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## Dignity and indignation: How people experiencing homelessness view services and providers

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### Abstract

This article examines how people experiencing homelessness view their interactions with service providers. Drawing on a database of more than 500 transcribed interviews with people experiencing homelessness we find that descriptions of interactions with staff and providers were predominantly expressed in sharply negative terms, with experiences of objectification and infantilization being commonplace. In response to these experiences, nearly all were angry, and many simply opted out of the social service system in order to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect. We argue that these responses should not simply be analyzed as an individual psychological or cognitive response, but rather as a result of the power relations and social inequities in the provider-client relationship. This suggests that the perpetuation of homelessness is not internal to the homeless individual as many claim, but rather may be embedded in the service industry itself, which subjects *both* clients and providers to bureaucratic forms of authority and experiences of disrespect. These negative descriptions are juxtaposed with positive comments, which offer potential solutions from homeless individuals themselves. We conclude that qualitative research, in contrast to a reliance on statistics and best practice assessments, is an important tool in developing socially just policies and programs serving those in need.

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The missions are horrid. I mean, you go there and you got like half an hour or an hour of listening to, ‘You are homeless therefore you are dead. . .you’re damned and you better be saved, and that is the only way you’re gonna beat this problem.’ . . .I mean, the way they inspect you at the door and, and the way they talk to you as if you are shit, you know, just bossing you around like some. . .dog with no training or manners, you know, that is shitting on your carpet and I am like ‘I don’t want it.’ (Female, Portland, Oregon)

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It is common practice today for funding agencies, both governmental and nongovernmental, to require the “measurement” of “outcomes,” regular “progress reports,” and “best practices” from their fundees. These methods of evaluating how funds are spent are rationalized in terms of accountability and the “responsible” management of risk. In response to such requirements, many agencies serving people experiencing homelessness have initiated “homeless management information systems” (HMIS). These are computer-based programs that catalog information about services and outcomes in a very visible (e.g., in graphs and charts) and easily knowable way—and they have become a required component of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)’s “continuum of care plan” (O’Connell, 2003, pp. 165, 166; Lyon-Callo, 2000, p. 338; Cormier & Simmonds, 2006). Such a monitoring and reporting system creates what may be termed “a new grid of visibility” (Rose, 1996, p. 55) of poverty and homelessness wherein numbers, statistics, and audits – rather than the opinions of “clients” or social service experts themselves – become the best method for evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of a program. One report, for instance, states “It is our belief that many of the answers to the problems surrounding homelessness can be found in the data being collected” (Cormier & Simmonds, 2006, p. 9), suggesting that if better statistics were available, we would have better knowledge of the problem we wanted to solve.

Drawing on a database of over 500 coded and transcribed one-to-one interviews with people who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, we argue first, for the value of qualitative methods for assessing social services and second, that one way to enhance solutions to the complex problems of homelessness is to consider the qualitative experience of interaction between providers and “clients.” Qualitative research and qualitative questions do not displace “accountability” standards, but they do require a shift from questions about numbers served to ones about *how* they are served. To this end, we draw on interviews in the database to examine how people described their *experiences* with emergency shelters, hospitality kitchens, food stamp offices, and other providers in Portland, Oregon. The interviews were done by staff and volunteers at a nonprofit homeless advocacy organization in Portland, Sisters Of The Road.

Based on our synthesis of several sections of the database, we identify two particularly powerful types of responses people gave when explaining their experiences at organizations and interactions with staff and providers. We have termed them “objectification” and “infantilization.” They did not feel that they were treated as fully recognized adults or respected as equal citizens, but rather as numbers and children. In response to these experiences, many “opted out” of the social service system in order to *maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect* (see also Miller & Keys, 2001). Yet rather than taking such “distancing” as an explanation of behavior or psychological condition (e.g., Snow & Anderson, 1993), we take these narratives, to use Biehl’s (2004, p. 479) phrase, as “life codes,” “pieces of truth. . .through which the abandoned person attempts to hold onto the real.”

Of course, the system provides necessities for survival, so complete avoidance is unrealistic—especially for families with dependent children, which in 2005 accounted for one third of the homeless population.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it is critical to recognize that most respondents in this project did not have dependent minors for whom they were responsible, making opting out a more reasonable response. We do not mean to suggest that this “new grid of visibility” has created this treatment, but rather that an emphasis on numbers and statistics diverts

attention from experience in the social service system. This affects both those experiencing homelessness and the providers, who may be experiencing their own loss of dignity and respect with difficult working conditions and bureaucratic pressure to produce HMIS statistics.

