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“Like a Prison!”:
Homeless Women’s Narratives
of Surviving Shelter

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Relying on field observation and twenty qualitative interviews with shelter residents, this article examines how the bureaucracy and institutionalization within a homeless shelter fits various tenets of Goffman’s (1961) “total institution,” particularly with regard to systematic deterioration of personhood and loss of autonomy. Women’s experiences as shelter residents are then explored via a typology of survival strategies: submission, adaptation, and resistance. This research contributes to existing literature on gendered poverty by analyzing the nuanced ways in which institutionalization affects and complicates women’s efforts to survive homelessness.

Key words: homelessness, shelter, institutionalization, women, gender, poverty

The feminization of poverty is a widely studied social phenomenon (Center for Law & Social Policy [CLASP], 2006; DiBlasio & Belcher 1995; Erickson, 2005/06; United States Census Bureau, 2005; United States Department of Housing & Urban Development [HUD], 2007). Of the approximately 38 million Americans who live under the poverty line, 28 million

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are women (United States Census Bureau, 2005). In 2004, 57 percent of female-headed households with children were living below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2004). By 2007, this statistic had increased to 59.6 percent (HUD, 2007).

While both homeless men and women suffer from abject poverty, the concerns of women are more complex and nuanced. Contributing to the gender-homelessness link are several intertwining social and situational factors (Tessler, Rosenheck, & Gamache, 2004). While homeless women cope with similar challenges faced by homeless men, such as mental illness (Mowbray & Thrasher, 1995), addiction (Baker & Carson, 1999), and economic issues (Abramovitz, 2005), they are also disproportionately responsible for child-rearing (Averitt, 2003; Kissane, 2006) and more likely to be victimized by family members and intimate partners (Gibson-Davis, Magnuson, Gennetian, & Duncan, 2005). As such, they are at greater risk for poverty and homelessness (Hagan, 1987).

In the general population, women with children are also disproportionately represented among those who utilize resources available through governmental-based social services (CLASP, 2006; DiBlasio & Belcher, 1995; Erickson, 2005/06). One of the primary avenues social service and philanthropic agencies have responded to homeless women is through the use of shelters. The shelter movement began in earnest in the 1970s, as a response to the growing homelessness rate spurred by high unemployment, rising housing costs, and deinstitutionalization of people with severe mental illness (Arrighi, 1997; Dordick, 1996). At the time, homelessness was seen as a temporary problem on both an individual and societal level. However, as homelessness rates continued to rise through the late 1980s (represented increasingly by women and families), shelters became permanent community fixtures. With this development came heightened shelter bureaucratization and institutionalization, perceived as a way to facilitate communal living (Gounis, 1992; Morgan, 2002; Stark, 1994).

Such bureaucratization and institutionalization have become so salient within contemporary homeless shelters that some argue they embody many of the tenets of a total institution (Bogard, 1998; Dordick, 1996; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Stark, 1994) as originally conceptualized by Goffman (1961). In

its most general definition, a total institution is "a place of residence...where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life" (Goffman, 1961, p. xiii). While Goffman did not classify homeless shelters as total institutions at the time of his writing (pre-1970s shelter movement), research on various types of shelters (e.g., homeless, domestic violence) has examined the ways in which they may be classified as such (Bogard, 1998; Moe, 2009; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Stark, 1994). As Stark (1994) attests, shelters become a type of total institution "when the role that the individual assumes as shelter resident blocks his or her ability to pursue the most basic human roles—those of friend, lover, husband, wife, parent, and so forth" (p. 557).

The goal of this paper are twofold. First, we examine the ways in which an urban Midwestern shelter, referred here as *The Refuge* (pseudonym), operates as a total institution. Second, we explore the ways in which female residents negotiated the bureaucracy and institutionalization within this shelter, presenting our findings within a typology of survival strategies: submission, adaptation, and resistance. Data come from field observations within the shelter and semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty female residents.

