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"Not Homeless Yet. I'm Kind of Couch Surfing": Finding Identities for People at a Homeless Shelter

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ABSTRACT

The meanings of homelessness are fluid and socially constructed, providing resources and limitations for individuals to negotiate their identities and relationships in everyday life. In this study, we examine the strategies and corresponding resources utilized by people who are homeless to cope with the labeling of a homeless identity and to redefine their identities. We used constant comparative analysis to examine in-depth interviews with 16 participants (male = 11, female = 5) who access a local homeless shelter in the southwest United States for resources. We identified three strategies that homeless people adopt to cope with the labeling of homeless identity: (a) differentiating oneself from others who are homeless, (b) prioritizing certain aspects of life, and (c) embracing the status of homelessness. Although these strategies have been identified in previous literature, the authors extend this line of research by identifying the common resources people who are homeless utilize when adopting these strategies, which entail important implications for theory development and practical implications.

Homelessness is a perpetual, knotty issue located at the intersection of multiple social issues, including health and wealth disparities as well as social and structural injustice (Boydell, Goering, & Morell-Bellai, 2000; Parsell, 2011). However, the very definition of *homelessness* is still under debate because the term *home* carries different meanings for different individuals, organizations, and governments (e.g., a physical place to sleep, a sense of belonging, or a sense of security; Riggs & Coyle, 2002). Because many people who are homeless often transition between homelessness and inadequately housed situations, we use the term *individuals/people who are homeless* to refer to a broad category of people who may be homeless and/or at risk of being homeless.

Despite the fluid distinction between homeless and nonhomeless statuses and the wide diversity of homeless populations, people who are homeless are often conceptualized as a group of people who share certain characteristics and are subject to portrayal of negative characters (Kyle, 2013). Such attributions is a form of social control to discourage individuals from enacting behaviors that a social system deems undesirable, destructive, or problematic. In this study, we use the term *homeless identity* to refer to the socially constructed, culturally situated identity that invokes multifaceted negative stereotypes.

Because of the diverse definitions and fluid meanings of *homelessness*, experiences of homelessness are not readily evident. In the following sections, we first examine the process through which homeless identities can be constructed and imposed upon through social interactions. Using interviews conducted and transcribed by undergraduate students, we examine how individuals at a homeless shelter manage their personal identities. Finally, based on our findings, we explore future research directions and policy recommendations.

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The social construction of homelessness and homeless identities

By drawing inspiration from Charmaz's (1991) work on individuals' identity management during chronic illness, we examine identity work among individuals who experience homelessness. Illness is socially constructed because it entails implications and imposes obligations for the patient as well as his or her support network (e.g., family members; Green, 2003). A diagnosis can transform individuals' identities, relationships, and their worldviews. In addition, illness provides resources and opportunities that an individuals may not otherwise have had (Pitaloka & Hsieh, 2015). However, the distinctions between health and illness can become porous (e.g., when patients are asymptomatic), providing opportunities for individuals to negotiate meanings of their identities and illness.

Like illness, the fluid boundaries of homelessness can provide ample opportunities and resources for individuals to redefine their identities and construct life meanings. Like stigmatizing illnesses, homelessness entails social stigma and imposes limitations on individuals' everyday life. Experiencing homelessness has a profound impact on individuals' identities as one is confronted with the loss of valued attributes (e.g., social roles and personal outlooks; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Recognizing that the label of a homeless identity, just like an illness identity, can be dispreferred for some, we propose that people who are (at risk of) experiencing homelessness would adopt various resources to resist, negotiate, and redefine the labeling of a homeless identity. We argue that individuals can experience "identity dilemmas" as they face the increasing possibility and reality of their homeless status, resulting in widening gaps between a homeless identity and their desired identities.

