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Task-Designated Identities in Danish Homeless Shelters

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This paper is based on an ethnographic study of how domesticity is enacted and adapted at homeless shelters for determining which clients are “service worthy.” The study draws on nineteen placement meetings with homeless men and focuses on institutional mechanisms for encouraging homemaking skills or domesticity among clients. Adapting Robert K. Merton’s typology of adaptations to social norms, as well as Jaber Gubrium’s “task-designated identity,” we showcase male clients’ self-presentation strategies for adapting to the institutional mandates of domesticity. Specifically, our qualitative analysis reveals four modes of task adaptation: (1) task conformity by professing the desired norms in their service encounters, (2) task evasion to avoid conversations and related tasks, (3) task transformation by linking the task at hand with something other than originally intended, particularly by reframing biographies to meet the local goals of domesticity, and (4) task protestation, which involves questioning the rationale and necessity of assigned tasks.

Keywords: domesticity, homelessness, client work, service worthiness, gender

INTRODUCTION

In examining the everyday life of male homeless individuals within shelters, this paper focuses on how everyday tasks at Danish homeless shelters affect the homeless individuals’ identity. Drawing from Jaber F. Gubrium’s notion of task-designated identity (personal communication, October 17, 2023), which emphasizes the performative aspect of identity within organizational contexts, we explore how

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clients negotiate their identities in relation to assigned tasks. Through a series of adaptations to task-designated identity, including conformity, transformation, evasion, and protestation, we illustrate the ways in which clients engage with institutional expectations and construct their identities accordingly. The analysis is contextualized within broader discussions of self-presentation, emotion work, and identity management, shedding light on the complex dynamics of identity negotiation within shelter environments.

In Danish homeless shelters, the client group consists predominantly of men who, in many cases, have never had home responsibilities in their adult lives. Commonly, these men define themselves using traditional masculine identity markers, such as by boasting about how they survived life on the street through violence. In the lives of these men, domesticity, as in conventional homemaking practices (e.g., cooking and cleaning), is antithetical to their independent and rugged lives on the street. In contrast, the shelter's service workers view teaching and encouraging homemaking skills as a crucial step for reintegrating the clients into society. The men's socialization, or re-socialization, into domesticity is a guiding institutional mandate and is seen as a prerequisite for their return to normality.

The three homeless shelters in this study require clients to attend placement meetings after staying at the shelter for one to two months. During these meetings, staff not only concentrate on housing possibilities and the financial situation of the client, which are topics of interest for clients, but also emphasize the assessment of the client's social skills: How well are they integrating, their interactions with fellow clients and staff, and so forth. Thus, the evaluation of clients' "service worthiness" (Spencer 1994), or eligibility for assistance also consider their social skills, their ability to maintain the shared kitchen, clean their rooms, and participate in various social activities.

The shelters' routine activities are designed to help residents transition into their own homes. However, given the scarcity of affordable housing, especially in larger cities where homeless individuals may have been sleeping on couches with friends or on park benches before arriving at the shelter, staff screen for certain competencies (e.g., cleaning, cooking, and involvement in conventional relationships) to ensure clients' suitability for transition to independent housing. As such the placement meetings served as social occasions for constructing client identities that are "service worthy" (Spencer 1994). As shown later in the analysis, while some complied with expectations which can be encapsulated under the general rubric of domesticity, others rejected them outright or adapted in other ways.

In what follows, we begin with a review of the literature on the constituent elements of the staff-client encounters. For our purposes, these include the influence of gender and domesticity in human service work with homeless populations. Subsequently, we outline our research methods and offer a brief description of the field sites, followed by the analysis. Using a typology influenced by Merton's "modes of adjustment or adaptations" as well as Gubrium's concept of "task-designated

identity,” (personal communication) we showcase male clients’ self-presentation strategies for adapting to the institutional mandates of domesticity.

GENDER AND HOMELESSNESS

The experience of homelessness is gendered in several ways, which include: (1) uneven gender distribution of the population; (2) pathways to becoming homeless; (3) self-presentation strategies of the homeless; and (4) staff-client interactions. In Denmark, where the current research was conducted, men make up 77% of the homeless population (Benjaminsen 2019:31), and as in the United States, minorities in Denmark (i.e., “people with a non-ethnic Danish background”) are overrepresented in the homeless population at about 20% (Kvist 2019:7). Furthermore, the homeless men in the study were more likely to attribute their plight to mental health and alcohol and drug addiction (45% versus 34%).

Despite many insightful studies on homelessness on how gender norms impact the situation of women (see below), there are hardly any studies on how gender impacts service encounters with male homeless clients. One notable exception is a study by Berg and Aaltonen (2017), which explores human service workers’ gendered assumptions about neediness. In this study, Berg and Aaltonen perceive males as being more dependent, or as “Lost Boys” needing a motherly “Wendy” figure to help them survive (referring to Barrie’s 1921 story of Peter Pan). Our study contributes to this limited amount of research by examining how stereotypical female norms affect the situation of male homeless clients.

