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Identity Talk Strategies of Sheltered Homeless Women

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IDENTITY TALK STRATEGIES OF SHELTERED
HOMELESS WOMEN

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Applied Sociology

by
Sarah Lynn-Musham DeWard
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Accepted by:
Dr. Catherine Mobley, Committee Chair
Dr. Ellen Granberg
Dr. Sarah Winslow-Bowe

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the identity talk strategies used by sheltered homeless women to navigate their personal identity in the midst of experiencing a deeply stigmatized social identity. Based on field observation and twenty qualitative interviews with sheltered homeless women at a Midwestern homeless shelter, this analysis examines the identity talk strategies used by sheltered women to disavow stigmatized social identities and to restore cognitive congruence. Using the identity talk framework of Snow and Anderson (1987), three categories of identity talk are explored: distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. Findings suggest that sheltered homeless women actively utilize these identity talk strategies to purposefully disavow stigmatized identities; however, sheltered homeless women utilize these identity talk strategies in divergent ways.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been much empirical research on the public opinion of welfare recipients, the working poor, and the homeless (Juhila 2004; Kerbo 1976; Phelan et al 1997; Rogers-Dillan 1995; Rokach 2005; Takahashi, McElroy and Rowe 2002). While mistreatment of the poor has diminished over time, the public's tendency to blame and stigmatize the individual is still prevalent (Phelan et al 1997). Constructed categorizations of less desirable groups, such as "the poor," "welfare recipients," and "the homeless," are linked with negative stereotypes such as lazy, "baby-making," mental patient, and criminal drug dealer (Hays 2003; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Rokach 2005).

For the large numbers of Americans living in poverty, negotiating stigmatization can be a daily struggle. An 'unkempt' appearance, shelter residency, food stamp use and social services use, for example, can persistently remind poor individuals of the stigma associated with their lower status (Rogers-Dillan 1995; Takahashi, McElroy and Rowe 2002). In particular, the stigma associated with homelessness is exacerbated by the attribution of poverty and homelessness to individual shortcomings rather than to institutional inequality and social stratification (Kerbo 1976; Rokach 2005; Williams 2003). The ensuing stigma often results in discriminatory practices and attitudes, affecting the public perception of the homeless, and governmental policies regarding public assistance (Hays 2003; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Williams 2003).

When individuals feel an incompatibility between a stigmatized, imposed social identity and their desired personal identity, a state of mental and emotional distress, or cognitive incongruence, occurs. Identity theory suggests that stigmatized persons will engage in identity management strategies (e.g., changing behavior, reframing negative appraisal, altering identity standard) to restore oneself to a state of cognitive congruence, or equilibrium, between social and personal identities (Burke 1991; Stryker and Burke 2000). Empirical research confirms such examples of stigmatized identity management (Burke 1991; Granberg 2007; Link and Phelan 2001; Snow and Anderson 1987; Stryker and Burke 2000).

Given this socially imposed stigmatized identity, how do homeless sheltered women create cognitive congruence with their personal identity? This research seeks to further explore such processes of identity work among sheltered homeless women. What verbal identity work strategies are employed by these sheltered homeless women? The secondary research question explores the utility of an identity talk framework previously developed by Snow and Anderson (1987). Is their identity talk framework, originally meant to describe homeless street people, useful for understanding the strategies employed by sheltered homeless women?

Thus, this research is significant because it expands the current identity literature through exploring identity processes of a marginalized, and traditionally invisible, social group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To comprehensively inform this exploration of identity talk strategies of homeless women, a thorough examination of the current identity and women's homelessness literature is required. This review of the literature examines the structural symbolic interactionism framework as well as identity theory and stigma theory. A deeper analysis of stigmatized identity management of sheltered homeless women in general is further discussed.

Stigmatized Identity Management

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the identity construction processes of sheltered homeless women. The theoretical framework for this research is consistent with structural symbolic interactionism, incorporating characteristics of both traditional symbolic interactionism and role theory. According to structural symbolic interactionism, the human experience is socially organized. Experiences of people are not random, but are guided by their social location and embeddedness within social structures (Stryker 2001). Consistent with traditional symbolic interactionism, however, the subjectivity of symbols is also central to social life. Individuals use symbols and definitions to organize their behaviors within the context of role obligations, relationships, and social networks (Tsushima and Burke 1999). These symbols vary across individuals (Stryker 2001). The use of the structural symbolic interactionist frame, therefore, is useful because it accounts for the fact that individuals can exercise personal agency when making decisions regarding their behavior, but views those available decisions as created through or constrained by

social location (Granberg 2007; Stryker and Burke 2000; Stryker 2001; Tsushima and Burke 1999).

The construction of a sense of self is largely accomplished through interaction with the social world (Hoyle et. al. 1999). Similarly, personal dignity and self-worth formation is largely accomplished through enacting certain social roles (Hoelter 1983; Park and Crocker 2005; Snow and Anderson 1987). Homeless people, because of their stigmatized social location, are often denied access to societally significant roles, such as that of a financially independent citizen (Juhila 2004; Meerman 2005; Murray 2000; Snow and Anderson 1987). Homeless people fall outside of this recognized social status hierarchy, and are denied corresponding methods of self-worth development (Juhila 2004; Murray 2000; Snow and Anderson 1987; Park and Crocker 2005; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). Narrative identity construction is one of the few management strategies available to the homeless to construct a positive sense of self (Snow and Anderson 1987).

While performing these roles and negotiating social symbols on a daily basis, people must make many personal decisions, interact with others, and experience social situations. To create a single life-story, or a personal narrative, people strategically choose the relevant facts and experiences that best characterize their self-image (Mason-Schrock 1996; Walker 2000). This constructed self-narrative is the way people present their identity to themselves and the world (Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, and Baldwin 1999; Mason-Schrock 1996).

Identity is best described as people's response when asked to describe themselves (Hoyle et. al. 1999; Stryker and Burke 2000). Identity is, to a large degree, socially constructed (Park and Crocker 2005; Stryker and Burke 2000). To formulate

personal identity descriptions, people draw from the data provided by interactions with other actors and the social world (Hoyle et. al. 1999; Mason-Schrock 1996). However, one's identity is not characterized as a single linear narrative. Identity is conceptualized as comprising several components.

One's "social identity" refers to the identity imposed by others when trying to locate or situate them as a social object (Hoyle et. al. 1999; Snow and Anderson 1987; Stryker and Burke 2000). This social identity is based upon gleaned social information, such as components inferred from appearance and behavior. This social identity may not characterize an individual's personally avowed identity, but is an imposition meant to socially locate or define individuals (Goffman 1963; Hoyle et.al. 1999; Snow and Anderson 1987).

Society has the ability to categorize some group memberships as "normal" and others as "abnormal" (i.e., as positive vs. negative). Stigmatized groups such as "homeless" are typically cast as negative or abnormal groups. Membership in such a group brings with it the threat of a negative stigmatized identity. The need to maintain high self-esteem suggests the individual will be motivated to minimize the implication of the negative social identity. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as a socially discrediting attribute. People do not have control over the societal attribution of stigma, since society defines people's social identity (Burke 1991; Goffman 1963; Stryker 2001). The social identity does not illustrate personal identity traits, but imposes the social identity attributes associated with their stigma (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001).

Conversely, the personal identity is the self-attributions or designations imposed by people on themselves. The personal identity encompasses unique

characteristics about oneself that differentiates self from others. These characteristics include idiosyncratic preferences or traits (Hoyle et. al. 1999). The definition of one's personal identity, however, may contradict one's imposed social identities (Snow and Anderson 1987). Such differences can create cognitive incongruence (Hoyle et. al. 1999; Snow and Anderson 1987).

Individuals use their identities as a way to gauge the social implications of their behavior. People desire to perform well in their roles, and seek social feedback to confirm this performance (Granberg 2007). This feedback is received through a cybernetic loop of social comparisons and self appraisals (Burke 1991).

Disconfirming appraisals produce cognitive distress. Identity incongruence takes place when social feedback fails to validate the identity meanings salient in the situation. Incongruity (also known as cognitive dissonance) is largely perceived through reflected appraisals—or experiences in and with other actors in social contexts (Burke and Reitzes 1991; Granberg 2007; Hoelter 1983; McFarland and Pals 2005). In the event of identity disconfirmation, behavior is typically modified to produce a more favorable role identity performance appraisal, bringing about a return to emotional baseline and cognitive congruence (Granberg 2007; Tsushima and Burke 1999; Burke 1991).

Due to the deeply stigmatized nature of homelessness, vulnerability to negative reflected appraisals is high for the homeless. Research shows that culturally dominant definitions of shelter residents include categorizations of dependent, unworthy social pariahs (Dotter 2002; Forte 2002; Hays 2003; Juhila 2004; Kerbo 1976; Phelan et al. 1997; Takahashi, McElroy and Rowe 2002). This conception is clearly negative, and has been linked to increased vulnerability to negative treatment

by others (Dotter 2002; Juhila 2004; Link and Phelan 2001; Presser 2004). This stigmatization includes status loss and discrimination; as people are associated with devaluing traits, they are then treated in devaluing ways (Lee and Craft 2002; Link and Phelan 2001; Park and Crocker 2005; Presser 2004).

For homeless people, negative reflected appraisals and discriminatory practices of the public do not go unnoticed (Hays 2003; Juhila 2004; Park and Crocker 2005; Snow and Anderson 1963; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). Homeless people are forced to interact with the public, for example, during employment or housing searches (Kerbo 1976; Rogers-Dillon 1995). Retreating to an undetected social sanctuary is not an option. Unfortunately, the stigma symbols associated with the homeless identity (i.e., homeless shelters, food stamps) are pragmatically salient in that they must be used for survival (Amster 2004; Goffman 1963; Juhila 2004; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Snow and Anderson 1987; Takahashi, McElroy and Rowe 2002; Weisman 1994). These same symbols, however, simultaneously operate as highly stigmatizing indicators of poverty, causing deep cognitive distress for homeless people (Goffman 1963; Kerbo 1976; Lee and Craft 2002; Phelan et. al. 1997; Snow and Anderson 1987; Zufferey and Kerr 2004).

Symbols operate as indicators of social information, either confirming or denying social identity assumptions (Goffman 1963). To avoid cognitive incongruence and reduce feelings of stigmatization, some individuals will engage methods of “passing” (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001; Snow and Anderson 1987; Zajicek and Koski 2003) People attempt to minimize disclosure or affiliation with stigmatizing symbols (Amster 2004; Lee and Craft 2002; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Weisman 1994; Zajicek and Koski 2003). Passing, however, is not available to those

who hold a visible stigma symbol (Amster 2004; Goffman 1963; Kerbo 1976; Snow and Anderson 1987). This causes personal identity modification for the sake of establishing congruence between one's personal identity and the social, stigmatized identity (Burke 1991; Lee and Craft 2002; McFarland and Pals 2005; Park and Crocker 2005; Presser 2004). Individuals' perceptions of incongruity between actions and consequent appraisals may lead to the use of identity management techniques (Anderson 1993; Lee and Craft 2002; McFarland and Pals 2005; Park and Crocker 2005; Presser 2004; Zajicek and Koski 2003).

Identity management techniques are displayed in varying forms. One may choose to change his/her behavior to match personal identity meanings. One might purposefully exit the disconfirming identity, or change the meaning of the identity (Burke 1991). The homeless hold a social identity that cannot be managed through exiting the identity or changing behavior. Therefore, the homeless often use identity talk strategies to resist prevailing notions of homelessness, thereby resisting the entry of stigma into their sense of personal self (Snow and Anderson 1987).

Homeless people must constantly negotiate their stigma (Kerbo 1976; Phelan et. al. 1997; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Snow and Anderson 1987; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). Because they cannot pass in greater society as "normal," other methods must be employed to maintain personal dignity and positive self-regard (Anderson 1993; Presser 2004; Snow and Anderson 1987). Snow and Anderson (1987) explain, "Homeless street people are thus confronted continuously with the problem of constructing personal identities that are not a mere reflection of the stereotypical and stigmatized manner in which they are regarded as a social category" (1340). The focus on the differentness associated with the stigma, and the subsequent identity

management behaviors place the stigmatized identity in a high position on individual salience hierarchy (Craft 1987; Cusack, Jack, and Kavanagh 2003; Granberg 2007; Lee and Craft 2002).

