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## **A Bergsonian analysis of time in qualitative research: Understanding lived experiences of street homeless people in Moscow**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding of how time is experienced is essential when conducting qualitative research. This article explores how time seemingly stands still, speeds up, slows down, rewinds and fast-forwards for the participants in our qualitative investigations. Drawing upon interview data with street homeless people in Moscow, Russia, this article examines the ways in which time is contextualized and used by research participants to make sense of their everyday experiences and important events in their lives. There is a tendency to understand time by measuring it, rather than seeing it as something within which lived experience happens and qualitative research is carried out. Drawing on Bergson's conception of time as duration, this article examines the ways in which time can be distinctively used and understood within qualitative research.

### **Keywords:**

duration, tempo, extent, elasticities, Bergson, homelessness, time

### **Introduction: Time, homelessness and qualitative research**

Time pervades everything we do, including our practice as qualitative researchers. Clift et al. (2021: 3) point out that 'time is linked to a host of decisions that researchers make before, during, and after collecting data'. Sheridan et al. (2011:554) say that time and narrative are 'inextricably woven together in that narrative almost always involves time and requires a temporal component to be meaningful'. Understanding how people move through time, make use of time, or relate to time helps to see how they make sense of their past and navigate their future. This requires us, as qualitative researchers, to explore time in order to understand 'the interplay of the temporal and cultural dimensions of social life' (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003: 189), making sense of the 'ebbs and flows' of lived experience (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Drawing on a case-study of people experiencing street homelessness carried out in Moscow, Russia, this article examines the importance of time in qualitative research and how time is experienced by homeless men and women. Using Bergson's (2007: 18)<sup>1</sup> concept of *durée réelle*, (translated as 'real' or 'true duration' in English), and developing three related attributes of duration, namely, 'tempo', 'extent' and 'elasticity', this article shows how the traditional concepts of time (empiricist notions of time measured and enumerated, like clock-time, or time as linear) are insufficient to capture the complex lived experiences of research participants. Bergson's notion of *durée réelle* allows us to explore how time can seemingly stand still, slow down, speed up, rewind and fast-forward, and expand and contract. Unlike clock-time, which provides a rational and measured consistency across the lives of different people, duration (we could call

this 'real time') is bound up with practices, events, experiences and relations of particular individuals. Long periods in which 'little happens' are interspersed with periods where a great deal can happen over a 'short space of time'. Bergson's notion of duration makes it possible to understand the different aspects of 'time' when conducting qualitative research. Researching respondents at different stages of their life, or before and after significant events, requires us to stick with 'the flow of experience' as it happens for them.

By drawing upon the stories told by people, experiencing street homelessness in Moscow, this article aims to illuminate how the study of time can be addressed using a framework developed from Bergson's ideas. We argue that this framework can help qualitative researchers to understand the social reality 'from within', as experienced by the research participants, as they re-live, in their narratives, the fateful, life-changing events and recount and reflect on their routine and everyday experiences.

We organize this article as follows. We first present the literature and methodology for this article and then develop three sections, dedicated to the three attributes developed from Bergson's notion of 'real duration': tempo, extent and elasticity. We argue that these attributes can help to understand homeless people's experiences of time, as well as their perceptions of the key critical events in their biographies.

### **Exploring time in qualitative research**

The study of time as it is experienced by individuals and societies throughout human history has had a long and venerable tradition. Among many texts, Adam's (1990) *Time and Social Theory* provides essential reading for understanding the importance of time in human experience. It shows the multiplicities and multidimensions of the flows of time embedded in our daily lives (see Adam, 1990, and also Adam, 1995, 1998, 2006). Adam's work summarized and developed the socio-historical and philosophical approaches to time at the theoretical level. In recent years there has also been a resurgence of practical interest in time in qualitative research (see Facer et al., 2021; McLeod, 2017; Sanchez-Mira and Bernardi, 2021; Neale, 2021). For example, Clift et al.'s (2021) *Temporality in Qualitative Inquiry: Theories, Methods and Practices* explores the relationship between time and qualitative research, examining aspects such as the passages of time for research participants, their timelines and transitions, as well as the temporality, rhythms and pace of research practice itself.

Presenting methodological reflections and several key case studies, Facer et al. (2021) explore 'time as method' in their text *Working with Time in Qualitative Research: Case Studies, Theory and Practice*. The authors appeal for 'more careful attention to the way that our research practices are shaped by how we work in and with time and how they are shaped by (often unexamined) culturally and socially specific ideas of time and temporality' (p.2). Several other studies have explored how time can be used to analyse the research participants' life courses, relationships and identities. For example, the ESRC Changing Lives and Times Initiative (Timescapes, 2007–12) addressed the intersection of biographical, generational and historical time, and also the 'micro, meso and macro dimensions' of time (Neale et al., 2012: 5). The project accumulated and tracked the events and turning points in peoples' lives 'serendipitously' by 'focussing on particular themes and moments that became important, repeatedly asking about past memories through the perspective of a shifting present, exploring expectations and anticipated futures and how they play out over time' (Neale et al., 2012: 8). The Timescapes approach provided a way to investigate the different durations in which participants experience life events, and everyday existence, almost as it is happening or becoming.