While the literature on homelessness is extensive, there is limited work on the construction of self-worth and claims on dignity and rights by the marginalized. Most studies focus on demographic issues, individual problems, and structural concerns, rather than experiences by the actual users of services.<sup>2</sup> Glasser and Bridgman (1999) in fact note that describing *experiences* of homelessness contribute to our understanding of the issues and serve as a useful tool to advocate for solutions (see also Miller & Keys, 2001; Paterniti, 2000; Mifflin & Wilton, 2005), while Kerr (2003, p. 30) also argues for the value of “having [homeless individuals] as active participants in the formation of a collective analysis.” The interview database we have accessed provides descriptions of experiences in shelters, signing up for food stamps and other forms of aid, or interacting with case workers. We ask what their narratives tell us about their sense of self in the world of emergency services and social marginalization, about institutional relations in the service industry, and about the complexity of developing respectful and effective solutions.

### **1. Community collaboration: working with the Sisters Of The Road interviews**

The woman quoted in the opening of this article is one of over 600 people interviewed by members of a nonprofit in Portland, Sisters Of The Road, about their experiences of homelessness, their backgrounds, everyday lives, and what the solutions to homelessness might be. Sisters was founded in 1979 by two community organizers who sat down with those experiencing homelessness and asked them what people on the street and in the old hotels needed. People responded that they wanted to feel safe and to have “a place where we can dine with dignity and work for a meal if we don’t have money.” Thus, rather than opening another soup kitchen or mission, they opened a Café and today, 27 years later, people either pay \$1.25, barter through 15 min of work, or use their food stamp debit cards to pay for a nutritious meal.<sup>3</sup> Based on philosophies of nonviolence and gentle personalism, and a relational model from the Catholic Worker Movement,<sup>4</sup> the Sisters’ approach also led them to a *dialogic relationship* with those they serve. They asked their customers what they needed and what they would like, rather than assuming the answer *a priori*. Sisters did a second interview-based project in the early 2000s that aimed to develop solutions to homelessness, producing the database analyzed here. The interviews, conducted initially by paid staff and then volunteers, were done between Fall 2001 and Spring 2004, first in restaurants and cafes around Old Town Chinatown in Portland and then in offices maintained for this project. All interviewees received cash compensation (\$7.50) for their time and participation.

Five hundred and fifteen of the over 600 interviews were transcribed and coded. Volunteers, many of whom had themselves experienced homelessness, coded the transcriptions on computers, working with 150 different themes that ranged from employment to services to self-esteem. Within each of these themes, the comments were broken down into categories, and then again into subcategories. For instance, in the services theme, the categories include “staff issues negative” and “conditions positive/general.” The comments were then coded further—such that

the subcategories under “staff issues negative” include sections on “staff is rude/disrespectful” and “staff is lacking/indifferent in caring/compassion.” This article draws in particular on the themes:

- “positive conditions of services,” with 81 individuals making such comments (50 men, 23 women, 3 unrecorded)
- “negative conditions of services,” with 98 individuals responding (64 men, 32 women, 2 unrecorded)
- “positive staff issues,” with 68 individuals responding (42 men, 26 women)
- “negative staff issues,” with 136 individuals responding (91 men, 43 women, 2 unrecorded).<sup>5</sup>

Sisters had approached this project with the intent of shifting the voice of expertise from policy makers and other professionals to share it with those experiencing homelessness (see also Wright, 1997; Lyon-Callo, 2004). It was, by its very nature, a political project. Yet they also recognized that in order for the research to have the impact they wanted, they needed strategic partners, such as academics. After discussions with staff at Sisters about the value of the database and the political and social service changes they hoped would emerge from the interviewees’ narratives, Sisters offered us access.

This project is then necessarily *collaborative and dialogic*, both in terms of the production of the interviews and in terms of publications. In many ways this project fits into Hale’s (2006) framing of activist research despite (or because of) the fact that no academic was involved in its development (see also Hoffman, 2006). At the same time, it poses several interesting methodological dilemmas. This qualitative research embodies the collaborative production of knowledge, which does not mean it is conflict-free. It is based on conversations between advocates and those experiencing homelessness and thus built on relationships of community involvement and activism. Certainly not devoid of power relations and potential conflicts, it is a different kind of researcher–subject relationship than a typical academic project would generate (DeVerteuil, 2004). We are then accessing a “database” generated by another party. Database access in the social sciences, however, commonly occurs with *quantitative* data that is valued for its capacity to create tables and charts about the prevalence or causes of social issues such as homelessness. Here, in contrast, we are interested in this material precisely for its *qualitative value*.

