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*Document Version*
Accepted author manuscript

*Published in:*
British Journal of Sociology

*DOI:*
10.1111/1468-4446.12633

*Publication date:*
2019

*License*
Unspecified

*Citation for published version (APA):*
Mik-Meyer, N., & Silverman, D. (2019). Agency and Clientship in Public Encounters: Co-constructing 'Neediness' and 'Worthiness' in Shelter Placement Meetings. *British Journal of Sociology*, *70*(5), 1640-1660. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12633

# Agency and Clientship in Public Encounters: Co-constructing 'Neediness' and 'Worthiness' in Shelter Placement Meetings

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Journal article (Accepted manuscript*)

**Please cite this article as:**
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**Agency and clientship in public encounters: Negotiating 'neediness' and 'worthiness' in shelter placement meetings**

Nanna Mik-Meyer and David Silverman

This article seeks to develop our understanding of the agency of vulnerable groups who at first sight may not seem to have much agency in their lives. It explores the co-constructed nature of agency in three Danish homeless shelters. Unlike earlier interview-based studies, our research is based on naturalistic data drawn from 23 video-recorded placement meetings. Using concepts from Goffman, we examine how versions of the neediness and worthiness of homeless people are negotiated verbally and bodily between staff and clients. We find that homeless people have to juggle two partly contradictory roles when they are given or take the roles of either a (active) citizen or a (passive) client. Clientship is actively negotiated by both parties and demonstrates the agency of homeless people: they can collaborate with (as clients) or challenge (as citizens) the staff's attempts to formulate solutions to their troubles. We further examine how the professional ideology of client centredness affects the meeting between the two parties. However, we show that, like any discourse, client centredness has no intrinsic meaning and is played out by actors in very different ways. In work with the homeless, the discourse of client centredness is related to discourses of 'neediness', 'worthiness' and 'value for money' that define agency in different ways and make three different client positions available: the resolute client, the acquiescent client and the passive client.

## Introduction

The agency of vulnerable groups such as homeless people is a much debated theme in sociological research (Parsell and Clarke 2017). Often researchers try to derive agency from social structure

(McNaughton 2008; Farrugia and Gerrard 2016) without taking the vulnerable groups' own situated explanation and sense of agency into account (Parsell and Clarke 2017: 2). Approaches that illuminate the social structures of homelessness (Sommerville 2013) and why individuals end up without a home are important, not least for policy making. However, within the field of homelessness there is a more Goffmanian branch of literature that focuses on the agency of homeless people and the way staff and homeless individuals make sense of homelessness (e.g., Carr 2011, Parsell 2011; Parsell and Clarke 2017).

In these studies, it is homeless people's character work that takes centre stage, for instance how discourses of 'sin-talk', 'sick-talk' and 'system-talk' affect the way homelessness can be understood and managed as, respectively, a moral offence, a pathology or a product of system injustice (Gowan 2010). In these studies, the agency of homeless people has to do with 'their capacity to make sense of their socially conditioned circumstances and identities' (Parsell and Clarke 2017: 2), for example, whether the homeless individuals are openly critical toward staff or display 'honest, open and willing talk' (Carr 2011: 149). These studies have shown how homeless persons establish service-worthiness by presenting themselves to staff as genuinely in need and morally worthy of the help offered (Carr 2011; Marvasti 1998; Meanwell 2013). Such Goffman-inspired work on the *hows* of interaction are equally important as structural research that sheds light on the *reasons* for homelessness. The *how* approach ensures that the agency of homeless people is included in the analysis and consequently results in a more adequate analysis of homelessness. In this work, agency is founded in the routine aspects of social life (Akram and Hogan 2015). Taking a relational approach to agency, staff and clients' agency are 'profoundly enmeshed with shared expectations and accomplished in everyday life through interaction' (Wright 2012: 318). Thus agency cannot be separated from existing power relations within a particular context (Wright 2012) or social world (Dobson, 2015). Consequently, acts of shelter residents and staff are acts from

individuals that not only operate with their 'own' interest in mind, but are influenced by the policy context and the other participants of the encounter (Hunter 2003: 332).

In order to investigate the relational aspect of agency, we discuss three client trajectories that demonstrate how agency is negotiated in real life placement meetings. Our focus is on the social processes through which agency is institutionalised in real situations (Dennis and Martin 2005). We present video recorded interactions as such naturalistic data make it possible to examine how the verbal and bodily acts of shelter residents and staff co-construct versions of what 'appropriate' neediness and worthiness – 'appropriate clientship' – in a placement encounter looks like. The article shows how clients may contest, ally with or grudgingly support staff versions of themselves – and how these actions relate to socially conditioned circumstances.

