THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS AND DANCE
AMONG WOMEN IN A SAN DIEGO TRANSITIONAL HOUSING
PROGRAM

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The Subjective Experiences of Homelessness and Dance among Women in a

San Diego Transitional Housing Program

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the women of “Passages.” I’m routing for you every day.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Subjective Experiences of Homelessness and Dance among Women in a San Diego Transitional Housing Program
by
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This thesis is a qualitative exploration of the subjective experiences of homelessness and dance among women in the San Diego, YWCA’s transitional living program, “Passages.” Homelessness is a social position characterized by conditions of extreme physical, social, and emotional suffering affecting nearly every aspect of an individual’s life. In contrast, dance is a physical activity shown to provide psychosocial benefits to participants cross culturally. Based upon this juxtaposition, in an applied dimension to this study the researcher created and facilitated once weekly, hour-long dance classes for “Passages” residents with the goal of assessing the effects of participation. However, in recognition of the constitutive nature of homelessness for affecting subjectivity, through open-ended interviews, direct interaction, and participant observation this research explores the ways in which “Passages” women have suffered through experiences of their homelessness and how these have influenced their subjective practice of dance participation. An investigation of the experiences of “Passages” residents as homeless women illuminates a marginalized subjectivity often overlooked in the academic literature, in which economic and social marginality manifest in experiences of psychosocial stress and of symbolic Otherness. In this context, dance participation was experienced as a significant stress reliever and provided a sense of social “normalcy” for participants. A discussion of these experiences substantiates previous research highlighting the stress relieving benefits of dance and expands our understanding of the emotional effects of dance participation through a recognition of it’s symbolic qualities.

[Keywords: homelessness, dance, subjectivity, lumpen abuse, transitional housing]
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Before coming to San Diego and beginning graduate school in the fall of 2009 I was a professional dancer in my hometown of Chattanooga, TN. For four years I taught local classes, averaging 250 adult students weekly; and then for two years, in addition to teaching locally, I traveled nationally and internationally to perform and teach workshops with a dance company. Despite these travels, most of my days were spent teaching wealthy southern women how to execute a series of physical movements; how to breathe, stretch, lock their hips, and turn. For a lover of dance and southern women this lifestyle had its rewards; however, as I entered my mid-twenties I began to fear that my own experiential possibilities and knowledge were foreclosing around a small and privileged world. I recognized that there was much I wanted to learn about humanity, things beyond physical movement and the wealthy population of Chattanooga. And so, with this hunger in my heart I started planning a move and researching graduate programs that would expand my experience of the world without forcing me to leave dance behind completely.

In this line of thinking anthropology seemed the perfect fit. I had read about early twentieth century ethnographic research in my undergraduate anthropology courses and the prospect excited me. As a result, when applying for the graduate program at SDSU I dreamed of going to some exotic location where I would learn about a folk dance tradition and the people that were part of it. While I certainly had a passion for dance as art and as technique, within my graduate program I was interested in looking at dance as a subject matter and a methodological tool through which I could approach and learn about the exoticized “other.” In other words, I was interested in examining the lives of a group of people who dance, viewing dance as one aspect of their lived experiences.

In some ways, my thesis research has been the realization of that dream: This thesis describes how a weekly dance class I facilitated at the San Diego, YWCA allowed me to get to know a group of homeless women and provided a lens through which I learned about their experiences of homelessness. However, in contrast to the naïve research dreams of an
applicant, this project’s approach reflects three years of anthropological graduate work, in the 21st century, which redefined my conceptualization of “otherness” in two basic but profound ways. First, in rectifying the belief that an “other” is only available in some remote, distant, traditional village; and second, by illuminating stark power differences that make “otherness” a space of social and economic marginality more often than one of lighthearted exoticism. This is certainly the case with regards to homeless Others as will be discussed in detail below. I had wanted a graduate education to make me privy to some secrets in a small and distant world. Instead, more than anything else, it has forced the recognition of how structural marginality manifests in experiences of suffering throughout the world, including in my own town. As a result, in this research I have sought to satisfy my own long held desire to use and explore dance while honoring a re-conceptualized notion of “otherness.” Using a qualitative approach, this thesis investigates how a group of homeless women in the YWCA of San Diego, California’s transitional living program called “Passages” have suffered through experiences of their homelessness, and how these experiences have influenced their subjective practice of dance participation.

When describing my research I am often asked with confusion, “Well is it about dance or homelessness?” For the women who chose to participate in my dance class, even those who came regularly, dance was a one-hour a week activity. In contrast, homelessness is a social position characterized by conditions of extreme physical, social, and emotional suffering that affect nearly every aspect of an individual’s life (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). It would not only have been short-sighted and uncaring of me to ask a group of homeless women about dance while ignoring their homelessness, it would not have been possible to fully grasp the significance with which the women of “Passages” experienced dance class without understanding a little bit about their homelessness. For example, as will be discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5, we may begin to fully appreciate how “Passages” women experienced dance as a stress reliever and as a symbol of normalcy only after we understand how their homelessness has led to conditions of extreme emotional and physiological stress and feelings of social “otherness.” In recognition of this, the methodological approach of this research was built upon the following questions:

1. How have the physical and social experiences of homelessness affected the emotional subjectivity of “Passages” women?
2. How have “Passages” women understood the physical, social, and emotional effects of dance participation?

Over a period of sixteen months I employed semi-structured interviews, participant observation and direct interaction during weekly dance classes in an effort to gain information regarding the experiences of dance class and homelessness independently. In my analysis I explored a relationship between these experiences and found the following question emerged from the data, “Why has this particular population experienced dance participation in this way?” Answering this primary question sheds light on the physical, emotional, and social suffering of “Passages” women as a particular segment of a homeless population; expands our understanding of the physical, emotional, and social qualities of dance; and showcases the utility of dance in an applied setting and as a methodological tool in relationship building and data analysis.

Current literature on homelessness has provided important insight on the experiences of individuals living in the streets or in short-term residential shelters but has failed to consider the experiences and perspectives of homeless women in long-term residential programs with the same depth. Taking into account the ways in which their residency at the YWCA creates a different experiential context than living on the street, this research examines how the marginality of “Passages” women manifests through distinct conditions of suffering and explores how these are experienced subjectively on an emotional level. A focus on this population provides depth to our definition of homelessness by illuminating a particular position of social and economic marginality and has the potential to help transitional living programs more fully understand the needs of their population.

A primary component of the research was an applied program during which I facilitated optional, free, weekly dance classes for “Passages” residents. Dance is a purposeful physical activity, shown to provide a wide range of physical, psychological, and social benefits to participants cross culturally (Hanna 1995a, 1995b). However, despite the recognized benefits of dance I was unable to find any assessments of dance programming in an applied anthropological setting. This research seeks to fill that gap. A qualitative evaluation of the physical, social, and emotional effects of dance class participation, as a particular activity, for “Passages” women deepens our understanding of dance and its potential for application. It substantiates previous research from the fields of dance, medical
and cultural anthropology, dance therapy, and psychiatry that has found dance to be an effective stress reliever for participants (Hanna 1995b), and expands our understanding of the emotional effects of dance participation through the recognition of its symbolic qualities.

While this chapter introduces the inspiration, the primary aims of the research, and the significance of the major questions, the next provides a review of the literature, including a discussion of the theoretical background in which this research was grounded. Chapter 3 details the qualitative methods used, provides background on the setting, describes the content of weekly dance classes, and outlines my approach to data analysis.

The following two chapters, 4 and 5, are each organized around one experiential category of homelessness discussed by “Passages” residents; the symbolic experiences of homelessness and experiences of stress respectively. While it is common in theses to have separate chapters for data analysis and the discussion of theoretical implications, for clarity, I have chosen to organize these chapters as complete presentations of each topic. Both chapters include a detailed discussion of the experiential context, an interpretation of qualitative data, and a theoretically based discussion of the significance of these findings for understanding the homelessness of “Passages” women. Furthermore, rather than presenting the experiences of dance as a separate topic in a third results chapter, I have chosen to include them in the experiential categories of homelessness to which they correspond. Chapter 5, “Symbolic Experiences in the YWCA” ends with a discussion of how “Passages” women have reported experiencing dance as a symbol of normalcy, and a theoretically based interpretation of why dance, as a particular activity, was available to function in this way. Likewise, Chapter 6, “Experiences of Psychosocial Stress in the YWCA,” concludes with a discussion of dance as a stress reliever and an analysis of why dance participation can provide significant stress relieving benefits in comparison to other activities. Placing the experiences of dance within the discussion of homelessness is meant to accurately reflect the experiences of dance and homelessness in the lives of these women by acknowledging the constitutive nature of their homelessness.

There are significant ethical concerns in conducting qualitative and ethnographic studies focused on suffering. These were well considered by anthropologists following the discipline’s own re-conceptualization of “otherness” in the late twentieth century (Kearney 2004). As anthropologists began to recognize the powerlessness and suffering of their
traditional subjects, concerns of academic voyeurism and issues of representation (to be discussed in detail below) brought the discipline to its knees during, “a period of soul-searching about the morality of fieldwork relations and the ethico-political implications of ethnography” (Robben and Sluka 2007:23). In response, anthropologists developed approaches for managing the ethical concerns of conducting anthropological research in the twenty-first century (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Kearney 2004). Three of these, the use of critical theory, reflexivity, and the development of policy level suggestions have been important guidelines in my efforts of managing the ethical vulnerabilities of this research. Grounding my approach in the historical development of the discipline, Chapter 6 concludes this thesis with a reflexive analysis of the ethics of this research, and along with a consideration of its contributions to academic literature, I share practical suggestions meant to ease the suffering of women in long-term housing programs like “Passages.”
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

MAJOR GROUNDING: LUMPEN ABUSE, SUBJECTIVITY, AND THE PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS OF DANCE PARTICIPATION

This study was developed around the theoretical partnership of lumpen abuse and subjectivity, as well as the literature illuminating the psychosocial benefits of dance participation. The theory of lumpen abuse provides an important framework for conceptualizing how structured marginality manifests in conditions of suffering among homeless populations while subjectivity points toward a consideration of the meaning experiences of suffering have for subjects on an emotional level. The literature regarding the psychosocial benefits of dance participation demonstrates the potential of dance as an applied anthropological tool and suggests an assessment of its effects among certain populations.

Understanding Lumpen Abuse as a Condition

Homelessness is among the most marginal of social positions in any society (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Dimsdale et al. 1994). To conceptualize the ways in which this extreme marginality plays out in lived experience, and in recognition of the structured nature of homelessness, Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) built upon the Marxian notion of the “lumpen.” In Marxian theory, the lumpen are those occupying the lowest structured position in capitalist society, those with no relationship to production (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:17). Bourgois and Schonberg’s (2009) theory of lumpen abuse lists the brutalities leveled against the homeless: the existence of and relations between structural violence, everyday suffering, intimate violence, self-destructive habitus, symbolic violence, and biopower as they coalesce in the lived experience of homeless individuals. (The categories of suffering that are pertinent to this research are defined in detail below.)

The literature on homelessness is replete with examples that support Bourgois and Schonberg’s (2009) structural framework of lumpen abuse and their arguments that
manifestations of abuse affect nearly every aspect of homeless life. For example, the homeless are highly likely to suffer criminal victimization; particularly theft, robbery, and physical assault (Evans and Forsyth 2004; Fitzpatrick et al. 1993; Huey and Quirouette 2010; Lee and Schreck 2005) and are more likely to endure multiple forms of victimization than the homed population (Lee and Schreck 2005). Mortality rates among homeless populations are three times higher than housed individuals (Lee and Schreck 2005) and morbidity rates are significantly higher as well (Cheung and Hwang 2004). Powerful symbolic violence, which glorifies personal choice, casts blame on the homeless individual for their condition (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) while obscuring structural forces (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Evans and Forsyth 2004; Lee and Schreck 2005) and contributing to social discrimination (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009) and criminal persecution wherein the condition of being homeless becomes criminalized (Evans and Forsyth 2004; Lee and Schreck 2005).

It should be noted that Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) built the theory of lumpen abuse around twelve years of ethnographic research among street dwelling homeless individuals. As a result, experiences of extreme biophysical suffering, such as cold and hunger, which are common among street dwellers, were an important component in Bourgois and Schonberg’s (2009) conceptualization of lumpen abuse. As will be discussed in detail below, as shelter residents “Passages” women have their immediate physical needs met and many of the biophysical experiences of suffering faced by street dwellers are not applicable among this population at this time. However, despite the ways in which the specific experiences of our subjects differ, the theory of lumpen abuse remains relevant for this research in two important ways. First, the theory of lumpen abuse provides a framework for conceptualizing the ways in which structured marginality manifests in conditions of suffering among homeless populations. An examination of specific histories leading to the homelessness of “Passages” women is beyond the purview of this research. However, in an effort to conceptualize “Passages” women in their macro context, I feel it is appropriate to call upon the work of scholars who have explored the large scale economic, political, and social forces implicated in creating modern day homelessness in the United States (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Evans and Forsyth 2004; Lee and Schreck 2005; Rowe and Wolch 1990) through the concept of lumpen abuse. Secondly, the theory of lumpen abuse provides a
tool for the classification of related experiences of suffering into meaningful analytic categories. Specifically, I have found the categories of everyday violence and symbolic violence, described in detail below, as salient in the experiences of my subjects.

**Subjectivity and the Subjective Experience of Homelessness**

As a theoretical paradigm, subjectivity is concerned with the inner lives of subjects as they inhabit a particular historical, structural, and cultural context; in other words, “the emotional experience of a political subject, the subject caught up in a world of violence, state authority, and pain, the subject’s distress under the authority of another” (Luhrmann 2006:346). It is a paradigm that provides general direction to research, pointing toward a consideration of the emotional experiences of individuals inhabiting a similarly constructed marginalized space (Luhrmann 2006:348). In recognition of the diversity and contingency of emotional experiences, Biehl (2007) has urged that subjectivity remain a contingent and flexible concept, one that, when called upon, is grounded within ethnographic data.

“Subjectivity” by T.M. Luhrmann (2006) shows the theory’s potential for directing ethnographic information on homelessness; an exercise that, in turn, expands and strengthens the concept itself. Luhrmann (2006) examines the emotional results of the homeless woman’s vulnerability to physical assault in the context of street culture and the way this plays out as women move in and out of the social service context. Here, past traumas and/or the threat of trauma create a sense of perpetual danger and lack of control, an alteration of the homeless woman’s experience of herself in the world, which results in the performance of a street code of honor— a quickness to anger and physical aggression that is meant to minimize the appearance of vulnerability. Though this behavior is prized in the culture of the street, homeless women move in and out of milieus in which it is unacceptable. In particular, social service agencies are governed by middle class values of respectability and aggressive displays often result in women being banned. Therefore, the homeless women in Luhrmann’s (2006) study suffer under competing hegemonies, struggling to protect both safety and the chance for a better life. The result of this impossible balancing act is emotional defeat: “to act by the code of one of them is to humiliate yourself by the code of another. Such humiliation is the constant emotional experience of these lives” (Luhrmann 2006:359).
The first question guiding this study, “How have the physical and social experiences of homelessness affected the emotional subjectivity of ‘Passages’ women?” is very similar to Luhrmann’s (2006) focus on the subjective experiences of homelessness. However, the context of this research differs from that of Luhrmann’s (2006); the YWCA is a long-term, relatively stable housing program, whereas the women in Luhrmann’s (2006) study were moving in and out of the street and less stable service contexts with much more frequency. As will be discussed in detail below, the YWCA is a physical, authoritative, and symbolic context, crucial in structuring the subjective experiences of “Passages” women. Due to the importance of context in influencing subjective experience, as recognized by Biehl (2007) and Luhrmann (2006) it is not surprising that there are some significant differences between Luhrmann’s (2006) findings and my own.

The Psychosocial Benefits of Dance

Dance is a purposeful, physical activity that has the potential for social, cognitive, and emotional facets and that has been shown to offer psychosocial benefits to participants cross culturally (Hanna 1995a, 1995b; Koch et al. 2007; Mills and Daniluk 2002; West et al. 2004). The work of Judith Lynne Hanna (1995b) is particularly relevant in exploring the potential dance may have as an applied anthropological tool. Hanna (1995b) draws upon the “limited” research from the fields of dance therapy, medical anthropology, psychiatry, dance, and cultural anthropology in order to synthesize many of the beneficial dimensions of dance (324). On a basic level, dance has been shown to reduce stress and the prevalence of stress related disease; has been used across time and cultures in an effort to relieve pain; has been shown to create feelings of inclusion (Hanna 1995a, 1995b) and bodily awareness (Hanna 1995b; Mills and Daniluk 2002); reduce levels of depression (Koch et al. 2007); and engender a sense of control over the body, a phenomenon shown to minimize the perception of pain (Hanna 1995b).

Literature on the psychosocial benefits of dance participation supported the development of once weekly dance classes as an applied anthropological dimension to this study, as discussed in detail below. Additionally, this literature suggested the potential for an assessment of the effects of dance application among a particular population. This was a central perspective in the development of my second major research question, “How have
‘Passages’ women understood the physical, social, and emotional effects of dance participation?” In this way, the literature on the psychosocial benefits of dance participation provided support for dance as an applied anthropological tool and a subject in this research.

While subjectivity, lumpen abuse, and the literature on the psychosocial benefits of dance framed this research, after an initial data analysis I began to look for other theories and perspectives that could provide insight into how “Passages” women subjectively experience certain aspects of their marginality and their dance participation. Specifically, because my population is sheltered, I have found the Seylean stress perspective, defined in the following section, to be an important tool in conceptualizing the experiences of “Passages” residents as it allows for an exploration of psychosocial stress and offers insight as to why dance functioned as a significant stress reliever for them. Additionally, I found that theories of identity creation and stereotype deepen the understanding of how symbolic violence, an aspect of social marginality, is experienced by “Passages” women on an emotional level and provides perspective as to why dance contributed to a feeling of social normalcy. These perspectives and theories are detailed below along with the categories of everyday and symbolic violence as defined in lumpen abuse.

**SUBSTANTIVE THEORIES, PERSPECTIVES AND ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES: THE SEYLEAN STRESS PERSPECTIVE; EVERYDAY VIOLENCE; STEREOTYPE, SOCIAL IMAGINATION AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE; AND IDENTITY CREATION**

While subjectivity, lumpen abuse, and the literature on the psychosocial benefits of dance framed this research, after an initial data analysis I began to look for other theories and perspectives that could provide insight into how “Passages” women subjectively experience certain aspects of their marginality and their dance participation. Specifically, because my population is sheltered, I have found the Seylean stress perspective, defined in the following section, to be an important tool in conceptualizing the experiences of “Passages” residents as it allows for an exploration of psychosocial stress and offers insight as to why dance functioned as a significant stress reliever for them. Additionally, I found that theories of identity creation and stereotype deepen the understanding of how symbolic violence, an aspect of social marginality, is experienced by “Passages” women on an emotional level and
provides perspective as to why dance contributed to a feeling of social normalcy. These perspectives and theories are detailed below along with the categories of everyday and symbolic violence as defined in lumpen abuse.

**The Seylean Stress Perspective**

Biological anthropologists have made important contributions to our understanding of stress as an emotional and physiological phenomenon. The Seylean stress perspective is concerned with how perceived stressors lead to emotional tension and a series of physiological responses, commonly called “fight or flight,” which many consider innate (Blakely 1995; Goodman et al. 1988). Due to the importance of perception, the advanced functioning of the human brain, and the social nature of humans, Seylean stressors can be psychosocial (Blakely 1995). Psychosocial stressors are social events or circumstances in which a threat is identified; the perception of one’s low status, the loss of a loved one, loneliness, status incongruence etc.

For this research, the Seylean stress perspective is an important addition toward understanding the conditions of suffering, in this perspective called stressors, experienced by “Passages” women as a particular lumpen population. The Seylean stress perspective helps us to distinguish biophysical stressors such as cold or hunger from the perceived stressors that initiate the Seylean stress response. As stated above, bio-physical stressors are a prevalent aspect of the experiences of street dwelling homeless people and are a major focus of the research on that homeless condition (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Davis et al. 2008; Kennedy and Fitzpatrick 2001). However, perceived stressors, specifically perceived psycho-social stressors, are the most common category of stressors identified by “Passages” women and as a result, the Seylean stress response appears to be a significant aspect of their lives. In this way, an acknowledgement of the emotional and physical suffering caused by psycho-social stressors sheds light on the structured marginality of the sheltered homeless population, despite the fact that they are not subjected to the more acute bio-physical suffering of street dwellers. Furthermore, because the physiological component of the Seylean response is common in all humans, a brief discussion of its psycho-physiological pathways may provide a deeper understanding of the experience of “stress” and provide insight into why physical activities such as dance may be experienced as stress relieving.
When an event or circumstance is defined as threatening, an emotional response is registered in the brain’s amygdala, often called the “emotional control center” (Blakely 1995; Jones and Bartlett Learning 2005). The specific emotion may vary depending on the nature of the stressor and the individual; a person may experience fear, anger, or frustration for example. Once one of the threat emotions is registered in the amygdala, the brain activates the sympathetic nervous system and the endocrine system, initiating a series of complex biochemical reactions that have significant consequences for the body. The physiological component of the Seylean stress response includes increased hormonal, neural, cardiovascular, and metabolic activity, increased sodium and fluid retention, and changes in salivation and gastrointestinal tone and functioning. Together, the emotional and physiological reactions to a perceived stressor are the phenomenon most often referred to simply as “stress” (Jones and Bartlett Learning 2005).

Though it is very difficult on the body, the Seylean stress response is adaptive in a sense. It prepares the body to respond to a physical threat by making energy immediately available to the skeletal muscles and this is the reason the Seylean stress response is often referred to as “fight or flight.” Physical exertion releases the body from the physiological response of the Seylean stress perspective through a “relaxation response” that returns the sympathetic nervous system, the endocrine system and as a result, the body, to homeostasis (Curtis and O’Keefe 2002).

Though our body prepares as if were responding to a physical threat, as discussed, the Seylean stress response may also be initiated by perceived psychosocial stressors, which are often chronic. In the face of chronic stress, the emotional and physiological components of the Seylean stress response are ongoing and unabated. This is further problematized by the fact that people often do not physically respond to psychosocial stressors: The body is continually preparing for physical exertion and may never be signaled to initiate the relaxation response that could return it to homeostasis. This can be detrimental to the health of an individual (Blakely 1995; Goodman et al. 1988; Jones and Bartlett Learning 2005). For example, stressed individuals often have an increased likelihood of heart attack and stroke, ulcers, hypertension, digestive disorders, depression, anxiety attacks, insomnia, decreased immune functioning, and muscle wasting (Goodman et al. 1988; Jones and Bartlett Learning 2005).
Everyday Violence

Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) built upon Nancy Schepner-Hughes’ everyday violence to conceptualize the “violence” of routine daily life, as a condition, for the homeless person as a member of an economically marginal population. In the context of homelessness, everyday violence may be understood as the chronic and banal inability to adequately and conveniently meet basic human needs. Everyday violence includes exposure to inclement weather (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009), lack of access to healthy food (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Davis et al. 2008) rough sleeping (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Kennedy and Fitzpatrick 2001), lack of safe and convenient storage for personal items (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Rowe and Wolch 1990), and lack of access to transportation (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Rowe and Wolch 1990). The consequences of everyday violence vary widely among individuals depending on their unique experiences of homelessness and may range from causing mild discomfort to severe embodied distress (malnutrition, hypothermia, morbidity) (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009).

Stereotype; Social Imagination and Symbolic Violence

A stereotype is a caricatured or oversimplified conceptualization of a group that has been assigned special, and often derogatory meaning in the social consciousness. According to Rautenberg (2010), the stereotype has two components; it defines a particular phenomenon or group, and it expresses public opinion surrounding it/them. Rautenberg’s (2010) treatment of the stereotype is useful as a conceptual tool as it distinguishes these components while recognizing the relationship between them. However, each component has taken primary focus in the work of other scholars who have investigated it in relation to homelessness. Lovell (2007) has focused on agency in relation to the defining aspect of the stereotype, or as she has labeled it, the social imagery of homelessness, while Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) have been interested in the stereotype as an expression of public judgment, or symbolic violence. Calling upon their work in addition to Rautenberg’s (2010) definition offers important insights for this research. Moving forward, I analyze the social imagery and the symbolic violence surrounding homelessness, as discussed by Lovell (2007) and Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) respectively, as two parts of the same process, the stereotype. Doing so provides the conceptual benefits of Rautenberg’s (2010) work while maintaining the
detailed insights offered by Lovell (2007) and Bourgois and Schonberg’s (2009) look at these processes in relation to homelessness. Most importantly however, I feel combining the work of these three scholars most accurately reflects the way in which “Passages” women understand the concept of the stereotype, experience the social imagery and symbolic violence of homelessness, and exploit the components of the stereotype as a medium through which they exercise agency in defining their homelessness. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

**THE STEREOTYPE AS A DEFINING FUNCTION**

To understand the ways in which stereotypes come to define a group it is important to grasp the potential duality of images. An image is at once a physical reality and a mental representation (Rautenberg 2010). As a mental representation the image “belong[s] to the world of significance” (Rautenberg 2010:127), in other words, it is a symbol. Symbols helps us to interpret reality but also are subjected to imaginative activity. As a result they can be simplified, hyperbolized, or otherwise manipulated. When a series of manipulated images come to represent a group in the social imagination, this is a stereotypical representation.

According to Lovell (2007), though the experiences of homelessness vary widely in the United States, certain images, gleaned from the conditions and behaviors of street dwellers, have coalesced in the social imagination in the creation of the stereotypical homeless Other (Lovell 2007:330). Specifically, things like being socially isolated, dirty, surrounded by trash, engaging in public urination and defecation, dumpster diving, habitation of public space, and the lack of material goods are how homelessness is understood and identified.

**THE STEREOTYPE AS AN EXPRESSION OF JUDGMENT**

The second function of the stereotype is the expression of public judgment regarding a group (Rautenberg 2010). The socially imagined homeless Other is not just defined through symbols but stigmatized by them, in a process Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) have labeled, “symbolic violence”. In the U.S., the collectively imagined “homeless” are characterized as lazy, crazy, and liable for their condition. According to Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) this
“common sense” explanation is rooted in a “celebration of individual agency [stemming] from a historically engrained cultural valorization of rugged individualism which subjects the poor, the powerless, and especially those addicted to drugs to dismissive moralizing judgments” (318). When viewing homeless individuals through the lens of our collective judgment, the symbols through which homelessness has been defined, are taken as “evidence of laziness, lack of intelligence, biogenetic disability or inadequate impulse control” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:133). By casting blame on individuals through this circular logic, symbolic violence functions to obscure the structural forces that contribute to homelessness.

For the remainder of the paper, when I wish to refer to the phenomenon in its entirety I will use stereotype. I will refer to the defining component of the stereotype as the social imagery or imagination of homelessness and when referencing the social imaged figure this process creates, “homeless” or “homelessness” will be in quotation marks. Finally when I wish to discuss the judgment component of the stereotype I will refer to it as symbolic violence.

Experiencing the Stereotype of “Homelessness:” Social Imagination and Symbolic Violence in Identity Creation

In her work, “Hoarders and Scrapers,” Anne Lovell (2007) examines the experiences of homeless street dwellers struggling to create an identity in the face of the stereotype surrounding them. According to Lovell (2007), identity has two related parts, a social identity, and a representation of self. Social identity is how one is perceived or valued by others, while the representation of self is one’s estimation of one’s place in society, and particularly, one’s social value.

