

Stigma of Homelessness

Introduction

Waiting to interview for her dream job, she notices that the receptionist glances sideways at her. “The receptionist *knows*” is her first thought as she recalls countless firms who turned her down, a few she has been fired from, and others she chose to quit because people refused to put aside the fact that she was homeless. She had to leave the homeless shelter this morning at 7:00am, and filled the two-hour time slot before the interview walking around a park feeling like the infamous “bag lady.” Her current salary barely feeds both her and her child, but finding a job that meets her level of qualification feels next to impossible; she has bachelor’s degree, but also the inescapable title of “homeless.” She sleeps at the shelter, as does her young child and has had job acceptances revoked when the telephone number written on her application was answered, “Lexington Homeless Shelter, this is Janet – how may I help you?” The look from the interviewer at the accounting firm makes her hopeful, and she is careful to steer the conversation away from things like transportation to and from the jobsite, or anything else that might clue him into her unique situation. She hopes that eventually, people will forget her homelessness – or at least become unable to discover it, and view her on a level playing field.

My main question is: are the poor, specifically the poor who are homeless, stigmatized? And if so, what effects does that stigma have, and why? The ways in which society is structured does not allow impoverished individuals to break free of the poverty that holds them captive. In the example above, a woman who is best qualified for a job might be turned down because she is homeless, and the title of “homeless” brings with it a bundle of other, more negative adjectives to describe a person. We need first to understand the way in which our views color our beliefs and vice versa. A stigma tarnishes and in some ways defines a person and is a way for others to

identify how a person should be treated. The stigma of “the homeless” as a single unit colors our view of specific individuals and is a contributing factor in the cycle of poverty. When meeting someone new, rather than draw on our own new experiences with an individual to determine character, the first few meetings are based mostly on information we know about the individual; various judgments we can make about an individual based on common stereotypes about individuals from their same group (i.e. teachers as compassionate, the homeless as lazy) contribute to one’s view of the particular individual. For example, if Jill Smith’s homelessness conjures up thoughts of unreliability, possible danger, and laziness, she will be much less likely to build positive relationships and be taken seriously by potential employers.

Homeless individuals constantly fight an uphill battle against a stigma that creates in them a lost sense of self. The stigma and resulting negative associations made about homeless individuals is one that keeps them in their place and unable to move forward; their stigma is for the most part universal but is one that keeps them stagnant and unable to advance. The stigma effectively holds them in a place in which they are unable to make forward progress. By exploring the effects of stigma on the homeless as well as the possibility that a stigma holds the potential for positive change, I will ultimately argue that that stigma affects people who are homeless negatively and holds them in the cycle of poverty.

Understanding Stigma (What is it? How does it differ from other normative classification?)

A stigma is a stain on the character of a person and is a “situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1). Stigma often takes its form in the assigning of negative characteristics to an individual based on the false beliefs about a larger group that the individual belongs to. Erving Goffman subtitles his book *Stigma*, “notes of the management of spoiled identity” because a stigma is always damaging to the psyche of an

individual. Goffman uses the term stigma “to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman, 3) to an individual and reduces said individual “in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 3) whose shortcomings are viewed as massive personal failures. It is at some level both necessary and normal to categorize people in an attempt to better interact with them in our everyday lives. However, a stigma carries with it a level of negative expectation. When defining how society characterizes the homeless, the view of them is destructive and one that discriminates based on previous ideas. For example, a child who is repeatedly told he is not good enough at math will over time begin to internalize this assertion; rather than try to overcome his difficulty, he will in some cases begin to cover low test scores in math with the answer “I’ve never been good at it...working harder won’t help...”.

Goffman states that “the standards [one] has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be” (Goffman, 7). This assertion indicates that a homeless individual who is stigmatized by others will begin to believe, if he does not already, that he is incapable of finding a stable place of residence or of bringing himself out of the world of poverty among other things. Although a stigma is thought to work to motivate individuals to step out of their stigma, this idea does not work that way when applied. The actions that big-time Wall Street financiers take to accept bonuses that we do not think they deserve should be stigmatized. However, although the behavior should be labeled negatively, the person should be allowed room for change. The negative association should not be made with *all* Wall Street financiers but with those financiers who *actually* commit the behavior characterized as negative in order to move forward. In the same way, I believe a stigma associated with all homeless persons has many negative effects, and few to no positive effects.

