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3

The Stigma of Being Homeless

As demanding and unpleasant as the physical conditions of being homeless are, they are not, for many, the primary challenge of being without a residence. One of the most difficult transitions for individuals in becoming homeless is taking on the homeless identity. As Greg told me:

> ***I was traveling through town, and camping where I could, hanging out in the park during the day, and someone in the park asks me, "Are you homeless? and it surprised me. Even though I had been here a couple of months, I didn't think that way I was just thinking I was traveling—you know, not settled yet. But when that question came-wow—I guess that's what I am now.***

Think for a moment of what you would write—honestly if you were asked to list in one minute as many adjectives as you could think of to describe a homeless person, someone in your mind's eye you had actually encountered. I invited a few hundred university students to do just this, and randomly selected one hundred of their one-minute jottings—"freelists" as they are called—to analyze. Although the freelists returned more than two hundred different descriptors, even after they were edited for synonyms, the picture they offered of the homeless was largely consistent and

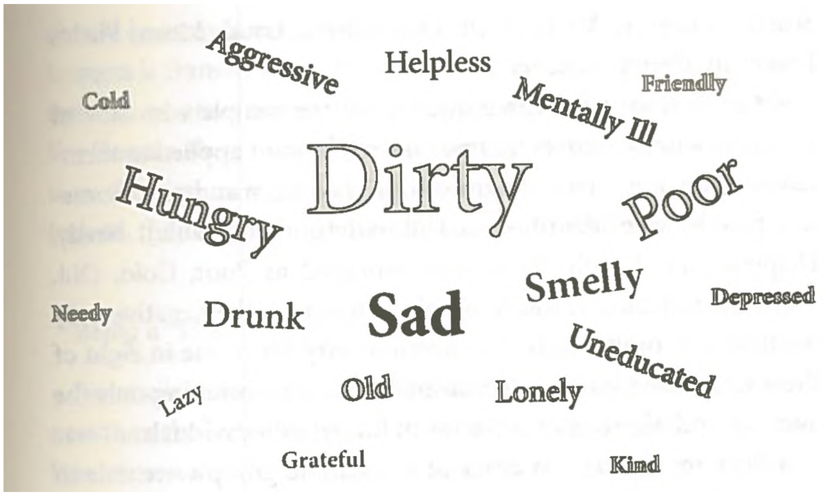

FIGURE 3.1
Most frequent responses given by college students when asked for adjectives to describe a homeless person.

followed a pattern. In this "word cloud," you can see the responses that occurred the most frequently, the larger the text, the greater the frequency.

A few things stand out about the freelists, taken together. First is that the portrait is largely negative. Seventy-two percent of the sample had *only* pejorative adjectives to apply to the homeless, ranging in flavor from Pitiable and Alone to Dangerous and Deranged. The main category of negative representation could be called "aversion," in which words such as Smelly, Dirty, Disgusting, Unkempt, and Gross were common. But the negative words clustered as well around two other overlapping themes: irresponsibility and cluelessness (Drunk, Out of It, Confused, Lazy, Uncoordinated, Slow, Disorganized, Unaware) and a darker portrayal of the homeless as dangerous or deceptive (Aggressive, Annoying, Scary, Terrifying, Mentally Ill, Compulsive, Loud, Mean, Pushy, Resentful, Ungrateful).

Yet even among the three-quarters of the sample who labeled homeless with adjectives that no one would want applied to themselves, there were frequent expressions of concern and pity. Homeless people were identified as Unloved (not unlovable), Needy, Helpless, and Lonely. They were rendered as Poor, Cold, Old, Hungry, Frail, Sick. It was unusual, even among the negative-only freelisters, to omit words of concern or pity. Only one in eight of these responders had no such words to offer, mentioning only the aversive or dangerous dimensions of homeless individuals.

