Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities

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# Identity Work among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities[1]

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This paper elaborates processes of identity construction and avowal among homeless street people, with two underlying and interconnected objectives in mind: to advance understanding of the manner in which individuals at the bottom of status systems attempt to generate identities that provide them with a measure of self-worth and dignity and to shed additional empirical and theoretical light on the relationships among role, identity, and self-concept. The data are from an ethnographic field study of homeless street people. "Identity talk" constitutes the primary form of "identity work" by means of which homeless street people construct and negotiate personal identities. Three generic patterns of identity talk are elaborated and illustrated: distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. Each form contains several subtypes that vary in usage according to the length of time one has spent on the streets. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical implications of the findings and suggesting a number of grounded propositions regarding the relationships among role, identity, and self.

Congregated at the bottom of nearly every social order is an aggregation of demeaned and stigmatized individuals variously referred to historically as the *ribauz* (Holmes 1966), the *lumpenproletariat* (Marx and Engels 1967), untouchables (Srinivas and Beteille 1965), the underclass (Myrdal 1962), or superfluous people (Harrington 1984). However they come to be situated at the lowest reaches of a status system, whether through political design, structural push, inadvertent slippage, or birth, they tend to

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be viewed and discussed primarily in terms of the characterological problems they are thought to have (e.g., cultural deprivation, genetic inferiority, and mental depravity), the problems they are thought to pose for the larger community (e.g., crime, contamination, demoralization, and welfare), or the problems associated with their material survival (e.g., food, shelter, and clothing). Their inner life, and particularly the problem of generating and maintaining a sense of meaning and self-worth, is rarely a matter of concern. There are exceptions to this tendency, of course, exemplified by Goffman's (1961*a*) elaboration of the secondary adjustments of mental patients in an asylum, the observations of Bettelheim (1943), Frankl (1963), and Dimsdale (1980) on the psychological coping strategies of concentration camp inmates, and the research of Liebow (1967) and Anderson (1976) among black street-corner men. But, in general, questions pertaining to the inner life of those at or near the bottom have been of secondary concern.

This lacuna is also evident in research on America's current wave of homelessness. To date, research has focused almost solely on the demographic characteristics of the homeless, their physiological survival needs, and the problems they have or pose (e.g., alcoholism, mental illness, criminality, and urban blight). That an understanding of life on the streets and variation in patterns of adaptation may be contingent in part on the webs of meaning the homeless spin and the personal identities they construct has rarely been considered empirically or theoretically.[2] Our primary aim in this paper is to fill this void in part and thereby further understanding of the manner in which a sense of personal significance and meaning is generated and sustained among individuals

[2] Absence of concern with such issues in recent research is clearly apparent in the U. S. House Committee on Government Operations' (1985) compilation of numerous studies throughout the country and in a General Accounting Office (1985) report on research on homelessness. Much of the previous research on earlier generations of homeless individuals also sidestepped such cognitive considerations by focusing on the demographic characteristics of the homeless and the problems (particularly alcoholism) they had or posed for their communities, as reflected most prominently in the large-scale survey studies by Bogue (1963) and Bahr and Caplow (1973) and the ethnographic research of Spradley (1970) and Wiseman (1970). Conspicuous exceptions to this problem-oriented focus are provided by the classic studies of Nels Anderson (1923, 1931) and Harper's (1982) recent travelogue about his adventures with an avowed tramp. In both cases, concern is primarily with portraying the nature of life on the streets or road from the standpoint of the participants but without attending systematically or theoretically to the manner in which personal identities are constructed and sustained. Liebow's (1967) and Anderson's (1976) research among black street-corner men clearly exhibits concern with the identity issue, but comparisons with the homeless have to be made cautiously since the structural situations and ways of life of the two groups are not identical. Black street-corner men, although on the margins of the larger order, can still descend a notch or two in the status hierarchy; homeless street people, as we conceptualize them here, can fall no further.

who have fallen through the cracks of society and linger at the very bottom of the status system. We pursue this objective by ethnographically examining processes of identity construction and avowal among homeless street people.[3] This method of inquiry is consistent with the Blumerian version of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) and the Geertzian strand of interpretive anthropology (Geertz 1973). Both hold, among other things, that an understanding of the social worlds people inhabit requires consideration of the meanings imputed to the objects that constitute those worlds and that these meanings can be apprehended best by intimate familiarity with the routines and situations that are part and parcel of those social worlds.

In examining identity construction processes among the homeless, we also seek to further empirical and theoretical understanding of the concept of identity and its relationship to role and self. Pursuit of this objective is consistent with longstanding sociological concern with the relationship between the individual and society (Dawe 1978) and with the theoretical function of identity as a kind of interface or conceptual bridge linking the two. The concept of identity is a problematic one laden with considerable ambiguity, however. A recent review essay on the identity concept notes that, although it has become a "stock technical term in sociology and social psychology" and even a "widespread cultural buzzword" the past 40 years, its widespread diffusion does "not imply agreement on or even a clear understanding of its various meanings" (Wiegert 1983, pp. 183, 202). The presence of this ambiguity, which is due in part to the preeminence of the self-esteem dimension of the self-concept as an object of research and in part to the absence of theoretical agreement on the nature and wellsprings of identity (Gecas 1982, p. 10), clearly indicates that work needs to be done "to unpack, codify, apply, and speculatively expand" the identity concept (Weigert 1983, p. 203).

The intent of this paper, then, is to elaborate processes of identity construction and avowal among homeless street people, with two underlying and interconnected objectives in mind: to advance understanding of the manner in which individuals at the lowest reaches of status systems attempt to generate identities that provide them with a measure of self-worth and dignity and to shed additional empirical light on the relationships among role, identity, and self-concept. We begin by framing more

[3] Although we use the terms "homeless" and "street people" interchangeably throughout this paper, it is important to keep in mind that the former includes but is not limited to the latter. Homelessness is a generic concept, with street people constituting a variant. Our focus in this paper is on homeless street people, conceptualized as individuals living in urban areas whose lives are characterized by the absence of permanent housing, supportive familial bonds, and consensually defined roles of social utility and moral worth.

precisely the problem of identity construction among the homeless. We then discuss our data sources and procedures. Next, we conceptualize identity and related terms and then elaborate the processes of identity construction and avowal we have observed. And last, we discuss the theoretical implications of these observations, concluding with a number of grounded propositions regarding the relationships among role, identity, and self.

## THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG THE HOMELESS

In *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* Ernest Becker (1962), drawing on the ideas of Alfred Adler (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1946), argues that our most basic drive is for a sense of self-worth or personal significance and that its accessibility depends in part on the roles available to us. If so, then it is sociologically axiomatic that, because of their differential distribution throughout the social structure, not all individuals have equal access to a measure of self-worth. Homeless street people are a case in point. Unlike nearly all other inhabitants of a society, the homeless are seldom incumbents of social roles that are consensually defined in terms of positive social utility and moral worth. As does any highly stigmatized class, the homeless serve various societal functions, such as providing casual labor for underground economies, but these are not the sorts of functions from which personal significance and self-worth can be easily derived. As a consequence, the homeless constitute a kind of superfluous population, in the sense that they fall outside the hierarchy of structurally available societal roles and thus beyond the conventional, role-based sources of moral worth and dignity that most citizens take for granted. The intriguing question thus arises of how the homeless attend to what Adler and Becker, among others, regard as the basic need for a sense of self-worth. More specifically, To what extent and how do the homeless generate personal identities that yield a measure of self-respect and dignity?

In his classic essay on stigma, Goffman (1963) notes a variety of strategies frequently used by the stigmatized to minimize the deleterious social and psychic consequences of their discrediting attributes. One such strategy is to to "pass" by concealing or withholding information about the stigma so that it is not easily perceived by others. This strategy is not a feasible alternative for dealing with all varieties of stigma, however. As Goffman noted, its utility varies inversely with the obtrusiveness of the stigma. For those whose stigma is not readily visible, such as members of some deviant religious orders, passing can be relatively easy. For the more visibly stigmatized, however, passing is largely impossible. Most homeless street people fall into this latter category. Their tattered and

soiled clothes function as an ever-present and readily perceivable "role sign" (Banton 1965) or "stigma symbol" (Goffman 1963) that immediately draws attention to them and sets them apart from others. Actual or threatened proximity to them not only engenders fear and enmity in other citizens but also frequently invites the most visceral kinds of responses, ranging from shouts of invective to organized neighborhood opposition to proposed shelter locations to "troll-busting" campaigns aimed at terrorization.[4] Moreover, these sorts of reactions seldom go unnoticed. As one homeless young man who had been on the streets for only two weeks lamented, "The hardest thing has been getting used to the way people look down on street people. It's real hard to feel good about yourself when almost everyone you see is looking down on you."[5]

Physical isolation might offer an escape from this dilemma, but the homeless seldom possess the requisite survival resources. Consequently, the vast majority find themselves "hanging out" on city streets and migrating from one agency to another that provides for such basic survival needs as food and shelter. Their daily routines thus bring them in contact with many other citizens on a regular basis. Because of this and the fact that they are always "in uniform," strategies other than passing and total withdrawal have to be devised in order to develop and maintain a measure of self-worth. 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.