Methods

Description of Field Location: The Refuge

The Refuge is a homeless shelter located in a Midwestern city. The building was constructed in the 1930s by an Evangelical Christian couple and run as a soup kitchen. The Refuge continues to operate privately as a faith-based organization, employing about thirty people, most of whom are part-time workers. However, while religion continues to be the root of the shelter's mission, and was a personal focus of some residents at the time of our study, it did not translate directly into the daily functioning of the shelter. The Refuge's many services, though termed "ministries," encompassed a blend of practical programs and counseling. As such, the characteristics of this shelter parallel those found by other researchers' descriptions of secular, non-religious shelters (Williams, 2003; Dordick, 1996; Kissane,

2007). At the time of this study, The Refuge was divided into three units—one for single men, one for single women as well as women with children, and one devoted to a women's restoration program. Our research focused on the women's unit, which accommodated 54 women and children with bedrooms, private bathrooms, and a community lounge. The typical stay for residents was 30 to 45 days, which is comparable to other women's shelters in the area.

Data Collection Procedures

The primary means of gathering data for this research were qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Relying on standpoint epistemology, interviews were purposively conducted with members of a socially and economically marginalized group with the premise that an important yet undervalued vantage point on women's homelessness and use of shelters would be obtained. Our goal was to position our participants' accounts of homelessness and survival against other, more hegemonic accounts offered by the gendered, raced and classed voices of those more socially privileged (e.g., therapists, social workers, police, legislators, religious leaders) [Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1987]. While employee accounts would have likely produced a different perspective, we focused on interviews with shelter residents, providing a voice to those less clearly heard by the shelter bureaucracy. A goal of this research was to explore the positionality of those subjected to the total institution structure, since a clear "us" versus "them" ("staff" versus "residents") mentality operated within the shelter.

Twenty confidential, semi-structured interviews with female residents were conducted by the first author within private rooms of the shelter. After answering basic demographic questions, the woman were asked to describe how they became homeless, the ways in which they had sought help for their homelessness, and the circumstances that brought them to the shelter. Of particular interest were their life conditions prior to and during the process of becoming homeless, such as instances of domestic violence, job loss, or illness. We were also interested in their experiences with obtaining assistance from various social entities, including the police/justice system, shelters, counselors, and social service agencies. It was within

this realm that the women discussed their experiences with the shelter, a reoccurring theme of which was frustration with their current living arrangements. Several follow-up questions were asked, inquiring what they would change about the shelter, and their thoughts of shelter rules and staff. The responses to these questions separated the women into groups, allowing a typology of survival strategies to emerge, consistent with a grounded constructionist analysis (see Charmaz, 2006).

A complimentary form of data collection involved participant observation. The first author spent three months (approximately 100 hours) visiting the shelter as an observer, gaining rapport with staff and residents. Participant observation provided a key opportunity to triangulate the findings of the resident interviews. Indeed, observations of staff-resident and resident-resident interactions coincided directly with the semi-structured interview content.

The Refuge as a Total Institution

Goffman (1961) posited that a bureaucracy operates within the total institution wherein a clear demarcation occurs between those who have power (in terms of decision making and the administration of the institution) and those who are dependent upon the institution. The very functioning of a total institution requires a rigid set of rules and regulations, the aim of which is to systematically exert control over residents and reinforce hierarchy. The hierarchy is well understood by all those within the institution, and those who question it are necessarily subject to punishment through a variety of means (Goffman, 1961; Snow & Anderson, 1993).

In an effort to run efficiently and, presumably, fairly, a bureaucratic structure was employed at The Refuge, which encompassed many rules and illustrated a clear demarcation between staff and residents. For discipline, The Refuge utilized a point system. A staff member could issue a point to any resident for any rule infraction or disobedience. Once issued, the point could not be reversed, unless formally erased by the issuing staff member. Residents were terminated from the shelter after receiving three points. Lisa described her concern about this policy:

One girl got wrote up because she's got four kids. She's a single mom, and all her kids are too young to go to day camp. So, she's got four kids, and they wrote her up because a job that she went to didn't hire her—but she's got four kids, four small kids...where are her kids supposed to go? They of course not gonna hire her because she got four kids taggin' along with her to the interview...

