

PERCEPTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS AND STRATEGIES FOR RECEIVING  
SERVICES AMONG THE FLORIDA HOMELESS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Homelessness is a complex problem replete with profound social distress and suffering, but with few adequate solutions. The homeless are a marginalized population particularly vulnerable to structural forces and policy decisions, including lack of affordable housing, unemployment, systemic inequalities, and lack of adequate social safety net.

Perspectives of homeless people are understudied in anthropological scholarship which tends to focus on service providers, with comparatively less attention on homeless people themselves who are commonly subjected to medicalizing and criminalizing discourses.

Using ethnographic research methods, including participant-observation and interviews with homeless people who pursue food pantry services at Hope Helps NGO in Oviedo, Florida, this paper examines the experiences of homeless people in Florida, where the issue of homelessness has been acute and is often depoliticized in public discourses. Specifically, it focuses on coping strategies of homeless people in Oviedo, and ways in which they understand their life circumstances and secure necessary services.

Findings demonstrate that the Florida homeless view reasons for their homelessness as primarily economic, but rarely critique policies behind low wages or unaffordable housing. The narratives also show that the homeless in this study obtain resources through networking, and despite use of assistance services, view themselves as independent, active agents.

Results of this research have potential to improve the way social services for the homeless are structured, and to inform policy relevant to homeless in Florida. Furthermore, this research brings attention to a marginalized problem and population, and considers how particular discourses function to maintain a structurally inadequate system.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Homelessness is a complex problem replete with profound social distress and suffering, but with few adequate solutions. The homeless are a marginalized population particularly vulnerable to structural forces and policy decisions, including lack of affordable housing, unemployment, systemic inequalities, and lack of an adequate social safety net. While homelessness is intrinsically a social and political problem, politicians may intentionally disguise it as purely one of mental illness or deviant behavior in order to reassign responsibility and justify using resources elsewhere. The portrayal of homelessness as a non-political issue is problematic because it distracts from working towards reducing homelessness through meaningful policy changes. Using ethnographic research methods, this paper examines the experiences of the homeless in Florida, where the problem of homelessness has been acute, and the issue is often depoliticized in the local public discourses. In particular, my research focuses on the coping strategies of the homeless in Oviedo, Florida, and the ways in which they understand their life circumstances and secure services necessary for survival.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Anthropologists have increasingly been pursuing research about homelessness (e.g., Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Kingfisher 2007; Lyon-Callo 2000; Lyon-Callo 2001; Mathieu 1993; Rowe and Wolch 1992). One of the most extensive ethnographic accounts of the lives of the homeless from their perspective is Bourgois's and Schonberg's ethnography *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009) in which the authors analyze the structural and social forces shaping the lives of the homeless. In particular, structural violence (Farmer 2004), the way political-economic organization harms vulnerable categories of people, manifests itself in lack of affordable housing, unemployment, legislation that seeks to keep homeless people away and out of sight, requiring the homeless to travel long distances to receive services, as well as the removal of homeless people from encampments and harassment by police officers. Bourgois and Schonberg theorize these practices as legitimized through particular uses of power and normativity, whereby "power is not wielded overtly, but rather 'flows' through the very foundations of what we recognize as reason, civilization, and scientific progress" (2009:18). Specifically, the state wields power through a logic of biopower (Foucault 1980), or a set of state techniques that produces the belief that the government promotes the health and well-being of its citizens, which is internalized by citizens. In the context of biopower, Bourgois and Schonberg conceive of the homeless as lumpen, borrowing from Marx, to convey "a subjectivity that emerges among population groups on whom the effects of biopower have become destructive" (2009:19).

Anthropologists Kim Hopper, Ezra Susser and Sarah Conover (1985) discuss the structural causes of homelessness through a case study of New York City. Hopper et al argue that "the roots of homelessness are found in the economic restructuring of the city" including deindustrialization, or "the decline or relocation of smokestack industries, the loss of

manufacturing jobs, the rise of white-collar professionals, and the refurbishing of certain urban environments” as well as gentrification, the process in which low income residents are displaced, and replaced by high income owners and tenants, “land values in the surrounding areas rise, and old staples of neighborhood services give way to those catering to a more affluent clientele” (2008: 184).

Other scholars have examined the experiences of the homeless through the analysis of the use of space. For example, Rowe and Wolch (1992) argue that the daily routines and social networks the homeless build are based on the services and resources available to them, as well as their own personal goals. When a person becomes homeless they lose the spatially fixed stations in their daily path, such as their home base or work place. In order to cope, such as by obtaining food, clothing, shelter, security, and income, homeless individuals are forced to develop an alternative network that does not rely on these fixed and established stations (Rowe and Wolch 1992). According to Wolch and Rowe, “the philosophies and policies of the service agencies influence client notions about what successful coping entails” (1992:124), such as by meeting day-to-day needs as opposed to reaching long term goals. Some cities focus on meeting the immediate needs of the homeless by providing measurable resources such as food and shelter. Other cities leave the immediate needs of the homeless to the homeless themselves, and focus on trying to get them back into the workforce and into low-income housing, if such is available.

