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CONFRONTATIONS AND DONATIONS: Encounters between Homeless Pet Owners and the Public

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This study examines the interactions between homeless pet owners and the domiciled public with a focus on how the activities of pet ownership help construct positive personal identities. Homeless people are often criticized for having pets. They counter these attacks using open and contained responses to stigmatization. More often, they redefine pet ownership to incorporate how they provide for their animals, challenging definitions that require a physical home. Homeless pet owners thus create a positive moral identity by emphasizing that they feed their animals first and give them freedom that the pets of the domiciled lack. Through what we call “enabled resistance,” donations of pet food from the supportive public provide the resources to minimize the impact of stigmatization.

Research on stigma management strategies has examined the many ways that discredited persons, or those of low status, attempt to maintain self-worth and dignity (see Anderson and Snow 2001 for a review). In *Stigma*, Goffman outlined “passing,” in which the discreditable person conceals the stigma through “information control,” and “covering,” which involves making “a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large” (1963a:102). Numerous studies have enhanced the understanding of the processes of passing and covering (e.g., Charmaz 1991, 1995; Herman 1993; Anderson, Snow, and Cress 1994; Nack 2008). When neither strategy is possible, especially when one has reached one’s limits, defiant behavior becomes an option, and the stigmatized engage in “reactive, entailing actions and verbalizations meant to reject humiliating moral assaults or ridicule” (Anderson et al. 1994:134). In *Asylums*, Goffman (1961) noted “open” and “contained” forms of defiance. Openly defiant acts can include yelling, disobedience, and other gestures that challenge the prevailing order in “an overt and directly confrontational” way (Anderson et al. 1994:134). Open defiance provides momentary relief from humiliation but often only perpetuates the stereotype associated with the stigma. Contained defiance might involve grumbling under one’s breath or complaining to similarly afflicted peers. It relieves humiliation backstage but ultimately does not challenge the conditions of stigmatization. By examining interactions between homeless pet owners and the domiciled public, we aim to supplement the literature on the construction of positive identities among the stigmatized. We build on the research concerned

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with stigma management strategies and argue that, through what we call “enabled resistance,” pet ownership facilitates both the defense of a moral identity and the construction of a positive sense of self.

Drawing on the interactionist emphasis on role taking, one might conclude that the experience of stigma would result in a degraded sense of self. In this view, which Gecas and Burke term the “reflected appraisals” approach, the perceptions of others have a significant influence on self-concept. However, “the reflected appraisals process does not operate all the time or under all conditions” (Gecas and Burke 1995:51; see also Kaufman and Johnson 2004). In keeping with Goffman (1959) and Blumer (1969), they describe the self as “not simply a passive sponge that soaks up information from the environment; rather, it is an active agent engaged in various self-serving processes” (Gecas and Burke 1995:51). Faced with the appraisals of others, people engage in an interpretive process (see also Strauss 1969). When the evaluations of others are inconsistent with one’s own, the process of interpretation leads one to reevaluate one’s own perceptions, and to decide whether to accept or reject the views of others, or to take a position somewhere in between. As Anderson and Snow argue, even those who are subject to constant affronts can reduce the impact on the sense of self:

No automatic reflected appraisal process connects status affronts, on the one hand, with self-concept and self-esteem, on the other. Rather, the social actor’s cognitions and activities are critical in determining the impact of stigmatization or subordination. The imputation of a negative social identity does not automatically translate into the acceptance of that identity, no matter how denigrated or demeaned the social status and the self implied, because the actor may assert a strong contrary view. (2001:401)

The interpretive process through which a positive identity can emerge through even the most discrediting circumstances has been richly analyzed in *Down on Their Luck*, Snow and Anderson’s (1993) study of homeless street people. Of the numerous conditions and circumstances that can result in stigmatization, homelessness ranks near the top of the list. The homeless are often treated as what Goffman (1963a) called “nonpersons.” LaGory, Fitzpatrick, and Ritchey (2001) describe homelessness as a “master status” that affects all areas of experience. Even so, studies reveal considerable variety in the quality of life among the homeless. When asking how some homeless people create a reasonable sense of meaning and well-being despite their lack of resources, scholars have arrived at answers that include the combined effects of “life chances and choices” (LaGory et al. 2001; see also Jencks 1994), community (Wasserman and Clair 2010), and social movements (Wagner 1993; Cress and Snow 1996; Wright 1997; Snow and Mulcahy 2001). Snow and Anderson (1987, 1993) focus on the construction of positive personal identity. Their analysis begins from the premise that all social interaction requires situating the actors as social objects, which entails establishing their identities within the situation (see also Stone 1962; Turner 1968; McCall and Simmons 1978). In their construal, identity can be social, imputed by others based on clues acquired from appearance and behavior in the

setting. It can also be personal, in which case it is asserted or claimed by the actor himself or herself. Social and personal identities can correspond or conflict. For example, when a passerby shouts to a homeless person, "Get a job, you lazy bum," the target of this slur might say, "That's right, I am a bum." In doing so, he or she would embrace the social identity attributed to him or her, making it consistent with his or her personal identity. But another person might see that social identity as inconsistent with his or her personal identity and instead distance himself or herself from it, declaring "I ain't no bum" (Snow and Anderson 1993:214).¹ The avowal or disavowal of implied social identities through distancing and embracement brings the importance of personal identity to the fore. Even those who have few resources with which to assert personal identity, nevertheless, strive to do so in a positive manner. As Snow and Anderson point out:

The presented personal identities of individuals who are frequent objects of negative attention or attention deprivation, as are the homeless, can be especially revealing, because they offer a glimpse of how those people deal interactionally with their pariah-like status and the demeaning social identities into which they are frequently cast. Personal identities thus provide further insight into the ways the homeless attempt to salvage the self. (1993:214)

Personal identity can be constructed through various activities that Snow and Anderson call "identity work." The list includes (1) the procurement or arrangement of physical settings and props; (2) cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearance; (3) selective association with other individuals and groups; and (4) verbal construction and assertion of personal identities (1993:214). Snow and Anderson argue that of the four types of identity work, "talk is perhaps the primary avenue through which [the homeless] can attempt to construct, assert, and maintain desired personal identities" (1987:1348). Lacking "the financial or social resources to pursue the other varieties of identity work," homeless people rely on identity talk to either embrace or distance themselves from negative social identities (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348).

Our analysis builds on and expands Snow and Anderson's work by investigating an instance of identity work among the homeless that minimizes stigma by combining identity talk with a form of props. The "props" of interest here are pets, or companion animals.² Although *Down on Their Luck* does not incorporate animals, a related article notes that some of the homeless have pets to encourage social interaction (Anderson et al. 1994:133). As we found in our research, the homeless consider their pets far more than "props," but we accept the analytic usefulness of the term. Indeed, studies have demonstrated that dogs, in particular, serve as "social facilitators," increasing interactions between people (see Messent 1983; Robins, Sanders, and Cahill 1991; Gardner 1995; Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004). Dogs transform their owners into what Goffman (1963b:126) called "open persons." Strangers will initiate a conversation with a person accompanied by a dog where they would not do so with a person alone. However, "mixed contacts" between the homeless and the domiciled can cut both ways (Goffman 1963a; see also Lankenau 1999). As Snow and Anderson argue, the homeless

are “ignored or avoided by the domiciled” except when they receive “negative attention,” such as taunting (1993:199; see also Gardner 1995). We found that this holds true for those with pets. Homeless pet owners receive both praise and criticism for living on the streets with animals (see also Baker 2001).³ On one hand, interactions with the public can result in gestures of goodwill, such as a contribution of pet food, hence the “donations” of this article’s title. On the other hand, interactions can also mean confrontation: an attack on the homeless person’s character in which he or she is deemed unable to care for the animal, and therefore undeserving of animal companionship.

Both confrontations and donations are commonplace in the everyday experience of homeless pet owners. Although there are no precise figures on the size of this population, the National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that 10 percent of homeless people have pets. In some areas, the figure is estimated at 24 percent. One might ask why those with such limited monetary resources would take on the care of an animal. Companionship and affection figure heavily in answers to this question. Surveys consistently reveal very high levels of attachment to pets among the homeless (Kidd and Kidd 1994; Singer, Hart, and Zasloff 1995; Rew 2000; Baker 2001; Taylor, Williams, and Gray 2004; Labreque and Walsh 2011). Despite the emotional benefits, the financial burden is only one difficulty associated with pet ownership. Research reveals that pets pose obstacles for homeless people seeking permanent housing (Baker 2001; Singer et al. 1995) and temporary shelter (Labreque and Walsh 2011). Pets can also restrict one’s access to health care facilities (Taylor et al. 2004). Moreover, as we found, having a pet on the street makes one vulnerable to criticism. By investigating how homeless people respond to criticism about their suitability as pet owners, we reveal how pet ownership fosters a positive identity. We show how the activities of taking care of a pet help justify a positive sense of self, especially among those who have few resources to spare. We introduce a strategy that blurs the boundaries between contained and open defiance, and adds to the forms of identity talk already recognized. More specifically, we reveal how homeless pet owners redefine stigmatized actions as superior to those engaged in by their accusers. Through the concept of “enabled resistance,” we analyze how the components of the new definitions cast stigmatized pet owners as not only resisting but also surpassing dominant ideas about responsible pet ownership.

In what follows, we first discuss the methods used in this study. We then describe how homeless people respond to confrontations with the domiciled and how pet food donations from sympathetic passersby enable them to do so. We conclude by discussing the implications of this research for the understanding of identity and interaction.