## 2. Story-telling and talking back: listening to the interviews

As noted above, in today’s climate of “accountability,” evaluations typically work through notions of best practices, outcomes, and cost effectiveness. The “grid of visibility” inherent in an audit culture is focused on measurement – e.g., how many people slept in the shelter during May – and categorization – e.g., how many have addiction problems or how many can be diagnosed with mental illness. Homelessness thus becomes “knowable” and actionable for governments (local, state, federal), social service agencies, and independent nonprofits through such measurements. It also suggests a magnification (although not creation) of the objectification of “the homeless.”

By focusing on personal experiences and the authoring of life stories, this article challenges this more quantitative and “graph-able” way of knowing, as well as the individual-focused solutions to homelessness that they tend to generate. Rather than necessarily identifying “the problem” of their homelessness within themselves, as many current solutions do, the interviewees draw our attention to serious systematic and paradigmatic problems with social service provisioning and structural inequalities more generally. The problem to be solved, in other words, is not internal to the homeless individual as many claim.

These interviews also offer an opportunity for the speaker to construct his or her own personhood, to be *visible* in a manner distinct from the way the “new grid of visibility” “knows” and is able to “see” particular understandings of progress and success in addressing and fighting homelessness. Narrative story-telling allows one to counter stereotypical and stigmatized notions of “the homeless” or the invisibility of numbers, “evok[ing] the possibilities of alternative identities” (Juhila, 2004, p. 263; also Kerr, 2003; Lovell, 1997; Paterniti, 2000; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Snow & Anderson, 1993).<sup>6</sup> We make extensive use of quotes in this article, both to highlight how “identity work” for the homeless occurs through “identity talk” (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348) and “story making” (Lovell, 1997), and to provide space for homeless individuals to define their own lives and offer potential solutions to their living conditions. Moreover, these interviews help us understand how, even in the face of economic and political marginalization, people make claims on their dignity and rights as respected adults.

While there is quite a bit of “talking back” to the forms of authority and forces of power experienced by those interviewed we do not mean to imply that these narratives and their narrators are somehow able to step outside of power relations “to resist.” Rather, the production of subjects who resist institutionalized processes of subject-making and who literally “opt out” of the service system all together is a process of subject formation that is necessarily embedded in power relations. Furthermore, by highlighting the voices of those experiencing homelessness and making a point of shifting expertise from policy makers and academics, we do not mean to imply that people experiencing homelessness “have the unvarnished truth about the meaning of their experience” (Wright, 1997, p. 32). They too are enmeshed in gendered, raced, and class categories and social norms of a capitalist society. Moreover, they are constrained by the constitution of multiple subject positions, specifically the related processes of “provider” and “client” subject formation.

### 3. Situating the responses

While a significant number of the responses highlight how they were not treated with dignity or respect, we do not question the motives of staff and volunteers. We assume the majority are caring individuals who are constrained by limited resources, forms of bureaucratic authority, professional identities, low wages, fear of losing their status and privileges, and perhaps even precarious and abusive working conditions (see Passaro, 1996; Lyon-Callo, 2004; Williams, 2003). For example, many facilities adopted detailed rules about who could receive services, leading one social worker to note “So we don’t always have the freedom to help out of compassion because we have guidelines that we have to follow” (Marvasti, 2002, p. 648). Similarly,

the director of a Phoenix shelter noted “. . .the only thing that makes it possible to run this shelter smoothly, and save my sanity and that of my staff’s, is to have a set of rules that governs everything that goes on here” (in Stark, 1994, p. 555). Some studies have noted tensions around maintaining class lines between staff and residents (Lyon-Callo, 2004; Passaro, 1996), while other facilities deal with issues related to relying heavily on volunteers, “unpaid outsiders,” (Dordick, 1997, p. 165), or social work students in training (Wagner, 1993, pp. 126, 127). Some shelter workers have even resisted the conditions under which they work, have asked how they may do more substantive (social justice) work to address homelessness, and in this light have also questioned the desired background of new hires (Lyon-Callo, 2004, pp. 116–120).