The studies investigating homelessness from the perspective of women and their identity management are, for example, DeWard and Moe’s (2010) study that offers a typology of homeless women’s self-presentation strategies in their encounters with professionals. These include “submissive” (embracing the power hierarchy and disciplinary system), “adaptive” (accepting the hierarchy), or “resisting” (rejecting the marginalization process of shelters) modes. Similarly, Gonyea and Melekis (2017) show the stigma of homelessness is more strongly experienced by women than men of similar age, presumably because there are greater societal expectations for women, particularly as they get older, to have stable home lives. The homeless women in this study countered such stigma by foregrounding nurturing and caregiving themes in their narratives, thereby reclaiming and reasserting conventionally feminine images of themselves. Our present study on the homeless men shows similar findings. Relatedly, Wesely (2009) emphasizes that structural gender inequality and patterns of sexualization and sexual abuse from early childhood impair the lives of homeless women. Accordingly, these early experiences are “an integral part of the gendered frame through which the women came to view their homelessness” (Wesely 2009:103). In another study, focusing on the everyday survival strategies of life on the street, Huey and Berndt (2008) illustrate the range of “gender performances” used by homeless women to manage the risk of sexual victimization on the street. The women in the study played on soft feminine qualities to gain support

and protection (“femininity simulacrum”), displayed aggressive masculine qualities to appear less vulnerable in a tough environment (“masculine simulacrum”), prevented rape by hiding their femininity without displaying masculinity (“genderlessness”), or attempted to appear gay to avoid sexualized heterosexual advances (“passing”).

Lastly, a key aspect of this study, focusing on the situation of male homeless clients, is how workplace interactions in general are influenced by gender norms as shown by, for example, Korvajärvi (1998) and Seymour (2009). In the context of human service work and charity, research indicates that homeless men are perceived as more dangerous (Markowitz and Syverson 2021) and less worthy of services compared to women (Gowan 2010; Passaro 1996). For example, using her field research in New York City, Passaro (1996: 1) asserts that homeless minority men are culturally stereotyped as both “hypermasculinized” (i.e., potentially violent) and “emasculated” (i.e., overly dependent on the generosity of others). Similarly, based on her field research with homeless men in San Francisco, Gowan (2010) notes that her participants were less likely than their female counterparts to benefit from charity and welfare because historically in the United States, “impoverished able-bodied men have been left to circulate between the streets and the rougher mercies of the criminal justice system” (Gowan 2010:16).

As a whole, during service encounters, both clients and staff draw on stereotypical perceptions of gender-appropriate behaviors (Martin-Matthews 2007; McDonald 2013). Gender identities are not reflections of inherent biological, psychological, or cultural differences. Instead, gender identities are fluidly constructed (West and Zimmerman 1987). Clients and staff essentially use varying “frames” (Goffman 1986) to foreground and determine the relevance of gender in their interactions. Such gendered interpretive frames are enacted at the micro level, but they also reflect “organizational horizons” (Emerson and Paley 1992; Gubrium 1992; Gubrium and Holstein 2001) that provide boundaries and scripts for the presentation of institutionally preferred identities. Before presenting our analysis on how the gendered frame of domesticity mediates client-staff interactions with homeless men during placement meetings, we present literature on domesticity.

DOMESTICITY AS AN INSTITUTIONALLY EMBEDDED GENDER FRAME

As part of their transition to independent housing, the male clients at our research sites were encouraged in their placement meetings to reflect on the work of maintaining a home, including everyday housework or domestic tasks. However, as Eichler and Albanese (2007:228) note, “our understanding of housework (who and what it involves, where it occurs and what it entails) remains incomplete.” They add that the multiple dimensions and complexities of housework, particularly its emotional aspects, are often overlooked by researchers. Generally, the scholarly literature focuses on how domesticity, related socialization, and expectations limit women’s

life potential. Reportedly, formal “domestic education” was introduced in England during the Victorian era as a way of helping working-class women harness their “innate talents” and become better housewives (Heggie 2011). A corollary “cult of domesticity” emerged in the United States around the same time and continues to be influential in relegating women to the realm of household chores (Gentile 2011). The unfair gendered division of labor in the household has been of particular interest to scholars (Bianchi et al. 2000; Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppner 2021; Treas and Drobnič 2010). As Hochschild (1989) poignantly argues in her groundbreaking *The Second Shift*, the disproportionate amount of physical and emotional labor of domestic work performed by women continues to be unrecognized and unrewarded. However, recent research also suggests that domesticity is an important theme in the lives of men with multiple and cross-culturally variable meanings (Eslen-Ziya, Fişek, and Boratav 2021; Meah 2014; Rezeanu 2015).

Domesticity conceptualized as homemaking becomes particularly relevant in the way homelessness is defined as a social problem and the attendant solutions. Decades ago, long before the introduction of terms like “unhoused” or “houseless,” Somerville (1992:531) notes, “conceptions of homelessness are too narrow, not only in the sense that they focus on the minimal meaning of homelessness but because they isolate this minimal meaning from its wider social and affective context.” Highlighting the multiple meanings of the word “home” (i.e., “shelter,” “hearth,” “heart,” “privacy,” “roots,” “abode,” and “paradise,”) Somerville details the many ways homelessness can be defined as their opposites, such as “rootlessness” and “purgatory” (533; see also Gurney 1990; Mallett 2004). As he sums it up, “[h]omelessness, like home, is a multidimensional concept” (Somerville 1992:532). Interestingly, for Somerville (1992:534), “[t]he evidence on domestic relations is perhaps more important [than other factors] for an understanding of home and homelessness.”

Fraiman’s (2017) *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* offers a somewhat romanticized view of domesticity as it relates to homelessness. Based on the analysis of found textual content, she highlights the ambiguous and at times positive aspects of domesticity, particularly in connection with the practices of homemaking. In Chapter 6, “Domesticity in Extremis: Homemaking by the Unsheltered,” Fraiman (2017:154–191) suggests that the “unsheltered” are actively involved in alternative practices of homemaking as they create domestic spaces for themselves in makeshift environments. Using examples from ethnographic studies, among other sources, Fraiman (2017:23) argues,

Domesticity is not absent for this population so much as it is broken and embattled. The various figures I consider do not entirely (much less willingly) forfeit such things as privacy, routine, kinship, and a place to keep stuff. They do, however, struggle daily to approximate these and other components of domestic life.

