EQUAL ON PAPER, BUT WHAT ABOUT PRACTICE?:

RELATIONAL INEQUALITIES AND LOCAL CATEGORIES OF WORTH AT AN EQUALITY-FOCUSED ORGANIZATION

by

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Abstract

Do equitable workplace conditions translate into equitable outcomes for workers? This study examines whether a workplace that implements inclusive practices, collective decision-making, and alternative governance structures achieves an equitable distribution of resources, rewards, and respect. Drawing on one year of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews at Midwest Harm Reduction, a homelessness services organization committed to equity, I find that formal structures intended to support equality do not fully account for relational inequalities that emerge informally. These inequalities do not follow the patterns predicted by traditional relational inequality theory, as they do not align with structural categories such as race, gender, or education, nor with formal organizational roles like manager or employee. Instead, a locally constructed "flipped hierarchy" privileges workers with lived experience of homelessness, granting them greater respect, authority, and access to resources. This hierarchy contrasts with broader societal notions of worth, given the stigmatization that individuals with experiences of homelessness often face. Yet, by examining organizational valuation processes, co-workers' claims-making, and individual workers' perceptions of worth, it becomes clear that this locally defined category of value produces meaningful differences in how resources, rewards, and respect are distributed, undermining the organization's formal attempts at equality.

This thesis contributes to the literature on workplace (in)equality by examining how structures, policies, and practices intended to create equitable outcomes are experienced in the context of workers' everyday lives and interactions. This article further advances relational inequality theory by highlighting the importance of incorporating local cultures and constructions of worth in identifying which categories of value are salient in specific contexts, rather than assuming a priori which categories will matter within relationships. This approach underscores how relational inequalities can emerge from local cultures, rather than from formal divisions of labor or external, structural categories.

Key words: *workplace equality, relational inequality, local cultures and contexts, organizations, categorie*

1. INTRODUCTION

Do equitable workplace conditions translate into equitable outcomes for workers? In other words, at a workplace deemed equitable—by virtue of its formal structures, practices, and policies—do workers actually experience equality in their day-to-day lives? Sociological research on workplace equality has largely focused on formal organizational interventions designed to foster egalitarianism, including unionization (Hoque and Bacon 2014), alternative governance structures that increase worker control (Appelbaum 2012; Rothschild and Russell 1986), inclusion practices (Adamson et al. 2021; Brimhall and Mor Barak 2018; Lucas 2003), explicit renegotiations of the definition of work (Correll et al. 2014), and transparent policies around hiring, promotion, and compensation (Rosenfeld and Denice 2015). These practices are generally expected to produce equitable outcomes, which I define as an *equitable distribution of resources, rewards, and respect* (Acker 2006; Sobering 2019; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014).

This seems like a logical assumption – why wouldn't equal structures, practices, and policies lead to equitable distribution of resources, rewards, and respect?[1] In the case of Sobering's (2019) analysis of Worker-Recuperated Businesses, she finds that mechanisms of inclusion, opportunity distribution, and flattening of formal hierarchies, do seem produce conditions that broadly grant workers more equitable access to resources, rewards, and respect at the workplace. Workers are paid equally, given partial ownership of the workplace, and expected to participate

[1] While there is considerable evidence that demonstrates the efficacy of these policies and practices in providing particular benefits to workers at the individual or aggregate level (De Jonge and Schaufeli 1998; Rezai et al. 2020; Rezai, Lopez, and Chen 2020; Shore et al. 2011), little attention has been paid to how these conditions impact the *relational dynamics* between workers, where a host of other, unaddressed inequalities arises (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2019).

collectively in collective decision-making practices, which grants them greater control over the conditions of their labor (Sobering 2019). What more could we hope for?

While equal pay and partial ownership over the workplace are huge benefits to workers and should not be taken as inconsequential, these outcomes do not guarantee an equitable distribution of resources, rewards, and respect in workers' everyday experiences at the workplace. Sobering (2019) acknowledges this limitation in her study's scope: while policies aimed at establishing more collective authority may foster more democratic workplace conditions, they do not account for how differences in race, class, gender, or other social categories shape actual *participation* in decision-making or policy production. As Sobering (2019) notes, understanding who is empowered to make claims, who is supported to use democratic procedures, and whose voice is taken seriously are all critical for assessing the extent and limits of workplace equality. In other words, even when formal practices provide workers with certain material gains, or promote more *collective authority* for workers, there is no guarantee that individuals, or particular groups, will experience these policies in the same way, or that they will translate into broader equitable outcomes across social positions.

The question, then, still remains unanswered: do equitable workplace conditions translate into equitable outcomes for workers? Sobering (2019) hints at the fact that differential identities of workers might impact their ability to access resources, rewards, and respect, even in the wake of equitable policies. Such an assertion might seem unsurprising to theorists of relational inequality, who argue that it is within the relationships between people and positions in an organization that inequality takes shape (Roscigno and Wilson 2014; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019; Tilly 1998). For these scholars, organizational policies and practices certainly matter, given that they structure the potential for unequal relationships – for

instance, a flattened hierarchy may remove the possibility of an unequal relationship between a manager and subordinate. However, organizational policies and practices do not account for *other* categories salient to relationships, which relational inequality theorists insist are actually more durable and extreme: categories that map onto structural notions of value, such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and educational attainment (Roscigno 2011; Tilly 1998). Such categories, relational inequality theorists may argue, will permeate workplace relationships *regardless* of formal policies. For example, even if it is an established policy that all workers must participate in a collective hiring practice, unequal gendered dynamics may still emerge during this process; perhaps men are called upon more frequently to give their opinion, or are perceived as more rational actors than women are therefore given preference in reading over job applications (see Ridgeway, Johnson, and Diekema 1994). While the policy indicates that women and men workers participate in the decision-making process equally, the relationships between actors at the organization complicate that reality.

The assumption that these more broadly salient categories will persist within the workplace regardless of its equitable conditions is rooted in a host of empirical data regarding the durability of status expectations (Berger, Conner, and Fişek. 1974; Correl and Ridgeway 2003; Ridgeway 2014), cultural schemas (Hunzaker and Valentino 2019), and valuation processes (Lamont 2012; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). However, to my knowledge, this assumption has not actively been tested on the ground. At a workplace that employs equitable policies and practices, do these more salient social categories emerge in unequal relationships at the organization? Perhaps, at some organizations, the answer is yes. However, this was not the case at the field site that I observed. While I did observe the presence of relational inequalities of a certain kind, they were

not what theorists of relational inequality would anticipate, and making sense of such relational inequalities requires an expansion of the theory of relational inequality.

To answer my question – do equitable workplace conditions translate into equitable outcomes for workers – I draw on one-year of ethnographic field work, supplemented by in-depth interviews with staff, at a homelessness services organization, Midwest Harm Reduction (MHR). MHR is explicitly dedicated to creating a more equitable distribution of resources, respect, and rewards at the workplace by hiring workers with lived experience of homelessness and including them under the same occupational title as all other workers; requiring no specific educational attainment for applicants, and following through by hiring workers of all education ranges; including all staff in collective decision-making surrounding hiring, promotions, and policy changes; and implementing a sociocratic governance structure, which explicitly emphasizes the equal value of all workers and circulates authority, rather than relying on top-down managerial control (King & Griffin 2024; Romme 1995). Such practices, as I will discuss in later sections, are aligned with other social service organizations' practices of promoting equality (see Austin and Claassen 2008; Black 2025; Francia et al. 2023; Voronka 2016).

Following the typical logic of relational inequality theory, one might expect that incorporating workers with lived experience of homelessness into the workplace could introduce the potential for unequal relationships to emerge. This expectation stems from the abundance of categorical, stigmatized identities associated with experiences of homelessness—poverty, low educational attainment, drug use, mental illness, sex work, and, often, minority racial status (Chassman et al. 2020; Elliott and Krivo. 1991; Frederick, Tyler. 2014; Fusaro, Levy, and Shaefer 2018)[2]. At my field site, many of these identities applied: several workers with lived experience

[2] Assumptions that workers with lived experiences of homelessness will be subordinated at the workplace also stem from empirical evidence *outside* of relational inequality theory, depicting the material challenges of obtaining and

of homelessness had not completed high school, had histories of substance use, experienced mental illness, and grew up in poverty. In contrast, other workers in the same occupational category held master's degrees, came from economically secure backgrounds, and had no histories of addiction. From a relational inequality perspective, one would therefore anticipate that inequalities would emerge in interactions between, for instance, a worker with an MSW and a worker who had not graduated high school. Regardless of the occupational status of the worker with the MSW, they might be treated with more deference from the worker who had not graduated high school (see Jenkins 2023; Tholen 2020). More broadly, relational inequality theory would predict that workers with lived experience of homelessness would occupy subordinated relational positions, mirroring the stigmatization and categorical inequalities that shape social life of formerly homeless individuals beyond the workplace (see Link et al. 1995; Phelan et al. 1997).

At Midwest Harm Reduction, however, I did not observe the presence of such relational subordination, nor did I observe the presence of other forms of relational inequalities that scholars might anticipate. Instead, I observed a "flipped" hierarchy relative to normative expectations of worth (e.g., Brown 2001; Collins 2019), where works with lived experience of homelessness were granted greater opportunities for resources, rewards, and respect at the workplace in comparison to their co-workers who did not possess such lived experience.[3] Workers with lived experience of

maintaining work as someone with this lived experience, due to mental health challenges, social stigma, and logistical challenges of housing access (see Poremski et al. 2016; Tiderington et al. 2020). However, such studies were not conducted at a workplace that explicitly aims to include workers with lived experience of homelessness, which fundamentally changes how such processes operate.