In addition, we do not posit that there is a coordinated conspiracy to control the downtrodden and further marginalize the poor and hungry, even as we recognize that many housing and emergency service programs are chronically underfunded. Rather, we aim to examine the mechanisms and logics through which people are degraded and controlled, including funding cuts, the “fragmentation” of services, and institutionalized policies reducing “caseloads and costs, as well as to privatize services,” what has been termed “new poverty management” (DeVerteuil, 2003, p. 361; DeVerteuil, 2005; Wolch & DeVerteuil, 2001). The complicated institutionalized processes of social interaction in shelters and agency offices, and under such conditions, produce client as well as provider subjectivities, through “characterizations and counter-characterizations” (Desjarlais, 1999, p. 469; see also Marvasti, 2002; Paterniti, 2000).<sup>7</sup>

A number of studies have analyzed how people experiencing homelessness – now termed clients – emerge as subjects who “adopt” strategies to interact with providers and to survive.<sup>8</sup> These strategies have been identified as accommodation, avoidance, distancing, and resistance (Wagner, 1993; Desjarlais, 1996; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Snow & Anderson, 1993).<sup>9</sup> “Clients,” for instance, may comply with the rules and regulations, engage in what Lyon-Callo (2000) terms self-blame (see also Goode & Maskovsky, 2001; Desjarlais, 1999), try to “salvage the self” (Snow & Anderson, 1993), resist being treated as a “case” (Williams, 2003, p. 92), or they may choose to opt out of the system to retain a sense of dignity.

At the same time, providers interact with those experiencing homelessness within a climate of cutbacks and service reduction, helping to shape providers who are trained to be suspicious of clients, who may question the honesty of those in need (i.e., assume there is fraud), and who must maintain “social control” and “order” in shelters (DeVerteuil, 2004, pp. 374–375; see also Ong, 2003). The bureaucratic pressures staff experience confront the reality of increasing homelessness as cities lose single room occupancy facilities (SRO) and affordable housing with gentrification,<sup>10</sup> and wages stagnate and employment becomes less secure.

#### 4. Infantilization and objectification

In a word, [the services in Portland] suck. . .you know, I went into the majority of all of them one day and told them I was allergic to wool blankets. They were like, we don’t care, here is a blanket, take it or leave it. You know, they have the attitude, ‘*well, you’re homeless, you don’t know what the hell you want. . .we’re not homeless and we know what you need.*’ (Male, emphasis added)

In examining the “conditions of services” and “staff interactions” sections of the database, a dominant theme that emerged in the interviews was experiences of disrespect. Negative comments about interactions with staff, for instance, were overwhelmingly about issues of disrespect, rude treatment, lack of compassion, incompetence, and unethical behavior by staff. One hundred and thirty six people made a total of 287 negative comments about staff, with 44% of these comments referencing the themes of disrespect listed above.<sup>11</sup> More specifically, the comments often revolved around the notion that they were “treated like a child,” and “are like a piece of shit to them.” One man said, “. . . it is just the lack of care that they, people working there, gave you. They treated everyone like children, like trash.” Another noted that the social services “don’t think we are human” and another person said that in the AFS Office she “felt really disrespected and pretty much dehumanized.” Miller and Keys (2001) also argue that the “lack of individual identity,” along with other experiences, such as unfair treatment, and arbitrary rules, violate the dignity of homeless individuals. In order to cope with this and to maintain a sense of dignity, many interviewees described “opting out,” choosing not to frequent service providers to the extent possible. This creates an additional set of issues, such as homeless camps under bridges, ones commonly referred to in discussions of chronic homelessness. It also directs our attention to an important reason *why* people are not “moving through” the system, that is, the social inequities embedded in provider–client interactions. In addition, while the literature on homelessness and emergency shelters often notes negative experiences, it rarely provides evidence of how people hold onto their dignity.<sup>12</sup>

The attitude that providers know better is what we term the infantilization of people experiencing homelessness. Other researchers have also reported that staff in shelters often acted in a “parental” manner to the residents, essentially infantilizing them (Desjarlais, 1996; Borchard, 2005). Lyon-Callo (2004, p. 65) reports that staff in a shelter in Massachusetts in fact were trained “to think of their work as similar to training a child” and thus to employ “parenting techniques” in their interactions with them. The interviewees in this database equated feeling as though they were being treated “as children” with control, unequal power relationships, disrespect, and an abuse of authority by shelter staff. Similarly, in one of the shelters where Borchard (2005, pp. 105–113) did research, he describes a status system among shelter residents displayed in colored dots on badges. The “lowest” level, for new arrivals and those without employment, was expressed with a red dot, which one man said made him feel like a private in the military. Infantilization processes like this lead to a sense among those seeking services that providers have little or no respect for them.

