From Losing Everything to Finding Community: How Homeless People Narrate their Lived Experiences

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FROM LOSING EVERYTHING TO FINDING COMMUNITY: HOW HOMELESS PEOPLE NARRATE THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Speech Communication
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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FROM LOSING EVERYTHING TO FINDING COMMUNITY: 
HOW HOMELESS PEOPLE NARRATE THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES

By
Joshua Daniel Phillips

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the field of Speech Communication

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Graduate School
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

JOSHUA DANIEL PHILLIPS, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Speech Communication, presented on September 17, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: FROM LOSING EVERYTHING TO FINDING COMMUNITY: HOW HOMELESS PEOPLE NARRATE THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Suzanne M. Daughton

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide an academic platform for people who are homeless to narrate their lived experiences. Traditionally, scholars and politicians drive public conversations about homelessness and commonly reach conclusions that require more social programs and more funding. In the literature review of this dissertation, I argue that many social programs for the homeless, while well intended, fall short of their goals because scholars and politicians do not appreciate the idea that homeless people are part of a distinct culture with different lifestyles and objectives. Because of the cultural differences between the housed and the homeless, social programs that may work for the housed may not work for the homeless. Therefore, to create policy that will best function for the homeless, it is important to learn about the culture of homelessness by listening to the voices of homeless people. In an effort to learn about the culture of homelessness, in this dissertation I utilize the narrative paradigm as a theoretical framework and ask: How do homeless people narrate their experiences?; What types of experiences and relationships do homeless people have with government benefits and charitable organizations?; and How would homeless people craft economic and social policy if given the opportunity to do so?

To answer these questions, I spent one summer working at a homeless shelter and interviewed 10 homeless people. While each person had an individual story, there were common themes that emerged among participants. These themes were arranged chronologically and
analyzed in chapters entitled: Losing Everything, Navigating the System, Manipulating the System, and Seeking Recognition/Finding Community. Based on my analysis of these narratives, I propose suggestions for how public policy can better respond to the needs of the homeless by offering long-term shelter assistance, connecting benefits to work and education performance, and educating the housed about the resources available for the homeless in their community. In the end, implementing policies that address homelessness should be done in conversation with the homeless. The voices of homeless people matter and intercultural dialogue between the housed and the homeless fosters a sense of mutual respect, personal empowerment, and shared ownership of public policy.
DEDICATION

For Keith. Even in your passing, your contribution to this research is unparalleled. I miss you and our conversations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people to whom I owe a great amount of gratitude. First, I would like to acknowledge the staff and clientele of Good Samaritan Ministries in Carbondale, Illinois for allowing me access to their facilities, their work, and their stories. Without their openness and cooperation, this dissertation would not exist. Next, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. Foremost, I cannot express enough gratitude to my advisor Dr. Suzanne Daughton. Without her guidance and compassion, I would have been lost in the graduate school process. I cannot thank her enough for her time, energy, and efforts over the last four years. Furthermore, Dr. Nathan Stucky deserves a great deal of recognition as the idea for this project first originated and took shape in his classroom. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Satoshi Toyosaki and Dr. Sandy Pensoneau-Conway for their particular insights that helped structure the theory and methods. Also, much appreciation is due to Dr. Ann Fischer. Her approach to teaching has greatly impacted my views about the possibilities that exist within the academy. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Rebecca Walker for her willingness to join this project.

I would also like to acknowledge the love and support of my family. My parents, Tony and Jeannie Phillips, deserve all the credit for instilling within me the values of hard work, self-discipline, and high academic expectations. Any accomplishment I may have is because of this upbringing. Finally, I wish to thank my family in Camden, New Jersey for sharing their lives with me. I especially want to acknowledge the love and wisdom of Ms. Carol, Siddiq, Mr. Billy, Danielle, Mr. Will, Meda, Lawrence, Mr. Charles, Ms. Loretta, Poogie, Pitbull, Gerald, Carlos, Mr. Headley, Micki, Mehregan, Will, and the rest of the crew at Frank’s Place. They have influenced and shaped my scholarship more than anyone else. I can only hope that they are proud of the work I’ve done.
PREFACE

“Today it is fashionable to talk about the poor. Unfortunately, it is not fashionable to talk with them.”

Mother Teresa

“Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticisms made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed.”

Herman Melville
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Camden

At some point during July of 2006 I found myself standing outside of a Duty Free store in the middle of a familiar-looking East Coast airport. Having just returned to the United States from an international trip to Zanzibar, I was tired, in need of a shower, and loaded down with luggage. My traveling companions and I had a couple of hours before our final leg back to Detroit, so we found a comfortable corner to stretch our legs and catch a nap. Like many of those who had traveled with me, I had packed my cell phone, but had not turned it on or checked my messages since I had left the United States two weeks prior. I turned on my phone and began listening to my voicemail. Caught between the usual messages from friends and family was a message from a recruiter with the organization Mission Year.

During the fall semester of 2005, my senior year in college, I had filled out an application to join Mission Year. My friend Erin had done the program two years before I applied and had nothing but positive things to say about her experience. The summary of the program is this: six people live in a house together for a year and volunteer in whatever city they are placed. In exchange for volunteering, the program provides a modest stipend for food and housing. The community standards included no television, no Internet, no personal vehicles, and limited phone calls as well as communal meals, communal reading experiences, and community outreach. One of the reasons for these standards is the idea of “intentional community.” Essentially, in order to more fully connect with people you have to make the effort in becoming more fully present and active with those around you.
As I was applying for the Mission Year program, I was also applying to Central Michigan University’s Communication graduate program. I knew I wanted to further my education in a field that would allow me to further explore social issues steeped in histories of power and marginalization, but I also wanted the option of leaving the academy for a moment to experience some of these social issues as they were happening in everyday communities. In the end, I decided to defer my graduate school acceptance for a year and accepted a position with Mission Year.

Back at the airport I nervously listened to the recruiter’s message. I had already been accepted to the program during the spring of 2006, but I had not been told where I would be living for the next year of my life. When I applied to Mission Year, the options included Oakland, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Chicago, Illinois. I requested Oakland as my first choice when I received my general acceptance letter a few months prior. First, it was far away and I was already familiar with the three cities in the east. Second, that’s where Erin had spent her year and since she enjoyed it, I figured it was a safe bet.

With all the anticipation and excitement that had been building around the possibility of leaving for Oakland within a matter a weeks, you can imagine my surprise when the voicemail told me, “Josh, we have placed you in Camden, New Jersey.” Camden, New Jersey? I had never heard of the place and based on the materials Mission Year had sent me, I didn’t even know Camden was an option. With no easily accessible Internet access in the airport and no one to call, I shut down my phone with more questions than answers about where I would be spending the next year of my life. Those questions would have to wait until I got back home and could do some research.
In the preface of his book, Camden After the Fall, history professor Howard Gillette (2005) captures the familiar feelings that many outsiders have about Camden when he writes, Cars passing through [via interstate 676] won’t be bothered by the smoke emitted from the stacks. Their drivers won’t contemplate the homes displaced or the neighborhoods disrupted to make their commutes easier. …[outsiders] may be stimulated by what they see, but they remain safely distant. What they know – or think they know – of this city assures them that it is best to keep that distance. …[outsiders] have learned through repeated media accounts that the city is not just poor and badly run. It is a dangerous and inhospitable place marked by crime as well as corruption. (xii)

These perceptions can be difficult to confront, but they are rooted in real and troublesome data. For example, Camden consistently ranks near the top of the FBI’s list of the most dangerous cities in America (Mach, 2012; Gibson, 2010). Additionally, recent census data indicates that 42.5% of Camden residents live below the poverty line (“New Census,” 2012). Within the abject poverty, a staggering number of homeless people have found themselves bedding down in Camden’s transportation center, shelters, and abandoned housing. It is estimated that over 3,000 homeless people live in Camden County (Volunteers of America Delaware Valley, 2010), many of whom funnel into the city of Camden for services. These types of numbers recently led Camden to the title of the poorest city in America (Romeo, 2012). With few job prospects for low-skilled workers or the long-term unemployed, a struggling economy, and Camden’s high

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1 An immediate concern of this dissertation is how to distinguish people and groups through labels. There are valid arguments for always using “person first language” such as “people who are homeless.” However, I made the decision to interchangeably use the terms “people who are homeless,” “the homeless,” and “homeless people” where I felt it enhanced brevity and clarity. I respect the arguments of those who disagree with my decision and I remain open to changing my views on whether “person first language” should always be used.
school graduation rate consistently hovering around 50% (United States Census Bureau, 2010), I am led to believe that this impoverishment will not end anytime soon.

When I moved to Camden in August of 2006, it fit the profile of everything I had read. Because there is no direct volunteer program established under Mission Year, it is up to each participant to find a local community program to work at over the next 12 months. Most people forego any serious volunteer searching until after they have taken the first week (or two) to settle into their surroundings by moving in, meeting neighbors, and learning the public transportation schedule. I was no different. After about a week I still had no idea where I was going to volunteer. Finally, I met Maxine after a Sunday morning service at New Mickle Baptist Church.

Maxine was an older woman who had lived in and around Camden most of her life. The pastor of the church, Reverend Allen, had pointed out the six new college-age kids sitting near the back of the church and made sure we felt at home in the congregation. After service, Maxine introduced herself and began asking me about how I planned to serve the community. I told her that I wasn’t sure and she prophetically answered, “You’re going to end up at New Visions.” The next morning at 7:30 am, my roommate Will and I made the four-block walk to 523 Stevens Street, New Visions Day Shelter.

For the next 12 months, Will and I would join the staff at New Visions (more commonly known as Frank’s Place in remembrance of a deceased homeless man) Monday through Thursday for a four-hour shift. Carved out of the belly of an old decrepit church, Frank’s catered to hundreds of people every Monday through Friday, 8:00 am – 4:00 pm. While I was there, the patron list included well over 1,200 names and there were no viable rooms or resources for allowing the shelter to remain open overnight. The daily duties for the staff included organizing the food pantry, organizing the clothing area, cooking breakfast and lunch, managing the
showers, washing linens, taking out the trash, and dealing with the chaos of high-school volunteers, church groups, and food deliveries. During my time there, I had taken on every assignment at one time or another, but mostly my role involved intake for new clients.

Intake was a demanding task because every day new clients would arrive at the shelter hoping to receive services. In order to receive services, New Visions had a policy of collecting several pages of information on every patron that came through the door. The process was extensive and asked questions ranging from name and address to welfare benefits to medical history. Those who went through the intake process included mothers picking up weekly food bags to take home to their children to homeless men who were only passing through and wanted a hot meal before leaving town. This rather invasive process of collecting such personal information on everyone who came through the door allowed New Visions’ executive board to quantify personal data for government grant applications that requested the specific makeup of clientele. The more detailed the grant, the easier it is to quantify services and the more likely it is that your agency will receive additional funding. Between staff members, board members, grant writers, and government agencies that granted funding, there were many people involved in this complex system of counting patrons and shifting money. The only absent voices in this money-shifting conversation were those of the patrons.

Purpose and Dissertation Overview

The origins of today’s methods for government funding of welfare services began roughly 50 years ago and have been expanding exponentially ever since. In the mid-1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson called upon the United States Congress to begin a national war on poverty and to create the foundation for what would become known as Johnson's "Great Society" legislation. In all, this legislation was aimed at creating upward mobility for those most
vulnerable to the grip of poverty, including the lower-class and homeless populations. However, today we are nearly a half century removed from the beginnings of this war and the poverty rates remain unchanged (Smiley & West, 2012; Murray, 2012; Blackwell, 2012; see Murray, 1984). Countless scholars and politicians have theorized why poverty and homelessness rates remain stagnant, but little research has been done that directly poses questions of economic and social policy to those most affected by homelessness. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to provide a space in which to engage with those individuals facing poverty and homelessness, in an effort to fashion better-functioning economic and social policies for those most invested in the outcomes. In doing so, this research will be able to create an academic account of homelessness that is rooted in the narratives of those who live these vulnerable realities each and every day.

Since leaving Camden, I still remain close to several people I met at the shelter and have since worked and volunteered at other shelters outside Camden. As an advocate closely connected to the issue of homelessness, it is easy to make demands aimed at increasing government funding for a plethora of poverty programs. Essentially, “I want my friends who are homeless to live more comfortably, so give them more money.” However, as a scholar deeply committed to ending homelessness – as opposed to simply managing homelessness – I have recently found myself engaging with this issue through more critical lines of questioning. Perhaps most contentious is my academic certainty that pouring more money into broken systems will not solve the problem. In fact, increased spending on certain government programs might actually impede progress or even exacerbate the problem. To this end, I have come to the conclusion that money is neither the root problem nor the foundational solution when confronting homelessness. Instead, access to money is simply a symptom of a larger cultural problem and government funding is simply used as a band-aid to try and cover up much larger
issues. As a replacement for the money argument, it is my belief that many of the causes that create a culture where homelessness can exist are perpetuated by a society that is deeply divided between those who have homes and those who do not.

In an effort to more fully explain this concept as well as offer more constructive ways for addressing homelessness, this research will move through six distinct chapters. First, in Chapter 1, I will provide a literature review that will aid in summarizing previous scholarship on homelessness, as well as position homelessness as an issue that can be adequately understood within the field of intercultural communication. Next, Chapter 2 will provide a theoretical framework for this research located within the narrative paradigm. In utilizing the narrative paradigm, this research finds justification for collecting and analyzing the stories of those who are homeless in an effort to better understand the culture of homelessness. In short, stories from those who are homeless provide a great wealth of knowledge that should be considered when discussing public policy. Chapter 2 will also offer methods for collecting these narratives. Most notably, the methods for this project will be informed by ethnography and critical ethnography as a way to observe spaces where homeless people congregate, as well as to collect interviews from those who are homeless. The methods section will also discuss how I plan to use thematic narrative analysis and the framework provided by the narrative paradigm to analyze the collected interviews and data. Chapters 3-6 will each analyze one of the four different themes that emerged from the interviews and my observations by describing reoccurring topics and/or subject matter. In doing so, these chapters will work together chronologically to help tell a larger story about homelessness. Finally, Chapter 7 will offer an academic conclusion about these results including the study’s accomplishments, implications for policy, limitations, and advice for future research. I will also offer my personal reflection about the study at the end of Chapter 7.
Literature Review

To begin, this portion of the research will focus on summarizing the current scholarship that addresses homelessness and poverty. In order to achieve this, first this literature review will contextualize homelessness through statistics and definitions. Second, I will position homelessness as a topic best understood in communication studies through an intercultural communication lens where homeless populations generate their own lifestyles, communities, and cultures (Ravenhill, 2008) because they are culturally segregated from housed populations. Third, this literature review will discuss how homelessness is situated as an individual phenomenon driven by drugs, alcohol, mental illness, or unfortunate hardships and then move toward a more holistic understanding of homelessness as a vicious institution that is created and perpetuated through systemic cultural interactions (Evans, 1988). In positioning homelessness as a systemic institution, this literature review will demonstrate how we are all implicated in its existence: in order to overcome its oppressive reality, we need to formulate strong alliances that work interconnectedly across rigid socio-economic class structures.

After contextualizing the larger systems of homelessness, this essay will then move into a discussion that looks at the more intimate details of everyday survival. For example, surviving homelessness can be contingent on one's ability to successfully navigate an impersonal and sometimes violent system. To highlight these realities, this section of the review will look at how people are made vulnerable in shelter systems where they must eat, sleep, shower, and eliminate in the presence of strangers. Additionally, families must share their most intimate moments amongst larger groups of unknown peoples, and women who find themselves alone in the system sometimes find themselves forced into unwanted sexual behaviors as a method of survival (Huey & Berndt, 2008).
Finally, the last section of this literature review will look at the perspectives of those outside of the homeless population who maintain occasional contact with the homeless. These perspectives include the positionality of volunteers who are eager to help alleviate some of the harshness of homelessness. By discussing volunteerism, this review will help foster a better understanding as to how some in the non-homeless populations currently understand homelessness as well as how some non-homeless populations are trying to help the homeless.

Context

Contextualizing the parameters of homelessness is a difficult task from the start because there is no agreed-upon understanding as to what constitutes homelessness. In 1987, the McKinney Homeless Act attempted to define the homeless as “an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (Lang, 2007, p. 47). However, the inadequacies of this definition are highlighted in its multiple interpretations. For example, this definition could include: a person with no shelter living on the street; a person living in a shelter; a person living in temporary or transitional housing; or a person living with family or friends. An early study on homelessness found that 9% of the U.S. American population fit this government-imposed definition of homelessness based on the McKinney Homeless Act; however, when people were asked to self-report their housing situation, 15% indicated that they had been homeless at some point in the previous year (Lang, 2007). These discrepancies between government estimates and individual accounts are noteworthy and should be taken into consideration when attempting to accurately define the homeless population.

In an effort to more accurately quantify the homeless population, several coalitions for the homeless have attempted new methodologies that track services rendered by shelters, soup kitchens, and various government programs. In 2011, the National Alliance to End Homelessness
reported that an average of 643,067 people were homeless at any given time over the course of one year. Additionally, in 2004, the National Law Center on Homelessness estimated that 3.5 million people experienced homelessness during a given year. In regard to these numbers, the National Coalition for the Homeless (2009) mentions that not all people who are homeless use services and therefore, the numbers are most likely higher than these estimates. Reporting on some of the statistical breakdowns, 26% of the homeless have a mental illness, 13% have a disability, the average shelter stay is between 51-70 days (National Coalition, 2009), and 40% of the homeless are without a shelter on any given night (National Alliance, 2011).

While these “official” numbers are impressive, some scholars suggest that we proceed with caution. For instance, in his essay “The Problem of Homelessness is Exaggerated,” Rosen (2007) asserts that there are no accurate data to quantify the homeless population because those who avoid the homeless have no interest in counting them and those who help the homeless often exaggerate their numbers in order to receive increased government funding. In the end, the homeless are positioned according to their monetary worth by both those who are apathetic as well as those whose paychecks and positions depends on providing services.

As callous as his analysis may sound, Rosen does provide an important critical lens that leads me to ask one striking question about the issue of homelessness: if these agencies are collecting money in order to end homelessness, are their programs working? Observantly, it seems to me that agencies working to end homelessness would be working against their monetary interest if in fact they were successful in ending homelessness. Essentially, a decreasing homeless population would lead to less government funding and less personnel. While I do not presume that people intentionally sabotage the system for the personal benefit of receiving increased government grants, much of the data collected over the past 50 years does
support the idea that little progress has been made at ending poverty and homelessness despite
the massive government subsidies that are continually poured into these systems.

