

A grayscale landscape photograph showing a wide, calm body of water in the foreground. In the distance, a range of low mountains or hills stretches across the horizon under a pale, overcast sky. The overall mood is serene and expansive.

The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Journal 2018

*Through subtle shades of color, the cover design represents the layers of richness and diversity that flourish within minority communities.*

# The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Journal 2018

*A collection of scholarly research by fellows of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program*



# Preface

We are proud to present to you the 2018 edition of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Journal.

For more than 30 years, the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (MMUF) program has endeavored to promote diversity in the faculty of higher education, specifically by supporting thousands of students from underrepresented minority groups in their goal of obtaining PhDs. With the MMUF Journal, we provide an additional opportunity for students to experience academia through exposure to the publishing process. In addition to providing an audience for student work, the journal offers an introduction to the publishing process, including peer review and editor-guided revision of scholarly work. For the majority of students, the MMUF Journal is their first experience in publishing a scholarly article.

The 2018 Journal features writing by 27 authors from 22 colleges and universities that are part of the program's member institutions. The scholarship represented in the journal ranges from research conducted under the MMUF program, introductions to senior theses, and papers written for university courses. The work presented here includes scholarship from a wide range of disciplines, from history to linguistics to political science.

The papers presented here will take the reader on a journey. Readers will travel across the U.S., from Texas to South Carolina to California, and to countries ranging from Brazil and Nicaragua to Germany and South Korea, as they learn about theater, race relations, and the refugee experience. On their journey, readers will also confront many societal and historical challenges, including climate change, homelessness, prison reform, and the 2016 presidential election. Readers will be encouraged to reconsider how we approach gender, race, language, class, mental health, and even the impact of popular culture. Through close reading, historical analysis, empirical study, and ethnographic exploration, the 2018 journal provides an illuminating window into our world.

It has been a privilege and inspiration to work with these young scholars as they prepared their work for publication. I can only hope that they have learned as much in the process as I have working with them. We are so proud to share their work with you.

*Elissa Krakauer Jacobs*  
MMUF Journal Editor-in-Chief  
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# A Malady of Provisions: Social Workers' Moral Pedagogy and the Internalization of the Thematic among Homeless Subjects

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*Jolen Martinez is an undergraduate student at Rice University, where he is studying anthropology and history. His current work examines the politicoethical frameworks that undergird interpersonal intelligibility and value formation, from which he hopes to understand new forms of power amidst contemporary neoliberalism. As a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow, his research interests are related to political subjectivity and imaginaries within historical and ethical contexts. These interests include: social movements and revolutions in Latin America and the Middle East, reformulations of power among social services in post-industrial societies, and climate security and resilience in vulnerable flood zones. Martinez hopes to attend graduate school after his undergraduate education.*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the hermeneutical relationship between social workers and persons who are experiencing homelessness in the downtown area of Houston, Texas, seeking to understand both the ethical framework that underlies their engagement, and the social effects of this ethical inculcation. I illustrate that many social workers and volunteers occupy roles as moral pedagogues and undertake ethical projects to lift homeless persons from their perceived liminality on the streets. I argue that social workers emphasize productivity in their pedagogy towards homeless subjects, establishing an individualized model of ethical responsibility which ultimately alienates the homeless and incurs a process of self-blame. Although this paper presents preliminary research for a larger project, it nevertheless serves as an invitation to understanding homelessness through an ethical and political framework.

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## Acknowledgements

I especially thank Dr. James Faubion for assisting me in understanding the place and importance of ethics and ethical interpretation in the world, Dr. Cymene Howe for assisting me in understanding the importance of anthropology, and Dr. Andrea Ballesterro for assisting me in understanding the importance of my own place at university.