Wolch and Rowe (1992) also examine the process of exiting homelessness. The authors describe two types of exits: shallow exits, which are temporary or unstable, and deep exits, when individuals move into permanent, affordable housing, sometimes linked to social services. According to Wolch and Rowe, “structural and individual factors influence the course of homelessness and type of exit: for example, the lack of appropriate employment or housing

opportunities, denial or termination of welfare or disability payments, or deepening addiction” (1992:118). When individuals begin to exit homelessness they are often affected by “worries about how those left behind will manage, guilt about gaining the opportunity to leave the streets, and fears of leaving the support of their homeless networks” (1992:127). Thus, the authors describe exiting homelessness as fraught with concerns for the sustainability of their new living situation, but also filled with concerns associated with leaving a social space which, despite the suffering and struggles, also offered a new “home” and supportive environment.

The nature of the movement among the homeless has also been examined by Wolch and Rowe (1992). Some movement is voluntary, however, “unlike homed individuals, the mobility of the homeless is much more profoundly influenced by involuntary forces: the police, the welfare system, and local businesses’ attitudes and behavior towards the homeless” (1992:130). In most locations in the US, police perform sweeps to keep the homeless from living permanently in one area, often forcing them to leave their resources behind. The welfare system causes involuntary movement by forcing the homeless to travel long distances out of their locale in order to receive services. Some local businesses force movement by refusing to serve the homeless or forcibly removing them from the premises as soon as a purchase is completed. According to the authors, forced mobility can hinder effective coping and “is to be avoided, since it not only depletes limited financial and physical resources, but also undermines self-esteem and creates dysfunctional (if justified) feelings of anger and alienation” (1992:138).

Other existing anthropological research on homelessness has been conducted with service providers and officials to examine the prevalent discourses that shape the perception of homelessness. For example, Catherine Kingfisher (2007) shows that discourses influence public



policy through particular depictions of who the homeless are, and are therefore far from neutral but rather “fundamentally political and power laden” (2007:94). As Vincent Lyon-Callo (2000) argues, the medicalized discourse of deviancy causes the homeless to self-blame, and leads many shelter workers to believe that the best way to combat homelessness is to help the homeless “fix” themselves. The representation of the homeless as in need of medical care by shelter workers, though well intentioned, reproduces and reinforces the image of homelessness “as a social problem with an origin in individual deviancy” instead of as an outcome of social structure and the economy (Lyon-Callo 2000: 332). The medicalization of the homeless therefore serves to depoliticize what are essentially social and political problems.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, an “individualized” discourse causes the reasons for homelessness to be viewed as an individual problem. Here, shelter workers and service providers focus on improving an individual’s skill sets through methods such as offering job training or resume writing classes. While it may help some people find jobs, it still does not focus on or solve the larger structural issues at hand. When the public believes that the causes of homelessness are individual, it also causes people to not want the homeless in their neighborhood. As Lyon-Callo observes: “Unfortunately, despite the lack of resources adequate to meet the needs of homeless

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<sup>1</sup> An example that illustrates this phenomenon is Arlene Mathieu’s (1993) description of a situation in New York City in which the Mayor continuously deployed the medicalized discourse during a time when the population of homeless people drastically increased in order to shift responsibility away from the city’s administration. If homelessness was understood as a structural problem by policy makers and the public, the author argues, then perhaps the society would be more likely to work toward solutions to address the structural issues that create homelessness, such as by making housing more affordable.

people, widespread public support for political movements aimed at decreasing systemic inequalities, which are a root cause of homelessness, have been largely absent,” and notes that “[i]nstead, local governments and community residents continue to be more likely to attribute homelessness to shortcomings within homeless people themselves. Consequently, the most vocal and organized community mobilizations appear to be aimed at preventing the location of services for homeless people in ‘their’ neighborhoods” (2001: 184).

Another common discourse shaping experiences of the homeless is that of criminalization, which includes legislation that criminalizes sleeping in public spaces, selective enforcement of laws that would normally apply to anyone, such as loitering, but are especially applied to homeless persons, driving them out of the area through police sweeps, and laws that outlaw and punish people for panhandling. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, when “a law is applied to criminally punish a homeless person for necessary life activities in public, like sleeping... if the person has nowhere else to perform the activity” (2006:11) it is violating the Eighth Amendment (the right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment). However, these disciplinary activities often go unchallenged.

Kingfisher (2007) further problematizes the discourse of diversity, which depicts the reasons for homelessness as highly varied. While it is accurate that the homeless are a diverse group, this discourse assists in constructing “marked” and “unmarked” categories of people and also distracts from addressing the shared problem of inequality. The “marked” category consists of homeless individuals considered deserving of attention. They are the ones, if any, that will be invited to discussion. According to Kingfisher, “the most marginalized, the members of the unmarked category, will remain marginalized, and, thus, the problem in which the architects of the diversity argument were attempting to intervene will be recapitulated” (2007:103).

