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# Homeless Women, Special Possessions, and the Meaning of "Home": An Ethnographic Case Study

RONALD PAUL HILL\*

This article investigates homelessness among adult women, an important and growing subpopulation among the homeless. To examine their situation within a consumer-behavior context, an ethnographic case study of a shelter for homeless women run by an order of Roman Catholic sisters was performed. The study focused on how these women became homeless, the effects of early life experiences on their homelessness, available emotional and financial support, possessions that were lost, maintained, or became available during their homeless period(s), their perspectives on their lives at the shelter and its ability to act as a "home," and their fantasies about home life. Public policy implications and contributions of these findings to the developing literature in consumer behavior regarding the meaning of possessions are discussed.

Since the industrial revolution, our society's conception of the home has changed. Today home is much less a place where living and work are interconnected and much more a symbol of our relative affluence that helps define us in society. According to Frawley (1990, p. 7), "Home became a consumer item, a measure of our success, and an avenue for spatially and socially differentiating ourselves from others." McCracken (1989) extends this perspective through his ethnographic investigation of the North American home. He found that the creation of "homeyness" is one of the most important goals in the transactions between people and their homes and that this goal leads to the inclusion of cherished objects such as gifts, trophies, and family heirlooms. This environment, "dense with symbolism," "exercises its gravitational powers to sustain the commitment of family members" (p. 176).

Unfortunately, homelessness eliminates such possibilities for many Americans (King et al. 1989). Current estimates of the number of homeless persons on any given night range from 600,000 to 3 million (Whitman 1989). However, an additional 4-14 million "nearly homeless" American families are living in crowded apartments with friends or family. It is believed that

even a mild recession will disturb this precarious balance and cause homelessness in this country to double or triple overnight (Rich 1989).

This article investigates the plight of adult women who are homeless, an important and growing subpopulation among the homeless. To examine their situation within a consumer-behavior context, an ethnographic case study of a shelter for homeless women run by an order of Roman Catholic sisters was undertaken.<sup>1</sup> The implications of this study for public policy and its contribution to the developing literature in consumer behavior regarding the meaning of possessions, especially the home, are discussed.

## PRIOR RESEARCH ON HOMELESSNESS AND A PRIORI THEMES

In a recent review, Blau (1988) analyzes the ideology of homelessness in the United States over the last hundred years. While differences exist among the approaches he discussed, they tend to share the view that the homeless are responsible for their plight (see Chesterton 1926; Sutherland and Locke 1936).

This perspective on the homeless did not change significantly until the rise of advocacy research in the 1980s (Hopper and Hamberg 1985; Ropers 1988), an approach that suggests that the current level of homeless-

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<sup>1</sup>Approximately 10 percent of the women at the shelter are accompanied by their children. However, no adult males are allowed to stay.

ness in the United States can be attributed to a number of structural or societal problems that are beyond the control of the affected individuals (Hill and Stamey 1990; also see Furnham and Lewis 1986). First, there is a lack of job opportunities. Statistics obtained from municipal shelters in New York City show that 40 percent of current users reported the reason for their seeking shelter was loss of a job (Salerno, Hopper, and Baxter 1984). A second reason for homelessness is the deinstitutionalization movement that resulted in the discharge of hundreds of thousands of former mental patients into ill-prepared communities (French 1987). A third factor is substance abuse, especially alcoholism. Recent investigations show that 33–38 percent of homeless adults are alcoholics, and 13–25 percent are illegal drug users (Whitman 1989).<sup>2</sup> A fourth factor is the scarcity of low-cost housing. Much of this type of housing has been eliminated through city “revitalization” projects and economic development schemes (King et al. 1989) in which occupied buildings are allowed to deteriorate and then are renovated for use by higher-income persons.

While these causes of homelessness apply equally to men and women, Hill and Stamey (1990) report an additional reason for homelessness among women. Physical violence, especially spouse battering and sexual abuse by an adult male in the household, may force a woman to seek alternative living arrangements (also see Hagen 1987; Ropers 1988). Since many of these women come from poverty, they are unable to turn to their extended families for financial support and, therefore, end up homeless. Taken as a whole, previous research suggests a priori theme one: homelessness among women at the shelter is the result of unemployment, deinstitutionalization, substance abuse, lack of low-cost housing, and family violence.

Most research that has investigated the consumer behavior of homeless persons has focused on health-care issues (see Hill [1991] for a summary), especially the struggle to cope with acute and chronic illnesses caused or exacerbated by homelessness (Institute of Medicine 1988). One exception to this narrow focus is Hill and Stamey’s (1990) ethnographic investigation of ways in which homeless persons act as “secondary consumers.”<sup>3</sup>

Three significant interpretive themes emerged from this research. In the first theme, the homeless were portrayed as a “nomadic society,” which relied on “nature” to provide the necessities of life. These homeless nomads were, perforce, mobile, covering an area wide enough to provide sufficient quantities of needed items, and flexible, adjusting to changing opportunities as they

arose (see Drake [1990] for an additional source). The second theme centered on self-concept development among the homeless. According to Hill and Stamey (1990), homeless persons are able to maintain some self-esteem by distancing themselves from their more dependent peers (e.g., “shelter dwellers”) and by living independent of welfare institutions. Finally, the third theme compared the meaning of possessions for homeless and for middle-class Americans. The authors found that, compared with average citizens, homeless persons had different perceptions and lower expectations regarding what constitutes acceptable housing. Further, they took pride in the construction rather than the purchase of their homes (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry [1989] for parallel findings).