In analyzing the failed systems of government programs aimed at helping the poor, some
scholars point to the complicated bureaucracies that eat away most of the funding before monies
reach those individuals for whom they were intended. For example, in 1992, $190 billion was
spent on poverty programs in the United States and

much of that $190 billion [was] not ‘for persons of limited income’ at all, but for the
poverty industry – bureaucrats, caseworkers, service providers, and a grab-bag of
vendors in the private sector who plan, implement, and evaluate social programs on
government contracts. (Murray, 1992, p. xiii)

By 2011, welfare spending for people with low income had increased 32% within the previous
four years (Ginsberg, 2012; Congressional Research Service, 2012) and the federal government
was spending approximately $1.03 trillion on welfare programs making “welfare that year the
government’s largest expenditure” (May, 2012, para. 1; Congressional Research Service, 2012).

When looking at the programs where money has been invested to specifically address the
homeless population, take for example The Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing
Program. In 2009, this program invested $1.5 billion to assist about 700,000 homeless people
(National Alliance, 2011). Despite these massive economic efforts, the homeless population
remained virtually unchanged from 2009-2011. In a poignant summary about government
programs aimed at helping the poor, Blackwell (2012) notes that “The massive transfers of
wealth of the Lyndon B. Johnson era were sputtering out, having achieved little. And some
people said then: ‘We declared war on poverty, and poverty won’” (para. 3).
Intercultural Communication

Part of the reason little progress has been made when it comes to ending homelessness may have to do with the fact that economic segregation has drastically increased over the years and that the upper class continues to make policy and financial decisions for the lower class despite having little to no contact with a lower-class reality (Murray, 2012). Coupled with class segregation is also the availability and access to voice in public space in order to steer dialogue about socio-economic policy. Commenting on voice, hooks (2000) writes, “We live in a society where the poor have no public voice” (p. 5). Therefore, when it comes to crafting policies that impact the poor and homeless, we have created a system where the reputed beneficiaries are locked out of conversations that have direct bearing on their livelihood.

This growing distance between class statuses is why I believe that homelessness is uniquely positioned to be discussed as an intercultural communication issue within the field of communication studies. Notably, this argument is in line with the work of Daniel (1970), Whiting (1971), and Philipsen (1976) who each highlighted class status as a variable in intercultural communication research. In regard to this essay, I understand this intercultural communication process as a site where people who are homeless and people who are housed continuously negotiate class identity, government welfare, and public policies. Due to these constant negotiations, it would be advantageous if these groups of people could better understand each other’s cultural perspectives. In order to better situate homelessness as an issue that ought to be framed within intercultural communication, the following section will provide a brief background on the field of intercultural communication as well as offer two paradigmatic approaches for studying homelessness within the field.
To begin, the field of intercultural communication dates back to the 1940s when Edward Hall’s work was used to educate U.S. American diplomats through the U.S. Department of State’s Foreign Service Institute (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Moon, 1996, 2010). Prior to the introduction of Hall’s work, there was a growing frustration that U.S. American diplomats did not fully understand the language or the culture of the countries where they were being stationed and many U.S. American diplomats simply wanted to know how to better interact with people in the various host countries (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). In addition, the U.S. American government stood to benefit from diplomats becoming more interculturally effective with regard to international and business affairs (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Moon, 1996). To this end, much of Hall’s work pulled from the academic fields of anthropology and linguistics to establish a model that advocated for a broader education about the histories, customs, politics, and economic policies of the countries where U.S. diplomats would be serving.

Hall’s emphasis on the interactions between cultures began the “shift from viewing cultures one at a time to studying interactions between members of different cultures…” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990, p. 263). While this shift began as a practical response for training U.S. American diplomats for intercultural interactions abroad, the field of intercultural communication burgeoned in the academy during the 1960s and 1970s when professors and students began researching intercultural interactions more intensely (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Moon, 1996). As a field closely connected to anthropology, one of the first goals of intercultural communication was to describe intercultural interactions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Mendoza, 2005; González, 2010). Through these descriptive analyses, intercultural scholars began to recognize that culture was not static, but rather a more fluid concept that was always changing and evolving through cultural interactions (Martin & Nakayama, 1999).
In addition to thinking about the changing aspects of culture, scholars also began thinking about how to define “culture.” Traditionally, the concept of “culture” had been used in reference to international nation-state borders. However, during the 1970s, scholars began “conceptualizing ‘culture’ in terms of race, social class, and gender identity” (Moon, 1996, p. 72). This work began to highlight the cultural diversity within nation-states (specifically, the diversity within U.S. American culture) and eventually led to the critical turn in the late 1980s/early 1990s when culture began to be conceptualized as a “struggle.” Previous to the critical turn, intercultural communication research was housed in the quantitative and interpretive paradigms, which offered different conceptualizations of culture where “researchers address ‘micro’ contexts” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 7). For example, “micro context” could address the interpersonal communication strategies between two members of the same community. However, the critical turn articulated that culture was a site of struggle and decidedly referenced how macro systems of power construct intercultural interactions and identities, shape reality, privilege some groups, and marginalize others (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010; Moon, 1996).

While understanding culture as a nation-state had traditionally been defined as a concrete idea that was singular and embraced by all members of a particular nation-state, these new ideas framed culture as a site where multiple interpretations of reality can and do exist based on a person’s positionality within a culture. As articulated by Moon (2010),

The move from viewing culture as unproblematically shared and relatively stable to one that acknowledges culture as a contested zone and thus in flux opens up new possibilities for intercultural scholars, allowing us to understand that rather than being comprised of “a reality,” culture is a space of competing realities embedded in power relations with all but the dominant or hegemonic version getting short shrift. (p. 38)
Ultimately, some scholars suggest that the role of an intercultural scholar who identifies with the critical paradigm is to recognize these power differences and to analyze issues of power within and between cultures (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010; DeTurk, 2001). In total, it is clear that the trend of intercultural communication has led to a moment where issues of power have become a large part of the growing conversation. Given the clear socio-economic power dynamics involved with the issue of homelessness, I argue that homelessness is one issue that has largely been absent from the intercultural communication discussion, but is well-suited to be explored within the field.

One way of doing critical intercultural research in relation to homelessness would be to look at issues of power as they exist within the United States between people with different income levels and various housing statuses. In attempting to understand homelessness in the United States, a middle-income U.S. American may have very different ideas about homelessness when compared to a homeless U.S. American because socio-economic difference can create different perspectives. While a recognition of these differences is a good place to begin intercultural conversations about culture, Mendoza (2005) argues that marginalized groups still have to fight for recognition because mainstream understandings about culture are more likely to come from those in positions of power who have the ability to shape and influence culture. Therefore, even though a middle-income U.S. American is not homeless, she/he is provided a larger platform for addressing homelessness because her/his living status is privileged.

In order to create more spaces for marginalized voices within the field, some critical intercultural scholars have worked “to redefine what counts as intercultural communication research” (González, 2010, p. 55). By challenging the traditional ideas about research and
knowledge production, intercultural communication scholars can expand the field to include “insights and perspectives usually ignored or marginalized” (Moon, 1996, p. 77). Looking back to an early critical intercultural outlook, Whiting (1971) asks scholars to be aware of the class bias that can happen when financially stable researchers study those individuals who are not financially stable. Answering these calls for more inclusive scholarship and researcher self-awareness, a narrative approach to studying homelessness would offer a platform where people who are homeless would be provided the opportunity to discuss their experiences within a scholarly setting, thus as providing valuable insights into the complex culture of homelessness.

Within these contemporary understandings of intercultural communication, homelessness would best be located within two intercultural communication paradigmatic approaches. First, using an interpretive approach, the culture of homelessness can be situated as a subjective experience where “[c]ulture…is generally seen as socially constructed and emergent…” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 6). Therefore, not only are the circumstances of becoming a homeless person developed through an ongoing communicative process, but also, one of the ideal ways that a researcher can learn about that process is through an ethnographic study where people who are homeless are given the opportunity to share their lives and narrate their stories. This can happen more vibrantly through qualitative methods. These acts of narration can help better connect scholars who are attempting to end homelessness, with the homeless whose lives depend on the implementation of good social and economic policy. As noted by Martin and Nakayama (1999),

there is a recognition that intercultural communication research should be more relevant to everyday lives, that theorizing and research should be firmly based in
experience, and in turn, should not only be relevant to, but should facilitate, the success of everyday intercultural encounters… . (pp. 7-8)

Being homeless can be a very personal struggle and the interpretive approach provides an avenue for uncovering these very personal stories in micro contexts. In the end, mutual understandings between the housed culture and the homeless culture are essential if those who are crafting policies that address homelessness wish to do so in ways that are sensitive and helpful to the homeless community. Embracing narration through the interpretive approach can help foster a better understanding of these cultural differences.

The second paradigmatic approach that could be used to more fully understand the issue of homelessness is the critical humanist approach. Similar to the interpretive approach, the critical humanist approach “assume[s] that reality is socially constructed” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 8). However, unlike the interpretive approach, the critical humanist approach is more concerned with looking at macro systems of ideology that create power structures, where culture becomes “a site of struggle where various communication meanings are contested” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 8). Therefore, analyzing homelessness through a critical lens will provide the opportunity of better understanding the systemic elements that create the conditions for homelessness to exist in the first place. Further studying these elements would also allow researchers to better understand why current methods for ending homelessness are not working. Ultimately, the interpretive and critical humanist paradigms can work together to give researchers a more complete understanding of homelessness. Whereas the interpretive approach attempts to highlight the personal accounts of homeless people through personal narratives, the critical humanist approach highlights the larger cultural institutions that create and maintain homelessness.
A Distinct Culture

In all, by positioning homelessness as a phenomenon to be studied through intercultural communication paradigmatic lenses, I am arguing that people who are homeless have a distinct culture marked by common lifestyles, customs, priorities, and vernacular. In part, these similarities are driven by shared socio-economic and housing statuses that are vastly different from the experiences of most U.S. Americans. That cultural differences cause social division between the housed and the homeless is not a new academic revelation: it was first observed over 120 years ago. One of the earliest academic accounts of class differences in the United States was Riis’s 1890 book, How the Other Half Lives. Riis’s (1890) original intent was to go to the poor in order to learn about their situation in an effort to start a larger conversation as to how two drastically different worlds of poverty and wealth could coexist in New York City. Upon observing the stark cultural differences between the financially stable and those who lived with dire financial needs, Riis (1890) concluded that most people in positions of power are blind to the realities of those who live in a constant state of poverty and homelessness.

This type of ethnographic work continued throughout the twentieth century with discouragingly similar conclusions. For example, Conover (1984) spent months living among the homeless in the early 1980s and would eventually record his observations in the book, Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America’s Hoboes. After living with the homeless and sharing life with the homeless for an extended time period, Conover (1984) concluded his work by stating “most of us still see hoboes as a race apart, strangers whom we have no need to know and no way of knowing” (p. 281). In this statement, Conover unearths two major observations.

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2 In researching this essay, I have found the plural of “hobo” spelled both “hoboes” and “hobos.” In an effort to be consistent with Conover’s work, this essay will use the spelling “hoboes” when referencing the plural.
consistent with Riis. First, people who are homeless are situated and treated as people from a
different culture. Second, most housed people avoid the homeless because the homeless offer no
measurable value to their lives.

At the most fundamental level, avoiding the homeless becomes problematic as it
perpetuates a class divide that further distances the policymakers from the intended beneficiaries.
The problems that arrive through this lack of interaction are best described in Campbell and
Reeves’s (1989) article, "Covering the Homeless: The Joyce Brown Story." In short, Joyce
Brown was a homeless woman who was content with living her life on the street despite the
humanitarian efforts of politicians and doctors to relocate homeless people into transitional
housing. In covering this story about homelessness, the initial news media elicited the
professional opinions of government officials as well as psychologists, but were negligent in
providing any platform where Brown’s voice could articulate her wants, needs, and desires.
Finally, 60 Minutes interviewed Joyce Brown and discovered intimate details about her life that
were previously void from public discussions on homelessness. Not surprisingly, Brown told a
very different story about her life than the politicians and doctors who were given the task of
“helping the homeless” through government funding and mental health treatment. She was
content with her lifestyle whereas politicians and doctors viewed her situation as dire. The
concluding message of Campbell and Reeves’s (1989) research is that we must be critical in how
we interact with one another across class lines as well as mindful as to how we communicate
other people’s stories. Addressing homelessness must happen within a dialogical framework,
especially when many of those who have the power to make these financial, housing, and health
decisions have never experienced homelessness themselves.
In conjunction with public voice, Brown’s story is also indicative of larger issues of power and control. As the homeless move through public spaces, their bodies, actions, and behaviors are carefully monitored by larger social pressures aimed at controlling their unwanted status. Not only does the housed population find ways to speak for the homeless, but the housed population insists that the “homeless need to be contained, enclosed, disciplined, or excluded” (Feldman, 2004, p. 5). For example, in 2012 the city of Denver passed an “urban camping” ban in an effort to coax homeless people off city streets (“Homeless Camping,” 2012). While those who supported the bill claimed they did so in an effort to protect the homeless by persuading them into city shelters, opponents of the bill noted “that even if the city doubled its current shelter capacity, it would still not reach the necessary number of people who are in need” (“Homeless Camping,” 2012, para. 6). In the end, the only way most homeless people could remain in compliance with the new ordinance was by leaving Denver.

This type of controlling behavior is indicative of putting someone in his/her proverbial place in order to mold more socially appropriate behaviors. This distinction of “appropriate behaviors” between the housed and the homeless also exacerbates the cultural differences between these two groups. As outlined by DePastino (2003), the homeless are not valued in mainstream society because the homeless represent the very antithesis of what it means to have a place in the world. This place is rooted in the idea of “home.” The foundational idea of “home” communicates one’s place as a contributing member of society (DePastino, 2003). Without a home, a person is viewed as an outsider with no roots, no direction, and no value, thus furthering the class divide. Moreover, home is a central location for family, work, and community. Therefore, the absence of home leaves a person on the margins of the dominant social fabric and she/he is positioned as having nothing of value to contribute. In the end, society constrains the
behaviors of the homeless by communicating its collective distaste for the homeless. The desired outcome of these collective actions would be to shame the homeless into making decisions that will allow them to more actively contribute to the larger community, through traditional work and traditional family roles.

Individual/Cultural Responsibility

Of course, shaming the homeless into making better decisions might be possible if homelessness and poverty were purely the result of individual choices. When people see homelessness as an individual choice, it is easy to situate homelessness and poverty as the end result of drugs, alcohol, mental illness, or unfortunate hardships. As noted by Smiley and West (2012), homelessness and poverty are socially positioned as a sign of personal failures and shortcomings and as a result “[t]he poor have long been maligned, stereotyped, and disgraced as lazy, irresponsible leeches who are a detriment to society” (p. 72). Additionally, people who are homeless are often categorized as dirty, drunk, and depressed (Wasserman & Clair, 2010). By consistently analyzing personal addiction and illness as a cause for homelessness, people become blinded to several other macro-level contributing factors. As pointed out by Campbell and Reeves (1989), there are three main social factors that literally push people into homelessness: 1) loss of jobs, 2) absence of affordable housing, and 3) gentrification of previously marginalized communities; i.e. pushing poor people out of their houses. Ultimately, a vast majority of U.S. Americans remains permanently disconnected from the poor and avoids discussions about how systems might be implicated in creating situations where poverty and homelessness are even a possibility. As a result, the housed and financially stable continue to position homelessness as a personal choice and are only concerned with how the poor are making efforts to help themselves get out of poverty (Wilson, 1996).
These ideas about the poor and homeless not only come from the housed and financially stable, but also from the poor and homeless populations. And some who are homeless or in poverty look beyond their own shortcomings to scapegoat other marginalized populations. For instance, when looking at poverty at the intersections of race, lower-class White Americans have pointed to illegal Mexican workers and overseas factory outsourcing to explain their own dire financial situations (Moss, 2003). In these examples, it is not the national or global marketplace systems that become the subjects of critique, but rather other lower-working-class people.

This is not to say that individual choices do not have a role in creating homelessness. However, individual choices are not solely responsible. Instead, it may be more appropriate to conceptualize homelessness as a vicious institution that is created and perpetuated through cultural interactions that are both individual and collective (Evans, 1988). These two positions feed off of one another and this dynamic interaction helps to demonstrate how we are all implicated in the existence of homelessness. In order to overcome the oppressive reality of homelessness we need to formulate strong bonds across unyielding socio-economic class structures and work interdependently in an effort to hold both individual people and collective institutions accountable.

Arguably, it is difficult for many U.S. Americans to even comprehend the perennial state of homelessness because many people genuinely believe that people can make it out of poverty if they just try hard enough (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005). This notion of class mobility creates a deafening void where no one wants to talk about social class, because no one wants to confront the notion that permanent inequities are still operating in twenty-first century U.S. America. Humorously noted, Fussell (1992) mentions that “actually, you reveal a great deal about your social class by the amount of annoyance or fury you feel when the subject is brought up” (p. 16).
To his list of feelings, I would add the word “discomfort.” Today, many people believe in class mobility, but as we begin to look at the issue of homelessness from a more collective vantage point, we can better understand how multiple factors contribute to a person ending up on the streets.

To begin, several factors including education, healthcare, housing, and public policy lead to the growing gap between the wealthy and those in poverty or on the brink of poverty (Noah, 2012). It is not one issue that drives poverty and homelessness, but a collection of issues unequally weighted, in a complex matrix that is forever shifting the rules of the game. For example, cities are constantly looking for new ways to relocate homeless populations through ever-changing regulations. In these “clean-up” acts, cities have criminalized vagrancy by issuing citations and arresting homeless people for such minor offenses as panhandling, jaywalking, littering, smoking, sleeping in public, open alcohol containers, and abandoning debris (e.g. boxes, clothing) (Flaccus, 2012; Feldman, 2004). In Newport Beach, California, the public library “recently updated a policy that says staff can evict someone for having poor hygiene or a strong aroma” (Flaccus, 2012, para. 10). While these types of policies cannot explicitly target the homeless in the ordinances’ language, and public officials continually insist that targeting the homeless is not their intention, many homeless people and advocates view various “clean-up” acts as directly targeting and disproportionately affecting the homeless populations (Flaccus, 2012; “Homeless Camping,” 2012; Pearce, 2012; Stier, 2012).