Identity management is essential for those coping with stigmatization (Kerbo 1976; Link and Phelan 2001; Phelan et. al. 1997; Rogers-Dillon 1995). Stigmatized persons desire the same normal identity as others, but their stigmatization hinders true social equality and acceptance (Kerbo 1976; Link and Phelan 2001; Rokach 2005; Snow and Anderson 1987). Given this undesirable circumstance, many individuals engage in identity work to construct a positive personal identity. Identity work is defined as, “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self concept” (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1348). Forms of identity work can include changing a stigmatizing physical arrangement (Gotham and Brumley 2002; Takahashi, McElroy, and Rowe 2002), changing undesirable personal appearance, selective association with other actors, or verbal construction of personal identity (Anderson 1993; Goffman 1963; Hoyle et. al. 1999; Phelan et. al. 1997; Snow and Anderson 1987). Verbal avowal, or verbal construction of personal identity, is also termed “identity talk” (Snow and Anderson 1987).

Identity talk provides the stigmatized individual the opportunity to manipulate the social information conveyed to others through symbols and signs (Presser 2004; Walker 2000). Those coping with a stigmatized identity can create personal symbolic meanings divergent from their imposed stigmatization, thereby creating positive self meanings (Anderson 1993; Burke 1991; Goffman 1963; Presser

2004). Therefore, identity talk provides the opportunity for stigmatized people to control their cognitive outcomes, creating congruence (Burke 1991).

According to Snow and Anderson (1987), identity talk is the primary way that homeless people construct desired personal identities; this is due to its relative accessibility (Walker 2000). Their analysis of identity talk strategies of homeless street people has found particular utility to this current investigation. Snow and Anderson (1987) conducted an ethnography of people residing on the street, and developed a framework of identity talk strategies employed to create cognitive congruence in the midst of an imposed stigmatized identity. The researchers found that homeless street people engaged in distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling as methods of identity talk (Snow and Anderson 1987).

This research seeks to explore the identity talk strategies used by sheltered homeless women to navigate personal identity in the midst of experiencing a deeply stigmatized social identity. What self-protective identity talk strategies are employed by sheltered women? The utility of Snow and Anderson's 1987 identity talk framework is also tested by applying their concepts to the narratives of sheltered homeless women. To further explore the identity talk strategies of homeless women, a discussion of the nuanced complexities and experiences of homeless women is discussed in the following section.

Gendered Homelessness

The feminization of poverty is a widely studied social phenomenon (Center for Law and Social Policy 2006; DiBlasio and Belcher 1995; Erickson 2005/06; Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999; United States Census Bureau 2005; United States

Department of Housing and Urban Development 2007). Of the approximately 38 million Americans who live under the poverty line, 28 million of these are women (United States Census Bureau 2005). In 2004, 57 percent of female-headed households with children were below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau 2004). By 2007, this statistic had increased to 59.6 percent (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development 2007).

In the United States, women with children are disproportionately represented among those who utilize resources available through governmental-based social services (Center for Law and Social Policy 2006; DiBlasio and Belcher 1995; Erickson 2005/06; Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999). Widespread poverty translates to widespread homelessness. While 34.4 percent of the homeless are adults with children, 84 percent of those are female heads of households with children (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development 2007). These statistics suggest that the feminization of poverty has effectively translated into a feminization of homelessness (Hagen 1987; Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999).

While both homeless men and women suffer from abject poverty, the concerns of women are more complex and nuanced. Contributing to the gender-homelessness link is a number of other social problems that intertwine with poverty and complicate women's lives. Situational factors in women's homelessness are numerous and interrelated (Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999; Tessler, Rosenheck, and Gamache 2004). While homeless women may need to cope with similar challenges faced by homeless men, such as mental illness (Mowbray, Thrasher, Cohen, and Bybee 1996; Schutt, Meschede, and Rierdan 1994), addiction (Baker and Carson 1999; Podymow et.al. 2006), economic issues at large (Abramovitz 2005; Meerman

2005), and miseducation (Rivera 2003), they are also disproportionately responsible for child-rearing (Averitt 2003; Kissane 2006; Thrasher and Mowbray 1995; Zugazaga 2004) and subject to victimization by family members and intimate partners (Gibson-Davis et. al. 2005). As such, they are at greater risk for poverty and homelessness (Hagan 1987; Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999; Zugazaga 2004).

For women who flee abuse, for example, homelessness and poverty are often inevitable consequences (Gibson-Davis et.al. 2005; Zorza 1991). Indeed, approximately 50 to 60 percent of women on welfare (Family Violence Prevention Fund 2005) and over 60 percent of women who are homeless have been victims of intimate partner battering (Bassuk et al. 1996; Rog et al. 1995; Zugazaga 2004), as compared to 25 percent found in the general population (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). As such, homeless women's needs for social and economic support are complicated by the additional concern for safety (Tessler, Rosenheck, and Gamache 2004). One of the primary avenues through which social service and philanthropic agencies have responded to homeless women is through the provision of homeless shelters (Hartnett and Harding 2005; Williams 2003).

Homeless women seek shelter for a variety of reasons. Russell (1991) found that homeless women desired a safe and clean shelter environment in which to stay because they did not have the ability to protect themselves from possible assault on the streets (DeWard and Moe 2007; Zugazaga 2004). Also, the urgency of homeless women seeking emergency shelter is exacerbated by the presence of children (Trasher and Mowbray 1995; Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999). Homeless women often negotiate poverty with custody of their children; therefore, the mother must feed,

clothe, and find housing for not only herself, but also her children (Averitt 2003; Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999; Thrasher and Mowbray 1995; Zugazaga 2004).

The shelter as an institution affects the ways women negotiate their homelessness (DeWard and Moe 2007; Mulder 2004; Packard 2001; Stark 1994). The women's shelter experience operates largely through a bureaucracy and processes of resident institutionalization (Hartnett and Harding 2005; Karabanow 2004; Packard 2001; Stark 1994). Women's shelters often operate as large scale family shelters (DeWard and Moe 2007; Hartnett and Harding 2005; Williams 2003). The very admittance into a women's shelter requires a woman's complete submission to the shelter bureaucracy and staff (Hartnett and Harding 2005; Mulder 2004; Packard 2001; Stark 1994). The sheer physical capacity of women's shelters typically results in the employment of widespread social control measures meant to facilitate communal living (DeWard and Moe 2007; Hartnett and Harding 2005; Karabanow 2004). Staff operate in parental or social worker roles, enforcing rules, administering services, and providing access to resources as they see fit (DeWard and Moe 2007; Marvasti 2002; Mowbray et.al. 1996; Mulder 2004; Packard 2001).

Beyond the perceived mistreatment of the institution itself, homeless sheltered women must personally negotiate the cognitive and emotional baggage of coping with a deeply stigmatized social identity. Simply living in the shelter provides an ever present personal reminder of one's stigmatized position, forcing the undesirable position of the stigmatized identity to be highly salient (Craft 1987; Lee and Craft 2002; Link and Phelan 2001). The very use of identity talk strategies among homeless sheltered women would suggest that they are negotiating a

dialectical relationship between social and personal identities (Hays 2003; Juhila 2004; Park and Crocker 2005; Snow and Anderson 1987; Zufferey and Kerr 2004).

The nuanced web of interconnected inequalities affects homeless women's lives and changes the ways they negotiate homelessness, and ultimately their identities. The institutional nature of the shelter experience exacerbates the stigmatization of women who are homeless. First, shelter personnel often attribute personal shortcomings instead of institutional inequality, as the primary causal factors in becoming homeless, thus blaming the victim. Thus, shelter policies and procedures are meant to address the individual factors that are deemed responsible for the homeless circumstance (Hartnett and Harding 2005; Mowbray et al. 1996; Packard 2001). This imposition of personal responsibility can create cognitive incongruence, creating dissonance between the women's desired personal identity and the imposed stigmatized social identity. Secondly, merely residing in a homeless shelter is a persistent stigma symbol. Shelter residence constantly requires the negotiation of a societally imposed stigmatization. The corresponding social identity may be incompatible with the desired personal identity of the homeless women, which causes cognitive incongruence.

In summary, structural symbolic interactionism defines human experiences as being defined through an interconnection between symbols and roles. Role choices are constrained by one's social location. Identity theory describes the ways that individuals construct a positive personal identity. Stigmatized social identities are imposed by society, and may be inconsistent with one's desired personal identity. Such circumstances create cognitive incongruence. People are motivated to return to the equilibrium of a cognitively congruent state, so they engage in identity

management strategies to reduce dissonance. For homeless sheltered women, their stigmatized social identity is especially salient, as many stigma symbols exist as a persistent reminder of their low status. Homeless women, therefore, must constantly negotiate their imposed stigmatized social identity and their desired positive personal identities. Given the existence of structural inequality, personal risk factors, and societal stigma, what identity talk strategies are employed to restore cognitive congruence within the self? This analysis explores this research question in detail. The methodology for this research will first be explored. This discussion includes a description of the field location, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

METHODOLOGY

This research investigation explored the identity talk strategies employed by twenty sheltered homeless women. In this section, the field location of data collection is described, as well as data collection procedures, and data analysis methodology.

Description of Field Location: The Refuge

The Refuge¹ was a homeless shelter located in a large, Midwestern city. The building was built in the 1930's as a soup kitchen run by an Evangelical Christian couple. The Refuge, a privately funded faith-based organization, employs about thirty people, most of whom are part-time workers. The Refuge was divided into three sections – one for single men, one for single women as well as women with children, and one devoted to a women's restoration program. The men's shelter operated solely as sleeping quarters. The men occupied a large, open-air room filled with bunk-beds. The men did not have a common space to socialize. They were required to leave the shelter premises by 6:00 a.m., and could not return to their bunks until 9:00 p.m.. These male clients were not offered any case management services while staying at the shelter. Their sleeping room was located in a separate location from the women's quarters, so the interaction between men and women was intentionally limited. Open community meals were offered for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but men and women did not mingle during these times. Shelter policy required that men and women sit on opposite sides of the dining room separated by

¹ The name of the shelter has been changed to protect the confidentiality of its residents.

a long salad bar. Because the men spent notably fewer hours within the shelter and interacted less with shelter staff and fellow residents, no interviews were conducted with homeless men. Understanding the experiences of sheltered homeless women was the objective of this research data collection.

The women's restoration program offered in-house assistance for women and their children who struggled with addiction. Residents of this program were often ordered by the court to reside at the Refuge, and were not necessarily homeless before admittance. Therefore, restoration program residents were not expressly recruited for this research.

The women's shelter was the most elaborate of the three programs, with large bedrooms, private bathrooms, and a community lounge. There were beds to accommodate fifty-four women and children, with plans for expansion. The typical stay in this part of the facility, according to shelter staff, was thirty (30) to forty-five (45) days, which is comparable to other women's shelters in the area. All of the women interviewed for this study were residents of this part of the shelter.

The brochure for the Refuge made clear that Christian-based roots were of primary importance, stating a deep religious affiliation, quoting Bible verses, and citing a reliance on the "power of Christ" to change lives. While the Refuge is recognized as an evangelical presence in the community, the assumed religious commitment of the shelter's high-level administration did not always translate to the staff who worked with residents. In fact, several of the employees were current or former shelter residents with no religious affiliation. A visitor to the Refuge, when observing staff behavior, would likely not assume the religious nature of the shelter,

but for the Bible verses prominently painted on shelter walls. While the Refuge offers daily Bible studies, these meetings were not required for the residents.