Through analysis of interviews of homeless individuals performed by the Sisters of the Road non-profit organization in Portland, Oregon, anthropologist Lisa Hoffman and urban studies scholar Brian Coffey (2008) found that the homeless are often infantilized through their interactions with service providers. Infantilization, the attitude that service providers know better than the homeless themselves, results in many homeless individuals feeling disrespected, as if they are children, and lead many to “opt-out” of services such as shelters in order to retain their dignity (Hoffman and Coffey 2008). Hoffman and Coffey thus argue that progress towards solving the issue of homelessness “can only be accomplished when they are consistently treated with respect in a variety of settings, retaining a sense of dignity” (2008: 219).

## **Florida as a Research Site about Homelessness**

Building on this scholarship, my research explores the experiences of the Florida homeless in Oviedo, a suburb of Orlando. Florida is an important site for the study of homelessness. In Florida, the situation is particularly acute with over four times more homeless than what shelters can accommodate. There are 86,000 homeless persons in Florida on any given day, and only about 22,000 shelter beds. Furthermore, many Florida cities have passed criminalizing laws that exacerbate the problem of homelessness.

One such city, the metropolitan area of Tampa-St. Petersburg, has the highest rate of homelessness in the United States. According to the 2012 Report generated by the National Alliance to End Homelessness—a nonprofit organization that has been tracking and reporting on this issue—there are 57 homeless for every 10,000 residents, and 20% are children (NAEH 2012:50). Despite the extent of homelessness in the Tampa area, effective policies are lacking to address the structural causes of homelessness, in particular in the domain of affordable housing. In 2013, the city of Tampa passed a new ordinance prohibiting people from sleeping on sidewalks and storing property in public spaces. Laws such as these criminalize the homeless who may have nowhere else to perform these activities, as lack of affordable homeless shelters is another problem faced by this population. Since the passage of the new ordinance, incarcerations of the homeless have increased, while the limited shelters continue to fill every night. The city's current approach focused on the removal of the homeless from public spaces falls short in addressing the problem and diverts limited resources from working to develop effective policies that could help solve the underlying root causes of homelessness.

The city of Orlando has also passed criminalizing laws, making it increasingly difficult for the homeless to survive in this urban environment. The Orlando Municicode, Sec. 18A.09. –

Prohibited Activities in Parks and Recreational Facilities Owned or Controlled by the City, makes it illegal to: (a) Lie or otherwise be in a horizontal position on a park bench where prohibited by signs, (b) Sleep at any time during the hours from sunset to sunrise of the following day, (c) Construct any hut, shanty, or other shelter, (d) Cook foodstuffs except where facilities for such preparations are provided by the City, (e) Set or stroke a fire except where appropriate facilities are provided by the City, (f) Discharge or deposit human wastes, except in toilet facilities provided by the City, (g) Sleep or otherwise be or remain in any bushes, shrubs, or other foliage where prohibited by signs, and (h) Bathe or otherwise be or remain in a water fountain and/or reservoir. While these laws do not specifically mention homelessness, it is clear that the homeless are being targeted, since these are activities that they would need to do in public, having no home in which to sleep, bathe, or cook.

This study examines the experiences of the homeless in the area of Oviedo at the non-profit organization Hope Helps, which helps low income and homeless persons through a food pantry, thrift store, and other assistance services. Specifically, I examine how homeless individuals share, reject, or appropriate the dominant medicalizing and criminalizing discourses in their interactions with service providers, and show how they use networking and “strategic deception” (discussed in findings) to obtain the needed services. The results of this research have the potential to improve the way that social services for the homeless are structured, and to inform relevant policy. Furthermore, this research brings attention to a marginalized problem and population, and considers how particular discourses function to maintain a structurally inadequate system. In this paper I will argue that the homeless generally reject the criminalizing and medicalizing discourses and understand the cause for their homelessness as mainly

economic. However, the economic realm is understood as an autonomous entity, rather than as lack of social safety net resulting from poor policy decisions.

## **METHODOLOGY: SITE SELECTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

Methodologically, this is an ethnographic study involving participant-observation and semi-structured interviews with the homeless in Oviedo, Florida, through the nonprofit organization Hope Helps. Hope Helps was chosen as a research site because this organization assists the homeless in the area by providing a variety of services, including a food pantry and a thrift store. Hope Helps also helps clients apply for government assistance such as food stamps as well as offers free cell phones, and connects them with shelters and other local service agencies. The staff of Hope Helps also conduct advocacy by participating in community events, and hosting “community nights” at local food stores where they advocate while fundraising for the organization. Moreover, over the past two years I have volunteered over a hundred hours at Hope Helps, working in the food pantry and at fundraising and advocacy events. In January 2013, I obtained the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board approval for research at Hope Helps. Moreover, I had volunteered at Hope Helps prior to launching this research; therefore, I had an established professional relationship with this organization.

*My two research questions were:*

- (1) How do clients at Hope Helps understand the reasons for their homelessness? and
- (2) To what extent, and in what ways do the homeless at Hope Helps use personal agency to acquire necessary social services?

