themselves, a strategy that is more typical among homeless adults (Pippert 2007). For these youth this strategy might mean staying in hotels or hostels with a friend or partner and only going to a shelter or to the street when absolutely necessary. My research suggests there are more subfields on the street than described in this study. For example, there is evidence of a subfield surrounding Aboriginal homeless in Toronto—consisting of networks of homeless Aboriginal youth and adults that are brought together through existing networks and through Aboriginal-specific social services. There was also evidence of a distinct social world

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11 A field approach to homelessness can also be used to explore the relationship between a broader range of institutionalized and non-institutionalized players. Emirbayer and Williams (2005) demonstrate the strengths of this kind of analysis in their study of a field of homeless social services in New York City.
surrounding crack use and female street prostitution that is located in the southeast corner of downtown. These subfields bring together people from more diverse age ranges than the youth dominated subfields discussed here.

9.5 Policy Implications

My analysis highlights characteristics of street involvement and homelessness that are underdeveloped in the research to date. The existing literature typically asks questions about the risk factors and challenges that predict subsistence strategies. In comparison, my analysis focused on understanding how economic, social, cultural, and status resources are distributed throughout the unique spaces of street life, and how their distribution shapes the nature and experience of homelessness. This lens deepens our understanding of the stratification that shapes homelessness, but it also brings into focus what is available for the homeless within street spaces and what street life might provide to the homeless. In focusing on hardships much of the existing research on subsistence strategies contributes to an image of homeless youth as feral and desperate—doing whatever it takes to survive. This type of framing discounts the more strategic and deliberative aspects of subsistence, as well as real instances of enjoyment and satisfaction that are experienced in the context of homelessness. The suffering that is often at the heart of being homeless must be acknowledged; however, this study shows the nuanced and complex dynamics that operate alongside the well-documented forms of marginality and hardship that homeless youth experience. These findings highlight the resilience of those without a home to take advantage of what is available and to carve out a place for themselves in the social spaces of the street despite the difficulties and challenges of their circumstances. Exploring homelessness and street life from this perspective offers important conceptual contributions but also policy insights. Accordingly, the following discussion highlights five policy implications of this study.

First, a field perspective encourages us to think beyond individual-level risk factors to consider how the nature and meaning of risk factors are structured by the distinct social spaces in which young people are embedded, for example, what it means to participate in drug use or sex work varies between subfields. This finding suggests that public health interventions and messaging will be most effective when they are sensitive to the unique conditions and frames that inform decision-making within each street space. For example, efforts to address drug use or sex work among young people in the gay village subfield needs to acknowledge the
connection that both practices have to pursuit of the “glamorous life.” The messaging and programming that succeeds in this context is likely different than the one that resonates among homeless young people in the sleeping rough subfield.

Second, my analysis encourages policy makers and service providers to ask questions about what homeless and street involved young people are being asked to give up in the transition away from street life. During their time on the street homeless youth struggle to acquire the resources and connections that are central to making street life manageable. They work to develop skills and expertise, and to gain the respect and status of their peers. One of the primary paths that youth are encouraged to take out of street life is using social assistance to rent an inexpensive apartment and then to move themselves towards financial independence through low-wage service work. Apart from the economics of trying to survive on minimum wage, for many homeless young people this means moving from a space in which they have acquired important social and cultural resources, and that offers some level of fun and excitement, to a social space in which they have few resources and in which the prospects for acquiring social status are minimal. Employment and housing supports are primarily focused on addressing practical challenges like getting social assistance, building basic employment and life skills, and finding landlords and employers willing to take a chance on marginal young people. These practical concerns are essential to transitioning youth into employment and housing and for that reason they are often prioritized within service agencies, especially given the limited financial resources of such organizations. Although addressing the practical issues is important, my research suggests that efforts to orient youth away from street life and towards mainstream opportunities will be more successful if support agencies could offer programs and opportunities that address the social and cultural needs of the youth as well. Initiatives need to consider how they can embed youth in non-street based social networks, provide some level of excitement and fulfillment, and that can help young people develop mainstream cultural capital. A type of program that might accomplish these goals could be one that connects homeless and street involved young people to intensive and team-based international and domestic development initiatives. These programs, if provided with proper supports, could provide young people with cultural and social resources that they could use to transition into more stable employment and living situations while providing them with a level of excitement and adventure that could serve
as a draw. Further, such programs would tap into the social justice consciousness that many homeless young people develop as part of their experiences on society’s margins.