**Conceptualizing clientship**

Social citizenship is a concept that makes clear that what it takes to act in an appropriate manner as a citizen differs according to time and place (Pykett, Saward and Schaefer 2010; Taylor-Gooby 2010). Citizenship in western countries has to do with legal and democratic rights such as voting. However, social citizenship in western countries also entails more normative expectations of citizenship, for example, that for immigrants citizenship has to be 'deserved' (Monforte, Bassel and Khan 2018). 'Active citizenship' (Soysal 2012) implies that individuals take responsibility for their lives, act independently and actively try to solve their problems (e.g., Clarke 2005; Clarke et al. 2007). However, there is a sub-category of citizenship – clientship – that emphasizes different character traits of the individual.

When citizens are welfare recipients, the expectations of what it means to act appropriately change. Clients such as homeless people are not necessarily 'abandoned' and left behind by the welfare state as suggested by Clarke (2005: 454), but their citizenship is none the less

of a particular kind. Clientship brings to the forefront the dependency and asymmetry of welfare work (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2012): a welfare recipient 'depends on the [social] worker for needs assessment and service intervention, not the other way around' (Gubrium and Järvinen 2014: 5). From this it follows that 'appropriate' client behaviour is behaviour from a person who is dependent and passive with little agency. Thus, when staff and clients negotiate key issues of social work such as what it means to be needy, worthy or client centred (Rogowski 2010), this negotiation is carried out in a policy framework of asymmetry and dependency. However, because clients, by definition, are citizens *as well*, they have to juggle a dual role that results in complex processes of co-constructing neediness and worthiness with staff.

When clients are given/take the role of citizens, they are expected to take action, show responsibility and demonstrate agency (DeLeon and Denhardt 2000, Dwyer 2004; OECD 1997). When they are given/take the role of clients they are expected to accept an asymmetrical, dependent and often also passive relation to staff without demonstrating agency (Gubrium and Järvinen 2014). Thus, agency of welfare recipients shifts between being a reflexive citizen and a reflexive client. The reflexive citizen responds – and sometimes even alters – the context of constraint of which he/she is part whereas the reflexive client responds to the object position given to him/her and the accompanying powerlessness, but does not succeed in changing the context of constraint (Hoggett 2001, Greener 2002).

Client-staff interactions are essentially encounters and, as Goffman argued, every encounter is played out within a set of framing activities, that help organize the action (Goffman, 1974). Goffman's (1990) theatrical metaphors (e.g., front stage, back stage, role, performance etc.) as well as his attentiveness to the bodily aspect of human interaction provide further inspiration for our analysis. For instance, placement meetings take place 'front stage' but may be rehearsed by participants in back stage environments. Gestures such as pointing, smiling and moving position all

influence the way staff and clients negotiate clientship – juggle dependency and independence as well as passiveness and activeness – in the encounter.

Co-constructing neediness and worthiness are not so much a private issue as they are an interactional accomplishment (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). The many 'little stories' co-constructed in everyday organizational settings connect to 'bigger stories' (Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Mik-Meyer 2013) of the proper behaviour of citizens as active and independent and of clients as inactive and dependent. It is these processes of articulation (Carr 2011; Silverman) or 'interpretive practices' (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) through which clients and staff attach meaning to their daily activities in their encounter with each other that can shed light on the agency of vulnerable groups such as homeless individuals.

**Related empirical studies**

Social workers who give aid to homeless persons often work with highly ambiguous goals (Ravenhill 2008; Smith-Carrier and Lawlor 2017; Stonehouse, Threlkeld and Farmer 2015) as they must sort out the complex troubles of the homeless persons' situation as well as negotiate with them what a better life might entail (Dwyer, Bowpitt, Sundin and Weinstein 2015). This moral enterprise is about deciding the 'moral culpability or pathology of homeless individuals', which then becomes the centre of the explanation (Farrugia and Gerrard 2016: 260, 270). For example, Snow and Anderson's (1987) classic study suggest three other kinds of talk than the sin-talk, sick-talk and system-talk that Gowan (2010) found: distancing, embracement and fictive storytelling by homeless people. However, their approach underplays the situated circumstances of narrative production (Terui and Hsieh 2016) and hence the situatedness of being homeless (Carr 2011; Marvasti 2002; Smith and Hall 2017). Carr's (2011) ethnographic work, *Scripting Addiction*, is a good example of a fine-grained ethnographic approach that show how an analysis of encounters in drug treatment can

provide a thorough understanding of how policy, power and everyday perceptions of clients and staff play out in real life situations. Clients may 'flip the script', that is, 'analyzing and responding to a set of institutional and clinical practices *as* linguistic and metalinguistic practices' (Carr 2011: 191). However, even though clients may reproduce 'therapeutic scripts' these should not be mistaken for being expressions of their 'inner thoughts', 'feelings' or 'intentions' (Carr 2011: 191).

