The Art of Collective Identity: *How an Art from the Streets Program Fosters a Sense of Community Among the Homeless*

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ABSTRACT

The current paper explores the role that identities play in creating and maintaining a sense of community in an organization supporting homeless artists in the South. Couched in the social movements literature on collective identity, this study examines the ways individual identities contribute to an overall collective identity of artists and volunteers within the organization Art from the Streets (AFTS). Relying on organizational materials, face-to-face interviews, and participant observation conducted from August to December 2011, the current research finds that AFTS creates a space where homeless individuals can negotiate the stigmatized identities they experience on the streets and adopt a more empowering identity. In the process, the organization fosters a collective identity among all members. This paper adds to the existing social movements scholarship by examining how an empowering collective identity is formed among members with individual identities that are traditionally considered stigmatized in larger society.

Keywords: Collective Identity, Stigma, Social Movements

INTRODUCTION

It is a hot August afternoon in central Texas, and in a downtown community center, over twenty local artists gather in the cool air conditioning. The white walls display colorful paintings, neatly placed between the windows that reveal the busy sidewalks of a street corner. Sitting at long tables covered in paint-splattered plastic sheets, the artists talk to each other while simultaneously working intently on the pieces of art in front of them.

I interrupt one artist from his work to have a conversation. He tells me he has only started attending these art studios for four months now, but he comes every chance he gets. When I ask why, he responds, "It's community outreach. It's help… they're just not thinking [each of us is] a dreg of society."

His statement is both poignant and hopeful. I know he is referring to the fact that he, like all of the artists in the room, is homeless. The reactions he receives from people outside of the studio are rarely friendly, but here in the Art from the Streets (AFTS) studio, he finds a supportive community.

The AFTS organization hosts art classes twice a week to any homeless people in the area who might be able to take a short, though regular, break from their oftentimes difficult and dangerous life on the streets, in order to create something beautiful. I ask the artist what the organization means to him, and he replies, "Just fellowship, in a way. I really am speechless on that… you'd have to cut my heart out and figure that out. My soul."

The current paper explores this topic: the "fellowship," or sense of community that is fostered by this local organization that supports homeless artists in unique although meaningful ways. Specifically, I explain the role that stigmatized identities play in the formation of collective identity, and how the organizational structure supports a sense of community that de-emphasizes stigma and empowers members.

"IT'S COMMUNITY OUTREACH. IT'S HELP…THEY'RE JUST NOT THINKING [EACH OF US IS] A DREG OF SOCIETY."
- HOMELESS ARTIST

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper relies on two bodies of literature to address different dimensions of collective action (Jasper 1997; Johnston et al. 1994; Melucci 1996) and the formation of collective identity (Gamson 1991; Jasper 1997; Jasper 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Valocchi 2008). The work of Johnston et al. (1994) and Melucci (1996) describes collective action beyond the previously limited category of "social movements," illuminating the need for research on social movements focusing on identity formation and confirmation (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Snow and Anderson 1987). The studies of Valocchi (2008), Gamson (1991), Jasper (1998), and Polletta and Jasper (2008) lay the empirical foundation for the analysis of collective identity in collective action.

COLLECTIVE ACTION, STIGMA, AND IDENTITIES

Scholars have recently begun to examine new forms of social movements, in an attempt to re-conceptualize their meaning, and to identify a wider array of different types of collective action (Jasper 1997; Johnston et al 1994). Melucci (1996) is frequently cited for his elaboration on collective action, claiming a specific type of collective action can be categorized by its relation to 1) solidarity within the movement, 2) conflict against outside actors, and 3) the social system in which the action takes place. While most social movements experience aspects of solidarity, Melucci argues that collective action includes movements that are not necessarily oriented toward any political conflict, and instead focus on building solidarity while working within the surrounding social system (Melucci 1996). Whereas social movements have historically been perceived as emphasizing political activism, "New Social Movements" (NSM) tend to be self-referential in nature, where "the action within the movement is a complex mix of the collective and individual confirmations of identity" (Johnston et al. 1994, 8).

Indeed, in today's social movements, the reshaping of identities is oftentimes the primary goal (Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Johnston et al. 1994). Jasper (1998) asserts that members in social movements at times participate to garner a new sense of self-worth through moral expression, and not necessarily to accomplish external structural goals. In other words, some social movements may be focused on re-conceptualizing identities that have been stigmatized by others (Jasper 1998). Here, stigmatization refers to:

> "the cumulative consequence of a history of failing to possess desirable attributes and evoking rejecting responses from conventional membership groups…The end result is a self-perception of possessing a stigmatized personal identity, perceiving oneself as stigmatized and as the object of collective stigmatization (Kaplan and Liu 2000:, 216)."

Some social movement organizations focus their efforts on challenging the stigma associated with individual members' identities through the use of *identity work*, or a "range of activities" that serve "to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1348). It is important to note that identity work is not just an individual effort, but may be accomplished by and for a larger group of individuals or collective (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). In fact, the New Social Movement Perspective suggests that collective attempts at identity work are the most important dynamic within movement formation, because they act as both a means of empowerment and way to challenge hegemonic identities and thus, to some extent, the existing social order (Johnston et al. 1994). Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) describe cooperative identity work as *subcultural identity work*, and argue that it involves four major parts: *defining* the identity; *coding*, or creating a way to express this identity; *affirming* the identity through validating an individual's claims to the identity; and *policing* the identity by protecting and enforcing the code that signifies it. Stigmatized individuals engage in subcultural identity work to resist stigma and redefine identities to have a more positive meaning (Kaplan and Liu 2000; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996, Snow and McAdam 2000).