In all of the efforts made to police certain types of public activities, perhaps none are as contentious as those policies that stipulate rules for public feeding. For example, the city of

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3 I understand that the term “vagrancy” has certain negative connotations. I am not condoning or condemning its use, but simply using it to parallel the language that it used in crafting public policy and public discussions.
Philadelphia is currently fighting a civil rights lawsuit in an effort to prohibit people (volunteer groups, churches, etc.) from serving meals in city parks (Winkler & Gillespie, 2012; Prois, 2012) and Dallas already requires a person to obtain “official permission” before giving away food (Pearce, 2012, para. 2). In 2012, Mayor Michael Bloomberg pushed legislation that banned all food donations to New York City homeless shelters citing health concerns and nutrition guidelines (Stier, 2012; “Bloomberg Bans,” 2012). In all, there are some cases where citations and regulations seem reasonable: for instance, city ordinances that issue fines in an effort to curb public urination or public intoxication. However, by and large, many ordinances seem to deliberately target non-threatening activities of the homeless who have nowhere else to sleep, eat, obtain finances, or store their belongings.

In comparison to such overt forms of public policy aimed at disciplining the behaviors of the homeless, there are also more covert forms of management when various political groups seek to purge the unsightly homeless from public spaces. For instance, during the 2008 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Denver, Colorado, the planning committee moved to “secure 500 free movie tickets to provide temporary refuge for homeless people who might be uprooted by convention activities” (Katz, 2008, para. 3). Notably, the movie tickets were purchased by the DNC after their original plan – a plan that provided the homeless with day-passes to the Denver Zoo – fell through. While the DNC denied that these actions were taken in an effort to clear the homeless out of large parks for which the DNC had secured permits, it remains troubling that a political convention scheduled at the brink of an economic recession would encourage the homeless to leave convention activities through pacifying incentives as opposed to encouraging the homeless to take part in convention activities: specifically, those activities that deal with economic, poverty, and housing policies.
While instances of displacing the homeless are not always the direct result of political planning committees, homeless people can still be displaced when powerful political groups come to town. Unlike 2008, the 2012 DNC did not encourage the homeless to leave Charlotte, North Carolina with movie tickets and zoo passes. Instead, the economic boom caused by the onslaught of the 2012 DNC being held in Charlotte indirectly resulted in homeless people being removed or financially forced out of their temporary motel rooms to make room for delegates (Jamieson, 2012). As one homeless person reported, “daily rates shot up from $30 a night to $300 a night” (Jamieson, 2012, para. 7). With such a drastic increase in rates, many homeless people and families were forced into shelters or onto the streets because they simply could not afford to absorb the higher costs that were being driven by temporary gentrification.

This is not to say that all political action is apathetic to the plight of the homeless or to suggest that politicians always turn a blind eye. In fact, there are those instances when political policy is intentionally designed to deal precisely with the issue of homelessness in a meaningful, compassionate way. However, as we will see, many of these programs fall flat and result in little change because the policies are misguided, crafted by public officials who have little understanding about the culture of homelessness. Illustrating this point is a case that centers on the Times Square Business Improvement District. In short, the Business Improvement District invested $2.5 million to create a one-year program intended to move hundreds of homeless people out of Times Square and into independent housing (MacDonald, 2000). This multi-layered program hired caseworkers to make contact with the homeless, develop relationships, and set up facilities for healthcare and shelter. On the surface it seemed like a winning solution for everyone: Times Square businesses no longer had to worry about loitering or vagrancy and people who were homeless would get the resources they needed to transition into a home. Yet,
after a year of work, only two people had successfully transitioned from being homeless to having permanent shelter (MacDonald, 2000). Like many programs, the Times Square Business Improvement District invested lots of money, time, and effort into housing the homeless and experienced negligible outcomes.

As frustrating as these outcomes are, there are actually a few reasonable explanations that justify these results. First, there are no universal standards that translate between government and charitable agencies. Therefore, people who are homeless can simply leave one program for another if they do not like the varying requirements of work, addiction counseling, mental health counseling, or health screenings that one agency might demand (Olasky, 1992). In framing the fruitlessness of the Times Square Business Improvement District, it can be theorized that the homeless population around Times Square did not take full advantage of this specific program because they could receive similar services from other agencies that did not require them to look for a job, get health screenings, or maintain a drug-free lifestyle. Like many people, the homeless often take the path of least resistance when it comes to obtaining the services they need in order to maintain their current lifestyle. Forcing work and counseling requirements onto people who have no current interest in work or counseling simply drives those individuals to other agencies that provide them with shelter and food with no additional requirements. Therefore, without universal criteria for receiving services, many homeless people will continue to strategically navigate their way from agency to agency in a way that may not help them get into permanent housing, but does allow them to avoid work and counseling services for the time being (Olasky, 1992).

Second, some housing programs fail to produce tangible results because the homeless are sometimes “subsidized to not obtain the skills and make the sacrifices necessary to obtain such
housing, when substandard accommodation is available free” (Schiff, 1990, p. 35). When looking at those homeless individuals who suffer from addiction disorders, the shelter system in its current form can actually hurt addicts’ chances of getting help. This claim is based on the research that illustrates how some homeless addicts choose to use their government subsidies for drugs and alcohol instead of using the monies for their intended purpose (food and shelter) because food and shelter are provided for free through other government and charitable organizations (Olasky, 1992). Notably, the government does not give out undirected cash to any person – homeless or non-homeless – receiving government welfare, and most people receive their food stamp benefits on an Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) card. However, a current report from the Government Accountability Institute does outline how EBT cards and housing vouchers are easily sold and traded online for cash through websites like Craigslist and Backpage (“Profits from Poverty,” 2012; Hall, 2012). Additionally, while EBT cards cannot be used to purchase non-food items directly, “a database of 200 million Electronic Benefit Transfers records from January 2011 to July 2012” highlighted that EBT cards were being used to withdraw cash from ATMs inside bars, liquor stores, tobacco shops, porn shops, strip clubs, and casinos (Briquelet, 2013, para. 3).

On the surface, this analysis may sound accusatory and judgmental; however, when offering monetary benefits to populations that have disproportionately high numbers of people with mental health and addiction disorders, as well as disproportionately low numbers of educational achievement and marketable skills, it becomes increasingly valuable to look critically and honestly at habits and incentives. Additionally, these observations are not highlighted in this research to place blame on those who find themselves in poverty and/or homeless, but instead to highlight the failed structural relationship between those who need
benefits and the agencies that wish to help them. In the end, programs that work do not “accept excuses, and [have] an emphasis on work and responsibility” (Olasky, 1992, pp. 214-215). People need to be given the opportunity to earn self-respect (Murray, 2012) and it would be advantageous to continue analyzing the types of organizational models that foster a successful transition from homelessness to housing.

Survival

While these “tough love” stances represent one end of the spectrum in addressing homelessness, the other end of the spectrum includes those who take a “hands off” approach and romanticize the homeless as free spirits (Feldman, 2004). In discussing homelessness, these free spirit accounts idealize the homeless for their resistance to dominant discourses about housing and living arrangements. For example, before the 1980s there was little media coverage given to homelessness, and the few articles that did appear in print categorized homelessness as “vagrancy” (Campbell & Reeves, 1989). Connotatively, the term “vagrancy” implies a choice to live life as a wandering hobo who loves a carefree lifestyle, or perhaps disrespect for the “need” for work. This mythical Americana character reemerged in popular culture throughout the 1990s as a kind of throwback to Kerouac’s On the Road and the Beat generation. In short, “no home” translated into “living outside the system” during the hobo punk movement of the 1990s (DePastino, 2003, p. 265). This movement revered homelessness and thought it cool to hop trains and live as a nonconformist on the margins of society. Yet, like most movements that rely on the appropriation of marginalized others, this movement was co-opted by popular culture: publications such as GQ, Maxim, and New York Times Magazine eventually produced articles that celebrated the exhilarating homeless lifestyle and even commercialized the clothing fashion of train-hopping hoboes (DePasinto, 2003).
The obvious problem with idealizing homelessness in popular culture is that these types of representations fail to contextualize the notion of choice. In no uncertain terms, for those who find themselves homeless against their will, homelessness is a brutal struggle for everyday survival, not an exciting adventure for nonconforming teenagers and college students who always have the choice to go back home. This notion of survival is not simply limited to food, water, and shelter, but also surviving the violent culture that can arise within homeless spaces (Ravenhill, 2008). Within the context of homelessness, violence can manifest in a multitude of different ways. The most obvious manifestation is physical violence. For example, sleeping on the streets or at a shelter among large groups of other surviving people can leave a person vulnerable to violence as an attacker attempts to acquire what little property a person may have. While these acts do not always result in physical harm, the mental anguish of having to constantly guard or replace one’s personal property can create massive amounts of daily stress, which may exacerbate physical health problems. Other forms of violence can include harm to self through destructive coping strategies, such as substance abuse or cutting (Walsh, 1992).

To survive this violence, small groups or partnerships may form alliances. In their article “‘You’ve gotta learn how to play the game,’” Huey and Berndt (2008) draw attention to the gendered and sexualized roles women perform in homeless spaces as a means of acquiring male protection. Positioning homeless spaces as masculine spaces, women reported that they often use sex or sexual favors as a means of survival. Essentially, women find it more desirable to sexually attach themselves to one man (with whom they may or may not want to be sexually active) instead of being abused or raped by multiple men. Conversely, sometimes sexual abuse is what drives women to become homeless in the first place. For example, Peaches was a woman who became homeless in her attempt to escape an abusive relationship. She eventually made her way
into a shelter where “the sheets that I got to put on the little wafer-thin mattress was bloody. When you shook out the sheets there was mice turds in it…When they served food, you had a plate, you didn’t have utensils” (Shipler, 2005, p. 153). In the end, Peaches left the shelter and returned to the man who abused her. Thus, even in those instances where a woman can navigate through the homeless system without feeling the pressures of sex for protection, the sometimes-abhorrent conditions of shelter life may make it more desirable to return to an abusive relationship.

For those men, women, and children who choose to stay at shelters, another hurdle to overcome is figuring out how to cope with the loss of privacy. In her book 21st Century Essays on Homelessness, Anderberg (2011) situates the lack of privacy as so important that it is discussed in chapter one, “The Privilege of Privacy.” Recalling her own experiences as a homeless person, Anderberg (2011) exposes the reader to a world where her homeless body was always on public display. To this end, she never felt as if she could relax or let her guard down. The desire for privacy also creates a grand contradiction for receiving help. On one hand, people who are homeless need to be publically outed as homeless in order to receive public assistance. On the other hand, people who are homeless value their privacy and wish to keep their homeless status confidential for many reasons, including guilt and shame.

Illustrating the particular theme of privacy, one can discover a vast amount of well-intentioned books, articles, and internet images that are extremely personal and arguably problematic. For instance, the book Homeless in America showcases several images of families in their most intimate moments in dire situations (Evans, 1998). One image in particular captures a mother and a father laying their infant child in a crib in the middle of a gymnasium overtaken with families and cots. Even more intimate is a picture of an older man’s fully nude backside as
he stands under a communal shower surrounded by wheelchairs and bed-frames that are pushed into the corner (Evans, 1998). While these pictures may have been intended to shock the reader into a deeper and more compassionate understanding of the harsh realities of homelessness, they not only depict but geometrically exacerbate the complete lack of privacy people have when engaging with family or using the bathroom. In the end, foregoing modesty and relinquishing privacy can sometimes be the heavy price that is paid in order to use public spaces for sleeping, eating, defecating, and showering – as well as the price of having one’s image used for activism.

This lack of privacy may be why some people who find themselves impoverished resist the shelter systems and therefore, circumvent additional public aid that may otherwise enable them and their children to break the cycle of poverty. Avoiding public assistance not only hurts those who need assistance, but also provides governmental and charitable agencies with inaccurate statistics, hindering public efforts to provide adequate assistance. In her book “A Roof Over My Head,” Williams (2003) writes about women with children who avoid the shelter system as a means of resistance. In short, this resistance can be a stubborn claim of independence from negligent fathers/partners, dismissive family members, or patronizing agencies. There is also the issue of safety. This idea is further elaborated in Walsh’s (1992) “Moving to Nowhere,” as she recalls the stories of families (both one-parent and two-parent) who avoid the shelter system as a way to protect their children from the stress and abuse that can happen within communal settings. Unfortunately, this continual avoidance of public services such as shelters, job placement agencies, and food pantries can perpetuate the cycle of poverty as families attempt to survive solely within the monetary welfare system (Williams, 2003). Breaking the cycle of

4 “A Roof Over My Head” as well as “Moving to Nowhere” are both italicized and quoted because the authors use direct interview quotes to title the books. To stay consistent with the authors’ intent, these titles are appearing as they were originally written.
poverty is difficult and requires both personal and financial assistance. Regrettably, some people are not receiving the full benefits of the system.

In the event that single mothers do seek help, their stories are often invisible in the public discourse against the strong stereotyped images of homeless people as older, single men. As DePastino (2003) writes, “Homeless women remain comparatively ‘hidden’ precisely because they have more available housing options, especially if they have children in tow” (p. 261). Essentially, people see more single men who are homeless because single men are more likely to live on the streets. Therefore, people disregard the possibility that single mothers with children could also be homeless because mothers with children are more likely to be hidden away in temporary housing. While these family images of homelessness may remain hidden from public view, Edin estimates that “more children are poor today than at any time since before Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty began three decades ago” (cited in Wilson, 1996, p. 91). Regarding families, more recent research indicates that “homeless families increased 28 percent, from 131,000 in 2007 to 168,000 in 2010” (Smiley & West, 2012, p. 47).

Volunteerism

Up until this point, most of the discussion throughout this literature review has been focused on the cultural complexities that contextualize the homeless population. Yet, in discussing the homeless, it is also important to include a brief conversation about the volunteers who aspire to help those in need. As described by Cloke, Johnsen, and May (2007), the volunteers who intentionally place their bodies into this system do so with noble motivations and oftentimes are doing so from a place of care. As social workers, volunteers, and agencies look for ways to best help those who are homeless, they genuinely strive for creating caring environments where people can obtain help, feel safe, and feel humanized. Moreover, the need
for these volunteers will continue to increase if the “current political and economic trends continue” (Lundahl & Wicks, 2010, p. 284).

Nevertheless, there are barriers within the current volunteer model that come from a lack of resources, the mismanagement of resources, or lack of knowledge about sufficient resources. Overall, homeless people disproportionately lack basic access to medical treatment, education, and job skills (Miller, Donahue, Este, & Hofer, 2004). As agencies and shelters are overrun with people needing assistance and understaffed by those who can provide assistance, homelessness soon becomes an issue of “crisis management” and the “containment of roofless people” (Ravenhill, 2008, p. 71). In this regard, volunteers and homeless shelters do a fairly adequate job in meeting clothing and food needs. However, volunteers and homeless shelters do a poor job in addressing deeper needs that could lead to independence through job training and education (Lundahl & Wicks, 2010). If there is any hope of homeless people escaping the system, then they need education and job skills that will allow them to perform in the mainstream workforce (Shipler, 2005).

Finally, it is important to continue analyzing how the current volunteer model works in an effort to be sure that the homeless population is being treated with dignity and respect. This is not to say that volunteers intentionally disrespect homeless people; however, it should be noted that some gestures of charity can sometimes be interpreted as condescending and infantilizing. For example, in describing the distribution of food to those who are hungry, Wasserman and Clair (2010) use the term “drive-by feeding” (p. 191). Implicit in this term are three key factors. First, there are many people who need food quickly. Second, the people who distribute food must do so quickly in order to feed as many hungry people as possible. Third, while this quick-feeding system may cure temporary hunger, it does not provide a model where the distributors can
engage with the hungry on an intimate level and form deep interpersonal relationships.

Essentially, this model neglects the aspect of human interaction and avoids any consideration for reciprocation. Consequentially, people receiving services are always positioned as “those in need” while volunteers are always positioned as “those with services.”

Instead, volunteers and the homeless should work in a mutually beneficial manner where homeless people are equally treated as having services of value. In the end, homeless people should be provided services from volunteers in exchange for partaking in varying responsibilities around the shelter or the community (MacDonald, 2000). Without such conditions, homeless people become forever dependent on the goodwill of volunteers and are never placed in a position where they are expected to harness their abilities and gain independence. Until social services, agencies, and institutions insist on homeless people participating in their own uplift, personal empowerment remains impossible and job skills are prone to atrophy.

Conclusion

As a complex issue, confronting homelessness will require a complex solution. In recognizing the complexity of homelessness, politicians and scholars cannot succumb to the notion that confronting homelessness is as simple as budgeting additional money for food, shelter, healthcare, and counseling services. As discussed earlier, extraordinary amounts of money have been appropriated for programs and services over the past five decades in an effort to end poverty and homelessness with effectively zero change in the proportional number of people who remain in poverty and/or homeless. Obviously, “a civilized society does not let its people starve in the streets” (Murray, 1984, p. 16) and I am not advocating draconian budget cuts to services and programs for the poor. However, there are growing cases of ineptitude, incompetence, and ineffectiveness in the system that make it increasingly difficult for the poor
and/or homeless to receive services that are adequate in addressing the source of the problem. Returning to Blackwell (2012), “Yes, there can be a downside to ever greater government provision. Many things done in the name of compassion – even compassionate conservatism – can have undesirable side effects” (para. 2). In this vein, homelessness and poverty are systemic issues that go far deeper than an individual lack of funds.

Thus far, this research has moved through five sections that help summarize the current ways scholars and policymakers are thinking and writing about homelessness. First, I discussed how homelessness is contextualized through societal definition and statistics. Second, I commented on how homelessness can be better understood when it is considered from an intercultural communication viewpoint. Third, I highlighted both the individual as well as the structural issues that create homelessness. Fourth, I discussed homelessness as a struggle for survival. Finally, I offered a few words about the volunteers who dedicate their time, money, and efforts to helping the homeless.

While I have great respect for those who have devoted countless hours to creating the current wealth of scholarship, the one glaring gap I have found within the discipline is the lack of in-depth research where the multiple voices of those who are homeless are highlighted and positioned at the center of cultural, social, economic, and housing conversations. Instead of listening to the insights of homeless people, we more often hear from experts arguing about how to deal with the homeless as third-party subjects. Notably, homelessness is an issue that has little direct impact on the daily realities of these experts, whereas expert analysis does have major consequences for the daily realities of those who are homeless. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to engage with the current scholarship that addresses homelessness in a manner that
will create larger academic platforms where those individuals who face the vicious cycle of homelessness have the opportunity to share their experiences in their own voices.