A little more than a quarter of the sample group were able to go beyond expressions of pity and assign what might be termed "positive" attributes to the homeless, including multiple lists with the words Nice, Humble, Understanding, Survivor, Sincere, Respectful, Friendly, and Hopeful. Still, only one of the one hundred responders used solely positive descriptors. All of the other positive listers in the sample included both negative and positive terms in their lists, describing a homeless person, for instance, as Filthy or Drunk but also Kind.

These adjectives might fit into Teresa Gowan's useful framework for understanding American cultural narratives about homelessness. She identifies three discourses that people use to discuss and interpret homelessness: (1) sin-talk—touching on cloud words such as Aggressive, Lazy and Mean—in which homelessness is seen to arise from the character flaws or immorality of the homeless individual (this shows up in the sample more clearly, though less frequendy, in words that did not make it into the word cloud, such as "criminal," "hustler," "freeloader," and "lowlife"); (2) sick-talk—invoking cloud words like Helpless, Frail, Needy, Out of It, "Mentally Ill—in which homelessness is framed as an illness that should be treated and cured; and (3) system-talk, in which homelessness is framed as the product of systemic injustice or instability with nouns such as Victim and Survivor in the word cloud. For Gowan, these narratives don't simply represent public perception; they enter, regionally and historically, into policy decisions. Indeed, they affect the homeless' view of themselves.

Being a "Homeless" Person

No one is more aware of the perceptions surrounding homelessness than the homeless themselves. In *At Home on the Street,* Jason Wasserman and Jeffrey Clair describe homelessness as a "master status," that is, a label that dominates all other forms of identity, overriding any other characteristic one might have. There is a point in all homeless people's lives when they first attach the label to themselves. When I interviewed homeless individuals, this turning point was one of the narratives they pursued. It was as if, only by situating in time the moment when the mantle of homelessness first fell on their shoulders, could individuals portray themselves in a life before becoming homeless; in this way, they separate their real selves from the stigmatized homeless label with which they were now tagged.

Malcolm, a shelter resident, described his homeless identity this way to Jason: *"Ever since I came in [to the shelter], automatically I just thought, 'Well, all right, I'm just going to be with a bunch of homeless guys, bunch of guys that pretty much don't know what they are doing*' . . . *I just had like a negative, like a little negative feeling about it."*

This "little negative feeling" was expressed to different degrees by many interviewees, and homeless individuals we met took pains not to fit the perceived stereotype. It is a form of "distancing," as it has been termed by David Snow and Leon Anderson, just one strategy for preserving a sense of self-worth by seeing who is homeless as "not me." For some, the goal was explicitly to "look normal." For most, who could not avoid appearing homeless, it was deliberately not fitting some prominent aspect of the label.

It was having combed hair and clean clothes. For Arthur, who did day labor construction work during the day and lived in a shelter, it was having his "clean pair" of clothes to wear out if he was walking in the street so he didn't appear so unequivocally homeless. For Hank, it was not having to sit noticeably without food or a lunch bag, as if he needed a handout, when the other men on the construction crew took their lunchtime break. Adam, and other shelter residents too, told Jason that they often left their backpacks at the shelter before walking outside, noting that an overstuffed backpack could be a "tell" that they were homeless. Oliver, another day laborer living at the local shelter, didn't want to appear drunk, a concern that he developed after a friend called him out on his appearance. He told Jason:

> *Like one of my friends, he works, and I ran into him at [the shelter]. He looks at me and he says, "Bro, you look like you've been drinking."*
> *I go, "What do you mean?"*
> *"'Cause your clothes are all dirty. I've never seen you like that."*
> *I said, "Hey, I worked today and I gotta do laundry and stuff so…"*
> *He goes, "Well that's good you're working but…"*

Oliver took the message to heart, explaining his new strategy for looking clean in public: "*That's why I wear the same clothes all week [at work]. My other clothes are clean so ... I can just change out… So, I think ahead of time, you know.*"

Miriam was very conscious of smells. At the night shelter where she slept, when boxes and baskets of bedding would be carried in, Miriam would go through the boxes, sniffing each blanket or bedroll, putting back some and selecting others. When I asked her why she did that, she told me, "*I always smell the blankets... [If a blanket doesn't smell clean] you don't want to lay on that. Because that's going to get into your pores."*

Miriam, who had worked on and off as a night reception clerk, complained that it was hard to keep her body and clothes clean sometimes when she was living in shelters: *"I'll be trying to look for a job with my dirty clothes on. So that's kinda hard because they can tell."*

"So what do you do?" I asked her.