A social identity emerges through symbolism, or, “the dialectic between the messages that one gives off… and the meaning others glean [from those messages]” (Lovell 2007:319). As a result of the importance of symbolism in social identity and the imagery surrounding homelessness, any one aspect of a street dweller’s conditions, for example being dirty, on or around a person may call forth the whole socially imagined homeless figure and foreclose the individual’s social identity around this stigmatized archetype. After being identified as
“homeless” the individual is also subjected to the symbolic violence that defines them as innately worthless. In other words, for homeless street dwellers, the stereotype surrounding homelessness is their social identity. Due to the powerful symbolism represented in the “homeless” stereotype, a homeless social identity is a symbolic context over which homeless individuals have little control. In contrast, a representation of self is how homeless individuals understand, experience, and may exercise agency in response.

Amid, or despite, their stigmatized social identity, many of the street dwellers in Lovell’s (2007) research exercise agency in their struggle to create a palpable representation of self. In response to their symbolic context, Lovell (2007) finds that her research participants sometimes manipulate the meaning of their interactions with the symbols of “homelessness” and therefore, the ways in which this reflects their relationship to society. It is important to note that in the creation of a representation of self an individual must account for the socially stigmatized symbols that surround him/her. For example, one respondent resisted the symbolic violence surrounding his homelessness as he began to interpret trash, a social symbol defining homelessness, as gifts. In this way, he was able to see himself as “part of an implicit community that cares for everyone” (Lovell 2007:331), rather than a social outcast.

As discussed, the theories of lumpen abuse and subjectivity, and the literature illuminating the psychosocial benefits of dance participation framed the development of this research, providing support for the major questions and direction for the methodological approach. In contrast, the Seylean stress perspective; the category of everyday violence; and theories surrounding stereotypes, social imagery, symbolic violence, and identity creation were included following an initial data analysis because they aligned with “Passages” residents’ descriptions of their experiences of homelessness and dance. These substantive theories and perspectives provided clarity and depth to my analysis of the data and because of this, they will be referenced again in the chapters below. Specifically, I will discuss stereotypes, social imagery, symbolic violence, and identity creation in Chapter 4, “Symbolic Experiences in the YWCA,” as I present an analysis of the qualitative data surrounding the symbolic experiences of “Passages” women. The category of everyday violence and the Seylean stress perspective will be discussed again in Chapter 5, “Experiences of
Psychosocial Stress in the YWCA” to support my interpretation of data regarding “Passages” residents’ experiences of “stress” and the “stress relieving” benefits of dance participation.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Over a period of 16 months, from July 2011 through October 2012, I used anthropological methods, ethnographic data collection, and an applied dance program that I created and facilitated to examine the subjective experiences of homeless women, and homeless women as dance participants. Specifically, I used open-ended interviews, and direct interaction and participant observation during weekly classes to explore the experiences of women in the YWCA’s transitional living program, “Passages.” Open-ended and qualitative methods, such as the ones used in this study, are critical in any research that seeks to explore the inner lives of a group of individuals. The open nature of these methods allowed participants to foreground experiences they have defined as significant while the qualitative nature of these methods gave insight into the meaning of these experiences for “Passages” women.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

In an effort to examine the subjective experiences of homelessness and dance, I elicited participation among residents of the YWCA’s transitional living program “Passages.” All of the women in the first and second phase of the YWCA’s “Passages” program (see below) were deemed eligible to participate in the research and were given the freedom to choose the components in which they wished or were able to participate. In total 27 women participated with me in dance and/or interviews. Some of the women participated in dance classes but not interviews (N=18), some chose to participate in interviews but not dance classes (N=5), and some participated in both dance classes and interviews (N=4). The decision to give “Passages” residents freedom in determining their degree of participation was based on two factors. Participation in any one of these methods was able to provide data for at least one of the major research questions. For example, all “Passages” residents were capable of providing information on the question, “How have the physical and social experiences of homelessness affected the emotional subjectivity of “Passages” women?
regardless of their dance participation. Likewise, dance class participants provided information on the second question, “How have ‘Passages’ women understood the physical, social and emotional effects of dance participation?” even if they chose not to or were unable to participate in interviews. Additionally, because the Passages program allows no more than 45 women at a time, I believed that granting this freedom to residents would expand my sample size in each component of the research, ultimately making my data more representative of the whole.

The women enrolled in “Passages” were deemed an optimal population for this research primarily because as homeless women, their experiences were in line with the research questions. Also important is the relative stability of the “Passages” program in contrast to emergency shelters or the street. This offered several benefits. First, I had a continuity of contact with a regular group of women. This provided the time I needed to develop dance classes and dance experiences with this population, and to build relationships and a trust that I believe made casual conversations and interviews more candid. Additionally, considering the extreme suffering that is characteristic of homelessness, I felt it important that “Passages” residents receive a great deal of individual and group counseling as part of the Y’s programming. It was my belief that access to these resources could help residents if potentially difficult interviews caused emotional distress.

**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT**

To solicit participation for open-ended interviews I attended 2 house meetings; June 5th and August 14th in 2012, during which I shared the research proposal, answered questions, and invited participation (see Appendix A). In addition to the presentation, attendees were given a handout containing information regarding research objectives and the time commitment requested. A participant-interest sign up sheet was passed around and interested parties gave their names, phone numbers or email addresses, and availability. Each resident expressing interest was contacted in the method they preferred and within four weeks to schedule an interview. If I was unable to make contact and received no response within a week, I tried contacting them two times more, waiting one week between each attempt. If I still received no contact I left a note for the resident at the YWCA containing my contact information. I invited them to get in touch with me at any time should they still have
an interest in participating. In order to recruit participants for the applied dance program, in
which participant observation and direct interaction were used for data collection, I offered a
weekly dance class for “Passages” residents. The class was advertised through fliers that
were posted around the YWCA facilities (see Appendix B), and was listed on the “Passages”
monthly events calendar. All components of research participation were voluntary and
subjects were free to discontinue their participation at any time.

**HOMELESSNESS IN SAN DIEGO**

On January 27, 2012 San Diego County’s Regional Task Force on the Homeless
blanketed the county in an effort to identify the number of homeless individuals in our area
on a given night. The results of which were disheartening: 9,800 homeless individuals were
counted, a number up 8.6% from 2011 and 22.1% from 2009 (San Diego County Regional
Task Force on Homelessness 2012). For this “point in time survey,” researchers utilized an
inclusive definition of homelessness; the lack of a “conventional dwelling unit” (Evans and
Forsyth 2004:480). It includes both sheltered and unsheltered individuals. The same inclusive
definition has been used in this research as I have worked with homeless residents of the
YWCA of San Diego’s transitional housing program. Of the 9,800 homeless individuals
counted in the 2012 survey, 3,279 or 34% were sheltered in transitional housing programs
and of those 1,339 or 41% were women (San Diego County Regional Task Force on
Homelessness 2012).

**THE SETTING OVERVIEW**

The following section provides relevant information on the YWCA and the
“Passages” program.

**YWCA and “Passages” Programming**

Since its founding in 1908, the YWCA of San Diego has provided shelter and support
for women and children in crisis. Today, the YWCA has four different residential services,
two directed toward domestic violence and two toward homelessness. Together, these
programs house 225 women and children a day.
The YWCA’s residential programming for the homeless includes a 120 day transitional program for intact families and “Passages,” a two-year transitional housing program for homeless women on which this research has focused.

“Passages” is a three stage transitional living program that serves around 200 women a year. Fundamentally, “Passages” is a work program. Its goal is to stabilize residents for a period of time so they may focus their energy on a job search rather than obtaining basic necessities such as food. It is believed that this will assist residents in completing a permanent transition out of homelessness. The first stage of the program is a stabilization period lasting three months. Program demands on women during this period are low as the YWCA is focused primarily on providing financial and emotional support. Their days revolve around group therapy and classes that teach life skills such as stress management, as well as weekly one-on-one meetings with case managers and therapists.

During the second stage, in addition to classes and meetings, “Passage” residents are expected to find and maintain employment. If unemployed, residents are required to submit between 25 and 30 employment applications per week and they are responsible for tracking their job search activities through weekly logs. These are presented to case managers who review them for compliance. Once employed, residents are required to pay 30% of their income in rent.

All residents in the first and second stages of “Passages” must follow the YWCA’s residential rules. For example, everyday, residents must honor the 10:00pm curfew and compete one cleanup chore. Residential staff members assign daily chores and “sign-off” on them to verify that the resident is in compliance with house rules. Once monthly, residents also must participate in meal preparation and clean up.

After demonstrating success in stage 2, women move into the final stage called, “Supportive Independent Living.” Here, the women transition to an apartment-like setting where they are expected to pay a higher percentage of their income in rent and are granted a greater degree of freedom (YWCA of San Diego 2010). All of the participants in this research were in stage one or two of “Passages” programming.
Authoritative Context

“Passages” residents are under the authority of YWCA personnel. This includes residential staff, case managers, and administrators; a program coordinator and a program director.

Residential staff members are responsible for maintaining order and ensuring rule compliance on the fifth floor during weekends and in the evening and nighttime hours. They perform a bed check at curfew, assign and sign-off on completed chores, and provide in the moment intervention in the face of conflict. In the event that residential staff members perceive a participant to be non-compliant, they may exert their authority through a system of write-ups. Residents may be written-up for behaviors such as failure to adequately complete a chore, the use of profanity, not keeping their room in order, or for inappropriate behavior during a verbal conflict with another resident. Residential staff members have no decision making power with regard to resident goals, punishments and rewards, or their continued participation in the program. However, through this system of write-ups, residential staff members inform these decisions. Written warnings are taken as an indication of how well an individual is following residential policies by case managers and administrators who do make decisions regarding participation in “Passages.” And so, despite the lack of direct decision making for residential staff the power of this position is not insignificant.

Case managers are responsible for assessing the needs of each resident, setting program activities and goals, arranging and coordinating services, and monitoring resident progress through the program. For example, in addition to communicating with residential staff through the write-up system, case managers are responsible for tracking attendance in group classes and therapy and in assigning and reviewing specific job search activities. Case managers also assign “homework” to residents. For example, residents may be asked to write what they feel they have gained since coming to the Y, to list short and long term goals, and to outline a plan through which to achieve these goals. Based on their assessment of resident behavior, case managers are responsible for assigning rewards or punishments. The system of rewards and punishments is described below.

Two administrators represent the highest level of authority over the “Passages” program. The hierarchical organization of the program is such that these women are approached as authority figures in the event of conflict between residents and house staff or
case managers. The “Passages” coordinator is over house staff and can intervene should she determine that the staff has acted unfairly or inappropriately. Similarly, the Program director is over “Passages” case managers and can intervene in the event residents wish to appeal a programming or punishment decision.

**Rewards and Punishments**

In “Passages” programming, rewards come in the form of residential privileges granted through the “A” or “B” list system. If a case manager determines that a resident has complied with all programming mandates and floor rules, the resident is placed on the “A list.” Residents on the “A list” choose from among a group of rewards that includes the most popular option, an overnight visitation whereby residents get to spend the night away from the Y. If a case manager determines that a resident has followed through on most responsibilities, the resident is placed on the “B list.” Here, the rewards are the same as the “A list” except there is no overnight visitation. A popular reward choice on the “B list” is a day’s exemption from chores. The “A” and “B lists are determined monthly by case managers and announced in monthly house meetings. Residents have until the next house meeting to claim their reward.

Punishment for failing to comply with programming requirements and/or house rules, or for inappropriate behavior such as yelling, in the very least, may result in the resident not making the “A” or “B” list. Here, residents receive no privileges for the month. In a more serious step, residents can be placed on a thirty-day probation period during which their continuation in YWCA programming is under evaluation. At the end of the probation period the case manager takes stock of the resident’s activities and behaviors during probation and determines the appropriate course of action. The ultimate punishment comes in the form of a termination of stay. Generally residents are given a thirty-day notice so that they have a chance to appeal and/or find another housing option. However, if a resident is deemed a serious threat to the safety of staff or other residents they can be evicted immediately.

Though there is a loosely organized system of rewards and punishments, “Passages” disciplinary structure is best described as discretionary. Every staff position comes with a degree of freedom in determining when and how authority should be exercised; a structure referred to as discipline on a “case by case basis.” Residential staff members have a great
deal of discretion in defining when a behavior is non-compliant and deserving of a write-up. For example, though there is an expectation that residents will complete their assigned chore, residential staff members determine what constitutes inadequate completion and they also have the power to determine when an individual’s tone or wording during an interpersonal conflict becomes inappropriate. These write-ups are meant to communicate compliance with residential rules. They go into the resident’s file alongside the information case managers collect regarding compliance with programming requirements—such as completing job search logs. A case manager reviews all of this information while assessing monthly behavior and determining the specific rewards or punishments a resident will receive. There is no protocol in place that case managers must follow in assessing when resident behavior warrants a specific punishment. There is, for example, no policy that states five write-ups in a month will result in the loss of an overnight privilege. Instead, write-ups and all other information regarding program compliance serve as something for the case manager to consider while making decisions regarding rewards and punishments.

The Appeal Process

If residents feel that they have been unfairly written up by residential staff or unfairly punished by case managers they must appeal along a specific chain of command. First, they are expected to go to the offending individual to try and resolve the problem interpersonally. If this fails, residents may go to either the program coordinator for problems with residential staff, or in problems with case managers they may go to the program director. These administrators determine whether or not staff members acted fairly or un-fairly and whether or not write-ups or punishments will stand, be reduced, or absolved. There is no process of appeal past this point.

Description of the Physical Setting

The YWCA is a rectangular, five story building located in downtown San Diego. Built in 1908 and designed by Julia Morgan in the Italian renaissance style, it stands out from among the modern high-rise condominiums surrounding it (see Figure 1). Two of the YWCA’s four residential programs are housed here: Becky’s house, a 30 day domestic
Figure 1. The YWCA.
violence emergency shelter; and “Passages,” the transitional living program for homeless women on which this research has focused.

Areas of importance for “Passages” women are on the first, second, and fifth floors of the building and will be described below. The third and fourth floors were not applicable settings in this research. The third floor houses “Passages” clients in the third stage of the program, none of which were participants in this research. The fourth floor contains Becky’s house, an emergency domestic violence shelter.

One enters the Y through the wide arch of the southward facing door, which leads into a large foyer. There is a large reception area on the west wall and three mahogany double doors standing twelve feet high on the north wall. These doors open into a large and well-maintained meeting room that is used for fundraising or other administrative events, though rarely for client focused services. This part of the YWCA and the reception hall are the only public areas. The interior of the YWCA, reached through the locked metal door that separates residential quarters from the rest of the world, is open exclusively to residents, YWCA administration and staff, and volunteers.

In addition to the reception hall and the large meeting area, the first floor contains five private counseling rooms, a career center equipped with six old desktops, a staff kitchen, and one office. This office belongs to the “Passages” coordinator who served as my contact with the YWCA’s administration. The five counseling rooms were made available to me and most of my interviews, with the exception of one, were conducted there. Each room is set up like a therapist’s office with couches and Kleenex for clients, and a desk and chair for counselors. The only interview not conducted in one of these counseling rooms was done in the participant’s home (by the time my interviews began, Joy was a passages “graduate”).

The second floor could be described as the client activity floor. There are three administrative offices but the floor is dominated by space dedicated to client free time. It contains a gymnasium, a boutique, a smoking patio, and an activity room. The activity room is an important location for this research as all of the dance classes were held here. It is a large room that has big open windows and wooden floors. In contrast to the rest of the Y’s neutral colors, the walls of the activity room are painted bright purple, pink and peach. It is packed full of items that speak to its many uses. There are a few old couches, a large screen television, several pieces of rarely used exercise equipment, and a plethora of disorganized
art supplies piled on top of tables and cabinets. The west side of the room has a small raised stage on which dance classes were held (see Figure 2). One of the walls of the stage area is mirrored which was of great benefit during class as it allowed participant to see the technical details I described as they danced. The other two walls of the stage area have large windows that open and create a comfortable cross breeze.

Figure 2. Raised stage of the activity room.
There is generally a couch and a few chairs on the stage that I pushed to the side before class began.

While the activity room is bright thanks to its colors and large windows, its disorganization and dirtiness prevent me from describing it as cheery or comfortable (see Figure 3). The floor is markedly dirty. Despite the fact that it is supposed to be cleaned weekly, it is always covered in dust, food and drink spills, and the occasional bits of trash. Empty cups, torn magazines, art supplies, and half completed projects are left on tables, couches and chairs.

The fifth floor of the building operates as the living quarters for the approximately forty-five women in the first and second phases of the “Passages” program (see Figure 4). All research participants lived on the “floor” and spent the vast majority of their time within the YWCA on it. Dorm-like rooms, whose doors face each other from opposite sides of the hall, take up most of the space of the floor. Each room is equipped with bunk bed(s) and sleeps between two and four residents. There is one office on the fifth floor, shared by residential staff members who each occupy it during their shift(s). The small office has a desk and computer, and in the back a closet in which food and cleaning supplies are stored. Next to the office, there is a small locker-room that provides secure storage for residents’ valuables. On one end of the hall there is community bathroom facility that contains four stalls and four showers. On the other, a community kitchen that has five refrigerators and one stove. Across the hall from the kitchen there is a small room that has a small table and some chairs. On the east side of this “dining” room is an activity room with a few couches, a television, a video player, and a small library.

The floor has an institutional feel. All of the walls, floors and ceilings are white, though stained, and there is florescent lighting. There is no air conditioning in the Y and at this time the windows on the fifth floor open only a few inches. All of the limited space on the floor is communal. Rooms provide some refuge from the crowd but are not private. Additionally, as they are YWCA property, clients share all kitchen appliances and supplies, such as pots, pans and measuring cups, as well as cleaning supplies.

I was not allowed to photograph most of the living quarters for security reasons. However, I was permitted to take one photograph of the hallway (see Figure 4).
Figure 3. Activity room.
FORMATIVE DATA COLLECTION

A brief period of formative data collection was conducted during July and August 2011. The purpose of these initial observations was to familiarize myself with the research setting and population and to work on creating an applied dance program.

Formative data collection included two important components: A tour of the facility and overview of YWCA programming given by the “Passages” coordinator, and 8 hour-long dance class observation and interaction periods. The tour and presentation allowed me to familiarize myself with the physical setting as well as the programming of the Y and I recorded field notes on both subjects. While I recorded a general description of the Y as a whole, noting what was on each floor, I described the fifth floor and the activity room in detail. This is because, during my tour, the “Passages” coordinator informed me that the fifth floor was the residential floor for my research population and the activity room would be the setting for dance classes. I described in detail how each space was laid out, made note of any striking details such as colors, lighting and cleanliness, and recorded the types of items that
were in each space (see above). With permission, I made photographs of the activity room. As stated, for security reasons I was not granted permission to photograph much of the fifth floor though I was permitted one photograph of the hallway. Notes on YWCA programming followed the content of the “Passages” coordinator’s presentation and were focused on the phases of the program.

The initial dance classes gave me the opportunity to begin observations and interactions with “Passages” residents. This was important for familiarizing myself with and to the population and for observing how my general approach to dance education would work with this population in this setting. These two months of observation made it apparent that I needed to make several adjustments to my class. Adjustments were deemed necessary for two reasons, the physical condition of the dance space and the physical condition of the student population. The most dramatic adjustment was made in response to both issues. When I began teaching in July 2011, I planned to teach a fusion class that called upon technique from several dance forms. However, the class plan was structured around a great deal of modern dance movements. These require a large space and are characterized by expansive gestures that demand a degree of core strength. Not only did this plan not work in the small dance space but also I felt as though these movements were beyond the capability of most students: I observed a lack of strength and connection to the core required for the physical execution of these movements and signs that students were feeling confused and awkward. For example, students often quit a movement before the drill was finished and many made comments regarding their inability to do what I was asking. In response, I decided to retool the class, focusing on belly dance technique. This is not because belly dance is easy but rather because I believed the core-centered movements of this form would be a great approach toward helping these students gain a connection to their core while building strength. Additionally, the smaller movements of belly dance are generally more comfortable for beginner students who have a tendency toward shyness when they are asked to be expansive. I want to be clear that the need for the adjustment in technical approach I am describing had nothing to do with the students’ homelessness. It simply had to do with their level of fitness, age, and dance experience. While these things may be related to homelessness, this is outside the purview of this research.
SUMMATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Summative data collection lasted fourteen months, from September 2011 through October 2012. During this time I taught an applied, weekly dance program that facilitated the opportunity to employ participant observation and direct interactions. Details regarding my approach to teaching, and observations and interactions were recorded in field notes throughout the research period. Additionally, I conducted open-ended interviews between June and September 2012.

Interviews

Open-ended interviews were completed with nine “Passages” residents. Of the nine interview participants, four (N= 4 of 9) were also dance participants. Five of the interview participants (N= 5 of 9) were in the first stage of “Passages” programming at the time of the interview, and four (N=4 of 9) were in the second. Interviews lasted between 55 and 105 minutes (mean interview time 90 minutes) and as stated most, with the exception of one, were held in a private counseling room on the first floor of the Y. The purpose of these interviews was to gain some understanding of the ways in which “Passages” women have experienced themselves as homeless, and when appropriate, as dancers (see Appendix C). I made efforts to keep these interviews open-ended by fully engaging participants in topics they initiated. The open-ended nature of these interviews was important because as it allowed me to explore those experiences the women themselves believed most significant. I took the lulls in their speech to ask follow-up questions or to initiate a new topic with a different line of questioning. In each interview this included questions regarding the physical experiences of homelessness, their experiences at YWCA, the emotional significance their experiences had for them, and if applicable their experiences of dance class. With permission, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full.

Dance Class Observation and Interaction

In my fourteen-month summative data collection I visited the Y approximately 55 times to facilitate a dance class for “Passages” residents. During these visits I utilized direct interaction and participant observation to gather information on the experiences of “Passages” residents.
I define direct interactions as informal and unscheduled conversations between “Passages” residents and myself. They ranged from brief exchanges that occurred during dance classes to lengthy conversations lasting close to an hour. In fact, as I became a familiar face at the Y, I frequently had long conversations with residents, dancers and non-dancers alike, who did not wish, or were unable to be participate in a formal interview but wanted to share their experiences with me. These informal conversations have been invaluable to this research. They not only gave me insight into the significant experiences of homelessness and dance for “Passages” women but also provided a sounding board for me during the process of data analysis. Specifically, on three occasions I was able to share my analysis with residents, each giving me confirmation and providing depth to my perspective. With verbal consent I made a written recording of these interactions in as much detail as my memory allowed.

I engaged in participant-observation during the weekly hour-long dance classes. Here, observations were focused primarily on gauging emotional and physical reactions to class. In ethnographic field notes I recorded my observations and interpretations of body language, posture, and facial expressions. These were used to inform interview questions as well as my approach to instruction in the moment. For example, if I observed signs of confusion such as a furled brow, I explained a movement in a different way.

**A Typical Y Visit**

Below, I offer a description of a typical day at the Y for me. Every week, my activities followed a particular pattern and were organized into three segments; these included the time before, during, and after class. Some knowledge of the pattern of my activities is important for two reasons. My activities had a direct impact on my interactions with and observations of residents. Secondly, my weekly activities in preparing the activity room were part of my approach to teaching in a homeless shelter and may have had an impact on the experience of class for “Passages” women.

**Before Class**

All of my activities before dance class were focused on class preparation but allowed for important moments of interaction with Y residents. I generally arrived at the Y at
approximately 4:30pm on Thursday afternoon. At this time, I would take the elevator to the fifth floor - the residential floor - in order to retrieve the Swiffer “Passages” administration had purchased for me. As we danced barefoot, it only took a few times of leaving the Y with black feet in the summer of 2011 before I asked if I could clean the floor of the activity room before class.

The Swiffer was stored in the fifth floor office, which I often found locked and empty upon arrival. I generally spent between ten and fifteen minutes waiting on the Thursday night residential staff member to return and unlock the office. This arrangement and the time I spent waiting proved highly beneficial as it placed me in a location that allowed for a great deal of interaction with Y residents.

The YWCA’s rules and regulations severely limit the amount of free contact volunteers are able to have with residents. Volunteers are generally not permitted to enter the two areas in which residents spend the vast majority of their free time; the residential floor and the smoking patio outside of the second floor. I was only permitted to enter the fifth floor for the purpose of retrieving the Swiffer. While I stood outside of the office waiting, I would see women getting on and off the elevator, heading to the restroom, or hanging out in the kitchen. This not only reminded dance participants of the class if they had forgotten but gave me important opportunities for interaction, making me a familiar face even among non-dancers. Ultimately this had an important impact on my relationships with Y residents and I feel it contributed to the candid nature of my direct interactions and interviews. Below is an excerpt from my June 26, 2012 field notes that exemplifies what this time was like and the ways in which it was an important part of relationship building.

I arrived at the Y about 4:30 today and headed to the fifth floor to get my Swiffer. [The residential staff member] wasn’t there so I waited outside the office. I swear, that Swiffer, and [the residential staff member’s] tendency to not be in the office have been great for me in terms of interactions and data. During the 20 minutes I waited I saw many of the girls I know. First, Elaina stepped off the elevator, and upon seeing me she said, “Oh are you having the class?! I’m coming!” and then she went back into her room to get ready. A few minutes later I saw Ashley as she was getting onto the elevator in her scrubs headed to school. We had a brief interaction regarding how school was going for her. She only has two months left in her medical assistant program and is very excited. She was involved in a very friendly conversation with Monica. I noticed Monica had dyed her hair black and commented on how good it looked. She knew I was waiting on [the residential staff member] and said, “you gon be waiting a looong time!” She mimed the rate
of [the staff member’s] movement as she said, “I know she old but goddamn!” I also saw Tiffany who I’d met the week before. She didn’t recognize me at first but was very friendly once I reminded her of my name. She said, “Oh yeah, the dancer!” and offered me a chair. I also had some brief, positive exchanges with two African American women on the floor who I hadn’t met before, one regarding my pants and one regarding the heat. It was very hot on the floor; the top of a hundred year old building with no AC.

[The residential staff member] finally showed up about 4:50 and I rushed down to the activity room to clean the floor and finish preparing for class. (author’s field notes, June 26, 2012)

Once in the activity room, I would move the couches and chairs off of the dance space and sweep the floor. The floor was so dirty that it generally took me three Swiffer pads before that small space was clean enough to dance on. Next, I would set up the computer speakers the YWCA had provided as my audio system and plug in my IPod. In my final preparations for class I would put on low, calming music and spray essential oil—generally lavender or rosemary. These were done in an effort to create an atmosphere that felt more like a dance studio and less like a shelter. Though I have always used music and scent to create a relaxing and welcoming tone for classes, I felt it particularly important here as the Y had an uncared for and institutional feel. After making the final touches to the room I would sit and wait for the dancers to arrive. My interactions with the women were limited during this time as the activity room is not a high-traffic area. On occasion a non-dancer who I had gotten to know a bit over the months of waiting on the Swiffer would pop in to say hi, often doing their best belly dance impression to make me laugh. Generally however, I was alone in the minutes before the dance class.

**During Class**

Teaching was a verbal and physical activity for me as I both explained movement and danced with the students. This was a deliberate decision on my part, growing from my efforts to make the experience comfortable for these beginners. I have found that beginners need to watch the instructor lest they become unsure of their own movements and also, that beginners often feel awkward if the instructor spends too much time watching them. I relied heavily on participant-observation during class and my years of experience as a dance teacher proved beneficial in this endeavor. Just as in all dance classes I have taught, when teaching “Passage” residents I looked to facial expressions, posture, and body language to
provide signs of confusion, awkwardness, enjoyment, or relaxation. As stated, these observations were noted for data purposes but also helped me make in-the-moment adjustments in the class if I felt they were needed. For example, if I noted that a student seemed to be enjoying a particular stretch I may have had the class hold it longer. Conversation during this time was minimal as students and I were focused on my instruction. On occasion participants made brief comments regarding the ways in which they were experiencing the class. These were noted but I did not engage participants in discussions regarding these experiences. A full description of the dance class format and each of its components is included below.