To what extent and how do they manage this identity problem? How do they carve out a modicum of self-respect given their pariah-like status? And, What are the implications of the answers to these questions for understanding more generally the relationships among social roles, identity, and the self? What, in short, can we learn from the homeless about identity and identity-construction processes?

## PROCEDURES AND CONTEXT

We address these questions with data from a field study of homeless street people in Austin, Texas. Concern with homelessness has become one of

[4] Such responses have occurred rather frequently in Austin, as well as elsewhere throughout the country, as the number of homeless people has mounted (see *Austin American-Statesman* 1985*a*, 1985*b*, 1985*c*, 1985*d*; *Los Angeles Times* 1984*a*, 1984*b*; *Newsweek* 1984; *New York Times* 1985).

[5] All such spoken material throughout the paper represents verbatim quotes of some of the homeless whom we encountered. They are used for illustrative purposes and are representative of what we heard or were told. The process by which these materials were discerned and recorded will be discussed in detail in the Procedures and Context section following.

the more salient domestic issues during the past several years, with estimates of the homeless population ranging from 250,000 to 4,000,000 nationally (General Accounting Office 1985; Hombs and Snyder 1982; Housing and Urban Development 1984; U.S. Conference of Mayors 1985; U.S. House Committee on Government Operations 1985). While urban homelessness has been associated traditionally with the large industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest, in recent years the phenomenon has become increasingly common on the streets of Sun Belt cities. Statistics from agencies serving the homeless in such "booming" Sun Belt cities as Phoenix, Dallas, and Austin clearly reflect this increase. In Austin, for example, local Salvation Army figures indicate that the number of different individuals who were served jumped from 4,938 in 1979 to 11,271 in 1984, an increase of 128%. That the majority of these individuals are indeed homeless street people is suggested even more graphically by the quantum jump in lodgings and meals during this same time period, from 16,863 to 156,451, an 828% increase.

While comparison of figures on the homeless across the country can be fraught with error, given the problems inherent in sampling such populations and differences in research objectives, it is interesting to note that the homeless living in or passing through Austin do not appear to be strikingly different demographically from the homeless elsewhere. Inspection of table 1, which compares samples of homeless individuals in four cities and one state, reveals that the vast majority is male and under 40 years of age throughout the country. The figures also indicate that in Austin, as well as in most other sections of the country, the majority of the homeless appears to be white, but with increasing numbers of minorities in the larger cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York (City of Chicago 1983; Crystal and Goldstein 1984; General Accounting Office 1985; Housing and Urban Development 1984).

Finally, the last set of figures in table 1 suggests that the homeless throughout much of the country appear to be quite mobile or transient. In Austin, for example, we see that 52% of those registered at the Salvation Army have come from some other Texas city and 42% have come from some other state. Taken together, the foregoing figures suggest that there is nothing strikingly peculiar about the subset of the homeless in Austin that should render reasonable generalizations based on them implausible. Not only have many of them come from the different regions of the country, but they are demographically similar to the homeless elsewhere. Moreover, we have learned from many of them that, aside from variations in climate and the availability of free shelter and food, most aspects of life on the street are quite similar from one city to another. We think it is therefore reasonable to expect considerable similarity in basic patterns and process of identity construction and avowal among the homeless.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF HOMELESS SAMPLES IN THE UNITED STATES IN TERMS OF SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

| Selected Variables | Austin[a] ($N$ = 767) | San Antonio[b] ($N$ = 139) | Phoenix[c] ($N$ = 195) | Los Angeles[d] ($N$ = 238) | Ohio[e] ($N$ = 979) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender: | | | | | |
| % male | 90 | 90 | 86 | 77 | 81 |
| Age: | | | | | |
| Mean age | 35 | 34 | 37 | 37 | 37 |
| % Under 40 | 73 | ... | 61 | 64 | 62 |
| % 60 and Over | 1 | ... | 3 | 6 | 6 |
| Ethnicity: | | | | | |
| % Anglo | 75 | 60 | 64 | 51 | 65 |
| % Black | 12 | 15 | 9 | 30 | 30 |
| % Hispanic | 12 | 25 | 17 | 11 | 3 |
| % Native American | 1 | ... | 9 | 5 | ... |
| % Other | ... | ... | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Residential status: | | | | | |
| % Local resident | 6 | 39 | 7 | 14 | 40 |
| % From within state | 52 | | 7 | 5 | 21 |
| % From out of state | 42 | 61 | 86 | 81 | 38 |

[a] Percentage male is based on the population of men, women, and children registered at least once at the local Salvation Army in 1984. The remaining figures are derived from analysis of a random sample of 767 of 13,881 unattached men and women who used the local Salvation Army at least once from January 1, 1984, to March 1, 1985. These data were collected with the assistance of Susan G. Baker and Michael Martin.

[b] Based on a survey conducted in an emergency shelter over a three-week period in February and March 1984. Residential data are based on place of birth (see San Antonio Urban Council 1984).

[c] Based on a survey conducted in food lines, shelters, and urban camps in March 1983. Residential data are based on response to question concerning place of origin (see Brown et al. 1983).

[d] Based on a survey conducted in shelters, soup lines, Skid Row and other areas from December 1983 to May 1984. Residential data are based on place of birth (see Robertson et al. 1985).

[e] Based on a statewide survey of homeless in Ohio. Local resident refers to a permanent resident of county in which interview took place (see Roth et al. 1985).

We pursue the identification of these processes with data gathered during a year-long ethnographic field study conducted among homeless individuals living in or passing through Austin from September 1, 1984, to August 31, 1985. The major research strategy was to "hang out" with as many of these individuals as possible on a daily basis, spending time with them in varied settings (e.g., meal and shelter lines, under bridges, in parks, at day-labor pickup sites), over the course of the 12-month period. The basic task was to acquire an appreciation for the nature of life on the streets and the ways in which the homeless managed street life both experientially and cognitively. We thus followed the homeless we encountered through their daily routines and listened not only to what they told us but also to what they told one another. In this way, we were

able to secure "perspectives in action" as well as "perspectives of action."[6] We asked questions and probed from time to time and also "interviewed by comment,"[7] but the major task was that of listening to conversations among the homeless to enhance the prospect of securing perspectives that seemed to arise naturally rather than only in response to the researcher's coaxing or intervention. This relatively unobtrusive listening took two basic forms: eavesdropping, which involved listening to others within a bounded interactional encounter without being a part of that encounter, as when waiting in meal lines or in day-labor offices; and a kind of nondirective, conversational listening that occurred when we engaged in encounters with two or more homeless individuals.[8]

[6] Perspectives *in* action refer to accounts or patterns of talk formulated for the purpose of realizing a particular end or accomplishing a particular task in a naturally occurring situation that is part of some ongoing system of action, as when homeless street people engage in identity talk among themselves while queuing up in front of a shelter, drinking beer under a bridge, or eating in a soup kitchen. Perspectives *of* action are constructed and articulated in response to the queries of researchers or other outsiders, as when two transients explain to the police what they were doing in an alley or when a street person tells a researcher about how he or she regards himself or herself. Perspectives of action are thus produced "not to act meaningfully in the system being described, but rather to make the system meaningful to an outsider" (Gould et al. 1974, p. xxv). Both perspectives yield useful information, but they are of different orders. Perspectives of action are post-factum, idealized accounts that place the action in question within a larger normative framework, whereas perspectives in action refer to the cognitions that emerge with and are inseparable from the sequence of action that perspectives of action may be invoked to explain. For further discussion of these two perspectives, see Gould et al. (1974, pp. xxiv–xxvi).

[7] Interviewing by comment refers to an attempt to elicit spoken information from a respondent or informant by making an intentional statement rather than by asking a direct question. Comments can vary, just as questions do, in the degree to which they are focused or unfocused and in their level of specificity or generality, ranging, e.g., from general and commonplace statements of puzzlement, such as "I don't get it" or "I don't understand," to more focused statements that cast others into a specific identity or role, such as "He sure looks like a greenhorn" or "I didn't think you were a regular Sally [Salvation Army] user." For a discussion of interviewing by comment as a supplementary data-gathering technique, the rationale and logic underlying its use, and the variety of forms comments can take, see Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg (1982).