[3] While this might appear similar to theories of tokenism – where minority groups are treated differentially based on their status as a minority and made to feel hyper-visible (Kanter 1977; Yoder 1991; Wingfield 2014) – it is worth noting that these workers are not, in fact, a numerical minority, nor were they treated *negatively* on the basis of their status. While some theories of tokenism suggest that workers are symbolically elevated on the basis of their minority status to signal an achievement of "diversity" at the organization, such practices usually include the devaluation of these workers behind closed doors or in circumstances where their status is no longer publicly relevant (see Alicea 2024; Scott 2005). Tokenism suggests that token workers are not truly included in the workplace (Wingfield 2014), which was not the case at my field site, as my data will present.

homelessness occupy visible and influential positions. They sit on the board of directors, participate in hiring decisions, lead teams, receive equitable pay (with differences based only on tenure), and are widely regarded as valuable contributors by leadership and coworkers alike. While this configuration might appear to "balance the scales" of historical inequality, it carried complex implications for all workers involved. For those with lived experience, it often generated ambivalence and feelings of undeservingness; for other workers, it left them feeling stifled and unable to fully recognize their own value to the organization. Merely "flipping" a hierarchy does not result in equitable distributions of resources, rewards, or respect, and makes it harder for certain workers to accept when they do receive such benefits.

To make sense of such a surprising finding, it is necessary to expand upon relational inequality theory's approach of examining how systemic categories of inequality emerge within relationships between workers, and investigate how *locally constructed* categories of worth emerge within these relationships (see Vallas and Cummins 2014; Fine 2010). In addition to expanding relational inequality theory in this way, this article also examines the valuation processes that produce these local categories, and observes the mechanisms through which they are reproduced in everyday interaction and self-evaluation (see Lamont 2012; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). This analysis does not dismiss the importance of broadly salient categories such as gender, race, and class within ostensibly equitable workplaces (it is likely that, at other field sites with equitable workplace conditions, those categories might emerge as salient in relationships that reinforce inequality). Rather, this article challenges the assumption that these categories are *usually the primary drivers of relational inequality*. Taking such local context for granted risks obscuring how inequality operates on the ground, presuming that a workplace without visible

gendered, racialized, or class-based dynamics means that there are not power differentials within the workplace that impact access to resources, rewards, and respect.

In what follows, I outline the theoretical frameworks that guide this study – chiefly, Relational Inequality Theory and Local Sociology. I then turn to the specifics of my case, describing the organization's efforts to promote workplace equality and providing background on "lived experience" as a category outside my field site. Following this background, I detail my data collection and analytic methods. I then present my findings, showing how (1) organizational valuation practices produce categories of worth, (2) these categories are enacted and reaffirmed through workers' everyday interactions, and (3) they become internalized and are perceived by workers themselves. Together, these processes underscore the importance of examining how categories of worth are locally constructed – rather than mapped on from broader structures– and reveal how relational inequalities can emerge even within contexts that appear equitable at the structural level, demonstrating that formal policies and practices do not always translate into equitable lived experiences or outcomes. The article concludes by considering the implications of these findings for advancing workplace equality initiatives and for sociological analyses of inequality in organizational contexts, and by acknowledging the study's limitations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Extending Relational Inequality Theory: Local Processes and Categories of Worth

Relational Inequality Theory (RIT) provides a powerful lens for understanding how inequalities emerge in organizations. Unlike approaches that locate inequality in individual characteristics or formal positions, RIT emphasizes that inequality arises through social relations: the value, authority, and influence of actors are contingent on their interactions with others (Acker 2006; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019; Vallas and Cummins 2014). For example,

managerial power is meaningful only in relation to subordinates (Roscigno 2011; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). Organizations are conceptualized as "inequality regimes" (Acker 2006), where actors compete for scarce resources, rewards, and recognition by enacting categorical distinctions through repeated social interaction (Ridgeway 2011; Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010; Schwalbe et al. 2000). While RIT effectively captures the persistence of inequalities linked to broad social categories, it often assumes that these categories are the *primary axes* along which inequalities unfold. Little attention has been paid to how locally constructed categories of worth – specific to a workplace's culture, values, and practices – may shape relational hierarchies and outcomes (Vallas and Cummins 2014; Fine 2010).

While scholars of RIT have attempted to move towards a more culturally sensitive approach, emphasizing the role of internally salient categories – such as manager/employee, chef/line cook, director/assistant – these categories largely map onto formal differences in division of labor, and often reinforce broader, external categories as well; who is able to become a manager, director, or chef is determined by structural notions of worth (see Vallas and Cummins 2014; Wilson and Roscigno 2014). While RIT recognizes how different organizations have inherently different divisions of labor and desires for different skills across workers, RIT has largely overlooked differences in how organizations construct value beyond this practical, structural notions. This acultural bend to analyzing relational inequality does not account for what scholars know about group meaning making (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Pugh 2009) or valuation processes (Lamont 2012) that can operate with distinct logics that do not map perfectly onto tangible structures. Failing to attend to these local processes and cultures risks missing mechanism that generate and exhibit inequalities – just because they are do not map onto distinct structures not mean they are irrelevant for worker outcomes.

Understanding how local categories of worth emerge is especially important in equality-focused workplaces, which often aim to directly address structural inequalities tied to gender, race, class, and other social categories (Camargo 2023; Dhanani et al. 2024; Nishii and Rich 2013). In recent years, equality-focused organizations have increased efforts to mitigate identity-based inequalities, potentially to avoid reputational risks (Alicea 2024), and potentially to align themselves with a broader culture of social-justice driven workplaces (Dhanani et al. 2024; Kiradoo 2022). Strategies to mitigate these inequalities include cultural competency workshops, mentorship programs, and workgroups connecting workers with shared marginalized experiences (Du 2024; Roberson, King, and Hebl 2020; Roberts and Nkomo 2025). While these practices do not fully prevent relational inequalities, they foster a culture that critiques identity-based inequities and discourages their reproduction. Many organizations, including my field site, argue that true equality requires supporting historically marginalized workers without pressuring them to assimilate (Ferdman 2013:331; Shore et al. 2011; Washington 2022). This increased focus on preventing unequal outcomes for marginalized groups is another necessary reason to look at how *other* categorical distinctions might contribute to inequalities at the workplace – with such a keen eye turned towards avoiding gender, racial, and class-based inequalities, we may negate how other, less structural forms of inequality emerge.

Gary Alan Fine's (2010) theory of local sociology offers a framework for understanding how organizational ideas of worth can diverge from broader structural hierarchies. Fine argues that social life is organized through local cultures – shared systems of meaning tied to particular groups, settings, and histories. Rather than treating culture or structure as autonomous forces, Fine shows how they co-emerge through ongoing group practices: local interactions both reflect and reproduce power, legitimacy, and stratification. In this view, unequal categories can be generated not only by

large-scale structures but also by localized processes that establish who is respected, whose voice counts, and what forms of experience are valued. Fine does not dismiss structural inequality; rather, he cautions against analyses that allow "broad structural realities… [to] overwhelm or even erase the specific characteristics of place, identity, and apparent idiosyncrasies" that shape group life (2010: 355).

While the workplace is a complex structure of individuals with differences in power, skills, and identities, it can also be, more simply, conceptualized as a *group*, or a collection of individuals with shared histories, spatial proximity, and enduring relationships (Fine 2012). Understanding the workplace as a group is crucial in recognizing the ways that workplaces can establish their own patterned norms, sets of values, and idiosyncrasies that might look unfamiliar or, even, unpredictable to group outsiders (Fine 2010). Fine's theory of local sociology emphasizes that value is *constructed*. Such construction tends to take place through the processes of valuation, in which individuals or groups actively assign social meanings and worth to particular identities, experiences, or categories (Lamont 2012), potentially implicating access to resources, rewards, and respect. These valuation practices do not *need* to be widely recognized outside the group; however, within a group, they can powerfully shape opportunities, norms, and practices – especially when 1) the valuations come from members with significant influence or power, and 2) the assigned categories of value are consistently reaffirmed by other group members (see Ridgeway 2011; Lamont 2012). Because groups develop boundaries and hierarchies of worth specific to their context (see also Gieryn 1999; Rivera 2012), it might be harder to intuit what exact categories of value exist within such groups without investigating the local culture further.

Alison Pugh (2009) provides an important example of why such local cultures must be investigated to reveal how value is constructed on the local level. Her concept of the "economy of

dignity" illustrates how groups of children establish their own moral logics of worth, shaping who is recognized as valuable or deserving of belonging. Children have access to different "tokens of dignity" that all count as symbols of the child's worthiness – such tokens span from particular playing cards to narratives about family histories. While class is a large indicator of how children access such tokens of worth, Pugh shows that value is also often redefined through locally meaningful alternatives that do not have to do with class; however, these alternatives only count if peers collectively recognized them as legitimate. Taking Pugh's examine and Fine's theory of local sociology, it is important to recognize how particular groups – whether they be workplaces or peers – have distinct norms and shared meanings of value that are challenging to see without 1) observing these relational exchanges unfold in practice and 2) recognizing that categories of value do not always map onto preconceived notions of what I might consider valuable. So long as these categories are reaffirmed as legitimate by group members themselves, they can result in the formation of social hierarchies with tangible consequences for access to resources, rewards, and respect (see Della Fave 1980; Baryla, Wojciszke, and Cichocka 2015).

Expanding relational inequality theory to include local categories of worth is crucial for revealing how relational inequalities unfold in practice, especially within workplaces that appear formally egalitarian. It highlights that focusing only on structural categories like gender, race, or class can obscure the subtler local or group-based dynamics that shape how respect, authority, and resources are distributed among workers.

2.2 Mechanisms of Relational Inequality: Making Claims

After establishing the importance of recognizing local categories of worth, it is necessary to examine how these categories are enacted in relationships between workers. I now turn to the processes through which relational inequality operates to grant certain workers greater access to

resources, respect, and rewards. Differential access to power, resources, and authority does not always flow from the top down; as relational inequality theorists argue, such inequalities emerge through ongoing social exchanges (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). Within these exchanges, categorical distinctions are enacted and reinforced – not necessarily consciously, but through mechanisms that signal their relative status. These mechanisms include social closure, exploitation, and claims-making, all of which can impact how resources are allocated and serve to reproduce distinctions among workers (Tilly 1998).