An implicit theme permeates these results: the “hidden homeless” are a resourceful, determined, and capable group that proactively deals with the lack of resources in their consumer environment. However, the hidden homeless are only one of many homeless groups. Many gaps still exist in our knowledge regarding other segments of this population. For example, the diversity among the homeless suggests that treating them as an undifferentiated mass may be inappropriate (Hagen 1987). Hill and Stamey (1990) limit their findings to that segment that exists outside the social welfare system, often in seclusion. Their research explicitly contrasts those homeless who choose to live by their own wits on the streets with those who choose to live in the array of shelters available in many cities. They view the shelter subpopulation, particularly homeless women who are in greater physical jeopardy on the streets than their male counterparts (Axelrod and Dail 1988), as dependent on the social welfare system. This distinction leads to a priori theme two: homeless women who reside at a shelter manifest a sense of physical dependence on the shelter.

As previously mentioned, Hill and Stamey (1990) found that the homeless subpopulation they studied was able to maintain some self-esteem and cope with their loss of possessions through a form of self-restoration involving active scavenging for goods and the construction of makeshift shelters. On the other hand, the sheltered homeless, because they depend on shelters for the necessities of life, are unable to use this form of self-concept development. Possessions nevertheless remain an important part of self-identity for them (see Belk [1985] for more details). According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), things embody goals, make abilities apparent, and shape identities in our society. Although homelessness greatly constrains the accumulation of material possessions—because of a lack of safe storage<sup>4</sup>—a priori theme three suggests that the few possessions maintained by homeless women at the

<sup>2</sup>While some might argue that drug addiction is a “personal weakness,” recent research suggests that it is a medical condition (Schutt and Garrett 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Hill and Stamey (1990) refer to many homeless persons as “secondary consumers” since they often search for and consume products that have been discarded as useless by the original owners.

<sup>4</sup>This constraint may be especially true in a typical shelter, where personal space and privacy are at a minimum.

shelter symbolize better past lives or future opportunities.

Finally, while shelters may contain many basic components of a home, the frequent intrusion by others and general loss of control make it unlikely to provide the "homeyness" that, according to McCracken (1989, p. 179), helps "the individual to mediate his or her relationship with the larger world, refusing some of its influences, and transforming still others." Although the hidden homeless, the subpopulation studied by Hill and Stamey (1990), satisfied this need through creation of their own homes, the sheltered homeless lack this solution. One possible alternative coping strategy is fantasy, described by Fine (1983) as the product of individual introspection through activities such as daydreaming that reflect needs, desires, or ambitions. This leads to a priori theme four: homeless women at the shelter use fantasy about future home lives to help them cope with their homeless situation.

## METHODOLOGY

In the last several years, the ethnographic research method has been applied with increasing frequency to the investigation of consumer-behavior issues (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). In this approach, both data collection and the ultimate interpretation are guided by emergent design, in which the researcher builds an understanding of the phenomenon as it exists in its natural environment (Belk et al. 1989; Denzin 1988). Typically, observation and both directive and nondirective interviewing are the primary methods employed (Sherry 1990). As in much previous research using this method, the following procedures recommended by Wallendorf and Belk (1989) were used to guide this investigation. However, while these procedures offer useful guidelines, they in no way ensure valid results (Holt 1991; Thompson 1991).

### Prolonged Engagement/Persistent Observation

To fulfill these conditions, I acted as a volunteer at the shelter during the course of one calendar year. The sisters and the guests<sup>5</sup> rely heavily on such support from the community, and the volunteers blend easily into the activities at the shelter. My early visits were on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Fridays, depending on the needs of the shelter as expressed by the sisters. However, I observed that most volunteers regularly worked on the same day of the week, so I settled on Mondays in an attempt to become a member of a particular group. After this initial period, I volunteered one day a week for the remainder of the year. My job consisted of sweeping the floor in the dining room and setting the tables for

the soup kitchen (seating for approximately 50 persons). However, I was regularly asked to perform other duties such as moving furniture, transporting guests to and from appointments, preparing food, and doing laundry. I would usually arrive in the early afternoon and leave in the early evening, having spent three to five hours per visit. This was the most active part of the day. Guests would be returning to the shelter, and I would often greet them as they arrived, talking to them briefly about their activities that day.

While working in this capacity, I was able to observe the operations of the shelter and the interactions among the guests, volunteers, and the sisters. For example, I saw firsthand the living quarters of the women, their reactions to the food, clothing, and toiletries provided by the sisters, and their attempts to navigate the relationships within this temporary home. After approximately two months of consistent attendance and many attempts at friendly conversation, most of the women began to consider me a part of their shelter "home" and looked forward to our interactions. When longer-term residents showed such trust, the more recent guests followed suit. Thus, I was able to develop the kind of intimacy with the guests that is necessary if one is to avoid the evasions many homeless persons use for self-protection (see Douglas [1976] for more information on evasions).<sup>6</sup>

After developing a relationship with the homeless women, I began conducting private interviews that lasted from 30 minutes to three hours, with the typical length being one hour. While the focus of the interviews evolved during the course of my tenure at the shelter, topics included early home life, reasons for coming to the shelter, current levels of emotional and financial support, possessions maintained, lost, and acquired during this homeless period, perceptions of life at the shelter and its ability to replace their home, and fantasies regarding future home life.

This change in roles from volunteer to interviewer was easily achieved. Arriving at the shelter in the early afternoon, I completed my usual job and any additional activities requested by the sisters. After the evening meal began for the nonresidents who came to the soup kitchen, I would approach one of the guests and ask permission to talk to her about her homelessness. All agreed to be interviewed and allowed me to record our conversations and take their pictures. Thus, the switch was easily accomplished; nobody (to my knowledge) seemed to find my dual role problematic.

### Triangulation and Negative Case Analysis

To fulfill these requirements, I met, had casual conversations, or conducted interviews with over 90 guests

<sup>5</sup>The term "guest" is commonly used in the shelter vernacular to connote status and a sense of hospitality toward the homeless.

