Transitory Spaces of Care: Serving Homeless People on the Street

ABSTRACT

Within a rapidly expanding body of work exploring the role of hostels and day centres in the accommodation and care of homeless people, very little attention has been paid to the dynamics of the soup run. Soup runs have however recently become a focus of concern for the British Government who, echoing nineteenth century debates regarding the ‘inappropriate’ distribution of alms, argue that they are undermining attempts to reduce levels of rough sleeping by making it easier for people to survive on the streets. Drawing upon a postal survey, together with a series of interviews and participant observations, this paper develops a comprehensive account of soup runs in Britain and explores the dynamics of the spaces involved. It argues that far from simply sustaining street homelessness, soup runs provide an important yet very complex series of spaces of care in the contemporary city. By their very nature, however - having a non-interventionist ethos, being transitory, and open to the public eye - the dynamics of these spaces differ in significant ways from those typical of geographically fixed spaces of care.

Key words: soup run, space of care, homelessness
INTRODUCTION

The practice of offering food to homeless people on the street has a long history within Britain, dating back to the Middle Ages at least (Hopper, 1991). Contemporary soup runs - involving the outdoor distribution of soup and other staple food items - follow in this tradition and are integral to emergency service networks utilised by homeless people to the present day. Soup runs are also beginning to feature in debates led by the Central Government regarding the 'appropriateness' of specific forms of provision for homeless people, evident in the expression of concern that they may undermine the Government's endeavours to reduce levels of rough sleeping by making it 'easier' for people to survive on the street. Yet, while a rapidly growing body of work explores of the role of hostels and (to a lesser extent) day centres in the accommodation and care of homeless people, soup runs have not received the same level of research attention. We know little about who runs them, why, and how they operate in practice.

Redressing the paucity of research in this field, this paper develops a picture of the characteristics and dynamics of the contemporary soup run by drawing upon the results of a postal survey, together with a series of interviews and participant observations conducted in seven towns and cities throughout Britain. It argues that far from simply sustaining street homelessness, soup runs provide a series of important yet very complex spaces of care in the city. By their very nature, however, soup runs differ in fundamental ways from more formal fixed spaces of care (such as day centres) because of the ethos which underpins them, and the nature of the spaces in which they operate. This argument is developed in several stages. The first section of the paper reviews historical debates surrounding the provision of food to homeless and impoverished people. The second section reports upon the findings of a recent survey of soup run providers, outlining the organisational affiliation and basic structure of their service. The third section introduces the concept of 'space of care', which is then used in the remainder of the paper to highlight the key features and complexity of soup runs as transitory forms of service provision for homeless people.
OUTDOOR RELIEF: A HISTORICALLY CONTESTED SERVICE

The giving of alms to homeless and 'poor' people more generally dates back to the Fourteenth Century at least (Hopper, 1991). Alms provision has historically taken two forms: 'outdoor relief' (food) and 'indoor relief' (food and shelter) – the former given freely and unconditionally, the latter usually being conditional upon recipients' completion of specific chores or 'rehabilitative' activities (Driver, 1993). The practice of giving alms has always been a subject of contention, being closely associated with debates regarding the personal culpability of those served for their poverty or homelessness (Wardhaugh, 2000). As a consequence, the State has for centuries questioned both the degree to which recipients of such welfare are 'deserving' of the assistance offered and the 'appropriateness' of that provision. In this vein, from the Sixteenth Century onwards the division between indoor and outdoor relief was superimposed by a moral distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. The 'deserving' poor were taken to include those stricken by poverty through 'no fault of their own' - such as disabled people, the elderly, widows, and children - and were thus deemed by the State to be eligible for outdoor relief. The 'undeserving' (able-bodied) poor, on the other hand, were presumed to be at fault for their plight and, consequently, were viewed as a threat to the work ethic and moral order of the time (Beier, 1985). They were therefore denied access to outdoor relief and consigned to the oppressive environment of the closed hostel and, later, statutory workhouse (Davis-Smith, 1995; Driver, 1993; Pound, 1971), with more persistent 'offenders' being punished (imprisoned or branded) under the Vagrancy Acts of the 1500s and 1823 (Leigh, 1979).

The number of private citizens distributing outdoor relief and number of local charitable organisations offering indoor relief increased in the mid- to late-1800s in response to concern over the number of applicants to, and plight of, those staying in workhouses (Humphries, 1999). Such provision attracted substantial criticism, however, with the Charity Organisation Society (COS) arguing from the 1870s onwards that far from ameliorating homelessness, the
rapid increase in and haphazard nature of charitable giving was in fact exacerbating the problems of vagrancy and pauperism. The COS thus designed schemes (e.g. the distribution of accommodation vouchers) to regulate the charitable impulse and push recipients indoors into the hands of more 'suitable' providers (Davis-Smith, 1995).

Early distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor and opposition to the provision of outdoor relief may be traced through to more recent homelessness legislation (Lowe, 1997). Echoes of such rhetoric are evident in the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, for example, where a clear distinction was made between those found 'intentionally' homeless (who were to be denied access to statutory accommodation) and others who were not (Beresford, 1979; Neale, 1997). Similarly, the injection of funding from Central Government via the Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) and Homelessness Action Programme (HAP) in the 1990s was associated with an expectation that homeless people should take up the expanded opportunities on offer, or risk being apportioned blame for their presence on the street (Fooks and Pantazis, 1999). Political debate at the time conflated rough sleeping with begging and crime, thereby demonising all street people and threatening persistent 'offenders' with the possibility of punitive action (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Fooks and Pantazis, 1999; Wardhaugh, 2000). In this regard, the Social Exclusion Unit reported in the late 1990s that:

The Government has no present plans to … make it an offence to sleep rough. But since the explicit intention of the policy is to deliver clear streets, the Government believes that the public will feel they have a right to expect hostel places to be taken up as more become available.  

(Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, p. 20)

Concomitant with such policy initiatives was an escalation of pressure placed upon organisations offering outdoor relief. Driven by the target of reducing rough sleeping by at least two thirds, the Government's Coming in from the Cold strategy sought to "pursue approaches which help people off the streets, and reject those which sustain a street lifestyle" (ODPM, 1999: 4). Consequently, soup runs were compelled to 'come on board' with Government-led initiatives and thus "channel their efforts into more productive provision"
The most direct repercussion for soup run providers was the commissioning by the Central Government of the London Soup and Clothing Run Coordination Project which was managed by the Salvation Army from July 2000. Given concern about the over-provision of services, the lack of 'supportive interaction' between volunteers and service users, and the impression that most of the people served were not rough sleepers but rather the 'unsettled resettled', that is, 'socially rootless' people who 'sought the camaraderie of the soup runs for support', the project was given the directive of reducing the number of runs operating in the central city (Moore, 2002). This was done by encouraging 'excess' groups to stop or redirect their efforts into other activities, such as supporting existing night shelter or tenancy sustainment services. Although many groups willingly joined the co-ordination scheme, the organisers did have to employ more 'forceful' tactics to ensure the compliance of a number of 'intransigent' groups via the use of cautions from police and letters from local Ministers of Parliament requesting that the service be terminated (Moore, 2002: 9). The target of reducing the number of soup runs operating in the city centre by two thirds was achieved by mid 2002, by which time 50 different soup run groups had halted or redirected their activities (Moore, 2002).

In summary, the provision of food to homeless people has a long but tumultuous history spanning from the Middle Ages to the present day. This has been strongly influenced by the long-standing moral distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, and the expression of concern regarding the potential outcomes of indiscriminate outdoor giving. It is against this backdrop of social and political conflict that this paper explores the characteristics and dynamics of contemporary British soup runs outside of the capital city.
THE CONTEMPORARY SOUP RUN

To develop a picture of the contemporary soup run, a survey of soup run co-ordinators throughout Britain (excluding London) was conducted in 2001\(^1\). This explored the basic structure and serving characteristics of individual projects, as well as their staffing and funding arrangements. A broad definition of soup run was used, to include any form of outdoor relief involving the provision of food. The mailing list was compiled from information provided by a variety of organisations including national and local charities, local authorities, and other homeless service providers (e.g. hostel and day centre managers) throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. Given recent pressure from Central Government, soup run co-ordinators often try to retain a low profile - their contact details rarely being included in local service directories, for example. Consequently, even when local authorities or other service providers are aware of the existence of soup runs in their area, they are often unsure as to who operates them, making the service exceedingly difficult to trace for survey purposes. Our mailing list did nonetheless contain a total of 72 potential contacts, 38 of whom responded to the survey. 29 (76\%) of these respondents referred to their project specifically as a 'soup run', the others opting for alternative titles including 'food run', 'breakfast run', or 'mobile outreach' for example.

Further to the survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with soup run co-ordinators, volunteers, and service users, together with the managers of other emergency services for homeless people (e.g. hostels and day centres) and representatives of local government in each of seven case study areas. These provided insight into the motivations of, and challenges faced by, service providers, as well as the nature of relationships between soup runs and other services in the local area. The survey and interviews were complemented by a series of participant observations, wherein one member of the research team worked as a volunteer on various soup run projects in one city over a four month period, and another maintained an existing soup run volunteer commitment in a different city.
Given the difficulty inherent in attempts to trace such services, it is virtually impossible to determine with any degree of certainty the exact scale of soup run operation throughout Britain. It does however appear that one or more individual projects may be found in virtually all cities and most major towns. In Bristol, for example, one organisation co-ordinates a soup run every night, two others distribute breakfast and lunch on the street once per week, and a small number of additional groups offer outdoor relief on a fortnightly, monthly, or more intermittent basis. Worcester has a soup run on Friday and Saturday nights only, each served by a different church. In contrast, there are no soup runs at all operating in smaller centres such as Scarborough (Yorkshire), Bodmin (Cornwall), and Dorchester (Dorset), to name but a few examples.

The picture which emerged from the survey and case study investigations was that of a service strongly dominated by churches and/or other voluntary or charitable organisations. Indeed, of the 38 projects involved in the survey, 37% were run by a church, 55% were run by charities/voluntary organisations (many of which were faith-based), with only 8% being overseen by private individuals or groups. Most organisations were in some way formalised, with 82% being registered charities and 61% either part of, or linked to, a larger organisation or partnership (e.g. The Salvation Army, Cyrenians, St Vincent de Paul Society).

Significantly more reliant on the labour of volunteers than other emergency services for homeless people (May et al., under review), almost three quarters (74%) of the survey projects were entirely reliant on volunteer staff. The rest (26%) did however have one or more paid co-ordinators, countering to some extent the notion implicit in Government reports that soup runs are unprofessional and poorly organised (Randall and Brown, 2002). The size of volunteer pools varied significantly, ranging from 2 to 200 people, with an average of 33.

With regard to the number of days of operation, 26% of the projects served seven days per week, usually drawing upon the services of different groups of volunteers (commonly
affiliated with different churches) on different nights. Others operated on only a few nights per week, often when other services providing free food, such as day centres or night shelters, were closed. Virtually all soup runs operated late at night, although there were some exceptions - a small number of projects offered 'breakfast' services in the early hours of the morning, for example.