Our society assigns each person a social role that tells him how to behave in certain social situations. This closely aligns various stigmas with specific social roles, thus placing on people an “undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (Goffman, 5). A stigma does more than identify a person in the way a social role does; it handicaps a person in a way that forces him to “face unwitting acceptance of himself by individuals who are prejudiced against persons of the kind he can be revealed to be” (Goffman, 42). The key to Goffman’s theory on stigma is the phrase “*undesired* differentness”; when talking about the homeless, the stigma is not positive. One does not hear the word homeless and associate positive traits. Rather, “homeless” is associated with traits such as lazy and unmotivated, among many.

While some people who are homeless have these negative characteristics, it is important to distinguish a negative characterization from a stigma. Characterizing a person as lazy because he has demonstrated lazy behavior time and again is not unjust. However, a stigma allows one to make negative judgments based on the title a person is given rather than on any actual behavior. The title “homeless” is socially viewed as an imperfection, and the nature of stigma speaks to the human tendency of “imput[ing] a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one” (Goffman, 5). In this way, we can see stigma as destructive, *unjust* discrimination. From a psychological perspective, most of how we think of ourselves, and the self-imposed limits of what we are capable of, come from others and the views they have of us (or even of the views we perceive they have of us). A stigma is an unjustified, negative characterization of a group of individuals. Negative labels cause an individual to feel badly about an action or a personality trait he has and can sometimes work positively. For example, if a child molester is released from jail, the stigma associated with being a child molester does not allow him to exist in society without changing himself. The stigma associated with poverty and homelessness is, however,

very different. We do not want the homeless to feel lazy because of the stigma imposed on them; if an individual is lazy, it is absolutely appropriate to categorize him as such, but that same individual should not be categorized by a label that he does not represent.

The Labeling Theory

Labeling Theory provides another way for us to conceptualize the way in which we view others. This theory, which holds that people are assigned labels and assign labels to others in order to better interact with one another, suggests that the behavior one is labeled for, whether positive or negative, is perpetuated by the label he is given. If an individual is labeled as “lazy” he will begin to view himself as such and perform all actions through the lens of laziness. However, label and stigma are not necessarily linked; one can have a label and not have the stigma associated with it, as may be the case when one is a job applicant or a student. Labels are not always inaccurate; labeling becomes problematic however either when it is inaccurate or when stigma follows a label. A homeless man for example, is held captive by the labels others put on him as a result of his being homeless. Although labels can be assigned without judgment following, the word *homeless* carries with it a heavy burden that all who experience the label are subject to. Traits such as lazy and unmotivated may apply to the homeless, but not simply because they are homeless. The label simply “initiates an attributional process through which people interpret other aspects of a person in terms of the mark [homelessness] and respond to stigmatized individuals on the basis of their stigma at the expense of their individuality” (Kurzman, 187). Therefore the act of labeling does not necessarily have stark repercussions; the stigma associated with the label is the directly correlating factor to the homeless because although the label of “homeless” may be accurate, the stigma associated with it may not be.

We can also make the distinction between a label and a stigma. Human beings need

labels for people/each other to know how to interact with one another. However, by labeling someone homeless, we make many assumptions about that person's life – their ambitions (or lack of), their family, their motivation – and box them into a lifestyle of mediocrity *if* they escape homelessness. When a label provides accurate generalizations about others, it could be helpful, but when a label is associated with a stigma (which is necessarily negative), the individual's reputation is tarnished such that he is unable to recover.

Value Judgments

Whether consciously or subconsciously, we make value-judgments on people based on what we are told about them, the way they look, the material possessions they have or do not have, their speech, who they are friends with, and much more we fail to be aware of. A value judgment can be defined as any judgment about ourselves or others that either approves or disapproves of an action or pattern of actions. Often our value judgments color our perception of an individual and determine whether we deem their behavior appropriate or inappropriate – right or wrong. It is appropriate to make value judgments in certain situations – for example, it is very appropriate for a woman to decide not to go down a dark alley late at night where a man in a long black coat stands with a grin. It is clearly inappropriate in others. A homeless man or woman should not be looked at disapprovingly for his or her life circumstances when one knows nothing of the man's background. While it is not necessarily detrimental to an individual to make value judgments, the judgments become negative only when they prevent an individual from thriving.

