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panhandling repertoires and routines for overcoming the nonperson treatment

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Abstract

In this article, I present panhandling as a dynamic undertaking that requires conscious actions and purposeful modifications of self, performances, and emotions to gain the attention and interest of passersby. I show that describing and theorizing panhandling in terms of dramaturgical routines is useful in understanding the interactions and exchanges that constitute panhandling. In addition, repertoires rightly portray panhandlers as agents engaging the social world rather than as passive social types. From this perspective, sidewalks serve as stages on which panhandlers confront and overcome various forms of the nonperson treatment. The research is based on a street ethnography of homeless panhandlers living in Washington, DC.

Some of the people just walk by and don't say nothin'. I call them zombies [laughs]. You ask them for change and they don't say "yes," "no," or "maybe I be back." They just walk by you like they don't even see you—it's like I'm not even sitting there. They could say "I ain't got none" or "no" or something. They just walk by.—Alice, a homeless panhandler

We use a variety of ploys to avoid the gaze or overtures extended by panhandlers—we avert our eyes, quicken our pace, increase the volume on our headphones. Some panhandlers manage to capture our attention, less frequently our money, using humor, offering services, telling stories, or by using other dramatic devices. A close examination of the exchanges between panhandler and passersby reveals that these interactions occur within a multilayered, theatrical context; dramas are enacted at the face-to-face level yet display the larger social relations among the poor and nonpoor.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective presents social life as a play in which persons or actors conduct themselves before various audiences according to scripted roles. Compared with the exchanges among everyday persons, however, interactions between panhandler and pedestrian more closely resemble the basic structural features of a play. The panhandler, who is the main actor, is like an improvisational performer who uses a repertoire of pieces or numbers to accomplish the act of panhandling. I refer to a panhandler's collection of these actions as his or her panhandling repertoire. Similarly, in reaction to the performer, pedestrians serve as the audience and respond to the panhandling routine by selecting from a menu of responses, like engaging or ignoring the panhandler. Being ignored by a passerby, which

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Goffman (1963) referred to as the “nonperson treatment,” is a primary problem confronted by panhandlers, but one that is directly addressed through a repertoire of panhandling routines.

On the basis of ethnographic observations and interviews of panhandlers on the streets of Washington, DC, I have conceptualized five primary panhandling routines: the entertainer, the greeter, the servicer, the storyteller, and the aggressor. These routines are premised on using various props, manipulating self-presentation, and engaging the sympathies and emotions of passersby. The fact that I am categorizing panhandlers according to various routines, however, does not necessarily imply that certain individuals are acting or feigning need and distress. Rather, panhandling repertoires are one way of describing the public dramas between panhandler and passersby.

A PRIMARY PROBLEM FACING PANHANDLERS—THE NONPERSON TREATMENT

The nonperson treatment of panhandlers, that is, passing by a panhandler as though he or she did not exist, originates in a disposition characterizing many city dwellers, which Simmel ([1903] 1971) called the “blasé attitude.” The blasé attitude stems from the constant stimulation found in a city and causes inhabitants to react to new situations with minimal energy or to disregard differences between things. Often, the city commuter or resident’s blasé attitude renders any particular panhandler as an unremarkable or meaningless figure against the backdrop of ubiquitous panhandling and homelessness.

In particular, passersby with the blasé attitude commonly cast panhandlers into the role of the stranger (Simmel [1908] 1971). The stranger is defined by a combination of nearness and remoteness—nearness because one resides within the confines of a group or spatial area and remoteness because one is not integrated into any particular social body. Additionally, the interaction between stranger and other is characterized by various degrees of *strangeness* as a result of this tension between the qualities of nearness and remoteness. Panhandlers resemble the stranger as they, as fellow human beings, stand in close proximity to pedestrians by virtue of asking for money along sidewalks or at subway stations, yet remain distant from these same individuals owing to certain stigmas.

For instance, negative stereotypes of homeless persons, such as being dangerous, dirty, diseased, and mentally ill, are often connected to panhandlers, which then fuels a fearful desire to maintain a certain physical distance from panhandlers (Liebow 1993; Wagner 1993). Similarly, owing to the common associations between poverty and crime in the minds of middle-class persons (Reiman 1970), panhandlers are often merged into the “dangerous class.” Additionally, race and gender differences also add strangeness as the great majority of panhandlers in this study are Black and male, whereas the pedestrian population in contact with the panhandling population is much more racially diverse and gender balanced. In particular, because the typical Washington, DC, panhandler is a Black man, non-Black panhandlers or female panhandlers who initiate encounters may “break frame” (Goffman 1974) or disrupt the stereotypical racial or gender expectations circumscribing the larger panhandling population. Some passersby may have legitimate reasons for ignoring panhandlers who engage them publicly—regardless of appearances or intentions—on the basis of gender and age mismatches or owing to past violent encounters with strangers.

Hence, a general disposition among urbanites—the blasé attitude—compounded by a variety of stigmas affixed to panhandlers often cause each to be viewed as a stranger. These attitudes and perspectives among passersby typically prompt a particular response toward panhandlers and their overtures for money or food—the nonperson treatment. A person withholding glances

or close scrutiny of another and effectively treating the other as though he or she did not exist characterizes the nonperson treatment.