Individual soup run teams usually consisted of between two and four people serving hot drinks, soup, and sandwiches to an average of 28 people per night. Material resources such as bedding and clothing were also provided by approximately 70% of the projects, as was verbal advice and basic information about things such as local emergency accommodation. Packs or pamphlets containing information such as local hostel and day centre addresses were distributed by just over half (51%) of the projects, suggesting that soup runs provide an important, albeit informal, signposting service that directs individuals to the services appropriate for their needs.

The provision of such services occurs, almost without exception, in public space. 60% of survey projects served at a fixed or regular site such as on the street or in a car park. A 'mobile' service was offered by 47% of the projects, wherein volunteers walked or drove in search of people to serve. 11% employed a combination of stationary and mobile serving strategies. Volunteers of the Bristol Soup Run Trust, for example, serve initially at two set points - a church yard and car park adjacent to the city centre - and then walk along the main thoroughfares between the city centre and University of Bristol campus serving people they pass on the street (usually people begging and/or sleeping rough).

In providing the service it does, the soup run offers an important 'space of care' within the city. Developed most fully by those researching day centres and drop-ins, the concept of space of care may be used to illuminate and aid understanding of the complex dynamics of the ephemeral socio-spatial nexuses that soup runs create.
SPACES OF CARE

Spaces of care are defined by Conradson (forthcoming: *) as "socio-spatial field[s] disclosed through practices of care that take place between individuals". Care is here conceived of not as mere charitable feeling (benevolence), but rather as the practice of showing kindness or 'doing good' (beneficence) (Smith, 1998). Simply put, in such spaces care is the articulation of an interest in the wellbeing of others in practical ways, wherein staff may provide practical assistance or simply take the time to listen empathetically to service users (Conradson, forthcoming). Spaces of care recently featuring on the academic research agenda include community drop-in centres (Conradson, forthcoming), drop-ins for the mentally ill (Parr, 2000), and day centres for homeless people (Llewellin and Murdoch, 1996; Waters, 1992).

Recent discussions of the geographies of care typically make a distinction between the partiality of care for those who are 'nearest and dearest' (i.e. friends and family), and the universalism of care for the geographically distant 'other' - malnourished children in developing countries, for example (Sack, 1997; Smith, 1998). The nascent research on day centres and drop-ins identified above reveals how such environments provide opportunities for the care of the 'nearby other', that is, those who are spatially proximate, but socially distant from members of 'mainstream' society in a given context. This is possible because, as Parr (2000) points out, such centres offer inclusive spaces of stability where unusual behaviours and appearances are considered to occur within the boundaries of acceptability. This, she explains, results from collaboration between staff and service users to create an environment where unorthodox actions and bodily aesthetics are regarded as 'unusual norms'. Put another way, in such contexts the nearby 'other' begins to be reconstituted as otherness is replaced by difference, whereby service users are sufficiently accepted to be able to express their difference as insiders rather than outsiders. Thus spaces of care are characterised by a collective sense of 'license' (Goffman, 1961) which allows for the expression of difference away from the threat of 'othering' so often implicit in mainstream public space.
Although sometimes aimed at a particular 'target group' (e.g. young homeless people or people with mental illness), spaces of care such as day centres do, as a general rule, have an open-door policy. Hence, an individual may enter without being questioned (although they might be asked to provide their first name at the door) - unless they have been officially 'barred' because of former rule infringements. Hence, even though such centres aim to offer an inclusive environment where difference is tolerated - welcomed, even - they must also be regarded as spaces of exclusion (Waters, 1992). In this regard, Parr (2000) explains that some forms of difference or otherness (even within the 'other' group) are too strange or extreme and transgress even the boundaries of 'unusual norms', thus becoming 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996). So, while in one sense spaces of care offer inclusive havens of respite from both climatic elements and social stigma, they are not entirely divorced from wider understandings of social responsibility and order which deem some behaviours 'unacceptable'. Deviants may therefore incur expulsion (temporarily or permanently), or at the very least may be avoided by fellow service users (Parr, 2000).

Spaces of care are imagined in different ways by different people, and these imaginations infuse the practices and experiences of staff and service users alike. Because care is a relational practice, that is, is predicated upon both giving and receiving (Bondi, forthcoming; Thomas, 1993), individuals' experiences of such spaces depend critically upon the extent to which they are receptive to, or able to engage with, the practices of care expressed by staff and/or other service users (Conradson, forthcoming). The dynamics of such spaces are also affected in significant ways by the physical infrastructure of the centre itself. There now exists a wealth of literature within and beyond geography exploring the influence of building design on the atmosphere of, and social interaction within, various spaces of care (see for example Cooper et al., 1999; Garside et al., 1990; Veness, 1994). Indeed, scholars have carefully noted the ways in which the structure of these spaces often reflect normative cultural
values and, in so doing, may reinforce ideological distinctions between the 'professionals' providing the service, and the individuals receiving the services on offer (Gillespie, 2002).

Spaces of care are also sites of resource. Day centres, for example, provide a sheltered indoor environment offering food, hot drinks and other basic utilities such as lavatories and bathing facilities. Many provide clothing, bedding, laundry and storage facilities, and an increasing number offer more specialised healthcare or resettlement services. Another primary function of such centres is the provision of advice and assistance with regard to things such as welfare benefit claims or applications for social housing. It is important to note however that expectations regarding the uptake of such resources are variable. As Waters (1992) explains, some organisations adopt a non-interventionist approach and view their centre as an environment of acceptance which emphasise the provision of essential resources to aid people's survival on a day-to-day basis. Others, however, take a more empowering or rehabilitative approach, actively encouraging or even challenging service users to change aspects of their behaviour or lifestyle (Waters, 1992).

