

THE PRECARIOUS LIVES OF HOMELESS SCAVENGERS IN TOKYO BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2008 CRISIS

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Abstract: *Awareness of poverty in Japan significantly increased after the bubble economy ended in 1991. The presence of older men, approaching or past retirement age, living in blue tents and on park benches, was one of the first to challenge the assumption of a classless Japan. One strategy for men experiencing homelessness to alleviate their hardships and survive is to gather and sell aluminium cans. This paper ethnographically explores their precarious work and documents the various patterns of gathering and selling cans, while also looking at the impact of both local and global forces (neoliberalism) on their work. Based on fieldwork that included the economic recession of 2008–2009, I observed six months of the work of the homeless during economic stability and six months during a severe recession. My research shows how homeless men used the work of gathering and selling cans to survive during a stagnant economy and then adapted to a brutal recession, which resulted in much lower income for their labour as the price of aluminium significantly decreased. I argue that their work was affected by the global economy and that collecting cans and earning money helped homeless men survive through the crisis. Finally, I conclude that earning money via selling cans allowed the men to maintain their self-respect and pride, have a sense of purpose, buy daily necessities, and occasionally splurge on entertainment.*

Keywords: *Japan; homelessness; recycling; precarity; globalization*

Introduction

Yamada wakes up in Tokyo at 5:00 a.m. to go to work. He commutes for an hour to a nearby neighbourhood, works for four hours, breaks for lunch, and then works two more hours before going home. What makes Yamada different from a retired *sarari-man* (“white-collar worker”) is that he works scavenging for aluminium cans for several hours before the trash pick-up. Then he crushes them after eating his first meal of the day around 10:00 a.m. Yamada¹ is homeless.

For many men who are homeless, collecting and selling recyclables is a crucial income-generating survival strategy. The lives of men like Yamada are similar to scavengers in China (Li 2003), Nigeria (Nzeadibe 2009), and the Middle East and Latin and South America (Medina 2007), as well as to *catadores* (“pickers who collect and sell recyclables”) in Rio de Janeiro (Millar 2018, 2). Building on these works and responding to scholarly theories of precarity, this paper aims to ethnographically examine the role that collecting recyclables plays in the lives of Japanese men, and it seeks to show how their lives, particularly their informal work of collecting and selling aluminium cans during my research in Tokyo in 2008 and 2009, helped them maintain their sense of independence and shows how that same work connected them via their informal work to both local and global forces. Moving beyond questions of work as a survival mechanism, this paper asks: How did the work of homeless men in Japan help them maintain their autonomy and create and sustain their identity, specifically their independence and pride? To what extent were their lives precarious, and how did their work nevertheless help them to live less precarious lives? Finally, it explores how local forces (local safety nets and local conditions of labour), as well as the global economy, impacted their lives via the informal work they did, and it observes the connection between their income and the price of aluminium, which was set on the global market.

To understand how these Japanese men experiencing homelessness earned money in 2008–2009, because “most of the men work in some way” (Slater and Ikeba 2020, 3), I conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews among men who had or were experiencing homelessness in Tokyo’s northeast areas, specifically Ueno Park and its surrounding localities, San’ya, and Asakusa. Of course, not all homeless men collected cans, but most did, and

¹ Even though many men in my study do not use their real names, I anonymize all names, including Yamada’s.

a second smaller group worked in the city workfare program, and only a small minority did not work at all and were dependent on the various soup lines to survive.

For more than a year, I participated in a variety of activities in the lives of homeless men collecting cans, including sitting on park benches, walking to soup lines, assisting a non-profit organization with their soup lines twice a week, helping men gather and crush aluminium cans, and participating in a variety of exchanges. A typical day might include talking to men selling aluminium cans or helping them crush cans, chatting with them while they waited in a soup line, talking to men after they had eaten lunch about the church's soup line, and helping them clean up before bed. In addition to these work activities, I participated in leisure activities such as doing puzzle books like Sudoku, gambling (both at the local OTB² and pachinko, a type of arcade game) and drinking with friends and neighbours. Of course, these activities decreased as the homeless men lost some of their autonomy as their income dropped with the recession. Both men who scavenged for cans and those who did not would go to soup lines, but not all men who collected cans used them. Since they earned money, they could choose not to use the soup lines, but some went anyway to help stretch their money. I took fieldnotes throughout the day in small notebooks, but especially after hearing or seeing something seemingly important for my research, and at the end of the day would type them out.

After seven months of fieldwork, the Lehman Shock³ sent the global economy into a recession, so my research questions expanded to include how the homeless men in Tokyo adapted to significant income loss. I continued my fieldwork for another six months, exploring how they managed to survive with less income for the same amount of work. The serendipity of conducting fieldwork with a severe recession beginning in the middle is rare, so some of the ethnographic data is written in the present tense to emphasize the lived experience of homeless men in Tokyo, while others are not, so the reader is not misled about the historicity of events.

Conducting fieldwork with these men, I faced an obstacle: they relentlessly guarded their privacy, especially regarding their lives prior to becoming homeless, so I worked to build rapport and trust and to verify the information they

² OTB stands for off-track betting or off course betting.

³ The Lehman Shock refers to the 2008 bankruptcy of the investment bank Lehman Brothers which was the climax of the subprime mortgage crisis.

shared with me. Otani-san, a grandfather, became a great source of information and openly shared information about his life. Still, when possible, I verified what he told me. For example, he described how he collected cans from a couple of nearby hotels, and I later made a point of following him as he began collecting their cans to verify his claim.

In addition to the obstacle of men guarding their privacy, they questioned my presence. Being a foreigner seemed to be the main aspect of my identity to the men, and they did not hesitate to ask why I was hanging out in the park. However, the various non-profit agencies that hold soup lines have volunteers from international schools and companies, so the men were accustomed to seeing foreigners. As a 34-year-old white American cisgender male, they did not seem to care about my presence as a researcher interested in their lives except to stress half-jokingly that I should get a “real” job. They became more incredulous about my life choice to conduct research when they learned I was married and later when my son was born. Still, these personal revelations presented an opportunity to learn about their personal lives, and I learned they were separated from their families (unlike the workers in Rio de Janeiro that Kathleen Millar describes; see 2014, 2018).