In moving toward this purpose, the next chapter of this dissertation will summarize and highlight some of the ways I believe that the narrative paradigm might be useful as a theory for better understanding the issue of homelessness. Through the narrative paradigm, I will attempt to bridge the divide between the housed culture and the homeless culture in order to create a better understanding about the differences in one another’s lived realities. In underscoring the significance of the narrative paradigm, my objective is to emphasize how useful the narratives of the homeless can be as a site of knowledge production. Ultimately, scholars must be willing to embrace these narratives as sources of valuable information that can help form more productive public policy. I hope my research will provide a catalyst where academic scholarship will become more active in seeking out and listening to these stories in an effort to develop more beneficial solutions.
Introduction

While I was living in Camden, I got to know many people who were homeless. One of those people was Bobby. I first met Bobby at a Dunkin’ Donuts where he insistently asked me for $7 so that he could buy a bus ticket to Trenton - about a 45 minute drive north. The story was that he had recently been accepted to a drug-treatment center and needed to get out of Camden before he started using again. I reluctantly gave Bobby the money (fearing that he would not spend it on his stated purpose), but I held some hope that he would get the help he needed. Within a week, I saw Bobby back at the shelter in Camden. He was strung-out with no place to go. I was disappointed, but not overly surprised. My personal rule is that I will help any homeless person who needs help with no questions asked as long as we maintain an open and honest relationship. However, once a person burns me, the trust is lost and I move on. It may seem coldhearted, but I cannot in good conscience enable a person’s abusive drug habit\(^5\) by blindly giving her or him money based on sad, yet untrue, stories.

Bobby ignored me for a few months, knowing that I was no longer any good for scrap cash. When he finally did approach me, he wasn’t looking for a handout, but wanted to make an honest trade. In short, he was offering to sell me his $300 food stamp card for $150 cash. He didn’t try to hide the fact that he would use the $150 for crack and I wasn’t overly concerned about the moral implications of a middle-aged crack addict trying to sell his government benefits. What struck me was the apparent ease at which the welfare system could be

\(^5\) I recognize that there are varying levels of drug use and that people use drugs for several different reasons. In this instance, I am particularly discussing abusive drug habits that negatively affect a person’s life.
manipulated. To be sure this wasn’t an anomaly, I checked with several other homeless people I knew in the neighborhood. Sure enough, the practice of selling, trading, and pawning food stamps, welfare checks, and housing vouchers was a common practice in the streets.

As a scholar, volunteer, and taxpayer, I am annoyed at how effortlessly government benefit systems can be manipulated. However, I am not morally aghast with poor people who “inappropriately” use government assistance to survive the harsh realities of poverty. If anything, I find Bobby's story useful in illustrating how many people – whether homeless or housed – use broken systems to their advantage. In looking at the homeless community, these broken systems may be used to obtain drugs or increased benefits, just as the housed community may use these broken systems to evade taxes or avoid high-interest loan rates.

In researching the culture of homelessness, my ultimate concern is that government programs are unknowingly supporting addiction and dependency within the homeless community by supplying food stamps to people who have no kitchens. Therefore, a person’s ability to mobilize him/herself out of homelessness may become inhibited by lax government programs that unintentionally make it possible for people to use benefits on unhealthy lifestyle choices. In all the places I have worked and traveled, a vast majority of the homeless people I have met know where to find free food through soup kitchens and food pantries. With their food needs met, some, like Bobby, choose to use their food stamp cards to barter for other services. Confronting this reality is important in order to reshape policies to more accurately address the experiences of homeless people. Only then can we create systems that will actually help people get off the streets. One way of achieving this is by listening to the narratives of homeless people.

Within the fields of rhetoric and communication studies, various scholars have made the claim that human beings construct their lives through narrative (Williams, 2007). In doing so,
these scholars have helped construct what is known as the narrative paradigm. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how the narrative paradigm may be used to help construct an academic framework where the stories of homeless individuals are validated and affirmed as well as compassionately considered when crafting public policy. In telling Bobby’s story, my objective is not to cut services for the poor and the homeless. Instead my objective is to illustrate the considerable disconnect between those who provide assistance and those who receive assistance. While those who provide assistance are doing so in an effort to help the homeless find housing and sustain independent living, these provisions have thus far been ineffective and homeless rates have remained unchanged over the past 50 years (Smiley & West, 2012; see Murray, 1984; Olasky, 1992). Perhaps one reason for this stagnation is that, by and large, people who are homeless remain inaudible when crafting public policy.

By recounting Bobby’s story, I position his narrative as an important voice to be heard in the fight to end homelessness. As a group, the narratives of homeless people are effectively ignored in public conversations about government benefits. Instead the vociferous voices of politicians and scholars who are not homeless direct the conversation. Yet, listening to stories from the homeless is crucial because homeless people receive government assistance and their voices can tell non-homeless people whether or not the assistance is helpful. In this vein, the narrative paradigm provides a framework where first-hand knowledge about homelessness is equally valued to the knowledge of individuals who write benefit policy. If scholars are willing to accept the stories of the homeless as a site of knowledge production, then perhaps those of us who are concerned about helping the homeless can help create solutions that address the needs of the homeless, rather than systems that unintentionally subsidize and perpetuate homelessness.
In order to demonstrate the relevance of the narrative paradigm for this project, the following discussion will include three distinct sections. First, I synthesize the origins of the narrative paradigm. Second, I summarize its critiques. Finally, I highlight examples of where voices of the homeless are being heard, and how the narrative paradigm might be used to better understand their experiences.

Theory

Narrative Paradigm

The narrative paradigm was most completely articulated in Walter Fisher’s 1984 article “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument.” The purpose of Fisher’s article was to create an academic paradigmatic shift that understood human communication through the process of making narratives. In doing so, the narrative paradigm combines traditional forms of argumentation and persuasion with literary and artistic elements of style (Fisher, 1984). Before rhetorical scholars fully articulated the narrative paradigm, the rhetoric community leaned heavily on the more traditional methods of what Fisher referred to as “the rational world paradigm” in order to understand human beings’ rhetorical interactions. While Fisher continuously makes it clear that the rational world paradigm should not be entirely abandoned, he does indicate that it has its weaknesses. In compensating for these weaknesses, scholars may find use for the narrative paradigm.

Before discussing the usefulness of the narrative paradigm, it is helpful to first have a foundational understanding of the rational world paradigm. Drawing upon the work of Plato and Aristotle, Fisher (1987) concludes that these essential pillars of rhetoric and philosophy made it abundantly clear that scientific discourse was the most successful type of discourse in producing true knowledge. Therefore, discourses that did not rely on a scientific model were substandard
and subjected to greater scrutiny and suspicion. Using Aristotle’s Organon as a site of origin, Fisher (1984) guides us through five key assumptions of the rational world paradigm: humans are rational beings; human communication is argumentative; arguments are rooted in the situational context; arguments have rules in determining a winner; and the world is a giant puzzle that can be solved through logic. The two main weaknesses Fisher found in the rational world paradigm are that argumentation skills must be taught, and that varying degrees of argumentative skill can create a hierarchy among people. This becomes problematic in that Western civilization is based on civic engagement through logic and reasoning (Hollis, 1977; Toulmin, 1970). Because these skills must be taught, those who have greater access to education and social status have pronounced civic advantages over those who do not. In the end, the rational world paradigm creates experts who are nearly infallible, compared to those who are not learned in the skills of argumentation (Toulmin, 1970).

Learning how to properly argue through linear logic also means that people must have an agreed-upon understanding of cultural symbols and language (Burke, 1968). While symbols and language necessitate the communication process, people can become marginalized through this process if interpretations are limited to dominant ideologies. For instance, arguments are disputed and affirmed on the basis of socially-constructed standards that are put in place, more often than not, by those with the educational privilege and social status to be viewed as experts (MacIntyre, 1978). Not coincidentally, the small group of individuals who set the standards is also the same small group of individuals who evaluate the arguments. Ultimately the process of expertise and civic engagement continuously affirms itself through rational world standards and becomes increasingly narrower with every validation. Therefore, knowledge and the power to
shape knowledge work together and inform one another through limited expert experiences (Foucault, 1977).

Of course, this limiting process is problematic since logic can be interpreted differently by different people (Heidegger, 1973). Since very few people have the resources and abilities to shape knowledge in the rational world paradigm, it is difficult to discover how non-experts would interpret different situations. In the end, the rational world paradigm creates winners and losers based on one’s ability to argue according to its rules. However, thinking contrary to the arguments asserted through the rational world paradigm should not necessarily be categorized as “illogical,” but rather a recognition that different interpretations might exist. In this vein, the narrative paradigm becomes useful in recognizing that all reasoning is not necessarily linear and one’s ability to argue does not automatically mean that one is correct.

Within these limitations of the rational world paradigm, Fisher and others find solace in the narrative paradigm as a site that is more democratic and open to multiple forms of communicative expressions and interpretations. Unlike the rational world paradigm, the narrative paradigm presupposes that all people’s interpretations should be given equal consideration based on the assumption that the act of narration has no rules that people must learn, but instead happens as a part of the human condition (Fisher, 1984). Essentially, the capacity for narration is something all people are born with and not a condition of educational and/or socio-economic status. In the end, storytelling as a universal and naturally-occurring mode of communication is what separates the narrative paradigm from other academic paradigms. The five key assumptions of the narrative paradigm are: humans are storytellers; human communication happens through the sharing of “good reasons”; humans decide what are and what are not “good reasons” based on situational context; the strength of the narrative is based on narrative probability (how
coherent the story is) and narrative fidelity (how true the story is/seems); and the world is made up of stories and humans decide which ones are worth their attention (Fisher, 1984).

Fisher (1984) establishes his case for the narrative paradigm through MacIntyre’s assertion that human beings are essentially “story-telling animals.” As noted by MacIntyre (1981), the process of storytelling is vital to the human condition “because we all live out narratives in our own lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives” (p. 197). Through this analysis, a narrative framework becomes fundamental to a person’s very existence and people can only make sense of the world by telling stories, hearing stories, and recounting stories. Once a person has a grasp on his/her own stories, it becomes necessary to circulate those stories within a group as the basis of community. As Ricoeur (1976) points out, language and experiences become significant to a person when they can be shared through narration within the larger group setting. To this end, shared stories create a sense of community (Finely, 2010).

Digging deeper into this idea of storytelling, we can draw upon the work of Kenneth Burke. Using the notion of dramatism, Burke (1968) describes human beings as “symbol-using animal[s]” who live out their lives through stories (p. 16). In using symbols, a person tells stories and these stories create the grand narrative of his/her life. Understanding our individual grand narratives can further help us make sense of how our life stories are connected with the stories that surround us. The core function of this activity is to place an individual life story into the world’s larger story (Burke, 1968). In this regard, one’s story must align with the larger cultural stories in some fashion in order for a person to feel validated by the world around him/her. As Heidegger (1949) commented, “conversation and its unity support our existence” (p. 278).
Without unity within the world’s stories, one’s life can become meaningless because s/he cannot communicate or feel connected with anyone else.

Fisher (1984) is so convinced of the human propensity toward storytelling that he uses the term *homo narrans* to describe what he believes to be our natural state of communication. Essentially, people use stories to make decisions, argue beliefs, and narrate lives. In communicating stories, humans give meaning to their lived experiences and pass these stories on to others. This process is described as “narrative-sensemaking,” which “refers to the narrator’s attempt to understand his or her experience more fully by engaging in the act of telling” (Montalbano-Phelps, 2004, p. 61; Bute & Jensen, 2011). While some people may use more technical or scientific jargon based on their field of study or career choice, the foundation for human communication is still rooted in a person’s ability to narrate those experiences in such a manner as to have those experiences acknowledged and accepted by others. Ultimately, communication is rooted in historical and situational contexts where multiple narratives strive for validation and affirmation (Fisher, 1987).

In creating these stories and realities, the narrative paradigm makes a significant distinction about the task of knowledge production. In the rational world paradigm, knowledge production is created through hierarchal forms of discipline wherein actions and language are policed by experts through reward and punishment (Foucault, 1977). Additionally, the rational world paradigm places a strong emphasis on the content of the argument and less emphasis on the value of the argument. In contrast, the narrative paradigm emphasizes “good reasons.” The term “good reasons” was originally defined by Wallace (1963) as “a number of statements, consistent with each other, in support of an ought proposition or a value-judgment” (p. 247). By placing additional emphasis on value-judgment, the narrative paradigm has the flexibility to
contest the content rationales provided by hierarchal systems, thus fulfilling psychological needs for creativity through what Bormann (1972) called fantasy themes. Therefore, argumentation becomes an art that utilizes both content and form (Wallace, 1963) in an effort to speak to the audience’s values. By fulfilling these needs for fantasy, drama, and value, narratives can become convincing forms of argument separate from the rational-world model of argumentation. In some instances, narratives can be even more convincing than laws, logic, and empirical evidence (Rodden, 2008). This is because the persuasive nature of narration can act as a powerful vehicle that uncovers a person’s core values and beliefs about knowledge (Fisher, 1995). In this regard, narration is a useful paradigm for understanding multiple forms of knowledge production and the reasons humans gravitate to certain forms of knowledge production while rejecting others.

To illustrate this point, I turn to the case of Marcus R. Ross and the Young Earth Creationists (McClure, 2009). In short, Ross was a graduating Ph.D. student who had recently defended his dissertation on reptile fossils that were millions of years old. In any other setting, this event would have been inconsequential, except for Ross’s association with the Young Earth Creationists. This group argues that the earth is no more than 10,000 years old, and supports its claims through empirical evidence. Ross’s association with the Young Earth Creationists resulted in his stigmatization, as scientists debated whether Ross, whose dissertation had been approved by his committee, should be allowed to join the ranks of the scientific community.

In this example, we can see Ross balancing atop the chasm between science and religion as other narrators attempted to merge seemingly contradictory spaces. Fisher states (1987), “Being reasonable and being rational are essential qualities signaling the presence of rhetorical competence…However, the issue of quality in rhetoric is inevitably influenced situationally” (p. 124). For Ross, it can be assumed that his scientific work and religious affiliation necessitated
the need for compartmentalization in an effort to make sense of conflicting viewpoints. The rational world paradigm supported his scientific research, while the narrative paradigm revealed conflicting beliefs rooted in his religious convictions. Millions-of-years-old fossils and a 10,000-year-old earth may seem antithetical. However, the narrative paradigm provides a theory for understanding how knowledge production has an ever-shifting situational context.

While this example is extreme in showcasing the contradictory spaces people’s stories inhabit, I would argue that conflicting narratives are not uncommon to the human experience. Given that the production of human discourse is intersubjective (Fisher, 1985) it should be assumed that those outside forces that shape a person’s reality may come from divergent viewpoints. Effectively, human experience is bombarded with various political, religious, and intellectual worldviews. Everyone is touched by all of these worldviews and each of these worldviews can play an important role in creating life’s narrative. As characters within these larger narratives, a person’s job is to create unity within his/her life by creating a story that allows him/her to move forward with coherent purpose and meaning (Williams, 2007). Because knowledge is situational, it should come as little surprise that individual narratives evolve and change based on the stories placed in front of a person at any given moment. While the narratives a person values can say a lot about his/her beliefs, the ways in which he/she merges conflicting values can say a lot about his/her efforts toward creating unity, despite the empirical evidence.

The final assumption I will explore in this section is that of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. As I briefly mentioned above, narrative probability refers to the story’s internal coherence (Fisher, 1984). In this regard, the story’s coherence refers to the likelihood that the events contained within the story unfold in a manner that follows a reasonable progression (judging on the situation or similar past situations). Conversely, narrative fidelity involves how
faithful the story is to other stories and situations within the culture (Fisher, 1984). Essentially, does the story sound like it could happen based on other cultural happenings? (In the example of newly-minted Dr. Ross, above, the lack of narrative fidelity, when others compared Ross’s career with his religion, gave critics fits.)

It is important to mention that there has been some pushback to Fisher’s ideas about narrative probability and narrative fidelity because some scholars argue that these standards are rooted in Western ways of thinking, conception, and positionality (Stroud, 2002). Furthermore, some argue that the standards within the narrative paradigm seem to contradict when espousing probability (Warnick, 1987). In short, the narrative paradigm wants to get scholars beyond traditional forms of consensus as a standard for knowledge production, yet recognizes that narratives need consensus in order to be judged as probable within a culture. While this concern is valid in critiquing how the narrative paradigm currently measures itself, Stroud (2002) does not believe that the narrative paradigm should be abandoned. Instead, Stroud has called for the narrative paradigm to become more multivalent in recognizing that multiple meanings and interpretations can happen to a story across cultures.

For example, when discussing ancient Indian texts, Stroud (2002) articulates how language translation can lead to a vast loss of knowledge. When rich descriptions of a text are lost in translation, it can be difficult to determine its narrative probability. Furthermore, without a deep understanding of the complexities of the culture whence a text originated, it can be nearly impossible to determine its narrative fidelity. In this vein, it is not only important to take into consideration the probability and fidelity of a text, but to also recognize the limitations of these standards and how these limitations may lead to incomplete understandings. Therefore, I appreciate the advice offered by Roberts (2004) that advances the discussion about how to fully
articulate the value of a text. In short, Roberts (2004) asks that scholars begin to blend the narrative paradigm with various aspects of performance in order to “texture” the story. Looking at folklore and folklore culture, Roberts (2004) adds that there are several aesthetic elements of a story that should not be overlooked. These include issues of costume, lighting, beauty, and time. Recognizing these nonverbal elements would add depth to the narrative paradigm’s understandings about narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

Remarkably, the narrative paradigm does not replace the rational world paradigm despite several divergent viewpoints. Instead, the narrative paradigm aims to explore those areas of human communication that cannot be explained solely through argumentation and linear logic as defined by the rational world paradigm. As one final illustration, Fisher (1984) points to The Epic of Gilgamesh. The purpose of telling this story is to discuss how knowledge manifests in different forms. Gilgamesh teaches us lessons about life, death, and love and people understand these lessons to be true because similar narratives have happened within their own lives and cultures. Other narrative examples include the teachings of Buddha and Jesus, Shakespeare and Gandhi. These figures, and others like them, do not advance their arguments about the human condition through extensive briefings embedded in the rational world paradigm’s model of argumentation. Instead, their stories have been canonized as important teachings about the human condition precisely because of their ability to connect with people through deeply-rooted narrative influences that stretch across educational, socio-economical, and cultural boundaries.

