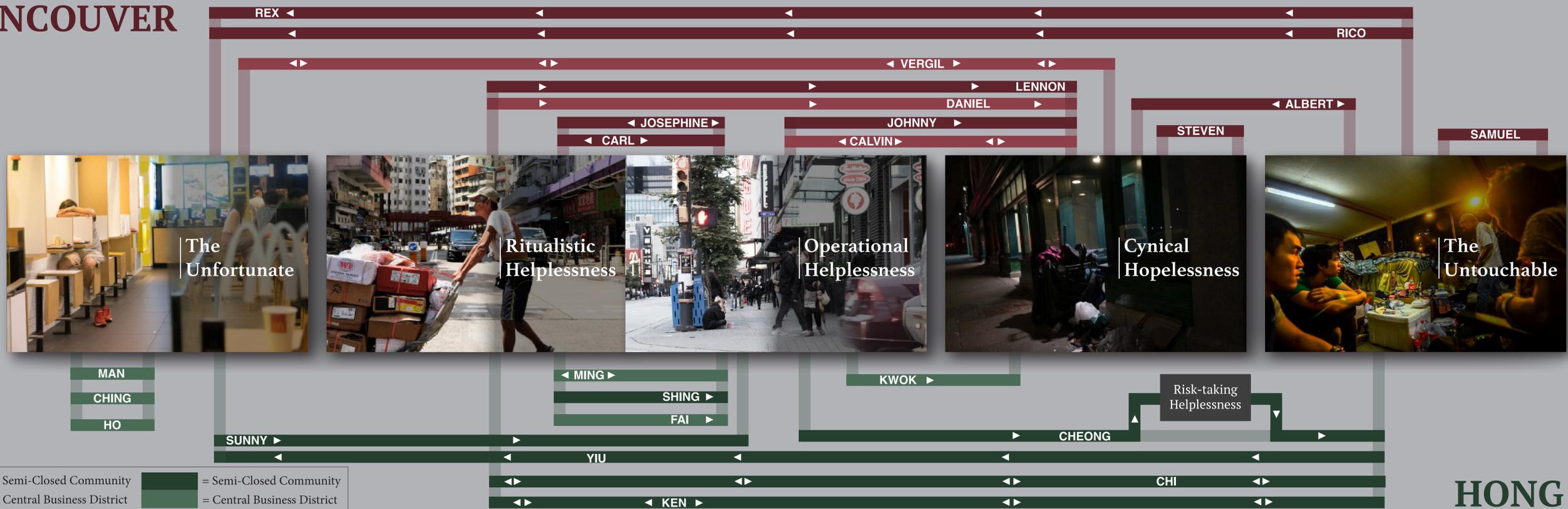


Beyond the Margins: A Typology of Homelessness & Strategies for Managing Stigma

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INTRODUCTION

People experiencing homelessness have encountered a series of life events that trigger them to fall into a deprived roofless situation. Public discussion focuses on how to increase housing supply to reduce homelessness efficiently but ignores the homeless person's perspective and the linkages between social stigma and identity. This research examines the different types of experiences and understandings of homelessness and helps account for why some people are less motivated to be re-housed. This study relies on narratives collected from people who are experiencing homelessness (or who have recently been housed) in Hong Kong and Vancouver to examine how people understand their experiences and the transition to being homeless, how they manage the externally imposed social stigmatism of being categorized as "homeless" and how they internally reconcile this identity with their own self-conception.

