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STRONGER THAN DIRT: Public Humiliation and Status Enhancement among Panhandlers

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Abstract

Panhandlers or street beggars are a highly stigmatized collection of individuals. In addition to publicly displaying their homeless status, panhandlers suffer numerous other indignities while begging passersby for spare change. Despite these humiliations, many panhandlers enhance their self-regard and status by developing relationships with givers who become regular sources of support. These ongoing relationships are advanced by panhandlers who learn to present themselves favorably by managing emotions and stigmatized identities. This study is based on a street ethnography of homeless panhandlers living in Washington, D.C.

There are people who are gonna be rude to you—that are gonna look at you like you’re an animal. It’s no different than looking at flowers. Some people look at flowers and they say, “That’s a beautiful flower.” And they stop and smell them. Others look at the thing and say, “That’s just something growing in the yard.” Seven or eight years ago, people didn’t look at you like you were dirt, they looked at you like “OK, you had a bad break.” Now, they have the assumption that panhandlers make an awful lot of money. And they’re really doing nothing about trying to find a job—that this is all they want to do.

—Walt (a homeless panhandler)

Begging strangers for spare change often is degrading and humiliating work. As Walt tells us, panhandling leads to contact with persons along the street that leaves him feeling like an animal, like dirt, or like a weed growing between the cracks in the sidewalk. These disparaging views of self are difficult for Walt, who was a roofing contractor, husband, and father before becoming homeless and resorting to panhandling. Despite these humiliations, Walt and countless others like him, with similar job and family histories, scratch out a precarious existence by panhandling.

This article describes and theorizes how a class of persons largely disconnected from traditional institutions, such as family or work, devise informal, family-like relationships through a different kind of work. I argue that panhandlers like Walt 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. These relationships are not easily created nor maintained, however. Rather, I describe how panhandlers successful at developing relationships with passersby learn to deal with harassment and to publicly present themselves in favorable ways. Collectively, I argue that

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most panhandlers are “stronger than dirt,” given their resourcefulness in coping with the material and psychological difficulties of homelessness.

Stated simply, panhandlers are ignored or harassed by some people and befriended by others. Such responses from passersby often lead to feelings of rejection or humiliation since panhandling typically involves a homeless person publicly asking a nonhomeless person for money and, thereby, advertising his or her stigma to a broad, often unsympathetic, audience. These “mixed contacts” (bGoffman 1963b) or public encounters between the stigmatized and “normals,”¹ reveal a whole array of normative breaches involving issues such as gender, race, and employment status.² These degrading encounters, as Walt indicates, are akin to being viewed as “dirt” or as a polluted entity of some kind and also may serve the latent function of excluding panhandlers from the larger society. The first portion of this article describes how certain public harassment practices lead to various degradations of the panhandler’s self.

Panhandlers attend to presentation of self in important ways to contend with humiliations and to develop fruitful relationships. First, in accordance with antipanhandling legislation that prohibits aggressive or threatening kinds of panhandling actions, panhandlers manage or control their emotions in the face of rejection and humiliations. Similar to persons holding certain service-sector jobs, successful panhandlers learn to control their emotions, and in the process, they sometimes gain respect and loyalty from passersby.

Second, panhandlers often manage their identities or outward appearances to maintain or advance relationships with givers. For instance, a panhandler who receives a jacket from a giver may wear it prominently to demonstrate appreciation. At the same time, however, such a display of “nice stuff” may make the panhandler appear less needy. Hence, panhandlers face countervailing demands from different audiences, which often compel them to manipulate signs and symbols to demonstrate appreciation or need. The middle section of this article describes these two processes—emotion management and identity management—in greater detail.

A passerby who befriends a panhandler typically bolsters that panhandler’s self-respect and ultimately may lead to a relationship featuring regular financial or social support. Relationships between a giver and panhandler minimally consist of the giver carrying on conversations with the panhandler and regularly providing money or some other form of assistance, such as food, clothing, or part-time work. These regular interactions between panhandler and certain givers serve as a “tie-sign” (Goffman 1971) or public evidence of a relationship among persons. These tie-signs are status enhancing for panhandlers because they temporarily transform the panhandler from pariah into person. In other words, panhandlers gain status as legitimate persons in their own minds and in the eyes of passersby, by developing relationships with higher status persons or individuals who typically live in homes and have regular jobs. Hence, these relationships serve to counterbalance the otherwise negative treatment suffered by

¹By using Goffman’s (1963b) term “normals,” I am suggesting that panhandlers view themselves as distinctly different from passersby. From my own experiences panhandling, I felt quite separate from commuters, tourists, couriers, police officers, and other workers who attended to their everyday business as I solicited them for spare change. Compared to their seemingly normal activity, I felt most abnormal.

²Applying Goffmanian concepts to the study of panhandlers is particularly fruitful given his concerns with behavior in public places (Goffman 1963a) and with ways that persons manage stigmas (bGoffman 1963b)—two key features of panhandling. In fact, the contact between panhandler and stranger represents a “primal scene” in sociology:

When normals and stigmatized do in fact enter one another’s immediate presence, ... there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides. (Goffman, 1963b, 13)

In other words, the interaction between panhandler and stranger often highlights the way a stranger feels about a panhandler and vice versa. These mixed contacts then point to the larger meanings attached to panhandling, homelessness, or other characteristics associated with low-status persons.

panhandlers while serving as a crucial source of informal assistance. The last part of this article describes these relationships between panhandlers and givers.

One aspect of the approach that I have just outlined—how panhandlers contend with harassment and stigma by developing relationships with higher status persons—comprises a type of “out-group” strategy (Goffman 1963b). Out-group strategies are processes whereby a stigmatized person relates with nonstigmatized persons in various ways to lessen the effects of stigmatization.³ In a separate study of homeless panhandlers, Anderson, Snow, and Cress (1994) describe certain out-group strategies performed by panhandlers, such as passing as a nonhomeless person, covering or minimizing one’s homeless status, and responding defiantly to humiliations. While these types of actions do occur, the out-group strategy I have identified is significant since it goes beyond stigma management and connects to a primary panhandling objective—to gain money and other types of help.

