

## Understanding Dignity in the Lives of Homeless Persons<sup>1,2</sup>

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*The current investigation is a planned, systematic study of dignity as critical to understanding the experience of homelessness and improving services and programs for the homeless. Specifically, we conducted a thematic content analysis of interviews with 24 homeless men and women to identify their perception of specific environmental events that validate and invalidate dignity. In addition, we explored the impact that these events have on homeless persons. Eight types of events were identified that sustain dignity such as being cared for by staff and having resources available to meet basic needs. Eight types of events were found that undermine dignity, such as being yelled at or insulted by staff persons and having staff use rules in an excessive and arbitrary way. Two outcomes followed the sustenance of dignity including increased self-worth and motivation to exit homelessness. Three outcomes followed the undermining of dignity including anger, depression, and feelings of worthlessness. The results suggest that dignity is an important variable to consider in understanding the experience of homelessness. Policies and programs that support validating the dignity of homeless persons are encouraged.*

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**KEY WORDS:** homelessness; dignity; qualitative methods.

<sup>1</sup>This manuscript is based on the first author's master's thesis research that was supervised by the second author.

<sup>2</sup>The authors would like to acknowledge the staff, guests, and alumni of the Inspiration Cafe for their generous participation in this study. The authors also appreciate the feedback and insights from James G. Kelly, Fabricio E. Balcazar, and the two anonymous reviewers concerning earlier versions of this paper.

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Since the mid-1970s, both a significant decline in the number of affordable low-income housing units and an increase in the number of Americans living in poverty have left many people homeless (Foscarinis, 1991; McChesney, 1990; Shinn, 1992; Shinn & Gillespie, 1994). Following the loss of a home, maintaining dignity may become difficult for homeless persons (Buckner, Bassuk, & Zima, 1993; Seltser & Miller, 1993). The social stigma of homelessness and the degrading and dehumanizing conditions these individuals encounter may compromise their dignity (Seltser & Miller, 1993; Snow & Anderson, 1993). According to Seltser and Miller (1993), "being homeless threatens the essential dignity of human beings, undermining or often destroying their ability to be seen, and to see themselves as worthwhile persons" (p. 93).

Research on homelessness has largely been focused on understanding both individual and structural causes of homelessness, service needs, and demographics (Blasi, 1990; Shinn & Gillespie, 1994). These research areas are important and necessary, yet the general focus of research on homelessness has ignored the inner lives of homeless persons and how they experience their world (Snow & Anderson, 1993). Little is known about if and how homeless persons experience themselves as persons of dignity.

Dignity, most generally, is defined as self-worth or inner worth (Gewirth, 1992; Seltser & Miller, 1993). To recognize someone's dignity is to recognize his or her worth as a human being independent of his or her status or role in society (Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1974; Schacter, 1983). Dignity, therefore, is not a possession. Rather, inner worth is a fundamental aspect of humanity (Gewirth, 1992; Seltser & Miller, 1993). That is, dignity is part of who we are, not something we have. In other contexts dignity also has been defined as "nobility of character, manner, or language" and as "a high office or rank" (Berube, 1994, p. 239). However, in the current investigation, the term dignity refers to self-worth alone.

Few studies have examined or discussed dignity in homeless persons' lives. According to Snow and Anderson (1993), following Maslow's hierarchy of needs, "many social scientists have long assumed that the issues of meaning and self-worth are irrelevant, or at least of secondary importance, in the face of pressing physiological survival needs" (p. 229). However, on the basis of their ethnographic research of homeless adults, they argue that the need for meaning and self-worth in life coexists with survival needs (Snow & Anderson, 1987, 1993). Seltser and Miller (1993) organized their book around the construct of dignity because issues of dignity emerged as the dominant theme in their 100 interviews with homeless women.

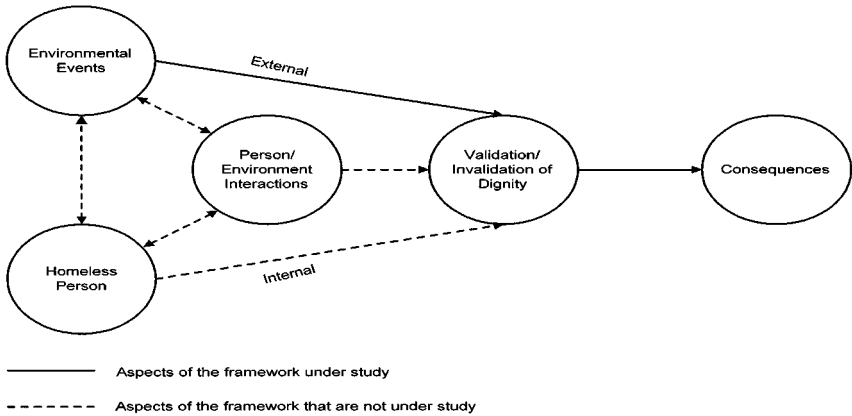
The experience of dignity is dependent on how we are viewed and treated by others as well as our own self-image. According to Seltser and Miller (1993), dignity is validated both internally and externally, making the

experience of dignity dependent on the interaction of individuals and their environment. Persons only experience inner worth if they view and carry themselves with dignity and if they are responded to as if they are persons of worth. If only internal validation of inner worth exists, others do not recognize dignity. If only external validation exists, it becomes difficult to internalize how one is viewed. The lack of either type of validation may lead to doubts about one's inner worth (Seltser & Miller, 1993).