METHODS

Data for this article come from a larger project examining homeless people’s relationships with their companion animals more broadly. In interviews, homeless people regularly mentioned receiving negative comments and criticism from passersby about their ability and even their right to have a companion animal. This sparked our curiosity about the strategies homeless pet owners used when subjected to negative

comments. The present analysis draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 59 homeless pet guardians in Berkeley, Boulder, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Miami. With the exception of Boulder, all interviews took place at veterinary street clinics for the pets of the homeless, or while accompanying a veterinarian on “house calls” to areas where homeless people with pets are known to live. San Francisco and Sacramento have well-established veterinary clinics for the pets of the homeless; Miami holds one occasionally at a homeless shelter. In these cases, veterinarians and, in Miami, outreach workers, served as gatekeepers to the homeless population. Boulder attracts large numbers of homeless people passing through with their dogs, especially during the summer. The interviews conducted in Boulder took advantage of this convenience sample but also provided a rough comparison with those who were interviewed at veterinary clinics. People who agreed to be interviewed received a gift card redeemable for five dollars at local pet food and supply stores. To avoid incentivizing participation, interviewees did not learn about the gift card until after the interviews.

The importance of gatekeepers in accessing a sample of homeless pet owners cannot be overstated. Homeless shelters do not typically allow animals because of safety and health concerns. With some exceptions, those that allow dogs require them to be kenneled outdoors. People we interviewed said they would rather sleep outdoors with their dogs than be separated from them. Thus, the absence of homeless pet owners from shelters ruled out one of the usual methods for recruiting a critical mass of homeless people for research. Many homeless people are suspicious of researchers and service workers, and initial attempts to recruit people by approaching them on the street proved futile. Fortunately, the veterinary clinics provided access to a number of homeless pet owners. The veterinary gatekeepers also vouched for the research, which helped minimize suspicion on the part of the homeless. During intake at street clinics, veterinarians and technicians explained the research and kept a list of those willing to participate. Interviews were conducted with pet owners before or after their animals were seen by veterinarians. The semistructured interviews addressed questions about the person’s relationship with his or her animal, including strategies for providing care. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using NVivo software (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia), employing the inductive practices well acknowledged in qualitative sociological research.

The interview sample includes 32 women and 28 men. The length of time they had been homeless ranged from just a few weeks to 15 years. The majority of those interviewed were white (48). Most people (44) had dogs only, 11 had cats only, and 4 had both species. Most had only one animal, but some (11) had two or three animals, and four had more than three. Only two people said they were homeless because of their animal(s). All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

CONFRONTATIONS

As mentioned, most of the homeless pet owners we interviewed had encountered criticism from domiciled citizens about their right or ability to have a companion

animal. This was more often the case for people with dogs, for the obvious reason that they appear in public together, whereas those who had cats did not typically move about in public with them. Those who panhandled or hung out on sidewalks heard criticism most frequently because they encountered the domiciled more often. For instance, Doug is a young, African-American man who had been homeless for about two years after losing his job. He sat on the sidewalk in the same Berkeley neighborhood every day reading while his dog lay at his side. He slept in a pet-friendly shelter and did not panhandle. Nevertheless, he said, "I see people in the street that tell me all the time, 'You shouldn't have a dog if you don't have a place to live.'" White, middle-aged Linda, whose recent eviction forced her to live in her van with her dog, heard similar comments. She had been homeless off and on for the last seven years. After losing the part-time job that paid her a little money under the table, she could no longer afford a spot in a parking lot. She spent much of her time looking for a free, legal place to park—a daunting task in San Francisco. Linda said she heard criticism "just constantly. I get this 'You should have gotten rid of him.' I'm so sick of that phrase."

"Who says that to you?"

"Everybody."

"Just people walking by, or what?"

"Everybody from my ex-husband to strangers walking by."

Megan, a white woman in her mid-20s who had drifted to San Francisco with her boyfriend and their dog said, "People are just mean. They're like, 'You don't deserve a dog. You shouldn't have one. You can't take care of him.'"

Sometimes, domiciled people even offered to buy their dogs from the homeless. For example, Chris talked while waiting to see the veterinarian at a clinic at the Homeless Youth Alliance on Haight Street in San Francisco. At 22, he had spent several years traveling the country with two dogs. They lay calmly beside him as he recounted the time a man tried to buy his blue-nosed pit bull:

"I got offered [money] by this rich guy for him in Vegas. He said, 'My daughter wants that dog, and money's not an object.' He kept going up and up, and I just looked at him and said, 'Would you sell your daughter, even for half a million dollars?' And he's like, 'No.' And I said, 'OK, then. I'm not going to sell my kid to you for any amount.'"

Another young man at the Homeless Youth Alliance clinic reported having had the same experience several times. "That's something you deal with a lot," he said, "people trying to buy your animals off you 'cause they want to give 'em a better home, and this and that."

Pet ownership is considered nearly a birthright in contemporary Western societies. In most people's everyday lives, the right to animal companionship and the ability to provide care are uncontested. The homeless are likely the only group criticized and stigmatized for having pets. They used several strategies to defy accusations from domiciled strangers.