<sup>6</sup>The only limitation I experienced was an inability to stay beyond 9:00 P.M. when the women retired to their rooms for the night. However, at this point, most of their interactions with each other, the sisters, and the volunteers ended for the day.

at the shelter and had multiple contacts with many of the women. These interactions ranged from discussions of the evening meal to in-depth dialogues concerning their pregnancies to 30 formal interviews with different guests. As my understanding evolved, interactions with the guests became more focused and directed toward particular issues or questions.

To achieve triangulation across methods, primary data were collected in various forms, including field notes, still photography, and audio recordings of formal interviews. All information pertaining to a specific informant was evaluated weekly, and all information on a particular theme was evaluated monthly. The purpose of these comparisons was to search for new insights as well as consistencies and inconsistencies in my findings. To meet the need for negative case analysis, I probed informants regularly during the later stages of data collection to determine the extent to which my interpretations captured their experiences and perceptions of the field. The goal of these interactions was to uncover information that did not support my beliefs regarding the shelter. Therefore, I regularly asked questions that were designed to uncover exceptions to the rule.

### Debriefing by Peers and Member Checks

To this end, I assembled a team of professionals that included a social worker, a clinical psychologist, an anthropologist, and a consumer-behavior researcher who reviewed my materials and my developing perceptions of the field. At regular intervals during the project, these social scientists reviewed information on particular informants or themes and provided their own informed interpretations. These reactions provided a wealth of new directions and insights and were used to guide additional data gathering. Further, several volunteers, the sisters, and a few of the current and former guests were asked to respond to various themes as they unfolded. I would present them with different versions of the four a priori themes and ask for an appraisal of the accuracy of the themes given *their* backgrounds and experiences. Occasionally, I would distort the portrait greatly to see their reactions. In virtually every case, they were willing to offer their opinions and to disagree with what they believed to be misrepresentations. This feedback satisfied the need for member checks.

### THE SISTERS OF MERCY SHELTER: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

This ethnographic overview of the Sisters of Mercy shelter begins with a description of the location and physical facility. Next, the backgrounds and activities of the sisters and volunteers (jointly referred to as “workers”) as well as interactions among themselves and with the guests are provided. Then, a brief sketch of the women who are guests at the shelter is presented.

Finally, a priori and emergent themes that supply interpretation of this environment are discussed within the context of relevant literature in the social sciences. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of informants, and the name of the shelter has been changed for the same reason.

### The Shelter

The Sisters of Mercy shelter is located in a suburban area of a major northeastern city, allowing relatively easy access from several adjacent communities.<sup>7</sup> Situated at the intersection of two busy streets, the facility is across from a Roman Catholic church that has title to the building. The buildings in a five-square-block radius around the shelter are primarily row housing and small retail establishments. Most local residents are blacks living at or near the poverty level. They view the shelter as a resource for food, clothing, and (occasionally) a home.

The exterior of the facility is unassuming, except for the 6-foot chain-link fence around the backyard. There are few low-level windows, and the wooden front door carries only a small sign designating the facility as an operation run by the sisters (see photograph 1, Fig. 1). The right side of the shelter borders a sidewalk, and the left side contains a fenced area where men and women congregate to wait for the soup kitchen to open at 4:00 P.M.

The backyard contains diverse items. First, equipment for doing laundry by hand is located next to the building, and several wires for hanging clothing are strung across approximately one-fifth of the total square footage of the yard. Second, several picnic tables and chairs are set on a platform under a wooden roof for informal gatherings, parties, and so forth. Third, there is a large enclosed room where donated clothing is stored or displayed for selection by the guests and members of the surrounding community. Finally, there is a small shrine to the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of this order of sisters.

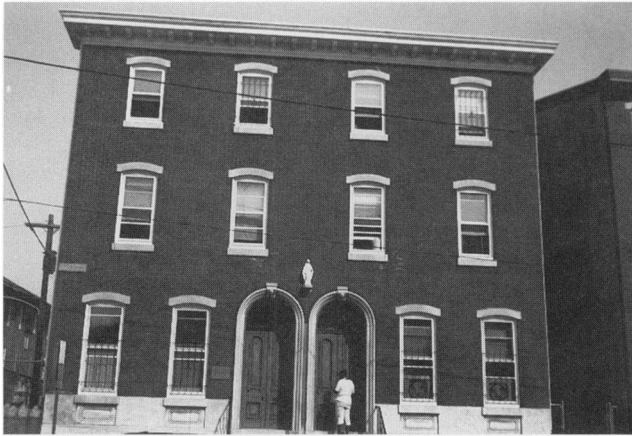
The interior is equally unassuming. The only entrance to the shelter is through the front door that faces the busy intersection. This door opens to a long hallway that stretches the length of the building. As you enter, the dining facilities are on your immediate right (see photograph 2, Fig. 1). This room contains five long tables with seating for nine to 11 people, and surrounding each table is the appropriate number of collapsible metal chairs. Hung on the walls are several religious sayings and pictures, including a drawing of the founding sister.

Moving through the hallway you come to a large kitchen where food is refrigerated, prepared, and cooked (see photograph 3, Fig. 1). Here, the shelves

<sup>7</sup>The number of homeless in this city is consistent with other major urban areas such as New York City.

FIGURE 1

## A PHOTOGRAPHIC LOOK AT THE SHELTER ENVIRONMENT



1. The front entrance to the shelter.



2. The dining area before dinner is served.



3. Volunteers preparing the evening meal.



4. The lounge where the women congregate during free time.

are filled with food donated by local supermarkets and residents of more affluent neighboring communities. Since all donated goods are accepted by the sisters, the entire basement is filled with a "potpourri" of food and other items, such as deodorant, toys, and shampoo.