"What do you do?" she repeated back. *"I just rub soap on my clothes so they don't smell. Right now* [she glances at me with an embarrassed look] *I'm still wearing my clothes that I slept in last night. I just went into the bathroom and rubbed soap on them so they don't smell."*

For Ross, the aspect of the homeless persona that was most important to defy was an appearance of aggressiveness. As a bearded adult male typically dressed in a worn military jacket, he was aware that someone else's interpretation of him as threatening could easily lead to troubles of his own. His cardinal rule, which he applied to me when we first met, is *"Let people approach you."* Although Ross can be animated and talkative once you know him, his initial persona seems passive and reserved, almost taciturn.

Subverting the homeless stereotype is sometimes a matter of honor, but sometimes, too, it is a matter of successfully avoiding consequential encounters. One day Ross and I were at the dog park. He was seated at a picnic table; I was standing. We had a lively conversation going as a black-and-white patrol car pulled into the macadam parking lot adjacent to the dog park. I noticed the car make a right turn from the road into the lot and figured the police would drive by, seeing no commotion or dogfights, and exit the other side. But the car stopped, and a fortyish uniformed white patrol officer emerged from the vehicle. I looked to see what he was attending to as he walked toward the dog park gate.

The officer came through the gate and straight over to us, turning his head pointedly toward Ross: *"You live in the neighborhood?"*

"*Good morning, officer;'* I heard Ross respond, and then I lost track, scouring my own arsenal of middle-class capital for the right things to say. Clearly more nervous than Ross, I awkwardly inserted little uninvited comments into their conversation. *"Yeah, you know, Ross and I have been regulars at this park for years now."* The officer glanced in my direction, returning his gaze to Ross, never once speaking to me. *"Hey, Ross,"* I bumbled, "*remember the time back when we first met when we... ?"* Ross smiled a bit and nodded. The specifics of what I related escape me now, but I vividly recall my panicked intent to establish that I knew him well and that his residence in town went back years. (At the time, he was sleeping—illegally—in the woods.)

The officer's interview lasted only a few minutes. "*You have a good day,* he said as he turned to leave the park, but the message was unmistakably "I've decided not to pursue this." The officer had been respectful and professional, but I felt a little shaken by the encounter. *"He profiled you,"* I said to Ross. *"Doesn't that bother you?"*

"What do you expect?" was Ross's retort. *"The police can't do their job if they can t approach people who don't look right to them."* It's a toughly gracious act of acceptance, I thought to myself, when the person who doesn't look right is you.

The consciousness of being and looking "not right" is a regular companion of homeless people, even when it is sometimes just an internal sense. I would not have known that Kevin, who solicited money at a shopping center exit with a "HUNGRY, HOMELESS, HANDICAPPED" sign, was homeless were it not for his panhandling. He would sit in a folding chair, grandfatherly in his sixties, with a collared oxford shirt, a wool winter coat, and polished shoes. Still, he consistently talked about himself in our conversations as *"a street bum like me."*

" *Why do you say that?"* I asked him once, feeling the sting of that description. *"Because that is what I am"* was his response.