Identities are socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed at the institutional and individual levels (Omi & Winant, 1994). Individuals do not have full control of their identities. Although people can meticulously prepare for their identity performances, such performances inevitably face the evaluations and responses from others. For example, a homeless person may obtain a Graduate Equivalency Diploma in hopes of obtaining better jobs only to realize that she or he is not eligible due to past criminal records or a lack of fixed address. Certain behaviors and performances can give off undesired identities. For example, though one can dress well during the day to mask a homeless identity, a well-dressed person sleeping in a public park at 5AM can be easily perceived as a person who is homeless. In addition, individuals who are homeless face unique challenges in their identity management. Without a house to conceal undesirable behaviors, homeless identities can be self-reinforcing, drawing attention to homeless people's problematic, deviant behaviors (e.g., camping, sleeping, urinating, and defecating in public; Parsell, 2011), resulting in further social isolation and stigmatization.

Identity management of people who are homeless can be a complicated process. People who are homeless can create hierarchies and subgroups within the larger homeless population, noting that some are better than others (Boydell et al., 2000; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Faced with limited resources and opportunities, individuals who are homeless may adopt a socially imposed and expected identity to maximize resources (e.g., utilize shelter, receive social service, or obtain additional sources of income; Parsell, 2011). For example, public services staff reward homeless individuals who assume the role of submissive reformers (Wasserman & Clair, 2013). An adolescent who is homeless may intentionally act tough or aggressive to minimize threats to personal safety (Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004). Rather than viewing such performance as internalized understanding of the Self, many people who are homeless view it as survival strategies (Gwadz et al., 2009). Nevertheless, a successful performance requires them to acknowledge the public's (potentially stigmatizing) attitudes, which may result in subtle changes in their identities (Conrad & Barker, 2010). Gradually but surely, individuals face identity dilemmas between the externally -imposed homeless identity and their desired identity (Riggs & Coyle, 2002).

Previous literature posits identity work among people who are homeless as fluid, but little is known about the specific process and resources individuals utilize to resist, negotiate, or embrace homeless identities as they manage identity dilemmas (McCarthy, 2013). In this study we ask, "What are the strategies and corresponding resources people who are homeless utilize to cope with the labeling of a homeless identity and to redefine their identities?"

Table 1. Strategies and Corresponding Resources for Identity Management for the Homeless.

Strategies	Resources	Exemplary Quotes
Differentiating oneself from homeless others	Personal hygiene and health	I had one of those solar showers like when you're going camping, and the black bag hanging, the sunlight hits them and heats them up. So I had my own shower. *Homer*
	Lack of addiction	I'm 30 years old, and I am proud to say that that I've never been drunk. I've been slightly buzzed but never drunk, and I've never touched cigarettes, and I never will. *Hilary*
	Employment	I'm not homeless. I have a job. *Haiden*
Prioritizing certain aspects of life	Productive self in the past	I'm an engineer. Then I had seven heart attacks and five surgeries. *Harris*
	Family and significant others	I come here to utilize the toothbrushes and toiletries. Sometimes save- it helps save money cause I have a lot of kids. *Hayes*
	Pride and a sense of responsibility	If you notice that it's just a burden on yourself, why would you want to place the burden on anyone else? *Hugo*
Embracing the state of homelessness	Obtaining new perspectives about life	Honestly, there was times when I was happier out here homeless than when I was living with my wife. *Henry*
	Perceiving self as a member of homeless community	We isolate ourselves. […] We know we are shunned by society and we know how they feel. *Helen*

Method

Participants

In total, 28 persons who access a local homeless shelter in the southwest United States for resources were interviewed by undergraduate students. However, due to equipment failure, including malfunctioned recording equipment and corrupted or lost audio files, only 16 interviews (participants: male = 11; female = 5) are included in the analysis of this study. Participants' age ranged from 21 to 60 ($M = 40.37$ years, $SD = 13.04$). The length that participants visit this shelter ranged from 6 months to 13.5 years ($M = 35.92$ months, $SD = 43.83$).

Procedures

Twenty-eight undergraduate students each conducted a semistructured, individual interview with a person who was homeless. The interview was part of a course requirement in an upper-division communication course. All students have successfully completed Intuitional Review Board training and received 2-week training on qualitative interviews. The students were encouraged to listen to narratives of people who are homeless and follow an organic flow of their interactions. The authors were present in all interviews and took field notes during the interview process.