[8] While it might be argued that the information secured during such encounters represents more a reaction to the researcher's presence than a naturally occurring phenomenon among the homeless, our field experiences suggest that this is not so. Although some of the homeless were apprised of the field researcher's true status, they typically seemed to lose sight of it quickly as he continued to spend time on the street with them, dressed in old clothes, and more or less walked in their shoes. This forgetfulness was forcefully illustrated one night when the field researcher gave an ill, homeless woman a ride to a health clinic. On the way back from the clinic to the abandoned warehouse where she was going to spend the night, she asked, "Are you sleeping in your car these days or down at the Sally?" The researcher had explained his position to this woman many times during the previous two-and-half months and had even asked her one time to fill out a short survey, but she had forgotten or not fully believed what he had told

Behavioral observations and conversational dialogues were recorded in a stepwise fashion, beginning with mental and jotted notes in the field and culminating in a detailed field narrative based on elaboration of these notes. Since compulsive note taking can deflect attention from the behaviors being observed to the process of recording, as well as give rise to various reactive effects, we chose to make mental and jotted notes instead of fully detailed notes when in the field. What this involved was the memorization or jotted recording of behavioral observations and comments. The jotted recordings typically included key phrases, longer quotes, and behavioral descriptions. These jotted notes, which were taken as inconspicuously as possible while eavesdropping or immediately following the dissolution of conversations, were then elaborated as soon as possible after exiting the field. It is these narrative elaborations that constitute the field notes or data log out of which the analysis presented herein emerged.[9]

Although the ethnographic research role was customarily performed by the second author, it was not enacted in the "lone ranger" (Douglas 1976, pp. 192–93) fashion characteristic of most urban ethnography (Anderson 1976; Liebow 1967; Spradley 1970; Whyte 1943; Wiseman 1970). Rather, the field researcher's activities, observations, and notes were continuously monitored and responded to by the first author, who assumed the role of a detached observer, functioning much like a sideline coach. Seldom was a day or evening in the field not followed by a debriefing session that included discussion of field experiences, methodological and theoretical implications, and the elaboration of plans for subsequent outings. Conscious and reflective enactment of these two roles enabled us to maintain involvement and detachment at one and the same time, thereby facilitating management of the insider/outsider dialectic characteristic of ethnographic research.[10]

The data derived from our field observations and encounters were supplemented by taped, in-depth, life-history interviews with six homeless individuals who had been on the streets for various lengths of time, ranging from two months to 14 years. All but one of the individuals were key informants with whom we had numerous contacts and who

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her. This should not be surprising, however, in light of the dramaturgical thesis that individuals tend to respond to and identify others more in terms of their proximate roles or actions than in terms of their claims to the contrary.

[9] For an extended discussion of the data-recording process, and of the development of field notes in particular, see Lofland and Lofland (1984, pp. 46–68).

[10] For a more detailed discussion of how we managed this problem, see Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986). For a general discussion of this chronic tension, see Pollner and Emerson (1983).

functioned for us in a manner similar to "Doc" in *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1943) and Tally in *Tally's Corner* (Liebow 1967).

All totaled, 405 hours were spent in 24 different settings (e.g., Salvation Army, city hospital, soup kitchen, plasma center, casual labor corner) with 168 homeless individuals. Field encounters with this nonrandom sample totaled 492, averaging three per person, with a high of 22. Field notes based on these encounters yielded over 600 double-spaced typed pages. From this pool of data, a total of 202 statements by 70 individuals about self and identity were extracted, coded, and analyzed. In order to enhance the probability of coder reliability, all field notes were coded jointly by the two authors. These data were initially coded broadly, as indicated by the 24 different focal settings and 30 different cultural domains that emerged,[11] only one of which was the identity and self-concept domain. In due time, however, it became clear that some of these settings and domains were more central than others to the lives and daily routines of the homeless, as indicated by variation in the number of data entries contained in each respective coding category.[12] In short, some of the files "bulged" with data and others did not. One of these bulging files pertained to self and identity.

Since the 202 identity statements contained in this file came from only 42% of our field sample of 168 individuals, it is useful to assess the representativeness of the subset relative to the larger sample. Table 2 provides a comparison of these two subsamples by gender, age, ethnicity, time on the streets, and mean number of research contacts. We include the variable "time on the streets" because inspection of the range of our data shows that adaptive strategies (e.g., where one sleeps, sources of money, use of alcohol and drugs, and mobility) and processes of identity

[11] By "focal settings," we refer to the major institutions or agencies (e.g., city hospital, city police department, and Salvation Army), commercial establishments (e.g., bars, restaurants, and plasma centers) and territorial niches (e.g., particular campsites, bridges, parks, and street corners) that are most relevant to the daily rounds, life-style, and prospects of the homeless living in or passing through Austin. By "cultural domains," we refer to categories of meaning, events, and problems that constitute the social world and life-style of the homeless (e.g., drinking and alcohol, drugs, food and eating, sleeping and shelter, social relationships, and work) and that were discerned by the previously discussed procedures. For further discussion of the concept of cultural domains, see Spradley (1980, esp. pp. 88–99).

[12] By "data entries," we refer to single bits of information relevant to any single focal setting, cultural domain, or homeless individual. The focal settings (24), cultural domains (30), and homeless individuals (168) composed the coding categories that emerged over time. The data entries, extracted from the field notes, varied from a single sentence to several pages in length and were assigned to one or more of the coding categories.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF IDENTITY AND NONIDENTITY SUBSAMPLES OF TOTAL FIELD SAMPLE IN TERMS OF SELECTED VARIABLES

| Selected Variables | Identity ($N$ = 70) | Nonidentity ($N$ = 98) | Total Field Sample ($N$ = 168) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender: | | | |
| % male | 91 | 83 | 86 |
| Age: | | | |
| Mean age | 36 | 34 | 36 |
| % Under 40 | 70 | 73 | 72 |
| % Over 60 | 10 | 4 | 6 |
| Ethnicity: | | | |
| % Anglo | 83 | 84 | 83 |
| % Black | 11 | 8 | 10 |
| % Hispanic | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| % Native American | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Time on the streets: | | | |
| % Less than six months | 19 | 30 | 24 |
| % Six Months to two years | 20 | 36 | 30 |
| % Two Years to four years | 33 | 25 | 28 |
| % More than four years | 29 | 9 | 17 |
| Research contacts: | | | |
| Mean number | 4.5 | 1.9 | 3.0 |

construction tend to vary significantly with length of time on the street. The choice of six months, two years, and four years as cut points was suggested by our data analysis rather than by the lore of the streets. The analytic utility of these temporal distinctions will be illustrated later.

Inspection of table 2 indicates that the two subsamples are comparable in terms of age and ethnicity but are somewhat different in terms of gender and time on the street. These differences are not critical to our analysis, however, because a number of our key informants were women and because we have numerous individuals represented in each of the temporal categories.

In light of the above observations, we feel confident that the identity orientations of the two subsamples would be quite similar. We thus think it would be erroneous to assume that the fact that we secured identity statements from only 42% of the field sample reflects a lack of identity concerns in the remaining 58%. We believe that the identity statements secured were, instead, largely a function of the substantially greater number of contacts we had with those in the identity subsample.

## VARIETIES OF IDENTITY TALK AMONG THE HOMELESS: FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Up to this point, we have used the term "identity" in a general and undefined fashion. It is necessary to clarify what we mean by the term "identity" and related concepts before proceeding further. Although there is no agreement on whether identity should be conceptualized as a unitary entity or disaggregated into several types, we find it preferable to pursue the latter tack. Accordingly, we distinguish among social identities, personal identities, and self-concept.[13] By social identities, we refer to the identities attributed or imputed to others in an attempt to place or situate them as social objects. They are not self-designations or avowals but imputations based primarily on information gleaned on the basis of appearance, behavior, and the location and time of action.[14] In contrast, personal identities refer to the meanings attributed to the self by the actor. They are self-designations and self-attributions brought into play or asserted during the course of interaction.[15] Since personal identities may be inconsistent with imputed social identities, the two need to be kept analytically distinct. Standing in contrast to these two variants of identity is

[13] While the distinction between identity and self-concept is commonplace in the literature, the disaggregation of identity into two or more dimensions or aspects is less frequent. In his essay on the relationships among appearance, self, and identity, Stone (1962) highlights the negotiated character of identities by conceptualizing them in terms of the "coincidence of placements and announcements," but he does not differentiate and articulate what we see as the distinct social and personal dimensions implied therein. The role-based conceptualization of identity provided by Stryker (1980, pp. 51–85) and Burke (see Stryker 1980, pp. 129–34) also highlights the coalescence or coincidence of both social and personal considerations, but it does not fully disaggregate these dimensions and allow for their disjunction as well as congruence, a point to which we will return later in the paper. Goffman (1963) and McCall and Simmons (1978) do make clear-cut conceptual distinctions between social and personal identities but not in ways that we find fully satisfactory or congruent with our observations.

[14] This conceptualization of social identity is consistent with both Goffman (1963, pp. 2–3) and McCall and Simmons (1978, p. 62), as well as with Turner's (1978, p. 6) "appearance principle," which holds that "people tend to conceive another person (and thus impute social identities) on the basis of the role behavior they observe unless there are cues that alert them to the possibility of a discrepancy between person and role."

[15] This conceptualization differs from Goffman's (1963, p. 57) and McCall and Simmons's (1978, pp. 62–63) in that they define personal identity in terms of unique, biographical facts and items that function as pegs on which social identities can be hung. It is our contention, which we will illustrate and elaborate, that biographical facts and experiences, just as the roles one plays or is cast into, influence but do not fully determine the construction and assertion of what we call personal identities. Thus, rather than taking for granted the relationship between biography and personal identity, we see it as problematic and variable.

the self-concept, by which we refer to one's overarching view or image of her- or himself "as a physical, social, spiritual, or moral being" (Gecas 1982, p. 3). Following Turner (1968), we view the self-concept as a kind of working compromise between idealized images and imputed social identities. Presented personal identities provide a glimpse of the consistency or inconsistency between social identities and self-concept, as well as indications of the latter.