In general, the nonperson treatment is one type of interaction occurring among unfamiliar persons in public places. When approaching a stranger in public, one typically ignores the other completely; provides the other with a subtle, noninvasive form of acknowledgment; or explicitly engages the other in some fashion. Goffman (1963) referred to these three types of interactions, respectively, as the nonperson treatment, civil inattention, and encounter or face engagement.

As suggested earlier by Alice, passersby commonly direct the nonperson treatment toward panhandlers. Pedestrians accomplish the nonperson treatment by effectively using props to pretend that the panhandler is neither seen nor heard or by simply looking down or straight ahead as though the panhandler were an inanimate object, like a tree or statue. From a panhandler's perspective, passersby using these variations of the nonperson treatment appear then as "zombies." Such explicit attempts to avoid and ignore reveal that the nonperson treatment is sometimes a conscious form of interaction rather than a passive or default disposition.

Viewed collectively, actions taken by pedestrians are also drawn from a dramaturgical repertoire of routines; that is, the nonperson treatment, civil inattention, and face engagements constitute routines used by pedestrians to address the encounter treatment initiated by panhandlers. Although not fully developed in this article, the exchanges between pedestrian and panhandler involve the interaction of repertoires. Pedestrians, however, typically control the interaction given their ability to regard the panhandler as a nonperson.

A NEW APPROACH TO STUDYING PANHANDLERS

I propose that panhandlers devise a repertoire of panhandling routines to break out of the role of stranger or to awaken pedestrians from the blasé state; these dramaturgical actions then minimize the nonperson treatment and pave the way for encounters. Framing panhandling according to a repertoire of actions represents a different analytical approach to the study of panhandler practices and problems. Most prior research on the subject presents typologies that often lack analytical precision. Although these studies offer useful descriptive categories, such as white-collar beggars (Anderson [1923] 1961), child beggars (Freund 1925), store beggars (Gilmore 1940), professional beggars (Wallace 1965), executive beggars (Igbino 1991), and character beggars (Williams 1995), I argue that they fail to provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of panhandling and of the problems faced by panhandlers.

First, past analyses often construct typologies that portray panhandlers not as actors but as types lacking agency and versatility. In contrast, panhandling repertoires highlight the drama and dynamism that often underlay the act of panhandling. I demonstrate how panhandlers confront ambivalent or negative reactions by using one or more routines in a single encounter. Ultimately, framing panhandling in terms of repertoires represents a departure from previous analyses as this strategy typifies action rather than essentializes or rigidifies persons.

Second, prior research typically fails to conceptualize panhandling in terms of interaction between two unequal sets of actors, the panhandler and the passerby. Framing panhandling as a theatrical exchange between two classes of actors with dissimilar material resources, different interactional objectives, and contrasting viewpoints, however, is a critical factor toward understanding the repertoire of routines enacted by panhandlers. Despite these inequalities, this analysis shows that panhandling repertoires lead to exchanges between the zombie and the stranger and thereby foster greater understanding among both classes of actors.

Method

I define a panhandler as a person who publicly and regularly requests money or goods for personal use in a face-to-face manner from unfamiliar others without offering a readily identifiable or valued consumer product or service in exchange for items received. Throughout the sampling process, I largely selected panhandlers who appeared mentally and physically fit for regular employment. Among both policymakers and the population at large, these able-bodied, often homeless individuals are generally regarded as the undeserving poor (Wright 1989), that is, persons viewed as undeserving of sympathy or assistance as they violate basic norms surrounding work. I learned during interviews, however, that these seemingly fit fronts often belied health problems and circumstances that inhibited gainful employment, particularly work requiring physical stamina and strength. For instance, many panhandlers reported mild to serious illnesses and injuries occurring largely before their entry into panhandling, such as back and leg injuries, poorly healed broken bones, knife and gunshot wounds, burns, diabetes, and HIV exposure. Others admitted to past or current drug and alcohol problems, and a few appeared to have mental difficulties. However, no single health factor typically explained entry into panhandling and homelessness. Rather, a constellation of problems, including unemployment, homelessness, family conflicts, or health factors, often characterized each panhandler.

During the data collection period, which spanned from December 1994 to August 1996, I sampled mornings, afternoons, and evenings on both weekdays and weekends within five contiguous neighborhoods or sections of northwest Washington, DC. This area covered a three-mile corridor beginning in a largely White, well-educated, and affluent residential neighborhood at the northern point and terminating in a large downtown business section at the southern end. Both a major avenue and a common subway line connect four of these regions. I undertook about 80 official data collection efforts into this area, which were accomplished largely on foot since I lived in one of the five neighborhoods. Including interviews, each journey usually lasted between two and five hours. At the end of the data collection period in August 1996, I typically was able to identify two out of three panhandlers within this corridor as someone whom I had either interviewed or informally spoken to previously.