While some relational processes reflect direct intent – such as active exploitation – many operate without such overt purpose. Claims-making, for example, refers to the ways actors assert, justify, or negotiate entitlement to resources, authority, recognition, or social value based on their categorical "worth" within a given context (Tilly 1998; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). Claims-making can involve direct assertions over material resources – such as demanding a raise or claiming ownership of a project – but they also encompass more subtle bids for authority or respect, such as asserting expertise or insisting on handling a task because one "knows better" (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). These claims *can* be pursued with explicit intent, such as the worker insisting on a raise, but they often occur more subtly and routinely, as when workers unconsciously volunteer for a task they are typically assigned on the basis of their perceived worth, rather than offering it up to colleagues instead. While this still reinforces existing hierarchies, it is not necessarily the intent of the worker to do so. Whether intentional or not, claims must be accepted as legitimate in order to be enacted, which occurs when the claimant is perceived as categorically superior within the exchange (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014).

Claims-making is conceived as a central mechanism in the generation of workplace inequalities, as resources, rewards, and power are allocated to those who successfully assert claims

to them (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). Such claims only matter in the context of social interaction, because their impact depends on whether other individuals or groups recognize and respond to them. Successful claims to resources, power, or rewards result in *deference* from the opposite party (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014), which signals an acceptance and legitimation of the claim. Such repeated acts of deference are social signals and affirmations that confer the *other* actor's higher status (Sauder, Lynn, Podolny 2012). Though, claims need not necessarily be accepted – claims can be ignored or challenged depending on their perceived legitimacy, making them key sites where relational inequalities are produced (Tilly 1998; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). Observing how these claims are accepted, ignored, or challenged reveals the relational processes sustaining informal hierarchies and provides insight into the nuanced ways inequality persists in practice.

To accurately observe the claims-making process, one cannot focus solely on structural categories of inequality. Claims-making can operate along any locally meaningful category of worth, though it is often assumed to occur only along axes such as gender or race. Identifying where and between whom these claims emerge is central to understanding how inequality is enacted in the workplace and to seeing through the appearance of equity in organizations that may seem egalitarian on the surface. Claims-making can also reveal local categories of worth by showing which workers' claims are consistently recognized and met with deference, and which are not. From this, it becomes clearer what these claims signal about a worker's categorical "worth," as this is often reflected in the nature and reception of the claim itself.

Understanding claims-making in practice reveals how relational inequalities are produced and maintained, but these processes do not occur in a vacuum. The ways in which claims are recognized, reinforced, or contested are deeply shaped by the broader organizational context – including its culture, norms, priorities, and formal structures (see Fine 2012; Roscigno and Wilson

2014). Investigating the organization itself is therefore essential to see how local categories of worth are established and sustained, how certain forms of experience or identity are valorized over others, and how everyday interactions are embedded within and informed by local cultures of value. In the following section, I turn to the specific context of my field site to show how its structure, mission, and culture provide the stage on which these relational dynamics of inequality and worth play out.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT: MIDWEST HARM REDUCTION

3.1 Inclusive Practices

Midwest Harm Reduction (MHR) is a small non-profit in a mid-sized Midwestern city, providing homelessness case management, street-based outreach, and medical care to clients across the county. Access to MHR was facilitated through my prior volunteer work before formal ethnographic observation. The organization's staff is small and tight knit, including five outreach workers, one nurse, one office manager, and an executive director. More information about their demographic breakdown is in the following section on my methods and data. This organization is distinct from other local nonprofits in its explicit commitment to workplace equality through practices of inclusion and sociocratic governance. MHR commits itself to practices of inclusion through its particular focus on institutionalizing and supporting the presence of workers with lived experience of homelessness into the workplace. While gender and racial inequality are of nominal importance to the organization as well, the highly feminized nature of the work (Abbott and Meerabeau 1998) and overwhelmingly white demographic composition of the city made for some challenges in achieving this goal. However, during my entire year of observations I did not observe any distinct relational inequalities on the basis of race, and, in their interviews, workers insisted that gender and racial inequalities were not of concern to them at their workplace.

MHR's focus on including workers with lived experience as a mechanism to support workplace equality aligns with broader practices in social service organizations (Barker and Maguire 2017; Doherty et al. 2021; Okoroji et al. 2023; Meriluoto 2018; Davidson et al. 2012). Individuals with lived experience—a socially devalued category encompassing those who have navigated marginalization, hardship, or systemic barriers—have historically been excluded from positions of authority and decision-making (Foucault 1980; Collins 2002; Voronka 2016). While broad and context-dependent, the relevance of this category becomes clear when an individual's embodied experiences provide knowledge or insight uniquely suited to a specific organizational context (Blencowe, Brigstocke, and Dawney 2013; Collins 2014; Eyal 2019; Au and Eyal 2022). The recognition of lived experience as a legitimate form of expertise has roots in AIDS activism of the 1980s and 1990s, which demonstrated its value in improving policy, practice, and service delivery (Arno and Feiden 1992; Epstein 1995). Over time, social and human service organizations have increasingly institutionalized this category, both to enhance client outcomes and to redress historical inequities, framing the inclusion of lived experience as a normative practice that signals an organization's commitment to equity (Barker and Maguire 2017; Doherty et al. 2021; Okoroji et al. 2023; Meriluoto 2018; Davidson et al. 2012).[4]

Despite increasing recognition of the value of lived experience within organizations, it remains broadly marginalized in society, and inclusion does not automatically ensure equitable access to resources, respect, or authority (Cleary and Armour 2022; Davidson et al. 2012; Davies and Butler 2023). Many workplaces confine workers with lived experience to specialized roles, such as "peer support" positions, which can reinforce symbolic and structural separation from

[4] Inclusion practices like MHR's – beyond the category of lived experience -- are broadly recognized among practitioners as symbols of equitable workplaces (see Adamson et al. 2021; Shore, Cleveland, and Sanchez 2018). In fact, within the applied literature on workplace equality, inclusive and equitable workplaces are referred to interchangeably (see Alegria 2020; Alvarez and Alvarez 2018; Singh and Ramdeo 2023).

other staff (Alavi et al. 2024; Tremblett et al. n.d.). Midwest Harm Reduction, however, sought to disrupt this hierarchy by integrating workers with lived experience into the broader category of "outreach specialist," eliminating formal categorical distinctions. The organization also actively recruited for lived experience and explicitly highlighted it as a preferred qualification – whereas more typical qualifications such as educational attainment were not included (see Appendix A) – signaling the dedication to including a historically marginalized pool of workers, and the active challenge to traditional hierarchies where workers with master's degrees would be hired for higher-level positions than their colleagues without a high-school degree (see Acker 2023; Bills 2003). Stratifying workers with lived experience into different roles, MHR believes, would undermine their practices of equality at the workplace, and add additional complications to their sociocratic governance structure, which is designed to minimize the impact of hierarchy within an organization and formalize egalitarian decision-making practices (King & Griffin 2024; Romme 1995).

3.2 Sociocratic Governance Structure

Sociocracy represents a fundamental departure from traditional hierarchical workplace structures by emphasizing distributed authority and the equal value of all members. Through iterative feedback loops organized in "circles," decisions are made collaboratively rather than imposed top-down, allowing workers at all levels to participate meaningfully in shaping organizational practices and policies (King and Griffin 2024; Romme 1995). This approach theoretically reduces power asymmetries, as each member's perspective is given formal consideration and decisions are continually refined through dialogue and consent. By embedding participation into the structure of decision-making, sociocracy fosters more equitable access to resources, respect, and rewards, creating conditions where inequalities are theoretically less likely

to be reproduced and where diverse forms of expertise – including lived experience – can be given equal value alongside traditional credentials like education.

To supplement the ease of applying this sociocratic governance structure in practice, MHR also applies non-hierarchical job categories to their workers, apart from their executive director, office manager, and nurse. All employees are classified as "outreach specialists," granted the same benefits and pay (which could change based on organizational tenure), and expected to allocate tasks according to skill and availability.

This combination of a sociocratic governance and intentionally horizontal role design makes MHR a particularly generative case for examining how, even under the ostensibly "best" conditions, it is still necessary to examine the organizational processes and relational dynamics that still contribute to inequality. On the surface, this organization has created an extremely equitable environment, but in practice, informal hierarchies and power imbalances still emerge.

Having outlined the organizational context of Midwest Harm Reduction (MHR) – including its sociocratic governance structure, non-hierarchical job classifications, and explicit commitment to including workers with lived experience – it is necessary to describe how I approached studying this setting.

4. METHODS AND DATA

To capture the relational and processual dynamics that shape workplace inequality, I employed a relational ethnographic approach (Desmond 2014), which emphasizes an examination of social processes and relationships. Rather than treating "lived experience workers" as a population of interest, I focus on observing the processes and relations through which resources, respect, and rewards are negotiated across the workplace – which lends itself well to an ethnographic approach (see Gross 2009).

Field observations took place from September 2024 to September 2025, totaling 170 hours on site. I volunteered weekly at the front desk every Monday from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., observing interactions among visitors, staff, and other individuals in the building. As my participation and integration into the organization deepened, I was invited to attend board meetings and assist in facilitating de-escalation training for staff and volunteers. These settings provided rare opportunities to observe 1) all staff together and 2) behind-the-scenes discussions with leadership, which was very helpful in understanding how authority and power were negotiated in practice. The participatory nature of this approach was both practical, given MHR's chronic understaffing and high client vulnerability, and methodologically valuable, granting access to informal and relational dynamics that often remain invisible.

In addition to ethnographic observation, I conducted seven in-depth interviews with MHR staff members, representing all but one staff member (who were consistently on-site). Below is a table including the demographics of staff[5] by gender (W = Woman, M = Man), job, race, highest degree of educational attainment, and housing background (demarcating lived experience of homelessness).