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Social workers who assist and direct homeless persons often influence homeless individuals' ethical positions by imposing upon them moral imperatives for redemption through productivity. In this paper, I analyze social workers' expressions of societal forms of morality in their assistance to the homeless populations with whom they work. Through sustained observation and interviews with both state and evangelical social workers in two locations in Houston, Texas—a homeless shelter for young adults, and a local food pantry—I argue that social workers view

their work with homeless subjects as an ethical project that enforces normative moralities that are centered on redemption through profitable work. Furthermore, social workers' emphasis on projecting productive behaviors fuses economic conditions of homelessness with an ethical inculcation for personal work ethic. In particular, I explore how social workers' moral pedagogy can further alienate homeless persons from society by turning structural and societal problems into homeless individuals' personal maladies. Drawing from recent developments in the anthropology of ethics, I offer what Michael Lambek terms, "an invitation to the subject of ethics" (Lambek 2015, 5) in the critical and far-reaching sphere of the condition of homelessness. By examining ethical interpretations of homelessness from the lens of social workers, we can understand more generally societal views on homelessness and the prevailing status of homeless persons as social pariahs.

## Recognizing "the Ethical" in Conditions of Homelessness

Structurally, patterns of homelessness, intimately influenced by forms of racial discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage (Carter 2011, 33), result in residential segregation and unequal access to financial resources or support. Still, homelessness is not a singular state or monolithic entity. Instead, it is an experience that is shared among a wide range of individuals, who express a wide range of evaluations of their condition, from despair and disappointment to vigorous self-affirmation. The wide range of experiences and commitments of those who are homeless troubles the category of "homelessness" so much that reducing homelessness to a singular condition would be an irresponsible simplification. Anthropologists Irene Glasser and Rae Bridgman, in their book *Braving the Street*, depict the heterogeneity of homelessness in North America by detailing the difference between literal homeless persons and the marginally housed (Glasser and Bridgman 1999, 2–3). They describe the different experiences of groups of homeless men, women, and youth of different races, and those with mental illnesses.

Despite the diversity of subject experiences that are included in social science literature on homelessness, the topic is dominated by the view of homelessness as a social affliction. Throughout their book, Glasser and Bridgman call homelessness a social problem (1999, 40), and they articulate symptoms of this problem in explaining two schools of thought: homelessness as personal pathology, and homelessness as caused by external factors (Glasser and Bridgman 1999, 44). Although these distinctions help to explain how homelessness is viewed within society as both a personal issue that includes mental illness and drug addiction and as a structural issue of low wages and racial and ethnic discrimination, they do not provide a means for addressing

why homelessness is often seen as a social disease (Allen 2015). My research builds on Glasser and Bridgman's interpretation of the heterogeneous conditions of homelessness by examining the different subject positions that homeless persons occupy.

However, my research moves beyond treating homelessness merely as a social problem and instead attempts to understand the shame and stigma attached to transience (Allen 2015) by examining how social workers perceive of their work with homeless persons as ethical work. The relations between homeless subjects and social workers are crucial to understanding the moral investments that social workers bring to their engagements with homeless people and the role that redemption through work plays itself out in those investments. Thus, an examination of ethics, ethical investments, and ethical interpretations in these engagements provide insight into how social workers and homeless subjects perceive of themselves, internalize societal moralities, and/or project these ethical views into wider society.

Social workers' interactions with homeless subjects exemplify what Michel Foucault terms "elements of ethical relations" (Foucault 1984). The first of these elements is "ethical substance"—the aspect of the self that is the focus of the development of the self as an ethical subject. Second is the "mode of subjection," or the way in which an individual relates to any given moral code. Third is "ethical work," or the self-forming activities persons engage in cultivating themselves as subjects meriting ethical attention (n.b: I use the terms "ethics" and "the ethical" anthropologically, and do not attach normative value to them). Lastly is "telos," or teleology, which is the ideal mode or state that one strives towards in ethical work. Although I will not be focusing on telos in this paper, it remains an important part of the ethical projects that social workers put forth towards their homeless subjects. Foucault's ideas serve to locate ethical relations in conditions of homelessness.