My data collection involved extensive participant observation on the days when the food pantry was open (which typically included Tuesdays, Thursdays or Saturdays). I interviewed 18 people who are currently or had previously been homeless and were over 18 years of age, using semistructured interviewing and the conference room as a quiet and confidential space to interview (Bernard 2006:211-220). I recruited interview participants through recommendations

by Hope Helps staff, a flyer describing my research on the Hope Helps bulletin board, as well as by sitting at the food pantry sign-in table, asking clients if they have experienced homelessness and asking them to participate if they had. Some interviewees directed their friends who had experienced homelessness to the study. After obtaining informed consent and conducting the interviews, participants were compensated with one \$10-gift card for their time. Interviews were recorded with permission, transcribed, then coded and analyzed thematically using the NVivo Software for text-based data analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1994). Transcriptions are kept in a password-protected file. All names in this paper have been changed to pseudonyms.



## **FINDINGS**

The findings of this study have been grouped into three main sections; (1) Conceptualizing Economy as “Autonomous,” (2) “People Should Help People. We Don’t Put it on the Government:” Finding Assistance through Networking, and (3) Discourses of Agency.

## **Conceptualizing Economy as “Autonomous”**

The narratives of the homeless in this study reveal that they view the primary reason for their homelessness as stemming from economic circumstances related to housing or employment, rejecting discourses of medicalization and criminalization as it applies to them. However, they typically view the economic realm as an autonomous “abstract” entity, rather than as lack of social safety net resulting from poor policy decisions made by people in governing positions.

For example, many of the people I interviewed lost their housing after losing their job. One emblematic example is Jordan, a youthful woman now living with her husband and their young daughter in a motel. She described her situation as follows:

Well we were evicted from our last place because I was unable to pay because I lost my job in May. So we had to go into this hotel. Now luckily my husband did get a really good job. It’s just now we are trying to find a place and trying to get back on our feet.

Jordan also complained about the expense of extended stays in the hotel and the difficult time she will likely have finding housing after their eviction. Her eviction may be visible on background checks performed by potential landlords—a reporting system that makes it extremely challenging to find agreeable landlords who are willing to take a chance on a previously-evicted tenant. However, her complaints were always limited to the immediate situation and did not consider the broader implications of policies, such as the eviction reporting system that further victimizes the individual. Her parents, whom I also interviewed, ended up in a similar situation when their apartment’s rent increased beyond their means at the end of their

seven month lease. After notifying the office of their intention to move and use the security deposit as last month's rent, they were surprised to find themselves evicted due to what they believe must have been a communication error. Jordan concluded that, "It seems like everybody is just one paycheck away," however, neither Jordan nor her parents complained about housing policies that favor landlords or the lack of safety net that was decisive in their situation such as, for example, in the form of temporary assistance with rent.

Rob, a single man who is currently homeless and unemployed was very aware of the structural issues that affect homelessness. Similar to many of the homeless men I interviewed, Rob supports himself through what some have referred to as "odd jobs," jobs that are temporary and often found on the internet or at temporary services. Rob recurrently provides labor for one homed individual he met, however, since it is only one day a week, often for only three hours, Rob declared, "I can't pay rent with that." During his time on the street he has learned that some other types of income are not enough to keep people in homes either:

A lot of homeless people get social security disability checks and they don't have enough to get a place to stay. It isn't enough income so they live homeless and a lot of homeless people are like older people. Older people that can't get a job, things like that... There's people who are underemployed who just don't have enough money to pay for a place to stay. You know, part-time workers, people that got part-time jobs.

Therefore, Rob's goal to get himself back into a home is to find a full-time job. While he realizes these structural issues, he does not explicitly identify, or complain about, policy

related to low wages or lack of affordable housing that prevent even those whom receive an income from being able to afford even modest housing.

Linda, a woman who became homeless after divorce, voiced similar concerns as Rob by saying, “The minimum wage doesn’t help. It’s too expensive to live right now.” Linda describes her current situation as “couch-surfing” at a friend’s house. She is justifiably bitter about her homelessness as her husband, who is not forced to pay alimony, lives on a six-figure salary in a well-to-do neighborhood of Oviedo. Now Linda is what she calls a “displaced homemaker.” Having been a stay-at-home mom in her previous living situation, Linda found that employers will hardly look at someone just starting out work at her age, despite her Associate of Arts degree. Unfortunately, her AA degree resulted in accruing significant debt, which she will not be able to start repaying anytime soon.

Linda’s complaint of minimum wage that is below a “living wage” and living options which are too expensive is something that has been well documented in Florida. In her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) left her comfortable lifestyle behind to go “undercover” and work in the minimum wage service industry in the Florida Keys. She found that many of her coworkers were living out of their cars or sharing rooms in hotels when they were able to pool their money together. In the course of her experiment to investigate whether full-time work in a service job could be sustainable, she was faced with homelessness herself due to lack of sufficient income and affordable housing. She eventually attempted to work two full-time jobs, which was impossible to handle due to sheer exhaustion, and left the experiment knowing she would not have been able to pay next month’s rent at her trailer home. Unlike her coworkers at her undercover job, however, she had a more

comfortable life to return to. Ehrenreich's documentation of the deterioration of her living conditions as the project went on brings attention to not only the impossibility of material survival on minimum wages in the current US economic structure, but also to the dehumanizing and stigmatizing conditions with which lowest income employees struggle.