Third, my study considers how the nature and experience of street life is influenced by the interaction between the skill sets and capacities that young people bring with them to the street and the nature of the social spaces in which they are embedded. Examining this relationship draws our attention to young people who are particularly vulnerable because they are marginal even within the spaces of street life. The young people most likely to describe their experience on the street in positive terms (or at least in less negative ones) were those who were the most successful at acquiring social capital and status in their respective street subfields. Rob, for example, found a sense of worth and belonging within the world of the gay village—a success he attributed to the “fabulousness” that he brought with him to the street. Similarly, the young people who felt the most positive about their experiences in the shelter system were those who were able to integrate into the high status cliques within the shelter and drop-in. This finding raises concerns about those young people who may come to feel even more marginalized and excluded because they lack the cultural capital and social skills necessary to access social and symbolic resources within the spaces of street life. Feelings of marginality can create or exacerbate serious mental health problems, encourage drug use as a form of escape, and encourage risk taking because there is “nothing left to lose.” For this reason, initiatives need to target young people who are socially excluded within street spaces and that may be having difficulty finding social support among their peers.

This same line of inquiry also raises questions about the availability of social space within the homeless field in general. As noted, it is important for homeless and street involved young people to locate a space where they feel like they belong. A theme among many of the gay and transgendered youth in this sample was that their experience of street life was more positive because it coincided with them finding a social space in which they could more openly express themselves and their sexuality. Unfortunately, none of the lesbian and bisexual youth interviewed reported finding that same kind of acceptance and sense of belonging. The nature of the gay village is that it represents and caters to some members of the LGBTQ rainbow better than others (i.e. mainstream and stereotypical expressions of gay male sexuality and identity). Spaces that cater to lesbians and bisexuals are smaller and more circumscribed, and therefore harder to find and access. Social service initiatives and policy should make a concerted effort to
create spaces in the where bisexual and lesbian homeless youth can connect with others in that community. Another group to consider more closely are young people whose lack of social capital encourages them towards particularly risky subsistence strategies. The clearest examples are young people involved in sex work whose lack of erotic capital encourages them to engage in riskier sex for less money. Helping these young people involves recognizing that youth involved in sex work do not have an equal capacity to negotiate safe sexual encounters.

Although its policy implications are not totally clear, it is also worth considering the finding that in some cases a moderate level of social exclusion might actually protect young people from the negative influences of delinquent peers. This theme was particularly strong within the shelter subfield where it was argued that being less popular could protect youth from being drawn too deeply into the interpersonal politics and drama that dominated street life around the shelter and the drop-in. This finding suggests that having a number of small emergency shelters dispersed around a social service area may be preferable to having a smaller number of larger facilities because the smaller size may mitigate against the formation of a broad and encompassing peer social world while still providing opportunities for youth to connect with peers.

Fourth, the role of the self in making decisions about subsistence and street life also has policy implications. The discussion illustrated how the self is an important construct for homeless young people and how they felt that having a strong sense of self was important for avoiding risky drug use or subsistence activities. There was also indication, following the work of Maruna and Copes (2005), that being able to effectively neutralize past wrongdoings and to construct a positive sense of self is important for making successful transitions away from homelessness. These findings suggest that we should continue to challenge the stigmatization of homelessness and to develop initiatives that help young people to establish a positive self-image.

The fifth and final policy implication I want to discuss extends from the kinds of insights that are available when we focus on how homeless young people engage practically with the structures of street life. In chapter 6 I discussed how animals emerged as a practical response to the challenges of living outside of the emergency system. An interesting consequence of this decision is that having an animal to care for encouraged these young people to avoid illegal activities and serious drug use for fear of having their animals taken away from them. However, this choice also further entrenched them in street life by making it more difficult to stay at
emergency shelters, access services, or engage in paid employment. This suggests that there might be benefits to encouraging and assisting homeless and street involved young people with responsible pet ownership. Specific initiatives could be service agencies offering basic pet supplies, kennels that allow youth to board their pets when accessing employment or services, and emergency shelters that allow pets.

The analysis and discussion provided here demonstrate the value of applying a field framework to the study of street life. The field perspective I develop provides the conceptual tools for examining the diverse spaces of street life and for understanding how the social organization of these spaces shapes the nature and experience of homelessness. It also provides insight into the nature of practice among the homeless. It challenges the image of the homeless as desperate and unscrupulous, and replaces that image with a view of the homeless as actively navigating complex and diverse social spaces in the context of their sense of self and structured repertoires of thought, action, and culture that give their experiences and choices meaning. The field framework developed here provides a basis from which to consider a range of issues related to homelessness, not just subsistence strategies, and provides important new directions for homeless social policy.
References


Osborne, R. E. (2002). "I may be homeless, but I'm not helpless": The costs and benefits of identifying with homelessness. *Self and Identity, 1*(1), 43-52.


Appendix A
Consent Form

Getting by on the street

Who is doing the study?

My name is Tyler Frederick and I am a PhD. student in sociology at the University of Toronto. As part of my program I have to do a large research project. I am asking you to participate in this project.

The study

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how youth who live or spend a lot of time on the street make decisions about how they will get the things they need to get by like food and money.

I am planning to talk to about 30 youth who are between the ages of 16 and 24, and who don't have a house, apartment, or room that they can easily and safely live at, or if they do, if they are worried that they might not be able to stay there for much longer.