Each interviewee received a $10 Wal-Mart gift card. The average time of interview was 24.69 minutes ($SD = 9.39$). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the student interviewers. The authors assigned pseudonyms to all participants. All procedures were approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Boards.

Data analysis

We used constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and NVivo 10 to code interview transcripts and analytic memos. During open coding, one of the major themes was individuals' construction of the Self. As a result, in our second phase of coding (i.e., selective coding), we identified narratives in which participants discuss (a) how they view themselves, (b) how they respond to others imposed identities, and (c) how they strategically present or construct their image, performance, or identities. In particular, we were interested in examining the various strategies and the corresponding resources individuals adopt as they cope with the labels of a homeless identity. We held weekly meetings to review our individual memo, clarify emerging categories, and check for inconsistencies or missing themes.

After finalizing a set of categories, the first author revisited the transcript to identify the exemplars for each theme. We italicized participant narratives to highlight our emphasis.

Results

We identified three strategies that people who are homeless utilize to cope with the labeling of homeless identity: (a) differentiating oneself from others who are homeless, (b) prioritizing certain aspects of life, and (c) embracing the status of homelessness. Although these strategies have been identified in previous literature (e.g., Boydell et al., 2000; Parsell, 2011; Snow & Anderson, 1987), we extend this line of research by identifying the common resources utilized by people who are homeless when adopting these strategies. Although these strategies are conceptually distinctive, they are not mutually exclusive.

Differentiating oneself from others

Some participants consciously highlighted their virtues based on their individual attributes and characteristics, emphasizing the differences between themselves and others who are homeless. Our participants often highlighted positive identities in the following areas: (a) personal hygiene and health, (b) lack of addiction, and (c) employment.

Personal hygiene and health

Because of limited resources, it can be challenging for individuals who are homeless to maintain a clean appearance. Many of our participants commented that problematic personal appearances could lead to unwanted, unwelcome attention (e.g., being stopped or questioned by police officers). For example, Henry noted, "[If you are] seen with a tote bag or you're not dressed properly or not clean enough, you could have on clothes but they're dirty and you look shabby. You look shaggy. They stereotype you." When asked about the most challenging thing faced in life, Helen responded, "To work. Be able to clean up, have clean clothes, look presentable, and get to work on time when you sleep on the dirt with no alarm clock no shower regularly." Hank explained,

> I was homeless for thirteen years, I never touched anybody, so. I'm not homeless anymore now, but I was. I'm at a place now, but I never put my hands on anybody unless he put his hands on me first. Fair game then. [laughs] […] Now I've got a place I can actually take a shower.

Hank's comment highlights the power of social stigma. So much so that he volunteered for social isolation, stopping himself from touching others. For people who are homeless, having access to shower becomes something to take pride in. Many of our participants talked about their access to shower. Homer gave elaborated details about his shower setup:

> I had one of those solar showers like when you're going camping, and the black bag hanging, the sunlight hits them and heats them up. So I had my own shower. [stopped to take a phone call.] But anyway, enough about that. That's probably boring.

By recognizing that the topic can be "boring," Homer acknowledged that access to shower is something to be taken for granted for others who are not homeless. Nevertheless, Homer's enthusiastic tone and pride in the detailed description highlight that this is an important identity claim for him.

Having a presentable appearance can be a valued identity within the homeless community. For example, when asked about common misunderstandings people hold about people who are homeless, Hazel said, "[We] are not all dirty. To be honest!" Later in the conversation, she found a fellow person who was homeless passing by and pointed at him saying, "Now, that guy, that guy is dirty (laughs)." Although it is not clear whether it was a simple teasing among friends, the underlying meanings of the joke entail acknowledging the social stigma that is placed on a homeless identity. In addition, by issuing

the joke and contrasting it with her earlier statement, Hazel emphasized her valued identity through her ability to maintain personal hygiene.

