"I Am Not Lazy": Panhandling in Urban Mexico

Hollie Nyseth

Faculty Sponsor: Timothy Gongaware, Department of Sociology & Archaeology

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study of a street community in one of Mexico's largest cities examines the stigma management techniques utilized by panhandlers. Panhandlers publicly request for money, food, or other goods with little or nothing of value given in return to the potential donor. Originating from an intricate blend of unemployment and solicitation of materials, they display a stigma as they undergo the very act that defines them: the panhandling itself. Consequently, as a stigmatized group, panhandlers must engage in strategies to manage and cope with their stigma. Following the work of Erving Goffman, stigma management is the process of managing a stigma by working to ease the social situation. While previous research has predominantly focused on the occurrence of panhandling, it has largely ignored this process. I explored panhandling through participant observation and semi-structured ethnographic interviews, and what emerged from the data were the many ways that the panhandlers engaged in stigma management techniques throughout the panhandling process. Particularly important among these strategies are the presentations of self that are used to increase their daily profits as well as the factors such as gender and disabilities that determine which stigma management techniques the panhandlers use. Another stigma management strategy can be found in the subject's notion that panhandling is a job with norms, values, and strategies. Such meanings are found to be lodged within cultural definitions of gender, work, class structure, agency, and morality.

INTRODUCTION

Today, many groups of people are considered stigmatized; and one such group, panhandlers, has largely been ignored. In general, panhandlers carry the discreditable attribute, or stigma, of unemployment. Specifically, it is their means of obtaining money and other donations that marks their deviant status. In order to engage in the very activity that defines them, panhandlers must display their stigma.

Concurrent with the continual display of their stigma, panhandlers engage in the process of stigma management. Research on stigma management and panhandling is limited and has focused mainly on stigma management in regards to harassment from passersby. However, panhandlers must continually engage in different types of stigma management throughout the panhandling process.

Through participant observation and semi-structured ethnographic interviews, I studied a group of panhandlers in Puebla, Mexico and examined the everyday processes of stigma management. As I will demonstrate in this article, these panhandlers continually display and confront the stigma of unemployment throughout the panhandling process. Specifically, I will explore the ways in which panhandlers engage in stigma management: from the act of capturing attention to the panhandler's presentation of his or her self.

Conceptions of Stigma

According to Erving Goffman, society establishes means to categorize its members as either "normal" or "abnormal." People deemed "abnormal" are conceptualized as having a stigma – a physical or social attribute that devalues an individual's identity and consequently disqualifies the individual from full social acceptance. Those people marked by stigma often engage in activities to devalue and rework their stigma and influence their categorization; they engage in stigma management (1963, 1963b).

Following Goffman's proposal that stigma is best understood through the study of social interactions and relationships between the stigmatized and the "normal," a handful of researchers have explored stigma and the intricate process of stigma management. This research has been two-fold in that some research has focused on the development of the stigmatized identity, while other research has focused on identity maintenance. A variety of groups have been studied, although far more attention has been given to ethnic/racial minorities, the LGBTQQ

community, people with disabilities, and adult performers (Anderson et al. 1994; Cox and Gallios 1996; Kaufman and Johnson 2004; Hefley 2007).

Stigmatized individuals engage in a variety of stigma management efforts in order to minimize their stigmas. Passing, or attempting to present the self as "normal," is a common stigma management tool (Goffman 1963; Kaufman and Johnson 2004). Other individuals are unable to hide their stigma and instead choose to compensate for their abnormality by excelling in another area of life (Goffman 1963; Cox and Gallios 1996; Hefley 2007).

Another important component of stigma management is ego identity, or the panhandler's own conception of his or her self. While a dissonance occurs in regards to degree, researchers agree that stigma affects the individual's opinion of his or her self. Originally, Goffman proposed that the stigmatized tend to hold the same beliefs about themselves as do the nonstigmatized sector of society (1963). However, more recent research of the 1980s and 1990s has suggested that stigmatized individuals develop alternative, more positive conceptions of their stigma in spite of the potential negative views of others. Positive conceptions are derived from stigma management strategies that include forming support networks and engaging in identity talk (Cox and Gallios 1996; Kaufman and Johnson 2004; Hefley 2007).