Interviews ($N=37$) were tape recorded and followed a series of open-ended questions focusing on four aspects of the panhandler's experience: street work, relationships, self-issues, and demographics. Panhandlers received \$10 for their tape-recorded interviews, which typically lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. On meeting a panhandler for the first time, I usually established basic rapport by giving \$0.50, which was then followed by an explanation that I was a student studying panhandling. Other relevant information that may have influenced rapport with each panhandler is that I am White, male, and of a middle-class background. Only a handful of panhandlers, however, refused to be interviewed. In addition to these formal interviews, I informally spoke with dozens of other panhandlers and posed as a panhandler for two consecutive days in downtown Washington, DC.

On the basis of the formal interviews, the profile of the typical panhandler in this sample is as follows: a Black, single, unemployed homeless man in his early 40s who was born into a lower or working-class family in the District of Columbia and who possessed a high school degree or higher. In addition, the typical panhandler began panhandling in his mid-30s or early 40s and had been panhandling consistently for the past five years after losing a job in the construction industry. A negative life event or events, such as an accident, an illness, a spell of homelessness, a layoff, or a drug or alcohol problem generally preceded job losses.

Largely owing to the disproportionate number of male panhandlers, only three female panhandlers were included in the sample of 37 persons. In addition, the city's demographic

composition partially explains the high proportion of African American panhandlers in the sample: The District of Columbia is predominantly populated by African Americans (65.8 percent in 1990) and poverty and homelessness are most acute among African Americans (D.C. Government, 1993). When comparing my sample of panhandlers to a study of Washington, DC, homeless individuals conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in 1991, the NIDA sample captured a greater proportion of women, younger persons, White and Hispanic individuals, less educated persons, and employed individuals. Only a small proportion of the NIDA sample reported panhandling on a regular basis.

All quotations in this article are by persons who gave their informed consent to participate in this research. All names in this study are pseudonyms, and certain biographical details have been deleted or altered to protect anonymity.

Panhandling Repertoires

Panhandlers overcome the nonperson treatment by initiating encounters through the use of dramaturgical techniques, routines, acts, pieces, or numbers, which I collectively call panhandling repertoires. Often enacted in a performancelike manner, repertoires capture the attention and interest of passersby by appealing to a range of emotional qualities, such as amusement, sympathy, and fear.

I have conceptualized five primary panhandling routines: the entertainer, the greeter, the servicer, the storyteller, and the aggressor, along with strategies within certain routines. The entertainer offers music or humor, the greeter provides cordiality and deference, the servicer supplies a kind of service, the storyteller presents a sad or sympathetic tale, and the aggressor deals in fear and intimidation. Generally, the entertainer and greeter attempt to produce enjoyment or good feelings, whereas the storyteller and aggressor elicit more serious or hostile moods. The servicer, who occupies a more neutral position, is focused on providing some sort of utility. Fundamentally, the moods or impressions created by the routines are largely attempts to attenuate strangeness or awaken pedestrians from their blasé condition, which then paves the way for an encounter and possible contributions.

Storyteller

Of all the panhandling routines, the storyteller approach most clearly conveys the dramaturgical nature of panhandling. The storyteller routine is based on using stories to evoke understanding, pity, or guilt from pedestrians. The primary message is need in virtually all cases. Stories consist of various signs, appearances, lines, or narratives that focus on shaking pedestrians from their blasé state. The storyteller routine is then accomplished by means of one or more specific subroutines: the silent storyteller, the sign storyteller, the line storyteller, and the hard luck storyteller. Here, Duane, a long-time homeless panhandler, points to the tactics or arts of capturing the sympathy of passersby with a good story:

What makes my panhandlin' successful and any other panhandlin' successful is the emotions. Now if you were reared in a good moral background and I come up to you [he pulls his face close—about six inches away], "Excuse me sir, I'm really tired. I just moved in and I've got five kids. Me and my wife—we can't get jobs." Now when you say the word *kids*—"Forget me—I've got babies I'm tryin' to feed." Or sickness—"I'm dyin' " or "my wife, my mother." More than just I'm givin' them money to get something to eat. These things are tactics. They'll be touched. [Duane gets up and demonstrates by calling out onto the sidewalk.] "Ma'am, my wife only has one hour to live ! I'm tryin' to raise money. Please, someone help !" [He returns to the table] Now, did you catch some of the arts? There's an appeal to your emotions. And you got those regulars who are sittin' down, "Hey, I'm homeless. Can you spare some

change sir?” And you see the same jerk on the same corner everyday. And then you get into a habit, “Well here’s a dollar.” But the real money comes from the emotions.

In addition to narratives, stories are conveyed symbolically through down-and-out facial expressions, as Ray indicates:

People look at me—the way I talk and you know—feel sorry for me. They know I’m homeless by the way I’m lookin’! And I give them a sad little look.

Clothing, appearances, and presentation of self may also be manipulated or used to tell the desired story. In fact, becoming a successful storyteller is contingent on developing a look that works, as Fox suggests:

When I first started panhandling I couldn’t understand why people weren’t giving me money—I looked too clean. So I grew this ratty beard and figured so that’s the trick of the trade. As long as I was looking presentable like I was doing a 9-to-5 job—say working as a computer specialist—I wasn’t getting a dime [laughs].