Additionally, this process whereby panhandlers develop relationships with passersby is consistent with a more general process of status enhancement (Milner 1994). Lower status persons typically increase social status in two ways—by associating with higher status persons and by conforming to social norms. Associating with persons of greater status tends to advance status since such relationships or ties perform a legitimating function for the lower status person. A panhandler who regularly speaks to a well-dressed business person, for instance, is likely to be regarded more positively by others than if he or she never speaks to anyone. Conformity to social norms or adhering to higher status conventions also increases status since it places a person in the mainstream. Since a panhandler’s low status partially stems from the violation of norms pertaining to issues such as housing, gender roles, and employment status, conforming to these norms is typically beyond the realm of possibilities. However, as I describe, a panhandler’s status may be enhanced by conforming to certain interactional norms and by adhering to laws surrounding panhandling.

Finally, attempts by panhandlers to gain sympathy and help from strangers in public reflect exchanges occurring in the larger socioemotional economy, a realm described by Clark (1997) as “a system of give-and-take within which people negotiate many aspects of identity and social worth” (p. 131). Clark’s description of the socioemotional economy focuses on exchanges existing largely among intimates, such as family and friends, and on the more positive aspects of this economy, such as love, company, gratitude, sex, help, and sympathy. Given the stigmatized status of panhandlers and their public attempts at obtaining socioemotional commodities more commonly exchanged in private, panhandlers often evoke the darker features of this economy, such as indifference, fear, mistrust, and anger. Hence, this article describes the ebb and flow of one facet of the socioemotional economy—the benign and malevolent interactions occurring between panhandlers and strangers in public amidst attempts by each to determine the social worth of the other. Underlying these exchanges is the identity and emotion work undertaken by panhandlers to make sympathetic, if not respectable, presentations of self to strangers and street acquaintances.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

I define *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

³In contrast to out-group strategies, in-group strategy refers to ways of coping with stigma among the stigmatized. See Lankenau (1997, 129–132, 147–149) for a separate discussion of in-group strategies among panhandlers, which include informal socializing, cheap entertainment, and drinking or drugging. These in-group strategies are very similar to those reported by Anderson, Snow, and Cress (1994).

the sampling process, I largely selected panhandlers who appeared mentally and physically fit for regular employment. Among both policy makers and the population at large, these able-bodied, often homeless individuals generally are regarded as the “non-deserving poor” (Wright 1989), that is, persons viewed as undeserving of sympathy or assistance since they violate basic norms surrounding work. However, I learned during interviews that these seemingly fit fronts often belied health problems and circumstances that inhibited gainful employment.

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, D.C. 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 down-town business section at the southern end. Four of these regions are connected by both a major avenue and a common subway line. I undertook about eighty formal 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 had spoken to previously.

As a street ethnographer, my fieldwork largely consisted of wandering the streets in search of panhandling activity, observing panhandlers from a distance, watching panhandlers close-up, informally conversing with panhandlers, and conducting semistructured interviews with panhandlers.⁴ I always undertook each fieldwork excursion with a certain amount of excitement and apprehension. The work was exciting because it required a presentation of self that defied the typical kinds of interactions occurring among strangers in public. Whereas the ordinary person generally minimizes uncomfortable interactions with strangers in public by ignoring the other, the street ethnographer’s mandate is to actively seek out potentially unusual exchanges that lead to fresh information and new relationships. Toward this end, I found the street ethnographer role to be a challenging and exciting undertaking. However, a sense of apprehension emerged out of the desire to maximize the productivity of each fieldwork excursion by successfully gaining new interviewees every time, or minimally, to make contacts with panhandlers for future interviews. Typically, I gained an interview on every other excursion—outcomes that produced alternating feelings of satisfaction and disappointment.

These emotions of excitement and apprehension partially were fueled by the fleeting and transitory nature of panhandling. On several occasions, upon finding a panhandler and turning a corner to prepare myself for the upcoming interaction, I would return only to find that the panhandler along with sign or cup had disappeared into the pedestrian population at large. That is, the identifying accoutrements and panhandling practices had been temporarily shelved and, thereby, the panhandler was a panhandler no more. In these situations, I could only pause in surprise before returning to the task of seeking out other panhandlers.

In addition to the street ethnographer vantage point, I gained other insights into the difficulties facing panhandlers by posing as a panhandler and soliciting passersby for two consecutive days in downtown Washington, D.C. Martin (1994) describes this attempt at gaining an embodied sense of one’s research subjects through participant observation as “visceral learning.” This experience helped me appreciate the “non-person treatment” directed toward panhandlers (Lankenau 1999) as well as the emotion and identity management skills practiced among

⁴The formal interviews were conducted in a variety of settings: alleyways, curbsides, parks, coffee shops, pizza joints, and fast-food establishments.

panhandlers that I describe in this article. Also, I incorporate several observations from this experience into the following analysis to elucidate certain points.

I tape-recorded interviews⁵ ($N = 37$) and followed a series of open-ended questions that focused on four aspects of the panhandler's experience: street work, relationships, self-issues, and demographics. I paid each panhandler \$10 for his or her tape-recorded interview, which typically lasted between forty five minutes and one hour. Upon meeting a panhandler for the first time, I usually established basic rapport by giving \$.50 and then by explaining 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. However, only a handful of panhandlers refused to be interviewed. In addition to these formal interviews, I informally spoke with dozens of other panhandlers during field excursions.

Based on the formal interviews, the profile of the typical panhandler in this sample is as follows: black, single, unemployed homeless male,⁶ in his early forties, born into a lower or working class family in the District of Columbia (1993), and possessed a high school degree or higher. Additionally, the typical panhandler began panhandling in his midthirties or early forties and had been panhandling consistently for the past five years after losing a job in the construction industry. Job losses generally were preceded by a negative life event or events, such as an accident, an illness, a spell of homelessness, a layoff, or a drug or alcohol problem. When comparing my sample of panhandlers to a sample of Washington, D.C., homeless individuals gathered 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.

In fact, the great majority of homeless persons across the United States are not regular panhandlers but presumably survive by using various public and private services designated for the homeless. Nationally, Stark (1992) estimates that 17 percent of all homeless persons receive most of their income through panhandling. However, homeless persons in this study gained the majority of their income through panhandling. Homeless panhandlers are then a subset of homeless individuals who largely subsist on contributions solicited from anonymous and known passersby.