Indeed, the Refuge was much more lenient, especially compared to a shelter located thirty (30) miles away, which required a twelve (12) month house arrest for residents to “focus on the Lord” rather than seek employment (see Mulder 2004). While religion was at the root of the shelter’s mission, and was a personal focus of some shelter residents, those aspects did not translate directly into the daily functioning of the shelter. The Refuge’s many services, termed “ministries,” encompassed a blend of practical, yet spiritual, programs and counseling. The characteristics of this shelter parallel those found by other researchers’ descriptions of secular, non-religious shelters (Williams 2003; Dordick 1996; Kissane 2007).

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining Human Subjects Institutional Review Board approval in the summer of 2003, the researcher negotiated access into the Refuge. Largely because the author was an acquaintance of the women’s shelter director, unlimited admission into the shelter’s common area, dormitory space, and cafeteria was granted. A confidential onsite location for conducting interviews was also permitted. At the Refuge, participant observation was conducted within the shelter. Participant observation took place over three months during the summer of 2003. This included visiting the shelter as an observer and establishing rapport with both staff and residents. Observations were made of the residents in common living areas and meal times within the shelter. The Refuge was purposefully visited at different times of day to engage with varying residents and staff members. Weekly, mandatory resident meetings were attended, as well as daily Bible studies which were provided

as an optional resource for female residents. Participant observation allowed a key opportunity to triangulate the findings of later resident interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Indeed, observations of staff/resident and resident/resident interactions corroborated the semi-structured interview content. Some field notes were recorded, primarily focusing on personal reactions to interviews, and observations of shelter staff interactions with shelter residents (Lofland et.al. 2006).

The primary methodology used in gathering data for this research encompassed qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Consistent with “standpoint epistemology” (Smith 1987: 3), this research was approached with the belief that the contributions made by members of a socially and economically marginalized group provided an important vantage point that could not be obtained by other means (Bar On 1993; Hartsock 1987). The intent was to provide epistemic privilege to those women who participated in this research – to provide a space for their voices of survival to be heard against other, more hegemonic accounts, so often offered by the gendered, raced and classed voices of those more socially privileged (e.g., therapists, social workers, police, legislators, religious leaders) (Collins 1989; Smith 1987; Harding 1991; Hartsock 1987; Romero and Stewart 1999).

Twenty (20) confidential interviews were conducted with female residents of the Refuge. The interview questions were intentionally open-ended and semi-structured to facilitate rapport and an atmosphere of acceptance and openness between the interviewer and participant (Kvale 1996). The interview questions were based loosely on a previous study completed by a faculty mentor about incarcerated women (Ferraro and Moe 2003). The interview guide can be found in Appendix A. After asking basic demographic questions, each woman was asked to describe how

she became homeless, the ways in which she had sought help for her homelessness, and the circumstances that brought her to the shelter. Of particular interest were their life conditions prior to and during the process of becoming homeless, such as instances of domestic violence, job loss, or illness. Other interests included experiences with obtaining assistance from various social entities, including the police/justice system, shelters, counselors, and social service agencies.

Participant demographics were consistent with the specific shelter population, as well as the general homeless population (Bassuk, Rubin, and Lauriat 1986; Bassuk et al. 1996; Crook 1999; Milburn and D'Ercole 1991; Rog et al. 1995). A comprehensive description of participant demographics can be found in Appendix B. Data collection was discontinued after collecting twenty interviews, as the same topics, concerns, and opinions were expressed throughout (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Wolcott 1994). The interviews were conducted in private rooms within the shelter, and lasted an average of forty-five (45) minutes. Each woman was given the opportunity to provide her own pseudonym for identification. Each was also provided with a remuneration of \$10 worth of bus tokens and/or gift certificates to a nearby fast-food restaurant, and instructions for obtaining a copy of her transcript.

The Refuge participants were encouraged to answer each question in ways that made sense to them. After an initial response that established a framework for their answers, they were probed for further details (Charmaz 2006; Kvale 1996). This interviewing approach yielded a wealth of information about various aspects of the women's lives, while empowering them to maintain their personal boundaries and comfort level.

Data Analysis Procedures

Grounded theory is characterized by systematic data collection and analysis throughout the research process. Using this approach, the researcher does not enter the research field seeking to explore a specific hypothesis, but rather conducts research allowing theory to emerge from the data itself (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2006). While this research strongly resonates with grounded theory, the methods (knowingly or otherwise) have deviated from this method's pure form. Grounded theory interviews place the participant in the role of expert. The questions allow the participant to verbally locate their identities socially, emotionally, and spiritually in ways that make sense to them. The interviewer probed for details, feelings, and reactions (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The interviewing techniques, while not purposefully constructed as such, closely followed the format ascribed by grounded theorists.

Pure grounded theory promotes a textual analysis of the initial data: emersion within this data, seeking emergent themes, and consequent theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998). This involves returning to the field, seeking data that relates to the possible emergent theory. The data analysis method for this research differed from grounded theory here, as the data were collected in a compressed timeframe over two months. Since returning to the field to collect more data is not an option, a pure grounded theory study cannot be pursued. While the interview content was reviewed throughout the research process, no formal analysis was conducted during this time, as would be done with "pure" grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Immediately after the interviews were conducted (Fall 2003), formal analysis of the data began with broad, incident by incident coding. Codes were simple and precise, purposefully without deep analysis. These codes included demographic characteristics, such as age, race and ethnicity, marital status, and number of children. Consistent with grounded theory, gerund phrases were used as initial codes, rather than imposed stringent categories (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). This analysis involved uncovering self-described factors in homelessness and help-seeking behaviors. The Refuge participants cited most often seeking help from governmental agencies (Family Independence Agency) and non-profit organizations (shelters).

Consistent with grounded theory, the data was revisited to conduct nuanced line-by-line analyses. This analysis was more theoretically advanced, requiring comparisons across interviews, and searching for assumptions and contextual meanings (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). From this analysis, a typology emerged of coping strategies employed by homeless women while residing in a bureaucratic shelter operating as a total institution (Goffman 1961). This phase of data analysis revealed that homeless women submit, adapt, or resist the total institution (DeWard and Moe 2007).

This current investigation revisited the narratives of the Refuge participants, seeking previously unnoticed themes. ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis tool was used to reanalyze the data for this investigation. Thus began the cyclical process of emersion in data analysis while referring to relevant research in social science literature. This data analysis uncovered narratives about the definitions of homeless identity. The women often speak of the stigmatized homeless identity (Juhila 2004;

Dotter 2002; Phelan et.al. 1997; Takahashi, McElroy and Rowe 2002; Kerbo 1976; Hays 2003; Forte 2002), and then verbally refute their identification with this role. They also differentiate themselves from other shelter residents and the shelter institution itself. These strategies were of particular relevance to the concepts identified in the literature review.

Snow and Anderson's (1987) research about identity talk strategies among homeless people was particularly salient to these emergent findings. Many similarities and differences were evident between Snow and Anderson's (1987) work and the emergent findings of the Refuge participants. Snow and Anderson's (1987) identity talk framework was purposefully applied to the interviews of the Refuge participants, and the narratives were coded to find parallels and contrasts. This analysis discusses the utility of Snow and Anderson's (1987) framework to the interviews of the Refuge participants. Using this well-known empirical research in analysis also situates my current investigation within a greater body of literature (Charmaz 2006; Guba 1981).

The twenty (20) semi-structured interviews of homeless women residing in the Refuge were analyzed using the identity talk framework proposed by Snow and Anderson (1987). Their framework included three categories: distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling (Snow and Anderson 1987). Each of these strategies are used to analyze the narratives of the Refuge participants, and are discussed in detail in the results section.

RESULTS

The purpose of this analysis is to explore the identity talk strategies of sheltered homeless women. To conduct this research, the identity talk framework presented by Snow and Anderson (1987) will be used. Snow and Anderson (1987) cited three primary identity talk strategies: distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. This analysis discusses Snow and Anderson's (1987) framework of identity talk categorizations, and explores the utility of their framework to the narratives of sheltered homeless women. While some of Snow and Anderson's (1987) framework were directly transferable to the Refuge participants, other concepts are inapplicable. For example, the narrative themes and topics found in Snow and Anderson's (1987) research differs from that found in the Refuge participants' interviews. While these deviations may be the results of the limitations of these data, they may also suggest the need for further replication and exploration into Snow and Anderson's methodology and findings. The distancing identity talk strategy will be discussed first.

Distancing

When homeless individuals seek to associate themselves with desirable people, roles, or institutions, they may choose to verbally disassociate themselves from undesirable people, roles and institutions (Snow and Anderson 1987). Snow and Anderson (1987) termed such identity talk strategies as "distancing," and describe three subcategories: associational, role, and institutional distancing. This

framework is utilized to analyze the interviews of female participants residing in the Refuge. This discussion begins with a review of associational distancing.

Associational Distancing

One's claim to a desired social identity is affected by the reflected social identities of their associates (Snow and Anderson 1987; Rokach 2005). To further affirm one's categorization into a positive personal identity, some individuals use language to verbally distance themselves from "negatively evaluated associates" (Snow and Anderson 1987). Associational distancing is the disavowal of identities linked with stigmatized groups or categorizations. Among the homeless, associational distancing is employed through verbal removal of oneself from other specific homeless people.

According to Snow and Anderson (1987), associational distancing is widely employed by homeless people to draw distinctions between themselves and other homeless people, claiming "I'm different." Their concern is to distinguish themselves from other "less desirable" homeless people (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1349). By comparing circumstances relative to others, this distancing strategy alleviates the cognitive incongruence felt between one's social and personal identities (Liebow 1993).

Associational distancing is found throughout the interviews with Refuge participants. A total of thirteen (13) women (65 percent) employed associational distancing strategies. Kelly, a mother of two, was residing in the shelter for one week at the time of the interview. Her interview offers many critiques of the other shelter residents. Kelly discusses the women who enter the shelter as struggling with drug addiction and sexually transmitted diseases. She claims that they do not try to "get

their lives together.” Kelly further differentiates herself from other “less desirable” homeless women residing in the shelter —those who she claims to have low personal hygiene and an array of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as ringworm and lice. She overtly differentiates herself from other shelter residents, literally using “us” and “them” language to disassociate. When asked to describe her negotiation through homelessness, Kelly describes her feelings about fellow residents at the Refuge:

I’m not saying don’t help somebody that need it but at the same time, don’t let them be here affecting us either. Just don’t let them blend in with us ‘cause that’s embarrassing and it would hurt to be around people like that when you are trying to get your life together. [Kelly]

She also implies that those who she believes have poor hygiene and diseases are not trying to find employment and housing. Note Kelly’s language in her last statement: “it would hurt [people like her] to be around [people like them] when [people like her] are trying to get their lives together.” This associational distancing statement is overt; Kelly claims a positive personal identity by effectively saying “I’m different from them!”

Many Refuge participants expressed opinions about how shelter procedures should change from bureaucratic and impersonal policies to individual and personal case management. Oftentimes, these ideas were not a criticism of the shelter bureaucracy, but rather an articulated desire for differentiation from the other “types” of residents within the shelter who should require different “types” of policies, rules, and services. Yolanda, residing in the shelter for two weeks with her two children at the time of her interview, illustrates this concept. When asked to elaborate about why it is hard to live at the Refuge, Yolanda replies:

It seems to me [staff] would do a better job screening the people that come in so they know what kind of people they are dealin' with. Everybody is not the same. Everybody's got different reasons they're here. I don't do drugs. I don't drink alcohol. I don't have a criminal record... but I have to account to [staff].

Iyayeiya also expressed similar sentiments. She and her two children had been residing in the shelter for thirty days at the time of her interview. With an average shelter stay length of sixty-three days, her stay was relatively shorter than her fellow residents. Iyayeiya believed that she was close to finding housing, as she was employed and focused on finding affordable housing.

Iyayeiya discussed the shelter rule that required residents to turn in all paychecks and earned money to shelter staff. This money was saved on behalf of the resident, and a weekly "allowance" was distributed. Iyayeiya commented on this policy:

Here they want you to turn in paperwork and all that, and that's pretty good because it is discipline. It's getting people in order because they don't know it but this is how God is getting their attention for them to get themselves in order in their life.