The emergent scholarly interest in homemaking, featured in a special issue of *Housing Studies*, suggests the concept is critical for a more humanizing and progressive understanding of homelessness. Accordingly, home is not only a special type of

domestic place, but also a constellation of practices, processes, skills, material settings, and meanings that evolve in private, public, and communal spaces. In this regard, the home-making practices enacted by those without a roof warrant special attention indeed (Lenhard, Coulomb, and Miranda-Nieto 2022:183).

In the related literature, homemaking has several overlapping features. For example, homemaking has been discussed as a survival strategy to transform inhospitable spaces into homelike settings (see, e.g., Fraiman 2017 discussed above). This type of homemaking is often opposed by authorities who see it as misuse or misappropriation of public spaces as shown in the work of Wright (1997). The concept also reflects expressions of agency by those who are otherwise seen as passive victims of poverty (Pleace, O’Sullivan, and Johnson 2022). Lastly, homemaking can serve an analytic device for distinguishing “the homeless” from “the unhoused” (Schneider 2022), implying that through homemaking any space can be transformed into a home, whether it has a roof or meets other physical and legal criteria of a house.

Here we build on this body of literature by considering how homemaking is institutionalized and employed as a pathway to recovery from homelessness. For our purposes, homemaking refers to a skillset (both behavioral and emotional) that shelter staff view as foundational and necessary for transition to permanent housing. To put it plainly, the shelter staff tried to solve the problem of homelessness by facilitating the emotional and physical transition from the status of “homeless” to “housed.” To direct attention away from the fact that it was difficult to find housing, the staff focused on whether the candidates possessed the requisite mindset as well as skill set. Though redemption (Meanwell 2013), or a transformation of clients’ attitudes and outlooks, was brought up in some encounters, equally important was “identity work” and “avowals” (Snow and Anderson 1987) focused on a professed interest and competence in homemaking skills. This type of task-designated identity involved both the physical and “emotion work” (Hochschild 1979) of maintaining a permanent residence. The tasks were about both doing things they would do “at home” and show certain feelings demonstrating that they felt “at home.”

Specifically, the shelter workers defined homelessness implicitly as the absence of domestic skills and thus enforced homemaking and related inclinations as a logical counterpoint and solution to the problem. For our purposes, domesticity and homemaking are multifaceted concepts, a performance or self-presentation (Goffman 1959) of a task-designated identity in the context of an institutional culture or mandate (Gubrium 1992; Smith 2005), conducted through narratives (Gubrium and Holstein 1998), identity work (Snow and Anderson) and client work (Loseke 1992; Spencer 1994). We show how these interrelated features of domesticity are realized in three Danish homeless shelters.

TASK-DESIGNATED IDENTITY

The shelter’s primary goal was to facilitate the clients’ transition to permanent housing. To illustrate how this work was done, we turn to Gubrium’s

TABLE 1. Task-Designated Identity Adaptions

Type of Adaption	Exemplary Statements
Task conformity	"I will do it just the way you asked."
Task transformation	"I will do it my way."
Task evasion	"I don't know what to do."
Task protestation	"Why do I have to do this?"

"task-designated identity," which focuses on "interactionally strategic, performative, and organizationally embedded analytics of identity" (personal communication, February 11, 2024). This emphasis on the pragmatic and usable sense of identity is echoed in Holstein and Gubrium's *The Selves We Live By* (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:12). As they put it, "[i]n today's world of proliferating sites and senses of identity work, the self is increasingly an institutional project, something persons must continually manifest as a basis for making sense of their conduct and relationships." As shown in Table 1, the adaptations to task-designated identity correspond to a series of rhetorical comebacks that are readily recognizable across a wide range of social institutions (e.g., schools, family, law enforcement, etc.).

For our purposes, tasks are not one-dimensional or purely behavioral. The shelter staff, explicitly or implicitly, encouraged certain ways of doing and feeling. The institution, in a sense provided "conditions of possibility for reality construction and reality contests" (Miller and Holstein 1995: 37). In this case, the focus is a local brand of domesticity that encompassed mundane chores (e.g., washing dishes) as well as sentimental attachment to such tasks (e.g., the joy of cooking). Client identities, in turn, were negotiated relative to their reception of their designated tasks. This is not unlike defining a "good student" in an academic setting as someone who complies with a series of tasks (e.g., attendance and participation).

The shelter also displayed task expectations. Rather than assessing clients' innate or psychological characteristics and motivations, compliance with institutional task designations (both behavioral and emotional) at the shelter was geared toward judging "service worthiness" (Spencer 1994). We consider related concepts of self-presentation (Goffman 1959), emotion work (Hochschild 1979), and identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987) in our analysis in relation to what clients were expected to do (i.e., their assigned tasks) and how they managed their identities accordingly. Using "task-designated identities," we explore client identity negotiations at the shelter in the context of task conformity, transformation, evasion, and protestations.

CONTEXT

The Scandinavian welfare model affords better living conditions for the homeless compared to many other European countries (Webb 2017). In Denmark, documented residents have a legal entitlement to a shelter bed in cases of

homelessness, a service utilized by one-third of the Danish homeless population (Benjaminsen 2019:34). The other two-thirds are “couch-sleepers” with friends and family or “rough-sleepers” on the street. There are eighty-five homeless shelters operating under Danish Social Service Law §110, offering housing and care to those in need of shelters or unable to live independently. Roughly 6400 people use these shelters annually, making them the predominant solution for homelessness. The cost of providing a bed in these shelters within the Danish welfare system is around £4000 per month. The homeless population in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries is smaller than in other European countries. For instance, while more than four percent of the population in the United Kingdom are homeless, that rate is less than a quarter of a percent in Denmark (approximately 6400 individuals, Benjaminsen 2019:31). It is essential to acknowledge, however, that measurements and definitions of homelessness vary across cultures (Minnery and Greenhalgh 2007; Shinn 2007).