Neale's (2021) more recent work elaborates on the Timescapes initiative, examining the tempo and pace of time in qualitative research.

A number of studies in qualitative research have explored the influence of life-changing events and transforming identities on perceptions of time among specific social groups. Coltart and Henwood (Coltart and Henwood, 2012) used qualitative longitudinal research on 'paternal subjectivity' to explore men's classed positions and transitions to first-time fatherhood (2012: 48). They were able to illuminate the 'energized flows' involved in men's subjective experiences of continuity and change in a process of a major life transition through the lens of time. Another notable study of time that documents the experiences of individuals undergoing traumatic events, was conducted by Sparkes and Smith (2003), who explored the life stories of a small group of men who had experienced spinal cord injury through playing rugby. The study found that the men experienced time differently before their illness than in its aftermath. Prior to their accidents, and becoming disabled, some of their respondents understood time in relation to sporting seasons, the calendar, match days, training times and 'the use of clock-time in the performance of biographically related tasks' (Sparkes and Smith, 2003 : 304). But after the accidents, 'time came to assume a dictatorial role' in the lives of their respondents, such as waiting for rehabilitation (Sparkes and Smith, 2003: 307).

People experiencing street homelessness can be seen as another social group whose life courses and identities are intricately bound up with temporal experiences, and in what follows, we address the key approaches to the study of time in social research generally and in homelessness research in particular.

### **Time and homelessness**

The length of time spent on the streets is often seen as profoundly influencing the adaptive patterns and orientations of homeless people (Snow and Anderson, 1993:43; Damon, 2002:149–50; Fitzpatrick et al., 2009: 10; Mayock and Corr, 2013). As Chamberlain and Johnson (2018) have pointed out, homelessness leads to material, relational and psychological liminality. As time seemingly 'goes on', homeless people increasingly move to become outsiders (Moran and Atherton, 2020). They gradually tend to lose hope that their situation will change and become stuck in the perpetual present, lacking a sense of future because it becomes 'blurred with the past and present', with shrinking time horizons (Seal, 2007: 3; see also Daly, 1996). Authors studying homelessness have showed that time can become 'marginal' to homeless people's lives, no longer punctuated by regular sequences of events ( Lovell, 1992) or perceived as 'empty' (see also Butchinsky, 2007: 15–17). In his anthropological study of homeless people living in a shelter, Robert Desjarlais (1997) discussed two different types of narratives about time. There were the periods where the residents had what could be described as unfolding 'experiences' that developed through a sequence of past, present and future, and periods which some characterized as 'struggling along' (Desjarlais, 1997: 19). The latter could be described as 'the pursuit of timelessness.... many residents tended to work toward points of equilibrium, which often came down to a sense of stasis... [becoming] worse the longer a person stayed in the shelter' ( Desjarlais, 1997: 19).

According to Van Doorn (2010), perceptions of time among homeless people change from linear time (or clock-time) to cyclic time, something that characterized time in pre-modern societies. Cyclic time is experienced as a flow without much demarcation, defined by the rhythms of nature or social ritual. People who have been homeless for substantial amounts of time experience shrinking time horizons and focus on short-term goals; they lose many of the possibilities of structuring their time and opt for

immediate rather than delayed gratification. They also gradually lose sight of the order in which events take place, and time for them either 'stands still', or moves at a very slow pace. Even significant events become part of the same routine, of the perpetual now. As O'Neill argues, as the whole world speeds up under the winds of capitalist globalization, the discards from the global economic order are left with 'a gnawing sense of the world slowing down' (O'Neill, 2017:182) and associated deep boredom. People experience a lack of connection to their present or future, and both 'temporal rhythms and spatial practices are lacking in meaning and significance' (p. 17).

Homelessness is a profound social problem that encompasses many types of circumstance in which one has no fixed abode (ranging from 'sofa surfers' to those living on the street). In this article we deal with street homelessness which, although the least common form of homelessness (Isaacs et al., 2015), is generally regarded as the most severe (if assessing it in terms of employment prospects, health and life expectancy). Generally, street homelessness tends to be characterized as a conflation of immanent states – stigmatization, exclusion, displacement, boredom and cyclic time. Similarly, and related to this, the identities of street homeless people tend to be seen as rooted in their exclusion from society, without any resources to construct a positive sense of self (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Osborne, 2002). More recently, however, several authors questioned such monolithic interpretations of street homeless people's identities, arguing that individuals may negotiate and perform different identities depending on events, relationships and settings (Pascale, 2005; Seal, 2007; Parsell, 2011; McCarthy, 2013). Homeless experiences emerge as complex and dynamic, and in what follows we show how Bergson's conception of time as duration can help us understand the changeable nature of time and contingent nature of identity in street homelessness.