To illustrate how members of a group with stigmatized identity employ identity work to empower themselves as a group, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) examine the case of a support group of transsexual individuals. The group *defined* the identity of transsexual by claiming the category is biologically determined – those who are not born with a male sex and feminine gender (or vice versa) do not fall into their identity category. The expression of this identity involved telling stories of gender non-conformity such as cross-dressing as a child, and thus these stories served as the *code* for a transsexual identity. The group members also compared themselves with other groups that face discrimination, such as gays, lesbians, and African Americans in order to *affirm* their identity as a legitimate minority group. Finally, the group *policed* the transsexual identity of members by avoiding talk about sexuality, which the authors contend challenged the stereotype that transsexuals are "perverted" or "hypersexual," while also helping to foster a more multi-faceted and positive transsexual identity among group members.

Additionally, members of social movements use identity work to match the identities formed as a group to their own self-conception (Snow and McAdam 2000). One important way this connection is developed is through *identity amplification*, which

"involves the embellishment and strengthening of [a member's] existing identity" (Snow and McAdam 2000, 49). The previously understated identity of a member becomes more salient so as to motivate that member to associate with the identity claimed by the group. When this process is successful, the nexus between a group's definition of an identity and each member's own self-conception results in the formation of a collective identity, or a "perception of group distinctiveness" that resembles a community more than a category (Jasper 1997, 86). I provide a more in-depth discussion of the concept of collective identity, as well as its implications for those with stigmatized identities, in the next section of this paper.

In a study of homeless individuals in Austin, Texas, Snow and Anderson (1987) find that a significant part of identity work of the homeless involved distancing themselves from other homeless individuals. Thus, the study demonstrates the unique challenges that may arise when attempting to create a consistent identity among the homeless, while also connecting this identity to each individual's self-conception. Furthermore, social movements that focus on identity formation as the means *and* the end have rarely been studied empirically; especially those whose members possess stigmatized identities. As a result, the current research fills a gap in the social movements literature on identity work among stigmatized individuals by examining a collective action organization that is comprised mainly of homeless individuals.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, STIGMA AND THE PUBLIC

Polletta and Jasper (2001, 285) define collective identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution." Collective identity occurs when members feel that they share the same status or relation with one another, resulting in positive feelings between members of the group (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Gamson (1991, 40) elaborates on the concept of collective identity by identifying three dimensions – the largest being solidary group identity, where members of a movement collectively identify based on a similar biographical location such as race or class. Within solidary identity, collective identity might be formed based on members having similar ideologies and thus supporting the same movement. Lastly, collective identity can be formed through identification with a specific organization within that movement (Gamson 1991). The current research focuses on one of these three types – solidary collective identity.

To illustrate, Valocchi (2008) describes the collective identity of one group of gay rights activists. The activists' connection to each other centered around their shared identities as gay individuals, more so than their similar ideologies surrounding the gay liberation movement or their affinities for one organization within this movement. He claims that the goals of "biographical activists," or members experiencing the equivalent of Gamson's solidary-based collective identity, are cultural. For these types of activists, "the work of consciousness raising is itself a social change goal and not solely a prelude to or byproduct of 'real' political action" (Valocchi 2008, 77). The goal for biographical activists is to challenge stereotypes and build new identities (Valocchi 2008).

The relationship between individual and collective identity is significant – the stronger a group's collective identity, the more likely each member will identify with the group as his or her own individual identity (Jasper 1997). We see this relationship at work when considering homeless individuals, specifically. Because stigmatized identities occur when individuals fail to conform to standards expected by a dominant group, a stigmatized individual may participate in a social movement in order to reject conventional norms and join a group in which the expectations are more easily navigated (Kaplan and Liu 2000). In turn, the "act of joining the movement increases the perceived value of one's social identity – a collective identity becomes a valued ego extension of one's personal identity and so enhances one's self-worth" (Kaplan and Liu 2000, 233).

However, a study by Norris and Milkie (2007) finds that homeless individuals were *not* in fact eager to collectively identify with other homeless individuals. While studying interactions in a small, northeastern city's homeless shelter, the researchers discovered that all adults in the homeless shelter rejected a collective "we" identity. When considering stigmatized identities, the scholars claim that the perceived mutability of one's identity, or how changeable an individual feels his or her identity is, determines one's propensity to collectively identify with others holding the same identity. Individuals with identities that seem "fixed" are more likely to collectively identify with others of that identity. For example, being an African American can be perceived by some as a fixed identity.[2] Thus, according to the authors, African Americans would be more likely to collectively identify with other African Americans than homeless individuals would with other homeless individuals, especially if those individuals perceive their homeless condition to be temporary (Norris and Milkie 2007).

