



## *Parallel Dualisms*

### **Understanding America's Apathy for the Homeless through the Sociological Imagination**

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Abstract: Drawing various sources in Spencer E. Cahill's anthology, *Inside Social Life* (2004), the author, a First Year Seminar student at UMass Boston and an honor student, contrasts the contradiction found in his own personal life between what one thinks of oneself and what one actually does, with the contradiction at the societal level between sympathy offered to the homeless and what the society does about it. Such parallel dualisms experienced via the author's sociological imagination then leads him to explore, from a social psychological standpoint, various facets of the American culture and society as they relate to the problem of homelessness.

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When the professor spoke about how dualism has become ingrained in much of our thinking and personalities, I initially shrugged off the idea as merely rhetoric. I knew that distinct dualisms existed in people, responsible for their inner fragmentation, such as in the case of people with Multiple Personality Disorder and perhaps with Manic Depression. Everyone would recognize the profound dualisms and fragmentations in people diagnosed with these disorders. Yet, we rarely acknowledge the subtle dualisms and fragmentations we all carry within ourselves. These dualisms may also be observed in society at large, in this case, the American culture and social policy. One dualism that pervades our lives in modern urban America is that of the dualism in our attitude toward the homeless:

how we think about them vs. what actions we take on those feelings.

A quick look at one dualism experienced in my own life can be a good window for understanding the dualisms populating the American culture. My experience throughout grade school and high school was fairly consistent. Much of it revolved around the "potential" I showed, which I was constantly reminded of by my parents and teachers, and one which I rarely fully achieved. However, in college, the structure in my life was pulled out from under me, and suddenly the only one reminding me of my potential was me, and needless to say I was not achieving it. I think "potential" is one of the most important, and somewhat abstract, concepts in life. The disconnect between who I was and who I

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knew that I could be was shocking, and it sent me into a deep depression. I knew I could be getting A's, I wasn't. I knew I could work out in the gym and it would boost my confidence, I didn't. I knew that I should go to class and not just sleep all day, I didn't. It was not what I was doing; it was the fact that I knew what I was doing wrong and I simply continued to do it. I also knew that turning my life around and lining up my inner desires to achieve with my outward actions would make me a very content person; but I didn't.

I feel my situation is analogous to the United States and its stance on homelessness. For over 50 years, the problem of hunger and homelessness in America has not been a problem of resources, but a problem of inaction. It is an established fact that we have the resources to feed everyone in this country. And I'm also fairly sure that if I asked 100 people on the street whether or not they would want America to eliminate hunger and homelessness in our own country, nearly 100 people would respond with "yes." It's basically a no-brainer. So if we have the resources, and we definitely have the desire, why does it not happen? I would submit that it doesn't happen mainly for the same reason that I do not work out and I don't necessarily do all of my homework. It simply needs to be a priority, and yet it is certainly not. This contrast in what we do and what we ought to do is a dualism that pervades not only much of our everyday lives, but also the social structures and institutions with which we identify ourselves.

I would submit that one's initial reaction to the sight of a homeless person or persons is one of sympathy, and this initial reaction cannot simply be discarded because that sympathy is not acted upon. Rather, we must look at the profound disconnect between that initial reaction and the subsequent reflection. Oliver Sacks popularized this **dualistic conception of perception/reflection** when he wrote about

the experience of his catatonic patients which was subsequently turned into a motion picture called *Awakenings*; Robin Williams played his role in the film. Sacks's patients looked like stone statues, with little to offer in the way of interaction, and thus were overlooked by other doctors, but Sacks did not judge solely based on his initial perception. He reasoned that there must be some way to cure these people of their ailment, and he would have never been able to help them had he not continued to reflect past the stage of initial perception. Similarly, the impetus to *not* react on the initial sympathy that one feels towards homeless people must have been caused during the reflection stage of thinking, and must be powerful enough to override the initial **sympathetic sentiment of the observer to another individual**.