In closing, the narrative paradigm embraces the act of using symbols to make meaning out of our complex world and sees a world that consists of facts and values, intellect and imagination, reason and emotion. The rational world paradigm does have its place in understanding specific disciplines and it remains important. Yet, the rational world paradigm
must be learned and is not accessible to everyone because this paradigm relies heavily on documented experts such as scholars and politicians to provide direction for public discourse. Without these educational or professional qualifications, non-experts have a hard time creating substantive arguments and being heard in the public arena. On the other hand, the narrative paradigm celebrates storytelling as a universal mode of communication that can create shared meaning and unity across cultures. By rejecting the dualism of modernity, the narrative paradigm welcomes multiple ways of knowing as well as multiple ways of moving through the world. Creating a space for the narrative paradigm also means that scholars are embracing new ways to cultivate knowledge and validate knowledge production. In moving toward the narrative paradigm, scholars are providing access for more people to share stories across boundaries in more meaningful and democratic ways.

Critiques

As with any prevailing theory, there are those who remain skeptical of the narrative paradigm. This section will briefly summarize and respond to two specific concerns: the extensiveness of the theory and the democratic claims of the theory. First, the extensiveness of the theory is questioned in regard to the uncertainty that follows any theory claiming to define all communication within the limits of the theory. As the title of Rowland’s article “Narrative: Mode of Discourse or Paradigm?” (1987) suggests, narration may be better understood as one way to communicate as opposed to all ways of communication (Rowland, 1989). The concern is that proponents have not articulated clear parameters of a theory and therefore, some scholars have found it difficult to measure and understand the usefulness of a theory.

The other concern addressed by Rowland (1987) is the concern that the narrative paradigm exaggerates its ability to create a more democratic way of communicating. In this
regard, Rowland (1987) argues that the narrative paradigm functions to create hierarchies as much as the rational world paradigm does. The only difference is that the narrative paradigm has a different set of criteria that evaluates the fidelity and probability of the narrative. Essentially, “there is nothing inherent in storytelling that guarantees that the elites will not control a society” (Rowland, 1987, p. 272). Whereas the rational world paradigm privileges traditional modes of argumentation, the narrative paradigm privileges the best story. In the end, Rowland (1987) argues that within the narrative paradigm those who can communicate the most plausible narrative will have their experiences validated and supported by the community and that this type of discernment is by no means “more” democratic.

Fisher attempts to address these concerns in his 1989 article “Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm.” In this article, Fisher makes it clear that it is not his objective to argue with Rowland or to offer a “counter-attack.” The justification in Fisher’s passive position is rooted in his motivation to create an academic model of engagement where competing paradigms can coexist. Once again, Fisher (1989) methodically lays out his reasoning for the narrative paradigm in a fashion that “celebrates human beings…by reaffirming their nature as storytellers” (p. 56). While it remains admirable that Fisher’s academic mission has been to develop a theoretical paradigm where all human beings can produce knowledge and serve as rhetorical critics, his response to Rowland still upholds the narrative paradigm as an all-encompassing paradigm and is largely incomplete at answering Rowland’s concerns about extensiveness and democracy.

Despite some of these early setbacks for the narrative paradigm in the late 1980s, current scholars are beginning to reemerge in support of the narrative paradigm and are working to provide more complete answers to the aforementioned concerns. For example, in 2007 Redick and Underwood published “Rationality and Narrative.” This essay not only reasserts the original
tenets of the narrative paradigm, but does so in a way that aims to merge the narrative paradigm with the rational world paradigm. Redick and Underwood’s (2007) rationale for this combined paradigmatic shift is rooted in their assertion that narratives create universal audiences, while rational thought creates a framework for engaging in goal-oriented thinking. Therefore, narratives are the ways in which people communicate rational thoughts. While this framework still focuses on the narrative paradigm as an all-inclusive paradigm for understanding and communicating all forms of human communication, it does so in a way that intrinsically links rationality and narrativity. Essentially, narratives give symbolic meanings to people’s lived experiences and rationality tests the probability and fidelity of those experiences. In this regard, the rational world paradigm and the narrative paradigm are interconnected and cannot be separated.

While the framework of the narrative paradigm is still in flux and there are still valid concerns to address, I do not believe that it should be abandoned. Instead, scholars should continue researching through this theoretical framework in an effort to create definitive parameters for the narrative paradigm, as well as aid in producing a sharper turn toward narrative scholarship (Spector-Mersel, 2010). In regard to Rowland’s concerns about the theory’s extensiveness and democracy, I cannot definitively say “that the elites will not control a society” (Rowland, 1987, p. 272) within a narrative framework; however, I will defend the narrative paradigm as a place where the poor and marginalized are at least given the opportunity to defend their narratives against the elites. In contrast, the rational world paradigm requires a plethora of credentials before a person is even allowed into the conversation.
Narratives and Homelessness

While there is no research that directly uses the narrative paradigm to theorize the stories of homeless populations, there are multiple scholars, journalists, and advocates who have positioned the narratives of the homeless and/or marginalized people at the center of their work. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to highlight some of these narratives and consequentially, demonstrate the usefulness of the narrative paradigm as a theoretical framework. In elaborating on the scholarship that addresses homelessness, the following examples will showcase how the process of collecting narratives of homeless people has real political and social value. As Willink established (2008), allowing marginalized people to narrate their experiences can give scholars a better sense of how public policy can help solve various social problems that plague underrepresented groups.

However, before scholars can begin collecting these narratives, it is important to understand the process behind these narratives. As Montalbano-Phelps (2004) comments on narratives, “people tell stories to survive” (p. 1). As a model for survival, narratives help people negotiate a variety of difficult situations. For example, in looking at the narratives of former middle-class individuals who were hit especially hard by the 2008 recession, Van De Mieroop (2011) describes the process by which these former middle-class individuals shifted and evolved their personal stories to reflect the reality that they were now a part of the lower class. This transition into a new economic identity can be both painful and revealing. Participants may not understand the significance of these negotiations at the moment they happen; however, as people continue to speak about their new identities, they leave open the possibility of narrating themselves out of seemingly hopeless situations. Without narrating these experiences, people can remain stuck in undesirable situations because of ignorance. It is only when narration takes place
that a person can move from a pattern of disempowered helplessness to active empowerment (Montalbano-Phelps, 2004).

Reflecting on the role of scholars who collect these narratives, Duneier (2001) cautions that the gathering process can be both emotionally uplifting and emotionally draining, since such intimate contact can cause a scholar to become emotionally attached to the participants. In discussing his life’s work as a professional listener, Studs Terkel (1993) was fully aware that his approach in collecting narratives was voyeuristic in nature; however many people he interviewed freely talked about their hardships and triumphs without apparent filters because Terkel’s motives remained opened and transparent. Furthermore, Terkel (1993) was direct in displaying passion for his work. In his book Division Street America, Terkel’s (1993) goal was to show the reader that the lives of everyday Chicagoans were not dull and boring, but full of vibrant and colorful wisdom that produced valuable knowledge. Terkel was positioned not as an author, but as a good listener with a gift for asking the right questions.

Before Division Street America, Terkel (1970) collected narratives of poverty in Hard Times: An Oral History of The Great Depression. In his opening statements, Terkel (1970) writes, “This is not a lawyer’s brief nor an annotated sociological treatise. It is simply an attempt to get the story of the holocaust known as The Great Depression from an impoverished battalion of survivors” (p. 3). Wrapped within these thoughts is the notion that poor people have stories and that their stories play a vital role in helping to shape a more complete historical account of The Great Depression. Extending poor people’s narratives beyond The Great Depression, I would add that such stories help poor people make sense of their situations, as well as provide financially-stable people with a more complete view of contemporary economic divisions.
Two other scholars who took it upon themselves to document first-hand accounts of the poor are Conover and Kozol. Conover’s (1984) unique look at poverty occurred through his ethnographic approach to train-hopping (an attempt to experience the life of hoboés and “leather-tramps,” in reference to worn shoe leather from walking). While this lifestyle may appear romantic at first, Conover (1984) is relentless in describing this transient existence as harsh with “no social mobility, no safety, nobody to count on, [and] nobody to love. Tramps were strangers wherever they went. Living with them had made me homesick, period” (p. 280). Through this widely-published book, the experiences of hoboés were given public attention and the narratives of hoboés were provided the opportunity to be heard in public spaces.

As for Kozol (2006), his appropriately titled book Rachel and Her Children vividly records the narratives of homeless families as they attempt to negotiate an uncompromising maze of social services and government assistance. In documenting these narratives, Kozol illustrates the tremendous cultural disconnect between those who are homeless and those who are housed. For example, Kozol (2006) interviews mothers who claim additional children or children with disabilities (sometimes fictional disabilities) in order to receive different benefits; corner store owners who allow patrons to buy diapers with food stamps for an extra surcharge even though non-food items are not supposed to be purchased with food stamps; and people who use the library for shelter when no other options are available. These library dwellers get unsympathetically thrown out when they are caught sleeping.

The value of these narratives is not found in whether or not homeless people are using the system “correctly.” Instead, the value of these narratives is that they help readers gain a more accurate understanding of the dysfunctional relationship between the poor and those who offer assistance. These stories are compelling precisely because they allow homeless people to
articulate their positionality within the welfare system. Documenting these stories gives homeless people the opportunity to have a dyadic conversation with the politicians and volunteers who are in charge of divvying up assistance. If politicians and volunteers listen to these stories, then perhaps they will be in a better position to help homeless people achieve the shared objectives of increased permanent housing and increased independent living. Ignoring these stories will only perpetuate welfare systems that are not working very effectively.

In addition to scholars, there are also plenty of instances where the homeless are speaking on their own behalf. For example, homeless people have written books (Anderberg, 2011), poetry (Finley, 2010), and edited newspapers (Lindemann, 2007). These texts work together to provide an opportunity for homeless people to speak directly to the general public, including scholars, journalists, advocates, and politicians, in a way that validates their experiences and lends credibility to their embodied knowledge. Additionally, these stories can help challenge dominant discourses about homelessness and work to create alliances across socio-economic and educational barriers.

In looking at all the work that is attempting to highlight the narratives of the poor and homeless, my overarching argument is that marginalized people matter and their stories should be heard. In an effort to create more opportunities for the homeless to share their stories, I plan to interview a number of homeless people. Through rigorous scholarship, I hope to demonstrate how homeless voices are essential components in public conversations about homelessness, poverty, and marginalization.

Conclusion and Research Questions

In conclusion, the narrative paradigm is a fitting theory for this research because it presumes that storytelling is an innate capacity for all people. In situating the human experience
through narrative, each person maintains the ability to influence cultural and scholarly inquiries regardless of economic, social, or educational blockades. The narratives of homeless people can be a valuable site of knowledge production where embodied cultural experiences are included in public policy decisions that shape and drive conversations about homelessness in the public sphere.

As previously argued, the homeless population has a distinct culture. However, the economic and social policies that drive the distribution of government benefits through collected revenues maintains that public policymakers and homeless people are continuously connected to each other through common governmental practices. Essentially, policymakers allocate revenues for services for the homeless and facilitate how those revenues can be spent. Therefore, because of this mutual connection to government policy - either writing it or benefitting from it - it is important that these groups converse with one another in an effort to form a productive intercultural relationship. In the end, homeless people need to be included in the conversations that drive public policy and we, as scholars, should be willing to listen to their voices. The narrative paradigm provides a solid academic foundation for beginning these conversations across rigid social and economic barriers.

In an effort to begin engaging in these conversations, this research is driven by the following research questions:

R1: How do homeless people narrate their experiences?

R2: What types of experiences and relationships do homeless people have with government benefits and charitable organizations?

R3: How would homeless people craft economic and social policy if given the opportunity to do so?
In an attempt to address these questions, the following section will discuss the methods I used for collecting and analyzing data. First, I will describe how I borrowed from ethnography and critical ethnography as a way to collect narratives through observations and interviews. This portion of the document will also provide a summary of how I moved through my research locations as well as a list of interview questions that guided the conversations. Finally, I will underscore how thematic narrative analysis was used to analyze the collected interviews, observations, and overall research experience.

Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

The following section will describe how I collected and analyzed the narratives of homeless people. This section is broken into five separate sections. First, I explain how varying aspects of ethnography, observation, and interviewing were used as methods for gathering data. Second, I discuss the primary location of the study. Third, I discuss how I gained access to the location and the participants for this study. Fourth, I outline the interviewing procedures for collecting narratives. Finally, I highlight how thematic narrative analysis was useful in interpreting the participants’ interviews.

Data Collection

Ethnography, Observation, and Interviewing

In order to collect my data, I borrowed methodological approaches from three different types of data collection: ethnography, observation, and interviewing. First, as a method for collecting data, ethnography originated in anthropology as a way to become more familiar with a culture’s social practices. The objective of researchers who use ethnography is to “try to immerse themselves in a setting and become part of the group being investigated, in order to understand the meanings that actors put upon events or situations” (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009, p.
40). In an effort to more fully immerse myself in the culture of homelessness, I obtained a 24-hour a week job at a local homeless shelter, Good Samaritan Ministries, throughout the course of the study. I also spent time with the homeless in front of a popular bar hang-out, at a local park, and near popular intersections where several people panhandle. These situations created ideal conditions for detailing my observations in field notes. In taking field notes, it was important that I paid attention to the details around me (Ferreira & Burges, 1976). This included recording unique events as well as common ones (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Throughout the study, I observed interactions and conversations that helped create a context for the culture of homelessness. Additionally, detailed notes about the environment helped create a framework for better understanding and interpreting the narratives that I collected through interviews. While I was working at Good Samaritan Ministries, these observations were immediately typed up on a laptop. While I was in front of the bar, at the park, or near the intersections, these observations were written in a notepad and typed up within two hours.

The turn toward critical ethnography uses similar techniques for gathering data through observations, but there is a core emphasis in critical ethnography that “critical researchers begin from the premise that all cultural life is a constant tension between control and resistance” (Thomas, 1993, p. 9). Further elaborating on this idea, Madison (2012) writes that “critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (p. 5). In this regard, critical ethnographers are encouraged to intervene and become active subjects in their research process. While I did not make intervention a core element of my research, I did follow up and have some conversations with non-homeless people who had key roles in shaping homeless people’s lives in Carbondale, Illinois. For example, I asked fellow staff members at Good Samaritan Ministries about particular situations
or patrons in an effort to gain further clarity about an event that had taken place at work. I also had a few brief interactions with people who offered food or spare change to panhandlers. These informal interactions with non-homeless people who were flowing through shared spaces with homeless people were typed up as observations for this research.

Finally, I gathered the narratives of homeless people through interviews. In addressing the role of narrative to the critical ethnographer, Madison (2012) writes that there is an aesthetic to personal narrative, oral history, and memory that can function as an empowering method to give voice to the voiceless. By simply providing a platform for sharing one’s life story, the interview process can be liberating because “to speak is to articulate a position. When we speak or write we give voice to our own systems of beliefs, our ideology. To create discourse is to engage in a process of self-disclosure” (Herrick, 2013, p. 218). This way of understanding the narrative process speaks directly to Montalbano-Phelps’s (2004) idea of “narrative-sensemaking” wherein narrators attempt to speak their experiences into existence.

While participants’ narratives are vital to critical ethnography, the way in which these narratives are collected is also important. In writings about interpretive anthropology, Geertz (1983) says, “To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency” (p. 16). Additionally, Geertz understands his work as part of the “long conversation of mankind [sic]” (p. 234). For me, these remarks capture the early foundations of critical ethnography. In having conversations with participants, scholars become entangled in the narratives and experiences of others. Mishler (1986) is quick to note that this type of narrative gathering should not be an interview between a researcher and a subject, but rather a “discourse between speakers” (p. 34). In an even more dramatic fashion, Madison (2012) relies on religious themes to describe this type of dialogic process as “communion” between two human beings (p. 10). However one
views the narrative gathering process, what should be clear is that the fieldwork is deeply personal.

Because the work is personal, it is important to reflect on my responsibilities as a researcher. While one of the central tasks of interviewing is capturing narratives and using them to highlight the participants’ characteristics (Phelan, 1996), scholars must remember that our work is always done from a position of authority (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). Therefore, I actively strove for accountability and self-reflection when entering communities, making observations, collecting interviews, and writing up my analysis. Furthermore, when critical ethnographers enter the field, they must be ready to hear the community speak on its own behalf (Plummer, 1995) instead of arriving with set scholarly agendas. In this vein, my objective was to always proceed with an emphasis that considered the viewpoints of the participants. In the end, my ultimate responsibility was to place the wellbeing of the participants over my scholarly ambitions (Madison, 2012). Because my research focused on the narratives of homeless people, it was my responsibility to recognize the vulnerability of this population and not to exploit that vulnerability in an effort to capture sensational narratives.

Primary Location of Study

The primary location of this study was the Good Samaritan Ministries homeless shelter in Carbondale, Illinois (also known as “Good Sam’s”). Good Sam’s is a shelter that serves three meals a day and has room to accommodate 20-25 individuals in overnight, temporary housing. Temporary housing at Good Sam’s means residents may stay up to 30 days at the shelter before they have to leave. Anyone is allowed to stay in temporary housing as long as s/he does not possess drugs or alcohol, fight, or have an arrest warrant issued against him or her. When people leave temporary housing, they cannot return for 30 days. Good Sam’s also has transitional
housing for 10-12 individuals. These residents may stay up to two years. Transitional housing has a tougher screening process and residents must apply to get into the program. In transitional housing, residents have their own rooms, are responsible for cooking and cleaning, enroll in educational courses, and receive help in locating and maintaining employment.

To better contextualize this site, it is important to understand the region’s socio-economic situation. In January 2013, The Southern Illinoisan reported that Jackson County, which includes the city of Carbondale, had the highest poverty rate in Illinois at 33.7% (Norris, 2013). The increasing poverty level of Jackson County also meant that services would be in higher demand. For example, in 2012 Good Sam’s estimated that a total of 28,000-29,000 meals would be served at its facility. These numbers indicated a 5,000-6,000 meal increase above what had been served in the previous year (Kulash, 2011). However, in September 2011 The Southern Illinoisan reported that while poverty in Illinois grew, the resources aimed at alleviating economic hardships had dwindled (Tareen, 2011). For example, from 2011 to 2012, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) cut $669.3 million from their budget (Tareen, 2011). Funding from IDHS subsidizes low-income housing, food assistance, and shelters. Good Sam’s was affected by these budgetary shortfalls when they lost 52% of their government funding in one year (Mileur, 2011) and there was a 62% reduction in food bank assistance (Kulash, 2011). So far, these resources have not been replenished.

