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Acting on Their Own Behalf:
Affiliation and Political Mobilization
among Homeless People

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Homeless people have been portrayed in the literature as passive, isolated, and unable to act on their own behalf. The authors discuss the findings of an ethnographic study of homeless activists which challenge the stereotypical view of homeless people as disaffiliated and disempowered. Collective social action was found to have a long term impact on access to material resources, development of social networks, and construction of positive homeless identity.

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in the homeless population and, in parallel fashion, a burgeoning social work literature on homelessness. Most studies have focused on this population either as victims of social policy (Baxter & Hopper, 1984; Burghardt & Fabricant, 1987; Redburn & Buss, 1986) or as recipients of social work services (Cohen, 1989; Glasser & Suroviak, 1988; Koroloff & Anderson, 1989). Only a few studies mention the existence of social protest among the homeless (Fabricant and Kelley, 1986; Ropers, 1988) or discuss the emergence of a homeless social movement (Blau, forthcoming). There has been increasing evidence of political advocacy on the part of homeless people in the last few years, including the National Union of the Homeless which has employed militant tactics in order to bring about reforms in services

for the homeless (*The New York Times*, February 9, 1986). This embryonic movement of homeless people acting on their own behalf has been somewhat obscured by the more visible state and national coalitions of the homeless, generally composed of human service providers, attorneys, and other professionals, which have played an advocacy role on behalf of homeless people. The coalitions have not, as a rule, sought to recruit members from among their homeless constituencies. In one of the few discussions of homelessness as a social movement, Blau (1992) characterizes the movement as being for, rather than by, the poor, attributing this to the politically disabling effects of homelessness.

Although the disempowering sequelae of homelessness can be considerable (Berman-Rossi and Cohen, 1989; Ropers, 1988) this has not prevented some homeless people from acting on their own behalf. Ropers (1988) suggests that as the size of the homeless population reaches epic proportions, homeless people begin to create their own communities and engage in political protest. Ropers' discussion follows Piven and Cloward's (1977) thesis that poor people's movements emerge from severe economic and social dislocations which tear asunder the fabric of everyday life. Homelessness represents a particularly extreme disruption of daily life. The erosion of identity and self-confidence that is frequently associated with homelessness can be extremely disempowering. There is, however, considerable potential for political empowerment inherent in collectivities of disenfranchized and oppressed people.

The literature has generally portrayed homeless people as passive, unable to act alone and lacking social skills to act together (Bahr, 1973; Blau, forthcoming; Rossi, 1989). It sheds little light on the political and social consciousness of homeless people or on the impact that involvement in political protest can have on their lives.

This article challenges the stereotypical view of the homeless as disaffiliated and disempowered. Drawing on the findings of an ethnographic research study, longitudinal data is developed which reveal the changes over time in the lives of homeless people. The authors argue that groups of homeless people can develop extensive social networks and construct positive identities as homeless activists.

The Research Context

During the summer of 1987, more than one hundred homeless people in the city of Portland, Maine (metropolitan area population 250,000) waged a political protest which began with a sleep-in on the steps of City Hall and culminated in the establishment of a "Tent City" in a nearby park. The protest was organized by the Coalition for the Dignity of the Homeless and the Poor, a group of homeless and formerly homeless advocates, in response to the closing of two homeless shelters (Emergency Shelter Assessment Committee, 1990). The homeless protesters abandoned the encampment after city officials agreed to open a year round shelter, waive certain categorical requirements for emergency shelter, and liberalize aspects of the general assistance program (*Portland Press Herald*, July 22, 1988).

Homelessness in Portland had been relatively invisible prior to 1987. The 24 day long Tent City protest made homelessness visible and brought public attention to the service needs of Portland's poorest citizens. Advocacy groups organized by former Tent City protesters have kept the homeless issue on the public agenda ever since. The Tent City protest marked the inception of a local homeless movement.

