

The impossibility of deservingness: sincerity, intersubjectivity and the allocation of English homeless assistance

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Background of my research

- Based on ethnographic data collected through participant observation in 'Castlebury' between September 2018 and March 2020
 - conducted in the capacity of a volunteer and support worker in the homeless industry
- My paper uses this ethnography to make the following sociological and theoretical provocation:
 - **Evaluations of 'deservingness' rely, first and foremost, on an estimation of a given subject's *sincerity***
 - Such estimations are 'impossible' from a phenomenological perspective
 - **Therefore, 'deservingness' is an unstable and 'impossible' category**

What is 'deservingness'?

- To whom should resources be allocated?
- Quite an Anglophone concept, but anthropologists working on 'the gift' show that behavioural conditionality for charity extends beyond the Global North (and necessarily Western ideologies)

The deserving homeless person

- A *very* well-worn idea, both in popular discourse and academic discussion
- A multiplicity of actors try to define who is a 'deserving' homeless person; the definitions tend to reflect the purpose of the definition in the first place (e.g., means-testing for state assistance, political popularity, one's own sense of the good)
- The stigma – and corresponding undeservingness – attached to various classes of 'homeless person' in the UK is also well-known:
 - see, e.g., the remarks of Conservative and Labour politicians alike in the 1990s
- Queues and (artificial) scarcity – there is seemingly not enough aid to help everyone

The sociological problem

- Stigma / (un)deservingness - **not** stable classes with necessarily predictable consequences
- Contemporary literature has shown that deservingness tends to be distributed by race, perceived vulnerability, age, gender and so on – in a hierarchical fashion
- Even though these moral hierarchies have been constructed by sociologists, they seem to reflect ideology more than ‘sociology’
- I suggest that ‘deservingness’ is not explained well by recourse to ideology as much as **phenomenology** – doubt, mistrust and the opacity / uncertainty of the other – AND the **circulation** of deservingness narratives in a **representational economy**

The (English) homeless economy

- Funding cuts by local and central govt, competitive rounds of bidding -> a need to demonstrate value
- Publicity campaigns seek to elicit funding and support from the public
- Fragmentation of funding streams leading to fragmented service providers
- Reputation and trustworthiness is key for organisational longevity
- A competitive, multiplex landscape of charities

Of saints and sceptics



Analysis

- Reciprocal dependence (Alf depended on the homeless charity; the charity depended on Alf's narrative)
- Deservingness narrative entered a representational economy and assumed a life of its own
- The circulation of Alf's narrative proved productive – and fraught – for an unexpected coalition of actors who invoked them in unpredictable ways
- Reputations on the line

Implications and usefulness

- The emotional, personal and financial stakes are high
- Interactivity is key methodologically and sociologically
- Instability of deservingness as a basis for (counter)political action
- Intractability of exclusion

Implications and usefulness II

ACADEMIC

- Why has deservingness persisted so long as a theme in popular discourse and academic literature in the Global North? Why is its salience seemingly on the rise again?

PRACTICE

- The potential harms of using beneficiaries 'stories' as fundraising material