While the research to date has focused on the stigma management of several stigmatized groups, it has largely ignored a faction that exists in every society: panhandlers. Panhandlers are prevalent in public locations around the world and carry the stigma of unemployment. Along with unemployment, panhandlers engage in a deviant process to solicit materials from passersby.

Panhandling

Panhandling refers to a public request for money, food, or other goods with little or nothing of value given in return to the potential donor (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lee and Farrell 2003). According to research, panhandling often involves a variety of social interactions. Importantly, panhandling is also understood as a two-way process that involves the interaction of both the panhandler and the passerby (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lankenau 1999).

While research has been split between the two actors involved, much more emphasis has been placed on the panhandlers themselves (Snow and Anderson 1993; Williams 1995; Lankenau 1999; Lee and Farrell 2003). For example, available research has focused on the response of panhandlers to deliberate harassment from passersby. Harassment and other types of mistreatment are internalized by the panhandlers and consequently contribute to the development of poor ego identities. The sheer knowledge of the stigma also has been found to have detrimental effects on the selves of panhandlers (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lankenau 1999).

Elsewhere, the *homeless* panhandler has been a major subject in several other research studies. For example, Anderson et al. (1994) examined homelessness in nine U.S. cities and found that one common strategy of the homeless panhandler involves identity work and often includes selective association with individuals and groups in the hopes of boosting one's own self rank. Other homeless panhandlers construct positive personal identities though verbal construction (identity talk). This action affirms (supposed) positive traits and raises the ego identity (Anderson, et al. 1994; Lankenau 1999).

While incredibly instructive, many of these previous studies have left holes in our knowledge. While the *homeless* panhandler is an important subject to study, he or she only represents a small percentage of the total number of panhandlers. Additionally, the driving focus for most of the existing research has been the presentation of self and the demographics of panhandlers (Snow and Anderson 1993; Williams 1995; Lankenau 1999; Lee and Farrell 2003; Speak 2004; Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2005). Unfortunately, minimal research has been conducted directly on the stigma management strategies of panhandlers, a topic intimately entwined with the process of self-presentation.

Presentation of Self. Instead of focusing directly on stigma management, the majority of panhandling research has qualitatively focused on the presentation of self. The presentation of self is an integral part of panhandling and is crafted to convey a message to the passerby with the ultimate goal of maximizing money, food, or other goods. Though not explicitly stated, panhandler presentation of self is an important aspect of stigma management.

Panhandlers must present themselves to the passerby in a strategic manner in order to communicate their requests. As the term implies, panhandlers often passively use cups or signs to express their wants and/or needs. However, to capture the attention of the passerby, panhandlers must often play a more active part through greetings, stories, entertainment, or small services. As a result, panhandlers usually prefer locations on the streets where the quantity of potential donors is likely to be high (Lankenau 1999; Lee and Farrell 2003).

Outward appearances, especially clothing choice and personal hygiene, are crucial. Oftentimes panhandlers try to fit the stereotype of the unkempt, dirty homeless person in order to appear needy. Other panhandlers take the opposite approach and appear clean and professional while panhandling (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lee and Farrell 2003; Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2005). Similarly, many panhandlers attempt to conform to other social norms in

order to elicit the maximum amount of donations. For example, women panhandlers often hold their babies to conform to the "mother" role while they beseech people for money (Lankenau 1999; Lee and Farrell 2001).

Everyday Stigma Management. However, what is missing from these conceptions is an analysis of panhandlers' everyday actions in regards to stigma management. Stigma management is the process of managing a stigma by working to ease the social situation (Goffman 1963). This intricate process involves a reflection on a stigma and subsequent development of coping strategies.

Panhandlers often carry the stigma of unemployment; their method of obtaining money is generally considered deviant by society at large. Thus, by engaging in the very act that defines them, panhandlers are deviant and display their stigma.   The relevance of stigma management is not limited to the harassment that panhandlers receive from passersby as a result of the stigma. Rather, the stigma must be acknowledged by the panhandler and incorporated into his or her every action while panhandling. Since the panhandler should be aware of her or his stigma throughout her or his construction and presentation of self, stigma management in regards to ego identity becomes equally if not more important because the stigmatized person confronts her or his stigma in every moment of the action.

The present study begins to fill the gap in the research on stigma management and panhandling. Particularly, it examines the proactive stigma management tactics employed throughout the entire process of panhandling as opposed to tactics employed only as responses. The study also examines panhandling in Mexico, a country where panhandling is prevalent but not yet reflected in research.