Similarly, taking good care of oneself (e.g., diet) can be a valued performance. Many of our participants said that they eat "whatever is the cheapest in the store" or "what the shelter offers." Helen concluded, "We have to eat when we can and what we can." In contrast, Hanna expressed that she cares about what she eats because her body reacts sensitively to junk food. She proudly noted, "I get healthy foods, and as a matter of fact, I am going to make some salsa." When asked whether she uses Food Stamps in similar ways as others do, she said, "Well … they probably don't have the same shopping habits as me."

Lack of addiction

Many researchers have argued that substance abuse can be a coping strategy for the harsh life on the street (Gwadz et al., 2009). For our participants, however, not having a history of substance abuse is a celebrated identity as it highlights one's ability to transcend everyday suffering. For example, Hilary, who attributes the cause of her homelessness to family issues, noted, "I'm 30 years old, and I am *proud* to say that that I've never been drunk. I've been slightly buzzed but never drunk, and I've never touched cigarettes, and *I never will*." Several participants attributed alcohol or drug addictions as the cause of others' homelessness. By noting others' problems with substance abuse, individuals claim moral superiority despite their homeless status. For example, Hayes, who used to have alcohol and drug habits, noted:

> You're drinking and using your drug ah … to change the way you feel. You know, so you don't feel homeless […] there are a few people here that I know personally.[…] I hate to say it, but that I wouldn't put a lot of faith in them, to get a place someday, you know … and a lot of it is drugs.

Hayes stayed away from the people who gather around the shelter as much as possible, because "a lot of people aren't good to have around." By avoiding interactions, Hayes reduces his chance to relapse due to peer pressures and social norms. From this perspective, distancing oneself from others who are homeless is not just about a symbolic gesture of distancing identities with homeless others but also can serve meaningful impacts in changing ones' perceived social norms. Our participants' struggle with addiction is not limited to themselves. Haile explained:

> My girl just got me off it. I'm twenty days sober now. She just got me off of doing that dope, even though I was living in tweaker house, so I'm trying to, like, *get her from that house*. I'm trying to get an apartment. She doesn't do it. She's clean, too. […] No, she's never done it. And I'm proud of her.

Haile's struggle is constant and ongoing (i.e., 20 days of sobriety). By highlighting his girlfriend's clean history, he portrayed her as a positive influence on his life. Nevertheless, he recognizes how his current living condition and the peers he keeps may eventually overwhelm both of them.

Employment

Our participants embedded moral claims in their narratives by emphasizing their willingness and motivation to work. Hank commented about his response to others' prejudice:

> I've had people come over while I was holding my sign up, asking for money, saying "Get a job, you lazy bum." I always said to them, "Hey mother fucker, give me a job," ya know? Otherwise shut your ass up and keep on going. [laughs] That's kind of my attitude. I'm going to let you know where I'm coming from if you're not gonna help.

In fact, during the recruitment process, several people declined to participate in this study because they "have jobs," only came to the homeless shelter to "eat lunch and meet friends," and suggested that we should recruit people who are jobless (i.e., thus really need the gift cards). Even after clarifying our intent to include people who access the shelter for resources, Haiden responded, "I'm not homeless. I have a job"; and Hudson asked, "Are you recruiting homeless people? I'm not. I have two jobs." Nevertheless, both agreed that they still frequent the shelter for resources.

Having employment is a valued identity, providing opportunities to be generous to others and making a moral claim as a contributing member to the society. For example, Haiden said that he sponsors some people after moving into more stable life. When asked how he enjoys it, he said,

> Oh I love it. I love working with uh … You know well it helps me see … uh you know it helps me remember what I looked like when I first came in. Like nothing … I had nothing. … I'd lost everything so, yeah. And … and to make a comeback … well a small comeback like I'm making. Uhh … is … uh you know is a blessing, and sponsoring people and helping them is blessings to me.

Henry also explained, "When I was here, ya know, like I get paid one or twice a month and I have people around here helping me. I give them a few dollars to get cigarettes you know *to help them out*."

Having a job creates important distinctions between individuals who are homeless versus individuals with homeless identity (i.e., an employed individual who is homeless is not subjugated to a homeless identity). In fact, even though many can still be categorized as experiencing high housing insecurity (as they barely have sufficient income from week to week, regularly rely on shelter housing, and/or share housing with similar others), many noted that they do not consider themselves homeless.