In the middle of the shelter is a stairway leading up to the guests' rooms. There are three floors of rooms, allowing for approximately 55 guests. Each woman in a particular room is allocated an individual bed, a portion of the closet, and one or two drawers in a chest of drawers. There are two bathrooms on each level that are shared by the women on that floor. Also, on the first bedroom level, there is a lounge containing several dilapidated couches and chairs, a few books, and a number of religious pamphlets, but no television or radio is allowed (see photograph 4, Fig. 1). Next door to this lounge is a small chapel and a locked room containing the medications of some of the guests as well as other medicines.

### The Workers

The workers at the shelter are composed of two groups—the sisters and the volunteers. There are four sisters and one volunteer who live at the shelter and who share primary responsibility for the day-to-day management of the facility. None of the five is from the United States, and only one was raised in an English-speaking country. They nevertheless communicate easily with each other, the volunteers, and guests.

One of the most important tasks of this subgroup is the establishment and enforcement of household rules. Guests are required to leave the shelter at 7:45 A.M. and are not allowed to return until 4 P.M. Since length of stay is limited to three weeks, guests are encouraged to seek employment and a new home during this time. Breakfast and dinner are served at specified times, and toiletries and clothing are dispensed at certain times of the day or days of the week. Drugs or persons who are under the influence of drugs are not allowed in the shel-

ter. Guests must be inside by 6 P.M. and are required to go to bed at 9 P.M. Fighting or other disruptive behavior (such as loud music) and stealing are prohibited. While a variety of penalties involving a reduction of privileges and possessions are available, the sisters more often use verbal persuasion to maintain conformity. However, guests are occasionally expelled as a last resort.

The volunteers are a relatively large number of men and women from churches and universities in the more affluent sections of the city. Typically, they are middle-aged or older and dedicated to serving the poor. They treat the sisters with great respect and the guests with much warmth. Most volunteer on the same day every week and have developed a strong bond with each other and the shelter through, on average, several months of consistent attendance. A few occasionally help the sisters enforce the household rules, but these individuals are in the minority. As mentioned earlier, each volunteer is quickly assigned a regular task, but almost all are willing to do whatever additional duties the sisters request.

## The Guests

The guests who lived at the shelter during the period of this study were quite heterogeneous with regard to race, age, educational experience, previous financial resources, and history of homelessness. There was almost an equal number of blacks and whites (I encountered no Asians during my visits), and the women varied in age from early twenties to midsixties with no predominant age group. With regard to education, almost half had graduated from high school and approximately 20 percent had attended college or specialized training programs (e.g., nurse's aid training, plumbing). Previous financial resources were just as varied. While many were from impoverished backgrounds, at least 40 percent came from middle-class families. Finally, although a majority of the women at the shelter had an extensive history of homelessness (often moving from being "housed" to being "homeless" several times over the last several years), about one-fourth were homeless for the first time in their lives.

## Development of Interpretive Themes

*Routes to Homelessness among Women at the Shelter.* Consistent with a priori theme one, there are several factors that precipitated the eventual homelessness of the women at the shelter. Doreen,<sup>8</sup> for example, reveals the devastating effects of chronic mental illness

<sup>8</sup>Additional information regarding the race and age of informants is not provided because these data do not improve interpretation of the findings.

and deinstitutionalization.<sup>9</sup> She lived with her husband and children in a traditional family environment for about nine years until her illness began dominating her thinking and behavior and led to the breakup of her family. She has lived in independent housing for the mentally ill or in institutions since that time, but became homeless after an altercation with another woman who lived in her building.

Long-term abuse of alcohol or illegal drugs may precipitate homelessness, as in the case of Janine, who lived in her family's home until her behavior under the influence of these substances jeopardized her brother's possessions. After leaving home, she spent the next several years in and out of alcohol-treatment facilities. Recently, "social services" sent her to another facility for treatment and on her release recommended that she come to the shelter.

Sue and Lynette show how family violence and abuse can precipitate homelessness. Sue lived with the father of her two children, a spouse abuser who regularly beat her and recently pushed her down a flight of stairs, breaking her leg and hip. This third vicious attack convinced her to leave him and come to the shelter. Lynette had been living at her grandmother's home for several months in order to save money for her own apartment. One evening while her grandmother was out of town, her uncle came into her bedroom and attempted to rape her. Unwilling to inform her grandmother of his behavior, she left and came to the shelter.

These findings support theme one that associates homelessness with deinstitutionalization, substance abuse, and family violence. But during this investigation three additional insights into the causes of homelessness emerged. First, guests were unemployed and, therefore, homeless as a result of poor health rather than a lack of job opportunities. For example, Loretta's physical disability caused her to become homeless. Because of a chronic heart condition, she was unable to work and her landlord "put her out." She moved to a nearby park for two months, sleeping during the day and constantly moving during the night. As winter approached, it became increasingly difficult to survive, so she contacted the "Coalition for the Elderly" and they referred her to the shelter.

Second, homelessness sometimes followed the loss of a parent through death, separation, or abandonment, which precipitated a "cycle of homelessness" among the affected women. Consider the case of Mary, whose home life was permanently disrupted by the separation of her parents. When Mary was 10 years old, her parents began having marital problems and her father left. According to Mary, his departure resulted in the disintegration of her home life. Her mother started "going out" all the time and she had to look after herself. She

<sup>9</sup>Since I am not a trained clinical psychologist, it would be inappropriate for me to make such diagnoses. Thus, I have relied on the guests themselves to provide evidence of a history of mental illness.

reported, "I had to get myself up, comb my own hair, wash my own clothes, and make my own meals at 10." This neglect resulted in a series of moves in and out of institutions and abusive relationships over the next 15 years. She "moved from place to place to place like a gypsy," coming to the shelter after her last residence was destroyed by fire.