Collective identity is reinforced in part by how non-members perceive the group in question (Jasper 1997). Johnston et al. (1994) call the external recognition a movement's "public identity," which creates a boundary between members within the group and the public, or individuals outside of the movement. Public identity serves to both maintain collective identity by creating a "we-them" distinction that further defines who the group *is* and who it is *not* (Johnston et al. 1994). Additionally, by soliciting attention from an audience, a social movement may garner support from observers who can then report on the movement's activities and messages favorably (Hunt et al. 1994).

To express collective identity publicly, members of social movements often use cultural materials, such as narratives, symbols, or rituals (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Because many social movements today emphasize the identity aspects of action, they necessarily emphasize cultural issues to differentiate themselves from the dominant group, or those outside the movement (Johnston et al. 1994). In an analysis of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Roy (2010) finds that the movement's music allowed for a crowd of people, experiencing similar adversities, to engage in prolonged collective action that required the same coordination and community that proved necessary for the movement as a whole. Thus, "many people *doing* art… not just consuming it, is an extraordinarily powerful mode for… solidifying commitment to social movements" (Roy 2010, 86). However, while recent scholarship has studied the effect that the cultural materials of a movement have on that movement's solidarity (for another example, see Sarabia 2005), little research has been done on how collective action through art also facilitates a public identity for individual social movement organizations.

Though some studies have shed light on the factors that support or impede the formation of a collective identity among stigmatized individuals (Snow and Anderson 1987; Norris and Milkie 2007; Kaplan and Liu 2000), there is a lack of scholarship on the mobilization of stigmatized individuals for the primary purpose of forming a counter-stigma collective identity. The current research addresses this gap by examining how collective identity is formed within an organization whose membership is mainly comprised of homeless individuals who, as a result, experience stigmatized identities

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

In 1991, a group of local artists Art from the Streets (AFTS) began hosting weekly art classes as an attempt to improve the lives of homeless individuals in their community. One founder, Hank, explains the birth of AFTS, saying, "The premise of the class was that, creating things and being an artist and doing art – whatever that means – is good for people. It's good for our lives. And that it would be helpful to them." The program began as weekly art classes held at a local community aid center, and in November of 1993, volunteers hosted an Art Show to display and sell the work that participants had created. Seventy pieces of art, painted by the homeless artists in the class, were put up for sale to the public, netting $1,650 in sales. All proceeds of each sold art piece went directly to the artist who produced the work, and the Show "had a tremendous effect on the homeless people who had participated" (Art from the Streets 2011a).

Since then, the Art Show has been an annual occurrence for AFTS, and in 2006, AFTS sold a record $81,000 in art. The Show continues to attract between one and two thousand attendees each year. And while the Art Show is still the most publicized feature of AFTS, the organization claims it is not the most important aspect. The now twice-weekly art classes reflect "the core of the program," where homeless individuals can interact with each other in a positive environment (Art from the Streets 2011b). Every Tuesday and Thursday, one can expect to find about fifteen to twenty homeless individuals in the AFTS studio, using the paints and resources provided by AFTS to make their artwork for the next Show.

Today, AFTS classes are held in a community center run by (and located adjacent to) a local Episcopal church, just across the street from a downtown resource center for the homeless. AFTS has eight board members (all of whom are non-homeless volunteers), and approximately twelve additional volunteers. The board, which only recently formed in January of 2011, is comprised of the original three AFTS founders, plus five additional members who have been invited to join the board to aid in the coordination of the Art Show. AFTS began applying for 501(c)(3) status in 2002, but has yet to finish the process due in part because of a lack of funding for the application fee. Its financial support comes primarily from individual donations and sales of admission to the Art Show.

Date	Time	Event	Total Hours
9/6/11	1:45 p.m. - 3:45 p.m.	Studio Class	2:00
9/13/11	1:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.	Studio Class	2:00
9/15/11	1:15 p.m. - 2:45 p.m.	Arists' Meeting	1:30
9/23/11	12:25 p.m. - 2:40 p.m.	Board Meeting	2:15
10/4/11	1:15 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.	Studio Class	2:00 [3]
10/11/11	2:00 p.m. - 3:45 p.m.	Studio Class	1:20 [4]
10/18/11	1:10 p.m. - 3:15 p.m.	Studio Class	2:05
10/20/11	1:35 p.m. - 3:05 p.m.	Studio Class	1:30
10/28/11	12:25 p.m. - 2:40 p.m.	Arists' Meeting	2:15
11/8/11	10:55 a.m. -1:00 p.m.	Art Show Prep Meeting	2:05
11/15/11	1:05 p.m. - 2:05 p.m.	Art Show Prep Meeting	1:00
11/16/11	6:50 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.	Public Art Viewing	2:10
Total Hours In Field: 22 hours, 10 minutes			

TABLE 1.