HUMILIATIONS OF THE SELF

The study of panhandlers fruitfully connects to other research (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Gardner 1995; Leblanc 1997; Pascale and West 1997) that investigates interaction in public places between "normals" and the stigmatized (Goffman 1963b). Public harassment and humiliation have been a particular focus of these studies. Deploying Gardner's (1995) three categories of public harassment practices—exclusionary, exploitative, and evaluative—in

⁵Three interviews were not tape-recorded. During all thirty-seven interviews, I verbally assured confidentiality and anonymity and also asked for permission to tape-record thirty-four conversations. Hence, all names in this study are pseudonyms, and certain biographical details have been deleted or altered to protect anonymity. In the text, indented passages are verbatim transcriptions of panhandler conversations.

⁶Only three women are included in this sample of thirty-seven panhandlers. This result was not desired or intended, but women panhandlers are far less common than are male panhandlers in Washington, D.C. Perhaps I was somewhat discouraged from approaching more women, by the fact that those to whom I did speak were less open to discussing their lives than were the men. In fact, two of the three women I did interview were among the least communicative in the entire sample. My sense is that women panhandlers typically contend with more debilitating events and are more stigmatized than are male panhandlers, which make them less trusting or open to discussing their lives with researchers, particularly male researchers. Donna Gaines (1991), a female sociologist, also reports difficulties interviewing marginal female figures.

conjunction with other theories that explore stigma cogently describe the degradation experienced by panhandlers as they interact with passersby.

Exclusionary practices are enacted primarily through formal and informal social control measures, such as laws or verbal warnings, and discourage individuals from entering public and semipublic places, such as streets, stores, and restaurants (Gardner 1995). Since panhandlers rely on these spaces to panhandle, they sometimes conflict with pedestrians and store owners over solicitation turf. Conflicts over turf range from angry looks among disgruntled passersby to calls for police intervention. Clear attempts at exclusion include explicit signs posted on store fronts stating that panhandlers are not welcome. Armand, a powerfully built man who became homeless after a house fire, describes a relatively gentle yet humiliating exclusionary practice:

People say to me—"You're always here"—like when you first saw me in front of [the video store]. Now they have a little sign saying, "No panhandling. No loitering." Like yesterday, I ran into a situation where the manager asked me in a nice way to leave from in front of the store because customers were complaining.

During my panhandling experience, I found that choosing a panhandling location that minimized harassment yet also afforded good solicitation opportunities required a fair amount of experimentation and a certain resistance to humiliation. For instance, on my first morning as a panhandler, I made several dollars within an hour playing guitar, close to several storefronts and a subway entrance. However, my success was cut short by an exclusionary practice—a store employee told me that panhandling was prohibited in front of his store and asked me to leave. Ultimately, I settled in the doorway of an abandoned shoe store, which eliminated possible scrutiny from store managers, but the location enjoyed less foot traffic, and consequently, fewer donors.

More extreme and problematic exclusionary practices move beyond specific public sites, such as a street or store front, and make the panhandler feel unwelcome in the larger society. During these situations, panhandlers may be specifically reminded of their pariah status, as Linda, who is twenty-five years old, homeless, and pregnant, indicates:

Well, sometimes people just walk past you like you're nobody, like you're a piece of garbage. And they don't look at you. Or if you try to ask them for a job, they look at you like, "You've been on the street. I'm not going to hire you." And they make us feel really bad. They call us all kinds of things.

In her outrage, Linda describes being treated as "a piece of garbage" and how being on the streets transforms her from a potential worker into a tainted or polluted entity. In this manner, panhandlers are symbolically connected to dirt, as described by Douglas (1966): "Dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder" (p. 2). From a broader perspective, treating panhandlers as dirt represents a status differentiation process or a movement toward hardening the existing stratification system. As Douglas indicates, "Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (p. 35). Hence, negative interactions that cast panhandlers as dirt may push some even further toward the fringes of society.

Exploitative practices refer to proximal interventions, such as touching, staring, or attacking, or other infringements on personal space and privacy (Gardner 1995). Among panhandlers specifically, passersby may target panhandlers with discrete, humiliating actions, such as spitting or physically assaulting. Marian, a forty-eight-year-old homeless panhandler who has panhandled for the past eight years, describes an exploitative interaction that had a lasting impact on his panhandling practices:

One day I was shaking my change in my cup and up walks this guy who slaps it all out of my hand. He knocked all of my change out of my hand. I just felt so bad—reaching and bending to pick up all the change—everybody laughing and everything. I must of had \$3 worth of change in my cup. Ever since then, I've promised never to keep any more change in my cup. When somebody gives a quarter, I take it out and put the change in my coat. Some people say, "Damn man, your cup stay empty. Every time I see your cup, it's empty." They don't know why it's empty. That's why.

A more insidious and serious kind of exploitative practice lies in what Schwartz (1967) refers to as hostility in gift exchange, "which has as an essential aim the degradation of the recipient" (p. 5). Over the course of receiving various food contributions, some panhandlers report that items occasionally are tainted or poisoned. In addition to the potentially fatal outcomes of such hostile gifts, giving panhandlers poisoned food connects symbolically to Douglas's (1966) concept of dirt described earlier. Robert, who has panhandled intermittently over the past twenty years since running away from an orphanage, describes being the recipient of a hostile gift:

Some give me food, but you got to watch some of them though. I've found out that people have tried to poison you. I've gotten sick—not real sick—but sick enough to know and to get through it.

Evaluative practices are unsolicited and degrading comments directed toward another in public that typically refer to physical characteristics such as attire or body type (Gardner 1995). While a common part of a panhandler's experience is to be ignored by passersby, panhandlers are subject to a variety of humiliations upon gaining a passersby's attention using various panhandling routines (Lankenau 1999). One source of degradation is a panhandler's homeless status, which often is revealed through a down-and-out appearance. However, panhandlers typically report feelings of humiliation connected to other factors, such as gender, race, and employment status issues. These humiliations may stem directly from external evaluative practices or may arise internally as panhandlers evaluate themselves through the eyes of passersby.

The vagaries of panhandling often prevent both male and female panhandlers from "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), that is, to accomplish traditional gender expectations, such as bread winner or caretaker. While conforming to gender role expectations is not necessarily desirable, such conformity is typically a means of gaining social acceptance. And as Passaro (1994) suggests, conformity to gender roles serves a practical function for homeless women who may gain state assistance by fulfilling the role of dependent mother. However, panhandling does not readily permit the enactment of traditional gender roles for either men or women.