The cultural context of recycling in Japan has importance for the public’s perception of recycling and resources. Their views impact how Japanese society understands the men scavenging for aluminium cans. Documenting waste from a historical perspective, Eiko Maruko Siniawer shows that Japan began recycling in earnest after the Oil Shock of the 1970s to maintain the current levels of consumption, but the main impetus was “saving resources” (2018, 174). She explains that “the idea of a resource-poor Japan made objectionable the disregard for anything from metal and glass to oil that was considered a resource, and reinforced initiatives to save valuable resources from ending up in the garbage” (2018, 175). Siniawer traces Japan’s recycling laws and their impact on keeping recycling in the thoughts of citizens, and of particular note is that in 1998 “92.8% of respondents expressed some degree of interest in creating a ‘recycling society’” (2018, 232). Interestingly, she found that in the 1980s there was an explosive rise in the number of recycling groups focusing on aluminium cans (2018).

Siniawer (2018) notes that Japanese society missed an opportunity to reflect on the more complex issues of waste besides recycling, as the social approval of recycling remains quite high. Given her description of the development of recycling in Japan, it is unsurprising that some people are sometimes

hostile to scavengers taking cans out of community bins (see below). Their view of the men experiencing homelessness can be understood by examining Miki Hasegawa's ethnography, which documents how in the late 1990s the Tokyo city government evicted homeless men from Shinjuku Station in Tokyo (2012). The homeless and their allies held demonstrations in which they protested the Tokyo government forcing the homeless residents to leave the station and the indoor corridor connecting the station to office buildings. During the protest, the homeless and their allies held posters arguing correctly that they were not "garbage" (2012). The protesters were highlighting how the government sees and treats homeless people. So, the public may see men scavenging for cans as taking or even stealing from the community that benefits from the money the recycling provides to the city, and given how the government treats them, the public sees them as less than human.

The scavengers who gathered aluminium cans had a complex relationship with the public. Staying off welfare and not being a burden to the government was a source of pride to them, even though "proper citizens", as Akihiko Nishizawa points out, "often criticize the homeless people as feckless and unintelligent" (2011, 209). Perhaps "proper" citizens did not see these men working as they were active before most people came out, while they were inactive (either napping or resting around lunchtime or late afternoon) when tourists, evening commuters, or school groups passed by them. Many of these homeless men would appear to them idle at best, and lazy at worst.

These ordinary people may have misjudged them, since the homeless men did work, although outside of the formal economy and outside standard work schedules. Given the local options available to the men I researched (e.g., attending soup lines, working occasionally for the city, applying for welfare, not working at all), making a living by collecting and selling cans was probably one of their best choices.

While the work of the homeless men falls outside of what Japanese society normally recognizes as "work", the justification I heard the most for their choice to scavenge for cans was simply, "If I don't work [gathering cans], I can't eat". While Tom Gill described can collections as "an improvised survival aid" (2012), many of the men I interviewed described it as *taihen* ("hard work"). Many Japanese homeless men took pride in that they have *not* applied for welfare and were maintaining their independence and dignity through work (Marr 1997; Margolis 2008). The men considered scavenging for cans work. One evening in the park, after chatting with Suzuki while he was preparing to go search for

cans, he said goodbye to me with the traditional expression *ittekimasu* (“I’m off to work”). This is standard Japanese used for everyone leaving home, but especially for school and work in the mornings. Thus, by using that expression Suzuki was indicating he saw his work as a regular job.

Turning to the basics of recycling, in Tokyo, like in most Japanese cities, each neighbourhood has a recyclables trash collection once a week, and residents put their recyclables in large boxes located at collection spots throughout the neighbourhood. There are several boxes including one for glass, one for cans (both steel and aluminium), and one for plastic bottles. Some people put their recyclables in the boxes in the evening before a trash collection, and recyclers take only the aluminium cans and sell them (during my research, scrap metal buyers paid much less for steel). While Japanese society values steel cans and other forms of steel, the men making a living selling scrap metals considered steel a waste of their time. Some men whom I observed during my research carried magnets with them to see if other scrap metals (e.g., the inside of a rice cooker) were aluminium or steel. Before further examining their work, however, it is necessary to understand poverty and homelessness in Japan. When and how did modern homelessness develop in Japan? How is poverty understood and explained?

Contemporary Homelessness in Japan

Homelessness first became a visible problem and was categorized as *hōmuresu* (“homeless”) in the early 1990s, with the end of the bubble economy (Kasai 2008), and people experiencing homelessness were almost exclusively male, with few homeless women (Gill 2015). Roughly half were in their fifties, and over half were junior high school graduates (high school is not compulsory in Japan) who never married (Iwata 2003). Although many men were in their fifties, numerous men had ailments from their hard life as day labourers, resulting in their life expectancy being 20 years below the national average (Gill 2001). While scholars and the public had previously associated homelessness with unemployed day labourers, that was no longer the case in the 1990s / early 2000s. Carolyn Stevens describes how “by the mid-1990s, a variety of men – day labourers and other unemployed people, both Japanese and non-Japanese – began claiming as their homes train stations, public parks, and other public areas [...] bringing the plight of the homeless into many mainstream places in Japan” (2013, 163).

The understanding of poverty and homelessness shifted again during the end of the year holidays in 2008 with the sudden appearance of a large encampment of tents and soup lines in Hibiya Park (a large park in central Tokyo) becoming the top news story for several days. One researcher described the event as “a turning of the tide in Japanese labour politics” (Shinoda 2009, 1). Others highlighted that the camp was not a response to natural disaster as one might expect, but rather “a consequence of the global financial crisis that had suddenly made hundreds of thousands of able-bodied Japanese men both jobless and homeless”, because they had been living in company dormitories, so without their job, they did not have a home (Kojima 2010, 23). Many of the men in the camp lost their jobs as dispatch workers due to the severe financial recession because “demand for exports collapsed in the final quarter of 2008, the Japanese economy contracted at its fastest pace in nearly 35 years” (Shinoda 2009, 3). Toru Shinoda is describing the recession and its impact on dispatch workers after the Lehman Shock, but how did it affect men already experiencing homelessness?