METHODS

My analysis is based on data from three qualitative research methods: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and a textual analysis of organizational materials. Between August and December of 2011, I conducted over twenty-two hours of participant observation at various events and gatherings held by AFTS. Over half of these hours were spent in the art studios. During these classes, I would act as an observer and as a participant. I spent my time walking around the studio and recording in my field notebook the conversations taking place among artists and between artists and volunteers. I also took notes on the physical surroundings, non-verbal interactions, and the artwork being produced. Additionally, I attended two board meetings and one artist meeting, carefully recording the agenda of the meetings and the conversations. Lastly, I attended two workdays aimed at preparing for the annual Art Show, where I played the role of a more active observer, helping with the work while making conversation with others in attendance (see Table 1 for a list of the events, times, and dates of my observations). Except for the board meetings, all gatherings were attended by both volunteers and homeless artists. Board meetings only included non-homeless volunteers. My observations were simultaneously recorded in a notebook, which I kept with me in the field. I then went home and typed up the field notes.

In addition to my observations, I completed seven face-to-face interviews. Before conducting an interview, I advised each interviewee that participation was completely voluntary, and that he or she may pause or stop the interview at any time. Once the interview was completed, I assigned a pseudonym to the interviewee to be used throughout my research and in the current paper. The interviews averaged nineteen minutes in length. I chose my interviews with three objectives in mind: 1) to obtain a sample of both volunteers and artists; 2) to reflect the demographics of the population in each category as closely as possible; and 3) to have respondents reflect a wide range of amount of time spent participating in the organization. Four interviews were conducted with homeless artists. Of these, two were men and two were women. The length of time the artists had been participating in AFTS ranged from four months to nineteen years. In addition, I conducted interviews with three volunteers – two women and one man. Ages of all interviewees ranged from mid-forties to mid-sixties.

All volunteer interviewees identified as white (in fact, all of the AFTS volunteers are white). One artist identified as black, one identified as American Indian, and the other two identified as white. Although all interviewees currently live in the city, six of them claimed hometowns outside of the state (see Table 2 for a list of demographic characteristics of the respondents). Interview questions focused on multiple aspects of the organization, although most centered on the identity of the respondent and how he or she perceived and interacted with others in AFTS. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author.

Finally, I examined a variety of materials pertaining to the organization, including the organization's official website and a documentary about the organization titled *Art from the Streets* (Blaylock 2006). Additionally, I analyzed text from the organization's website to shed light on the ways the group's collective identity is portrayed to the public. Materials were analyzed according to how each represents the formation and maintenance of a collective identity of the homeless artists.

Respondent	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Home State	Length of Time With AFTS[5]	Role In AFTS
Nelson	Man	White	58	Mississippi	18 years	Artist
Davis	Man	Black	47	Tennessee	4 months	Artist
Shannon	Woman	White	51	Arkansas	3 1/2 years	Volunteer
Hank	Man	White	65	Colorado	20 years	Volunteer
Faith	Woman	White	60	New York	20 years	Volunteer
Julie	Woman	American Indian	40s	Texas	3 years	Artist
Martha	Woman	White	53	Unknown	9 months	Artist

TABLE 2.

FINDINGS
COLLECTIVE ACTION, STIGMA, AND IDENTITIES

As an organization that is largely comprised of homeless participants AFTS experiences the same challenges at constructing a collective identity that is described by Norris and Milkie (2007). The homeless individuals from AFTS are aware of a negative label they receive from society, and the reactions garnered by that label. For example, one homeless participant, Davis, describes the responses of people from the community when they come to the shelter just a block down from the AFTS studio: "So kind of wealthy people sometimes feel a little unease with the environment of the people hanging outside [the shelter]… it's sort of like a challenge for them." This negative perception of homeless individuals is sometimes even held by homeless AFTS participants themselves, creating a potential obstacle in the formation of a collective identity with other homeless participants. In fact, two out of the four homeless respondents conveyed some type of ambivalence toward the homeless population in Austin. Nelson, who, it is important to note, has only recently begun participating in AFTS studios, expresses this reluctance to associate himself with others, saying "I see people all the time [outside of the studio]. But I kind of stay to myself. I hang with them, you know, but I don't participate in a lot of the stuff they do." Nelson's ambivalence toward identifying with other homeless individuals demonstrates a type of distancing identity work which is characteristic of those with stigmatized identities, specifically the homeless (Snow and Anderson 1987).

Because almost every homeless individual experiences this stigma, it seems reasonable that an organization of homeless participants would focus some efforts on navigating the stigmatized identities of their members. When Hank, a former volunteer and now chair of the board, describes the goal of AFTS, he recognizes the role that stigmatized identities play in the organization's efforts:

> …[T]HE VALUE THAT [THE HOMELESS ARTISTS] CARRY FROM THIS IS THEY HAVE SOME WORTH. AND I THINK THE IMPRESSION OF HOMELESSNESS, AND…HOW PEOPLE WHO LOSE THEIR HOMES, WHO LOSE THEIR WAY IN LIFE, INTERNALIZE THAT FAILURE, AND THEY JUST SEE THEMSELVES AS A PARIAH. WHY WOULD ANYBODY CARE ABOUT ME? AND [AFTS] GIVES THEM SOMETHING ABOUT THEMSELVES TO CARE ABOUT."

As the above quote suggests, AFTS establishes a space where homeless individuals can de-emphasize the negative identity that is given to them by society, and can adopt a new sense of self. During one class, a homeless participant described the AFTS studio as a place where he can "rekindle [him]self and [his] creative juices without being dictated by society." As an organization that exhibits traits reflective of those associated with New Social Movements, a majority of the efforts in AFTS involve the "collective and individual confirmations of identity" as described by Johnston et al. (1994). Homeless participants in AFTS find ephemeral freedom from their stigmatized identity in the studios, and this potential for relief constitutes an important source of motivation for their participation in the organization.