I draw from the anthropology of ethics as a framework for analyzing the relations between ethical subjectivity and homelessness (Lambek 2015). As Michael Lambek argues, the anthropological subject of ethics is crucial to understanding human behavior "at its most universal and intimate scales" (Lambek 2015, 8) because ethics provides us with direction and value in how we understand ourselves and the world. Anthropologist James Faubion's critique of Foucault's elements of ethical relations is among many anthropological contributions to the study of ethics. Faubion elaborates on Foucault's elements of ethical relations, arguing that they include techniques, regimes, and methods that subjects might "follow or perform in the pursuit of their ethical formation" (Faubion 2011, 48). Faubion's descriptions of ethical practices are foundational principles for examining social

workers' work with homeless subjects. In addition to examining the ethical questions that inform the relations between social workers and homeless persons, my research focuses on the interactions between social workers and homeless persons as everyday engagements, or what anthropologist Veena Das calls the quotidian (Das 2015). Das and Lambek both argue that to understand ethics and moral systems as driving forces in human sensibility and action, one must think of ethical life through the lens of the ordinary rather than as extraordinary instances of ethical dilemmas or moral breakdowns (Zigon 2007).

### Methodology

In the course of my study, I conducted qualitative research with ethnographic methods. This included sustained observation, in which I gained entrance into two homelessness service providers and became familiar with volunteers, social workers, and homeless clients in Houston, Texas. I also conducted 12 ethnographic interviews with these different populations. These interviews lasted approximately one hour each and took place at the institutions in which I worked. My interlocutors and I would converse with open questions and fluidity as to allow the interviewee to express their full experience without my prompting. All participants in my research gave informed consent and were aware that they could drop out of the interview at any point in time or request that I delete any record of our conversation. My research was consistent with the parameters outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), maintaining ethical procedures and confidentiality. Lastly, the participants in my research ranged in age, although all interlocutors were older than 18 years of age. There was a considerable age difference between the homeless subjects that I interviewed at the two locations mentioned in this paper. Nevertheless, I found similar pedagogies and responses despite the age differential. I will discuss the setting-specific methods in the proceeding sections.

### Moral Pedagogy among Social Workers

In my ethnographic research at a local homeless shelter, I discovered that many social workers thought that homelessness remained a personal choice. They saw homeless individuals not as abject, but instead actively capable of assessing the virtues and shortcomings of integrating or reintegrating themselves into ordinary (middle-class) ethical life. The homeless shelter at which I conducted participant observations and several interviews was part of a nationwide program to address homelessness in youth aged 18–24 through crisis mediation, immediate aid provision, and outreach. During these encounters, I was introduced to Michael Barber, a social worker who had formerly worked as a parole officer before assisting homeless youth. I joined Mr. Barber

on several weekday night-drives in October and November, 2017, in which we boarded a van with other volunteers and delivered food, water, and clothes to various well-known homeless tent-communities in the downtown area. Before departing from the shelter during one of our night-rides, Barber stated that our job “was to help these people, and if they don’t want it then it’s okay.” He continued: “for every person that rejects our help, there’s probably someone who needs it.” He concluded by saying that many homeless people make the decision to be homeless, but that he would still offer them a choice to come to the shelter.

Homeless persons’ choice whether to adhere to the shelter’s suggested system of societal morals reflects James Faubion’s differentiation between the thematical and the ethical. For Faubion, the thematical is the subject’s relation to norms and values. The ethical, on the other hand, is not normative, but includes a process of autopoiesis, or self-making, by which subjects occupy different ethical positions through askesis, or training to become a subject of collective esteem (Faubion 2011). Mr. Barber viewed homelessness as a temporary state of liminality, or betweenness, and regarded many homeless persons as adrift in the potential for immoral behavior. This liminal state exists between recognized normative ethics, or the thematical, and the immoral potentialities (drugs, crime, etc.) that Mr. Barber believed threaten the homeless populations I visited. He believed that many homeless persons were adrift. A young man that Mr. Barber described as his student success-case was his example of a homeless subject that made the choice to volunteer at the shelter by providing food and clothes to homeless encampments throughout the city. The young man’s choice represented his acceptance of the social workers’ endorsement for normative ethics. Rather than remain on the liminal space of the streets, he agreed to enter into the confines of the shelter and volunteer his time under the social workers’ watch. Under the guidance of social workers, homeless persons must reflect upon the ethical substance of the state of homelessness. Homeless subjects are encouraged to examine their life and their choices in a process that Foucault calls “problematization” (Foucault 1984, 10). They must then choose whether to work with the homeless shelter. This decision establishes the homeless subject’s position in relation to normative ethics.