Research Methodology

Research on the homeless population has generally been characterized by large scale, quantitative studies focused on estimating the size of the homeless population in a particular geographical area and examining its demographic characteristics (Arce et al, 1983; Rossi et al, 1987; Roth, et al, 1985). These studies have greatly expanded our understanding of the composition of the homeless population but, by design, have yielded relatively little in-depth or longitudinal data. Hudson (1988) critiques this quantitative emphasis in homeless research, suggesting that it has limited the development of public policy.

The present study utilized qualitative research methodology to obtain retrospective, longitudinal data on a cohort of politically active homeless people. The cohort consisted of the approximately 100 individuals who participated in the Portland

Table I

Location and Interviews of "Tent City" Cohort

Total names	105
Total number of subjects locational information was obtained for	100 (95.2%)
Total contacted	81 (77.1%)
Total interviewed	65 (61.9%)
(Deceased)	(2)
(Refused)	(6)
(Contacted or met by researchers, but interview not completed)	(8)

Tent City protest. The study was conducted in 1990, three years after Tent City.

Demographic data collected at Tent City by the Coalition for the Dignity of the Homeless and the Poor was made available to the researchers. Names of Tent City participants were obtained from newspaper accounts, homeless advocates, social service providers, and from the participants themselves. A non-random, snowball sampling technique was approximated by asking each subject to provide the names of other members of the Tent City cohort. A total of 105 sample members were identified in this fashion and in-depth interviews conducted with 65 (see Tables I and II).

Locating sample members three years after Tent City proved to be a difficult yet fascinating process. Time honored research techniques using phone books and city directories were of minimal utility. The researchers relied largely on the social networks within the homeless community and sample members' knowledge of each others' whereabouts.

The Tent City Cohort Three Years Later

The stereotypes of the "bag lady" and "skid row bum" continue to inform the public's view of homeless people. As Snow and his colleagues (1986) note in their challenge to the stereotype of homeless people as mentally ill, the visibility of

Table II

Demographic Characteristics of the Tent City Cohort

	Interviewed	Not Interviewed	Total
GENDER	N=65	N=40	N=105
Male	42 (64.6%)	39 (97.5%)	81 (77.1%)
Female	23 (35.4%)	1 (2.5%)	24 (22.9%)
Unknown	(0)	(0)	(0)
AGE (1990)	N=65	N=35	N=99
< 26	23 (35.4%)	12 (35.3%)	35 (35.4%)
26-35	23 (35.4%)	8 (23.5%)	31 (31.3%)
36-45	12 (18.5%)	7 (20.6%)	19 (19.2%)
46-55	3 (4.6%)	6 (17.6%)	9 (9.1%)
56-65	2 (3.1%)	0	2 (2.0%)
> 65	2 (3.1%)	1 (2.9%)	3 (3.0%)
Unknown	(0)	(6)	(6)
EDUCATION	N=60	N=16	N=76
9th Grade or less	15 (25.0%)	7 (43.8%)	22 (28.9%)
Some H. S.	16 (26.6%)	4 (25.0%)	20 (26.3%)
H.S. Diploma or GED	19 (31.7%)	2 (12.5%)	21 (27.6%)
Some College	8 (13.3%)	2 (12.5%)	10 (13.2%)
College Degree	2 (3.3%)	1 (6.3%)	3 (3.9%)
Unknown	(5)	(24)	(29)
PLACE OF BIRTH	N=65	N=27	N=92
Portland	26 (40.0%)	6 (22.2%)	32 (34.8%)
Other Maine	19 (29.2%)	10 (37.0%)	29 (31.5%)
Other New Eng.	6 (9.2%)	1 (3.7%)	7 (7.6%)
Other US	14 (21.5%)	9 (33.3%)	23 (25.0%)
Foreign Born	0	1 (3.7%)	1 (1.1%)
Unknown	(0)	(13)	(13)
SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS ¹ OF FAMILY OR ORIGIN	N=55	Not Available	Not Available
Middle Class	17 (30.9%)		
Working Class	23 (41.8%)		

Continued . . .

