Down and Out in Atlantic City
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This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to provide a sociological life history of a man the author calls George. George lived on Atlantic City's streets between 1995 and 2009. Instead of accessing available social services, George stayed outside year-round, even during the cold winter months. He obtained small amounts of money by begging for spare change and slept in alleyways, casino bus terminals, underneath the Boardwalk, and behind garbage dumpsters until his death. George's story reveals how someone who likely would have been committed during the era depicted in Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) had viable alternatives to confinement within an institution. This article has two aims. First, it adds empirical depth to literature on working-age, unhoused men disconnected from formal labor markets and social service systems. A second, more analytical aim is to extend our thinking about Goffman's concept of moral career.

Keywords: poverty; chronic homelessness; emergency shelter; moral career; Atlantic City

How people collectively construct the moral worth of social positions serves as one of the primary foundations for ordering society. As an intellectual pursuit, the study of careers reveals how personal matters are shaped by, and shape, public and social institutions. Within the value-free approach to social science advocated by Max Weber, careers are neither brilliant nor dull; they just are.

Careers are social facts. Social facts, in Emile Durkheim's terms, are "a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual . . . invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they

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exercise control over him” (Durkheim 1982, 52). What constitutes social facts are the particular beliefs, tendencies, and actions that shape an individual’s line of behavior, both in immediate moments and over the course of life. Just as the physicist treats atoms as material facts—an assumption that guides the theoretical framework of the resulting analyses—this article treats careers as social facts, as things. The assumption is that individual lines of acting, thinking, and feeling always encounter external, socially constituted constraints.

The unique purchase that a directed analysis of careers offers is realizing the universality of the concept. All individuals experience careers. Careers differ from one another not only in their duration but qualitatively, in kind. Traditionally, the concept of career has been narrowly defined and reserved for individuals who experience long tenures within occupational fields that are well regarded by the general public, such as business, science, medicine, education, politics, and the military.

Although careers are popularly associated with a person’s advancement in an occupation or public life, a career also comprises the entire life course and includes a broad range of public and private endeavors. This concept of career connects private and public matters common to members of a given social category. “One value of the concept of career,” Erving Goffman asserted, “is its two-sidedness. One side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex” (1961, 126).

Employing Goffman’s two-sided concept of career, one may assert the public side of careers is synonymous with structural position in the labor market or a person’s work history. For example, a person’s public career may be that of judge, professor, or physician—positions typically associated with permanency and formality. Similarly, a person’s public career may be that of day laborer, prostitute, or street corner beggar; such labor market positions are typically perceived as temporary and informal. On the other hand, the private side of careers is connected with people’s sense of personal worth and how they see their lives as a whole. We might imagine the unique challenges members of different social categories confront while connecting public and private aspects of their careers, particularly when the status of one’s public career is taken into account.

In that light, addressing the following two questions represents necessary but not sufficient attempts to begin connecting the two, public and private sides of careers, less abstractly. First, what role do institutions play in ascribing morally distinct status characteristics to members and nonmembers? Second, how do members of particular social categories, reinforced by institutional association or disassociation, define their personal worth and reflect on their life’s course?

In Asylums, Goffman furthered the study of careers while developing a novel analytic concept, the moral career. In Goffman’s terms, a moral career is “the regular sequence of changes that career entails in the person’s self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others” (1961, 128). Goffman conducted a sustained, systematic study of the ways in which mental hospitals
confine and control inmates. Because confinement was the preferred method of social control for deviant and dependent populations at the time of his study, the mental hospital, which he categorized as a “total institution,” served as a powerful device for the surveillance of ordinary people by elites of the modern state.

This institutional approach to the study of selfhood showed how people, once introduced to the totalizing characteristics of institutional processing, responded to their social situation in similar ways, creating, maintaining, and resisting imputations of moral worth. The inmate was “stripped of many of his accustomed affirmations, satisfactions, and defenses, and subjected to a rather full set of mortifying experiences: restriction of free movement, communal living, diffuse authority of a whole echelon of people” (Goffman 1961, 148). Indeed, during the in-patient phase of institutionalization, a person’s conception of self proved difficult to sustain because the usual supports for it were removed.