Characteristic of total institutions, shelter staff enjoyed a wide degree of discretion in terms of issuing points, as well as enforcing other rules, administering services, and providing access to resources (Marvasti, 2002; Mulder, 2004). Through observation, it was clear that staff at The Refuge were encouraged to use their discretion in such matters as distributing personal items, as well as permitting entrance and exit of residents from the shelter. Likewise, education and access to community resources were subject to the approval and assistance of each resident's caseworker. The wide margin of staff discretion, and their potential misuse of authority, created a deep power differential from the residents' perspectives. As Becky commented, "I think some of the staff treat them [residents] okay, but overall, I think they treat them kind of harsh I think they on a power trip." Moreover, this discretion allowed staff to reinforce their own version of hierarchy, favoring some residents over others (see Holden, 1997). As Angela attested:

They staff...they are something else! I think they pick and choose who they like and who they let do certain stuff.... One woman got caught stealing...didn't nothing happen to her. Then somebody else bought take-out food and got written up.

Because total institutions emphasize conformity to rules, there is little respect for autonomy or individuality (Goffman, 1961). Residents are viewed as dependents, reduced to virtual child-like status, in that they are fully reliant on the institution for all of their basic necessities (e.g., food, shelter, clothing, personal items) [Snow & Anderson, 1993]. In this way, residing at the shelter seemed to carry with it the presumption that one is incapable of regulating one's own affairs. Such a supposition

is closely related to the original conceptualization of the total institution, in that such facilities have traditionally been associated with persons who, due to either illness or poor decision making, are seen as incapable of functioning in the larger community (e.g., people with mental illness, criminal offenses or contagious diseases) [Stark, 1994].

Accordingly, The Refuge relied upon an age-graded system (Goffman, 1961) aimed at subjecting previously independent adults to rules and tasks that were infantilizing and demoralizing. For instance, rules dictated when and where activities, mealtime, recreation, and bedtime took place. Residents resented such measures. As Nicole commented, "If they want respect, they should talk to you with respect and not talk to us like we kids, 'cause we are all adults here."

Thus, in order to survive within a shelter institution, it was often necessary for residents to confront and reconcile certain role conflicts (Stark, 1994). According to Goffman (1961), it becomes impossible for residents of total institutions to maintain their civic role of autonomous adults while complying with their institutionalized role of dependents. Mothers, in particular, recognized the institutionally imposed role conflict between autonomous adult and dependent. Prior to entering shelter, many women who were mothers were considered the sole heads of their families. Upon entering the shelter, however, their familial leadership roles were usurped by staff authority. Subsequently, both mothers and their children were subjected to the rules and discipline of the shelter.

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

Prior research on homeless women's shelter experiences substantiates these elements of the total institution. For example, Stark (1994) cites the loss of respect experienced by parents from their children within shelter institutions. More specifically, Breese and Feltey (1996) found that the privacy, freedom and control women had within their homes, and

lives in general, were drastically compromised upon entering a shelter. Becoming homeless and accepting space within a shelter institution were equated with forsaking the “privileges” that housed people take for granted. So while shelters are distinct from institutions, such as prisons and some mental health hospitals, wherein people are confined against their will and are not free to leave, there is an element of coercion within them. While women were free to leave, this “freedom” was mitigated by the consequences of living homeless on the streets or otherwise without secure access to shelter, food and clothing. To put oneself, and in many instances one’s children, in such perilous circumstances is not a realistic “choice” per se. The safety of the shelter, regardless of its bureaucratic nature, becomes the most pragmatic and reasonable means of survival.