This paper connects the consequences of the recession to how homeless men in Tokyo used the work of recycling aluminium cans to maintain their dignity and pride. Then it turns to show how their actions nevertheless kept them from living even more precariously during the crisis. Men experiencing homelessness slept in public places such as parks, train stations, and riverbanks, and while the official count at the time of the research was 14,707 people (over 95% men) for the entire country, and 3,436 for central Tokyo (e-Stat 2021), the number of people experiencing homelessness has decreased significantly to 800 in 2021 (TMG 2022). Tom Gill explains that the substantial decrease is due to ward officials, city officials, and bureaucrats accepting many more “applicants for welfare” (*seikatsu hogo*) (personal communication, 5 January 2018). Matthew Marr also points out that based on estimates of the increase in welfare recipients, “there is a sizeable precariously housed population across Japan that would fit a broader definition of homelessness” (2015, 33).

Work, Identity, and Independence among the Homeless

Research in Japan has shown that workers often experience episodes of homelessness, especially when they cannot find work (Gill 2001). Matthew Marr’s study focuses on day labourers in Nagoya, and provides insightful analysis and description of their values, including “self-pride”, not wanting to “limit their

freedom”, and a strong desire for “privacy and autonomy” (1997, 238–239). He finds that

The day labourers’ preference for work instead of public handouts is evident in the demands made on the public administration by day labour unions [...] In the vast majority of protests made to city governments, the leading demand is to increase the amount of jobs through public works projects (ibid., 237).

Demanding work and not a handout shows that homeless men value their independence, pride, and hard work. Similar values can be found among the homeless in Tokyo according to Abby Margolis’s research (2003, 2008) with men experiencing homelessness in and around Ueno Park. She documented slightly different values but noted that the homeless men “prided themselves in their self-sufficiency, honour, and perseverance” (2008, 355) and observed the thoroughness and seriousness with which they carried out their work and their social role. Margolis describes “doing homeless” as doing the acts of living in the park, collecting aluminium cans, and attending *takidashi* (“soup kitchens”) in a way that reflects the traditional samurai spirit (ibid., 353).

Outside of Japan, Teresa Gowan finds a similar attitude among homeless men in San Francisco who also work as recyclers (2000, 2010). For example, she quotes Anthony, a homeless recycler who comments on the stigma of being homeless: “When I’m working hard, right before their eyes, no one can say I’m just a smelly drain on the public purse” (2000, 74). Gowan highlights the role recycling plays in helping homeless men survive by providing “an essential economic floor, the bare bones of survival”, and that the act of work helps to reconnect with their roots as members of the working class (ibid., 78). She expands on these themes in more detail in her ethnography (2010) documenting the experiences of scavengers in San Francisco and the various ways the men work to survive.

Given the desire for work among Japanese men, what happens when this strategy is challenged by a crippling recession? Before the recession, the concept of the working poor had firmly developed in Japan (Obinger 2009). The informal work of scavenging fits clearly into the current political-economic theories of neoliberalism, particularly regarding the global move, since the late 20th century, from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy, whereby flexibility and precarity are the main qualities of labour. At the time of the 2008 recession, scholars began using precarity also as a theoretical framework to understand modern

Japanese society (Obinger 2009; Allison 2013) and described the homeless as “possibly living under the most precarious conditions” (Obinger 2009, 7).

Julia Obinger defines precarious work as “poorly paid non-standard employment, which is highly insecure, unprotected and offers no benefits” (2009, 3; see also Allison 2013). The work of scavenging for cans clearly meets this definition, and I would add that this work also lacks a safety net. There are no paid days off, sick leave, healthcare, retirement savings, safety standard, or anything else to provide any security. Obinger further argues that the emergence of a sizeable class of working poor, or “precariat”, in Japan is by no means a marginal phenomenon. Anne Allison also sees homelessness as a symptom of precarity in Japanese society, and she highlights that poverty is back after a long absence (the recovery from World War II) and is increasing (2013, 5). The increase is seen in the rise of precarious work, and she notes that “one-third of all workers today are only irregularly employed. Holding jobs that are part-time, temporary, or contract labour, irregular workers lack job security, benefits, or decent wages” (ibid.). This research, however, will show that the work the homeless men in Japan do and the solidarity they have with neighbours and friends helps them survive while living precariously, and that they are connected through their work with aluminium cans to the global community (and economy).

Furthermore, Kathleen Millar also studies informal, precarious work and expands on and clarifies the issue of precarity by introducing the concept of “relational autonomy” (2014, 35), which she defines as “a relative degree of control over work activities and time [which] enables *catadores* to sustain relationships, fulfil social obligations, pursue life projects in an uncertain everyday” (ibid., 35–36). Her work on *catadores* and their notion of autonomy emphasizes “sociality”, “relations of care”, “community”, and “social belonging” (ibid.), and thus stands in contrast to the neoliberal model of autonomy, which relates to “individual empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and self-help” (ibid., 47). However, if we compare Japanese homeless men to Brazilian *catadores* (and their notion of relational autonomy), during my fieldwork, two themes emerged. First, although most homeless men in Japan fostered some degree of community, their emphasis was on their work. Their community ranged from men who kept to themselves but would still participate occasionally in exchanges with other men, and at the other end of the spectrum, some men developed solid friendships with other homeless men and would look out for each other, share meals, and essentially live together. I will discuss their community in more detail

later. Second, few Japanese scavengers had relationships with family members or “life projects” outside of their current circumstances. This stands in contrast to a *hikkikomori* (“socially withdrawn individual”), whom Allison identified in her work as someone who literally stayed home, but also reflects her argument that family relationships are breaking down and that Japan is becoming a *meun shakai* (“relationless society”) (2018, 41). Scavengers in Tokyo would therefore come closer to neoliberal notions of individual empowerment and self-help than to relational autonomy, which emphasizes solidarity and community since they empowered themselves individually with work and did not want to be a burden on society.