Table II continued

Low Income	15 (27.3%)		
Unknown	(10)		
<hr/>			
WORK, SCHOOL, VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES	N=65	Not Available	Not Available
<i>(Categories are not Mutually Exclusive)</i>			
Full Time Work	14 (25.0%)		
Part Time or Temporary Work	5 (8.9%)		
School	6 (10.7%)		
Advocate or Volunteer	13 (23.2%)		
Discrete Number of Individuals Reflected Above	31 (55.4%)		
Not Involved in Activities	25 (44.6%)		
Unknown	(9)		

some of the most psychotic members of the homeless population and the tendency of researchers to view the homeless through the prism of hospital emergency rooms and shelters, reinforces this view. Through a longitudinal approach, a broader view of homelessness can be documented.

One measure of how far the Portland cohort was from the view of the homeless as a fixed population was their absence, 3 years after Tent City, from the institutions and services most associated with the homeless. A review of the City of Portland's municipal shelter during the six month study period found only 3 of the 105 sample subjects using the facility. Spot checks of the city's only breakfast feeding program, serving as many as 175 each morning, found no more than five of the Tent City cohort at any given meal.

Most significantly, the majority of subjects were housed at the time of the study. Definitions of homelessness vary. The advocates define homelessness as "lacking a permanent and

customary home" which includes those who are institutionalized or "doubled up." Social scientists have generally preferred a measure of "literal homelessness," defined as sleeping in homeless shelters or other places "not intended as dwellings." (Rossi, 1989, p. 48). Table IIIA categorizes subjects by both definitions. Among the 65 subjects interviewed, 76.9% were housed in the Spring/Summer of 1990, even under the fairly rigorous definition of the advocates. If the literal homeless definition is used, 89.2% were housed. Although data on the remainder of the cohort is more tentative, considerable information from family, friends and others was available to confirm that the non-interviewed group showed a similar pattern.

Some social scientists have noted the fluidity of homelessness and urged researchers to view the problem of homelessness as marking only the extreme edge of poverty, with people fluctuating between the status of housed and homeless (Rossi, 1989). The success of the Portland cohort in securing housing supports Rossi's findings and suggests that under the conditions of political mobilization, significant resource mobilization on an individual level can result.

The most dramatic gain for subjects other than housing was the availability of income supports. Prior to the Tent City protest, most subjects lacked consistent social benefits and had to rely on an arbitrary and changing general assistance system.

Table IIIA

Subjects' Housing Status when Interviewed, 1990

	(N=65)	
	Advocates' Definition	Literal Homeless
Housed	50 (76.9%)	58 (89.2%)
Homeless	15 (23.1%)	7 (10.8%)
(street, shelter)	(7)	(7)
(correctional setting)	(2)	—
(rehab facility)	(1)	—
(with family)	(1)	—
(with friends)	(4)	—

Table IIIB

Subjects' Housing Status, Entire Cohort Estimated, 1990

	(N=98) ²	
	Advocates' Definition	Literal Homeless
Housed	70 (71.4%)	83 (84.7%)
Homeless	28 (28.6%)	15 (15.3%)
(street, shelter)	(15)	(15)
(correctional setting)	(3)	-
(rehab facility)	(2)	-
(with family)	(2)	-
(with friends)	(6)	-

While some had experienced significant upward mobility since 1987, for the most part, subjects remained poor but were able to secure more regular income support through Social Security, SSI, AFDC and veterans assistance. Those receiving social benefits increased 6 fold from 8 to 46. In almost all cases, the securing of benefits came about through the pressure of the Tent City protect in which participants applied en masse for benefits and had access to attorneys to appeal benefit rejections.