However, the moral high ground of being a person with jobs can also lead a person who is homeless to be more critical to others who are jobless. For example, Henry, one of participants who was once homeless but now a part-time staff member in the shelter, emphasized the character differences between people with and without jobs:

> A lot of them are in their situation because it is more like by choice and not by force. You see this guy out there homeless, and 2 weeks from now you go back out there and you don't see that guy no more, then that was a guy who actually needed help getting on his feet, but if you've been seeing the same one repeatedly for a year or two, now that's a guy who isn't trying to do anything with himself cause it doesn't take that long. Even when the economy is in the slum there are things you can do, you don't have to get a tax deducted job, you can get a job under the table you know […] that's a job right there, you know what I mean?

Although employment can be a complicated issue involving the socioeconomic climate of the larger society as well as the structural injustice against marginalized populations (e.g., low wages and poor health insurance), the narratives from our participants centered on individual responsibility and achievement.

Prioritizing certain aspects of life

Embracing their identities as individuals who are homeless can be difficult because their everyday life experiences entail significant violence, including physical, emotional, and symbolic violence. As a result, many of our participants choose to focus on certain aspects of life to maintain a sense of identity and preserve meanings of the Self. In particular, they often centered on the following aspects of life: (a) productive self in the past, (b) family and significant others, and (c) pride and a sense of responsibility.

Productive self in the past

Our participants find meanings of current Self by referencing the productive self in their prehomeless life. For example, when asked about common misunderstanding about people who are homeless, Harris responded, "They think we're all drunks, but we're not. I'm an engineer. *Then I had seven heart attacks* and five surgeries." Helen, who has been homeless for 6 months, attributed the cause of her psychological problems and homelessness to the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. She emphasized the success of her prehomeless life, "I was two weeks away from graduating to be a paramedic. [On the day Murrah bombing happened] I had just got off a 16 hour shift on the ambulance … and I had just gotten home at … like 7:15 and they called me at 9:30." The emphasis of her professional skills and long working hours allowed her to resist the stereotype of a lazy homeless identity. Many participants used their academic achievement/degree, material possessions, and professional standing to generate meanings of their current self. Hope explained:

> I have owned two homes, you know, and I drove semi for seventeen years made a good living . . . and then, I lost my family fourteen years ago all in the same year and that's when *my symptoms of PTSD really kicked in*. [. . .] I wasn't able to uh manage as well as I had once did so that's when I lost everything over a course of that fourteen years and that's how I ended up here (chuckle).

In these narratives, their experiences of homelessness were triggered by events beyond their control, disrupting their achievement and success in the prehomeless life. By constructing the cause of homelessness (e.g., unexpected illness or terrorist bombing) to be beyond their control, our participants were able to minimize self-blames. Emphasizing the success of prehomeless life allows them to salvage their current identities and project a possible future once a destructive force, much like a natural disaster, passes on its own.

Family and significant others

Many of our participants emphasize that their family members provide the basis of their self-worth and support their positive self-image. For example, Haile emphasized his girlfriend as a source of stability and positive influences in his everyday life. Family can also serve multiple purposes for people who are homeless. When asked to identify the most important people in his support network, Haile responded, "My family and my girl right now. My girl stabilizes my mood. That's a social to me. And my family provides the money." Close contact with families provides resources for their survival on the street.

For some participants, their family members' happiness and achievements were essential to their well-being and identities. For example, Hudson moves to Las Vegas in winter in hopes of getting a job with minimum wage while having access for a warmer weather for a homeless life. Rather than lamenting on his everyday struggles, Hudson commented:

> My children are raised. All I have to do is feed myself, and I don't have a whole lot of ambition. [. . .] All I do really is . . . just worry about is my kids being healthy and happy, I don't really care much about myself.

In other words, after raising his children, he has fulfilled his life meanings: Self is secondary to his kids' health and happiness. Hayes commented:

> I got on housing and I've gotten a job. I mainly—I come here to utilize the toothbrushes and toiletries. Sometimes save—it helps save money cause I have a lot of kids for-, you Know, they are at school right now and I'm not working right now.