Spaces of care, then, are complex spaces of inclusion and exclusion which allow room for the articulation of difference in an environment intended to facilitate the expression of care and distribution of resources. To date, academic explorations have focussed on spatially fixed indoor spaces of care (such as day centres and drop-ins). When turning attention to soup runs, the fundamental question that arises is what happens to the expression and receipt of care when it is translated to outdoor contexts? In what ways, for example, does the transitory nature of the soup run influence who is served, what resources are offered, and the nature of the relationships between service users, staff, and the wider public? Furthermore, one might wonder to what extent the deserving/undeserving differentiation mentioned earlier might be implicated in the nature of outdoor service provision or the experiences of service users. The following section considers these, and other, issues in detail.
SOUP RUNS AS TRANSITORY SPACES OF CARE

Four themes stand out when comparing soup runs to the indoor spaces of care described above which, taken together, highlight the complexity of soup runs as transitory outdoor spaces of care.

*Sustaining life: caring by providing essential resources*

Like indoor spaces of care, one of the primary functions of soup runs is the provision of resources. While the transitory nature of soup runs dictates that they may provide only the most basic of services, the material resources offered are essential for the very sustenance of life, especially for people who are homeless. Contrary to Government claims regarding the housing status of people using soup runs (Randall and Brown, 2002; see also Moore, 2002), evidence from our survey suggests that the majority of service users are in fact homeless, that is, are roofless or living in temporary or insecure accommodation (Jacobs et al., 1999; Pleace et al., 1997). Soup run co-ordinators estimated that, on average, approximately 36% of people served were sleeping rough, 17% were staying in hostels or night shelters, 10% were guests of bed and breakfast hotels, and 13% were 'hidden homeless' (e.g. living in squats or sleeping on friends' or relatives' floors).

Yet, soup runs also cater for many individuals who have their own accommodation but remain reliant upon such services for material resources and support to maintain independent living and sustain an adequate quality of life. For example, soup runs are crucial for many statutory homeless people who have been placed in bed and breakfast hotels by their local authority while awaiting allocation of more permanent council housing. Often socially isolated, on very low incomes, and with no access to cooking facilities, these individuals are reliant on soup runs for basic sustenance and opportunities for social interaction. In this way, by providing very basic resources in such an accessible manner, soup runs provide a vital safety net for those facing shortfalls or gaps in 'the system': individuals who have not been given resources to which they have a statutory right, or for whom welfare benefits are
inadequate to cover basic food and accommodation costs, for example. In this light, when discussing the pressure placed upon soup runs by the Rough Sleepers Unit under the direction of 'Homelessness Tsar' Louise Casey, one soup run co-ordinator cogently stated:

…the system is always gonna fail somewhere and there is always gonna be a need for people to provide for the gaps when people do fall through the system, and that's my argument against that lady's [Louise Casey's] view of getting rid of all the soup runs and things. If there wasn't a need we wouldn't do it, and the need is still there, and at the end of the day if the need isn't supplied, people will die.

Consequently, as Evans and Dowler (1999) note, free meal services are essential in providing a regular source of food to prevent hunger and frank starvation of homeless and other marginalised people, and until such time as the welfare system is adequate to meet the basic sustenance needs of such individuals, the informal provision of food in this way will continue to be necessary.

Moreover, soup runs are often the only service accessible to those whom have (because of rule infringements) been excluded from other services and thrust into even more unforgiving public space. For these people, some of whom we found were not in receipt of welfare benefits, soup runs remained their only (legal) means of accessing basic food and clothing. Indeed, evidence from interviews suggests that the absence of soup runs (and other services providing free meals) can in fact lead to 'survivalist crime' (Carlen, 1996). For example, when asked how he had survived on a day-to-day basis while sleeping rough in a town with no soup run or day centre services for those over the age of 25, one hostel resident openly admitted:

I was a thief. I was pretty good at it I thought until I got caught, but, yeah, I mean I used to steal tins of soup and things like that. That was the only way I could survive.

(Hostel resident, male, 52 years)

Alternatively, when no such services are available, homeless people may simply go without food. For example, a 26 year old night shelter resident in the same town claimed that since trying to break away from his former lifestyle of theft, he often had to go hungry from the
time of vacating the shelter at 8:30am until it reopened at 9:30pm. The same situation is often true of housed people who beg as a result of a drug addiction, a situation explained in the following way by two Contact and Assessment Team outreach workers in another city:

Worker A: Most of those are people who are out on the street or people who are begging, and they do spend all their money on drugs, and that's why they're begging, in most cases, and…
Worker B: They don't even want food.
Worker A: …food is somewhere over there in their priorities. It's just not - they're not going to spend hard-begged money on food, simple as that, and then that's probably the only food that they get, really, from the soup runs and the night shelter.

While the Government might question the deservedness of such individuals for outdoor relief, and by extension the appropriateness of soup runs as a form of provision, it is clear that the termination of such services will not mean that these individuals will necessarily address their addictions. On the contrary, evidence suggests that they are more likely to go without food or steal - negative outcomes for both the individuals concerned and wider public.