Finally, lack of low-cost housing cuts across all other routes to homelessness among the women at the shelter and acts to exacerbate the other problems. For example, Loretta told me that her disability payment for the month was approximately \$50 less than the rental payment for a typical apartment in the area. This was also true of Doreen, who received welfare because of her emotional illness, and Sue, who was unable to earn much money because she had to take care of her young children.

An additional theme that emerged during this study was the negative impact of these routes to homelessness on the quality and availability of financial and emotional support and the consequent long-term reduction of housing options. While this lack of support occasionally results from death, for the most part it is caused by an accumulation of bad feeling built up over several years of negative interaction due to problems such as mental illness or drug dependence. These difficulties leave the guests unable to support themselves and with few alternatives. The following field note describes how Patricia's mental illness resulted in her alienation from her family:

Patricia interacts with her family on rare occasions, usually when she is in crisis. Although she expressed great pride concerning her father's background as an air force pilot and officer, she feels that he is a spoiled "only child" who was absent during her childhood and unable to give to his wife or children. For instance, he told her during her last visit that "You are no longer part of this family." This incident as well as many others have left her feeling alienated from her parents. She also has a sister and a brother. However, she asked her sister (who lives across country) not to contact her anymore, and only communicates irregularly with her brother by mail.

*The Guests' Dependence on the Shelter.* Consistent with theme two, the women quickly became dependent on the shelter to provide the basic essentials of a "home." Typical reactions to the question involving physical dependence included comments like the following: "I'm not living on the streets. I have an address, I can get a job, I can shower. Even though I'm homeless, I'm not really homeless." An important facet of theme two that emerged during this study was the guests' *emotional* dependence on the shelter. I found that it was the relationships in the shelter that dominated the women's perceptions of the shelter as home. The guests regularly commented on their interactions with the other women at the shelter and often felt that disruptive guests negatively affected the quality of their home life.

While many behaviors were mentioned, most prominent were stealing, violent or psychotic behavior, and monotonous conversations.

On the other hand, the women viewed the sisters that run the shelter positively and felt that they provided spiritual as well as temporal guidance that organized and focused their lives. A major part of this direction was the rules of conduct laid down and enforced by the sisters. While the women agreed that these rules were necessary, they viewed them as a double-edged sword best used to discipline others. Further, the women were often resentful when exceptions were made, which happened regularly, or when rules were broken and the "violators" went undetected. Some examples from my field notes on these issues include the following.

While Joan values the sisters and the material things they provide, she is bothered by her lack of independence: "I don't like having to be out all day. Not when I don't feel good. . . . They [the sisters] can't make too many [exceptions] because then [some]one would say 'Well she didn't [leave during the day]!'"

Nancy is a strong advocate of the rules of the house and told me that: "Everybody in the household, everybody have to go by the rules!" However, she was angry that some of the other guests break the rules and go unpunished: "She sneaks out of here at night and stuff. If it was one of us, we'd be out the door! . . . Somebody had a can of beer in here last night, but I'm not going to say anything! When they ask about it, then I'll say something."

There is a body of literature in sociology that provides a possible explanation for these reactions, which views the family as the primary socializing agent that facilitates the successful passage of an individual from childhood to adulthood (Hareven 1986; Jamieson 1987; Kalmuss and Seltzer 1989; Kenkel 1966). While the exact nature of this process of influence varies from culture to culture (see Goode 1963), the role of parent remains central. Specifically, the interactions and behaviors of both mother and father with their child(ren) greatly affect the ability of offspring to effectively navigate relationships as adults.<sup>10</sup>

Research involving patterns of family interaction suggests that cohesive and integrated families produce children whose emotional and affectional needs are likely to be satisfied (Bakken and Romig 1989; Sebald and Andrews 1962). Strong family ties greatly increase the extent to which a person assumes responsible adult roles in society (Rose 1959). On the other hand, families characterized by a lack of cohesion, neglect, or abuse are more likely to damage children, resulting in weak self-identifies and poor coping skills (Doueck, Ishisaka, and Greenaway 1988). Such persons may become overly

<sup>10</sup>However, research by Edwards (1987) suggests that an intact nuclear family is not necessary for normal childhood development as long as others in the child's environment give appropriate nurturing.

dependent on individuals and institutions later in life since they missed necessary maturational steps (see McLanahan 1985).

The crisis of homelessness made guests feel more dependent, both physically and emotionally. These women were typically without any financial or emotional support from family or friends and came to rely heavily on the sisters for life-sustaining possessions as well as guidance. Once fully integrated into the home life at the shelter, these women developed patterns of interaction with one another and the sisters that resembled a family structure, with the sisters in the role of "parents" and the guests in the role of "children." In the words of Lasch (1977, p. 6), this surrogate family became "a haven in a heartless world."

However, guests' reactions to these roles varied according to their previous family histories. The women who came from more stable and nurturing homes were more likely to resent the loss of personal freedom that comes with communal living and to long for a residence of their own where they could make purchase and consumption decisions themselves. On the other hand, the women who came from homes characterized by violence, neglect, or abuse were more likely to be comfortable with the rules and to feel more dependent on the shelter as a future residence and a source of needed possessions. These reactions and behaviors suggest that homelessness may have facilitated a "relapse" into childlike emotional dependence in guests who had poor early family relationships.