Sanctions

Sanctions might be helpful because of what they promote, but we need to make the distinction between a sanction and a stigma. A sanction has time limits and allows for the

possibility of motivation through the limits; the nature of a sanction implies belief in the individual that because he does not need the assistance forever and is only allowed to have it for a specific amount of time. If, for example, a homeless individual were allowed to stay at a shelter for only a specified amount of time, that individual might be more motivated to quickly find a job that pays enough for him to live comfortably. Stigma however, is placed on the individual for as long as he is homeless and possibly after and allots only negative characteristics to the individual. Stigmatized individuals are “disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, cover) and are not allowed a way out of their negative social role.

Is the stigma a good thing? Is it helpful?

Stigma holds the potential to generate positive change in the same way that criticism begs motivation, but is not helpful (and is often/always harmful) when linked to the homeless.

However, a stigma is necessarily negative thus damaging, especially as related to the discussion of personal and ego identities. Negative criticism of one’s self can sometimes help build positive characteristics through self-reflection. However, when dealing with the stigma of the homeless, the stigmatization does not allow for anything but negative consequences because the very nature of the stigma holds one in place and says that he is unable to move from where he is. Stigma breeds a diminished view of self and a perceived inability to accomplish anything. One of the women in Liebow’s book asked, “How will I ever get out of here...I’m working as hard as I can but I can’t get ahead” (Liebow, 201).

Do We Stigmatize the Homeless?

According to the estimates of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, “on any given night in America, anywhere from 700,000 to 2,000,000 people are homeless”

(Homelessness, 1). For this statistic to hold true, there must be something keeping Americans on the streets, and stigma is a common thread.

When the word “homeless” is mentioned, we think of many other things besides simply not owning a home. In a case study about homeless women, Elliot Liebow questions our definition of homelessness. He challenges our perception of the homeless as ignorant, uneducated, and sometimes crazy people who have low aspirations. He says that “those women who may have been mentally ill (or alcoholic or drug addicted) by one or another standard were homeless for exactly the same proximal reason that everyone else was homeless: they had no place to live” (Liebow, xiv). To view the homeless in a more positive light and allow them to move out of homelessness requires a shift in perspective in which we move from stigmatizing them to associating the label, “homeless” with what it truly means: one without a home.

One frequently made assumption about the homeless is that the majority of them suffer from mental illness and are therefore unable to be helped. According to national statistics from the National Coalition for the Homeless, only “16% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness” (National, Who, 3), most of which are able to function normally in society. This is not to say that a high number of the homeless do not suffer from mental illness and/or illicit and damaging drug use. However, the knowledge that there is a percentage of mentally handicapped homeless persons, for example, should not imprison the larger majority of the homeless and chain them to their respective social boxes. There should be no judgment to follow labeling one as homeless. We wrongly allow the meaning of *homeless* to extend beyond persons living “outside conventional dwellings, either...in shelters for homeless persons or in locations that are not intended for dwelling – on the streets, in abandoned houses, or in public places such as bus stations or hospital waiting

rooms” (Rossi, 4), to various negative judgments based on their label. The association of a homeless individual to “mental illness and the extent to which a person is held responsible for [the following] stigma determine the amount of pain inflicted upon him and how favorably he is evaluated” (Farina, 421).

Two common thoughts about homelessness that contribute to our negative portrayal of any individual associated with the title, “homeless” is that homeless individuals are such because they choose to be/are lazy and that they exist in single units. However, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless, “one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population is families with children” (National; Families, 1). In fact, in 2007, “23% of all homeless people were members of families with children” (National; Families, 1), a strong portion of whom were victims of domestic violence. Statistics prove that “nationally, approximately half of all women and children experiencing homelessness are fleeing domestic violence” (National; Families, 3) thus proving that they are not simply homeless because they choose to be or because they are lazy but often because they have no other choice. Employment is also linked to laziness among the homeless. There is a major misconception that the homeless are such because they are unwilling to work; many studies report that at least 25% of the homeless are working but that “in the median state a minimum-wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing” (National; Who, 4).

