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James A. Forte  
*Christopher Newport University*

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# Not in My Social World: A Cultural Analysis of Media Representations, Contested Spaces, and Sympathy for the Homeless

JAMES A. FORTE

Christopher Newport University  
Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology

*The social constructionist approach offers conceptual tools that may augment social workers' persuasive powers and problem solving capacities. In this case study, I examine a newspaper campaign to cast the homeless in negative terms and justify the closing of a shelter. Findings are presented as seven themes used by competing claims-makers. Each constructs a different depiction of the homeless, of homelessness, and of preferred solutions. Linkages between community memberships and favored problem definitions are identified. I conclude with suggestions for how "intelligent social reconstruction" might help social workers function as sympathy brokers for the vulnerable. (Key words: homelessness, NIMBY, mass media, constructionist approaches to social problems).*

Some pairings work well: the Chicago School *and* the Hull House Settlement, theory *and* practice, basic *and* applied interactionism, word *and* deed, sociologist *and* social worker, men *and* women, subjectivity *and* objectivity, and George Herbert Mead *and* Jane Addams. The early pragmatist philosophers and interactionist sociologists recognized this and preferred a both / and logic to the more common one-or-the-other logic. These scholarly practitioners valued their partnerships with social workers and other civic reformers and they made pragmatic use of ideas to improve community conditions (Deegan, 1988; Denzin, 1998; Maines, 1997). Unfortunately, their example was rejected by influential interactionists like Robert Park (Bulmer, 1984) and Erving Goffman (Marx, 1984) who each embraced a different notion of scientific sociology. Since then, symbolic interactionists have

been divided. Some are quite content doing basic and academic research while others try to contribute to amelioration and social reconstruction.

This tension is evident in social constructionist approaches to social problems theory. In their classic text, Spector and Kitsuse (1987 / 1977) commented that "social workers who try to relieve social problems contribute to them; humanitarian reformers profit from, and therefore, propagate the very conditions they crusade to remove" (p. 51). Commenting on counselors, probation officers, government officials, and other sociological interventionists, Gusfield (1984, p. 47) advised each adherent to the constructionist perspective to become "the critic of the social problems professionals and their constituencies" and to undercut the "normative thrust" of these professions. While updating constructionist social problems theory, Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) made a firm distinction between a "sociologists' theoretical project" and the "members' practical project" (p. 29). Woe to the sociologist who privileges any version of the troublesome condition in question. Even Blumer (1971), a scholar who engaged in extensive service, attacked the practice-oriented approach to the sociology of social problems. He was against theory builders who encouraged sociologists to gather and add knowledge to "the store of scholarly knowledge" and to place their findings "at the disposal of policy makers and the general citizenry" (p. 299). Spector, Kitsuse, Gusfield, Ibarra, and Blumer argued for a role that leaves sociologists "on the side" (Gusfield, 1984, p. 31): silent about the value of competing definitions of social problems; uninterested in the objective products of contests between rival claims-makers; and withholding their expertise from social work professionals determined to advance the public good.

A few interactionists and their theoretical allies have differed. They want to expand the constructionist approach so practitioners can avail themselves of its concepts, propositions, and case studies. Summarizing this position, Loseke (1999) argued that social problems theorists have an ethical obligation to develop a social change agenda, attend to the faintly voiced claims of powerless people, and argue that sociologists can't be value-neutral. In an early statement, Howard Becker (1966) acknowledged, without any disdain, that professions like social work and

education have a responsibility for dealing with aspects of social life defined as problematic. Echoing the pragmatist parents of symbolic interactionism, Holstein and Miller (1997) commented that "social problems work has a very practical side" (p. xvii) and added that the way problems and people are constructed has a direct bearing on the kinds of social services offered. Loseke (1999) expanded on this idea. She suggested that claims-making activities influence the resources available to practitioners, the methods of service delivery, workers' understanding of clients, and service organization rules. Best (1989) recommended the use of constructionist case studies as a source of guidelines for deciding what claims-making strategies work under what circumstances. Agger (1993) added that without renewed attention to the theory-practice linkage, social problems analysts will not develop the discipline's potential for policy relevance and social transformation. Mead, Weber, Durkheim and other great figures of classical sociology would applaud these efforts to fortify reformist impulses.

#### Investigating Media Characterizations of the NIMSW Controversy

Knowledge when tested against pragmatist-interactionist standards must prove useful. In this paper, I join with those "applied symbolic interactionists" (Dunn & Cardwell, 1986; Forte, 2001) devoted to both scholarship and praxis. I take the side of the whole community but open my ears especially to the claims of the homeless members and their spokespersons, and I attempt to show that the constructionist approach to social problems discourse (as amended by practice-minded theorists) provides a valuable framework for understanding and mediating a definitional dispute about the location of services to the homeless.