Poverty: Ethnographic Context

Every year, over 8 million people die because they do not have enough money to stay alive. Half of the world subsists on less than two dollars a day, and one billion of those people live on less than one dollar a day. The figures are endless, but the bottom line is that a large fraction of the world's population lives in poverty. Conceptualized by the United Nations as "a human condition characterized by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights," poverty measurements have encompassed many different types of analyses (2002: 1). It is a social ill that has tormented humankind since time immemorial; and it affects all areas of the globe, one being Latin America (Gilbert 2000; Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 2002).

Latin American is a region well documented with inequalities. While these inequalities stretch back in time, most research spans the last four decades. The countries of Latin America endured severe economic adjustments during the 1980s. Hyperinflation devastated many of the economies of the region, which lead to economic crises. Among other things, these crises in turn led to an increase in economic inequality and poverty (Lustig 1995; Randall 1996; Berry 1998; Helwege 2000).

In an attempt to combat the rising inequality and poverty levels, many Latin American countries underwent reforms. Despite the reforms and a relatively healthy world economy, the growth rate in Latin America fell to zero during the 1990s. Today, most Latin American countries are still struggling with poverty. And one of these countries is only separated from our affluent country by a common border (Lustig 1995; Randall 1996; Berry 1998; Helwege 2000).

Poverty and inequality in Mexico are certainly high by international standards. Of the 108,700,891 citizens, between 24-35% live below the poverty line. The GDP is $11,369, which ranks 63rd out of 179 countries. Unemployment rate estimates vary between 3% and 40%, and underemployment is estimated at 25% (CIA World Factbook; World Health Organization).

Health conditions in Mexico have been continually improving over the last few decades yet still remain low in some aspects. Today the average life expectancy is 75.6 years, which is fairly high. The infant mortality rate is 20 per 1,000 live births with the leading causes originating from the prenatal period, congenital malformations, and infections from influenza and pneumonia. Maternal mortality rate is 65.2 per 100,000 live births and is largely associated with complications during delivery (CIA World Fact book; Pan American Health Organization; World Heath Organization). Mortality from infectious diseases has declined over the past decade; however, infectious diseases still account for over 5% of deaths. Furthermore, HIV/AIDS (4.3 %) and tuberculosis (3.3 %) continue to be public health problems (Pan American Health Organization).

In response to these social dilemmas, the government of Mexico has implemented a series of programs aimed at alleviating poverty and other social ills. It also engaged in the processes of democratization and better integration of its economy into the international realm. However, large scale changes such as these necessitate years of planning and implementation. Furthermore, even newly-implemented programs often do not reach those most in need because these people are often not even accounted for in national data. Instead, these invisible members of society are often forced to find ways to manage their poverty without outside help (Lustig 1995; Randall 1996).

In an attempt to make money to live each day and cope with poor economic conditions, some people dedicate themselves to panhandling. They ask for money or goods for nothing or little in return, often because they are unable to survive otherwise. Panhandling occurs in most Mexican cities; however, it is more prevalent in the urban areas of Mexico (Randall 1996; Speak 2004).

Puebla is Mexico's sixth largest city with over a million inhabitants. Built by the Spanish as a strategic check point between the port city of Vera Cruz and Mexico City during the sixteenth century, Puebla contains a unique blend of Spanish and Mexican culture. Though it boasts beautiful baroque cathedrals and numerous museums and cultural centers, Puebla's poverty statistics mirror the aforementioned country statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática). Streets lined with glittering shops are also often lined with homeless people and panhandlers.

ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

For the purpose of the study, panhandling is defined as "public request for money, food, or other goods with little or nothing of value given in return to the potential donor" (Snow and Anderson 1993). Following this definition, I identified a street in Puebla, Mexico, where such activity took place. During the data collection period beginning in May 2007 and ending in July 2007, I spent approximately 100 hours observing in the field. I frequented the street during morning, afternoon, and evening hours on both weekdays and weekends to determine the times and general locations of panhandling. The vast majority of the panhandlers were found to keep fairly regular schedules, and I easily became familiar with the patterns of individuals. Occasionally someone would change time or location, which would contribute to the excitement and dynamic style of this ethnographic work. However, most people stayed in the area, affording me an opportunity for consistent observations.