It is not surprising that the shelter affects how women negotiate homelessness (Mulder, 2004; Stark, 1994). The shelter experience operates largely through bureaucratic processes aimed at resident institutionalization (Stark, 1994), and admittance into a shelter requires complete submission to its bureaucracy and staff (Mulder, 2004; Stark, 1994). A peculiar contradiction is thus created, wherein the supposed goals of the shelter—to provide a nurturing and empowering environment for residents so that they may become independent and self-sufficient—are couched against a structure that relies on obedience and conformity (Ferraro, 1981).

We turn now to the ways in which women residents at The Refuge negotiated the institution. Their narratives delineate a typology of strategies utilized to navigate the bureaucratic, institutionalizing shelter structure. In this vein, they either (1) submitted to the institution by accepting it; (2) adapted to the institution by reframing their perspective about it; or (3) rejected the institution through various means of resistance.

Surviving the Shelter as a Total Institution

Submission: Embracing the Total Institution

Based on their responses to the interview questions and field observations, we categorized seven of the interviewees

as "submitters" to the shelter institution because of their complete deference to the organization, its power hierarchy, and its disciplinary system. Such women fit the categories of "good," "deserving" or "appropriate" clientele (Ferraro 1981; Lindsey, 1998; Marvasti 2002), in that they obeyed the rules, did not question the authority of the staff, stayed out of others' business, and appeared grateful for what they received. The shelter organization thrived with these residents, who due to their compliance, reinforced the structure and created a reciprocal codependence between themselves and the organization. In other words, the shelter, whose stated purpose is to help residents become independent, actually reinforced dependence on the system through its support of submissive residents (Stark 1994).

An example of such dependence and submission to the institution can be found in Mary and her two children, who had resided in The Refuge for six months at the time of her interview. The Refuge policy dictates a maximum shelter stay of thirty days, so substantial exceptions were made on her behalf. Instead of pursuing outside work, Mary applied for and was hired as a staff person in the women's dormitory—the same dormitory in which she was living. She lamented the lack of enforcement of shelter rules during the interview, which she had to both enforce upon others and follow herself. When asked if there were any rules that she would change, Mary replied, "No, definitely not. I would make sure they are enforced." Mary stated that she had no future plans of leaving the shelter, and she was indeed still living and working at The Refuge when data collection was completed (comprising a nine-month stay).

Several other excerpts were notable for their very brief and unqualified acceptance of the bureaucracy. In response to a question about whether they would like to see anything changed in the shelter, Judy responded, "Nope. I would keep it exactly how they got it." Similarly, Nakiea stated, "I'm not going to say the [The Refuge] is perfect, but it is close to perfect." With regard to whether they would change any rules in the shelter, Judy responded, "I would leave the rules the same." The responses were not only brief, but also quite passive, appearing almost preprogrammed. While these

women were probed for further elaboration, they were unwilling to offer any. Their retention of the subordinate role within the shelter structure seemed to necessitate this succinct communication. While we were unable to determine whether they were aware of their subjugated state, or just willing to accept it for the sake of survival, we interpreted this communication style as a retention strategy aimed at conforming to the shelter bureaucracy in ways that did not jeopardize their stay or status within it. Indeed, such a survival strategy may be illustrative of a strategic use of power by these women, in that by appearing non-confrontational and conformist, they are consciously acting the part required of them in order to secure a roof over their heads.

Adaptation: Reframing the Total Institution

Seven women adjusted to shelter institutionalization through adaptation. The adaptive strategies assumed two primary strategies: (1) emphasizing spirituality; or (2) recreation of hierarchy. This group was characterized by their acknowledgement of their subjugated role within the shelter hierarchy. However, unlike the unquestioned acceptance illustrated by those who submitted to their status, "adapters" reframed their identities in ways that allowed them to define for themselves where they fit within the hierarchy.