**After Class**

Generally, my interactions with “Passages” residents were very brief following the dance class. By the time class ended at 6 dinner was usually ready on the floor and I was in a rush to return home to relieve my babysitter; I was generally back in my car by 6:10. However, there were a few exceptions. On five occasions during my field research a resident(s) approached me after class and engaged me in conversation, sometimes lasting close to an hour, regarding her experiences of dance or of homelessness. Though rare in comparison to the direct interactions before class, these conversations provided important insights for my research. With permission they were recorded in detail in my field notes.

**DANCE CLASS DESCRIPTION**

From September 2011 through October 2012 I had 22 dance class participants. The amount of participation varied greatly from individual to individual. Many of the dancers came only once (N=10 of 22), some came almost every week during their residency (N=4 of 22), and some came on and off throughout their residency (n=8 of 22).

“Passages” residents were approached as beginning dance students, not as “homeless” dancers. In other words, I made no adjustments in pedagogical approach for this population because of their homelessness. I focused on teaching “Passages” residents dance technique; we worked on posture and alignment, body awareness, muscle articulation, and building dance vocabulary. I did not place a great deal of focus on expression, emotion, or story telling- the exception to this was in the cool-down portion of the class- and I did not attempt
dance therapy. Each dance class contained four main parts; warm up, isolation exercises, movement building, and cool down; these are described in detail below.

**Warm-Up**

The yoga-inspired warm-ups were performed on yoga mats with soft, slow tempo music playing in the background. The gentle warm up was designed to set the tone for the class while fostering physical awareness, flexibility, and strength. Each warm-up lasted about fifteen minutes and consisted of breath-work, gentle stretching, and core strengthening exercises. The breath-work was often used in the very beginning of the warm-up period in order to help students bring their mental awareness into their bodies. For example, during some classes, students were asked to close their eyes and breathe deeply, noting the feeling of the breath as it entered and exited their bodies. To provide direction in this, I may have asked them to pay attention to the way their an inhale expanded their rib cages and made their chests rise, or to note the way the breath felt as in moved into and out of their nostrils. Once the mental focus had been directed inward through such exercises I frequently asked them to check in with their bodies, noting areas of tension or fatigue and I encouraged them to direct care to those areas during the remainder of the warm-up, by, for example, staying in a stretch a longer than directed if needed. The breath was also used throughout the warm-up to help students move more deeply into stretches. For example, in paschimattanasana, a seated hamstring stretch, students were asked to take a deep breath in, growing longer in the torso with the inhale and pulling the bellybutton toward the spine on the exhale as they folded deeper. Using the breath in this way encourages both a physical awareness and an energetic and fluid movement in and out of stretching postures, allowing students to gain a deeper expression in each stretching pose.

Specific stretching postures varied from week to week, however, due to the core-centered movements of this type of dance, particular attention was always given to the torso, low back, and hips. For example, in every warm-up students worked on increasing the flexibility of their spines through exercises such as cat/cow- an arching and rounding of the back alternatively. Students also worked on increasing the flexibility of the hips (including the glutes) and relieving tension in the low back through poses such as bodha konasana, or butterfly pose. I frequently gave particular attention to the neck and shoulders because
students often mentioned feeling tense in those areas due to stress. We did slow neck rolls, allowing the weight of our heads to relieve some tension in the neck, shoulders, and upper back and I often directed the students through a self-massage of the neck and shoulders in order to alleviate some of the pain they had expressed experiencing in those areas.

**Isolations**

The next ten minutes of class was focused on isolation exercises. Isolations are movement articulations of one part of the body. For example, a dancer may move the hips while keeping the rest of the body still. While isolations are common in many dance forms, they are particularly important in belly dance and are the building block of much of belly dance movement vocabulary. Isolation drills help the beginner student locate and strengthen the specific muscles required for these controlled movements while building a connection to the core, something that is important for all dance. Eventually, this fosters the ability to maintain proper technique as students begin moving through space, building dance vocabulary, or working on choreography. In belly dance, isolations are most often executed in the hips and ribcage. The particular isolations drills done week-to-week varied depending on the particular combination planned for the class. For example, if I planned to teach a combination which utilized hip locks, we drilled hip locks in a stationary position during the isolations segment of the class before we began moving through the space or building a combination which included hip locks.  

**Movement Building**

The movement-building segment of the class was focused on building dance vocabulary and putting it to use in simple combinations, or short phrases of choreography. This segment of the class generally lasted around 20 minutes. It began with students learning and drilling particular dance movements. Most often, I taught them two simple movements; an isolation based movement and non-isolation based movement. Isolation based movements included the articulation of one part of the body as the dancer moved through space, building upon the isolation drills they had just completed. For example, if the students had been

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1 Up hip movements are those in which the hip is pushed up toward the ribcage in a sharp motion.
drilling hip locks during isolation exercises, they may have worked on moving across the floor, or turning on the spot while bumping one hip in this segment of the class. (An example of a non-isolation based movement would be a chassé or a turn). After each separate movement was explained and drilled they were incorporated into a short combination. Here, movements were set to a particular rhythm and were given specific arm and direction instruction.

The layers contained even in a simple combination can be overwhelming to a new dancer and can easily lead to frustration. Keeping this in mind, I kept the combinations very simple. I wanted them to learn a little bit of dance, but most importantly I wanted them to have fun while doing it. After students learned the combination, it was drilled for the remainder of the movement-building segment of the class. To keep this segment of the class fun, I generally played up-beat music with a medium to fast tempo.

**Cool Down**

The cool down section of the class gave me the opportunity to focus on some of the important, though less physically demanding aspects of dance. I generally took this opportunity to work with students on complex arm movements such as floreos or snake arms, or, to work on the emotive aspects of dance. As stated above, this is the only portion of the class in which I focused heavily on dance as a communicative endeavor. While this is an important aspect of dance, in my experience, new dancers generally lack the dance vocabulary and the confidence in which to express emotions freely through movement. Though there are different philosophies in dance education regarding this topic, it is my belief that like dance technique, dance expression requires work, practice, and direction. Because of this, rather than asking students to express themselves freely throughout, the cool down segment of the class was used to introduce students to the expressive capacities of dance within comfortable boundaries set by my direction. This was most often done while I had students follow me in repetitive and simple arm movements that required little focus on technique. Here, as we moved together, I encouraged the women to consider the ways in which choices in movement execution could convey different emotions. I often gave the women emotive options as an exercise. For example, during one class, I asked them to dance either as if they were mourning a loss or celebrating a gain. At other times I told them to
dance as if they were reaching for something they desperately desired, or as if they had a secret.

**Data Analysis**

I took a grounded theory approach to analysis, allowing my data to dictate the direction in substantive concept formation and theoretical application. Ultimately, this had significant effects, as, after a preliminary analysis I was obliged to alter the focus of my major questions in order to capture the significance of my data.

Originally, this study was organized around two foundational questions:

1. How have the physical experiences of homelessness affected the subjectivity of “Passages” women?
2. What are the physical and emotional effects of purposeful physical activities, such as dance, for this population?

As is common in the grounded theory approach, a general data analysis began as soon as I completed the first interview and continued in rounds after every data collection (Corbin and Strauss 2008). In my initial attempts to categorize the experiences of “Passages” women I became convinced that a focus solely on the physical and emotional could not be reconciled to the data. This was the case, particularly because, the significance with which participants reported experiencing dance had strong social components that I had not anticipated during research design. Specifically, as will be discussed in detail below, “Passages” women consistently reported experiencing dance as a physical and emotional release from psychosocial stressors existing in the context of the YWCA, and, reported the opportunity to participate in dance classes as giving them a sense of social normalcy. In response to these new insights, I adapted my major questions to include the social experiences of “Passages” women in my examination. As a result, as discussed above, my research centered on the following:

1. How have the physical and social experiences of homelessness affected the emotional subjectivity of “Passages” women?
2. How have “Passages” women understood the physical, social and emotional effects of dance participation?

At the time of this adjustment I had four interviews and three months of direct interaction and participant-observation left to complete. Nevertheless, the alteration to my major questions had a limited effect on my methodological approach. Because I had chosen
open-ended and qualitative methodological components (see above), in which participants are granted power in directing conversations, I already had a great deal of data regarding the social significance of dance and homelessness for “Passages” women though I had not been specifically looking for it. However, in the remaining months of direct-interactions and interviews the change in focus allowed me to follow respondents with greater insight and to ask better-informed questions regarding the social significance of their experiences. As a result, some of my clearest data comes from these final interviews.

The greatest adjustment I made following this change was in my approach to data analysis. With the social significance of dance participation in mind, I centered my analysis on the question, “Why has this particular population experienced dance in this way?” I began to look for information regarding physical and social experiences of homelessness that fit the primary codes of “experiences of stress” and “experiences of otherness.” As anticipated in the original plan for data analysis, the theory of lumpen abuse provided important insights for further categorizing the conditions of homelessness. For example, respondents have described stressful circumstances surrounding their lack of personal space in the shelter. As this seems to fit within Bourgois and Schonberg’s (2009) definition of everyday violence- the chronic and banal inability to adequately and conveniently meet basic human needs- experiences of this nature were coded “everyday violence in the shelter context.”

As data collection and analysis continued in rounds, codes were supplemented with examples and were refined or discarded as seemed appropriate. I began to look for theories or perspectives in the anthropological literature that reflected the ways in which “Passages” women discussed their understandings of and reactions to experiences of homelessness and dance and that would explain why dance functioned for this population as it did. These substantive theories and perspectives were added to my literature review and were called upon to provide depth and clarity to my analysis.

It is common for data to be analyzed in this section followed by a separate chapter that discusses the implications. However, as discussed in my introduction, I feel it most effective to place the analysis and interpretation of my data alongside field notes and narratives in two results chapters. Chapters 4 and 5 are each organized around one experiential category of homelessness, as discussed by “Passages” residents; the symbolic experiences of homelessness and experiences of stress respectively.
CHAPTER 4

SYMBOLIC EXPERIENCES IN THE YWCA

As discussed in the literature review, anthropologists have done important work regarding the symbolism surrounding homelessness in our society. Specifically, Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) were interested in how, on a macro level, the homeless stereotype functions as an expression of public judgment against homeless individuals, blaming them for their condition while obscuring causal structural forces, a phenomenon they referred to as symbolic violence. Lovell (2007) was interested in the process through which homelessness is defined via the conditions and behaviors of street dwellers, the defining aspect of the stereotype she referred to as social imagery. Lovell (2007) brought this macro process down to the level of subjective experience as she examined how social imagery affected and was manipulated by homeless individuals seeking understand their place and value in their social world- or in creating symbolic representations of self.

I have called upon the work of Bourgois and Schonberg (2009), and Lovell (2007) in my efforts to conceptualize the symbolic context of “Passages” women and to explore how they exercise agency in response to it. However, while these scholars engaged in research among street dwellers, my work has been with women in a transitional housing program. As will be evident below, this difference is crucial in distinguishing the symbolic context and experiences of “Passages” women from those of street dwelling homeless peoples.

As residents of the YWCA, “Passages” women have access to bathrooms, laundry facilities, and indoor shelter. These resources allow for significant differences in their physical condition and public behaviors as opposed to the homeless street dwellers lacking them. And so, though they are homeless, “Passages” women do not exhibit the conditions and behaviors stereotypically associated with “homelessness;” things like being dirty, public urination and defecation, and habitation of public spaces. Finding that they are neither “normal” nor “homeless” in the socially imagined way, “Passages” women are left unsure of the meaning of their social identity and the degree to which it is stigmatized. In other words,
as homeless individuals in a long-term residential program, “Passages” women find themselves in a symbolically liminal space.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the experiences of symbolic liminality for “Passages” women and their agency in this context. For clarity, I begin by defining the symbolic categories of “homelessness” and “normalcy” as characterized by “Passages” women. Next, I present excerpts from interviews in which respondents discuss their own position as lying somewhere in between these categories. In addition to highlighting the ways in which “Passages” women define their status, these showcase the ambiguity of their liminality and the resulting internal struggles experienced in trying to understand the social significance of their homelessness. In the midst of this liminality, “Passages” women exercise symbolic agency through efforts to give meaning to their status, a phenomenon that, following Lovell (2007), I will refer to as their creating a symbolic representation of self. The majority of this chapter consists of an examination of this symbolic work. Specifically, I explore four categories of symbols: appearance, the status of intimate relationships, other homeless residents, and dance, commonly used by “Passages” women in their efforts to estimate their proximity to either the imagined “homeless” stereotype or the more desirable imagined “normal” person. I conclude this chapter with an interpretation as to why dance participation, as a particular activity, is available to function as a symbol of normalcy for this population.

**DEFINING “HOMELESSNESS” AND “NORMALCY”**

The data presented below clearly identifies the stereotype surrounding “homelessness,” as discussed by Lovell (2007), and Bourgois and Schonberg (2009). This indicates that “Passages” women symbolically categorize “homelessness” through the social imagery and symbolic violence outlined by these scholars. As this was discussed in detail in the literature review I feel it needs no further definition here. However, as stated, “Passages” women experience themselves in between two worlds; “homeless” and “normal.” Due to the liminality of my population, I feel it is important to outline their understanding of “normalcy” with the same depth and to note the reasons why I have chosen to use the word normal categorically in this chapter.
*Normal* is the term most often used by interview participants (N=8 of 9), in descriptions of who they want to be after the Y; of others they see around them who have homes, cars and families; and to describe me, the researcher. *Normal* was used in reference to the middle-class world that “Passages” women imagine to exist and of which they desire to be part. For example, when asked what her dream was, one respondent told me that she wanted to be able to cook for her kids in a place of her own, “just a normal life” (Ashley, personal communication with author, June 15, 2012). Another said, “I want the white picket fence and the husband and two kids. I know it’s old fashioned but I just want a normal life” (Monica, personal communication with author, September 6, 2012). For “Passages” women, “normal[cy]” is the mirror image of “homeless[ness], and like the latter, is an economic condition understood to represent something about the innate value of an individual. In contrast to “homeless” people, “normal” people are believed to have intelligence, dignity, meaningful relationships, and self-respect. “Normalcy” is a symbolic category that “Passages” women want to position themselves proximal to, and want to believe themselves to be innately capable of entering one day, though they cannot ignore the symbols they recognize around them speaking to their ab-normalcy, their homelessness.

**The Y’s Liminality**

Before we can discuss their dynamic identity work, we must first understand how “Passages” women experience the YWCA as liminal to “homeless” and “normal.” *Liminal* is taken from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold. It is a concept that was developed by Arnold van Gennep (1960) to describe the ambiguous and temporary status of individuals in the middle of a rite of passage. During that time, the individual is no longer who they used to be, but have not achieved a new status either. Being in-between, they are neither here nor there (van Gennep 1960). Anthropologists have generalized the concept of liminality to define the period of symbolic ambiguity during status transition in a wide range of social phenomenon (Bigger 2010).

As stated, “Passages” women seek to estimate their *proximity* to each symbolic world, not their position in it. As residents in a long-term transitional program, and not street dwellers, “Passages” women see themselves as neither “homeless” or “normal” and the instability and ambiguity of the in-between, being neither here nor there, is a foundational
part of what makes this phenomenon so significant in their lives. Below I share three interview excerpts portraying the ways in which “Passages” women experience the Y as symbolically liminal. I have chosen two of the excerpts, the first and last, because of their fullness and clarity. The middle passage is less explicit but offers a perspective on liminality while giving readers an idea of the range of comments I received regarding this topic. I offer a brief analysis of content following the presentation of each and conclude this section with an analysis of these data as a whole.

In each of the following excerpts, participants are responding to (a version) of the following question:

Jules: “I was talking to one of the women here and I said something about, or, I referred to her as a homeless woman, and she said to me, “Please don’t call me that. Please don’t use the word homeless.” And for her there was something about that word that was bigger than just not having a house. Do you know what I’m talking about?” (personal communication with author, September 5, 2012)

I have chosen to present an excerpt from my interview with Kristen first. Kristen is a forty-three year old white female. She entered the Y in May of 2012 and at the time of our interview was still in phase one of the program, the stabilization period. Kristen has been homeless all of her adult life, with the exception of a 9-year period during which she was able to find steady employment as a city bus driver. In her time as a homeless woman prior to entering the Y, Kristen slept on the street, in short term and emergency shelters, and spent almost two years in a long-term residential program at St. Vincent’s.

Kristen: I’m not [homeless].

Jules: When she said, I’m not “homeless” I think she was referring to it in the stigmatized….

Kristen: yeah.

Jules: sense of the word. Like there’s an idea of “homelessness” as being bigger than you just don’t have a house.

Kristen: It’s huge.

Jules: What do you mean? What do you thing the stigma is?

Kristen: (11 second pause) The stigma is a person like you seeing somebody on the street corner dirty, stinky, with nothing, probably got a bunch of trash around him, and you think that’s one of us. I may not have my own home but I’m not on the street either, so I’m not homeless, even though the, well I guess, the state or whomever is gonna say I’m homeless because I don’t have my own home. That’s ridiculous. I have an address; I get my mail here just like you would at home. Um,
I wouldn’t call this home, it is a shelter, but, it’s a place for me to get my life together, home is where I can go in, kick off my shoes like you do when you go home. You can sit down and scratch your butt. (personal communication with author, September 5, 2012)

Kristen is aware that the social imagery surrounding the archetypical homeless person has been gleaned from the condition of street dwellers. Because she is a woman in a long-term residential program, Kristen rejects not only the symbolism defining, but also the word homeless as applicable to her. However, Kristen knows that a shelter is not a home and she must acknowledge the differences between her context and mine. It is significant that as she seeks to explain her status as a shelter resident, Kristen must contrast the Y with the symbols of the street and the homes for “people like [me],” there is no stand-alone imagery available to her. In other words, the Y is symbolically ambiguous, and Kristen’s difficulty in defining it - not this, but not this either- gives us some indication of the uncertainty experienced within this ambiguous context, a point I will return to in greater detail below.

The next passage comes from Joy, a 52-year-old white female from Detroit. Joy became homeless in 2005 after losing a string of nursing jobs. She spent the majority of her homelessness in short-term and emergency shelters in New York City and moved to San Diego in February 2010 because of the milder climate. Since then, Joy has found shelter in the homeless winter tent, Rachel’s overnight shelter, and was in the “Passages” program two separate times for around a year each. Here, in response to my question, Joy explains why some women may wish to reject the word homeless.

Joy: Well I guess it’s just, maybe if they’re like, “Ok I’m at the Y.” You know it’s like, I can sort of breathe now, relax, I have a place. I’m not that you know, like, on the waves without an anchor. You know, I have a little bit now, something, and I’m not, you know, I have some security

Jules: Do you think when people use the word homeless or hear the word homeless they have a picture in mind?

Joy: Yeah like on the street. Yeah but then, you know, I’ve learned a lot of different just, people back in Michigan thought that I was living on the street and I said, ‘No, no, I’ve never done that. I’ve never even tried.’ Though I have thought that if I run out of options here, you know, I, I’ve, but I’ve never even tried that, but yeah there’s, … all different kinds,. But, but, yeah it’s the thing of, you know and the whole thing, “you’re a bum, you don’t want to work” and you know, “Get a Job!” (personal communication with author, June 14, 2012)
In this excerpt Joy identifies both the social imagery of “homelessness”, someone on the street, and the symbolic violence attached to it, “you’re a bum.” However, Joy understands the YWCA as providing a different context for her than the street and hopes that it can distance her from imagined “homelessness.” Specifically, when Joy says, “I’m not that you know, like, on the waves without an anchor.” I interpret her stress of the word that, as an indication that she is contrasting her position to the socially imagined archetype. Joy further differentiates her status from “homelessness” by sharing that she has never slept on the street, “never even tried.” On the other hand, I assign significance to the qualifiers she includes in the rest of that phrase. When she says, “I can sort of breathe now, relax….I have a little bit now, and I’m not, you know, I have some security.” I find it significant that she chose to include, “sort of,” “a little bit” and “some” and interpret this as a awareness that she has still not quite attained a normal status.

The final excerpt comes from my interview with Barbara. Like Kristen, Barbara clearly and powerfully conveys her experience of the YWCA as a symbolically liminal space. Barbara is a white female in her early fifties. She entered programming at the YWCA in September 2011 and at the time of our interview was in stage 2 of the “Passages” program.

Barbara: Sure, sure. Yes I know exactly what you’re talking about and I kinda felt the same way. But, that’s why I said, ‘There are so many ways to become homeless.’ Uh, I think there totally is a stigma.

Jules: What is the stigma?

Barbara: Dirty, uneducated, on drugs, um, drugs, uneducated I think, I think, um are the biggest that seem, I know that I did.

Jules: That you…?

Barbara: Had that view. You know, when I, you know I mean, you see somebody homeless and, and, you just automatically, it’s their fault. And now a lot of times, they, well like I said earlier, they, I’m homeless, but not as homeless, technically I’m homeless but, I have a, this is my home, I’m transitioning. But when I was happily married and, and had a car and you know just a regular person, and I saw homeless people I had that view. Um, ‘They’ve gotta be on drugs. There’s gotta be something wrong with ‘em.’ I mean, there’s you know, now I know that mental health, bummer, but it, you know and you don’t want that stigma but it is there. And, sometimes it is deserved because I walk these streets and I have people beggin food shit and I used to, I still feel sorry for a lot of people, it’s sad! But, there’s help out there, go get it, and you’re beggin money for food? Food is the easiest thing in this town to get. You’d eat better than I do if you’d get your ass to St. Vinny’s three times a day. You know and so, my opinion, god, you
know I know there’s a lot of ways to be here but there’s help, go get it! Get up off your ass and go get the help. Stand there and freakin beg all day! You must be bored out of your mind! I see the people in the same place every single day! Aren’t you bored?! So, I don’t know, I go back and forth on that and I can see why the homeless has a stigma because of the negative things involved in it of it being your fault but you know what, a lot of times it is your fault! But then, a lot of times it is, I mean, shoot man, there but the grace of God. I didn’t choose this, you know when I lost my husband I lost everything. The medical bills, we put ALL of our money, not into health insurance, I mean, not into, life insurance but health insurance, and he got to die comfortably at home. (personal communication with author, August 31, 2012)

Barbara recognizes the social imagery surrounding the “homeless” other and the symbolic violence that takes this condition as evidence of an innate defect or worthlessness. In light of her own status, we see Barbara wrestling with these powerful symbolic processes.

Barbara is not sleeping on the street, and so, she does not define herself as “homeless” in the archetypical way. Through the difference her position in the Y provides, Barbara is able to create some distance from the symbolic violence attached to “homelessness.” She creates a symbol of her condition by contrasting it with street dwellers who she feels must deserve to be on the street because they are too lazy to get the help. But Barbara is homeless, and she must account for this. As a woman living in a shelter, Barbara can no longer consider herself “regular.” Instead, she understands herself as somewhere between the socially imagined “homeless” archetype and the “normal” person she used to be. This is most evident when she says “I’m homeless, but not as homeless, technically I’m homeless but, I have a, this is my home, I’m transitioning” As we will see below, the liminality of Barbara’s homeless status leads to ambiguity in determining how much of the symbolic violence is applicable to her, in other words, it leaves Barbara unsure of her social value.

The Y is a long-term transitional living program. It provides residents with a maximum two-year period to find employment and ready themselves for independent living. Residents are legally homeless, and the Y is a homeless shelter, but they do not live on the street and do not exhibit many of the conditions and behaviors used to symbolize homeless people in our social imagination. As a result, they understand the Y as in-between or liminal to “homelessness” and “normalcy.” Liminal spaces are characterized by symbolic ambiguity and there is a void in the social consciousness regarding the homeless in the long-term
residential programs. How do we picture the homeless who are “not that homeless?” What does this status mean for the innate value of the individual? There is no shared symbolism with which to answer these questions. For YWCA residents, we can see this ambiguity manifest in the struggle to define their status and importantly, this leads to uncertainty regarding the degree to which they are stigmatized by the symbolic violence attached to “homelessness.”

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to exploring how “Passages” women exercise agency in this context. Because the ambiguity of their status provides no certainty for them, “Passages” women become consumed by an internal dialogue in which day to day interactions, activities, and conditions come to represent a proximity to “homelessness” or “normalcy,” a phenomenon Lovell (2007) referred to as the creation of a representation of self. As we move into an analysis of “Passages” residents’ work with symbols, it is important we keep in mind the emotional significance of this struggle for them. Biehl (2007) has called for subjectivity to showcase the angst of life as it is lived, not merely analyzed and theorized about. In a quick effort to humanize my analysis of this phenomenon, I would like to present an excerpt from my interview with Barbara in which she discusses the difficulty of this internal dialogue.

I mean GOD, You’re just, judged on so many levels and it’s a lot of time to, to [think], God! Am I wrong? And then part of you feels bad, part of you feels wrong, part of you feels of not worth, all that homeless shit, but then again part of you, if you have any self-esteem at all, which I think I do, I have more pride than I deserve, you’re going wait a minute, so you’ve got the conflict of, you got a lot of conflict of emotions, uhhh, but hey, but, wait a minute, I rock man, I, some of my best friends like me, I mean there’s a lot of conflict of, of emotions, cause you feel so worthy but how did I fail? Well I didn’t fail, well you’re here, yeah, but, I’m uh, uh, you know. (personal communication with author, August 31, 2012)

**CREATING A SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF SELF IN THE YWCA**

Subjectivity seeks to capture a bit about the inner lives of a group of people inhabiting a similar marginalized position (Luhrmann 2006). In many ways a representation of self, a symbolically based perception of one’s social value, is a singular process and could certainly be examined as such through a psychological approach. However, because of their shared structural and symbolic position, there are clear patterns in both the materials that
come to be significant for “Passages” women as a group, and the ways in which these symbols are exercised in a liminal context.

Given the clearly defined and powerful symbolism surrounding homelessness, it is not surprising that the symbols used by “Passages” women grow out of the stereotype surrounding homelessness, whereas things that seem unrelated to or contrasting of “homelessness” come to represent “normalcy.” Once signified, these contribute to a feeling of being, and being perceived as more or less “homeless” and of being (de)valued on that basis.

Below, I offer data highlighting four categories of symbols utilized by “Passages” women in their representation of selves: appearance, relationships, other residents, and dance. For each symbolic category I offer interview or interaction excerpts from a number of participants. The excerpts presented below are by no means comprehensive of the symbolic categories in my data, or of the individual passages for each category. However, I have chosen categories I feel best represent the phenomenon as a whole, and which contextualize the significance of dance class participation as part of this phenomenon (to be discussed in detail below).

**Appearance**

One of the most common symbolic categories discussed by interview participants was appearance; seven out of nine (N=7 of 9) respondents specifically discussed the importance of not “looking homeless.” In each case, the materials contributing to a feeling of “[not] looking homeless” are related to the strong imagery surrounding the “homeless” condition as was described by Lovell (2007) and Bourgois and Schonberg (2009). I have chosen to share passages from three interviews that I feel best and most concisely convey the importance of appearance as symbolic.