However, they also helped each other to varying degrees and created moments of solidarity, although this depended on each particular group. The closer the group, the more support a homeless scavenger could count on. For example, when Fukuda burned his foot boiling water to cook noodles, his homeless neighbours bought him bandages and burn cream. For others, the solidarity among them was occasional and unreliable, and only occurred when a neighbour had extra food or goods to share. Their solidarity and acts of support and harmony stood in contrast to the frequency with which men complained about other scavengers. Some men bitterly complained that there were *warui hito* (“bad people”) and *dorobou* (“thieves”) among the homeless, and that sometimes cans and other goods get stolen.

While Millar uses the notion of relational autonomy to stress that “the desire for mobility among *catadores* is tightly woven into other desires for sociality, intimacy, and relations of care” (2014, 16), homeless men in Tokyo valued their privacy more than relationships. For these men, their desires were twofold, maintaining their privacy (selling cans never required giving any personal information beyond a name to the buyer, and some men even used pseudonyms) and earning money to help them eat and maintain some degree of independence. The other way men earned money was through a government-run work program, but this required them to register with the program, and some men did not want to give away their personal information.

While the scavengers in Tokyo earned money through a piece wage system, this leads to a question as to whether the canners would work collectively to improve their lives. Millar’s research includes an insightful analysis of collective action among *catadores* and raises the question: would such relationships of solidarity form among homeless scavengers in Tokyo (2018)? While the group in Rio had episodes of success, they were also in everyday relationship with

ordinary people around them, who could be called into action when *catadores* needed them (ibid.). Among the Japanese homeless men, however, two different approaches to community materialized, with one showing clear examples of solidarity among the various groups of homeless men and the other evidencing social tension and frequent complaints about *ningen kankei* (“getting along with others”) and lamenting that dealing with other homeless men is the worst part about being homeless. Given the difficulties of getting along with others, they often worked individually or sometimes with partners to collect cans and functioned as neoliberal individualists with some level of support from each other.

Many scholars have recognized scavenging for aluminium cans and plastic bottles as a form of work among the homeless (Fortuna and Prates 1989; Dordick 1997; Hopper 2003; Aoki 2006; Ashenmiller 2009; Gowan 2010; Marr 2015). Hideo Aoki’s research is most pertinent for this article, as it documents work among the homeless in Osaka. Among them, 87.3% are “collecting recyclable resources” (2006, 100). Aluminium cans made up 79.5% of the items the homeless collected and over half of the men made less than 30,000 yen⁴ (\$320) per month (2006). Aoki also found that 74% of homeless men are dissatisfied with their work because it provides for an “insecure income, and in which the competition is fierce and the work is heavy” (2006, 101). Considering these conditions, Aoki finds the dissatisfaction of Osaka’s homeless men with their work understandable. However, for men in Tokyo, their dissatisfaction can easily be understood within the precarious conditions of their work (insecure income and lack of benefits) and those same conditions of hard work, autonomy, and independence allow them to maintain their pride and anonymity as some are hiding from debt collectors and family members. While there was no guaranteed constant supply of cans for their work, their experience showed them that there would always be some cans that they could find.

The Work Gathering and Selling Aluminium Cans

Early in my research, I saw Yamada, whom I had met during preliminary fieldwork a couple of years earlier in Ueno Park in Tokyo. In the mornings, I looked for him in his usual place, but could not find him. Yamada was already busy with his work gathering and selling aluminium cans, which requires knowing the city’s trash collection schedule. In the morning households and businesses

⁴ The exchange rate for 2008 was 103.39 yen to the dollar.

put their trash out before 8:30 a.m., after which the city collected it. Yamada gathered cans from the neighbourhood bins and kept a busy schedule visiting six different neighbourhoods a week.

His work of collecting, crushing, and selling aluminium cans was not easy. While a few men gathered cans in the evening, most men started work early, waking up as early as 5:00 a.m. and collecting cans until nine-thirty or ten o'clock. Many men walked and a few rode bicycles to the nearby neighbourhood with the recycling pickup. Those who walked left earlier since it took them longer to get to the neighbourhood. Some neighbourhoods were adjacent to the park where they lived, but others were quite far away. When I went to meet Takayama and Yamada to accompany them, they had already started walking at 5:30 a.m. I took the train two stops to the neighbourhood to catch up to them. Some neighbourhoods were three to five train stations away, so they walked a considerable distance to each neighbourhood and once there, continued walking around the neighbourhood to the various recycling bins to collect cans.

While Yamada's pattern of gathering cans was the most common, a few men collected cans at night and crushed them the following morning. These men collected cans either directly from trashcans along the street, in parks, and the trashcans in front of convenience stores, or they took whatever cans residents placed in the recycling bins in the evening. The men who gathered aluminium cans at night also did so during the day and crushed them whenever they could. Working at night made getting decent sleep difficult. Otani, who harvested his cans, often compared himself to Napoleon. His comparison was that like Napoleon, he only sleeps three hours a night. His schedule often had him returning to his base area near the park around 3:00 a.m., and he would wake up at 5:00 a.m. because morning commuters were beginning to arrive. He joked that he was better than Napoleon because he only slept for two hours. His sleeping habits and knowledge of Napoleon were not unique, since other men also compared themselves to Napoleon, especially when they woke up from a nap or a short night's sleep, so this seemed to be a common reference.