Another huge assumption made about the homeless is that they are all addicted to some type of drug. Addictions and disorders are frequently associated with the homeless for various reasons, and the common conception is that the homeless man begging for money on the side of the road will go straight to the liquor store or to a local drug dealer rather than spending his five

dollars on a sandwich. Like the others, this conception is false. Less than half of all homeless men, women, and children (a meager 37%) are dealing with issues of substance abuse (National; Addiction, 1) which does not in any way make it okay for the general conception of the homeless to be those who struggle with addictions. Sometimes the data is twisted to make these numbers appear higher than they are, but “studies that report substantially higher numbers often over-represent long-term shelter users and single men, and use lifetime rather than current measures of addiction” (National; Addiction, 1). Those who do struggle are viewed as unwilling or poorly motivated to overcome their addiction. Although this is the most commonly held conception by the public, “the numerous barriers to treatment and recovery opportunities” (National; Addiction, 2) are unknown. The homeless usually lack access to transportation and other supportive services and “typically do not have health insurance, including Medicaid [which] means that few homeless people with addictive disorder are able to find the resources necessary to pay for their own treatment or health care” (National; Addiction, 2).

Single men are also thought to comprise the majority of the homeless population which may contribute to the idea that they should be able to make it on their own because in a society of male dominance, we are taught that men are independent and should be able to shoulder the responsibility not only of themselves but of a family as well. In 2005 however, “a survey by the U.S. conference of Mayors found that single men comprised 51% of the homeless population” (National; Who, 2).

Although these statistics may be higher or lower than found by the National Coalition for the Homelessness, any contradiction between the truth of homeless individuals and the way they are thought to be is a stigma. Statistics gathered over the long term verses the short term differ because one either gets a snap shot of poverty or one that leaves out many individual behaviors.

The problem arises when the homeless are lumped into a massive sum of individuals that are all dysfunctional in many ways: lazy, addicted, unmotivated, mentally ill. These individuals are not allowed the freedom to be themselves or to come out of the stigma they are assigned to.

Homelessness, however, crosses all boundaries. It affects men and women, black and white, those with and without jobs, young and old, and those with and without families, and many people think that homelessness is a package deal – one that comes with a load of other issues. Regardless of the numbers given in statistics, it is crucial to note that not all homeless individuals, and the minority of homeless individuals in some cases, have the characteristics assigned to them. However, according to previous estimates, “two-thirds of the homeless are not mentally ill, three-fifths are not alcoholics, three-fifths do not suffer disabling physical disorders, and 90 percent do not abuse drugs” (Rossi, 25). These statistics point to the idea that the homeless are not simply a massive homogenous group that can be defined by similar, negative characteristics. However, following that statistic, one must ask for the reason that one in four homeless individuals remain “homeless for two or more years” (Rossi, 45). While stigma may not be the only reason people remain homeless, it is a common thread in many stories and like homelessness is not limited by gender, race, employment status, age, or the addition of a family. Stigma is very debilitating and renders many homeless individuals less capable of success.

How Do We Stigmatize the Homeless?

As was previously discussed, the stigma associated with homeless individuals is a negative one; it is in many ways very debilitating and causes homeless individuals to be viewed in a negative light. Although there used to be more of an association with men and homelessness, that is no longer the case. The shift from “old” homelessness in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, to the “new” homelessness of the 1980s made citizens without homes harder to ignore. Rather than

sleeping in plain sight on the street, the “old” homeless were “concentrated in Skid Row, an urban feature that one could avoid and hence ignore” (Rossi, 13). However, the “new” homeless were found sleeping on the street, “in doorways, in cardboard boxes, in abandoned cars, or resting in railroad or bust stations or in other public places” (Rossi, 13) making it hard for others to overlook their problem. No one was left oblivious to the existence of the homeless.

Homelessness had been stereotyped as a male’s problem for a while because it was mostly men that lived on Skid Row, but people began realizing that homelessness now is a people problem – one that affects men, women, and children alike.

Around the 1980s, the deinstitutionalization movement caused homelessness to be associated with poor mental health; “persons with mental disabilities and histories of psychiatric hospitalization were overrepresented among the homeless. These findings prompted emergence of a new stereotype of the homeless person as a single psychotic adult” (Robertson, 341). The common conception became that people with some type of mental illness constituted almost the entirety of the homeless population, when in reality, persons with a severe mental illness constituted less than half of those without homes (Robertson, 341). The association of homeless persons with mental illnesses continues to be strong, and points out that stereotypes work in ways that make what is generally or more often true of a specific group of individuals, true of the majority of individuals in that group. Studies found that “contrary to some previous claims that persons with severe mental illness constituted up to 95% of the homeless adult population, severe mental illness did not apparently characterize the majority of homeless persons” (Robertson, 341). They also found that “even among persons with severe mental illness, their disability alone was often not sufficient to explain their homelessness” (Robertson, 341). The

reality of the lesser ties of homelessness to mental illness than previously thought do not, however, lower the stigma associated with homelessness.

