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# Will You Look Me in the Eye? The Embrace and Denial of Human Dignity on Marquette Campus

Katie Ellington  
*Marquette University*

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# Will You Look Me in the Eye?

## The Embrace and Denial of Human Dignity

Katie Ellington

### Research Question

Does the Marquette community acknowledge human dignity in everyday interactions?

### Introduction

This project was inspired by phenomenology and stale bread. The philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, changed the way I perceive the world altogether with his pseudo-ethical theory: **the Phenomena of the Face**. Levinas' theory inspired me to further consider a person's humanity and human dignity in everyday interactions, such as passing someone on the street. While learning about Levinas, I saw mysterious bread scattered across campus. With my new philosophical mindset, I saw this plethora of bread, unwrapped, lining the streets and flower boxes of Marquette's campus as some sort of statement against dignity rather than for it. I was compelled to ask the question: **does the Marquette community consider Human Dignity on an everyday level?**

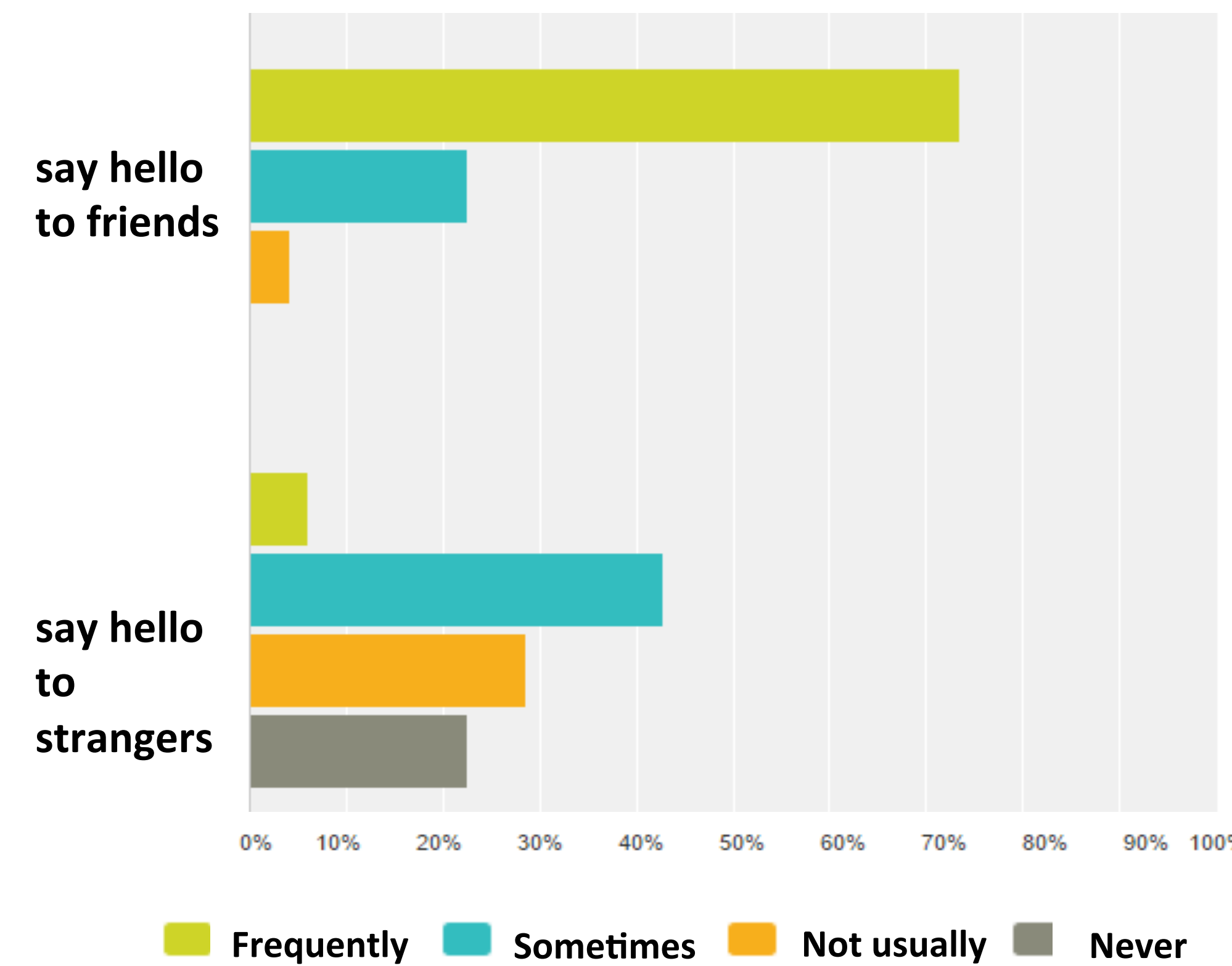


Above Left: Outside the US Bank Building downtown  
Above Right: Outside Gesu Catholic Church on Campus

### Results

#### Reaching Out

- Common to reach out to friend
- Much **less likely** to reach out to a stranger
- Notice the difference in **frequencies** on the chart below:



#### Reciprocity

- Common when interacting with strangers
- A person will only do as much as is done to them  
→ A smile elicits a smile back, but one only says "good morning" if the stranger says "good morning" first
  - **The other person elicits a response**
- If they did not elicit a response, there would be no need to reciprocate.
- When actions not reciprocated, noted sense of unease  
→ As if a duty has been neglected

#### Conclusion

Participants indicate that they wait until interaction is initiated with strangers. Since someone has to initiate in order for an interaction to occur at all, it must be the Milwaukee community which reaches out to the Marquette community more than the other way around in these situations. Marquette needs to do a better job reaching out to strangers and making them feel welcome on our campus.

“I think a lot of people don't know how to act in those situations. Maybe it's not necessarily that they think those people don't deserve human dignity, but maybe that they don't necessarily know how to interact with people in that way.”