There are a few reasons why, upon reflection, the feeling of sympathy becomes diluted or simply changes to a different feeling, almost always one less sympathetic than at first. From the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley we learn that a specific self that people often identify with is **the self as a feeling of possession or appropriation**. Within the framework of this specific self, people feel as though they are defined (and define themselves) by the materials that they possess. But this self may not be as "natural" a process in one's upbringing as one may think, and certainly not limited to an initial stage in development of our selves. As seen in the movie *Affluenza*, this problem has increasingly reached near epidemic proportions in the U.S. As a result of living in a capitalist, profit-driven society like ours, where material possessions often define the man or woman, the sight of a man or woman with literally almost no possessions is not normal to say the least. As people strive for the higher paycheck, the nicer car, the bigger house, they cannot imagine the feeling of having nothing to one's own name. Although sympathy can be derived from this, a feeling of implied

responsibility is placed on the homeless, the thought that that person is in that situation because of what he or she did, and if the observer had been in his or her shoes, he or she never would have ended up there in the first place. Many people who pass by the homeless truly believe that s/he must have done something wrong along the way to somehow deserve or at least cause the situation that s/he is now faced with. Affluent businesspersons may believe that regardless of where they had grown up or what situation they had been born into, they still would have achieved their current level of success, overcoming whatever obstacles were in their way to get there. Though this logic is clearly not correct in many cases, I would submit that it is wholly irrelevant to the problem of homelessness, and should not affect one's desire, or lack thereof, to help those in need.

The work of the philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead can also be useful in interpreting how we can account for the public's behavior relating to the homeless. Mead agreed with the proposition that **in all of us multiple selves** exist, a state which is, in most cases, a normal occurrence (Mead 1962). Two "selves" that I think are most pertinent are (what one may awkwardly call) the self-defined self---i.e., the internal conception of oneself, and how one would like to be portrayed to others---and **the empirical self**, or the person we actually are as determined by our actions (Mead 1962). Another way of distinguishing this is that of contrasting between who we think we are, and who we actually are. In this case, these two identities clash. Most people define themselves as somewhat compassionate people who care for the wellbeing of others, regardless of their social-economic, racial, or cultural background. But in practice the empirical self does not live up to the high ideals that the self-defined self sets. In short, people are generally worse people than they say or think they are, and rarely the other way

around. This dualistic nature of the individual's thinking/acting naturally applies to the society in which the individual was cultivated. Jerome Bruner expresses this social dualism: "For all our power to construct symbolic cultures and to set in place the institutional forces needed for their execution, we do not seem very adept at steering our creations toward the ends we profess to desire" (Bruner 1990:13).

This duality is also seen through other traditions with which people tend to identify. Take religion for example. In 2001, 79.8% of Americans identified themselves as Christian (Wikipedia 2006). Increasingly, however, people are straying from the true meaning and spirit behind Christianity. This can be seen in people's lack of care for the problem of homelessness and in people's subscription to the "just war theory," which are in quite a contrast to Jesus's clearly caring and non-violence teaching.

There must be other reasons that the homeless, who account for about 1% of the population in the U.S. (Washington Profile 2006), receive a disproportionately small degree of attention. One reason is the media. Mead introduced the concept of the "**generalized other**," and Melissa Milkie, in her article on the media's influence on adolescent girls, took that concept one step further by saying that the "media may have become a significant part of the generalized other---that is, the 'society' we know" (Milkie 1999:48). The generalized other, especially in the media, is suspiciously lacking of the most unfortunate members of our society. In the movie *Affluenza*, it is stated that the average child will have seen 1 million TV ads by the age of 20. I would submit that the amount of ads that pertain to the homeless or the problem of homelessness account for less than .01% of those ads, disproportionate to the percentage of society that they represent. In TV shows also, the homeless are shockingly absent from the "culture" that the media has fabricated.

Only with true observation and under-

standing of our inner reactions to the homeless can we see why little action is taken on the subject. The problem is so easily avoidable, one may think. Because the issue of homelessness is never on the front burner, and people are never forced to align their internal sympathy with their empirical self, if everyone were made to reflect on the subject, perhaps to write about it, people may understand better the cavernous gap between what they claim they would do and whether or not they actually take action. As Louise DeSalvo states in her book *Writing as a Way of Healing*, writing and reflecting would “force us into an awareness about ourselves and our relationship to others and our place in the world that we wouldn’t have otherwise had” (1999:5). With the help of this cathartic and illuminating thought, the public may realize the situation that our society is in.