Based on Seltser and Miller's (1993) conceptualization of how dignity is experienced, we framed the current study using a person-environment transactional framework. Following transactional models of stress that discuss stress as being influenced by the individual and the environment (e.g., Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we conceptualize dignity as being influenced by specific environmental events (external validation pathway), by person-level variables such as an individual's biography, self-image, and cognitive appraisals (internal validation pathway), and by Person  $\times$  Environment interaction variables such as behavioral exchanges between the homeless person and others in the environment (P  $\times$  E interaction pathway). In the present study, we focus on the external validation pathway and examine if environmental events influence the individual's sense of dignity.

Using a transactional framework, we also view dignity as a mediating construct in which the validation or invalidation of dignity is in turn related to positive or negative consequences experienced by homeless persons. Based on their interviews with homeless persons, Seltser and Miller (1993) inferred that the invalidation of dignity led to feelings of worthlessness, passivity, and depression. Little is known, however, about the impact that the invalidation of dignity has on people. Nor has any research to date documented the consequences of validating dignity. However, it stands to reason that homeless persons would accrue benefits as a result of the validation of dignity just as they may have experienced negative consequences as a result of the invalidation of dignity. (See Fig. 1 for a presentation of the conceptual framework employed in this study).

A few authors have concluded that a variety of events may threaten the dignity of homeless persons. For example, Gounis (1992), Seltser and Miller (1993), and Stark (1994) noted that homeless shelters frequently have excessive rules that constrain when residents can stay, eat, bathe, and sleep in the shelter and limit the ability of residents to make other choices that affect their lives. The excessive use of these rules and limitations on choice-making constrict homeless persons' sense that they are trusted and they possess the judgment to control their own lives. Thus, they may come to believe that they are not capable or worthy of self-determination (Seltser & Miller, 1993). Homeless persons often lack roles, occupations, or social relationships that provide them with the status of contributing and worthy members of society.



**Fig. 1.** Transactional framework of the experience of dignity.

Instead, the homeless tend to be viewed by society as persons of little social utility or worth (Seltser & Miller, 1993; Snow & Anderson, 1993).

A number of other events have been linked to the invalidation of dignity including (1) being treated impersonally and negatively by shelter staff and welfare workers (e.g., being yelled at, stereotyped, or insulted), (2) being ignored and avoided by domiciled people who pass them by on the street, (3) having little privacy in sleeping areas and bathrooms in shelters, (4) being required to attend religious services or obey behavioral contracts in order to receive services, and (5) having to wait in long lines to receive services (Golden, 1992; Grunberg & Eagle, 1990; Huttman & Redmond, 1992; Rivlin & Imbimbo, 1989; Seltser & Miller, 1993; Snow & Anderson, 1987, 1993). Several researchers have offered important insights into how dignity is influenced. However, discussions of dignity and homelessness have been based primarily on researchers' post hoc construals rather than on a priori questions by researchers and direct reports of homeless persons focused explicitly on the issue of dignity in their lives (Seltser & Miller, 1993; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Stark, 1994).

Overall, we posited a conceptual framework for the experience of dignity as a person-environment transaction. Within this framework, we examined the environmental events that validate and invalidate dignity and the personal consequences that follow these events. The current study builds on previous research that examines dignity in homeless persons' lives in several ways. First, it is a planned and direct investigation of how the environment influences their dignity. Second, the knowledge and insights of this study are based on homeless persons' perspectives of dignity in their lives. We felt that research specifically designed to give voice to the homeless

person's perspective would aid in more fully understanding the challenges they face.

The current study also focuses on the specific events that sustain and promote dignity. Services for the homeless have been depicted as compromising the dignity of homeless persons in a number of ways. Although this criticism may have some merit, it is also likely that homeless persons experience the validation of their dignity within the context of receiving services. Based on observations at a shelter, Breton (1984) noted how a drop-in center for women emphasized granting privacy to their clients and limiting the number of rules as ways of establishing and maintaining dignity. Shinn, Knickman, Ward, Petrovic, and Muth (1990) rated the quality of life in non-profit shelters in New York City and found that the shelters demonstrated fairly high levels of respect for their residents. The authors did not specify, however, how the shelters demonstrated such respect. In short, research on how dignity is promoted would offer specific details of how dignity can be supported and may be useful to existing and future social services and policymakers.

Finally, this study focuses on the consequences of exposure to events that support and undermine dignity. In past research, there has been little discussion of these consequences. Understanding the consequences of the violation and support of dignity may help elucidate the potential benefit and harm of exposure to events that influence dignity.

The purpose of This study was to pose three demands for selection of methodology, including (1) facilitating a contextual analysis of dignity, (2) gaining an insider's perspective of dignity and the environment, and (3) respecting the dignity of all participants in this research project. A qualitative interview method and collaborative professional style were chosen to meet these demands. We designed a measure that amplified the voice and insights of homeless persons and allowed the insider's perspective to develop our understanding of the environment's influence on dignity (cf. Bartunek & Louis, 1996). Thus, context was defined by the person living in the relevant context as well as by the researchers, rather than relying only on the researchers' perspective alone (Kingry-Westergaard & Kelly, 1990). In this way, study participants were treated as valued sources of knowledge (Ayers, 1989). We also collaborated with persons who had experienced homelessness in the development of the interview protocol and the data analysis. Based on an inductive approach to inquiry, the following questions guided the analysis of the information gathered:

1. How is the dignity of homeless persons validated and invalidated by the environment? Specifically, what events occur in their environment that validate and invalidate their dignity?

