

Panhandlers or street beggars are a highly stigmatized collection of individuals. In addition to publicly displaying their homeless status, panhandlers suffer numerous other indignities while begging passersby for spare change. Despite these humiliations, many panhandlers enhance their self-regard and status by developing relationships with givers who become regular sources of support. These ongoing relationships are advanced by panhandlers who learn to present themselves favorably by managing emotions and stigmatized identities. This study is based on a street ethnography of homeless panhandlers living in Washington, D.C.

STRONGER THAN DIRT

Public Humiliation and Status Enhancement among Panhandlers

STEPHEN E. LANKENAU

There are people who are gonna be rude to you—that are gonna look at you like you're an animal. It's no different than looking at flowers. Some people look at flowers and they say, "That's a beautiful flower." And they stop and smell them. Others look at the thing and say, "That's just something growing in the yard." Seven or eight years ago, people didn't look at you like you were dirt, they looked at you like "OK, you had a bad break." Now, they have the assumption that panhandlers make an awful lot of money. And they're really doing nothing about trying to find a job—that this is all they want to do.

—Walt (a homeless panhandler)

Begging strangers for spare change often is degrading and humiliating work. As Walt tells us, panhandling leads to contact with persons along the street that leaves him feeling like an

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Analyses were completed while I was a postdoctoral fellow in the Behavioral Sciences Training in Drug Abuse Research Program sponsored by Medical and Health Research Association of New York City, Inc., and National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., with funding from the National Institutes on Drug Abuse (5T32DA07233). I would like to thank the fellows in the program for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article, along with the comments provided by reviewers of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. The opinions in this article do not necessarily represent the official positions of the United States Government, Medical and Health Research Association of New York City, or National Development and Research Institutes, Inc.

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ETHNOGRAPHY, Vol. 28 No. 3, June 1999 288-318
© 1999 Sage Publications, Inc.

animal, like dirt, or like a weed growing between the cracks in the sidewalk. These disparaging views of self are difficult for Walt, who was a roofing contractor, husband, and father before becoming homeless and resorting to panhandling. Despite these humiliations, Walt and countless others like him, with similar job and family histories, scratch out a precarious existence by panhandling.

This article describes and theorizes how a class of persons largely disconnected from traditional institutions, such as family or work, devise informal, family-like relationships through a different kind of work. I argue that panhandlers like Walt endure the degrading aspects of panhandling by developing supportive relationships with certain passersby who provide both material resources, such as money or clothing, and an enhanced view of self. These relationships are not easily created nor maintained, however. Rather, I describe how panhandlers successful at developing relationships with passersby learn to deal with harassment and to publicly present themselves in favorable ways. Collectively, I argue that most panhandlers are "stronger than dirt," given their resourcefulness in coping with the material and psychological difficulties of homelessness.

Stated simply, panhandlers are ignored or harassed by some people and befriended by others. Such responses from passersby often lead to feelings of rejection or humiliation since panhandling typically involves a homeless person publicly asking a nonhomeless person for money and, thereby, advertising his or her stigma to a broad, often unsympathetic, audience. These "mixed contacts" (Goffman 1963b) or public encounters between the stigmatized and "normals," reveal a whole array of normative breaches involving issues such as gender, race, and employment status.² These degrading encounters, as Walt indicates, are akin to being viewed as "dirt" or as a polluted entity of some kind and also may serve the latent function of excluding panhandlers from the larger society. The first portion of this article describes how certain public harassment practices lead to various degradations of the panhandler's self.

Panhandlers attend to presentation of self in important ways to contend with humiliations and to develop fruitful relationships. First, in accordance with antipanhandling legislation that

prohibits aggressive or threatening kinds of panhandling actions, panhandlers manage or control their emotions in the face of rejection and humiliations. Similar to persons holding certain service-sector jobs, successful panhandlers learn to control their emotions, and in the process, they sometimes gain respect and loyalty from passersby.

Second, panhandlers often manage their identities or outward appearances to maintain or advance relationships with givers. For instance, a panhandler who receives a jacket from a giver may wear it prominently to demonstrate appreciation. At the same time, however, such a display of "nice stuff" may make the panhandler appear less needy. Hence, panhandlers face countervailing demands from different audiences, which often compel them to manipulate signs and symbols to demonstrate appreciation or need. The middle section of this article describes these two processes—emotion management and identity management—in greater detail.