However, the problem lies in the fact that we have **reified the concept of homelessness**: we have accepted the phenomenon of homelessness as a true, natural thing when it is our very system that has created it. In doing so, we have not only forgotten the millions left homeless, but we have also made the classic blunder of accepting a socially created problem as a natural occurrence, and thus stifled our ability to progress. And because, as Clifford Geertz put it, “**there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture**” (Bruner 1990:9), society’s values are reflected in the individual; “by virtue of participation in culture, meaning is rendered public and shared” (Bruner 1990:9). As Ayan Ahmed notes in her article, “The Complexity of Naïve Acceptance of Socially Manipulated Beliefs,” it is society’s “routines that define its realities” (2003:1). And nowhere is that more true than in our daily routine of walking by homeless and ignoring them.

As we saw in the film *Awakenings*, however, true shifts in perspectives can occur. We saw cold, unfeeling, almost robotic doctors break from their routines and eventu-

ally grasp that their patients, even the ones stricken with the most debilitating ailments, are real people, and deserve the best of what the doctors can offer. Rather than disregarding his patients with vague diagnoses, Dr. Sayer (the role for the real life author and physician, Oliver Sacks, played in the film by Robin Williams) put all his attention on curing his patients, and regardless of whether he was successful in the long run, legitimately tried to help a group of people that had long since been stigmatized at the hospital. The homeless, similar to the patients in the hospital, are real people with real feelings, regardless of the fact that few acknowledge these feelings, as it is easier to ignore them. The longer they are ignored, the more stigmatized they become, and the more they are viewed as mere inconveniences to society, “objects of contamination” (1993:128), as Snow and Anderson put it.

There are many reasons why the homeless are constantly overlooked, and I would argue that most of those reasons are not a result of the homeless person’s appearance, but more about the intricate and almost immediate reaction within the “overlooker’s” head. As Erving Goffman notes in his piece, “Face-Work and Interaction Rituals,” routine social interaction primarily is focused around convincing others of one’s **social worth** (1967:156). But when the average person off the street interacts with a homeless person, there is no doubt about who is of greater “**social worth**,” and thus there is no need for any interaction. On the flipside of this matter, it would be difficult for a homeless person to convince the average person that he is socially valuable, and thus, conversation is still not warranted.

Wheelchair users are subjected to **dehumanizing interaction** in much the same way the homeless are. In a public setting, people with visible disabilities note that people simply avoid looking at them, as if they do not exist (Cahill and Eggleston 1994). Aside from the possible discomfort

that some may feel, it is important to question why people treat other people as “non-human” and not worthy of interaction. Candace Clark, in her essay “Sympathy Biography and Relationships,” introduces the concept of *sympathy margin*, the amount of sympathy one has a right to claim (Clark 1987:218). Clark goes on to define the rules of the “economy of sympathy,” the second of which is “do not claim too much sympathy” (1987:221). I would posit that when one sees a homeless person or a person with a physical disability, there is a certain amount of implied sympathy that the observer thinks is being asked of him or her. Walking by a homeless person, an observer feels as though his sympathy is being asked of him, regardless of whether or not it is. After some amount of time, most likely before adulthood, the observer has witnessed enough of this, and now determines that the homeless are claiming too much sympathy, thus violating rule number two of the sympathy economy, and in effect, excludes them from being granted any sympathy whatsoever. Another main point that Clark makes is of the *reciprocal nature of the sympathy economy* (1987). Sympathy is granted to those that the sympathizer believes could possibly sympathize with him in the future. Relating back to Goffman, the homeless are believed to have almost no *social worth*, thus their sympathy has very little value. Just as “gifts of sympathy given by superiors...are imbued with greater value than the same gift from an equal or an inferior” (Clark 1987:226), the sympathy gift from a homeless person would be viewed as having little or no value compared to the sympathy from an equal. Due to the fact that the sympathy economy is reciprocal in nature, and that sympathy from a homeless person carries little or no value, people feel as though the homeless have no right to claim sympathy from them.