I returned to the same street every day in an effort to gain what Lofland et al. call "intimate familiarity with the sector of social life" (2005: 17). I chose the particular street for several reasons. Previous studies have generally found that urban panhandlers choose to position themselves in highly-traversed regions of a city. With the center of the city only two blocks from my residence, I was able to examine one of the most transited locations in the area.

This street, located very close to a plaza, is closed to vehicular traffic. It is lined with shops and vendors, and for this reason it is teeming with social interactions. The street is divided into two main walkways. In the middle of the walkways are benches (ideal for participant observation), trees, and shoe-shining stations. The calls from vendors coupled with the towering balloon trees, sounds of music drifting from stores, and the smells of various treats combine to create a festive and lively atmosphere.

I engaged in participant observation that included eighteen panhandlers. While they do not represent the total number of panhandlers who were present on the street on any given day, they do represent those who were most frequently present. Some panhandlers choose to engage in panhandling while they are stationary and target passersby. Other panhandlers choose to be mobile and approach potential donors, usually those who are seated at tables or benches. In an effort to control for which panhandlers I studied and to obtain in-depth information about the subjects, I chose to examine only the social interactions of stationary panhandlers.

For the first several weeks I engaged solely in participant observation. Time in the field varied between thirty and one hundred eighty minutes, and following each session I immediately returned home to type my fieldnotes. I spent as much time as possible in the field in an attempt to gain an understanding of the daily behavior of one group of panhandlers.

It did not take me long to became familiar with the panhandlers on the street selected for my study. Most of them were on the street every day for several hours. Each one appeared to have a fairly regular time schedule as well as a usual spot. Occasionally someone would change his or her location, but he or she would usually remain on the street. I observed both male and female panhandlers, split fairly evenly in age between early 20's, middle-aged and elderly.

The majority of the women sat on the ground as they leaned up against store windows. Their hair was usually disheveled, and multiple pieces of clothing hung loosely on their frames. Blankets, as well as large cloth bags, were often extra accessories seen on or near the female panhandlers of the street. The male panhandlers could usually be found wearing slacks and collared shirts as they stood aside the walkways. Often they were playing music from instruments such as guitars, harmonicas, or music boxes.

In an attempt to strengthen the study, I also engaged in informal conversations and semi-structured formal interviews. Additionally, twenty-one interviews were tape-recorded. I attempted to interview every panhandler I had observed. Thus, the majority of the interviewees station themselves on the street within two blocks of the plaza. Several panhandlers declined, but other panhandlers from surrounding streets whom I had not observed were willing to talk with me. The ages of the interviewees range from twenty-one to eighty-six, similar to the ages of those

observed. Twelve interviewees are men, while nine are women. Nineteen of them speak Spanish as a first language, and the other two speak a native dialect along with Spanish. About two-thirds of the panhandlers were not born in Puebla; and, while the majority did live in Puebla at the time of the interviews, several others commuted from nearby villages. All of the interviewees were positioned where a sidewalk or walkway meets a building.

For the purpose of this study, nineteen of the twenty-one interviews are considered valid. Aspects of the two remaining interviews are incorporated as well, although the full interviews are unusable because the answers were incoherent. The interviews included a series of open-ended questions that can be broken down into questions about the panhandler, the panhandler's family, the panhandler's process of panhandling, the panhandler's view of his or her actions, why the panhandler engages in his or her actions, and what the panhandler believed others think of his or her actions. The questions were chosen in an attempt to better understand the reality of the panhandlers and to ascertain the motives behind their behaviors.

Interviews generally lasted anywhere between fifteen and ninety minutes. I began each interview by asking the panhandler if I could talk to him or her and explaining that I was a student studying human rights and "panhandling." Following consent, I explained that I would pay for time in an attempt to enlist cooperation and develop rapport. Rapport also may have been influenced by the fact that I am a young, blonde, American girl, a novelty in that part of the Latin America. Upon agreement, I read the informed consent form and they responded with their consent. The form was read in an attempt to prevent fear of signing papers as well as to accommodate for the possibility of illiteracy. All interviews were transcribed and translated from Spanish to English for conformity of data.

Following the advice of Lofland et al. and Emerson et al., I engaged in a process of open coding to discover themes in the data. Once the important themes were identified, I focused the coding to further narrow the themes, identify categories, and allow patterns in the process of panhandling to emerge. While many themes can be found in the data, what emerged as most important to the subjects and in their behaviors were patterns of self presentation and, more important, stigma management.