— Interview respondent

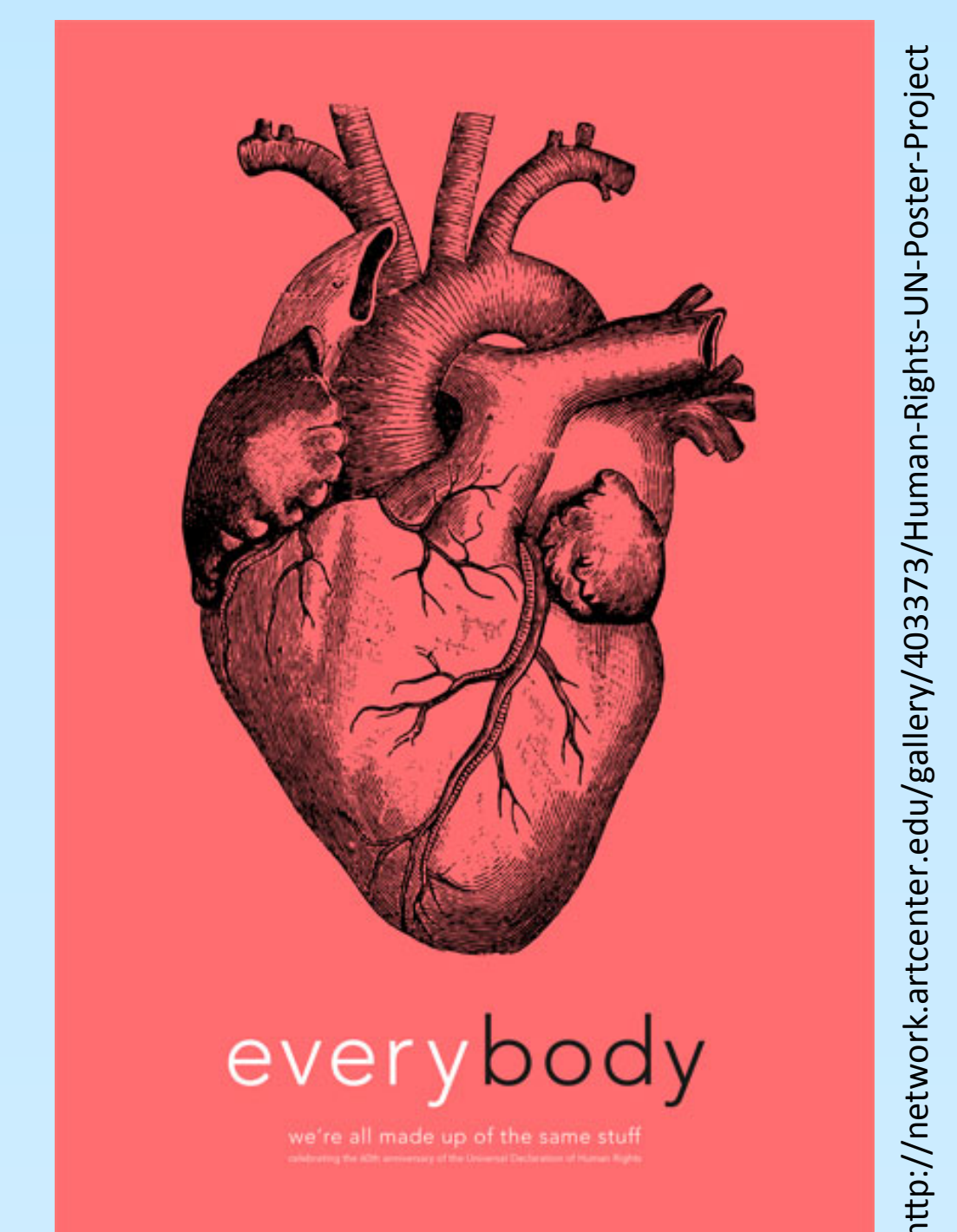
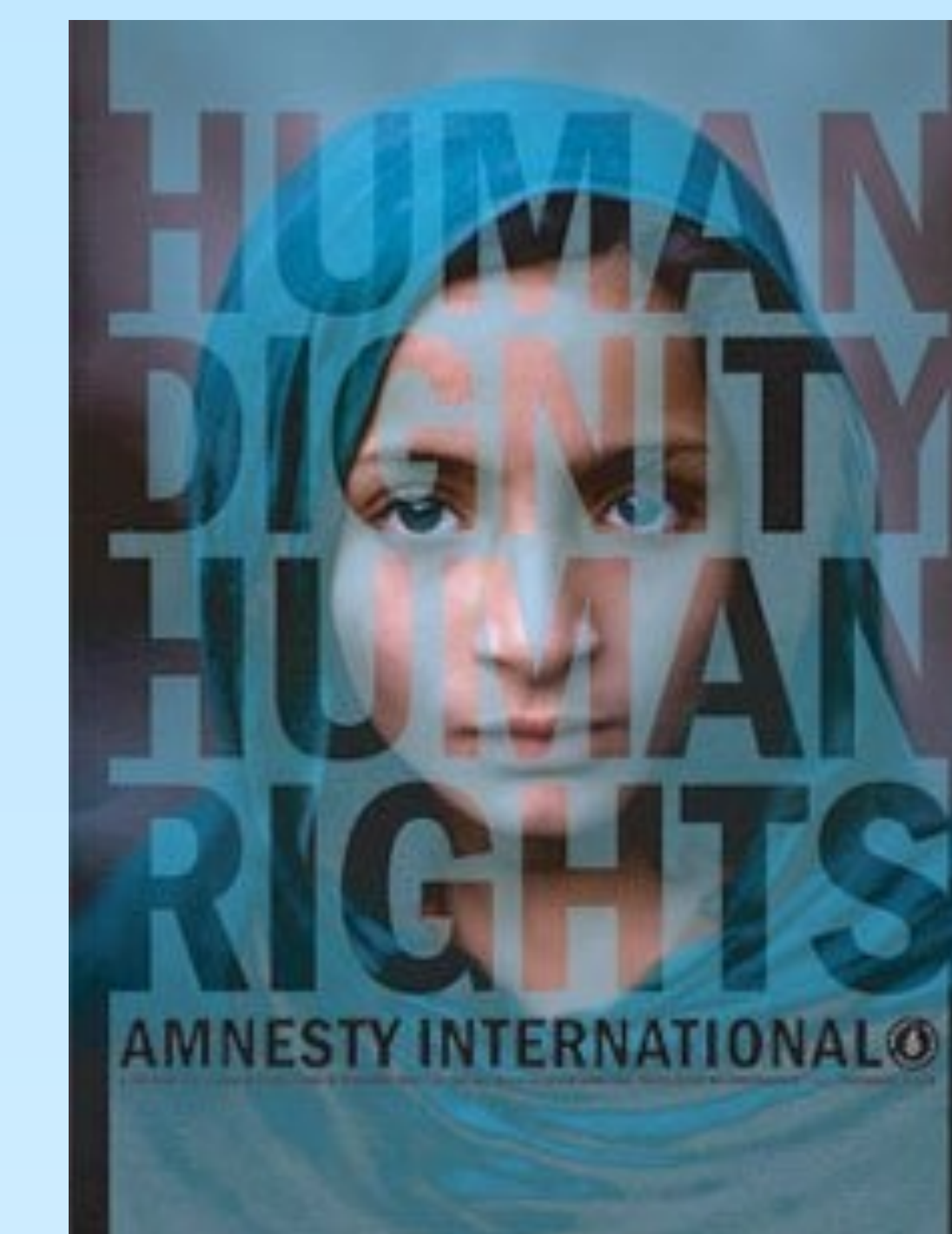
### Proposals for Change

#### Immediate

- Raise awareness by posting posters up around campus.
- Begin with simple statement posters about human dignity issues in the Milwaukee area.

#### Long Term

- Coordinate a week long series of events and speakers to raise awareness about the many different issues concerning Human Dignity.
- Highlight ways we can affect our own Marquette and Milwaukee communities while also acknowledging a few international issues.
- Present everyday interactions on the same platform as global issues.



### Methods

#### → Interviews

- Convenience Sampling
- Approximately 30 minute duration

#### → Observation Notes

- Observed Bus Stop on 12<sup>th</sup> and Wisconsin Ave.
- Common place for both Marquette community members and Milwaukee members

#### → Online Survey

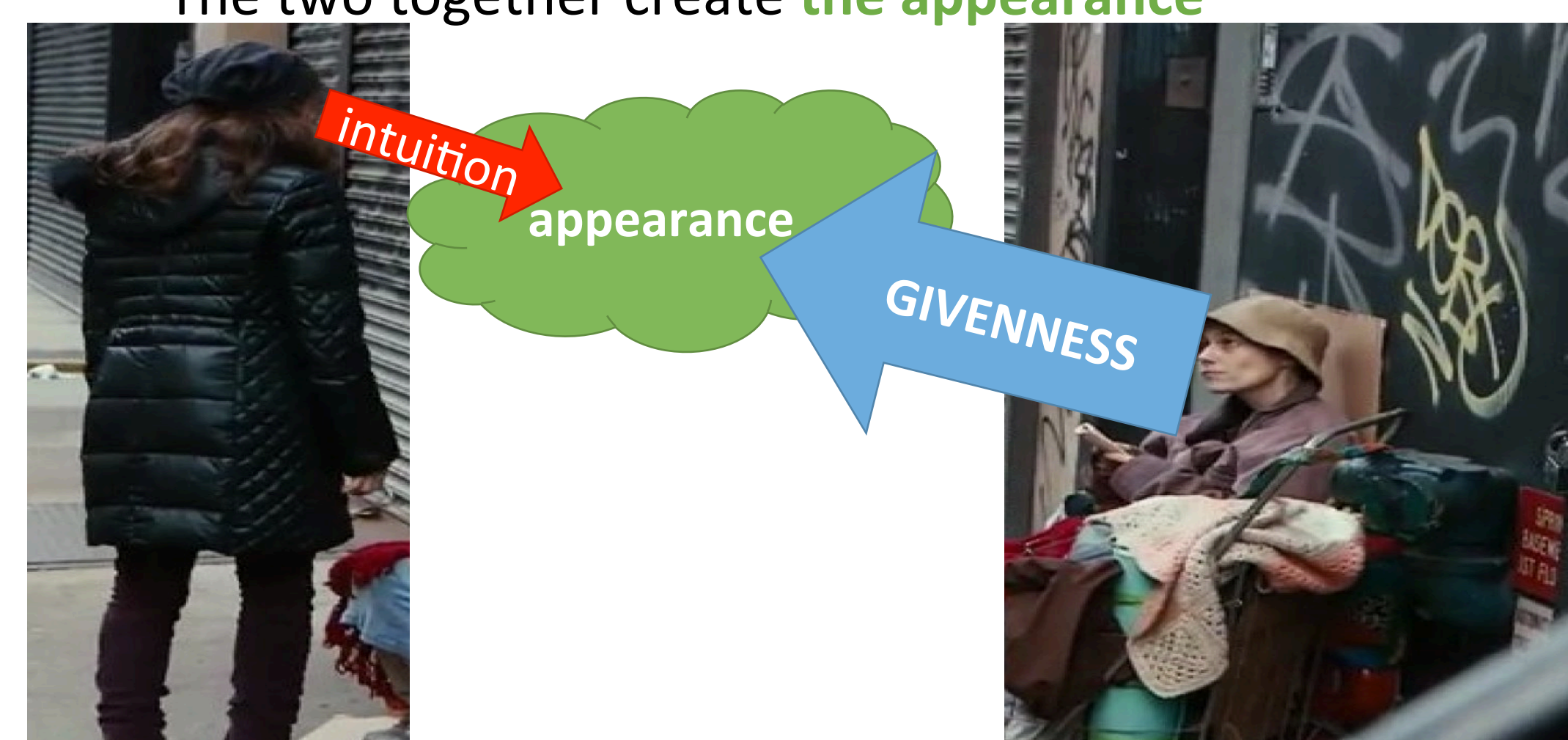
- Voluntary involvement
- Snowball sampling