The fact of the matter is that regardless of the reason for such dehumanizing inter-

action, it is a self-perpetuating cycle. As Bruner points out, “society exists in action and must be seen in terms of action” (1998:320). That is to say that the treatment of the homeless, the constant apathy and disregard, is only a trend because day in and day out, that treatment is continued. Even the fact that we have a term, “homeless,” for these people is a good example. This term is a prime example of a *master status* (Anderson 1990) when we refer to their individuals. If someone is deemed “homeless,” that sole attribute takes priority over all other descriptors, and immediately we start to subconsciously conceptualize what that person looks like, what their *social worth* is, etc. We can dismiss someone as homeless, which is a lot easier and more pleasant than thinking about how terrible his or her life actually is and thinking about how he or she got there and what can be done to help. As long as they are treated like “non-people,” they will continue to be “non-people.”

The perpetuation of this dehumanizing behavior is analogous to the German citizens during the Holocaust, although certainly to a lesser extent. This behavior characterizes the “*banality of evil*,” as Hannah Arendt put it. The theory of evil arising from “ordinary persons [acting] in ordinary contexts” (Berger 2002:399), I would argue, is also applicable in this situation. Just because something is ordinary, typical, or common does not make it inherently not evil, and the dehumanization and mistreatment of the homeless is a prime example.

In Joel Best and Frank Furedi’s article “The Evolution of Road Rage,” we see that people will jump on a bandwagon of media attention in order to attract more attention to their particular problem that they want to push into the spotlight. This piggybacking of interests onto a social problem with high visibility is not a new phenomenon. We rarely see, however, media attention on the homeless, much for the same reason

that people avoid eye contact with the homeless; out of sight, out of mind. In the rare instances that the homeless do make it into the news, it is because of stories of horrific violence or unbearable weather conditions. A few days a year, when the temperature in Boston is around its lowest in the year, we sometimes see the homeless on the news getting blankets, or news anchors warning that people could die overnight if unprotected from the harsh cold. At that point, most people turn to the person they're watching the news with and say, "Boy, that would suck, huh?" But we never see stories without a hook, without some kind of reason that the homeless are on the news, aside from the fact that they live in continual uncertainty about where they will eat, get water, or sleep.

Just this past March a homeless man, who was sleeping in Langone Park in the North End, was doused with lighter fluid and set on fire. That story made the news, and people naturally were appalled, but very few people probably imagined that if he hadn't been set on fire, that man would have never been on the news, and he most likely would have continued to live anonymously, out of sight and out of mind of the public. In fact, "hunger and homelessness increasing in the US" has been the fourth most marginalized story of 2005-2006 (Klotzer 2006:27). The main point here is that homelessness is a horrific problem in and of itself, and yet people need some extra incentive to put it on the news. Like when we walk down the street and see a homeless person, we are fully aware of their terrible situation, but it's just shy of bad enough to actually do something.

Another reason that people may fear homeless interaction is the same reason that people fear getting old, dying, showing emotion. All of these fears revolve around dependence and/or vulnerability. One theme brought up in the film *Tuesdays with Morrie* is the "shame of dependence." Mitch tells Morrie that he "never cries,"

and Morrie deduces that Mitch is afraid to show emotion; he also tells Mitch that he is afraid of dying and of getting old. When Mitch first comes for his weekly visit, he is clearly uncomfortable with Morrie's dependence on his caretaker and his frail and vulnerable body. Here we see a duality inside Mitch, seeing his teacher in such a state makes him want to care for him, but at the same time, the sight of it makes him uneasy, and he wishes that he didn't have to see it. This is not surprising to Morrie, however, who writes in his book, "be prepared to deal with profound contradictory feelings" (Schwartz 1997:46). Morrie was aware that dualities are normal, and in some cases, those dualities may become apparent.

The homeless are ignored much in the way that people ignore those with physical ailments, or those who are dying. It is easier to ignore these people than to go through the process of psycho-sociologically analyzing oneself to understand why it is we ignore these people in the first place. Morrie understands this, and, in time, allows Mitch to cure his own "*dis-ease*" about *mortality* (Cahill and Eggleston<sup>1</sup> 1994). I believe that creating similar opportunities for meeting the homeless would also cure an observer's "dis-ease" around them. Such "Tuesdays with a Homeless Person" scenario would forcibly expose people to what they are uncomfortable with, and force them to deal with it.