Our empirical concern here is primarily with personal identities and particularly with the ways in which the homeless construct and utilize such identities. We conceptualize identity construction and assertion as variants of the generic process we call *identity work,* by which we refer to the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept. So defined, identity work may involve a number of complementary activities: (*a*) procurement or arrangement of physical settings and props; (*b*) cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearance; (*c*) selective association with other individuals and groups; and (*d*) verbal construction and assertion of personal identities. In this paper, we concentrate on the last variety of identity work, which we refer to as *identity talk.* Since the homeless seldom have the financial or social resources to pursue the other varieties of identity work, talk is perhaps the primary avenue through which they can attempt to construct, assert, and maintain desired personal identities, especially when these personal identities are at variance with the general social identity of a street person. Because the structure of their daily routines ensures that they spend a great deal of time waiting here and there, many homeless also have ample opportunity to converse with one another about a range of topics.

Inspection of these conversational data yielded three generic patterns of identity talk: (1) distancing, (2) embracement, and (3) fictive storytelling. Each was found to contain several varieties that tended to vary in use according to the duration of one's street career. We discuss and elaborate in turn each of the generic patterns and their subtypes, summarizing statistically (in tables 3, 4, and 5) at the end of each section the relationship between the various types and time on the streets.

## Distancing

When individuals have to enact roles, associate with others, or utilize institutions that imply social identities inconsistent with their actual or desired self-conceptions, they may attempt to distance themselves from those roles, associations, and institutions (Goffman 1961*a,* 1961*b;* Levitin 1964; Stebbins 1975; Sayles 1984). Our findings reveal that a substantial proportion of the identity talk of the homeless we studied was consciously

focused on distancing themselves from other homeless individuals, from street and occupational roles, and from the institutions serving them. Nearly a third of the 202 identity statements were of this variety.

*Associational distancing.*—Since one's claim to a particular self is partly contingent on the imputed social identities of one's associates, one way to substantiate that claim, in the event that one's associates are negatively evaluated, is to distance oneself from them. As Anderson (1976, p. 214) noted, based on his research among black street-corner men, claims to a particular identity depend in part "on one's ability to manage his image by drawing distinctions between himself and others he does not want to be associated with." This distancing technique manifested itself in two ways in our research: dissociation from the homeless as a general social category and dissociation from specific groups of homeless individuals.

Categorical associational distancing was particularly evident among homeless individuals who had been on the streets for a comparatively short time. Illustrative of this technique is the following comment by a 24-year-old white male who had been on the streets for less than two weeks: "I'm not like the other guys who hang out down at the 'Sally' [Salvation Army]. If you want to know about street people, I can tell you about them; but you can't really learn about street people from studying me, because I'm different."

Such categorical distancing also occurred among those individuals who saw themselves as on the verge of getting off the street. One 22-year-old white male who had been on the streets for several years but who had just secured two jobs in hopes of raising enough money to rent an apartment indicated, for example, that he was different from other street people: "They have gotten used to living on the streets and are satisfied with it. But not me! Next to my salvation, getting off the street is the most important thing in my life." This variety of categorical distancing was particularly pronounced among homeless individuals who had taken jobs at the local Salvation Army shelter and thus had one foot off the street. These individuals were frequently criticized by other street people for their condescending and holier-than-thou attitude. As one regular shelter user put it: "As soon as these guys get inside, they're better than the rest of us. They've been out on the street for years, and as soon as they're inside they forget it."

Among the homeless who had been on the street for some time and who appeared firmly rooted in that life-style, there were few examples of categorical distancing. Instead, these individuals frequently distinguished themselves from other groups of the homeless. This form of associational distancing was most conspicuous among the homeless who were not regular social service or shelter users and who thus saw themselves as being

more independent and resourceful. These individuals not only wasted little time in pointing out that they were "not like those Sally users," but they were also given to derogating the more institutionally dependent. Indeed, while they were among those furthest removed from the middle class in their way of life, they sounded at times much like middle-class citizens berating welfare recipients. Illustrative is the comment of an alcoholic, 49-year-old woman who had been on the streets for two-and-a-half years: "A lot of these people staying at the Sally, they're reruns. Every day they're wanting something, wanting something. People get tired of giving. All you hear is 'give me, give me.' And we transients are getting tired of it." In sum, we have seen that, although associational distancing provides one means by which some of the homeless set themselves apart from one another and thus develop a somewhat different and more self-respecting personal identity, such distancing varies in scope according to the duration of time on the streets.

*Role distancing.*—Role distancing was the second form of distancing employed by the homeless in order to buffer the self. Following Goffman (1961*b*, pp. 107–8), role distancing involves an active and self-conscious attempt to foster the impression of a lack of commitment or attachment to a particular role in order to deny the virtual self implied. Thus, when an individual finds himself cast into or enacting a role in which the social identity implied is inconsistent with the desired or actual self-conception, role distancing is likely to occur. Since the homeless routinely find themselves cast into or enacting low-status, negatively evaluated roles (e.g., panhandler, day laborer, vagrant), it should not be surprising that many of them would attempt to dissociate themselves from those very roles.

As with associational distancing, role distancing manifested itself in two ways: distancing from the basic or general role of street person and distancing from specific occupational roles. The former, which we construe as a variant of categorical distancing, was particularly evident among individuals who had been on the street for less than six months. It was not uncommon for these individuals to make explicitly clear that they should "not be mistaken as a typical street person." Role distancing of the less categorical and more situationally specific type, however, was most evident in day-labor occupational roles, such as painters' helpers, hod carriers, warehouse and van unloaders, and unskilled service occupations, such as dishwashing and janitorial work. Although the majority of the homeless we encountered would avail themselves of such job opportunities, they seldom did so enthusiastically because of the jobs' low status and low wages. This was especially true of the homeless who had been on the streets between two and four years,[16] who frequently reminded others

[16] Pursuit of day-labor jobs rarely occurred among the homeless who had been on the

of their disdain for such jobs and of their belief that they deserved better, as exemplified by the remarks of a drunk young man who had worked the previous day as a painter's helper: "I made $36.00 off the labor corner, but it was just 'nigger' work. I'm 24 years old, man. I deserve better than that." Similar distancing laments were frequently voiced over the disparity between job demands and wages. While we were conversing with a small gathering of homeless men on a Saturday afternoon, one of them revealed, for example, that he had turned down a job earlier in the day to carry shingles up a ladder for $4.00 an hour because he found it demeaning to "do that hard of work for that low of pay." Since day-labor jobs seldom last for more than six to eight hours, perhaps not much is lost monetarily in forgoing such jobs in comparison with what can be gained in pride. But even when the ratio of dollars to pride would appear to make rejection costly, as with permanent jobs, dissatisfaction with the low status of the menial job roles may prod some homeless individuals to engage in the ultimate form of role distancing by quitting current jobs. As one informant recounted the day after he quit in the middle of his shift as a dishwasher at a local restaurant: "My boss told me, 'You can't walk out on me.' And I told her, 'Fuck you, just watch me. I'm going to walk out of here right now.' And I did. 'You can't walk out on me,' she said. I said, 'Fuck you, I'm gone.'"

The foregoing illustrations suggest that the social identities lodged in available work roles are frequently inconsistent with the desired or idealized self-conceptions of some of the homeless. Consequently, "bitching about," "turning down," and even "blowing off" such work may function as a means of social identity disavowal, on the one hand, and personal identity assertion, on the other. Such techniques provide a way of saying, "Hey, I have some pride. I'm in control. I'm my own man." This is especially true among those individuals for whom such work is no longer just a stopgap measure but rather a permanent feature of their lives.

*Institutional distancing.*—An equally prevalent distancing technique

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streets for more than four years. Instead, they tended to survive by other means, such as panhandling, collecting aluminum cans, and scavenging. Retreat from the day-labor market among these individuals might be interpreted as a form of behavioral distancing that ideally reduces the prospect of interaction with other citizens and thereby lessens the need for constructing alternative identities. The problem with this proposition, however, is that many of the longtime homeless intentionally engage the public with their panhandling activities. In addition, it is frequently the more chronic homeless who are the most visible to the public—e.g., shopping-cart people and bag ladies. It is perhaps because of such considerations that embracement, which will be discussed in the next section, is a more common mode of identity construction among the homeless who have been on the streets for two or more years.

involved the derogation of the very institutions that attended to the needs of the homeless in one way or another. The one agency that was the most frequent object of these harangues was the local Salvation Army. It was frequently typified by many of the homeless who used it as a greedy corporation run by inhumane personnel more interested in lining their own pockets than in serving the needy. The flavor of this negative characterization is captured by such comments as the following, which were heard most often among individuals waiting in the Salvation Army dinner line: "The Major is money-hungry and feeds people the cheapest way he can. He never talks to people except to gripe at them. The Salvation Army is supposed to be a Christian organization, but it doesn't have a Christian spirit. It looks down on people. . . . The Salvation Army is a national business that is more worried about making money than helping people"; "The Sally here doesn't nearly do as much as it could for people. The people who work here take bags of groceries and put them in their cars. People donate to the Sally, and then the workers there cream off the best"; and "If you spend a week here, you'll see how come people lose hope. You're treated just like an animal."