Continuing this focus on social interaction, Marvasti (1998) demonstrates how his research participants embraced the degrading aspects of being on the streets in order to craft autobiographies that were meaningful for others. Similarly, we treat 'stigma' as a narrative resource that is not simply resisted but also used to construct a locally effective narrative. The stigma of being homeless works as a little story that connects to bigger stories of 'appropriate behaviour' of both citizens (active) and clients (passive). Consequently, there is no such thing as shelter residents' absolutely rejecting or completely embracing the identities made relevant by today's service model (Parsell and Clarke 2017: 3). For instance, in two interview studies with homeless service administrators (Wasserman and Clair 2013) and representatives in a housing agency (Schneider 2010), it was shown that homeless people do not necessarily get a particular service simply by claiming it; instead they need to match specific service criteria (Wasserman and Clair 2013). Routine placement work for homeless people thus seems to be about gathering 'descriptions of who applicants "are" at the moment of intersection with the organization for the purpose of finding a fit with the available housing' (Wasserman and Clair 2013).

In another US study, Marvasti (2002: 628) finds four ways in which staff at a homeless shelter can make sense of the story of the homeless person. Staff can collaborate, be directive, or be confrontational or dismissive of the homeless person's story. These variations show how a 'service-worthy client' is constructed (Marvasti 2002: 628). Staff either '(1) subtly assist the clients in telling their stories, (2) focus on establishing the veracity of their accounts, (3) confront

their stories as "irrational," or (4) dismiss client narratives as of no institutional interest/importance (i.e., institutionally inappropriate)' (Marvasti 2002: 649). Alongside research on the agency of homeless people (Parsell and Clarke 2017), research on types of homeless 'talk' (Carr 2011; Gowan 2010), the storytelling of homeless people (Snow and Anderson 1987) and staff approaches to the homeless person's narrative (Marvasti 2002) has inspired our approach. We expand his research by examining the agency involved in real time co-constructions of clientship in placement meetings and by examining these 'little stories' in relation to the 'bigger story' of appropriate behaviour of clients and citizens.

**Method of procedure**

Every year approximately 6,000 people use the 72 homeless shelters in Denmark (Social Appeal Board 2016: 2); each individual 'bed' cost £4000 a month (Danish National Audit Office 2014: 4). A stay at the shelters lasts typically between three months and one year. Besides trying to solve a range of structural problems such as searching for a home for the homeless person in cities where housing is very costly, the social workers at the shelters instruct homeless people in household management and other basic skills relating to paying bills etc. In Denmark, legal residents have a right to a shelter bed if they do not have a home. In these cases, they well turn up at one of the 72 shelters. If the shelter cannot provide a bed, the shelter staff will contact another nearby shelter and hopefully find a bed for the person within reach. However, even though a shelter bed is a legal right for residents in Denmark, studies show that homeless people are in fact kicked out of the shelter if they misbehave (e.g., drink, act in an aggressive way or stop participating in the training activities) (Mik-Meyer 2018).

In order to investigate the situatedness of vulnerable groups' agency, we decided to video-record 23 placement meetings with homeless men (19) and women (4) living in three Danish

shelters. Because these meetings are highly complex naturalistic data is suitable (Heath and Luff 2012: 35). The recordings took place in the autumn of 2017 and the winter months of 2018. The participants at the meetings were a shelter resident, a shelter social worker, a municipality social worker and in some instances also client relatives as well as mentors or other staff such as drug counsellors. All participants gave permission to video-record the meeting and were given anonymity and their names and places have been fictionalised.

On average, each meeting lasted fifty-seven minutes (the longest lasting 82 minutes and the shortest 32 minutes). Mik-Meyer or a student set up the camera, greeted all participants but then left the meeting (except in the first three meetings where Mik-Meyer stayed). Afterwards, all participants were interviewed. However, these interviews are not used here as our focus is on real-time encounters. All data – meetings and interviews – have been transcribed in full. Selected passages from the meetings have been transcribed using a simplified Jeffersonian system appropriate to the level of our analysis (see appendix 1).

Using a constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), we discovered different co-constructions of client characters displaying agency of clients in three different ways. From this scrutiny, we have selected three paradigmatic client encounters that in a significant way reflect central features of the way agency of clients were co-constructed. Finally, we selected 12 short sequences of around 15-30 seconds to present in the paper that demonstrate significant features in the material at large. Two of the three clients are female. This does not reflect the gender balance in our data (where the vast majority of the clients are male). However, we have selected the meetings with Emily, Edith and Peter because they are clear examples of each trajectory.

**Three trajectories of agency**

The outcomes of the placement meetings are patterned in terms of the trajectories of three forms of agency that in different ways resonate with the shelter's core mission of placing the client at the centre of the work. We have named the three client positions: the resolute (Emily), the acquiescent (Edith) and the passive (Peter).