2. What are the consequences experienced by homeless persons that follow events that validate and invalidate dignity?

## **METHOD**

### **Setting**

The research setting was a private, not-for-profit organization called the Inspiration Cafe. Opened in 1989, it provides services in a restaurant format to men and women who are homeless. The organization's mission is as follows: "The Inspiration Cafe is committed to serving homeless persons with dignity and respect. Our primary goals are to foster independence and promote wellness among our guests and ourselves." Most meals are cooked and served by volunteers from the local community. Guests are served as they would be in a restaurant. The Inspiration Cafe is staffed by six persons and provides meals and social services to groups of approximately 25 guests at a time. Once guests successfully exit homelessness they graduate to alumni status. Alumni are entitled to four meals a month at the Cafe and to participate in many Cafe activities. They are encouraged by the staff to remain active members of the Inspiration Cafe community.

### **Collaboration and Constituent Validity**

The current investigation was conducted in collaboration with members of the Inspiration Cafe. Input and feedback from guests, alumni, and staff were used in the development of this study and in the analysis of its results. The senior author had volunteered at the Inspiration Cafe for 1 year prior to beginning the current study. The relationships she had developed with members of the setting helped facilitate the process of collaboration. A four-member research advisory group including two guests and two alumni was formed at the inception of this research project. This group met every 2 months throughout the research project. We discussed the conceptual focus of the research on dignity. Advisory group members strongly affirmed the centrality and importance of dignity in the lives of homeless persons. They also played a valuable role in developing the interview. We discussed what kinds of interview questions people would be comfortable answering and the need to be sensitive to difficult and negative experiences guests and alumni may have had.

An alumnus assisted with the development of a coding system for this investigation and coded portions of the data. The senior author also solicited feedback from guests, alumni, and staff members of the Inspiration

Cafe about the results of the current study. This collaboration helped insure constituent validity in that the research both addressed issues of importance to community members and obtained results that resonated with their experience (Keys & Frank, 1987).

### Participants

Prior to the selection of research participants, the first author attended three guest and alumni meetings at the Inspiration Cafe. These biweekly meetings are mandatory for guests and optional for alumni. At these meetings, the first author informed guests and alumni of the study. She asked them to fill out and return a form to a box located at the Cafe entrance if they were interested in participating in the study. Twenty of the 21 guests who were current members of the Inspiration Cafe volunteered to participate. Eighteen of the 21 alumni who attended at least one of the three meetings volunteered to participate. At the time of the study, there were approximately 50 people who had graduated to alumni status since the inception of the Inspiration Cafe. However, contact between the Inspiration Cafe and some alumni had not been maintained. Thus, it was not possible to inform all alumni of the study. Overall, 86% of the guests and alumni who attended the three meetings volunteered to participate. The research participants were 12 guests and 12 alumni who were randomly selected from the larger group of 20 guests and 18 alumni who volunteered to participate in this study. Guests and alumni were not paid for their participation in this study.

Fifteen (62%) of the research participants were men and nine (38%) were women. A number of different reasons for becoming homeless were cited by guests and alumni, including drug or alcohol addiction or both (71%), eviction (17%), loss of employment (8%), pregnancy (4%), and divorce (4%). One hundred percent of the guests and alumni had a history of drug or alcohol addiction problem or both. Sixty-two percent of the guests and alumni were African American, and 38% were Caucasian. Four of the 12 guests (33%) were employed at the time of the interview. Over half of the guests reported that their previous job was hourly service or labor work such as home-care for the elderly, restaurant work, factory work, or construction. Eight of the 12 alumni (66%) were employed at the time of the interview with the remaining four alumni obtaining government assistance. Most of the employed alumni worked in hourly service or labor work. One alumnus ran a business. Table I provides additional information on the demographics of the research participants.

Before becoming members of the Inspiration Cafe, guests and alumni were screened in an initial interview with the case manager to determine if they were (1) motivated to improve their lives and (2) in recovery from

**Table I.** Guests and Alumni Mean Age, Education, Length of Homelessness, and Length as Guest and Alumni

	Guest		Alumni		Overall	
	<i>M</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	Range
Age (years)	43.9	34–56	35.2	29–52	39.5	29–52
Education (years)	12.8	9–16	12.6	8–17	12.7	8–17
Length of homelessness (months)	10.3	3–29	10.8	1–48	10.5	1–48
Length as a guest (months)	2.9	1–6	7.2	1–14	5.0	1–14
Length as an alumni (months)	N/A	N/A	13.3	1–26		

drug or alcohol addiction or both for those with a history of substance abuse. In addition, half of the study participants achieved enough success in their lives to become alumni of the Cafe. Alumni status is granted to guests who obtain housing and a means to pay for the housing (e.g., employment, disability insurance). Consequently, the current sample may represent a segment of the homeless population that is experiencing fewer difficulties than others (Banyard, 1996). These results are likely to generalize best to homeless persons with substance abuse problems, who are actively working for self-improvement.

### Measure

The interview instrument was developed with the advisory panel as discussed above. In addition, the instrument was influenced by the existing literature on homelessness, informal conversations with guests, alumni, and staff persons at the Inspiration Cafe and faculty members at a research university knowledgeable about both community interviewing and people experiencing difficulties (cf. Rappaport, 1981).