My social problems work takes the examination of homelessness in a new direction. Previous researchers have not accounted for a person's proximity to publicly visible homeless persons. Many researchers have invited participants to report hypothetical views about imaginary homeless persons in relation to artificial issues. Media studies have not examined battles over the construction of homeless service centers in the press. This study

will analyze newspaper documents representing the views of motivated stakeholders in deliberations about locating homeless services near their homes or businesses. The resolution of the controversy is seen to have a direct impact on the income, safety, daily interaction, sense of citizenship, and neighborhood of these claims-makers. Specifically, I expect that claims-makers with expressed orientations associated with Christian religious organizations, the social work profession, and other advocacy groups are likely to be sympathetic and pro-homeless. In contrast, I anticipate that those with an economic outlook emphasizing business investment and profit maximization would have little sympathy. Members of neighborhood associations will see the center as a threat to their residences and voice anti-homeless sentiments. Additionally, I identify the rhetorical devices—cultural themes, symbols, and images—used by varied claims-makers in this community's definitional contest. The paper concludes by articulating a practitioner role suggested by early interactionists, one that recognizes the concerns of constructionists about the misuse of expertise but avoids the extremes of indifference and detachment.

### The Case Study

After building a headquarters in Richmond, Virginia in 1992, a large corporation requested that the nearby multipurpose service center vacate its shelter/drop-in building. Claims-makers, those "people who say and do things to convince audiences that a social problem is at hand" (Loseke, 1999, p. 19) differed in their reactions. For almost seven years, advocates for the homeless, leaders of neighborhood associations, downtown businessmen, local politicians, and representatives of area churches argued about the problem. The best location for the agency was the central issue. The "Not in My Back Yard" (NIMBY) (Takahashi, 1997) chorus yelled loudly, but calls for Christian compassion and for community responsibility were also heard. Advocates of the homeless wanted the Daily Planet to stay where it was. This location provides the homeless with access to the agency's varied services and to nearby health and social services. Opponents, including those associated with the large corporation, challenged the legality of the current siting. They wanted the agency moved

to the poor south side neighborhood, moved to a desolate spot near the city jail, moved to the African American north side, or closed.

Social problems work, the interpretive activity that community members undertake to “call attention to some aspect of our everyday affairs as an instance of a social problem” (Holstein and Miller, 1997, p. ix) occurs through various communication vehicles (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 1993). Much of the society-wide argument about the housing problem, for example, has been influenced by the “image-making industries” (Gusfield, 1989). Films such as *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* or *The Fisher King* and television series like *Seinfeld* offer unflattering images of the homeless. Newspapers have been influential too. In the late 1980s, major newspapers printed about one story per day on the homeless (Lee, Link & Toro, 1991). Extensive local newspaper coverage continued into the 1990s. Local daily newspapers reported between 1985 and 1992, for example, on over 500 protest actions by homeless advocates in 17 different cities (Cress & Snow, 2000). Television news also shapes perceptions of homelessness. Network news coverage has risen and fallen with presidential administrations (Media Research Center, 2001). During the Bush presidency (1989 through 1992) for example, there were 212 national news stories, an average of 52 per year. Yet, there were only 132 stories, 16 per year, during the eight Clinton administration years (1993 to 2000). Bozell (2001), a media expert, reports that the decision makers in the mass media have rediscovered the problem.

### The Social Constructionist Approach to Homelessness

Social constructionism is a contemporary elaboration of ideas formulated by early American pragmatists and interactionists like John Dewey and George Herbert Mead (Pearce, 1995). The foremost proponents of the approach, Berger and Luckman (1966, p. 18), assert that this approach asks, “How is it possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities?” Social constructionists examine “the social processes by which people come to describe, explain, and account for their world” (Franklin, 1995, p. 397). Humans are not passive recipients of knowledge about a preexisting and concrete reality but active participants in social

life who use symbolizing capacities to construct “stocks of knowledge” and practical ways to act despite fluid and uncertain circumstances. The meanings that community members attach to important elements of social reality—selves, others, places, and physical objects—are collective creations, and meaning assignment varies by culture, historical period, and location in the social structure. Human understandings of troublesome conditions and public problems, Franklin adds, are also social constructions, “products of claims making, labeling, and other constitutive definitional processes” (p. 397).

The social constructionist theory of social problems offers four insights that can help social workers conceptualize the problem of homelessness. First, this approach shifts practitioners’ attention from interminable quarrels about the “facts” of homelessness (How many homeless are there? Does mental illness lead to homelessness or does homelessness cause mental disorder?) to the collective, interpretive processes by which “real” housing problems become defined as social problems (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Best, 1989). Assessment questions address problem construction. Which people and groups have made claims that brought homelessness to the community’s attention? How do these claims typify or stereotype the homeless? How are members of the public, lay persons and policy makers alike, responding to these claims? Which claims from a set of claims will be objectified and thus, made to stick?

Second, constructionists advise practitioners to consider the conflictual nature of social life. Blumer (1971), for example, contended that “a social problem is always a focal point for the operation of divergent and conflicting interests, intentions, and objectives” (p. 301). Contending groups struggle not only for material advantage but also for victory in contests to define social reality. Claims-makers differ in the power that they can muster to influence the problem definition process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Miller, 1993; Miller & Holstein, 1989). Groups like the homeless are less visible, less audible and less powerful than the developers, business leaders, and politicians arguing with them over city spaces. The material and psychic circumstances of the homeless handicap them in these contests.