Despite Linda's acknowledgment of low minimum wage and living that is too expensive as central forces underpinning her homelessness, very few of the interviewees recognize the role of policy related to minimum wage or housing, and the lack of social safety net that is behind the "unemployment" or living that is "too expensive" or why "the economy is bad" right now. They discuss their economic situation as if there is no policy behind it, as if the economy is an autonomous entity that is either up or down, or that prices for housing cannot be controlled.

### **“People should help People. We don’t put it on the Government”**

The statement that most summarizes the views of the homeless individuals I interviewed came from Jordan’s mother Melissa, discussed earlier, who asserted that “People should help people. We don’t put it on the government.” This was her response when I asked who was responsible for helping the homeless single mothers, the population she dreams of helping when she gets back on her feet. This sort of philosophy aligns with the actions of the homeless who actively seek services from non-profit organizations, support from churches, and assistance from people in their community, and further, when some interviewees stigmatize those who “live off the government.” Stigmatization of government hand-outs, as reflected by Melissa’s comments, contrasts with some of the political discourses which depict the poor as taking advantage of, and even abusing, such hand-outs. Yet, it also repeats and perpetuates right-leaning political positions which call for “smaller government,” and which have been used to justify cuts in the support that the poor need.

#### *Networking: “People should help people”*

Many interviewees have discussed programs and churches in terms of using them to network for connection to services, transportation, places to stay, and referrals. Wolch and Rowe (1992:117) argue that when a person becomes homeless, in order to cope they must “develop alternative networks that do not rely on a spatially fixed home base or job site.” The alternative network may involve homed individuals, as Rowe and Wolch (1992:117) explain:

These relationships may date from the period prior to the onset of homelessness: homed friends and family, social workers, and other service providers. Or they

may be established within the context of homelessness: panhandling clients, local business people, neighborhood acquaintances, and again, service providers.

Liz, a single woman who was living on the streets but is now living in a motor home with a kind individual she met, explained that the local church serves as her main service provider. As a child, Liz dropped out of school to take care of her mother who was dying. She worked at the same place as her mother and would give her mother her paycheck, only keeping what she needed for food and “smokes.” At church, Liz said she would “talk with them and they can give you more feed on where and what. They will do that for you. But you’ve got to speak up... If the place ain’t got buses you can catch, they will take you or they will call the people and talk to them and the people will come and get you.” Liz is referring to the way churches in the area connect people to service providers and how they will arrange for the service provider or church member to drive them there if necessary. Liz and other interviewees have been able to find connection to other services, transportation, and financial support through local churches. Some of the interviewees had always attended church, while others only went to church after they became homeless, in pursuit of services and networking opportunities.

Kelly, a single mother who now has a grown daughter and son, has also benefited from networking with a church she has been attending since she arrived in Oviedo. Kelly moved from Kentucky to Florida to live with her daughter who called her asking for help. Kelly is on disability and in a program called Section 8 in which the government helps pay for her housing. In the past, Kelly had drug problems but was able to keep her disability check if she had it put into the name of a beneficiary. In Kentucky it was under her son’s name, and when she moved to Florida she switched it into her daughter’s name. Her daughter, however, would use Kelly’s

money to pay her own rent and would not give Kelly enough to buy the things she needed, causing tension to build between the two. That year Kelly had passed all necessary drug tests required to receive disability and decided to put the money back under her name. When her daughter learned that the money would not be in her own name anymore, she threw Kelly out. Since Kelly had nowhere to live, her Section 8 was going to be voided, unless she could get into an apartment fast. She asked the church she had been going to for help. Kelly explains:

I almost lost [Section 8] because of the homelessness and taking [my daughter] off the lease and everything. I almost lost it, but my church talked to them and they let me keep it and I immediately moved into the apartment. Just like that.

The same day they inspected it I moved in and I laid on the floor.

The church also paid for Kelly to stay in a hotel until she found the apartment, and helped her pay for the deposit. Individuals at the church have also helped Kelly by giving her a mattress and other household items. Kelly says her church does not usually help out, but since she was a member and was baptized there, when they saw what she was going through they immediately helped. This also suggests that good networking skills can become very important, since churches such as Kelly's might not have the resources to help everyone in need to this extent.

Not only do people network with churches, the narratives of the homeless also suggest they network with service providers in interesting ways. One way the homeless strategize is through networking with non-profit organizations. Linda, the woman who describes herself as a displaced homemaker, uses case management staff at Hope Helps as what she calls, "counseling, just talking to somebody trying to network." According to Linda, the type of support this provides is extremely valuable.



Even though it's one of your primal needs to have something to eat, something to drink, I think that the emotional support is much more important when you're homeless. The camaraderie of just somebody saying, "you will make it, we will help you," just knowing that there are other avenues, other things that are out there, just the information, technology, even something as simplistic as hey here's a computer.