Among men, the act of panhandling or asking for money connotes submission and dependence—traits that run counter to traditional masculine ideals such as assertiveness and control. In particular, panhandling highlights the spectacle of the failed male worker who spends his days on the street panhandling rather than working in an office, factory, or store. Among women, the act of panhandling complicates the possibility of conforming to traditional gender roles. On one hand, women panhandlers perform the traditional gender role of dependent individual by begging or asking for assistance. Yet, women who panhandle alone breach the norm of being accompanied by men or other women when in public. Also, by being on the streets, women panhandlers fail to conform to traditional constructions of motherhood, by either being without children or for caring for their children in public. Public evaluations may trigger an awareness of gender role violations and a sense of failure as Armand indicates:

Nobody's happy with it being out on the street you know asking for money' cause we're used to working. ... I'm out here a big strong guy like me—this one lady tells me that all the time—"A big strong guy like you should have no problem finding a job." But what they don't realize is that it's not as easy as they say it is. You're not the only one looking in the paper.

Similarly, all panhandlers held higher status positions prior to becoming homeless or a panhandler. When reflecting back on a former life, the act of asking others for money itself creates an awareness of downward mobility or declining social standing both as workers and as men. Mick, who worked as a backhoe operator, tile setter, carpet layer, and drywall hanger before becoming homeless, describes this sense of a downward slide:

Just panhandling is difficult, period—just sitting out here begging for money' cause I use to workin'. ... And almost every panhandler once upon a time—we was out there. We was into something—businessman, musicians, boxers, singers and all that stuff. And now, we all in it together. Just remember remember that we had things once upon a time in life, and it's kind of hard for us to be on the other side of the tracks.

Race issues are also a source of humiliation for some panhandlers. While the residential population along the corridor where most panhandlers work is largely white, the racial demographics of the commuter traffic is more mixed. These facts notwithstanding, there is a sense among black panhandlers that fellow blacks should identify with their troubled plight and act as faithful allies. Instead, several black panhandlers expressed feelings of abandonment by other blacks. Sanford, who is a thirty-seven-year-old African-American, indicates this sentiment, while suggesting that generous acts undertaken by blacks are fueled by ulterior motives:

The majority [who give to me] are white females, some white males. My own race—shhheww—they don't give me nutin'. Straight up—they don't give me nutin'. The only time I can get something from my own race is if it's from a church. I might be downtown, and they give you something but they might be getting something out of the deal—funds and stuff [laughs].

However, this sense of being more generously treated or supported by a racial group other than one's own is not limited to black panhandlers. Marc, who is thirty-six years old and Caucasian, indicates that nonwhites are his primary benefactors, although he is uncertain of the motives behind the contributions:

Minorities give more money—to me they do. And some people make a real point of it—like they're glad to see it. I don't know what's in their mind. They may be thinking that I might be confronting people's attitudes and ideas about it only being black people that are in this position or something.

Apart from negative interactions with the public surrounding gender, race, and work status issues, the day-to-day realities of homelessness impart a sense of rejection by the larger society that also can be a source of humiliation, as Richard, a forty-five-year-old who is on his second homeless spell in the past five years, suggests:

Homelessness in general, it can get real deep out here. Some of these [homeless] people have real serious problems. And we're not talking so much unemployment, but we're talking about things like people being orphaned, people running around here in violence, and they caught the [HIV] virus, and so many different problems that makes them homeless—it really runs deep, and nobody really gives a damn. It gets to the point that if you get out here on the street, and you lose your job, and you don't have any family or friends to back you up—you know your just shit out of luck these days.

Given the public nature of panhandling, panhandlers often experience rejection and humiliation as a regular feature of everyday life, particularly via exclusionary, exploitative, and evaluative practices. On one hand, these experiences have a demoralizing effect on the self. At a broader level, these everyday practices that portray panhandlers as dirt continue to downgrade the status of panhandlers in the eyes of the community. I now will describe how panhandlers cope with these public indignities and attempt to enhance their own status and feelings of self-respect.

MANAGEMENT OF EMOTIONS

In the face of public harassment, panhandlers respond in certain pragmatic ways that both advance their bids to solicit money and minimize feelings of degradation. Most panhandlers realize that displaying aggression through words or acts, even if justified, is likely to detract from contributions and lead to possible arrest. Rather, most have panhandled in the same area for an extended period and rely on a core group of contributors for a significant part of their daily income. Consequently, certain interactional norms are followed to contend with humiliation, to maintain supporters, and to avoid arrest.

Controlling one's emotions in public helps to accomplish these objectives. Hochschild (1983) refers to this kind of instrumental self-control as "emotional labor," that is, to manage private feelings in public as a primary part of a job. In her analysis, Hochschild points out that flight attendants are paid to manage their feelings toward distressing situations and rude customers, and those who are successful gain the esteem of passengers and enhance the status of their airline. Similarly, panhandlers often rely on a clientele of contributors and must minimize reactions to gain the support of passersby. Richard implicitly refers to emotional labor in his description of the difficulties underlying panhandling:

A lot of these people out here don't like me for one reason or another, right. And yet, I'm still more or less dependent upon them for money, you know. And they'll sit here and downgrade me, but I still have to be half-ass polite and ask them for the change. That's the most difficult part—dealing with people.

In certain respects, antipanhandling legislation provides the parameters for a panhandler's emotional labor. In 1993, the D.C. government passed the Panhandling Control Act, which is intended to "rid the streets of those ... whose behavior presents a danger to citizens in public areas" (p. 3). The bill does not ban panhandling completely but seeks to impose restrictions on "aggressive behavior ... touching, accosting, continuing to panhandle after being given a negative response, blocking or interfering with a person's free passage" (p. 5). The penalties for violating this law are a fine of up to \$500 and incarceration for a maximum of ninety days.⁷ Few panhandlers have read the specifics of the law, but most understand the essence of the regulations that ultimately convey proper panhandling etiquette. In the long run, this knowledge minimizes future arrests⁸ and possibly legitimates a panhandler in the eyes of pedestrians, since those who act in a reserved and polite manner are less likely to be viewed as dangerous.