Parallel forms of the interview instrument were developed for the guests and alumni. Research participants were provided with a definition of dignity—“self-worth, inner worth, the sense that one is a person of worth”—to increase the likelihood that the researchers and research participants had a common understanding of the construct under study. The researchers and the advisory group agreed upon this definition for use in the study.

The design of the interview allowed us to assess the usefulness of a person-environmental transactional framework to study dignity. Guests and alumni were first asked to identify places or persons that made them feel they were persons with dignity. They were then asked to describe how their dignity was promoted in the place(s) or with the person(s) identified. Study participants were also asked to describe any effect they experienced as a consequence of being in the dignity-promoting situation they described. Guests and alumni were also asked the same series of questions regarding settings that violate dignity.



## Procedure

The senior author conducted the interviews in an office at a local church. Interviews ranged from 35 to 90 min and were audiotaped. The senior author and two undergraduate research assistants transcribed the interviews. All questions were asked of all participants, unless a question had already been answered in the context of a previous question.

## Data Analysis

Following qualitative data analysis recommendations by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Tesch (1990), we conducted a thematic content analysis in which new categories of coding could emerge throughout the duration of the study. Tesch (1990) identifies this type of qualitative research as the “identification and categorization of elements” (p. 78). This technique is appropriate because the purpose of this study is to identify and categorize events that sustain and undermine dignity and the outcomes that follow these events.

We developed an initial list of codes using the interviews of four guests and four alumni. Informed by the literature on homelessness, we created categories using the words of the study participants. Initial categories were made as specific as possible and the descriptive adequacy of the categories was checked against new information as the coding process proceeded. When a particular statement did not fit into the existing set of categories, we created a new code category. After coding 12 interviews (including the initial 8 coded interviews), an acceptable interrater agreement of 91% and 89% between the first author and each of the two research assistants, respectively, was achieved with four additional interviews. We calculated interrater agreement by dividing the number of agreements between coders divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements  $\times 100$  (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At this point, we had a refined coding system. The first author used the refined coding system to code the remaining 8 uncoded interviews and the 12 interviews used initially to obtain interrater agreement.

## Enhancing the credibility of the study

Prolonged engagement, member checking, and reanalysis of data were employed to increase the credibility of the qualitative data and its interpretation (Foster-Fishman, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement involves having the researcher spend time in the setting under investigation to prevent distortions of data based on unfamiliarity with the context and culture of the setting. To date, the senior author has spent over 5 years as

a volunteer server and cook at the Inspiration Cafe and has made multiple visits to shelters and other services for homeless persons. In addition, she has been a member of the Inspiration Cafe's board of directors for 3 years.

Member checking involved giving data and interpretations back to study participants, members of the advisory group, and the alumnus who assisted with coding for evaluation, comments, and aid in the development of themes and insights (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Emerging themes and insights were only included in member checking if three or more study participants had mentioned them in some way.

Finally, we assessed the stability of the coding system over time by coding a subset of six interviews 1 month after interrater reliability was achieved (Foster-Fishman & Keys, 1997). The intracoder reliability was computed by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements  $\times 100$  (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We obtained reliability of 95% over time.

## RESULTS

Thematic analyses were conducted to examine the usefulness of a person environment transactional framework. We analyzed the data to determine if homeless persons would identify environmental events that they perceived as influencing their dignity and consequences that followed these events. Analyses of the interview data revealed eight kinds of events that validate dignity and eight kinds of events that invalidate dignity. We also identified two overarching categories that seem to subsume the environmental events that influence dignity. The categories include (1) interpersonal events in which a homeless person interacts directly with other people and (2) person-setting events in which a homeless person interacts with physical aspects of settings (e.g., how clean or dirty a shelter bathroom is; the availability of resources to meet basic needs). Tables II and III provide an overview of the different types of events that promote and violate dignity and the frequency by which they were discussed by guests and alumni.

### HOW IS DIGNITY VALIDATED?

#### Interpersonal Transactions

##### *Receiving Care*

Receiving care, support, or encouragement from others was the most frequent description of being treated with dignity. One guest described how

**Table II.** The Percentage of Guests and Alumni Reporting Events That Validate Dignity and the Consequences That Follow Events

	%		
	Guests & alumni ( <i>n</i> = 24) <sup>a</sup>	Guests ( <i>n</i> = 12) <sup>a</sup>	Alumni ( <i>n</i> = 12) <sup>a</sup>
Interpersonal events			
Receiving care	67	67	67
Individual identity	50	33	67
Personal service	46	42	50
Belonging to a group	46	58	33
Person-setting events			
Basic need resources	71	83	58
Self-sufficiency resources	46	42	50
Opportunities in the community	21	25	17
Roles	21	33	8
Consequences			
Worth	100	100	100
Motivation	58	67	50

<sup>a</sup> Guests and alumni all reported multiple events and consequences; therefore, percentages do not add to 100.

she was treated with dignity by being cared for by the staff at a women’s shelter:

Yeah, the fact that they’re there to help you to get out of your situation. They let you know that you have the potential to make something of yourself and to get yourself out of there . . . you know, care about the things that you do want.