Because there is already an existing stigma on the poor, those who are homeless are assigned a double stigma: impoverished and homeless. Three pages in the Oxford Unabridged Dictionary are given to the definitions of “home” and its derivatives, most of which “stress one or more of the themes of safety, family, love, shelter, comfort, rest, sleep, warmth, affection, food, and sociability” (Rossi, 5). If one does not have a home, it is assumed that he does not also have these things, or have them in the quantities that a “normal” person would. The exclusion of these things from one’s life makes him unequal and lowers his status among those who do have these things. There exists a belief that the homeless are unable to provide for themselves and their family because they cannot provide something so necessary as shelter; this belief makes many weary of attributing positive characteristics to the homeless. In some cases, homeless individuals are viewed as undeserving of the same commodities that individuals who are not homeless are offered. One of the women Liebow had the privilege of talking with said that “discrimination in housing” was a huge problem for many of the homeless women she knew. She said, “we may have the money to rent an apartment, but the ‘minimum income requirement’ is out of reach for many of us; rental policy restricting the number of persons per apartment directly prevents poverty-level wage earners from obtaining housing” (Liebow, 66), a policy that may have been put in place specifically to keep the homeless out. This both perpetuates the cycle of homelessness as well as furthering the stigma that the homeless do not work hard enough. The belief here is that the homeless are unreliable and cannot be depended on or trusted to follow through with their commitments.

Furthermore, many are quick to assume that a homeless individual is in some way either dangerous or disabled. Often our aim to keep the homeless off the street and out of sight stems from the fact that “the homeless are thought to be dangerous because they *look* dangerous” (Abbarno, 143). People may also be offended at the presence of a homeless man who has been unable to bathe for a week, and when talking generally about the homeless, many people argue, “that the homeless contribute to the demoralization and destabilization of entire communities” (Abbarno, 144). This view stems only from assumptions based off of the few homeless who are continually unkempt. However, if we assume of the homeless that, “disheveled people connote dangerousness, this just shows a lack of understanding and a bias on our part” (Abbarno, 143).

Although we may stigmatize the homeless for what may seem like “good reasons,” such as recreational use of illegal drugs or mental illness, it is inappropriate to stigmatize a group of people for the behavior of a few. Viewing an entire group negatively based on patterned behavior of part of the group changes the act from appropriately associating negative behavior with a specific people to associating negative characteristics to people who may not associate with those actions. Perhaps, for example, the average college student is more apt to exhibit lazy behavior than is the average homeless person, but the college student does not carry with him the stigma of laziness. The “2007 United States Conference of Mayors ‘Hunger and Homelessness Survey’” found that approximately 37.1 percent of homeless individuals are dealing with issues of substance abuse. The study cited higher reported numbers of substance abuse as “over-represent[ing] long-term shelter users and single men, and us[ing] lifetime rather than current measure of addiction” (Homeless, 1). Although some studies report these numbers closer to 50 or 60 percent of the homeless abusing alcohol, studies about alcohol abuse on college campuses have comparable numbers; studies done by the Department of Health and Human Services found

that “past month alcohol use was reported by 63.7 percent of full-time college students” and that “binge and heavy use rates for college students were 43.6” percent (Results, 37). Society allows college students the opportunity to correct their deviant behavior and does not stigmatize them while in the process. However, because of the drinking behavior of some homeless individuals, the entire community is looked down upon. The 2007 Bureau of Justice statistics revealed that 66.4 percent of high school seniors reported using alcohol within the last twelve months, and 44.4 percent reported using alcohol within the last 30 days (Drug, 1). However, the knowledge of these statistics does not make one view individual high school seniors in a less positive light. Why then does the term “homeless” add such negative connotations?