→ **The combination of these methods provided for a more comprehensive view of human dignity on campus – each plays a vital role for insight.**

### Theoretical Framework

#### Transcendental Idealism (Kant)

- We (*the ego pole*) provide an **intuition** about an object or the other (*the object pole*) which **presents itself** to us through **givenness**
- The two together create **the appearance**



[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/23/make-them-visible-homeless-video\\_n\\_5200574.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/23/make-them-visible-homeless-video_n_5200574.html)

#### Levinas & the Phenomena of the Face

- Levinas uses Transcendental Idealism to build his theory
- The face is infinite; it cannot be completely grasped
- We perceive the face as an **ethical alterity**  
→ *a visual representation of a person's humanity\_*
- The infinity of the face is special because of its overwhelming factor  
→ undermining our **own intuition** of the object **MUCH** more than any other object
- Levinas argues that we “annihilate” the person when we ignore their humanity

#### My Argument for Social Importance

- The face calls out to us to react to it
- We have a **responsibility** to uphold a person's human dignity by including their humanity

### Literature Cited

Bergo, Bettina. "Emmanuel Levinas." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 23 July 2006. Web. 1 Mar. 2015. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>>.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969. Print.

Grier, Michelle, "Kant's Critique of Metaphysics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/kant-metaphysics/>>.

### Acknowledgments

My wonderful guide into the world of research: Dr. Beth Godbee  
Philosophical Guidance: Nicholas Oschman

# WILL YOU LOOK ME IN THE EYE?

## The Embrace and Denial of Human Dignity on Marquette Campus



May 1, 2015

Final Paper

Katie Ellington

## **Will You Look Me in the Eye?**

### **The Embrace and Denial of Human Dignity on Marquette Campus**

Katie Ellington

The innate human passion for discovery can root itself in strange curiosities. In the case of this research project, my desire to discover more about the Marquette community's approach to everyday interaction and human dignity was inspired by an entry ethics course and stale bread. While I will give more information on the inspiration of my research in the Background section of this paper, I will share that the vital take-away from my introductory ethics course was Emmanuel Levinas' pseudo-ethical theory, the Phenomena of the Face. This theory pushed me to reconsider my own everyday interactions with the people that I would pass on the street and in the classroom. Levinas' theory serves as a foundation for my own ideas on social justice. From this, I proposed my research question: does the Marquette community acknowledge human dignity in everyday interactions? Throughout my research, I also asked: how does the Marquette community acknowledge human dignity? And most importantly: are people aware that human dignity is a part of everyday interactions?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I combined the data collection methods of one online survey, two interviews, and multiple observation field notes. I sought out literature on this topic of everyday interaction and human dignity in general on college campuses, but I was unable to locate any previous studies or articles on the matter. There are plenty of scholarly articles on human dignity in regards to global issues as well as disabilities rights on campuses, but I alone could not find any articles about ethical everyday interactions. This lack of information encouraged me to seek IRB approval in order to raise awareness of this relevant issue of human dignity. Ultimately, my research led me to a few consistent conclusions.

1. *Respect*: In this section I discuss the common theme of respect when interviewees were asked to define human dignity.
2. *Nonjudgemental Attitudes*: In this section I discuss the second theme in defining human dignity. Both this section and the section above seem to show a potential disconnection between personal definitions of human dignity and actions regarding human dignity in everyday interactions within our Marquette community.
3. *Reciprocity versus Reaching Out*: When interacting with strangers, we as a Marquette community members are most likely to respond by speaking when spoken to or gesturing when gestured to. Upon seeing friends, Marquette community members are more likely to reach out with an initiating phrase or gesture. This section discusses how reciprocity is a positive step but only a stepping stone toward the more effective form of acknowledging human dignity: reaching out.
4. *The Implications of Reciprocity*: Here I discuss more about why reciprocity is positive yet unideal.
5. *The Challenges of Observing Acknowledgement*: Though some forms of acknowledgement were difficult to record in observation, we as a Marquette community do not usually go out of our way to acknowledge anyone we do not know. This most likely means there is a lack of awareness about human dignity in everyday interactions on campus.
6. *The Other and the Disruption of Consciousness*: Here I further expand on the idea of the face as a disruptor and how this idea is reflected in an interviewee's response. The other's face calls out to us to react to it and our consciousness cannot ignore this call. When we

do ignore this call, there can be a sense of discomfort for we are aware we have ignored our duty to answer this call.

These findings suggest that while the Marquette community may have positive intentions about human dignity, they do not always follow through and uphold human dignity in everyday interactions on campus. As an open campus, Marquette University should take the necessary steps to raise awareness of human dignity in regards to issues we may face in Milwaukee as well as issues that are prevalent around the world. If the Marquette community changes its attitude toward the Milwaukee community, the communities will feel more connected which is something I believe Marquette strives for.

In order to implement change, I propose both two attainable solutions.

1. *Poster Proposal*: I propose that posters be placed around different high traffic areas such as the AMU, Raynor Library, classroom complexes, and all residence halls. These posters are also an attempt to raise awareness about huamn dignity, but they will focus on recognizing the humanity in the Milwaukee community. These posters will utilize pictures and quotes from the Tumblr account wearehumansofmke as is illustrated in Appendix D.
2. *Mission Week Proposal*: I propose some sort of coordination with the Mission Week planners in order to raise awareness of human dignity during Mission Week. This would be very effective if it could be implemented because it would bring human dignity awareness to an already established and influential platform at Marquette University.

## Background

My choice to research human dignity in everyday interactions on Marquette campus is essentially a summation of a few small and strange realizations. I did not realize these items and ideas would come together until the research question was sitting right before my eyes; essentially, this project was influenced by phenomenology and stale bread. First, let me explain the former. Since Marquette University requires all students to take a course in Ethics, I enrolled in the course with enthusiasm, and upon learning some philosophy of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, my eyes were immediately opened to a reality I had not previously considered. The Phenomena of the Face changed the way I saw each person on the street; it had seemed like my whole outlook on life finally came into focus. As I will explain in greater detail in theoretical framework, Levinas inspired me to further consider a person's humanity and personhood in everyday interactions; specifically, his theory made me reconsider my interactions when passing a stranger on the street.

Now, pair this new philosophical mindset with a plethora of stale bread, unwrapped, lining the streets and flower boxes of Marquette's campus as well as a few other places around Milwaukee. The same semester I was learning different ethical theories, I spent time wondering who was putting out this bread and why they were doing it. With the entire semester to let my mind wander, considering the placement of the bread, my revelation came. I would find the bread typically set out outside of Gesu, on the ground and in the flower pots around where people from the Milwaukee community would sit. It was also set near the 12<sup>th</sup> Street bus stop where many people would wait for the bus. This placement among frequented areas implied that the bread was left out for people to eat, not birds or other animals.

My question then was not who was putting out the bread or why, but rather I wondered as a current ethics student, is putting out this bread an ethical thing to do? This old bread seemed to represent a sort of neglect for human dignity. When I would tell others about the bread, they would ask if the bread was meant for the birds. Certainly, no one considers it normal for bread to be left out for fellow human beings. I now had a question that took into consideration the inherent value of human dignity. While I believe the bread was placed out with good intentions, it neglects to uphold a person's human dignity. There certainly are more dignified ways to feed the hungry, ways that are implemented all over the city. I came to realize that ultimately, the people leaving out this bread failed to acknowledge human dignity. Human dignity, as I will define it, is the deserved respect each person is born with just for being human. Human dignity can be given through interpersonal recognition and forms of purposeful acknowledgement of their existence and personhood. Recognition and acknowledgement of human dignity can be defined as a conscious act of eye contact at the very least, a statement or act of kindness at the very best. The bread's presence – and lack of presence in these soggy winter months – can represent the proof that someone's attempt to outwardly express sympathy for those who are hungry, but at the same time, it denies a sort of respect that is required for preserving complete human dignity. The bread littering the streets around campus is better fit for birds to pluck up and run away with than human beings. In addition to the respect that one inherently deserves as a human being, the purposeful recognition of existence is a necessary aspect of maintaining human dignity. These small actions accumulate overtime and make up the foundation upon which human dignity is set.