Table 1
Demographics of Workers at Midwest Harm Reduction

Name	Job Title	Race	Education	Housing Background
Billie (W)	Executive Director	White	J.D.	Never homeless
Frances (W)	Office Manager	South Asian	Master's	Never homeless

[5] Board members of the organization were not included in this table given their infrequent presence actually *on site* at the workplace. However, their demographic makeup is largely stratified from that of hired workers, consisting of no formerly / currently homeless individuals, most of whom have PhDs, J.D.s, or master's degrees.

Jessie (W)	Nurse	White	Bachelor's	Never homeless
Alexandra (W)	Outreach Specialist	White	High school diploma/GED	Never homeless
Gina (W)	Outreach Specialist	South Asian	Bachelor's	Never homeless
Abigail (W)	Outreach Specialist	White	Master's	Current Vehicular Homelessness
Hank (M)	Outreach Specialist	White	High school diploma/GED	20+ years of street homelessness
Jeff (M)	Outreach Specialist	White	High school diploma/GED	Former vehicular homelessness

Each interview lasted 1.5 to 2 hours and focused on how workers understood their roles, relationships, and sense of legitimacy within the organization. All interviews were recorded, transcribed via Otter.ai, and pseudonyms were assigned. A semi-structured interview guide facilitated conversation while allowing participants to prioritize and guide the topics themselves (Rubin 2021). I asked participants to reflect on their relationships with co-workers, work responsibilities, perceived skills, and perceptions of job satisfaction, challenges, and personal achievements. These interviews were indispensable for understanding how organizational categories of worth were internalized by workers, illuminating how individuals made sense of their roles and positions within the workplace relative to others.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Initially, I employed a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis, following Charmaz's (2014) framework, to generate theory rooted in participants' experiences rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. When I arrived at my field site, I was primarily interested in understanding interactions between clients and outreach specialists – particularly given that the staff included workers both with and without lived experience. I aimed to see how these relationships might reveal relational inequalities between outreach worker and client, perhaps

based on workers' identities. However, after several weeks of fieldwork, my analytic focus began to shift. As I reviewed themes in my field notes through writing weekly memos, I was struck by how the dynamics *between workers* themselves were far more revealing of how inequality was enacted and justified within a workplace explicitly designed to be equitable.

My ethnographic approach involved iterative cycles of data collection, coding, and constant comparison, allowing patterns, categories, and relationships to emerge organically from the data. To understand these patterns, I put together weekly memos of my jottings, indicating what themes emerged as salient. I then turned to the literature to understand how these surprises aligned with scholars' broader notions about workplace inequality. This approach became abductive in nature (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) once I began interviewing participants around six months into my field work. Insights from early field observations informed the design of my initial interview guide, while emergent themes during interviews were continuously refined in dialogue with the literature on relational inequality. Following each round of interviews, I then returned to the field with a more focused analytic lens. This iterative and abductive process ensured that the analysis remained responsive to unexpected findings while deepening attention to how relational inequalities unfolded within an ostensibly equitable workplace.

Guided by scholars' definitions of workplace equality as equitable access to resources, rewards, and respect (Acker 2006; Sobering 2009), I developed a set of analytical codes to examine the organizational processes that either facilitate or hinder the realization of equality in practice. I began by coding my data for interactions that revealed how leaders engaged in processes of *valuation.* While valuation could be observed across a range of everyday interactions, I first focused on explicit examples that 1) claimed to represent "organizational priorities" and 2) by necessity produced distinct opportunities for certain workers. I prioritized these situations because

they crystallized how leadership articulated and formulated categories of "worthiness" (Lamont 2012; Rivera 2012, 2020), making it possible to trace how such categories were later reproduced in more mundane and interactional contexts. Two primary examples of valuation were coded: leadership deliberations and ruminations regarding 1) hiring decisions and 2) representation on the board. As I will discuss in the results section, observing these deliberations – and following up with clarifying questions to leadership – illuminated how these organizational gatekeepers constructed and justified hierarchical categories of worth among different groups of workers.

To examine how these categories of worth were enacted and deployed on the ground, getting at the *relational* mechanisms in the workplace, I analyzed situations of negotiation among co-workers where all workers had formally equal opportunities to contribute. I looked at decision-making processes among co-workers, which helped provided insight into how workers differentially deployed trust, authority, and respect to one another at the workplace, and how these practices brought to life the organizationally constructed categories of worth.

Interview data with my field-site participants provided insight into how workers perceived workplace situations, their relationships to co-workers, and their positions within the workplace hierarchy. These accounts helped me trace whether workers actively subscribed to or internalized local cultures of worthiness, and how their personal perceptions might be different from what I was perceiving at the workplace. This process was an extremely helpful way to triangulate my observations and test my assumptions (see Duneier 2011).

Ultimately, the analysis revealed interconnected processes shaping informal workplace hierarchies: 1) organizational valuation practices that privilege workers with lived experience, 2) workers' deployment of unequal categories of worth through relational claims-making, and 3) internalization of categories of worth. These findings demonstrate that even in workplaces

committed to equity, informal hierarchies persist through locally constructed categories of value, highlighting the importance of examining relational and cultural dynamics – not just formal structures – to fully understand how inequality is produced and maintained.

In what follows, I first examine how these dynamics of informal hierarchies are rooted in the organization's local culture, evidenced by how leadership constructs and communicates norms of value that shape subsequent interactions among workers.

6. FINDINGS

7.1 Constructing Local Categories of Worth through Organizational Valuation Processes

Deliberations on Hiring and Board Representation

Midwest Harm Reduction was involved in the process of hiring new employees in January 2025. After a period of winter closer and a series of workplace improvement efforts, the organization was ready for a fresh start. I had been volunteering on a weekly basis at the front desk, where I got to know Billie, the executive director of Midwest Harm Reduction. Before all the staff and volunteers went on this winter vacation, Billie had invited me to "keep in touch" in the off period. I agreed and was subsequently added to the email list for the Midwest Harm Reduction "board of directors" meetings; I was invited to sit in and provide commentary on hiring priorities for the organization. At this point, I had been a volunteer for six months and conducting formal ethnography for three, but I had not had the chance to witness the behind-the-scenes practices at the organization. I jumped on the opportunity.

Board meetings took place twice a month on zoom, as many of the board members rarely came to the organization in person. When I joined the zoom meeting, I was greeted by a sea of new faces seated comfortable in front of their book-shelf-lined walls in their home offices. As they began introductions, given the new face in the room, I quickly learned that I was surrounded by a

group of PhDs, MDs, RNs, and J.Ds. For the first time working at MHR, I was, by far, the least educated person in a room. These board members all had backgrounds in public health, healthcare, and law. While they all had seasoned histories in the non-profit sphere, none of them had lived experience of homelessness themselves.

The board meeting agenda began with a discussion on priorities for new hires; each member was given a moment to state their few most pressing priorities for the next pool of outreach worker applicants, though the final decisions would be made among those employed at Midwest Harm Reduction – the outreach workers, Frances the office manager, Jessie the nurse, and Billie the executive director. Regardless of who makes the final call[6], however, board members had a say in which applications got past the threshold for an interview and made it into the pool of eligibility.

As each board member unmuted their mic to state their main priorities for the next pool of applicants, I noticed a theme: unanimously, board members requested hiring more workers who "get it," and "see the things that [they] don't see" from their disconnected positions. Jessica, a Doctor of Nursing and longtime advocate for public health policies that address parities across mental and physical health, stated:

> "We need more people who lived it. I know it was tough with Oscar [a worker who had quit before my time at MHR], but it makes it all feel a little closer to the thing."

While the board members did mention the challenges of hiring more individuals with lived experience, referring to former experiences that had gone "awry," they stated their explicit support

[6] Due to the sociocratic nature of the organization, board members rarely had "final say" in organizational decisions – expect for in instances of firing, which I did not observe first-hand at the workplace. However, the board's opinions and priorities were *almost always* collected prior to a decision making process, and further influenced the ways that workers at the organization discussed or resolved an issue. It is important to remember that, while nominally "not in power," the board is a large source of funding and support for the organization's continued existence, providing it with a significant amount of behind-the-scenes sway.

for making this a priority for the upcoming session, insisting that it aligns what they "had been told is valued" and "is supposed to work," in the words of Rebecca, a housing rights lawyer.

Aligning with the literature on equality practices in social service organizations, the board members explicitly valued potential workers with lived experience, given their proximity to the issue and potential to improve conditions for clients (Barker and Maguire 2017). Additionally, however, board members were convinced that hiring workers with lived experience would contribute to a more equitable workplace.

Referring to the composition of staff with and without lived experience: "It'll help *balance it all out*, give people more opportunities," Rebecca further stipulated. Her fellow board members nodded, agreeing that it was a priority to "level the playing field" for who could get hired, and be sure not to favor "credentials" too much, even though this is sometimes a fallback.

This discussion among board members demonstrates the organization's explicit valuation of lived experience as an important form of knowledge and contribution, privileging it in hiring decisions over traditional credentials. Their repeated emphasis on hiring people who "get it" or "see the things that [they] don't see" illustrates that value is being socially constructed and codified within the organization itself, providing tangible opportunities for workers with lived experience.

After attending this board meeting, I set up an interview with Billie. I wanted to understand her priorities for hiring, given that she is the one who 1) disseminates the information she gets from the board to other outreach workers, and 2) sets up the process for hiring including interviews, which worker is responsible for which interviews, and evaluating the primary round of applications. Billie acts as an essential gatekeeper in shaping this process of evaluation.