Often individuals being treated in an infantile manner are individuals who are educated and who have experienced success and stability previously in their lives. For example, one man who holds an associates degree noted, “Ten years in the service and 10 years in my own business, they are telling me that I do not know what I am doing. That is a bit much, don’t you think?” A 37-year old woman with some college education explained that many providers assumed she had drug, alcohol, or related problems because she was homeless. She noted in the interview that many people were homeless “because of the economy. . . they need to realize that and they don’t.” She continued that “they treat everybody the same. . . like they are in elementary school.” Then she added,

OK, you know I am an adult; I deserve to be treated like an adult. I lost my job; I lost my apartment. I don't drink, not excessively, I mean, come on, I am not an alcoholic. I mean I have something to drink once a week maybe. . . I hate being homeless. I never wanted to be homeless. It's embarrassing to be homeless. . . I expected better of myself so that makes my self-esteem even worse.

A 27-year old male who did admit to a drug problem still refused to be treated in a derogatory manner.

Yeah, I tried the Salvation Army program they had up there but I had too much personal pride to be talked down to and to be treated like a child. . . I still carry a lot of pride being a veteran and I was not about to have somebody talk to me like I am a street fellow. . . They have the attitude, we can. . . treat you how we want because if you do not like it you can get out. . . there is 10 more guys waiting for your bed.

Another way that individuals felt they were disrespected was through objectification in that they were treated simply as “a number.”

You see it in action, the way they talk to you. . . You are not the one giving me the food stamps; you are doing a job that you are being paid for. Do your job. Do not degrade me, and that is the way it is, they look down on you, every damn one of them in there, you know. *As soon as you walk through the door you are not a name or you are not a person, you are a number . . . you can institute all the programs in the world you want, but with the attitude that people have towards the homeless running these organizations, none of them are going to work until they learn a little bit of compassion, you know. They need to understand that we are people, not a number.* (Male, emphasis added)

Contributing to such experiences are the conditions in the shelters themselves, places in which “minimal provisions. . . and minimal privacy. . . express a vision of the homeless as bare life, as beings stripped of human personhood and individual identity” (Feldman, 2004, p. 96).<sup>13</sup> Bare life refers to a state of being outside the realm of human jurisdiction, a state of exception that is in fact a state of having been abandoned (Agamben, 1998). Being treated only as a number is symptomatic of a kind of abandonment by mainstream society. One woman's description of a mission exemplifies the conditions of minimal provisions, a state of exception, and abandonment.

At the Salvation Army there was a mat on a dirty floor, and that is what you got, and a blanket. There were no beds; there was nothing, but mats and floors and lots of women who were obviously sick and needed to be taken care of. They are coughing and sneezing all night long. At 6:30 in the morning you are out of the shelter and out on the streets in the rain. . . There is nowhere to go except for the park.

In addition to treating the homeless as children or as numbers, many staff members were perceived as simply being “rude.” Several interviewees were quite articulate about the effect of such behavior. These quotes draw our attention to the complex relationship between staff at provider agencies and the people who come for assistance. By controlling resources and access to goods and services, staff attempt to elicit certain kinds of behaviors from the interviewees. Concomitantly, however, the interviewees use notions of “professional” behavior standards to critique the staff's behaviors (see also Williams, 2003, pp. 85–93). For instance, one person

pointed out that when going to service providers, the homeless do not want to deal with “people trying to keep [them] down or lower [their] self-esteem.” She continued:

You walk into a food stamp office; I feel that I should be cared about. Show me concern, walk the path. . .with me. If you burn out from your job, move on. Give it to somebody else that cares. . .but don’t just sit there and take it out on me. (47 years old)

Others expressed similar sentiments.

They applied for that job. Nobody has made them get that job. They knew what the job description was. They knew where they were going to be working. They knew what kind of people they were going to be dealing with. How dare they come in there and get a job like that and be rude and, and not want to help and expect you to kiss their ass just to get some help. It is so fucked. How dare you! Ah it frustrates me so bad. (Female, high school degree)

The staff there is highly unprofessional. You go up to the desk and they’ll just be reading the newspaper, or they’ll just be playing cards and. . .they ignore people. . .they think they’re too good to talk to you. You know, they have this job and you don’t and so they don’t want to talk to you. . .If I were their supervisor I would fire them for sure. . .It’s an abuse of their authority. (Male, 45 years old, 4-year degree)

This last interviewee added that being treated in a professional manner meant being treated “with respect. . .and courtesy” and that there should be a minimum standard of professional behavior on the part of the staff. [Joanne Passaro \(1996, p. 8\)](#) suggests that part of the problem with staff–client relations may be that they both “belonged to the same employment pool.” The staff’s structural positioning was, in other words, too close to their clients, leading to impressions of job burn out and unprofessional behavior by the interviewees. Additionally, as noted above, providers were themselves constrained by welfare reforms and institutional rules that emphasized personal responsibility and reducing the state’s “burden.” One woman who volunteered at a shelter explained how the managers “brainwashed” them with so many rules. “No, don’t let them do that. No, don’t let them do that,” she explained they told her. “I go then, what the fuck are we here for? Aren’t we here to help these people?” (45 years old, some high school).