How do members of AFTS navigate the identity of homelessness? Though not always a conscious effort, a large part of the interactions within the studios and other events held by AFTS serve as identity work that refuses this stigmatized identity. Participants in AFTS come from a variety of backgrounds, with a broad range of artistic experience, ranging from simply drawing cartoons as a child, to attending a few training courses, to receiving college degrees in the Fine Arts. However, in the AFTS studios, homeless participants are always referred to as "artists." Faith, a co-founder of AFTS, explains the decision to implement this label:

> *[We] decided that, you know to really honor that part. I don't like the whole thing of identifying people as homeless. I'd much rather identify them as* being *homeless, but they're like* people *first. They're not homeless – "the homeless" – which I really don't like. They're people. And then, they're people who happen to be expressing themselves artistically.*

Here, the process of identity amplification is evident, as the previously subordinate (and at times almost non-existent) identities of "artists" become more salient to the participants in AFTS.

Faith's description of "artists" – those who expresses themselves artistically – serves to *define* the artist identity in a way that is accessible to the homeless participants. The structure of AFTS then acts as a *coding* mechanism to help construct the means of expressing this identity. Volunteers ensure that the homeless participants have significant agency within the organization, which provides various avenues to exercise their artist role. For example, participants are invited to help with preparation for the annual Art Show, which takes place outside of the bi-weekly studios. During the prep sessions, artists price their artwork, with little imposition from the volunteers. Volunteers choose a space for preparation that is easily accessible by bus or by walking, so that artists don't face obstacles in attending. Additionally, volunteers use a local company to mount the artwork that will appear in the Art Show. While I was attending one of the monthly board meetings, I witnessed a conversation among volunteers about how their choice of a local company to do the mounting may not be the least expensive route. However, a volunteer quickly pointed out that they needed to continue doing business with a "local mom and pop place," because they can be sure that the homeless artists will be allowed inside to turn in their work.

It is important to note that all but one of the volunteers at the studios are artists themselves – many even professionally trained to some extent. This aspect of the program proves important to the construction of identity within the studios, since the volunteers, as artists themselves, can give credit to the artist identity of participants, thus further affirming that identity. For example, volunteers become very familiar with the work of artists in the studios, to the point where they can identify which pieces were created by which artist, without looking at a signature on the artwork. During one instance in the studio, I observed a volunteer pick up a small piece of art that was drying on the rack, and say with excitement, "Oh, look! A tiny Pete!" referring to the piece's creator. This comment introduces the symbolic nature of the art created in AFTS – acting as a cultural material that solidifies identity – and illustrates how volunteers strongly associate homeless participants with their art, thereby validating their identities as artists. This process of identification is recognized by the artists themselves. In one instance, a volunteer picked up a piece of artwork from the drying rack and commented to the artist standing next to him, "This is yours." The artist smiled and said, "You know my work!" in a proud tone, to which the volunteer replied, "I know your work – it's beautiful."

As the above conversation illustrates, interactions in the studios among homeless participants, and between the participants and volunteers, further support the participants' identities as artists. The studios are arranged in a very egalitarian manner. Volunteers do not cluster in a group or attempt to visibly separate themselves from the artists in any fashion. Rather, volunteers are found seated or standing throughout the room, most often having one-on-one conversations with artists as equals. In fact, Hank, the chair of the board of AFTS, specifies that the term "art classes" is actually a

> *misnomer… They aren't really classes, and they never have been. There's never been any instruction, or just almost none… the way [volunteers] treated people in the class was so respectful and nurturing. And just kind of encouraging, nonjudgmental, people loved being there with them.*

Shannon, a volunteer and board member, testifies to this supportive type of interaction between volunteers and artists by remarking, "For the most part I really enjoy just hanging out with [the homeless artists] and being on their same level, and equal with them. And just talking about art and their lives." The "nonjudgmental" attitude from the volunteers helps *police* the artist identity, as it prevents a dichotomy between the artists who are homeless and those (the volunteers) who are not. Thus, the egalitarian structure de-emphasizes the stigmatized identities of members and fosters a positive identity as artists for the homeless participants.

One can observe the effects of the identity work in AFTS in both the perceptions of the identities of homeless participants by themselves and by volunteers. Faith describes the outcome of her work with AFTS by saying the organization,

Shannon confirms this sentiment by saying,

"I HAVE TO SAY THERE'S A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOW I PERCEIVE THE ART FROM THE STREETS HOMELESS IN CONTRAST TO THE — WHAT DO YOU CALL THEM WHEN THEY'RE ON THE STREET CORNER? PANHANDLERS.... "
-SHANNON

"... SLASH[ES] ALL THE STEREOTYPES. IT'S BEEN VERY GOOD FOR ME PERSONALLY TO KEEP BEING REMINDED OF HOW WE ALL STEREOTYPE EACH OTHER AND IT JUST BREAKS THAT. IT JUST COMPLETELY BREAKS IT."
-FAITH

And whereas Shannon expressed having "very little tolerance" for homeless individuals that she saw on the streets of Austin, she described the artists in AFTS as "really down-to-earth, nice, good people," demonstrating that the identity she ascribes to participants in art from the streets is separate from the stigmatized identities one is more likely to assign to other homeless individuals.