While resources such as food are necessary, it is apparent that the support provided by people who can sympathize and offer help is also something homeless people in this study actively seek. One way they gain sympathy is through sharing the story of how they became homeless with service providers and other members of the community. Kelly, discussed earlier, explained that her reason for sharing her narrative was "I want you to know step-by-step I was not always like this." Lyon Callo (2000) argues that the willingness of the homeless to self-disclose personal information to service providers is part of the hegemony of the medicalized discourse, which encourages self-disclosure and self-governing within the service agency. However, I argue that self-disclosure may also be viewed as a tool used by the homeless in order to gain sympathy and support, and to build relationships with service providers and other members of the community. Furthermore, interviewees not only network through talking to providers and offering their personal narratives, they also may network through participating in services. Rob, mentioned earlier, was looking forward to participating in a new job skills program at Good Samaritan because he said, "I'm also hoping that they give referrals. That employers might actually want to use them. Like sometimes you go to a place like that an employer might stay in touch with them looking to hire sometime. So I'm kinda hoping for that too." These stories of networking suggest

that people do not just use services for their original purpose – for example, job programs for job skills - they also use them to their advantage in other ways.

Another avenue of support utilized by the homeless in this study is connecting with homed individuals in the community. Liz described that together with the individual she shares a motor home with, they do errands for the elderly people they live near, such as mowing their lawns in exchange for money. Bill, a divorced man who has lived in and near Oviedo all his life, has built an extensive network of people from which he gives and receives help. He explains his relationship with one woman in his network as follows:

I'm kind of her adopted brother. She's almost 500 lbs. Her and her husband, they're getting up in age. Sometimes I might just talk to her and she still gives me money, but most of the time she has a little list to do.

Bill also provides carpentry services and other forms of labor for many other people in the community in exchange for money, beer, or cigarettes. Networks such as these can be an important source of income for the homeless, especially when chances for other sources of income are limited. For example, despite Bill's experience and skills in construction and carpentry, when he went to Goodwill for help finding a job, they told him they could not help, and his best bet was the labor pool, a place where employers go to hire cheap, temporary labor. While these networks may not provide enough income to pay rent for a home, they form an important part of many homeless individuals' survival strategy. This survival strategy is similar to what Hopper et al (1985: 213) refer to as "economies of makeshift," using the term "developed by Olwen Hufton to describe the subsistence strategies of the 18th century poor of France" and applying it to the contemporary homeless. It describes how the poor manage to

adapt and survive despite worsening circumstances through taking on “shadow jobs” or informal work including scavenging, salvaging, and hustling.

## **Discourses of Agency**

I conceptualize agency in the way described by anthropologist Sherry Ortner as “the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control in their own lives” (2006: 144). Even those who are not considered powerful have the ability to exercise some degree of influence in the ways events unfold. Agency is also about intentionality and it can be seen in the pursuit of projects. Even though the homeless are not politically powerful individuals, they still have agency in the way they resist, and act to better their lives, even when acting within a constraining system.

The homeless I have interviewed generally reject the medicalizing discourses that depict the homeless as in need of professional help and believe they are able to help themselves through their own personal agency. Rosa, is a divorced woman who was homeless in the past but she is currently renting a room from a family and works part time at the Publix grocery store as a cashier. She has used many assistance services including shelters, transitional housing programs, food pantries, and food stamps. However, Rosa advises that, “You really have to be proactive and be independent and take care of yourself. No one’s going to really help you out of it, you have to help yourself out of it.” For example, Rosa told the story of how she learned about and applied to Scattered Sites, a transitional housing program, while at the women’s shelter:

Publix in the beginning would give me 37-38 hours a week, which was not quite 40. It was pretty much consistently that for the first couple years I was there [at the shelter]. And then I went down to Tawny’s office. Tawny was a social worker that worked at the end of the hall. One of the ladies that lived there, housemates in the shelter, Lindsay, came in. We were eating dinner one night, she says “well

you know I saw Tawny and I'm moving into Scattered Sites and I got this apartment" and I'm like, well I want to do that too. She said "well go do it." So I just trotted my little self down to Tawny. I sat down and she was writing up the papers. Then I went to see my social worker, who was one of the ones that actually took care of the residents at the shelter, and she was furious with me. She said "you don't have a full time job you cannot apply for Scattered Sites." I said "well I already did and Tawny's already done the paperwork and she's got me set up with Mustard Seed."

Rosa's determination paid off and she was accepted into Scattered Sites. The program paid part of the Rosa's rent for an apartment of her choosing that is within a specific price range. She also was able to receive furniture from Mustard Seed, a program that supplies furniture and other household supplies for free to people who need it. Rosa still sees herself not as dependent, but as an independent agent who utilizes these services within an otherwise unsupportive system. Even when her social worker did not support her in applying to Scattered Sites, she took the initiative to apply anyway.

Such agentic decisions and discourses are also evident in other narratives in this study. John, a 67 year old man who is currently living in a friend's house, is retired and unable to work due to his emphysema. He has lived in rooms in other people's homes in the past in exchange for taking care of the property. However, the arrangements do not always last:

I'm put it like this. I was working for the good sister and the bad sister took over the business and we didn't get along. See, she wanted me to work and pay rent and see that wasn't in the agreement I had with the good sister and the mother.

Alright, so I stayed there about a couple months after that, then I just moved.

Then like I said I'm in between. I'm staying with some friends right now but you know that just... you know how that is.

Since living with others has been unstable for him, John is applying for disability, which he describes by saying "I'm preparing myself now that I don't get homeless no more. Ever again." His experiences relying on others, which have often ended with him becoming homeless again, have given him the determination to pursue disability income in order to become more independent and thus have a more stable living situation.