The resolute client (Emily) actively provides resources relating to her medical troubles and moral career, but lets her municipality social worker name the solution; a solution that she has desired all along. The acquiescent client (Edith) presents a particular placement solution without giving too many details about her troubles. However, staff decide on a different solution leading to what staff mark as 'inappropriate' behaviour by Edith. Opposed to Edith but like Emily, the passive client (Peter) behaves in an 'appropriate' manner and co-constructs his worthiness with staff. However contrary to Emily (and like Edith), he does not talk much about his troubles. He is largely passive and lets the social workers characterise his situation and define a solution. In each case, we are not dealing with types of clients but with different demonstrations of agency illuminating how clientship is a co-constructed phenomenon.

***Trajectory 1: the resolute client***

Participants: Emily (client), Sheryl (social worker at shelter) and Doreen (social worker from municipality). Talk time: Emily 30 minutes, Sheryl 5 minutes and Doreen 20 minutes. The meeting begins with Emily cooling herself with a hand held fan. She explains that she is going through the menopause and is suffering from overheating. They jointly talk about menopause and giggle. After seven minutes, Doreen changes the joyful setting to a more serious one. She explains to Emily that this is a 'safe meeting' and that she is only there to learn about Emily's situation. Emily asks teasingly if there is such a thing as a 'dangerous meeting' and thereby signals that she is at ease with these types of events. Then she goes on to explain that she has been part of the 'system' all her

life, being born with withdrawal symptoms and being an addict most of her young and adult life (being needy). However, she also points out how normal she also is (being worthy) despite her troubled life suffering from different 'normal' illnesses such as arthritis, cancer, blood clots in the head, bad knees etc. She is looking at Doreen and gets acceptance nods along the way. Twenty minutes into the meeting, Emily elaborates her worthiness while talking about her drug use.

19:45-20:27

| | |
|---|---|
| Emily: | ((looking at Doreen)) Instead of Ketogan and all these (.2) benzodiazepine and drugs like that, which I have taken earlier, (.5) I have now chosen to get Panadol because they take the top off the pain. The other drugs only make me shut up because I am stoned. And I don't really want that. I don't want to be more stoned, I have been stoned for more than 15 years and that must be enough ((she elaborates for 20 seconds on this)) |
| Doreen (m): | ((in an official tone of voice to Emily)): What I hear from you is that you also want to work on being clean. |
| Emily: | Yes, yes, that's my two focus points. That is my illness history and to remain clean. |
| Doreen (m): | Yes. |

Emily: Because now that I'm a grandmother, and I've been that for a few years, but I haven't been there mentally ((makes quotation sign next to her forehead))

Emily's demonstrates agency by taking control of the situation. Besides talking a lot, she is also defining which issues are relevant for the meeting. She weaves a story of normality, that is, taking Panadol but not stronger drugs and being a grandmother. She adds more troubled stories of being old/coping with the menopause, having suffered many illnesses, having lived as a drug addict and having survived a difficult childhood with a mother who was a drug addict (and died at the age of 39). However, in between describing her many troubles, Emily is building up a narrative of elderly people who live a good life. It is her 'new' role of grandmother that may mark the change in her life, her story suggests. Even though she gives Doreen the 'formula story' (Loseke 2001) of focusing on illnesses and drug problems, Emily *also* introduces a grandmother-narrative. Emily tells anecdotes of happy and 'crazy' old people and badminton playing 'pensioners'. This kind of life is hopefully the good life that awaits her. She states 'you know what? I am an older lady, I can do that, I am allowed to be crazy' and Doreen responds affirmatively: 'yes, the crazy people are usually having more fun'. Emily continues to strengthen her grandmother narrative.

38:35-39:02

Emily: When I saw these seniors playing badminton (1). And <u>I do know</u> that you say that I am not all that old ((giggling and talking to Sheryl)). (1) But when I saw these seniors playing badminton and we (.8). Sometimes our badminton group was invited to play with them, right? And they

were so good at playing and they had a really good time together these (.2) older people. And it was very fun and so I thought 'well, I'm also in my 50s, and then I am also someone that can come and use a racket'.

Sheryl (s): Well, if you are plus 50 years old then you can take the liberty to join a seniors team.

By telling Sheryl in a friendly manner that she knows that she may not seem that old, Emily makes a disclaimer that helps to avoid her real age being discussed. On this occasion and elsewhere, Emily suggests that she is in fact an elderly person who will distance herself from her troubled past. Thus, she is not just needy but also worthy of the help Doreen can offer. Now Doreen takes the floor and says:

44:00-44:15

Doreen (m): What I think, is is (.2) that we should look into the possibility of a (.2) a a senior residence in [stead].

Emily: [Yes], that's what I think, too.

Sheryl (s): That's also what you ((looking at Emily)) have been talking about.

Doreen (m): And that's also because you ((looking at Sheryl)) have written that you ((gazing at Emily)) want a disability friendly apartment.