The interviewees expressed dismay at this kind of social distancing that ultimately made them feel, as this man says, that “it’s just not worth it.”

It seems to me all the agencies. . .make everything so hard and so aggravating for you that you’ll give up. . .It’s almost like it’s designed to see how aggravated they can get you. . .The majority of people walk out the door, they’re frustrated. It’s just not worth it. It’s not worth the hours and hours and hours of holding a ticket number in your hand. . .It’s the attitude like, ‘well, here’s another one’ . . .Usually they can’t answer the question; they tell you to go to another building, another place, and keep pushing you down the line. I guess hoping that you’ll get discouraged and you’ll just forget all about trying to get housing or trying to get a check or something.

The implication of such comments is that for many of the interviewees, the only way for them to hold onto their humanity and dignity, that is to exist not only as ‘bare life,’ is to leave the system and live on the streets.

## 5. Implications: how to hold onto one's humanity

I am quite aware of the services and stuff. . .and I would not touch them with a ten foot pole. I have gone to these places for meals and it is the most degrading, impersonal, disrespectful experience in the world.

Refusing to touch the services with a 10 foot pole because of the degrading and disrespectful treatment is what we term “opting out” whereby individuals avoided services and providers to the extent possible. A common theme was that they avoided providers not just because of petty rules and regulations, but because to consume the services and to interact with providers led to a deterioration of their self-esteem and dignity.<sup>14</sup> This is not merely a “psychological consideration” (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 81) for the discourse of opting out affords them an important sense of agency that allows them to disappear from one grid of visibility and reappear on their own terms.<sup>15</sup>

Echoing our arguments above, one man was explicit about what going to a shelter meant for his sense of self.

Well, because *all you are in the shelter is a number*. . .If you get involved in the shelter, you have no life. . .Your choices are taken away from you. Your self-respect is taken away from you. *You are treated like a small child*. It says if they think that because you are living this way you cannot make any decisions on your own, that you have no ability to. . .to decide anything for yourself and. . .I am not going to let them do that to me anymore. They have made too many decisions for me and. . .it has gotten me nowhere. . .*I do not consider myself a number*. (emphasis added)

These individuals tend to live on the street rather than in shelters and tend to ignore other services available to them. They valued this sense of independence and often expressed disdain for people who did not opt out. Rejection of the system is how they held onto their dignity, made claims about their right to belong (and thus not to be abandoned), “claiming experience on [their] own terms” (Biehl, 2004, p. 478): “I refuse to be treated that way,” one man explained. “[I learned] to survive. . .on the streets and slept under bridges, because to me, I had more dignity living under a bridge than I did living in that shelter.”

While many policy makers tend to identify individuals who opt out as one of the most serious homeless problems, reflection on this database and the reasons many respondents gave for opting out of the service system make it critical that we ask where “the problem” actually lies—within the homeless person or with the social service system itself? (see also Williams, 2003; Lyon-Callo, 2004; Mathieu, 1993) Is the answer forcing people into shelters, arresting them, or something else all together? Given the powerful negative views in this database about what happens to the self-respect of those experiencing homelessness when dealing with service providers, it seems important to ask if our current system is helping to solve or to perpetuate the problem. These narratives, along with evidence from other qualitative studies (e.g., Williams, 2003; Miller & Keys, 2001) suggest that providers and policy makers need to engage in a significant degree of self-reflection about the quality of treatment by providers. In the following section, we return to the narratives for a different kind of “story-telling”—one that offers examples of services that have provided experiences of self-respect and dignity.

## 6. Experiencing respect

We suggest it may be helpful to examine aspects of services that the interviewees viewed positively in order to offer potential solutions, and to better understand what people identify as dignified treatment. While there were a total of 68 individuals (42 men, 26 women) who made positive comments about staff issues and 81 individuals (50 men, 28 women, 3 unknown) who made positive comments about conditions, negative comments, as also noted by Miller and Keys (2001), often “were given in greater detail and seemed to convey more powerful images than those concerning the validation of dignity” (p. 348). Moreover, in this database, a majority of the people commenting on staff and conditions noted negative experiences rather than positive ones (136 noted negative staff interactions; 98 noted negative conditions of services).