### **Bergson and *durée* of homelessness**

Bergson's (2007) philosophical understanding of time as duration provides qualitative researchers with a conceptual framework that helps to understand the experiences of time in a more nuanced way than the conventional accounts of 'linear' time. Although it is less common to draw directly on Bergsonian philosophy in empirical social research, Bergson's ideas of fluid time have been influencing authors writing about qualitative research methodology and processual social enquiry for some time (Glick et al., 1995; Neale and Flowerdew 2003; Abbott 2001, 2016). Koro-Ljungberg and Hendricks (2018) examine how qualitative researchers are able to 'play with time and narrative' when constructing stories from the field. Also drawing on Bergson's notion of duration, they argue for an understanding of 'nested-time', challenging the vision of time as nearly always linear and organized into a simple series of events. A recent text by Neale (2021:35) entitled *The Craft of Qualitative Longitudinal Research*, shows the importance of Bergson's philosophy for capturing 'fluid time' and the 'continuous process of becoming' in the pursuit of qualitative enquiry, particularly for longitudinal studies.

Bergson differentiated between the common-sense understandings of time, such as clock-time, with '*durée réelle*' ('real duration'). The Bergsonian *durée* refers to lived experience: human existence 'happens' in *durée*. By using the term 'real duration' to understand human existence, Bergson is avoiding the sort of time he says the intellect creates and uses to 'know' the world, one that is a 'mathematical abstraction that lacks the inner consciousness and experience of lived time' (Neale, 2021: 42). For Bergson, the intellect is important for knowing, but it's not the same kind of knowing that we intuitively grasp from lived experience (*durée*).

In our study of street homelessness in Moscow, some of the research participants, suffering from the adverse effects of homelessness, found that 'life has slowed down since living on the streets'. For other research participants, time seemingly speeded up and fast-forwarded. For some, special moments became 'frozen in time', locked in the memory and then recounted in minute detail during the interviews. How do we come to understand these experiences of time, as 'slowed down', 'fast-forwarded' or 'frozen'? We suggest that Bergson's account of real time, of 'durée' or duration, can help us to understand the ways in which people may experience changes in their sense of time. Because of the fluidity of the social world, we thus 'need fluid modes of enquiry to investigate and understand it' (Neale, 2021: 35). Bergson offers us this approach.

Bergson's intuition involves going back to internal duration; it grasps a succession which is not juxtaposition, a growth from within. It is 'the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future', 'the indivisible and therefore substantial continuity of the flow of inner life' (Bergson, 2007: 20). In qualitative research, instead of taking an intellectualized approach to time, we suggest engaging with time as experienced by participants themselves, going back to internal duration. As Bergson suggested, instead of separating intellectually one element of existence from the next, 'One must get back into duration and recapture reality in the very mobility which is its essence' (p. 19).

Coming back to our case-study of homelessness in Moscow, measuring social life in weeks, months or years does little to enhance our understanding of homeless people living on the streets. A young female sex worker, who is addicted to alcohol, talks of how 'she has aged' since becoming homeless in Moscow. For her, six months on the street has 'felt like several years', because 'so much' had happened to her. Others cannot remember or even articulate lengths of time they have spent homeless or begging at the local market. Some of the vague recollections are attributed to their experiences of real time as they live through it. When they try hard, some of their experiences are expressible in static terms. But in most examples, it is difficult to express or articulate, in language at least, the 'pure change' that they experience (Bergson, 2007: 21). Engaging with the participants' intuitive sense of the role of time in their lives provides a way to understand their experiences which is 'truer' to their reality than through intellectualized perception. The intellect 'cuts out chosen elements precisely in such a way that they can be treated as invariable' (Bergson, 2007: 58), but this takes us away from the true experiences of homelessness (in 'flow').

To give a further example of how the intuitive understanding of time can be applied to our data, when a research participant talks about 'becoming irredeemably homeless' [zabomzhevatsia], intellectually we may conclude that there are a number of steps that result in an eventual profound change of one's social condition from being housed to becoming street homeless. These steps may be a loss of housing, a loss of social connections, a loss of 'presentable' appearance, a loss of self-esteem, etc. In real durée, however, there is a blending of all these factors which only our intuition may grasp. 'My life spiralled out of control' said one homeless person, 'my life was over in a flash'.

In this article, we use the case-study of street homelessness in Moscow, insofar as it demonstrates how a Bergsonian understanding of time can be fruitfully used in qualitative research. We show that research participants who were homeless experienced different forms of durée as different flows of lived experience. We argue that these different temporal states, or modes of time, offer us insight into the ways in which experiences are contextualized and understood. We developed the following 'model' to make sense of 'types' of time experienced by street homeless people:

Dimensions of durée réelle	Experienced as	Definitions
1. Elasticities	Shortening and expanding	Elasticity: Ability to be stretched or compressed
2. Tempo	Abundance and being out of time	Tempo: The rate or speed of motion or activity; the pace
3. Extent	The short and long	Extent: The degree, scale or magnitude. May also include range and thoroughness

We develop these three aspects of time experienced by street homeless people later in this article. In the following section we present the methodology of the study.