A passerby who befriends a panhandler typically bolsters that panhandler's self-respect and ultimately may lead to a relationship featuring regular financial or social support. Relationships between a giver and panhandler minimally consist of the giver carrying on conversations with the panhandler and regularly providing money or some other form of assistance, such as food, clothing, or part-time work. These regular interactions between panhandler and certain givers serve as a "tie-sign" (Goffman 1971) or public evidence of a relationship among persons. These tie-signs are status enhancing for panhandlers because they temporarily transform the panhandler from pariah into person. In other words, panhandlers gain status as legitimate persons in their own minds and in the eyes of passersby, by developing relationships with higher status persons or individuals who typically live in homes and have regular jobs. Hence, these relationships serve to counterbalance the otherwise negative treatment suffered by panhandlers while serving as a crucial source of informal assistance. The last part of this article describes these relationships between panhandlers and givers.

One aspect of the approach that I have just outlined—how panhandlers contend with harassment and stigma by

developing relationships with higher status persons—comprises a type of "out-group" strategy (Goffman 1963b). Out-group strategies are processes whereby a stigmatized person relates with nonstigmatized persons in various ways to lessen the effects of stigmatization.³ In a separate study of homeless panhandlers, Anderson, Snow, and Cress (1994) describe certain out-group strategies performed by panhandlers, such as passing as a nonhomeless person, covering or minimizing one's homeless status, and responding defiantly to humiliations. While these types of actions do occur, the out-group strategy I have identified is significant since it goes beyond stigma management and connects to a primary panhandling objective—to gain money and other types of help.

Additionally, this process whereby panhandlers develop relationships with passersby is consistent with a more general process of status enhancement (Milner 1994). Lower status persons typically increase social status in two ways—by associating with higher status persons and by conforming to social norms. Associating with persons of greater status tends to advance status since such relationships or ties perform a legitimating function for the lower status person. A panhandler who regularly speaks to a well-dressed business person, for instance, is likely to be regarded more positively by others than if he or she never speaks to anyone. Conformity to social norms or adhering to higher status conventions also increases status since it places a person in the mainstream. Since a panhandler's low status partially stems from the violation of norms pertaining to issues such as housing, gender roles, and employment status, conforming to these norms is typically beyond the realm of possibilities. However, as I describe, a panhandler's status may be enhanced by conforming to certain interactional norms and by adhering to laws surrounding panhandling.

Finally, attempts by panhandlers to gain sympathy and help from strangers in public reflect exchanges occurring in the larger socioemotional economy, a realm described by Clark (1997) as "a system of give-and-take within which people negotiate many aspects of identity and social worth" (p. 131). Clark's description of the socioemotional economy focuses on exchanges existing largely among intimates, such as family and

Polite

friends, and on the more positive aspects of this economy, such as love, company, gratitude, sex, help, and sympathy. Given the stigmatized status of panhandlers and their public attempts at obtaining socioemotional commodities more commonly exchanged in private, panhandlers often evoke the darker features of this economy, such as indifference, fear, mistrust, and anger. Hence, this article describes the ebb and flow of one facet of the socioemotional economy—the benign and malevolent interactions occurring between panhandlers and strangers in public amidst attempts by each to determine the social worth of the other. Underlying these exchanges is the identity and emotion work undertaken by panhandlers to make sympathetic, if not respectable, presentations of self to strangers and street acquaintances.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

I define *panhandler* as a person who publicly and regularly requests money or goods for personal use in a face-to-face manner from unfamiliar others without offering a readily identifiable or valued consumer product or service in exchange for items received. Throughout the sampling process, I largely selected panhandlers who appeared mentally and physically fit for regular employment. Among both policy makers and the population at large, these able-bodied, often homeless individuals generally are regarded as the “non-deserving poor” (Wright 1989), that is, persons viewed as undeserving of sympathy or assistance since they violate basic norms surrounding work. However, I learned during interviews that these seemingly fit fronts often belied health problems and circumstances that inhibited gainful employment.

During the data collection period, which spanned from December 1994 to August 1996, I sampled mornings, afternoons, and evenings on both weekdays and weekends within five contiguous neighborhoods or sections of Northwest Washington, D.C. This area covered a three-mile corridor beginning in a largely white, well-educated, and affluent residential neighborhood at the northern point and terminating in a large down-

town business section at the southern end. Four of these regions are connected by both a major avenue and a common subway line. I undertook about eighty formal data collection efforts into this area, which were accomplished largely on foot since I lived in one of the five neighborhoods. Including interviews, each journey usually lasted between two and five hours. At the end of the data collection period in August 1996, I typically was able to identify two out of three panhandlers within this corridor as someone whom I had either interviewed or informally had spoken to previously.