Hence, storytellers may have to consciously manage their appearance more than others to foster the impression of need. On buying or receiving new or secondhand clothes and shoes, for instance, storytellers find themselves in the difficult position of negotiating those symbols that do not suggest need, as compared with other routines that rely less on a sympathetic or pitiful appearance or story. I now discuss the four storyteller subroutines in greater detail.

The silent storyteller relies primarily on symbolic communication rather than verbal exchanges to gain the attention of passersby. The silent storyteller uses attire, expressions, movements, and other props to advertise his or her situation and needs. Movements might entail limping down the street or shivering unprotected in the rain and cold. Props may include crutches, a wheelchair, or other symbols of disability; bags of belongings; or children. Generally, silent storytellers, who often sit with their cup on the sidewalk and refrain from unnecessary interactions, are the most passive of all panhandlers. Harlan, a panhandler for the past six years, explains his silent approach:

Over the years I’ve looked at all the guys’ styles and when I first started some of the guys used signs and some of the guys talked, some the guys sing, some of the guys danced, some of the guys do everything—I mean I can do all that too. I don’t like to ask people for money so when I first started I used to say “Excuse me sir, can you spare some change?” Then I started to develop my own thing—something told me not to say anything. In other words, I let my cup do the talking. People used to tell me a long time ago, if anyone wants you to have anything they’ll give it to you. You know, you don’t have to ask. I’m not gonna ask everybody that comes up and down the street to give me a nickel [laughs]. I’ve tried it, I’ve done it. You know, I just let my cup do the talking.

Like the silent storyteller, the sign storyteller typically waits passively for a pedestrian to initiate an encounter. A sign is a tool that effectively creates interest and concern within passersby with minimal effort exerted by the panhandler. A sign, as compared with a verbal exchange, reduces the likelihood of being subjected to a negative or humiliating interaction, as explained by Walt:

I let the sign do the talking. I don’t speak unless I’m spoken to or unless to say “good morning” or something like that or “good afternoon.” I just hold a sign and if people want to give me money they give me money and if they don’t they walk by and nothing is ever said. There’s no dirty looks, no nothin’ because you can’t look nasty to everyone that doesn’t give you money because you’d looking nasty to 90 percent of the world [chuckles].

Lou also uses a cardboard sign that reads, “Homeless and Hungry. Please Help. Thank you. God Bless All.” He includes his name in the lower right corner of the sign. Lou sits on the sidewalk with his back against a building, his belongings on either side, and his sign and cup positioned in front of him. For Lou, the sign removes the uncomfortable process of verbally soliciting money and minimizes negative exchanges:

I don’t like asking people for money straight out—that’s why I use my sign. And incidentally, I don’t feel as bad because I’m not asking people. A lot of people are afraid of me if I ask. With the sign they have the option of walking by or not walking by.

Thus, sign storytellers view the sign as an unobtrusive, non-threatening device but one that still conveys a message of need. Generally, signs protect panhandlers from degrading interactions by allowing agreeable donors to initiate an exchange without compulsion or intimidation.

The line storyteller is the most common among all storytellers and possibly the most ubiquitous routine in the panhandling repertoire. The line storyteller typically remains stationary and simply presents a line to pedestrians as they pass. Almost all lines focus on money in one form or another. The most basic, unadorned money line is “Can you spare some change?” but specific higher amounts, such as a quarter or a dollar are often inserted in place of *change*. Another variation on the money line is to ask for very little money, such as “Can you help me out? Pennies will do” or an odd amount of money, such as “Can you spare 27 cents?”

Other lines may refer to “help” rather than money while specifying how the help would be put to good use. In these instances, food is a typical theme, such as “Can you help me get something to eat?” or “Can you spare some change to get a burrito?” In addition to food, transportation needs are another common theme used by line storytellers, such as “Can you spare two or three dollars for bus fare?” Lines invoking transportation may also include a destination and purpose, like returning to the shelter for the evening, buying medication at a hospital, or going to a job interview. Lines also focus on the return from unintended destinations, such as a hospital or jail, which may involve displaying evidence of a stay, like an institutionally marked identification wristband. Beyond money, food, transportation, and destinations, line storytellers focus on innumerable topics, but lines typically center on subjects that a homeless or poor person might realistically need.

The hard luck storyteller uses a more direct approach than the teller of a line story and offers an in depth narrative focusing on difficult or unusual circumstances. On gaining the person’s attention, the hard luck storyteller then presents an extended narrative to elicit sympathy and a contribution. Often, hard luck storytellers elaborate and combine themes used by line and sign storytellers. Here is an example of a hard luck story told to me one afternoon:

I know this is a little unusual but I need you to save me. God told me to approach the man with the pink shirt. [I was wearing a pink shirt.] I almost just committed suicide by jumping off the bridge. You need to help me and my two daughters. We’re trying to get a bus ticket to Philadelphia. I’ve been in prison for the past five years and I’ve been out a month and I’m broke. When I was in prison my wife was raped and murdered. I need \$15—Travelers Aid is going to pay the rest of the ticket. [I gave him a dollar from my wallet.] Can you help me get something to eat from Roy Rogers then? I’ll put that dollar towards the bus but I need some money for food as well.