Acknowledging a person's existence sounds so simple, yet I see many people fail to acknowledge others every day. Every day, a man or woman stands outside Walgreens asking



passing students for change; every day, students pace about the bus stop avoiding eye contact like the plague; every day, students stuff their gaze deep into their phones on elevators. “What is so negative about this?” one may wonder. In all these scenarios, we purposefully ignore another person’s existence. In an increasingly technological world, it is easier to hide behind the barrier of our headphones and cellular devices, away from the “outside world” that causes us to react to it. Marquette University is a Jesuit institution defined by the ideal of *Cura Personalis* but does the community live the life it promotes? In my research project, I explore whether or not the Marquette community respects the human person in everyday encounters by assessing whether or not we treat others with dignity in simple ways, such as how we decide to interact or not interact while passing others on the street.

## **Theoretical Framework**

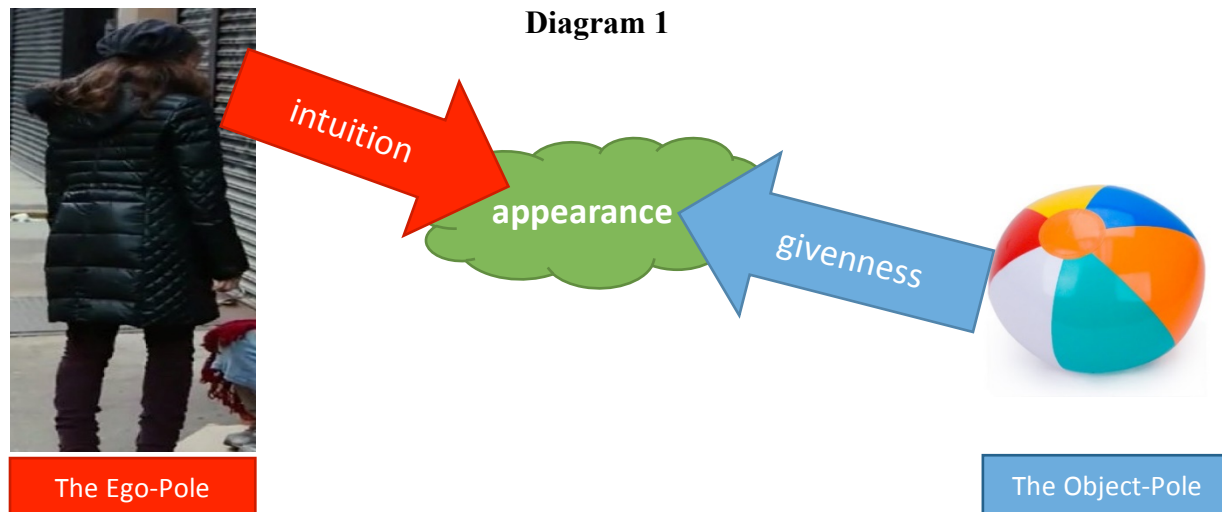
### *Transcendental Idealism*

Transcendental Idealism, a philosophical claim first made by Emmanuel Kant,<sup>1</sup> is vital to understanding Levinas’ Phenomena of the Face because transcendental idealism explains why perceptions matter and the manner in which we receive the world around us. Kant argues that we do not see objects in the world exactly as they are in their purest form.<sup>2</sup> To aid this explanation of transcendental idealism please refer to the diagram below (next page).

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Grier, "Kant's Critique of Metaphysics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. June 21, 2012, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=kant-metaphysics>>.

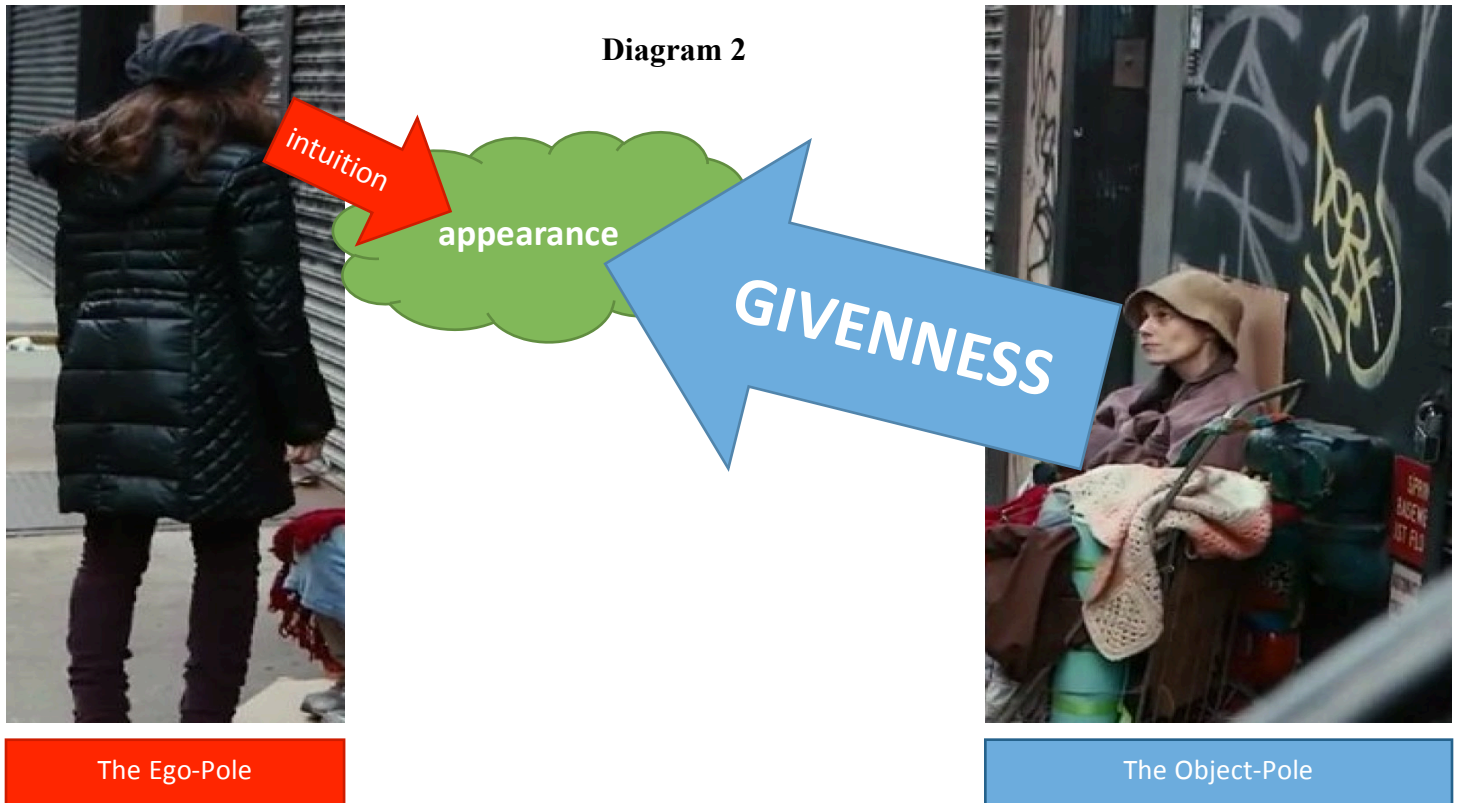
<sup>2</sup> Ibid



There is an interaction between the *ego-pole* and the *object-pole*. The *ego-pole* represents the person looking towards an object and the *object-pole* represents the object itself. Between the *ego-pole* and the *object-pole* an *appearance* is created. The *appearance* represents what the *ego-pole* is actually seeing. The *ego-pole* brings an *intuition* about the world and about the object itself, which applies to the *appearance* of the object. The *object-pole* also provides a representation of itself to be applied to the *appearance*. This representation of the *object-pole* is called *givenness*. In other words, the *object-pole* gives itself to the *ego-pole* and the *ego-pole* brings its own *intuition* about the object and together these two create the final *appearance* of the object. If we consider transcendental idealism to be a valid philosophical theory about how we experience the world, then we are required consider the importance of *appearances*. I have provided the visual in Diagram 1 to exemplify this philosophical concept. There are a few things to note about this diagram that will help further explain the Phenomena of the Face. Keep in mind that in Diagram 1 the arrows for *intuition* and *givenness* are equal in shape and size.