Rather than seeing his reliance on the shelter (for toothbrushes and toiletries) through a homeless identity (e.g., taking advantage of generous others), he constructed it as an effort to help conserve resources for his kids who are in schools. Some participants reference their families as they cling to a possible future of sobriety. Hayes talked about his drinking problem and how he was not able to quit drinking. However, when asked what'd be his motivation to stop drinking and get out of street, he answered, "Just my family. My family." Some of our participants talked about having a tighter, smaller network, focusing only on people who provide positive influences to one's life. For example, Homer noted, "I don't care if anybody else don't like me, you know, but I like me. [. . .] And my girlfriend likes me. So, to me, that's about the only two people in the world that matter."

In summary, close, intimate relationships provide people who are homeless valuable buffer to the hostility, violence, and suffering in everyday homelessness. They provide access to financial resources, offer emotional support, and help to maintain a positive outlook, all of which are essential in allowing our participants to feel connected, loved, and appreciated.

Pride and sense of responsibility

A few of our participants explicitly commented about not asking for help despite their lack of survival resources. By noting the inappropriateness to impose burden on others, some participants refused to seek help from their personal network (e.g., family members and friends). When asked if he has some support

network, Hugo mentioned that he would utilize resources from the shelter because it is for the public, but he would try not to ask for help from his family members. He said, "If you notice that it's just a burden on yourself, why would you want to place the burden on anyone else?" Hazel, who has her relatives in a city close by, believed that it is her responsibility to be independent from other family members. She explained, "We always have the option of going or having my family help us and stuff, but . . . that is . . . if we go back there, and . . . have a bunch of temptation, but we also just want to do it on our own." Henry echoed, "You got places like this and Salvation Army the places that will help you, but then again, like I said, you can't help anybody if they don't want to help themselves." The emphasis on individual responsibilities allows them to maintain pride and a sense of control in their life circumstances.

Some participants were offered a place to sleep by their relational partners' parents or relatives, but they declined the offer and decided to maintain a street life. Several male participants in this study noted that they did so to help their relational others to conserve resources. For example, Hayes and Homer commented:

> Hayes: I probably could have lived on my friends' couches, and stuff like that, but I didn't wanna do that. [. . .] I would come around, you know, I would help . . . I would show up and help her mom and help but I didn't spend the night there I . . . I didn't wanna . . . I didn't feel right doing that.
> Homer: You know, I'm just hanging out here this time because . . . just, you know, being a man and always taking care of myself and my lady, and I just don't want to be over there till they get our place ready, you know, living . . . because to me, that's like living off her dad, and I can't do that. I'm supposed to be taking care of her, you know.

Although accepting others' assistance and resources can improve their life circumstances, our participants also recognize the significant burden they can impose on their (fragile) network. As a result, rather than depleting it to meet current needs, some participants created the narratives of a self-determining, generous identity. They "choose" their fights and struggles while doing the best they can for their loved ones.

Embracing the status of homelessness

Finally, many of our participants accepted their homeless status while emphasizing the significant gaps between the society's misconstrued, stigmatized homeless identity and the "real" homeless identity. The following examples show the ways in which their experiences of homelessness enhanced their lives and helped negotiate their identities: (a) obtaining new perspectives about lives and (b) perceiving self as a member of the homeless community.

Obtaining new perspectives about lives

Many of our participants experienced difficult interpersonal relationships before and after coming to the life on the street. When asked if she perceives herself socially isolated, Hazel said, "We have really good friends around here, especially when people don't want you for your money or anything like that. You actually get a genuine connection." Our participants found values in the time of being homeless for enhancing the quality of life in some ways. When asked about his experiences on the street, Hayes responded:

> Just to learn, you know, you are either gonna learn, or you're not. You know a lot of people end up homeless and they don't have any hope not to be homeless any more. A lot of people around here, you know, *I've-I tried to learn from what I have seen*, and what I've seen- but it's—I don't know, I didn't accept being homeless. I don't! You know, *I accepted it*. But- but, I don't. I wasn't content with that.