Billie has a storied history in the field of human services and social justice. Before joining the MHR staff, she led a different non-profit organization in the same town focusing on housing

justice. She is a born and bred Midwesterner with a soft smile and a loud laugh. Standing just under five feet tall, but wide in stature, Billie is an unassuming and casual boss, showing up in jeans and a hoodie to work each day. She does this, in part, to appear "on the same level" as workers at the organization, as she explained to me. Billie is the person who introduced the sociocratic governance structure to Midwest Harm Reduction in an attempt to (somewhat) flatten hierarchies and prioritize equity at the workplace. Her other biggest priority for MHR was hiring workers who she felt could meet the "mission driven" goals of the organization, in her words, as well as provide the most valuable insight into what the clients of the organization may need. Billie was the first to pitch the inclusion of lived experience into the organization to ensure the organization was properly engaging with the community they served, as well as providing equitable opportunities for employment. With these goals in mind, Billie produced MHR's recruitment materials (see Appendix A), which, as aforementioned, explicitly state "lived experience of homelessness" as a "plus" under "preferred qualifications," yet make no mention of any "traditionally valued" requirements, such as educational attainment or prior work experience in homelessness case management.

When I sat down with Billie to address her priorities for the next round of hiring, I asked explicitly about the recruitment materials, probing about her choices regarding which preferred qualifications to include or not. Billie provided the following explanation:

> "When I worked at [my previous organization], I hired a lot of people who I gave them their chance to do a job they would never have gotten otherwise, right? Like I hired W-2, TANF people, right?... I didn't hire every single person that came through there, but, you know, like, my office manager ended up being one of my best housing counselors, and was someone who came through that program."

Billie centers her hiring priorities on workers with lived experience, emphasizing the importance of giving them opportunities they might not otherwise have had. In taking a chance on

this "underdog" worker, she ended up hiring one of her "best housing counselors." This illustrates that Billie perceives workers with lived experience as both skilled and valuable, while also recognizing that they have historically been marginalized from broader opportunities.

Billie attributes part of her rationale to the fact that, in the past, hiring workers with *other* forms of expertise – such as traditional credentials – did not pan out as positively as she had hoped:

> "Iris [former employee] was getting her master's degree in social work. This one, in theory, had a social work background. At least the training."

Sensing her oncoming critique, I probed: "Did her training not translate to her experience with clients?" Billie responded:

> "Not at all. Her previous training was more in rhetoric and argument and debate and, you know, you could see that, right? But in [terms of the] 'social work' or the like, the more 'soft touch' stuff… it wasn't really there."

Billie uses Iris as an example of why she no longer prioritizes traditional credentials in hiring. In her view, educational credentials alone did not equip workers with the "soft touch" skills necessary to meet the organization's needs. A worker with lived experience, however, ended up being one of her best housing counselors. To clarify what Billie was suggesting with this anecdote, I asked her what she explicitly *does* value when looking at an application:

> "Either their lived experience or their experience already working in homeless services, you know? … We *prefer* to hire people who have the experience with homelessness, though, and then we can teach them the rest… Right now, almost half of our staff has lived experience of homelessness, or mental health, or substance use issues. So that's good and bad, because it means everybody brings a lot of trauma to the workplace, and there's a lot of work to do around just holding the staff together some days, you know what I mean? But also I think that it makes the staff definitely more empathetic towards our clients, more driven in the mission"

Despite the challenges associated with hiring workers with lived experience—such as trauma or interpersonal conflicts – Billie remains committed to their inclusion at MHR, emphasizing that they are more empathetic and mission-driven. In justifying this decision, she

implicitly compares workers with and without lived experience, attributing moral and practical worth to the former that she does not ascribe to the latter. Billie assumes that, by virtue of having lived experience, workers inherently bring empathy and dedication, regardless of the specific similarities between their experiences and those of clients. This reasoning illustrates Billie's conscious valuation process, showing how she explicitly elevates workers with lived experience within the workplace based on the assumed benefits of their identities.

Similar themes emerged in Billie's recapitulation about deciding on a staff representative to the Board. Abigail, a worker with lived experience at MHR, had served as the previous representative, and there was soon to be a deliberation about the next member. When I asked what Billie thought the board might want to see in a representative, Billie reflected:

> "It's good to have lived experience voice on the board… I think [the board] very much valued Abigail, her input and insights and her thinking about things differently and saying what she thought, which was different from the way they were thinking. I think they legitimately value that… it's so far out of their thinking."

The distinct emphasis placed on the value of having a "voice of lived experience" on the board reinforces the idea that this category of worker possesses something essentially different and inherently "worthwhile." This construction of value offers workers with lived experience greater opportunities to shape workplace conditions, given the formal authority that a seat on the board affords, while at the same time, precluding workers perceived as less, inherently "worthy" to board operations. When I asked Billie who her pick for the next board representative would be, she immediately named Hank, a longtime outreach specialist who had lived more than twenty years on the street.

Reflecting on my observations of the board's deliberations about hiring priorities, alongside Billie's accounts of both 1) hiring practices and 2) decisions regarding board representation, the data reveal a clear process of valuation that privileges workers with lived

experience – contradicting conventional expectations about which workers typically occupy positions at the top of informal workplace hierarchies.

Although leadership acknowledged the "challenges" associated with hiring workers with lived experience, they consistently reaffirmed their commitment to this practice. They justified it by framing it as central to the organization's core values and as evidence of alignment with its broader mission. By anchoring the valuation of workers with lived experience in the organization's stated commitment to equality and social justice, leadership framed the privileging of workers with lived experience not as the creation of a new hierarchy of worth, but as an enactment of fairness and inclusion.

In practice, however, this process of organizational valuation and justification produces an unequal category of worth. However, as stipulated by Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey (2019), categories of worth take on their "life" through "interactions and meanings that actors make of those categories" (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2019), meaning that we must move beyond the mere construction of these categories and analyze how they are deployed in social exchange between workers, particularly in the process of "claims-making." Further, interaction is often theorized as a process where culture is observable (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). In looking at interaction between workers, we can deduce whether these organizational valuations are actually salient amidst the group, or remain a hierarchical perception at the "top" of the social order.

7.2. Deploying Categories of Worth through Claims-Making and Deference-Taking

Observing the Decision-Making Process

Due to the somewhat overwhelming nature of homelessness services management, with high needs clients barging in and out of the organization daily, there were frequent opportunities to observe staff decision-making processes and collective deliberations. Most of the time, these

deliberations happened on an informal basis as a situation arose. These deliberations took similar shapes – often, a challenge presented itself at the workplace to one or more staff members, and the rest of the group would join in collectively to discuss how they all should address it.

One such deliberation centered on a particularly challenging client, known to staff as "Ms. Hannah." Ms. Hannah was rarely seen without her large floral sun-cup and a story to tell. She lived with the lasting effects of a traumatic brain injury, which shaped both her cognitive and social interactions at the organization. While many staff expressed empathy for her condition, there were limits to the patience and accommodation they could offer.

On this particular afternoon, Ms. Hannah entered the building carrying a large bag of trash she had collected herself and emptied its contents onto the front desk. As she did so, she began loudly denouncing the organization – claiming that MHR's presence in the neighborhood encouraged a "lazy culture" where people experiencing homelessness could "get away" with "doing nothing." Her outburst, punctuated by racialized language, quickly drew attention from other clients and staff, disrupting the flow of work and escalating tensions in the shared space. To make matters worse, Ms. Hannah deployed racial epithets in her musings about the "dangerous" environment at MHR.

Ms. Hannah has been a topic of staff conversation before, but this situation was the pinnacle of severity. At the time, there was no formal process in place for banning or sanctioning members, so workers were forced to negotiate and decide amongst one another what to do on a case-by-case basis. After trying to calm the situation down and de-escalate Ms. Hannah, Alexandra, one of the outreach workers at the organization, decided to gather up the staff for an informal meeting to discuss "the Hannah problem."

The outreach specialists filed in, standing around the coffee machine in the office with long looks across their faces – this is a situation they do not want to handle, and a decision they do not seem to know how to make. Granted, the situation is challenging; this is a choice about how to balance a stable environment at the workplace and a clients' acute needs.

After almost a minute of standing in silence, Alexandra offers up her opinion: while she acknowledges that the choice is never easy, she feels that the importance of maintaining a stable environment for other clients outweighs the needs of this particular client. She motions to have a discussion about banning her. Almost immediately following this call, Billie jumps in, defending Ms. Hannah. While Billie states that the use of racial epithets and stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness are "deplorable," Billie attributes this largely to Ms. Hannah's traumatic brain injury and inability to self-censor.

This is an awkward moment for the workers – how can someone maintain their position without contesting the challenge of living with a TBI? Jeff, an outreach specialist at the organization with lived experienced of homelessness, responds to Billie's defense of Ms. Hannah: "I have a traumatic brain injury myself and you don't see me calling people slurs and throwing trash on the table."

This moment breaks the silence – workers begin talking again. Not to voice their own opinions, however, but to ask Jeff what *he thinks* should be done, signaling an automatic deference in response to his subtle, relational claim to authority, afforded to him on the basis of his disclosed lived experience. After finding out he had a TBI himself, Gina, Jeff's co-worker, was quick to defer to him: "whatever Jeff comes up with, I'm sure it will be good!" Gina states. The staff nods in agreement, waiting longer for Jeff to chime in.

Jeff offers no concrete solution to the situation – he just wanted to make it clear that TBI is not an excuse for racism. Alexandra echoes Jeff's assertion, and, when it was clear Jeff was finished engaging in solution-oriented discussions, Alexandra turned towards Hank.

Hank was frequently called upon in situations like these, seen as a "seasoned veteran" given his extensive experience with people like Ms. Hannah from his time living outside. Hank chimes in with his opinion, saying that he doesn't want to have to deal with this woman ever again:

> "There should be a 0-tolerance policy for anyone saying that kind of thing about MHR visitors. If I could drag people out by the hair, I would. I was keeping clients locked in my office, so they didn't have to experience the discrimination that they experience outside all over again within MHR walls. I don't want to have to put up with that fucking shit again, not after my time outside. Even *then,* I wouldn't have dealt with shit from someone like her."

After letting Hank's words settle in for a moment, with no other responses from co-workers, Alexandra asks if the meeting can be adjourned – stating that it "looks like we got our answer."