STIGMA MANAGEMENT ON A MEXICAN STREET

Panhandling is a complex process marked by panhandler behavior that is both calculated and goal directed, and stigma management is undertaken at virtually every step of the process. Panhandlers must engage in specific tactics to capture the attention of the passerby. Once the attention has been secured, panhandlers have at most several seconds to create an impression for the passerby. This impression is strategically constructed around the panhandler's conception of the passersby's social expectations and norms and is rooted in the idea of stigma. Since the panhandler must be continually thinking about his or her stigma during the presentation of self, stigma management is integral in retaining a healthy ego identity as well.

Capturing Attention

In this metropolitan Mexican area, panhandlers first must strive to capture the attention of the passersby. Masses of people pass by the panhandlers every moment. The colorful sights of store windows and outside shops and the cacophony of sounds compete with the panhandlers for the attention of the passerby. Consequently, panhandlers must develop and use strategies to elicit the attention of potential donors.

Many panhandlers feel that they are invisible to the passersby. When I asked Maria about the reaction of most people, she explained, "They do not see us. Either they pretend we are not there or they really do not see us. It does not matter to me. The two of them are the same." Many other panhandlers expressed similar views.

To combat these feelings of invisibility, panhandlers engage in techniques to capture attention. One of the most common strategies is noise. Tin cans, maracas, drums, and other pieces of metal are all common tools used to generate attention-capturing sound. Other panhandlers try to garner the attention of passersby by acknowledging them. According to José, an elderly male, "If I point at the people, more of them look at me." Similarly, Hector gave a verbal greeting to as many people as possible in hopes that they would look his way.

Yet other panhandlers use movement to catch society's eye. Some move their bodies toward the potential donor as he or she passes. For example, note how Julia uses movement in the following fieldnote excerpt.

> *In her left hand is a small, orange container. As a crowd of people approaches, Julia raises her outstretched hand slightly higher, moving the container closer to the passersby. She also raises her head and follows the group with imploring eyes. Her head moves with the group until it has passed, and she lowers the orange container slightly. Looking to the right (the direction from which most people are coming), she notices a couple walking toward her. Again she raises the orange container.*

Julia's strategy of movement is similar to the strategy observed in many panhandlers' actions. The orange container is Julia's symbol of request; it exists to communicate to the passerby that Julia wants money. All of the panhandlers in this study utilized a symbol of request, most often an open container, to communicate their request for money once they had secured attention from a passerby. Interestingly, the symbol of request is concurrently the stigma symbol; it communicates to the passersby that the panhandler is requesting money and is unemployed.

Social Identity

Simply capturing the attention of the passerby does not lead to a monetary contribution. Rather, the panhandler engages in another form of stigma management in order to influence the passerby to give him or her money—social identity maintenance. Social identity refers to the opinions of society at-large and is determined through social interaction. Panhandlers manage their personal identity by controlling the image of themselves that they project while panhandling. This image is created by the panhandler to match their idea of society's expectations for the purpose of generating the greatest possible "profit."

Appearance is an integral component of the panhandler's dramaturgical performance. Multiple impressions are formed based solely on the appearance of an individual. Panhandlers take advantage of this and use their appearance to choose the impression that they want to give. Appearance strategies most commonly involve clothing choice, personal hygiene, and verbal and nonverbal communication and often can be linked to Mexican gender norms.

Male Panhandlers. Goffman suggested that stigma management includes an attempt to correct or lessen the impact of the stigma (1963). Accordingly, male panhandlers in the setting often dress professionally to reduce their stigma and correct the stereotype of laziness that accompanies their unemployment status. When I asked Fred about his nice pants, he replied, "Well, it looks nice, yes? I am dressed well for the job." Likewise, the personal hygiene of male panhandlers is usually better in comparison to female panhandlers.

For example, Cristo, a middle-aged panhandler who plays music, demonstrates many of the appearance strategies utilized by male panhandlers as evident in my fieldnotes.

> *Cristo stands with his legs shoulder-width apart. His posture is nearly flawless as he turns the knob on the music box. The silver necklace around his neck glints in the sunlight and completes his outfit, which consists of gray dress pants, shiny black shoes, and a white collared shirt.*

The "professional" attire that Cristo is wearing is an effort to appear industrious and respectful. Furthermore, Cristo stands straight and tall. This body language communicates confidence to the passerby.