Additionally, one can see the results of the amplification involved in identity work when considering the artists' self-perceptions. In the documentary, *Art from the Streets*, one volunteer expresses how the homeless participants in AFTS have "learned to identify themselves as artists" rather than just homeless people (Blaylock 2006). My research confirms this process. In the interviews of participants, I asked them how they identify as a person. All four of the homeless respondents self-identified primarily as artists. For example, Davis responded with, "I just see myself as… an artist that's going through a lot of trials and tribulations and trying to maintain a positive edge." And Nelson responded similarly, claiming, "I'd say I'm a homeless artist for now. And then I'll be the artist formerly known as a homeless artist." Both of these responses demonstrate how participants in the organization experience amplified identities. Additionally, the work produced by an artist rarely, if ever, alludes to the artist's status as a homeless individual. During my observations in the studios, I saw a painting of Lake Austin in the style of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, a work inspired by scenes from a Hemingway novel, and numerous colorful portraits and landscapes. The only work of art I witnessed in my observations that even subtly called attention to the author's homeless identity was one labeled with the words "Street Artist Birthday." By making the identity of "artist" more salient, the AFTS program allows individual members to ascribe to the artist identity established by the group, rather than to individually emphasize their identity as homeless.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, STIGMA, AND THE PUBLIC

The two quotes mentioned in the previous paragraph demonstrate the seemingly non-mutable nature of their identities as artists, compared to the transient nature of their identities as homeless individuals. Although Davis has been involved in AFTS for about nineteen years he still talks about his homeless status as if it is a stage in his life, and not a permanent identity. He *does,* however, refer to himself primarily as an "artist," suggesting that he perceives this identity to be both salient and fixed. In this way, the identity work performed during the studios and other events in AFTS puts the stigmatized identity of homelessness in the background, and foregrounds what participants perceive to be a non-mutable artist identity, which is more likely to support the creation of a collective identity (Norris and Milkie 2007). Indeed, when I asked one artist, Martha, if she felt she had anything in common with the other homeless participants, she confidently replied, "Yeah… they're artists. So we have artistic ability in common."

Four out of the seven total interview respondents expressed some form of collective identity, by either referring to others as "a team," or "an artist like myself," or some other expression of shared status. To illustrate, the film *Art from the Streets* documents one artist remarking, "it's good to paint with other birds of a feather" (Blaylock 2006). A prevalent theme in both informal conversations and interviews involves artists in AFTS identifying other artists and volunteers in the organization as "family." For example, Davis explains the studios as "a family setting. Because we see each other and… try to be supportive towards other artists." During the studios, participants often ask other artists or volunteers for advice on their artwork, demonstrating that each artist affirms others' identities as artists, as they present the collective identity as an "ego-extension" of their individual identity (Kaplan and Liu 2000). Additionally, the artists display a solid understanding of a "we-they" distinction between the artists in AFTS and other homeless individuals outside of the organization. The door separating the studio from the street is a symbolic reminder of such distinctions. AFTS artists easily discern who "belongs" inside the studio, and who does not. Because they recognize fellow artists, AFTS participants know who to let in the door, which is locked from the outside. When other homeless individuals, who are often looking for services from the community center

attached to the studio, knock on the door, artists do not open the door and instead wait for a volunteer to direct the visitors elsewhere. In this way, the door symbolically reinforces the collective identity by creating a distinction between artists inside, and the homeless individuals outside of the studio.

Notably, the collective identity not only includes homeless individuals but non-homeless volunteers as well. Davis attests to the sense of collective identity at AFTS, saying "Yeah it's a community. It's sort of like a big family, coming together. Volunteers as well. You build a bond with people." Faith claims that this community is one of the most important aspects of AFTS:

"I think the community that's been developed is very important…between the artists themselves, between the artists and the volunteers…They're like, in some kind of identifiable group together. And they, you know refer to that in a way that is positive. I mean, it doesn't mean all kinds of stuff doesn't come up between them, but that's any family."

And Shannon expresses this sense of collective identity from the perspective of a volunteer:

"I think that [the homeless artists] think a lot like I do, like an artist does. Which is very different than most people, more creative or whatever. And I feel like I know where they're coming from… I see them as myself, or "wow how easily that could have been me had I not had the resources that I had as a child.""

Shannon's perspective sheds light on the sense of collective identity that is fostered in AFTS. As illustrated by this quote, she affirms the homeless participants' identities as artists, but also collectively identifies *with* these artists.

The inclusion of volunteers in the collective identity of the organization supports the dismissal of participants' homeless identity, as it demonstrates that the identity of AFTS artists does not delineate between homeless and non-homeless. In this way, the collective identity formed in AFTS demonstrates a unique type of Gamson's solidary collective identity. Initially, the most obvious biographical location that the participants have in common would be their similar class as homeless

individuals. However, this commonality does not lend itself to forming a collective identity, as Norris and Milkie (2007) previously explained, because of the seemingly changeable status of homelessness as an identity category. However, when engaging in identity work to establish a new biographical location as "artists," AFTS can build from a less stigmatized biographical location, and thus successfully create a collective identity among the homeless participants.