Home-Free and Houseless

Not all homeless wear the homeless label without resistance. Jason interviewed a number of day laborers, many of whom were young men, living in local shelters or on the street. *Are you homeless?"* he would ask. *"No, I'm home-free,"* was sometimes the reply. The term was used with him both tongue-in-cheek, in the shelter, and less jokingly, on the street, where Jason saw it as a way to resist the stigma of homelessness. In this sense it aligns with national developments among some homeless and homeless advocates who have moved to the term "houseless." Here's how the houseless state the plight of stigma on the website, houseless.org:

> **Those who are forced into being without an abode and/or dwelling are all too quickly deemed less than citizens. In many regards are even treated as less than human. How about thinking that we are NOT homeless, nor last-class citizens or non-human? We think, have feelings, have intellect and struggle. How would you feel to be thought of as anything less than human just for circumstances due to those of profit/gain/control?**

The monikers "houseless" and "home-free" are meant to evade the cluster of social meanings attached to being homeless. Yet whether or not shelter and street dwellers construct a different frame of self-reference, the public does not always cooperate in the re-signification. The “carefree,” “unfettered,” or “independent” quality of houseless life that home-free advocates wish to convey is not totally absent from wordlists in my sample. Nevertheless, they constitute a tiny category of description (about 1 percent) that would not likely make it into the world cloud of frequently used terms among any sample of Americans. Instead, the major descriptive themes that went beyond the nefarious or worthless cast the homeless as passive victims, far from the vision of “intellect and struggle that the website of the houseless aims to advance.

Media coverage of the homeless does little to invite an alternative vision. News headlines about the homeless often reiterate the themes captured in the freelists—homeless victimhood, homeless survivorship, homeless nuisance or aversion, homeless aggression and deception—and rarely does a reporter include multiple perspectives in the same article. With this steady perceptual diet, a consuming public is tugged between polar inclinations of pity and fear, compassion and disdain. It is no wonder that at both personal and policy levels, the waters of homelessness are muddied by contradictions.

Observers simply don t know what to do. My heart may go out to that homeless person sitting in the cold with a sign, but should I really give him money that he could use to buy alcohol and drugs? Should we pass laws that prevent or limit panhandling when it curbs a growing public nuisance or safety issue but criminalizes those who may be trying to climb out of homelessness? Should I ask the guy passed out on the ground if he is okay when he might be dangerous or unstable? Should I call the police? Do nothing? Should I personally pay for a homeless woman’s night at a motel? Should my city subsidize housing for people who live on the street when many others work two jobs to afford their rent? It depends on which narrative about the homeless I choose to invoke, and whatever I choose, there is its persuasive opposite.

Invisibility and Super-visibility

One product of this self-contradictory perception, seen with homeless eyes, is that one feels either super-visible or invisible. Homeless individuals complained of both in my interviews. *Can you believe it?"* Kevin asked me. *"They arrested me for sleeping too long in the forest. Do you know anyone else arrested for camping out?"* The same super-visibility issue was apparent in Ross's exchange with the police officer, recounted earlier in the chapter, and with Malcolm, a forest dweller and day laborer helping Jason understand how camping sites were selected.

When Malcolm led Jason into the forest to show him his campsite, someone called the police. Although camping in the area was legal, the police investigated, and much to Jason's chagrin, it turned out that his homeless research partner had an outstanding arrest warrant for violation of parole. (Much of the time when this happens, as in this case, the charge is failure to report on time to the parole officer, and, as you will see in chapter 5, the logistical challenges of reporting are partially to blame.) He was arrested on the spot, leaving Jason to refigure how and where he should talk with homeless participants in his research. Although Malcolm was released the following day, and Jason drove to the jail to pick him up, Malcolm had already missed the transport bus to the pumpkin-picking job in New Mexico he had just secured.

The problem of visibility goes beyond attracting the eyes of the police. It cuts to the heart of identity, and the basic wish not to be, in current parlance, "othered." One morning, after Ross had already secured a semi-permanent subsidized room at a Motel 6, he asked me, "*Tell me the truth: Do I look homeless?"*

"Why are you asking me that?" I responded.

He proceeded to relate the story of his morning. Ross's motel was just a few blocks from a Super Walmart, where he could buy food for his room, which he had outfitted with makeshift shelving and an illegal hotplate. Ross had walked the couple of blocks, bought provisions, and was returning on foot with two full plastic Walmart shopping bags. Ross continued, *"I'm walking along the road back to my room—just walking, you know, carrying Walmart bags, and this . . . Indian guy comes over to me and hands me five dollars. Can you believe it? I was just walking on the road with food I had bought. So that's why I'm asking. Do I look like I'm homeless? Like I need help?"*

It was a heart-wrenching question. It didn't matter much what my answer would be.