Men who collected cans from *manshons* ("large condominium buildings") could sleep more, as they did not have to compete for the cans due to their agreements with owners and managers of these buildings (cf. Hill and Stamey 1990). These places were like hitting the jackpot because they were one-stop and usually had many cans (they also exemplify some of the local labour conditions). Typically, a man approached the building supervisor and asked to make an agreement to collect their recyclables, and some men had made

several such agreements with building managers so they could collect large amounts. Another advantage of these agreements was that they eliminated competition. For example, when looking for cans, homeless men sometimes approached a recycling box just a minute or two apart. When this happened, only one of them would get the cans. Having an agreement with supervisors guaranteed a certain number of recyclables, which meant both additional money and a secure source of it. Nishi had several agreements, which led to him pushing a flatbed cart overflowing with large plastic bags filled with cans. Teresa Gowan (2010) found a similar pattern where restaurants will save their bottles and boxes for homeless men.

Another advantage of apartment buildings and condominiums was that their recycling bins were larger and therefore usually had more cans. Even a small apartment building would likely have many cans, from six to as many as 30, especially just after the building manager put out the recycling boxes. Often a residential recycling bin would have just a few. Finding more than two or even a small plastic bag full of cans was a real treasure. When collecting recyclables with Takayama, he came across a bag, smiled broadly, and exclaimed, “*Kekkou aru!*” (“There are more than I thought!”).

After the work of collecting their harvest, men crushed the aluminium cans, which took several hours, depending on their number. The bags cost money, so the more cans they could squeeze in the bag, the better. Yamada-san, who has been homeless for at least four years and was in his forties, relatively young for Japan’s homeless population, explained, “Because the bags cost money, we all try to crush the cans as much as we can. That’s why we try so hard to crush them” (i.e., to save money). The men used the bags repeatedly and added duct tape to make the bags last longer.

Many men crushed them by stomping on them, and unsurprisingly, they often complained that their feet were tired. Typically, a man reached into his clear plastic bag full of uncrushed cans, drained any remaining liquid, lined up three or four cans in a row, and then stomped each can several times. Experienced recyclers knew that heavier aluminium cans, often containing coffee, required three to four stomps while the lighter aluminium cans, which usually were soda or beer cans, needed just one or perhaps two. Crushing cans was especially tiring for men who walked to collect recyclables. The canners refrained from crushing cans in cases when they were planning to throw away their worn-out bags, because the weight of too many crushed cans would rip the bags. In these cases, they were usually hoping to receive new bags from the buyer.

The other method used to crush cans involved using a *jakkibeisu* (a heavy tool similar to a sledgehammer, see Figure 1). A *jakkibeisu* weighs 3.3 kg and lifting it is tiring. Before Otani-san and Saito-san let me use it, they warned me that my shoulder and arm would hurt, and as I used it, I could feel blisters forming on my hand. Like stomping, the heaviest cans required three or four hits with a *jakkibeisu*, but with this method, they became as flat as a tack, so the men could get more cans in the bag and save money.



Figure 1. *Jakkibeisu*, a tool used by homeless men in Tokyo to crush cans.

The advantage to the *jakkibeisu* was also that a garbage bag full of cans crushed by a *jakkibeisu* weighed significantly more because more cans could fit in the bag. Some of the men who used this tool have experienced shoulder aches, and others have developed a hunched back and neck. One man, Otani-san, who often sits on the curb and crushed his haul with a *jakkibeisu*, compounded his repetitive work injuries by often sleeping while sitting on the curb with his head and shoulders slumped.

Regardless of how the men gathered cans and crushed them, it was work and thus it provided a way for them to maintain their independence and freedom and earn enough income to get by. Their lives were precarious, because the men lacked formal work, healthcare, and housing, and the work they did depended

on other people drinking and disposing of valuable materials. In contrast, regularly employed workers could count on a regular salary, healthcare, and in Japan, company-provided housing. The lives of these homeless men were more precarious, as they refused to apply for welfare and state-sponsored health insurance and lacked any certainty of a minimum amount of cans and therefore a wage, but their work and the income it generated prevented them from being absolutely destitute and live even more precariously. Their work prevented them from being totally dependent on the various soup lines and the nearby free clinic. In addition to their work enabling them to live less precarious lives, the relationships with other homeless men also helped them to some degree as they could depend on them to share food, information, and safety.

Selling Cans and Getting Paid

Once the men collected and crushed their recyclables, they sold them. There were two main buyers, greatly influencing local conditions of scavenging labour among homeless men. The most popular buyer, a young man in his twenties, paid a little more and always came on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. The other buyer, much older, parked in a different area, came every day, except Sunday, and paid about 5 to 10 yen less. This buyer, the older one, had the sellers sign their names next to the amount on a receipt. Men experiencing homelessness often used pseudonyms, so the accuracy of these receipts is questionable, and the receipts seemed to be for show.

Some men developed a relationship with the buyers, especially the younger one, often having friendly conversations. The more popular buyer, the younger one, paid the most and was sociable, talkative, and smoked cigarettes with the men while buying cans. The recyclers would often come in waves and in between these busy times, a few men and the buyer would chat. Having a good relationship with him had benefits for sellers, as he might give them cigarettes, canned coffee or tea, and plastic bags. Although the buyer would not always give away plastic bags, when he did, the more cans a man sold, the more plastic bags he would receive. For example, Oba-san sold around 50 kg, so he received an entire pack of bags. The buyer sometimes needed help and would ask one of the men selling recyclables to throw away the trash that had gathered from the various sellers, typically an empty plastic bottle or two and discarded plastic trash bags and would give the man who helped him a can of coffee or another non-alcoholic beverage.

These gifts were not the only Japanese business practice the younger buyer replicated and, in some respects, he treated the men like clients. For instance, on 6 January 2009, the first day of work after the New Year's holiday, the buyer brought paper cups and a large bottle of sake, and some cans of beer for the men to drink as a New Year's gift. Men who did not normally socialize stayed to enjoy the sake, and those who usually socialized hung out, drank, and talked much longer than usual. The relationship the men established with this can buyer, however, did have limits. For example, when the price of aluminium dropped and some men learned of a new place paying 5 yen more per kg, they would go there when it was convenient, about once a week, but as Yamada said, "We still have to show our face [maintain the relationship] at the can buyer by the park, so he will keep buying our cans".