Art from the Streets makes occasional efforts to publicly display art made in the studio. The most notable of such displays occurs regularly with the annual Art Show and Sale, which is open to the community. As a form of public identity described by Johnston et al. (1994), the Art Show is an important part of solidifying the collective identity in AFTS. In his interview, Davis enthusiastically commented on the importance of the Art Show to AFTS artists like himself, saying, "It's almost like an NFL team or a college team going to a national championship… and the crowd is cheering you on." Through the Art Shows, the "crowd," or public, is obliged to recognize the "team" aspect, or collective identity of members in AFTS. This in turn validates individual artist identities. Participants wear nametags at the Show, stating their name, followed by the word "Artist." Hank affirms: "Within the context of the Show," he says, "they *are* artists."

The public acknowledgement of a collective identity, and the public validation of individual identities, result in a solidified effort against the stigmatized homeless identity that artists would otherwise be burdened with in public settings (Kaplan and Liu 2000; Johnston et al. 1994). Shannon emphasizes the importance of the show and its opposition to stigma:

"[It is important] that we get a lot of people in to see this art. And how creative these otherwise "rejects" as some people like to think they are, are. And how astonished that some people – I mean, even within the last two years of the Show, people come up to me and told me, "Wow, I just cannot get over this." And it gives [the homeless artists] a chance. That to me is what's important. For them to have that opportunity to show what they're capable of doing, despite their hardships."

Faith agrees, saying,

**"CAUSE IN THEIR LIVES, MOSTLY [THE ARTISTS] ARE JUST REALLY PUSHED ASIDE. SO IN THIS VERY UNIQUE LITTLE BUBBLE, ESPECIALLY AT THE SHOW…THE ATTENTION IS ON THEM AND THEIR CREATIONS, NOT ON "WHY DO YOU LIVE ON THE STREET?""
-FAITH**

**"NOT UNTIL LATER DID WE REALIZE THAT WHEN WE SAW [THE ARTISTS'] REACTIONS TO SELLING THEIR WORK, AND HOW PROFOUND IT WAS… BEING IN THAT POSITION WITH THE PUBLIC, TO INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE THAT USUALLY JUST WALK RIGHT BY THEM… IT WAS JUST OVERWHELMING TO SOME OF THEM."
-HANK**

The public confirmation of the artists' collective identity, and the subsequent affirmation of individual artist identities, then makes a significant, empowering impact on the participating artists. Hank explains the effect:

Thus, the Art Show functions as a cultural material used to generate a public identity which reinforces the collective identity of AFTS. And since a stronger collective identity results in each member being more likely to individually identify with the group (Jasper 1997), the Art Show further strengthens the participants' identities as artists, while de-emphasizing their stigmatized identities as homeless.

In sum, the identity work fostered by interactions and other efforts in AFTS serve to create a positive individual identity for the homeless artists involved in the organization. By doing so, homeless individuals can more readily adopt an empowering collective identity that is affirmed by the public, and in turn de-emphasize the stigma experienced with the identity of homelessness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Relying on an analysis of organizational materials, face-to-face interviews, and participant observation conducted from August to December 2011, this paper has explored the roles that identities play in an organization supporting homeless artists. Specifically, the current research has explained how the organization employs identity work to create an empowering collective identity that de-emphasizes the stigmatized identities of its homeless members.

Because of the stigmatized identity that accompanies homelessness, homeless individuals are often hesitant to collectively identify with others experiencing homelessness (Norris and Milkie 2007; Snow and Anderson 1987). My research finds that the members of AFTS exhibit the same reluctance. However, utilizing a range of activities that serve as identity work, the members of AFTS successfully navigate their stigmatized identities and adopt more empowering identities as artists. Exemplifying the process described by Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996), the activities central to the organization serve to define, code, affirm, and police the artist identity that is continually being emphasized and confirmed.

The act of participation in the program – namely, routinely expressing oneself artistically in the physical space of the studio – defines homeless participants as artists rather than simply as homeless. By allowing the artists to have some agency in the organization, AFTS provides participants with a safe and nurturing space to express themselves using the newly emphasized identity as an artist. The volunteers, most of whom are artists themselves, then affirm this identity by consistently associating each artist with his or her art, and showing sincere appreciation as fellow artists for the work that participants do. Finally, the seemingly non-judgmental behaviors of the volunteers, and the unstructured nature of the art "classes," serve to police the artist identity, ensuring that the collective identity of the group does not delineate between homeless and non-homeless members.

During my observations of AFTS, I did note a few discrepancies between the structure of the organization and its attempts to provide a nonjudgmental, empowering atmosphere for participants, which merit attention here. The most glaring of these discrepancies involved the organization's board, which did not have any homeless members. The board's non-homeless membership is troubling, given that the board makes many large decisions concerning the Art Show without immediate input from the artists who will be featured. However, within about nine months of the board's formation, members resolved to restructure the organization at the start of the new year, proposing that there be three committees rather than one board. One committee would be comprised of artists, one of studio volunteers, and the other of original founders (who currently comprise most of the current board). Under the new structure, representatives from each committee will meet regularly to exchange information and opinions, thus strengthening the agency of all members of the organization, especially the artists. Thus, while the fact that there are no self-identifying homeless people on the board could certainly be raised as a self-reflexive critique of the organization, the fact that within nine months of the board's formation, members sought to make it more inclusive is indeed, promising.