Given that the Salvation Army is the only local facility that provides free shelter, breakfast, and dinner, it is understandable why attention would be riveted on it more than on any other local agency. But that the Salvation Army would be continuously derogated by the very people whose survival it facilitates may appear puzzling at first glance, especially given its caretaker orientation. The answer lies in part in the organization and dissemination of its services. Clients are processed in an impersonal, highly structured, assembly-line fashion. The result is a leveling of individual differences and a decline in personal autonomy. Bitching and complaining about such settings thus allow one to gain psychic distance from the self implied and to secure a modicum of personal autonomy.[17] Criticizing the Salvation Army, then, provided some regular users with a means of dealing with the implications of their dependence on it. It was, in short, a way of presenting and sustaining a somewhat contrary personal identity.

While this variety of distancing was observable among all the homeless, it was most prevalent among those regular service users who had

[17] Wiseman (1970, pp. 187–88, 194–98) similarly notes the "harsh sentiments" of Skid-Row alcoholics toward their benefactors. Similar patterns of bitching and griping have also been observed in relation to more all-encompassing institutions, such as prisons and mental hospitals. In commenting on such verbal insubordination, Goffman (1961*a*, p. 319) offers an interpretation that dovetails with ours: "This recalcitrance is not an incidental mechanism of defense but rather an essential constituent of the self" that allows the individual "to keep some distance, some elbow room, between himself and that with which others assume he should be identified."

TABLE 3

TYPES OF DISTANCING BY TIME ON THE STREETS (in percentages)

| TIME ON THE STREETS | TYPE OF DISTANCING | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Categoric[a] ($N$ = 16) | Specific[b] ($N$ = 23) | Institutional[c] ($N$ = 22) |
| Less than six months | 75.0 | 4.3 | 9.1 |
| Six months to two years | 6.3 | 26.1 | 13.6 |
| Two years to four years | 6.3 | 56.5 | 40.9 |
| More than four years | 12.5 | 13.0 | 36.4 |

NOTE.—$\chi^2 = 35.06$, $df = 6$, $P < .001$.

[a] Comments or statements coded as categoric included those indicating dissociation or distancing from such general, street role identities as transient, bum, tramp, drifter or from street people in general, regardless of variation among them.

[b] Comments or statements reflective of specific or situational distancing included those indicating dissociation from specific groupings of homeless individuals or from specific survival or occupational roles.

[c] Comments or statements suggestive of institutional distancing included those indicating dissociation from or disdain for street institutions, such as the Salvation Army, soup kitchens, and the like.

been on the streets for more than two years. Since these individuals had used street institutions over a longer period of time, their self-concepts were more deeply implicated in them, thus necessitating distancing from those very institutions and the self implied.

Thus far, we have elaborated how some of the homeless distance themselves from other homeless individuals, from general and specific roles, and from the institutions that deal with them. Such distancing behavior and talk represent attempts to salvage a measure of self-worth. In the process, of course, the homeless are asserting more favorable personal identities. Not all homeless individuals engage in similar distancing behavior and talk, however. As indicated in table 3, which summarizes the foregoing observations, categorical distancing tends to be concentrated among those who have been on the street for a comparatively short time, typically less than six months. The only instances of such distancing we heard from those who had been on the streets for more than four years were made by individuals categorized as "mentally ill," as in the case of one 32-year-old white male who expressed disdain for the homeless in general even though he had been on and off the street for 10 years between stays in Texas state mental hospitals.[18] For those who are more firmly entrenched in street life, then, distancing tends to be confined to

[18] The homeless who were categorized as mentally ill composed only 10% (17) of our field sample of 168 individuals. For a discussion of the criteria used for categorizing individuals as mentally ill and for a detailed discussion of mental illness among the homeless in general, see Snow et al. (1986).

distinguishing themselves from specific groups of the homeless, such as novices and the institutionally dependent, from specific occupational roles, or from the institutions with which they have occasional contact.

## Embracement

By "embracement," we refer to the verbal and expressive confirmation of one's acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role, a set of social relationships, or a particular ideology.[19] So defined, embracement implies consistency between self-concept and imputed or structurally based social identities. Social and personal identities are congruent, such that the individual accepts the identities associated with his status. Thus, embracement involves the avowal of implied social identities rather than their disavowal, as is true of distancing. Thirty-six percent of the identity statements were of this variety.

*Role embracement.*—The most conspicuous kind of embracement we encountered was role embracement of the categorical variety, which typically manifested itself in the avowal and acceptance of street role identities such as the "tramp" and "bum."[20] Occasionally, we would encounter an individual who would immediately announce that he was a tramp or a bum. A case in point is provided by our initial encounter with a 49-year-old man who had been on the road for 14 years. When we

[19] This conception of embracement is derived from Goffman's (1961*b*, pp. 106–7) treatment of role embracement but with two differences. First, we conceive of embracement as a generic process through which attachment to and involvement in a particular entity or activity is expressed, with role embracement constituting only one form. And, second, we think embracement can be expressed without the kind of active, behavioral engrossment or spontaneous involvement that suggests disappearance into the activity at hand and corresponding inattention to the flow of other proximate activities. Such engagement should be viewed as a variable feature of embracement, not as a defining characteristic.

[20] These two identities, along with that of the hobo, constituted the triadic folk typology that was particularly prominent in the vernacular of the road during the first third of the century, especially among the hoboes (migratory workers) who regarded themselves as the cream of the road and who looked down scornfully on the tramps (migratory nonworkers) and the bums (nonmigratory nonworkers) (Anderson 1923, 1931). By the 1950s, this threefold distinction had apparently lost its conceptual utility. The terms "tramp" and "bum" were still bandied about, but the hobo concept no longer seemed to be a useful, generalized descriptor. Whether its decline in usage on the street was due to the disappearance of the hoboes' supportive subculture, as some romanticists have lamented (Bruns 1980), or to a blurring of the previous distinctions between hoboes and the tramps and bums is unclear. What does seem to be certain, though, is that by the last third of the century homeless men were no longer imputing or avowing the hobo identity. The tramp and bum constructs were, and still are, part of the lexicon of the streets, however, as indicated by Spradley's (1970) and Harper's (1982) research, as well as by ours.

engaged him in conversation on a street corner, he proudly told us that he was "the tramp who was on the front page of yesterday's newspaper." In that and subsequent conversations, his talk was peppered with references to himself as a tramp. He indicated, for example, that he had appeared on a television show in St. Louis as a tramp and that he "tramped" his way across the country, and he revealed several "cons" that "tramps use to survive on the road."

This tramp, as well as others like him, identified himself as being of the more traditional "brethren of the road" variety. In contrast, we also encountered individuals who identified themselves as "hippie tramps." Interaction with a number of these individuals who hung out together near the local university similarly revealed attachment to and temporal continuity of this particular street identity. When confronted by a passing group of young "punkers," for instance, several of the hippie tramps voiced agreement with one's remark that "these kids will change but we'll stay the same." As if to buttress this claim, they went on to talk about "Rainbow," an annual gathering of old hippies, which functions in part as a kind of identity reaffirmation ritual. For these street people, there was little doubt about who they were; they not only saw themselves as hippie-like tramps, but they embraced that identity both verbally and expressively.

This sort of enthusiastic embracement also surfaced on occasion with Skid Row–like "bums," as evidenced by a hunchbacked alcoholic's repeated reference to himself as a "bum." As a corollary of such categorical role embracement, we found that most individuals who identified themselves as tramps or bums had also adopted nicknames congruent with these general street roles. Not only did we find that they routinely referred to themselves in terms of these new names, but others also referred to them similarly. Street names such as Shotgun, Muskrat, Boxcar Billy, Panama Red, Gypsy Bill, and the like can thus be construed as symbolizing a break with the past and suggesting a fairly thoroughgoing embracement of life on the streets.

Role-specific embracement was also encountered occasionally, as when a street person of several years referred to himself as an "expert dumpster diver." In street argot, "dumpster diving" refers to scavenging through garbage bins in search of clothes, food, and salable items. Many street people often engage in this survival activity, but relatively few pridefully identify themselves in terms of this activity. Other role-specific survival activities that functioned in a similar manner included panhandling, small-time drug dealing, and street performing, such as playing a musical instrument or singing on a street corner for money. Illustrative of this type of embracement was a 33-year-old white male known on the streets as Rhymin' Mike, who called himself a street poet and made his money by

composing short poems for spare change from passersby. For some homeless individuals, then, the roles they enact function as a source of positive identity and self-worth.

*Associational embracement.*—A second variety of embracement used to denote or embellish a personal identity entailed reference to oneself as a friend or as an individual who acknowledges the norm of reciprocity and who thus takes his social relationships seriously.[21] A case in point is provided by the individual alluded to who pridefully acknowledged that he was a bum. On one occasion, he told us that he had several friends who either refused or quit jobs at the Salvation Army because they "weren't allowed to associate with other guys on the streets who were their friends." Such a policy struck him as immoral: "They expect you to forget who your friends are and where you came from when you go to work there. They asked me to work there, and I told them, 'No way.' I'm a bum and I know who my friends are."