*Dealing with difference and otherness: the simultaneity of inclusion and exclusion*

The second key feature of the soup run is the creation of an ephemeral environment which is on the one hand inclusive of difference but, on the other, is not entirely devoid of exclusionary practices. The expression of care in an altruistic, undemanding manner that is free from judgement is central to the work of soup runs. The core philosophy of many projects is reflected well by the following statement of the Leeds Simon Community (2001: 1):

It is often when people are living on the streets that they are in their most vulnerable and lowest states. Desperation and fear are exacerbated by exhaustion, cold, and anxiety, leaving a person with numb resignation and despair; preferring to stay on the street, knowing the score, than daring to hope or try for anything else. At this point, making the most immediate and concrete gesture of caring, without conditions, questions, or demands, is the soup runners' work. ... On the streets these people are feeling worthless, excluded, and abandoned, and it is on the streets that fundamental care work must continue to take place.
Accordingly, projects overseen by survey respondents were almost without exception governed by the aim of providing a service open to all, where for example 'all are welcome - no judgements made', and where 'hospitality is offered to anyone who wishes to avail of it (and who obviously has some kind of need or wouldn't turn up!) without prejudice'. Integral to such projects was a 'no questions asked' policy, described in the following way by a Salvation Army officer:

You see, [on the soup run] we don't ask any questions, we don't ask – like, if somebody came here [to the Salvation Army Corps] for a sleeping bag or for a food parcel, I start asking, 'What's your name, what's your National Insurance number, where do you live?' … but in the soup run you just ask no questions, we just give, and it's very different.

Such an approach contrasts significantly with the ethos of many day centres within which service users are encouraged to accept responsibility for their behaviour and/or move on a more independent (mainstream) lifestyle (Waters, 1992). Soup runs tend to be non-interventionist, accepting of difference, and aim to bestow upon individuals the dignity to just 'be' without demanding anything in return. Given such an ethos, soup runs might appear (on the surface at least) to be the most inclusive of all emergency services available to homeless people - and in many senses they are. They are after all open to anyone, do not require referrals from other agencies, do not question the 'deservedness' of those served and, most importantly, do not place conditions upon the receipt of their service. Yet, by being so open to difference, soup runs are, by default, also spaces of exclusion. For, by offering a service geared towards the needs of socially marginalised people, including those barred from other services, soup runs may be (and are) perceived as unsafe and intimidating spaces by some individuals. For example, one young homeless woman explained that she and her sister had been put off using emergency services, particularly soup runs and direct access night shelters, by other homeless people who recalled violent incidences in such environments:

We started chatting to some people and we were asking them about places to stay and stuff and they said that things has happened there… [but] if you don't look scared then nobody is going to hurt you or anything. But we were two girls and me and my sister got scared really easily so we didn't want to go.

(Hostel resident, female, 20 years)
Soup runs are also spaces of exclusion in other, more complex, ways. Although the conduct of soup run users is not dictated by the formalised rules and regulations characteristic of fixed spaces of care, soup runs are not entirely devoid of expectations regarding behaviour, and may thus be exclusive of those contravening such conventions. In indoor spaces of care, formal rules provide staff with official boundary markers between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviours, thus relieving them of the need to make a personal moral judgement on the actions of service users (and consequently risk being seen by those individuals to be judgmental). Thus while individual members of staff might interpret and implement rules in slightly different ways, the defining 'line' between what is and is not acceptable is at least relatively clearly defined - and is usually tangibly expressed in signs adorning the building interior. Furthermore, individuals exhibiting 'inappropriate' behaviour may be denied access by 'gatekeepers' in the reception area or, once inside, may be forcibly removed from the premises if behaving in ways that counter the ideals of the project (Waters, 1992). In contrast, the non-existence of such rules on soup runs means that the moral dilemma of determining what is and is not acceptable does (in theory) fall upon the shoulders of the volunteers on duty. To complicate matters further, if a volunteer does deem a service user's behaviour 'unacceptable', they are left with something of a quandary regarding how to respond because the service is offered in outdoor public space over which the service provider has no 'ownership' and which, importantly, is not defined by predetermined tangible boundaries. Thus while volunteers may refuse to serve someone (and thus act to some degree as agents of exclusion), it is not realistically possible to remove a person from the 'premises' without enlisting the assistance of other agents (such as the police). Consequently, when a service user behaves in a threatening manner it is more common for volunteers to withdraw their service altogether so that the safety of staff (and other service users) is maintained. Such strategies normally apply to the night of incident only, but may be more long-term. For example, the Derby soup run halted serving for one month in 1995 'as a warning' to service users because 'it had got more dangerous on the streets'. Similarly, safety concerns arising as the result of an 'act of violence' committed by someone using one of Brighton's soup runs
meant that the organisers abandoned the service entirely in 1989. It was reinstated two years later by a different group.

Given the lack of rules governing soup run spaces and the risk that the service may be terminated should the atmosphere become volatile, it is not uncommon for service users to take it upon themselves to 'police' the situation, restoring 'law and order' if and when they deem it necessary. What is particularly interesting here is the way service users appear to be less tolerant of 'deviant' behaviours than are the volunteer staff themselves. Such differences in tolerance are in many regards a manifestation of the traditional deserving/undeserving distinction referred to earlier, in that they were primarily founded upon assessments of service users' behaviour and (presumed) culpability (Rosenthal, 2000; Takahashi, 1996). That is, typically ascribing to the non-judgemental ethos described above, volunteers usually viewed soup run users as victims of an unjust society and therefore as having a valid claim on the sympathies and services offered. In this vein, one volunteer stated that:

It's so basic what we actually give them, that if they want to queue up or actually wait for us to give them basics, then they must be desperate … I tell you what, I wouldn't do it, I can assure you … Hanging around just to wait for a bit of soup and a few sandwiches. I wouldn't. You know, you've got to be quite desperate to actually do that.