As referenced above, communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is another common method utilized by male panhandlers to manage their stigmas. Men convey confidence through good posture, wide stances, and raised chins. Men also stand or sit on a stool while they engage in panhandling; never did I see a man seated on the ground. Furthermore, men position themselves conspicuously so as to be noticed. Mexican men are expected to be bold, and these male panhandlers maintain that cultural expectation in their street positions. One man even stood at the stop light in the middle of the cross walk so that people would have to pass directly by him. Others position themselves several feet out from the building so as to be in the way of the passersby.

Verbal communication is much more common among male panhandlers as well. The vast majority of these male panhandlers make verbal requests to the passersby. While it is sometimes an attempt to obtain the attention of the passerby, the verbal request also serves as a bold assertion to the passerby. In the excerpt below, Homero uses verbal requests to reinforce his panhandling:

> *"Money for the music!" Homero shouts at a group of men who are passing by him. His beady eyes dart back and forth between the men as they stroll down the street. With a scowl on his face, Homero scans the crowd and points at a group of women approaching – "Don't you like the music?"*

Note that Homero's statements are almost commands rather than requests. The brash, commanding demeanor is a prime feature of the machismo embedded in the cultural norms of Mexico (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Wilson 2003). By following that and other cultural norms, male panhandlers are doing two things. First, they are trying to minimize their stigma by appearing hardworking and industrious. Second, the men are trying to present themselves in the way that they believe will be most favorable in the eyes of the general passerby.

As can be seen in the previous excerpts, men also frequently provide a service in the hope of receiving compensation in return. As Homero demonstrated, many men play music in "return" for profits. A few men even

sell trinkets, such as small cars or key chains of little monetary value. These actions are done in part to counter the stigma of unemployment, as Juan references below:

> *People pay for this music. I am a musician. I play, and they pay me for the music. Mainly adults pay me because they recognize the songs and like to hear my music. I work to learn the songs that they like. I work hard here just like anyone else. I would like to see them stand here for 7 hours a day.*

The case above illustrates that many panhandlers, particularly men, must believe that they are engaging in an exchange process. In other words, they believe that they are more likely to receive money if they are providing a service. Furthermore, providing a service brings panhandling closer to the definition of having an occupation, an active step toward minimizing the stigma of unemployment.

Female Panhandlers. On the other hand, female panhandlers employ very different strategies of self-portrayal. Women actually project a "down and out" appearance with the goal of eliciting sympathy and gaining profit. Women are usually dressed in ragged layers, and their clothing is often caked with dirt and full of holes.

The clothing on women also adheres to common gender stereotypes. While Mexican men are expected to adhere to the expectations of machismo, Mexican women are encouraged to correspond with marianismo. Considered the counterpart and dual opposite of machismo, marianismo idealizes Latin American women as non-confrontal, traditional women of moral superiority, purity, sacrifice, and devotion (Pearlman 1984; Moreas-Gorecki 1988; Ehlers 1991; Dehart 2005). Though this cultural expectation is not proven, the current research suggests it is an idea prevalent among panhandlers. To comply with this norm, women panhandlers attempt to portray a helpless, needy individual to invoke the passerby to "help" them. In the excerpt below, Clara's tattered clothing is part of her stigma management technique.

> *Clara is sitting on the ground directly in front of the store window. She is wearing a long, brown skirt. I am unable to see her top because her shoulders are wrapped in several cream-colored shawls. All of the articles of clothing are faded, and several holes can be seen in the shawls. In her lap is a small, male child who appears to be around age two. He is sleeping and is wrapped in a red blanket so that only his head is visible.*

Clara's shawl and multiple layers adhere with the poor, helpless, needy image of women panhandlers. The presence of children is also consistent with the cultural norm of motherhood, which is thought to be approved-of by most passersby and is dually consistent with the feminine aspect of marianismo. A later conversation with Clara revealed that she did have the option to leave her child with her mother, yet she believed he helped evoke greater sympathy from passersby. Some mothers do not have that choice; nevertheless, they feel that having their children aids their impression management techniques. Likewise, Clara's skirt adheres to the cultural norm of feminine dress. Every woman panhandler I observed was wearing a dress or a skirt, both of which reflect femininity.