The role that social workers play in their ethical project to bring homeless individuals outside of their perceived liminality resembles what Faubion calls the “moral pedagogue.” Mr. Barber stated that he was drawn to his current occupation from his work as a parole officer because it allowed him to “influence youth.” He described the success case of a student who had “come off the streets” after he decided to join the shelter volunteer group. He added that the student was “trying to make a difference” by giving

other people the chance he had received. Barber glowed about his student’s progress and provided examples of other youth who had been homeless. He said that after they had entered the shelter and enrolled in programs offered by the social workers, the homeless youth had been able to go to college and get jobs to “make themselves better and return to society.” Barber’s work with the young men that he described, and his intent to influence others’ autopoiesis during moments of problematization, epitomize his position as an ethical pedagogue (Faubion 2011, 34). Social workers are trained to recognize these moments of problematization. A key component of their job is, as Mr. Barber puts it, to “offer themselves as a resource” to help homeless individuals “make themselves better.” The moral pedagogue teaches the student-subject important components of ethical self-formation and self-governance; their ethical model is a source of socialization/re-socialization (Faubion 2011) for the student. Finally, ethical pedagogy is tied to askêsis, or the process by which homeless subjects are trained by social workers to become ethical subjects.

#### **The “Work Ethic Cure”: Social Workers’ Perception of Homelessness as a Personal Sickness**

The strength of social workers’ influence as moral pedagogues is derived from their projection of the thematical. Homeless persons become exposed to prevailing moralities through social workers’ provision of shelter, meals, and lessons in leaving the streets to reenter society. Social workers’ endorsement of the thematical was particularly prevalent at the second location of my ethnographic research. I worked at a local food distribution center and kitchen that served meals to homeless persons every day for breakfast and lunch, where I volunteered almost every weekend between the months of January and August, 2018. During my time volunteering, I would prepare and serve meals or pour cups of coffee and water. After the meals were distributed, I talked with persons who identified themselves as homeless as they ate on the patio outdoors. The social workers who also worked at the food pantry projected onto their homeless subjects, what Webb Keane calls, ethical affordances—invitations to ethical reflection—and perceptions that enable ethical decisions (Keane 2015, 27). This was exemplified by a group of volunteers from a local evangelical Christian organization that routinely drove to the kitchen with coolers of food and barrels of coffee and juice. In an interview with a member of the religious organization, I was told that the world would always have the poor, and the church cannot make their decisions for them, but it can help them to “get better.” Many volunteers and social workers’ perceptions of homeless persons reflected this evangelical morality, viewing homeless persons as fallen children of God.

The evangelical group, as well as many of the state social workers at the food kitchen, sought to reform homeless persons by encouraging them to work. Outside of the distribution center and kitchen, the group set up a prayer table where they encouraged the homeless to take a bible and a reform booklet and pray for better days. Several individuals visited the table and picked up the books. They also took flyers that detailed how homeless persons can reform themselves to be hired or be more productive. When I asked about the goal of their prayer table/career booth, several workers and volunteers claimed that their role was to promote a virtuous work ethic. Evangelical social workers believed that this ethic would please God, while state employed workers believed it would make homeless persons become productive members of society. The pastors who administered the prayer tables at the food kitchen, and the social workers who offered workshops to homeless youth at the shelter, endorsed the themetical virtues of efficiency and productiveness. Many of them saw stagnant or unproductive conditions such as homelessness as unvirtuous, and a few saw it as immoral.

Certain volunteers and social workers' perceptions of homeless persons saw personal productivity as a moral imperative. In an interview at the food distribution center, a female volunteer told me that the condition of homelessness "was a sickness." She added that the homeless person must make the decisions necessary to find a cure. When I asked about the nature of this malady, she paused and thought. She then stated that their sickness was "a lack of provisions." She offered examples of these provisions, such as "losing a house or a husband." Her description of homeless subjects as "sick persons" attributed structural problems and uncontrollable events such as the loss of a job or a spouse to an individual malady. The volunteer's incorporation of external, largely amoral, factors influencing individual behavior provides a picture of the form of themetical that these particular social workers project onto homeless subjects.