Third, social constructionists remind practitioners that perceptions of the housing problem reflect differences in “symbolic

universes" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) or "communities of orientation" (Miller & Holstein, 1989). Think of culture as the accumulated totality of "organized systems of significant symbols" (Geertz, 1973, p. 46) and think of modern society as including many subsystems of meaning. Practitioners should appreciate, therefore, that people may live in the same metropolitan region yet inhabit vastly different social worlds. Members of each social world construct and reconstruct their own systems of meaning, communication networks, interests, motivations, and perspectives on the plight of the homeless (Miller & Holstein, 1989). *Not in My Social World* (NIMSW), my title, refers to the constructionist translation of the phrase, "Not in My Backyard."

Last, social constructionists with pragmatic inclinations emphasize that social problems work has observable outcomes in the objective world (Loseke, 1999). The winners transform their subjective meanings into "objectivations" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), enduring and publicly available signs of their distinctive conceptions of social reality. The losers of the definitional contest, the homeless, for instance, are likely to experience more than a setback in the "social problems language game" described by Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993, p. 29). A three-mile walk to a shelter, intensive hunger, frequent arrests for loitering, scorn from the public, and possible death will be the social products of a failure to make homelessness salient. Sympathetic constructionist social workers must try mightily to cast the plight of the homeless as "matters about which something must be done" (Miller, 1992, p. 4).

### The Construction of Homelessness: A Review of the Literature

With few exceptions (Andreasen, 1995; Brawley, 1995, 1997), social workers have made limited use of media studies and social constructionism. A major review of the social work literature on homelessness (Johnson & Cnaan, 1995), for instance, failed to discuss the task of changing media depictions. And Cnaan and Bergman (1990) are the only social workers that I located who used the social construction of problems framework in a research study. Survey data from the social science literature, however, indicate that social memberships influence the social construc-



tion of "homelessness," especially claims about and responses to housing problems (Bunis, Yancik, & Snow, 1996; Link, Schwartz, Moore, Phelan, Struening & Stueve, 1995; Phelan, Link, Stueve, & Moore, 1995; Toro & McDonnell, 1992). For instance, political party affiliation (Democrats, Republican, or Independent) influenced judgments about the seriousness of homelessness and support for aid to the homeless (Toro & McDonnell, 1992). Expressed religiosity was also strongly associated with intentions to help (Morgan, Goddard & Givens, 1997).

A few social scientists have directly studied the construction of homelessness. Snow and Anderson (1987) participated in the daily routines of the homeless to learn how the undomiciled construct personal identities. Rowe (1999) examined the building of helping relationships by outreach workers and the homeless. However, these studies focused on face-to-face negotiations about identity and conduct not community-wide deliberations about housing problems. Demerath and Williams (1992) studied a struggle between various groups over the creation of an emergency shelter. They reported on the political competition of social workers, religious activists, and community leaders to define the homelessness problem. Demerath and Williams did not focus, however, on the media as a forum for this social problems work.

Research on topics other than homelessness exemplifies the study of media-influenced social problems work. Sociologists have investigated media-influenced changes in judicial sentencing practices (Altheide, 1992); media images of nuclear power (Gamson, 1988; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989); and the media depiction of the missing children crisis (Fritz & Altheide, 1987). Loseke (1997) decoded the changing social construction of notions of public welfare as revealed in eighty years of *New York Times* commentary on "Neediest Cases." Her identification of four moralities of charity—each differing in the way the problem, the people, and the interventions were symbolized—demonstrates the utility of the constructionist approach.

Recently researchers from professions other than social work have shown some interest in studying homelessness by examining data derived from the news media. One pioneering team (Penner & Penner, 1989) examined cartoon images from two San Francisco newspapers. They found that these visual depictions

generally stereotyped the homeless as middle-aged male alcoholics. Bunis, Yancik and Snow (1996) studied newspaper coverage of the homeless in the *New York Times* from 1975 to 1993 and in the *London Times* from 1980 to 1993. These researchers demonstrated that sympathy for the homeless increases during the holidays, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas. Cress and Snow (2000) collected newspaper reports on collective action by 15 homeless social movement organizations in eight major U. S. cities. They were interested in "framing activities," the acts of signifying work by which meanings about the homeless are produced and maintained. Clear "diagnostic frames" (characterizations of homelessness, its causes, and the targets for change), and articulate "prognostic frames" (characterizations of the goals and tactics for remedying problems associated with homelessness) were causally related to successful outcomes. Snow and Mulcahy (2001) reviewed newspaper articles and editorials from two local papers in Tucson, Arizona. Analysis of coverage between 1992 to 1997 identified the varied strategies community groups used to control movement in public spaces. Symbolic processes related to the conceptualization and valuation of spatial areas were employed to hide, dislodge, or exclude those without permanent homes. Torck (2001) compared European and U.S. newspapers sold by homeless persons and the different ways that these papers represented homelessness issues. European papers were dominated by personal narratives and poetry with little framing of the problems of homelessness in words used by the homeless. San Francisco's street paper devoted the most space to written efforts to influence the symbolic constructions of sociopolitical conflicts and to characterize homeless persons positively, and thus, promote their dignity and self-respect.