Maintaining a relationship seemed less of a concern for men who sold their cans to the older can buyer. He was probably in his fifties and was all business. He usually came around three o'clock and stayed for less than ten minutes, leaving after he bought all the cans. His schedule put pressure on the men to be on time, so most men lined up before three o'clock, although occasionally one recycler would be seen rushing to sell his loot before the buyer left. Sometimes the buyer needed a hand tying a tarp over the back of his truck, and whoever helped him usually received a can of coffee and a thank-you, but this transaction felt much more like a business transaction than a friendly gesture. This buyer usually had about ten men and one woman waiting for him. A woman selling cans was unusual, but the men would point to her as evidence that collecting recyclables is something that "normal" people do, reflecting the strong belief in Japanese society of the benefits of being ordinary (Ohashi and Yamaguchi 2019).

Both buyers had the same straightforward process to sell the cans. First, the scrap metal buyers weighed the bags. Since many men sold several bags, the buyer, each time a seller put a bag on the scale, wrote down the weight, totalled it, and paid in cash. The older can buyer, who was more business-like, rounded off the payment and the younger paid the exact amount, and if there was any change in the rate, they announced it before starting.

An unusual event I witnessed shows both that the scavenger took pride in their work and that their independence and income were dependent on the can buyer to buy their cans. With the weight of the bags determining how much money they made, it was unsurprising that several men waiting to sell their haul gasped when they were putting a plastic bag full of cans in the truck and some

trash came out. Two men picked out the trash, but not the man who sold the bag. The trash included four steel cans, two empty plastic bottles, and a couple of empty plastic bags. Putting anything that was not aluminium in the bag was considered cheating, and the men took their work seriously. Because they depended on the buyer's goodwill, many men were reluctant to put anything in their bags of cans other than aluminium because they were afraid the can buyer would not accept their recyclables. Another time, a frail-looking older man was selling a bag of cans, and as some other men placed his bag into the truck, the bag ripped, and a heavy comic book fell out of the bag. Seeing this, another homeless man exclaimed "*Yabai!*" ("Oh no!"). Subsequently, the younger can buyer subtracted the weight of the comic book from the older man's bag. Later, the can buyer explained that he has had men trying to sneak plastic bottles filled with water, books, and steel cans into their bags of aluminium cans.

Hardship and the Relationality of Scavenging Work

Being a recycler was not easy work, and it had several drawbacks. Most men usually did not wear gloves, so they would get cuts and blisters on their hands from picking up and crushing cans. Another downside was that the entire process was unsanitary, because the cans often contained liquid – usually remaining beer – so their hands smelled of alcohol, and the excess liquid caused the men to often have wet feet, leading to Athlete's foot. The work felt miserable. With sweat pouring off their foreheads in the summer heat and humidity, rain falling on them during the rainy season, and the repetitive, dull simple act of stomping a can required efforts that were far from enjoyable. Unlike in the past, when recycling was uncommon, most of the cans the men gathered during my fieldwork were already destined to be recycled, as they were almost always taken from a neighbourhood collection box to be picked up and recycled, so the community service element of their work was absent. The few cans they took from unmarked trashcans or cans that were littered in the park, however, did have a community service element.

Furthermore, if the men gathered recyclables in the morning, the neighbourhood residents, who put their cans in the recycling box, would see them, and maybe stare at them. Pushing a cart full of cans during rush hour meant that not just a few homemakers, but many people, would see them. When I collected with them, some people stared, some people looked disapprovingly, and others paid no attention.

That homeless men wanted to maintain their anonymity became obvious to me as I spent time with them. Crushing cans, a somewhat noisy process, could attract the eyes of tourists or locals. A tourist or anyone walking through the park staring at a homeless man could annoy or even anger them. If someone tried to take their picture when they were crushing cans, they may become angry. For example, Yamaguchi-san once yelled at a tourist who tried to take his picture, “*Shashin dame!*” (“No pictures!”). Saito-san used a less confrontational approach by working behind a park bench and covering his face with his hat when he saw someone and thought they were going to take his picture. While they had to crush cans, the unwanted attention brought on by the sound of the *jakkibeisu* smacking the aluminium reminded them of their need to protect their identity, since some men were hiding from debt collectors or from their families. Many men would not and did not discuss their families, even when asked directly, clearly indicating that their families were a taboo topic.

The intense competition to gather cans was another drawback. Homeless men would often describe neighbourhoods as *kondeiru* (“crowded”), with many men gathering cans. I repeatedly heard from them about how too many people were gathering cans. Their description gave the impression of many men walking the neighbourhood, but the notion of crowdedness with competitors can be relative, and just seeing another scavenger in the vicinity could signify crowdedness for them, and they would subsequently think it was hard to get cans. For example, when I was out with Takayama and Yamada on a hot and humid Friday morning in July, seeing another collector approach the recycling bin a minute or two before was disappointing for all of us because we knew the bin would be empty.

The relationship between Takayama and Yamada shows some of the solidarity, care, and community between the homeless men. While they worked as partners, as did a few others, most men worked alone but sometimes would receive help from friends. Examples include helping push extra carts of cans to the buyer, watching over each other’s belongings, and sharing goods and information. Sharing food was quite common, even among men who did not always get along. For example, I observed Suzuki tell me to share some drinks I had brought with me with his neighbours, whom he often bitterly criticized and had the occasional conflict with. Perhaps the strongest illustration of camaraderie occurred when Yamada became ill and later passed away. I visited him in the hospital as both a friend and researcher, and when I told his friends who lived in a small encampment consisting of a little more than ten people behind

the baseball field, they were quite appreciative, and Miki-san thanked me as he pointed out that they could not go visit him. When Yamada was in the hospital for several months the year before my fieldwork, a friend watched his stuff so that the park management would not throw it away.