### The study

This article draws upon a Moscow-centred study of homelessness in Russia (Stephenson, 2016). The study involved life history interviews with 113 homeless people. Locating street homeless people and gaining access can be difficult and 'labour intensive' for the researchers (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). To overcome these issues, research data was gathered from a number of places, including the local police detention centre (where homeless people without documents were brought), in several NGOs and shelters, and also on the streets (Stephenson, 2016). The interviewees were largely street homeless people (in Russian signified by the derogatory word *bomzh*, an abbreviation for *bez opredelennogo mesta zhitel'stva*, 'without a fixed abode'). The circumstances that brought these people onto the streets were varied. Some lost housing because of a family crisis (such as divorce, separation or domestic violence). Some were ex-prisoners or care leavers. A significant minority were migrants from other areas of Russia or other former Soviet states. There were also people who had lost their housing to fraudsters or sold it to feed their drink habit. In the study, interview methods were chosen because they made it possible to obtain biographical information and to get people's own perspectives on their lives. The life history interviews (with a typical length of 2 hours) were conducted in Russian and translated into English. This method normally assumes that the drama of life is presented and interpreted in the form of a free monologue by the actor, with very little prompting from the interviewer.

In many cases, the methodology that was employed did not work well. In Stephenson's (2016) study, some homeless people, particularly those who had served a long time in prison, were clearly alienated from the researchers from the start and refused to present any substantial narrative. Others had a prepared short narrative or 'official story' (Roer Strier and Sands, 2015: 251), which they were used to reciting in their communication with police, charity personnel and even other homeless people, and were reluctant to depart from this script and engage in an in-depth interview. Still others presented stories which had many contradictions and contained apparent evasions and deceit, either through lack of trust or because of the specific 'moral repertoire' that they were used to adopting.

One way of engaging research participants was the method of incomplete sentences – enabling researchers to tap the opinions, attitudes, perceived problems and strategies of interviewees. The sentences used in the project were employed to investigate the aspirations of the interviewees and the traumatising zones ('The main problem of my life is...' and 'My mood gets ruined every time when...'). Questions were also designed to tap their strategies for interpersonal communication ('To be liked by others it is necessary to...'; 'People are kind to me as long as ...') and perceptions of the sources of social support ('If I get in trouble, I can rely on...'). This technique proved to be quite successful even in the case of the most reserved and alienated interviewees. Another method was to ask the interviewees to respond to the question 'Who am I'? They were asked to give as many definitions of 'Who am I?' as they could. The answers gave us an insight into their world and made clearer the reasons why it was so difficult for the homeless people to attempt to change their situation.

Perceptions of time figured prominently in the answers to 'Who am I?'. One interviewee, Nikolai, expressed very clearly the feeling of living outside of time found in many interviews. Nikolai had been in prison several times. His mother died when he was last in prison. On his last return he could not get back his residence permit in Moscow without her application, and was now living in a cellar, having abandoned all hope of ever getting access to his own housing. Answering the question, 'Who am I?' he said

I am unstable, nervous, unreliable. I can let people down. It is impossible to rely on such a person. Briefly, I am finished! I see no prospects. I do not know what is ahead of me.

Within the original study and subsequent publication (Stephenson, 2016), the length of time spent on the streets was revealed as a key factor in the changes in the homeless people's identities and their progressive disassociation from the mainstream society. In this article we present a new analysis of the interview data relating to the temporal aspects of homeless experience, conducted using a conceptual framework based on Bergson's conception of *durée réelle*. Rather than focusing on time as an 'objective' determinant in what can be described as street homeless 'careers' (Snow and Andersen, 1993; Hutson and Liddiard, 1994), we stick with time (duration) as it is experienced by those homeless individuals themselves. Instead of seeing time as an outside force that pushes homeless people relentlessly towards social and personal ruin (whilst they stay on the streets), we address the experiential temporality that the interviewees convey (e.g. street life 'dragging on' or 'time lapsing' after drug consumption). The data collected in the original study lends itself well to such analysis, as the multiple methods that were used opened up different, both diachronic (moving) and synchronic (staying in the moment), accounts of time (Sandelowski, 1999; Neale, 2021: 322). While biographical accounts showed how the interviewees 'zoomed in and out' of particular experiences, recounting their past as a flow of events, having different durations, the incomplete sentences method allowed to disrupt the logic of retrospection inherent in interviews and present the research participants with a chance to reflect on their lives here and now. The answers to 'Who am I?' question also gave valuable insights into the homeless people's sense of themselves at a moment in time.

In the following three sections, we lay out three dimensions of time which help to make sense of street homeless life in Moscow: elasticities, tempo and extent.

### **1. Elasticities of *durée réelle*: Expanding time and shortening time**

The concept of elasticities of real durations allows us to capture the ways in which lived experience is seemingly expanded or shortened for some homeless people. Here, time is not merely linear or chronological but, as Sanchez-Mira and Bernardi (2021: 19) argue, is 'multidirectional, elastic and

telescopic' (i.e. one moment in time slides into another, rather than coming after another). Using the metaphoric image of an elastic band, we argue that time can stretch out and be long-lasting, as well as shrinking or shortening in span.