METHODOLOGY

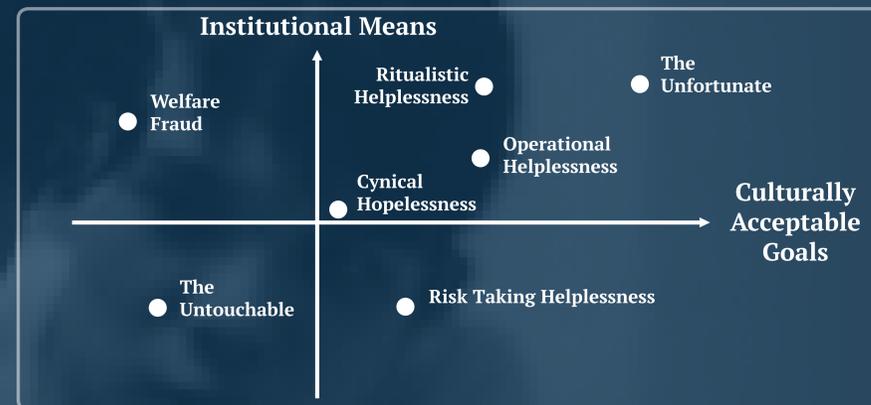
Ethnographic Field Work

Over the course of three years I worked with and immersed myself in homeless communities in two urban areas with exceptionally high rents and a growing homeless population. Metro Vancouver, Canada, a metropolitan area of 2.4 million, has a modest social democratic government that relies on a mix of private philanthropy and public support to address homelessness. And Hong Kong, a city of 7.34 million, which has fewer public programs providing support and a less developed charity system. In each city I conducted in-depth interviews and informal interviews with people experiencing homelessness or with people who had recently been rehoused.

Research Method	with...	Quantity (Vancouver)	Quantity (Hong Kong)
In-depth Interviews	Street Sleepers, sheltered homeless people, McRefugee (Hong Kong), and Housed ex-homeless people	12	12
Informal interviews	Homeless people and Community workers	60	65
Participant observation	Volunteer work at "Equal sharing Action" (Hong Kong) and "UBC Food Initiative" (Vancouver)	Approx. 242 hours	Approx. 416 hours

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building on Merton's theory of anomie, I identified **institutional means** that people in each community had at their disposal to "exit" homelessness. I also identified **culturally acceptable goals** – both communities have traditional ideas of home as a place where one lives, prepares food, and can have privacy. I used this framework as the basis for creating a typology of ways people experience and understand their homelessness.



FINDINGS



DISCUSSION

Analyzing the fieldnotes and narratives of 24 people experiencing homelessness in two cities, I identified five different "types" that reflect the distance between alignment with culturally acceptable goals and institutional means. Importantly I found that people transition between types as they employ various strategies that help them cope with the external and internal challenges of managing the stigma of being homeless. As an example, three groups, the Unfortunates, Cynical Hopelessness and the Untouchable differ in their response to the label of "Homeless":

	Active Strategies	Passive Strategies
The Unfortunate	- Covering (Goffman, 1963; Snow & Anderson, 1993) / - Non homeless homeless (Perry, 2013) Reject stigmas by self-portraying as an exceptional case, and distant himself or herself from other homeless people to declare his or her worthiness of taking welfare.	- Passing (Goffman 1963) / - Fictive Storytelling (Snow & Anderson, 1993) Hide his or her homeless identity in front of some non-homeless people, especially employers or colleagues, and sometimes use fictive stories to manage the impression so as to avoid discrimination.
Cynical Hopelessness	- Meaningful Nonadherence (Goffman, 1971; Snow & Anderson, 2001) - Interactional Vandalism (Duneier and Molotch, 1999) Intentionally performing deviant behavior to demean the definition of self, and to reject interactions with other people.	Passive Meek Homeless Person (Parsell, 2011): Avoid getting into situations (example: find a job) that he or she might have to disclose his or her identity and lifestyle (example: telling employer that he has to rush to the shelter after work, and unable to work overtime).
The Untouchable	- Passing (Goffman, 1963; Snow & Anderson, 2001) - Dealienation (Foss and Larkin, 1986) - Assertive Empowered Customer (Parsell, 2011): Self-identify as "homeless", claiming that he or she has already adapted to a certain lifestyle, and legitimize some behaviours that are highly stigmatized and culturally unacceptable. (example: substance abuse)	Reject invitations to participate in social programs that might require a longer term involvement or commitment. (Recovery program, long-term shelter or modular housing projects)

Using Merton's Anomie Theory to develop a contextual typology of homelessness provides a social distance scale differentiate people living beyond the margin. Moreover, it provides a meaningful scale to reflect the linkage between their level of conformity to social norms and the different strategies of managing stigma.