(Soup run volunteer, male, 43 years)

Accordingly, volunteers appeared to be highly tolerant of difference and were undeterred by the 'unusual norms' spoken of by Parr (2000). Service users, on the other hand, tended to be less accepting of behaviours which they considered to transgress 'normal' conventions of etiquette. They did (as a rule) expect that everyone being served should abide by orthodox practices of queuing, being polite, and expressing gratitude to volunteers for the services received. Thus they were highly disapproving and unforgiving of those who failed to adhere to such conventions, most especially individuals who were rude to or threatened volunteer staff. For example, one soup run user argued that:

The night shelter, soup van, it's all the same. If the soup van turns up and has got no sandwiches they [the other service users] go on and on. At least they're getting a cup of
coffee and a fag, but that's not good enough … It pisses me off when I go there and hear people knocking them [the volunteers].

(Hostel resident, male, 38 years)

In this way, those who transgressed traditional conventions of etiquette were considered to be 'less deserving' of the resources and care on offer, as were those who were not 'genuinely homeless', that is, rough sleeping:

There are a few that go along just to save money and scrounge … They plead poverty and they basically scrounge. There are a few scroungers that don't need to be using it … It saves them money for their beer and everything … Although I'm going because I'm hungry I don't believe in going somewhere because I would be taking a meal from somebody else who might need it more … [For example], the first time I was in the night shelter I hadn't eaten a decent meal in six days, so I figured I was property qualified to go and have something to eat.

(Hostel resident, male, 39 years)

The men are selective and they have a word with you about the fact that that person's not actually homeless, and they'll say to you, 'Oh, he's not homeless, he shouldn't have any food'.

(Soup run co-ordinator, male, 40 years)

Such assertions are permeated by the question of 'legitimacy', much in the way witnessed amongst people who beg (Dean and Melrose, 1999; Fitzpatrick and Kennedy, 2001) and reflect the 'identity work' undertaken by marginalised people in an attempt to 'salvage the self' (Snow and Anderson, 1993; see also Wardhaugh, 1999). That is, by embracing the 'homeless' identity whilst distancing themselves pejoratively from the identity of other groups whom they consider to 'abuse' the service (by virtue of housing status and/or behaviour), homeless soup run users justify their greater deservedness of the services on offer.

Importantly, there is a distinct spatiality to the expression of this code of conduct governing soup run use which varies according to the location and method of serving. When service users have gathered at a regular site specifically for the purposes of receiving food, the rules of engagement are determined by mainstream social norms. When volunteers search for potential candidates - a person bedded down on a pavement for example - the code of conduct is different. In such instances, the homeless person concerned has translated a fundamental routine of daily life that is normally conducted in the private domain of the home (sleeping) to
the public space of the street (Wardhaugh, 2000). Thus, although still serving in a public area, volunteers are in effect entering the personal space of the individual being served - space often 'privatised' via the placement of personal effects such as bedding (Lofland, 1973) - and must thus do so on terms determined by that individual. In a similar way, when entering the 'turf' of street drinkers, volunteers must be sensitive to nuances of 'ownership', described by one soup run co-ordinator in the following way:

> We all felt so much more that we're - on their territory, and we're therefore, we've got to really play it by their rules, and it just didn't feel particularly brilliant being there … I don't know how to explain it really. Just like 'yeah, this is our space', and when you're in it you have to behave according to their rules, absolutely.

**Fragility and resilience of care: the ability to overcome resource shortages**

In offering services to individuals excluded from other services whilst at the same time attempting to create a space of resource and respite for all, soup run providers create spaces of care which are fragile. This fragility derives from both the characteristics of the people served and the fragmented monetary and resource bases of the service itself. Soup run users are not a homogenous 'community' and thus, as Waters (1992) notes of day centres, the service user group reflects the same diversity, pecking order, and prejudices inherent within wider society. Many service users share little other than the need to utilise the soup run, and attitudes toward one another are complicated by the deserving/undeserving distinctions referred to earlier. Furthermore, many of the people served have complex problems and needs (e.g. the combination of mental illness and substance dependencies) and can act in unpredictable ways. Thus soup run operation may on rare occasions be disrupted by verbal abuse or physical violence. The following incident, recalled by a soup run co-ordinator in Bristol, is a case in point:

> … one time … we just had a really, really drunk guy who - don't know who he was, don't know where he was from, haven't seen him since - but he did verbally lash out at us quite heavily, and that was not particularly nice, and he was actually hanging out with some guys by the fountains on the centre... and I got the feeling that they may have been dealers, and he was saying that he was from St Paul's and he operated St Paul's and he called the shots in St Paul's, and it was funny because initially he was really nice and fine, and then just flew off the handle because we were speaking to this [other] homeless guy, but then apologised and then flew off the handle again.
Soup runs are also fragile in terms of resourcing, continually facing challenges in generating the financial, material and labour resources needed to ensure their long-term sustainability. They are heavily reliant on unpredictable and often short-term sources of funding, monies typically being donated by churches and individuals within the local community. One quarter (25%) of the survey projects were funded entirely by their local church or parent organisation, the others typically having to pool small sums of capital from several different sources. Moreover, 38% of survey projects were reliant upon donations as gifts in kind for 100% of the food served and 66% of projects for all of the clothing provided. These material resources were typically provided by the soup run's own volunteers, local churches, members of the public, local shops, or schools. Importantly, donations from external organisations tended to be sporadic, coinciding with events such as Harvest Festival, meaning that while some projects encountered storage problems at specific times of the year, at others they faced serious shortfalls in provision. Furthermore, sustaining the support of volunteers has been another ongoing challenge for soup run organisers. The main soup run in Bristol for example had to stop serving on two nights of the week for a prolonged period in 2001 because two teams withdrew their services and the co-ordinator had difficulty finding replacements.