The first excerpt comes from Heather, a forty-one year old mother of six. Heather entered the “Passages” program in July 2012 and at the time of our interview was in the stabilization phase of the program. During our interview in September 2012 I noticed that Heather had very well manicured toe and fingernails. As this was one of my last interviews, I was already aware of the importance of appearance for many of the “Passages” residents and so I used this observation as a chance to open a discussion on the importance of appearance.
Jules: I noticed that your, your nails and your toes look very pretty.
Heather: Yeah! Oh yeah I went to Texas. My daughter, ok, she’s in the army so I was here thirty days and my daughter’s in the army, her husband’s in the army. He had to go to the field and she just had a baby so… I went there she got my nails done. It was cool. I love this color. I don’t like these sandals though these are homeless sandals.

Jules: What do you mean they’re “homeless sandals.”
Heather: I don’t know. Cause they look ugly. So.

Jules: I wear flip flops a lot too, why are these “homeless.”
Heather: These aren’t even flip flops these are like, icky. I got these from that little closet [Becky’s closet] upstairs. I went there, these’ll get me to the bathroom you know so I don’t have to wear tennis shoes all the time. I crawled out of bed this morning I was like, “Oh my god! I gotta go!” So yeah.

Jules: So when you say, “Homeless sandals” cause they’re ugly, do certain things like, and you’ve also mentioned your clothes, do certain things you wear make you feel, bad, more, more homeless and certain things and when you have your nails done make you feel less homeless?

Heather: Ok. These, these shoes to me, they’re dirty, and, they don’t fit me so, these shoes to me would remind me of me being homeless. And I’ve got shoes, as soon as I get some other sandals, cute girl sandals, these’ll go in the trash. So.

Jules: So then, if you get cute girl sandals, these remind you of being homeless, the cute girl sandals will make you feel not homeless?

Heather: I don’t know. Well won’t be embarrassed to wear those sandals and I can show off my toes.

Jules: And, and do things like fixing yourself up and having nice nails and all that, does that make you feel better and a little bit away from the homeless world?

Heather: Yeah, it makes me not look homeless.

Jules: do you feel like people treat you better?

Heather: Sometimes. You know and then like, there’s a lot of homeless people out there that, that don’t, I mean, they could go to Rachel’s to take showers. They could go to the [unintelligible] and take a shower, they could go to Rachel’s and get clothes, they could go to [unintelligible] and get clothes, you know they don’t have to be dirty. You know what I mean, you don’t have to, it just makes the rest of us look bad. So, yeah, I guess, I guess having nice nails and clothes makes you feel better. (personal communication with author, September 7, 2012)

Heather experiences aspects of her appearance as meaningful in two ways; the way they make her feel and the way she understands others to perceive them. In her perspective, a “homeless” person is dirty, wears “ugly,” “icky” shoes, and, as they do not utilize the
resources available to them, are to blame for these conditions. In this excerpt then, we see both aspects of the homeless stereotype from which Heather wishes to distance herself; the social imagery which defines homelessness via the conditions of dirty street dwellers and the symbolic violence taking these conditions as evidence of their faults. As they contrast this imagery, manicured toe and fingernails and cute shoes have the power to make Heather “feel better” because they provide Heather a sense of security that she is not close to the homeless archetype and also is not communicating “homelessness.” When Heather says that she is embarrassed to wear the sandals, she fears that they may signal her homelessness to others and that this may subject her to the symbolic violence attached to street dwellers, which makes them “all look bad.”

Next, I have chosen to share two passages from my interview with Kristen. In the first, Kristen discusses the ways in which certain clothing can contribute to her experience of herself as “homeless.” This passage immediately follows and is a continuation of her discussion of experiencing the Y as a liminal space shared above. Within that context these new passages show the power of symbols for making sense of her liminal position. In order for the reader to get a sense of the context I have include the last bit of her discussion of the Y’s liminality that was shared above.

Kristen:…wouldn’t call this home, it is a shelter, but, it’s a place for me to get my life together, home is where I can go in, kick off my shoes like you do when you go home. You can sit down, scratch your butt,

Jules: Privacy?

Kristen: Absolutely. Being with your family. I had it for a little while, but the stigma, no, I’m not ‘homeless.’ You know, when, when I’m sitting out here on the corner, I know that, fifty cars go by and at least one of ‘em’s gonna go, “Eww look at that homeless person.” And not know who I am. You know. Walk across the street, cause I’m wearing this clothing, (pulls at her shirt) and somebody’ll lock their doors in their car. (personal communication with author, September 5, 2012)

Because Kristen experienced the old, dirty, and ill-fitting clothing she was wearing during our interview as symbolic of “homelessness,” she also internally experienced the social shaming she understands to be attached to those symbols. And, so, despite the fact that Kristen rejects the word homeless and the imagery surrounding it as applicable to her as
discussed above, in wearing that clothing Kristen experiences “homelessness” through a perceived social devaluation in her symbolic context.

Next we see the mirror effect, how a good appearance can contribute to Kristen’s experience of herself as being less “homeless” in the archetypical way. This excerpt comes from a moment in our interview when I was trying to direct the discussion toward the experience of stress. The fact that Kristen responded to my question regarding stress with a discussion of bath and beauty products offers insight into the significance these items have as symbols for her representation of self and for use in foregrounding a particular image of herself to others.

Jules: What are the biggest stressors in your life right now?
Kristen: Not being able to afford the things I need for work. Um, my hygiene stuff, I’m sorry, it may seem petty but it’s not.
Jules: What do you mean by that?
Kristen: I love my hygiene products.
Jules: Oh your bath and beauty products?
Kristen: Yeah, all that. And I spend, expensive stuff, bed-bath-and-beyond, Victoria’s Secret you name it and that may seem menial but it’s not.
Jules: I don’t think it’s menial.
Kristen: That’s one of them, and that especially because when I go to work my body needs to be clean and it’s not like I don’t shower everyday
Jules: Right, and your bath products, do they give you a sense, cause you’ve discussed the importance of your worth, of feeling self-worth,
Kristen: A lot. Yeah. It’s one of the biggest things.
Jules: I understand that, I don’t think that’s….I recognize why that’s not menial.
Kristen: It’s huge for me I, it just makes me happy, it makes me feel good.
(personal communication with author, September 5, 2012)

In the text above we see how expensive bath and beauty products give Kristen a sense of self-worth. Their use unequivocally distinguishes her from the “dirty” and “stinky” image of the homeless person who could never afford them. In doing so, they assure her that she is not “homeless” in the imagined way and provide a sense of security that the symbolic violence attached to “homelessness” is not being applied to her. This symbolic process is particularly important for Kristen, a massage therapist, in her workplace. Kristen fears being defined and devalued as a “homeless” woman at work and believes that expensive products
will prevent this from happening, therefore she reports a significant amount of stress surrounding her inability to purchase these products at this time. Though not specifically discussed in the interview, Kristen’s fear of being identified and stigmatized as “homeless” at work may be related to recognition of the fact that others’ opinions of us can sometimes have serious consequences. As Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) have noted, symbolic violence contributes to the social discrimination and persecution of homeless individuals. Therefore, given the nature of conversation above, it seems plausible that Kristen fears that being identified as “homeless” could lead to discrimination in her workplace and threaten her job security. If true, we can see how Kristen may view expensive bath and beauty produces as a means to ensure her livelihood.

The last excerpts come from my interview with Bekah. I have chosen several moments from our interview that, together, give some indication of the obsession Bekah has with appearance. In fact, most of our interview was about Bekah’s plans to take care of herself and to look better. This included wearing makeup, fixing her hair, wearing nice clothes and shoes, taking care of her skin, and eating right and exercising.

Jules: It sounds like it’s important to you to be able to do things, um, like, you mentioned one time to me having nice cream for your face, and like things for you uh, for your appearance to take care of yourself as a woman.

Bekah: I got that, I got that, and I got a big orange duffle bag that I put at the corner of my bed and then I got a blanket, like a curtain cause it’s pretty heavy to carry it’s my make-up and manicure stuff, and pedicure stuff, and you know, things like that, so, it’s just sitting there but once in a while, I, I get it out when I find that it’s just me in the room or, But now I have a better idea but it’s not consistent. Just take what I need, and take a little bit of make-up and I go to second floor here, to the bathroom and it works. But when you do your hair and, some of them, or most of, really don’t take the time. So I don’t want them to think I’m miss preppy cause I’m not. I just want to feel better about me. So, I have to make a plan, again, like plan to, what can I do for me. Not just the belly dancing cause I always look forward to that but what about the rest of the days of the week?

Bekah: But luckily, I don’t have a job where it requires me, to, dress up more now, because that would be stressful for me. But that’s why now I wanna to take it slow and lay out what I need to wear the day before, you know, more decent. And, and I hate these tennis shoes but when I go out there I see a bunch of bird poop and all that and I’m like, ‘Oh, gosh!’ So, you know, I’m working with myself. I’m not the happiest being like this, but I’m the most comfortable on fifth floor, but I says to myself, when I start going to, nicer places, or um, getting
invited to seminars or something, I’m not going to dress like this, so I’m gonna have my stuff ready, and take my makeup in a small bag but my hair will be done the night before.

Bekah: One of the girls had mentioned [getting] a iron board cover and [the program coordinator] said, “Well, we’ll, we’ll look into it.” So that’s, so that’s about it, mostly, um, I feel a little but sad because it’s been four months and I’m not taking better care of myself, I keep myself clean but you know. And, taking better care of myself, like there’s a few times, like after my shower, you know, I’d go to my bed, and I’d have the curtain, and I’d even put a little, um, you know, scent with the lotion, and I felt so much better! I mean, even doing that, you know, I did it a coupla times you know so. I have to plan out something that I can do consistently, everyday, everyday, …just little by little cause when the time comes when I’m gonna have to do this on a regular basis, at least I’m weaning myself, is that how, just a little bit? (personal communication with author, June 22, 2012)

I must admit that during our interview I felt some frustration with Bekah. Every topic I introduced somehow went back to makeup or hair and I could not see how this was relevant to my research. As discussed in more detail below, it was only during my analysis, after I began to understand dance as symbolic, that the significance of appearance for Bekah started to become clear to me. At that point I began to understand her anxiety regarding her current appearance and the insecurity she feels around lacking the ability to look appropriate for jobs in the future. She is so concerned with looking “decent” that she creates elaborate plans regarding how she will get herself ready in the mornings and these are recorded in a journal. Bekah practices these plans, using occasions like church to motivate her. She has done things like getting up 4 in the morning so that she has quiet time to focus while getting ready or going to the second floor where she has some privacy to do her makeup (Bekah, personal communication with author, June 22, 2012).

Lovell (2007) has defined one’s representation of self as an estimation of one’s position and worth in one’s social context, one’s social identity. Appearance is an important and logical symbol for “Passages” women as they seek to understand their homelessness, and, by extension, social worth. Physical appearance is often a symbolic material that individuals manipulate in efforts to control their social identity (Lovell 2007). This commonplace activity is full of significance for “Passages” women because much of the symbolism defining homelessness comes from images associated with the street dweller’s appearance; the “homeless” are understood to wear ill-fitting, dirty clothes and are thought to
be stinky and dirty. In contrast to the condition of street dwellers, “Passages” women have access to bathroom facilities and basic toiletries. However, as opposed to most middle class women, they lack control over the clothes they wear, the bath and beauty products they use, and the degree to which they are manicured. When “Passages” women recognize their lack of ability to construct their appearance in the way they would like, it contributes to their experience of themselves as being proximal to the archetypical “homeless” person. They fear that others will read their homelessness through these symbols, judging and (de)valuing them on that basis.

The pain surrounding any perceived social stigmatization is exacerbated by “Passages” residents’ fear that this type of symbolic de-valuation could have significant, real world consequences for them, particularly surrounding their ability to find a job. While alluded to by Kristen and Bekah above, another participant, Barbara, specifically discussed her belief that her appearance was negatively affecting her job search. Barbara is missing two of her bottom front teeth. While discussing the difficulties she has had finding a job she confided in me that she is very insecure about her teeth, feels that employers recognize her status through this symbol, and pass her over on that basis (Barbara, personal communication with author, August 31, 2012). Whether or not this is the case, it showcases how Barbara’s missing teeth have significant consequence for her representation of self as a homeless woman. Barbara believes that others use this aspect of her appearance to symbolically stigmatize her and through this process find her un-employable. In contrast, when “Passages” women are able to use expensive products, wear nice clothes and shoes, and are well manicured, they have a sense of security that they are not and will not be perceived to be in the symbolic category, “homeless.” As a result, “Passages” women begin to imagine themselves symbolically closer to “normal” than “homeless” and believe that this protects them from some of the symbolic violence that deems “homeless” people worthless and contributes to discrimination against them.

**Relationships as a Symbol**

I think it’s that whole thing, like my dad would call a “bum” you know. Someone who’s I don’t know, and I guess, you know, you always want to feel like you belong. You know if you’re a woman, you have a family or whatever, or a home
or a guy or even if you don’t have maybe, you know, even if you’re single but you have a job. (Joy, personal communication with author, June 14, 2012)

Lacking personal and private space, street dwellers are constantly surrounded by strangers. However, according to Lovell (2007), they are often isolated from those intimate relationships that, for others, form a supportive social network. As a result, one of the defining conditions of “homelessness” is extreme social isolation (Lovell 2007). Stemming from the shared imagery of the homeless isolate, I have found three recognized relationship statuses that have been given a symbolic function for “Passages” residents; the lack of intimate relationships, strained intimate relationships, and healing intimate relationships. For this thesis, when I use the term intimate I refer to immediate family, such as parents, siblings, and children; and/or a significant other such as a husband or intimate partner. As will be discussed below, in examining their intimate relationships and discovering them to be absent or strained, “Passages” women experience themselves as socially isolated. Because this is reminiscent of the imagery surrounding the “homeless” social isolate, it contributes to a deeper entrenchment in “Passages” residents’ understanding of themselves as “homeless.” In contrast, upon finding that their previously strained relationships are “getting better,” “Passages” residents experience a sense of social belonging that, as it contradicts the imagery of the “homeless” isolate, contributes to their sense of “normalcy.”

THE LACK OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

The first excerpt, from my interview with Barbara, gives us a sense of how the lack of intimate relationships can contribute to an individual’s sense of social isolation and by extension, their experience of themselves as “homeless.” It was near the end of our time together and I was trying to get a sense of some of the things she does to cope with the feelings of stress she had reported experiencing. I asked her if there was anything she likes to do, any activity that helps her to relieve her stress. She reported that when she first arrived at the Y she used to go to the beach several times a week to walk and that had helped a little. However, after a few weeks she had stopped going and she has not been in months. In the discussion that followed, Barbara explained how those activities made her feel alone in the crowd, contributed to an overall feeling of social isolation, and referenced the homeless archetype.
Barbara: Yeah. So, yeah you gotta do self-care, whatever makes you happy. I read, I got a laptop that I can watch movies on but it’s getting ready to die, um, you gotta take self-care, but, it, it’s hard you know cause you just get into a, and then you’re grateful that, yeah I can sit on my ass tonight. But you know you need to get out cause that’s your, that’s your self-care. Isolating, you know, we tend to isolate.

Jules: Does that reinforce a sense of being, cut-off?

Barbara: Yes. Yes, yes. And you’re doing it to yourself.

Jules: Yeah. Cause I would imagine if you isolate because you feel bad and then you feel worse because you’re not connecting with people

Barbara: Cause you isolate

Jules: I would imagine even going to the beach and being, not just in the outdoors with the fresh water but being around all these other people would make you feel better?

Barbara: But it’s still being alone. Yeah. Yeah. When I first got here they had uh, tickets to a baseball game, I thought, uh, I’d been here like a month now I was really new, and it was relatively new, it was less than six months since I lost my husband. And, um, and, so we had tickets to the game and so I went alone, but I said, well all the girls from the floor are gonna be there, beyond shitty seats. Uh, I, I’ve been to several games and sometimes it’s bitchin,’ and sometimes it’s, ah, well what do you want for nothing, beyond shitty seats. And not only was I alone, but all the girls took the tickets to have the extended curfew. And I am with however many thousands of people and, I didn’t have anybody sitting next to me. I’m not a cryer, and I almost cried. And I don’t cry. I was so… don’t go to a baseball game by yourself man. I mean there, you, that is alone, and wow that sucked. So, you know, even though, you know, and, and I go out, and, it depends on your mood at the time. You gotta have a pretty, I don’t know. Sometimes I can go by myself and just, you know just enjoy, and then sometimes it just reinforces how alone I feel.

Jules: Because you see all these other people with their friends and family

Barbara: Yeah. Yeah, so, sometimes it’s fine, sometimes it doesn’t bother me and sometimes you know. There’s a lot of emotional shit here. Because you’ve got, when you have your home, when you have your people, be it your boyfriend, your husband, your kids, there’s people here with parents, now though my childhood wasn’t a whole lotta love and shit, if my parents were alive, I sure as hell wouldn’t be here. How can you be homeless and talking to your mom every other day? You know, how bad do you have to fuck up man?! (laughter) Wow! But anyway, um, you, you’re just alone, and you don’t, when you’re alone in your home, you’re surrounded by your things, which gives you kind of a sense of, well this is my stuff, you know, and when you’re alone in a shelter you’re not even around your own things, it’s really getting in touch with yourself and sometimes that’s not pretty. You know, I, I’m sure, when I get a place of my own, all my
annoying habits are going to go away because, because you’re home. And, being alone here, although you’re grateful, and, and yay, but uh, it’s, there’s a lot of self, introspect, is that the right word? (personal communication with author, August 31, 2012)

As it is related to the “homeless” archetype, Barbara’s experience of herself alone in a crowd became symbolic of her extreme isolation and reinforced her sense of “homelessness.” She contrasts these isolating experiences, and her experiences as a homeless woman in a shelter, with those she believes “normal” individuals to be having. “Normal” people go to a baseball game with their family and friends and she imagines them returning home to their parents, or children, or husbands, etc., and all of their material possessions which are symbolic of a full and “normal” life. These symbols are so powerful for Barbara, and so painfully reinforce her sense of isolation and “otherness” that she avoids situations where she may have this experience again. Choosing to isolate in her room is less difficult for Barbara than the realization that she is alone in a crowd while others are sharing an experience with their intimate social network. A confrontation with the contrast leaves her feeling isolated, “othered,” and causes her to reflect upon her “homelessness.”

**Strained Relationships**

Strained relationships can also contribute to the experience of one’s self as close to the homeless archetype. When I use the term strained, I refer to the physical and emotional separation from intimate relationships. In other words, when relationships are strained, it refers to the fact that intimate relationships do not function in a way that is socially desired or expected. In strained relationships, “Passages” women do not communicate regularly or do not get along with the people “normal” individuals have within their most intimate social network. I found this to be a particularly poignant phenomenon for the mothers who had children under the age of eighteen. Four of my research participants had dependent age children who they were unable to care for because of their homelessness. These mothers either gave their children up willingly or the children were taken from them and placed with extended family or in the foster system.

I have chosen to share an excerpt from my interview with Monica, a twenty-four-year old Native American woman, because I feel it illustrates the symbolic phenomenon well. Monica has a two and a half year old son that she gave up for adoption in April 2011, when
he was a year old, because she could no longer care for him. By my definition, Monica’s relationship with her son is strained because he does not live with her and she does not communicate regularly with him. In this piece of our conversation, Monica was responding to my questions regarding her plans for the future. Specifically, as I was unaware that her son had been given up for adoption I had asked her if she planned to get him back after becoming stable.

Monica: I’m not getting my son back. I’m never getting my son back. Unfortunately. I wish I hadn’t made that decision now but I did.

Jules: Do you see, do you get to see him ever?

Monica: I haven’t seen him since like, May of last year, April of last year [when she gave him up]. So almost two years. Cause, he was a year when he left me. I raised him for a year. I couldn’t, I couldn’t provide a stable environment for him. I lost my housing, I lost my income, I lost everything; 22. I couldn’t stay in the house, I was staying with this man I was, ‘come get him!’

Jules: Were you afraid for his safety?

Monica: I was, I didn’t want him to ever worry about having to eat, or where he was sleeping, or, you know, anything. He didn’t, shouldn’t have ever had to worry. And I couldn’t put him through the, I couldn’t. (Monica was crying during the remainder of this passage) And it follows me…And Jason (an ex-boyfriend) will tell you, Jason will never tell me to my face, he did once, that he thought that I chose him over Jackson and I smacked the shit out of him and I told him if he ever fucking said that again I’d kill him. Never chose a man over my son I said I chose, I said I love my son more than I love myself. I said, ‘you think I wouldn’t die to have my son back with me right now? Like of course I miss my baby. I was like, he’s like, “well, that why you wanna have another one?” I said, ‘Of course I want to have another one. At least give me one chance to do it right. I mean. Maybe not right this moment, but, you know, yea, once I get stable, hell yeah I want one. (personal communication with author, June 8, 2012)

Monica’s intense pain is rooted in her perceived failure as a mother. Her experience of having to give up her son was a public acknowledgement of the severity of her condition as a homeless woman. Furthermore, though she believes it was the right thing to do for him, it opened her up to criticisms of her character that are related to the symbolic violence attached to homelessness. If, as symbolic violence asserts, homeless people choose to be homeless because they are lazy, then homeless women who give up their children must be particularly bad: They are too selfish and lazy to do something about their condition for their children.
In Monica’s case, her admission that this decision follows her and that she so vehemently rejects assertions that she made it selfishly, provide insight into how this aspect of her homeless condition- the inability to care for her son- has become representative of an innate selfishness. Though Monica is trying to reject this, it is my interpretation that this is an ongoing and painful internal dialogue for her.

In contrast to her situation, Monica understands that normal mothers have the stability and resources to care for their children and desires the opportunity to “do it right.” As she told me in separate conversation, Monica desires to have a husband, two kids and a white picket fence, a “normal” life (personal communication with author, September 6, 2012).

**HEALING RELATIONSHIPS**

Intimate relationships can also serve as symbols representing proximity to “normalcy.” I found this to be particularly true when intimate relationships had been previously strained but had begun a healing, (whereby the participant newly sees, communicates and gets along with intimate relations), concurrent to their participation in the “Passages” program. For these women, the healing relationships have become part of, and are symbolic of their transition toward a more “normal” person deserving of the trust required in such intimate ties.

The first excerpts I wish to share regarding healing relationships come from Kristen. At this point in our interview I was trying to get a sense of how Kristen understood and responded to the symbolic violence attached to the homeless condition. I was interested in gaining insight into how Kristen defined the symbolic violence in a nutshell, but in a general way, as applied to the “homeless” archetype and not necessarily to her personally.

Jules: Right, and I feel like, and you know, you correct me if I’m wrong ok?
Kristen: Mmm Hmm.
Jules: But I feel like, well, you’ve mentioned worth, I feel like the stigma of “homeless” attacks the worth of the individuals it’s attached to, socially.
Kristen: Absolutely!
Jules: And saying, “Ewww look at that homeless person! They’re dirty, they’re…” whatever.
Kristen: And you see it all the time.
Jules: And it doesn’t allow homeless individuals to be recognized as worthy and to express worth.

Kristen: Yeah.

Jules: And so when you say, “Look I’m at the Y, I’m not “homeless” is it a way of asserting your value?

Kristen: Mmmmm Hmm. I think so. I mean, a lot of homeless people choose to be where they’re at, I mean, and some of em probably have bank coming in. I’m talking a lot of money, but they choose to stay right where they’re at, they’re comfortable. I didn’t plan for this to happen, I mean, I think I chose some of the things that happened but a lot I didn’t. I didn’t choose to be born into an addicted family either. I didn’t choose for my parents to be who they are, but they are who they are. Um, I, I don’t know, I, I try not to take the little things for granted because a lot of people do. And I’m talkin a tooth-brush, or a roll of toilet paper, um, even as silly as my phone. My dad paid for it the other day, my relationship with my father is, is getting better. We hadn’t talked for almost two years, and, about four months ago he was hit by a car on his motorcycle. So he’s had reconstructive surgery on his left leg and is still immobile. He can hop around and just rented like, one of those motorized scooters so he could get around, cause he can’t drive right now. He can’t hop up into his truck. And it, it’s I don’t think we’ve ever talked as much as we have in the last couplea months, ever, in my entire life. And um, he strongly believes that someone needs to work for what they want, or even need in their lives. He wholeheartedly believes in that. He was around my age when he got his job at North Island Naval Base. He was a civilian working on the base. And, um, he just retired after twenty-one years. And um, he worked for what he has, and he doesn’t, he’s a penny pinchin’ butt head. But he’s actually, I, when I was younger and I was out there playing, and testin things and doing what my kids are doing and I did what my parents did, it just falls in line like that. And, um, I’d ask him for money and he’d laugh at me, wouldn’t give me any money. And he paid for my insurance which is two-hundred bucks and then he paid for my phone, “Oh I’m not gonna pay for your phone. I thought about it and thought about it, ok I’ll pay for it, no I don’t wanna pay for it.” But he paid for it anyway. And then just over the weekend on Friday, I go on Friday’s and Saturday’s to see him and just, be there. And um, Friday I was gettin’ ready to walk out the door and he goes, “Do you need some money?” I, kinda put my head down and I said, “Yeah, your poor broke daughter needs some money.” And then on Saturday he, I went to um, I don’t know if you know Ocean Beach or not but, Chris’ Liquor, so, um and he lives up on Ebert and I walk all over Ocean Beach for two days. I do this every weekend. So um, he didn’t have any cash on him so he brought his credit card, you know those bank cards, and his driver’s license and anytime I have that on me, I immediately take it out when I get back and put it on the table. He’s like, “Where’s my money at,” or, “my cards?” I was like, “Right here up underneath these papers by your wallet.” And I picked up his wallet and showed him and he goes, “Well take out the money in the wallet.” ‘Huh?’ So he’s, uh, uh, I mean we’re talking about all kinds of stuff, not just the
money, though, we’re talking about being real nosy, I hope I didn’t bother him, this is something I haven’t even talked to [my counselor] about but, his mom, his biological mother, um, was in her late twenties to early thirties when she had him and she didn’t keep him. And, his grandma who raised him, didn’t tell him, so at age fifteen, he’s like pissed off, he found the picture of his mom and was just pissed. So, um, it, it’s kinda weird, I’m talkin to him and he’s sharing his life with me and some of the things he’s done in his life, it’s really weird. And um, all of it’s really weird I didn’t think I’d have a relationship with my dad, and a lot of my self worth is coming back because of that. So, you know

Jules: So that relationship and the trust he’s putting in you,

Kristen: Yeah!

Jules; the fact that you have that connection is giving you a sense of value?

Kristen: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I don’t, I, I think there’s some trust there, I have the PIN number to his bankcard! Yeah, here real soon there’s gonna be over 60,000 dollars in his bank account from this accident. I’m just like, I wanna ask him about the massage chair but then again I don’t want to push my luck. But I keep thinkin about it too because he’s the one who’s like, “You really need to do this. You’re good at it!” I work on his feet, not so much on the leg but I work on his feet and stuff and he’s just like, “you’re gonna do so good cause your hands are so strong.” It’s just like (laughs)! (personal communication with author, September 5, 2012)

In the context of my questions regarding the worth of the “homeless” individual Kristen, rather than responding in an abstract or general way, is interested in symbolically distancing herself from the stigma for me. She begins by contrasting herself to those other homeless people who have chosen their condition, but in her relationship with her father Kristen finds an even more powerful symbol with which she can assert her worth.