In the participating shelters, a central dilemma arises for staff members: striking the delicate balance of creating a welcoming environment while avoiding the situation where clients desire to stay because it is too comfortable. Shelters are meant to be temporary, and the staff’s goal is to prepare clients for eventual independence. To assess clients’ readiness for independent living, shelters offer various daily activities designed to teach housing, cleaning skills, and more general social skills. These activities encompass weekly cooking classes, participation in morning gatherings, engagement in social excursions, and the expectation that clients maintain their rooms and shared kitchen areas after meal preparation. In the participating shelters there were no formal rules for cleaning a kitchen or for social interaction with fellow homeless individuals or staff. However, there are informal rules, discussed in placement meetings, that outline how to be a considerate roommate in a shelter. Social workers anticipate that these activities will not only impart practical skills but also nurture personal growth and responsibility among clients. Clients often struggle to meet these expectations, leading to frustration among staff members. Clients frequently prioritize addressing structural issues like housing and finances, considering discussions about cooking and cleaning skills less critical as they primarily seek stable housing and improved financial situations. Therefore, from the perspective of clients, these meetings are often emotionally charged.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

Our analysis is based on nineteen video-recorded placement meetings with homeless men. Among these nineteen men, eight are from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Morocco, Somalia, Syria, and Greenland, while the remaining participants are of Danish ethnicity. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, they are identified in the analysis as either ethnically Danish or non-ethnically Danish. Of the sixty-nine staff members who participated in the placement meetings, fifty-seven were women. The service encounters included shelter residents, service providers, and a representative from

the municipality that would eventually offer to house clients who participated in the placement meetings. On rare occasions, relatives of the residents, drug counselors, mentors, or other staff also participated in the placement meetings. On average, four people were involved in each placement meeting, which lasted approximately fifty-seven minutes (with a range of thirty-two to eighty-two minutes). The data collection occurred between the fall of 2017 and the winter of 2018.

To recruit study participants, managers at three Danish shelters were contacted. Next, other shelter staff was contacted to arrange access to clients and their placement meetings. Following informed consent protocol and explanation of how the participants were secured confidentiality, we provided written information about the study to would-be participants including information on the right to withdraw from the study at any time. At the beginning of each placement meeting, re-requested permission to video record the placement meeting was done. The participants were also informed that the recordings would only be viewed by the research team. Furthermore, clients were reassured that their participation would have no bearing on the outcome of their cases. After gaining permission to video record the placement meeting, the camera was set up. All video recordings were shot from a fixed “mid-shot” angle (Luff and Heath 2012:268). The recordings show the participants’ behavior during the placement meeting, including nonverbal activities such as laughter and body movements. Participants looked at the camera at the start of each placement meeting, but most averted their gaze after approximately five minutes.

Procedure of Analysis

All video recordings were viewed several times. Subsequently, full transcriptions of all video-recorded meetings were completed. Following this, a systematic thematic coding process was applied to the transcribed meetings, focusing on situations in which staff aimed to encourage positive client cooperation. It was especially sequences that typically corresponded to the following types of questions: “How do you feel about living here?” “What is your relationship like with the other residents?” “Are you able to prepare your own meals?” that was looked for. The following questions that addressed problematic client behavior, such as “Why are you not participating in the morning gatherings?” or “Why are you not maintaining your room as agreed upon?” were also considered. These sequences were categorized into sub-themes based on the client’s responses, whether positive, negative, or neutral. Subsequently, text was translated into English, and we proceeded to analyze this identity work among clients in terms of their physical and emotional readiness for transition and personal growth. In doing so, we looked for descriptive elements and analyzed how the interactions unfolded. The presented sequences in this article include verbal expressions as well as some non-verbal cues like smiles and laughter. In all the included excerpts, names and locations have been anonymized. Our study adheres to Danish law and ethical standards in the field of sociology concerning data storage and processing.

ADAPTING TO DOMESTICITY REQUIREMENTS

In our analysis, we consider the adaptation strategies of homeless men to the prerequisites of domesticity in the three participating shelters. Our focus is on how institutional policies and practices of domesticity unfold in the context of “interactional domains characterized by distinctive ways of interpreting and representing everyday realities” (Gubrium and Holstein 2000:103–104). Building on interactional analyses of human service encounters and related housing programs for homeless men (see, e.g., Torelli and Puddephatt 2020; Vassenden and Lie 2013), our research delineates how taken-for-granted social categories become meaningful in everyday practices. Specifically, we aim to explore the dynamic interplay between individual experiences of homelessness, micro-interactions with service providers, and the structural frameworks in which lived experiences become enacted locally and organizationally useful. For the staff and clients at the participating shelters, the institutional goal or “the going concern” (Hughes 1984, cited in Gubrium and Holstein 2000:102) is establishing client service-worthiness or eligibility for receiving housing and other forms of assistance. In this context, demonstrated domestic skills and inclinations signify the potential to transition to a more stable lifestyle. As shown in our analysis, the enactment of domesticity and its meaning are not static and uniform; rather, they are varied and artfully achieved.