Goffman’s analysis of total institutions displayed how selfhood and moral worth were created and recreated through a series of social processes that occurred within the context of total institutions. But Goffman self-consciously excluded analysis of ex-patients’ moral careers. In so doing, he left an analytic opening: How do those who have left total institutions of their own accord navigate their subsequent moral careers? Where Goffman focused on how life inside the total institution shapes selfhood and moral worth, this article focuses on how life outside the total institution shapes selfhood and moral worth. Employing ethnographic and life history materials I collected while conducting fieldwork in Atlantic City, this article picks up where Goffman’s analysis left off.

This article draws on observational fieldwork and interviews to provide a sociological life history (cf. Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–1920; Shaw 1966; Linde 1993) of a man I call George. George lived on Atlantic City’s streets between 1995 and 2009. Instead of accessing available social services, he stayed outside year-round, even during the cold winter months. He obtained small amounts of money by begging for change; and he slept in alleyways, casino bus terminals, underneath the Boardwalk, and behind garbage dumpsters until his death.

George’s story reveals how someone who likely would have been committed during the era depicted in Goffman’s Asylums had viable alternatives to confinement within an institution. This article has two aims. First, it adds empirical depth to literature on working-age, unhoused men (Duneier 1999; Snow and Anderson 1993; Spradley 1970) who are disconnected from formal labor markets and social service systems. A second, more analytical aim is to extend the concept of moral career.

The Memorial Service

On December 21, 2009, nearly two hundred people gather in a cramped cafeteria at “The Ranch,” an emergency homeless shelter located off the beaten path in Atlantic City, New Jersey. It is standing room only inside the cafeteria. A few
representatives from the local media snap pictures and jot down notes on yellow legal pads. Dozens of caseworkers and chaplains sit at tables or stand against the walls. They wear lanyards replete with their pictures and official titles. Many have Bibles or clipboards in their hands. Dozens of middle-aged men—approximately half black, half white—sit dutifully at the tables, clutching small prayer books and twirling pencils while engaging in small talk. Other individuals mill around in the lobby near the cafeteria door. Just outside the Ranch’s main entrance, other people smoke cigarettes and exchange stories in the biting cold.

Every year on the evening of the winter solstice, chaplains, social workers, homeless individuals, and members of the local media come to the Ranch to memorialize people who died on the streets and in the shelters of Atlantic City during the previous year. Not far from the carnival-like atmosphere on this city’s Boardwalk, some individuals gathered here tonight appear forlorn. The visual juxtaposition is stunning. The casino lights blaze 24 hours a day and generate millions in revenue. By contrast, many individuals gathered at the Ranch on this night are poor; physically disabled; mentally ill; or addicted to drugs, alcohol, or gambling. Some live on the streets; others have been enrolled in the Ranch’s programs for years; but the majority, whether on the street or in the program, have not overcome their troubles.

Tonight, I sit at the table nearest the cafeteria’s entrance. I periodically take notes on a small, folded-up piece of paper while my digital recorder preserves the talk around me. The man seated next to me chews nervously on a plastic straw while checking incoming emails and text messages on his cell phone. He cracks the occasional joke, directed for my ears and entertainment, but mostly he is in a reverent mood. He tells me that several folks “on the list” for tonight’s memorial service were friends of his.

A couple minutes after 6 p.m., the service begins. With the exception of an occasional cough and sniffle, the room slides into silence while Chaplain Richard walks to the front of the room. Once there, he places his maroon leather-bound Bible on the cherry-red wooden podium with a slight thump, adjusts his glasses, and looks out at the audience. After a moment’s pause, Chaplain Richard begins a prayer and ends it with an “Amen!”

“Amen,” the audience says in raucous response. Then Chaplain Richard steps away from the podium to make room for the next speaker: Neil, a long-term client at the Ranch. Neil is an athletically built white man in his mid-50s. His faded blue jeans and an orange pocket T-shirt contrast sharply with the beige walls and black crucifix behind the podium. He asks people to remove “caps and head covers.” I take off my blue stocking cap, fold my hands, and bow my head as others go through similar motions. Neil begins reading the first and last initials of individuals from a white piece of paper he holds. He is nervous, stuttering and occasionally mispronouncing initials as he makes his way through the list. These thirty-three people died on the streets and in shelters in Atlantic City during the previous year.

