

Track 2 Abstract: Dignity and Dependency in the Acquisition and Consumption of Social Program Resources

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Federal welfare programs have existed since the inception of the United States. These programs require recipients to demonstrate financial need relative to the federal poverty level (Government Benefits 2018). Locally based social programs follow a similar approach to federal welfare programs; individuals must demonstrate need based upon a standardized set of criteria for inclusion and for access to resources (Trattner 2007).

Eligibility guidelines for social programs, federal and local, revolve around acceptable norms for what constitutes “too little” in terms of material and economic wellbeing. Within this context, wellbeing refers to adequacy or security in material circumstances that make one feel human, as well as a consumption-based understanding of positive functioning (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Sen 1999; U.S. Census Bureau 2005).

Existing research has so narrowly focused on the “who” and “what” of which people deserve resources and what level of resources they have the right to receive, that the “how” has been neglected (Baker et al. 2015). Efforts are spent on the tangible elements, i.e. the functional aspects of goods received, with little thought given to the intangible elements, i.e. the symbolic aspects of goods received and the social interactions associated with the acquisition process. In this vein, our work seeks to illuminate the human experience of acquiring and consuming resources obtained through social programs. We specifically investigate perceptions of dignity and dependency as experienced through interactions with social programs.

Our research questions focus on (1) the nature of exchange in the acquisition of social-program resources, (2) perceptions and valences of human dignity in the acquisition and consumption of social program resources, (3) the relationship between dignity and dependency in the acquisition and consumption of social program resources, and (4) the social and other contextual influences on perceptions of dignity and dependency.

References

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