Our analysis of male clients’ adaptations to domesticity, or their “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987), is inspired by Robert Merton’s typology of “modes of adjustment or adaptations” (Merton 1938:676). Merton’s central premise is, “[e]very social group invariably couples its scale of desired ends with moral or institutional regulation of permissible and required procedures for attaining these ends” (Merton 1938:673). He further explains that most individuals achieve these goals through conventional societal or institutional means (i.e., they conform). For others, however, the sanctioned goals are not achievable through the prescribed means. According to Merton, in instances where desired goals cannot be achieved through conventional means, individuals employ varying adaptation strategies, such as withdrawing from the interactional task and goals altogether (“retreatism”), rejecting the conventional goals (“rebellion”), or using alternative means to achieve the intended goals (“innovation”).

For the clients at the homeless shelters in this study, “the permissible and required procedures” (Merton 1938:673) for transitioning to a more permanent housing status is to embrace and demonstrate the behavioral and sentimental qualities of domesticity. Adapting Merton’s typology for an interactionist analysis, we demonstrate that while some clients engage in *task conformity* by professing the desired gender norms in their service encounters, others use the strategy of *task evasion* to avoid conversations and certain tasks. Still others modify the very expectations of domesticity *task transformation*, linking the task at hand with something other than originally intended, particularly by reframing their biographies to meet the local goals of domesticity. Lastly, some clients challenged the task assignment itself through

task protestation, questioning the rationale and necessity of their task-designated identities. For our purposes, Merton's classification system is a useful analytic tool for understanding how individuals respond artfully to organizational demands. The adaptations discussed here are neither static social forms associated with inherently "deviant behavior" and nor stable across individual actors, as implied by Merton's (1938:680) original formulation of the concepts. Rather, the typologies represent variegated rhetorical and interactional strategies. An individual client can employ one strategy (e.g., task conformity) in one encounter and a different one (e.g., task transformation) in another.

Task Conformity

During the placement meetings, where future housing plans are discussed, male clients had to *conform* (Merton 1938) to locally relevant ideals of domesticity to be worthy of the services provided by the shelter. The shelter staff seemed to assume that certain dimensions of domesticity were innately present in their clients' character, there to be harvested or revived with the right training and opportunities. For example, a staff member noted that the male residents "just love to cook" at the shelter; presumably being homeless and thus deprived of access to kitchen amenities created a yearning for mundane domesticity, such as putting a meal together from scratch. Implicitly and explicitly, the staff encouraged clients to trade stereotypical masculine traits, such as a predisposition toward aggression and emotional aloofness, for a domestic orientation, such as learning to cook and clean.

Many staff-client conversations during the placement meetings focused on physical domestic activities, with the staff assessing whether clients were keeping up with their household or homemaking chores. The topics included:

- Baking skills,
- Mastery of preparing a sauce,
- General cooking and cleaning skills,
- Cleaning a kitchen after cooking, and
- Keeping a tidy home.

Consider, for example, the following service encounter with Mike, an ethnic Dane in his thirties, and three service providers (one woman and two men). Initially, the meeting dealt with emotionally sensitive matters with Mike linking his homelessness with his suicide attempt after the death of his mother. As the conversation went on about the purpose of the meeting, the staff introduced the theme of housing. Mike seemed uncertain and worried about his ability to support himself while living on his own, explaining that he had lost certain skills after his suicide attempt. At one point in the meeting, Mike specifically expressed his regret about losing the ability to make a roux-based sauce:

Service provider: Now, you mentioned it yourself, this thing about housing and stuff like that, shouldn't we start there, since ... you've indicated that you actually

don't know if you would be able to do well living on your own ... [she looks at Mike, waiting for a response] you've been a little upset while living here.

Mike: [Takes a deep breath.] Well, I've been kinda [...] I have little issues in life, or something, to begin with, because ...

Service provider: Yes.

Mike: ... stuff like making a roux sauce, it shocked me that day you and I were standing — [the service providers interrupt by laughing, but Mike keeps a serious tone] — I've always been able to do a roux sauce, always, I've always been able to do it; if there's been problems [sic] or lack of time, I've gone in and done the sauce right. And I stood there like a question mark, and I thought, "Roux sauce? How do you do that again?" [Mimics scratching his head in confusion.]

Service provider: Yes.

Mike: And I've always done that [the making of the sauce], normally, right.

Mike uses his cooking as a benchmark for gauging whether he has his life under control and whether he is fit to live on his own. Here, the sauce and its domestic connotations seem to symbolize routine and longing for lost normality.

A similar dynamic unfolds in the following meeting with Gordon, an ethnic Dane in his thirties. He became homeless following a disagreement with his landlord, which resulted in Gordon criminally assaulting him and causing minor injuries. Approximately halfway through the meeting, the focus changed from work and housing to other matters, such as Gordon's assault conviction and alcohol intake. When Gordon was questioned about his social network by the two female social providers, he responded that he preferred to sit at home alone with some good food:

Service provider 1: [She leans over the table, while Gordon casually leans back in his chair.] So, you like to make some nice food and ...

Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

Service provider 1: Eat with someone?

Gordon: Yeah, yeah ... bake a cake.

Service provider 2: Yeah, that you're good at.

Gordon: [Laughs.]

Service provider 1: [Smiles and turns to the other service provider.] Is he good at that?

Service provider 2: Yes.

Service provider 1: That's nice.

Service provider 2: We've got some men who are simply hooked on to those cakes [referring to Gordon's baking].

Service providers 1 & 2: [Both laugh and straighten up in their chairs as if to end the conversation.]

Service provider 2: Yes? [Looks at service provider 1 to confirm the closure of the meeting.]

Service provider 1: Well, but I guess there's not much more to do. [Both service providers shuffle their papers to signify their work is done.]

Service provider 2: No, I don't think so either [shakes her head], what do you think, Gordon, do you have anything else to say now that you're visited by the municipality case worker?

Gordon: No.