However, encounters with residents while gathering cans were mixed. Some exchanges might have been embarrassing, such as when an older Japanese woman asked me, “*Kan iru no?*” (“Do you need cans?”) when I was waiting for her to put them in the recycling bin. While I appreciated her kindness to offer me the cans, I also felt ashamed to be offered help in this context. Other contacts might be confrontational. Yamada, in his sixties and from the Tohoku region in northern Japan, told a group of us that he was gathering cans one morning when a man confronted him, saying “*Toccha dame desuyo*” (“You can’t take the cans”). Yamada apologized, waited a minute, and after the man left, took the cans anyway. He laughed at the end of recounting the story. His need for money overshadowed the threat of the confrontation, and as he claimed, the man confronting him as an ordinary resident had no authority over him. Gaining the public’s support and understanding could make a significant difference in the lives of homeless men. With more public backing, ward officials might also change their attitudes toward homeless people and could help them better when applying for welfare.

Discussion

No matter how many cans the men gathered, they were dependent on the price of aluminium, which is connected to the global economy. Based on my fieldnotes documenting what the can buyers would pay per kilogram, the price of aluminium did not fluctuate much from March to September 2008. It hovered around 160 yen (\$1.55) per kg, although it increased briefly to 165 yen per kg in August, shortly before the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Many homeless men I interviewed explained the high price as China needing aluminium for construction projects for the Olympics, and most of the recyclers believed this idea and accepted it as fact. After the Olympics ended in August, the price did not drop. However, the price of cans started falling at the end of September and bottomed out in January, which corresponded to the Lehman Shock and the ensuing recession. The price dropped from 160 to 50 yen (\$1.55–\$0.49) per kg and then increased to 60 yen (\$0.58) per kg, and some men stopped selling cans since they decided it was not worth the effort at this price.

Unsurprisingly, some men attributed the drop in price to the end of the Olympics, but others who kept abreast of world events by reading newspapers at the library or discarded ones blamed the US economy. In their minds, their connection and dependence on the global economy were obvious. Several men – at least one or two in each group – referred to the Lehman Brothers collapse and the burst of the US housing market as prime examples of the connection and were aware that these global events impacted their livelihoods, as they were connected and impacted by these events. Others around them echoed their point about the US impact on their work.

With the drop in price, men had to make cutbacks. One homeless man, Kawano, reflected on the days of selling cans for 165 yen per kg, and called that time *natsukashii* (“nostalgic”, “missed”, or “fondly looking back”). The good times that he remembered included the long walks to gather cans, crushing them in the hot sun for more than an hour, and making just enough money to place some cheap bets on a Sunday afternoon. Now, men spend a little more time gathering cans, but even before the drop in price, they would bemoan, “If only I could get a few more cans, life would be better”. The drop in price due to forces beyond their control severely challenged their ability to maintain their independence and dignity as workers, but they still made some money and did not have to rely on soup lines.

The men who gathered and sold recyclables suffered more than a 60% decrease in their earnings – a demoralizing situation. People who were normally friendly and cheerful felt despondent. Usually, men were the happiest right after they sold their cans; however, as the price dropped over a month, no one was content with the significant decrease in their earnings. Given their position in society, they could do little to adjust to their new income. Some men stopped gambling or significantly decreased their betting, and the number of men attending soup lines increased because many needed to stretch their limited incomes. Considering their anger and frustration, surprisingly they rarely complained vigorously or grumbled to the scrap metal buyer, but men who knew I was an American would often blame me, half teasingly, although their anger was authentic. Without a “real job”, perhaps I symbolized the greed that had led to the Lehman Shock and the recession that had made their lives worse, so it was no surprise that their comments and questions about when I would get a real job increased.

The work of recycling is critical to the survival of homeless men and provides them with an identity and sense of worth. It encompasses a few key elements of their identity: pride, independence, and agency. Many men demonstrated

their pride by self-identifying as a *shokunin* (“craftsman”). Like day labourers in Yokohama who had a strong desire to work (Gill 2001), some homeless men in Tokyo looked down on those who did not work and attended soup lines. For example, Tomita, while looking at a group of men sitting and participating in the Tuesday church service and soup line, complained, “These men should be working, especially the younger ones. It is disgraceful”. Many men, like Tomita, grew up in poor or working-class families, learned the importance of work, and reflected the belief that able-bodied men should not receive a hand-out from the state or a soup line. Matthew Marr (1997) and Abby Margolis (2002, 2008) found similar attitudes among homeless men in Nagoya and Tokyo.

When asked if they could leave homelessness with the money they make from selling aluminium, many men dismissed the idea. What they did not explain, because it was understood, is that the initial cost of renting an apartment in Japan is quite expensive and includes a security deposit (1–2 months’ rent), key money (a gift to the landlord equal to 1–2 months’ rent) and the rent itself. Even though it is natural to think that the men would prefer to work stable jobs or receive support from the state via a stable social safety net, when one considers that “in Japan, poverty additionally means living with the stigma of personal failure” (Obinger 2009, 4), it is understandable that some men elect not to contact their family for help. This stigma works to keep men from applying for welfare out of fear that government social workers will contact their families (Gill 2015). Tomita, who worked in a car factory for several years before having a falling-out with his family and quitting his job, was waiting until he turned 65 to receive his pension. He was eligible for welfare, but a mix of pride and shame kept him from applying.

While the number of cans the public recycles influences the scavengers’ work, the most important variable to succeed in their work and maintain their sense of worth is the price of aluminium. Although the lives of homeless men were precarious before the recession, the recession quickly and clearly showed the limits of their survival strategies and their dependence on the global market that sets the price of aluminium. The Lehman Shock caused the Great Recession, which led to the price of aluminium dropping significantly, so the can buyers paid less to the homeless man for cans. While the men could bear the hard life of recycling cans because they still earned a little money to buy an *obentō*⁵ for lunch, or to spend it on gambling on horseraces, playing pachinko

⁵ A boxed lunch usually divided into sections including rice, fish or meat, vegetables, and pickles.

or buying sake or beer, the recession demonstrated clearly how their work and income is dependent on larger economic conditions.