Open Defiance: Cursing

Cursing at those who criticized was the response of choice on the part of many homeless youth, in particular. For example, Ronnie, interviewed in Berkeley, had been on the road for four years. He grew up in Florida, lost both his parents, and became homeless at 18 after losing his job and then his apartment. He lived on the street for a while but then decided to travel. For the last year, he was accompanied by a pit bull/Labrador retriever mix named Dozer. During his travels, Ronnie had stopped at a drop-in center to take a shower, and a woman was sitting outside looking for someone who could take Dozer because she could no longer care for him. Ronnie and Dozer had been traveling companions ever since. "We're inseparable," Ronnie said. During the interview, he finished the sentence when he was asked "have you ever had any people say to you something like . . ."

"You're homeless. You don't deserve a dog." [We laugh]

"Exactly. So how do you respond?"

"With a big 'FU'! I've had people say, 'I'm calling Animal Control and having your dog taken away from you' and I'm like 'Yeah, yeah. Whatever.' Because Animal Control's going to come and see a healthy, happy dog and be like, 'You have a nice day.' [laughs again] They're not going to take Dozer from me. For what?"

Toni, a self-described "street kid" who, although not yet 25, has lived in Golden Gate Park for six years, has a pit bull she refers to as her "road dog." She answered without hesitation when asked how she responded when people said she should not have a dog. "Fuck off!" she said, laughing loudly. "Scuse my language," she added, "but that's what we tell 'em. They don't know anything." Similarly, Melanie, who had been traveling with her boyfriend for three years after leaving New England, had a four-month-old puppy at a clinic in San Francisco. She described a recent encounter:

"[A woman] told me, like, I'm a bad person for having my dog on the streets and just because I'm homeless doesn't mean my dog wants to be homeless."

"So how did you react?"

"She said it in her car and she drove off, so it was like whatever. You know. They don't know me. They don't know my dog. So fuck 'em."

In some instances, the response is still a curse but with less coarse language. For example, here is an excerpt from an interview with Ike, another white traveler in his early 20s passing through San Francisco:

“Has anybody ever told you that you shouldn’t have a dog?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How do you react to that?”

“I tell ’em that they shouldn’t have a life!” [laughs]

It would be easy to dismiss the act of cursing as irrelevant, but doing so disregards the use of language to achieve emotional and social goals. The kind of cursing homeless people reported engaging in consisted of wishing strangers harm (*fuck you, fuck off*). In this case, the curses are “emotionally harmful expressions” (Jay 2000:9; see also Jay 2009). The use of such insults points out the degree to which the speaker makes a claim to power, a scant resource among the homeless. The main intention of aggressive insults “is to lower the social status of one’s opponent” (Jay 2000:159; see also Želvyš 1990). The use of cursing by the homeless points to interactional advantages and disadvantages associated with social rank (see Branaman 2003). As Goffman (1955, 1967) has argued, two rules of social interaction ensure that people can “maintain face” in most situations. The rule of self-respect “calls for individuals to maintain the face they have been given, typically on the basis of various social attributes ascribed to the person by others in the situation and by the wider society” (Branaman 2003:93). The rule of considerateness “calls for individuals to exercise tact with respect to the feelings and faces of others in social situations” (Branaman 2003:93). Typically, the combined effects of the rules favor high-status persons, but in this case, cursing violates both rules and disrespects those with higher status. To be sure, cursing does not challenge the social order, but it allows one to “express detachment and implicitly affirm the dignity and value of the self” (Branaman 2003:117).

Contained Defiance: Ignoring

Many homeless people simply ignored negative comments, perhaps understanding they were unlikely to change the minds of those launching the assault. For example, white, middle-aged Stan said he ignored criticism because he knew that others did not understand what his dog meant to him. He had been with his dog for a decade, and the two had been homeless in San Francisco for the last year. Stan had been evicted from his apartment. He received a Section 8 housing voucher, but the eviction on his record made it especially hard to find someone who would rent to him in an already-tight rental market. In the meantime, he and his dog camped in Presidio Park, evading the police for several months. Then they slept in a trailer at a construction site for a while, where the manager had unofficially hired Stan to serve as a temporary night security guard. A

disabled Vietnam veteran, Stan receives a monthly check from the Veterans Administration and sometimes gets help from friends. When we met, he had saved enough to spend a few nights in a single-room occupancy hotel, just to have a bed and hot shower. In response to the question of whether anybody ever criticized him for being homeless and having a dog, Stan nodded immediately and recalled:

“Oh, yeah. Yeah. When I first became homeless, everybody said it was really selfish to keep her. They said I should give her to someone, and everybody had suggestions as to where I could give her up, that it would be easier for me to get a place like a shelter or something like that . . . a lot of people criticized me.”

“And how did you respond when they said that?”

“I just ignored them [laughs]. It’s just, most people would think that probably it makes it a lot harder and it’s not worth it, but that’s because they don’t have a dog. For me, it was never an option to give her up. It just wasn’t. I couldn’t do that.”