As the meeting ends, Gordon declares that he is "pissed that people don't clean" and he generally prefers cleanliness, a statement that earns him approving nods from the service providers. By explicitly acquiescing to the necessity and desirability of domestic tasks, both Mike and Gordon establish that they live up to the norms of the shelter and the expectations of the staff. In Mike's case, the eroding of domestic skills is presented as a sign of lost normality. For Gordon, the emphasis on domestic tasks detracts from his violent past and signifies the prospect of returning to a normal life.

In addition to emphasizing physical domestic tasks, staff members also encouraged clients to reconnect with family members and embrace the sentimental and relational aspects of homelife. Essentially, clients were called on to engage in domestic "emotion work" (Hochschild 1979), as a constituent ingredient of the task-designated identity of a housed person. Such guidance was readily adhered to by some clients. For example, Ali, emphasized his personal development and his hopes for a future home in line with the staff's expectations:

Service provider 1: It could be up around [city] ...

Service provider 2: Yes.

Service provider 3: It is also so cozy [chuckles].

Service provider 1: It is extremely cozy.

Service provider 3: Yes.

By embellishing the mental image of an ideal home, social workers tacitly approve of and narratively elaborate on Ali's story. They encourage him to go on:

Ali: I have come to a point where I can't just sit and think about parties and drinking. I just can't. I have hit the bottom. I have lost my hair. That was the biggest thing, and then there is nothing more to come.

Service provider 3: You suffered from stress, yes.

Ali: So I would like to have a place where it is calm and I can observe the landscape instead of viewing a person gets mugged or something like that. Then, rather living in the countryside.

Service provider 3: Yes.

Ali: Rather than pollution from cars in the city and I don't know what.

Service provider 3: Mmmh ...

Ali: And the filth of the city.

Ali signals his desire to abandon his deviant and troubled past for an emotionally grounded and idyllic future. He contrasts domestic codes of tranquility and cleanness

with the violence and “filth” of urban life. Ali lives up to the staff’s expectations by verbalizing a wish for personal development that would eventually become the foundation of a proper home. His story of yearning for the serenity of domestic life also involves redemption (Meanwell 2013), of “bottoming out” before transitioning to his newfound desire for a sense of belonging and a stable home life. Toward the end of the conversation, Ali is complimented by service providers for showing great insight into his situation, which made it “easy” for them to help him.

Task Evasion

Not all clients easily understood and embraced institutionally enforced domesticity. Some appeared disengaged or confused about what was expected of them. Sometimes, this took the form of not talking or expressing confusion about why they were being schooled about the virtues of domesticity. For example, Salem, the client featured in the following excerpt, simply did not say much, although he spoke Danish fluently. As a result, the two service providers had to speak for him. Salem appeared uncertain about the task-designated identity featured at the meeting, which required that he share his past domestic experiences, particularly with living independently:

Service provider 1: [Speaks in a calm voice.] So, the things we have talked about regarding housing, I think that Cynthia [gestures to service provider 2] would also like to hear what we have discussed. What are your experiences [gestures to Salem] up until now?

Service provider 2: Mhm ...

Service provider 1: [Leans toward Salem.] With housing, with living by yourself, but also the experience you already have from living in secure housing, which you did earlier ... ?

Salem: Yes.

Service provider 1: So, could you briefly discuss that? And briefly describe what you think you will need assistance with when you get housing? [Smiles and tilts her head to the side.]

Salem: I don’t know. I think ... [After a long pause, Salem leans forward over the table and looks down.] Yes.

Service provider 1: [Smiles and leans closer to Salem.] Well, you could briefly discuss the time after you arrived in Denmark. How it has been and ... [leans back], where you have lived and where you have moved to and how it was to live here [smiles encouragingly at Salem]. I’ll ask some questions if you don’t know what to say [leans closer to Salem].

Salem: Yeah. [After a long pause, Salem straightens up.] I ended up living in a center.

Service provider 1: Mhm [nods encouragingly].

Salem: Yes.

Service provider 2: Could you repeat that? [Leans closer to Salem.]

Salem: ... in 2009.

Service provider 1: [Speaks softly.] You arrived in Denmark [nods in agreement and encourages Salem to go on].

Service provider 2: Yes, 2009. And where was it you lived before you came to Denmark? [Makes notes.]

Salem: Ehm ... xx-country and xx-country [two countries in the Middle East].

Salem's demeanor is characteristic of the uneasiness male clients showed when the conversation revolved around specific tasks and past experiences. His body language alternated between looking down, leaning across the table, and laughing nervously. Salem was not inclined to frame his experiences for the task at hand, which was consistently about demonstrating a willingness and ability to belong to the physical and domestic space of a home. The service providers' praise, acknowledgment, and caregiving were ineffective and perhaps even found strange by recent arrivals to the shelters, like Salem. Such clients seemed unaccustomed to placement meetings' protocol and practical goals. Whether Salem feigned confusion to avoid sabotaging his chances of becoming service worthy or he genuinely did not understand what was expected of him, the practical outcome was the same. The meeting was derailed.

Evasion of task-designated identity can also take the form of redefining the service encounter. In the following example, the domestic, nurturing ambience of the meeting is repurposed by the client to advance his romantic interests. Here, Hank, an ethnic Danish client, initially indicates that he finds it difficult to stay at the shelter and is having a hard time opening up to the female staff at the meeting. Later in the meeting, Hanks transposes a different meaning on the encounter by asking one of the women out on a date.

Service provider 1: But I don't think we have anything more [looks at service provider 2], do we?

Service provider 2: I guess we don't have more, do we? I think [unclear] ...

Service provider 1: Yes [laughs]. What does the judge say? [Looking and smiling at Hank.] What do you say, Hank? Do you have any questions or anything?