In contrast to the importance of social benefits in achieving housing stability, few subjects were able to achieve stable employment situations. While almost all subjects had worked fairly recently, at the time of the interviews only 14 were working full time and 5 part time. While some of these jobs generated increased income and a sense of efficacy, most paid too little, were too sporadic, or involved too much conflict with the employer for the subject to remain in long term employ.

The Disaffiliation Stereotype And The Tent City Cohort

Homelessness has frequently been linked to a process of social disaffiliation in which the homeless are defined as socially deviant as a result of attenuated family, friendship, and institutional ties. Theodore Caplow (as cited in Watson & Austerberry, 1986, p. 17) defined homelessness as "a condition of detachment from society characterized by the absence or attenuation of

the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures."

The lives of the homeless people studied present a very different view. Amy, a 38 year old woman who has been homeless sporadically for five years, described a typical day's schedule:

- 7 a.m. Breakfast with her boyfriend
- 8 a.m. Meeting with her social worker
- 9 a.m. A.A. meeting
- 10 a.m. Church group meeting
- 12 noon Lunch at soup kitchen
- 1 p.m. Meeting of the Portland Coalition for the Psychiatrically Labelled (an advocacy group)
- 3 p.m. Meeting of the newsletter committee of a social club for the mentally ill
- 5 p.m. Dinner with her boyfriend at soup kitchen

Amy was well known to service providers, ministers, and many low income people. The researchers were frequently told "ask Amy, she'll know where whoever you are looking for is."

As indicated in Table IV, quantitative measures of affiliation, including ties to friends and family, were in striking contrast to the disaffiliation stereotype. More than 85% of the subjects interviewed were able to name 3 close friends and many were accompanied by friends when they met interviewers. While the marriage rate was relatively low among this sample, when live-in relationships are included, more than 4 out of 5 subjects were in long term relationships, and this number is even higher among those over 25. Like many poor people, the Tent City subjects often do not have partnerships sanctioned by the state for a variety of reasons: the cost of marriage licenses, the reluctance to become involved with state institutions, avoidance of social benefit problems, and, in some instances, relationships are between partners one or both of whom are still married or are between gay or lesbian partners.

Only in terms of social ties with families of origin might the subjects be seen as somewhat different from the general population. Nearly 1 in 2 subjects had been the victim of physical or sexual abuse or were in foster care during childhood. It is not surprising that approximately 1 in 4 subjects had no

Table IV

Affiliation and Social Contacts of 'Tent City' Cohort

SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP	Number	Percent ⁴
Currently married	13	21.3% n=61
Ever married	30	49.2% n=61
(over age 25)	25	65.8% n=38
Ever in long term partnership	47	81.0% n=58
(over age 25)	31	86.1% n=36
currently in long term partnership	29	56.8% n=51
(over age 25)	18	58.1% n=31
LIVING ARRANGEMENTS		
Live with spouse/partner	25	
Live with friend/roommate	6	
Live with family of origin	5	
Total 36/50 housed living with others		
RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY OF ORIGIN		
See biological parents frequently	25	48.1% n=52
See biological parents occasionally	40	76.9% n=52
See children frequently	20	54.1% n=37
See any adult family members frequently	45	76.3% n=59
FRIENDSHIP		
Named three or more friends	55	87.3% n=63
Identified three or more Tent City participants as friends	52	82.5% n=63

contact at all with biological parents and another 2 in 7 had only

"occasional contact." Close to half of the subjects reported being on good terms with parents, a proportion similar the general population, (see Rosenthal, 1989, for a comparison).

Most subjects had maintained good relations with at least some members of their families: siblings, aunts and uncles or grandparents, sometimes in addition to and sometimes absent parental contact. Subjects discussed the many barriers to contact with families when they were homeless:

My grandparents are right over in Westbrook (a neighboring city) and they've been pretty good to me. But it's hard to explain. When I was homeless, I'd be out there without twenty cents to make a call, without decent clothes. It was embarrassment, yeh, a lot of times, to go there, but also how was I going to call them, to get over there? They're elderly and you can't just call all the time and say, come get me . . .