In contrast to the research of Norris and Milkie (2007), which found that homeless individuals in a homeless shelter did *not* collectively identify with each other due to the perceived mutability of their homeless identity, the identity work in AFTS facilitates a community that resembles Gamson's (1991) solidary collective identity. What is particularly noteworthy is that this community exists between homeless participants *and* non-homeless volunteers, suggesting that the formation of a collective identity has permeated the boundary dividing homeless and non-homeless, and instead draws a distinction between artist and non-artist. Additionally, the annual Art Show and Sale allows participants to engage the public with their identity as artists highlighted, and their stigmatized identity of homelessness de-emphasized. In this way, the Art Show functions to create a public identity for AFTS, as defined by Johnston and his colleagues (1994). The participants of AFTS are re-introduced to the public as artists rather than homeless, a practice which also serves to demarcate a we-them distinction between AFTS participants and those outside of the group in a way that emphasizes and affirms the participants' artist identities.

Using AFTS as a case study to examine a form of collective action in which identity formation constitutes the means *and* the end, the current study fills a gap in the emerging literature on

New Social Movements. Additionally, the results suggest ways that collective action organizations can navigate the stigmatized identities of members in order to form an empowering collective identity that de-emphasizes this stigma. It is important to note that the work of AFTS does not necessarily help homeless individuals off the streets. In fact, a few of the homeless participants in the organization today have been participating since AFTS first began in 1991, which suggests that they have been homeless for at least twenty years. The documentary relates the story of one artist who, after participating at an annual Art Show and Sale, earned enough in sales to pay for a year's worth of rent for his own apartment. But the monetary outcome of the following Show was not as successful for him, and he returned to living on the streets that next year (Blaylock 2006). The chronic nature of participants' homelessness further reveals the power that identity work has on individual members of AFTS. To the participants, it proves difficult to ignore their longstanding identity as homeless individuals. However, in light of their newly amplified identity as artists, their homeless identity moves to the background. The identity of "artist" takes on a kind of permanence that participants do not associate with their homeless identity. That is to say, participants in AFTS speak of their artist identity as if it will last a lifetime, whereas their identity as homeless may not. As a result, the ability to take on a more empowering identity – which is perceived as more permanent than the stigmatized identity of homelessness – serves as an important respite for members of AFTS.

During my observations at AFTS, not one volunteer claimed that the goal of Art from the Streets was to end homelessness. Although many volunteers recognized that the program offers financial benefits to some artists, they expressed that the AFTS mission was to provide a space for homeless individuals to creatively express themselves, escape the difficulty of homeless life, and to build relationships in a supportive community. In this way, the approach that AFTS takes regarding homelessness is unique in comparison with other homeless service providers in the area, as it does not directly address structural issues, but rather builds community among homeless individuals. While this approach certainly invites criticism – is the organization merely putting a band-aid over the critical social problem of homelessness? – many of the other local homeless service providers support and promote the efforts of AFTS by distributing information about the program to their own clients and encouraging them to participate. In an email with a member of a local homeless advocacy organization on January 7, 2011, AFTS is described as "a wonderful *client*-centered, *client*-run community outreach organization...that meets clients' needs, just as they are."

The findings of the current research shed light on a potential aspect of social problem alleviation that often remains unaddressed in more direct structural approaches. When attempting to find solutions to social problems involving people with stigmatized identity, the work of AFTS suggests that it may be necessary to first de-emphasize the stigma and create an empowering collective identity for the individuals involved. My study does not address the effect of the empowerment of members in AFTS, or their potential for future involvement in activism involving ending homelessness. Future research should address the impact that empowerment of stigmatized individuals has on their propensity to support social justice or promote further social change related to their marginalized status. Regardless, the current research suggests that identity formation is an essential part of collective action involving stigmatized identities, and that an empowering collective identity can be formed despite this stigma. While AFTS members produce beautiful works every week, perhaps their most interesting craft is mastering the art of collective identity.

[1] While I recognize that there are many differences between the transsexual communities and homeless communities, I believe the work of Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) lays a useful foundation for the analysis of group identity formation, which I believe can be applied to various contexts, including the current one of collective identity among the homeless.

[2] This example is taken from the work of Norris of Milkie (2007). As a sociologist, I recognize the problematic nature of this particular illustration. Race is, in fact, socially constructed and, as such, varies across time, locale, and situation and can even change within a person's lifetime (see, for instance, Takaki 2008 and McDermott 2006). However, I am using the example given by the authors to illustrate their argument of the perception of a fixed identity.

[3] I conducted a 15 minute interview on 10/4/11 and have adjusted the total hours accordingly.

[4] I conducted a 25 minute interview on 10/11/11 and have adjusted the total hours accordingly.

[5] The length of time the respondent had been participating in the organization at the time of the interview

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