#### *Altheide's Media Analysis Approach and Homelessness*

Altheide's method of media analysis (1987, 1996) provides a systematic approach for practitioners interested in studying the use of media documents by contestants in a public controversy. Step one identifies the public problem to be investigated. Step two identifies the major sources of and forums for claims. Step three familiarizes the researcher with examples of the claims being made. Steps four, five, and six involve the development, pilot

testing, and refinement of the data collection sheet, a tool for examining media documents. Step seven samples the range of meanings (claims) found in media coverage and the different purveyors (claims-makers) of those meanings in a particular reality-definition contest. Step eight appraises problem typification in terms of media themes, frames, and summary symbols. Steps nine through eleven entail data analysis, coding, and summarization. These elucidate the details of the claims-making processes and of problem construction. In dealing with the NIMSW battle, I used Altheide's step-by-step method to understand the diverse, media-transmitted claims about and perspectives on shelter site location.

#### *Sources of Claims about Homelessness*

All disputes about the representation of homelessness, about the homeless, and about ideal services were selected from four local newspapers: *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the city's daily paper; *Style* and *The Richmond State* (both are weekly publications); and a monthly street paper, *Hard Times*, published by the homeless and their advocates. Newspaper data have biases (the tendency to cover mostly spectacular or violent events related to homelessness, for example) but Snow and Mulcahy (2001) summarized evidence showing that such biases are less operative in local papers, like those used here, than in data from national news organizations. Newspaper coverage was monitored from 1993 to 1996, a period when the fate of the service center gained regional attention. I collected more than 150 news stories, editorials, photographs, and letters to the editor related to the controversy. Sampling followed Altheide's "progressive theoretical" logic (p. 33): newspaper materials were collected until the sample size allowed a thorough understanding of the topic (Altheide, 1996). Of the 150 news documents, I conducted a detailed analysis of 79 documents.

Each newspaper operates according to a distinctive mission, but together the newspapers capture the diversity of the region's public culture. *Hard Times* is a publication of the Virginia Coalition for the Homeless, founded in 1995 and published six times a year. Its circulation is 15,000 copies. Papers are distributed for donations of \$1 per copy and profits are used to benefit area

homeless people. Each edition includes the statement: "Our goals are to provide a public voice to people who are homeless; to provide job training; to provide survival income to those who distribute papers; and to provide readers with a unique perspective on homelessness." The *Richmond State* was an independent Virginia paper, founded in 1994, distributed weekly, and for free. The paper went out of business in 1996. Circulation was about 10,000. Each edition stated, "We hope that each week we can continue to try to uncover the Virginia we know and love. For it is this blessed state, and her people, that sustain us." The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* is the leading provider of news and information in Central Virginia. It was established in 1850, is published mornings from a downtown Richmond, Virginia location by Richmond Newspapers Inc. The weekday paper costs 50 cents. Daily circulation is about 210,000. The paper does not offer an official mission statement. *Style Weekly* publishes on Tuesday and is free. Its circulation is 40,000. The paper is directed to the concerns of residents in neighborhoods near the city center. *Style's* mission is "to pursue opportunities to be an innovative alternative source of news, information and entertainment that customers want and need." *Style's* written mission statement, available at their main office, further asserts that "We will build partnerships with our customers that help them be more successful and achieve superior business results."

#### *Measuring the Claims Makers, Claims Package, and Claims Themes*

The major membership categories for claims-makers included religious affiliation (Christian affiliation or none); political orientation (Conservative, Moderate, Liberal); economic stance (Pro-business or antibusiness); identified residence (homeowner or neighborhood association member versus no residential stake); and association with the social work profession. The public problem of homelessness was viewed as multidimensional. Loseke (1999) included four components in her "package of claims" (p. 213). These were constructed moralities; constructed types of people responsible for and affected by the conditions; constructed conditions promoted as the social problem; and constructed solutions. A version of Loseke's scheme, one tailored to the particulars of this shelter location debate, was developed and used to code the

media accounts. Components of the claims package were coded as: overall stance toward the homeless (sympathetic or not sympathetic); characterization of the moral features of the actors in the controversy (homeless to blame or not to blame); attribution of blame for the problem (bad luck, deficits of the homeless, societal conditions); and recommended policy toward the agency serving the homeless (leave the Planet in the city center, move the Planet from the center, close it).

Data analysis also incorporated qualitative methods. The inquiry followed the inductive logic of grounded theory, and I attempted to produce a portrait of the different claims-makers and their diverse claims. My goals were to identify the multiple systems of symbols, the alternative depictions of homelessness, and their divergent implications for corrective action.

#### *The Homelessness Controversy: Document Entry and Analysis*

During the spring of 1998, each article dealing with homelessness was typed in its entirety into the qualitative data analysis software, QSR NUD\*IST (Qualitative Solutions and Research Non numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing). The NUD\*IST system facilitates the entry of newspaper documents into a computer data base, the search of text, the coding of data by word patterns, and the creation of researcher memos (Richards & Richard, 1991). A subset of 79 of the 150 documents addressed directly the issue of location of services. For each of these 79 articles, statements indicating a stakeholder's position on the NIMSW controversy were identified. Many articles included more than one position statement. A total of 138 position statements were identified in the 79 articles obtained from the four newspapers. The text of each position statement was translated into a researcher memo summarizing the features of various rhetorical packages. Using manifest coding and latent coding procedures, each statement was searched and images, symbols, themes, metaphors, phrases, and quotes related to the controversy were recorded. Two hundred and sixty-six different rhetorical constructions were identified in the set of 138 position statements. The following illustrates the coding process. One woman identified herself as "owner of Very Richmond in the Jefferson Hotel" and worried that the agency's feeding program in the nearby park would "attract the homeless" and "make this

place worse." This excerpt was coded as "pro business orientation," "not sympathetic," and a "financial considerations theme."