Consistent contact with families of origin and with friends and acquaintances from higher socio-economic classes, tended to diminish when subjects were literally homeless. These ties were not completely severed, however, and were usually resumed when subjects became housed.

Numerous examples of mutual aid among the homeless and marginally housed were evident throughout the study. A 27 year old homeless women talked of helping an elderly alcoholic man:

Yeh, I get Barry his coffee everyday, and help him get to the check cashing place when he gets his social security. He has trouble walking so we get him his cigarettes and a paper. I like him a lot . . . he acts kind of like a father figure to me, giving advice, telling me where I can stay, which social worker to talk to . . .

Providing shelter to each other was viewed almost as an obligation by many subjects:

(Nina, a 38 year old formerly homeless woman who has provided food and shelter to many cohort members) They see me as their mother, all these runaways and young kinds . . . they come over and call me 'Nana.' Sure, I'll take them in as long as I have room. Nobody ever helped me and I felt cheated. I don't want them to feel cheated.

(Sidney, a 32 year old building manager who has been housed for 2 years with his girlfriend): I've been there and I always remember this. When we see someone on Congress Street, particularly an old person, we give them a meal, try to take them in. It's only right . . .

Some forms of mutual aid replaced family and institutional systems that had failed. Wally, a homeless man in his 70s with throat cancer, was a frequent subject of comment by many subjects. Sam, a 24 year old formerly homeless man noted:

No one but us (Tent City group) would help Wally. His family had abandoned him. The city kept cutting him off assistance, food stamps. We brought him to the hospital, we got him Medicaid, we kept going back to the city and yelling. It makes you angry that no one else would respond. But it also makes you feel good that we got some things done for him.

Perhaps most striking, given the stereotypical view of homelessness, was the organizational attachment of the subjects studied. When interviewed in 1990, a large number of subjects were still active in homeless or low income advocacy groups, church groups, and self-help organizations. Seven formerly homeless subjects volunteered their time at soup kitchens, clothes pantries, or at a local AIDS project. Subjects noted the strong impact of these organizations in helping them secure housing, sobriety, income benefits, and stability:

(Amy, 38 yrs old) The Lutheran church has been my strongest asset, whether (I've been) homeless or not. Its given me strength and its helped me get treatment, helped me see my problems with booze . . .

(Alycia, a 17 yr. single old mother): "I don't know what I'd without AA and the friends I made around the Arnie Hanson Center (a residence for alcohol abusers). Someone to call, someone to help me. They come whether I'm down and out on the street or whatever. Its led me to a very different life . . .

Since this research study was restricted to a small, non-random sample in a particular geographic area, it is difficult to gauge how common such extensive social ties might be. The tendency of researchers to perform one-shot quantitative head counts rather than ethnographic research serves to obscure the

extent to which the politically active homeless people in the Portland study are different from other homeless people. Several recent studies (Cohen et. al., 1988; La Gory, Ritchey and Mullis, 1989; Rosenthal, 1989) confirm that more extensive social ties exist among the homeless than previously believed.

As La Gory and his colleagues note, such ties do not necessarily lead to empowerment. We would suggest, however, that under the conditions of political protest, social ties can be built upon to permit resource mobilization, and that such mobilization, at least in part, explains the striking improvements in the housing and income situations of the Portland cohort.

Political Activism And Identity Construction

While the literature in the past twenty years had tended to portray homeless people as politically disabled and disempowered, there is an earlier tradition in American history which conveys quite a different image. Homelessness, or "tramping," was associated with radical political sentiments and activism as early as 1874 when the Tompkins Square riot in New York City gave rise to the belief that the rioting tramps were part of a professional army of revolutionaries (Ringenbach, 1973; Blau, 1987). This tradition persisted in the twentieth century with the IWW's political recruitment in the hobo communities. During the Great Depression, hundreds took to the roads or joined tent city encampments as social and economic upheaval reinforced the association between homelessness and political protest. The Wobbly song "Hallelujah! I'm a Bum" reflects this earlier, less stigmatized image of homelessness.