**Table III.** The Percentage of Guests and Alumni Reporting Events That Invalidate Dignity and the Consequences That Follow Events

	%		
	Guests & alumni ( <i>n</i> = 24) <sup>a</sup>	Guests ( <i>n</i> = 12) <sup>a</sup>	Alumni ( <i>n</i> = 12) <sup>a</sup>
Interpersonal events			
Lack of individual identity	88	100	75
Poor service	71	92	50
Unjust treatment	41	42	42
Lack of care	21	17	25
Person-setting events			
Arbitrary rules	54	67	42
Lack of resources for basic needs	50	50	50
Negative association	33	25	42
Negative physical setting	17	25	8
Consequences			
Lack of worth	79	75	83
Anger	50	42	58
Depression	21	33	8

<sup>a</sup> Guests and alumni all reported multiple events and consequences; therefore, percentages do not add to 100.

### *Individual Identity*

Guests and alumni also discussed being recognized as an individual or treated like a human being as a source of dignity. They described this recognition as being treated like an individual human being, person, or adult. Here a guest illustrated how she was recognized as a human being at an Al-Anon meeting:

I go to a place called the Al-Anon club. It's a club. They have all sorts of meetings, and they treat me like I'm a human being as opposed to a "thing."

### *Personal Service*

Another prevalent source of dignity was described as being served by others and receiving personalized service in social service settings. This way of promoting dignity was generally described as occurring when the service provided was directed to the individual. In the following example, a guest described an interaction with the volunteers at the Inspiration Cafe:

They (volunteers) would be polite to you. "Is there anything you need?" They come and serve you, give you coffee and stuff.

### *Belonging to a Group*

Some guests and alumni reported that feeling that they were part of a family or a group was a source of dignity. Here a guest described how people at the Inspiration Cafe are his family:

I don't know what I'd have done without you guys after those holidays after my mother passed. I came and ate dinner with you guys because it was Thanksgiving. I didn't go to my family's house. That was my family.

## **Person-Setting Transactions**

### *Resources*

Guests and alumni frequently discussed the availability of resources as promoting their dignity. These resources fell into three categories including resources that (1) meet basic needs, (2) help homeless persons become self-sufficient, and (3) offer opportunities to participate in the community.

*Resources for Basic Needs.* Resources that met the basic needs of guests and alumni, such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical and hygiene needs

were the ones most frequently discussed in terms of dignity. It was the presence of these resources in settings that guests and alumni related to dignity. Here a guest described how the availability of resources at a men's shelter made him feel good:

The meals, we eat a meal before we go in . . . So before you go to sleep you can eat if you want . . . You can take a hot shower at night. I mean if you go and talk to the manager at the shelter you can go wash your clothes at night before you go to bed . . . it makes you feel good.

*Resources for Self-Sufficiency.* Many guests and alumni reported that the availability of resources to help them become self-sufficient, exit homelessness, or improve their situation were a source of dignity. Here an alumna described how an employment opportunity she was given through her shelter case manager was a source of dignity:

A lot of opportunities have opened up for me through [my case manager]. There was a job opportunity that came through for me . . . I worked for a while, a little tele-marketing. It gave me a chance to get back out there and build that self-confidence a little bit because you lose some of it, you lose some of that sense of worth you used to have.

*Opportunities in the Community.* Several guests and alumni described how the Inspiration Cafe had a program that offered them access to plays, movies, and sporting events. They reported that participation in such community events was a way to be a part of society. An alumnus described how these resources validated his dignity:

Like the movies, the plays we went to. The tickets that they give, I mean who would expect homeless people to be going to plays? Not any third rate play, I mean top plays. Cirque du Soleil, those are \$35 tickets and a crew of us got to go there . . . I was like "homeless, who me?" Nobody else in the room would believe [it] and that was a great feeling to sit there.

### *Roles*

In addition to resources, guests and alumni reported that the availability of opportunities for guests and alumni to volunteer or obtain employment at the Inspiration Cafe had a positive influence on dignity. For example, there are opportunities at the Inspiration Cafe to volunteer and to work as a paid kitchen aide. One alumnus described how dignity is related to being able to volunteer:

It makes you feel good that you can pick up around here, clean up a little, like when John asks who will unload the van. It's the chance to do it.

## HOW IS DIGNITY VIOLATED?

### Interpersonal Events

#### *Lack of Individual Identity*

Guests and alumni discussed dehumanizing events as the most common type of interpersonal interaction that undermined their dignity. This kind of violation occurred by being (1) treated like a number or having no individual identity in a group, (2) treated like a child or an animal, (3) yelled at with insults or stereotypes, and (4) ignored or avoided by other people. A guest described her experience at a women's shelter with a female staff person:

She only works 3 nights a week, and every day it's "God help me get through these three days." It's like everything you say is "you women are such a trial to me." She says things like, "you make me embarrassed to be a woman and to claim you as the same species as me."

#### *Poor Service*

Many guests and alumni described the poor service they received in social service settings as undermining their dignity. They reported receiving impersonal service in one or more of following three categories (1) having to wait in long lines or having to wait a long time, or both, to receive services, (2) being given orders by staff persons of how to behave or what to do, and (3) being rushed in a service setting (e.g., told to eat your meal quickly in a soup kitchen). Here an alumna discussed waiting to receive services at a soup kitchen:

You have to wait in line . . . you line up . . . the line can extend around the corner. You may have a hundred or so people in line and you get herded in.