Other homeless people had other reasons for ignoring comments about their dogs. Trish, who panhandled in Boulder to support herself and her Jack Russell Terrier, brushed off the insults she regularly encountered from drivers who passed by and yelled that she did not deserve to have a dog. “I usually don’t say much,” she said. “Everybody’s entitled to their opinion.” Others who ignored the insults saw them as based on ignorance about how the homeless live and how they care for their companion animals. For example, Sandy, nearly 30 and living in an abandoned car with her cat, had comments hurled at her the morning we met her. As she was bringing her cat to the Sacramento clinic in a carrier, someone told her she could not take care of her cat. “I ignore it,” she said. “It affects me, sure. But they don’t know. People just don’t know.”

Jason hitchhikes around the country with his girlfriend and their two dogs. A Californian by birth, he had made his way back and we met up at a veterinary clinic in Berkeley. Although only in his early 20s, he pointed out that his ability to ignore comments came with time and experience. “I don’t respond,” he said, then added, “now, at least. At first, it wasn’t so good. I had to really, like, think about that one and work on it. Sometimes when I’m not thinking, I still respond pretty bad. But, it’s sheer ignorance on their part, though. My dog is well loved and cared for.”

Other scholars have noted attributions of ignorance as a stigma management strategy. For example, in their study of African-American women with HIV, Buseh and Stevens (2007:12) found that women who attributed hurtful comments to ignorance were more able to “understand why and how [stigma] existed. . . . They could identify with people’s fears and hostility.” (3) Similarly, those who ignored the insults were relatively gentle in doing so. They had either developed thick skin on the streets, or they assumed ignorance on the part of others, but overall they had framed their responses in a self-protective manner.

Redefining

Most of the homeless people we interviewed responded to affronts by redefining pet ownership to incorporate what they do in the course of caring for their animals. As a strategy, redefining involves responding openly to verbal assaults, but doing so with a narrative that indicates a fully articulated rejection of the values behind those assaults, rather than simply a defense against humiliation. In this way, the homeless make positive moral sense of their pet ownership.

The alternative definition of pet ownership has four components, which appeared alone or in combination in our interviews. The first involves not leaving the dog alone. This is a moral critique in which holding a job, and thus keeping a dog at home and often alone all day, constitutes improper care bordering on abuse. This version of “condemning the condemners” (Sykes and Matza 1957) was a common theme among the homeless. For example, Ike said with disdain:

“They put their pets in their houses and then go to work all day, and they barely see their dogs. And when they come home, they’re too tired to spend any time with their dogs, so their dog’s kind of like a floor item, just off to the side. Just some ‘thing.’ It’s their pet. It’s not their kid. It’s not their son or daughter like these guys are. It’s their pet.”

Toni reinforced this when she said, “it really pisses me off when the yuppies are like, ‘You don’t feed your dog’ or ‘You don’t take care of your dog right.’ You know what? All they do is leave their dog in their apartment for twelve hours out of the day. That’s not fair.”

“So what do you mean ‘yuppies?’”

“You know, it means all the people that walk up and down the street.”

“So, people who have jobs?”

“Yeah.”

James, a mixed-race man we met in Boulder, held a similar view:

“People think because you’re homeless, you can’t take care of a dog. Being homeless, that’s not the point, OK? Even people that have houses abuse and mistreat and neglect their animals, so that has nothing to do with it, whether you have a house. Certain people should not own animals, OK? I totally agree that there are some people on the streets, that are homeless, and I mean, there’s no way they can take care of a dog. I understand it completely. But it goes the same way with people that got houses and jobs. You ain’t got the time to spend with the animal, ’cause you’re so busy at work trying to keep that house that you have and pay your car payments, that

your dog is neglected and doesn't see you but when you come home, and when you come home, you just want to eat and go to bed. That dog—that's mistreatment, too."

The second component of redefined pet ownership—constant companionship—is related to the first. We met Cory, originally from outside of Chicago, at the Homeless Youth Alliance clinic in San Francisco. He summed it up this way:

"She gets plenty of exercise chasing sticks all day. I give her that, and then, in return, she gives me companionship. She won't leave me. I could take her off the leash and run down the street, and she'll keep right up with me. She does not want to be apart from me, and that's really cool. It's unconditional love on both our parts, both sides of it."

Similarly, Paula a white woman nearing 60, said, "Dogs of homeless people are incredibly lucky dogs, because they get 100 percent of the people's attention. [They are] normally more well behaved, more well rounded socially." In redefinitions of dog ownership, providing dogs with constant companionship, which the domiciled can seldom do, purportedly enhances the relationship and the dog's quality of life.