In sum, storytellers attempt to negate the blasé state by emphasizing the apparent disparities between themselves and pedestrians. These differences then create feelings of sympathy or pity within passersby and often lead to encounters and contributions. The storyteller’s

dramatized tales or physical appearance, however, may actually exacerbate the level of strangeness between panhandler and pedestrian—a result that is in contrast to more positive routines that neutralize strangeness, such as the entertainer, greeter, and servicer numbers. Aggravating strangeness through stories or appearances, though, places storytellers in the “sick role” (Parsons 1951) or a position of alienated dependency, which then paves the way for sympathy and contributions.

Agressor

The aggressor technique is premised on evoking guilt and fear in pedestrians by using either real or feigned aggression. Compared with the storyteller, the aggressor captures the attention of a pedestrian in a more pointed and dramatic fashion. Like the storyteller routine, however, the aggressor increases feelings of strangeness by highlighting disparities and differences. Primarily, the aggressor obtains food, money, and other items through intimidation, persistence, and shame.

Intimidation is accomplished through sarcastic and abusive comments, or fearful movements, like walking alongside, grabbing hold of the pedestrian, or silently using intimidating looks or stares. For instance, I encountered an unidentified panhandler using a kind of physical intimidation by standing in front of an ATM machine and then darting and lunging at pedestrians as they passed. Finally, a woman who initially refused his overtures gave him some money after completing her transaction at the ATM machine.

Persistence entails doggedly pursuing a contribution after it has been refused or seeking more money after an initial donation. Rita, for example, displayed this kind of persistence, though politely, during our hour-long encounter. After meeting her in front of McDonald’s and buying her lunch, she then requested the change from lunch, asked for additional money to help her pay rent, and then asked for any old articles of clothing. During our meeting, Rita clearly displayed need especially after describing how she had been partially disabled by a stroke. Her method of asking, however, conveyed this element of aggressiveness and persistence.

Shame is evoked by making the donor feel that his or her quarter or dollar donation is insufficient and cheap given the vast material discrepancies between donor and panhandler. For example, my first encounter with Mel incorporated a sad tale with a shameful admonishment. After meeting him on the street, he lifted his shirt with his left hand revealing a long scar extending from his sternum to his belly button. The scar was folded over like it had recently been sewn up. “See this,” he said, pointing to the scar with his right hand, “I need to eat right now. It’s also about time for me to take my insulin. I’m a diabetic.” I responded by giving him a dollar. “Can you tell me what I can get with that?” he returned somewhat indignantly.

Any of these prior examples may have constituted a form of aggressive panhandling under the District of Columbia’s Panhandling Control Act, enacted in 1993. This act prohibits panhandling in an aggressive manner, which includes “approaching, speaking to, or following a person in a manner as would cause a reasonable person to fear bodily harm” and “continuously asking, begging, or soliciting alms from a person after the person has made a negative response.”

Most panhandlers are well aware of this law and the prohibitions surrounding aggressive panhandling. Consequently, panhandlers often distinguish themselves from other panhandlers who act in an aggressive fashion, as Lou suggests:

You have people out there with the cup going right up to people and saying “Help me out.” That’s what they call aggressive panhandling. That makes a bad name for me because I use a sign. And I mean that says it all. I’m not in people’s face. I’m just off on the side. That’s how I do it.

Up until now, I have described the aggressor routine as one that is consciously initiated by the panhandler. However, it also is clear that due to the many negative comments and interactions panhandlers report receiving from passersby, at least some of the time behaving aggressively is a reaction rather than a role, as suggested by Vern:

I have no problem people askin’ for change because you can always say no. Some people have attitudes but you got to keep a good mind because I’ve been through it with people: “You got some spare change?” “Get the hell out of my face.” You can’t lose your spot over that because as soon as you get aggressive [makes police siren noise]. Don’t let one dollar mess you up from a hundred dollars. They [fellow panhandlers] tell me that four or five times a night.

Hence, panhandlers generally understand the economic and legal imperatives behind remaining silent when publicly humiliated. Although easier said than done, managing one’s emotions in the face of rejection or abusive comments is part of the job, as suggested by Ray:

I don’t do aggressive panhandling. I don’t harass nobody. If you have a problem with me I have nothin’ to say to you—I’m a panhandler. If people have something to say I just let it go—words are words.

Whereas the aggressor routine is often good at stirring pedestrians from their blasé condition, such action runs the risk of furthering strangeness and alienating potential donors. Particularly among panhandlers who are tempted to react aggressively to humiliating interactions with passersby or police, the job of panhandling is akin to service occupations that require emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) or publicly managing one’s feelings.