Again, her literal "us" and "them" language verbally distances her from those she considers to be less desirable (Anderson 2003). With her life not as chaotic and unbalanced as compared to other residents, Iyayeiya believed she would be leaving the shelter soon. Interestingly, Iyayeiya and her children were still residing at the shelter at the conclusion of data collection (approximately two months).

Associational distancing narratives were also especially prominent in regards to parenting and children. When Angela was interviewed, she was residing in the shelter for two and a half weeks, and had no children. She expressed resentment of those women in the shelter who were mothers. When asked why she did not speak with other shelter residents, Angela stated:

They are on different levels than me... Most of these women got kids and they still comin' back to the shelter. Why would you stand to put your child through that? I don't understand that at all.

For Angela, she is able to create cognitive congruence through associational distancing strategies. The severity of her circumstance, and the corresponding undesirable social identity, is diminished when compared against those who are homeless and mothers. For Angela, this identity (homeless mother) is worse (more undesirable, more stigmatized) than her current situation (homeless, but not a mother). She is, therefore, able to create cognitive congruence through verbally distancing herself from these undesirable associates.

Sheltered women also distanced themselves from associates who they considered chronic shelter users. Ironically, those who used this strategy have themselves been reliant on the shelter institution for comparatively longer periods of time. They have not proven themselves to be objectively more self-reliant or independent, as a benchmark for such traits would be finding housing and full-time employment (Anderson 2003; Williams 2003). It appears that a divergent benchmark exists among sheltered women. Length of shelter stay (in terms of actual number of nights sheltered) is not the standard of criticism. If dependence on the shelter was the standard of comparison among shelter residents, then each Refuge participant would be found lacking; all residents living in a shelter are dependent on the institution for their practical needs. Those women who appear as if they are complacent in their dependence upon the shelter (or those who embrace the institution, which will be discussed later) are considered lower on the shelter social status hierarchy. The Refuge participants differentiate themselves from those who

portray a perceived attitude of complacent dependence on the shelter (Anderson 1999; Anderson 2003; Marvasti 2002).

Becky, for example, had lived at the shelter for approximately a year at the time of her interview. She is the mother of four children, three of whom are residing at the shelter, and was eight months pregnant at the time of interview. Becky was recently informed by shelter staff that she would have to find alternate housing after giving birth.

Despite her personal circumstances, she regularly reprimanded other residents throughout her interview, specifically criticizing their lack of respect and inability to find stable housing. When asked to elaborate about her sentiment that some shelter residents view the Refuge as a hotel, Becky states:

Once they [shelter residents] get in [the shelter] they get comfortable with the environment and don't want to leave, you know? And they think it's cool to be here...to the percentage of them, once they get comfortable, I think over 90% of them.

Becky differentiates herself from the group of “them” who get comfortable in the shelter environment. However, given Becky’s own year-long shelter stay, “comfortable” must be defined differently than length of stay.

Other aspects of Becky’s narrative suggest that the attitude of the resident defines service-worthiness among residents (Anderson 1999; Anderson 2003; Marvasti 2002). She states, “you know, I don’t think this place should be [a hotel] for some people. I think it should be what it is... a temporary shelter.” For those who conceive of the shelter as a free luxury, Becky openly judges their shelter stay. However, Becky herself believes that residing in the shelter is one step on her way to stable housing.

Becky maintains her personal identity of being self-reliant and independent through associational distancing, removing herself from those who she believes are complacent with shelter life. Regardless of the realities of shelter stay length or other personal circumstances that may inhibit self-sufficiency, it is the self appraisals of personal identity that sheltered women use to maintain the positive self-conception (Anderson 1999). Negative appraisals of other shelter residents' identities operate to differentiate residents into "us" (desirable) and "them" (undesirable) groups (Anderson 2003).

In summary, the Refuge participants used associational distancing strategies to verbally disavow associations with those perceived as undesirable. These narratives primarily focused upon claims of being different, the use of "us" and "them" language, and judging the attitude and service worthiness of other shelter residents. A second distancing strategy employed by participants from the Refuge to create cognitive congruence is role distancing strategies.

Role Distancing

Role distancing occurs when there is a deliberate attempt to portray a lack of commitment to the stereotypical homeless person identity. When using this identity talk strategy, the individual tries to differentiate oneself from typical low-status roles or actions usually associated with the homeless. Snow and Anderson (1987) used role distancing specifically in relation to occupational roles and day-labor. Homeless people will take work, but will do so without enthusiasm because of the low status accompanied with employment deemed inadequate. This operates as both a social identity disavowal and simultaneously as a personal identity assertion (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1351).

Of the Refuge participants, eleven (11) or 55 percent engaged in role distancing narratives. They often expressed the hierarchical sentiment of being able to “do better” or “deserving better.” However, none of these comments were in relation to employment. The women’s narratives centered around housing, both current shelter conditions and future housing prospects (Liebow 1993). This finding is consistent with the results of Gotham and Brumley’s (2002) research on public housing residents. They found that public housing residents used distancing techniques to remove themselves from the symbolic stigma of their residential space (Gotham and Brumley 2002).

For the women of the Refuge, simply residing in the shelter was a demeaning experience that required verbal distancing from the shelter resident role. For example, Yolanda was living in the shelter for two weeks with her three children (including her pregnant daughter) at the time of her interview. She lost her job due to an injury she received on-site, and her employer was unwilling to pay her workers’ compensation. Without any income or other support, Yolanda was forced to seek refuge at the shelter. She states:

It’s not a good feeling [living in a shelter]... especially when you know you’ve done better and you can do better. It would be different if you had no other options. Then, this is it. This is the best you can do. This is the best you can do. I don’t knock that. But I know I can do better than this. I’ve done better.

This narrative, shaded by the traumatic losses recently endured, explicitly disavows shelter living as beneath her standards. Simultaneously, she (knowingly or not) separates herself from those whom shelter living is “the best they can do.” She removes herself from the undesirable social role of shelter resident, and avows a personal identity of high self-worth and pride.

Kelly also expressed role distancing, but her words expressed a disavowal not of shelter life in general, but the specific living conditions found at the Refuge. At the time of her interview, Kelly and her two children had lived at the Refuge for one week. This was not Kelly's first time living at this shelter, however. She has periodically resided in both homeless and domestic violence shelters for ten years. When discussing her shelter history, Kelly stated that she resided at the Refuge previously, but left for another local shelter due to the conditions. She stated, "I really didn't care for [the Refuge]...Like it wasn't really kept to a standard of cleanliness as far as germs spreading and like the bathrooms and the upstairs and the bedrooms and stuff." Kelly does not disavow herself from the social identity of shelter resident, but rather proclaims that she can do better in terms of living conditions within shelters. Kelly, therefore, disassociates herself from the living conditions of the Refuge, avowing a desirable personal identity through exhibiting pride in both personal hygiene and social appearances.

Finally, Angela discusses the process of finding affordable housing that is amenable to her standards. Single with no children, Angela had resided at the shelter for two and a half weeks at the time of interview. This was her first time living in a shelter, and she was focused on finding housing. However, she stated that she would not live in any apartment. The living quarters must be affordable, but also not government subsidized.

Interviewer: How has your apartment search been going?

Angela: Not good. Not good.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Angela: I've never lived in the projects... I wasn't raised in the projects. I'm not down in that, you know, I'm just not used to that. And I don't want to stay there... I'm still searchin'. Hopefully I find somethin' decent.

For Angela, the “projects” or government subsidized apartments are unacceptable. She maintains her pride by not living in undesirable apartment complexes, and disavows the social identity of living in the “projects.” Because she denies this form of housing, however, Angela must further cope with the social identity of homeless woman and shelter resident.

In summary, the Refuge participants used role distancing to verbally disavow undesirable role identities. These narratives primarily centered around their perceived ability to accomplish more than shelter residence implies, or that they deserved better than the shelter had to offer. For participants from the Refuge, role distancing statements were in largely in reference to their feelings about shelter residence. The complex relationship of the participants to the shelter institution will be discussed in the next section.

Institutional Distancing

Institutional distancing is cited by Snow and Anderson (1987) as a form of identity talk which demeans the very institutions that are meant to offer aid to the homeless. Snow and Anderson’s participants spoke mostly about the Salvation Army. This organization provided the most services to their respondents, and therefore, the homeless men frequently came into contact with organizational bureaucracy and staff. The participant complaints mostly center on the inhumane treatment of clients by staff, and the impersonal procedures resulting from organizational policy. The bureaucracy of such institutions often leads to a decline of personal autonomy of clients. Complaining about such institutions offers a path to maintaining a self-respecting personal identity that is removed from the social identity associated with the organization (Snow and Anderson 1987).

The Refuge participants openly and often engaged in institutional distancing from the shelter. While other social services agencies were also critiqued (Family Independence Agency, Child Protective Services, WorkFirst), the shelter itself was the brunt of the majority of complaints. In fact, twelve (12) or 60 percent of participants actively used distancing strategies to disavow the shelter institution.

Similar results regarding institutional attitudes were found in Elliott Liebow's ethnography of homeless women (1993). This makes sense, as the majority of the women's experiences took place within the four shelter walls. The increased amount of contact with shelter staff and policy provide for many critical opportunities to encounter to negative aspects of shelter life. For example, the Refuge participants offered critiques of the shelter staff and supervisors. These narratives are consistent with other homelessness research (Packard 2001; Kissane 2007; Liebow 1993; Anderson 2003). For example, Lisa had resided at the shelter for one week at the time of her interview. She describes staff treatment of residents as demeaning, citing the established power hierarchy within the institutional bureaucracy. When asked what changes she would make to the Refuge, Lisa replied:

A lot of times the staff seem power struck. You know they think... 'cause you're homeless they got you under their thumb. You supposed to do whatever they want you to do because they work here. [Lisa]

She explains that the shelter has a hierarchy of respect; shelter staff require obedience and submission. Lisa verbally distances herself from the institution and its associated social identity, thereby presenting a desirable personal identity. Through complaining about shelter staff, Lisa is able to distance herself from an undesirable identity.

Institutional distancing strategies often intersected with statements about parenting or motherhood. Outside of the shelter, children were used to their mothers being the heads of their households; the power hierarchy shifted upon entering the shelter, making staff the ultimate authority figures. Some Refuge participants spoke of the degradation of the mothering identity within the shelter institution. When asked to elaborate on her negative feelings about living at the Refuge, Yolanda states:

I feel like they are taking some of my dignity, my pride, away...in my children's eyes also. They are used to me being the strong one. I take care of them. And then to see me having to answer for every little thing I do.

Such sentiments are akin to those found by Stark (1994) in terms of the loss of respect experienced by parents from their children within the shelter institution. Identity incongruence emerges when women who are supposed to be authority figures within their families are subjected to the authority of shelter staff within the bureaucracy (Connolly 2000; Collett 2005; Hays 2003).

Other Refuge participants explained that the shelter rules disrupted her parenting style and decisions. Iyayeiya describes this dilemma. While discussing complaints about shelter staff, Iyayeiya explains:

I have my children on a set schedule and when we come down here. [Staff] don't want them playing with the toys, but they want them to be quiet. [My children] can't watch T.V., but they want them to sit down. You can't tell a two year old to sit down and be quiet for a hour and a half.

When Iyayeiya was interviewed, she was residing in the shelter for thirty (30) days and was the mother of two (2) children under the age of five (5). Her narrative is full of institutional distancing statements that expressed her inability to fulfill her desired mother identity because of shelter policy and procedures.

Other Refuge participants used institutional distancing to condemn the shelter structure at large. For example, Kelly had resided at the shelter on and off for several years. At the time of interview, however, she lived at the shelter for seven consecutive days. Kelly addresses institutional rules and processes by complaining about the shelter disciplinary process. At the Refuge, women are given an issue management (IM) form, which operates as a “warning.” The Refuge employs a “three-strike” rule: after three IMs, the offending resident will be forced to leave the shelter for a minimum of ninety days. Kelly explained that staff do not require residents to complete housing lists, but forbid swearing or yelling at children. She continued, “this is a shelter for housing. That’s backwards.”