Panhandlers may combine this knowledge with emotional labor in the form of certain "deflective strategies" (Gardner 1995) that occur amidst harassment, such as complying with, ignoring, or answering a harasser. Vern, a thirty-one-year-old native of Washington, D.C., refers to a disposition that is premised on emotional labor and a certain willingness to comply

⁷While ostensibly a practical ordinance designed to maintain the safety of pedestrians, this law implicitly connotes panhandlers as dirt at an institutional level by its proscriptions against panhandlers touching or getting too close to nonpanhandlers. That is, a pedestrian's space is regarded as somewhat sacred and stands to be polluted by panhandlers who invade it.

⁸The majority of panhandlers in this sample had been arrested at least once for violating an aspect of D.C.'s Panhandling Control Act.

with untoward responses from passersby that ultimately deflects harassment and police intervention:

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.

Typically, a panhandler becomes skilled at managing emotions, as he or she becomes hardened to abusive treatment and learns the value of remaining tight lipped. Over time, the panhandler views the abuse as less personal and more as an everyday state of affairs. Nate, a formerly homeless forty-five-year-old who now lives in his grandmother's house but continues to panhandle, suggests that he deflects the pettiness of the daily humiliations by ignoring them:

I used to lash right back at them right, but I ain't never curse a person for it right. When people say negative things, I don't even respond to them. See, I'm not lookin' for no trouble, and I know they are, so I ain't gonna feed into that. They can say what they want to say, and I just let them go about their business. I used to all that ignorance.

Aggressive reactions to public harassment are also deflected through the development of certain recipe responses (Schutz 1976). Recipes are common responses used to handle routine situations. For instance, a typical degrading line directed at panhandlers is, "Why don't you get a job?" Rather than becoming angered each time the line is heard or responding differently to similar lines, many panhandlers develop recipe responses. Dispassionate recipe responses permit agency on the part of the panhandler without jeopardizing his or her position in the eyes of more important contributors. In a sense, recipes allow for the expression of emotion within certain parameters. The following is Mick's recipe for the line, "Why don't you get a job?":

I say, "If you've got one for me, I wouldn't mind workin'. And if you know anyone that's got one for me, let me know." That's what I tell 'em. I don't get nasty with them. I say, "If you know anybody that got one or if you got one, I'll work." There's a couple of guys that does that every time they see me—older guys. And I say, "If you got a job for me sir, I'll work that job. If you know anyone that got one, I will work." And I let it go at that. I don't get nasty. I don't take it any further than that. And that surprises them. You know what I'm sayin', because the other guys that they say that to—they get nasty with them—"Hey, you this and that. ..." I'm not like that.

Of course, panhandlers deflect public harassment in ways that do not rely on emotion management. Hostile outbursts are directed toward pedestrians who act in particularly unjustified manner, such as spitting on a panhandler, or may follow after the accumulation of repeated smaller humiliations, such as a wave of nonperson treatment. In these cases, panhandlers may respond aggressively to harassment or create an intimidating situation. Yanky, a forty-year-old who has been panhandling for the past seven years, recalls a situation in which he took an aggressive stance toward both a harasser and a police officer:

One guy—who I never asked for money anyway—saw people giving me money, and he walked up and he said, "Why don't you get a job." And I said, "I know why you're saying that. When you were growing up during the Depression you couldn't find work because people got old from looking at you [laughs]. That's what your mother told you, and I bet that's what your wife told you when you couldn't find work either, too." And he got very furious, and he came back with a police officer who said, "Either you apologize to him or I'm gonna arrest you." I extended my arms and said, "Ok arrest me." Do you know what they did? They looked at each other and walked up the street. That intimidation shit doesn't work with me. To avoid arrest at the expense of my dignity? I always tell them, Those Uncle Tom's are up the street." It's easy to find one. I'm not one.

Rather than deflect harassment, some panhandlers are the source of various forms of public harassment, as proscribed in the earlier description of D.C.'s antipanhandling legislation. More specifically, certain panhandlers assertively solicit money using the "aggressor routine" (Lankenau 1999), which is premised on evoking guilt and fear in pedestrians by employing either real or feigned aggression. Roland, a thirty-six-year-old Washington, D.C., native, describes how his panhandling repertoire contains elements of intimidation that is most likely experienced by passersby as a kind of public harassment:

You can always confront people. That's why I'm not afraid of anybody. I'm not gonna hurt you, but I'm gonna try to talk to you. I'm just not gonna walk away from you. You know what they say about niceness—nice guys finish last. If you be a little bold with people, they be a little afraid of you. They more afraid of you than you are of them. I know what I'm talkin' about. I'm not afraid of anybody.

Panhandling routines that employ minimum amounts of emotional labor and resemble outright forms of harassment tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Typically, the necessities of maintaining good relations with passersby, store owners, and police encourage interactive strategies based on emotional labor. However, as described, the contingencies surrounding panhandling and homelessness heighten the difficulties of practicing emotional labor in public. Additional troubles stem from the fact that, as Hochschild (1983) indicates, emotional labor is more commonly demanded in female dominated occupations, such as flight attendant, and is more closely linked to traditional female gender role expectations, such as nurturing behavior. Consequently, the initial demands of emotional labor are often foreign since most panhandlers are men and few held occupations dealing directly with the public prior to becoming panhandlers. However, panhandlers who become skilled at emotional labor and conform to basic public interactional norms deflect harassment while enhancing their status and maintaining a supply of regular contributors.

MANAGEMENT OF IDENTITY

In addition to managing emotions, panhandlers are faced with dilemmas surrounding appearance and identity. Physical appearances and choice of clothing offer passersby important biographical clues about particular panhandlers during initial meetings or brief encounters. During these interactions, panhandlers often are ignored or receive nonperson treatment (Goffman 1963a). However, when panhandlers do engage a stranger, they are often subject to "inspection draw" (Gardner 1995) or close scrutiny by passing individuals in public. The panhandler who is shabby and unkempt fits the popular stereotype of a homeless person and may be viewed as needy. In contrast, the panhandler who wears new sneakers or a sporty jacket deviates from the stereotype of homelessness and neediness and may be viewed suspiciously or even harassed by passersby. Consequently, some panhandlers may be compelled to either conform to or reject stereotypical conceptions about appearing needy. In this sense, panhandlers who shape their dress code are managing their public persona or identities—practices that influence feelings of self-respect and social standing in the neighborhood.