Servicer

In contrast to all other routines, the servicer provides specific services to stimulate social interaction and exchange. Using various dramaturgical techniques, the servicer transforms the exchange into something different than merely giving money to a panhandler. The servicer dispels the blasé attitude by ostensibly offering a service while lessening the sense of strangeness by converting the interaction into a kind of business transaction. In other words, giving money to a stranger in public is an unfamiliar practice, whereas being engaged by a salesperson offering a service is a familiar ritual. Regardless of whether a service is desired or not, however, providing a service dampens strangeness by establishing a sense of obligation and reciprocity between panhandler and pedestrian. Although this rapport may be contrived in some cases and more akin to “counterfeit intimacy” (Enck and Preston 1988), that is, interaction supporting the illusion that a legitimate service is being performed when both parties know this to be false.

The servicer repertoire consists of a formal, proactive component and an informal, reactive aspect. The formal servicer consciously seeks out situations to provide a service in exchange for a tip, much like a bellhop or bathroom attendant. Roaming the streets in search of an opportunity is a particular characteristic of the formal servicer. In contrast, the informal servicer is more typically sought out by virtue of possessing something desirable, such as information. Additionally, the informal servicer can be viewed as a secondary type of routine that emerges owing to the failure of a primary one or arises when a panhandler is in the right place at the right time.

Car parking, that is, pointing out parking spaces to drivers in exchange for a tip, is the most prevalent type of formal service. This practice, however, is illegal under the Panhandling Control Act. The maximum penalties for violating the statute are a \$300 fine and 90 days in jail. Despite its illegality and potential costs, parking cars remains a booming business in certain neighborhoods.

I gained a sense of the car-parking routine one evening by observing Spike, who is one of among a half-dozen car parkers that work a certain neighborhood. As we spoke alongside a busy street, Spike motioned to an approaching luxury sedan that a spot would be vacant. As the vehicle backed diagonally into the space, Spike stood behind and yelled out directions: “Turn your wheel to the left. You’re OK. Come on.” The passenger—a tall, professionally dressed man—took several minutes to emerge. Spike noted the car’s Georgia license plate and asked the man as he opened his door what part of Georgia he was from. “I’m from Atlanta,” the car owner said. “Oh yeah, I’m from Statesboro,” Spike responded. The man then gave Spike some change. During this exchange, Spike’s friendly demeanor also demonstrates how car parkers often integrate the greeter rap into their parking routine.

In terms of earnings, car parking appears to be the most lucrative of all the panhandling routines. Although, most car parkers panhandle in addition to parking cars, it is difficult to gain an accurate understanding of the payoffs of car parking alone. In any case, regular car parkers report a minimum of \$40 of total earnings on a good evening compared with the median level of \$35 among all panhandlers. However, earnings reportedly can exceed \$100 if a car parker encounters extra generous drivers who give \$10 or \$20 at a time.

The increased earnings netted by car parkers may stem from any one of numerous factors, including drivers giving out of fear, generosity, appreciation, a desire to impress friends or dates, or inebriation. However, Mel, a long-time car parker, offers his own explanation for why car parkers earn such high relative earnings:

It’s free money out there. I don’t ask for nothing. I just direct cars into parking spaces and people give me money—some change, one dollar, five dollars, ten dollars, twenty dollars. Sometimes they’re so happy to give me money even though they could’ve paid for an actual space in a parking lot for less. If you ever get hard up for money, go over there and try it. It’s almost like they’re trained. They expect it when they come into the neighborhood.

In contrast to the formal servicer, such as the car parker, the informal servicer provides services to pedestrians, vendors, storeowners, and the police. These services, which result from a panhandler’s propensity of being in the right place at the right time, include offering an umbrella to a soaked pedestrian, giving directions to specific street addresses, escorting unchaperoned, sometimes inebriated persons to their final destinations, or hailing a taxi for the less streetwise or in rm. These exchanges convert the panhandler into an informal service provider.

Beyond informally offering everyday information and help, panhandlers occasionally encounter more significant and valued news. Owing to their near omnipresence on the streets, panhandlers are frequently knowledgeable of many important happenings. Information absorbed by panhandlers, particularly facts and persons relating to crimes, are sought after by store owners and police, as explained by Vance:

We provide services to some of the storeowners. If there’s a break-in or vandalism, we usually know who did it within a 24–48 hour period, whereas it might take the police several days to a week to find out the same information.

However, not all panhandlers capitalize on the opportunity to provide information to the powers that seek it. Each panhandler may have personal reasons for not offering up important information, such as fear of retaliation, a code of silence among street people, not knowing the desired facts, or not trusting the police. Hence, a witness who fails to cooperate with the police when the stakes are high may feel the stick rather than being handed a carrot, as Mel explains:

I went to jail because I wouldn't open my mouth. So they said I was in contempt of court. I was the witness of a murder and they all pointed their fingers at me man—I'm telling you Joe—"He saw it. He was there." I was just walking past. I didn't see who was blowing who away. I be everywhere. I see a whole lot of things—and that be my business. I hear the gunshot goin' off, but do you think I looked around to see what time it was? I keep with my straight steady walk—outta there—caught a cab.