There is no doubt that certain behaviors are negative and should carry heavy consequences, but it is important to understand that the person with the label (i.e. homeless) does not always behave in ways associated with the stigma such as recreational illegal drugs, or laziness. A college student drinking to get drunk is in many cases seen as normal behavior for that particular stage of life. A homeless man however, although he may be drinking to cope, is not allowed the same leeway with his behavior. The reasoning for drinking may be the same, but one person is chastised for his behavior, and the other (the college student) is encouraged to recall drunken stories as signs of a “well-lived college experience.” The stigma of the homeless shows up in the way they are viewed and does not allow homeless individuals the same privileges as those who are “normal”; “it is not the attribute, per se, that is a stigma, but the ‘definition of the situation’ or the social perception of the attribute which deems it a stigma” (Waxman, 68). In the book *Tell Them Who I Am*, for example, Elliot Liebow works with many homeless women to “break down the simplistic stereotypes and dehumanizing labels so often used to describe” (Liebow, cover) them. He finds that judgments such as “‘mentally ill,’

‘alcoholic,’ ‘drug addicted,’” (Liebow, xii) and other negative characterizations are commonly used to describe and explain homeless people.

Liebow tells the story of many homeless women and describes the struggles they endure as they try to thrive in a society that views them incapable of survival in the ‘real world.’ He says that at some level,

we seem to accept or ignore conditions of homelessness that mock the values we claim to hold: people who work full time and cannot live on what they earn; people who are put in jail because they have no place to live; people who feel safer living on the street than in public shelters; people in shelters who walk 11 blocks to use the toilet in Union Station rather than use the toilets in the shelter; shelters in neighborhoods in which the homeless are not permitted to walk, but are bussed in at night and bussed out in the morning; and on and on and on (Liebow, 230).

When our American values of “work harder and you will succeed” fail, we are quick to blame the individual rather than the system through which they are unable, not incapable, of succeeding in. The stigma then is perpetuated through society’s misunderstanding of the individual’s ability to get himself out of his situation. However, we see an active stigmatization when we examine what happens when a homeless individual attempts to lift himself from his situation through the societal view that he is unable to succeed or incapable of success.

In Liebow’s account, he talks to a woman who was fired from a receptionist job at a doctors’ office when the office found out she was living in a shelter; “‘If I had known you lived in a shelter,’ Kim said the doctor told her, ‘I would never have hired you. Shelters are places of disease.’ ‘No,’ said Kim. ‘Doctor’ offices are places of disease” (Liebow, 54). Perhaps there should be an implementation of specific laws that work to prevent the stigma. For example, not allowing employers to fire employees based on racial discrimination carries with it an implied equality between races; a law that stops employers from firing based on homelessness could also go a long way in keeping homeless individuals from being stigmatized.

The media is also partially responsible for the ways in which the homeless are stigmatized. Homelessness is not accurately reported on often, and as a result, most Americans have no personal familiarity with homeless people (Reynolds, 1). When they report, they “often present a misleading picture of America’s homeless as otherwise ordinary people whose problems can be ‘fixed’ by a meal and some overnight shelter” (Reynolds, 7) and continue the association of the homeless with their stigma. It seems possible that if the media began to accurately cover the homeless and pose possible solutions such as education or an awareness of the true meaning of “homeless,” the public view and association of stigma with homelessness would be changed. It would help to alleviate the fact that although the evidence points to the idea that “homelessness is due primarily not to mental illness or other personal problems but to large-scale social and economic inequalities, many people still resist acknowledging such a cause” (Golden, 9).

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How does Stigma Harm the Homeless?

The stigma placed on homeless individuals by society radically alters the identity of the individual. The *personal identity* of an individual is affected by the views others have of him whether correct or incorrect, and often some information is left out or misrepresented in one’s personal identity. At the center of a personal identity “is a full array of socially standardized anticipations that we will have regarding [one’s] conduct” (Goffman, 53). A personal identity allows others to make the “assumption that the individual can be differentiated from all others” (Goffman, 57) by certain personality traits and features, and after a while, a person cannot help but buy into his or her personal identity. One woman said about being homeless, that “you can’t decide what to do because it doesn’t matter what you do. You’re not needed anywhere, not

wanted anywhere, and not expected anywhere. Nobody cares what you do” (Liebow, 30). When a statement like that speaks truth into one’s life, his or her self-efficacy plummets.