Several participants questioned the priorities of shelter: was the shelter’s main objective to maintain control and order, or to empower women to achieve self-sufficiency? Interestingly, this question asked by shelter clients is also being raised in the academic community (DeWard and Moe 2007; Hartnett and Harding 2005; Kissane 2007; Mulder 2004; Stark 1994; Wuthnow, Hackett, and Hsu 2004).

In summary, the Refuge participants employed several distancing strategies to disavow undesirable social identities. Associational distancing strategies were used to differentiate or disassociate oneself from undesirable individuals or groups of fellow homeless women. Homeless women used role distancing to verbally avow that they deserve better than their current circumstance or status in life. This analysis found that homeless women employed institutional distancing through critiquing shelter

staff and policy². However, homeless women's relationship to the institution is complex. The second category of identity talk, embracement, will be discussed in the following section.

Embracement

Embracement occurs when homeless people actively express acceptance or attachment to the social identity associated with a group of social relationships, association to a specific or broad role, or ideology (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1354). Those who employ embracement identity talk strategies experience congruence between their reflected social identities and their desired personal identities. According to Snow and Anderson (1987), embracement strategies encompassed avowal of social identities, rather than disavowal (as found in distancing strategies). Divergent results, however, were found in this analysis. Snow and Anderson (1987) cite three sub-categories of embracement identity talk: role, associational, and ideological embracement.

Role Embracement

According to Snow and Anderson (1987), role embracement strategies encompassed narratives whereby the individual actively avowed a given social identity, and claimed it as their own personal identity. Snow and Anderson described role embracement as an avowed social and personal identity that is linked to an activity. For example, the authors cite a man who asserts his identity as an "expert dumpster diver" (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1355). Snow and Anderson (1987)

² Snow and Anderson (1987) discussed a correlation between length of time being homeless and prevalence of distancing identity talk strategies. Preliminary analyses did not find any correlations between length of stay and distancing strategies, but this may be a limitation of the cross-sectional nature of these data.

discuss not only participation in, but embracement of the subsequent social identities associated with specific activities, including drug-dealing, stealing, and panhandling (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1355).

Many of the specific examples presented by Snow and Anderson (dumpster-diving, panhandling) are specific to homeless people residing on the street; those activities are widely unnecessary for people who live in shelters as the women's homeless shelter provided residents all of their personal care needs. Providing clothing, food, personal care items, and even baby diapers decreases the need for sheltered women to participate in illegal money-making endeavors.

For the Refuge participants, role embracement generally focused upon embracing the role of shelter resident. These narratives were openly affectionate or supportive of shelter bureaucracy, staff, or shelter institution as a whole. These narratives were increasingly compliant, submissive and appreciative of shelter institution and staff (see also Williams 2003 and Mulder 2004). Seventeen (17) or 85 percent of the Refuge participants employed institutional role embracement strategies.

Instances of institutional role embracement diverged from Snow and Anderson's (1987) findings. Most Refuge participants who used institutional role embracement as a form of identity talk did not avow the stigmatized identity of shelter resident. That is, they did not find congruence through merging their personal identities with their imposed social identities. To create cognitive congruence, the Refuge participants reframed their language regarding their relationship to the institution. They reframed a negative situation by speaking about their circumstance in a positive way, and thus they were able to alleviate cognitive dissonance.

For example, shelter staff were the subject of many institutional role embracement narratives. Judy, an intermittent resident at the Refuge for thirteen years at the time of her interview, displays institutional role embracement.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the staff [at the Refuge]?

Judy: I love them all. They are all wonderful people.

Judy defines her feelings towards shelter staff as “love.” This characterization is an indication of embracement of the shelter staff and its structure. While shelter staff hold the power to enforce rules, Judy reframed this hierarchy as part of the shelter experience. She does not avow the role of shelter resident, but rather reframes her undesirable situation (shelter residence) by agreeing with shelter bureaucracy and cooperating with shelter staff. Later in her interview, Judy shyly giggled, and stated that she was glad that the Refuge has rules and she “likes them, too!” (Judy). This narrative diverges from the majority of the Refuge participants interviewed who showed open disgust for staff and shelter rules.

Extreme cases of sheltered women engaging in institutional role embracement include those who wholly accept and adopt the shelter lifestyle. Three (3) women or 15 percent of the Refuge participants personally avowed the stigmatized social identity of shelter resident; no other instance of stigmatized social identity avowal was found in this analysis. Refuge participants who employed this extreme of institutional embracement created cognitive congruence by fully integrating into the sheltered life. These women are no longer actively seeking independence apart from the shelter. This finding is consistent with other research that found homeless shelter residents to be “hyper-institutionalized,” and incapable of independently living (Mulder 2004; Stark 1994).

For example, Mary and her two children resided in the Refuge for six months at the time of her interview. The Refuge policy dictates a maximum shelter stay of thirty days, so substantial exceptions were made on her behalf. Instead of pursuing outside work, Mary applied for, and was hired, as a staff person in the women's dormitory at the Refuge—the shelter in which she resides. When asked about the shelter, she laments the lack of enforcement of shelter rules—rules that she must both enforce upon others, and follow herself. When asked if there were any shelter rules that she would change, Mary replied, “No. Definitely not. I would make sure they are enforced.” Mary so vehemently avowed the identity of shelter resident that she wanted rules enforced that restricted her personal autonomy. Mary stated that she had no future plans of leaving the shelter. She was still living and working at the Refuge when data collection was completed.

This analysis uncovered that role embracement for the Refuge participants was primarily seen in relation to the role of shelter resident. Most Refuge participants who employed institutional embracement did not avow the identity of shelter resident, but used self-narrative construction to reframe their sheltered circumstance in a positive way. In rare cases, Refuge participants did avow the socially stigmatized identity of shelter resident. Those Refuge participants who embraced the roles associated with the shelter institution created cognitive congruence through aligning their personal identities with their imposed social identity. Another type of embracement strategy, associational embracement, will be discussed next.

Associational Embracement

Snow and Anderson (1987) claim that individuals who employ associational embracement identity strategies understand the social importance of the personal identity of “friend.” Associational embracement can also be found in those who understand the importance of reciprocity in key social relationships, and therefore embellish their friend identity to reap the benefits (Anderson 2003; Snow and Anderson 1987). Snow and Anderson found that for homeless street-people, identifying oneself with another may allow access to limited resources, such as cigarettes or alcohol.

Associational embracement may also be evident through verbal or physical protection or defense of those considered friends (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1356). By “vouching” for someone, the homeless individual couples him or herself with others (Anderson 1999; Anderson 2003). The benefits of such association are inherent in the assumed reciprocity of the friendship. The idea follows that others will defend or vouch for someone who has already offered the same courtesy. The narratives of the Refuge participants illustrate instances of associational embracement. Ten (10) or 50 percent of participants employed associational embracement strategies; however, the types of narratives diverge from Snow and Anderson’s (1987) findings. Within the shelter structure, all basic needs were met, and everyone was relatively safe; therefore, bartering or aligning with others to achieve those ends (as described in Snow and Anderson) was seemingly unnecessary.

Other commodities, however, are perceived as being in high demand. For the Refuge participants, the most coveted resource was information about housing openings and employment opportunities. Through associational embracement, they

created associational social networks to aide each others' negotiation through homelessness. Nicole explained one such relationship with a fellow shelter resident:

Nicole: Don't got no friends... only one... and that's the girl in here... her name is Brenda. We just go job searchin' and help each other out and help each other find houses and we both will call...
Interviewer: Did you meet her here?
Nicole: Uh-huh, here at [the Refuge].

Nicole used her friends, and the reciprocity associated with that friend identity, to aid in their quest to find employment and housing. Tasha expressed the same sentiment: "I mean, I look at all of us came here basically for the same situation. I listen to each one's experience. I try to help them whichever way I could."

Further analysis suggests that an intersection between associational embracement and institutional distancing may exist. As the Refuge participants verbally disavowed identities associated with the shelter institution, they simultaneously avowed associational ties with other shelter residents. For example, Karen, nineteen (19) years of age and pregnant at the time of her interview, spoke against the perceived favoritism used by shelter staff. When asked what she would change about the Refuge, Karen stated:

I just think that [staff] should treat everyone the same because we are all human, we are all people, we are all homeless, we are all in the same position. No one is better than anyone just because one's on medication and one's not or one has kids and one don't. It is not fair.

This statement both disavowed the identity associated with the shelter institution, yet simultaneously embraced association with fellow shelter residents. She stated that "we are all the same," grouping herself in that category along with the mentally ill and mothers. Her identity was made congruent through creating solidarity with

shelter residents (associational embracement) against the shelter institution (institutional distancing) (See Anderson 1999).

Another Refuge participant, Nicole, also used institutional distancing and associational embracement strategies simultaneously. Nicole's narrative was very critical of shelter staff and policy. When asked to elaborate on her negative feelings about the Refuge staff, Nicole stated:

[The staff have] been fine towards me, but I saw them talk to another girl. The girl was getting' ready to do an interview for a job. [Staff] told the girl 'you have to clean up this room and clean up behind your kids and go in your room.' And the girl was like, 'you not my mother, you can talk to me better than that cause I'm grown just like you,' and [staff] put her out [Nicole].

Nicole's narrative continued to express total dissatisfaction with the actions of shelter staff, not because of their personal mistreatment of her, but because of their actions to her fellow shelter residents. Nicole expressed empathy for the situation of other residents, thereby utilizing associational embracement strategies.

Simultaneously, she joined in solidarity with other shelter residents to distance herself from the shelter institution (institutional distancing). These strategies, used in combination, supported cognitive congruence.

In summary, the Refuge participants used associational embracement strategies to create social networks to gain information about employment and housing resources. A connection between associational embracement and institutional distancing was also evident. As the Refuge participants verbally removed themselves from the institution (institutional distancing) they simultaneously avowed solidarity with other shelter residents (associational embracement). Another form of identity talk strategy used by Refuge participants was ideological embracement.

Ideological Embracement

Snow and Anderson (1987) cite ideological embracement as a form of identity talk strategy used by their homeless participants. Some individuals embraced an outside ideology as a way of creating cognitive congruence between their social and personal identities. Most frequently, Snow and Anderson (1987) identified this identity strategy in regards to embracement of a particular religion or belief system. While not as frequent, adherence to occult beliefs or to the doctrine of Alcoholics Anonymous was also found as a method of ideological embracement.

For the Refuge participants, religion and spirituality was used as a strategy to gain congruence between undesirable social identities and desirable personal identity. While they did not express any adherence to outside belief systems, many women spoke of religious ideological embracement. Thirteen (13) or 65 percent of the Refuge participants utilized ideological embracement strategies. Several women stated that they did not need money or wealth because they had God and salvation. Other women openly talked about their faith as a way to psychologically cope with shelter residence. For example, when Lee-Low was asked how she stayed positive while in the shelter, she responded, “[I] think about God. I know He loves me, and I know He been good to me.” Similarly, when Angela was asked how she emotionally copes with being homeless, she stated, “I just talk to God every day all day long. That’s all I can do.”

Other Refuge participants used ideological embracement as a way to cognitively negotiate their circumstances. These women stated that God was in control, and that he would provide housing and employment. Nakeia, for example, was living in the shelter for ten (10) days at the time of interview. When asked about

her current job search, Nakeia responded, “I keep trying and applying at places and maybe God will bless me with a good job.” Through this lens, Nakeia’s continued unemployment was not due to personal factors or inadequacies, but because of the will of God. She believed, therefore, that she will find a job when God decides.

This ideological embracement strategy clearly created cognitive congruence regarding her life circumstances.

Similarly, some women believed that it was God’s will for them to be homeless or reside in a shelter. Yolanda states,

I believe in God— that He is with us and He has blessed us in so many ways, and I know that sometimes you gotta go through things, in order to get your blessings.