In sum, the servicer captures a pedestrian's attention by creating the impression that he or she has some valuable utility to offer in exchange for payment, much like the relationship between salesclerk and patron. Although intimacy or familiarity may increase the likelihood of a pedestrian giving money to a servicer, the quality of strangeness is attenuated by the panhandler's ability to turn the interaction into a kind of neutral business exchange. Because of their presence on the streets, overcoming the nonperson treatment is occasionally a moot point as panhandlers are sometimes actively approached for information or assistance. As indicated, however, panhandlers must intermittently use other dramaturgical routines to avoid encounters (and thereby foster strangeness) with more powerful persons, such as the police, who seek to develop exchanges that may be disadvantageous or detrimental to their existence on the streets.

Greeter

The greeter offers friendliness, respect, flattery, and deference to passersby in exchange for contributions and cordial responses. This routine largely revolves around polite behavior, such as greeting pedestrians with a "hello" or "good morning," quite like department store employees who welcome customers at store entrances. Like these service occupations, the greeter number is firmly rooted in dramaturgically managing emotions. Additionally, the routine is enhanced when a panhandler becomes familiar with a panhandling locale and then remembers faces, names, and biographical facts about contributors. Hence, a command of these more intimate details about passersby allows the greeter to personalize each greeting and devise a more comprehensive panhandling repertoire.

Sanford personifies the greeter number. During numerous observations and encounters, Sanford always offered a pleasant greeting and a distinctive, friendly smile. Sanford typically stands at the top of the Metro (subway) or along a busy side street greeting passersby during their commute or afternoon stroll. As he explains,

I greet people in the morning—say "good morning" to them—say "hello." I try to make people happy and everything. I generally get a good response—a happy greeting in a happy way especially with a smile. They always like my smile. Everybody has their own different style. My style is my smile. That's how a lot of people remember me you know.

Whereas Sanford capitalizes on his friendly smile and good nature, Lonnie, a 40-year-old native of the West Indies, appeals to pedestrians through his pleasing Caribbean accent and interactional flair:

I just talk to people because I'm gifted. I know that I'm gifted, ok. It doesn't matter what you have on as long as you are a gentle person and your mind is proper. As long

as you have a pleasant personality it doesn't matter [exclaimed] what you have on—how stinky you feel or whatever. If you are nice to people, people will give.

Although some panhandlers possess specific attributes that facilitate the greeter number, such as a friendly smile or a courteous manner, a certain amount of on-the-job learning is usually involved. Wally implicitly describes his evolution from the aggressor to the greeter, which required emotion management skills:

I always say “good morning” to the people. It makes them feel real good. And most of the time I'm good at it but I was a nasty motherfucker when I came here. But now I've learned my lesson—I've learned from my mistakes. Now that I'm so nice to the people I can get anything I want. When I was nasty and dirty I used the “f” word. Now I think things have changed. Now I just like being friendly with my cup in hand —“Hey, how are you doin'!”

Just as a panhandler's repertoire may undergo an evolution, city commuters often require a breaking-in period before moving from the nonperson treatment toward being open to encounters with panhandlers new to their daily schedule. As Sanford explains, pedestrians were generally skeptical of him and his routine until he developed a presence in the neighborhood:

When I first came up here [to this neighborhood] people didn't really know me or nothin' and I didn't get no friendly greetin'. I got a couple right. But then they saw what kind of guy I was, right. There's a lot of stereotypes—guys who are homeless panhandlin'—cussin' people out bein' disrespectful to people and everything. Or they feel a lot of them are alcoholics or crack addicts or whatever. So you know, they saw that it wasn't like that with me so as soon as they got to know me I got a better greetin'. Cause I couldn't even get a dollar when I first got here [laughs].

Once a panhandler is known in a certain area and rapport is established with a group of regular contributors, the greeter may be emboldened to mix compliments, such as “You're looking good today,” with more conservative salutations, like “good morning.” Alternatively, a more confidant, forward greeter may deal largely in compliments.

In sum, the greeter deploys pleasantries to maintain friendships with regular contributors or displays politeness and deference to newcomers. Given its versatility, it is a routine used by nearly all panhandlers. Although some use it as a primary part of their repertoire when dealing with large processions of anonymous crowds, storytellers and others typically use it as a secondary routine on encountering persons who give regularly.

Entertainer

The entertainer provides humor and enjoyment and encompasses two more specific numbers: the joker and the musician. Both typically awaken pedestrians from their blasé state through a benign or positive offering, such as a joke or a song. Strangeness is then reduced by creating rapport or intimacy by performing a familiar tune or by developing an ongoing presence in a particular neighborhood. Generally, the entertainer routine most clearly resembles an actor staging a performance before an audience.

The joker entertains by telling funny stories, making irreverent comments, or offering bizarre appearances. Minimally, the joker's goal is to make an unsuspecting pedestrian smile or laugh. Once the pedestrian is loosened up, it is hoped that a contribution will follow.