While they were dependent on these conditions before the recession, the pain caused by the price drop exacerbated and illuminated this dependency. Wanting to maintain their autonomy and pride, some men responded by changing from aluminium cans to experimenting with cardboard or newspaper recycling, but others continued to do the same work. There were no buyers for cardboard and newspaper, so men had to haul them to the recycling centre about a 15-minute walk from the park where many men lived.

Most men embraced their work, continued to toil hard and lamented their victimization due to the recession and blamed the US economy. This contrasts with scavengers in San Francisco, who relied on their values from the past to stand up against globalization (Gowan 2000). While the scavengers in Tokyo would not label themselves as victims of neoliberalism, they did blame the US economy and the Lehman Shock for their lack of income and the decrease in their standard of living, while they also struggled to maintain some autonomy. While the forces of globalization did not change significantly after the crash, the crash revealed for the homeless men the role the global economy plays in their everyday lives, most poignantly for those struggling to make a living.

While some men might have worked in pairs or lent each other money, most worked individually and did not borrow or lend money; however, other goods were often readily exchanged. For example, after sweeping the area where a church had a soup line in the park, a church member gave Takayama a bunch of bananas, which he promptly shared with his friends, who had also helped sweep the area. Similarly, when a former homeless man came to visit Yamada, he brought beer and sake, which they shared with all the homeless guys around them. Finally, at one point in the fall everyone I talked to offered to give me canned peaches. For almost a week, several times a day, someone would offer them to me, but I did not manage to track down how so many peaches had become available.

Considering a comparison between the canners in Tokyo and the *catadores* in Brazil, one main difference between them is that the Tokyo scavengers lacked family relationships. Other scholars (Margolis 2002; Aoki 2006) have documented that day labourers and homeless men in Japan are not in contact with their families. For example, Gill's long-term friendship with a day labourer in Yokohama who had experienced episodes of homelessness confirmed the lack of a family relationship (2015). In my experience, some men lived in small groups

of four or five, and they worked as fictive kin groups (Stack 1975; Nelson 2014; Webb and Gazso 2017). These groups of homeless men would share resources and look out for each other, but these social relations were not emotionally deep because men guarded their privacy, limiting what they shared with others. With their desire to protect their privacy, life events and celebrations did not occur. Since they did not tell their neighbours and friends when their birthday or anniversary was, they could not celebrate it.

Although they lacked personal and community celebrations and contact with family, the homeless men did maintain their pride, and by doing so they worked to live less precarious lives. Scholars (Obinger 2009; Allison 2014) rightfully label these men as examples of precarious lives, but for them their work, while informal, and the various soup lines – which some men rejected, while others did not – kept their lives from being worse. These local resources of food provided meals almost daily, with at least four soup lines in Ueno Park, and most of them also gave food to homeless men to take with them. There were also soup lines twice a week along the river, about a 40-minute walk from Ueno Park. The soup lines not only functioned as safety nets for food, but also as social and work networking sites. Men greeted friends and acquaintances at the soup lines and could thus learn about other resources, including other food and work opportunities. Even those men who rejected attending soup lines would come to socialize but might not actually take the food.

Homeless men whom I have researched worked hard and took pride in their work, but this was exhausting for them, as Yamada once commented about how his two neighbours, who were sound asleep on the next bench, “worked hard and are probably tired”. Finally, Nishizawa points out that the scavengers “try to sustain their self-image of being independent by continuing to make a negligible amount of money collecting and selling aluminium cans while vowing never to scavenge rubbish outside restaurants and convenience stores” (2010, 209). While some men in my study did see their work as a way to maintain their independence, for many others, earning money from selling cans was simply about providing for themselves.

Conclusion

While documenting the precarious work of the scavengers in Tokyo, I learned – and my research shows – that they were connected to the larger global economy and that oftentimes they were aware of this connection. Early in my fieldwork,

they attributed the high price of aluminium to the upcoming Olympics and later blamed the US for the rapid and painful fall in the price. They also thought that Japanese automotive companies needed aluminium to manufacture cars. In Brazil, Millar (2014, 2018) found that the scavengers had significant family relationships, but most men in Tokyo would not discuss their kin, and only once did I see a family member visit a homeless man: a daughter visiting her father, giving him cash. As I was wondering why she did not help him more, Okamoto praised her for coming several times a year and remarked that she was to be commended for helping her father.

There are several larger themes beyond the men simply gathering and selling cans to survive. Their work, in combination with a few local resources that supported their lives (e.g., a free health clinic, soup kitchens, and friends), demonstrated that their lives and work were not as precarious as they could be. However, the health clinic, which has been operating for years, had rather limited hours and days of operation, and while the soup kitchens were dependable, since some of the churches came to offer food even in thunderstorms or typhoons, they provided only one meal per day. Nevertheless, in addition to the nontangible resources, homeless men could count on aluminium cans being available most days of the week, and although the number varied, there were always some cans and therefore always some money. However, the unpredictability of the number of cans they could collect exposed and added to the precarity of their work.

Collecting cans was vital to the livelihood and desired independence of homeless men, but their work was also dependent on other, more local forces (conditions of work). Allison quotes in this relation the well-known feminist scholar, Judith Butler, who argues that “precariousness implies living socially, that is the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of another [...] It implies [...] a dependency on people we know, and to those we do not know” (2013, 14). The homeless men from my study understood this dependency well. Suzuki, in his fifties, knew this dependency when he remarked, “People aren’t drinking tonight because of the weather. It will be a bad night”, implying that he would not make much money from empty alcohol cans. To put it succinctly, if people do not drink, the men will not eat.

In sum, many factors – some individual and local; others larger, systemic, and global – influenced the success of their work. The men experiencing homelessness adopted strategies to maintain their work ethic and achieve their goals, earning money to survive and in some cases, to live a better life. It is difficult to

overstate the importance of aluminium cans and other recyclables that the men sold for cash. Simply put, selling cans helped them make a living, as they often concluded, “If I do not collect and sell cans, I cannot eat”. Their work provided a lifeline in an otherwise precarious life and connected them to both local and global economic forces.

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