Homeless subjects' encounter with social workers' projection of a normative ethics of productivity is what Didier Fassin describes as the link between the microsocial realm of moral subjectivities and the macrosocial realm of moral economies (Fassin 2015, 196). Social workers' moralizing efforts represent the integration of individual acts in the moral context of the state or society. Homeless agents act and react to the evangelical and societal moralities that they must experience as they receive food from distribution centers or seek safety at homeless shelters. By regarding homelessness as a "malady of provisions," social workers and volunteers who serve homeless persons at the food pantry frequently incorporate the macrosocial themetical into the behaviors of individual homeless persons. When these evangelical and state social workers enter into their roles as moral pedagogues, the morality that they project may encourage homeless persons to internalize the structural

problems that they face. The difficult experiences of discrimination, loss, or alienation that homeless subjects may suffer are turned inwards.

### **Conclusion: Social Implications of the Themetical in Social Workers' Pedagogy**

This paper argues that social workers and volunteers' efforts to reform homeless persons into productive members of society inherently carry a moral project of drawing homeless subjects back into the themetical, and towards a form of normative morality centered on productivity. In my ethnographic research at a homeless shelter and a food distribution center, I found that social workers take on roles as moral pedagogues, becoming crucial components in the process of subjectivation among homeless subjects who frequent shelters or food pantries. Social workers assist homeless persons in refashioning their lives to adhere to a productive work ethic. Lastly, evangelical and state social workers may perceive homelessness as a personal malady, despite the fact that the symptoms they attribute to this sickness (i.e., loss of a family member, a job, or a home) reflect external provisions. Although the scope of this paper is limited to a description of the processes of ethical subjectivation and subjugation in a very particular case, the insights I provide are important for recognizing the ethical components of economic and political ideologies and institutions, and how vulnerable populations are affected by prevailing standards of what is good and right.

The productive telos that remains a common feature of social workers' ethical pedagogy is intimately tied to neoliberal ideas of efficiency, which promotes the internalization of personal accountability for structural issues such as racial discrimination in employment opportunities, or corporate layoffs. Foucault's elements of ethical relations can be easily understood in terms of economic productivity and personal accountability, features of neoliberalism that encourage citizens to engage in the market and invest themselves in economic growth. Even though this paper does not focus on these economic influences on homeless subjectivities, I wish to further explore how homeless individuals engage with these neoliberal ideas. Future research must analyze the moral systems that many social workers and volunteers offer to homeless persons as a neoliberal ethics (Chandler and Reid 2016) that places vulnerable subjects at the center and cause of their own misfortune.

As Michael Lambek reminds us, humans are not programmed via universal metrics but are instead always conditioned by the norms and values distinctive of the social environment in which they are embedded. Ethical subjects must make sense of the world into which they, as Martin Heidegger described, are thrown (Heidegger 1927). The

power relations that underlie the interactions between state and evangelical social workers and homeless subjects are connected to the economic and political contexts (Fassin 176) in which the ethical practices of both are based. Not all ethics is political, and not all politics is ethical, but they are intertwined to the point that seemingly amoral behaviors carry intensely ethical underpinnings (Fassin 177–178). Although their interactions may appear purely economic—as in getting a job or a house—social workers and homeless subjects interpret one another’s microsocial moral subjectivity and undergo ethical projects that translate ethics from this personal interaction into the macrosocial realm of moral economies. Likewise, the social worker’s seemingly innocuous effort to help homeless persons find employment carries the thematical, such as societal understandings of transience, in their pedagogy. Although further research is needed to understand homeless persons’ navigation through the ethical projects endorsed by social workers and volunteers, this paper establishes that the perception of homelessness as a “malady of provisions” is a crucial component of social workers’ moral pedagogy and an invitation to intervene in reductively individualistic judgments of moral failure.

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