For Yolanda, being homeless was a learning lesson from God on the path to future blessings. She believed that by managing her homeless circumstance, she is opening her life to future rewards.

In another poignant example, Michelle was residing at the shelter with her two children because she fled from her partner. Her boyfriend was sexually abusing her daughter, and her only escape was to come to the shelter. Michelle believed that God used the sexual assault of her daughter to show her personal wrongdoings. She thought that her own sins caused the sexual abuse of her daughter and subsequent homelessness.

It’s a whole process that I have to go through turning my life around, changing and seeking God and seeing what He has in store for me. I done missed out on a lot of blessings because of the things that I used to do and, and being in a relationship with somebody that didn’t have God in their life. He really got my attention by using my daughter. I felt that God used my daughter to show me that she needs to leave this man alone. [Michelle]

The victimization of her daughter coupled with her current homelessness was considered a punishment from God. This form of ideological embracement was not meant to excuse her circumstances; it was meant to contextualize and clarify God's justification for her plight. Homelessness was the retribution she must pay for her lack of faithfulness to her ascribed ideology. While her ideology may not provide positive cognitive feedback, it did provide information to create cognitive congruence regarding her situation. She can answer the question, "Why am I here?" with some certainty.

In summary, ideological embracement was used by the Refuge participants to create cognitive congruence between social and personal identities. Such narratives used their ideology of faith to explain their undesirable circumstances. Other participants used their relationship with God as a way to cope with their homelessness. These embracement strategies were commonly employed by participants at the Refuge³; however, as discussed in the following section, another identity talk strategy was also used: fictive storytelling.

Fictive Storytelling

Snow and Anderson describe fictive storytelling as the discussion of one's past, present, or future experiences or accomplishments that have a "fictive character to them" (1987: 1359). These narratives are not purposefully misleading, although some have this quality. According to Snow and Anderson (1987), these narratives

³ Snow and Anderson (1987) discussed a correlation between length of time being homeless and prevalence of embracement identity talk strategies. Preliminary analyses did not find any correlations between length of stay and distancing strategies, but this may be a limitation of the cross-sectional nature of these data.

range from slight exaggerations to grandiose stories. Two types of fictive storytelling exist: embellishment about the past and present, or fantasizing about the future.

Embellishment

According to Snow and Anderson (1987), embellishment refers to the purposeful exaggeration or omission of specific details of one's past or present experiences for the reason of avowing a desired personal identity. Embellishment is used for conscious identity construction, defining how one prefers to be perceived socially. Embellished stories about the past or present are meant to put a positive spin upon specific details or experiences. Embellishment narratives also focused upon specific, non-stigmatized positive personal identities to remove focus from undesirable social identity. Snow and Anderson found that the most common embellished themes were sexual and drinking exploits, "predatory" activities, and finances or employment (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1359).

Snow and Anderson (1987) primarily focused upon narratives with grandiose exaggerations to construct a desired personal identity. These narratives primarily included discussions of sexual encounters with many people, earning extreme amounts of money, and killing many people in combat. The themes found in these narratives suggest that Snow and Anderson's participants (which was 86 percent male) were using narratives to perform traditional hegemonic masculinity. It follows, therefore, that the Refuge participants did not engage in such narrative themes. In fact, sexuality was discussed only with reference to regret or guilt.

The Refuge participants did use embellishment techniques within their interviews, often using their narratives to reinforce hegemonic femininity, thereby spinning their circumstances to appear more desirable. Fourteen (14), or 70 percent,

of the Refuge participants utilized embellishment strategies. The most frequent embellishment themes were about demographic information, hegemonic femininity, and negative shelter experiences.

Embellishment narratives often focused upon constructing hegemonic femininity. These statements were used to embellish the desirable personal identity of child-focused mothers and/or loving wives or partners. The Refuge participants largely disavowed the social identities associated with homelessness and shelter residence; however, many embellished their personal role as mother, which appears to justify their acceptance of social aid and shelter assistance (Averitt 2003; Cosgrove and Flynn 2005; Connolly 2000; Hays 2003). In fact, twelve (12) or 60 percent of the Refuge participants employed mothering embellishment strategies.

The Refuge participants risked the social stigma of receiving aid and living in a shelter in order to create congruence in their highly salient mother identity (see Cosgrove and Flynn 2005, Connolly 2000, and Hays 2003). For example, Nicole, a mother of two, was asked how she keeps up her morale within the shelter. She responded, “pick up my kids. Everything I do is for my kids.” By using embellishment narratives to focus upon her identity as mother, Nicole diminishes the importance of socially stigmatized identities.

Similarly, Michelle, a mother of two, came to the shelter fleeing her child’s sexual abuse perpetrator. When asked how she copes with living in the homeless shelter, she states:

I look at my children, and I love my children with all my heart and this is not some place that I want for them. I don’t...And I don’t want to be in this situation. You know, [the abuse] was going on right up under my nose and I didn’t know it, and now I’m in this situation. I just want my kids to be happy.

Through embellishing the mothering role, Michelle is able to create congruence between her social and personal identities. While she wants better for her children, she chooses to live in the shelter. These examples are just two of many narratives of women seeking safety and security for the benefit of their children. The Refuge participants created cognitive congruence with their undesirable, stigmatized identities through embellishing their narratives about motherhood and their children.

Other participants from the Refuge used their narratives to construct the identity of hegemonic womanhood in regard to marriage. Alice explained during her interview that she does not regret being homeless because she met her current husband on the streets. She further explained that she was married for four months at the time of interview. When asked about her marital satisfaction, Alice stated, “marriage is great!” While it was possible that Alice genuinely did believe that her marriage was “great,” her circumstances suggested that such narrative was an embellishment strategy. Alice’s response did not follow the traditional definition of what constitutes a great marriage. Additionally, because of shelter policy, Alice and her husband would be unable to be alone together anywhere on shelter property, or sleep in the same room (not to mention, sleep in the same bed). While Alice claimed that her husband was getting an apartment the afternoon of the interview, the researcher often saw Alice in the shelter during continued observation and interviewing. Alice was still residing at the shelter when research was completed.

Not surprisingly, some Refuge participants used embellishment strategies to present shelter staff and policies as arbitrary, capricious, and heinous. While participant observation did suggest that the shelter bureaucracy was often

dehumanizing and impersonal to residents, the policies were not illegal. Such was the suggestion of Kelly in her discussion of her shelter chores:

And when I was in [the shelter], the man who ran [the thrift store] blew his head off and they made the women from [the shelter] clean it up. And yes... I am not exaggerating and I'm not lying 'cause I was here... I witnessed it. They took the body out and everything else. And we had to clean up. And I'm dead serious. I'm not lying. I wouldn't lie under God. And there was a lot of ugly things going on in [the shelter].

While it was possible that a suicide did not happen on shelter property, other neither staff nor resident discussed its occurrence. It is highly unlikely, however, that the police would allow others to tamper with a suicide crime scene. Such crime scenes are processed by police detectives, not cleaned by civilians. Furthermore, while the shelter staff was perceived as uncaring, the researcher saw no indication that the staff would force anyone to clean the remains of a deceased person. It appears, therefore, that Kelly used embellishment strategies to purposefully portray the shelter staff as inhumane. Consistent with institutional distancing, Kelly used embellishment strategies to disavow the social identity of shelter resident, thereby creating cognitive congruence. By using narratives to present their situations in a more personally desirable light, the Refuge participants actively engage in impression management.

Nee-Nee also explained that the shelter staff capriciously dictated rules and punishments. She was living in the shelter for two days at the time of interview, and already had very negative opinions about the shelter staff and structure. Nee-Nee explained that she attended a festival in the downtown area near the shelter, and consumed a wine cooler while there. Upon returning to the shelter, the staff suspected that she had been drinking alcohol. Alcohol consumption was forbidden while residing in the shelter, and was grounds for eviction.

According to Nee-Nee, shelter staff administered a breathalyzer test. She states, “[Staff] said that I blew .25 when I knew on the thing I only blew .05 but she said I blew .25.” According to blood alcohol content (BAC) estimates, it would take approximately twelve drinks for a person to blow .25 on a breathalyzer test. A person with this BAC would most likely be unconscious. Therefore, it would be impossible for the shelter staff to indicate her intoxication to be this high.

Furthermore, Nee-Nee was not dismissed from the shelter because of this incident, which shelter policy would have demanded if a .25 BAC was reported. Nee-Nee uses embellishment strategies to explain that shelter staff used discretion and their hierarchical power to lie about resident circumstances. Nee-Nee probably did believe that the staff were unfair, so she used embellished details in her narrative to fully convey the depth of her negative feelings about shelter staff and policy.

Other narratives lacked demographic consistency, and suggest embellishment. Lori, for example, embellishes her answer to the demographic question about educational achievement. At the beginning of the interview, demographic questions were asked about her educational level. Lori claims to have achieved, “almost a college degree.” As her narrative continued, Lori explained her life story and circumstances without mention of college attendance. Further questions about educational achievement were not asked explicitly, but her narrative does not allude to college attendance. Lori does state, however, that she has been unable to find employment and was living intermittently in the shelter for over a year. While this analysis cannot definitively confirm this embellishment, if her level of education was as she stated, it was not likely that she would experience chronic shelter residence and complete unemployment. It is possible that Lori’s use of this

embellishment may be to present herself as socially desirable to the interviewer. The interviewer, as a part of the informed consent process, disclosed that she was a college student. It is possible that Lori sought to construct her social identity, as reflected by the researcher, as positive and socially desirable.

Alice also employed embellishment strategies throughout her interview. She was living at the Refuge for one week at the time of interview. At thirty-two, Alice claimed to be the mother of five adult (over age eighteen) children. This statement was probably an embellishment, since a thirty-two year old woman with five adult children would have conceived to her last child at age ten. While this is feasible, it is also possible that Alice reported that she was younger than her actual age. That is, it is possible that Alice is the mother of five adult children, but chose to under-report her age to the researcher. Again, Alice may have chosen to modify (or embellish) her self-narrative to appear more acceptable to the researcher, a twenty-one year old student.

Embellishment strategies were employed by the Refuge participants through modification of their demographic information, by avowing hegemonic roles of marriage and motherhood, and by conveying negative information about shelter staff and policy. These narratives were in regard to past or present circumstances or experiences. Fantasizing strategies were also used by the Refuge participants, in regards to future goals or dreams.

Fantasizing

According to Snow and Anderson (1987), fantasizing includes “future-orientated fabrications” that verbally locate the speaker in positive situations which are distinctly disconnected from past or present circumstances (p. 1360). This form

of fictive storytelling not only operated to avow a desirable personal or social identity reflected appraisals, but also included a large degree of self-deception. Participants in Snow and Anderson's (1987) research displayed personal belief in their fantasized tales. Those homeless participants who used fantasizing as an identity talk strategy were those considered to be anchored in the world outside of the homeless subculture. They were able to see into the future, even if their depictions were considered outlandish. Snow and Anderson (1987) found fantasizing narratives to center around four major themes: self-employment, money, material possessions, and the opposite sex.

The Refuge participants exhibited fantasizing as a form of fictive storytelling, but in markedly different ways than found by Snow and Anderson (1987). These differences are consistent with the explanation offered by Snow and Anderson (1987). Their street people participants were not embedded in any groups or relationships that would know about one's true past or future possibilities. Therefore, the street people were able to construct fictive narratives without others questioning authenticity or credibility. The Refuge participants, however, were thoroughly embedded in a social network of both shelter staff and fellow residents who could actively call into question narratives that seemed implausible. It follows, therefore, that the Refuge participants would engage in fictive storytelling strategies in minor ways.

None of the Refuge participants discussed their futures in eccentric terms. No woman discussed being rich, starting a business, obtaining large sums of money, or sexual conquests. It appeared, however, that the Refuge participants were anchored in the goals and dreams of the world outside of the shelter. While they did

not discuss outlandish fantasies, they did discuss improbable or unrealistic future aspirations. These narratives centered on finding housing or employment. While these future desires were not in themselves unrealistic, the timeframe established for achievement was improbable. Six (6) or 30 percent of the Refuge participants engaged in fantasizing strategies.