While male posture communicates confidence, female posture conveys helplessness and submissiveness. As Clara demonstrates in the above excerpt, most of the female panhandlers sit directly on the ground, emphasizing a subservient status and the marianisma female persona. In addition to sitting on the ground, many women may kneel to magnify the appearance of being prayerful or helpless. Reina, a middle-aged panhandler, commented that "It hurts my knees, but I get more money this way." Furthermore, women panhandlers choose to sit against walls or in doorways so that they are barely visible. While their intent is still to draw public attention, their position on the street portrays a meek and quiet persona.

Likewise, women panhandlers in this urban Mexican area seldom speak. Along with the marianisma role of submissiveness, these women remain mostly quiet during the process of panhandling. Only one of the women whom I observed utilized verbal requests; all others remained silent.

Panhandlers with a Disability. Though many female and male panhandlers adhere to the aforementioned strategies during their presentation of self, panhandlers with disabilities engage in these strategies far less often. Instead, disabled panhandlers use their other stigma, a physical disability, as a counterweight. As Albano explains below:

> *Interviewer: How do you think people view your disability?*
> *Albano: Well, I think that most people realize that I am out here because of the disability. The Mexican government does not support people with disabilities well, and many people know that.*

Albano explains that many people believe that it is difficult for people with disabilities to find work in Mexico and thus can understand why they panhandle. In one sense, Albano and other disabled panhandlers use the stigma of

having a disability to counter the stigma of unemployment.   In fact, they feel that they do not have to change their appearance because the most noticeable aspect, their disability, is enough to influence the passersby to give money. Shelia remarked to me, "People do not care what I look like. They care that I am disabled. Well, if they care at all."

For this reason, many panhandlers with disabilities take measures to display the disability. For example, panhandlers often lay their crutches in front of them or stand with their crutches. Furthermore, those in wheelchairs often sit so that their wheelchair is almost an extension of their body. Many other panhandlers with disabilities display signs taped on their wheelchairs or their crutches that explain what caused the disability.

As illustrated above through examples of men and women panhandlers, both able-bodied and disabled, the presentation of self by panhandlers is a strategic process and an important aspect of stigma management. Through personal identity panhandlers present themselves in the way that they believe will influence passersby to give them money. However, stigma management comes into play in other points during the panhandling process.

Ego Identity

Ego identity, defined as the psychological core of what the individual means to himself, is another important part of stigma management. Ego identity develops over time and is impacted by many factors. While a study conducted over only a few months is unlikely to fully explain the ego identity of a panhandler, this study can give clues to how panhandlers are conceptualizing their stigma and some of the strategies that these panhandlers are using to protect their concepts of themselves.

Central to the ego identity of a panhandler is his or her recognition of the stigma. Every single panhandler interviewed believed that he or she was a stigmatized individual. According to George, a 40-year-old man who plays a music box on the street for money:

> *"Most people think we are lazy. They think that we do not work hard, that we do not work at all, that we only spend this money on alcohol or drugs. They think we do not have lives of our own, families, homes that we are trying to protect."*

The above observations suggest that panhandlers believe that society harbors negative views about them and their actions. Many of the panhandlers even believed that I held similar views and took action to "correct" my views. Several of the panhandlers immediately told me that they used their money on food and basic necessities rather than on alcohol, drugs, or other frivolous items. In fact, at the beginning of an interview, Harold's first comment was: "I want to make something clear. I want you to know that I do not get drunk with this money."

Several theories propose that stigmatized individuals typically see themselves the same as they believe others view them (i.e., as a stigmatized/damaged person). Yet, interviews with the panhandlers in this study revealed such was not always the case. In one conversation, Cynthia explained some of his positive attributes.

> *Interviewer: What do you want people to know about you?*
> *Cynthia: Mmmmm. I want people to know that they should support me. I work hard. I am an honest, good woman. I have good work ethic; I work hard like everyone else. People should not ignore me. People should not fear me. People should support me.*

As the excerpt depicts, Cynthia endows herself with many positive qualities or actions. This process of speaking about one's positive qualities in order to increase self-esteem is termed identity talk (Anderson et al. 1994). By affirming her positive identity aloud, Cynthia is creating and reinforcing a positive ego identity. Many other panhandlers engaged in identity talk by telling me about their determination, their strength of character, and their good family relations. Some of the interviewees even stressed their free will by explaining that it was their personal choice to work as a panhandler. For example, Timoteo remarked to me, "Yes, they {the government} have found me and told me they could give me a job. But I didn't want it. I have a job. I do not like that they tell me what to do; I do not like that they give me commands. I choose to do this**."**

Other panhandlers reaffirmed this idea, stating over and over that panhandling is a job. Most panhandlers, in fact, assertively stated that panhandling is their profession. Others, like David, stated it more indirectly by referring to their friends as co-workers or to their money as wages.