As a street ethnographer, my fieldwork largely consisted of wandering the streets in search of panhandling activity, observing panhandlers from a distance, watching panhandlers close-up, informally conversing with panhandlers, and conducting semistructured interviews with panhandlers. I always undertook each fieldwork excursion with a certain amount of excitement and apprehension. The work was exciting because it required a presentation of self that defied the typical kinds of interactions occurring among strangers in public. Whereas the ordinary person generally minimizes uncomfortable interactions with strangers in public by ignoring the other, the street ethnographer's mandate is to actively seek out potentially unusual exchanges that lead to fresh information and new relationships. Toward this end, I found the street ethnographer role to be a challenging and exciting undertaking. However, a sense of apprehension emerged out of the desire to maximize the productivity of each fieldwork excursion by successfully gaining new interviewees every time, or minimally, to make contacts with panhandlers for future interviews. Typically, I gained an interview on every other excursion—outcomes that produced alternating feelings of satisfaction and disappointment.

These emotions of excitement and apprehension partially were fueled by the fleeting and transitory nature of panhandling. On several occasions, upon finding a panhandler and turning a corner to prepare myself for the upcoming interaction, I would return only to find that the panhandler along with sign or cup had disappeared into the pedestrian population at large. That is, the identifying accoutrements and panhandling practices had been temporarily shelved and, thereby, the panhandler was a

panhandler no more. In these situations, I could only pause in surprise before returning to the task of seeking out other panhandlers.

In addition to the street ethnographer vantage point, I gained other insights into the difficulties facing panhandlers by posing as a panhandler and soliciting passersby for two consecutive days in downtown Washington, D.C. Martin (1994) describes this attempt at gaining an embodied sense of one's research subjects through participant observation as "visceral learning." This experience helped me appreciate the "non-person treatment" directed toward panhandlers (Lankenau 1999) as well as the emotion and identity management skills practiced among panhandlers that I describe in this article. Also, I incorporate several observations from this experience into the following analysis to elucidate certain points.

I tape-recorded interviews⁵ (N = 37) and followed a series of open-ended questions that focused on four aspects of the panhandler's experience: street work, relationships, self-issues, and demographics. I paid each panhandler \$10 for his or her tape-recorded interview, which typically lasted between forty five minutes and one hour. Upon meeting a panhandler for the first time, I usually established basic rapport by giving \$.50 and then by explaining that I was a student studying panhandling. Other relevant information that may have influenced rapport with each panhandler is that I am white, male, and of a middle-class background. However, only a handful of panhandlers refused to be interviewed. In addition to these formal interviews, I informally spoke with dozens of other panhandlers during field excursions.

Based on the formal interviews, the profile of the typical panhandler in this sample is as follows: black, single, unemployed homeless male,⁶ in his early forties, born into a lower or working class family in the District of Columbia (1993), and possessed a high school degree or higher. Additionally, the typical panhandler began panhandling in his midthirties or early forties and had been panhandling consistently for the past five years after losing a job in the construction industry. Job losses generally were preceded by a negative life event or events, such as an accident, an illness, a spell of homelessness, a layoff, or a drug

or alcohol problem. When comparing my sample of panhandlers to a sample of Washington, D.C., homeless individuals gathered by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in 1991, the NIDA sample captured a greater proportion of women, younger persons, white and Hispanic individuals, less educated persons, and employed individuals. Only a small proportion of the NIDA sample reported panhandling on a regular basis.

In fact, the great majority of homeless persons across the United States are not regular panhandlers but presumably survive by using various public and private services designated for the homeless. Nationally, Stark (1992) estimates that 17 percent of all homeless persons receive most of their income through panhandling. However, homeless persons in this study gained the majority of their income through panhandling. Homeless panhandlers are then a subset of homeless individuals who largely subsist on contributions solicited from anonymous and known passersby.

HUMILIATIONS OF THE SELF

The study of panhandlers fruitfully connects to other research (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Gardner 1995; Leblanc 1997; Pascale and West 1997) that investigates interaction in public places between "normals" and the stigmatized (Goffman 1963b). Public harassment and humiliation have been a particular focus of these studies. Deploying Gardner's (1995) three categories of public harassment practices—exclusionary, exploitative, and evaluative—in conjunction with other theories that explore stigma cogently describe the degradation experienced by panhandlers as they interact with passersby.

Exclusionary practices are enacted primarily through formal and informal social control measures, such as laws or verbal warnings, and discourage individuals from entering public and semipublic places, such as streets, stores, and restaurants (Gardner 1995). Since panhandlers rely on these spaces to panhandle, they sometimes conflict with pedestrians and store owners over solicitation turf. Conflicts over turf range from angry