The positive comments often revolved around staff members showing that they cared about the individual, they were treated as a full human being, and that they were given the space and privacy to rest. In describing a worker at one center, a 39-year old woman said:

She is always really nice to me when I go there, you know, she makes me feel like I am a human being and not just another bum or something, you know. . . It is because she acts like she is happy to see me every time she does see me. (some high school)

Many of the positive comments were about shelters that served women in particular, highlighting how people experience respect in different ways. Rather than being punitive towards the clients, staff at these centers, according to the interviewees, “cared” and supported them by being flexible with rules. One woman explained that the staff was “accommodating.” “They knew I was trying to get out of the homeless situation,” she said, “so they would give me permission to come in late. . . because I was at work. I felt that was very nice. I think it is wonderful that it’s there for some people” (some college). Passaro (1996, p. 83) refers to this as the idea that women, as opposed to homeless men, are “potentially rehabilitatable.” Borchard (2005) also reminds us that cultural stereotypes around age and gender affect the way society views homelessness. Women and children are viewed with compassion while men are judged to be at fault (see also Liebow, 1993; Passaro, 1996; Williams, 2003).<sup>16</sup>

In addition, the freedom of movement and the opportunity to be in a space that felt “like home” was especially important to these women. One of the centers “feels like a home to me. . .” one woman said, “because there is so much love there.” Others commented specifically on the fact that they could sit without being bothered, without being told to move along, and without being harassed by staff.

That’s so great, we can go in there for like 4 hours and watch a movie and take our shoes and socks off and just rest and relax and not be bothered by anybody. It’s great; it’s just like sitting in somebody’s living room. (Female, 50, some high school)

They have a place where you can just sit. If you want to just sit for a couple of hours you could take a book and sit. That is really important to people that are on the street – sit and not being chased off or harassed or somebody trying to buy something from you or sell something to you. (Female, 52, some college, Voc certificate)

In addition to being able to feel like they are in a home, with a little private space, these facilities were important to the women because the staff treated them with respect

and dignity, again in contrast to the majority of comments about the missions and shelters.

Because [this facility] is for women only and you can kick back if you want to and feel comfortable. I can drink a cup of coffee without just men being around, period, you know, yes. . .yes, I get space, you know, private little space for a few hours, get your thoughts or whatever, together.

One of the organizations not only helped the women find jobs and housing, but they also allowed them to return to the center for help, guidance, and even holiday celebrations (see also [Shinn et al., 1998](#); p. 1655). This continued support was described in detail by a 31-year old woman who spent 8 months in their 11-month program.

What they do is they first have you get established with whatever type of counseling or drug and alcohol treatment, whatever you need first. Then they start working with your financial problems. . .then they help you start looking for housing in a place where you know that you'll be safe. . .and the payment to move in, if you don't have the money to move in right away. They will pay your rent for your first month if that's necessary too. You can come back there for the dinners. . .just to say hi to old friends or just know that you're still a part of this group so you don't end up feeling like. . .well, I'm out on my own now and nothing is going to help me. . .And they'll help you for up to two years after you move out. (GED)

Another organization which provoked a positive reaction from individuals was Sisters Of The Road Café. A defining feature of Sisters, the organization that sponsored this research, is that they prioritize treating everyone with respect and dignity. The Café is set up as a place where people are treated as customers would be at any public restaurant. In addition, people are able to work for the equivalent of a meal with 15 min of labor in the Café and can accrue credit for future meals.

You go in there, relax without having to feel like you are in a mission or something, you know. People there are nice to you and they treat you with respect, as a person, you know, not well, as a homeless person. . .they give you a little bit more dignity. (Female)

I like it; it's nice, good people. If you do not have the money, 15 min worth of work, you've got food. Cannot gripe on that, or volunteer to help them out and you get a whole bunch of marks on the books that says you can eat. I think it's good, yeah, I think there should be more of that. (Male, 55 years old, some high school)

A 50-year old female reinforced the idea that being able to work for or pay for your food was empowering because it was “like you're going into a real restaurant. It's like you're a real person and you're being like treated like a real person. . .It helps your self-esteem” (some high school). The positive reactions to some agencies and the reasons given for those reactions suggest that relatively minor changes in policy and practice should be considered for they will help establish a sense of dignity among the clients, thus allowing for greater success in the organizations' goals.