At first blush, this conception of identity management may seem logically flawed since the person who owns nice articles of clothing and must strategize whether to look needy is not needy by definition. However, panhandlers receive various gifts from regular givers or charitable organizations, such as a clean shirt or a heavy winter coat. Panhandlers who scavenge also find new or respectable articles of clothing discarded in dumpsters or lost on the street. Finally, some panhandlers rationally set aside money to purchase clothes new or at second-hand shops. Sanford, a homeless panhandler who often charms passersby with his smile and politeness, explains how he acquires presentable articles of clothing:

There's a lot of people who donate stuff. That's what a lot of people don't realize. They donate these things and put money to these causes and see guys walking around

with brand new tennis shoes—coats and things. They don't realize people have given us these things, so if you have enough sense to take it and wear it or try to sell it—a lot of people do sell it. Nice is nice—seriously. Hey, that's the whole purpose of giving and donating.

As Sanford's case demonstrates, it is very possible for a panhandler to own an article or two of respectable clothing yet be homeless and poor. Consequently, the panhandler who suddenly receives a nice gift or possesses the resources to buy clothing must decide how to manage this "disidentifier" (bGoffman 1963b), that is, a symbol or object that disrupts a largely coherent image of the self. In these cases, disidentifiers break the frame of need and homelessness. Richard discusses the problem of managing disidentifiers, such as new shoes or looking clean:

A lot times, people didn't think I was homeless. They said I was just out here asking for money to play games. ... They always say, "Look at the panhandler—he got a brand new leather coat on" or "Look at the panhandler—he got a brand new pair of shoes on." You know, "He's doin' better than I am, and I'm working full-time." But it's not like that because maybe I'll panhandle up a new pair of shoes, but it's not like I got a wardrobe or something like that. ... They don't think I'm homeless because I don't get extremely dirty like the rest of the guys and run around with urine running all down my leg, or feces running all over me, or smell you know that I haven't taken a shower in four or five months, or something like that. So they don't think I'm homeless, but it isn't true.

Panhandlers who do not conform to the stereotypical conceptions of homelessness risk depleting their "sympathy margin" (Clark 1997) among passersby. Sympathy margin is the difference between the typical amount of sympathy accorded to a person, or accrued in the form of "sympathy credits," and the amount of credits used. Panhandlers that do not look impoverished may unwittingly drain their sympathy margin and receive fewer contributions. Fox, a forty-three-year-old homeless panhandler, who also regularly scavenges dumpsters for salvageable goods, attributes his early failure as a panhandler to appearing too presentable, but he has since changed his look:

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]....[Now] I'm a roughneck beat-up guy. They know I'm a scavenger or a homeless panhandling guy. He looks like one, he's dressed like one, you know. ... They don't have no problem identifying me.

During my panhandling experience, I also attempted to create a needy appearance by displaying my hair and beard in an unkempt manner, by wearing clothes that were somewhat dirty and disheveled and by carrying around a plastic bag containing disparate items that a homeless person might own, such as a tennis ball, a book, an empty bottle, and a shirt. Interestingly, my contrived appearance and pleas for spare change did attract several dozen contributors from the population of largely middle-class passersby. However, while wandering the streets after having finished panhandling for the day and still wearing the same costume, I was approached nonetheless by several panhandlers seeking contributions. Evidently, my contrived appearance did not persuade actual homeless panhandlers.

Employing a down-and-out appearance, as described by Fox and enacted by myself or telling sad stories of misery and misfortune are part of the storytellers' panhandling repertoire (Lankenau 1999). As Clark (1997) indicates, sympathy credits may be earned through interactions and interpersonal skills similar to those used by story tellers. While presenting a needy look is often functional to panhandling, the realities of homelessness make it the most

practical appearance to maintain. Despite the occasional disidentifier, such as new sneakers or a coat, keeping clean and presentable is difficult, given the contingencies of panhandling on the street all day and due to the lack of available resources to wash clothes and bathe. Stu, who sleeps in a park, describes his techniques for keeping clean and presentable:

See, these pants I've had on for two days. This shirt, I just washed. I got my pants and another shirt all ready washed over there on the bench being watched—drying. Cause tomorrow, I'll put creases in them and put them under my blanket and sleep on them, so the wrinkles come out. We call that ironing. Tomorrow morning, I'll go over to Starbucks in the bathroom, lock the door, and take care of my personal hygiene and put my clothes on, and I'm fresh and new.

Despite the difficulties of homelessness and the practical rationale for displaying a needy appearance, a larger proportion of panhandlers reported reasons for maintaining a more upstanding appearance—factors that connect to issues surrounding respectability, work, self-reliance, and family obligations. In addition to building sympathy credits through interactional skills, Clark (1997) indicates that sympathy credits also are accrued through other means, such as demonstrating respectability or a work ethic. Wally, a twenty-eight-year-old Washington, D.C., native, discusses the problems of managing disidentifiers while justifying looking clean for reasons of self-esteem and family:

I've had a lady tellin' me [in a high-pitched voice]—"Why are you panhandlin' when you dressin' clean? Get a job." I see her everyday, but I figure why should I take these pants off and put on the dirty pants and the dirty shirt. That will make me feel like a bum. But I don't feel that way because I got to be clean. I'd be embarrassed to see my mother and that cup. And she'd [in a high-pitched voice], "That's my son. What's he doing here?" And I'd be like, "Oh no!" But I have a lot of people telling me that, "Why are you clean?" But I'm clean most of the time. I'm clean right now.

Likewise, Vern, a thirty-one-year-old who briefly attended college on a basketball scholarship, prefers a cleaner panhandler appearance in the event he sees a friend. He also hints at the difficulty of simultaneously maintaining two identities:

I try to look presentable. I grew up in D.C., so I know a lot of people around town. If I see somebody I know, I don't want to look like I'm panhandlin'. Somebody sees me from across the street and asks me, "What you doin' out here?" "I ain't doin' nothin'. I'm waiting on my man." Sometimes you could be talkin' to him, and some lady comes up and says, "Here you go, sir." Right in front of them.