Hank's word was final. By asserting his authority after Jeff had yielded his seat of power, Hank effectively brought the decision-making process to a close. He drew upon his lived experience of homelessness to signal his credibility and trustworthiness in making the "right choice," referencing his previous experiences from his "time outside." While Alexandra and Gina have been case-managers for years, they defer to him on the matter after he evokes his categorical status of lived experience. Within the context of the organization's informal hierarchy of worth, this invocation of lived experience grants Hank a legitimated claim to authority (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014)

Jeff's and Hank's explicit evocations of their lived experience during collective deliberations illustrate how organizational categories of worth are enacted in relational exchange. When reminded of their co-workers' status – associated with value, knowledge, and authority – workers outside this categorical distinction immediately deferred, effectively granting decision-

making authority to those with lived experience. This is consistent with RIT and the literature on status hierarchies, which finds that "status hierarchies encourage interactions marked by deference toward higher status actors" (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014; also see Goffman 1956), which in the case of this organization context and relational exchange, are workers with lived experience.

Inequality is produced and reproduced within these relational processes, where authority, deference, and categorical recognition intersect. However, decision making processes were not always so clear cut and easily accepted among workers. There were also relational struggles for power in attempts to thwart more highly valued workers' assumed authority.

Gina, an outreach worker without lived experience and one of the few women of color on staff, and Abigail, an M.S.W. student and outreach worker who was living in her vehicle during her time at MHR, were both caught in a challenging and somewhat high-stakes decision-making process on behalf of a client.

At 10:45 on a chilly November morning, a woman in her late 20s, Ella, entered Midwest Harm Reduction with an older man, her apparent partner. While he went to the case-management desk, she lingered uncertainly. When I asked what had brought her in, Ella explained that she had recently completed psychiatric outpatient treatment, was now unhoused and living in her car, and had been relying on her partner's electronics and financial support. Her immediate priority was regaining access to her own phone to reclaim a sense of independence. I escorted her to the locked case-management room, where Abigail and Gina were meeting, and, at Ella's request, stayed while she explained her situation to them.

After assessing her safety to ensure she was not in immediate danger, the workers were able to continue with the process. Eventually, the case-management scenario reached a critical point: the workers had to make a difficult decision – allow the client to leave and return to her

circumstances, hoping she would re-engage with services when needed, or attempt to locate an immediate resource. Gina and Abigail had differing ideas about the best course of action.

Ella was asked to step outside momentary while Gina and Abigail convened. In decisions with multiple case managers, workers at my field site tended to discuss strategy. Immediately after Ella's momentary exit, Gina asserted that she wanted to connect Ella with another resource within the day – she didn't feel good about sending Ella back to her partner without any resolution, and felt it was within their capacity to make this referral. However, doing so would require staying overtime, a decision that comes with some costs. Abigail immediately responded that "we've done what we can. We are not a one-stop shop," insisting upon the value of Ella having vented and sharing her experience with us. Gina, however, would not back down – stating that "we can do better than just giving up, can't we? We might not be a one-stop shop, but we aren't *nothing."* I could tell that Abigail's patience was running low in response. She had a firm concept of what the organization should provide, and that's what she would prioritize:

> "It won't help her to give her another resource that will close within the day. Trust me. It never helped me."

To my surprise, Gina did not retort. She took in Abigail's words, thought carefully about her next move, and said:

> "I'll tell her she can come back any time this week if anything happens at all. Can you go grab her?"

Abigail's position had won. Through, once again, making claim to a category of worthiness by calling upon her lived experience, Abigail, in a sense, shut down and silenced Gina's response. While Gina could have theoretically fought back in this scenario and engaged in a direct *devaluation* of Abigails experience (i.e. "just because it wasn't helpful to *you* doesn't mean it isn't helpful to *her*"), but this would risk going against organizational norms, and potentially harm

Gina's future allocation of resources, rewards, and power (Ridgeway, Johnson, and Diekema 1994; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). To complicate matters more, Gina had multiple years of case management experience at a neighboring homelessness services non-profit, where Abigail had began the job this year. Rather than allowing Gina to draw on her professional expertise and knowledge from working on the other side of a client-provider encounter, Abigail insisted upon the value of her own knowledge, subordinating Gina's "professional" expertise.

When Abigail left the room, I leaned over to Gina and asked if she felt alright, sensing that she was exasperated by the situation. She gave me a long look, followed by an eye roll: "I mean, like… what could I even say to that?"

While Gina was not automatically deferential in this scenario, she ultimately complied once Abigail "laid claim" to authority by asserting her categorical dominance, putting Gina, ostensibly back in her place. This illustrates that even when workers initially resist deference, the invocation of a relatively lower status can cue individuals to follow their expected "script." Relational Inequality Theory posits that social categories carry interactional orders, shaping which claims can be legitimately made depending on the distribution of power in a given context; attempts to assert authority outside one's category risk "embarrassment or attack" (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). Although Gina appears exasperated and disappointed by the outcome, she does not contest it. Within the norms of this relationship, it would be "off script" to tell Abigail that her lived experience does not matter or cannot substitute for other forms of knowledge.

This scenario illustrates how the unequal categories of worth emerge in interaction and operate in practice to shape workplace hierarchies and decision-making. Abigail's lived experience allowed her to assert authority over the case despite Gina's greater professional tenure, demonstrating that legitimacy in relational claims is contingent on organizationally recognized

categories of worth rather than formal credentials alone. Even when workers resist, interactional norms and expectations around these categories often guide deference, showing how local valuations of lived experience can redistribute authority, influence, and access to organizational resources in ways that may override traditional hierarchies.

Further, observing interactions between workers helped illustrate the practical salience of organizational leadership's valuation of lived experience. While leadership may explicitly value lived experience, at a workplace with largely flattened hierarchies, workers may not always share the same view. Yet, the data show that workers' practices and interactions largely reaffirmed this valuation, suggesting the presence of a local culture of worth that centers lived experience. However, to truly understand whether these interactions indicate that workers genuinely "buy into" these local valuation categories – or whether they simply reproduce them as part of expected organizational norms – requires close attention to workers' perceptions and accounts.

7.3 Internalizing Categories of Worth: Reaffirming Local Culture

Direct Reaffirmation

Interviews revealed how workers internalized organizational categories of worth in distinct ways. Workers without lived experience tended to straightforwardly reaffirm the hierarchy, marking clear distinctions between themselves and colleagues with lived experience. Workers with lived experience also affirmed the hierarchy but negotiated its meaning, differentiating themselves from coworkers based on the type or severity of their experiences. While the broader informal hierarchy persisted – with those possessing lived experience at the top – workers' perceptions of their own position suggest that claims-making might function less as a fully intentional strategy to maintain power, and more as a routinized response to established local norms and cultures.

In my interview with Alexandra, we had a long discussion about the dynamics between her and her co-workers, how she felt about the work she does, and what she thinks she excels at on the job. When I asked her to describe what she was most proud of on the job, Alexandra told me about her extensive attempts at remembering people's names:

> "I make a point of doing it, and I know that so many people I work with don't… even, like, okay, like, when I go out on outreach with Hank, who lived outside for 20 years, and we go somewhere, and I'm like, 'Oh my gosh! Derek, like, how's it going?' He's like, 'Wow, you really do know everybody, right?' Like, even *Hank* is like, like, it's hard to impress Hank, right?"

Alexandra draws on Hank's approval as a marker of her own worthiness on the job, explicitly referencing his twenty years of experience living outside. Remembering clients' names is, in itself, a skill she takes pride in – but what makes this skill especially *meaningful*, or "worthwhile," is that it earns validation from a coworker who occupies a categorically different position of authority. In Alexandra's view, Hank's extensive lived experience grants him a kind of epistemic authority: he has "seen it all" and "knows it all." Within their relational dynamic, it is Alexandra who is expected to be impressed by Hank, not the other way around. His expression of being genuinely impressed by her is, to Alexandra, a workplace reward in and of itself.

By framing Hank as a worker whose markedly different experiences make him difficult to impress, Alexandra draws a boundary between them based on their categories of worth – emphasizing their difference rather than their shared identity as outreach workers. This process of distancing herself from Hank is illustrative of Alexandra's internalization of categories of worthiness that place workers with lived experience in a "league of their own."

This dynamic is further evidenced in Alexandra's reflections on how workplace sanctions are distributed. During our discussion, she shared that she had received a formal "letter of warning" from Billie following a negative interaction with a client and was required to attend a one-on-one meeting to discuss the incident. Over the course of my fieldwork at MHR, this represented the

most severe form of punishment I observed at the workplace. Typically, instances of conflict among clients and workers remain unaddressed. Alexandra had gotten into a verbal spar with a client, resulting in an escalation where the client stormed out of the workplace and screamed. At MHR, I had observed instances such as these on numerous occasions, but I had only witnessed Alexandra be punished for it.

I asked Alexandra how she felt about this, and why she thought she was being held "accountable" for her actions when other workers, in similar situations, had not been. Alexandra immediately jumped to Hank, once again, as a point of reference, extrapolating as to why he is not held accountable for such behaviors in instances of conflict with clients.

Her response offered a perplexing justification – one that naturalized certain behaviors for some workers, while remaining unacceptable for herself:

> "I mean, Hank is just like, absolute, tell it like it is, like he has never – He does not give a *fuck*, like, what people think of him, right? So, I mean, he just says whatever the hell he thinks, like he really does… and like…he definitely has, he has a harsher approach, where I will try first to be like, 'Come on, man, like, we're not gonna do that.' Or, like, 'that's not cool.' Like, 'let's not do that.' And then they don't listen. Then I *finally* get like, 'Okay, you gotta go, like, get the fuck out, right?'… But a lot of people know Hank from the time outside, yeah, so they listen, because they've known him"

When I probe further, reminding Alexandra of her long history as a homelessness service worker with long-standing community connections herself, she retorts:

> "Yeah, I guess so, but they know us in different ways"

What Alexandra identifies here is a real and consequential distinction: Hank's community connections are, indeed, different from hers. Community members recognize him as someone who understands them through his direct experience with homelessness. Yet what Alexandra's account invisibles is the *root* of these categorical distinctions, which is the organizational valuation process. The clients are not the ones who decide who gets punished at the workplace. And, if the clients'

perceptions did have sway in these valuation processes – which they might on the basis of third-order inference (Correll et al. 2017) – it is *still* the deployment of a hierarchal category of worth by *leadership* that determines who is punished.