When Neil says, “GB,” I glance at Chaplain Del, who is seated across the room from me. His head is bowed and hands folded. He is speaking tonight. Based on
our conversation earlier that day, I know he intends to give special mention to “GB,” or George, during his address. As one of the Ranch’s outreach chaplains, Chaplain Del developed long-standing relationships with many of Atlantic City’s street-based homeless. He persuaded some to “come inside” and enroll in the shelter’s programs. Though George harbored reservations about staying at the Ranch and was reluctant to enroll in its programs, Chaplain Del maintained warm, caring feelings toward George, never severing their ties or giving up on that veteran of Atlantic City’s streets.

An Invitation to Observe

Beginning in 2005, I frequently traveled from Philadelphia to Atlantic City. The contradictory features of this city’s physical and social landscape, with its large tourism industry and impoverished neighborhoods, sparked my intellectual curiosity. Following a tradition established by many ethnographic fieldworkers, I took up residence in the community.

I moved to Atlantic City to begin fieldwork among professional poker players. This was at the height of the Texas hold ‘em cultural craze. Once settled in Atlantic City, I began visiting various poker rooms in Atlantic City’s thirteen casinos. I struck up conversations with people who were playing poker in the casinos. Some talked to me. Most, however, dismissed me or were skeptical of me. This was true even when I told them I was a “student” who wanted to “write a paper.” I persisted, yet few people I talked with showed interest in being a research subject. This frustrating pattern repeated itself for months.

Although I remained interested in the study of poker players and gambling, the omnipresence of the city’s homeless population stirred my sociological imagination. The daily reality of life lived outside began to reveal itself during my earliest observations of the city, when I saw numerous men and women panhandling on the famed Boardwalk, gulping drinks on the street corner, and socializing curbside. Because I lived in the community, I saw these individuals on a daily basis, and I grew increasingly curious about those navigating life on the streets in this context. I did some online research and discovered there was an emergency shelter in Atlantic City.

The Ranch is a nonprofit, faith-based emergency shelter that provides numerous services to men, women, and children. The aim of the organization, according to its mission statement, is “to meet the physical, emotional and other basic needs (through the provision of shelter, clothing, food, counseling, referral and structured programs) of the poor and those who are bound and bruised by addictive lifestyles in Atlantic City and the surrounding communities.” It is the only emergency shelter located in southern New Jersey.

Within a week, I began volunteering at the Ranch. During the weeks that followed, I showed up nearly every day for three to five hours per day. I chopped
vegetables, washed dishes, stocked shelves, prepared food baskets, laundered clothes, unplugged toilets, and mopped floors. I met other volunteers, and I met drug and alcohol counselors, social service caseworkers, and individuals (“clients”) who boarded at the Ranch and were enrolled in work-readiness and counseling programs. Slowly I forged relationships with people.

One employee at the Ranch, Chaplain Del, approached me and spoke with me frequently. Chaplain Del did frontline work. Dispatched to Atlantic City’s margins, he attempted to recruit street-based people to come inside and utilize services instead of staying outside. One day, he asked me if I wanted to join him to observe what goes on “out there.” Picking up on my desire to learn via firsthand experience, he offered to “show me the ropes” as he interacted regularly with the street-based population. I jumped at the opportunity to shadow him, sensing he was equally excited to teach someone what he knew. Several days a week for several months, I met Chaplain Del on the Boardwalk. We spent many afternoons walking, talking, and interacting with people outdoors. Chaplain Del informed newcomers to the area about the services available at the Ranch, including shelter, food, drug and alcohol treatment, and medical care. I observed these exchanges with great interest, and in some instances I played a more active role. Occasionally we brought food, blankets, clothing, shoes, and socks to those on the street, whether they were former clients of the Ranch or habitual nonusers of its services.