*Special Possessions among the Women at the Shelter.* Consistent with theme three, the guests maintained possessions that held symbolic value for them. During the course of this study, three categories of possessions emerged. The first was possessions the women were able to maintain despite their homelessness. On occasion, these included mementos such as pictures of loved ones, but more typically they were "just the clothes on my back and the shoes on my feet." This response is not surprising given that homelessness is often a slow process involving the eventual loss of a shelter capable of protecting most consumer products (see Hill and Stamey 1990; also see Wallendorf and Belk [1987] for parallel findings). However, possessions were not limited to such external objects. More thoughtful responses frequently included the following important components of the extended self (Belk 1988b): "Just my morals and my values—respect for myself as well as others"; "my heart"; "memories of my family during the happy times."

The second category was possessions that the women were able to acquire after becoming homeless. The guests typically acknowledged lodging ("a bed to sleep in"), food, and clothing as possessions they acquired after coming to the shelter. However, equally important were items that symbolized a better future:

Two items are very important to Maria. One is the rosary that Sister Martha gave to her. "It is special because Sister Martha is special." Also, she wears two chains with religious medals attached. One was given to her by the sisters, the other by the (affiliated) church next door. They have symbolic meaning for Maria in two respects. First, they represent the support that she has received from the church. Second, they serve as an inspiration to stay off drugs. She has integrated their meaning into her life and attends Mass every day.

Coleen presented me with something that was very meaningful to her—a flyer from a local photographer that describes his/her prices for various services. She told me that she has no pictures of her children, and intends to take them to this person so that she will have some. "I'll take the kids down there to get their pictures taken." The importance placed on this flyer suggests a strong desire to maintain contact with them through this difficult time of separation.

Interestingly, a third category of possessions emerged as important during this investigation: items that had been lost or that these women were unable to keep with them as a result of their homelessness. Responses to questions involving these possessions varied, depending on the quality of early home life of the informant. If their childhood and adolescence were characterized by continuous interpersonal problems between or with their parents and other family members, then the women were more likely to long for nontraditional possessions that involved other less conflictual relationships.

"She [our dog] was as black as the ace of spades—the Yellow Rose of Texas! She had big brown eyes. [The dog was my brother's] but she would come for me. When the dog had to go out, she used to come in and lick my hand. . . . Part whippet, part greyhound—she loved to run in the snow!"

"My son . . . that materialistic stuff is all replaceable."

"My godson—he's my second cousin. He's one year old and a couple months. I watch him, change his diaper, bathe him, feed him. I was the first person to turn him on to baby food! I feel good about myself doing that! He usually sleeps with me on the floor and the couch."

These women lack traditional socializing figures who could act as role models, influencing their behavior. So they organized their thinking (and sometimes their behavior) around these other, less troublesome relationships (see Rochberg-Halton [1986] for more information on object relations).

On the other hand, guests who had experienced at least some portion of their lives in a stable and happy home frequently mentioned tangible possessions that symbolized these earlier circumstances.

"[My house] was beautiful. Simple, a lot of brass and glass. Central air, central heating. Also, the kitchen—you go in the kitchen and you see lots and lots of food, and all kinds of appliances. Everything had to be homemade, I couldn't cook out of a box!"

"I valued everything. I took very good care. I had a beautiful picture—a tapestry—of polar bears given to me from the father of my first three children. I valued that. I had meaning to everything that I owned. And I took care of it. My linens, clothes, and files of my personal records [were all important]."

"I miss many of my possessions, especially my teddy bear that keeps me company, and my stuffed dogs that are so real people pet them! Also, my pictures of clowns and bears—my tablecloth even has bears on it! And a picture of the space shuttle given to me by my brother."

The developing body of literature on special possessions aids in the interpretation of these results. Myers (1985, p. 560) states that "attachment to special possessions occurs at all ages" and should be viewed as growth promoting throughout one's life. This perspective has received considerable attention and generated research activity in the consumer-behavior discipline. For example, in a cross-cultural investigation, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) found that favorite objects provide opportunities for individual self-expression and serve integrating or differentiating functions within a society (also see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).<sup>11</sup> Further, Belk (1988b), in his development of the concept of extended self, suggests that possessions may become part of ourselves and, therefore, are important indicants of our self-identity (also see Belk 1989).

Since possessions hold such important meaning for individuals, their loss is often viewed as a violation and loss of self (Belk 1988b). As Erich Fromm stated, "If I am what I have and what I have is lost, who then am I?" (Belk 1988a, p. 52).<sup>12</sup> Such a negative result is particularly likely when the severing of one's connection to objects is involuntary, as happens, for instance, when one enters a "total institution" such as a prison or mental hospital (Goffman 1961; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). While the impact of this loss can be devastating, one possible reaction is an attempt at self-restoration (Belk 1988b).

While the Sisters of Mercy shelter is not a total institution, there are some similarities. The women who come to the shelter are typically unable to transport many of their possessions or have lost them during their transition from being "housed" to being "homeless." Thus, they often arrive with little more than the clothes that they are wearing. Consequently, they have access to the necessities of life at the discretion of the sisters, who often decide when, where, and what possessions they acquire and whether they keep these possessions for an extended period of time.

<sup>11</sup>Mehta and Belk (1991) have identified a dimension of integration versus differentiation (or communality vs. individuality) in the uses of possessions.

<sup>12</sup>Fromm's comment was meant to be an indictment of the fruitlessness of attachment to possessions rather than support for their value to the self.

One outcome of this situation is that the women at the shelter are usually apathetic regarding the care and maintenance of new possessions, except those that have symbolic value. Guests often avoid cleaning their own living areas, discard clothing rather than wash it, and rarely provide help in the kitchen. As one of the volunteers noted, "I get the sense that they don't have any respect for anything. Like caring for the things they are given—it doesn't matter. They get everything here, but it's like pulling teeth with most of them to just get them to do a little bit [of work around the shelter]." Some of the volunteers believe that this lack of care is the result of "laziness." An alternative explanation is that their lack of control may cause them to avoid strong attachments to things that can easily be withdrawn (see Belk 1988b).