By focusing on their *actual* differences in community-ties, Alexandra papers over the organizationally constructed differences in their worth, which obscures the underlying dynamics at play: because Hank's lived experience is perceived as more valuable by co-workers and leadership, he is granted more behavioral latitude. He can enact a harsher, more confrontational approach without repercussion – an approach that, when taken by Alexandra, results in punishment. This double standard affords Hank the freedom to be his "authentic self," while constraining Alexandra to conform to more regulated norms of workplace conduct. Her justification, then, naturalizes and legitimates a process of unequal distribution of punishment as a reflection of intrinsic difference, rather than as a differential deployment of organizational rewards and sanctions for similar behavior (see Della Fave 1980).

This moment illuminates how relational inequality operates through workers' own interpretive frameworks. Alexandra's account shows how individuals internalize categorical hierarchies of worth, reproducing them in their sense-making and self-evaluation. In accepting the legitimacy of Hank's greater behavioral latitude, Alexandra effectively paints herself as less inherently "deserving" of same latitude, reenforcing dynamics of inequality, rather than challenging them.

Ambivalent Reaffirmation

Workers with lived experience did not directly reaffirm the hierarchy in the same way that workers without lived experience did – instead, they focused their attention *within* the category of lived experience, complicating the notion that workers experience this category as a stagnant, or

"fixed" property. Workers with lived experience draw further distinctions among the type and severity of the lived experience, creating more nuanced vision of a workplace hierarchy, yet one that still explicitly values lived experience nonetheless.

During Jeff's interview, I asked him what he thought made him a good outreach worker – a question I asked to all my participants. For Jeff, this was very challenging to answer:

> "I don't consider myself a great outreach specialist, I've been doing this, like, about a year, okay, like, that's all [the time] I've been doing this. There's so many people out there that been doing this for decades that have way more experience. I have no idea I'm doing. Like I said, I wing it, man, like I'm lucky I am where I am, but I just fucking show up every day, do my best."

Jeff does not exhibit great levels of confidence or trust in himself, even though he is *regarded* as a seasoned outreach specialist among his co-workers and, especially, leadership. Within his first year, after I finished ethnographic data collection, Jeff was assigned an additional title of "outreach coordinator"[7] and asked to take on a host of new responsibilities:

> "As outreach coordinator, what I have the ability to do is enroll people into my program. And when they're in community outreach program, I have the ability to refer them out to any outreach agency in town, so based on their criteria, mental health, substance use, veteran status, age, pregnancy, yada yada. Then I decide where they should be. Then I'll go ahead and make that referral out to the community. And then I'll be able to follow up with them to see if that other organization has reached out to them, if there's been a gap or barriers, and try to pick it up that way."

Jeff's promotion represents an organizational recognition of his worth and competence, marking his elevated position in the workplace status hierarchy. He now occupies a distinct role with greater authority and responsibility than many of his peers. Yet Jeff himself does not interpret

[7] While during my fieldwork all workers were "outreach specialists," the addition of a new categorically distinct title could absolutely serve to produce more formal relational inequalities between co-workers with different titles. While Jeff was not anyone's boss or direct superior, these additional responsibilities and change in title provide more potential for relational inequalities to emerge (see Sobering 2019). While I recognize this possibility, this was not the case during data collection, and is not a condition at this particular workplace that I can speak to or directly analyze.

this as evidence of greater ability or deservingness. Just moments after explaining his new role, he doubled down on his self-doubt:

> "I'm completely fucking winging it out here, dude, I'm surprised Midwest Harm Reduction hired me."

Even after recounting his accomplishments and formal recognition, Jeff minimizes his value, expressing surprise at his own legitimacy. His narrative reveals that, even though he might be valued by the organization and in certain relationships with co-workers, this elevation in the organizational hierarchy does not necessarily translate into an internalized sense of worth, or elevation within his *own* status hierarchy. To try and probe for further insight, I asked Jeff what he believed *does* make a good outreach worker. He responded:

> "Common sense, street smarts, like a lot of street smarts… um, experience. I thought, like, when I first started doing peer support specialist work and stuff like that, that was natural, and I was good at it, but there's still a lot of stuff I didn't know. So I guess, like not being naive about it is a good thing."

Jeff explained that the work initially felt "natural" to him, but that he later realized how much there was to learn – how many things he "didn't know." As a result, he no longer considers himself a "natural" or even a particularly "good" outreach worker. Instead, he evaluates his competence relationally, measuring his worth against others whom he assumes must know more, have done more, and have experienced more. For Jeff, both his lived and professional experience are insufficient bases for claiming hierarchical status in relation to his co-workers. Rather than viewing himself as someone whose experience holds value, he sees himself as *lacking relative to others* who, in his words, "have way more experience." In doing so, Jeff implicitly constructs a hierarchy *within* the category of lived experience, which he elaborates on more shortly. These findings were not unique to Jeff. When I asked Abigail how she felt about the process of adjusting her work during our interview, Abigail exclaimed:

> "There's no, like, preparing for what [the work] actually looks like in action, right? So when you start a job, unless you've done this kind of work before, you get whatever training they give you at the job… There's not a lot of training… I think they didn't think it was a big deal. I think they figured I could just handle it… just because of what I know from before."

Abigail explains her feelings of under-preparedness and uncertainty on the job – because she is a worker with lived experience of homelessness, she believes that her bosses thought she could simply "handle it." But the training, preparation, and logistics of a job are starkly different from living in one's car or on the street. Abigail was thrust into a situation in which her experiences did not, in reality, prepare her for the tasks at hand. Abigail does not have confidence in her voice when reflecting on her experience. A sense of uncertainty and anxiety about her ability to live up to such expectations is palpable. She recognizes that, how she is viewed by others, particularly her employers, does not match up to how she views herself within her role.

Similarly, Jeff's self-assessment stands in sharp contrast to how others in the organization perceive him. Leadership and co-workers alike view him as highly competent, even exemplary. This divergence between self- and organizational valuation underscores the relational and interpretive nature of "worth" at the workplace: value is not inherent in one's lived experience but continually negotiated through social comparison, recognition, and self-perception. Later in the interview, when I asked about how his own lived experience plays into his approach at work, and Jeff laughed:

> "My lived experience? Who am I holding myself to though? … what about seven years of the person who was raped and beat in the face and all this other shit! I didn't experience anything like that… I had it relatively easy. I had a car when I was houseless… I could just sleep in my car. But it did become a problem, like, gas is always hard to come by even if you have a car… I was houseless for a few months, like, that was my experience of homelessness… I won't hold a candle in the wind to what Hank knows and his experience. And I think what's cool is that once you do get people who do connect, like Hank respects me about drug use and comes to me about what I know about drugs, and I go to him about… 'dude I know nothing about hopping trains, getting across the country, what can I tell this person?'"

Jeff situates himself within a stratified hierarchy of lived experience, complicating the potential assumptions that workers see this category as uniform at the workplace. Relative to Hank, whose experiences of long-term homelessness he views as more severe, Jeff "doesn't hold a candle." Yet, Jeff also recognizes his own expertise in matters of drug use, highlighting that hierarchies of lived experience are domain-specific and relational: in different contexts, he and Hank occupy different positions. In this sense, they are able to engage in reciprocal exchanges that negotiate authority, credibility, and influence depending on the context.

Jeff's comparisons also show how the severity of lived experience becomes a moral and symbolic currency. By downplaying his own experience as "easier," he reaffirms a hierarchy that values greater suffering as greater authenticity. Jeff downplays the value of his lived experience in favor of those who have been "raped" or "beat in the face," signaling his relative *difference* and subordinate status rather than similarity and relative equality. While the category of lived experience is often collapsed as one large signifier of "worthiness," this does not map onto how workers experience these categories or think about themselves in relation to others. It is important to think back to Jeff's ambivalence about his own skills – there is always more he could learn, always more he could have experienced, always more he could have done. Jeff does not experience his relative position on the informal hierarchy as "at the top," even if this is how he might be perceived by organizational leadership and co-workers without lived experience.

Both Alexandra and Jeff engage in self-deprecation or minimization of their own value when comparing themselves to other workers they perceive as relationally "above" them. Alexandra downplays her extensive professional experience, privileging Hank's lived experience as the marker of authority and worth. Similarly, Jeff minimizes his own experience of homelessness, situating himself relative to others with more severe or longer-term experiences.

These patterns illustrate how workers internalize and navigate relational hierarchies: rather than simply reflecting formal roles or credentials, hierarchies are reinforced through comparisons, deference, and self-assessment.

Alexandra's and Jeff's accounts indicate a broad naturalization and acceptance of the workplace hierarchy. While the hierarchy's composition – how much lived experience is considered "enough" – is more nuanced than observational data alone reveal, there is a strong, shared belief that lived experience confers worth, ability, and status at MHR. This hierarchy generates insecurity among workers who see themselves as "beneath" others, affecting both Alexandra (with no lived experience) and Jeff (with significant lived experience). While the local valuation of lived experience remains firmly entrenched, workers' internal experiences reveal ambivalence, anxiety, and uncertainty around their roles or expectations. Examining the perceptions and affectual impacts of these hierarchies helps illuminate how local cultures of valuation can impede the way that workers receive resources, rewards, and respect. Even when resources, rewards, and respect *are* distributed to workers, their comfortability in accepting such conditions is impeded by their own perceptions of their place on the informal hierarchy. This complicates the notion that workers with lived experience are in positions of total privilege, given the compilated feelings attached to their workplace benefits. At the same time, these workers' perceptions do not challenge the overarching structure of the workplace hierarchy, and serve to potentially reproduce these same inequalities in the future.

7. DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

7.1 Summary of Contribution, Argument, and Findings

This article makes two key contributions. First, it advances scholarship on workplace equality by showing how formal efforts to promote equity—through policies, norms, and decision-making practices—are experienced on the ground, illustrating the uneven ways that workers benefit depending on their position within local, informal hierarchies of worth. Second, it extends Relational Inequality Theory (RIT) by incorporating locally constructed categories of value, revealing how organizational logics of worth shape workplace hierarchies beyond broader social categories such as gender, race, or class, as well as formal distinctions like manager and subordinate. By integrating theories of local culture with RIT, the article demonstrates how categorical differences between workers – such as whether they have lived experience of homelessness—take on locally specific meanings, complicating prior assumptions about workplace equality. Rather than presuming what organizations value, it traces how value is actively produced and reaffirmed through workers' everyday interactions, responding to Vallas and Cummins's (2014) call to examine the construction of inequality categories.

Interview data helps triangulate these observations, revealing whether workers' perceptions of value align with their actions and explaining why relational inequalities persist. If workers did not recognize these local categories of worth, informal hierarchies might be less durable (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). Overall, this analysis highlights how organizational valuation processes produce salient categories of worth that are enacted in worker interactions and internalized at the micro level. Even in workplaces designed to promote equity, locally constructed valuations can constrain who is able to assert authority, access resources, and gain respect. Inclusion of historically marginalized workers, combined with egalitarian formal structures, does not automatically produce equitable outcomes; informal hierarchies grounded in local perceptions

of value continue to shape relational dynamics, revealing the complex interplay between formal policies and cultural logics that define worth within a workplace.

7.2 Implications for Research and Practice

This study underscores the importance of examining relational inequality and local workplace cultures as central, not peripheral, components of understanding organizational inequality. Traditional assessments of workplace equality often rely on formal structures, policies, or compositional metrics – who is hired, promoted, or included in leadership (see Jansen et al. 2014; Roberson, King, and Hebl 2020; Zhao et al. 2025). While these measures are important, they can obscure the subtler ways in which inequality is enacted through everyday interactions and culturally specific valuations of workers. By attending to relational hierarchies and the locally constructed categories of worth, sociologists and practitioners can better understand how authority, respect, and opportunity are distributed in practice, revealing patterns that might run counter to formal measures of inclusion.

For sociologists, integrating attention to local culture and relational processes challenges assumptions that inequalities can be predominantly captured by structural or demographic categories (Fine 2010). It also opens new avenues for understanding how marginalized groups can simultaneously occupy positions of authority in specific contexts while broader hierarchies persist, and how local valuations can generate configurations of inequality that do not neatly align with societal-level categories. In short, this study demonstrates that examining relational inequality and local culture together can expand our conceptualization of workplace equality, revealing both its potential and its limits in practice, as well as our understandings of inequality on a broader scale. It is not only helpful to apply local cultures within the frame of RIT, it is also helpful to apply RIT within the study of groups. Applying Relational Inequality Theory (RIT) to the study of local

cultures enriches interactionist approaches by focusing less on rituals and order (Fine 2012), and more on how power and value are *negotiated* within everyday interactions (Tomaskovic-Devey 2019). While scholars like Fine (2010) emphasize the cohesion and shared meanings produced through interaction rituals, RIT highlights how hierarchies of worth are constructed, contested, and reinforced among group members (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). This perspective allows researchers to see not just patterns of interaction, but how certain members' expertise and perspectives gain legitimacy while others are subordinated, revealing hidden inequalities within local cultures.

For practitioners, this approach suggests that efforts to promote equity cannot rely solely on formal inclusion policies, hiring quotas, or alternative formal structures. Organizations must also consider how leadership and co-workers interpret and enact categories of value in daily interactions: who is deferred to, whose expertise is legitimized, and how perceptions reinforce or challenge formal structures. Evaluating these dynamics can uncover hidden barriers for certain workers and highlight the work necessary to ensure that policies translate into equitable outcomes. While any *prescriptive* suggestions for workplace practices to mitigate such local cultures from emerging are outside the scope of my expertise, a review of the applied literature suggests that practitioners seeking to address *relational inequalities* have attempted to beyond formal policies and examine every day dynamics of value and authority, such as who is deferred to and whose expertise is legitimized (Bolton, Logan, and Gittell 2021; Green and Kalev 2008). Strategies include reflexive discussions on workplace hierarchies, rotating decision-making roles to distribute authority, formal recognition of *diverse* expertise (rather than informally privileging certain forms), participatory policy design, mentorship or peer support programs, and training on relational inequalities and power dynamics (Bolton, Logan, and Gittell 2021; Devine and Ash 2022; Green and Kalev 2008; Scully and Rowe 2009; Wu and Paluck 2020). Regular feedback on

relational dynamics has helped workplaces identify hidden barriers and work towards more effective mechanisms for ensuring equitable *outcomes*, rather than just conditions alone (Green and Kalev 2008).

This review, however, is by no means expansive, and there are many factors that must be considered in addressing equitable distribution of resources, rewards, and respect that are outside the scope of my knowledge and research design.

7.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers detailed insight into how categories of worth and relational hierarchies operate at my field site, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on ethnographic observations and interviews at a single, small, sociocratic organization. While my study does not assume causality, rather, a processual unfolding of dynamics, this context-specific focus still limits the generalizability of how these dynamics might unfold at other organizations with other structures. However, this article does not attempt to make a prescriptive or empirically generalizable claim – I aim for a conceptual generalizability through reaching saturation in my data collection (Collins, Neely, and Khan 2024), and thoroughly examining the mechanisms through which local cultures enter into relational inequalities to produce inequality at a workplace that tries to prevent it. The dynamics observed are necessarily influenced by the specific culture, leadership style, and sociocratic governance structure unique to MHR. However, the conceptual necessity of examining how local cultures impact relational inequalities is broadly generalizable to many different contexts, especially contexts that aim to examine groups with shared settings and histories, where dynamics of relationships might be taken for granted as ritualistic (Fine 2010; Fine 2012). Examining these dynamics more closely might reveal unexpected inequalities that are important to understand.

The small size and lack of demographic variability at my field site also likely impacts how relational inequalities unfold. I would expect that at a larger worksite with more diversity across different diffuse characteristics, there would likely be more contending, intersectional hierarchies of worth at play (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2016).

Building on these limitations, future research could expand in several directions. Comparative studies across organizations with different governance structures all aiming for equality efforts could illuminate the impact of formal organizational structures on relational dynamics observed in these contexts. Longitudinal studies could also track how hierarchies of worth shift over time, particularly as new workers are hired, board composition changes, or organizational policies evolve. Additionally, research could more explicitly explore intersections between identities – such as lived experience, professional expertise, and race, for example – to understand how complex or *intersectional* hierarchies are negotiated across categories (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014).

By addressing these areas, future research can deepen our understanding of 1) how structural, policy- and practice-based efforts actually map onto equitable *outcomes*, 2) how inequality manages to persist within organizations that aim for egalitarianism, and 3) how practitioners might better address mechanisms that create inequality in the workplace that is under-theorized in the applied literature.

8. APPENDIX A

GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- **Outreach:** Perform weekday outreach to places where unsheltered homeless individuals reside providing basic survival gear and other supplies. Serve as a resource for unsheltered individuals to meet needs.
- **Engagement:** Once a relationship is developed through outreach, engage with individuals about goals and needs while providing information about community resources.
- **Housing Search & Placement:** Assist interested individuals in getting connected to Coordinated Entry as well as perform other housing search and placement tasks.
- **Case Management and Care Coordination:** Using a client-centered approach, assist in coordinating medical and housing related appointments and associated paperwork and data entry. Assist in connecting clients to appropriate services based on their needs.
- **General Expectations:** Be a dependable team player aligned with [redacted]'s vision, mission and values including respectful and compassionate interactions with people experiencing homelessness and maintaining client confidentiality. Maintain a positive attitude, exercise good communication skills, meet deadlines, follow personnel policies, attend required staff meetings, one-on-ones and trainings and use technology provided by the organization. Actively participate in sociocratic circles as assigned.

SPECIFIC JOB DUTIES INCLUDE:

- Proactive weekday, daily outreach and engagement activities to various places people experiencing homelessness reside (street, woods, parking lots, etc) providing basic supplies and information and referrals.
- Monitoring housing priority lists and opportunities to connect clients with housing opportunities, including chronic homelessness documentation, assistance connecting with other service providers and landlords.
- Timely data entry and updates to the [redacted] County Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) for [redacted] program participants, including completing monthly interim assessments and entry/exits from the program.
- Ensuring confidentiality for our clients, including obtaining releases of information and providing information about rights and responsibilities related to the data of program participants.
- Attend Homeless Services Consortium Outreach and Case Conferencing meetings and report back to staff and volunteers as needed.
- Assist in educating [redacted] volunteers and staff housing matters.
- Assist in connecting clients to other housing and mainstream resources, as needed.
- Provide case management and care coordination for clients enrolled in our programs.
- Other duties as assigned.

SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS:

- A passion for ending homelessness and working with people without homes.
- Ability to be trained in HMIS and maintain required certifications.
- Ability to be trained in [redacted] Electronic Health Records system.
- Commitment to maintaining confidentiality of our program participants.

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- Ability to interact with clients in a trauma-informed way that includes harm reduction and centers on the program participants needs.
- Ability to meet clients where they are at and be flexible in providing services.
- History of positive working relationships with people of diverse racial/ethnic, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds.
- Demonstrated ability to use creative problem-solving skills to assist persons of diverse backgrounds and abilities, often in extreme personal crisis.
- Good organizational skills and ability to work independently and with close attention to details.
- Ability to learn about government or social services agencies that assist people without homes.
- Commitment to the mission of a small, volunteer driven non-profit organization.
- Ability to have a flexible schedule.
- Use of personal vehicle for doing outreach (mileage reimbursed)
- Lived experience of homelessness, experience in the homeless services system in [redacted] County, bilingual in Spanish or ASL a plus

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