This way the meeting ends with Emily getting what she wanted and has been communicating as a subtext during the entire meeting - an apartment for elderly people. Doreen's utterance shows how this outcome is a joint accomplishment. The agency of Emily is indeed a relational matter: it was Emily who wanted this type of placement; it was Sheryl that documented this wish in Emily's file that was sent to Doreen; and it is Doreen that makes the decision that it is this specific outcome that they will try to accomplish. Because Emily does not look old enough to be included in the category of 'elderly people', 'pensioners' or 'grandmothers', this decision of Doreen to apply for a senior residence must be seen as quite an identity accomplishment of Emily (and expression of agency).

Emily plays the part of the ideal client – the perfect blend of neediness and worthiness – concealing her agency within a performance whereby she steers or directs the two social workers, so that they come to offer her exactly what she was asking for (though of course Emily never names it outright). Instead, though the use of humour and a playful approach, she drip-feeds the social workers so that they begin to visualise what Emily is picturing *for* them, and thus she leads them towards a decision that matches her desires. In this scenario, agency is co-constructed almost entirely through a feigned passive clientship, with little to suggest a citizen endowed with social rights, and the decision is reached through what appears to be consensual-concerted power, even though this is (to a greater or lesser extent) orchestrated by Emily. She may be one of the clients who are 'flipping the scripts' (Carr 2011: 3), that is, successfully analysing and responding to the institutional expectation of client behaviour.

***Trajectory 2: the acquiescent client***

Participants: Edith (client), Diana (social worker at shelter), Mary (social worker from municipality) and silent student. Talk time: Edith 10 minutes, Diana 10 minutes and Mary 8 minutes. The meeting

begins with Mary messing with her papers while no one talks. The atmosphere is tense. After a few minutes, Diana positions Edith in a dependent and passive client role when Diana explains to Mary that Edith is not all that enthusiastic about the meeting 'It is not Edith's best day today' as Mary explains. Diana finalises her introduction by asking Edith about her 'wishes for the future':

00.42-01.04

| | |
|---|---|
| Diana (s): | ((looking at Edith)) But then we talked about that it might be a good idea to meet anyway, because you do actually have some wishes for the future? |
| | (1.5) |
| Edith: | ((Edith sits bent over in a disengaged posture)) Yes. |
| Diana (s): | And if we are going to help you, then we have a caseworker from the municipality here to help you ((looks at Edith and points at Mary)) |
| Edith: | ((turns a bit towards Mary but keeps looking down)) My wish is to move to Hillside and live there or move to the Seaside place again ((respectively, an institution where other active drug users live or a treatment institution)) ((she nervously touches her sweater)) and I have already talked with them over there ((talking to Mary)) |

Mary (m): Yes.

At this point all participants are talking with soft voices and Diana and Mary lean forward towards Edith. When Edith nervously touches her sweater or fiddles with her fingers, she displays that she is a troubled person with little agency and is co-operating to the best of her ability. After about 15 minutes of having to explain again and again that she wishes to move to one of two named institutions, Edith is about to lose her temper and thereby shows inappropriate clientship. Even though she explains that she has already made contact with the institutions – taken on the role of the responsible active citizen – and talked to the two managers, this act of demonstrating agency is not recognised as a sign of resourcefulness – or help – by staff.

It is almost as though she is laying claim to something she feels entitled to as a citizen, though this is clearly not the case. In staff's eyes she is playing the wrong power game. In this moment she is not a citizen endowed with rights and accordingly should not be choosing her own placement options. Edith falls back into her place in the hierarchy as client when she says: 'It is you who have to call them [managers], because it is you who can allocate the money so I can move in there'. When neither staff member replies, Edith walks across the room towards the door as if going to leave. Still getting no response, she sits back down again. This moment seems decisive in moving from citizenship to clientship: the social workers call her bluff. At that moment it becomes apparent that 'client-centredness' is a deeply unequal power relation, and when Edith acquiesces, it is as though she becomes aware that she has little choice other than to submit to the power which is present in the room but also extends well beyond the people gathered in the room. Diana asks her if she really wants to go and live at one of these institutions, given that she will only be able to stay there for a short period of time. Edith replies loudly:

16.37-17.04

Edith: THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT I HAVE JUST SAID.

Diana (s): But you are not (.2) I thought you said you didn't want to be alone in your own apartment.

Edith: THAT DEPENDS ON ((drums on the table)) HOW IT WILL TURN OUT (1.5) AND WHERE YOU DECIDE (1) to push me out to.

Diana (s): We don't push you anywhere. It is just an offer [we are giving you]

Edith: [It is like] I just talk to the wall here ((she shakes her hands on each side of her head)) (.5)

Diana (s): [No, we]

Mary (m): [No] we do listen to you, Edith, [but, but]

Edith: [No], you talk to me like like I am five years old and I am not. (.5) I don't want that ((looks down))

Edith is now primarily communicating through her loud voice and aggressive body language. Ironically, this behaviour can be used as a staff resource to underline their perception of her as indeed 'needy'. By contrast, and producing the humiliation demonstrated in Edith's anger, staff

communicate in a gentle way. They talk with soft voices, look down at the table and pose in 'listening modes'. They lean in over the table and place their hands under their chins supported by the table as if to signal: we are not in hurry and as stated 'we do listen'. None the less, Edith's aggressive behaviour challenges the key value of addressing the client as citizen and hence as someone capable of making responsible decisions. There is no client centredness here, if Edith is to judge. We might say that Edith is trying to make a claim that the staff are operating a paternalistic discourse that does not leave much room for agency and her role as citizen.