The pain of being noticed as different is often better than not being noticed at all. Pedestrians walk by a homeless person in a doorway without a glance; drivers avert their eyes from curbside panhandlers, in part from guilt, in part to avoid raising hopes that some donation will be forthcoming. On a website begun by once homeless Mark Horvath, the videographer and activist tells what probably is an apocryphal story (beginning "I once heard a story about") of a homeless man on Hollywood Boulevard who was handed a Christian pamphlet. "What!" the story reads, "You can see me?" The man, so long ignored like "a piece of trash on the sidewalk," felt that he had become invisible.

The Invisible People website (invisiblepeople.tv) presents the first names, faces, voices, and stories of numerous homeless individuals. You can watch short unedited videos in which homeless participants describe their lives in their own words. They are worth watching. The narratives offer the public a window into the lives of homeless individuals and a forum for dozens of people to tell their stories. They are presented in the hope of affecting the daily interactions that these and many more homeless individuals experience.

Part of the problem when you meet a homeless person is that there is no personal history. There is a tired face, or an alcoholic gaze, or an injured presence that makes you either turn away or offer spare change. This is not Charlie or Ruth. You don't know what this person looked like as a child. Or what his mother did for the community, or how well he could sing, or where his family lived.

There are few channels available to a homeless person to be "known" in any full human sense. Unless you are homeless yourself, it is unlikely that you would know a homeless person's name, much less anything of her family, her history, her talents, or her life situation before she was sleeping on a park bench, or living at a shelter, or seeking a handout.

For a homeless individual, daily contact with the non-homeless public, beyond a smile exchanged with a patron offering a dollar or two, comes through institutions, with people whose job it is to relate to the homeless. How one is known is always sifted through the set roles of the shelter, the food bank, the church, the free clinic, the probation office, or the charity organization. Chapters 4 and 7 delve into those interactions in further depth. In most other daily interactions, a homeless person will be either invisible or anonymous. It's why when something other than that occurs, it can be so poignant.

I met Miriam, a fifty-something African American woman, when I volunteered in a church shelter set up to handle the overflow of patrons who flock to the shelters in the cold winter months.

It was Miriam whom I saw sniffing the bedding, which she would afterward drag into a separate room—really an office—where the women slept. One of my roles there, besides organizing food and coffee for the patrons, was to welcome people and talk to them as they were settled for the night.

Most interactions between church workers and homeless clients had a scripted quality. *"Welcome! There's coffee on the small table, and help yourself to snacks over there. Nice to see you tonight!"* The tone was friendly but superficial. The homeless, arriving for the night with their gear and boxes of bedding, typically returned the greeting, and many would voice a "thank you" for the food and the effort as they staked out their places on the floor.

"Hi, where are you coming from?" I asked Miriam in that friendly volunteer way after she had sat down with her beverage. *"Pennsylvania"* was her answer. *"Oh? I came from there too. I lived in Philadelphia. What about you?"* I asked to extend a show of interest. Miriam shared that her clerical job and her life with her (now estranged) husband had been nearby there, but she added, *"Well, actually I'm from here."*

"Really?" I said with surprise, because it was not usual in my experience to encounter homeless who grew up in the town. And our conversation took a new path about how she happened to leave and return, and then where she had lived in town, where she had gone to school. Within a few minutes more, we were into a *"Do you know this place? This person?"* conversation.

We talked back and forth now about our lives, and it was in this context that Miriam mentioned her childhood, her grandfather, an important figure in her life, and her experiences growing up in our town. Almost an hour had gone by when I realized that I was the only volunteer still in the church for the night, having been absorbed in the conversation. *"It was so nice talking with you,"* she said, and I felt the same.