Hank: Nah.

Service provider 3: [Laughs] I guess not ...

Service provider 1: You don't want to ask about anything?

Hank: Yea, shouldn't we go out for dinner [Hank turns to service provider 1]?

[Everyone laughs].

Service provider 1: We shouldn't.

Hank: No, we shouldn't?

Service provider 1: We can schedule a meeting in January.

Hank: Yeah, okay, then we'll take it from there.

Service provider 3: Is that when we will meet next?

Service provider 1: Yes, it is.

The staff members defuse the inappropriateness of Hank's proposal by first laughing, then explicitly rejecting his offer, and eventually shifting back to the formality of the business at hand. Hank is implicitly reminded of his task-designated identity as a client whose interactions with the staff take the form of scheduled service encounters rather than dates.

Task Transformation

Some clients constructed their task-designated identities by linking their street survival skills and their resilience with their potential for independent living. This rhetorical strategy seemed aimed at convincing the staff that domesticity can be achieved through the alternative means of being rugged, or through emotional and physical endurance. These clients recounted stories of beating up their landlord (Gordon), hanging out with drug dealers (Peter), having their "skull split open" (Frank), socializing with people who "cut your fingers off" (Eddie), and having been "on the run" (Ali). Simultaneously, they spoke about loving hard physical labor (Mike), wanting to work (Nick, Salem, and Rashid), building their own houses (Rick and Malik), being good at practical tasks (Jim), playing soccer (Eric), and being physically fit (Marwan). The clients narratively linked (Gubrium and Holstein 1998) these characteristics of independence, a propensity for inflicting and enduring violence, and endurance with the image of a service-worthy client who is ready and able to settle down if or when he wishes to do so. In this context, domestic norms were not followed; rather, they were altered or reconstructed *innovatively* (Merton 1938) in line with the clients' autobiographical particulars.

During their placement meetings, some male clients emphasized that they were independent and able to take care of themselves, despite their present situation of extreme dependence whereby they routinely received social welfare payments, assistance to find housing, or referrals for managing drug or alcohol addiction. For instance, one client, Walid, stated that he had never needed social welfare because he is a man. He described himself as a criminal who "functions by selling and being a salesman and using [his] street abilities to be a good salesman." Walid accentuated his masculine identity and criminal career to present himself as a self-sufficient man who does not rely on others. In a sense, Walid and others presented their survival and self-preservation skills as an alternative way of homemaking.

In other cases, male clients explained more explicitly how they would parlay their emotional and physical toughness into domestic life. For example, Ali described how structure, hard work, and discipline were essential for transitioning to domestic life — along with some help through drug treatment. He stressed that to achieve that goal of a stable life, he needed to be in a setting that "pushed" him rather than being overly nurturing.

Ali: If I get there [to the drug treatment facility], I want to do what I did in prison. Now I'm just going to tell you. When I was in prison, I had a set structure. There was a guard after me, making sure I got up in the morning. I had to work out,

I had to drink water. You know, I was pushed to do all those things. Someone just keeps pushing me saying: “This is what you have to do, get started right now.”

Service provider 1: Structure.

Ali: Yes, I promise you if someone did that, all the things I wished for would ...

Service provider 2: You mean that you need a little push?

Ali: Yes, and it is that push I don't get here.

Service provider 1: And that is exactly why you are the right candidate for this drug treatment facility. You are very motivated that there needs to be a change.

Ali: Yes, very. And you will notice that I'll look much refreshed and I won't be able to sit down.

Ali is also the client who *conformed* with his designated task-identity, he was praised by the service workers for engaging in emotional work of longing for a home. Ali's case exemplifies how the same client can utilize different task orientations depending on the context and rhetorical resources in play. In other words, task-designated identities overlap, are situationally variable, and may be employed alternately in the same encounter.

Task Protestation

Rather than realigning their autobiographical profiles with the organizational emphasis on domesticity, or evading task-designated domesticity, some clients protested their very rationale. For example, Yassin did not comply with the service providers' expectations of domestic chores and challenged them explicitly. Among other things, he did not clean up and put his dirty dishes in the dishwasher. During a placement interview, Yassin's words and body posture conveyed his dislike for the shelter's domestic tasks and routines:

Yassin: Honestly, I don't even know what to say, because sometimes I just feel like I get things thrown at me, I mean not in reality of course [he throws his hands in the air]. I just don't bother talking more about cleaning up, because then it just becomes too much.

A similar type of questioning of task-designated identity is exemplified in the excerpt below, where Walid objects to the invitation to discuss his father's illness and the related “emotion work” (Hochschild 1979) of self-disclosure:

Service provider 1: [Speaking calmly.] But now, just to ask, what about your dad? How is he doing ... ?

Walid: [Short pause.] Do we also need to talk about that?

Service provider 1: No, no, we don't have to, it was just ...

Walid: [Short pause.] Not that well [shakes his head once].

Service provider 1: No, okay [nods], that's fine [makes a note].

Walid: [Sighs, looks at the table, raises his eyebrows, looks at the ceiling, down to the table again, collecting himself, followed by a short pause.]

Service provider 1: That, yes, that's fine.

[After a long pause, service provider 1 looks away from Walid. After another pause, she looks at service provider 2 inviting her to take over the conversation.]

Service provider 2: Yes. In any case, I've gone through all the goals that were decided last time [going through Walid's journal], so ... But I don't know [gestures to Walid] if you have something on your mind or something else [opens arms invitingly] outside your housing situation and your finances and addiction or something like that?

Walid: No [shakes his head]. Nothing but housing.