Chaplain Del told me that he tried to extend goodwill to and develop trust with those he encountered outside. He sought to persuade people to come inside to get help. Some came in on their own accord, without any prompting; some came in after just one encounter with Chaplain Del; and some came in following dozens of exchanges with him. Others remained unconvinced of the benefits of coming inside. They lived outside year-round and came inside only briefly under certain conditions: when the weather turned bitterly cold, when they wanted a shower, or when they wanted fresh clothes. I became especially interested in those who lived outside most of the year, instead of coming inside for shelter and services at the Ranch.

George’s Social Situation

One person in particular piqued my interest. Chaplain Del nearly always started outreach expeditions by “looking for George,” a longtime acquaintance, to make sure he had survived the night. Chaplain Del developed a caseworker/client relationship with George and tried to convince him to come inside; but George usually refused. One afternoon while driving back to the Ranch, I asked Del about George and others who stayed outside.
Jacob: Is there a course of decline for people who stay outside?

Chaplain Del: I think there’s a decline that takes place in most people who stay out here. But people hit bottom at different stages. A number hit bottom and say, “This is not me. I want out of this lifestyle.” Others hit bottom and say, “This is me. This is where I belong.” I suspect many people out here believe “This is where I belong.” They punish themselves for wrongs they’ve done in their lives. They feel karma coming back to get them. They feel like they’re stuck and they can’t get out. They think, “This is just what happens when you’ve done what I’ve done.” They’ve totally given up.

George seemed to fit the latter type.

During my conversations with George, he told me how he came to live in an alcove behind a dumpster in Atlantic City. Admittedly, he had some good times and some rough stretches in his life, but he was not always in such dire straits. He grew up in a small town in western Pennsylvania. He never knew his father, and his mother raised him. As a young teenager, he stole a car, got caught, and spent a few years in a juvenile detention facility. He returned home to an alcoholic, emotionally and physically abusive mother. His mother kicked him out when he was 16. His grandparents, who lived an hour away, took him in.
With his grandparents, he found a stable, caring household. At their urging, he graduated from high school. Then he became an orderly at a state mental hospital. He met and married a nurse at the hospital. Both quit working there during the mid-1970s. She found work in a community hospital; he found work in construction. In the years that followed, they had three kids and bought a house in northern New Jersey. George, his wife, and their children lived what he called “a very mainstream existence.”

Eventually, he said, he got to the point where he “couldn’t take it anymore.” He lost his job and felt weighted down by the pressures of providing for a family. He struggled with chronic depression and drank heavily. The situation culminated in his wife leaving him. They divorced, and she got custody of their children. In 1985 he had no house, no car, and little money. He rode off on a motorcycle, one of his few possessions, and traveled up and down the East Coast without a fixed idea of where he was going.

On the road, he got involved with a variety of motorcycle gangs. Although he was never really a member, he traveled the country’s highways and drank in roadside taverns with other bikers. They found ways to make money along the way. They had friends who would provide a place to stay for short periods. George sustained this lifestyle for several years. About 10 years after separating from his wife and children, he returned to New Jersey, sold his motorcycle, and headed to Atlantic City. He stayed in motels and flophouses for two weeks while looking for work in the casinos and construction, but his job search failed.

In 1995, George became stranded in Atlantic City. During the next few years, he stayed at the Ranch occasionally. He enrolled in alcohol treatment programs and sobered up. But, he said, he became bored with sobriety and the menial, mindless jobs the social workers arranged for him. Repeatedly, he relapsed and returned to the streets. Every time this happened, the relapse was harder, deeper, more frustrating, and more discouraging. He harbored tremendous guilt about leaving his wife and kids. On numerous occasions, he told me he “wanted to make the call” to his family but could not “strike up the courage.”

The guilt crushed him. He was determined to examine his situation clearly and never to lie to himself. As he saw it, he was a loser and an incurable alcoholic. Furthermore, he believed nothing could change that reality. George retreated to the streets. He panhandled and drank multiple liters of vodka daily. He slept underneath the Boardwalk and in casino stairwells. Despite the obvious downsides of living on the streets, insulting stares from passersby, and dangerous and unhealthy living conditions, he apparently deemed the freedom, privacy, and sociability outside preferable to the institutional help available inside.