The third component of redefining involves emphasizing that what counts is that one's dog eats first, eats well, and that the owner will sacrifice to feed the dog. For instance, 52-year-old Don has lived in an encampment under a San Francisco freeway for over 15 years. He has had at least one dog for much of that time. When asked if he had ever encountered any criticism about keeping dogs, he said, "Yes. Quite a bit, actually." He continued:

"They say, 'You can't take care of yourself, how do you expect to take care of your animal?' It's not that I can't take care of myself. I think I do a pretty good job of taking care of myself, considering that I eat every day, three times a day if I want. It kind of bothers me. They don't know what I do, or to what I extent I will go, to make sure my dogs eat every day. They come first. Off the top, they come first, you know. And so there's no way they could tell me that I don't take care of my dogs."

Pete, a white man in his late 40s, was camping in Sacramento with his two large dogs after losing his job, his home, and then his truck in five short months. Nevertheless, he said, "These dogs eat before I do. They'll eat before I do, period. They eat well." With a chuckle, he added, "and they eat as much of my food as I do anyway."

Others echoed the theme of never letting their dogs go hungry and even putting the dog first. Toni, the "street kid" living in Golden Gate Park, said, "My dog eats before I do. Way before me. She comes way before me." Jerry, a long-time drifter and guardian of two dogs, put it this way when we met in Boulder: "Some of us out here take damn better care of our animals than ourselves. When I don't have any money sometimes for food, I'll give 'em what I'm eating and go without food 'cause I won't see my animals go hungry." Like Jerry, a man in San Francisco had gone without food so that his dogs could eat. As he explained, "it gets hard sometimes because you gotta feed them before yourself, so

sometimes you're going hungry a little bit for them." Karl, on the road in California with his dog and his girlfriend, said, "I make sure that my dog gets fed before me. If I gotta starve for a day so that she can eat, I do. She can't go out and ask somebody, 'Hey, I'm hungry. I need some food.' I can. So every day, I make sure my girlfriend's fed, make sure my dog's fed." Stan, the veteran, said, "I make sure she gets good food. Even though I'm homeless I just make it a point, you know. . . . She has a pretty good diet. And she's never missed a meal." Portraying the sacrifice in somewhat therapeutic terms, another pet owner said, "The dog isn't starving, you know, because I will always feed the dog before I feed myself, which is strange in the sense that you're supposed to love yourself before you love anybody else, but I do feed the dog before I feed myself."

The fourth component of redefined pet ownership is freedom. For example, Devon, a white man in his early 30s and homeless off and on for several years, claims his dog likes it better when they are homeless because "he gets to play, and he's out in the trees. He sees more dogs, and he's not cooped up in a house." On a similar note, Don said:

"That dog is happy. He's healthy. He has fun every day. He has a gigantic field that he can just run and romp in. He don't have to worry about cars, you know? And he's behind a fence so there's no outside interference and he's happy. [Don gestures toward the fencing around the encampment where he lives.] So what am I doing wrong?"

Whereas the domiciled see animals as deprived if they do not have a house and see homeless people as unable to take care of themselves by virtue of being homeless, these statements cast a different light on the situation. They emphasize freedom, and claim it enhances the bond with their dogs. They emphasize food, the most basic element of care, and companionship, especially not leaving the dog alone all day. Kaz, whose two dogs rested quietly by his pack during our interview at San Francisco's Homeless Youth Alliance, incorporated all the components when he redefined pet ownership this way:

"They tell me that 'You can't take care of a dog on the street,' and I tell them that they're crazy, because I spend 24/7 with my dogs. My dogs don't leave my hip. They eat way more than I do. They eat before I do. They get plenty of water. Plenty of food. They get way lot of attention. They get 24/7 attention. I go to parks with them. They get to run around and have fun. They get to see new things every day and they're exploring nature like they were meant for. They weren't born to live in a box. That's why, when you see a dog in a house, they're freaking out because they want to go outside, 'cause that's their natural habitat, you know, they don't even like it in the house, so I get 'em through the woods and all that. And I take 'em to dog parks. They exercise more than anybody. I mean [laughs], look at their muscles!"

In redefining, homeless pet owners express their values in ways that resemble what Edin and Kefalas (2005) found among low-income, unmarried mothers. Whereas middle-class women put education, career, and marriage before childbearing, low-income women (and girls) saw children as a way to prove one's worth. For them, children

provide more certainty than marriage does. Thus, they put motherhood first, with marriage possible only once things were “set” in their careers and lives. Likewise, homeless pet owners reversed the typical sequence, in which the “right” way to have a pet is to have a house first, often with a yard, and only then can a dog enter the picture. For the homeless, having a house is a goal they aspire to but may find difficult to reach. Having a pet is within their reach, and doing so provides a sense of meaning in the present.