When staff members questioned Walid about his father, his silence disrupted their routine work. They struggled to find the right words, paused, and looked away. Walid's silence also suggested that the service providers had crossed the line of proper decorum by openly discussing a sensitive and private topic during an impersonal bureaucratic placement meeting. Walid neither conforms to nor adapts to the task-designated identity; rather, he explicitly asks, "Do we also need to talk about that?" and asserts the task he deems most relevant: "Nothing but housing."

Similarly, an ethnic Dane, Eddie, expressed his annoyance when the service providers recommended housing-support education (a program designed to teach clients basic domestic skills and help them settle in their new homes through weekly visits). Eddie insisted that he could take care of himself. He complained sarcastically that he knew "how to use a dishwasher, washing machine, and dryer." Both Yassin and Eddie explicitly rejected the service providers' preferences for domestic task-designated identities by casting such concerns as trivial.

DISCUSSION

This study offers insights into how gendered norms of domesticity mediate human service work and are variously adopted or performed in social institutions. To some degree, the male clients in this study were working on their masculinity in relation to specific, feminized tasks at hand at three homeless shelters. Despite the shelters' predominantly stereotypical feminine institutional frame and focus on domesticity, some men marshaled stereotypical masculine characteristics effectively to present themselves as service worthy. As shown in Ali's case, masculinized authoritarian regimes and self-discipline (such as what he experienced in prison) were presented as prerequisites for settling down and becoming more domestic. Viewed in this manner, masculinity and femininity become "going concerns" (Hughes 1984) that are evoked and negotiated in staff-client encounters as both sides try to achieve relevant institutional goals.

As the analysis shows, such practices are varied and their outcomes, while guided by institutional context, are not predetermined. Instead, institutional frames or priorities are artfully reinvented and applied by local practitioners, who are often only tacitly aware of their very existence. This approach is consistent with the perspective that human service organizations are not simply involved in processing people's needs but essentially construct certain types of clients that fit their organizational priorities (Gubrium 1992; Holstein 1992; Loseke 1989). Reflexively, institutional frames and clients themselves are always in the making and subject to negotiation. In this case, the goal of educating the homeless men in domestic chores that mediate the interactions is constructed locally and enacted in client-staff interactions.

In our analysis, masculinity and femininity are not external "social facts" (Durkheim 1982) but locally-activated relevancies that guide service encounters. As such, their application is not uniform or consistent. For the staff, conventional home life outside the shelter requires behavioral and emotional domesticity. Clients, in turn, offer their own accounts of what it means to be domestic. At times, the gendered social norms in the making and their practicality are questioned even by the staff, such as when researchers observed service providers chuckle privately about the prospect of homeless men baking a cake, tidying up their rooms, and embracing domestic chores.

As Rezeanu (2015:13) notes, domesticity is closely linked with "doing" and "undoing gender," a recurring and at times contested theme in poststructuralist gender theory (Butler 2004). The present study, highlight the situatedness of gender, or "doing gender" as an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987:129). Rather than a property of individuals, gender and gendered norms of an organization may be viewed as an accomplishment and an emergent feature of social situations (West and Zimmerman 1987:126).

In the same manner that organizational members may interact in a stereotypical, binary gendered frame, gender can also be changed or even become an irrelevant factor in social interactions. Both ethnomethodological and poststructural perspectives contribute to the work of "undoing gender" (Kelan 2010). An ethnomethodological orientation toward "undoing gender" counters the notion that gender is "omnirelevant" in everyday life by highlighting social encounters in which gender is not invoked ostensibly by the participants in the interaction (Nentwich and Kelan 2014; Peukert 2019). Our analysis of "doing domesticity" (Fraiman 2017:1–24) echoes the themes of the "doing" and "undoing" of gender, particularly in institutional settings such as homeless shelters.

Our analysis also suggests that what is considered stereotypically feminine, domesticity in this case, is not necessarily devalued, as suggested by previous research (Evertsson 2000; Knijn and Kremer 1997). At the homeless shelters in this study, domesticity is valued and equated with competency and is not static and inherently feminine; rather, it is performed interactionally and adapted for local relevancies. Our research contributes to the growing interest in how gender hierarchies are established and practiced by clients and practitioners in organizational settings (Fournier

and Smith 2006; Linstead and Brewis 2004). Rather than assuming that masculinity is universally valued over femininity, the staff-client interactions analyzed here show that seemingly feminine norms of domesticity are fluid social categories that are artfully negotiated and used in practice. Admittedly, our data and analysis do not explore how female clients negotiate domesticity. A cursory examination of the existing research in this area suggests that there are indeed double standards, with women being judged more harshly or rigidly about their ability to conform to house-keeping standards. For example, in an experimental study (Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppner 2021:1200), subjects were shown images of rooms in various states (“clean” versus “messy”) and then held female occupants to a higher standard of cleanliness.

Finally, the institutional emphasis on domesticity in the Danish homeless shelters in this study is based on a specific view of “home” and its absence in the form of “homelessness” (Somerville 1992). Such a focus on individual homemaking skills could divert attention from structural factors, such as the lack of affordable housing. Domesticity in this sense serves to individualize the problem of homelessness, much like attributing the problem to mental illness, drug use, and alcoholism has done in the past. As Blasi (1990:210, see also Wright 1997:20-24) points out, “this simple-minded reasoning [...] has more to do with strong currents in our culture to blame individuals for their situations than it does with scientific explanation.” A simultaneous emphasis on addressing the lack of affordable housing and poverty as well as deficiencies in homemaking skills may be most effective in lessening the suffering of those without permanent shelter. Future studies can offer greater insights into how policymakers and service workers can balance the individualistic emphasis on domesticity by eliminating the structural inequalities that cause homelessness.

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