One aspect of this elasticity is 'expanding time'. Time expanded and contracted depending upon the nature of the events experienced by homeless people. Recounting their biographical narratives, homeless people would 'zoom in' on some specific life-changing events. Often, the past tense of the narrative would get interrupted by the present tense, indicating that the experience was ongoing for the person, as if they were still inside it. Vivid memories of events that brought positive changes to people's lives were recounted in fine detail. The change of pace in the narrative showed the researcher that something important was being recounted, an experience that had had a profound impact on a person's life, something he or she was still living with.

One of the interviewees, Revaz, an ethnic Georgian, had lived through a long period of street homelessness when he was scavenging around Moscow, begging or doing odd jobs at the market. He did not recount any specific events from that period. But his life changed when he met compatriots from Georgia in a street market in Moscow. These people, learning that he was also a Georgian, began to help him, giving him food, clothes and money, and eventually offering him a job in the market which they owned. This fateful event is recounted in detail. In Revaz's account, time slowed down, with the past and present tense being used side by side:

How did I get this job? I met these people. People are standing at the tables, eating. This guy didn't like something he ate. He threw it on the ground. Here is a bomzh getting it. This is me. I am grabbing a piece of ham. And he tells me, this Georgian: 'Hey you! Get out of here.' I was dirty, badly dressed then. And he started swearing at me in Georgian. And I answered him in Georgian. He was so stunned: 'So you are from Georgia?' I say: 'Yes.' 'Who are you?' I say: 'Don't you see? I am a bomzh.' 'What has happened to you?' I tell him. He says: 'Come here tomorrow. I'll get you a change of clothes.' So he brought me the clothes. Another man came to meet me. They gave me food and money to buy drink. And in two or three days he says: 'One of the guys who works for me is leaving soon. Come to me. I will give you a job.' And so they started to support me.'

Positive accounts like this, where a life-changing moment occurred, are frequently 'zoomed in' on; the optimism, joy and hope stretched out this moment in Revaz's life. The exchange where the 'devalued self' of a homeless person, a major aspect of homeless experience (Boydell et al., 2000, 31–32) is at first confirmed in interaction and then transformed into a positive identity by the co-ethnics, gives Revaz a hope that he will be able to overcome his liminality. The fateful meeting and its aftermath are stretched into an almost religious experience of social resurrection. The re-gained positive social identity is expressed through expanses of time, with the account stretching between the past and the present.

Not all 'stretched-out' moments are positive ones. A young man called Kirill recalled, in some detail, being treated as a 'third-class citizen' whilst travelling on a bus:

Interviewer: How would you continue the sentence, 'People are kind to me as long as ...'

Kirill: Until they realize that I am a bomzh. They immediately start looking at me as if I am a wild animal. Once I was travelling on a bus, and this guy sat next to me. He was a bit drunk, we started talking; he turned out to be my namesake. He says: 'Let's go and have a drink to celebrate our acquaintance. Where do you live?' I could have lied, but I said: 'You see, nowhere, I am a vagrant at the moment, trying to get my home back.' A woman in front, she



had a bag, she began to fasten the bag as if I would steal from it. If I was like that, I would have stolen from her long before that, and I wouldn't have said that I was a bomzh.

Kirill recalled and spoke about this experience as if it were a long-lasting event, even though the incident he describes happened very quickly (in terms of clock-time). This event became a turning point in Kirill's life. In his account, it extended, 'stretching out' to dominate Kirill's past, while other aspects of his life remain tight knit, 'shortened', or just forgotten ('zoomed out'). Kirill, a newly homeless person, who, despite living on the streets, still has some odd jobs and tries to keep a neat and tidy appearance, successfully manages to hide discrediting information about himself and thus avoid visible stigma (Goffman, 1963). The moments where his stigma is communicated to him through interaction with the 'settled' members of the public are experienced as endless and recounted in significant detail. Just like Revaz's experience of his newly assigned positive identity is experienced as elastic, stretching in time, Kirill's experience of stigmatising treatment is elastic too, powerfully influencing his current sense of self. We suggest that the narratives of 'expanding time' can indicate important moments in the homeless persons' identity development, providing a unique window into the personal experiences of accepting a devalued self or recovering a positive identity. Changes in the elasticity of time also point at the presence of the 'turning points' (Giddens 1991: 112; Abbott 2001: 258; Thomson et al., 2002; Carlsson, 2012; Neale, 2021: 74) or 'vital conjectures' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) in the subjects' lives, at vital processes and biographic events that open (or close) the future and change the person's life course and their position in the social structure. These events were recounted as lasting in time. Endlessly significant, they stretched from the past into the present.