#### *Unfair Treatment*

Being treated negatively or differently because of being homeless and having one's rights violated were discussed as undermining dignity. Some guests and alumni described being verbally harassed, physically harmed, and having drugs planted on them by police officers. Here a guest described how he was treated differently at a hospital after a staff person discovered he was homeless:

I had to tell them I was homeless because they wanted to see if I could pay for my TB test, and that was a very bad feeling, you know. "You're homeless?" . . . It was

just like their whole attitude changes. [Nurses] make you wait longer, stop treating you decent. It's like they think he's homeless so it doesn't matter how I treat him.

### *Lack of Care*

Feeling that other people do not care about you or do not offer support or encouragement was another way guests and alumni described being treated without dignity. Here a guest described the feeling that shelter staff does not care about her:

I feel like they don't care about me as an individual. And they have their own rigid structure or personal agenda that has nothing to do with any of their clients. They don't support what we are up to, they're doing their thing.

## **Person-Setting Events**

### *Arbitrary Rules*

The manner in which rules and policies were used in a setting was also described as undermining dignity. Some guests and alumni reported that rules were enforced at the staff's discretion. Thus, some staff persons applied certain rules to certain homeless persons and not to others, or some staff would uphold a rule one day and ignore it the next. In addition, several guests and alumni reported that there were an excessive number of rules in a setting and that the rationale for these rules was not made explicit.

Here a guest provided an example of how rules are used arbitrarily in a shelter for women:

This one stupid rule that you can't have anything at your head at the table, any scarves or anything. And a lot of times, almost always they don't say anything about it. But sometimes they get strict about it. This one woman, I really felt bad for her, she had been real sick . . . I don't know if it was cancer or what, but she had lost all her hair and she would wear this little scarf on her head. Well, they made her take it off the one night . . . I felt terrible. I was like, "How can they embarrass this woman like this?" I mean telling her that she's got to take this off her head or she's got to go out on the streets for the night . . . she had been there at least 2 weeks, if not longer, wearing it every night. And now all of a sudden this is a strict rule, "You have to take that off your head."

### *Lack of Resources for Basic Needs*

Guests and alumni reported that the lack of availability of resources to meet basic needs undermined their dignity. These resources included food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and resources for hygiene needs. A guest described how a men's shelter receives donations of clothing, food,

and toiletries, but that they are not made available to the shelter residents:

Like [shelter X has] a large donation of things, and they keep them in their back room and I know this because I've come in and brought those donations in and set them down in the back room. And you get down the stairs in the shelter, and we don't have anything. No, it's all sitting up here, you know. I don't understand what they could be doing with it.

### *Negative Association*

Being associated with other people's behavior that was deemed negative was also discussed as a violation of dignity. This association was described as being in the presence of other people behaving poorly or being treated poorly by others, not an interpersonal interaction between the study participant and another person. Association with other homeless persons' negative behavior (e.g., fighting, drinking) was the most common type of negative association mentioned in this study. In the following example, a guest discussed the negative behavior of other homeless persons on the streets:

There's a lot of drunk people, so there's a lot of fighting going on, drunk talk, people are always stoned out of their minds. It's just not a good place to be.

### *Negative Physical Setting*

A physical environment that was dirty or otherwise inadequate (e.g., lack of storage space for belongings, inadequate lighting) was also discussed as a way dignity could be undermined. In the following example, a guest described the bathroom at a shelter:

It's not nice, the bathroom is just plain ugly. It's ugly, it doesn't work very well, there is only one knob on the faucet. There are rust stains on the radiator. It's not a pleasant environment.

## **Consequences Related to the Validation of Dignity**

We identified two categories of consequences related to the validation of dignity. The categories included statements reflecting (1) feeling good, better, or worthy and (2) being motivated in some way to improve one's life.



### *Worth*

Many guests and alumni reported that being treated with dignity or being in an environment that supported their dignity left them feeling good, confident, happy, better about themselves, or increased their sense of self-worth, or a combination of these. Here a guest describes how being cared for by staff and receiving personal service at a drop-in center affected him:

Makes you feel like you are worth something, otherwise why would they be wasting their time on you.

### *Motivation*

The other outcome of being treated with dignity was being more motivated to improve oneself, become self-sufficient, exit homelessness, or contribute to others. In the following example a guest discussed how receiving care at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting motivated him to maintain his sobriety:

Just knowing that there are other people that care; that they're just there for me. It helps to keep me clean, motivated in my recovery and it gives me support that I can do it.

## **Consequences Related to the Invalidation of Dignity**

We identified three categories of consequences related to the invalidation of dignity. The categories included statements reflecting feelings of (1) worthlessness, (2) anger, and (3) depression.

### *Lack of Worth*

Feeling worthless in some way (e.g., “less than a person,” “no dignity,” “like I am nothing”) or feeling bad about oneself was discussed by many guests and alumni. In the following example, a guest described how the lack of adequate food and toiletries in the shelter made him feel:

You feel like you're nothing, like a piece of dirt. That's what they make you feel like.

### *Anger*

Many guests and alumni reported feeling angry in response to the violation of their dignity. Here a guest discussed how she felt in response to being rushed at a soup kitchen:

I used to get irritated, like really mad, sometimes about the rushing.