Unlike his sheltered peers at the Ranch, nobody told him what to do, where to go, or when to wake up. On the street, he developed relationships with others who, like him, had tortured histories and dim futures. Together, they survived in tucked-away corners of Atlantic City. Because many aspects of street-based homelessness, such as begging for money and sleeping and drinking in public spaces, are criminal offenses, making the rounds on an institutional circuit is inescapable. Homeless people spend time in jail, emergency rooms, and
psychiatric hospitals, sometimes individually and sometimes together. Occasionally George and his friends would come inside the Ranch for a day or two.

Years of heavy drinking, poor nutrition, and living outside inevitably damage a person's health. Over time, George got sicker and frailer. His friends with long street tenures died. After the death of his closest friends, George distanced himself from social life on the street. He became increasingly isolated, only intermittently socializing with others on the Boardwalk or at the soup kitchen’s lunch table. Rough living had exacted a physical toll on George, but the social bonds he developed with others provided a reprieve from past failures and indiscretions. These bonds of kinship took years to build. When they were dissolved, he lost an important, perhaps the sole, source of daily affirmation. It appeared that George would be next to die, and he would probably die alone.

Chaplain Del first met George in 2005, when he found George slumped down in a parking lot. George had a bottle of vodka in his hands and was half asleep. Chaplain Del approached him, rustled him to awareness, and started talking with him. He informed George about the Ranch’s services and asked if he was interested. George, who had years of experience with the Ranch, politely declined. But he asked for some socks, which Chaplain Del brought him the next day.

During the next three years, Chaplain Del and George interacted frequently. Chaplain Del bought food, coffee, and clothing for George and drove him to the Ranch for showers. Del said, “Sometimes he’d remember me, sometimes he wouldn’t.” Nevertheless, Chaplain Del continued to “work on George,” trying to persuade him to come inside. When he succeeded, George typically stayed only a night or two and then went back outside. This pattern repeated itself for years.

When I first met George, he was living in an alcove behind a garbage dumpster. He had retrieved wood pallets from a nearby casino’s loading dock and placed them on the ground. Here, behind a foul-smelling and vermin-filled dumpster, George lived and slept. The very notion that somebody dwelled here left me, like most people, bewildered and struggling for an explanation. The first time I peered into his living quarters, I shuddered. The old guy and his place really stank. Instantaneously I asked myself, “Some people live like this?” Seeing this old man, distressed and sick from years of living rough, struck an emotional chord that is difficult to describe. I wondered, “Who is this man? Why does he live like that?” Why did I respond that way? Could he be helped? Would he be helped?” At least outwardly, Chaplain Del seemed somewhat inured to the situation. He interacted with George and others who lived outside on a regular basis. He heard their troubles, saw their frail bodies, and knew where to find them. The spot behind the dumpster was George’s home. It offered some privacy from the public and protection from the cold.

From then on, I kept up with George. Initially I always accompanied Chaplain Del, but we all talked. Through continued exchanges with George, I grew more comfortable. I began looking for George on my own. Sometimes I saw him; more often I did not. As Chaplain Del had said, sometimes he remembered me, sometimes he did not. Sometimes he talked to me, sometimes he did not. Yet I did not let the on-again/off-again nature of our relationship deter me. I kept looking for
George. When we encountered each other and he remembered me, I bought him coffee or something to eat. We would talk, and he would tell me about his past. Though he glossed over details, I just listened. I let him steer the conversation wherever he wanted. After several conversations, I started offering to locate George’s wife and kids for him. I offered to drive him anywhere he wanted to go or to pay for a bus or train ticket. Without righteousness or anger, he declined my offers to help.