Snow and Anderson, in their 1987 study of street people in Austin, Texas, point out that homeless people are "... 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 (p. 1340).

In order to maintain self-worth, homeless people construct positive role identities either by distancing themselves from the homeless role or by embracing it. Those who engage in role distancing, speak of the homeless as "they" and do so with

great disdain. Those who engage in role embracement speak proudly of the homeless as "we," often invoking the historical icon of the tramp or bum (Snow and Anderson, 1987).

Snow and Anderson's analysis of "identity work" is the only such discussion in the homeless literature and these authors do not examine the potential impact of participation in collective political action. The experience of the Portland cohort suggests that political activism can facilitate the construction of positive personal identity through role embracement.

Most of the subjects credited Tent City with changing their views about homelessness and about themselves. The following quotes suggest a relationship between political activism and role embracement:

(From a letter written to one of the researchers by 35 year old Arnie, following his interview): Politically, I have come to be left of center from my experiences at Tent City. I saw how the City didn't want to listen and how they just wanted to repress us. I hadn't really thought of myself as part of an oppressed group before . . .

(From an interview with Hal, a 26 year old man): I never got involved with politics before (Tent City) but I've been active ever since. A whole bunch of us went to Washington D.C. in October to the big homeless demonstration. There were so many of us, it was really cool. Being involved in politics has really made me feel proud to call myself homeless. Even though I have a place to live now, I still think of myself that way.

The persistence of the identification with the homeless role, expressed by many members of the cohort who were housed at the time of the interview and thus in a position to abandon the stigmatized label of "homeless," speaks to the strength of role embracement. Indeed, many subjects maintained their positive homeless identities through their involvement in one or more of the homeless advocacy groups which were organized by and for homeless people after the Tent City protect:

(Mitchell, a thirty-one year old man, housed for two years at the time of the study): After Tent City I helped organize the advocates . . . We have to help each other, man, the city isn't going to do it for us. Last month I helped that old guy, Carl, get into the

Everett Hotel. That's what it's all about, homeless people helping each other.

Not all members of the Tent City Cohort embraced the homeless role. Three years after Tent City, a small number actively distanced themselves from a homeless social identity, describing "those homeless" as "lazy," "crazy," or "drunk." These individuals differed sharply from the role embracers in their views of the causes of homeless and the efficacy of political protest in improving social conditions. We suggest the term "Individualists" to describe this group. Through role distancing, they came to reject political activism as a solution to the problems of homelessness which they saw as caused primarily by the individual deficits of homeless people. The Individualists stood in sharp contrast to the group we termed "Militants" who were characterized by strong role embracement, a view of homelessness caused by societal power relationships, and a belief in militant social action aimed at radical social change.

A third group was also identified. We termed "Incrementalists" those individuals who took a middle road to identity construction through the process that Snow and Anderson refer to as "categorical associational distancing." Incrementalists made a sharp distinction between those who are homeless due to character deficits and those, like themselves, who are homeless due to societal inequities. This careful distinction between the "good homeless" and the "bad homeless" allowed the Incrementalists to embrace the role of the former while transferring negative societal stereotypes to the latter. Incrementalists advocated a strategy of peaceful social action to alert the public to the plight of the homeless, thus bringing about gradual improvements in the service delivery system.

As noted, only a small number of subjects (12.5% of subjects whose views could be coded) were classified as Individualists. The remaining subjects either embraced the homeless role completely (Militants, 37.5%) or categorically (Incrementalists, 50%). Differences in identification with the homeless role were found to vary according to the age, gender, and socio-economic background, with younger, male subjects from low income and working class families most likely to be classified as Militant.