Some panhandlers seek to maintain a respectable appearance because it indicates self-reliance and provides contributors with a sense that their money is properly spent. In other words, a new shirt or pair of shoes provides reassurance to regulars that their contributions are not necessarily spent on commodities typically viewed as wasteful or intemperate, such as alcohol or drugs. Stu expresses this rationale for looking respectable:

I don't try to look what you call excellent because there's no such word when you're on the street—excellent. I try to look presentable, where people will accept the fact that I do keep myself clean you know. You don't have to look dirty or smell dirty to be homeless. You really don't. People will admire you more when you're not—especially when they see you everyday, three times a day—same identical people. And it represents a lot to them that they are helping somebody, you know, that's a write off. That they're helping somebody that's trying to do good for themselves. It puts a smile on their face.

Hence, many panhandlers wear disidentifiers to enhance self-respect and as a type of offering to regulars and others who give gifts. When faced by the contingencies of homelessness, keeping a respectable appearance is a kind of reciprocation in the gift exchange process that

also builds sympathy credits. As suggested earlier, presenting a groomed front is no small task for a homeless person, but it may be demonstrated by shaving, getting a haircut, bathing, and wearing clean clothes. Showering and laundry facilities are found at some homeless shelters and outreach centers but often are not conveniently located or available when needed.

Female panhandlers may contend with more identity management dilemmas than may men since women generally are held to higher appearance standards. Like female inmates in total institutions, women panhandlers typically lack an “identity kit” (Goffman 1961), that is, cosmetics, grooming items, or clothes that help maintain a feminine front. Alice, a forty-one-year-old Washington, D.C., native and mother, wrestles with the cross-cutting demands of achieving a sympathetic appearance as a panhandler while maintaining a respectable demeanor for her children’s sake:

Well, sometimes by me having kids, you know, they got a whole lot of friends [in the neighborhood], so I have to dress nice. But if I dress nice, I don’t get no money [laughs]. Usually, during this time [evening], I put on—you know like this, and I get money. Sometimes, I wear dirty jeans—they look like they’re dirty, but they’re sort of clean—and I get more money that way. So that’s why I say if you’re clean, then they say, “Well you got money,” or “You got this.” It’s the way you dress, so I got to be dirty to get money. If I’m all clean, they just walk by, “Oh you got money.” I’m homeless, I take my money and buy clothes and shoes. You all think I have money, so I put my rags back on.

In sum, panhandlers face differing normative expectations regarding appearance that have consequences for sympathy and contributions from passersby. On one hand, most of the panhandlers discussed here are homeless, and few have resources to move themselves out of their current position. Hence, appearing needy reflects the reality of their situation, but neediness also may lead to more sympathy from the anonymous passerby. On the other hand, many of these same panhandlers maintain family relationships or relationships with regular contributors that necessitate a different dress code. Also, many panhandlers seek to keep themselves presentable to enhance their own feelings of self-respect. Consequently, many panhandlers who manage their appearance in a positive manner risk harassment by strangers for looking “too good” but may build sympathy credits among regulars.

STATUS ENHANCING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG REGULAR CONTRIBUTORS

Many panhandlers maintain a consistent schedule of time and place and develop ongoing relationships with residents and commuters who give money on a routine basis.⁹ In fact, some donors become so consistent in their giving that panhandlers refer to them as regulars or clientele. Regulars are important to panhandlers for several reasons. In particular, regulars are significant because they represent a consistent source of income. Several panhandlers report that on many days, the money received from regulars comprises half or more of their daily earnings. Receiving from regulars is particularly important for panhandlers who set their panhandling schedule according to a monetary quota, as Stu suggests:

OK, I have a certain clientele of people. They’re like lawyers, doctors, professors, or the average person. There’s one of my regulars right there. You made me miss him [laughs]. Tomorrow I’ll catch him. . . . I counts on my regulars everyday to come by because then I know my quota will be made if they come by. They stop and talk — conversation—I give them a laugh, they get a laugh. I mean I got a beautiful relationship with some of the people that come by there. All people are not bad. . . .

⁹In addition to residents and commuters, panhandlers develop ongoing relationships with store owners, street vendors, police officers, and other panhandlers. For the sake of simplicity and brevity, this discussion is limited to relationships between panhandlers and residents and commuters. See Lankenau (1997, 60–94) for a more complete discussion of the kinds of relationships developed among panhandlers.

Only from my clientele is what I get most of my feeding money from. Sometimes I make \$6 if I don't see any of my clientele. But if I see most of my clientele, I could make the limit—I will make the quota [\$10].

Regulars also accord panhandlers a certain amount of status in the neighborhood or in the eyes of passersby. Regulars who chat with a panhandler, especially those conveying status through attire or mannerism, confer legitimacy on a panhandler. For those brief moments, the panhandler is treated with respect and familiarity in an atmosphere often charged with degradation or anonymity. The exchanges, whether conversation or contribution, constitute a kind of tie-sign (Goffman 1971) linking panhandler and giver. As Gardner (1995) suggests, interacting with higher status individuals represents a deterrent strategy against public harassment. Richard describes how certain regulars serve as protectors in the midst of daily harassment:

I got a couple of friends—I call them friends. Like in the morning—two or three or four of them, it doesn't matter—like everyday they come by, they see me, they'll give me a dollar. There's one guy named Thomas—a couple other guys—a lady who comes from Bethesda every morning and works across the street. No matter what anybody says about me, that "You shouldn't give to panhandlers," or "He's just being irresponsible" or "He's not tryin'"—they'll still give me a dollar and help me get something to eat.

The act of panhandling also provides panhandlers the opportunity to interact with regulars and strangers of a higher social strata. These elites include high-ranking government officials, judges, doctors, and media and sports figures. Given the lower- and working-class background of most panhandlers and the importance of social class in determining a person's friendship networks (Wright 1997), panhandling provides a forum for face-to-face encounters with individuals of a higher class who otherwise might never be engaged or met. Yancy describes an important citizen with whom he became acquainted:

You get to meet people of note. You get to know a little bit about their personality, aside from what you see on television and in the media. One good friend of mine—who just died—was Bill Colby, the ex-director of the CIA.... He was one of the nicest people I ever had a chance to meet. He had a sense of humor.