Avowal of such social ties and responsibilities manifested itself in other claims and behavior as well. Identification of oneself as a person who willingly shares limited resources, such as cigarettes and alcohol, occurred frequently, particularly among avowed tramps and bums. One evening after dinner at the Salvation Army, for example, a 29-year-old white male who had been on the street for several years quickly responded to the researcher's offer of a cigarette with an offer of his own to take a drink from his Coke, commenting, "See, man, I'm all right. I share, man. I don't just take things."

Associational embracement was also expressed in self-identification as protector or defender of one's buddies. Two older drinking partners whom we came to know claimed repeatedly to "look out for each other." When one was telling about having been assaulted and robbed while walking through an alley, the other said, almost apologetically, "It wouldn't have happened if I was with you. I wouldn't have let them get away with that." Similar claims were made to the field researcher, as when two street acquaintances indicated one evening after an ambiguous encounter with a clique of a half-dozen other street people that, "If it wasn't for us, they'd have had your ass."

Although protective behaviors that entailed a risk were seldom observed, protective claims, particularly of a promissory character, were frequently heard. Whatever the relationship between such claims and action, they functioned not only to cement tenuous ties but also to express

[21] Anderson (1976) found that this form of embracement figured prominently in the identity work of the black street-corner men he studied. Indeed, the identity work of these men consisted mainly of associational distancing and embracement.

something concrete about the claimant's desired identity as a dependable and trustworthy friend.

*Ideological embracement.*—A third variety of embracement that can provide an individual with a special niche in which to lodge the self and thereby distinguish himself from others entails the acceptance of a set of beliefs or ideas and the avowal of a cognitively congruent personal identity. We refer to this as ideological embracement.

Among the homeless we studied, ideological embracement manifested itself primarily as an avowed commitment to a particular religion or set of religious beliefs. One middle-aged tramp called Banjo provides an example. He routinely identified himself as a Christian, he had painted on his banjo case "Wealth means nothing without God," and his talk was sprinkled with references to his Christian beliefs. When asked whether he was afraid to sleep at the Salvation Army following a murder that had occurred the night before, he replied: "I don't have anything to worry about since I'm a Christian, and it says in the 23d Psalm: 'Yea though I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.'" Moreover, he frequently pointed out that his religious beliefs transcended his situation on the streets. As he indicated on one occasion, he would like to get off the street but not for money: "It would have to be a bigger purpose than just money to get me off the streets, like a religious mission."

An equally powerful but less common functional equivalent of religion as a source of identity is the occult and related supernatural beliefs. Since traditional occupational roles are not readily available as a basis for identity and since few street people have the material resources that can be used for construction of positive personal identities, it is little wonder that some of them turn elsewhere—to mystical inner forces, to the stars, to the occult—in search of a locus for a positive identity. Illustrative of this was a 29-year-old male who read books on the occult regularly, identified himself as a "spirit guide," and informed us that he had received "a spiritual gift" at the age of 13 and that he now had special prophetic insights into the future that allowed him to foresee the day when "humans will be transformed into another life form."

In addition to mainstream religious and occult beliefs, conversionist, restorative ideologies, such as that associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, provide some of the homeless with a readily available locus for identity, providing they are willing to accept AA's doctrine and adhere to its program. The interesting dynamic here, however, is that AA's successes seldom remain on the street. Consequently, those street people who have previously associated with AA seldom use it as a basis for identity assertion. Nonetheless, it does constitute a potentially salient identity peg, as well as a way off the street.

TABLE 4

TYPES OF EMBRACEMENT BY TIME ON THE STREETS (in percentages)

| TIME ON THE STREETS | TYPE OF EMBRACEMENT | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Categoric[a] ($N$ = 39) | Specific[b] ($N$ = 20) | Ideological[c] ($N$ = 13) |
| Less than six months | ... | 25.0 | 15.4 |
| Six months to two years | 5.1 | 20.0 | 7.7 |
| Two years to four years | 59.0 | 35.0 | 46.1 |
| More than four years | 35.9 | 20.0 | 30.8 |

NOTE.—$\chi^2 = 14.88$, $df = 6$, $P < .05$.

[a] Comments or statements coded as categoric included those indicating acceptance of or attachment to street people as a social category or to such general, street role identities as bum, tramp, drifter, and transient.

[b] Comments or statements coded as specific embracement included those indicating identification with a situationally specific survival role, such as dumpster diver and street performer, or with a specific social relational role, such as friend, lover, or protector.

[c] Comments or statements coded as ideological embracement included those indicating self-identification with a set of beliefs or ideas, such as those associated with a particular religion.

We have seen how the personal identities of the homeless may be derived from the embracement of the social identities associated with certain stereotypical street roles, such as the tramp and the bum; with role-specific survival activities, such as dumpster diving; with certain social relationships, such as friend and protector; and with certain religious and occult ideologies or belief systems. While embracement and distancing are not necessarily mutually exclusive means for constructing personal identities among the homeless, we have noted how their usage tends to vary according to the stage or point in one's street career. More specifically, we have found, as summarized in table 4, that the longer one has been on the street and the more adapted one is to street life, the greater the prevalence of categorical embracement in particular. That relationship is emphasized even further when it is noted that the only cases of such embracement among those who had been on the streets for less than two years occurred among those categorized as mentally ill, as in the case of a 33-year-old black female who avowed the nonstreet identity of The Interracial Princess, which she said had been bestowed on her by "a famous astrologer from New York."

## Fictive Storytelling

A third form of identity talk engaged in by the homeless is what we refer to as fictive storytelling. It involves the narration of stories about one's past, present, or future experiences and accomplishments that have a

fictive character to them. To suggest that these stories about the self are fictional to some degree is not to imply intentional deception, although it may and frequently does occur. Rather, we characterize these stories as fictive because they tend to range from minor exaggerations of experience to fanciful claims and fabrications. We thus distinguish between two types of fictive storytelling: embellishment of the past and present and fantasizing about the future.[22] Slightly more than a third of the identity statements we recorded fell into one of these two categories.

*Embellishment.*—By "embellishment," we refer to the exaggeration of past and present experiences with fanciful and fictitious particulars so as to assert a positive personal identity. It involves an overstatement, an enlargement of the truth, a "lamination," in Goffman's terms (1974), of what has actually happened or is unfolding in the present. Embellished stories, then, are only partly fictional.

Examples of such embellishment for identity construction purposes abound among the homeless. While an array of events and experiences—ranging from tales about the accomplishments of one's offspring to sexual and drinking exploits and predatory activities—were found to be the object of embellishment, the most common form of embellished storytelling tended to be associated with past and current occupational and financial themes. In the case of financial embellishment, the typical story entailed an exaggerated claim regarding past or current wages. An example is provided by a 40-year-old homeless male who spent much of his time hanging around a transient bar boasting about having been offered a job as a Harley-Davidson mechanic for $18.50 per hour, while constantly begging for cigarettes and spare change for beer.

Equally illustrative of such embellishment is an encounter we overheard between an inebriated 49-year-old homeless woman passing out discarded burritos and a young homeless man in his early 20s. When he

[22] Given the categorization of this line of talk as "fictive," it is important to make explicit the criteria used to determine whether a particular narration was indeed fictive. As we previously noted, we not only talked with and listened to each of the 70 individuals within our identity subsample, but we encountered nearly all of them in a range of situations at different points in time, with an average of 4.5 encounters per individual. We were thus able to monitor many of these individuals across time and space. This enabled us to discern the fictive character of stories by noting one or more of three kinds of narrative contradictions: (1) those among multiple stories told by the same individual, as when one street person claims to be 36-years-old on one occasion and 46 on another; (2) those between stories and observed behaviors in various situations, as when someone claims to be working regularly but is seen panhandling or intoxicated during the course of the day; and (3) those between current situations and future projections and claims, as when a disheveled, penniless street person claims to have a managerial job awaiting him at a local business. In each of these situations, credulity is strained because of objective discrepancies or because of the vast gap between current and projected realities.

took several burritos and chided the woman for being drunk, she yelled stridently at him: "I'm a floating taper and I make 14 bucks an hour. What the fuck do you make?" Aside from putting the young man in his place, the statement functioned to announce to him, as well as to others overhearing the encounter, the woman's desired identity as a person who earns a respectable wage and must therefore be treated respectfully. Subsequent interaction with this woman revealed that she worked only sporadically and then most often for a temporary day agency at $4.00 per hour. There was, then, a considerable gap between claims and reality.

Disjunctures between identity assertions and reality appear to be quite common and were readily discernible on occasion, as in the case of a 45-year-old transient from Pittsburgh who had been on the streets for a year and who was given to excessive embellishment of his former military experiences. On several occasions, he was overheard telling tales about his experiences "patrolling the Alaskan-Russian border in Alaskan Siberia" and of encounters with Russian guards, who traded vodka for coffee with him. Since there is no border between Alaska and Siberia, it is obvious that this tale is outlandish. Nonetheless, such identity constructions, however embellished, can be construed as attempts to say something concrete about oneself and how one would like to be regarded in a particular situation.