While Good Sam’s was the primary location for this study, the nature of this study did present situations where observations, interactions, and interviewing took place away from this primary site. For example, I made initial contact with two interviewees at Good Sam’s, but by the time they were ready to be interviewed, they had passed their 30-day limit at the shelter. Therefore, I arranged to interview these individuals in a public park about one mile from the
shelter. Additionally, I met four participants who used Good Sam’s for its food, restroom, or shower facilities, but these participants did not stay at Good Sam’s overnight, either because they did not like to stay at the shelter or because they were banned from staying at the shelter. In these instances, I made plans to meet these participants at various locations around Carbondale. These locations included outside a bar where homeless people are known to congregate, and a few different intersections where some participants panhandled.

Gaining Access to Location and Participants

In order to gain access to the location and participants for a study, it was important for me to gain trust (Madison, 2012; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). This process took time and proved to be difficult under some circumstances. DeWalt and Dewalt (2002) state that “Gaining entry to a field site and beginning the process of building rapport can be a daunting experience” (p. 35). What helped me in this process was that I already had a history at Good Sam’s, as both a volunteer and employee. Originally, I had worked and volunteered at Good Sam’s from 2009-2010. In the spring of 2013, I contacted my former supervisor at Good Sam’s and was able to get a part-time job for the duration of this study. Additionally, because I left Good Sam’s in 2010 in good standing, I was able to obtain a letter from the director of Good Sam’s that allowed me to observe the facility as well as interview patrons. Without this letter, I would not have been able to conduct research within the facility. Finally, I had staff and patrons who knew me introduce me to new staff members and patrons. This bolstered my reputation at Good Sam’s and helped me to quickly gain credibility with the new community members (see Moeran, 2009).

After establishing my credibility at the site, I began making decisions about whom I would ask to participate in interviews. Madison’s (2012) writing on critical ethnography describes the importance of spending time in the field prior to conducting interviews. Therefore,
this process was gradual and unfolded organically as I began to spend more time at Good Sam’s and develop relationships. Ultimately, I would end up collecting data over a period of three months: May 15, 2013-August 15, 2013. Throughout the study, I worked at Good Sam’s 24 hours a week and spent an additional five hours a week with homeless people at the park, in front of the bar, or at popular street intersections. Being in these spaces allowed me to “note the relationship between cultural reconstructions and the physical environments in which [my participants] live, learn, and work” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 203). During this time, I took field notes and interacted with participants in an informal manner in an effort to obtain a better understanding of the environment, as well as foster good relationships.

During the second month I began recruiting and interviewing participants. In total, it took two months to collect 10 interviews (see Appendix A for a list of participants and demographic information). These 10 interviews lasted from 28 minutes and 56 seconds to 64 minutes and 11 seconds and were conducted at Good Sam’s, the Carbondale Pavilion, the Southern Illinois University Student Recreation Center, McDonald’s, and two different parking lots. As Gubrium and Holstein (2012) write, “Narrative environments not only feed personal accounts but are also a source of socially relevant questions that interviewers pose to respondents” (p. 39). Therefore, I was able to use my surroundings to prompt relevant questions about living at the shelter or living on the streets. Additionally, because many of these locations were where homeless people gathered, stayed, or panhandled, participants had the opportunity to physically show me the locations they were referencing: e.g. bedrooms, showers, park benches, restaurants where they used the restrooms, hotels they would stay at when they had the money, and awnings under which they slept.
Interviewing Procedures

Before each interview began, the participant had to meet three requirements. First, the participant had to be at least 18 years of age. Second, the participant had to self-identify as a person who is homeless. Finally, the person had to sign a consent form indicating that this study had been reviewed and approved by the Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Human Subjects Committee (see Appendix B). This form stated that the participant’s identity would be kept confidential. Additionally, this form allowed the participant to create a pseudonym for himself/herself and gave me the permission to audio-record the interview. Once I transcribed the audio-recordings, the audio-recordings were destroyed. In the event that a participant did not create a pseudonym, I created one for him/her during the analysis.

In conducting the interviews, it was important for me to be aware of my subjectivity and active participation within the interview (Jacobs, 1970; Denzin, 1997; Riessman, 2012). As a reminder, I used these three research questions to guide my entry into the conversations:

R1: How do homeless people narrate their experiences?
R2: What types of experiences and relationships do homeless people have with government benefits and charitable organizations?
R3: How would homeless people craft economic and social policy if given the opportunity to do so?

Recognizing that I had specific objectives within the interview process allowed me to more fully engage with each participant. Through the process of mutual subjectivity, I gained a partnership with each interviewee where both of us were allowed to guide the conversation.

Mishler (1986) writes about the interview process as one in which participants should feel empowered to share their stories. For example, empowerment can be achieved through
open-ended questions and minimal interruptions. While I did have guiding questions for the conversations (see Appendix C), I allowed additional questions to evolve naturally through the interview process. In the end, I strove to proceed through all of the interviews in a manner that encouraged the participants to set the tone as well as take ownership of their stories.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, it was important to remember that my conclusions would be imperfect and incomplete. Addressing this concern, Denzin (1997) writes,

> Ethnographies will not attempt to capture the totality of a group’s way of life. The focus will be interpreted slices, glimpses, and specimens of interactions that display how cultural practices, connected to structural formations and narrative texts, are experienced at a particular time and place by interacting individuals. (p. 247)

Because of my desire to capture everything, homing in on one mode of analysis was a difficult task. Did I want to focus on ideology and politics? Did I want to focus on gender and race? Did I want to focus on economics and poverty? After stepping back, I came across some notes from Becker’s (1986) Writing for Social Scientists. In this book, Becker (1986) reminded me that the researchers are not the sole producers of their texts and that writing up observations is a collective act. Therefore, my objective was not to artificially drive the analysis, but to record what I observed, type up my notes, and allow the themes to emerge organically. To this end, I used thematic narrative analysis to sort through the data (see Bute & Jensen, 2011; Riessman, 2012).

Thematic Narrative Analysis

Thematic narrative analysis aims to assess the entirety of the data, instead of breaking it into sections that avoid larger contexts (Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007). “From a
dialogic standpoint, meaning does not reside in the mind or words of any single participant, but rather emerges in the interfaces between stories, people, and context” (Harter, 2009, p. 142). Therefore, when working through the data, I wove together interviews, field notes, location descriptions, and personal reflections. Finding similar themes among the data required a strong coding method. In their writings, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) view coding as a way to sort data and form categories. A coding process that looks for common themes helped me categorize data into manageable and organized portions. In doing so, I strove to “maintain the uniqueness [of each participant’s experience] while presenting the integrating concepts, or common themes” (Vanderford & Smith, 1996, p. 24).

While working through the thematic analysis it was important to remember that discourse is contextual (Baktin, 1986). Moreover, when listening to the narratives of the interviewees, my thematic narrative analysis also looked at how the narratives were situated within the culture. For instance, if an interviewee talked about her living arrangements at the shelter, did her stories match my observations? If they did not match my observations, then I noted the differences and engaged in critical reflections about positionality. To this end, Burke (1982) writes that “the self becomes a product of the culture” (p.83). Therefore, some of the narratives were in conversation with the surrounding environment, and how people perceive the surrounding environment was located in their identity.

As with any analysis, there were challenges to overcome. For example, researchers who collect interviews have the unique challenge of discerning “between what people say they do and what they actually do” (Moeran, 2009, p. 147). By spending time with multiple interviewees in both formal and informal settings, I aimed to separate actual lived experiences from exaggerations or fabrications. A thematic narrative analysis provided me a way to code personal
narratives within a larger set of narratives. By comparing narratives against one another, I looked for shared experiences. Essentially, when people shared similar experiences, the validity of those experiences became stronger.

A second challenge was the process of interpreting other people’s lives through academic writing. The first step in alleviating this challenge was simply recognizing that I would fall short (Fine, 1993). The reality of the situation was that I could not see, observe, or experience everything that happened in my participants’ lives. Therefore, my reading of Ellingson (2011) encouraged me to be clear about my findings and my limitations. There was no need to position my research as the complete story, but instead, my research was one more voice in the conversation. In a similar vein, readers “create these meanings not by imposing their subjective whim on the text, but by reflecting the culturally transmitted expectations, predispositions, biases, and ideologies which produce readers themselves and program them to read in one way rather than another” (Graff, 1989, p. 3). In addressing both the writer and the reader, all forms of scholarship should work toward reflexivity when analyzing other people’s narratives (Denzin, 1997).

In closing, Pelias (2011) reminds us that our “work is always partial and partisan” (p. 664). This thematic narrative analysis is partial because interpretations are never final and my research can always be reordered, rearranged, and restructured. This thematic narrative analysis is partisan because I entered the field with ideological biases and lived histories that influenced what I observed and how I observed. Therefore, the following analysis recognizes the limitations of my embodied subjectivity in an effort to minimize faulty generalizations (Minnich, 1986). In working toward more inclusive scholarship, I attempted to allow the experiences of the
participants to drive the emergent themes and I continuously worked at placing the voices of the participants at the center of my scholarship.

Analysis Preview

In combing through the observations and the interviews, first, I grouped narratives and experiences together based on their similarities. During the grouping process, four themes emerged. Next, I developed each theme into a chapter and organized each chapter based on narrative flow and content. Finally, the four chapters of analysis were arranged to create a sense of chronological progression through homelessness. For instance, the first chapter of analysis, Chapter 3, is entitled “Losing Everything.” This chapter highlights the initial reactions and adjustments people made when they became homeless. Some of the topics that we explored include losing privacy, losing income, losing family, and losing a sense of self. In losing these types of personal identifiers, participants discussed the waves of emotions they went through as well as the different forms of stress they had to overcome on a regular basis. For every participant, becoming homeless was a jarring experience and therefore, each participant described his or her own way of dealing with the new situation.

Once the participants were able to manage their initial reactions, they then moved toward surviving this new lifestyle. In Chapter 4, “Navigating the System,” I retell the participants’ stories of finding shelter, finding food, and securing social welfare benefits. Just as happens with any person entering a new culture, people who are homeless are required to learn new skills for moving through the world. In the beginning, “learning how to be homeless” can be a daunting task. For those who have financially supported themselves their entire lives, figuring out where to go for assistance can be intimidating, overwhelming, and demoralizing. Not only are people who find themselves homeless learning how to navigate a new culture, but they oftentimes find
themselves trying to navigate a complicated and impersonal bureaucratic entanglement. This process was both humiliating and defeating to the participants.

After learning how to navigate the social welfare system, some homeless people chose to misuse or abuse certain social welfare programs. Chapter 5, “Manipulating the System” illustrates how participants manipulated certain social welfare programs for personal benefits. For instance, in order to receive additional financial benefits some participants shared that they had resorted to selling food stamps, exaggerating claims of disability, and/or lying to the public while panhandling. In the event that a person had no shelter for the night, some participants embellished an injury in order to stay at the hospital.

The final chapter of analysis, Chapter 6, is entitled “Seeking Recognition/Finding Community.” This chapter discusses the participants’ aspirations and highlights how the participants found support during difficult times by creating community with other homeless people. Predictably, every participant expressed his or her desire not to be homeless. In articulating this desire, participants outlined their plans for escaping homelessness through rehab, temporary housing, and work. While work and income are tangible markers of stable housing, participants also spoke about escaping homelessness in non-financial ways. For example, many participants understood homelessness as a very lonely existence where they felt invisible. For these participants, escaping homelessness also meant being recognized by the housed community, reconnecting with family, and developing a sense of belonging among other homeless people. While homeless people and non-homeless people might belong to two different cultures, this section of the analysis underscores the similar desires they share: a stable job, a steady income, and a loving and supportive community.
By the end of these four chapters of analysis, I hope to have created an academic account of homelessness that is critical, reflexive, and rooted in the narratives of those who live these vulnerable realities every day. Prior to this research, the most powerful narratives I had heard about homelessness commented on how homelessness forces people into a day-to-day struggle to exist (Rossi, 1989). There is stress in losing privacy, stress in finding shelter, stress in navigating the system, and stress that comes with the overall uncertainty with the direction of life. By designing a study where homeless people can discuss these issues, perhaps narrative ownership and personal empowerment become possible. To this end, this research might help to create a space where those who are most affected by public conversations concerning economics, housing, food assistance, and social services will finally have a voice in those conversations.
CHAPTER 3
LOSING EVERYTHING

The difficulties I would face throughout the data collection process were immediately apparent. When I began working at Good Sam’s in May 2013, I was forward with the patrons about my long-term academic goals and how I was hoping to learn more about how homeless people narrated their lived experiences. These initial conversations were casual, and besides, nothing formal would take place for another four weeks. Overall, people seemed generally intrigued in my research and appeared happily surprised that someone was taking an academic interest in bringing attention to homelessness. However, as I began to explain the need for collecting personal interviews, people would often respond with a sarcastic “good luck” and became visibly hesitant and distanced.

Ultimately, recruiting people into the project became a personal point of stress and caused me to second-guess my entire project. From a logistical standpoint, interviewing homeless people was agonizing. First, many of them lacked a personal phone and regular email access. So they were hard to get hold of or follow up with. Second, none of them had a consistent daily schedule and tracking down potential participants was challenging. Finally, because their lifestyles were so fluid, it was impossible to schedule interviewing appointments. Therefore, I had to approach people when I saw them and do interviews on-the-spot or risk losing a potential participant. This also necessitated that all of the interviews take place in public spaces. While the participant and I would find a relatively private spot away from potential eavesdroppers, we could not control the noise and potential distractions caused by traffic, weather, and the occasional passersby.
These interviews also put me in an ethical dilemma. Of course I had known several of my potential interviewees from working at Good Sam’s and hanging around the local areas where many of them congregated, but once the conversations turned personal, many people either passed or told me, “I’ll think about it.” Once I heard, “I’ll think about it,” I came to realize that I would never interview that person. “I’ll think about it” was simply the polite way of telling me that I was digging too deeply into someone’s personal business. In short, many people were reluctant to share their distressing stories and soon caused me to question my methodology and ethical responsibilities to such a vulnerable population. In quiet moments of humility I realized that I was asking strangers to talk to me about what was, quite possibly, the most shame-filled aspect of their lives. They had already lost so much of their material lives, was it even ethical to ask them to also give up their private lives and thus, lose everything? In thinking about my earlier critiques of Evans’s (1998) photography that exhibited homeless people during intensely personal moments, I began to question whether or not my research was prying too much.

In the end, I continued to pry and I remain conflicted about it. Yet, my personal struggles over asking people to share their private stories did become a catalyst for better understanding the concept of “lost” within the homeless community. The remainder of this chapter attempts to capture these stories of loss in five areas. First, in addition to my prying questions, I will look at other ways homeless people lose privacy. Second, I will discuss the stories of loss surrounding jobs and finances. Third, I will summarize the loss of physical health, safety, and material possessions. Fourth, I will discuss how people who are homeless have lost their sense of family. Finally, I will look at how homeless people communicate a loss of self and self-worth.
Loss of Privacy

While collecting data for my research, I was often reminded of Anderberg’s (2011) personal narratives about being homeless and, in particular, her chapter “The Privilege of Privacy.” This sentiment was never more tangible in my observations than during the intake process at Good Sam’s. As a staff member, I was sometimes in charge of client intake and the intake process dictated that I had to collect names, former addresses, social security numbers, physical and mental health histories, finances, and welfare benefit information. Additionally, I had to administer drug tests through urine samples, alcohol tests through a breathalyzer, and contact the police department to inquire about any outstanding warrants. At this point in the process, I now had information about personal histories as well as any current illicit behaviors. The final, and one of the more invasive acts of the intake process, was for staff members to collect and label medications. A locked cabinet that hung on the wall was filled with patrons’ bags of medications and only the staff had access. Therefore, not only was the staff informed about what medications patrons took, but the staff also served as gatekeeper of those medications. Consequently, patrons could not access their private medications without permission. In all, a person’s entire life was given to and catalogued by a stranger he or she had met within the first fifteen minutes of entering Good Sam’s.

While the collection of personal information could be invasive, all patrons readily complied without ever raising a question about the validity of the process or whether the information would be kept private. However, interviewees did react to this process. As communicated by Tiffany,

You go through a lot mentally getting shuffled all over the place. You lose your privacy and you start to realize what you’ve lost and it’s hard. It’s been really affecting me
because I’ve lost my privacy for a while now. I have no privacy anymore. I mean, you’ve
got your own room here, but they’re not sound proof. The bathrooms, you’ve got to share
with everybody and not everybody’s clean. That’s an issue. I mean, every staff member
here knows everything about me and everybody else. It’s hard when you lose your
privacy.  
Part of Tiffany’s discussion of privacy was also connected to the fact that she and her husband
shared a room a Good Sam’s. They were recently married and had been living at Good Sam’s for
43 days at the time this interview took place. In the larger context of our discussion, I have come
to conclude that part of her frustration with the rooms not being “sound proof” had to do with her
and her husband’s desire for sexual intimacy.

The complexity of sexuality and privacy within the homeless community came up more
than once during my time at Good Sam’s. Twice a man complained to me that his roommate was
up at night masturbating and once a resident complained about semen in the shower. Perhaps the
most relevant incident of sexuality and privacy occurred when Jane was arrested and spent one
week in jail for manually stimulating her boyfriend behind an outdoor shed. This incident is
relevant because Jane’s lack of privacy in expressing her sexuality created conditions where
public resources (tax money to arrest and jail her) were used to stop her behavior. Whereas
many housed people likely have similar sexual experiences in private, Jane’s lack of privacy

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6 I understand that “[sic]” is used by writers to recognize errors in direct quotes. However, conversations often use
informal language and grammar. Therefore, I will not use “[sic]” to mark errors in participants’ quotes. The
participants’ quotes throughout the analysis use the language and grammar used by the participants.

7 In addition to the pseudonyms given to the interviewees, I have also changed the names of the individuals who
were observed.

8 I recognize that Jane’s boyfriend is also a relevant person to this event and that he is also culpable in this situation.
However, I never learned what happened to Jane’s boyfriend once the police arrived.
meant that her sexual experience was dealt with as a public problem and was eventually documented in the official public record.

While public displays of sexual intimacy are not a conundrum that every homeless person deals with, all homeless people do deal with the issue of having to use the restroom. When speaking with Kenneth I learned that simply finding a restroom when homeless can be a site of public debate. As told by Kenneth, he was banned from using the McDonald’s restroom because he smelled bad. He continued,

Another guy came by and asked the McDonald’s manager, “Hey, if I give him ten dollars, can he come in here and get something to eat.” And McDonald’s said, “No, we don’t want him in here.” It was all because I used to go in there to use the bathroom and I smell bad. I know I smell bad. I’m out here in the sun all day and I can’t take a shower and wash my clothes all the time. I try to when I can... Well, I try to stay [at the hotel] as much as I can so I can take a shower every night. If I could do that, then I wouldn’t have gotten banned from McDonald’s.