DONATIONS AND ENABLED RESISTANCE

Members of the domiciled public who support—or at least do not oppose—pet ownership among the homeless often donate pet food to homeless pet owners. They are one of several sources of pet food. Another major source is the veterinary street clinics previously described. In addition, animal control services and humane societies in many cities provide free pet food. One man in Boulder described how it often works. He often hangs out in a particular area in a city park with several other homeless dog owners. He said, “I’ve watched Animal Control pull up in their van and hop out with five or six twenty-pound bags of dog food, and be like, ‘Yo! You need dog food here?’ ” Second, many soup kitchens and drop-in centers provide pet food. As a young man said, “Dog food’s pretty much free. I mean you can get it pretty easy at any drop-in center or dog place [pet food store]. That’s pretty much covered.” Third, those who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) include pet food in their monthly budgets. As one SSI recipient who had been homeless for nearly 15 years said, “I buy at the beginning of the month, you know. They’re very well cared for.” Finally, nearly everyone in the sample had received pet food from domiciled citizens. Buzz, homeless for five years when we met in Boulder, explained:

“I could be sitting here in the park, minding my business, reading a book. Someone will walk up. ‘You’re homeless? Here. Can I give you this?’ They’d bring me wet food. Dry food. Dog treats. And I’m like, ‘All right!’ Well, I’m not going to say no. I’ve never had a problem feeding my dog. Ever.”

Most of the homeless pet owners had similar experiences. A young, white, male traveler in Berkeley said, “A lot of people just come up to me and say, ‘Hey, do you want some dog food? Here, have some dog food.’ ” Middle-aged Ruthie, homeless for five years, echoed these reports: “People say, ‘Hey, do you need some food for him? Hey, I got this.’ You know, people are just like that. They’re just very giving.” Cory recalled, “I’ve really only had to buy him dog food once. Like actually *had* to. ‘Cause people see you with a dog, see you sitting on the sidewalk and they just presume that you need help.” We heard a similar account from Dee in Berkeley. “Because I live in People’s Park,” she said, “I’m really fortunate because people come by and they just donate food all the time, you know what I mean? And there is a drop-in clinic on Monday night for youth that gives out dog food, and I get dog food from them.” Consistent with this, Ronnie explained, “I’ve always been able to feed him. I’ve never ran out of food. Once I get low on food, something comes by. Something happens.”

“So you get donations?”

“Most of the time, when I’m running low on food . . . I save the money I spange [panhandle]⁴ and buy him food myself, but if I buy him food because I’m low, I end up getting like a 20 pound bag [donated] the next day and I’m like, ‘Oh, man. Why’d I buy the food?’ I’ve actually taken back dog food that I’ve spent my own money on, ’cause later on in the day, somebody would buy me a better brand of dog food. And I’d be like, ‘I don’t need this’ and I take it back and get my money back almost every time.”

Donations of food from some of the domiciled enabled the homeless to resist stigmatizing assaults from the others. Through this “enabled resistance,” homeless pet owners were able to affirm a positive sense of identity despite consistent status affronts. In our sample, none of the pets of the homeless went hungry. This is consistent with what Baker (2001) found in a survey of homeless pet owners in the United Kingdom; they easily obtained food for their animals. But this is in dramatic contrast to the results of an earlier study of homeless pet owners in and around San Francisco. Kidd and Kidd (1994) found that of the 105 people surveyed, more than half had difficulty feeding their animals and obtaining affordable veterinary care. Since the publication of that article, however, food and veterinary services are provided free of charge through the Veterinary Street Outreach Service (VETSOS) in San Francisco and through similar venues in other cities. Because of these services, and the generosity of ordinary citizens, many of the homeless people in our study had several bags of dog food among their belongings. This allowed the homeless pet owners not only to feed their animals, but also to engage in enabled resistance to stigmatizing confrontations. They could resist insults from some passersby because of the goodwill of others.

CONCLUSION

Our research contributes to the discussion begun by Snow and Anderson about how the homeless seek to “salvage the self” when cast into stigmatizing social identities. Whereas Snow and Anderson focused on identity talk, particularly the forms of distancing and embracement, we introduce redefining as another form that helps minimize stigmatizing affronts. Although some homeless pet owners responded to such affronts with open or contained defiance, we found that the majority redefined pet ownership so that the meanings ascribed to it reflected the activities that characterized their relationships with their animals. They pointed out that they could provide what other dogs lacked and that their way of caring for an animal surpassed the typical standards, which require a house. They asserted their ability to provide food for their animals, even at personal sacrifice, and to offer enhanced quality of life through constant companionship, an outdoor environment, and freedom. Redefining differs from distancing, which would involve disassociating oneself from the roles of pet owner or homeless person. It also differs from embracement, which would involve the avowal of the negative social identity of irresponsible pet owner. If homeless pet owners simply agreed with the

accusation that they could not provide for their companion animals, then they would accept the social identities imputed to them, which cast them as incapable of caring for themselves, and therefore unworthy of animal companionship. Instead, redefining is an attempt to challenge the basis of the affront. By redefining pet ownership, the homeless pet owner can assert that he or she may be homeless but not helpless (see Osborne 2002). Thus, the personal identity that emerges from pet ownership is a *moral* identity, one that defines a person as essentially good (Kleinman 1996:5; see also Katz 1975). The task of establishing a positive personal identity is as essential for homeless people as it is for the domiciled. Accomplishing it is far more difficult for the homeless, and for some, caring for an animal is part of the process.