## **2. Tempo of real duration: Abundance of time and being out of time**

The next dimension is tempo. This refers to the idea that time can also be experienced as having different speeds, with the fast lane existing for the members of the 'settled' society, and the slow lane for those who have been thrown to its margins. Some of the research participants communicated the sense that one cannot change these lanes at will. Consequently, this had left the homeless people with abundant time. Anton, a student who had been homeless for one month prior to the interview, having lost his place in a student dormitory, spends time in the company of homeless people who are outside of the daily rhythms of city life:

You see people who are busy shopping, mothers running past with heavy bags, men who are coming home from work, I don't want to try and start a conversation with them. They have their own problems; I understand that they have a lot of concerns. Bomzhi have no problems anymore, they can listen. I can talk to them, share my worries, we can chat and have a cigarette together.

Here, group identity (as bomzhi) is shaped by the shared time spent in each other's company (sharing worries and sharing a cigarette together). The tempo of everyday life for them is slower, seemingly more spaced out, with less happening. Beyond the 'rat race' of city life, people, experiencing street homelessness, exist within a different tempo of time – qualitatively different to other tempos (as experienced by members of the 'settled' society). This abundance of time that Anton referred to was a part of the experience of pleasant sociability with others in the same situation. This makes sense when drawing on Bergson, whose philosophy shows us that duration is not clock-time, but lived experience (Adam, 1990).

Time as duration was also experienced during joint alcohol consumption, which brought people together in episodes of festive communication, as Vladimir points out:

I would get together with someone who is in a similar situation and it would feel better. Here I see a woman who is also depressed, who also suffers. Maybe she too spent time in prison ... she is also homeless. She also washes once a month ... although she suffers, I feel a bit better – I have found a soulmate. We cut an onion in half, lay a newspaper under it, fill a glass each, and we just talk.

Sharing the same tempo of duration meant sharing identity with other homeless people. The tempo was part of what kept individuals together. It was also part of what differentiated them from mainstream society.

The tempo for the street homeless people and the tempo for mainstream society remained at odds with each other. Duration for the homeless was slow-paced but mainstream society was moving at full throttle. Those people who had recently become homeless and still had a foothold in mainstream society experienced this contrast the most. Like being dragged along by a current, some felt, that for homeless people like themselves, time was moving too fast, working against them, unleashing the forces of social entropy that were dragging them to social (and even physical) death. Time was the enemy, and one had to swim against the tide, resist its rapid flow in order to survive.

In the narratives of the people experiencing street homelessness, time was often perceived as a powerful force in the deterioration of their health, appearance, opportunities and relationships. Time drove the process that was characterized as 'sinking deeper and deeper' or by the use of the word *zabomzhevalis* [have been *bomzhi* for too long, becoming irredeemably homeless]. As Pavel said: '...anyone can get into trouble – if friends and relatives don't help, they sink lower and lower... Without help, they just keep sinking'. A young woman called Elena used the expression 'to be out of time' when talking about her defeat by homelessness:

When we lost our flat, we went to stay with one family of friends, then another, then brought all our possessions to the cellar of our building [block of flats]. But the residents were against this and they called the district police officer. He told us: 'Get out of Moscow, go roam elsewhere.' But I was not just roaming, I was confused. I didn't know what to do, but I was out of time.

People who could not resist the rapidity of time, or tempo, were seen as defeated by it, and recently homeless people tried to avoid them so as not to find themselves dragged down with them:

There are people who are the lowest of the low; they have lived for years at train stations. [As other people]...detest *bomzhi*, these are detested by other [homeless people] ... others wouldn't think of coming close to them. (Valentina)

The 'identity hierarchies' that homeless people construct (Boydell et al., 2000) tend to include the length of homelessness as a crucial stigmatising and self-stigmatising factor. As homeless people typically follow mainstream society in attributing responsibility for failure to individual rather than structural causes (Snow and Anderson, 1993; Zufferey and Kerr, 2004; Terui and Hsieh, 2016), surrendering to the destructive forces of time while living on the streets becomes equivalent to personal failure. People come to accept the societal stigma and internalize the blame, and this becomes reflected in the sense of having 'voluntarily' relinquished their agency, their ability to act in the world, and becoming stuck in a perpetual present. As Boris, who lived on the streets for many years, said

I have no relation to this life. One has to fight for one's life, and me ... I get drunk, switch off, and what happens tomorrow doesn't matter anymore.

This feeling of there being no tomorrow, of there being 'no time left', was common for people who had lived on the streets for a long time. Importantly, as tempo (the pace of everyday life) continually slows down and comes to a halt, life seemingly stops (some describe life as 'standing still'). The state of permanent (and sometimes administratively confirmed) social exclusion was often communicated in the present tense, where a person's entire life had been put on hold (halted altogether). As Leonid, who had been homeless for 15 years, said when asked to answer the question 'Who am I'?

I am standing in front of people. There is a policeman between us. He does not let me come near them.

By answering 'Who am I?' in this way, Leonid is seemingly locked into a present moment in which he feels continually excluded from mainstream social life in Russia, from positive connections with people, and 'needed by nobody' (Hojdestrand, 2009). He does not refer to his past, his family history or work, and nor does he answer the question by referring to his future hopes or ambitions. He experiences life as being stuck in what he perceives as a hopeless situation. The tempo halts – he is frozen in time.