### *Results: Divergent Claims about Homelessness*

Newspapers varied in their coverage of homelessness. The largest number of statements was carried by the *Richmond Times Dispatch* (70 percent,  $N = 97$ ) followed by the *Style Weekly* (20 percent,  $N = 28$ ). The *Richmond State* had 9 position statements (6.5 percent) and *Hard Times* only 4 (3 percent). Regarding the type of coverage most frequently used in the debate, feature stories (66 percent,  $N = 90$ ) were most common, with editorials and letters to the editor sharing the remaining categories with 12 percent ( $N = 17$ ) and 18 percent ( $N = 25$ ). Six of the position statements (4 percent) were in other formats such as photo stories with minimal text. As a total collection of views on the NIMSW controversy, sympathetic views prevailed: 85 statements (62 percent) compared to 24 statements (38 percent) that were not sympathetic. The remaining 29 statements were judged as mixed or neutral in their stance towards the controversy.

### *Cultural Perspectives and Sympathy for the Homeless*

The relationship of membership in various "communities of orientation" to views of the homeless service center was examined. I considered first the influence of business interests, business affiliation, and pro-business organization statements on sympathy. Only 42 position statements provided adequate information to allow coding. Of claims-holders with orientations coded as antibusiness, 94 percent ( $N = 15$ ) stated that they would leave the Planet where it is. One antibusiness person recommended moving the Planet. Those with pro-business affiliations were evenly divided: 50 percent ( $N = 13$ ) recommended leaving the Planet at the current location (perhaps, this site on edge of downtown seemed less threatening than relocation closer to the business center) and 50 percent ( $N = 13$ ) suggested that it be moved out of the city center or closed.

An identification with a neighborhood association or home ownership was linked to writers' stances in 74 published positions. While 27 percent ( $N = 15$ ) of non-homeowners were judged as recommending the agency's move or closure, only 11 percent ( $N = 2$ ) of the residents and those expressing a neighborhood

association orientation advocated closure. Almost 90 percent ( $N = 17$ ) of the residential stake-holders preferred to leave the Daily Planet at its current location, but only 73 percent ( $N = 40$ ) of nonresidential stakeholders were supportive of this policy. It may seem odd that residents did not all join in calls to move the agency. However, the current location is not residential and, therefore, might be preferred to relocation in the Far North side, West End, or North of Downtown neighborhoods.

Data analysis show that the 76 statements indicating a Christian orientation (affiliation with Christian Church, reference to the Bible, use of Christian moral teachings) were strongly related to a sympathetic policy towards the service center. Christian-oriented respondents were uniformly designated as being pro-Planet. For instance, 100 percent ( $N = 8$ ) supported leaving it near downtown. Of those without expressed Christian affiliation, 25 percent ( $N = 17$ ) wanted to move or close the agency. However, 75 percent ( $N = 51$ ) were willing to leave the agency at its current site.

Like those identified with the teachings of Christ; those expressing the perspectives of social workers and self-avowed advocates for the homeless were decidedly for services to the homeless. For the 74 position statements examined, 97 percent ( $N = 30$ ) of those with social work orientations were sympathetic indicated by their recommendation to leave the Daily Planet at its current location. Only one advocate urged closure. For those not affiliated with the social work perspective, only 63 percent ( $N = 27$ ) were sympathetic to the agency's desire not to relocate, and 37 percent ( $N = 16$ ) recommended moving or closing the agency.

Indicators of political orientations included direct statements about political affiliation, about the preferred role of government (active or minimal), about preferred tax policy (few taxes or taxes to redistribute wealth), and about preferences regarding gender and family roles. Careful reconsideration of my coding efforts suggested that the newspaper documents lacked member information sufficiently precise and unambiguous to assess validly political orientation.

### *Discourse about Homelessness: Themes, Symbols and Images*

Social problems workers make much use of rhetoric (Burns, 1999). The victors in social problems competitions are those who

can most persuasively use the available idiom, motifs, typifications, stereotypes, and images as vernacular and visual resources (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 1993; Loseke, 1999; Miller, 1992). Effective claims are added to the community's "stock of knowledge" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and treated as objective and taken-for-granted social facts. Effective claims become central to community prioritization schemes, and thus influence decision making about resource distribution. To increase the likelihood of widespread adoption, competitors attempt to summarize their arguments in simple forms that can be easily assimilated. These summary constructions have been called "motifs" by Ibarra and Kitsuse, "rhetorical packages" by Loseke, "summary symbols" by Burns, and "frames" by Snow and Mulcahy (2001). Altheide (1996) refers to them as "themes." In the homeless controversy examined in this paper, the rhetorical constructions of the competing groups can be organized as seven themes. The ranking is summarized in Table 1.