### *Depression*

Several guests and alumni described feeling depressed and even suicidal as a result of being treated without dignity. Here a guest described how being avoided and ignored by strangers on the streets made him feel depressed:

Actually it makes me feel sad, depressed. I was depressed most of the time . . . All day long I was depressed.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current investigation is a planned, systematic investigation of dignity and homelessness that provides tangible examples of how dignity is undermined and supported and the types of consequences that follow these events. The eight identified ways of sustaining dignity and the eight identified ways of undermining dignity help provide a fuller understanding of what dignity means to homeless persons and their view on how it is influenced in positive and negative ways. Overall, the descriptions of how dignity was invalidated were given in greater detail and seemed to convey more powerful images than those concerning the validation of dignity. The different images may reflect that being recognized as a person of worth is expected by human beings and thus the absence of dignity is noticed more than its presence. The descriptions of invalidation also indicate the harsh realities homeless persons may face in their environment.

In the current study, we employed a person-environment transactional framework as a guide for thinking about how dignity is influenced. The results of our investigation also reveal that there are two types of events experienced by homeless persons that influence their dignity: (1) interpersonal and (2) person-setting events. Interpersonal events in which homeless persons interact directly with other people were frequently discussed as influencing their dignity. Guests and alumni identified interpersonal events such as receiving care, encouragement, or personalized service from other people as ways their dignity was supported. Interpersonal events such as being insulted, dehumanized, or treated unjustly by other people were ways their dignity was violated. Person-setting events in which homeless persons interact directly with some physical aspect of a setting were also identified as influencing dignity, albeit less frequently than interpersonal events. Guests and alumni identified person-setting events such as the availability of resources to meet basic needs and help them exit homelessness as supporting dignity. They discussed person-setting events such as the excessive and arbitrary use of rules, a lack of resources to meet basic needs, and dirty or inadequate physical facilities in shelters as invalidating dignity.

In terms of a transactional framework for understanding the enactment of dignity, it seems that transactions between homeless persons and their environment occur on interpersonal and setting levels. The interpersonal and setting factors that contribute to the validation and invalidation of dignity in turn affect the individual, as indicated by the consequences identified in this study. In addition to dignity being influenced by external forces, it is also possible that homeless persons' behavior influences the occurrence of events. For example, a small number of guests and alumni discussed how their own behavior was linked to being treated with and without dignity. In the following examples two guests discuss how being treated with dignity and without dignity, respectively, was linked to their own behavior. First, a guest discussed how other homeless persons treated him with dignity when he was on the streets:

Well, I guess they can see that I have respect for myself. People tend to treat you the way you treat yourself or the way you conduct yourself. So I conduct myself as a gentleman. I practice that. So I get treated like that.

Here a guest describes how being treated unfairly by police was related to the fact that he was drunk and talking back to police officers:

When I was drunk, I made the experience. I know quite well that the experience [was bad] because once I drink, I say things I shouldn't say.

In future studies, homeless persons could be interviewed or observed, or both, to determine how their behavior is related to the occurrence of events that influence dignity.

Our study reveals that the homeless persons we interviewed experienced several different consequences in response to events that validate and invalidate dignity. An increase in positive feelings about oneself and motivation to help oneself or others were the outcomes reported to result from events that supported dignity. An important implication of these findings is that one way homeless people get the hope and motivation to begin to reconstruct their lives is by being treated with dignity. Anger and feelings of worthlessness were the most common outcomes reported as a result of the invalidation of dignity. Study participants also reported feeling depressed and even suicidal, demonstrating the possibly extreme consequences of violating dignity. A natural extension of research on the consequences that follow environmental events is a study of how people cope with events that violate their dignity.

The current study provides information on events that influence dignity from the perspective of homeless persons themselves. Thus, it builds on previous research (Seltser & Miller, 1993; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Stark, 1994) that discusses the importance of dignity in homeless persons' lives as understood through indirect and observational research methods. The

current study provided homeless persons with an opportunity to directly describe dignity in their lives and offer their own, insiders' perspective on how their dignity is influenced (Bartunek & Louis, 1996).

The current study also emphasizes that dignity is often promoted as well as undermined in the various settings homeless persons encounter. This is an important issue because the focus of many investigations on homelessness has been on problems and deficits. The current study's dual focus on distinguishing both positive and negative events leads to the identification of problems associated with providing services in a dignity-invalidating manner and to possible solutions to these problems. This documentation of how dignity is influenced indicates the value of policies and services attuned to the importance of preserving individual dignity.

The identified negative environmental events and consequences related to these events are indicative of the importance of paying attention to the dignity *and* basic survival needs of homeless persons in the design of social services (Snow & Anderson, 1993). We may need to rethink the motivational need hierarchy through which we generally address the needs of homeless persons. Social science has tended to emphasize their survival needs over "higher order" psychological needs for dignity and meaning in life (Maslow, 1962; Snow & Anderson, 1987, 1993). However, both kinds of needs appear to co-occur in this study. Maintaining a sense of worth seems to be important and necessary to surviving homelessness (Snow & Anderson, 1993). Providing housing and food while simultaneously treating people without dignity appears to reduce the benefit of the resources offered. In contrast, the provision of services to meet survival needs can be conducted in a way that simultaneously promotes dignity. Paying attention to what homeless persons' needs are and responding to them in a way that is respectful may help them maintain a sense of worth as they attempt to survive and end homelessness for themselves.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are several limitations of this investigation that should be discussed. To begin with, the persons who participated in this study may reflect a segment of the homeless population who were experiencing fewer difficulties in their lives and fewer barriers to exiting homelessness. This is not to say that the participants had not experienced serious difficulties in their lives. For example, 100% of the sample had histories of substance abuse. In addition, many of the guests and alumni (when the alumni were homeless) discussed spending considerable time and effort obtaining resources to