> *Interviewer: Who are they?*
> *David: They are my co-workers.*
> *I: Oh. Then, playing music here is your job?*

> *D: Of course. I am here ten hours a day. I wear this uniform, and I play music for the people. At the end of the day I go home and continue my life, like everyone else who has a job.*

While the above statements may have been in part an effort to increase his social identity, David demonstrates that he views panhandling as an occupational identity. This tactic enables David and other panhandlers to keep their ego identity from declining and may prevent the stigma from infecting all areas of their lives.

In order to protect their ego identity, many panhandlers form support networks. All but two of the twenty-one interviewees admitted knowing one another and to being friends with the other panhandlers on the street. This network enables panhandlers to support one another by sharing stories or assisting one another in daily tasks. Furthermore, simply knowing that others share the same plight is a comfort in itself. As Sarah explains, "We are here together. We help each other. We have to do the same things each day."

Relationships with others also help panhandlers avoid further problems with stigma management and ego identity. While this group of panhandlers overall reported minimal harassment problems, they often engage in certain overlying strategies to minimize problems that could arise while they are panhandling and that may subsequently damage the ego identity. Similar to Snow and Anderson's conception of shadow work, many panhandlers utilize friends or family to help keep watch in case of trouble (1993). During several interviews I was approached by someone who evidently knew the panhandler and was making sure that I was not harming him or her. Ultimately, shadow work ensures that the actions panhandlers take to protect their social identity and their ego identity are not in vain.

CONCLUSION

Panhandlers are a group of stigmatized individuals present in societies around the world. Their stigma, which originates from an intricate blend of unemployment and solicitation of materials, is displayed when panhandlers undergo the act that defines them – panhandling. Consequently, stigma management is not only applicable when panhandlers are mistreated or receive harassment. Rather, panhandlers must be able to manage their stigma in a variety of ways throughout the panhandling process.

While it is difficult to generalize from data of such a specific group, the study certainly highlights some of the everyday stigma management tactics that can be, and have been, utilized during the panhandling process. Panhandlers first must engage in techniques geared to capture the attention of the passerby. Once attention is garnered, they begin to use strategies to project an impression to the potential donor.

Specifically, impression management techniques vary between individuals and according to gender. Male panhandlers typically adhere to the gender ideals of the bold, strong Mexican man. To this degree, male panhandlers often dress professionally and project confidence in their verbal and nonverbal communication. On the other hand, female panhandlers present themselves as submissive, impoverished individuals in need of help. This impression is formed through tattered clothing, meek body language, and minimal verbal communication. Panhandlers with disabilities engage in these strategies far less and often use their other stigma, their disability, as a counterweight.

Stigma management, as it relates to ego identity, is another important component of the panhandling process. Since they confront their stigma throughout the entire presentation of self during panhandling, the subjects often engage in several techniques to protect their ego identity. Examples of these techniques include identity talk, shadow work, and support networks.

Future research is needed to further examine the stigma management tactics of panhandlers, both in Mexico and in cities around the world. Studies should examine the gender differences that were highlighted by the present study and the differences in presentation of self and other strategies employed. Additionally, other studies might focus on differences and similarities between urban and rural panhandlers and might benefit from a longitudinal analysis of ego identities. For example, research could examine how the ego identity of the stigma develops and factors that may be involved in its persistence over time.

Overall, this research highlights a process that is often ignored. Stigma management and panhandling are phenomena that occur worldwide and that subsequently merit attention. Insight into the techniques of panhandlers may provide information to be used to better understand panhandling, particularly in areas where it is illegal, and the stigma management tactics utilized by panhandlers and other stigmatized individuals.

On a broad scale, this research is useful in the context of understanding the poverty that plagues Mexico and Latin America. Panhandling is a way that some people choose to cope with their poverty and is prevalent in many Mexican cities. In the context of rising poverty, it is particularly important that panhandling be understood, both in Mexico, in Latin America, and in the world.

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