Yet, despite such forms of fragility, soup runs are remarkably resilient. Because they operate on a 'shoestring' - 39% of survey projects having an annual budget of less than £500 and 50% of projects less than £1,000 - financial shortfalls may be counteracted relatively easily. In this way, when finances are 'tight', co-ordinators and/or volunteers 'reach into their own pockets' and cover any deficit. Soup runs are therefore more economically resilient than fixed spaces of care, as they require less in the way of resources in order to keep operating on a day-to-day basis. The deployment of such survival tactics stands testament to the passion and commitment of the individuals involved in soup run provision, as well as members of the public supporting such projects, as described in a newsletter published by the Bradford Soup Run after the theft of its five-tonne container serving unit:
After the initial shock, the call to police (who asked us to check again in case we'd misplaced it!), and the interviews with the press, it slowly started to sink in. Not only did we have no base from which to work, we had no contents, too. In true soup run supporter tradition people rallied round. Some offered practical help; all offered good wishes and expressed horror at the news. And so the marathon began. We not only had to identify what was missing, we also had to source and then buy (or, in some cases persuade people to give us) what we needed. Six weeks later we had a replacement unit - bigger, and now better, than the original.

(Bradford Soup Run Supporters Newsletter, Christmas 2000: 1)

Bringing homelessness to the fore: the visibility of care

Another feature of the soup run distinguishing it from fixed spaces of provision is its greater visibility to the public. Operating outdoors in public space, soup runs bring homelessness and homeless people to the forefront of public attention. As do beggars, soup runs provide passers-by with an uncomfortable reminder of the disparities between rich and poor in what is supposedly a wealthy nation (Fitzpatrick and Kennedy, 2000). Their mere existence violates what Jordan (1999) describes as a 'negative right of citizenship', this being the expectation that payment of taxes buys citizens freedom from unsolicited reminders of the problems endured by others. As a consequence, soup runs are often subject to opposition from the public and bureaucracy whom attempt to obscure them from view. In Scarborough, for example, any endeavours to provide outdoor relief were hampered by pressure from the local authority, as noted by a day centre staff member:

We're a tourist town, it don't look good if people are queuing up at a soup caravan for a night, you know, when families have been to pictures or have been on sea front or what, and you get all these homeless people queuing up at a Sally Army van. It don't look good does it, as far as the council are concerned.

Similarly, one of the soup runs operating in Brighton was forced to move its serving site from a residential square to the seafront 'where there were no residents to object' following the lobbying of councillors and police by local residents. Thus, the response strategies employed by soup run providers strongly parallel those of rough sleepers, in that they attempt to reduce their visibility by confining themselves to ever more marginal spaces so as to minimise the
potential for offending the sensitivities of mainstream society (Cloke et al., 2002; Duncan, 1983; Knowles, 2000a, 2000b).

For soup run users, the process of entering public space and becoming visible to people passing by involves an assessment of risk to personal safety and self-identity (Duncan, 1983; Wardhaugh, 2000). By utilising soup runs individuals do in effect reconfirm their social marginality and, by extension, run the risk of being associated with deviant groups and activities. Indeed, the mere occupation of such spaces provides the potential for significant assaults on self-identity (Goffman, 1959), targeted at individuals and groups because of what they are (assumed to be) rather than who they are (Lawrence, 1995). For, as Duncan (1983: 96) notes, there is a belief prevalent in Western society that the social value of an individual is approximately commensurate with the social value of the place he or she frequents, such that "if one shares a setting with another then, to a degree, he (sic) shares his identity thus allowing stigma to spread by spatial association". Given such a spatial association, individuals using soup runs are swift to engage in the identity work mentioned earlier, in an attempt to disassociate themselves from other service users whom they consider more deviant than themselves. For example, when discussing fellow rough sleepers, one soup run user explained that:

…you do have different types of homeless people as well. You've got the really scuzzy dirty ones that don't give a shit and you've got the other ones... Like me myself, I'll find somewhere like that and I'll keep it clean and respectful, because if you don't it fucks it up for everybody else, you see?

(Rough sleeper, female, 24 years)

Given the potential for such spatial associations and conflict with the authorities, there are valid reasons for both the providers and users of soup runs to want to minimise the service's visibility to the public. Yet, this is coupled with a need for soup runs to remain visible enough that they may be found easily by service users and, importantly, to ensure the safety of volunteers and those being served. As one soup run co-ordinator pointed out:
[We serve in] the college car park, partly because that is near the … day centre and a lot of them [the service users] know that. We used to go down by outside [the day centre] but it's a bit off the beaten track, and security for us apart from anything else… You couldn't be seen – if anything happened down there you couldn't be seen, so we have okayed it with the college who are only next door to [the day centre], but we use their car park, which is more visual to be seen and is far more convenient all round.

Thus, like homeless people themselves, soup runs traverse the 'path of least resistance' (Cooper, 2001), negotiating what Sibley (1995) refers to as varying 'contours of tolerance' throughout the city. They must operate in spaces that are marginal enough to minimise the potential for conflict with agents of opposition, but not so marginal as to invoke intolerable levels of fear amongst those involved, exacerbate assaults on self-identity, or compromise the safety of volunteers and service users.