Nakiea was a resident in the shelter for ten days at the time of interview. According to her narrative, she had applied for social security disability assistance. Other residents claim that she was schizophrenic. Nakiea stated that she was homeless because she “got sick” of her job and quit. When asked about her future, Nakiea responded, “I have dreams. I would like to get a house of my own and a car and a part-time job and a social security disability.” This statement is disconnected from her current circumstances. She desires to own a house and car, but also would like government assistance and a part-time job. Her self-described pathway to homelessness was quitting her job. This behavior generally does not result in home ownership.

Tasha was residing in the shelter for a month and a half with her two children at the time of interview. When she was asked about her future, Tasha responded, “I know within a year’s time I’m going to finish school-- been saved up some money to. I’ll be able to at least be able to put a down payment on a home.” This outcome, while possible, is highly unlikely within the context of her past and present circumstances. Tasha may finish school, and holding her GED would help her find employment and housing. However, there is a disconnect in the trajectory of her life circumstances. It is unlikely that Tasha will, within a year’s time, move from unemployment and shelter residence, to employment and home ownership.

Other Refuge participants fantasized about leaving the shelter while actively avowing positive and desirable personal and social identities. Kelly states,

You have to put [your kids] number one in your life and God will help you. You know, that's proly why I been blessed to get up outta here so soon. It's because I put my kids number one.

Through this narrative, Kelly positioned herself within several positive identities. Firstly, she fantasized about leaving the shelter when she considers "soon." Next, she avowed the desirable identities of good mother (role embracement) and spiritually blessed (ideological embracement). Interestingly, Kelly was one of the first interviews conducted, and was still residing at the shelter with her two children when research was completed. If further interviews were conducted with Kelly, it would be interesting to learn whether her identity talk strategies shifted as her length of shelter stay increased. Would Kelly no longer employ ideological embracement if she was still living in the shelter for six months? A year? This fictive storytelling strategy is a powerful technique for women residing in a homeless shelter, as it allows them to remain grounded in the hopes and dreams of the world outside of the shelter bureaucracy⁴. The implications of these results will be further explored in the discussion.

Three forms of identity talk strategies cited by Snow and Anderson (1987) were analyzed in regards to sheltered homeless women. These strategies were distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. The presence or absence of these strategies suggests important implications for the current identity and women's

⁴ Snow and Anderson (1987) discussed a correlation between length of time being homeless and prevalence of embellishment identity talk strategies. Preliminary analyses did not find any correlations between length of stay and distancing strategies, but this may be a limitation of the cross-sectional nature of these data.

homelessness literature. The implications of the aforementioned results are presented in the following section.

DISCUSSION

This analysis uses structural symbolic interactionism as well as identity theory to expand the current identity literature. This analysis explored the identity talk strategies of women residing in a Midwestern homeless shelter called the Refuge. When participants felt a cognitive incongruence between their imposed social, stigmatized identity and their personal identity, they engaged in identity talk strategies to reframe their experiences and restore congruence. Participants from the Refuge primarily engaged in three types of identity talk strategies: distancing, embracement and fictive storytelling. Refuge participants used role distancing to disavow stereotypical homeless roles, and verbally claim that they deserve better housing and resources. Associational distancing was used to remove oneself from undesirable people, thereby protecting their desirable personal identity.

Participants from the Refuge had a very complex relationship with the shelter in which they resided. Some employed institutional distancing strategies which removed themselves from the undesirable identity of shelter resident. Analysis also showed that a relationship exists between institutional distancing and associational embracement. As the Refuge participants distanced themselves from the shelter institution, they embraced solidarity with other shelter residents. Other participants embraced the role of shelter resident, thereby reframing their circumstance to create cognitive congruence. Other embracement strategies include avowing the role of mother, and embracing other shelter residents (associational embracement). Finally, shelter residents used fictive storytelling techniques as identity talk strategies. Some

embellished their past or present circumstances in ways that made them seem more favorable or desirable. Others used fantasizing narratives to discuss their futures in positive ways.

This research about the identity talk strategies of homeless sheltered women offers several unique contributions to the literature about women's homelessness and identity work. This thesis utilized the existing identity talk framework created by Snow and Anderson (1987), and empirically tested its transferability in analyzing the verbal identity construction strategies used by sheltered homeless women. An extensive literature review did not locate any other empirical research that explicitly tests the framework developed by Snow and Anderson (1987). While Snow and Anderson's (1987) article was cited over one hundred times in other empirical journal articles, none of those researchers challenged Snow and Anderson's (1987) findings. Therefore, this thesis uniquely contributes to the literature by expressly testing and questioning the validity of their identity talk findings.

This contribution is significant because the strategies employed by sheltered homeless women diverged from those expressed in Snow and Anderson's (1987) discussion. Because differing themes were found between Snow and Anderson's (1987) sample and the Refuge participants, we can conclude divergent identity construction processes among each. These divergent processes are likely a function of gender differences (men versus women) and residence (street residence versus shelter residence).

Snow and Anderson's (1987) research fails to address the gendered components of homelessness. Their ethnographic research was focused upon understanding the culture of homeless people. Upon analyzing their sample, their

“people” were eighty-six (86) percent male. Therefore, Snow and Andersons’ homeless “people” are really homeless men. The authors do not address this bias in their sample, generalizing their findings to both men and women. The researchers cite “homeless people” as comprising their sample, while ignoring the gendered components of their narratives and subsequent analysis (Allgood and Warren 2003; Blasi 1994; Morgan 2002; Snow and Anderson 1987).

By ignoring gender in the analysis of homelessness, the worsening plight of homeless women is rendered invisible in the academic literature. This invisibility is also seen in the popular media. An example can be found in a recent *Associated Press* article summarizing a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report on homelessness (2007). The headline states “Of 744,000 Homeless Estimated in US, 41 Percent are in Families” (Ohlemacher 2007). The article continued to address the perils of homelessness, and the increase of families living on the streets and in shelters. What this article failed to discuss, however, was that of those families, eighty-four (84) percent were female head-of-households with children (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development 2007). The feminization of homelessness is a growing problem, but the realities of women are not addressed specifically because they are kept invisible beneath blanket headlines.

Why does the differentiation between men and women matter? Because research indicates that men and women experience and negotiate homelessness in different ways. For example, Rokach (2005) found that homeless women were much more in touch with personal experiences and self reflection than homeless men. Research has shown that women with children experience many more stressful life events than single women or men (Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999; Zugazaga 2004).

Homeless men and women also cite differing pathways to homeless, which require differing social service interventions (Tessler, Rosenheck, and Gamache 2001).

A gendered finding in the analysis of the identity talk strategies of homeless sheltered women is the high prevalence of mothering narratives. While the Refuge participants did not embrace stigmatized role identities as with Snow and Anderson's (1987) research, they did actively avow the mother role identity. The personal and social identity of "good mother" was very high on the Refuge participants' identity hierarchy (Hoelter 1983; Schindler and Coley 2007). Mothering was also a salient theme among associational distancing narratives. The Refuge participants compared their relative circumstances (mother verses no children) and parenting style ("good" parenting verses "bad" parenting) to distance themselves from residents deemed undesirable. Parenting was also a salient theme in institutional distancing narratives, with several Refuge participants criticizing the shelter for disrupting the mother/child relationship. Because over half (eleven, or 55 percent) of the Refuge participants were mothers, it makes sense that motherhood and parenting were salient themes.

These findings are consistent with other research about mothering (Averitt 2003; Collett 2005; Connolly 2000; Hays 2003). Collett (2005), for example, found that women actively protect and pursue the identity of a "good mother." Baker and Carson (1999) found that substance abusing mothers used narratives to embrace the parenting role, and to actively manipulate the cultural ideology of motherhood to create congruence between the "drug addict" identity and "mother" identity. Thrasher and Mowbray (1995) found that a prevailing strength of homeless women is their ability to care for children and seek resources to keep their families' together.

This thesis also contributes to the identity and women's homelessness literature by exploring the idiosyncrasies of identity construction for homeless women residing in a shelter. The review of the literature predicted that the shelter experience significantly affected the experiences of residents in two ways. First, the shelter as an institution imposed institutionalizing social control measures upon female residents, thereby operating as a persistent reminder of residents' lower status and stigmatization (DeWard and Moe 2007; Hartnett and Harding 2005; Karabanow 2004; Mulder 2004; Packard 2001; Stark 1994). Shelter staff reinforced this hierarchy by exercising discretion in policy enforcement, service administration and resource access (DeWard and Moe 2007; Marvasti 2002; Mowbray et.al. 1996; Mulder 2004; Packard 2001).

Second, while the shelter institution itself operated as a stigma symbol, the homeless sheltered women also negotiated the personally imposed cognitive and emotional baggage of coping with a deeply stigmatized social identity. Simply living in the shelter provided an ever present personal reminder of one's stigmatized position, forcing the undesirable position of the stigmatized identity to be highly salient (Craft 1987; Lee and Craft 2002; Link and Phelan 2001).

As expected, the Refuge participants did engage in identity talk strategies that diverged from the experiences of Snow and Anderson's (1987) homeless street residents; this thesis provides empirical research to support the significance of shelter residence upon identity talk utilization. Homeless sheltered women, regardless of their lack of practical or social resources, are concerned with maintaining a positive self-regard and self-esteem (Juhila 2004; Murray 2000; Park and Crocker 2005; Snow and Anderson 1987; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). The Refuge participants were

motivated to maintain self-esteem through verbally avowing or disavowing social identities (Link and Phelan 2001; Park and Crocker 2005). The high prevalence of the use of identity talk strategies among the Refuge participants suggests that homeless women are negotiating a dialectical relationship between social and personal identities (Hays 2003; Juhila 2004; Park and Crocker 2005; Snow and Anderson 1987; Zufferey and Kerr 2004).

Also, these findings further address the complex, dynamic process of identity construction. Patterns of identity talk among the Refuge participants are presented in Appendix C. This table showed that several Refuge women employed several, seemingly dichotomous identity talk strategies within the same narrative. For example, Angela engaged in all forms of both distancing and embracement identity talk strategies. These findings do not necessarily imply inconsistencies with this analytical framework, but rather reaffirms that being homeless and residing in a shelter is a very complex experience. This finding also underscores the importance of narratives. The Refuge participants used the identity talk strategies interchangeably, suggesting that the identity talk categorizations are neither mutually exclusive nor contradictory to each other. Feelings, for example, about the shelter are inevitably complex as one relies on the shelter institution for physical sustenance and safety, yet is emotionally and mentally subjugated and mistreated by that same institution. It follows that shelter residents could express statements of gratitude for the shelter and criticism of shelter bureaucracy within the same narrative.

This research also expands the literature about homeless women's relationship with stigmatized identities (Goffman 1963; Hays 2003; Juhila 2004; Park and Crocker 2005; Snow and Anderson 1987; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). In Snow

and Anderson's (1987) research, participants who engaged in embracement identity talk were assumed to actively avow stigmatized identities, thereby merging the imposed social identity with their constructed personal identity. This process removed the possibility for cognitive incongruence in regard to this identity, because the social and personal identities became one and the same.

Consistent with Snow and Anderson (1987), disavowing identity talk strategies were often found in distancing narratives however, this research also found that embracement strategies were used as a form of identity disavowal. This finding diverges from that of Snow and Anderson (1987), who conceptualized embracement identity talk strategies as the personal avowal of stigmatized identities. Refugee participants used embracement as an identity talk strategy, but did not internalize that stigmatized social identity. Rather, embracement identity talk strategies were used to reframe the ways that they verbally constructed their circumstances and experiences. Identities that were embraced were devoid of stereotypical stigmatization (i.e. mother, friend, religious person, respectful resident).