Her renewed relationship with her dad is profoundly important to Kristen and something that came up repeatedly during our interview. In the depths of her homelessness, Kristen’s father had written her off as unworthy of his time and his help. Their relationship was strained in the ways I have defined the phenomenon; they did not see or communicate with one another and there was long standing animosity. For Kristen, her father’s attention, and especially his trust, contribute to her sense of social worth and inclusion. His decisions to allow her to use his credit card, to give her money, and to pay for her phone bill signal to her that she is on the right track, and that in her new life, no longer “out there playin and testin things” she can be someone worthy of his trust. Additionally, it is significant for Kristen that her father believes in and is supporting her new career plans. Kristen graduated from
massage therapy school in May of 2011. She finished the ten-month program despite being homeless, living in St. Vincent’s shelter and on the street for part of the time. Her plans to transition out of homelessness revolve around her ability to find a job in massage therapy. Her father’s support and trust in these choices reinforce her hope that she is in the process of transitioning toward “normalcy.”

The last excerpts come from my interview with Ashley, a 31-year-old mother of two. For most of her adulthood, Ashley had been a stay-at-home mother. Following a divorce from her husband she had become the paid guardian of two children whose single mother was on military deployment and Ashley had moved into their home with her two children. Ashley became homeless following a six-month period of extreme domestic abuse by a new boyfriend. This had ended when Ashley decided to call the police and press charges. However, when this became public, her ex-husband, and the mother of the children over whom Ashley had guardian-ship blamed the situation on Ashley’s poor judgment. As a result, Ashley lost her children, her job, and her home. At this point, Ashley picked up an old meth addiction, though she had been sober six years prior to this fallout. As Ashley’s world crumbled around her, her most intimate relationships began to fall apart as well. She was kicked out of her mother’s house, where she had gone after losing her own home, because of her drug addiction, her children no longer wanted to see her, her brother and the man who had been her father figure refused to talk to her, and many friends cut off contact with her.

I have chosen to share two passages from my interview with Ashley. Together, these give a sense of how the breakdown in her relationships during the depths of her homelessness and drug-use (things Ashley experiences as two sides of the same coin) contributed to Ashley’s experiences of isolation, worthlessness, and understanding of her “homelessness,” and how, in contrast, renewed relationships with her children and ex-husband are part of and have become symbolic of her transitioning out of these depths.

Jules: Well what made you think, “I need to get off this?”
Ashley: Um, I have two sons and my oldest son, he just turned 14, sent me a text one night saying he can’t be in my life anymore. And, that just kinda brought me to my knees. You know, and then I also… I went to jail and um, and I was in jail for my son’s 13th birthday and that’s just ridiculous.

Jules: Did you feel hopeless?
Ashley: Oh yeah.
Jules: You had gotten to a point of feeling hopeless?

Ashley: Yes, yes, extremely. I, yeah. I don’t know, if I didn’t have kids I probably would have just ended it cause it was like, ‘What the fuck’s the point anymore?’ You know ‘What am I fighting for? Nothing.’ You know? Just so one more person can say, ‘I don’t want you in my life anymore.’ You know. And, I just held on for dear life and it’s been worth it.

Ashley: I had nowhere to go…. so, I’d just walk around sometimes cause I had nothing to do and no where to go and no one to call you know because I fucked, I’d burned all my bridges or, I didn’t want to reach out to certain people because I knew I was high, you know. So, it’s not anything I recommend.

Jules: So now you’re workin hard you know, to get yourself together to get that “normal life” you described, is there anything you do for you? Anything that makes you feel good physically or emotionally? Anything that replaces that physical and emotional high of drugs in terms of, you feel good in your body? Is there anything like that for you now?

Ashley: Being with my kids and knowing that, just being with my boys. Like when we’re having fun, like we go out at, when I go visit them at my mom’s or something we’ll go out and play baseball in the street. I never would’ve done that high, you know, and we’re laughing the entire time. Like nothing is better than that. And, um, my ex-husband and I are really getting along. Like, we go do family things now, we went to sunset cliffs one weekend, and he kept saying to me, ‘I can’t believe how much fun I’m having with you!’ You know, because I’m happy now! I’m gen, I feel, content in my own skin and I may be putting on a lot of weight but I don’t care you know. And um, it felt, it feels good knowing that we can laugh together and, with the boys there, you know what I mean. And for him to say that, that’s a huge compliment to me. You know like, “I’m having fun with you!” And he texts me afterwards, after that and I um, “You know I always have fun with the boys but I had a lot of fun with you.” You know and that, it’s like, it’s awesome. (personal communication with author, June 15, 2012)

In the most severe period of her homelessness and drug use Ashley’s relationships with her sons, her parents and brother, her friends, and her ex-husband were strained. They all cut off contact and communication with her. According to Ashley, this happened because of her drug use and her victimization. However, for her emotional life, the breakdown in these intimate relationships contributed to her sense of social isolation and worthlessness and they became part of her definition of herself as a “homeless,” drug-addicted woman. The social isolation she experienced as part of her homelessness was so significant that she discussed it throughout the interview and the excerpts shared here are meant to give indication of its importance. Perhaps because the breakdowns of these relationships were so painful to Ashley during her homelessness, the congruence of their healing with her new
sobriety and entrance into the transitional housing program are part of, and are symbolic of her transformation. It is Ashley’s dream to live a “normal” life where she has a job and her boys living with her. She wants to provide for them financially and do the things “normal” mothers do- like cook dinner (Ashley, personal communication with author, June 15, 2012). The healing in these relationships is not only one step in that direction but also symbolize to Ashley that she can be that person, that she has the ability within herself to move away from “homelessness.”

Like other materials used by “Passages” women, the symbolic power of relationship statuses grows out of the imagery that surrounds the archetypical homeless person. As discussed in the literature review, one of the defining characteristics of “homelessness” is social isolation (Lovell 2007). This is, in part, a function of the fact that “homeless” individuals lack the resources most often relied upon in the creation or extension of social networks such as a job and the means to participate in leisure activities. However, “homeless” individuals are often also isolated from those intimate relationships that for others form a supportive social network (Lovell 2007).

Given the social isolation that characterizes and defines “homelessness” in the United States, it is not surprising that the perceived status of interpersonal relationships, and what this perception means for their feelings of social inclusion/exclusion, have become an important symbol for “Passages” women.” When they perceive themselves to have healthy intimate relationships “Passages” women have a sense of social inclusion and this contributes to their sense of “normalcy.” When they lack or have strained intimate relationships “Passages” women experience themselves as socially isolated and as a result, this contributes to an understanding of themselves as “homeless.”

**Other Residents as Symbolic**

As “Passages” residents seek to understand their own homelessness, other Y residents have become symbolic in an interesting way. All “Passages” residents are in a similar condition. In other words, none of them fully exhibits the conditions of homeless street dwellers with which we generally identify "homelessness.” Perhaps it is because of this that “Passages” women do not often use the condition of other residents as symbols with which to understand their own status. Instead, they assess the character of other residents against the
symbolic violence that takes homelessness as “evidence of laziness, lack of intelligence, biogenetic disability or inadequate impulse control” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:133) and this becomes a symbol through which “Passages” residents position themselves in relation to either “homelessness” or “normalcy.”

I have found this generally occurs through two processes, compare/contrast and/or association. Through compare and contrast “Passages” women weigh their own abilities and behaviors against those of others, estimating whose are most proximal to the homeless archetype. When “Passages” women understand themselves to be more intelligent, more genteel, more motivated, and/or more hardworking than those around them they experience themselves away from the “homeless” stereotype. When “Passages” residents find others to be intelligent, hardworking, well mannered, and/or proactive they define those individuals as innately close to, and capable of becoming “normal.” As stated previously, “Passages” women want to see themselves as close to “normal.” Through an association with those who have admirable characteristics, “Passages” women are assured that they have similar qualities, belong with that type of person, and are by extension, close to “normal” as well. There were no incidents in my data where the character of others functioned to make “Passages” residents feel more "homeless.”

This symbol was quite common in both open-ended interviews and direct interaction with many respondents and throughout my fourteen-month research period. Below I offer excerpts from two interviews that are representative of the way this symbolic process unfolded. I will briefly introduce each selection before its presentation and offer an interpretation of its content directly following.

The first data I offer comes from my interview with Judy, a white woman in her early forties who has spent the majority of her life homeless. For clarity, I have created a representative composite of excerpts from various points in the interview. During our time together, Judy frequently called upon the character, and particularly the abilities of other "Passages" residents, as symbolic. Through comparison, Judy experiences herself as innately more "normal" than other residents.

Judy: So at this point in my life all of those experiences, I’ve really, um, benefited from that in a lot of ways that, like I see these women around me in this place, and I wonder how they will, how they will utilize this opportunity and go on and actually like, thrive and blossom and be successful and really, you know, not ever,
not ever, be in the same position. Because there’s really nothing that addresses the issues.

Jules: And what are the issues?

Judy: Emotional scars. Um, it’s, it’s, it’s beliefs about yourself.

Jules: And so these women that concern you, what do you think they need?

Judy: Well I have a lot, I have a lot more going for me. And I feel sorry for them. Jules: What would you want to give them? If you were running a program, and you wanted to, you

Judy: Oh, ok, ok, alright. Well, ya, the thing is is through those, through my experiences back then in the 80s and early 90s, people don’t change until they’re so freakin’ miserable, that there’s just no other direction to go. So I don’t know I mean, well, and on the other hand, like I was talking to the career counselor about my roommate, she’s a lovely person and she just has, she has learning difficulties, and this is where I was taking it….she told me this story, it broke my heart, she failed the GED. Myself on the other hand, even back in the day you know, I walked in, I didn’t take, I, maybe I took a little bit of math refresher, but no more than a month and I walked in and I aced that damn GED. But this poor woman, she, she couldn’t do it. And then she told me that she um, she never really, um, made it past the fourth grade that she kinda, that she cheated, that she literally wrote cheat sheets up her arms to make it to tenth grade. This place needs a, a tutor program. A lot of these women need, need, need, the, the, their skills, you know; their, their, um, their school skills. They need something. And it was, inspired by that lady, my roommate, and she told me that story, 4 years old and she has learning issues. She learns a different way than what is standard. And I learn a different way than what was standard. But, I had a mother, who was a genius, and photographic, memory wise. And I’m not, uh, uh, mongoloid as they used to call them. Ah, so, I have the, the wherewithal to um, be, you know, intellectually gifted. Some of these ladies, they don’t, they didn’t have that, and maybe it is emotional issues; “You a dumb bitch! You ain’t ever gonna,” you know, whatever trips. (personal communication with author, June 15, 2012)

Though Judy has spent a great deal of her homelessness on the streets, and many of the other women, including the roommate she references, have not, because of her perceived greater intelligence and emotional stability, Judy experiences herself as closer to "normal" than other residents. As a result of this favorable comparison, Judy believes herself to be more capable of transitioning out of homelessness than are her counterparts, and is able to distance herself from the symbolic violence taking “homelessness” as evidence of craziness and stupidity. It is significant that this former street dweller is able to use the symbolic violence, generally attached to the imagery of street dwellers, in favorably comparing herself to her roommate, a woman who spent the majority of her homelessness with family. Because
they are currently in the same condition, both being residents of the Y, Judy is not forced to account for the differences in their histories as she assigns meaning to their abilities in assessing her own status. The Y has, for now, equalized the condition of the women in Judy’s perception and Judy feels free to engage in symbolic violence against her fellows in this liminal context.

Next, I share excerpts from my interview with Bekah. (Interestingly, Bekah is the roommate Judy referenced as symbolic based on her lack of intelligence and education.) Bekah was a regular dance class participant. She frequently discussed the character qualities of other women in our interactions as well as our interview. Though I have a great deal of data regarding this symbol for Bekah, here I offer a sample of these conversations to give the reader an idea of the ways in which others function symbolically for her.

Bekah: I mean that most single women have never even wined and dined on fifth floor and then, you, the ones that I have things in common with are the ones that travelled that have been in abusive relationships. Like the one, she went to Italy, “Oh, you’ve been to Hawaii too, I’ve been there. Where did you go, what did you see? Oh did you go.” Those I have in common with. That was almost ten, ten years ago.

Bekah: But you see the women, that I get along with are either working, going to school, or both. And that’s just, maybe four or five out of 42. Like, they’re more um, intelligent, you know, they got common sense and, we have a understanding even though I’m not working now and I’m not in school. But I’m just so happy to see them because they are a great motivation people. And these are the ones that don’t stick around all day and night. And, go to the smoking area and, bum cigarettes. When they come, they’re tired because they’re working on themselves. And these are the only women that I really get along with. You know. That’s like four or five of them, no four of them. And I’m so proud when I see them carrying their books, I’m ‘How’s school?!’ you know. And then Eliana, the Spanish, she’s say’s “Oh I miss belly dancing!” I say, “I know!” And then the birds of a feather they flock together. So, let them. So the ones that I know, that they’re not going to change overnight unless they want to, but that’s still, it’s going to take a miracle, I make it, really short. (personal communication with author, June 22, 2012)

Bekah assesses the character of those around her in several ways, here however, I would like to focus on two, the causation of homelessness and employment status. Each of these criteria is based in the symbolic violence surrounding homelessness.

Symbolic violence casts blame on the homeless individual for their condition (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). When Bekah says that she prefers to associate and has things in common with those who "have been in abusive relationships," she alludes to the
causes of homelessness being reflective of the individual's character. Those who are homeless because of the abuse of others cannot be blamed for their condition. In other words, for Bekah, since it is not their fault, their homelessness is not evidence of an innate character flaw.

According to symbolic violence, homeless individuals are lazy and they lack intelligence (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). As she shared, Bekah currently has no job and is not in school. Therefore, these are not available to her as symbols to draw upon in distancing herself from the homeless archetype. However, Bekah sees herself as one of, and chooses to associate with the "intelligent" group, whose other members are working and studying. Bekah takes their status, as student or employee, as reflective of their character and abilities; she sees them as intelligent and hard working. Because Bekah defines herself as belonging with this group she is able to appropriate the symbols of their employment in her own representation of self. In other words, her association with such people reinforces her assessment of herself as intelligent and hardworking and less worthy of the symbolic violence attached to "homelessness."

At all times in the Y, “Passages” women are surrounded by approximately forty-four other homeless women. They define the other women in relation to the symbolic violence that attacks the character of homeless people. Those they believe to be lazy, stupid, and ill-mannered are understood to have the character traits of “homelessness.” In response, those individuals are symbolically positioned proximal to the homeless archetype, despite their physical presence in the Y. Those determined to be intelligent, hardworking, and well-mannered come to represent an innate “normalcy” and are thought to have the best chances for transitioning out of homelessness. Once the characters of other women are defined in relation to symbolic violence, they may be used as symbols through which “Passages” residents define themselves. Feeling superior in ability or character to others allows them to create a hierarchy in which they are further from the stereotype. Feeling as though they belong, and have things in common with those they understand to represent “normalcy” gives the women a sense of being “normal” themselves. Ultimately, like the other symbols discussed in this chapter, the character of others provides a symbol through which “Passages” residents may define themselves as homeless women within a liminal context.
THE EXPERIENCES OF DANCE AS SYMBOLIC IN A LIMINAL SPACE

I was not initially interested in examining the social significance of dance or homelessness. Because dance is primarily a physical activity, as are so many of the experiences of street homelessness, I was interested in a comparison of the effects of these different physical experiences for the inner lives of “Passages” women. However, after several rounds of an initial analysis I began to pay attention to small bits of data indicating that participation in my weekly dance class had given some residents a feeling of social “normalcy.” With the symbolic function of dance in mind, a re-analysis of my data unveiled the significance of the social symbolism surrounding homelessness and the ways in which all “Passages” respondents reported grappling with their symbolic position. As a result, I would like to acknowledge the way in which dance functioned as a communicative tool in this research. The experience of dance participation aided the production of a narrative in which a handful of “Passages” women were able to communicate the abstract, the inner experience of the symbolism surrounding them, and through this narrative I was able to grasp the significance of symbolism and identity creation for “Passages” women in the liminal space of the Y. Because I had begun data analysis before completing my field research, as is common when using grounded theory, I was able to focus on this phenomenon in my remaining three interviews and two months of direct interaction, allowing for others to build upon this narrative in a more complete way. This was done as I directed specific questions toward the topic or took the opportunity to expound upon it if it was alluded to subtly. As a result, much of the richest and most powerful data regarding the inner-experiences of this symbolic context came from the second half of my research and has been presented above.

Below I share excerpts from interviews and field notes indicating how “Passages” women experienced dance as symbolic. After presenting each, I offer a brief analysis of content before closing with my interpretation as to why dance, as a particular activity, functioned symbolically for some of the “Passages” residents, and a discussion of its significance in the context of other symbols.

Two respondents explicitly spoke of dance as symbolic (though they did not use the word symbol). To begin, I would like to share an excerpt from my interview with Joy. Joy came to my first class in July 2011 and was a regular attendee until May 2012, even returning
to the Y for dance class after she had moved out in March 2012. I have chosen to present this excerpt first because it explicitly, and with detail, articulates an experience of dance as a symbol of social “normalcy” and it is this narrative that was central in my recognition of the entire symbolic phenomenon I have discussed in this chapter.

Jules: Did, um, the piano or the zumba or dance, any of the things you did while you were at the Y, those programs, did they help you relieve some stress, did they function in that way for you?

Joy: Yeah, they did, and I, you know I liked it. Felt like I was doing, sometimes you feel like, you don’t, you know, ‘and what do I have in my life?’ I’m you know not….

Jules: What do you mean?

Joy: And you know, but then you know, you do other things outside of your routine, whether it’s stabilization or job search, like you know you feel more like normal, like oh yeah, you know, cause people, you know on day to day they go to the job, or, you know the little things they do, so you go to different things like to the dance or piano, or you know even little parties and stuff, sometimes you’ll have a person on the floor that’s really good at throwing these different parties and really that kind of spirit and you know it’d be always, you’d feel like you’re part of the normal

Jules: A normal life?

Joy: yeah more, you’re not so much, you know, set aside. You know so, you’re just, yeah. So, but yeah those helped. (personal communication with author, June 14, 2012)

When Joy speaks of participation in activities such as dance helping her feel “part of the normal” and not so “set aside,” I interpret this to mean that dance has become symbolic for Joy in creating a less “homeless” representation of self. Joy believes that the day-to-day activities structuring her life as a woman in the “Passages” program, job search and stabilizations activities, are abnormal and indicative of her “homeless” status. In contrast, Joy believes that “normal” peoples’ days are structured by their jobs or free time activities, “the little things they do.” This perceived contrast between the day-to-day activities of “homelessness” and “normalcy” makes dance and other extra-curricular activities symbolically available to Joy: because leisure activities are something “normal” people do, the ability to participate in them helps her feel a bit closer to “normal” as well.

Joy’s line of thinking is repeated in the only other data in which dance is blatantly discussed as giving participants a sense of normalcy. This data comes from my July 5, 2012
field notes recording a direct interaction with Bekah. This passage is much shorter than Joy’s discussion but is still important, particularly when considered alongside the other data regarding symbolism. The reference to dance as symbolic of normalcy is only a brief statement within a discussion dominated by the theme of dance as a stress reliever. The full passage is given in the following chapter should the reader have an interest in its context. Here however, I share only the brief comment regarding dance as symbolic of normalcy.

Bekah told me that it’s important that she gets to do something for herself because she spends all day doing her job search and running from this social service office to the next trying to get everything in order and this was a chance to do something normal. (author’s field notes, July 5, 2012)

Here, in a similar fashion to Joy’s quotation above, Bekah refers to dance as a “normal” activity in contrast to the activities that structure her day as a homeless woman in the “Passages” program, her job search and social service meetings.

It was only after I began to appreciate what Joy and Bekah were saying about the symbolic function of dance that other incidents I had recorded in field notes, but had not understood, began to stand out to me as indicative of dance as a symbol of social normalcy. The field note excerpts offered below highlight a group of strikingly similar incidents spanning the fourteen-month substantive field research period. It is important for the reader to note that each incident involves a different dance participant.

Right before class began tonight Bekah’s phone rang. It was her daughter. Though she answered, she told her daughter, “I can’t talk right now because it’s time for my belly dance class!” The same thing happened last week, and both times Bekah seemed excited to tell her daughter about the class. She could have chosen not to answer the phone but it seems like she did just to tell the daughter she was about to take the class. (author’s field notes, August 30, 2012)

Jean has only taken my class two times, but today, before class she came into the activity room, to say hi and to tell me that she’d told her sister about the class. She laughed as she shared how she’d bragged to her sister about how much she was learning and how she was going to be so much smarter than her. She told me that she’d also joked with her sister about becoming a professional dancer. (author’s field notes, May 17, 2012)

As we were waiting for class time Joy answered a phone call from her daughter. I’ve heard brief conversations between them several times and whenever her daughter calls Joy is upbeat and jokes around with her on the phone. Tonight, with a smile she said, “Guess what I’m about to do. I’m belly dancing.” She laughed at her daughter’s response and then said, “Uh-huh! I’ll teach you sometime!” (author’s field notes, January 19, 2011)
Marcia, (a regular from September 2011 until she moved out in December) answered a call from her son just after class had finished. With a smile she told him that she’d just been belly dancing and then said, “Yeah! I told you we have a belly dance class! It’s fun!” She then told him that she’d call him back in a few minutes. After she got off the phone she told me that he (jokingly) said he didn’t believe she had been dancing. To prove it to him she asked me to take a picture of all the women in the class with their hip scarves on so that she could send it to him. She handed me her phone and all three of the students got together in a group. I told them to strike a pose and gave them some suggestions for dramatic posturing. They all smiled as I snapped the picture, and all of the women took a turn seeing it and laughing at themselves afterward. (author’s field notes, October 27, 2011)

If we accept that activities such as dance have symbolic power for “Passages” women in their representations of self, it follows that these symbols would also be available to them as they try to influence their social identity. As Lovell (2007) discussed, the creation of a social identity is a dialectic process between the symbols one gives off and the messages others interpret from those symbols. Lovell (2007) also states that in this work, individuals can, “flaunt, mask, or play with other culturally evaluated and embodied characteristics” (319) as they seek to control another’s impression. So, should “Passages” women want to create an impression of themselves as normal, despite their status as homeless women, they could choose to foreground activities and experiences they understand to symbolize “normalcy” as they minimize those they define as “homeless.” In each incident reported above, participants made a deliberate choice to communicate their dance participation to family members. The women seemed to take pride in sharing their participation in the activity, even if that participation was minimal, as it was in Jean’s case. It is my interpretation that the women choose to foreground dance participation to their family members in order to create a positive impression of themselves in the YWCA context, one in which they are still, in large part, members of normal society.

CONCLUSION

The symbols used by “Passages” women grow out of dichotomized understandings of “homelessness” and “normalcy.” Here, homelessness is stereotyped through the conditions and behaviors of street dwellers and the symbolic violence that attacks the character of homeless peoples. The stereotype of homelessness has become the constitutive other to the socially imagined “normal” person. “Normal” is essentially the unmarked category, a
standard contrasting imagined “homelessness.” If homeless people are social isolates, normal people are engaged; if homeless people are slovenly, normal people are clean. Because they are neither street dwellers nor homed persons, “Passages” women find that neither symbolic category is fully applicable to them and instead experience their position at the Y as a liminal space. Here there are no shared symbolic categories through which “Passages” women may fully understand their homelessness. As a result of this ambiguity, “Passages” women struggle to create a representation of self. In doing so, certain materials, relationships, people, and/or conditions come to represent either “homelessness” or “normalcy.” Through any given symbol, “Passage” women may position themselves in relation to these two worlds. This helps them to both define their homelessness as it relates to the social imagined “homeless” Other and to estimate their social worth as it relates to the symbolic violence attached to “homelessness.” Considering the social worthlessness attached to the homeless archetype, it is not surprising that “Passages” women actively search out symbols of normalcy and wish to assure themselves of their value by calling forth these symbols. In this context, the provision of programming activities like dance can provide an important symbolic, and by extension, emotional experience for some women in their struggle to become part of the normal world.

It is my belief that dance participation was symbolically available for some “Passages” women because it is an activity of the middle and upper classes and because it has a degree of vibrancy in the social imagination. Dance is generally viewed to be something that healthy, social, youthful, and relatively well off individuals participate in. This image of a dance participant offers a great contrast to that of a disengaged, poor, and lazy “homeless” person. However, despite this symbolic contrast, dance was only reported as symbolic for some “Passages” women, and even then, dance has functioned as one symbol of normalcy among many. I do not feel this should not be taken to minimize the symbolic function of dance per se, but rather, should put it into context. In the face of the powerful symbolism surrounding homelessness, the symbolic power of dance class, a once weekly event is limited, but it can provide some positive benefits in this emotionally charged context.

The ambiguity of the Y leads to a constant internal dialogue in which “Passages” women weigh the symbols they identify around them. While they must acknowledge the symbols of “homelessness,” “Passages” women experience hope, comfort and a sense of
validation in symbols of “normalcy.” Given the emotional stakes of this symbolic process, their desire to see themselves as normal, and by extension, socially valued, it is logical that “Passages” women would call forth many symbols of normalcy, each providing an additional degree of social validation in the face of the powerful symbols surrounding “homelessness.” In this way, though it was a small part of their lives, dance participation provided an important emotional experience for some “Passages” women.
CHAPTER 5

EXPERIENCES OF PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS IN THE YWCA

As residents of a longer-term housing program, “Passages” women have all of their basic biological needs met. Unlike street dwellers, “Passages” women do not have to worry about inclement weather, about an inability to access food or clean water, about not having a place to bathe or relieve themselves; thanks to the Y, these bio-physical stressors are not an important aspect of their lives.

The anthropological literature on homelessness has given well-deserved attention to the extreme and acute biophysical suffering endured by street dwellers (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Cheung and Hwang 2004; Dimsdale et al. 1994; Evans and Forsyth 2004; Fitzpatrick et al. 1993; Huey and Quirouette 2010; Lee and Schreck 2005). And yet, the sheltered homeless and their experiences of suffering have remained largely invisible. Here, their liminality—being homeless but not that homeless—has veiled their experiences behind the more acute suffering of street dwellers.

When beginning this research in the summer of 2011, I shared in the social imagery defining “homelessness” via the conditions of street dwellers discussed in the previous chapter and this perspective had been reinforced during my review of the academic literature. As a result, I expected that my research population would consist entirely of former street dwellers and that my data would be full of information regarding past experiences of biophysical suffering. These expectations were amended at the very beginning of my field research. During my facilities tour with the “Passages” coordinator, discussed in Chapter 3, she informed me that most of the women in the “Passages” program have never lived on the street but rather moved from shelter to shelter or participated in “couch surfing” with friends and/or family. Ultimately, this proved to be true among my research population as only 3 (N=3 of 9) of my interview participants had spent time living on the street. At first, this left...
me unsure of how to conceptualize “Passages” women as a particular homeless population and unsure of how to approach them with questions regarding their homeless experiences.

In this conceptually ambiguous context, narratives surrounding dance experiences provided a lens through which I was able to first conceive, and then explore, how social and economic marginality have become manifest in the lives of “Passages” women. As will be discussed in detail below, throughout my fourteen-month substantive data collection period dance class participants frequently and enthusiastically discussed experiencing dance as a stress relieving activity and specifically, a Seylean stress relieving activity (see literature review). I took this to indicate that Seylean stress, the emotional and physiological response to a perceived stressor, is common for “Passages,” women and by extension, that psychosocial, as opposed to biophysical, stressors are a significant aspect of their homeless condition.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the psychosocial stressors framing the lives of “Passages” women as a particular homeless population and to explore dance as a stress relieving activity for them. First, I identify and describe three psychosocial stressors commonly discussed by my research population and explore how “Passages” women, individuals sharing a marginalized position, subjectively experience these circumstances. Following this, I share data regarding the experiences of dance participation as an emotional and physical stress relief. Finally, calling upon information regarding the physiological component of the Seylean stress perspective, I conclude this chapter with a discussion as to why, on a basic biological level, dance can function as a significant stress reliever for “Passages” women.