### *Levinas' Phenomena of the Face*

When interacting with another human being instead of an object, Levinas argues that the diagram would look something more like Diagram 2.



The arrows in the above diagram are different sizes for a reason. Levinas believed – as he explains through the Phenomena of the Face – that the face is infinite, because “the face resists possession, resists my powers.”<sup>3</sup> In the diagram between two people, the intuition of the *ego-pole* is much smaller than the *givenness* of the other person who she is looking at, *the object-pole*. This diagram depicts the how the infinity overwhelms our *intuition*. Levinas also describes the infinity of the face by “its refusal to be contained,”<sup>4</sup> which makes it infinite and accessible always, but not fully graspable. In comparison, consider the ball from Diagram 1. We, as the *ego-pole*, can look at the ball and understand everything about it, but when we look at another human being, we cannot understand everything about them. We can begin to understand parts of them, but not the person’s self in their entirety. Consider the fact that even if you know someone on a personal level, you still cannot know everything about that person. This helps explain how

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 197

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 194

our *intuition* can have much less of an effect on the *appearance* that is manifested. The ball is an entirely graspable concept, whereas the face is infinite and is far too complex for our full understanding.

When looking into the face of another person we recognize the undeniable humanity of their face. We react to the face of the other person unlike any other object because of this humanity. “The epiphany of the face is ethical,”<sup>5</sup> which is why we react differently to a face than to any other object. The face represents an ethical alterity that we must respond to, for we realize not only that the other is like us but that we have a moral obligation to them. Levinas notes that despite the face’s overwhelming infinity, “the Other does not purely and simply negate the I,”<sup>6</sup> meaning that our own intuition in the encounter which creates the *appearance* is not stripped from us completely. We still have an intuition, but it is simply overwhelmed by the *givenness* of the face.

My final note on Levinas is this: Levinas claims that we are commanded by the face “you shall not commit murder”<sup>7</sup> or “do not kill me.” Our internal recognition of similarity and ethical alterity of the other as the *object-pole* is a major part of what gives the face humanity. Levinas argues that we as the *ego-pole* “annihilate”<sup>8</sup> the other person altogether. This may seem extreme out of context, but if we do not acknowledge the call of another’s face, we deny their humanity. That is to say, we deny they exist as a person at all. We annihilate them. The face’s call to us demands us to recognize their humanity. In this claim, I focus my social critique.

### *Social Implications of Levinas’ Phenomena of the Face*

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<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 199

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 194

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 195

The social implications of Levinas' Phenomena of the Face depends on the interpreter of his philosophy. The Phenomena of the Face itself makes no ethical command to bring about social change. It simply states that this is a philosophical theory that Levinas believes to be relevant and true. I depart from Levinas' own theory now to make a claim about this call that the face makes. While the face's call demands us to not kill, it also begs us to acknowledge their humanity. In order to acknowledge humanity, we must at least attempt to uphold human dignity. Something as simple as making meaningful eye contact with someone instead of blatantly looking away can acknowledge the humanity in another. I make the claim that there is a spectrum of responses that a person can make in an interaction with another. The spectrum has an low, medium, and high degree of acknowledgement of human dignity, so to speak. The low is ignoring someone outright. The medium response is to simply politely reciprocate what has been done to you. The high, or best thing to do in an interaction with another person, is to reach out to them. Examples of reaching out include a simple gesture such as a wave, a "good morning" or "hello," or an initiating conversation if the situation seems appropriate. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a community where reaching out is done most often, for it does the best job of acknowledging humanity in another.

Of course, since humans themselves are imperfect and complicated, interactions that involve upholding human dignity can become complicated as well. In a city landscape, like Milwaukee and Marquette campus, it is understood that not every instance will call for a reaching out gesture. The city setting does not deter acknowledging humanity, it simply puts us slightly on guard. Sadly, not everyone is setting out to see the humanity in others, which is part of the reason why crime rates are what they are. There are situations that I admit reaching out is not wise, such as when one is walking alone in the dark. There are many times where we must

consider our own safety in addition to upholding human dignity. This being said, I believe that on our campus specifically, we can rest assured that we are safe. During the day time walking to class or to work, no one on Marquette campus should feel threatened by another individual. This is a wonderful time to foster an environment that practices acknowledging human dignity in everyday interactions.

## **Methods**

### *Research Design*

As a research paper based on interactions, I wanted to pursue a few different types of research data collection. I decided to utilize interviews, an online survey and observation notes to research a broader range of people across campus to combine the methods of self-report with observation. Any one of these research methods alone would provide an interesting insight, but alone they tell an incomplete story. The combination of these three research collection methods made for a more comprehensive view of the Marquette community's ideas on human dignity as well as their actions concerning human dignity. Interviews allowed me to ask specific questions about interactions on campus and a bit of the interviewee's background. Observation notes allowed for actions to speak rather than rely on self-reporting responses, not all people act upon things that they say they believe. Finally, the survey allowed for a greater pool of people to respond to my questions about interactions and human dignity on campus – much more than I could interview alone.

### *Data Collection*

Through the combination of two interviews, one online survey, and multiple notes from observation periods, I collected data across campus. My goal was to hear Marquette

community's thoughts on the issue of human dignity while also examining whether or not members of the Marquette community actually showed dignity to others in interactions around campus. Interviews were typically 30 minutes to an hour long in a setting chosen by the interviewees. The interviews were conducted based on convenience sampling, since I knew that friends and acquaintances were more likely to take 30 minutes to an hour out of their day to sit down with me as opposed to a stranger. The interviews functioned as an in depth look at specifically Marquette University students' ideas about human dignity on campus and how they reacted to others on Marquette's campus. My notes on the interviews were balanced by my observation notes.

In the interviews, I had to rely on the interviewees' perspective of themselves, but in observation sessions, I could see if these ideas of human dignity were actually put into action. I conducted my observation notes on the street across from the Marquette Bus stop on 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Wisconsin Avenue on the east side of campus. The bus stop is frequented by Marquette students walking to class, back to dorms or to apartments, and it is also frequented by whomever may be taking one of the many buses that stop there. I observed around midday when students would be likely to be walking around and people would be taking the bus to and from the bus stop so that there would be plenty to observe.

Finally, in order to gather information from a larger pool of people in the Marquette community, I utilized an online survey. For the online survey, I used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling with voluntary participation. The complete list of survey questions can be found under Appendix A. I started by emailing a range of people in my largest classes as well as some professors and encouraged them to forward the survey on to others. In both the survey and in the interviews there was no incentive to participate so that the

responses would not be skewed. The only downfall to this lack of incentive is that there were less responses than I would have liked to receive. With fifty respondents out of a potential one hundred, it was a good start, but still less than desirable. Luckily, the survey results mirrored much of what I discovered in the observation notes and interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

#### **Qualitative Coding**

I did some coding on the interviews to determine commonalities between interviews as well as recurring themes that came up during the interviews, whether anticipated or not. Below is the key I created for coding my interview transcripts.

Signs of Reciprocation = yellow	Indicators of Personality = purple
How another's face "disrupts" = blue	Perceptions of safety on campus = <u>underlined</u>
Signs of barrier between reaction to people we know and do not know = green	Referring to the Marquette Bubble = blue
Need to break down meaning = red	Defining Human Dignity = <b>bold</b>
	Perceptions of Others = red

#### **Survey Data**

Through the online survey engine, Survey Monkey, I was provided with graphs and percentages comparing the various responses to each question of my survey. I was able to easily record trends in the data this way.

#### **Observation Data**

I looked into my observation notes to record any common patterns in the observation periods. I sought out consistencies and inconsistencies between observation notes and after this, I compared my findings to the survey responses as well as the interview responses. I also searched for key words or ideas from the interviews or survey to see if I had a recorded any observation notes of these themes in action.



*Literature Review*

As previously mentioned, my initial inspiration behind this entire research project stems from Levinas' *Phenomena of the Face*: a theory I learned about in my ethics course at Marquette University during the fall semester of 2014. This pseudo-ethical theory changed the way I encountered others around me and ended up being a great building block to this research project. In order to reinforce the foundation of this project, as well as define what it is to uphold human dignity, I began by reading peer reviewed articles from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. These articles discussed an overview of Levinas' ideas and Kant's transcendental idealism. While these articles on the Stanford Encyclopedia provided a solid foundation and starting point, I needed a more in-depth description of Levinas' theory of the Phenomena of the Face. So, naturally I went straight to the source. Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* lays out this theory in the early stages of his philosophical career. This direct source aided me in relaying his ideas in an accurate manner. Ultimately, the literary support for this project was gathered in order to solidify the theoretical framework which grounds the entire basis of my research. Seeking out other research reports on human dignity in everyday interactions was more difficult than I thought, but it also made me more excited about the work I was doing to bring awareness to this little discussed issue.