Another important function of regulars is that they generally do not need to be panhandled. In other words, when encountering a regular, the panhandler can drop or alter his or her panhandling routine for the moment, while receiving a contribution. Hence, encountering a regular affords a panhandler a break from the monotony of panhandling. Nate describes his regulars and how he interacts with them:

Some people help me everyday! They don't have no excuses or nothin'. It's not that many right, but there's a few that help me out everyday. When I see them, I don't try to approach them like big old so-and-so, and I'll automatically get it. I like to lay back and see what they gonna do. And they always help me man. The main reason why they always help me is because I'm always smilin' and I'm never frownin' or nothin', you know, and even if they say, "I'll catch you tomorrow" or something, I still feel the same way about them.

Likewise, Ray, a forty-one-year-old panhandler who sleeps in the basement of an apartment building, describes a kind of interaction with regulars similar to Nate's:

Well, you know, I have a whole lotta clientele—black people, white people, Ethiopian people. Sometimes I don't have to ask, you know. They say, "Oh, how you doin'?" I may sit there and say "Alright." "There you go." Or they say, "I'll see you when I come out." That's the way it is—you get to know people, talk to them nice, and stuff

like that, and you're gonna have a lot of people sayin', "How you doin' Ray. There you go."

Many panhandlers derive much more from their interactions with donors than money or other types of material goods. Rather, the relationships developed with regulars cause panhandlers to regard many as friends. Panhandlers often lead solitary lives barren of companionship and intimacy, but they experience a certain warmth and rapport among regulars. The relationships formed between panhandlers and donors serve to emotionally stabilize an otherwise precarious existence. Harlan describes the social support donors give him:

[Having no friends]—that's my problem. I just lost my mother recently and my father—my people. They're all my friends [his regulars]. They don't know it. They're like a family—they're all I have. They really don't know that. They are my friends, my family, because I don't have a family. They don't realize how much they mean to me. It's more than just the change. At times, it's lonely, you're by yourself, and they are my family.

During my short panhandling experience, I knew I was failing to capture the important ongoing relationships that sometimes develop between donors and panhandlers as just described by Harlan. Rather, these relationships may take months or even years to grow. However, I was able to appreciate the significance of a single contribution—how it validated my sense of self and lessened my feelings of shame and loneliness. For when I received a stranger's spare change, I felt like I had succeeded at something—both monetarily and socially. However, repeatedly failing at this role left a rather troubled, embarrassed feeling. From this experience, I concluded that panhandlers who develop a few ongoing relationships with regular passersby lay the foundation for a minimum amount of financial and psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that a panhandler's display of various stigmatized attributes make them particularly vulnerable to public harassment and humiliations. Emotion work (Hochschild 1983) and identity management (Goffman 1963b) are tools employed by panhandlers to contend with public harassment (Gardner 1995), but they also pave the way for status-enhancing relationships with passersby. In addition to enhancing status, these relationships provide specific necessities, such as cash. Collectively, my approach is consistent with Goffman's (1963b) concept of stigma management via out-group strategies and Milner's (1994) process of status enhancement. Additionally, this research extends features of the socioemotional economy (Clark 1997) to include public exchanges of both benign and malevolent sentiments among the stigmatized and "normals."

Despite the harassment experienced by panhandlers at the hands of some passersby, I have presented relationships between panhandlers and givers in a largely favorable light. However, the phenomenon of panhandlers developing pragmatic relationships with passersby connects to the broader, controversial issue of whether those who give to panhandlers somehow are perpetuating the panhandling problem. In other words, if people stopped giving money to panhandlers, would panhandlers be compelled to stop soliciting and, instead, resort to other forms of sustenance or assistance?

In fact, some social service providers¹⁰ imply a causal relationship between giving money to panhandlers and the panhandling problem. The primary message is that panhandlers frivolously waste collected monies on alcohol and drugs, and rather than helping panhandlers, such money only prolongs and exacerbates the problems of unemployment, addiction, and poverty. Instead of giving money to panhandlers, it is suggested that panhandlers and the public would be better served by giving money to legitimate charities. It is argued further that the problems suffered by these individuals are best served by organizations and institutions that specialize in the problems of homelessness and addiction rather than by untrained lay persons who actually may worsen the problems through their own individual interventions. In other words, the face-to-face relationships established among panhandlers and informal givers is viewed as part of the larger problem rather than as a solution to the problem.

It is true that a majority of panhandlers in my study are users either of alcohol or illegal drugs or both. It then follows that a certain proportion of monies received from givers is spent on alcohol or illegal drugs. However, if passersby simply stopped giving, it is unlikely that alcohol or drug use among panhandlers would end or that entry into drug-treatment programs would increase. Rather, many panhandlers would regain these losses by participating more heavily in informal or underground economic activities, such as under-the-table laboring, thieving, drug dealing, and prostitution. While nearly all panhandlers reported panhandling as their primary source of income, many indicated that they supplemented these earnings with informal earnings.¹¹

Aside from alcohol or illegal drugs, panhandlers report a wide variety of other items on which they spend their money, such as food, medicine, clothes, toiletries, and transportation.¹² These expenditures suggest that contrary to other claims, money offered by givers to panhandlers frequently is spent on useful goods and services. While many of these same goods are provided free of charge at homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and other social service facilities, panhandlers who purchase these goods for themselves at stores or restaurants with money earned gain a sense of agency and normalcy. Relying exclusively or primarily on the social service infrastructure for assistance fosters a sense of dependency among panhandlers that many find debilitating. Instead, devising short- or long-term relationships with passersby offers panhandlers important forms of social support and income that is not readily available from typical social service providers. In these ways, relationships between panhandlers and givers do not necessarily fuel existing social problems but, rather, offer a forum for direct contact between persons who share common interests toward bridging gaps in resources, support, and understanding.

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¹⁰For instance, one D.C.-based homeless service provider, who offered valuable outreach assistance to the homeless, distributed pamphlets discouraging persons from giving to panhandlers. Likewise, the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), in its efforts to rid the subway of panhandlers, posted placards on the subways reading, “Oh no ... not another panhandler ... If I give my money to charity, I can be sure it goes to the truly needy.”

¹¹Under-the-table laboring, such as washing dishes or yard work, was the most common type of informal economic activity. For a more complete discussion, see Lankenau (1997, 110–119).

¹²For a more complete discussion of panhandler spending habits, see Lankenau (1997, 129–39).

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Biography

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