In making this point, our analysis also contributes to the literature on pet ownership among the homeless by offering a more comprehensive picture of the benefits of pets. We agree that pets provide emotional support and companionship, and facilitate social interaction. But we also suggest that the activities of caring for an animal are themselves an avenue to the construction of a positive personal identity. Together, redefining and enabled resistance allow homeless pet owners to assert a personal identity characterized by responsibility and even self-sacrifice. Thus, animals are much more than props. They are sentient beings who require care, and the person who accepts the companionship of an animal also accepts responsibility for that care. For many of the people we interviewed, providing care became a way to mitigate the negative consequences of stigmatization brought on not solely because of homelessness, but because of the *combination* of homelessness and pet ownership. By redefining pet ownership and emphasizing care, homeless pet owners were able to establish a moral personal identity that helped to manage the negative impact of stigma. Thus, the same conditions that resulted in stigma are also the means by which to deflect it.

For homeless pet owners, the stigma management strategy of redefining is possible largely through what we refer to as enabled resistance. As mentioned, the pet owners interviewed for this study could resist insults from some of the domiciled because of the goodwill of others among that same group. In particular, donated food allows them to keep their dogs healthy. Indeed, a contented, well-fed dog was a large part of their ability to redefine pet ownership. Their claims about freedom, access to the outdoors, and constant companionship would have meant little if their animals were starving. Their ability to contest stigmatization and redefine its basis arose because others empowered them to do so. This is similar to what Lankenau (1999) observed in a study of status-enhancing acts by panhandlers. He described how the “regulars” who frequently donate money “serve as protectors in the midst of daily harassment” (211). Panhandlers “endure the degrading aspects of panhandling by developing supportive relationships with certain passersby who provide both material resources, such as money or clothing, and an enhanced view of self” (289). The regulars not only donated spare change, but they also treated the panhandlers as persons rather than pariahs. The relationships between the homeless people in this study and their benefactors both fit and depart from this description. In a few cases, the donations of food came through established relationships with veterinary clinics or service providers. In these instances, the interactions with the

veterinarian result in not only pet food and services but also in conveying the status of legitimacy on the homeless person. Over time, the veterinarian and staff learn the name of the client and his or her animal, and talk to the client as an equal. But more often, the food donations come from strangers, many of whom simply drop off a bag of dog food without exchanging any words. These one-time encounters do not constitute “supportive relationships” that Lankenau found, but they nevertheless provide the resources that enabled resistance to stigmatization in other encounters.

To develop the theoretical implications of our claims for additional research, it would be useful to know whether there are variations in redefinitions and enabled resistance among homeless pet owners and, if so, to determine what factors influence the variations. But it would also be useful to find other instances of redefining to determine the conditions under which it is adopted and by whom. Edin and Kefalas’s study of low-income, unwed mothers, mentioned earlier, suggests one possibility. Other avenues could extend the discussion beyond the realm of pet ownership among the homeless. The creation of a positive personal identity, indeed a moral identity, is relevant for everyone, not just the homeless, and the notion of how people secure one through redefining would add to the sociological understanding of this general social process. In addition, the relationship between redefining and stigma merits further investigation. If redefining occurs in situations where stigma is not involved, it would be useful to understand what prompts it. Redefining is a potential engine of social change, and research can show the conditions under which it becomes more than a personal strategy and evolves to have a broader social impact. In sum, the concept of redefining holds promise for several areas at the heart of sociology.

One limitation of this study is that it took place in communities having existing support for the pets of the homeless. Thus, we cannot generalize these findings to other parts of the country. The people interviewed here had access to pet food and veterinary services. But this limitation points to an implication this study has for the services potentially offered to those living on the streets. Clearly, pets are important sources of identity and stability for those who have few other means to secure these intangibles. Recognizing this unique human–animal bond, and acknowledging that pets prevent their homeless owners from accessing many social services, such entities should find ways to accommodate animals. The established venues of support for the pets of the homeless can provide working models on how to do so. The reward for these efforts will be addressing a wider range of needs of a greater number of people on the margins.

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NOTES

¹Snow and Anderson also found a third pattern of identity talk not relevant for this analysis, which they refer to as “fictive storytelling.”

²The term “pet” is contested because of its subtext of human dominion over animals. “Companion animal” is often preferred because it connotes the active role of animals in relationships with humans (see Irvine 2004 on this debate). For related reasons, the term “guardian” is currently preferred to “owner.” In this article, we use all four terms interchangeably, either for convenience or to be consistent with their use in interviews.

³In an unpublished survey of domiciled citizens, we found that attitudes toward pet ownership among the homeless were approximately evenly split (76/147 in favor). In the only other extant study to survey the public on this issue, Taylor et al. (2004) found that 74 percent (compared with our 51 percent) of those polled in Cambridge, United Kingdom, believed the homeless “should be allowed pets if they want them.”

⁴“Spange” means to beg for “spare change.” The term is commonly used among youth, in particular.

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