The *ego identity* of an individual is how the individual understands himself and incorporates what he knows to be true about himself. Ego identities are molded by personal identities, and the effects of homelessness act to greatly shape and mold the ego identity into a more negative view of self. In Liebow’s study of homeless women for example, he studies two main homeless shelters under very different management. One shelter allows freedom within in the structured environment and encourages the woman to be their best version of self; the other shelter “tends to be directive and authoritarian” (Liebow, 9); the staff in the second shelter maintained a “holier than thou” attitude and saw it as their job to “change the women, to help them out of homelessness” (Liebow, 123). However, the women in authority positions stigmatized the homeless women, viewing them as incapable and powerless. As time passed, the homeless individuals began to mesh their personal identity with their ego identity and also began seeing themselves as the way the staff viewed them. To the staff, “homeless women are homeless because they [are] dirty and dishonest and lazy” (Liebow, 129). Even if the homeless desire at first to break through their stigma, they are more often than not caught in the whirlwind of powerlessness and made to believe the stigma is true.

Not only are the stigmas internalized the homeless, but they also affect others’ actions towards homeless individuals, therefore directly impeding achievement. One woman found that because of the way she felt that she was being viewed by society, she stated that during an interview, “you cannot think clearly, cannot hold an intelligent conversation, your mind wanders, you have difficulty following directions, difficulty remembering, and an attitude of despair, depression, and eventually bitterness” (Liebow, 57). These feelings stemmed from her

realization and understanding that she is characterized by society as less capable of success or undeserving of aid. In a study meant to assess the attitude toward welfare it was found that an overwhelming majority “interviewed agree[d] with the statement: ‘There are too many people receiving welfare who should be working’” (Waxman, 72). Another woman in Liebow’s book told him that the women who worked had to keep the fact of their homelessness a secret. She told him that many times she “had been dismissed from a job because [her] co-workers found out [she] lived in a shelter. At one agency, when [she] told them [she] lived in a shelter, jobs were no longer made available to [her], although [she] had worked for this same agency for the past nine years when living in [her] townhouse as a ‘normal’ person” (Liebow, 54). When reading the young woman’s story there can be little argument that she was dropped from her job for a reason other than the stigma associated with homelessness. The loss of a job because of missing qualifications or an inability to complete required tasks is completely fair, but the loss of a job based on the associations made when using the word “homeless” is unable to be justified.

Homeless individuals are aware of the stigma following their identity and in many cases, especially when looking for a job, learn to pass or cover. *Passing* is the act of pretending that the stigma does not exist, but does sometimes allow for the possibility of being found out and may be necessary in our society. Depending on how or why one became homeless, he might feel the need to *pass* more effectively because Americans make “quite strong distinctions between *local homeless*, known families and individuals who fell upon hard times, and the *transient homeless*, persons believe to be homeless out of choice for an irresponsible life-style” (Rossi, 6). When thinking about homelessness in general, the assumption that all homeless individuals are transient homeless and do not deserve to be helped because if their own irresponsibility is the

cause of their homelessness, then their own responsibility should be the cause of them finding a home again.

Why do we stigmatize the homeless?

Behind every stigma lies a presumed rationale for it. Stigmas typically carry some truth to them, but when applied to the entire population are damaging. We are taught at a young age to categorize people in order to know how to interact with them. Goffman states that “we construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences” (Goffman, 5). People take comfort in knowing a person and will make snap judgments about someone in order to interact with him better. In the case of the homeless, it is detrimental to their forward development.

We often assign social roles to people for our own comfort. It is helpful for a college student going to class to know who the professor is and who the other students are so that he can act appropriately once in class. Very rarely would you find a student in class stand up and begin to lecture without a professor’s permission. Categorizing people into different social roles is helpful in our daily interactions to know when to say what and to whom, and “perhaps the main function of a social role is that it enables others to categorize a person, which makes it easier to deal with him. It makes for anticipated consistent conduct” (Vaz, 32).

Following the idea of anticipated consistent conduct, we know from Goffman’s discussion of stigma that,

we immediately form certain impressions and evaluations of [an] individual, and we proceed to relate to him (or her) on the basis of expectations derived from these impressions and evaluations. This pattern is so typical that we are, in fact, unaware that we have formed these expectations until they are, for one reason or another, called into question. It is only at this point that we may become aware that we have been making certain assumptions about the individual which are actually unwarranted (Waxman, 68).