### **3. Extent of duration: The short and long durée of homeless life**

The third dimension is the extent of duration. Much of it is short. For people experiencing street homelessness, time is characterized by short-term aims and immediate gratification. They typically do not plan what to do next year, or next summer, or even next week. This is linked for many to an inability to imagine an exit from the streets, also common for homeless people elsewhere in the world (Snow and Anderson, 1993: 293–302, Davidson et al., 2021: 5). People tend to look for short-term solutions to their problems, such as their next meal or drink. As the following interview extract reveals:

Interviewer: Do bomzhi have life prospects?

Boris: I can speak for everybody here. You simply hope that something will change tomorrow. And in reality, you see, there is no escape.

Boris, a 52-year-old homeless man, describes his 'life prospects' by what might happen tomorrow. Feeling hopeless and downtrodden, Boris says 'there is no escape' from his present situation. For him and many people in his situation, life is reduced to a short duration of human existence.

Alexei spent two months in total on the street.

I spent the first month under the impression that in just a month, two at most, things would sort themselves out. ...This month I'm making plans for the day after tomorrow ... plans to go somewhere ... I need to get out of here.

Here, the extent of duration for Alexei is pervaded by short-term goals, but with constant anxiety about the future, he is prevented from formulating any long-term realistic plans.

Interviewer: Do you feel certain that these two months will end positively for you?

Alexei: This last month I've had no idea what awaits me. But I'm hopeful.

Interviewer: How realistic is that hope right now?

Alexei: I think I need to get away for a little while, just to calm down. There's nothing good about being unemployed any further. I was told that on Fridays there are recruiters from the Moscow suburbs at the Kursk train station. They take people even without documents, or they get someone with documents to register the rest as his team. He gets the money and then shares it out. But when we try to get together ... 'let's wash, so we can be clean when we go'. We wash, and then it's 'let's get a change of clothes', 'let's get some money together' ...

Interviewer: And in the end?

Alexei: And in the end nothing happens. That's why I've been like this for two months.

People's social identities are closely related to the experiences of the *durée* of homelessness. When people see their homeless condition as temporary, they tend to see their lives stretching into the future. Those who have lived on the streets for a long time internalize their status as outsiders and experience time as short *durée*, with their days marked by trips to soup kitchens, periods of begging, and solitary or collective drinking.

Perhaps most importantly, different experiences of the *durée* of time prevent people from mixing with each other. Fifty-four-year-old Pavel had been a construction team foreman before he became homeless after being robbed of money and documents at a train station in Moscow. At the time of the interview, he was squatting in the cellar of a block of flats. Envisaging a longer-term strategy, he tried to form a team out of homeless people he met on the streets. He wanted to earn some money, buy himself decent clothes, find a place to live while he waited for a new passport to be issued and get back home. But people he met clearly experienced time as short *durée* and were unable to commit to any joint projects.

I tried to get the guys together somehow. I met one young lad. He looked normal. I said, 'Let's team up'. We teamed up for a while, earned a little and then he disappeared. The same thing happened with the second one. The third time, a homeless guy who is an ex-criminal joins me. I earn good money, buy myself a denim jacket. We work together briefly, but I see that he's not keen. He says, 'Give me your jacket. I'll go to a shop'. And he disappears. Then there was Oleg ... I told him, 'Let's go, there's work at the station. We can work together.' He said, 'I don't believe in that'. I said, 'Why don't you believe in that? I can earn money like that, I can survive.' He said, 'I don't believe in that, I'll just go and beg. I am always hungry'. I used to think that you have to try to help people. But now I think that you should just stay alone. Because you try to help and then everything goes wrong.

The practices around the use of alcohol can also be linked to homeless identities and different experiences of *durée*. As recently homeless Tatiana, who has lived on the streets for a year, explains:

People drink when they are not sure what tomorrow will bring. I too am not sure, but I try not to drink. I think that things will be better. I still have some hope.

Once a person has lost hope of leaving homelessness,, attempts to stop drinking become rare. Here, are the words of Irina, who was on the streets for nearly five years:

Where would I go if I got cured [from alcohol addiction]? All right, I would not drink, but where would I live? Where would I belong?

Irina, who has accepted her identity as a homeless person, lives in the perpetual present, without a future, and her experiences of time as short *durée* mean that she does not see any point in changing her habits, developed in response to street life.

The health consequences of drinking are dire for people living on the streets (see Ghose et al., 2013). But without understanding their experiences of time, we cannot appreciate how drinking alcohol is understood by homeless alcoholics. Medical advice on drinking alcohol means very little to long-term homeless people. Research participants understood the risks of excessive and constant drinking perfectly well. But the time frame in which alcohol creates adverse effects on the human body is contrary to the time frame long-term street homeless people use to live their everyday lives. The different 'extents' of duration are at odds with each other.