While in the previous chapter I analyzed the content of every excerpt, here I do so only when necessary. This is because, as opposed to the abstract data on symbolism and identity creation in the last chapter, much of the data below is clear and an analysis of content would be redundant. The exception I make to this is in my presentation regarding how the programming context of the Y exacerbates the feelings of housing insecurity and affects relationships within the Y during times of conflict, as this data is a bit more complex. Otherwise, I will explain my understanding of the topic in the opening of each section, introduce each excerpt for context, and conclude with an analysis of the data as a whole.
CATEGORIES OF PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS

Below, I have identified three psychosocial circumstances that create stress for “Passages” women: their status of un/under-employment, the everyday violence of the shelter context, and their housing insecurity as structured by “Passages” programming. For each category, I provide exemplary data outlining and explaining the particular circumstance of marginality - the stressor - and analyze how each circumstance is subjectively experienced by “Passages” women on a social, emotional, and sometimes, physical level - their stress. It is important to note that the specific emotion identified in the data below may vary depending on the individual and the nature of the stressor; a person may report experiencing anger, fear, frustration, or simply stress, for example. However, all such emotional responses are considered emotional distress within the Seylean stress perspective and each begins a physiological response meant to prepare the body for fight or flight.

UN/Under-Employment

“Passages” is a work program, its purpose is to temporarily sustain women by meeting their basic biological needs so that they may focus on finding full, stable employment. All participants are either un- or underemployed when they enter the program and are expected to be “ready, willing, and able to work” (Barbara, personal communication with author, September 1, 2012). For this paper, I define underemployment as the condition of having a job that does not provide sufficient financial resources to independently sustain housing. At the time of my interviews, three participants were underemployed and 6 were unemployed. In contrast, full employment provides sufficient financial resources to meet the basic need for shelter. “Passages” participants understand full employment to be “the key to everything,”(Kristen, personal communication with author, September 10, 2012), the “only hope” (Ashley, personal communication with author, June 23, 2012), they have in getting themselves out of homelessness.

Because full employment is understood as their salvation, “Passages” women experience their un/under-employed status as a significant stressor. This stress manifests itself in two ways in the internal lives of “Passages” women; in a preoccupation with plans regarding how to get a job, and, in anxiety over reasons they may not be desirable candidates. These internal experiences of stress differed slightly depending on the training of the
candidate. For example, Judy, who at the time of our interview was working at the market chain 7/11, discussed a variety of plans for future employment. This included plans to start an NGO, become an audio technician, open a few hostels, start a small business (she did not know what), become a professional videographer for surf videos, get a job doing factory work, and to work as a chef. When discussing concerns over her qualifications, Judy oscillated between touting her intelligence and work experience, particularly as a “chef” (she has past experience cooking in restaurants though she lacks formal training), and lamenting the fact that she lacked the training she needed to get the “next things in place” (personal communication with author, June 15, 2012). To me, Judy’s plans represent her preoccupation with finding a solution to her underemployment; she does not know what she can do but knows she has to do something, while her oscillation between foregrounding her qualifications and lamenting her lack indicates anxiety over being an undesirable candidate. This line of discussion was common among research participants who lacked training for a specific field (5 of 9). Among those who had training in a particular area; three participants had training as a massage therapist, one as a nurse, and one as a medical technician. Their anxiety was focused around a fear of not being able to find a job in their area of training because of a problem with themselves as candidates. For example, during the time of our interview, Ashley was finishing up training as a medical technician. She was concerned that because of her past felony drug conviction no one would hire her (Ashley, personal communication with author, June 15, 2012).

While the status of un/under-employment is, by itself, a stressful circumstance for “Passages” women, it is magnified in circumstances that remind them of their housing insecurity. Because they are dependent on the YWCA, certain aspects of the Y’s programming structure, specifically the time limit on participation, contributes to a sense of insecurity surrounding the continued access to safe and secure housing. This then intensifies the degree to which “Passages” women experience distress surrounding their un/under-employment, the cause of their dependence. And so, while I wished to introduce the stress surrounding un/under-employment here, and acknowledge it in its own right, it will be discussed again later in the chapter as I analyze the stressor of housing insecurity.
The Everyday Violence of Shelter Life

When you understand the living arrangement of the residential floor for “Passages” women (5th floor), it is not surprising that they experience it as stressful. As discussed in the methods chapter, at any given time there are roughly 45 women living on one floor. Between them they share one kitchen, one bathroom with four stalls and four showers, a small activity room, food, and kitchen and cleaning equipment. There is no private space for residents. The only personal space is a bunk bed in a small room shared between two to four people depending on the size of the room. “Passages” women are constantly surrounded by others and are frequently inconvenienced or offended by the presence, behaviors, or personalities of other residents. Because of this, they experience a significant amount of stress surrounding their inability to escape the crowd in a personal and private area.

In addition to the lack of personal and private space there is an expectation of cooperation within YWCA programming. “Passages” women are responsible for cooking and cleaning and this creates a situation in which they must rely one on another for the functionality of their living space. The Y, in part, seeks to regulate this cooperation as each woman is assigned a daily chore and is responsible for a once monthly evening meal preparation and cleanup. Residential staff members, who sign off on satisfactory completion of each chore, assign these responsibilities to the residents. There are, however, no specific requirements set, or responsibilities assigned when it comes to cleaning up after one’s self in the kitchen (other than for the once daily community meal), keeping one’s personal items neat in shared rooms, cleaning up after one’s self in the bathroom, or the appropriate (sanitary) way to handle food and use shared equipment. As is evident in the data below, residents feel that others do not fulfill their responsibilities for maintaining the livability of the 5th floor. In response, “Passages” women report a great deal of stress surrounding what they perceive to be the “filth” (Bekah, personal communication with author, June 22, 2012) of their living space and their own lack of control in bettering the situation.

The living arrangement of the Y can be understood as everyday violence because “Passages” women, as an economically marginalized group, cannot adequately or conveniently meet their basic needs for personal space and privacy, or control the cleanliness and sanitation of their space, food, or equipment. Below I present data surrounding the frustrations caused by everyday violence in the shelter context. These data have been chosen
to give the reader a sense of the types of circumstances or incidents of everyday violence common at the Y and the intensity with which “Passages” women experience them as stressful.

The first passage is an excerpt from my June 5, 2012 field notes. That evening, I had gone to a house meeting in order to recruit research participants. At the end of each meeting residents are given the chance to air problems they are having on the floor with the goal of finding and agreeing upon a solution as a group. There were approximately twenty-five women in attendance that night. As soon as the floor was opened to them, several women began to raise their hands with issues they had regarding the cleanliness and sanitation of shared spaces and the sanitary use of kitchen equipment and food. In addition to understanding the circumstances I have described below, it is important to note the ways in which residents expressed their inner experiences of these circumstances through anger, disgust, and frustration.

The last twenty minutes of the meeting was reserved for residents to bring up any community issues they had. The things that were mentioned were interesting and were all about how to live together on the fifth floor. The residents were very angry and frustrated because they felt as though others were not cleaning up after themselves or appropriately using the bathroom facilities. Several women began to name what they understood to be appropriate bathroom behavior, contrasting it to the messes that had been created on the floor by inappropriate behaviors. For example, they discussed how other women should be careful to aim for the toilet, not relieve themselves in the shower, and clean the toilet when menstruating or ensure that menstrual blood does not get on the toilet. There was a great deal of passionate discussion around these issues and many of the women expressed agreement and disgust. There was also a great deal of stress regarding whether or not people were washing their hands after using the bathroom. Tonight, this issue was primarily related to food preparation and the behaviors of those preparing the community meal. I’ve heard this discussed many times during my direct interactions with dance students. There is a fear that unwashed hands touching kitchen equipment or food will contaminate the food. Many participants have reported a fear that even if they prepare their own food they will ingest bathroom germs. (author’s field notes, June 5, 2012)

The next passage comes from my interview with Barbara. Like others in my research, Barbara experiences a great deal of stress surrounding the everyday violence of the shelter, particularly the lack of sanitation and cleanliness she is forced to endure because of others’ lack of cooperation in maintaining shared spaces. I have pulled two excerpts from our
interview that are representative of the types of incidents and circumstances that occur at the Y and the intensity with which residents experience emotional stress surrounding them.

For context, in our discussion below I mention that I’d been to two house meetings. I attended a second house meeting on August 14, 2012 and during the open floor Barbara had brought up the fact that food and many of the kitchen supplies, including measuring cups and knives, had been stolen. In response, many women, including Barbara, had expressed their frustration and anger over the missing community resources. I reference this situation in the excerpt below.

Jules: Well, I, you know, I’ve been to two house meetings now and I’ve noticed that it’s the issues, like, over the shared space, that seem to cause the most frustration.

Barbara: Yeah! Just clean up after yourself.

Jules: And then the issues regarding like, where the kitchen supplies are going.

Barbara: Oh god! Search. Search. Search!

Jules: But I’m sure, I mean I don’t think that, I think anybody being placed with forty other wom, especially women, let’s be honest, let’s be honest here about it! (Laughter)

Barbara: UM HMM! Yeah! Cause we all wanna be in control! (Laughter)

Jules: But, it would be a challenge for sure.

Barbara: It’s a challenge, it’s a challenge. Yeah. Yeah it is, it is. Cause you used to have, you know we have stuff happen, uh, uh, I told you about the toilet paper on the floor, do you do that at home, do you clean out the stuff in the kitchen sink and put it there (on the counter)? We had somebody actually, I went into the bathroom and somebody had shit on the floor.

Jules: I heard about that.

Barbara: I cleaned it up, which gave me bitching rights.

Jules: Yeah it does. It does give you bitching rights.

Barbara: Right? It gave me bitching rights. And [the coordinator] says, “Well they had an accident.” ‘But you had to step over it to get out!’ I, and I cleaned it up, I have bitching rights, and while I was cleaning it up, in fact I told [the coordinator] I said, ‘I’m not going to the meeting today.’ She said, “Why?” I said, cause I’ll lose it! I’ll have an absolute fit.’

Barbara: They’re, they’re trying, this is gonna be a new thing, and I disagree with it but, they’re closing the kitchen on the weekends cause people are such freakin pigs it’s become a problem. You pull a knife out of the knife holder, freaking dirty, you get a pan, and that’s if people do dishes at all, you know, you, you use dishes and you leave them soaking and you know, everytime I go on the
weekends to make my nice breakfast that I have on the weekends I gotta wash the freakin dishes to do it! And uh, uh, they’re lockin the, they’re lockin the uh, it’s gonna start this weekend they’re gonna lock the kitchen during the weekend. I said, ‘Well can we at least pull the microwave out?’ And they’re gonna consider it, but that’s how bad it’s gotten, people not cleaning up after themselves, that they’re locking up the kitchen.

Jules: Wow, that would be hard to deal with.

Barbara: Yeah. Cause people just cant freakin clean up after yourself, and, and, I made a statement at a meeting, uh, this is why I’m not allowed to go to the meetings. I said, “When you drop trash on the floor and don’t pick it up, when you use a pan and you don’t wash it, you are blatantly leaving it for somebody else to have to do. You’re blatantly leaving it for somebody else to do!” (personal communication with author, August 31, 2012)

Finally, I present two excerpts from my interview with Bekah. Together, they highlight many of the aspects of the everyday violence on the fifth floor and give the reader a sense of the level of stress these cause. Because she was a regular dance student, I had a lot of interaction with Bekah during my time at the Y and many of our conversations were focused on the stress she experienced living on the floor. Bekah frequently reported experiencing anger, frustration, and a fear of eating at the Y. Additionally, after a few months in the “Passages” program Bekah developed digestive problems where she experienced frequent bouts of nausea and diarrhea. Bekah attributes her sickness to the types of circumstances she describes in the passages below, a lack of privacy and personal space particularly in the kitchen and bathroom, and her lack of control regarding the sanitation of her living space.

Jules: So, you, what all are you up to right now besides job searching? What are some of the things you like to do for yourself?

Bekah: You know there’s, there’s a lot, but, when you get, just herds of people, I just call herd, ok, that’s okay it’s just how I like to like, “MOOOOO OOOOOO MOOOOOOO!” And, how can I do it?

Jules: You need more quiet? A little space?

Bekah: Yeah.

Jules: Cause it’s, there’s a lot of women up there?

Bekah: But, but you know what, I know, but I think a herd a cows is more quiet! I’m sorry, no really, they are! It’s just that, I’m not used to be around some women and they come to the kitchen, like, like children but they’re not children, “I’m hungry!” You know, they open the refrigerator, there’s food there, you can make yourself a ham sandwich or a turkey, eggs or something. And they open it
and they close it, “Well, I’m hungry.” And they look at you [like they want you to
feed them], and then they turn around again and then they walk off, and this is all
the time!

Bekah: Yeah. You know, the thing that bothers me, this is a nice place, they have
a lot to offer, but the cleanliness, why don’t they write them up? The trash is over
full where the lockers are, that’s a health hazard. And some girls they don’t do
their chores cause on the weekend they wanna say, “C’est la vie baby!” You
know, and then the other girls, that’s why they got attitudes, it, you know, cause
the person’s not done their chores so when they do their chore, they’re doing that
person’s chore plus theirs, and we’ve been bringing it up in the meeting for the
last four months! I don’t get it and they leave the place a slop and filthy, and last
night, I tell the residential staff, she’s a sweetheart, I said, ‘that bathroom smells
horrible!’ She says, “Well, did they flush the toilet?” I says, ‘Yes, but it, that
whosoever in there, I can’t even brush my teeth. I need to use the handicap
bathroom.’ Which we’re welcome too, but even um, the other woman who went
in behind me, um, she keeps herself clean, and it was like, she also want to use the
handicap bathroom, it was [that] bad. And you know what else I heard from this
one um, woman there, that used to be my roommate, she says if a person is
slamming drugs or, or heroin or something, I don’t know, but she says that when
they use the bathroom it will smell to high H-E-L-L. (personal communication
with author, June 22, 2012)

“Passages” women understand that their residency at the Y protects them from the
much more dangerous context of the street, a place that is generally feared. Because of this,
in the midst of expressing their frustrations with shelter life, it was very common for
residents to acknowledge their dependency and gratitude for the Y, saying things like, “I
know I shouldn’t complain” (Jean, personal communication with author, August 23, 2012) or
“I don’t belong here. But also, at the same time I’m very very grateful for it, but I don’t
belong here” (Barbara, personal communication with author, August 31, 2012). Over time I
began to understand these comments as growing out of residents’ feelings of guilt or shame
regarding the acknowledgement of their own suffering in light of the suffering of the street.
In other words, in this situation, being homeless but not that homeless left them feeling it was
inappropriate to complain about the program that has kept them safe. Upon understanding
this, I began to say something like, “I think it’s okay to be grateful to have a safe place to
sleep and to recognize the difficulty in this situation at the same time.” I would say the same
to the reader. While the Y is not the street, it is not easy or comfortable. The difficulties of
living in this context should not be dismissed because they are not as extreme as those
suffered by the street dwelling homeless population. As the category of everyday violence is
meant to illustrate, the inconveniences of shelter life are mundane and banal, but they are not insignificant. As is evidenced in the data above, they cause a great deal of stress for “Passages” women.

**Housing Insecurity as Structured in “Passages” Programming**

“Passages” is a transitional housing program that provides important assistance for those seeking a transition out of homelessness but it is not an end to homelessness. At most, “Passage” provides women two years of relative stability in order for them to ready themselves for independent living and the average stay is eight months (Program Director, personal communication with author, June 5, 2012). By nature of their dependency, no shelter residents have housing security. However, as will be demonstrated below, this particular programming context, which includes the programming guidelines and the authoritative structure of the YWCA, frames “Passages” residents’ access to safe and secure housing and intensifies the experiences of stress resulting from their lack of control over it.

“Passages” residents sometimes leave the program unsuccessfully and involuntarily. Successful completion of the program is defined as gaining the ability to independently meet the need for shelter. This occurs via full employment or in some cases after being awarded disability. There are two ways to leave the program unsuccessfully and involuntarily. If the (maximum) two-year participation period ends and an individual is still unable to secure their own housing they must move out anyway. Individuals are also under the authority of staff and administration and may be kicked out of the program for bad behavior, particularly in regards to conflict with other residents, or for failing to meet program requirements for job search activities and/or residential rules. “Passages” residents experience stress related to each aspect of their housing insecurity, its temporary nature and the authority of staff, in interesting ways. Essentially, the temporary nature of the program intensifies the stress residents experience related to their un/under-employment while the authority of staff members creates a sense of helplessness that frames their interactions with staff and other residents, particularly in times of conflict.
The Programming Time Limit

“Passages” participants live at the Y because they have “nowhere else to go” (Monica; Ashley; Barbara; Eliana; personal communications with author, June-September, 2012), in other words, the Y is currently their best option for safe, secure shelter and, as discussed previously, the condition of un/underemployment prevents “Passages” women from independently obtaining housing. Therefore, it is not surprising that in my research with “Passages” women, I have found that, as it draws closer to an end, the time limit on their current housing heightens their experiences of stress surrounding their un/underemployment.

This phenomenon was communicated to me during a direct interaction I recorded in my field notes. It was a particularly hot evening in August 2012 and I was not surprised when no one came to take the class I had come to teach in the un-air-conditioned activity room. Finding myself with some free time I sat down with one of the “Passages” residents whom I will call Sara. Sara had come to the activity room in search of an un-crowded place to relax. Though she was neither an interview participant nor a dance participant I had interacted with Sara around the Y many times and we had become familiar to one another. That evening we talked for about an hour and she gave me verbal consent to discuss the things she had shared though she declined a later, audio-recorded interview. At one point, she asked me, “Do you know that if after two years you don’t have a job you have to leave the program?” I indicated that I was aware of the time limit. She responded, “It’s like ‘your time’s up, you gotta go.’ And we know the time is getting close for some women and they still don’t have a job! It’s like, oh my god! And we can’t even really talk about it. It’s just this unspoken fear. But we all know. They ‘ll just kick you out and where are we gonna go?!” (Sara, personal communication with author, August 9, 2012).

A discussion of the time limit and the way in which it intensifies the stress surrounding un/under-employment was repeated in my interview with Barbara. Directly preceding the excerpt below Barbara was discussing the difficulties she has had finding a job though she has been at the YWCA for over a year.

Jules: It seems like that would be a very big stress hanging over your head, like, what if this runs out and where am I gonna go.

Barbara: Now that is, that is, uh, yeah.

Jules: Is that something that weighs on you?
Barbara: Yes, very much so, very much so. It does. No one tries harder than I do. It’s my record that’s killing me. No one tries harder than me. (personal communication with author, August 31, 2012)

Here, we clearly see how Barbara’s fear of her time running out at the Y, feeds back into her stress regarding her unemployment. When Barbara says “It’s my record that’s killing me, no one tries harder than me,” she references her criminal record, an old felony conviction. For Barbara, the time limit intensifies her anxiety surrounding reasons she may be an undesirable candidate, one aspect of the stress of un/underemployment identified above.

**Housing Insecurity as Experienced in the Authoritative Context of the YWCA**

As housing dependents, “Passages” residents live under the authority of Y staff and administration. Residential house staff, case managers, and YWCA administrators all have power over the housing security of “Passages” women; and they may influence or terminate a resident’s participation in the program. The power difference that exists, by nature of residents’ dependency, is only aggravated by YWCA disciplinary policy, specifically the amount of discretion awarded each authoritative position regarding disciplinary procedures. As discussed in the methods chapter, Y personnel have the power of discretion in defining when behaviors warrant write-ups and for determining, from a list of options, what punishment will be applied and when. This discretionary disciplinary policy essentially gives power to individuals who hold positions of authority. There is no standardized protocol to function as an overarching authority and as a result residents perceive staff members to be inconsistent and unchecked in the exercise of power. Additionally, as discussed, there is no real appeal process through which residents may seek justice in the event they perceive staff to have acted inappropriately or unjustly. The grievance is simply heard by the program coordinator or director who decides the appropriate action.

“Passages” women experience the authoritative context of the Y as a significant psychosocial stressor. Their perceived lack of control in the face of staff power creates a sense of uncertainty regarding disciplinary action, particularly in regards to the security of
their housing, and the uncertainty of this context has a significant affect upon their relationships with staff and interactions with one another during times of conflict.

**Relationships with Staff**

Over the course of my time at the Y, I had many discussions with “Passages” residents regarding their understanding of the Y’s power context and how it affects their perceptions of and interactions with staff. In light of their dependency, Y residents perceive the lack of a disciplinary protocol and appeal process as giving staff an exorbitant amount of power over them. They perceive this context to permit abusive, contradictory, and unchecked disciplinary action by staff and administrators. In the face of perceived injustices, “Passages” women experience anger, frustration and a sense of helplessness as their housing insecurity holds them hostage to staff’s power.

Below, I share a series of representative data through which to explicate the phenomenon. First, I offer an excerpt from my field notes meant to highlight the power context of the YWCA and how residents experience staff’s authority as abusive in general terms. The next data was chosen from an interview and informs the reader of a specific disciplinary incident and failed appeal process in which a resident perceived staff and administrative action to be inappropriate. This is meant to give the reader a sense of the types of incidents that residents view as unjust and which are permitted through the authoritative context of the Y. Finally, I present a segment of an interview that represents the emotional tone of “Passages” residents in this particular authoritative context. After presenting each passage I will offer a brief interpretation regarding its meaning.

The first excerpt was recorded in field notes following one of the house meetings I attended. As I mentioned previously, at the end of each meeting residents are given the opportunity to air, as a group, any issues they have had over the month. This excerpt documents a conversation between several “Passages” residents and the program director, who is the highest authority figure of “Passages.” There were roughly twenty-five women in the meeting that evening and I estimate that around fifteen participated in this conversation by speaking directly or by nodding in agreement as other residents shared their frustrations regarding staff action and invocation of power.
As soon as the floor was opened to residents Monica raised her hand and asked if the staff has any sensitivity training. She shared that one residential staff member has been rude and disrespectful to her on several occasions—example when she had been just a few minutes late for curfew. Many of the women agreed that they had had issues with this particular staff member. When Monica said, “I know I’m young but she shouldn’t talk to me like I’m a four year old,” one of the other women chimed in, “Well I’m not young and she still talks to me like that,” and made reference to the staff member’s condescension and yelling. The conversation then opened up to personnel’s (residential and case-management) treatment of residents in general. Many agreed that they had not been treated with respect and were adamant that though the Y personnel were in a position of authority, and that even though they were in a shelter, they deserved be treated with respect. They argued that it is a matter of common courtesy and the appropriate way to treat a fellow human being. They shared that staff often threatened to kick them out of the program to control behavior. For example, several of the women reported being told that if they didn’t feel like doing something or had a problem with something that there were plenty of women on the waiting list who would take their place. They argued that this sort of threat was very stressful for them and that staff should not be allowed to do that.

Throughout the women’s complaints the program director reminded women not to discuss specifics or use any names and encouraged them not to complain but to look for solutions. After hearing many of the women complain about their treatment and staff’s level of power over them, the program director asked them what they should do if they have a problem with personnel. No one answered. The program director talked them through the appeal process. She instructed them that should they have any problems with the way staff treated them they should first go to talk to the individual personnel member about it. If the were not happy with the way the problem was resolved there they could go to either the program coordinator for problems with residential staff or to her, the program director, for problems with case managers. For the most part, this silenced the women.

However, after a few moments one woman raised her hand in response to the program director’s description of the chain of command. While leaning forward with her eyes mostly on the floor, she made a profound statement of suffering regarding her authoritative context. She told the program director that it was really difficult for residents to go to staff and administrators because of the power difference between them due to the fact that staff can have them kicked out of their housing. She argued that in her experiences neither staff nor administrators listen and things didn’t get better. She argued that residents couldn’t do anything about the way staff treated them. She felt that the power difference was a big problem and that a level of professionalism was missing. Many of the women nodded enthusiastically as she spoke. In response to her statements the program director simply reminded them to go through the appeal process in the event of future problems. (author’s field notes, June 5, 2012)
This scene is loaded with significance. It highlights the way in which the “Passages” women experience the Y’s personnel as abusive and unchecked and how this experience is rooted in the Y’s authoritative context. Many of the residents understood and experienced their lack of power in specific interactions they perceived as abusive. This is illustrated in Monica’s complaints regarding the way a staff member reacted to her tardiness and also in comments made regarding personnel’s threats to kick them out of the program if they did not change their behavior. Additionally, the systemic nature of these incidents was addressed in the comments of the woman who gave such an insightful criticism of the YWCA’s authoritative context and the level of power Y personnel are given over them. It is instructive that in response to these complaints, particularly the critique of the power structure, the program director simply reiterated the appeals process that residents had been telling her did not work. She chose not to address any of the specific complaints, saying that those things were in the past, and did not address the concerns raised over the level of unchecked power given personnel. In this way, this conversation is not only a critique of the Y’s discretionary power structure; it is an example of it. The program director brushed aside resident concerns, offering the appeals process as a viable solution. This interaction at once highlighted and reinforced residents’ powerlessness in the face of perceived injustices and also substantiated their claims that administrators almost always side with personnel, creating a situation in which Y personnel are virtually “infallible” (Janet, personal communication with author, October 13, 2012).

The next excerpt is from my interview with Barbara. It provides a representative example of the types of disciplinary actions that have been perceived as abusive and inconsistent. Here, Barbara discusses the disciplinary action taken against her by her case manager because of her continued unemployment.

Jules: Yeah, so, you’ve been here a year so you have another year?

Barbara: Ah, not necessarily. See this is, this is where we’ve uh, run into a, my case manager and I have run into a little bit of a problem. She’s threatening me with a thirty day notice because I don’t have a job yet… they just gave me a uh, thirty day, [probation]. And in thirty days, if I don’t have a job, they’re going to consider if they’re going to give me another thirty-day case plan, or a thirty-day notice. And it’s like, ‘Uh, there’s people who’ve been here two years to the day and left without a job!’ ‘Well it’s case by case…” ‘I should be one of those
cases!” No one tries harder than I do. It’s my record that’s killing me. No one ties harder than me.

Jules: Uh huh. And do you feel, that, them, putting that pressure on you of a thirty day…

Barbara: Yes. I think that’s not fair. I, I think that’s unnecessary, unfair, and just not cool.

Jules: Is there anything, when you have a problem with your case manager and think that, ‘This is an unfair thing,’ is there anywhere you can go and say, ‘Look at what’s happening’?

Barbara: I have, and I suppose they should, but I’ve gone over [my case manager’s] head and they defended her.

Jules: To who?

Barbara: Well, uh, [the program coordinator] defends her. [She says], “Well it’s all on a case by case basis.” Well I apparently don’t know what you judge on because none of it, a lot of the time it doesn’t make sense to me. (personal communication with author, August 31, 2012)

It should be noted that at the time of this disciplinary action Barbara had met all program requirements surrounding job search. For example, she had consistently fulfilled the required twenty-five weekly applications. Though “Passages” can be a two-year program, as mentioned, should a case manager determine a resident to be non-compliant with programming they can begin disciplinary action. Because “Passages” is essentially a welfare-to-work program, continued unemployment may be deemed non-compliance but is not always. As Barbara states, some women are in the program for two years and never have a job. Her claims are substantiated through information regarding other residents. For example, among my other interview participants, Bekah was given a thirty-day notice to find a job or move out after only being in the program eight months while Joy never had a job in the almost two-years she was in the program. Discussing these decisions with staff may have provided me a better understating as to why they were made. However, my research is not an evaluation of the program but rather an investigation of the experience of the residents; for them, the contradictions represented in these incidents leaves them feeling threatened and victimized by staff members. Barbara’s experience exemplifies this feeling of victimization. In the passage above Barbara believes her case manager’s threats to her housing to be abusive and inconsistent with the ways in which others have been treated. Additionally,
Barbara’s concerns were not taken seriously by the program coordinator, contributing to her sense of powerless in the YWCA, particularly regarding her housing security.