While McDonald’s is technically a privately-owned established and has no legal obligation to allow homeless people to use their restrooms, McDonald’s (and other fast-food restaurants’) restrooms are commonly the only spaces where homeless people can quickly and quietly use the restroom. Unfortunately, Kenneth now evacuates in public when he is not near Good Sam’s or staying at a hotel. Hence, his private act became a public issue.

Ultimately, Kenneth’s, Tiffany’s, and Jane’s stories are all reminders that even the most private moments for homeless people have public consequences and require public attention. For example, the police, sanitation department, or social services might be tasked with addressing any of the aforementioned situations. Of course, housed people are rarely subjected to public
scrutiny regarding any of these activities because housed people are able to perform these activities in private. Furthermore, housed people are rarely asked to disclose personal information to strangers. Yet, because each of these homeless individuals must utilize public services, share public rooms, use public restrooms/bathrooms, and socialize in public parks, it becomes socially acceptable to ask for their private information and regulate their personal behaviors. In short, homeless people have no privacy because they have no private property. Instead, everything in their life is at risk of becoming public. In the end, homeless people’s inability to experience or maintain guaranteed privacy creates a condition where their lives are always on public display and at the mercy of public critique.

Loss of Financial Stability

Sometimes, public critiques of the homeless transform into blaming homeless people for the situations in which they find themselves. As Kenneth described some of the verbal abuse he received from people while he stood on the corner holding his cardboard sign, he stated that I’m always hollered at, “Get a job!” When they do it, they just drive by. I’d like to get one of them to stop and ask them, “How am I suppose to get a job when I keep putting in applications and no one wants to hire me and we got a high unemployment rate?”…Like the people who yell, “Get a job!” I want to ask them, “Do you not watch the news? Do you not know that we have a high unemployment rate? You don’t know me. You don’t know that I put in my applications. You just know that I’m out here.”

In writing about the homeless, Reeves (1989) noted that the loss of jobs was one of the main reasons people found themselves homeless. In fact, six of the ten people I interviewed said that losing a job (either theirs or a spouse’s) was the reason they ended up homeless.
For example, before moving to Carbondale five years ago, Kenneth worked as a custodian at the Southern Illinois Miners’ field, a local baseball team, where he “picked up trash and cleaned the bathrooms.” He also worked part time at a restaurant “for nine years delivering pizza.” He lost both jobs around the time of the 2008 recession and he “lived off unemployment for the first couple of years; friends and family for a couple of years after that. And now [asking people for spare change] is finally a last resort.” Unlike Kenneth, Ashley had not been working before she became homeless because of a back injury. However, her “husband had a job working aluminum, but he got laid off” 18 months ago. Ashley and her husband, Philip, now spend their days standing at an intersection asking drivers for money.

Unfortunately, jobs were scarce in poverty-stricken Jackson County Illinois at the time this research was conducted. As Tiffany mentioned,

Jackson County is so poor right now. I mean, if there’s no one here anymore to help people with jobs, then there’s going to be a lot more homeless people. Right now, no one has any work. People just need help or this world is going to be homeless.

However, according to Tiffany, there were some people who were getting jobs:

I mean, this is a college town and it seems like [students are] first. College students get first everything…I’ve got a bunch of friends who are college people and everybody just mingles, but college students always seem to get first dibs on jobs and housing. So if you don’t have a job by now [August 1, 2013] or this weekend or next week, you might as well forget it.

For several interviewees and during observations, there seemed to be a quiet tension between the college students and the long-term Carbondale residents who struggled financially. Southern Illinois University sat in a privileged area of town where, according to Tiffany, “SIU students
can just come and go and not worry about how much poverty is in other parts of Carbondale.”

The competition for low-wage jobs, such as servers and sales clerks, was not something Tiffany held against college students, but she did mention that “maybe holding open some of these jobs for homeless people is something that everyone [in Carbondale] should pay more attention to.”

Certainly for many homeless people, struggles with employment are directly connected to struggles with housing. Before ending up on the street, married couple Philip and Ashley were making payments to a landlord in an effort to buy the trailer they were renting. As Philip told it,

We used to live at The Crossings, but we got tricked out of [the trailer] because the manager at the time told us that he was trying to help us buy the trailer to own. The Vine church even helped us get the down payment for it, but come to find out, [the landlord] was doing some shady stuff under the table. But we didn’t know, so we kept making what we thought were payments, but then he kept coming up with another story about how we couldn’t buy it that month or the next. Eventually our sewer backed up and [the landlord] wouldn’t fix it, so I didn’t want to pay rent and then he got it condemned. So that’s how he got us kicked out and we couldn’t get any of our money back.

In the end, Philip’s sense was that he had been swindled and, ultimately, he had to learn a difficult lesson about property contracts and sound financial advice. Shorty after losing the trailer, Philip lost his job at an aluminum factory and because Philip and Ashley’s savings had been poured into trying to buy the trailer, they were forced to live on the streets.

Another example of how one participant lost his housing came from Joe. Joe recalled his family’s situation from a year ago:

We lived in The Fields for a while and my daughter was raped out there and then the guy who did it and his girlfriend jumped my wife when she confronted them and there was a
big fight. I got involved, so well, we were just trying to defend ourselves, but we got blamed because my wife started the confrontation and we got put out. We finally got ourselves another place in Murphysboro. And then, I guess it was about two months ago, it burnt down. The next day I lost my job because the [college] students left [for summer break] and I drove for Yellow Taxi. So, I got laid off and things just went downhill from there. I’m a mechanic. I’ve built three cars from the ground up. People would bring their cars out to me and stuff, but when we lost our place and I lost my job, I ended up having to sell all my tools and lost everything.

Joe’s situation reads like a man trapped in quicksand: the more he struggled to get his finances in order, the worse his situation became. He sold his tools to pay some bills, but now that he had no tools, he had no way of bringing in new income. Without income, he cannot buy new tools and therefore, remained unemployable. He was literally stuck in the vicious cycle. Fortunately, Joe’s wife and three children were living with his wife’s parents at the time this interview took place. Joe said that “being away from my wife and kids is the most challenging part of [being homeless],” but that he cannot live with them right now because Joe and his wife’s father “can’t be in the same room together.” As evident by both Joe’s story and Philip’s story, the relationship between job security and housing security are closely related when people have no savings, no line of credit, a break in employment, and/or little financial literacy. Given the right set of inopportune circumstances, even a minor setback in financial stability can push someone out of their home.

To be sure, the struggles surrounding financial stability with some participants were more complicated than mere job openings. Five of the participants admitted to having a criminal record that involved jail time and three of those five participants had recently been released from
prison and paroled to a homeless shelter because they did not have anywhere else to go. For all three of these participants, this was the first time they had been homeless. According to Brandon, Well, this is the first year I’ve actually ever been in a shelter. I was locked up in the joint and I didn’t have any place to parole to in Illinois, so they paroled me to the Lighthouse shelter in January…I stayed my time there until April, May; something like that. And then I came here. I stayed my time here. I think two months…and then I went to a shelter in Herrin and stayed there for two months. Then my time was up there, so I had to come back here.

Rather surprisingly, “the state knew that [Brandon] was going to the homeless shelter, but it was the only place [he] had to go. The prison officials even gave [him] a ride there.” Brandon’s story exemplifies the complicated relationship that exists between the criminal justice system and homelessness. Of course, when a criminal has done his or her time, he or she should be released from prison. However, when a person is released into a financially unstable environment, the person has few resources that will enable him or her to make better decisions that lead toward financial stability. This is by no means the fault or responsibility of individual police officers, parole board members, or independent prisons. However, if U.S. American society is serious about addressing the issue of homelessness, then the parole process for criminals with no residence is a factor that ought to be seriously debated.

Unlike Brandon, Michael had a place he might have been able stay once he got out of jail (he was currently out on bond), but he was too ashamed to ask. As he told it,

I’m pretty certain that I could have stayed with [one of my buddies] if I had to, but he’s got two kids and the stress that would put on him is probably too much. And he’s my best friend and I don’t want to do that to him. He already helped bond me out.
Because Michael refused to ask for help, he said that

I ended up where I was unable to have anywhere to stay and so I ended up staying in my truck at night and the city park by day. And I didn’t know how to be homeless or how to do it. All I knew is that I didn’t have anywhere to go and I didn’t want to ask anybody for help anymore.

As evident in Michael’s story, not asking for help created excessive burdens and only added to the barriers he needed to overcome to get control of his housing and finances. Even though Michael might have been able to overcome some social burdens by asking for help, his criminal record might have still stood in the way of complete financial stability as criminal records had stood in the way for other participants.

Finding and keeping gainful employment can be hard for any homeless person for a multitude of reasons: lack of access to proper identification, gaps in employment history, and transportation to and from work. For convicts, it is nearly impossible. Interestingly, one of the interviewees, James, “used to work [at Good Sam’s] 25 years ago.” James was a recent parolee who had spent a few months in jail on a drug charge. He came back to Good Sam’s trying to pick up a few shifts at the front desk, but his criminal record stood in the way. So James ended up performing day-labor when he could and worked for money “under the table” so he did not “have to pay taxes on that shit.” Unfortunately, day-labor is inconsistent, unreliable, and pays poorly; meaning James will probably remain homeless for the foreseeable future. Much like James, Brandon also considered himself a worker. Brandon stated that

I had a few jobs. I worked in factories over in Kentucky. My family helped me get that job. I was working in a plastics factory until I found a better job that paid a little bit more. But the main job that I had was traveling with carnivals and working carnivals.
However, Brandon’s work history was interrupted in his mid-twenties when he began an extensive streak of breaking and entering. He continued

I’ve been locked up most my life. I’ve been in and out of prison. Now that I’m out, I went to some of the factories and temp places, but I couldn’t get nothing. It’s been pretty much a regular thing; looking for a job. Most of the jobs that I’ve had an interview with or a follow up with have all turned me down because of my background. As soon as I got [to Good Sam’s] my roommate [Andy]\(^9\) said I could get a job where he’s working down at these apartments – refurnishing apartments and painting apartments. So, I went down there and did an okay job the first day. But when I went and talked to the [boss] the next day and let him know about my situation that “Hey I’m pretty much homeless. I’m staying at Good Sam’s homeless shelter and I really need this job because I’m on parole…” And then before I could finish, he said, “What are you on parole for?” And I told him that I was on parole for residential burglary and he just said, “Leave. We need you to leave.” And that was that.

Ultimately, Brandon’s story pushes against the notion that homeless people are lazy and/or lack job skills. It also contradicts the widely-held belief that anybody can get out of poverty if they are willing to work hard (see Scott & Leonhardt, 2005). Brandon was willing to work hard and could perform the duties. Yet, his criminal history made employers leery. As a result, he was left without a job and no job prospects.

To be sure, Brandon is responsible for his crimes and he should have to deal with the consequences. However, it is also undeniable that his criminal history had immediate and long-term consequences for his community, whether the community wants to deal with the

\(^9\) Not his real name.
consequences or not. On a larger scale, the reality is that unless Brandon (and others like him) can find gainful employment, his condition remains a public burden: he will continue to live on the streets or in a shelter, collect food stamps, and require public resources for basic necessities. While avoiding hiring people with criminal histories may be rational in the short-term for employers, it is not a long-term solution for creating a community where all citizens contribute to the community’s economic well-being. Therefore, it would be advantageous for communities to engage with employers in determining how to help former convicts like Brandon gain financial independence or risk the long-term consequences of Brandon’s public dependency.

Loss of Physical Health, Safety, and Material Possessions

In addition to discussing their dire financial situations, participants also talked about the devastating physical impact that homelessness can assert on one’s body and personal possessions. Notably, some participants struggled physically before they became homeless, but uncomfortable living situations and restricted access to medications exacerbated their problems. For example, Malcolm had been paroled to Good Sam’s in early June 2013 after spending a few months in county jail. While in jail he was on a daily regimen of methadone to help ease withdrawal symptoms associated with heroin. Now that he was out of jail and no longer had access to this medication, he became lethargic, confused, and constantly had to carry a roll of paper towels to control his continual drooling. Without medication, his only options were to fight through the withdrawal symptoms until they subsided or start using heroin to balance his system. Malcolm would choose to fight through the symptoms, but it took nearly two months before his body returned to a state of normalcy.

While Malcolm’s physical ailments were acquired through drug use and withdrawal, others experienced painful physical conditions as a direct result of being homeless. The most
common conditions people complained about included: Lack of sleep from sleeping in strange places; sore legs and feet from walking everywhere; skin rashes and diseases from having close contact with people who did not wash themselves or their clothes frequently; and back pain. As reported by the participants, back pain was the result of awkward sleeping situations. This included sleeping on uneven ground, sleeping on concrete, sleeping in tight spaces (such as a crate for safety), sleeping on inadequate mattresses, and sleeping in vehicles. As Michael recalled,

The biggest challenge for me was not having something to lay on and I couldn’t lay my body flat in my pickup and that was hurting me. I might have been able do it when I was younger, but [sleeping in my pickup] was hurting me. I aggravated my back. And I went to the hospital and my [X-ray] was covered in white hairs and on an X-ray that’s arthritis. And a doctor typed up a letter to me that said that this type of arthritis would have been aggressive for even somebody twice my age.

Michael’s back problems prohibited him from performing manual labor for more than a couple of hours a day, which limited his ability to find a full-time job. In order to dull the pain Michael was “tempted to get an ounce of cocaine to help the pain,” but chose not to because he was “tired of living in [his] criminal past.”

Uncomfortable living conditions are not the only threat impacting a homeless person’s physical well-being. In short, homeless people are also confronted with physical assaults that range from mocking gestures to violent beatings. While all forms of physical assaults are deplorable, some of the less threatening instances involved drivers throwing items out of car windows. For example, Kenneth said that
I’ve had some people throw food at me or throw coins at me. Not a hand full of coins or nothing like that, but like I had a guy a couple of days ago that just threw out a penny; like he just tried to hit me with it.

Joe experienced similar situations and recalled having cheeseburgers, bottles of water, and ice cream thrown at him while standing at an intersection, near a McDonald’s, asking people for spare change. In a rather detached tone, Joe stated that, “I think they buy a little extra just to throw it at me.”

For Kenneth and Joe, these types of acts are dehumanizing at worse, but neither participant felt unsafe during the violent exchange. However, two female participants did express feelings of fear during confrontations with sexually-aggressive men. For instance, Ashley said that while she was standing on the corner asking drivers for spare change,

I had one guy spit at me. Yeah, it was a man and I standing over here while he drove by a couple of times; which is scary anytime a guy keeps driving back and forth staring at you. Finally, he rolled down his window and asked, “How much for oral sex?” You know, I won’t say the exact words he used, but I said, “I’m not out here for that,” because I’m not…And he said, “Well, you’re a bitch ass ho anyway” and spit at me as he drove off. I thought he might circle back again as he was doing all day to harass me some more, so I just ran to my husband crying because I was scared and that was really uncalled for. You don’t have to like me or read my sign, but if you read it, don’t look down on me like some ho on the corner. If you don’t like [my sign], then you don’t have to read it. You can just go on and leave me alone.

Kristen had a similar story of being targeted by a man that “kept stalking me until he got me someplace where we were alone. Fortunately a waiter came out the back door [into an ally] for a
smoke break and the guy ran off.” Kristen’s and Ashley’s stories are reminiscent of the unwanted sexualized role women are sometimes placed in while they are homeless (see Huey & Berndt, 2008). With their bodies on public display, Kristen and Ashley were vulnerable to objectifying comments as well as physical intimidation. Unfortunately, Ashley, specifically, was stuck in a conundrum; she could remove herself from the public’s eye and risk losing public assistance, or she could stay in the public’s eye and risk further confrontation. Because Ashley was standing on the corner “to support [her] daughter,” Ashley vowed to be “out here today, tomorrow, next week, next month; as long as it takes to get [her daughter] into an apartment.”

Besides confronting the physical challenges that affect the body’s health and sense of safety, interviewees also faced physical challenges with regard to their personal possessions. Because few homeless people have anywhere to store their personal possessions, they must always travel with everything they own or hide their belongings in public places such as dumpsters, bushes, or drainage pipes. Kenneth chose to carry everything he owned and “travel light. Otherwise people will get at your stuff.” As illustration, Kenneth told me that he knew another homeless person who

…had a bunch of stuff in a cart that he kept behind Wal-Mart and he stashed it where he thought it wouldn’t be bothered. But when he went to get it last month it was gone. It wasn’t much for someone like you, but that was everything he had: A suitcase with clean clothes, a radio, a couple of books, and some things that other people had given him to hold onto. It all just came up missing.

The occasional stressing over one’s personal possessions is an emotion to which many housed people can probably relate. However, during this research, it seemed as if property protection was a constant battle for the homeless. For example, Philip recalled leaving his bike in front of
McDonald’s while he ran in to get a soda for “no more than two minutes.” When he returned, “somebody had stolen [his] bike.” Philip was particularly upset about this incident because My sign was still leaning there against the pole. It’s clear that I got a sign and some other stuff laying there next to the bike. I’m already down. Whoever did this could have read the sign next to the bike and knew I was homeless. How much more you got to kick me? I couldn’t have had that bike much more than 24 hours before somebody’s got to steal it.

That’s two bikes I’ve lost in two weeks.

In a similar vein, Tiffany stated that she was “always worrying about not knowing if my stuff is going to be [where I left it] or if it’s going to be safe.” She did mention that this was not always the case and that when she first became homeless she did not worry about people stealing her personal possessions because “who would want a bunch of homeless person’s junk?” However, her vigilance increased after the summer of 2012 when

My stuff was at the Econo Lodge storage bin and I went back to check on it and somebody went through all my stuff and it’s all over the floor. So I don’t even know what’s missing and what’s not. And I can’t really do anything about it. I don’t have anywhere to take it or anyway to transport it anywhere. So I just had to leave it all and walk away. What else am I supposed to do? So, yeah, it’s hard because that’s all we had.

In each of these stories about personal possessions, there are themes of stress, endless worry, nervousness, and constant vigilance. More than personal property is the identification with this property as “all they have.” Therefore, when someone steals, damages, or flippantly disregards their items as trash, homeless people have reason to take it personally. In witnessing their only possessions being treated with such disrespect, homeless people feel fully disrespected and disregarded as human beings. In short, they too, are made to feel like trash.
Loss of Family

Tragically, homeless people oftentimes lose something far more valuable than physical health, safety, or material possessions. They lose family. For a variety of reasons, familial relationships become strained while a person is homeless. According to the participants, the major reason is money. Of the ten people I interviewed, eight mentioned that they had lived with a family member and/or borrowed money from a family member immediately prior to becoming homeless. During somewhere between six months and two years of dependency, six of these relationships would become stressed and the housed family member would ask the interviewee to leave and/or cut him or her off financially. Unfortunately, this type of ending usually meant that long-term damage had been caused to the relationship and many of the participants now struggled to reconcile with their loved ones.