Adaptation through emphasizing the spiritual self. Adaptation through one's spiritual identity was a powerful element to shelter survival. Unlike the submitters, spiritual adapters were able to articulate the reasons for their homelessness, accept responsibility for their situation, and view their faith as central to their efforts to regain economic independence. Indeed, what was distinct about this group of women was their heightened sense of personal responsibility. They viewed their homelessness as a result of their "sins," and believed that only through a genuine focus on their spirituality would they have any hope of escaping their plight. In contrast to submitters, spiritual adapters did not appear to embrace the bureaucratic and institutionalized nature of the shelter. They seemed relatively uninterested in condoning the shelter's practices and the efforts of its staff. Instead they turned inward, embracing their faith

as an instructional guide in accepting and resolving their situations. In this way, spiritual adapters seemed focusing on their faith for their own psychological well-being—to make sense of a senseless situation. While The Refuge was a faith-based organization, the ties between its spiritual mission and the daily operations as they related to clients were few and far between. Thus, it did not appear that spiritual adaptation was done in a way that illustrated submission to the institution. Their intention was not to unquestionably conform, but rather to adapt an explanation for their predicament based on their spiritual beliefs about the role of a higher power.

In a poignant example, Michelle was residing at the shelter with her two children because her boyfriend, with whom she had been living, had sexually abused her daughter. Michelle thought that her own sins caused the sexual abuse of her daughter and subsequent homelessness.

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

This form of adaptation was not meant to excuse Michelle's circumstances, but rather to contextualize and clarify God's justification for her plight. Homelessness and the institutionalization of the shelter was the retribution Michelle reasoned she must pay for her lack of faithfulness to her ascribed ideology.

Another example was found in Marie's narrative, who as a self-acknowledged alcoholic and "recovering" lesbian, believed that these two "sins" were at the root of her predicament. However, she viewed herself as now being on the right (or "righteous") path, explaining, "You could give me a yacht and a big ol' house and I wouldn't care because I have a Savior today, and I know He loves me, and I know He's taking care of me. You know, it's not about material things."

Iyayeiya expressed similar sentiments with regard to her

“sin” of being “promiscuous” and having relationships with abusive men, “I get my strength from God through prayer everyday. You know, He gets me up in the morning. He provides shelter...this is like God’s hotel to me. I don’t see this as, ‘Uh, I stay at the shelter.’” As a result of her belief in God’s care, Iyayeyiya had resolved to keep men and “fornication” out of her life as she worked to move out of homelessness.

As further illustration of the way in which spiritual adapters used their religious beliefs to psychologically negotiate homelessness, when Lee-Low was asked how she stayed positive while in the shelter, she responded, “[I] think about God. I know He loves me, and I know He been good to me.” With an emphasis on spiritual growth, rather than material wealth, these women were able to define their existence by a higher calling. Adhering strongly to faith gave spiritual adapters much needed hope and comfort, mitigating feelings of desperation, confusion and loneliness. By purposefully adapting their circumstances to a larger spiritual lesson and purpose, they were able to reframe their shelter experience.

Adaptation through recreating hierarchies. In the second adaptive strategy, women reframed the shelter experience in ways that allowed them to see themselves as better positioned than other residents. Distinct from the spiritual adapters who focused on personal responsibility and spiritual growth, hierarchical adapters focused more on the distinct circumstances of shelter residents, differentiating between those considered “homeless” and those considered “houseless.” Homelessness referred to those who entered shelter because of an incapacitation, perceived lack of judgment or poor decision-making, such as mental illness or alcoholism. Alternatively, houseless referred to those who entered shelter due to “bad luck” (e.g., losing a job, going through a difficult divorce). A homeless person was in a long-term predicament and deserved some amount of personal blame. A houseless person was in a temporary situation that could be rectified given some time and assistance. In this way, a hierarchy between residents was created.

Tasha illustrated the distinction well, “This is my third time being here. I might have been homeless, well *houseless* three times. Each time, I feel it wasn’t my fault.” She indicated

that she had become houseless due to being laid off, suffering poor credit, and forced evictions. Angela also elaborated on this distinction, having found herself houseless due to fleeing domestic violence:

There's a lot of women up here that has...I'm not perfect...but has drug problems, alcohol problems. I feel that they should have treatment here for that, you know? It's twelve women in there...and they're nasty. They are very nasty.