An additional consequence is that the guests generally consider sacred objects special since they are not easily lost, stolen, or destroyed and have meanings beyond their functional properties. This category of possessions includes "places, times, tangible things, intangibles, persons, and experiences" (Belk et al. 1989, p. 9). Possessions of this type included morals, values, memories of happier times and important relationships, all of which were particularly valuable to the guests. Further, favorite tangible possessions often symbolized their desire to improve their lives and/or provided them with a connection to important relationships. These items included religious medals, pictures of children who were separated from them, and items associated with previous jobs or skills. Thus, both tangible and intangible sacred possessions helped the guests cope with their current circumstances and served to restore and maintain their sense of self.

*Fantasies about Future Home Lives.* One serious concern of the women at the shelter was the temporary nature of this living arrangement. While the rule involving length of stay of no more than three weeks is regularly violated (some women have remained for a full year), the guests realize that they are allowed to continue beyond this deadline only at the discretion of the sisters. Thus, they do little to personalize their living quarters and are resigned to the fact that their tenure is short-lived: "It's not a permanent home; it's only temporary housing until you find somewhere else to go permanently. You can never come here with that thought. . . . It is not *my* room, it is the Sisters of Mercy's room."

Because of the tenuous nature of their current situation, the women at the shelter regularly fantasize about future homes, as suggested in theme four. However, substantial variation in the content of these fantasies emerged during this study, depending on the character of the guests' previous home lives. For example, the women who were homeless for the first time in their lives and who were in stable environments until that point tended to wish for simple homes that contained

the basic necessities and a personal touch: "I don't need a lot of space. I'll take a room. I want a large bed, nicely furnished. See, I don't want a six room apartment. I just want a room with a bed in it, a TV, a radio, a fan for the summer, a little kitchen, and my paints. I would have a bed that doesn't look like a bed [i.e., also acts as a couch], and I would crochet a cover for it and put a coffee table in front of it. I would paint pictures and put them on the walls—pictures of flowers."

On the other hand, the women who came from troubled backgrounds that also featured periods of stability and happiness were more apt to fantasize about homes that contained elements of previous happy residences:

Linda told me that she once lived in her "dream" home. This was a time when her young family was together and happy. She told me that: "I had my ideal home! It was in 1954 and it was beautiful! It was a split level. The outside, the grounds were beautiful. Maybe half an acre of grass. We had a garden with flowers and we planted trees. We finished off the inside ourselves and that was beautiful—I even put down a tile floor! I learned how to wallpaper and paint, insulate, and hang wallboard. A little bit of everything!"

Kathy said that her ideal home is a "Williamsburg colonial" like the homes she admired and lived in while in Virginia. "That time period was the best period of my life. I was in college, head of the university's Young Republican club, and politically active."

Finally, the women whose previous home life was wholly or mostly troubled had fantasies of homes that provided security from the outside world or allowed them to escape from their tormented past:

"My ideal home would be shaped like a doughnut [with a protected center]."

"I'd have all the windows painted black—because of thunder and lightning!"

"Just the hell away from my family! A shelter where they can't find us [me and my son]."

The most disturbing of all was a woman who was raised in a home full of violence and sexual abuse: "You got me thinking about a monster now! . . . You hear about people who sit around and shoot their babies and fuck their babies! . . . [I just want a car] to go on the expressway [to] take the kids [away]!"

Two distinct bodies of knowledge, taken together, help in the interpretation of these findings. The first involves the literature on the meaning of the home. As discussed earlier, home has changed from a place where work and living are interconnected to a symbol of relative affluence that helps define one's position in society. Consistent with this theme, Costa and Belk (1990) found that *nouveaux riches* commonly purchase large and expensive homes to distinguish their current from their previous selves (also see Pratt 1982).

However, McCracken (1989) found in an ethnographic investigation that the typical American home

acts as a "status corrector" or a "status claiming device," providing integrating and differentiating functions that lead to the inclusion of cherished objects such as gifts, trophies, and family heirlooms. Thus, the home becomes "a metaphor for living because we structure our homes as we wish to structure our lives" (Claiborne and Ozanne 1990, p. 373).

This body of literature suggests that one's identity is linked, in part, to the physical properties of one's home. However, research in the field of architecture by Boschetti (1986) has shown that the self is a function not only of the present environment, but also of past selves experienced in previous homes. Bachelard (1969, p. 5) says poetically: "Through dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days." Thus, memory and fantasy provide opportunities to define ourselves consistent with the various contexts of our lives.

It seems likely that the homeless use their fantasies about home life to relieve the stress associated with their current circumstances. Caughey (1984, p. 159) describes fantasy as "an escape from reality; it is also an escape from thinking about reality, from coping with it through self-talk, memory, or anticipation." Other investigations in the social sciences support the premise that current unhappy situations often result, particularly among women (Giambra 1983; Golding and Singer 1983), in the use of fantasy and daydreaming as a coping mechanism (Chinoy 1952, 1955). Typical fantasies involve the use of "projected personal futures" that resolve the dilemma that dominates present existence (Sloan 1983). Thus, homeless women may fantasize about future home lives that will settle their need for permanent shelter.

These fantasies may, however, be a function of either desire or fear (Halderman, Zelhart, and Jackson 1985). Belk (1990) suggests that individuals with a "rich" sense of past define themselves according to their previous history. Such a sense of self becomes particularly helpful when one's current identity is challenged, as may be the case under conditions of homelessness. However, this positive effect can occur only if the past contains predominantly positive images, which is not always the case. Thus, according to Lowenthal (1985, p. 63), "The past not only aids and delights; it also threatens and diminishes us." Individuals with an "evil" past may believe that it continues to endanger the present and strive to forget or escape their previous lives.