You are being asked to participate in an interview for one to two hours. In this interview you will be asked to talk about your experiences with your family, caregivers, or foster parents. This will include questions about abuse. You will also be asked to talk about all the things that you have done to make money and to get by since you first stopped having a regular place to live.

I am looking for people who are able to openly and honestly talk about these two things.

You do not have to be in the study if you do not want, and you can stop the interview at anytime if you change your mind. You can also let me know if you don’t want to answer any of the questions I ask, or if there are certain things you don’t want to talk about. Also, your choice to participate in this study (or not) will not have any effect on the services you receive from any agency or service.

Risks

Before you agree to participate, you should know that there is a risk that during the interview some upsetting or uncomfortable experiences or things from your past might come up. You should know that you don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to talk about, and you can take a break anytime you feel like it. I also have some information that I can give you for places that you can go to if you want to talk more about any of the things that might come up, or any other things that might be on your mind.

Compensation

To compensate you for your time you will be given $20 for completing the interview. You are still welcome to stop the interview at any time, and if you do, you will still receive compensation for the time that you have already given.
**Privacy/Confidentiality**

This interview will be private and confidential. The recording will not be marked with your name or information that will link the recording to you. If I use any part of your interview in any writing or publication any information that could be potentially used to identify you will be removed or changed. But, you should know that there are some limits to how confidential I can be in some cases.

I will be asking you to talk about things that you have done to get money, food, or other things that you want. It may turn out that some of the things you have done have been illegal. That is okay, I want to hear about those things too, and what you tell me is confidential. However, you should know that there is one exception. If the police have a reasonable and probable grounds to believe that you told me about a specific crime, they could make me let them read or hear what you told me. It is important that you don’t describe any specific crimes that you might have done, and to do your best to avoid telling me the real names of people and places that have to do with specific crimes that you know about.

You should also know that if you tell me about physical or sexual abuse that is happening to someone under the age of 16, I am under a legal obligation to report that abuse. You may want to think about that if the experiences of younger friends or family come up during the interview.

**Storing your information**

If it is okay with you this interview will be recorded. This is only so that it is easier for me to remember all the things that you say, and so that I can refer back to the interview at a later date.

After the interview either myself or a research assistant will transcribe (write out) the interview.

A copy of the digitally recorded interview will be kept on my computer until it has been written out. Then it will be destroyed. An electronic copy of the written out interview will be kept on my computer. A paper copy of the transcription will be kept in a locked cabinet. Your name will not be put with any of these stored materials. I will keep the paper copy of the interviews forever so that I can use them again in the future. I will destroy all copies of your interview at anytime if you ask me to.

**Contact Information**

Below is contact information for myself, my supervisor, and the ethics review board at the University of Toronto if you have any questions or concerns about the research. I encourage you to remain in touch. I will be happy to provide you with updates about the project, and a copy of the results.

Tyler Frederick  
tyler.frederick@utoronto.ca

Kelly Hannah-Moffat  
hannah-moffat@utoronto.ca

Ethics Review Office
Appendix B
Interview Schedule

I am trying to learn more about how people get by and survive on the street so I am going to ask you some questions, just tell me whatever comes to mind. I am not looking for anything specific. I am just hoping that you might help me and others to understand how people on the street survive on the street a bit better.

I should also mention that sometimes I might scribble some things down but all I am writing is things that interest me that I might try to come back to. I am not making any notes about you. I also might glance over at my tape recorder, I am still listening I just want to make sure that it is recording properly.

There are a few different things that I am interested in so I might jump around a little bit but the first thing that I wanted to ask you about some of the things that people do for money on the street.

1. What would you say are the most common ways that people make money on the street?

Some of these questions may sound dumb but...

2. How does _____ work?

3. Who are typically the kids that are_____?

4. What about _____?

5. Is there different ways to _____?

6. How about you? Can you walk me through how you’ve gotten by?

7. How did you get into that?

8. Is there reasons that you didn’t do some of those other things?

I am also interested in where people stay.

9. Is there a lot of differences between shelters?

10. Are there some places that are better than others?

11. Is there some places you wouldn’t go or wouldn’t recommend?

12. Who stays there?

13. If you didn’t want to stay in a shelter what are some other options?
14. Have you ever done that?

**Can I ask you some questions about yourself?**

15. When did you stop having a safe and regular place to stay?

16. Can you tell me a bit about what it was like when that first happened or when you first came on the street?

17. Were you surprised by what the street was like?

18. How were you feeling when you first arrived?

19. Was there anything from your past that helped prepare you for the street?

20. Has the street changed you at all?

21. How are you with money?

22. There are a lot of names for people that live on the street, like “homeless” or “street youth” do you think of yourself as any of those?

23. Are there any names that you do think describe you or situation?

24. Is there any groups that you feel you belong to or fit with?

25. How far did you make it in school?

26. Any plans for more education?

27. Do you think how people look affects how they get treated?

28. How about their size?

29. What about the way you look or your size?

30. What sort of things do you worry about?

31. What is a typical day like for you these days?