**Theme 1: Financial considerations, "We are capitalists (but shouldn't be)."** Critics of the homeless center reject the "waste of money" and charge the agency with fiscal irresponsibility. For homeless supporters moral issues are more relevant than economics. The anti-shelter people, according to the pro-homeless, are selfish, greedy money hoarders, committed to "crude materialism," to the "supremacy of economic values," or to "consumeristic hedonism" and, furthermore, "a little fiscal success . . . breeds in a person coldness and self-interest." A prominent critic of the Planet is chastised as a "hypocrite" and a slum landlord, who "owns dilapidated houses on Church Hill that have cost his neighbors their home insurance" and are "bringing down property values." To move the agency near the convention center "would undermine the nearby \$5 million Jackson Place development." To leave the agency where it is would put merchants "out of business." Advocates reverse the logic and fault the community for inadequate financial support. Comments include: "The services are still here to be provided but there is no money from the city from them"; "the city's \$61,000 contribution to the Daily Planet is paltry"; and there is "too little funding." Others cite financial disparities between the central city and the suburbs. They comment that "because of disinvestment in the Richmond



Table 1

*Rank Order of Rhetorical Constructions of Homelessness by Claims-Makers During Sympathy Battle*

| Rank  | Theme   | Uses of Theme |      |
|-------|---|---------------|------|
|       |   | n             | %    |
| 1     | We are capitalists or anti-capitalists            | 94            | 35.3 |
| 2     | We are soldiers at war                            | 71            | 26.7 |
| 3     | We are flesh and blood creatures of natural world | 38            | 14.3 |
| 4     | We are law followers / They are law breakers      | 26            | 9.8  |
| 5     | We are strangers or brothers and sisters          | 20            | 7.5  |
| 6     | We are lifters and carriers                       | 12            | 4.5  |
| 7     | We are competitors                                | 5             | 1.9  |
| Total |   | 266           | 100% |

community, the number of homeless increases" and "regional investments continue to pour into Henrico and Chesterfield" resulting in loss of jobs downtown.

Opponents of the service center offered no detailed financial suggestions for solving the problem other than to end agency funding. Advocates, in contrast, recommended a varied of remedial actions ranging from personal changes ("greater generosity of spirit," more thought of "religious values" rather than economic interests, "more donations") to community changes (more "support from the city"; "widespread financial support in the form of donations, gifts and grants"; regional support for "jobs and training"; and policies organized around "investing in people").

**Theme 2: Conflict among stakeholders, "We are soldiers at war."** Each worker at the service center, "defends the people they serve" and the agency is a "besieged counseling center" that has "survived another in a long line of public beatings." The language of war and battles, not of joint problem solving prevails. The agency faces an "uphill battle to secure approval from city officials." It must resist the "combined forces of Virginia Commonwealth University and the Carver Civic Association." "Volleys" are fired at enemies during city planning meetings. The opponents of the center, also use conflict terminology. One

commentator wrote, "I feel like I live in a war zone." Others regret that the taxpaying corporation is "beat up on" by many. They worry about the "few remaining merchants barricaded behind locked doors," about the "incoming homeless legions," about the "destruction" of city neighborhoods, and about the possibility that the city will "be taken down" by the Daily Planet. From this frame of reference, there are no solutions only victors and vanquished. Homeless advocates will prevail by "gearing up to fight the changes," by "fighting changes every step of the way," and by "vowing to continue the fight." Only one claims-maker called for peace. Opponents of the Planet add desperation to their pleas and urge "Fight hard, very hard to keep it away" and "fight the Planet plan."

**Theme 3: Physicality and the environment, "We are flesh and blood creatures of the natural and built world."** In many letters, editorials, and feature stories, symbols were drawn from nature, the animal kingdom, evolution, and technology. Homeless advocates suggested, while exchanging moral outrages, that opponents are like "monkeys," prone to frequent "howls of protest." Opponents, they complain, treat the homeless "as though they were some lower life form." "Uncaring merchants" are vultures "who prey upon homeless alcoholics." One fatigued homeless defender felt herself becoming "cynical about the altruistic propensities of the human species." For critics, the agency is like a "pigsty" and the surrounding natural area spoiled by "a dozen empty bottles of Colt 45 and Magnum 12 lying among the piles of crisp autumn leaves."

Naturalistic themes explain the problem. For advocates, local corporations are like a flood or a tidal wave that is "leaving victims and refugees in their paths." The Planet is like a tree in a heavy wind "bowing to pressure" and legal changes regarding city shelter rules "will trap the Planet like a rat" forcing staff to shuffle "here and there like sheep." Changing ecological conditions affects the vulnerability of the homeless. For example, "Heavy snow means its time to leave and seek a place that's relatively warm and watertight—where you won't freeze to death overnight." One analyst suggests that "poor people migrate to downtown and the Daily Planet because community-based service systems have been destroyed." Some claims-makers use metaphors from

physics and engineering. Critics worried that agencies for the homeless were "enabling magnets" and asserted that the "city doesn't want to become a magnet." Construction of downtown parks should be stopped because these attract the homeless. Pro-homeless writers compared homelessness to inefficient industrial processes and argued that "homelessness is a byproduct of modern life." Others worried about the "gaps in safety net" and the fact that the Planet is "caught in a vise . . . between powerful players." Ecological solutions were few. Advocacy groups should help the homeless "get a foothold" and initiate more outreach and coordinated services which will be like "planting seeds for the homeless." One cynical critic of the Planet simply recommended that opponents "throw a wrench in the works."