Although the homeless depend on the services, they nevertheless view it as strategizing on their own part, building on what is available to them. They also reject services that get in the way of their own strategy by being too structured or disciplining. For example, Rob, discussed earlier, was wary of becoming part of a job skills program. He said:

"I'm going to get with Good Samaritan. I'm just going to see. I hope it isn't too structured, to where every day of the week I might have to do something for them... It would work against me... Well I mean every day. There's other things you gotta do every day."

The homeless therefore build their own routines, utilizing services but not depending on them fully, and rejecting services that interfere with their ability to use different resources.

### *Strategic Deception*

In order to obtain needed services, some homeless also use what I refer to as strategic deception. Jim, who had been living in camps and shelters, revealed that, "because I'm not

substance abused I had to lie my way into a programming format just to get housing.” The program that Jim joined was a Housing-First Program which houses substance-abusing individuals as they attempt to quit drugs or alcohol and find work. While Housing-First Programs exist for people with substance-abuse, there are no comparable programs in the area to house sober homeless people before they find a job, a situation likely relating to the medicalization of homelessness. Liz, discussed earlier, explained her strategy as follows: “Am I gonna lie? Yes I have, because I wanted it that bad. I need it. It’s embarrassing but I went back I apologized. That’s the main thing. I mean it’s wrong, but I had no problem doing it.” Even though Liz later regrets lying, she had no problem doing so in the first place since it was out of necessity. An important theoretical concept that helps to understand strategic deception is that of Gray Zones, originally described by Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi (1989) as a morally ambiguous space where survival imperatives overcome human decency. Bourgois and Schonberg in their long-term ethnographic research in the San Francisco area (2009) identify Gray Zones in their work with the homeless and suggest that “addiction under conditions of extreme poverty and concerted police repression creates a morally ambiguous space that blurs the lines between victims and perpetrators,” and that “most people fail to see the everyday ‘state of emergency’ in which the socially vulnerable are forced to live” (2009:20-21). Likewise, in my own research, the homeless cope and survive in severely impoverished conditions. Therefore, I suggest viewing strategic deception not as something that should be morally condemned, but as an agentic attempt to obtain services by a vulnerable marginalized population.

## CONCLUSIONS

Anthropologist Catherine Kingfisher asserts that “if we, as academics and activists, want to intervene in systems of inequality, it is imperative that we attend to the views and actions of those who have an influence on the conditions of oppression or its alleviation, that is, policy makers, politicians, the media, and so on” (2007:93). I believe this is an important aspect of understanding social inequalities, however, I argue that the homeless are not passive participants in this system and that their views and actions need to be taken into account as well. James Pfeiffer and Mark Nichter (2008:413) suggest that in the context of global health three sets of stakeholders and centers of power need to be addressed: the decision makers, care providers, and “the populace who are the final reservoir of power...[and] set the limits for those who exercise authority.” Yet, the perceptions and expectations of homeless people themselves are less often addressed, and their power should not be overlooked. The understandings of the homeless themselves about the reasons for their homelessness, and the strategies they use in order to receive the necessary services are significant in helping us understand how current social policies affect future possibilities and the everyday lives of the homeless.

Anthropologist Elzbieta Gozdzik (2004:206) discusses the medicalization of human suffering, which in many ways relates to the medicalization of homelessness. She argues that “[w]hen suffering is defined as a medical problem, it is removed from a public realm and is no longer within the purview or power of ordinary people.” Similarly, the “continuum of care” approach to treating homelessness suggests that the “cure” to homelessness can only be found within shelters where professionals can diagnose and treat individual cases. In both situations medicalization of these issues can help secure funding for these organizations, but also “removes the matter from the political and social context that produced their anguish and loss” (Gozdzik



2004:206). As with other discourses of homelessness, medicalization distracts the public from focusing on the structural causes of homelessness and creating meaningful policy changes.

Furthermore, it is important that services do not have a structure that hinders the homeless from being independent, as the homeless value their independence and feel that the “cure” to their homelessness lies within themselves if offered the opportunity, and often in finding work. When an organization suggests that they themselves hold the “cure” it may be patronizing and infantilizing to the homeless, who prefer to view themselves as independent, and who may opt-out of such services in order to retain their dignity. I therefore suggest that social services view the homeless as active agents, and assist them by providing services without strict and disciplining structures which may impede on their own strategies rather than enhancing their well-being, and to structure services in ways that empowers the homeless by treating them as independent and capable individuals (Ortner 2006). This may be challenging for service providers, who often receive more funding by having stricter requirements, such as by requiring case management procedures in order to receive other resources such as food. Case management style of service provision is a scaffolding strategy wherein the homeless clients must complete certain steps in order to qualify for support services. For example, Hope Helps is currently changing their policies to make intake interviews, during which a case manager sees what other services a person might need, mandatory. Presently, if a person does not come in for an intake interview they cannot get food from the pantry. Their goal is to increase the number of intake interviews so that the organization can receive more funding from the government. David Zipperer, the food pantry manager at Hope Helps with whom I discussed this issue, brings up an important point: when people go to multiple organizations seeking services it limits the resources and funding each has. Therefore, it may be that there is a greater problem behind how services

are funded and how organizations are forced to compete with each other for resources that would need to be resolved in order to meet the needs of the homeless. Whether it was because the homeless were unable to come, or because they did not want to attend, after intake interviews became mandatory several of the homeless I planned to ask to participate in this study did not show up to their scheduled intake appointment and did not return to Hope Helps. Perhaps one way to encourage intake interviews would be to offer an incentive, but not make it mandatory.