Through these individual expectations, one realizes that he stigmatizes the poor, specifically the homeless. American society is impressed and surprised when a person who is in poverty rises above it, or when a homeless individual takes on a high-ranking position in society. Because we stigmatize the poor, and the societal assumption that those who are homeless are necessarily poor, we can assume a heavy stigma placed on those who are homeless. During an interview, one homeless man said that the media's portrays "all homeless people as dirty, filthy, scroungy people out there just begging for money, or don't want to work or worthless" (Reynalds, 114). That supposed media portrayal of the homeless is a fairly accurate view of how they are viewed by the general population and may give us insight into our own beliefs as our minds are penetrated by thousands of media messages per/day. If we are told to believe a group of people are a certain way for long enough by powerful people (i.e. the media), it is only logical that we will eventually begin to believe what we are told.

There is also the possibility that some truly believe that there is a personal fault behind homelessness. If the person who is homeless had just tried harder, worked more, not participated in any number of deviant behaviors, society tells itself, he or she would not be homeless. A woman in *Tell Them Who I Am* passes judgment on another woman saying "Judy isn't homeless. She just can't get along with her mother" (Liebow, 83) insinuating that if Judy would swallow her pride, she could have somewhere to live.

It is easier at some level to categorize the homeless negatively and to assign personal fault to their circumstances because if the fault lies with the individual, we as members of society no longer feel obligated to recognize our own obligation to alleviate it. One young woman who frequently volunteered at a homeless shelter asserted when talking about the homeless that, "for many of us it is so painful to confront such destitution amid the surrounding affluence, and to

feel so helpless to affect it, that we shut down our feelings and either look away or get angry at those homeless who are too intrusive to ignore” (Golden, ix). We place blame on the shoulders of the homeless when we stigmatize them in part because “it is a conscience-soothing method of doing nothing toward problem solving” (Waxman, 69). If we stigmatize the homeless for fault at the core of their being, we are no longer obligated to help them and can simultaneously feel that we are doing something right.

Stigma Prevents Us From Seeing Our Obligation

The obligation to the homeless is hard to determine, but clearly lies with more than just the individual. Not only does the stigma of the homeless make it necessary that they receive outside help, but it also blinds us from seeing our obligation. As the homeless began making themselves known by not concealing themselves in Skid Row, society was no longer able to ignore the problem. Recognition of the need for public support came in many ways, one of which “was a celebrated 1979 New York case in which public-interest lawyers sued the city, claiming that New York had an obligation to provide shelter to homeless men” (Rossi, 14). Following this case, many shelters sprung up and the shelters began including women in their mission to fight homelessness, but I do not think our obligation to the homeless can stop at shelter. Because of the stigma associated with being homeless, a roof over one’s head will not provide him money, an education, or a job, and in some cases may make it harder for him to obtain those things. A homeless shelter must therefore extend its obligation to helping men and women raise their perception of self and acquire necessary skills to thrive in their community as well as providing a roof over their heads. There are also welfare departments who have begun housing families in hotel rooms (Rossi), but as I said before, simply providing someone with a roof is not very helpful in getting them off the streets permanently.

However, while the necessity to fix the problem of homelessness may lie outside the individual, the stigma largely prevents anyone from sharing in a desire to help. Homelessness “can continue at this level because we do not find its eradication morally compelling” (Pogge, 3). The media could, in my opinion, do quite a bit to reduce the stigma of the homeless and help people recognize their personal obligation. The media has the power to reach millions, but to do this, we need a media base that is not afraid to challenge our current views on homelessness and is ready to “shake things up” a bit.

Education as a means of informing people of the realities of homelessness could also go a long way in helping get rid of the stigma. Getting the truth to America’s youth would be very beneficial in getting the truth of homelessness to penetrate what people believe and stopping our opinions from hindering capable individuals, because the view of the homeless as lazy individuals who do not care about their lives gets in the way of us clearly seeing our obligation.

Conclusion

It may be true that some homeless individuals have negative characteristics that are rightly assigned to them; however, not every individual shares in all of these qualities, and many do not have any of the negative characteristics. Therefore, judging by the effects of stigma on the homeless and the cycle it perpetuates, it would be best if sanctions could be added, media coverage could be upped, or some other measure could be taken that would reduce the stigma of the homeless, or the effects of that stigma. As the stigma is used now, poor performance and the label of homelessness induces a stigma that perpetuates poor performance; the cycle needs to end.

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