**Theme 4: Legal aspects of the controversy, "We are law followers (or law breakers)."** For those arguing against downtown services, "criminals" and "murderers" reside at the Planet. The agency encourages aggressive, illegal panhandling. The agency is a contract violator that "breaks faith and trust with the public" by illegal use of zoning. It is like an unruly child and continually defies "its neighbors' wishes." The pro-homeless reject these charges and assert that "the only people who stay at the Daily Planet are those with medical complications or a mental illness." They boast that "The Daily Planet is finally legal" and countercharge that "people of power and influence in Richmond hide behind laws as justifications." The problem wouldn't exist, according to critics but that "the scales of justice have been tipped in favor of the underclass" and there is "lax enforcement" of city ordinances. Critics assert that the agency's census tract "had the second highest number of robberies north of the river last year" and ask "Who in the name of right reason can deny at least a significant connection between the downtown location of the Planet and the disproportionate pace of downtown robberies?" Advocates of the shelter argue, in turn, that City Council members "were threatened with everything from hellfire to lawsuits, but still passed laws" in unfair "attempts to evict us."

Angry opponents recommend "fair zoning, fairly enforced" and urge the agency to "show respect for their neighbors" and "to better control its clients." Some opponents argue that "The Planet is poorly run," should be "declared a public nuisance"

"and closed." As one suggested, "Buy it, block it, take it to court, do whatever it takes to stop the Daily Planet from putting a shelter for the homeless downtown." Supporters differ in the ideal solution. Some recommend cooperation with authorities. The agency needs to be "properly zoned" or obtain a "special permit." Others recommend defiance. "I have no intention whatsoever of abiding by it" (unjust laws) says one influential leader, and "the reason we feed people has nothing to do with government permission but with a Biblical mandate." If the Planet is moved near the city jail, one encourages aggressive legal action because of "civil rights violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act."

**Theme 5: Group comparisons, "We are strangers to each other."** Those eager to move the Daily Planet make frequent ingroup-outgroup distinctions. The homeless are aliens, people of little moral or social worth. They are bums, dangerous criminals, incessant beggars, undesirable lepers vagrants, happy campers, drifters, drunks, thieves, them, they, and those people. Their supporters participate in "bizarre missions concocted by religious cults." The homeless are not "civilized people" but "bums on the sidewalk lounging" and "living in "drunken happy land," and likely to "break glass Mad Dog bottles on our sidewalks."

Opponents of services prefer distance from the "strange ones." One wrote, "Why do we want outsiders roaming our streets?" Another asserted "we don't want that element here in our community" and another, "we never know what to expect when we confront a street person by ourselves." Advocates for the homeless also cast their opponents as "other." Disparaging comments included "people of power are known for sheer ugliness and audacious elitism" and the "fear, prejudice, disgust, and guilt (of those opposed to the service center) are not noble traits but are instead signs of ignorance." The anti-homeless should acknowledge their shared humanity and accept that the homeless, "like us, are creatures of God." Many referred to the "ethnic and racial prejudices," "stereotypical ideas," "hate" "class bias or race bias" and "blatant discrimination" of agency opponents as "primary factors behind the effort to move the center out of downtown." For the pro-homeless, overcoming this sense of strangeness is the solution. One calls for more "workshops and other forums for interaction with the homeless" and for community-building jazz-

poetry events. Many use Christian phrases and assert common brotherhood. Such pleas include: the "call to love our neighbor, the call to reach out to those in need, the call to serve is God's call to each of us"; and the request that community members "make the decision based on what Christ himself would have done" and that "the Bible says help the poor and feed the needy."

**Theme 6: The distribution of community burden, "We are lifters and carriers."** A recurrent theme is the distribution of community burden. In defense of the Planet, someone commented that the agency is a "treasure" because it "relieves pressure for the provision of similar services in and by the counties." A critic complained that social workers failed to see the extent to which they burdened others; "liberal do-gooders" don't understand or "appreciate" other communities. For the pro-homeless, "Homelessness was a regional issue and the cost of aiding the homeless shouldn't fall solely on the city." Referring to the counties, some said that each is "failing to pull its weight" and the Daily Planet is unable "to shoulder the load by itself." Those against agency relocation worry about "fragile neighborhoods" with "more than their share of problems and believe that the agency can "drag down a neighborhood." Many recommended a more equitable distribution of burden by recognizing "the regional nature of homelessness and the need to develop a regional solution"; by illuminating "the role other local governments are playing"; and by replacing the slogan of "not in my neighborhood" with "let's share some of the responsibility" and "we're all going to have to take on the burden." Even critics of the center suggest that the region "needs a fair distribution of burdens" and that "the county ought to be sharing the city's load of assisting the homeless" and "take up the slack." The "city shouldn't be the only locality responsible for the plight of the homeless."

**Theme 7: A contest for victory, "We are competitors."** Claims makers employed the analogy of sports competition. For example, the "Planning Commission wrestled with what to do." The homeless are game losers because they "are least fortunate." If forced to move, the Planet will be in "second place." The corporations have made a "successful end run" around the poor and "For years, the Council and the city administration have played games with the Planet" and made the Planet's site "a political football."

Competitors in the controversy are time conscious because "the clock is ticking." Solutions are cast in sports terms. Advocates for the poor must "cry foul." Council members are jockeys on out-of-control race horses and need to "get a grip and do something." Social workers are boxing coaches who should "help the clients get back on their feet" and return to the ring. The Planet needs a "slam dunk" of a fund-raising auction.