## 7. Conclusion: treating people with dignity

If we expect to make inroads toward solving homelessness it is important that homeless individuals feel it is possible to become a part of “mainstream society.” This can only be accomplished when they are consistently treated with respect in a variety of settings, retaining a sense of dignity. This issue certainly does not eliminate the need for diverse solutions, particularly when faced with the lack of a living wage, high housing costs, and continued cuts in funding for services. Yet we argue it deserves greater emphasis in the fight against homelessness given the potential benefits that might be derived from such a shift by service providers, who are themselves also subject to bureaucratic forms of authority and experiences of disrespect.

Accountability measurements and statistical outcomes offer information about numbers served, but they do not contribute data on the quality of that experience. Thus, qualitative research, specifically examining individual experiences and the stories people tell about their lives, are important tools in the study of policies addressing homelessness. Examining the quality of people’s experiences does not in and of itself end homelessness, but it does help us understand how experiencing a lack of respect and dignity may turn individuals away from services intended to help them.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/families.pdf>. While an increasing percentage of the homeless population is made up of families with children, this database draws primarily on an adult population. Thus, the conditions, circumstances, and decisions surrounding their homelessness are not the same as those experienced by families with young children.
2. On this issue, see Acosta and Toro (2000); Freund and Hawkins (2004). For examples of studies that do examine experiences, see Snow and Anderson (1987); Snow and Anderson (1993); Liebow (1993); Williams (2003); Dordick (1997); Burns (1998); Glasser (1988). For an argument for the value of “biographical” research on homelessness see May (2000). For more on how life histories “reveal” important aspects of the social context that might be “obscured in the structural study of processes as such” see Marcus (1998), p. 94 (quoted in Biehl, 2004, p. 478).
3. Genevieve Nelson, a co-founder of Sisters, was instrumental in fighting for federal legislation allowing people to use their food stamps at designated restaurants. See also Morell (2007).
4. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker Movement in the early 1930s. Sisters pulled many ideas about nonviolence and treating people with respect from this Movement and Day’s work.
5. Demographic information about gender, age and educational level was recorded from many of the interviewees, but not for all. We include it with quotes when available.
6. Narratives, Franzosi (1998) also notes “are packed with sociological information” (p. 517), making them important sources of social science “data.”

7. Much literature that examines the interaction between shelter staff and shelter users do so through the concept of “shelterization” that builds on the idea that shelters are “total institutions.” Our discussion of the production of provider and client subjectivities, however, is skeptical of this notion of the shelter as a total institution in the lives of those experiencing homelessness (see [Marcus, 2003](#)). Rather, we draw on the work of Foucault to understand how norms, rationalities, and points of truth shape subjectivity.
8. Drawing on the work of Michel de [Certeau \(1984\)](#), [Desjarlais \(1996\)](#) makes an important distinction between the use of strategies by shelter staff and the use of tactics by shelter residents as residents “had few grounds – spatial, political, or economic – on which to stand” (p. 886). Residents could “adopt, borrow, mimic” or entirely avoid “the frames of meaning” used by staff, but they could not change those frames (p. 894). Thus, while we do use the term strategies to describe some of the responses by clients and residents, we do not mean to imply they are in equal power relationships with staff.
9. [Snow and Anderson \(1993\)](#) have even devised a typology of “generic types” of the recently dislocated, straddlers, and outsiders.
10. For more on the history of the loss of affordable housing, see [Wright, Rubin, and Devine \(1998\)](#).
11. There were a total of 43 coded subcategories in the negative staff interactions section of the database. The top four categories covered these themes, accounting for 44% of all the comments made.
12. [Miller and Keys \(2001\)](#) have done one of the few studies that take dignity as an important variable in addressing homelessness.
13. [Feldman \(2004\)](#) distinguishes between therapeutic shelters that “treat their clients as subjects-in-the-making – persons with pathologies and dependencies” and emergency shelters that provide only “minimal provisions” (p. 95).
14. In 1984, Kim Hopper made a similar point in testimony about shelters in New York City. See [Dordick, 1997](#), p. 111–112.
15. This should be distinguished from the “outsider” category in [Snow and Anderson’s](#) study (45% of those they interviewed) which is made up of individuals with street identities who “rarely talk[ed] about getting off the street” (1993, p. 58). For an interesting discussion of various responses to poor treatment in shelters, see [Wagner, 1993](#).
16. Clearly gender and domestic violence are important aspects of these dynamics, but a thorough discussion is beyond the scope of the present article.

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