By recreating a hierarchy among residents, these women were able to maintain pride and self-worth by adapting the perception that they were better than some of the other residents. In essence, they were buying into commonly held stereotypes regarding distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor. In this way, they illustrated an internalization of cultural ideology regarding homelessness for others, yet resisted such ideology with regard to themselves (Williams, 2003). By defining themselves as something other than homeless, these women created a flexible space in which they could assert their own condition, despite the fact that doing so necessitated the denial of such space to others (Wardhaugh, 1999). Indeed, to construct and maintain a sense of self-worth within such a context may be critical for survival, particularly for those who exist at the margins (Snow & Anderson, 1987).

Resistance: Rejecting the Total Institution

A third group of women actively resisted the bureaucracy and structure of the shelter, which they viewed as contributing to their marginalization. Comprised of six women, this group opposed the subordination of the shelter experience, doing so most often by verbally expressing their opinions and thoughts to staff and other residents. Nee-Nee exemplified the "resisters" when she blatantly responded that the shelter's services were "full of shit." This group was characterized by conscientious efforts at retaining a sense of themselves within the shelter. Their voices and actions expressed their desire for autonomy and respect as individuals. As Kelly described:

I let them [staff] know they ain't gonna use none of that [rules and use of discretion] against me, 'cause I know that I have street smarts and educational smarts, and I'm not gonna let you judge me off that and break me down like I can't be on the same level as you... That's how they do. They'll try to demean you, the staff do here... They wanna just brainwash you... But that's not gonna help you get an apartment.

This group of women aptly articulated the contradictory nature of the shelter institution, and were unique from the other groups in their ability to place their critiques within a larger social context. For example, Alice compared the shelter system to a correctional system:

I think shelters should be like a shelter, not like a treatment center. If you come into a shelter, you need it not to feel like a correctional center. Like a prison! You got people right back out there on the streets because they don't want to be closed in all the time.

It was not surprising then, given their non-conformity, that these resisters were more likely to recognize the effects of institutionalization and the resultant loss of personhood. Indeed, it was primarily from their transcripts that excerpts were found to document our earlier examination of the structure and bureaucracy of the shelter. Because of this, they were also most likely to recall arguments with the staff as they challenged the discretionary use of power.

Nicole stated: She [staff] was like, "You have to clean up this room, and clean up behind your kids and tell her to go in your room. You aren't supposed to be out here." And the girl [shelter resident] was like, "You're not my mother...you can talk to me better than that 'cause I'm grown just like you." And they [staff] put her out because she said that.

This sentiment, regarding discretionary use of power by shelter staff to suppress vocal opposition, was echoed by Lisa:

"I think that we should be able to complain—like my complaints about [shelter staff]—if they are not doing something right... [Staff] don't listen to you say, 'staff is doing *this*.'"

Resisters also addressed the disruption of parenting within the shelter. Yolanda, for example, bought a bottled fruit juice for her pregnant teen daughter even though it was against the shelter's money management policy. She explained:

I withdrew money to get [my daughter] something [to drink]. I'm not going to have her go into the hospital because of [the shelter's] rules. But see, I'm going to have to answer for that. You know, [staff] will say, "You should have got permission." I am 44 years old. I shouldn't have to ask permission to do something for my children.

Prior research (Grella, 1994) suggests that resistant women may be of a distinct type within the general homeless population—mentally ill to the point that they are unable to function within a shelter for any period of time without violating many rules and causing general disturbances. However, we are not convinced that this was the case with the resisters in our study. Indeed, of the six women who reported or were observed to suffer from a mental illness, only one was categorized as a resister. We thus remain open to the possibility that women deemed resisters in our sample were simply that—they were more conscious of and/or willing to articulate the problems and contradictions encountered during shelter stay.