For Hayes, the life of homelessness provides learning opportunities. People who refused to learn are the ones who have given up. Although he accepted a homeless life, he refused to accept a homeless identity. As long as he is learning, he still has opportunities to get out of the homeless life.

Some participants found happiness in their homeless life. Henry explained:

> Homeless accept the homeless, you know. (Laugh) I mean surely people say there goes a homeless dude stay away from him. No, No, the homeless accept the whole damn—they embrace each other, you know? And honestly, there was times *when I was happier out here homeless than when I was living with my wife*. (Laugh)

Perceiving self as a member of homeless community

People who are homeless experience various forms of social isolation. By recalling some of the interactions with people in the community, Helen said:

> The look you get … when people are driving to work in the morning, taking their kids to daycare or school. Just the looks you get … because they see you carrying a bed role. It goes from a happy "good morning" to an "ugh, just disgusted."

Their personal experiences with social rejection and social isolation may motivate them to seek a sense of belonging. People who are homeless may actively construct a positive, collective identity shared by all people who are homeless.

Coming out of street after 13 years of homelessness, Hank recalled how the homeless community protected him from the possible violence. He said, "Living down in Dallas, I always had my crew that I ran with when I was on the streets down there. […] We had our little group, for safety reasons partly. Who's gonna screw with eight people, right?" Getting along with other individuals who are homeless was necessary. Homeless community not only protects these individuals from the possible violence, but also provides additional resources and the feelings of care. For example, Henry said:

> Mostly you know you talk to another homeless person and they know you're sick. Mostly when I was out here we looked out for each other. Somebody is going to have some medicine or something you can have. You know, they can help you out, over the counter prescriptions, but not all of them. But, you got, if you know people, then somebody's got something that you can take to make you feel better.

Although not many of our participants used the word *community* when describing their experiences of homelessness, the collective subject *we* was used numerous times by participants.

Helen, a first-time homeless woman, commented that the best word she can use to describe her homeless experiences is "humbling," as it involves a change in life perspectives. The needs of belonging and their experiences of social rejection can create identity dilemmas. When asked if she feels socially isolated, Helen responded:

> No, not socially isolated, but we isolate ourselves. […] We know we are shunned by society and we know how they feel. The police and all the people in town … and what not. So after a while, you isolate yourself. It's not that they are isolating you, they are not throwing stones at us per se.

As they face identity dilemmas in their everyday life, our participants regain a sense of control by reframing social isolation as a personal choice. However, Hank's earlier comment about not touching others unless his is touched first highlights that such choices were not necessarily volunteered but were a learned response to the larger social stigma that was imposed on them.

Discussion

The fluid boundaries and definitions of homelessness provide ample opportunities for people who are homeless to negotiate and redefine their identities. Our findings provided important insights into the current literature. First, this study deepened our understandings of the comparative mechanism adopted by people who are homeless to enhance their sense of self-worth. Previous studies found that people differentiated themselves from other people on the street by denying homelessness (Snow & Anderson, 1987) and creating hierarchies within the homeless populations (Boydell et al., 2000). Our findings suggest that people who are homeless strategically present themselves as superior to homeless

others through specific attributes that are often implied in a homeless identity. By emphasizing their valued performances and characteristics through contrasts with a homeless identity, our participants resist the label of a homeless identity. The valued attributes are symbols of their accomplishment, even when they can be seen as taken-for-granted behaviors for others who are not homeless. By accomplishing such tasks despite the hardships they face, our participants made moral claims of their success and survivorship.

It is important to note, however, our participants' choice of resources to accomplish this strategy (i.e., differentiating oneself from others who are homeless) in fact is built upon the stigmatizing discourse against the homeless in the larger society. The more successful they are and the higher moral claims they accomplish are set in the backdrop of agreeing and accepting the negative stereotypes imposed by the society. This is why it is common to see people who adopt such a strategy to generate narratives of self-hate, condemning others who are homeless for their own failure. Nevertheless, such attitudes and efforts can be self-defeating as such rhetoric highlights the importance of self-determinism and personal responsibility. Homelessness is a complex issue involving structural and social injustice against the vulnerable and marginalized population. As people who are homeless attribute their success and others failures to individuals' (as opposed to society's) doing, they overlook the injustice at organizational and societal levels that have been imposed upon the homeless populations.