The final excerpt has been taken from my interview with Monica and is meant to give a reader an indication of the emotional experience residents have of this power difference. Preceding this particular portion of the interview I had asked Monica about the comments she had made in the house meeting regarding staff’s treatment of residents, as shared in the field notes above. Specifically, I reminded her that she had said that staff treats her like she “is four” and asked her to tell me a little more about that situation.

Monica: You know… we’re fucking people too! We’re just like you! We have our lives just like you! Instead of, you know, thinking that, no offense we’re not, not that they think we’re animals or treat us like that but, I understand there’s rules. Understandable. But what do you think, don’t you think we have lives outside of here just like you guys do? I’m pretty sure that you guys don’t go home and bitch about, “oh blah blah blah had a and duh duh duh duh duh!” No! Our lives don’t fucking revolve around the YWCA. And I’m pretty sure yours don’t either. Only difference is we just come home to here. And, like, T’s like, “where you at?” ‘The residence.’ “Not your home?” ‘Ain’t my home, aint my house! It’s my residence. This is a dwelling.

Jules: Why do you think that they, why do you think people think it’s ok to treat you like you’re “a four year old” as you describe it?

Monica: Because it’s a level of power. (personal communication with author, June 8, 2012)

Monica was angry during this portion of her interview. Her voice grew louder, she sat up straighter in her chair and her eyes were wide as she responded to my question. As is common when people speak through emotion, Monica’s response is a bit disjointed but it does showcase the sense of injustice Monica feels in light of staff’s treatment. Monica’s need to assert her independence from the Y highlights the lack of control she has within it. Monica is forced to submit to authority figures she perceives as condescending and unfair because they control her access to safe housing. She references her life outside of the Y in an attempt to minimize the authority staff has over her personhood, and the discomfort caused by her forced submission. Later in the interview Monica briefly referenced this situation again by saying, “You know… we are people. You know, yeah I’m 24 and I ain’t got nowhere else to go… but for anybody to treat anybody beyond humane is I don’t know I maybe, hmm, I say, you know” (personal communication with author, June 8, 2012).
Monica’s feeling of victimization by staff members and her resulting anger and frustration was a common theme in interviews and in direct interactions among many residents. I should note that Monica’s language, specifically her use of profanity, was stronger than the language used by other women discussing this phenomenon. However, I feel that in written form Monica’s description is the most accurate reflection of the intensity with which residents experience the power over them. Because one cannot read tone or facial expressions in this format, the strength of Monica’s language may serve as representative of the emotional tone of “Passages” women as a group of people living under this particular authoritative context.

The condition of dependency on what is perceived to be an abusive, inconsistent and unchecked power structure is a significant psychosocial stressor for “Passages” women. Because staff members have control over housing, because they can threaten residents with a termination of stay to control behavior, and because there is no explicit protocol or appeal process regulating disciplinary action, residents feel as though they are victimized in their powerlessness. This creates a significant emotional response for “Passages” women, and it has a profound affect on the way they define their experiences of the Y, including their relationships with staff members.

I was fortunate that during the writing of this chapter I was able to have a long, frank conversation with Janet, a YWCA resident who has a background in anthropology. I shared my perspective on the YWCA’s authoritative context and how I perceived this to effect residents on an emotional level and in their relationships with staff. After providing confirmation of what I had shared Janet added her own story of “victimization.” Though she is under doctor’s orders not to lift anything above her head Janet was written up by staff members for non-completion of a chore she is physically unable to do. After this chore had been assigned, Janet had reminded the staff members of her physical limitations, told them she could not complete it, and asked them to assign her another chore. They wrote her up anyway. Janet appealed this disciplinary action to the “Passages” director who listened to her for an hour. Janet left the meeting feeling positive. However, the next day Janet was forced to sign an agreement conceding to the appropriateness of the disciplinary action. When she expressed confusion regarding why this was so in light of her positive meeting with the director, she was told that the director thought Janet should be heard but never had the
intention of over-turning the write-up. Janet was left feeling powerless. She explained to me that the discretionary discipline of the YWCA creates a context in which the beds of YWCA residents are essentially “held hostage” (Janet, personal communication with author, October 13, 2012) to individual personnel.

**Interactions among Residents**

The powerlessness residents experience because of their housing insecurity also has significant effects on how residents interact with one another in times of conflict. As discussed earlier in the chapter, there is a great deal of stress caused by the everyday violence of shelter life. These circumstances often lead to interpersonal conflicts among residents. While interpersonal conflict is in itself a stress-inducing event, in light of their dependency for housing, in most cases exacerbated by the discretionary power of staff, these become highly stressful events for some women. As stated above, staff is responsible for maintaining order on the floor. In the event of a conflict, Y staff defines what actions have been inappropriate and case managers decide whether or not and which disciplinary action should be taken, up to and including a termination of stay. In the event of conflict with other residents, “Passages” women must weigh personnel power over their housing security, or someone else’s, against the threat or injustices posed by the other resident. This situation often leaves residents paralyzed. To protect oneself from one threat is to expose oneself to the other. For some, the resulting emotional experience is an extreme helplessness and fear.

Below I present stories from three “Passages” women caught in this situation. These stories are rather straightforward. While I will introduce and offer my interpretation of how each story contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon as a whole I will not be analyzing each for content. Rather, I will allow the women to speak for themselves as much as possible.

The first story comes from my interview with Eliana. In sharing her experience of interpersonal conflict, Eliana clearly illustrates how the power structure of the Y, specifically the staff’s power to arbitrarily terminate her housing, left her to powerless to protect herself. Eliana gives a vivid, even visceral description of her stress experience in this context. The result is a full picture of this particular phenomenon. We see how the Y’s authoritative structure and the disciplinary actions stemming from it frame (circumscribe) her action in the
face of conflict, and, we are given a description of how this affects her on an emotional and physical level.

Eliana: At the very beginning it was very hard, very hard for me cause I never never, never, um, spent, share room with another person, just the family, just the relatives, but being here in um, meet different persons, different personalities, is very hard, is very hard. But, I feel I learn, I learn a lot, and being in the situation made me more human maybe. In touch with humanity. Um, because, every head is a different world. They think different all of them and I’m learning of that. But in the very beginning it was hard because I had problems with three, well, they had problems with me. They didn’t like me. When I am, how I am. Well, they say we have different lifestyles. Which is true.

Jules: What did they mean by that?

Eliana: In the way that um, how you, sleep, how you, stay in the room.

Jules: Um, hmm, so these were you’re roommates?

Eliana: Uh huh yes. One of them sent me to the hospital.

Jules: Really?

Eliana: Uh huh.

Jules: Did she physically

Eliana: She was very rude, I was afraid, I got a panic attack like heart attack, I couldn’t breath, she, I can say she sent me to the hospital. Because she was threaten me she was bullying me.

Jules: What was she threatening you with?

Eliana: Um, saying that they, she knew that I am tranquil and calm and I didn’t want to fight back and she always bullying me saying that, “I don’t like you. I gonna um, do everything to kick you out of the room.”

Jules: And this was when you first got here.

Eliana: No, after maybe, six months, six, six months. But um, she was the one that got to be kicked out cause she wasn’t very, she, she had mental problems. And she got in trouble with many ladies. And uh, they knew that she wasn’t ok in her mind.

Jules: Right. She got kicked out of the program?

Eliana: Yeah, because she, she had man, many um, problems, mental problems.

Jules: And were you afraid for your safety? Your physical safety.

Eliana: yeah, yeah, and, when I was, with her in the room and she remind me a lot of my [abusive] husband because she, he always, um, told me the way to do the things, the way that he didn’t like, um, threaten me, threaten me, telling that I am, stupid, which he used to tell me. Because I couldn’t speak good English, I don’t speak good English but at least I know they understand me. But she was very
mean, she was, and my husband was mean. She, like my husband he used to tell me that uh, if I don’t know how to say the things, don’t ask him, or don’t tell, because I have grammar, grammar errors. So, he, used to tell me, “You don’t speak well.”

Jules: Was he American?

Eliana: Yeah, and that lady remind me a lot of my husband.

Jules: So she, she was verbally abusing you?

Eliana: Yeah, well, it remind me of my husband and I was afraid and I was, with my body, like uh, tight, every time I went to the room, I didn’t want to go in the room and I couldn’t sleep, and I didn’t sleep for maybe three days. And that make me feel, made me feel uh, like weak and shaky, uh huh, and I’m sorry (crying) excuse me.

Jules: Oh, I’m sorry, I was looking in my bag for Kleenex. It’s ok. It’s ok.

Eliana: But, that’s the worst situation that I’ve had here, in here. Well, because, they, the program made us sign an agreement to respect each other and I said, ‘Well, I can’t sign everything you want but, who can guarantee my safety, my safety when I am in the room alone with her. Nobody is with me twenty-four hours a day when she is with me.’ And they say, “Well, if the troubles keep happening, you two gonna be out of the program,” and I was afraid of that.

Jules: You? They were gonna kick you both?

Eliana: Both. Uh huh. So I was so afraid because I didn’t, I don’t have no where to go, I don’t have a place to go.

Jules: I’m sure! And so you felt, trapped, is that correct?

Eliana: Yes, yeah, yeah.

Jules: Between, putting up with her, or losing your housing.

Eliana: Uh huh, uh huh, and so, I didn’t want to stop, to, to to, to explode, because, when somebody’s bullying you, there’s a time when you want to fight back. You want to, to fight. But I didn’t want to explode so, everything was in my inside, well, that’s what the doctor says, said that I’m (body gesture- holding it in). But it was very bad. It feel like I, I was having a heart attack in the bed and uh, everybody gonna, go find me dead the next day because I couldn’t move, couldn’t do anything, couldn’t speak, couldn’t do anything, it was for maybe half an hour. Like I feel like a knife in my chest and my heart. So, after that um, I called the staff and they came and they sent me to the hospital, the, the paramedics came and they released me, I don’t know, maybe, 10 hours after that. And when I got to my room, it was maybe nine or ten in the morning and she was asleep, it was a Sunday, and she was asleep and I came to my room and um, climbed into my bed cause I had uh, uh, the upper bunk and uh, she said, “Don’t think that [because] you went to the hospital don’t give you the right to make noise. You don’t see I’m sleeping.” It was ten in the morning. And I was, ‘Oh my god. How can I, god give me patience.’ So, after that, the next day they move her
out of my room. And then, she had problems with another, then another, then another. And so they knew that she was the problem, not me. But it was very, very, very bad, very bad. (personal communication with author, July 2, 2012)

The next story comes from my interview with Joy. Her experience is different from Eliana’s in that there is not actually a conflict. Rather, Joy’s fear of conflict and the resulting disciplinary action has a profound affect on her interactions with her roommates. Specifically, Joy fears that her participation in conflict could result in her being kicked out of the program and ending up on the street. In response, Joy strategically minimizes the chances of conflict by consistently deferring to her roommates.

Joy: Did you defer to your roommates?
Joy: I do a lot, I did a lot, because I’d hear it a lot, quite a few of my former roommates at the Y, “She’s the best roommate I ever had.” And I’d think yeah because I never, I’d let them have their way, you know. I mean if they wanted the lights off at 10, I’d let em. I either slept or I got up and read. If they liked the window open, if they liked the blinds open or if they wanted the blinds closed cause someone was looking in from who knows where or, you know and all this different, and I basically, you know, and sometimes I’d get a little irritated like why do I have to always, but a lot of times I felt like, this is just too small, you know I’m this close to the street.

Joy: Did you just feel like it was easier just to let it go?
Joy: Yeah because I’m just that way but also I you, besides the Y where am I gonna go?
Joy: And you said, “I’m this close to the street.”
Joy: Yeah, it’s like, I can’t, this is not big enough to argue about, it’s not worth it. (personal communication with author, June 14, 2012)

The final excerpt comes from Ashley. Ashley was very new to the Y at the time of our interview. She had only been there three weeks. Just prior to the conversation shared below I had asked her how she was doing there so far. Her story is rather different from the other two because in it Ashley must weigh a threat posed to her against the security of her roommate’s housing. Though she would like to protect herself, Ashley does not want to put her roommate on the street. As a result, Ashley must sacrifice what is best for herself to protect her roommate.

Ashley: Um, (rather long pause) It’s going ok. It’s going ok. Um, not, I guess it’s not really like I expected it to be. Um, uh, (long pause) I don’t even know where to start, where to go with that. Last week, or was it this week, I think this week, it’s one of the reasons I’m here is because of meth, crystal meth addiction and uh,
so, I’m trying to get away from that and then my roommate had some the other
day and was doing it in the room and I thought I was coming here to be safe from
that and so that sort of threw my whole program for a loop.

Jules: Right, right. Um, so are you just coming out of this addiction?
Ashley: 67 days today.

Jules: Ok, well, congratulations.
Ashley: It’s pretty new.

Jules: You’re still fighting.
Ashley: Yeah, uh huh, I think so. I mean I thought I was doing pretty good but it
was just too close to home.

Jules: Yeah, and in your room.
Ashley: Right, um, (sighs,) right.

Jules: What did you do?
Ashley: I just told her, she offered me a line, and I said ‘no’ and she’s like,
“Nobody will know.” But, I’ll know. You know and I’m trying to do this right for
once so.

Jules: Right, and there are, are there four people in your room total.
Ashley: No, it was just me and my roommate and then we had somebody else
move into our room last night.

Jules: Ok. Um, so, are you feeling afraid then, that you haven’t been able to get
away from some of the things
Ashley: Um, no, I think I’m more angry about it.

Jules: You’re angry.

Ashley: Yeah. Because I don’t know that I’ll ever get away from it you know. I
think it could be anywhere technically so I just need to learn how to deal with it if
it comes my way and just know that I’m going to be strong enough to say ‘no.’
But I think I’m, I think I was just mostly angry and kinda hurt you know

Jules: Angry at who?

Ashley: The system. Kind of, because I kinda felt let down. And I knew that, you
know I didn’t want to go tell and then be like a tattle tale, so I didn’t and then that
made me angry because I knew that if I told then, you know, I’d have that
hanging over my head and, you know I don’t want my roommate to get in trouble
cause I like her and, it’s, she, I don’t know. It’s just a situation I’ve been feeling
kind of torn over.

Jules: Yeah. And um, do you think there would be repercussions for you, socially,
or otherwise if you told?
Ashley: Possibly. Possibly. She’s kinda the fighter type, so.
Jules: So possibly physical and social repercussions.

Ashley: Yeah, yeah, I think people would be pissed off at me for telling and, you know, not minding my own business. But, so it’s just not worth it.

Jules: Right, and you were feeling like, hopeful, if I’m putting words in your mouth stop me and correct me.

Ashley: Ok

Jules: What I’m hearing you say is, you were feeling hopeful that this would be kind of a sanctuary in terms of some space, 90 days, to, to be out of the situation, get yourself mentally prepared for when you face it, and so you haven’t been given that space you thought you were going to have.

Ashley: Yeah, exactly. And it was disappointing, and it makes me almost feel like, do I want to find somewhere else? But, I don’t really have any other options, so. (personal communication with author, June 15, 2012)

Together these stories showcase how the power of staff to terminate resident housing can paralyze residents in the face of conflict. Conflict on the floor is common given the physical arrangement of the Y and the resulting close proximity between residents; they are often inconvenienced or threatened by the personality or actions of another. While considering how they will seek justice or safety during conflict, residents must consider the ways in which staff may react. They must weigh the threat posed by others against their housing security or that of another before deciding a course of action. As evidenced in the data above this often leaves residents helpless to do anything, paralyzed by a dependency for shelter. The fear associated with this situation is magnified by the arbitrary power structure of the Y in those situations where a resident fears for her own housing. Because the staff does not follow an explicit disciplinary protocol and because there is no mandate for investigative procedures in the event of a conflict, residents have no certainty that they will be fairly heard if involved in a conflict. Though the conflicts in each case presented above are different, the power context that affects them and the resulting experience of helplessness are the same, indicating the significance of the programs power structure in mediating relationships in the Y.

**EXPERIENCES OF DANCE AS A STRESS RELIEVER**

In contrast to the stress “Passages” residents experience as homeless women, throughout my time teaching at the Y participants discussed experiencing dance class as a stress reliever with frequency and enthusiasm. The most illustrative data on this comes from
direct interactions during dance classes from September 2011 through October 2012. Below, I share two excerpts that I believe typify discussions regarding the stress-relieving experiences of “Passages” dancers. First I present an excerpt from a June 21, 2012 dance class. This passage shows the degree to which observations and interactions concerning dance as a stress reliever occurred in a typical class period.

Tonight, two new women came to the dance class. Right at five o’clock, Tiffany walked into the activity room, introduced herself, and said she’d never danced before but would like to give the class a try. I told her that was great, that we’d get started, and that if no one else came she’d get a private lesson. However, just as we were beginning Noel came in and asked if she could join. Saying, “Of course” I laid down yoga mats for both women. Noel also indicated she had no experience with dance.

Because both students were beginners, and were not dressed appropriately for dance and yoga as they were both wearing jeans, I kept the warm-up very mild and chose stretches that are generally pleasurable but simple. For example, we spent some time working on gentle side stretches, drawing attention to the way the breath affects the side body, opening the ribs and increasing the stretch. We also did a standing cat and cow stretch to work the muscles along the spine and open the chest. My primary goal in that moment was to give them physical pleasure through stretching and both made unsolicited comments to that effect. For example, at several points throughout the warm-up, Tiffany would say, “Oh, yes, that feels good,” while Noel shared that she’d stopped stretching because she used to get cramps but now she remembered how good it felt.

After warm-up I showed them the hip scarves and told them to choose whichever they liked, if they wanted to wear one. While I looked through my iPod for the music I wanted for the isolations segment of the class, Tiffany and Noel looked through the scarves, talking amongst themselves about how attractive they were. They seemed excited about them as they picked out the one they wanted and spent some time showing off their choices to each other. They were unsure of how to wear them and so I showed them by helping Tiffany tie the one she’d chosen around her hips.

In isolations we worked only on shimmies and up hip movements. We discussed posture and sharpness, focusing on the low belly for spinal support and the glutes for articulation. They were both sweating and breathing heavily. Every now and again Tiffany would exclaim, “WHOO!” and “This is a good workout!” in recognition of the amount of muscular and cardio work we were doing. The last half of class we worked on moving with isolations and building a simple combo as we added some arms on the side-to-side movement. We finished with a cool down of simple arm movements. After class, Tiffany said to count her as a regular. She said she planned to commit to the class the and as long as she wasn’t working she’d be there. She said it made her feel better and happier.
asked her what she meant by this she said that it helped her to take her mind off of her stress and just made her body feel better. (author’s field notes, June 21, 2012)

Next is a composite of interactions with one student. This account of dance class is representative of the range of comments I received over the 14 months of dance classes. I have chosen to present data from one vocal student in order to provide clarity for the reader. It is important to note that while Bekah is particularly elaborate and enthusiastic in her description of dance as a stress relief, her descriptions of the ways in which she experienced dance are similar in nature to comments from other students. Bekah was my only student tonight. She has been a regular in my class for months and almost every week she tells me how much she enjoys dancing and what a big stress relief it is for her. She is very energetic and communicative with me regarding her experiences of the class. Tonight, as she walked into the activity room she stopped, opened her arms in a dramatic gesture and said, “Bellydance! I can’t believe I’m here, I’m so happy!” She ran up the stairs to the stage and as I handed her a yoga mat she said that dance was something she could do for herself because it helped her to get away from the stress and the monotony of her life “up there,” as she pointed up in reference to the fifth floor. I asked her what she meant by “getting away” and she said that it gave her something to do other than being up there, referring to the fact that it physically removes her from the floor, and that it also helps take her mind off of things. She said it’s also important that she gets to do something for herself because she spends all day running from this social service office to the next trying to get everything in order and this was a chance to do something normal. She said she’d had a rough week and she’d been really stressed about everything; especially finding a job and getting her social service benefits lined up. She said that all the applications and appointments she had to do added to the stress of her situation and got her down. She said that she has to spend so much time focused on getting things in order but that she needed to do other things sometimes to feel happy. She said dance was one of the things that gave her that opportunity.

During our warm-up I made sure to give extra time for a little foot rub and some extra neck stretching because she’d mentioned having pain in both areas. She attributed her foot pain to the fact that she’d done so much walking throughout the week and her neck pain to tension caused by stress. Bekah is quite vocal when she likes something. Tonight was no exception as she said things like, “Oh that’s nice” or, “That feels good,” at several points during the warm-up but particularly when we worked to stretch our necks, feet and low back. Bekah spoke at length about how the dancing made “it all go away,” and the way in which our neck and shoulder rolls and the movements we did while dancing made her feel “so good.” She also spoke about the ways in which emotional stress can have a physical effect if not dealt with, saying it can start to wear you down. Bekah reminded me of the stomach issues she had in her first two months at the Y. She was so stressed
about sharing her space with all those other women that she had become ill, and she experienced regular bouts of nausea and diarrhea. She attributed this illness to her stress and has said that dance was one of the things that helped her take care of it. It was something that helped her ‘let it go’ so that she could be happy. She gave the metaphor of a spider bite. She said, “you don’t ignore it, you put medicine on it to make it better” and that dance was her medicine.

Because she has been coming regularly for several months, Bekah is familiar with many of the isolation drills and so we were able to move through several as a review tonight. I only taught Bekah one new isolation, a pelvic tuck which is generated by the low abs and which is an essential building block both for undulations and for moving the legs with support from the core. Most beginners have a difficult time with this isolation but Bekah picked it up very quickly. She said that she enjoyed this one because it helped to stretch out the tension in her low back and that that “felt so good.”

In the movement building section of the class we began to work on low arabesques and top to bottom undulations, building a combo around these two movements. At first, she had a bit of difficulty with both movements. They are not simple, and so I told her to take the layers out of the combination by focusing on the correct footwork before she added the details in the torso or the arms. I told her that she could add the other aspects of the combination when she felt comfortable doing so. We drilled the combo together several times and I feel that taking some of the difficulty out helped her a great deal. By the end she was smiling and enjoying it, saying ‘All right!’ as she clapped her hands together after each run through. Having noted her earlier frustration I made sure to be very encouraging of her progress, telling her she was doing great and learning these difficult movements very quickly. In response she said, “It’s because I really want to learn to dance!”

As we cooled off I told her just to follow me in slow dance movements. As usual we focused on arms. We worked on snake arms because they are her favorite. She has told me she thinks they are beautiful and that they are a good work out because they cause the muscles in her arms and shoulders to burn. I also had her follow me in a simple movement as we swept the arms down and to the side with a little push before we changed direction. I asked her to think of a story, suggesting that she pretend she was pushing something away from her. She laughed and said that she was pushing away all the women on the floor. As she added her narrative her movements got bigger and sharper. We laughed together as with each push she said things like, “Get out of the kitchen!” or “Clean up your mess!” (author’s field notes, May-September, 2012)

The excerpts above exemplify the typical data recorded during my fourteen months of participant observation and direct interaction. These students’ experiences of dance as an emotional and physical stress reliever were a ubiquitous theme in my field notes. In fact, over the course of my time teaching, I had twenty-two different students attend my class. Of those,
fifteen were recorded as indicating they had experienced dance class as a stress reliever. When dance students describe experiences of their “stress,” they speak of it as an emotional preoccupation that has physical results. For example, in the data above, Bekah describes several experiences of this nature, such as her stomach illness and her inability to let go of a mental focus on her circumstances. Similarly, in a September 20, 2012 class, a first time student named Jessica shared that she was experiencing a great deal of neck pain and attributed this to her emotional preoccupation surrounding her job search.

As discussed above, it was “Passages” residents’ narratives of dance that provided insight into how to conceptualize and approach them as a particular marginalized population. When participants described their emotional and physical stress, they placed their experiences within the phenomenon biological anthropologists have labeled the “Seylean Stress Perspective.” The Seylean stress perspective acknowledges the emotional and physical suffering caused by psychosocial stressors (for a full explanation see Chapter 2). As seen above, an exploration of psychosocial stressors, as opposed to biophysical ones, is crucial in understanding the marginality of “Passages” women. In turn, an understanding of the physiological component of the Seylean stress perspective aids us in understanding the experiences of dance for this particular, highly stressed population.

In this research, I have identified three categories of psycho-social stressors prevalent among this particular marginalized population; the status of un/under-employment, the everyday violence of the shelter, and their housing insecurity as it is exacerbated in the programming context of the Y. As the data above shows, Y residents experience a great deal of emotional stress related to these circumstances, including anger, fear, frustration, and powerlessness. While the emotional response was generally identified, or apparent from their descriptions, participants less frequently specified their experiences of the physiological components of the Seylean stress perspective, a biological processes that goes hand in hand with any human’s experience of emotional distress. As it is common in every human, acknowledging the physiological component of the Seylean stress response provides additional insight into the subjective experience of “stress” and offers an understanding as to why dance, as a particular activity, can function as a significant stress reliever for “Passages” residents.
As discussed in detail in the literature review, the physiological component of the Seylean stress response includes increased hormonal, neural, cardiovascular, and metabolic activity, increased sodium and fluid retention, and changes in salivation and gastrointestinal tone and functioning. While the physiological component of the Seylean stress response prepares the body for movement, “fight or flight,” physical exertion signals the body to begin a relaxation response that halts and reverses the effects of the stress, returning the body to homeostasis. Because of this, physical activities have the capacity to provide greater stress relieving benefits than do non-physically based activities (Hansmann et al. 2007).

Knowledge of Seylean stress response provides insight into why, on a basic biological level, “Passages” participants may have experienced dance class as a significant stress reliever. Dance is an activity in which participants physically exert themselves. In this way, though I found no research that did biological testing to confirm this, I argue that dance participation can initiate the body’s relaxation response and provide relief from the biological component of Seylean stress. If one accepts this, it may also be assumed that dance participation initiated the same physiological process among “Passages” dancers and that this was one aspect of their experiences of dance as a stress relief.

Given the biological nature of the phenomenon I am discussing, one could make the argument that any physical activity would provide the same stress relieving benefits that “Passages” women reported experiencing in dance class. This is certainly a possibility and one that could be explored in future research, but I must note that with the exception of two, none of my 22 dance participants reported engaging in any other physical activities. This fact is significant given the proven ability of physical activities to provide greater stress relieving benefits than sedentary activities. Perhaps this is why “Passages” dancers reported experiencing dance as a stress relief with such frequency and enthusiasm.

**CONCLUSION**

The Seylean stress perspective provides a conceptual tool for understanding how the psycho-social stress of “Passages” women may be understood. As sheltered women, “Passages” residents do not have to worry about the most severe biophysical stressors, things such as cold and hunger, endured by homeless street dwellers. However, because academic literature and our social imagery have focused on the acute and severe category of
biophysical stress when examining homelessness, the experiences of longer-term shelter residents, such as “Passages” women, have gone unnoticed. In contrast, an acknowledgement of the psychosocial category of stressors sheds light on the social and economic marginality of “Passages” women and provides insight into how these manifest emotionally and physiologically in the subjective experiences of “Passages” women. Considering the high levels of stress reported by this marginal population it is, perhaps, unsurprising that those who participated in a once weekly dance class have experienced it as a stress reliever. As a physical activity, it is likely that dance is capable of releasing the body from the physiological component of Seylean stress in a way that other more sedentary activities cannot.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

During the early history of anthropology, “the ethnographic other…[was] assumed to be geographically and historically [meaning traditional as opposed to modern] distant from communities that produce and consume anthropological products” (Kearney 2004:79). This perspective produced ethnographies that simply sought to satisfy curiosity about exotic ways of being in a local context. In the 1970s and 80s, this perspective of the “other” began to crumble. Historical realities such as the Vietnam War, migration, economic globalization, etc., made it impossible for anthropologists to continue to conceive of subjects in a circumscribed, distant, and unconnected world. The advent of a global perspective forced the recognition of interconnected economic and political forces creating concentrated suffering among certain groups (for a full discussion see Kearney 2004). In response, many anthropologists began to feel that the discipline “[could no longer] physically, ethically, or emotionally escape the hardship of the lives of its traditional research subjects” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:320). To remain a valid and ethical discipline in the contemporary world, anthropology had to account for structurally imposed suffering (see Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Kearney 2004; Robben and Sluka 2007).