Conclusion

This research examined the ways in which a homeless shelter qualified as a total institution, in accordance to the tenets set forth by Goffman (1961), and the strategies employed by homeless women within it. Residents were subjected to a bureaucracy and system of rules, premised largely on an age-graded system and layered with liberal use of staff discretion that dictated nearly all facets of their lives. In examining the ways in which the women in our sample dealt with this institution, three distinct survival categorizations arose:

(a) those who submitted, seemingly without question, to the institution; (b) those who adapted in ways that allowed them to conform to the bureaucracy but still retain a sense of individuality; and (c) those who completely rejected the institution in ways that illustrated an awareness of the bureaucratic structure that facilitated their marginalized status.

Our findings contribute to the literature regarding the bureaucratic nature of shelter institutions, and the standpoints of women residing therein. Also of note is the development of a survival typology, which serves as an illustration of constructionist grounded theory—a presentation of theory arising from data within a particular context (Charmaz, 2006). While our findings may not be generalized to a larger population, they do provide for theoretical transferability (Guba, 1981) in that the conceptual advancements made here may be used as a framework for other shelter settings (e.g., domestic violence shelters) and populations (e.g., sheltered men).

Future research could concentrate on adaptations of our typology along other demographical variables as well, particularly in terms of race, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, sexual orientation and so on. Our typology could also be expanded to account for more dynamics or situational factors within shelter settings. Of particular interest is whether the length of shelter stay affects a person's placement within the typology. Because our sample was cross-sectional and our interviewing strategy was semi-structured (questions specifically about the impact of length of stay were not consistently included), we were not able to determine whether our typology represented a distinction between women's survival strategies per se, or rather a progressive experience of identity deterioration that correlated with stages of institutionalization. In other words, to what extent and under what contexts were *submitters* once *resisters*? While we did notice that the *resisters* in our sample tended to report shorter shelter stays as compared to other residents, we were not able to go back to the women who fit in the other two categories to see if they had once acted in a more resisting way, but then changed as time passed.

Based on personal observations of the shelter, this did not seem to be the case. The women seemed to lean in one direction or another from the start, however it may have been

the case that women who were more inclined to submit from the start of their shelter stay had already been socialized/institutionalized by other agencies or shelters, whereas the women more inclined to resist had not. Longitudinal analysis of this question, as well as questions geared specifically toward understanding the range of women's past help-seeking, could provide greater breadth to our findings. Such research could further elucidate how social service-based agencies, like shelters, affect their clientele in terms of their coping mechanisms over the long term.

Despite the potential for future research, our present analysis does provide an expansion in our understanding of women's poverty and homelessness, specifically the ways in which shelters have both worked for and against homeless women's survival. Such social critiques are timely within our current economic crisis. The results of this analysis point to several recommendations for homeless shelters, beginning with a thorough reevaluation of shelter goals and practices. A contradiction exists between the operation of such agencies, and their reaction to and dismissal of those who reject their structures. Indeed, the women in our study who resisted the shelter's rules and its staff, and subsequently risked being denied the safety and security the shelter could provide, were in a way the very type of individual social service-based agencies claim to want to create. Given the appropriate resources, these women exhibited the drive and tenacity to survive in an autonomous state. Indeed, if agencies that served marginalized populations, like homeless women, were truly concerned with and committed to fostering self-sufficiency, it would be these clientele who would be seen as at least somewhat desirable.

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

rather than judgment. Appropriate strengths-based assistance may thus become possible (Saleebey, 2005).

A great divide exists between academic literature about social service provision and actual implementation of shelter policies by street level bureaucrats (Hopper, 2003). Best practices for shelters should be informed by the academic literature, and formulated to reach a diverse population. Moreover, client experiences should be included in the formulation of such protocols (Wuthnow, Kackett, & Hsu, 2004). This recommendation is especially salient in faith-based organizations, where empirical research disputes their current effectiveness (Kissane, 2007). It is the responsibility of social service organizations to understand the ways in which organizations have both worked for and against homeless women's survival. The services of such organizations must push beyond the pragmatic physical needs of food, water and shelter, and begin addressing the human need for acceptance, affirmation and amity.

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