*Annotated Bibliography*

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969. Print.

*This text from Levinas' early philosophical career lays out his ideas on the Phenomena of the Face. This philosophical concept was vital to the theoretical framework in which I ground my research.*

Bergo, Bettina. "Emmanuel Levinas." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 23 July 2006.

Web. 1 Mar. 2015. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>>.

*This article provided a background in parts of Levinas' philosophical theories, including the Phenomena of the Face. This was a useful secondary source to guide my reading of the primary source, Totality and Infinity.*

Grier, Michelle, "Kant's Critique of Metaphysics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

(Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/kant-metaphysics/>>.

*This article aided my simplified explanation of Kant's Transcendental Idealism. This philosophical argument for perception of the world around us is vital to understanding Levinas' argument for the Phenomena of the Face.*

## **Findings**

### *Respect*

In order to gather more information about how other Marquette students felt, I asked the interviewees what they considered to be crucial to the definition of "Human Dignity." As I had internally hoped – and attempted not to convey in the interview process – both of the women I interviewed felt respect to be a critical aspect of showing or maintaining a person's dignity. One interviewee, Pam (*pseudonym*), noted that something crucial about upholding human dignity is

“showing everybody respect, even if you might not agree with what they say or what they’re doing, you show someone respect.” Similarly, another interviewee responded, “I would say treating all people with equality and not judging someone, treating all people the same way and with the same respect.” These statements describing personal definitions of dignity certainly mirrored what I observed while taking notes on the bus stop at 12<sup>th</sup> and Wisconsin Avenue. But, is respect alone enough to uphold a person’s human dignity? Certainly, no one at the bus stop was acting in a purposefully disrespectful manner, but the absence of an outwardly disrespectful act does not mean that the person in mind is upholding a person’s human dignity. As my findings go on, I will explain these ideas in further detail.

### *Nonjudgmental Attitudes*

In two completely separate interviews, both women similarly emphasized the need for a non-judgmental attitude towards people. The first interviewee, Pam said:

I think a big thing is not judging ‘them.’ I think society forces us to judge people, so being open-minded and not having your idea of what a person is supposed to be and just being really open to all different aspects of it.

Similarly, the second interviewee, Alexa simply claimed human dignity entailed, “treating all people with equality and not judging someone.” Both interviewees spoke on the need to not judge people, which seems to be a noble pursuit. Pam believes “society forces us to judge people.” Whether or not judgement is an inherent feature of humanity, I believe judgment does not necessarily bar us from acknowledging and upholding human dignity. This judgement can come from a place of self-protection as well as a barrier to discomfort. So long as we are aware of our personal judgments and we work to combat them when they are unnecessarily cautious, we can push ourselves outside of our comfort zone and reach out to greet and help others.

Judgment can be used to protect oneself, but sometimes our judgments are hyperactive; this is what I mean when I say “unnecessarily cautious.” In safe situations, we should be comfortable to reach out to another who is different than us and acknowledge their humanity, their similarity to ourselves.

In terms of recording data, judgmental attitudes are not so easily detectable while taking observation notes, so I was not able to follow up this question with observation notes as much as I would have liked to. Certainly, by precedent of incomplete integration into the Milwaukee community – noted by the low number of bus-riders and weekly volunteers in survey results<sup>9</sup> – there is a barrier in place simply in this way. The issue of the “Marquette Bubble” is not one that I will be discussing in this research paper, but it functions along similar ideas.<sup>10</sup>

### *Reciprocation versus Reaching Out*

Though the following question may seem insignificant outside the context of my research idea, it was actually crucial to gaining insight concerning the themes of reciprocation and reaching out. I asked Pam, “thinking about no one in particular if you were acknowledging them, passing them on the street or like anywhere really, what would you do to show that you were acknowledging a person?”<sup>11</sup> Instead of an answering statement, Pam’s first response was a clarifying question. She asked, “If I knew them or if it was someone I didn’t know?” This response initially struck me, for this presented a dichotomy which I had not previously anticipated. After further consideration, though, it made perfect sense. Since she asked for clarification, I was immediately able to deduce that she – and most likely many others – react

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix C for survey chart evidence of this claim.

<sup>10</sup> The “Marquette Bubble” is referred to as the blocks of Marquette University’s campus between 10<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Street East to West (respectively) and between Michigan Avenue and Kilbourne Street South to North (respectively). The “Marquette Bubble” is the area that Marquette students mainly stay in and claim they feel safe in, though all of Marquette campus is open to the city of Milwaukee.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix B for interview questions.

much differently to people based on whether they know them or not. And even though I had not consciously recorded it, I noticed that I, too, respond differently to friends versus strangers, as well.

After going back over her answers, I discovered something even more interesting. Pam described herself, without any prompting, to be “a generally friendly person” which certainly exuded from her answers, such as how she would greet her friends. Upon seeing a friend on the street Pam would reach out with “a really enthusiastic hello and ‘how are you?’” In this same breath, Pam concluded that upon seeing someone she did not know, she would “usually say hey back or good evening for whatever time of day it is” immediately insinuating – without fully explaining – that she would only say something to a stranger if they said something to her first. Again, when I asked for an example of an interaction with someone she did not know on the street, she told me about a walk to the gym a certain morning when someone reached out to her saying “‘good morning!’” and she said “I said ‘good morning’ to them too,” and that was it. This idea of reciprocation as a reaction or even a possible form of obligation to strangers remained consistent through similar lines of questioning throughout the interview.

Further examples of reciprocity in Pam’s answers ranged between strictly direct and strictly indirect, but all seemed to be very clear examples of reciprocity with strangers in my post-interview analysis of what she said. One direct example of reciprocation from Pam’s interview reinforced this forming notion that one only has an obligation to act if someone reaches out to them first. I asked Pam, “If someone shows they acknowledge you, do you feel required to smile back at them? Or acknowledge them?” To which she replied:

If I'm listening to music and there's someone I know then I'll wave versus having a full on conversation. Someone I don't know—I mean if someone addresses me or just looks at me I probably wouldn't say anything.

Here, whether knowingly or not, Pam points out the dichotomy of a reciprocate response to a stranger versus an inviting statement to a friend. In this case, the reciprocate response to someone who “just looks at” Pam would be to simply look back and go on with her day. Though it is not verbalized, it can be assumed that Pam would look back at the stranger in this situation since she notes a stranger looking at her which she would only be able to tell by at least glancing in the stranger's direction. For both Pam and the other whom she encounters, this “looking at” action is the least disruptive thing that a human face could do. It is as if the two of them are both silently agreeing “yes I see you there, but no I will not do anything about it.” But, Pam seems to consider this look or glance to be a form of acknowledgement since I began the question as “If someone shows they acknowledge you...” Which technically would mean that Pam's response is also an acknowledgement of the other's personhood, just not quite the acknowledgement that Levinas would consider adequate, considering that eye contact does not necessarily have to be made to notice someone looking at you.

Clearly, this response to a stranger is vastly different than Pam's response to seeing a friend on the street. Even with her headphones in her ears, she would at least extend the acknowledgement of a wave to a friend, and if she did not have her headphones in while passing a friend on the street, she would have a conversation with them. Not once in the interview does Pam say she will only address or acknowledge a friend if they acknowledge her first. In reference to interactions with her friends, there is no instance of pure reciprocation mentioned by Pam. In reference to the question/answer sequence in this paragraph and the paragraph before this one, Pam would talk about initiating conversation or initiating a gesture to show that she was

acknowledging her friend. Similarly, whether it be the example of the “good morning” story, her response in this paragraph, or her response in the paragraph before, Pam consistently references a reciprocate response to strangers – feeling obligated only to do or say as much as the stranger has done or said to her.