As the months went by, George’s spot was getting smellier and more littered with trash. His physical health seemed to be getting worse, too, which hardly seemed possible. One day Chaplain Del and I discovered George sleeping with trash piled on top of him, presumably to protect him from the cold. Chaplain Del woke him. I helped clear away the debris covering George and got him upright. Once the three of us were situated to converse, Chaplain Del asked George, “Why do you stay here? Are you punishing yourself for something?” “I don’t know, Chap,” George replied. Chaplain Del then asked him, “Do you see yourself as garbage?” The question lingered and seconds passed slowly. Finally, George solemnly said, “Yeah, pretty much. I’m not worth the trouble, Chap. If I go back to the Ranch with you, then what? If I complete treatment, then what? Then what, Chap?” Out of character, Chaplain Del yelled at George, “You’re condemning yourself to die!” There was silence for another minute. Then Chaplain Del tried to convince George he was worth the trouble and to persuade him to come back to the Ranch. As he had done so many times before, George declined Chaplain Del’s offers to help.

A month later, without any coaxing by Chaplain Del, George arrived at the Ranch. He sweated through a couple weeks of detoxification, enrolled in treatment, and was sober for another three weeks. But he found it difficult to follow his treatment plan, which included adhering to a strict medication regimen and daily group therapy sessions. Once again, he went back outside. I never saw George again. Eight days later, an Atlantic City police officer found George’s body behind the dumpster.

So George’s initials, “GB,” are on the list for the December 21, 2009, memorial service. Chaplain Del made a short speech that night.

I answered my phone one morning in October. My case note reads: “I received word that GB was found dead. Send contact info by fax to Atlantic City Police Department.” That was my case note, a footnote to a life I followed for many years. I was sad when I got the news. We tried hard to bring him inside. Just before he died, he came inside to give recovery another chance. But something happened while he was detoxing, and he went back outside. I will never know what that was. . . . We need to help those struggling with the issues of life. We need to help those outside, who struggle in the cold, in the snow, with addictions, health problems, and all those things. And we need to remember those, like George, whose struggles have ended.

Chaplain Del’s message, couched in the language of Christian theology, resolves George’s death on metaphysical, spiritual terms. Perhaps explaining George’s
death in physical and material ways seems especially difficult, given Chaplain Del’s charge to recruit people to come inside.

George’s story and Chaplain Del’s message beg many questions: How did life outside become more attractive than life inside? Why do some people consistently resist help from institutional helpers? Does resistance serve a purpose? If so, what is the purpose? On the other hand, if some people submit and accept help before they die, what comes next? Then what?

From thinking carefully about George’s moral career, I have learned that, after many years of living on the streets and cycling in and out of the Ranch and its programs, there was no clear future for George beyond the Ranch. If he accepted Chaplain Del’s help and enrolled in a drug, alcohol, and behavioral health program, then what? If he completed that program and enrolled in work readiness classes, then what? If he completed a work readiness program, then what?

Asking then what? aligns George with the Ranch and its services, and it strongly suggests that his resistance can be explained partly by the sequences and contingencies in his own moral career. Most notably, he consistently resisted institutionalized forms of help and, one could argue, he was resistant to any additional transitions. His behavior could be interpreted as saying a loud and resounding “no!” to any more transitions. Indeed, George’s moral orientation, his framework for drawing boundaries between himself and others, reached a point where he no longer appeared interested in making social transitions through institutionalized channels. His acknowledgment that he viewed himself as worthless garbage reinforces that point.

If individuals in George’s social situation are unable to regain their moral credibility, asking then what? with resistance takes on increased significance because, at the very least, it improves one’s posterity vis-à-vis institutional agents.

Conclusion

George’s life story is a concrete and dramatic exemplification of one lifestyle on the streets of Atlantic City. It exemplifies how a person who likely would have been committed during the era of Asylums had a viable alternative to the confined and controlled life within an institution. Indeed, instead of accessing the institutional web of services available to him, George purposefully stayed outside year-round. He slept rough in alleyways, underneath the Boardwalk, and behind vermin-infested garbage dumpsters.