meet their basic needs (e.g., waiting on long lines, traveling long distances, and negotiating difficult rules and policies to receive services). However, the Inspiration Cafe has stricter eligibility criteria than most service organizations in its neighborhood. All of the participants in this study had to at least meet these criteria (e.g., being in recovery from substance abuse) before becoming a guest. Half of the participants in this study (the alumni) were people who had successfully exited homelessness. It is also likely that the study participants had more resources than some other segments of the homeless population (e.g., as guests they receive eleven meals per week at the Inspiration Cafe). Thus, the sample obtained at the Inspiration Cafe may not be representative of the homeless population in general. For example, they may have had more energy to spend on concerns with dignity because their needs for food were partly met. Future research should explore dignity with groups of homeless persons who are experiencing other and more extreme difficulties.

It should also be noted that the majority of settings discussed in this investigation are located within the local vicinity of the Inspiration Cafe. Thus, this study's examination of the environment focused on one neighborhood in Chicago. This scope may limit the generalizability of these findings to other contexts. Research in other neighborhoods, cities, and in suburban and rural areas would be useful to expand our knowledge of the universal and unique ways that dignity is influenced in different contexts.

Finally, there are two validity issues that are important to acknowledge. Some degree of caution is needed in interpreting the results of this investigation. First, the first author who was well-known to many of the research participants prior to data collection conducted all of the interviews. We believe that her familiarity with research participants was in many ways an asset in that it enhanced the interviewees' trust of the research process and their willingness to volunteer and disclose information about potentially sensitive issues in their lives. However, it is also possible that the first author's familiarity with the respondents could have influenced the content of their interviews such as encouraging socially desirable responses. Given the overall willingness of research participants to discuss both positive and negative circumstances in their lives in detail, the extent of such influence does not seem significant. Nonetheless, this research merits replication by other interviewers who are not well acquainted with the homeless persons they interview to fully discount this possibility.

A possible second limitation is that research participants might have provided similar responses to questions that substituted other concepts such as sense of well-being or feeling stressed for the concept of dignity and invalidation of dignity, respectively. Thus, it cannot be definitively concluded that

all of the identified environmental events are only related to the experience of dignity. A related validity issue in this study is whether the reported consequences were exclusively the result of encountering environmental events. The consistency with which the 24 guests and alumni reported only a small number of consequences suggests that some relationship exists between the reported events and consequences. However, other personal and environmental factors could contribute to the reported consequences. For example, a history of abuse or mental illness could also contribute to the experience of worthlessness or depression discussed as a consequence of a particular event that violates dignity.

Future studies are needed to differentiate dignity from other constructs such as well-being and life satisfaction and examine the meanings of dignity in relation to other concepts that include a dimension of positive affectivity. Such research can help delineate how the meanings of these concepts are related. Additional areas for future research include developing quantitative measures for assessing dignity. Measures could include assessments of individuals' sense of their own worth as well as the extent to which different settings support/undermine dignity. To further corroborate the importance of dignity, interventions such as the Inspiration Cafe that are designed to support dignity could be experimentally compared to other interventions. Finally, needs assessment data that are based on the report of homeless persons could provide further support for the value of fostering dignity.

### **Policy and Practice Implications**

Although more suggestive than definitive, the results of this study support the affirmation of dignity as an important value for the organizational culture of programs serving homeless persons. Program developers and leaders who wish to strengthen the extent to which their setting fosters the dignity of homeless persons are encouraged to consider approaches to organizational development such as management by values and value-based job analysis (Keys, Henry, & Schaumann, 1997). Important organizational values can be made more central to key organizational processes such as staff recruitment, selection, training, communication, and evaluation using these approaches. Similarly, funding agencies and program evaluators can assess the extent to which proposed and existing programs validate and invalidate dignity. Funding agencies and program evaluators may also draw on the categories of environmental events identified in this study as a starting point for developing a framework for their appraisal of programs' attention to dignity issues. A direct implication of our research findings is for policymakers to

encourage service providers to maintain flexibility in the implementation of rules and regulations in their organization. Thereby, the service providers would reduce the use of restrictive and arbitrary rules.

Our advisory committee experience indicates the usefulness of including homeless persons in the review of dignity issues. For example, homeless persons may constructively contribute to the design and evaluation of services. Homeless persons may be able to identify strengths and weaknesses of social service settings that are not recognized by staff, board members, or program evaluators. In addition, effectively including homeless persons in the design and evaluation of services can be a very explicit way of communicating to them that they are viewed as valuable and worthy of expressing their opinion and ideas.

In conclusion, the concept of dignity had meaning for the homeless persons who participated in this study. They were readily able to identify environmental events that they experienced as validating and invalidating their dignity and consequences that followed these events. Assuming dignity is of central importance to homeless people, the challenge for community researchers, program developers, and policy analysts is to address the dignity of homeless persons and other marginalized persons in their work. A person-environment transactional framework is a constructive organizing template for understanding dignity. If this framework continues to be explored, it may provide a sound base of empirical support for steps that need to be taken in the realm of policy and practice to preserve and enhance the dignity of homeless persons.

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