Seven more minutes into the meeting things have changed and all seem to agree that what Edith needs is not to move to her preferred (and expensive) treatment institution or her preferred (but not expensive) institution where she would only be allowed to live for a short period of time. Instead, the staff want Edith to move to a relative cheaper care facility where she can live for a long time. She will not be offered costly treatment for her drug problem in this care facility, but she will be given care – and staff think that this is what Edith needs:

24:11-24:36

| | |
|---|---|
| Diana (s): | I am also not familiar with Waterhouse ((the facility, suggested by Mary)) |
| Mary (m): | It is a (.7) It's a care facility. |
| | ((Mary and Diana mention some other care facilities)) |
| Diana (s): | Well, I think (.5) Could you use °some care, Edith?° (.2) Could you use that as well? (2) |

Edith: °Yes°

Diana (s): Yes, I think so. You could use [that too].

Mary (m): [I agree. °You need that°].

At this point Edith's verbal and body language have changed from defensive and aggressive to submissive: her body has fallen down, she looks at the table and her hands are firmly positioned as a cross over her chest as if to signal that they will not be aggressively chopping on the table nor be shaken on each side of her head. Notice that when Diana asks Edith if she could use some care, and Edith does not answer at first, Diana softens her offer by supplementing it with 'as well' and 'that too' as if to tell her that she is also getting what she has been asking for (even though she is not). A few minutes pass and Mary elaborates on the choice of a care facility:

25:01-25:16

Mary (m): There are not as many people that you need to [relate to]

Edith: [°No°, °No°]

Mary (m): Edith, it's a smaller place.

Edith: °I just say "yes, yes, yes" to everything° ((looks tired and makes hand gestures))

Diana (s): But it should only be (.5) You should only say yes if you actually [want it]

Edith: [Well, I would] want that.

Diana (s): Maybe [we should]

Edith: [The most important] thing for me is to become clean.

The last part of the meeting ends by Edith quietly agreeing ('no, no') to her role as passive client and the staff's agenda that Edith should want to go to a care facility. However, this apparent agreement only lasts a few seconds until she says: 'I will just say "yes, yes, yes" to everything'.

By using this strong formulation (Sacks 1986), she tests client centredness and this approach imbedded ideas of clients as resourceful citizens. This explains why Diana responds immediately by rhetorically asking or telling Edith that she should only say yes if she means it. Edith quickly withdraws her formulation and gives staff back their discourse of client centredness with a soft tone: 'Well, I would want that' and displays her worthiness ('The most important thing for me is to become clean'). The acquiescent client position that Edith finally co-constructs with staff demonstrates how the problem of integrating very different and opposing discourses of what it means to be respectively a client (without agency) and a citizen (with agency) in real life interactions.

***Trajectory 3: the passive client***

Participants: Peter (client), Diana (social worker at shelter), Susan (social worker from municipality) and silent researcher. Talk time: Peter 6 minutes, Diana 16 minutes and Mary 16 minutes. The meeting begins in a friendly atmosphere while Diana offers coffee to Peter. After some more informal talk, Diana sums up:

03:51-04:17

Diana (s): In this way I thought it could be a good way to support Peter's wish to move on ((gazing at social worker from municipality)), (.5) <u>because</u> we shouldn't underestimate that (.5) you also ((gazing at the client)) have had a troubled past.

Peter: Yes.

Diana (s): Where you have (.5) That it might be a little <u>scary</u> to suddenly move out of here. And we (.2) also have the first aim here ((points at paper on the table)), the aim that you want to stay out of criminal activities. And (.2) how do I put it (.5) you also have (.5) you also have a history and it could be frightening to leave this place.

Peter: Yes, of course.

Diana is instructing both Susan and Peter in her little monologue: she looks first at Susan and this glance encourages Susan immediately to jot down what Diana is saying. Then she turns towards Peter and explains to him the institutional version of him (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). By pointing

at Peter's report that she has handed out to all three participants, Diana reaffirms with Peter that an important aim in his life is to stay out of criminal activities. This aim has been established back stage before the meeting and Peter's front stage role is only to agree with what Diana says. He does as expected by nodding and verbally affirming ('yes, of course'). The trouble in Peter's life is passed on to Susan, but it is Diana doing the work, not Peter. Throughout the meeting, his needs are constructed by the staff and he adopts a passive role. A little later it is Susan who defines the frame of the conversation:

08.11-08:37

| | |
|---|---|
| Susan (m): | Yes. (.5) But I think that these needs ((pointing at Peter's report)) (.2) Peter might (.2) or your needs ((addressed to Peter)) are bigger than a warden can (.5) can take care of. |
| Diana (s): | °Yes.° |
| Susan (m): | And therefore I think that it could be relevant to (.3) think about a (.5) social worker who could visit regularly. What is your own opinion on working together with a social worker at your home? ((addressed to Peter)) |
| Peter: | Well, I don't even know what such a social worker does. |

Susan's opening line show how she corrects herself when discovering that they once again – as they regularly do in these kind of meetings – talk about the client in the third person. Even though she

inserts ‘or your needs’, she shifts back immediately to talking about Peter to Diana. However, passive clients such as Peter are not bothered by this. In these kind of encounters, social workers respond accordingly as in this case where they do not react to Peter’s disclosure that he in fact does not know what to expect of a visiting social worker. Thus a discourse of client centredness and client resources provides the rhetoric but does not structure the practice. Susan then invokes the citizen role by inviting Peter to tell the story of his shelter stay himself:

13.50-14.36

Susan (m): Ok yes. Are you satisfied with being here overall or do you just think: ‘I just want to get out of here’?

Peter: Well, (.2) I am glad to have a place to sleep and stuff like that, right? But besides this I am very unhappy with the clientele.

((Susan asks Peter if he is afraid of a relapse. Peter declines by saying that he just doesn’t think he has much in common with the other residents))

Peter: I think it is one big party (.5) ((Susan begins to write down)) and hard drugs all the time, (1) °and I don’t really want to have anything to do with that.° (1.5) And drunk people, I don’t want to be around either. I grew up in an alcoholic family. (1.5) Therefore (.7) ((Unclear)) In that way (.2) I’m sick and tired of being here. (3)

Diana (s): °That's nice to hear° ((Diana giggles and smiles while looking at Peter))

Again we see how Peters agency is indeed a relational phenomenon. Peter's presentation of self as someone who does not want all the partying is a powerful display of 'worthiness' which fits the staff's depiction of him. Diana shows her appreciation by verbally and bodily affirming his troubled story. Susan also show her appreciation of how the meeting is developing by writing down what Peter says even though there probably is not much newsworthiness in it.

Peter's story displays that he is *trying* to be normal as when he distances himself from the party-narrative just like Emily was *trying* to live the life of joyful elderly people. He wants a normal life like the one that Susan and Diana live. The next thing is then to agree on the right help and the choice of the staff is a visiting social worker mentioned earlier, whose job function Peter did not know:

32.28-32.42

Susan (m): In relation to a supporting, visiting social worker – is that a short period of time? ((Susan shifts her gaze from Peter to Diana)) That's maybe you I should ask, if it's for a short time (.2) in relation to your work experience. What do you think?

Diana (s): I think <u>that it is</u>. (.2) Just until (.2) Peter finds his feet and thinks 'this actually works fine'.

Peter: °Yes.°

Everyone knows – including clients such as Peter – that one has to be considered needy and worthy for receiving costly help which involves being given accommodation and/or skilled care ('is that for a short period of time'). Finally, the two social workers incorporate Peter minimally in their teamwork decision by turning towards him (Susan) or talking for him (Diana). Both ask for his approval for their evaluation of his situation:

34.12-34.40

| | |
|---|---|
| Susan (m): | °And I think you can argue that (.3) a visiting social worker can complement° |
| Diana (s): | <u>motivate and support</u> him to maintain ((addressed to Susan)) the (.8) lifestyle that he wants in the future, right? ((Peter nods)) |
| Peter: | Yes. |
| Diana (s): | As you've chosen now ((looking at Peter who nods)). (1) I also think that would be great. That would be money well spent ((looking at Susan)) |
| Susan (m): | Yes. (1) Great. |

The two staff talk as one person. When Diana finishes Susan's opening line, she shows she is 'with her' (Sacks 1986). They have reached an agreement and are now ready to end the meeting. Diana states that Peter not only wants a new lifestyle; he has – in his role as resourceful citizen – also

actively *chosen* a new one now. Peter's nod displays that once again he is agreeing with Diana's presentation of him as – in this case – a worthy citizen prepared to make changes in his life. Throughout, the social workers speak *about* the client rather than *to* the client, and even when they do speak *to* Peter, they are at the same time speaking *for* him. In effect, Peter occupies the somewhat strange position of fading in and out of the discussion, as though he is part of the scenery in a play where the two social workers are performing for each other: a game whereby each demonstrates her professionalism *to* the other and *with* the other by rehearsing the priorities of the organisation (value-or-money, etc). Insofar as Peter participates in the game, he does so by conforming to a part scripted for him – by acting on cue and distancing himself from the consumption of alcohol and drug-use in his current accommodation.