This research expands this discussion of identity construction, since the majority of the Refugee participants (85 percent) actively disavowed stigmatized social identities. Refugee participants consistently felt cognitive incongruence between social and personal identities, and were motivated to change this uncomfortable state of mind (Burke and Reitzes 1991; Granberg 2007; Hoelter 1983; McFarland and Pals 2005). Rather than internalizing (or embracing) their imposed stigmatized social identity, they used embracement identity talk techniques to verbally reframe their circumstances, thereby creating cognitive congruence. The Refugee participants still rejected their social identities; they used positive, accepting narratives to explain their

experiences. Only three (3) or 15 percent of the Refuge participants engaged in identity talk strategies, and wholly avowed the stigmatized identity of shelter resident.

This thesis also offers a unique utilization of Snow and Anderson's (1987) identity talk framework—the emergent theme of institutional role embracement. Some Refuge participants embraced the shelter institution and/or shelter staff; this form of identity talk was unheard in Snow and Anderson's (1987) discussion. The presence of institutional embracement strategies, while not cited in Snow and Anderson (1987), is consistent with other research. Gotham and Brumley (2002), in their study of public housing residents, found that people embraced government redevelopment projects for their living spaces as a way to cognitively cope with public housing residence. Because the Refuge participants are deeply embedded in the shelter, it follows that they have an increasingly complex relationship with the institution, more so than the participants in Snow and Anderson's (1987) research.

This analysis offers several unique contributions to the academic literature about identity work and gendered homelessness. These contributions are also a starting point from which future academic research can begin. The results of this research also have practical implications for social services provision and policies. These suggestions will be discussed in the following section.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND SOCIAL SERVICES PROVISION

This research, while adding to the current identity literature, also provides a space to offer practical implications for future research in this field, as well as service provision for homeless women. Of particular interest for future research is further analysis of the links between length of shelter stay and utilized identity talk strategies. Because this sample was cross-sectional and the interviewing strategy was semi-structured, this research cannot determine whether the identity talk strategies displayed by the Refuge participants were due to the social psychological creation of cognitive congruence, or rather because of a progressive experience of identity deterioration (with corresponding identity talk strategies) that correlated with stages of institutionalization. In other words, did the identity talk strategies of the Refuge participants change as the length of their shelter stay increased? Because the participants were not interviewed long term, I have no indication of their narratives across time. Preliminary analyses of length of shelter stay and identity talk strategies do not suggest a relationship, but this may be due to a limitation in this data. Longitudinal analysis of this question could provide greater breadth to the findings here in terms of how social service-based agencies, like shelters, affect their clientele over the long term.

Similarly, the results of this analysis did not find any instances of ideological distancing. That is, the Refuge participants did not blame God for their situation. Ideology or religion was only used in a positive way to cognitively explain one's experiences and life circumstance. This form of identity talk may be unheard

because of the cross-sectional nature of this analysis. Do ideological embracement narratives shift to ideological distancing narratives if their life circumstances worsen over time? Further research should longitudinally research sheltered women who engage in ideological embracement identity talk strategies.

Further sociological research should be completed expressly to compare experiences of men (see Dordick 1996) and women. How and to what extent does the shelter experience affect men and women? Empirical research needs to be conducted about the differences of experiences within the shelter for men and women (Roll, Toro, and Ortola 1999; Zugazaga 2004). Specifically, the parent identity within the shelter should be further explored for both men and women, as it proved to be an exceptionally salient concept in this study (Averitt 2003; Baker and Carson 1999; Cosgrove and Flynn 2005; Schindler and Coley 2007).

The results of this analysis point to several recommendations for homeless shelters. First, a thorough reevaluation of shelter goals and practices is required. The Refuge participants readily offered critiques of the shelter, using institutional distancing identity talk strategies, questioning policies that were seemingly contradictory to establishing self sufficiency of residents. This question has also been raised by several other researchers (DeWard and Moe 2007; Hartnett and Harding 2005; Kissane 2007; Mulder 2004; Stark 1994; Wuthnow, Hackett, and Hsu 2004).

This current research found that a relationship exists between institutional distancing and associational embracement identity talk strategies. That is, as the Refuge participants disavow the shelter bureaucracy or staff, they simultaneously avow relationships with fellow shelter residents. The result of this relationship was a pointed hierarchal, “us” verses “them” relationship between the shelter staff, the

front-line workers who enforce bureaucratic policies and procedures, and shelter residents.

This adversarial relationship is inherently counter-productive to the goal of self-sufficiency of shelter residents. Homeless shelter workers should operate as advocates for shelter residents, providing individualized case management to aid in employment and stable housing for shelter residents. Staff should be educated about inequality (Abramovitz 2005), urban neighborhood issues (Kissane 2004) and poverty policies (such as welfare reform) to aid in advocacy for clients (Kissane 2006). With this knowledge, staff should be able to display greater empathy for residents, holding positive regard for clients rather than judgment (Packard 2001).

This counter-productive relationship is an ineffective use of donor dollars, federal funding, and volunteer time. I suggest that homeless shelter executive boards and women's shelter directors research and observe domestic violence shelter practices. Domestic violence shelters operate under the empowerment philosophy of individualized needs and case plans. Shelters often operate as a large home, focusing on interpersonal support among residents. This approach may prove to be more beneficial for homeless shelters and the women therein.

Too much of a divide exists between academic literature about social service provision and actual implementation of shelter policies by street level bureaucrats (Hooper 2003). Shelter best-practices should be informed by the academic literature, and formulated to best reach a nuanced population (Karbanow 2004; Hartnett and Harding 2005). Client experiences should be included as a way to guide best practices formulation (Wuthrow, Kackett, and Hsu 2004). This recommendation is

especially salient in faith based organizations where empirical research disputes their current effectiveness (Kissane 2007).

This thesis does expand the literature about sheltered women's verbal identity construction and gendered homelessness. More specifically, this analysis explored the ways in which sheltered women negotiate their personal identities in the midst of a deeply stigmatized social identity. While this research expands the academic literature, the analysis also offers suggestions for the more effective provision of services to homeless women. Such social critiques are timely as economic conditions for homeless women worsen. This research shows that sheltered women are engaging in identity talk strategies, which implies the presence of deep cognitive and emotional distress among homeless women. It is the responsibility, therefore, of social service organizations to understand the ways in which organizations have both worked for and against homeless women's survival. The services of such organizations must push beyond the pragmatic physical needs of food, water, shelter, and begin addressing the human need for acceptance, affirmation, and amity.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Basic Demographic Information

- 1) What is your current age?
- 2) What racial/ethnic group do you identify with?
- 3) What level of education have you achieved?

Questions About Homelessness and Helpseeking

- 4) What circumstances led you to become homeless?
- 5) What happened that brought you to the KGM Women's Shelter?
How would you describe your life circumstances at that time?
(e.g., partner, kids, living arrangement, jobs, social welfare benefits)
How long have you been a resident at the shelter?
How long do you expect to stay?
Do you have children? If so, are they staying at the shelter with you?
Have the shelter's services been helpful to you? Helpful for your children?
- 6) Aside from the shelter, from what other agencies, organizations, or people have you sought help with being homeless (in poverty)? (e.g., FIA, CMH, police, other shelters, family, friends, churches/religious groups, etc.)?
When did you seek help from these programs (groups, agencies, etc.)?
How would you describe your life circumstances at those times?
(e.g., partner, kids, living arrangement, jobs, social welfare benefits)
How long did you work with/have contact with these programs, etc.?
If still involved, how long do you expect to stay working with them?
Have these programs (groups, agencies, etc.) been helpful to you?
To your children?
- 7) Aside from these efforts, how have you personally coped with being homeless?
How do you keep your morale up?
How do you help your kids on a daily basis (if there are children involved)?
- 8) If at least some of your needs were not met by the programs (groups, agencies, etc.) you've contacted for help, what types of programs (groups, agencies, etc.) would be able to meet these needs?

Appendix B

Participant Demographics

Of the twenty female homeless shelter residents interviewed, 16 (80 percent) identified as African-American, three (15 percent) as white, and one (5 percent) as multi-racial. Their ages ranged from 19 to 53, with an average of 34. Four (20 percent) had obtained less than a high school education, seven (35 percent) had either graduated from high school or obtained a G.E.D., and nine (45 percent) had completed some form of higher education. Thirteen (65 percent) of the women were mothers, with an average of 2.5 children each. Ten (50 percent) had children staying with them in the shelter and one woman was pregnant at the time of her interview. Eighteen (90 percent) of the women were single, while two (10 percent) were married. The average shelter stay at the time of interview was 63 days with a range from two days to one year. These demographics are consistent with the specific shelter population, as well as the general homeless population (Bassuk et al. 1996).

Consistent with prior research (Williams 2003), the women often could not or did not offer concise reasons for their homelessness. Because I wanted to see how the women made sense of their lives through their own accounts and explanations, while trying to maintain a non-blaming atmosphere, they were not pushed to elaborate. However, through conversation, many did describe a complex array of personal situations and circumstances (e.g., loss of job, domestic violence), often intertwined with general societal deficits (e.g., lack of living wage and affordable housing).

Thinking about the compounded pathways toward homelessness as “factors” rather than reasons, 16 (80 percent) cited unemployment or loss of employment, seven (35 percent) described family violence (6 domestic violence and/or child abuse; 1 child abuse), six (30 percent) of the women cited substance abuse (prescription drugs, illicit drugs, and alcohol), and six (30 percent) discussed mental illness (primarily depression and schizophrenia).

As the interviews progressed, the women discussed the ways in which they had sought help with their circumstances. Six (30 percent) received help from their family members. Seven (35 percent) asked for help from churches or other religious agencies. Fourteen (70 percent) had resided in another shelter before entering The Refuge. Eight of these women indicated that they were referred or transported to The Refuge by another shelter due to overflow or the ending of allowable length of shelter stay; four reported that they had traveled a distance (ranging from 30-60 minutes) for a bed at The Refuge.

Additionally, 14 (70 percent) of the women mentioned utilizing services through the Family Independence Agency, which is a state-run agency responsible for welfare administration (including welfare-to-work programs) and child protective services. When asked about their experience with the welfare system, the women who had seemingly hard-working caseworkers (10, or 50%) expressed higher appreciation. Two (10 percent) were currently working with Child Protective Services, both due to their children’s truancy. In terms of physical and mental health care, 7 (35 percent) used Medicaid for healthcare, 5 (25 percent) received counseling or psychiatric treatment through Community Mental Health or other private agencies. Two (10 percent) had previously received services from a drug treatment

facility. Three (15 percent) were utilizing adult education through a local non-profit organization to earn their GED.

Appendix C

Participant Demographics and Identity Talk Strategies

Demographics					Distancing			Embracement			Fictive Storytelling	
Name	Age	# of kids	Shelter Stay Length	Previous Shelter Stay?	Assoc- iational	Role	Instit- utional	Assoc- iational	Ideolo- gical	Role	Embel- lishment	Fanta- sizing
Nee-Nee	31	0	2 days	No	X	X	X				X	X
Alice	32	5	7 days	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sarah	33	5	7 days	Yes				X	X	X		
Kelly	32	2	7 days	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Linda	40	2	7 days	Yes	X		X					
Lisa	21	1	7 days	No	X		X	X				
Nakiea	43	0	10 days	No					X	X	X	X
Nicole	27	3	14 days	Yes	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Michelle	31	2	14 days	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Yolanda	44	6	14 days	No	X	X	X		X		X	
Angela	22	0	17 days	No	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Karen	19	1	30 days	Yes			X	X		X		
Marie	44	0	30 days	Yes	X	X			X	X	X	
Lee Low	53	0	30 days	Yes					X	X	X	
Iyayeiya	25	2	30 days	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Tasha	27	2	45 days	Yes		X		X		X	X	X
Judy	42	1	90 days	Yes					X	X		
Mary	36	2	180 days	No						X		
Lori	51	2	360 days	Yes	X	X				X	X	
Becky	32	5	360 days	Yes	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Average/ Total	34	2.5	63 days	14/20	13/20	11/20	12/20	10/20	13/20	17/20	14/20	6/20

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