My own reconceptualization of “otherness” and the resulting compulsion to study suffering alongside dance is a product of my 21st century anthropological education. And though an appropriate endeavor for anthropologists, and even anthropology students, there are significant ethical concerns in conducting research on the suffering of socially and economically marginalized groups. These were well considered by anthropologists following the advent of the discipline’s new perspective on “otherness.” Specifically, concerns regarding representation and academic voyeurism brought anthropology to its knees during the discipline’s post-modern pause, “a period of soul-searching about the morality of fieldwork relations and the ethico-political implications of ethnography” (Robben and Sluka 2007:23).
As suffering is a major focus of this research, inherent in it are those same ethical vulnerabilities that caused the substantial period of reflection within anthropology. Because of the significance of these risks, I feel it important to begin this concluding chapter with a reflexive analysis, grounding my efforts at ethically managing this study in the historical development of the discipline.

As Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) noted, research documenting the details of daily life among “cultural pariahs,” like the homeless, is especially vulnerable to the risks of unethical representation because a reader’s ideological projections regarding the meaning of taboo behaviors may substantiate the stereotype[s] attached to a group. In this research for example, details about drug use or grotesque bathroom behavior could further stigmatize a population already coping with a certain degree of symbolic violence. These correlations may draw us into details reminiscent of the social imagery surrounding the dirty, drug using street dweller, and through this affiliation further diminish the social value of “Passages” women.

Academic voyeurism names a concern that research among socially and economically marginal groups may be conducted in the service of anthropological knowledge while doing nothing for the suffering population. It is an uncaring intrusion into the lives of the world’s most powerless that is permitted because the prestige of academia manages to obscure the violation. This risk, in particular, has weighed heavily on me. Many times throughout the past year and a half, and even as I write this, I have worried over the ethics of my intrusion into the lives of “Passages” women. I have felt uneasy in interviews when asked, “How is this going to help us” (Heather, personal communication with author, September 7, 2012), and I have had to answer honestly, “It won’t help you.” I have been apprehensive that this risk is somehow magnified by the fact that I am a student who is “cutting my teeth” on their suffering: In asking myself, “Who really stands to gain from this?” I have had to admit that the party unequivocally standing to gain, and standing to gain the most is myself; I am gaining a master’s degree.

Fortunately, I have not had to struggle through my own reflexive pause[s] alone. In addition to deconstructing a mis-guided notion of “otherness,” my education has exposed me to guidelines for managing the ethical concerns of representation and voyeurism in examinations of suffering. I have focused on three of these guidelines throughout the
development of this project and the writing of this thesis; the use of integrative theories, practical anthropology, and reflexivity (Kearney 2004). While my discussion to this point is reflexivity in action and needs no further exploration, I wish to briefly discuss the ways in which I have sought to fulfill the other two.

Anthropologists have created critical theories that locate populations in their local, national, and global contexts (Kearney 2004). In regards to research on the homeless, their use addresses an issue of representation by illuminating the economic, social, and political forces that operate to create homelessness (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Doing so denaturalizes the belief that homeless individuals are responsible for homelessness. As a result, these integrative theories can weaken the symbolic violence attached to this population.

As discussed in the literature review, one of the major contributions of Bourgois and Schonberg’s (2009) theory of lumpen abuse is its demonstration of the structural causes of homelessness. In it they examine how global economic shifts, such as the overseas relocation of factory jobs; and national level neoliberal economic changes, which included for example, a dramatic reduction in federal spending for subsidized housing, broke down the security of the working class and is directly implicated in the creation of contemporary homelessness in the United States. Even though the women of my research are sheltered and the specific conditions of their homelessness differs from those of street dwellers, I feel it is appropriate to tie the status of my population to the work of scholars who have explored the large scale economic, political, and social causes of modern day homelessness (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Evans and Forsyth 2004; Lee and Schreck 2005; Rowe and Wolch 1990) through the theory of lumpen abuse. In conceptually integrating “Passages” women into their macro context, I have hoped to diminish the painful symbolic violence attached to their status rather than bolster it, even though an investigation of the causes of their homelessness is beyond the purview of this research.

In anthropology’s potential to expose the conditions and causes of suffering it also carries the potential to benefit a population. The applied anthropological approach addresses the issue of academic voyeurism by putting the knowledge gained through research to work in the service of the examined population. Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) explain,
As anthropologists studying people who live under conditions of extreme duress and distress, we feel it is imperative to link theory to practice. Otherwise, we would be merely intellectual voyeurs. It is politically and analytically gratifying to engage with critical theory but we also need to operate at the level of immediate policy options and specific local interventions that can be implemented in both the short and long term to reduce the structurally imposed suffering of our research subjects. (297)

As discussed, in an applied dimension to this study I created and facilitated a dance program for “Passages” women. This was done, in part, from my sensitivity to the issue of academic voyeurism; I hoped dance would be beneficial for participants and the data indicates that it was a positive experience for some of the participants. However, halting the applied dimension of this research with the dance program would fail to harness the power of anthropology for creating the informed policy suggestions discussed by Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) above. I believe the academic insights gained in this research point to practical suggestions that could reduce the suffering of individuals in long-term transitional housing programs like “Passages.” Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an examination of the academic contributions of this research for the literature on homelessness and dance, as well as a presentation of the suggestions arising from them. I will begin with homelessness, discussing the contributions this research has made for the academic literature and offering practical suggestions growing from my investigation of this subject. I will then turn to dance, presenting this research’s contributions for dance literature and my advice for dance educators interested in teaching in a shelter context.

**Major Contributions for the Literature on Homelessness**

When proposing this study I expected that most of my respondents would have spent their homelessness on the streets prior to entering the Y. This view, no doubt, grew from my own participation in the social imagery that defines “homelessness” via the conditions of street dwellers, but also it was reinforced in my review of the literature: I found no studies on homelessness that focused on populations living in contexts other than the street or short-term shelters. As a result, I expected my interviews to be filled with discussions of past biophysical suffering and its emotional results, and wondered if, perhaps, dance participation could salve any lingering emotional trauma. My expectations were misguided. Prior to
entering the Y, only some of my research participants had spent time on the street (N=3 of 9), some had stayed on the couches or floors of family and/or friends (N=2 of 9), some had utilized short and/or long term shelter situations for several years (N=4 of 9), and in addition to one of these living arrangements four of the women (N=4 of 9) had also intermittently exchanged sex for shelter. Upon finding that few of my participants [N=3] had spent time on the street and that in interviews and direct interactions, all participants seemed more eager to discuss their present experiences in the Y than their past, I was a bit dumbfounded about how to conceptualize this population and their homelessness. I was so focused on the homelessness of street dwellers that it took months for me to see the YWCA as a physical, social, authoritative, and symbolic context in which these women were experiencing distinct conditions of suffering in the present. Examining the suffering of these women, residents of a long-term housing program, highlights a particular, often overlooked, position of social and economic marginality and this is the major academic contribution of this research.

In the examination of “stress” we see how psycho-social conditions such as underemployment, the everyday violence of shelter life and, particularly, housing insecurity as exacerbated by the authoritative context of the Y creates painful inner experiences dominated by fear, frustration, and a sense of powerlessness and victimization. As research indicates, these emotional responses initiate the physiological reaction often referred to as “fight or flight.” This causes discomfort in the moment and in the face of chronically stressful circumstances, the unabated response can be detrimental to the health of the individual. Exploring the symbolic experiences of “Passages” women illuminates how the YWCA, a long-term transitional housing program, is experienced as a position of symbolic liminality and how this contributes to a sense of uncertainty in identity creation. The result is a painful internal dialogue in which “Passages” women search out or create symbols to estimate their proximity to “homelessness” and “normalcy,” and when possible, to flee from association of what they too perceive as the “homeless” Other. Through this process “Passages” women seek, not only to define their own homelessness, but to understand their social value. Together the experiences of stress and identity creation in a liminal position help us to characterize the lumpen subjectivity of “Passages” women.
PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS TO RELIEVE THE SUFFERING EXPERIENCED IN THE YWCA CONTEXT

This research has focused on lived experiences in the YWCA’s “Passages” program. Below I make suggestions focused on addressing issues within the Y’s current disciplinary policies, which this research has found to cause significant stress for residents surrounding their housing security. The Y’s disciplinary structure is largely discretionary and lacks a standardized appeals process. This leaves “Passages” women feeling powerless in the face of perceived injustices, victimized by staff members, and paralyzed in moments of conflict with other residents. In response, I propose the development of a more codified disciplinary protocol that would diminish the level of discretionary authority at the residential staff and case manager levels, and a standardized appeals process to reduce the discretionary authority at the administrative level while guaranteeing certain rights to “Passages” residents. I have several suggestions for how this may be accomplished.

Residential staff members are responsible for maintaining order on the floor and for communicating a resident’s degree of compliance with “floor rules” through the write-ups they issue. Though floor rules have been established, as discussed in Chapter 3, there is a great deal of discretion awarded residential staff members in determining what constitutes a punishable offense to any given rule. In response, I suggest the creation and implementation of clear protocols outlining the issuance of write-ups. This should include guidelines for determining what constitutes a rule violation and specifics regarding the resulting consequences. Many of the YWCA’s “floor rules” are straightforward, and for these, it would be easy to create such procedures. For example, the YWCA has a 10pm curfew. A policy could be established that if a resident is more than five minutes late they will be issued a written warning. However, there are rules surrounding cleanliness and behavior and compliance with them is less clearly evaluated. In these cases I would suggest the development of guidelines to clarify staff expectations to the highest degree possible. For example, residents are required to complete a daily chore and staff members determine what constitutes completion. To ensure consistency, as a group residential staff members could codify their expectations and the consequences that will follow in the event that these expectations are not met. For example, if a resident is responsible for cleaning the showers it may be specified that they must clean every shower and that each shower surface must be
wiped down in its entirety before the chore is considered complete. If a resident is responsible for taking out the trash it could be specified that each container must be emptied, the trash placed inside the dumpster, and a new bag placed in every can before the chore is considered complete. Failure to complete the chore could result in a verbal warning and the chance to do it again. The second failure to complete a chore could result in a written warning. Failure to do the chore at all could come with a more significant consequence such as, for example, two written warnings. Guidelines could similarly be established for behavioral expectations. For example, it could be determined that threats, the use of profanity and/or yelling during an argument will each result in a write-up. This sort of codification would be fairly easy to accomplish given that residential staff members already follow informal guidelines in their evaluations of cleanliness and behavior and in their disciplinary responses. They would simply have to meet together, come to an agreement, and write the guidelines down. These could be reviewed by administration before implementation.

The write-up based disciplinary structure has a limit that I would like to acknowledge and support. As stated in Chapter 3, when a resident’s behavior is believed to be a danger herself or others, residential staff members are expected to take the immediate action they believe appropriate and necessary, and the resident can face an immediate termination of stay. In other words, the system of write-ups is not applicable in these cases. I would like to clarify that the suggestions above are meant to limit the discretionary authority within the write-up system only and do not address staff response in these extreme incidents.

Case managers are responsible for assessing resident compliance with the Y’s residential rules and programming requirements, and for determining an appropriate punishment or reward from a list of options. In their assessments of compliance with residential rules, case managers are assisted through the write-ups issued by residential staff discussed above. However, case managers have full discretion in determining the significance of write-ups during punishment decisions. Given the uncertainty this causes among residents, I suggest that clear and consistent meaning is given to write-ups through the development of policies specifying the consequences for them. For example, a policy could be implemented which states that five monthly write-ups will result in the loss of A list privileges, etc. Similarly, while specific programming requirements are in place for “Passages” residents, case managers have discretion in determining the consequences for
non-compliance. Because these requirements are already in place, it would be fairly simple to codify the consequences for non-compliance. For example, one could say that failure to submit the 25 required applications for two weeks in a month will result in the loss of all privileges. Finally, I would suggest that continued unemployment no longer be determined “non-compliance” in any case. As long as a resident is following program requirements surrounding job search activities there is no reason to punish her for the inability to find a job. This is particularly important when California’s unemployment rate is third highest in the United States, currently at 9.8% (United States Department of Labor 2013).

As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, residents view the current discipline of residential staff and case managers as inconsistent and unfair. They often feel that punishment decisions are based on the personal feelings of the Y personnel and whether or not they like the resident. Creating a disciplinary protocol like the one described above would diminish the power granted to individuals holding positions of power, providing a more consistent and, from residents’ perspective, fair authoritative context. This may be effective in diminishing residents’ feelings of confusion and frustration regarding disciplinary action, give them a greater sense of security with regards to their housing, and allow them to be more productive in their job search by reducing their overall stress.

At present, should a resident wish to appeal a written warning or a punishment decision they go to one of two administrators who decide the action[s] to be taken. There is no protocol in place regarding the rights of a resident during an appeal and none in place that administrators must follow in making or communicating their decision. Many residents believe that administrators abuse this discretionary authority, refusing to take the appeal seriously and always siding with staff members, creating a situation in which Y personnel are “infallible” (Janet, personal communication with author, October 13, 2012). As a result, residents feel powerlessness in the face of perceived injustice and this exacerbates their experiences of housing insecurity. In order to address this issue, I suggest the development of a robust and standardized appeals process. I would begin with the creation of an appeals panel including both of the “Passages” administrators and a resident advisory counsel consisting of women in the third-stage of the program. Having completed the first and second phases of “Passages,” these women may offer an important perspective in decisions regarding appropriate punishments while their status limits their chances for conflict with
other residents or YWCA personnel. Women in the third stage of “Passages” programming do not live with and do not have regular contact with women in the first and second stages of the program, reducing the likelihood of an inter-resident power struggle. Furthermore, as they have jobs and live rather independently on the third floor, women in the third stage of the program are no longer under the authority of residential staff and rarely see case managers. This limits the risk of retaliatory punishments in the event the panel should rule against Y personnel.

The appeal should begin with a meeting between the resident and the appeals panel in which residents may bring forth evidence they feel pertinent in substantiating their argument(s). This may include witnesses or documentation, such as the written guidelines for case managers and residential staff, a doctor’s note limiting their ability to do physical chores, or photographs of a completed chore. After hearing the resident’s appeal the counsel should meet with the involved Y personnel in a separate meeting. Following these meetings, the counsel should jointly make an appeals decision through a vote. Afterward, the resident and the Y employee should each receive a written explanation of the counsel’s decision. While this may seem complex, in reality it would require little extra work for administrators as they often already meet with both residents and personnel in the event of a resident appeal. Because the burden for evidence is on the resident, the only additional work would be in the conversations surrounding decision-making and the writing of the panel’s decision.

After its establishment, this same appeals process could be useful in determining appropriate action in the face of a continuing, inter-resident conflict. I am thinking specifically of the situation described by Eliana (and feared by Joy), in Chapter 5. In this case, though it was eventually determined that Eliana was the victim of bullying, both residents were initially punished for their inability to get along and threatened with a termination of stay. In future incidents of this nature, a resident could be given the opportunity to appeal the punishment(s) she has been given by demonstrating the appropriateness of her actions in the context of another’s. In this case, the appeals counsel would meet with both residents and the involved personnel in separate meetings before making a decision regarding which punishments will be given and to whom.

The process described above is built upon the evaluation of evidence by a group and is meant to ensure due diligence, fairness, and consistency. In comparison to the current
appeals process, in which individual power holders exercise full discretion, this process would increase the likelihood of an appeal being fully heard and fairly weighed. Additionally, because administrators work closely with Y personnel, and must work with them for years, placing women in the third stage of the program on the appeals panel could provide additional support of resident perspective as decisions are made. Such an appeals process would provide an important resource for residents seeking justice in the face of perceived abuse and in doing so may reduce feelings of powerlessness regarding housing insecurity.

As stated above, these suggestions grow from my investigation of “Passages” residents’ experiences within the authoritative context of the YWCA. This has two, potentially limiting implications that I would like to address. First, though I have focused upon the YWCA’s authoritative context specifically, I do not feel the application of these suggestions must be limited to the YWCA alone. Instead, they may provide important insights for all transitional housing policy makers in their efforts to create a fair and consistent disciplinary structure. Second, because these suggestions are, in some ways, a critique of the YWCA’s current disciplinary program I feel it important to note that I did not discuss these policies with YWCA personnel or administration at any time. It is possible that there are reasons for certain policies that I have not considered. However, the primary purpose of this research was not an evaluation of the Y’s programming but an investigation of the experiences of “Passages” women within the Y context. From their perspective, the current disciplinary context is experienced as victimizing and these suggestions address the issues contributing to this.

**Major Contributions for the Literature on Dance**

Dance participation had two reported effects among “Passages” women. It provided relief from the physical and emotional effects of Seylean stress and a sense of social normalcy. The stress relieving benefits of dance has been documented in previous studies (Hanna 1995b) and this research substantiates those findings. In contrast, I am familiar with no research examining the symbolic qualities of dance for participants in identity creation. Perhaps the most closely related has been research examining dance participation’s ability to
create feelings of social inclusion within a dancing group (Hanna 1995a, 1995b). This primarily speaks to the sociality of dance. In this research, however, a connection was not made with the other dancing participants but with a symbolically imagined normal population. Through their participation in dance, an activity “Passages” women imagined normal people to do, they experienced if only briefly, a symbolically [more] normal self. This recognition highlights the symbolic qualities of dance and their potential to benefit socially marginalized populations.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING DANCE IN A SHELTER**

I taught dance at the YWCA for sixteen months. As a result of my experiences my definition of success and my approach to teaching changed quite a bit during that time. I wish to discuss this evolution below along with a few brief and informal suggestions. These are primarily anecdotal and meant to provide perspective to dance educators interesting in teaching in an applied setting and specifically, in a long-term shelter context.

When I first began teaching dance at the Y, I envisioned large classes in which I would have a regular group of students who would, by the end of my time there, actually learn a little about dance. This is not what happened. I had very few students from week to week and most were inconsistent in their attendance. I do not think this is the result of my sub-par teaching as both the “Passages” coordinator and residents assured me that the low attendance in my classes was not unique. In fact, I was told that the other activities offered at the Y during that time, including yoga, zumba, and piano, generally had even lower attendance. Regardless, this was not only deflating but made building upon technique from week to week almost impossible. I have two suggestions based upon this reality. First, I would suggest that anyone planning to teach in this context expect low attendance. Within a shelter lives a small population in which only a small percentage will be interested in any given activity. I would guess the percentage of shelter residents interested in dance is similar to that of a larger population. And so, while we may be used to thirty individuals in studio classes, it is important to keep in mind that we are drawing from a much smaller pool when teaching in a shelter. Tempering our own expectations regarding class size may prevent us from taking actions or making comments that could hurt attendees that, as this research has shown, are already feeling “othered.” For example, one of my regulars, Joy, told me how the...
Zumba teacher always complained to her that no one else came. Joy reported the teacher to have said, “It’s always just you” and to have frequently cut the class short by up to forty-five minutes out of frustration. The Zumba class was permanently cancelled soon after, even though Joy had attended regularly. Joy confessed to me that this had made her feel like she was not worth the teacher’s time. Likewise, residents informed me that the piano teacher only taught one month before giving up and the yoga teacher, upon having only one student in her first class, never came back. Given the symbolic subjectivity of a long-term shelter, for the students who do come, such actions could be perceived as symbolic of their social worthlessness, as they were for Joy.

Secondly, I would suggest the development of a class approach that allows for drop-ins and inconsistent attendance. If a student must know what happened in the last three classes to participate today, new students or those who come inconsistently will be lost. Instead, teachers should focus on a different theme or move every class. In this way, each student can feel comfortable in her ability to participate. Those who do attend regularly will still build a technical repertoire, as they are exposed to new things every class, though they will not enjoy the benefit of review. Understanding that attendance will be inconsistent should also direct a teacher’s goals for dance attendees. We will not be training dancers, but may provide a positive experience to a stressed and socially marginal person. I would suggest that to do so teachers focus on harnessing the fun and stress relieving benefits of dance rather than on fostering technical proficiency. This can be accomplished by focusing on stretches that feel good and technique that is very simple.

**CONCLUSION**

In this research I have sought to satisfy my own long held desire to study and use dance while honoring my twenty-first century anthropological education, which redefined my understanding of anthropology’s traditional research subjects and compelled me to investigate the suffering of a local homeless population. Over a period of sixteen months I employed open-ended interviews, and participant observation and direct interaction surrounding weekly dance classes to investigate how a group of women in the YWCA of San Diego, California’s transitional living program “Passages” have suffered through their
experiences of homelessness and how these have influenced their subjective practice of dance participation.

In my approach to studying the suffering of “Passages” women I have been sensitive to the ethical vulnerabilities recognized by anthropologist following the discipline’s reconceptualization of “otherness” in the late twentieth century. In response to this ideological shift, anthropologists developed guidelines for managing the risks of anthropological voyeurism and representation inherent in any qualitative examination of suffering. I have called upon these guidelines in my efforts at ethically managing this research. Specifically, I have sought to accurately represent the structured nature of homelessness by including “Passages” women within the lumpen population. I have sought to avoid academic voyeurism by employing the insights gained in this research in the development of specific policy suggestions meant to benefit future “Passages” residents as well as those living in other transitional housing programs.

Despite my efforts, this research has several limitations in scope and design and a brief discussion of them may provide insights for future research. First, as mentioned above, my critique of the YWCA’s disciplinary programming is limited, as I did not discuss policies with staff or administration at any time. While an evaluation of YWCA policy was not the primary purpose of this research, including both residents and program personnel could ensure a more complete evaluation of YWCA policies in future research. Furthermore, though my research methods provided a wealth of data, a larger sample size could have strengthened this research. I had 9 interview participants, roughly 20% of the total population during my interview period. While this is a respectable percentage during that time, given the high degree of turnover at the Y, a longer research period may have resulted in a larger number of total research participants and additional insights into the experiences of “Passages” women. Finally, it should be noted that only four of my interview participants were also dance participants. Though I did gain a great deal of information regarding the experiences of dance during direct interactions and participant observation, I believe that, had I been able to interview more dance participants, I could have gained a greater understanding of the experiences of dance for this population and, perhaps, have created better suggestions for teaching dance in a shelter.
Although limited, this research has highlighted the stress relieving and symbolic benefits of dance participation in a shelter context and has shed light on an often-overlooked position of social and economic marginality. In doing so, it has laid important groundwork for future studies of dance and homelessness alike. As discussed, very little research has been conducted on the use of dance in applied settings (Hanna 1995b) and one of the major contributions of this study was its illumination of the symbolic effects of dance participation in a shelter. Future research could compare the effects of dance participation in a variety of applied settings. Doing so may provide a greater understanding of the ways in which particular life experiences influence the significance of dance participation and may ultimately aid dance educators in tailoring dance experiences to the particular needs of a population. Additionally, this research provides the groundwork for conceptualizing those living in transitional housing programs as a particular population with distinct experiences and needs. For example, this research provided an analysis of the ways in which “Passages” women suffer within their authoritative context; as alluded to above, a full evaluation of transitional housing policies could provide greater insights for practical suggestions, and, perhaps be more welcomed by programmers given that their perspective has been considered. Such efforts may greatly ease the suffering of those in long-term housing programs and help them to achieve the permanent end to their homelessness they so desperately desire.
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Rowe, Stacy, and Jennifer Wolch

San Diego County Regional Task Force on Homelessness

United States Department of Labor

van Gennep, Arnold

West, J., K. Geher, J. Johnson, and D. C. Mohr

YWCA of San Diego
APPENDIX A

SUBJECT RECRUITEMENT SCRIPT
Subject Recruitment Script

I Introduction of the Investigators
   1. Jules Downum- SDSU Department of Anthropology graduate student
   2. Ramona Perez PhD- Department of Anthropology

II Purpose of the study
   1. To better understand the experiences of homelessness- particularly the emotional results of the physical experiences of homelessness
   2. To examine the effects of purposeful physical activity for women transitioning out of homelessness

III Participant involvement: I am looking for 15 volunteers from the passages program to participate this research.

Should you agree to participate you will be asked to
   1. Participate in 1 interview.
      a. Interview time
      b. Interview location
      c. Interview recording/ participant rights to decline recording
      d. Nature of the questions
         i. Experiences of homelessness
         ii. Experiences of physical activities,

   2. Optional dance class observation
      a. Nature of observations
         i. Comments and discussions of dance experiences
         ii. Body language and posture

      b. Duration and number of observations

      c. Optional nature of dance class and research: Please note that those participating in dance are not required to participate in the research and vice versa. No observations will be recorded of those dancers who do not wish to be research participants.

IV. Confidentiality:
   1. All identifying information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law.
      a. Aliases for reports, notes, interview transcripts and publications
      b. Security of identifying information: alias key, audio recordings,
      c. Security of non-identifying research materials: notes, interview transcripts

IV. Participant rights: you will have complete control over your participation in this research. The potentially personal nature of interview questions may cause some participants to be uncomfortable. Please know:
1. The decision of whether or not to participate is entirely up to you. You may decline participation with no retribution from myself, the YWCA or SDSU.

2. You may end your participation at anytime (even right in the middle of an interview) for any reason with no penalty from myself, the YWCA or SDSU.

3. You may choose to skip specific questions or specific topics if they make you uncomfortable, while still participating in the research, without retribution from the YWCA, SDSU, or myself.

4. In the event that interviews cause you extreme discomfort, you will be referred to one of the YWCA’s professional counselors for assistance.

5. Interview content will have no influence on your relationship with the YWCA, SDSU, or myself.

VI. Questions
   1. Are there any questions about this research?
   2. If you have questions later you may contact me- my email is provided on the consent form
APPENDIX B

DANCE CLASS FLYER
Discover Dance!

This fusion class is designed to get your body moving as you learn fun, basic dance technique. It is for beginners—no previous experience necessary!

Thursdays 5-6
Activity Room
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Pseudonym_________________
Age______________
Race/Ethnicity___________

1. When did you first find yourself without a place of your own? – Where did you go?
2. What are some of the places you’ve slept? - Of those, which were the best and which were the worst? Why?
   - Did you share your space with others/ who?
   - Did you feel safe? Why or why not?
     If no- what did you do to try to keep yourself safe?
   - Did you have everything you felt you needed?
     - If not, what did you need that you couldn’t get
What was this time like for you? Can you give me some idea what it has been like in your shoes?
3. How long have you been at the Y? How is it going?
4. The word homeless-
   Does it bother you? - Why?
   What is the stereotype?
     What does this person symbolize to people
     Bum? Loneliness? Crazy?
   How do you feel about this?
5. What is your dream for the future?
6. Is there something, some activity you choose to do for stress relief? What? Why?
7. Is there anything you would like to add?
8. Is there anything you’ve shared with me that you would like me to not talk about?
   If they are dance participants
   1. Why did you decide you’d like to participate in the dance classes?
   2. What has the experience of dance been like for you?