Table V

Relationship between Political Attitudes and Gender

Gender	Individualist	Incrementalist	Militant	N
Female	1 (5.3%)	14 (73.7%)	4 (21%)	19
Male	6 (16.2%)	14 (37.8%)	17 (45.9%)	37
Totals	7 (12.5%)	28 (50%)	21 (37.5%)	56

Table VI

Relationship between Political Attitudes and Age

Age	Individualist	Incrementalist	Militant	N
< 26	3 (13.6%)	9 (40.9%)	10 (45.5%)	22
26-35	1 (5.3%)	10 (52.6%)	8 (42.1%)	19
36-45	1 (10%)	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	10
> 45	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	5

Table VII

Relationship between Political Attitudes and Socio-Economic Status of Family of Origin

SES	Individualist	Incrementalist	Militant	N
Middle Class	2 (13.3%)	11 (73.3%)	2 (13.3%)	15
Working Class	5 (21.7%)	8 (34.8%)	10 (43.5%)	23
Low Income	0	7 (46.7%)	8 (53.3%)	15
Unknown	(0)	(2)	(1)	3

The relationship between role embracement and socio-economic class is perhaps easiest to explain. Strong associational ties appeared to exist among subjects from lower-income families. Such ties were more likely to be absent in subjects from upper-income families who tended to distance themselves from the homeless role and view their own circumstances as

idiosyncratic. This suggests that the distance between homeless status and lower-income status is more readily traversed than the wider gulf which exists between homeless status and upper-income status.

Gender differences may be a function of homelessness being associated with greater norm violation for women than for men. Being independent and alone has always been more socially acceptable for men (Golden, 1986) and the romanticized image of the tramp has historically been male image. It would seem that the process of positive identity construction through homeless role embracement would be easier for men than for women.

The negative association that was found between age and role embracement is harder to explain. The small number of subjects over the age of 35 in the cohort as a whole (see Table II) makes it difficult to generalize about this group. Since studies of the general homeless population in Portland have found a much higher percentage of older homeless (Emergency Shelter Assessment Committee, 1990), the low number in the Tent City cohort may suggest that older homeless people are less likely to become politically active than younger ones. In the Tent City cohort, the older members differed from their younger counterparts primarily in their higher levels of alcoholism and lower levels of affiliation.

The Tent City protest was a collective effort in which homeless people came together, shared living and sleeping quarters, and experienced intense social contact. The older alcoholic homeless individuals in the group tended to remain on the periphery (often not sleeping in the tents where alcohol was forbidden). Their identification with each other and with the homeless social movement tended to be quite tenuous. Viewed in this light, this group's preference for identity construction through role distancing rather than embracement becomes more understandable.

For most of the subjects, collective political activity meant being part of a group that took pride in its homeless identity. The status of homeless activist conferred dignity and self-esteem rather than passivity and dependence.

Summary

This ethnographic study of a small group of politically active homeless people challenges the stereotypical view of the homeless as disaffiliated and disempowered. The experience of collective social action can be understood as fostering the development and maintenance of social ties while creating a context for political empowerment and facilitating positive identity construction. When homeless people are allowed to speak on their own behalf, social science can reveal, rather than mask, their realities. Purely quantitative research can obscure the strengths of homeless people. Further ethnographic research is greatly needed to illuminate the rich experiences and varied perspectives of homeless individuals.

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Notes

1. Families classified as Middle Class included those where one or more parent was employed as a professional, businessperson, or military officer.

Families classified as Working Class included parents with stable employment in factories, mills, and the skilled trades. Families where employment was sporadic and low wage were classified as Low-Income.

2. Data was obtained from a variety of informants on 33 people who were not interviewed. Two deceased sample members are excluded as are 5 for whom information was not available.
3. Because 5 subjects were actually in prisons or jails at the time they were interviewed, the percentage actually underrates participation in organizational activities, since these 5 subjects did not have access to these activities.
4. The n varies somewhat throughout the tale because some subjects were not responsive to the questions or gave equivocal responses.