Reciprocity was a theme within the responses I collected in the survey as well. A question within the survey asked “Walking around campus do you...” and then listed a few different sections for the respondent to rank either “Frequently,” “Sometimes,” “Not usually,” or “Never.”<sup>12</sup> I will reference two sections of this question relate directly to this issue of reciprocation. The first asks, “Walking around campus do you say hello to friends?” The second asks, “Walking around campus do you say hello to strangers?” The difference in frequencies is staggering. While 73% of respondents said they would frequently say hello to friends on campus, only 6% of respondents said the same about saying hello to strangers on campus. In these questions I did not prompt the survey respondents to give differences as to whether they were reached out to by the stranger or not – in other words whether or not they were reciprocating or reaching out. I deduced that by agency of taking this survey and answering questions from their own perspective, it is safe to assume that respondents answered the questions as if they were reaching out and did not consider instances of reciprocation. The phrase “say hello” seems to insinuate a reaching out, as opposed to the passive reciprocate response. This certainly is evident in the drastic percentage differences in responses of saying hello to friends versus strangers. Even though only 22% of respondents said they would *never* say hello to a stranger, there were *zero* respondents who said they would never say hello to a friend on campus. These responses represent the majority’s unwillingness to reach out to someone who they do not necessarily

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A.

know. Reciprocation is certainly easier than initiating a conversational quip or gesture, but I would argue, while it is polite to reciprocate, reaching out is a more positive way to express acknowledgement of personhood and human dignity.

### *The Implications of Reciprocity*

Based on the theoretical framework I have set up, Pam's interview answers and the participants' responses in the survey represent reciprocate actions are positive yet unideal. First, let's consider why this is positive. I have established that positive acknowledgement is a form of upholding human dignity. This act of reciprocation depicts a step in the right direction for human dignity, for Pam does have the opportunity to ignore the stranger reaching out to her through gesture or speech. She has the opportunity to deny this person's existence but she chooses not to. She could have ignored the stranger's "good morning" completely without responding and gone on with her day, but she does not. She affirms an acknowledgement of the other, upholding their personhood while wishing them well in this instance of reciprocation. On the other hand, while this may be a step in the right direction, there are still more steps to be taken. In this instance, the stranger made their presence known and ultimately created situation where reciprocation was easy and required little on Pam's behalf. But, what if the stranger had not made it so easy? Consider the man or woman asking for spare change outside of Walgreens that I referenced in my introduction. The situations are similar in comparison: a stranger reaches out to you, but instead of wishing you a good morning, they are asking if you have spare change. Reciprocation is not necessarily a possible response. No longer can you simply reply "good morning" or ask in return, "do *you* have spare change?" Reciprocation, while respectful, is not always a possible way to acknowledge another's personhood and dignity. Additionally, sometimes people need you to reach out to them; sometimes you need others to make your day better.



Reciprocation is not the solution to universal human dignity in everyday interactions. Reciprocation does not search for eye contact, smile at someone who you make eye contact with, or compel someone to reach out to another human being who may need the validation of being recognized, acknowledged. Reciprocation is only half of the issue.

### *The Challenges of Observing Acknowledgement*

In my observation periods, I set out with the intention of recording interactions between the Marquette community, the Milwaukee community, and both communities within themselves. I found that, though I looked for signs of reciprocation or acknowledgement – ready to record anything down to the level of mutual eye contact – it was much easier for me to record interactions of people reaching out. These instances were usually between friends or people within the same communities as opposed to strangers. Since members of the same community were more likely to reach out and respond to one another, I was able to see reaching out more openly. I recorded my observation notes from the steps of Johnston Hall, which is on campus on Wisconsin Avenue directly across the street from the 12<sup>th</sup> Street bus stop. While observing, I found it very difficult to discern if eye contact was made between two people. Conversely, the reaching out in an interaction between friends or acquaintances was much easier to recognize and record because they were consistently much longer interactions as well as much more noticeable interactions in comparison to more subtle interactions between strangers.

To record potential eye contact, I decided to record head movement. If a person seemed to redirect their line of sight into the same line of sight as another person, I recorded possible eye contact. Of course, this method had its complications. If this person – walking by the bus stop for example – turned their head towards a person in the bus stop *and* the person in the bus stop had their head facing outward – as opposed to down at their feet for example – I recorded potential

eye contact, but there is no guarantee that I was correct in these occasional assumptions. There was a clear, concrete occurrence of eye contact between one Marquette student and one Milwaukee community member only once in my observation notes. Of course, during my observation periods, due to the slight distance and occasional disruption of view due to buses picking up passengers, there could have been more concrete eye contact than I had recorded. Overall, the interactions between people who could easily be perceived to be friends was much more noticeable. These types of interactions were concretely recorded in ways such as “two male students laugh and shake hands in passing and go their separate ways.” The interaction is brief, but the gesture and verbalized laughter made it much easier to detect and record than trying to spot a glance a millisecond in length. I’m sure there are some small interactions like this that I probably missed, but I did not want to insert myself directly into the bus stop, because I felt that a person observing and taking notes would gather attention and skew the typical interactions of this bus stop.

A majority of the potential interactions with eye contact were recorded as such:

- “Asian male student is limping towards bus stop from the west. He looks towards the buildings of the 707 grouping; I believe eye contact is made between him and the man on the bench.”

Issues with the bus blocking my view were recorded as such:

- “Male students walk by – cannot see interaction because view is blocked by bus.”
- “Bus blocks view as students pass, unsure of the number of people who are waiting at the bus stop currently. (Bus moved: same amount of people.)”

Other non-interactions were recorded as such:

- “Four students pass by individually; each has their head down or are looking away from the direction of the bus stop.”
- “The man with the cane is still sitting on the bench. A white female student passes the bus stop texting the entire time from where the side walk begins on the block to the west until after passing the bus stop. She looks up from texting when she passes the first tree to the right of the bus stop shelter. (approx. 5 yards to the east)”
- “Student walks behind shelter instead of in front of it.”
- “White male student walks by, keeps head forward.”

Walking patterns, head direction and any potential forms of interaction or non-interaction with others are recorded. For the most part, the head direction is recorded, as it can be easily seen, and usually people just walked by minding their own business, so to speak.

As previously stated, the interactions that I did notice that were clear were situations where one community member reached out to another member of the same perceived community. Of course, the people I observed were not labelled “Marquette community member” or “Milwaukee community member,” but people seemed to reach out to others who seemed to match the same mold as they did. Age range and status as student or non-student defined these interactions as well as defined the differences in the community members that frequented this bus stop while I did my observations. It is safe to say, that based on my observations, interactions of reaching out – as opposed to reciprocation or no interaction whatsoever – are much more likely to occur between people of the same community. I did not record an instance where

someone from the Marquette community reached out to a Milwaukee community member or vice versa. These sessions of observation do not sum up the totality of interactions on Marquette campus, but I would have expected more than zero interactions within these busy time periods that I observed.

*The Other and the Disruption of Consciousness*

When I asked Alexa of a time she may have changed her walking route to avoid something or someone, she told me of a time late at night when she crossed the road to avoid a man singing outside of the Starbucks on Wisconsin Avenue on campus. While we qualified this as sensible, as it was late at night, in the dark of the city, and she was alone, she still ended her story on (what I perceived to be) a note of guilt, saying, “Yeah, and I was—I don’t know scared and tired or something.” Whether her discomfort was aroused by a sudden realization of the true negativity of a cultural norm – in this case, the commonplace occurrence of purposefully avoiding other human beings – or not, Alexa seemed to feel uncomfortable admitting that she had gone out of her way to avoid another individual, purposefully neglecting interpersonal contact. Within my theoretical framework, I would claim, while Alexa acted upon her own safety, she also did this to avoid a further disruption of conscience. First, let me state that I personally know Alexa to be a caring individual, and therefore her reaction of perceived guilt provided more evidence for even a stranger’s impact on our lives, consciences and consciousness.

Certainly, a disruption of consciousness is essential to Levinas’ theory of the Phenomena of the Face. Alexa’s conscience was disrupted by the man’s presence late that night, but I, too, was a disruptor. The man’s presence on the street caused a reaction from her to cross the road, just as my presence in asking her about the event caused a sense of embarrassment that may not

have been elicited without my presence and question. Similarly, Pam's morning and state of mind was disrupted by the person wishing her good morning, and due to her enthusiastic "good morning" response and smile when she relayed the story to me, this person clearly had an impact as did I when I asked her about this and made her smile from a memory. Another's face can have either a negative or positive impact on our consciousness and memory, and we should not shy away from safe interactions for fear of a negative disruption of consciousness.

## **Proposals for Change**

### *Poster Proposal*

The ultimate goal of my long term proposal is to raise awareness on campus, but since my long term proposal will take time for planning, I devised a way to raise awareness sooner rather than later. The first step in my proposals for change are to create posters concerning issues of human dignity in the Milwaukee community. My proposal concerns local issues rather than global issues in order to raise awareness in the environment that we live in. The goals of raising the awareness are not to create a further rift between the Milwaukee and Marquette communities. Rather, this is an attempt to humanize the Milwaukee community to those who simply see them as a crime rate. This vast generalization is an unfair one, and the members of the Milwaukee community – just like any other group of people – do not deserve to be grouped off entirely with crooks.