*Fantasizing.*—The second type of fictive storytelling that frequently manifested itself during the course of conversations with and among the homeless is verbal fantasizing. In contrast to embellishment, which involves exaggerated laminations of past and present activities and experiences, fantasizing involves future-oriented fabrications about oneself. By "future-oriented fabrications," we refer to fanciful constructions that place the narrator in positively framed situations that seem distantly removed from, if at all connected to, his past or present. These fabrications were almost always benign, usually had a Walter Mitty, pipe-dream quality, and varied from fanciful reveries involving little self-deception to fantastic stories in which the narrator appeared to be taken in by his constructions.[23]

[23] Fanciful identities are constructed by other people as well, but it is our sense that, with movement up the class structure, they tend to be more private and temporally or spatially ritualized rather than publicly articulated, ongoing features of everyday life, as was true for many of the homeless we studied and the black street-corner men observed by Liebow (1967) and Anderson (1976). Regarding the latter, Liebow (1967, p. 213) noted that the construction of fictive identities allows them to "be men once again providing they do not look too closely at one another's credentials." While many of the personal identities they construct, such as "going for brothers," are different in content from those constructed by the homeless, they are functionally similar. We will return to several of these points.

Regardless of the degree of self-deception, the spoken fantasies we were privy to were generally organized around four themes: self-employment, money, material possessions, and the opposite sex, particularly for men.[24] Fanciful constructions concerning self-employment were usually expressed in terms of business schemes. A black 30-year-old male from Chicago told us and others on several occasions, for example, about his plans "to set up a little shop near the university" to sell leather hats and silverwork imported from New York. In a similar but even more expansive vein, two white men in their early 20s who had become friends on the street seemed to be scheming constantly about how they were going to start one lucrative business after another. On one occasion, they were overheard talking about "going into business for ourselves, either roofing houses or rebuilding classic cars and selling them." And a few days later, they were observed trying to find a third party to bankroll one of these business ventures.

An equally prominent source of fanciful identity construction was the fantasy of becoming rich. Some of the homeless daydreamed openly about what they would do if they had a million dollars, as did one 32-year-old white male, who assured us that, if he "won a million dollars in a lottery," he was mature enough so that he "wouldn't blow it." Others would make bold claims about becoming rich, without offering any details. The following is illustrative: "You might laugh and think I'm crazy, but I'm going to be rich. I know it. I just have this feeling. I can't explain it, but I am." And still others would confidently spin fairly detailed stories about being extravagant familial providers in the future. Illustrative of this was an emaciated 25-year-old unemployed roofer who had just returned to Austin after a futile effort to establish himself in a city closer to his "girlfriend." Despite his continuing financial setbacks, he assured us: "I'm going to get my fiancée a new pet monkey, even if it costs me $1,000. And I'm going to get her two parrots too, just to show her how much I love her."

As we previously noted, fanciful identity assertions were also constructed around material possessions and encounters with the opposite sex. These two identity pegs were clearly illustrated one evening while we were hanging out with several homeless men along the city's major nightlife strip. During the course of making numerous overtures to passing women, two of the fellows jointly fantasized about how they would at-

[24] That these four factors function as springboards for fanciful identities constructed by homeless men in particular is hardly surprising, given that success as an adult male in America is defined in large part in terms of job, money, possessions, and women. This thematic connection also suggests that, while homeless males tend to stand outside the normative order in their way of life, some of them are, nonetheless, very much of that order in their dreams and fantasies.

tract these women in the future: "Man, these chicks are going to be all over us when we come back into town with our new suits and Corvettes. We'll have to get some cocaine too. Cocaine will get you women every time."

We have seen how respectable work, financial wealth, material possessions, and the opposite sex figure prominently in the fanciful, future-oriented talk of some of the homeless. While all these themes may be interconnected in actuality, only one or two of them were typically highlighted in the stories we heard. Occasionally, however, we encountered a particularly accomplished storyteller who wove together all four themes in a grand scenario, as illustrated by the following fanciful construction told by the transient from Pittsburgh over a meal of bean stew and stale bread at the Salvation Army and repeated again later that night prior to going to sleep on a concrete floor in a warehouse converted into a winter shelter for 300 men: "Tomorrow morning I'm going to get my money and say, 'Fuck this shit.' I'm going to catch a plane to Pittsburgh and tomorrow night I'll take a hot bath, have a dinner of linguini and red wine in my own restaurant . . . and have a woman hanging on my arm." When encountered on the street the next evening, entangled in his own fabrication, he attempted to explain his continued presence on the streets of Austin by saying he "had been informed that all my money is tied up in a legal battle back in Pittsburgh," an apparently fanciful lamination of the original fabrication.[25]

Although both the embellished and fanciful variants of fictive storytelling surfaced rather frequently during the course of the conversations we overhead, they were not uniformly widespread or randomly distributed among the homeless. As indicated in table 5, embellishment occurred among all the homeless but was particularly pronounced among those who had been on the street for two to four years. Fantasizing, on the other hand, occurred most frequently among those who still had one foot anchored in the world they came from and who could still envision a future; it occurred least often among those individuals who appeared acclimated to street life and tended to embrace one or more street identities. For these individuals, especially those who have been on the street for four or more years, the future is apparently too remote to provide a solid anchoring for fictive, identity-oriented spinoffs that are of this world. Again, the only exceptions to this pattern among the long-term

[25] It is important to note that this account was elicited by the field researcher rather than by another homeless individual. In fact, we rarely overheard the homeless call into question one another's stories and asserted identities. Interestingly, this contrasts strikingly with Anderson's finding in peer groups of black street-corner men that "people 'shoot down' and 'blow away' each other's accounts frequently" (1976, p. 18). Reasons for this difference will be suggested in Conclusions and Implications below.

TABLE 5

TYPES OF FICTIVE STORYTELLING BY TIME ON THE STREETS (in percentages)

| TIME ON THE STREETS | TYPE OF FICTIVE STORYTELLING | |
|---|---|---|
| | Embellishment[a] ($N$ = 38) | Fantasizing[b] ($N$ = 31) |
| Less than six months | 13.2 | 51.6 |
| Six months to two years | 26.3 | 32.3 |
| Two years to four years | 50.0 | 9.7 |
| More than four years | 10.5 | 6.4 |

NOTE.—$\chi^2 = 17.55$, $df = 3$, $P < .001$.

[a] Comments or statements were coded as embellishment if they entailed the elaboration and exaggeration of past and present experiences with fictitious particulars. See fn. 22 for criteria used for determining the fictive character of comments and stories.

[b] Comments or statements were coded as fantasizing if they entailed future-oriented fabrications that placed the narrator in positively framed situations. See fn. 22 for criteria used for determining the fictive, fabricative character of comments and stories.

homeless were the mentally ill who had been on the street for four or more years.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

We have identified and elaborated three generic patterns of identity talk through which the homeless we studied construct and avow personal identities that yield a measure of self-respect and dignity. We have noted that each pattern of talk—distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling—contains several varieties and that their frequency of use tends to vary with the duration of one's street career. Categorical role and associational distancing and the construction of fanciful identities were found to occur most frequently among those who had been on the streets a comparatively short time. Categorical embracement and embellishment, however, tended to manifest themselves most frequently among those who had been on the streets for two or more years.

Glossed in our presentation of these findings are three related considerations that warrant brief discussion. First, in focusing attention on the construction and assertion of more positive personal identities, we do not intend to suggest that the homeless we encountered did not sometimes view themselves in terms of the more negative, stereotypical identities that are frequently imputed to them. On one occasion, for example, a long-time street person lamented in a demoralized tone that he was "nothing but a bum." But such self-deprecating comments were relatively rare in comparison with the avowal of more positive identities. We suspect

that this is partly because the homeless have little to fall back on in their attempts to salvage the self other than their own identity construction efforts.

The second caveat concerns the kinds of causal inferences that might be derived from the various patterns of identity talk we have elaborated. Given that slightly more than a third of the identity statements are of the embracement variety, it might be tempting to conclude that a sizable proportion of the homeless are on the street because they have chosen that life-style. From this vantage point, homelessness is seen as a matter of choice rather than as a function of structural forces beyond one's control. Such a voluntaristic interpretation strikes us as empirically unwarranted and theoretically misguided, however. In the first place, it is nearly impossible to infer causal dynamics from voluntaristic-sounding assertions apart from an understanding of the range of options available to a person. Homelessness may indeed be a matter of choice for some people, but perhaps only when there is a scant number of alternatives that are no more palatable than life on the street. To the extent that this is true, the choice is of the lesser of evils and takes on a rather different meaning than if it were made in the face of more attractive options. Thus, to attribute homelessness to choice without an understanding of the context in which that choice is made adds little to our understanding of the precipitants of homelessness.