The perspectives of the homeless are also valuable in considering the ways in which anthropologists and other social scientists might contribute to the re-politicization of homelessness as an urgent social problem in need of collective solution. This question is particularly important in light of the growing neoliberal rhetoric that prioritizes individual responsibility over meaningful social policies. Therefore it is important to analyze homelessness within the political economy framework (Roseberry 1988)—a concept closely related to structural violence, but one that focuses on the history and laws of the area. This includes an analysis of the policies that were passed that exacerbated homelessness or specific contributions from political decision-makers.

A brief comparison to Adriana Petryna's (2003) ethnography *Life Exposed* is useful to consider. Both the people exposed to, and suffering from, radiation in Chernobyl, Ukraine, as well as the Florida homeless are marginalized populations that are extremely vulnerable to structural forces and violence. They are left to deal with the consequences of policy decisions made by distant decision makers. However, the perceptions of the homeless are in distinct contrast to the perceptions of Chernobyl survivors in the sense that the latter recognize that the government is responsible for their situation and feel they are entitled to compensation. So why

do the Florida homeless not hold the government responsible? Why are their narratives mainly describing the “economy” or “employment” in abstract, rather than shaped by human decisions? I argue that the neoliberal rhetoric, pervasive in the media and political discourses in the US, has caused them to view the economy as an autonomous entity, rather than as lack of social safety net resulting from poor policy decisions. The dominant perspective among the homeless in my study is to blame their situation on a “bad” economy, and, believe it is their responsibility to find a place in it. This internalized responsibility benefits those stakeholders and political actors that stand to gain from neoliberal economic policies by cutting what is perceived as cost, namely social services, as well as limiting wages, benefits, and low-income housing.

David Harvey’s (2005) analysis of the processes through which neoliberalism was implemented is useful in understanding of how neoliberal discourse has become hegemonic. In the 1980s in the US, neoliberalization was advertised as the pursuit of individual freedoms, with “the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade” (Harvey 2005:7). However, Harvey also demonstrates that neoliberalism was used in practice to restore the power of economic elites, who were in danger of losing their dominant positions. Consequently, as Harvey observes (2005:16) “redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project.” While the discourse of freedom is meaningful when considering freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and many others, Harvey, agreeing with economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi (1954), asserts that these freedoms are only a byproduct of a market economy built to guarantee the freedoms to exploit others, to make profits without benefiting the community, and to keep technological inventions from benefiting the public, “which means ‘the

fullness of freedom for those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing, and a mere pittance of liberty for the people, who may in vain attempt to make use of their democratic rights to gain shelter from the power of the owners of property” (Harvey 2005:37).

This ideology is particularly destructive towards the homeless, whose superficial rights of freedom do not protect them against exploitation in the way that policies reflecting social justice would. The discussion of such policies, however, may prove difficult since, as Matthew Ruben (2001:455), an urban poverty scholar, argues, “the realm of policy has become more and more promiscuous under neoliberalism, taking over areas of public discussion that used to be concerned with ‘maximum feasible participation’ and community empowerment, replacing them with top-down prescriptions, individual empowerment, self-help, and pragmatic, mechanistic debates over tax breaks and market-based incentives.”

The narratives of the homeless in this study suggest that the hegemonic discourses of neoliberal freedoms and self-responsibility have in part been absorbed by the homeless themselves. While they view the reasons for their homelessness as economic, they believe it is their responsibility to maneuver the meager resources available in order to get themselves back into a home and full-time work. They do not blame policies related to the regulation of housing markets, non-sustainable minimum wage, or unemployment. Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2009) argued, “[i]f anthropology cannot be put to service as a tool for human liberation why are we bothering with it at all?” In the case of homelessness, I argue anthropologists and other social science researchers can make a valuable contribution through re-politicizing the issue of homelessness and addressing these problematic perceptions by shedding light on the

processes through which neoliberalization becomes common sense, allowing us and the public to be more critical of these policies.

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## **APPENDIX: SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS<sup>i</sup>**

- 1.) What assistance programs and services do you use?
- 2.) What do you think caused you to be without a home?
- 3.) Do you think others are homeless for similar reasons?
- 4.) Have you ever been asked what the cause of your homelessness was in an interview to receive services? What did you say and why?
  - a. If you said you believed it was problems with yourself as an individual, is it what you truly believed at the time, or did you choose to go along with their view in order to receive the service?
- 5.) Have you ever gone to a program that taught you new skills or tried to fix something with yourself as an individual? Why?
- 6.) Do you believe that all you can do about homelessness is fix something about yourself? If so why?
- 7.) Do you attend self-help programs in order to receive necessary services?

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<sup>i</sup> Probes were used throughout the interview process to follow up on answers to the above questions.