We could argue that George’s resistance to Chaplain Del’s offers to help is symptomatic of mental illness. Similarly, we could argue that a man like George was bent on drinking, and the policies of residential treatment centers prohibit drinking and drug use. Perhaps both of these arguments are valid to some extent. Given his experiences at the Ranch, however, George’s story suggests something beyond individual disabilities (i.e., severe mental illness) and propensities (e.g., for heavy drinking).
Once George disconnected himself from the labor market and his family, he had few resources to draw on. After his funds were depleted, he enrolled in the Ranch’s programs and boarded at its emergency shelter. Intermittently, he participated in various drug, alcohol, and behavioral health programs. Repeatedly, not only at the end of his life but throughout his years in Atlantic City, he exiled himself to the street. The important thing to remember is that George could choose to leave the Ranch’s confines and stay outside. Outreach workers, such as Chaplain Del, could only strongly suggest to George that he come off the street and utilize available services inside.

George’s lived opposition on the streets of Atlantic City might not have been made with explicit moral or political motives. But his actions highlight that people can and do go to extraordinary lengths to preserve a sense of autonomy when faced with bodily, emotional, mental, and material degradation. As Paul Willis put it so elegantly, “Where meanings seem absent, or someone else’s meaning traps you under an ideological weight of definition that you know in your bones is unfair to you and unjust... then certain cultural moves are not optional, a mere recreational choice” (2010, 11). For those in George’s social situation, who make similar “cultural moves,” the intentional resistance mocks normative ideas about what he ought to do and what is within the realm of acceptable behavior—even, or perhaps especially, when well-intentioned outsiders wanted to offer him help.

Oddly enough, Goffman’s work is often credited as being influential in the deinstitutionalization movement that emptied out many state-run psychiatric hospitals. Along with other reports that came out in the early 1960s (Caplan 1961/2003; Kesey 1962; Szasz 1961), Goffman’s Asylums influenced how policy and practices for the mentally ill would be implemented from the 1960s onward. For those in George’s social situation, who make similar “cultural moves,” the intentional resistance mocks normative ideas about what he ought to do and what is within the realm of acceptable behavior—even, or perhaps especially, when well-intentioned outsiders wanted to offer him help.

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An implied argument in Asylums was that the behaviors of inmates were collectively learned within the setting and, even further, the behavior of inmates could be understood as a reaction to the institutional setting. Thus, if inmates were only released, they would not have to act in bizarre ways any longer. This, of course, is a political statement that Goffman never made and the ex-patient phase of the moral career that he self-consciously avoided writing about. Forty years later, however, following Jack Katz’s (2010, 41) plea that “we start participant observation at the current end of a temporal continuum” and analyze how social patterns take shape “step by time-ordered step,” we can begin to understand the cumulative impact of deinstitutionalization and the counterpractices and de facto institutions it created. Just as important, we can begin to understand the outcomes of these historical and political changes for people like Chaplain Del and George. How we understand their words actions, make them comprehensible, and render their social worlds to the wider public are significant—here or there, now or later.
Notes

1. Indeed, as Goffman wrote in Asylums, “The career of the mental patient falls popularly and naturalistically into three main phases: the period prior to entering the hospital, which I shall call the prepatient phase; the period in the hospital, the inpatient phase; the period after discharge from the hospital, should this occur, the expatient phase. This paper will deal with the first two phases” (1961, 130–31).

2. On the value of life history methods, I am inclined to agree with Charlotte Linde when she says, “In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story. . . . Life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way. They are also one very important means by which we communicate this sense of self and negotiate it with others” (1993, 3).

3. The Ranch opened in 1964 with twelve beds in a storefront facility in Atlantic City. It provided food and shelter to a small group of transient adult men. The community’s need for additional shelter space grew measurably at the onset of casino development in Atlantic City in 1976. In terms of people served and services offered, the Ranch grew in size following the legalization of casino gambling. By 2009, while I was conducting fieldwork in Atlantic City, the Ranch provided 2,987 unduplicated people with shelter, food, clothes, and services per annum. On an average night in 2009, nearly 300 people slept overnight at the Ranch. Approximately 75 percent of these people were single adult men.

4. As E. Fuller Torrey asserts, “By the end of 1961 three axioms had been established that would influence services for the mentally ill: (1) psychiatric hospitals are bad and should be closed; (2) psychiatric treatment in the community is better because cases can be detected earlier and hospitalization thereby avoided; and (3) the prevention of mental diseases is the most important activity to which psychiatric professionals can aspire” (1988, 97).

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