Something in Miriam's conversation tweaked my memory. It was the name of her grandfather, which I recognized. With a little research, I found that, sure enough, her grandfather had been part of an oral history project whose interviews I had listened to years ago to get my cultural and historical bearings after moving to town. I went to the library and listened to the tapes again, to Miriam's grandfather talking about his life—how he came from the South in pursuit of better wages and a better life; how he raised a family that included Miriam's mother, and other details of what probably was Miriam's early life.

When I saw Miriam again at the church's makeshift shelter and she headed in my direction, I wondered whether to say anything at all. Was this too personal? A violation of her privacy? Something she would want left unknown? I decided, because of the details she had shared the night before, to ask the question: *"Is the grandfather you told me about the same man who came here from*--------- ?" (I named the town and the state.)

Her mouth opened in visible surprise. *"How do you know that?"*

"He was interviewed thirty years ago," I began.

"Yes! Yes!" she interjected excitedly, clearly cognizant of the tapes.

"Well... I listened to those tapes at the library, I heard him talk about his brothers and his sisters, and his children, how he would go hunting in the woods."

She took my hand. *"Yes, that's him, I would go squirrel hunting with him as a child!"* she exclaimed. *"I can't believe you know my grandfather."*

There was a look between us that I will never forget. It was a look of being recognized.

People Like Us

"Please always remember," the last sentence begins on the "About Us" page of the Invisible People website, "the homeless people you'll ignore today were much like you not so long ago." The words remind us that what we are missing in the perception of homeless individuals is how "like us" they are.

It is an omission one can notice in the freelist adjectives. Although descriptors like Aggressiveness and Mental Instability that invite alarm are far different from those like Neediness and Frailty that invite our pity, neither alternative is "like us." Neither suggests a relationship of sameness and equality, of mutual connection and obligation. Even descriptors such as Survivor, although nobler, suggest a breed apart. Only a few words on the freelists define qualities we would want in a neighbor (Friendly and Kind are two), but words such as "helpful" or "funny" or "generous" are noticeably absent. Missing is the message of belonging, connection, and mutual obligation that extends to "one of us."

One of the social acts that creates a sense of connection and relationship is gift giving. When gifts go in one direction, they signal an asymmetrical relationship—the giver "higher" than the receivers—as between parent and children, donors and charities, or patrons and those in need. When relationships are socially equal, the gift giving tends to be more balanced and two-way.

Even knowing all this intellectually, I missed an opportunity in my friendship with Ross, and made a thoughtless mistake. Just after Ross had moved out of the forest and into a motel room (as part of a subsidized veterans' program), he recovered a few items of value that he had placed in a storage unit. One of them was a lovely original painting, given to him by a homeless Native American artist with whom he had shared a connection and some months together in the forest.

He offered me his painting as a gift. It was really the first chance that Ross had in our years of friendship to give me something of conventional worth. I accepted the painting with thanks, but the bright orange and red acrylics on the canvas did not, I decided, mesh with my house decor. I took the painting to work, with the intention of hanging it in my office or a hallway of my university building. Given that I worked in an anthropology department, I asked my department chair, a museum curator, to appraise the painting, which she considered a very decent work, probably worth $250 to $300 and appropriate for a wall in our building.

I donated it to the department in Ross's name, and asked that a formal note of thanks that included the monetary amount of the gift be sent to Ross. I was happy a week later to see the nicely embossed card with the school logo, and the handwritten message thanking Mr. Moore for his gift. I swung by Ross's room, pleased to give him the card. He opened it with curiosity, but the minute I saw his face (and despite his *"Thanks, this is nice* remark), I knew. I was prepared for his softly spoken *"You know, I gave it to you for you. I wanted you to have the painting. I wish you woulda wanted to keep it."*

What was I thinking? As Marcel Mauss, the French anthropologist, explained in his classic work *The Gift,* there can be no greater act of mutual obligation and connection than a gift offered and received.

The next two chapters take the reader deeper into the homeless life both in the shelters and on the street.