**Agency and clientship**

By investigating a small part of our data in detail, we locate how agency of homeless individuals is a situated phenomenon in which staff play a key role. The agency of clients reflect a built-in ambiguity as clients in the role of citizens are expected to take action and show responsibility; whereas when they are in the role of clients, they are expected to be passive and in a dependent relation to staff (Gubrium and Järvinen 2014; Mik-Meyer 2004, 2017).

The resolute client (Emily) balances her agency so it reflects her role of client (by focusing on her many troubles) as well as her role of citizen (by claiming that she wants to take responsibility for her life). Staff support her balancing act and she succeeds in both defining the theme of meeting and its outcome. The acquiescent client (Edith) emphasizes her agency too strongly when she stresses her role as citizen (by taking responsibility and contacting institutions where she wants to live) at the cost of her client position (by not talking about her many troubles). Staff do not support this presentation and she does not succeed in getting what she wants. She has to

accept the choices of staff. Peter emphasizes the role of client by being passive but does also engage with his citizen role (when he states that he wants to live a normal life and not the party life of the shelter). He does not succeed in defining the theme of the meeting, but he never the less gets what he wants, because he – just like Emily – succeeds in incorporating staff in his balancing act.

The concepts of front stage and back stage seem highly relevant to understand how discourses of 'neediness', 'worthiness' and 'value for money' articulate client centredness in practice. Thus, prior to the front stage meeting with the municipality social worker, the shelter social worker has arrived at a particular client narrative (informed by her knowledge of the client) that will be played out shortly. Similarly, the municipality social worker will bring a back stage knowledge of financial, legal and other structural factors to the encounter; factors that are discussed with co-workers in her back stage environment. Financial costs are an issue that belong back stage. Just as shelter social workers' professional judgments of clients' worthiness is discussed back stage with colleagues and usually not revealed front stage. Of course, clients situate their narratives in the meeting as well and, as our analysis shows, these narratives do not necessarily display agency as they cannot always be incorporated in the organizational narrative of how neediness and worthiness ought to be represented (as with the acquiescent client Edith).

The municipality social worker acts as a gatekeeper in her formal decision making capacity whereas the shelter social worker can suggest decisions building primarily on her professional judgment of what would be best for the shelter resident right now. This explains why the shelter social workers often define themselves as the shelter resident's advocate and as the facilitator of the meeting and not as the decision maker. These roles relating to the staff's job functions as well as the financial situation of the municipality social worker affect the way in which clientship is co-constructed by staff and clients.

## Conclusion

Our analysis is informed by previous research on how to examine the agency of vulnerable groups. We have built our analysis upon Goffman's trailblazing account of the mechanics of interaction. By using video data it has been possible to identify the fine tuning of co-constructions of clientship and real-time displays of teamwork among the participants (both staff and clients) (see also Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff 2010**).** The participants' moves – staff as well as clients – can be interpreted as attempts to manipulate the information about themselves when trying to decode the moves of their counterpart. However in the spirit of Goffman, interpreting the many situations in which people interact has to do with much more than the verbal communication. Clients and staff are always 'spying' and being 'spied on' in their interactions in an effort to achieve whatever outcome they have in mind for the encounter with their fellow participants (Goffman 1970: 85). Our three cases can be seen as a scale of power and resistance. One client (Emily) conceals her resistance of the social structure and succeeds in steering the social workers; the second client (Edith) makes the mistake of contesting the social structure overtly and acquiesces in the end; while the third client (Peter) is entirely compliant with the social structuration of the service providers (as this compliance will get him what he wants). Agency is indeed a situated, dynamic phenomenon (Wright 2012) and clients can free themselves – at least momentarily – form the 'context of constraint' that often defines client encounters (Hoggett 2001).

In our study, clients act and make choices even when constrained by the capacities and resources of the situation in which they interact. The analysis shows how clients and staff actively try to manipulate and negotiate these resources, and in a 'non-trivial sense', as put by Jenkins, 'human agency *is* power' (Jenkins 2013: 147 - emphasis in the original). Agency viewed as power is not a given, but has to do with how the participants (in this case clients and staff) 'attempt to achieve their objectives and to assist or obstruct others in the achievement of theirs' (Jenkins

2013: 140). Thus, the analysis shows how the participants deploy different resources meaningful to the contexts in which they interact. For instance, clients' agency has to do with how they succeed in fitting their performance to the ambiguous discourse of client-centredness ('my views matter'); to discourses of neediness and worthiness ('I have had a troubled life, but am moral'), to a discourse of responsibility ('I take control of my life') and to clientization ('I am dependent on the staff's decision').

'Client centredness', like any discourse, only acquires a meaning within practice and so may be played out by actors in very different ways as shown in this article. This means that normative models of practice such as client centredness and the 'appropriate' display of agency (and perception of agency) are properly treated as research topics rather than as resources. Agency is build up in the many situations in which individuals interact. Further research on professional-client encounters therefore needs to discover how agency relate to dominant discourses and other normative models in the context of a range of situated practices.

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