Second, a person who is homeless may actively refuse valuable resources as an identity claim to reject a homeless identity. Despite their experiences of high housing instability, we were surprised to find that many of our participants use employment status to refute a homeless identity. This highlights the emic versus etic differences in how homelessness is conceptualized by the homeless populations versus the larger society. In addition, despite their limited resources and hostile environment, our participants willingly refuse resources and supports from others to maintain positive identities. In other words, contrary to past literature, our findings suggest that recognizing self as homeless does not always mean that people who are homeless would "avow" and/or "ascribe" homeless identities (Parsell, 2011; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Our participants constructed homelessness as a temporary status, an indicator of their objective living condition, rather than a representation of who they are. Whether people have a homeless identity is reflected through their choices and behaviors: There are people who want jobs and there are people who are just lazy; there are people who would take from others and there are people who would try to take care of others even when they do not have anything.

How we define *homelessness* affects not only who should be addressed in governmental and/or institutional interventions (Springer, 2000), but also how we can best provide assistance to those in need. A patient who refuses to believe that she or he is sick is unlikely to accept or follow a doctor's treatment recommendation (Hyphantis et al., 2005); similarly, a person who is homeless but does not accept the label of homelessness is unlikely to accept the resources designed to help that person out of homelessness. For example, despite the availability of housing for women with psychotic disorders, many women refused to accept the free housing because accepting the housing would imply that they are mentally ill (Luhrmann, 2008). From this perspective, as we develop interventions and support to assist people out of homelessness, it is critical to identify meaningful ways to work with the homeless population, finding ways to help them obtain the resources without accepting the associated stigma.

Finally, our findings suggest that identity management of people who are homeless shares similarities and differences with identity management of individuals with chronic illness. Our participants adopt "bracketing" as a coping strategy, a common strategy also used by people with chronic illness (Charmaz, 1994). By defining one's identity through prioritizing certain aspects of life, our participants are able to bracket their homelessness from damaging their prized identities.

Also, similar to Charmaz's (1991) observation, our analysis showed that individuals manage their identities along with a temporal dimension (past, present, and future) of Self. However, our participants' narratives also suggest some important differences. First, past Self may or may not be a desired Self for people who are homeless. People with illness sometimes reconstruct their past identities and believe that the past selves were "unquestionably preferable" (Charmaz, 1991, p. 235). In contrast,

rather than seeing current Self as a lesser self (e.g., a salvaged Self retains a past identity based on important values or attributes but acknowledges current limitations to return to a past identity) as suggested by Charmaz's (1991) identity progression; some of our participants viewed current Self as an improvement for their previous life conditions (e.g., abusive relationships or substance abuse problems). For some, despite the struggles and homeless conditions, current Self can already represent success and achievement in their life stories. Whereas past Self in chronic illness can serve as a constant reminder of what life could have been, for some of our participants, a productive and success past Self of in homelessness provides a hopeful trajectory to indicate what life could be once they are able to overcome the cause of their homelessness. In other words, past Self serves to maintain a sense of self-worth for the current and future Self. This can be particularly important for people who experiences transitional homelessness (i.e., once-in-a-life time homelessness, which is often marked by short duration and low frequency of homelessness in a brief period; McAllister, Lennon, & Kuang, 2011).

Finally, as our participants actively construct a positive collective identity for the homeless, they generates a sense of belonging and community, in which they can serve as contributing members of positive norms. Although our analysis centers on individuals' construction of identities, some of our findings highlight the importance of social norms and social contexts in shaping our participants' life choices and life circumstances. This highlights the importance for government agencies and public services to not view homelessness as individual failures or problems but as a systematic problem that can be addressed through providing meaningful structural support that promotes valuable lifestyle change for people who are homeless.

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