In an attempt to further humanize the Milwaukee community, I would like to utilize the pictures and quotes from the Tumblr account *wearehumansofmke* which posts to a blog named "Humans of Milwaukee." This account – inspired by a popular blog entitled "Humans of New York" – seeks the humanity and variance of life in the city of Milwaukee. In my volunteer group,

Marquette Volunteer Corps, we sat down and looked through a slideshow of 10 examples of images and quotes from Humans of Milwaukee during a final reflection period. The group as a whole agreed that this reflection made us even more aware about the variety of life in the city, as well as the various backgrounds that people come from. The images in front of us came alive as human when we read their advice, their struggles, their stories. I think that this would be another way to raise awareness of human dignity in everyday interactions and it is a resource that can easily be shared.<sup>13</sup>

### *Mission Week Proposal*

Initially for my long term proposal, I wanted to mimic the model of Mental Health Awareness Week and have something like Human Dignity Awareness Week stand on its own. After further consideration, and a helpful tip that I received while sharing my research at the poster fair, I was inspired to do something different. Now, my proposal is that I would coordinate a committee of people who are also passionate about the issue of human dignity both on a communal and global scale in order to pair up with Mission Week planners. During Mission Week, I would like to have the Human Dignity Awareness committee work with the Mission Week planners in order to create an aspect of human dignity awareness in coordination with Mission Week. The committee would coordinate with Mission Week planners on how to coordinate human dignity cohesively, through speakers, more posters and statistics around campus. While this plan is still in the making, the idea of Human Dignity seems to go hand in hand with Marquette mission statement and Jesuit ideal of *Cura Personalis*, care for the whole person.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix D for an example poster.

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### Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. What is your affiliation with Marquette University?
  - a. Undergraduate Student
  - b. Graduate Student
  - c. Professor
  - d. Other (please specify)
2. With which gender do you identify?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Prefer not to answer
3. What is your age?
  - a. 18-24
  - b. 25-34
  - c. 35-44
  - d. 45-54
  - e. 55-64
  - f. 65-74
  - g. 75 or older
4. How safe do you feel on Marquette campus?
  - a. Extremely safe
  - b. Quite safe
  - c. Slightly safe
  - d. Not at all safe
5. How safe do you feel in the city of Milwaukee
  - a. Extremely safe
  - b. Quite safe
  - c. Slightly safe
  - d. Not at all safe
6. How often do you utilize Milwaukee’s Public Bus System?

	More than 3 times per week	1 to 3 times per week	3 times per month	1 to 3 times per month	A few times per semester	Never
To workplace	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To Marquette Campus (if living off campus)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To activities downtown	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To a volunteer or service learning site	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify)



7. While walking around campus do you...

	Frequently	Sometimes	Not usually	Never
make eye contact with people passing by	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
listen to music with headphones	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
say hello to friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
say hello to strangers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
avoid walking past bus stops	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
smile at people passing by	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Do you think Marquette University promotes the values of Human Dignity?

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat Agree
- d. Disagree

9. Can you define the Jesuit concept of *Cura Personalis*?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If yes, please type what it means below.

10. Do you do any volunteer work?

- a. Yes, more than one day per week
- b. Yes, one day per week
- c. Yes, once or twice per month
- d. Yes, once or twice per semester
- e. No, I have not volunteered in the past year

What organization do you volunteer for?

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

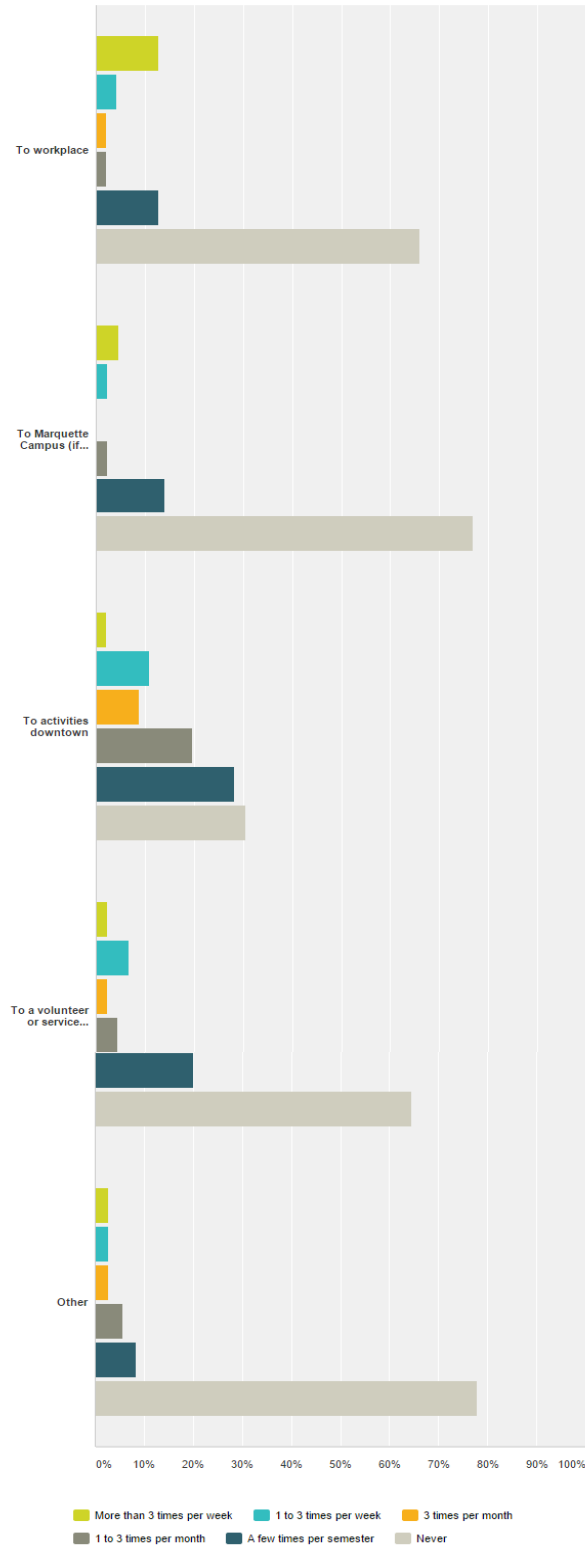
- What is your age, major and favorite color?
  - Does this line of questioning sound familiar?
  - How often do you actually remember the people's names or favorite colors in ice breakers?
- If you wanted to show someone that you acknowledge them while passing on the street, what would you do?
  - What would you do if someone you didn't know acknowledged you on the street?  
(say hi, smile, wave?)
  - Do you have an example scenario?
- Where did you grow up?
  - Would you describe it as an urban or suburban setting?
    - If you were walking in your hometown were you likely to see someone you knew?
- What is something that might have made you uncomfortable in your hometown?
- In what ways is Marquette different from your hometown?
  - In what ways is it the same?
- What makes you uncomfortable on Marquette campus or in Milwaukee?
- Do you feel inclined to smile back at someone who makes eye contact with you on the street if you know them?
  - Does this response change if you don't know them and make eye contact?
- Have you ever changed your walking route to avoid walking somewhere?
  - What was it that you wanted to avoid?

- How often do you think you change your route for this purpose?
- How many days out of the week might you wear headphones to class?
- How do you feel about Marquette’s openness with the rest of the city? (as opposed to a closed campus)
- Are you familiar with Marquette’s motto *cura personalis*? What is it?
- What is one or two things that you think is crucial to the definition of human dignity?
- In Kantian Philosophy, Kant claims we have a moral obligation to respect others because they have inherent dignity just by being a human. Do you believe every human has a right to dignity?
  - An article from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy said Kant would make the claim if someone is “once a person, [they are] always a person (barring, say, brain death), and so individuals cannot forfeit dignity,” meaning a person’s actions could not take away their right to dignity, even if they do not live up to the worth that dignity entails. What’s your reaction to this? Do you think there comes a point when someone no longer deserves human dignity?
  - Have you ever met anyone who you believe lost their right to human dignity?
  - What would it entail to no longer have human dignity?
- What person or group of people do you think about when you think about people who deserve dignity that may not receive it?
- Do you think Marquette students as a whole body are aware of the issue of human dignity?
  - What about the student population makes you feel this way?

## Appendix C: Survey Chart

How often do you utilize Milwaukee's Public Bus System?

Answered: 49 Skipped: 0



Appendix D: Example Poster

# Humans of Milwaukee

from the Tumblr account: [wearehumansofmke](#)