So what can be done about the situation? How can people act in a less dehumanizing manner towards the homeless? Aside from giving money and/or volunteering at a drop-in center like Rosie's Place, there are other ways in which we can, through simple self-observation, analyze the way we treat people inhumanely, whether subtly or otherwise. One simple and powerful change people, and I for that

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<sup>1</sup> The concept is adapted from Cahill and Eggleston's term regarding discomfort around wheelchair users.

matter, can make is to simply not avoid eye contact with the homeless out of discomfort. Just look at them exactly as you would another passer-by, say “how are you doing?” as you would to a friend, and if you are asked for change, just say yes or no, give money or don’t, but at least you will have treated them as a person. As the sociologist Morrie Schwartz wrote, “[The] need to feel connected to other people is as vital to human survival as food, water, and shelter” (1997:73). Morrie Schwartz came to understand human nature very well in his last stretch of life, and I believe that his words are as profound as they are relevant to the homeless. Like food, water and shelter, the connection to other human beings is both something that most people take for granted, and something we do not usually give homeless people access to. These “homeless” are people first and homeless second, and they deserve to be acknowledged as such.

The research that this paper has led me to has introduced me to many innovative ideas that may help the plight of the homeless. In an article from *Media Asia*, the magazine’s Big Issue has involved the homeless in their first advertising campaign in Japan. The magazine, whose circulation had recently been suffering, opted to employ the homeless to sell the magazine, “as a means of helping them get back on their feet...and raising awareness of the plight of homeless people” (Murphy 2005). Minoru Kawasaki, head of the advertising firm in charge of the campaign, said, “We would like to change the consciousness of the public from ‘disregard’ to ‘understanding’ towards the homeless issue” (Murphy 2005). It is revolutionary thinking like this, which incorporates the homeless in ways that are mutually beneficial, that will help our society to improve the situation of the homeless or at least raise awareness of the problem.

Simply writing about the subject of homelessness has led me to both reconsider my actions concerning the topic, and has

given me specific ways that I can change my own actions in order to accomplish the societal shift in the treatment of the homeless. The story of Morrie Schwartz is another example of someone’s inner questioning bringing clarity to many others. In fact, the entire spiritual and philosophical journey that Morrie embarked on late in his life was all due to his “writing for his own benefit” (1997:66). Morrie began the sequence of becoming a celebrity not intending to do so, but rather, he wanted to “distance [him]self from [his] illness and remind [him]self of what [he] needed to do to maintain [his] composure throughout [his] illness (1997:66). Morrie continues his explanation, in a very DeSalvo-esque manner, by saying that his goal was also to “objectify [his] experiences and be a witness to [his] own process” (1997:66).

In writing this paper, I have unknowingly accomplished Morrie’s goal; I have become a witness to my actions and much of this paper has been possible because I have been able to do so. In being a witness to my own actions, my writing has followed the stages laid out in Chapter 7 of DeSalvo’s book. That chapter, entitled “Stages of the Process, Stages of Growth I” (1999:108), has laid out the stages that I have unknowingly gone through while writing this paper. The stage described in this chapter that I identify with the most is the germination stage, in which “fragments of ideas, images, phrases, scenes, moments” (1999:110), mostly concerning my and others’ reactions towards homeless people, were flying through my head, and this paper is a result of my trying to make sense of it all. The process has not only elucidated the changes that I can make pertaining to my actions, but the process of writing has also been a therapeutic one as well. I took DeSalvo’s advice to “trust that in time something worthwhile will emerge ... [and] trust, too, that engaging in the writing process, by itself, is valuable” (1999:85). This counsel has proven true for

me, and I hope that something valuable has emerged from a process that has already been valuable to me.

Every member of our society is for the most part only in control of his or her own actions, but through this individual control, one may also realize that our society's nature and structure are also malleable and subject to change, and not static. We saw Billy Elliot have a profound effect on the smaller society in which he lived, changing people's notions about boys doing ballet and the stereotypes that accompany it. But achievements more significant than that may have happened years after Billy Elliot left his small mining town. Not only did Billy change his own people's views, he or the film about him made people rethink why they have the particular views that they do have. The result was a much more civilized, rational society. The "banality of evil" (Berger 2002:399) was evident; Billy's dad and brother disliked him doing ballet because that's not what boys do, but when confronted, their strong opinions proved to be just a façade of unstable and unneeded convictions.

Society must change; we must propose an *alternative to the social script* (Berkowitz and Padavic 1999) that currently dominates people's attitudes towards the homeless.

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