**A marginalised form of care: peripheral position in service networks**

Soup runs do not only frequent marginal sites in a spatial sense, but also occupy marginal positions within local service networks. Providers of outdoor relief have, as noted earlier, been subject to opposition from the State for several centuries. They have however been increasingly marginalised by mainstream service providers in recent years, in lieu of the Central Government's endeavours to exert greater control over services available to homeless people. Under the RSI and HAP, service providers' receipt of funding was contingent upon their agreement to abide by Government directives regarding how services would be delivered which, given the Government's ambitious goal of reducing dramatically the number of rough sleepers, were highly interventionist in nature - focusing in particular on proactive outreach and resettlement schemes (ODPM, 1999). Given the considerable dissonance between the Government's stance and the non-interventionist and accepting ethos typical of soup runs, many soup run providers have actively resisted attempts made by their local authority to bring them into line with Central Government directives. Such resistance represents a firm belief in the value of outdoor relief and an ardent desire on the part of providers to maintain autonomy regarding what they offer and the nature of service delivery.
For example, one soup run co-ordinator spoke of a wish to maintain her project's freedom to 'meet people where they are at', explaining that:

… we do do our own thing, and that's not because we want to be elitist in any way, it's just… Our real thing is that we want relationships with the people that we meet on the streets, and we want to be able to maintain those relationships, so that's why we very much do our own thing.

Given the desire for such autonomy, soup runs are frequently subject to criticism from representatives of local government and other agencies actively involved in local homelessness consortia. In this regard, a representative of a street outreach team in one city castigated local soup run providers on the basis of the argument that:

I think the biggest problem comes with what I call 'ad-hoc' agencies, not in receipt of funding, for example the … soup run who are sort of out of the loop… I've tried to give those organisations an opportunity to feed into the … consortium through a practitioners' forum, which meets just before each consortium to look at issues, share best practice, etcetera etcetera … But it's a hard slog sometimes, because I think people choose not to accept funding for a variety of reasons, and it can be quite difficult getting these agencies, these organisations, on board in terms of ensuring a professional approach to the work that they're doing. Not just in health and safety and training issues, but more particularly, helping clients move away from a life on the streets - giving people opportunities to move forward in their lives, and I think very often that is missing in some of those voluntary organisations … Personally, I feel that it's quite irresponsible not to be in a position to offer people opportunities to change.

Hence, despite Central Government pushes toward 'joint working' amongst all (statutory and non-statutory) agencies with a stake in service provision for homeless people (Pannell and Parry, 1999), conflicts of ethos between soup run providers and other agencies do, and are likely to continue to, ensure that soup runs remain on the margins of established service networks.

CONCLUSIONS

As a form of outdoor relief, soup runs have a history spanning several centuries - a history fraught by conflicting arguments regarding the deservedness of those being served and, thus, the appropriateness of outdoor relief as a means of addressing homelessness and poverty. These arguments have recently been reinstated on the political agenda with the
implementation of the RSI and HAP in the 1990s. Yet, despite their increasing presence within government discourse, soup runs remain neglected from academic research. This paper thus represents the first comprehensive examination of the characteristics and dynamics of soup runs in Britain. It has revealed that they offer an important service that provides life-sustaining resources for homeless people and members of the housed public. They reduce the need for disenfranchised people to commit survivalist crimes and act as an important safety net for individuals who have been excluded from other services or have in some way been 'failed' by existing state welfare arrangements. Yet, soup runs continue to occupy marginal positions within service networks because of the incongruity of their non-interventionist ethos and the Central Government's stance regarding the culpability and deservedness of service users. Soup runs are in fact underpinned by a slightly different ethical prompting to charity than are most (fixed) spaces of care catering for homeless people. Coles (1997) is critical of the ethical promptings behind most spaces of care on the grounds that they fail to appreciate adequately the need for a receptiveness to the alterity of service users and thus risk imposing their views and forms of social control upon the people they seek to serve. Coles (1997) thus advocates a 'post-secular' ethical prompting to charity which holds no expectation for reciprocity, such that service providers have a sense for the 'other' regardless of whether or not the 'other' is for them. Of all spaces of care available to homeless people, soup runs are most closely aligned with Coles' (1997) notion of post-secular ethos. For, the soup run involves momentary encounters between volunteers and service users that, of all service-related encounters, are the least likely to involve the intentional (re)construction of the 'other'. That is, volunteers give freely in and of the moment without the expectation that service users should respond in specific ways.

Spatially, the soup run consists of a series of complex transitory spaces of care. It temporarily converts seemingly insignificant outdoor public spaces (such as car parks or sections of pavement outside automatic teller machines) into spaces of compassion which, whilst providing room for the expression and receipt of care, may also be perceived as spaces of
danger. Hence, like fixed sites of service provision, soup run spaces are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. They are accepting of difference, but often (inadvertently) exclude those who are fearful of either physical attack or assault on self-identity. Furthermore, the service may be withdrawn if the behaviour of those being served transgresses the 'unusual norms' spoken of by Parr (2000). These spaces of inclusion/exclusion are however more complex than those characteristic of fixed spaces of care, because of soup runs' transitory nature, lack of rules, freedom from physical boundaries, and visibility to the public. Soup runs engage directly with (and must adapt to) spatial variations in turf ownership and associated behavioural codes, may necessitate the reconstruction of service users' identities, and often have to negotiate conflict with neighbouring retailers, residents and authorities.

Soup runs might thus be thought of as a marginalised service comprising complex ephemeral micro-geographies of care. Whilst being politically, economically, and socially fragile, they have proven themselves to be remarkably resilient. Their long-standing presence in the (marginal spaces of) the British urban landscape is thus likely to remain, as they continue providing basic sustenance for homeless and other socially marginalised people.
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NOTES

1 The soup run survey and interviews comprised part of a much broader project exploring the provision of emergency services for single homeless people (including direct access hostels and night shelters, day centres, soup kitchens and soup runs). In total, the project involved three national surveys (responded to by over 400 projects) (Johnsen et al., 2002a, b and c), together with interviews with over 200 project managers, staff, volunteers, service users, and representatives of local government and homelessness support agencies in seven different case study areas: Bristol, Doncaster, Banbury, Scarborough, Worcester, Bodmin and Dorchester.