Such a perspective is consistent with the guests' fantasies about future homes. Guests with partially or mostly positive earlier home lives tended to discuss ideal homes that contained furnishings, wall decorations, layouts, and external facades that were similar or identical to previous residences where their lives were happier. On the other hand, the women who characterized their prior home lives as entirely or predominantly negative fantasized about acquiring a home that provided a secure environment away from the dangers of the past.

The former apparently want to retain the positive sense of self that developed in a more nurturing and stable setting while the latter try to lessen their fear through escapism.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Summary of Findings

This ethnographic case study of the Sisters of Mercy shelter provides several novel findings regarding homeless women. First, the poverty experienced by the guests reduced their attachment to typical consumer goods. Instead of typical consumer products, they tended to value sacred items, such as memories, relationships, and religious beliefs, in which physical ownership was irrelevant, and tangible items that symbolized these intangible possessions. Second, a lack of strong bonds to family and friends combined with their inability to support themselves led to a childlike dependence on the sisters and the shelter. The degree and nature of the dependency hinged on the extent to which previous home lives were nurturing and stable. Third, the women appear to have used fantasies about future home life as a coping mechanism. The content of these fantasies was a function of their sense of the past. If previous home lives were characterized by violence, abuse, or neglect, the women tended to fantasize about secure environments that would protect them from the past. On the other hand, if previous home lives were mostly or partially positive, the women fantasized about homes like those where constructive parenting took place.

These findings provide additional support for the nontraditional perspective of possessions advocated recently in the consumer-behavior literature (see Belk [1988b] for more details). This position suggests that consumers value a wide variety of possessions, including relationships, memories, and beliefs, and that they value belongings not only for their functionality but also for their symbolic representation of the past, present, and future. While this symbolic value exists for many individuals in our society, poverty and unhappy current circumstances cause such "things" to have special significance for the homeless. Further, this research shows the importance of fantasy as a coping mechanism for those who lack needed or desired possessions. Although methods for exploring fantasies will have to be refined before fantasy can be used in other consumer environments, it nevertheless holds promise for the discovery of the deeper meaning of lost, stolen, or abandoned possessions.

### Social Policy Implications

Clearly, the quality of life of the guests was dramatically affected by their experiences at the shelter. This environment provided the typical material possessions of a home (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) as well as the emotional and spiritual support often provided by par-

ents. While this setting is far from ideal, it is superior to the municipal shelters described by Hill and Stamey (1990), which lack privacy, nutritious food, safety, and humane treatment of guests. Thus, one important implication of this study is that public and private operators of shelters need to recognize the complex set of physical and emotional needs of the homeless and must be prepared to offer appropriate goods and services.

There is an additional implication for the future home life of the guests. All shelters, whether public or private, are designed to be temporary residences rather than permanent homes. Since women are at greater risk of physical and sexual assault on the street, the typical guest does not view life on the street as a realistic option. Therefore, they can make the transition from the shelter to a new living arrangement only if affordable housing is provided in acceptable neighborhoods, usually in the communities where the women have lived previously.

Such a transition is rarely easy. It often requires tireless persistence in a "bureaucratic jungle." Consider the following extended example: Karen is 56 years old, but she looks much older. She is missing several of her teeth, some of her hair, and she moves very slowly. As if to apologize for her appearance, she quickly informed me that she suffers from liver cancer (the sisters confirm this diagnosis). Karen has been at the shelter for approximately 10 months and is almost obsessed with finding a new home. She came to the shelter after losing her job because of her illness. She told me, "If I could get healthy, I wouldn't be in this predicament because I would have went to work and gotten me a place and that would be the end of it!" She has never been married, has no children, and her parents and siblings are all deceased. She has two friends (both women) that she writes occasionally, but personal contact, by phone or visits, is sporadic.

Unfortunately, the disability payment she receives from social security would barely cover the cost of a small efficiency apartment even in a marginal neighborhood, so if she were to rent an apartment, she would have little money for food, clothing, medicine, and other essentials. She went to the appropriate government agency to apply for additional benefits but was turned down. While she is eligible to try again, her energy level is so low, because of her illness, that further trips would be too exhausting.

At this point the sisters intervened, asking an attorney from the local community who specializes in such matters to help guide her through the maze of forms, lines, and necessary documents. This support renewed her energy, and she began to show interest in objects from her past (her crochet materials, water colors and supplies, and nurse's uniforms), possessions that symbolize her past role as an independent, hard-working, and talented person. Three months later her request for additional support was approved, and she located an acceptable apartment within a few blocks of the shelter. This, I believe, was the first time I had seen Karen smile.

Unfortunately, Karen is the exception rather than the rule. During my tenure at the shelter, I have seen only a handful of women move successfully to permanent homes. The remainder stay on indefinitely or wander in and out of this and other temporary residences. The success stories usually are women who have had relatively stable early home lives and who strongly emphasize independent living. For example, Karen described her early home life in mostly positive terms and, accustomed to independence, resented many of the rules enforced by the sisters. Less independent guests appear to need the nurturing and resultant positive sense of self that a loving home typically provides as preparation for the difficult transition to an independent existence.

These findings suggest that public and private support for homeless women should be tailored to their individual needs. Providing financial aid to women who are recently homeless and come from stable backgrounds may be all that is necessary to help them improve the quality of their lives. They value independent living, have a strong sense of self, and have the motivation to seek out long-term solutions. However, mere financial assistance to women from troubled pasts will probably fail or, in the case of addicted persons, only make situations worse. These more troubled women require social support in a nurturing environment that helps them improve their survival skills and sense of self. Unfortunately, such "rearing" is difficult and will require a major change in the training and staffing requirements of most shelters.

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