#### Implications for Practice:

##### The Social Reconstruction of Homelessness

As suggested by social constructionists, community group orientations did correspond with problem definitions, sympathy for the homeless, and agency site-location preferences. Those expressing business themes offered unfavorable depictions of the social problem while those adopting the perspectives of social workers, advocates, and those committed to Christianity were consistently favorable. Residents were less sympathetic than non-residents, but they recommended leaving the multipurpose center at its current location. This would keep the homeless out of their backyards and social worlds.

Claims-makers used seven themes to characterize the homeless, the multi purpose agency serving the homeless, and the problem of homelessness. The symbolism and imagery of these rhetorical constructions can be summarized by the extreme commentators. A proponent of the capitalistic position cast the controversy as "a matter of life and death for real businesses operated by real people" and argued that "they (the Daily Planet) will ruin more of the city." A citizen associated with the militaristic position suggested "It's your neighborhood. Fight. It's gonna be ruined if they come near you. Fight." "It cannot, no must not, be taken down by panhandlers, drunks, and drug addicts." One claims-maker used the flesh and blood position to warn of "the health hazard" associated with services to the homeless and of an "alarming surge of tuberculosis" because "one drop of sputum from a sneeze, or a cough, or a mere conversation can infect many people in proximity to the carrier" A complainant adopted the law and order theme and recommended that "we need a loitering law in the city," "the Supreme Court should recognize

a person's right to live in peace," and "the police need to keep the pressure on the Daily Planet." A neighborhood association representative exemplified the ingroup versus outgroup position that the homeless are strangers. Her comment was "we've been paying taxes for 35 years. Why do we want outsiders roaming our streets?" An advocate for a fairer distribution of burden asserted "To assist life on the street is to encourage people to move to Richmond for such benefits" and "We are not only taking care of our share of the problem; we are taking problems from all over the East Coast." Referring to the theme of sports competition, the participant in the controversy who complained that "the clock is ticking," also noted that "past councils have made this a political football" but now "someone should take this one and run with it and soon."

Social workers using the method of "intelligent social reconstruction" (Campbell, 1992; Mead, 1968/1899) can cultivate their ability to take the role of all claims makers, including those unsympathetic to the homeless, and lead efforts to construct societies characterized by social awareness, responsibility, and compassion. For the social worker concerned about aiding agencies for the homeless, constructionist assessment and reconstructionist intervention necessitate the enactment of multiple change-agent roles. As symbolic geographer, the worker needs to map both community locations and their meanings as these relate to the claims-making process and to specific service-siting recommendations. As media analyst, the worker needs to identify the media vehicles covering the homelessness controversy, learn how each structures communication, and trace the influence of the media on problem defining and resolving processes. As rhetorician, the social worker should interpret and classify the major claims about homelessness, identify routine and novel arguments, relate the use of rhetorical devices to social memberships, and monitor the assimilation of rhetorical constructions into shared stocks of knowledge. As political broker, the worker must mobilize symbolic resources on behalf of homeless clients and service-providers, often in opposition to the "rhetorical elite" (Burns, 1999). For instance, the worker might weigh the relative cultural power of favorable depictions of the homeless in terms of rhetorical effectiveness, resonance with existing community

opinions, and likelihood of being retained in social institutions. Counter-arguments to the critics of the homeless and their service providers can be fashioned, accordingly. In the Richmond community, for example, social workers should recognize that faith-based arguments about members' bonds with and obligations to the homeless seem to have special symbolic power. So, social workers would be wise to ally with leaders of spiritual organizations and to include religious imagery and language in the claims-making activities designed to reconstruct the problem of homelessness and to increase sympathy for the homeless.

Finally, the social worker needs to enact a mediator role. The method of "intelligent social reconstruction" mandates that practitioners mediate between groups with divergent interests. Tying this method to a cultural analysis will afford the worker the opportunity to use the three key perspective-taking abilities, identified by Schwalbe as accuracy, depth, and range (1988). Specifically, analysis of media documents sensitizes the worker: both to the community's subcultures (its varied systems of meanings), its different claims-makers, and to the way claims-makers tend to use their rhetorical toolkits (images, words, phrases, metaphors, and themes) to compete in reality definition contests. With such knowledge, the worker can accurately and deeply take the perspective of a wide range of participants in a community's life and death deliberations about housing the homeless. These perspective-taking capacities equip the worker also to identify the multiple stakeholders and their perspectives; to determine the group-relevance of each housing policy or program; to challenge all stakeholders to hold in sight the entire community (including the barely visible homeless members); to create new meanings and remedies that better reconcile the divergent interests (for example, the dispersion of multiple shelters as an alternative to the centralization of services in one agency); and to promote by consensus the provisional solutions most likely to further the social process for all.

Those who are indifferent to or oppose the development of humane and inclusive symbols of homelessness and of community programs for the homeless often have more money, power and tricks than practitioners. They also seem content with a sociopolitical reality that masks and ignores human suffering.



Yet, if the social worker can bring theory, skill, and determination to a constructionist analysis of "housing problems" and to reconstructionist advocacy for creative definitions and solution statements (and for making these subjective meanings real), then perhaps more of the potentials of all members of our communities, domiciled and those without homes alike, can be realized.

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