Other problematic behaviours can also be explained by the *durée* of time. Tatiana, a 27-year-old woman, points out the acceptability of violence and crime against other homeless people. The 'order of things' as she calls it, refers to the social rules by which people live on the streets. Taking someone's possessions today is justified by the idea that tomorrow the same could happen to them.

Well, let's say a bomzh is walking around drunk. They [other homeless people] undress him in plain sight and no one says a word. That tends to happen in the summer. They put the clothes on straight away and walk away. I think it's in the order of things for them. Today I take someone's clothes. Tomorrow someone takes mine. That's how life is nowadays.

In a famous account of his life among homeless addicts, John Healy (2012) describes how street homelessness deprives one of opportunities to build a social reputation, as people exist beyond time and memory. Having to demonstrate a capacity for violence here and now is one of the consequences of living in a short *durée*, with no social expectations and lasting obligations. This creates a sense of ever-present danger.

Fear plays a large part, it compels us. It's a simple equation – he who can produce the most fear gets the most drink for nothing. Everyone and everything is full of tension. There are no tomorrows; tomorrow can't be relied to come. In this vagrant society you cannot live on past achievements, you could not simply close your eyes to it. Violence is an obligation of this way of life. Each day you have to prove yourself anew in your toughness or lack of it, stealing, fighting, begging or drinking.

Elsewhere he writes, reflecting the sense of a long, endless *durée* of homelessness: 'So the days merge together more and more, each one like the other. You wake, rise, look for drink, fall asleep again, staring into darkness, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, hearing nothing. Time passes nonetheless'; 'Time goes round and round'. Healy's (2012) reflections on everyday life amongst the homeless people affirm our notion of 'extent' of duration – clock-time passes but days merge into each other, resulting in prolonged miserable periods of existence for homeless addicts.

## **Conclusion**

This article contributes to the understanding of time in qualitative research by drawing on a study of street homelessness in Moscow, Russia. While time is commonly seen as an important factor in the progressive inability of homeless people to extricate themselves from the streets (Snow and Anderson, 1993: 300; Boydell et al., 2000), an exploration of street people's lived experiences of time can further elucidate the processes that affect their social identities and life prospects. The marginality of people's existence, their identities as societal outsiders are experienced in their relationship to

time. For some street homeless people in Moscow, risky behaviours, tenuous connections to other people, including other street dwellers, and loss of aspirations are all predicated on the sense of living out of time, on being stuck in a perpetual present typical of liminal life states (Van Gennep, 1960; Neale, 2021). Many homeless people's accounts revealed the vital biographical conjunctures that brought them to the streets or offered opportunities of an exit. These changes in the experienced flow of time, were analysed using Bergsonian philosophy, with time stretching, slowing down, almost standing still while the course of a person's life was turning, for the worse or for the better.

In exploring how time can be analysed in qualitative research generally, and homelessness research in particular, this article suggested that Bergsonian ideas of *durée réelle* – real duration (Bergson, 2007: 12) can offer a valuable conceptual tool of understanding lived experiences. We developed three different types of *durée réelle* experienced in street homelessness. The first centred on the ways in which real duration could be seemingly expanded or contracted so that some people could zoom in and zoom out of important aspects of their life. We called this the elasticities of *durée réelle* because one moment could seemingly stretch out within a person's real-life experience or shortened (the metaphoric image of an elastic band helped to facilitate our understanding of this idea). The second type was the tempo of *durée réelle* – namely the speed at which the life of homeless people was played out. The third theme identified in this article was the extent of *durée réelle* – the short and long periods through which people would experience life on the street. For many street homeless people, the immediacy of money, food, drink or alcohol was far more important than the longer-term opportunities. At the same time, people can experience the long *durée* of existence that stretches beyond the time horizon, endlessly repetitive and uninterrupted by meaningful events.

In line with other scholars who show Bergson's importance for understanding time in qualitative research (Koro-Ljungberg and Hendricks, 2018; Neale, 2021) and more broadly in social theory and the social sciences (Adam, 1990, 2006; Olkowski, 2021) this article showed that *durée réelle* is something experienced and not measured. Qualitative researchers who attempt to measure social life can fall prey to the idea that the measurements taken are social life itself. But as our analysis of the interviews with the street homeless people in Moscow shows, a great deal of rich insight can be missed, or overlooked, if we fail to recognise that not all time is the same. Time can be understood via the dimensions of elasticity, tempo and extent, which sheds light on the complex and messy conjectures of social life. The pace of an individual's social life can change depending on their unique circumstances. Building on the work of authors who brought Bergson's philosophy to the forefront for understanding social life and its temporal dimension, and employed his ideas for doing qualitative research, our article has further demonstrated that the application of Bergsonian theory of time and development of types of duration to peoples' lived experience is a valuable addition to the qualitative researcher's arsenal.

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### **Text Footnotes**

1Bergson’s book *A Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, from which we draw upon here, was published in 1934, drawing on a set of lectures and essays which took place between 1903 and 1923. We have adopted the contemporary style of referencing the most up to date text we have used of 2007.