For instance, Yancy demonstrates the joker by presenting a strange appearance in conjunction with humorous lines. One evening, I observed Yancy walking along a crowded sidewalk with the collar of his blue shirt pulled over his forehead, exposing only his face and a green leaf

drooping over his left eye and cheek. Donning this clownish look and occasionally saying, “Can you help me out? I’m trying to get on the Internet,” he moved about holding out an upturned baseball cap. During an interview, Yancy explained how confronting a weary afternoon commuter with a humorous scenario, like the incongruity between a homeless panhandler and the Internet, is a good antidote for the nonperson treatment:

A certain line can make their day or a little bit of laughter. If a person may have his briefcase or purse and whatnot and they may have two bags of groceries from Sutton Place Gourmet and a bottle of beaujolais nouveau. They want to go home and smoke a cigarette and watch cable and you’re telling them that you’re panhandling and trying to get on the Internet. And they’re failing out—you know what I’m saying?’

Humor sometimes emerges spontaneously, seemingly without any instrumental intentions. For instance, while standing outside the Metro late one quite evening, Ralph called out to a Metro system repairman riding up the escalator: “Hey, I caught my foot in the escalator last week.” While walking away, the repairman sarcastically replied, “Sue Metro.” Ralph then excitedly responded, “But you’re the Metro man !” And then to the cadence of the Village People’s song “Macho Man,” Ralph sang “Metro, Metro man, I’d like to be a Metro man.” No money was exchanged, but all parties within earshot appeared amused.

The musician is another variation on the entertainer routine and covers a range of musical acts from polished saxophonist to struggling crooner. Often, musicians play familiar and fun tunes to maximize appeal. Likewise, singers frequently enhance their act by interspersing humorous lines or jokes into songs.

For instance, a companion and I were abruptly accosted one evening by a man standing five-and-a-half feet tall with long sideburns and cowboy boots who introduced himself as “Blelvis”—Black Elvis. Blelvis announced that he could sing over 1,000 Elvis songs and could relate any word to an Elvis song. As we continued walking toward our destination, I mentioned the word *cat* and Blelvis began singing a tuneful Elvis melody containing the word *cat*. Eventually, Blelvis asked for \$1.50 for his performance.

This encounter with Blelvis, though largely promoted as a musical/comedy act, also contained elements of the aggressor technique. After initiating the encounter, Blelvis followed close behind and offered us little choice but to engage him. When my companion produced only \$0.50 in response to his solicitation, Blelvis deftly grabbed a bottle of beer from the bag I was carrying.

Because many street performers are less aggressive than Blelvis or lack genuine musical talent, contributions may be more linked to sympathy and respect than to performing abilities. For example, late one afternoon, Alvin sat on a milk crate and played a Miles Davis tune, “Solar,” on his worn clarinet. Several moments after Alvin ceased his playing, which was inspired but not exceptional, a group of young men walked past, and one dropped a handful of coins into Alvin’s green canvas bag. Alvin responded to the contributions by pulling the bag next to his side and reasserting his identity as a musician: “Sometimes people hear me when I’m playing good but give me money when I’m playing bad or just warming up. They might give me money now or later. But I don’t want anyone to think I’m a panhandler.”

Hence, some ambiguous performers, like Alvin, occasionally struggle to prevent one routine, such as the musician, from being misinterpreted for another act that may be more degrading to the self, like the storyteller.

In sum, entertainers awaken pedestrians from their blasé state through benign or positive offerings, such as a song or a joke. Strangeness is reduced by performing familiar tunes or

developing a welcoming presence in a particular neighborhood. Many panhandlers devise a coherent repertoire based largely on the entertainer and greeter routines, given the affinity between these two numbers.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that dramaturgical routines are a useful way of describing and theorizing the interactions and exchanges that constitute panhandling. From this symbolic interactionist perspective, sidewalks serve as stages on which panhandlers confront and overcome the nonperson treatment. Given the numerous contingencies facing panhandlers, the most successful panhandlers devise a repertoire of several routines to stir the blasé attitude, to minimize strangeness, and to maximize contributions.

Fundamentally, however, panhandling and panhandling routines are a response to economic and social marginality. After years of homelessness, joblessness, or health problems, few panhandlers possess the resources or skills necessary to gain stable jobs in the formal economy. Rather than relying exclusively on programs designed for the poor and homeless, such as food stamps, soup kitchens, or shelters (which many view as controlling, humiliating institutions), the individuals described here support themselves by creatively, sometimes desperately, engaging the consciences of passersby. Surviving in this manner is an accomplishment given that the majority of Americans do not believe the homeless should be allowed to panhandle publicly (Link et al. 1995).

In a broader sense, panhandling routines represent general strategies that any person might use to get what he or she wants from reluctant others. For instance, the salesperson who humors her clients to facilitate sales is being the entertainer, whereas the minister who dramatizes the church's financial status to increase contributions is playing the storyteller. Viewed in this manner, panhandler routines perform the same function as those deployed by the salesperson or the minister. When enacted by a panhandler, however, the entertainer, the storyteller, and the other routines appear in their baldest terms; that is, the performing and staging are done in the most unadorned settings and without the protection of position or prestige. In light of such difficulties, panhandlers who devise routines to overcome the nonperson treatment demonstrate a certain resiliency and fortitude, qualities that, were it not for their position as a poor panhandler, might have earned them raises and promotions rather than leftovers and spare change.

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