Our finding that patterns of identity talk vary with length of time on the street provides an even more compelling reason for cautiously refraining from making inferences about the causes of homelessness, at the individual level, based on those patterns. In fact, our findings tell us relatively little about the reasons for homelessness. What they do seem to make clear, however, is that the personal identities homeless people construct and avow are not static but, instead, change with the passage of time on the streets. The typical progression is from categorical distancing and the assertion of fanciful, future-oriented identities to categorical embracement, distancing from specific types of homeless individuals and street institutions, and the embellishment of past experiences and encounters. Accordingly, our findings suggest that identity statements implying choice can best be regarded as manifestations of life on the street rather than as indicators of initial precipitants, especially since such statements tend to be more common among those who have been on the streets for more than two years.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that our research, unlike most research on identity, was based on in situ observations of and encounters with individuals engaged in natural ongoing interaction. The identities discerned and recorded were thus "in use" in an ongoing system of action rather than responses to prestructured questions in purely research-

contrived situations. Whatever the limitations of this research tack, we think they are outweighed by the fact that it provides a relatively rare glimpse of the actual construction and use of personal identities in the course of everyday life among individuals at the very bottom of society. In addition, and more important from a theoretical standpoint, a number of implications flow from these findings regarding the relationships among structural location, role, identity, and self-concept.

The first theoretical implication pertains to the widely held assumption among social scientists that identity-related concerns, such as the need for self-esteem, are secondary to more physiological survival needs. This assumption is rooted in Maslow's (1962) well-known hierarchy of needs, which holds that the satisfaction of physiological and safety needs is a necessary condition for the emergence and gratification of higher-level needs, such as the need for self-esteem or a positive personal identity. This thesis has become almost cliché even though research bearing on it is scant, ambiguous, and typically at the aggregate level (Allardt 1973; Inglehart 1977; Knutson 1972). Our finding—that identity-related concerns can be readily gleaned from the talk of homeless street people, clearly some of the most destitute in terms of physiological and safety needs—calls into question this popular assumption. More specifically, our findings suggest that the salience of identity-related concerns is not necessarily contingent on the prior satisfaction of more physiological survival requisites. Instead, such needs appear to coexist, even at the most rudimentary level of human existence.

That this should be true makes sound sense from the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, which views the imputation of meaning to the objects in one's environment, including the self, as one of the core activities in which people engage regardless of their social status. Indeed, it is this signifying activity that Znaniecki (1934) conceptualized as the "humanistic coefficient" and saw as perhaps the distinctive characteristic of the human species. We view our findings as consistent with this thesis.

In addition, our findings provide further evidence of the tendency for individuals who have fallen through the cracks of society to carve out a modicum of meaning and personal significance in what must, from the more privileged perches of the normative order, appear to be an anomic void. As noted at the outset, other examples of such spirited identity work have been found in mental hospitals (Goffman 1961*a*), concentration camps (Frankl 1963; Dimsdale 1980), and among black street-corner men (Liebow 1967; Anderson 1976). In these and presumably other cases, the attempt to carve out and maintain a sense of meaning and self-worth seems especially critical for survival, perhaps because it is the thread that enables those situated on the margins or at the bottom to retain a sense of self and thus their humanity. To the extent that this is generally true, it

follows that it is not lack of interest in identity issues, self-realization, and the like that characterizes those for whom physiological survival cannot be taken for granted but the scant material and social resources at their disposal. Consequently, their identity construction efforts are often less transparent and more likely to be confined to the conversational realm, as in fictive storytelling among the homeless and "going for brothers" and "playing the dozens" among lower-class, black street-corner men and youths.

Implied in the foregoing discussion are a number of theoretical implications that also bear more directly on the relationships among role, identity, and self. A major area of ambiguity associated with their interconnections concerns the sources or wellsprings of identity. There are two central perspectives within sociology that bear on this issue: the role-identity model (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1968, 1980; Burke 1980; Burke and Tully 1977) and a more processual, negotiated perspective (Strauss 1959; Shibutani 1961; Stone 1962; Goffman 1963; Blumstein 1973). The former perspective, as articulated by Stryker (1968; 1980, pp. 59–67) and his associates, conceptualizes identity as "internalized positional designations" that constitute the self and that "exist insofar as the person is a participant in structured role relationships." From this vantage point, the source of our identities resides not so much in self-concept or the improvisational aspect of self but in the roles we play and the social relationships in which we are embedded. In contrast, the more processual perspective assigns relatively greater significance to the self in the construction and avowal of identities, a conception that also resonates with several current strands of theorizing in both moral philosophy (MacIntyre 1981) and psychology (Gergen 1982; Sarbin and Scheibe 1983).

Our findings suggest a modification of existing role-identity theory that integrates the insights of the processual perspective. Clearly, our data indicate the importance of structurally based roles as a source of identity, as with the embracement of both general and specific street roles. But the data also show that for some individuals there is greater indeterminacy between identities and structurally based roles than role-identity theory suggests. In the case of distancing, for example, there is rejection of structurally based roles and role relationships and the assertion of a contrary identity, albeit one that is frequently vague and emergent. And, in fictive storytelling, there is improvisation with respect to both embellishment and fantasizing. In the former case, there is fanciful elaboration of past or existing structurally based experiences or relationships; in the latter, there is fanciful projection of future identities that may or may not be structurally based. Taken together, these observations suggest that while structurally based roles and role relationships do indeed function as an important springboard for personal identities, they are neither auto-

matic indicators nor determinants of the latter. Moreover, the nature of the relationship between roles and identities may be positive or negative, so that personal identities may be congruent with or counter to existing roles and role relationships.

The theoretical implications of these observations for understanding the relationships among role, self, and identity are several. The first and most basic pertains to the conditions under which role-based social identities and personal identities are likely to be congruent, as in embracement, or incongruent, as in distancing. Our findings suggest a set of two propositions, the first consistent with the role-identity model's structural emphasis, the second highlighting the importance of improvisation and negotiation:

1*a*. When there is a positive articulation between self-concept and role-based social identities such that the self implied by the latter is favorable, then social and personal identities are likely to be congruent, with the latter mirroring the former.

1*b*. When there is a negative articulation between self-concept and role-based social identities such that the self implied by the latter is debasing or demeaning, then personal identities incongruent with social identities are likely to be constructed.

The foregoing propositions specify that the construction and verbalization of personal identities are more probable in the event of incongruence between self-concept and role-based social identities. Yet, the conditions that give rise to the tendency to construct and verbalize personal identities do not specify the degree to which those identities can be elaborated and embellished in fanciful and fictional directions. One's experiences and imagination constitute limiting factors, but so does the interactional context in which those identities are verbalized. Thus, a second set of theoretical implications follows from the first and concerns the factors that affect the latitude one has to construct and present personal identities that are discrepant with role-based social identities. Our observations suggest three factors as being especially prominent, each of which suggests a corollary proposition: the first concerns the degree of alter's familiarity with ego's biography; the second concerns the degree of alter's familiarity with the role-based experiences in which ego's personal identity is supposedly grounded; and the third pertains to the degree to which alter exhibits tact and thus refrains from calling into question ego's asserted personal identity.

2*a*. The more intimate alter's knowledge of ego's biography, the lower the probability that alter will accept ego's asserted identities that are strikingly incongruous with ego's biography and the more constrained ego's latitude in constructing and asserting personal identities.

2*b*. The less familiar alter is with the experiences in which ego's as-

serted personal identity is lodged, the greater the latitude for ego to elaborate that personal identity.

*2c*. The more tactful or less inclined alter is to call into question ego's identity assertion, the greater ego's latitude for constructing personal identities that are discrepant with imputed role-based social identities.

These propositions help explain the prevalence of fictive identity talk in interactions among the homeless. As we noted earlier, the homeless rarely make queries about one another's past or call one another's stories into question (at least not in one another's presence) and thus have considerable elbow room for embellishment and verbal fantasizing. In contrast, most other individuals who are members of peer groups based on work, leisure, or neighborhood have less leeway and are therefore more constrained in their verbal identity construction efforts. According to Anderson's (1976) ethnographic research, even black street-corner men experience considerable constraint because of the propensity for them to call one another's identity claims into question. The preceding propositions point to three factors that account for these differences. First, homeless street people, unlike members of most peer groups, seldom have biographical knowledge of one another. In addition, the homeless come from diverse regional and experiential backgrounds and are therefore frequently unable to evaluate accurately the plausibility of one another's stories. And last, there seems to be an unspoken norm among the homeless that prohibits biographical probing and questioning of identity claims. In part, this appears to be because little seems to be gained by challenging another's avowed identity except to risk physical reprisal. By decreasing the likelihood of an identity claim being called into question and a person's losing face, this mutually deferential stance increases the prospect of embellishment and fanciful storytelling, thus making the homeless unwitting coconspirators in the spinning and maintaining of outlandish personal identities.

The foregoing propositions, and the observations in which they are grounded, suggest that the role-identity and processual perspectives are neither mutually exclusive nor antithetical approaches to understanding the relationships among role, self, and identity. Instead, they supplement and complement each other. The central question is not whether structurally based roles and personal identities are congruent or incongruent but under what conditions they are one or the other. The above propositions provide answers to that question and thus further understanding of the relationships among role, identity, and self. Finally, these propositions and findings caution against the tendency within sociology to adopt an overly structuralized conception of self and identity, treating the latter as an entity that is routinely assigned or bestowed upon the actor rather than

constructed or negotiated on occasion. Clearly, the homeless we came to know provide an empirical counterpoint to that tendency.

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