This is what happened to Michael’s relationship with his father as Michael relied on his dad’s finances to help him fight criminal charges. Michael said,

At first, I was unable to accept that this had happened to me; that I had to fight a cocaine charge and a rape charge at the same time. The cocaine charge would have been just probation because it was my first offense, but now that I got a rape charge, I could be facing twenty years. What people think from my town is that I’m fine because my folks are helping me [financially]. People in town know that my folks aren’t wealthy, but they also know that my folks have put a lot of money into lawyers. They keep up with my folks and they know that we’ve got about $20,000 in a lawyer. They know that [my folks] paid this recent $5,000 bond. They probably think that I’m fine, but the truth is, is that this has gave my dad a mental fit. He’s losing his mind over losing that kind of money. And he’s getting ready to take more money out of his retirement for my lawyer. That’s a
lot of money for him. Did he have it? Yeah. But he didn’t have it to let go of for nothing.

And that’s really what it’s come down to. Him losing it over nothing.

During this portion of the interview, Michael was visibly distraught over the entire situation. Yet, his stress had little to do with his pending legal situation. In fact, Michael seemed at peace with his pending twenty year prison sentence. Instead, the only thing Michael seemed truly concerned with was helping his dad and mending their relationship. While he admitted to using and dealing cocaine, he denied that he ever raped anyone. However, Michael did say,

My criminal life finally just caught up with me. Whether I raped anyone or not, I kind of deserve this. But my dad, he doesn’t deserve any of this. I think about him having to go through this and it’s really uncalled for. I just think about how I upended his life overnight. I just want to go back to how things were with my old house and my old job. I’m well aware that I’ll never be able to pay my dad back twenty, twenty-five, thirty thousand dollars – whatever it ends up being. But I just want to make the effort and try to make this right before he dies so that he can have a retirement and we can get back on good terms.

Like Michael, several participants mentioned the sentiment of “making an effort” to reconcile broken family relationships. Besides finances, participants mentioned prior drug use, alcohol use, and violence as reasons their families had chosen break ties. Unsurprisingly, not a single participant blamed family members for the broken relationships and instead, each participant took full responsibility. However, as Kristen talked about healing these relationships, she mentioned that “the difficult part is just convincing your family that you’ve changed now even though you’ve dragged them through this shit 15 other times.”
Certainly, there were times when fragmented family relationships were more directly caused by outside circumstances rather than intrafamilial tensions. In the cases of Brandon, Maddy, Ashley, and Philip, their family units were actively striving to remain intact, but legal systems were keeping them apart. For Brandon, being away from his family was emotionally hard. It bothered me that I couldn’t go home. I couldn’t parole over with my family in Kentucky because I got misdemeanor warrants and fines over there. So, yeah, it kind of bothers me. I wish I could be over there with my family, but I can’t until I can get me a job and pay off those fines. I got misdemeanor warrants and fines that need to get paid so I don’t get locked up. I’m hoping that [Illinois will let me parole in Kentucky] because my sister’s gonna write up a letter saying that they’ll allow me to stay with them and that they got a job ready for me. So I’d get an interstate compact and go ahead and parole over [in Kentucky] so I can see my family while I’m working off the fines. So maybe [Kentucky] will be lenient on me and won’t lock me up if I’m working to pay [the fines]. That’s what I’m hoping, but I have my doubts.

In Brandon’s case, he was trying to challenge two state criminal justice systems at once. He wanted to leave Illinois to live with his family in Kentucky, but Illinois was prohibiting him from leaving Illinois while he was on parole. Additionally, Brandon was trying to get work in Kentucky to pay legal fines to Kentucky, but if he stepped foot in Kentucky, Kentucky would arrest him for outstanding warrants. For any person caught in the chaos of homelessness, it seems logical that a steady job and family support would help create the necessary conditions for stability and recovery. However, because his family lived outside his parole boundaries, Brandon was legally prohibited from utilizing the strength and resources of his family relationships, such as emotional support, housing, and job placement. By not being able to utilize these family
resources, Brandon was forced to continue wandering southern Illinois from one homeless shelter to the next every 30 days with no direction, no job prospects, and no emotional support.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking incidences of broken families involved homeless people who were currently separated from their children. For example, Maddy was a 30-year-old mother who had a 15-year-old child. Living an unstable financial life was something Maddy had become accustomed to over the years since she had grown up poor and “had pretty much been on [her] own her whole life.” Maddy also mentioned that “Hell, the first time my mom kicked me out was when I was nine.” Therefore, living her life in and out of homelessness no longer took the “emotional toll that it probably takes on other people.” However, Maddy did express strong emotions when speaking about her daughter, whom she had not seen in over six months. Explaining the reasons for their separation, Maddy said,

I’m originally from up north [Illinois]. I moved around a bit after my daughter was born; with her father – to Missouri – but her father never really wanted anything to do with us so we moved backed in with my mom so I could finish high school. A few years ago, I followed some friends to Iowa. It wasn’t much; just waitressing, but I had to get out of here. Well, that didn’t last long because when my daughter was 13 she got raped by a friend of ours. I was stupid and reported it and when the cops found out that we didn’t have much, the state said that [my daughter] was living in an “unfit environment.” Anyway [Department of Children and Family Services] took her and I’m working to get her back. So, I moved back [to Illinois] because I have a better chance of making a stable life here opposed to Iowa. Hopefully, I’ll have her back here around November once DCFS sees that I have a job and proper housing.
In Maddy’s case, she was faced with trying to understand a difficult paradox: Do not report a rape and keep her daughter or report a rape and lose her daughter. For a person who is homeless, dealing with state resources, specifically the Department of Children and Family Services, can be a delicate process that sometimes involves half-truths and strategic omissions in an effort to get help while keeping her or his family intact. In fact, the uncertainty that comes with accepting public assistance is one of the reasons some homeless families simply avoid state assistance in the first place (Williams, 2003). On the one hand, people who are homeless want assistance for their family. On the other hand, people who are homeless do not want to be seen as unfit parents and risk losing their children. Unfortunately, the lesson Maddy learned was to not ask for help in the future because if she had known that the state was going to take her daughter, she “would have never reported [the rape].”

Like Maddy, Philip and Ashley were in a similar struggle with the Department of Children and Family Services regarding their four-year-old daughter. When I first met this married couple in July, Ashley had told me that her “daughter usually stays with her cousin a couple days a week so that [Philip and I] can work together out here and my husband can go fill out applications.” At the end of the day, it was expected that Ashley’s cousin would drop off Ashley’s daughter and this remained the routine until the beginning of August. During the first week of August, I was out collecting data when Philip approached me with a panicked look on his face. Apparently, Ashley had gotten into a fight with her cousin and [her cousin] got mad and she wouldn’t bring the baby back. I said, “Why don’t you bring the baby back?” She said, “No, I got something for you. I’m not going to bring the baby back.” And the next thing you know she called DCFS and said that I sexually assaulted my kid and physically beat her. Anyway, [DCFS] came and they took the baby. And
[DCFS] checked up on [the abuse allegations] and none of that was true or nothing, but then the allegations against me is that [DCFS] don’t feel like [my daughter’s] in a stable environment because we don’t have housing and we live day by day at the hotel and stuff. And the woman says, “Who knows when you all will be put out or something like that?” I even had the hotel vouch for me. I’ve never missed a payment when I’ve had my daughter with me. I mean, I’ve slept on the streets. But she’s never slept on the streets. Not when she’s with me.

For Philip and Ashley, they lost their daughter because of the subjective conclusions of a DCFS social worker. Now that their homeless status was known, getting their daughter back was going to be a lengthy process. According to Philip, they had to first move into an apartment and then prove that they had a steady income before the state would return their daughter. However, Philip had been filling out job applications for the past several months with no luck. With no job prospects, this was proving to be a near impossible task. Most difficult for Philip was that he did not know where his daughter was. As he relayed

[DCFS] won’t tell us where she is. They said something about foster care, but I’m trying to get one of my family members or one of Ashley’s family members to get her out. I want to know where my kid is, but our next official court date isn’t until October. Like I said, none of this was proven. There were no physical signs of abuse, you know. How can you just take somebody’s kid based on what somebody said that turns out false?

Talking with Philip that day was incredibly difficult. He had found himself in an impossible position where he had lost his daughter and had no way of reaching out to her except through the lengthy court process. Furthermore, with no housing and no job, it was a real possibility that he and his wife would not regain custody for the foreseeable future. Knowing that housing and a job
were essential in his fight, Philip asked me, “You still got my number? It’s 618-[number withheld]. If you know of anybody’s who’s got a job, please, please, please give me a call. I gotta get my kid back.” Sadly, what remained unknown during our conversation was how his four-year-old daughter was handling the transition. According to Philip, he had “been with her, her whole life.” Therefore, not only were the parents going through emotional turmoil during this ordeal, but it was quite possible that their four-year-old daughter was scared, anxious, and/or confused about being placed into the foster care system with strangers. Quite possibly, she was also asking a DCFS social worker about where her family was in an effort to reunite with her parents.

Loss of Self

The totality of this accumulating loss wore on all of the participants and ultimately caused each one of them to (at least partially) lose their sense of self. No longer could they find their identity in their professions, their possessions, or their families. In short, each participant’s life had spiraled so far out of control that the participant had a hard time articulating who exactly he or she was anymore. In order to make it through each day, Tiffany said, “You got to be strong to handle it out here. If you’re not strong, you’re not going to handle it. To live outside is hard. People just got to stay strong or they’ll lose their mind.” Unfortunately, Tiffany’s advice was easier said than done. In the following passage, Michael captures why being homeless was emotionally difficult for him. He said

It’s a real mental challenge for me. It’s like, I haven’t been unemployed for like 11 years and I’ve always had insurance. Now I’m a part of the system that I want nothing to do with. Having to get food stamps and asking people for help. I don’t have insurance. It’s
degrading. You know, I’m lucky though because I haven’t come across many people from back home. So they don’t really know what’s going on.

At the age of 37, Michael was experiencing homelessness for the first time. Now that he was homeless, he wanted to keep it a secret from as many friends and family members as he could. Being homeless had become a point of shame for Michael and he did not want others to identify him as a homeless person who had become dependent on government welfare and/or charity. However, he could not hide this reality from himself and was forced to confront the fact that he no longer had financial stability. In turn, his sense of self was shifting from a financially-independent housed person to a welfare-receiving homeless person. The fact that Michael was homeless and dependent on the finances of others “hurt [his] pride” and made him think about “how [he] ended up here.” Therefore, one of the ways to help a person like Michael regain his sense of self is by helping him transition from a state of dependency to a state of independence (Murray, 2012).

Another participant who talked about how homelessness affected her pride was Ashley. Ashley “had worked from the age of 16 to the age of 32” until she became disabled. While standing out in the sun all day asking for change, Ashley said that

I don’t want to be out here. This is embarrassing. You know, I’m burnt to a crisp out here. I’d much rather be working eight hour days inside, but I can’t. I got some of my husband’s family around here that’s always asking “Why would you do this?” But I guess you never know what you’d do until you’re in this situation. I mean, I used to work, but now I’m disabled. And public aid doesn’t help that much. So I have to be out here all burnt up in the sun. And for me to stand out here and swallow my pride is a big thing
because I’ve worked and I’ve never had to beg, but here I am, you know. But I got a kid to take care of, so I have to swallow it.

Throughout the interviews, “embarrassment” was a common word used by participants to describe how they felt about their public image. Furthermore, all of the participants were well aware of the public stigma associated with being homeless. In an act of resistance against this stigma, Kristen went so far as to confront me during the interview and abrasively shouted,

“You think I like being like this?! I hate it! It’s embarrassing! People are always doing bad things to me! I don’t know what to do. I hate everybody! When you’re out like this, people want to rub it in your face like it’s funny. It’s not funny! I know a bunch of friends who’ve died this year! I’m afraid that I’m going to die!

In the previous passage, Kristen’s words moved from accusatory to agony; her tone started off angry, but almost immediately became desperate. At the end of this outburst, Kristen buried her face in her hands and leaned over in exhaustion. As she gathered her belongings and walked away from our interview, Kristen wanted me to assure her that she would make it through her bout with homelessness. She wanted to me to tell her “when [she was] going to find [herself] again.” Interestingly, her phrasing detached the idea of “homelessness” from her identity. This phrasing was common for other participants as well. In other words, some homeless people would not accept the idea that their true self was a homeless person. Instead, they talked about how they were “searching” for their true self like it was some sort of journey.

In addition to dealing with the abstract concepts of embarrassment, pride, and sense of self, participants also confronted more concrete concerns, such as the endless worry over daily necessities. According to Ashley, “you wake up every morning and you constantly worry, ‘am I
going to be able to get through the day?’ Cuz you never know. You might not.” In Kenneth’s case, his constant worry over daily necessities sometimes led to depression. He stated that

I get depressed a lot, especially if I don’t get a good few nights of sleep or some food or money. If you don’t get any money, you can’t stay at a hotel. If you get money, but no food, you can pay for a hotel, but you might have to go to bed hungry. If you don’t get neither, then you have to go to bed hungry and it’s not going to be in a hotel. It’s just worrying all the time. I never know what’s going to happen.

During a later portion of the interview, Kenneth said that “the biggest challenge is just being out here all the time and having to deal with not having a place to stay all the time. It can definitely be emotionally and mentally challenging.” Kenneth’s statements highlight one of the many divides between the homeless and the housed community. Whereas many housed people may take food and shelter for granted, homeless people are forced to struggle for these resources every day. Having to constantly struggle for food and shelter leaves homeless people with little time for managing other aspects of life, such as family, education, résumé-building, or personal care. Consequentially, while homeless people are stuck fighting for survival in the short-term, they are prohibited from working on items that may help them in the long-term. In the end, worrying about food and shelter makes it nearly impossible to better one’s education and job skills. Thus, people without basic necessities fall further and further behind.

For some participants, the continuous worry over basic needs, such as food and shelter, not only caused personal anxiety, but was also a source of violent outburst. As Tiffany told me,

It makes you want to get violent. Your anxiety level goes up. It just does. You can blow up at the drop of a hat. And people do. People argue a lot around here. We try not to, but you can’t help it. Sometime it gets physically violent and then you realize it’s over stupid
shit like cleaning a table or borrowing a towel. Hell, people be fighting over free stuff.

How stupid is that?

In time, these verbal and physical outbursts can cause rifts within the homeless community.

During observations at the shelter, it was clear that small cliques of four to six people had formed based on an altercation that had happened in May 2013. When I asked one of the residents what had happened, he told me that “a pushing match had started between Mia and Tina\textsuperscript{10} over some shoes from the church van.” Two months later, people were still angry about the situation and, from my perception, this created unhealthy emotional tension and stress within the community.

Indeed, expressions of violence toward others were not the only ways participants processed their situation. Quite overwhelmingly, nine of the participants talked openly about “crying every day” and six mentioned thoughts of suicide. Philip’s remarks captured these sentiments most profoundly and are worth quoting at length. Philip, a 49-year-old husband and father to a four year old, said,

Shoot I cry all the time. I mean, I’m a man, but I cry all the time. I cry for the simple fact that I’m a man and that a man should be able to provide more for his family, you know.

So, I cry for all this. I mean, I have strength – it takes a lot of mental strength to be out here trying to be that man that I should be. But then I look at it and at least I’m a man that’s still sticking around. Because, well, I’m a black man and I know a lot of black men who have kids who don’t give a crap about them. I’m just saying in general. I’m from the hood. I grew up in the hood and you got babies strung up everywhere and ain’t no men to take care of them. They’re not even trying! Hell, I know some men who got jobs and don’t even try to help they kids out. So, I look at it like “I don’t even have a job, but I’m

\textsuperscript{10} Not their real names.
actually there for my baby!” And that gives me motivation to come out here another day. That gives me motivation to not go out and bust a car window and steal a radio for quick cash because I know I want to be there for my daughter. I want to be there for her and for her to get an education and for her to possibly grow up and have a life; a better life than I got. So, yeah, I cry. But I’d rather be crying trying to make something for my daughter than hanging out somewhere having a good time and her never know who her daddy is.

Like Philip, many participants cried for the wont of a better life, either for themselves or for their loved ones. Michael cried because his criminal history and lawyer fees had fractured his relationship with his father. Tiffany cried because she witnessed her 22-year-old son fall into homelessness alongside her. Kristen cried because she felt alone. And Maddy cried because “this wasn’t the life [she] had imagined for [herself].”

These moments of intense sadness and disappointment led some participants to think about suicide. As Philip continued,

Sometimes I just want to stand out there and walk in front of a truck because I get so depressed. And especially when there ain’t no money coming in and the hotel where we’re staying is like, “You have to have money today or we’re throwing you out!” And we’ve been thrown out before. So they’re not joking. It’s not easy – mentally. People probably think that it’s so easy for you to stand out here and get money from other people, but it’s not as easy as it looks. It’s hard. Trust me; it’d be a whole lot easier for me to throw myself in front of that truck right now. And if you catch me on a bad day, I just might.
While Philip mentioned that he “couldn’t commit suicide right now” because he had a wife and daughter to take care of, there was one particular participant who spoke as if he had nothing keeping him from killing himself. As he discussed his feelings, Joe said,

Hell, I was in shock for a while. Now I’m just numb. I don’t know what to feel. I don’t know what to think. Before, I was a little scared. I didn’t know what was going to happen or where I was going to go. I used to cry, but now it’s straight numbness. It’s always like that now. Hell, I’m not even bothered about being homeless now. So, what’s the point?

In this passage, Joe seemed to have lost hope about his situation improving. Whereas others were still fighting for their dignity, Joe had grown tired of being homeless for the past year. Moreover, since Joe’s wife and children were being taken care of by his wife’s parents, Joe was “not sure that moving back in with [him] is their best option.” Slowly, Joe seemed to be convincing himself that his family’s life would improve if he just committed suicide.

Conclusion

In closing, in Chapter 3 I looked at the many ways the homeless people I interviewed experienced loss. In brief, they discussed losing their privacy by having to disclose personal information to social workers, share public bedrooms, and use public restrooms. Additionally, the participants talked about losing their jobs and/or income and how losing this type of financial stability led to lost housing. Next, in this chapter I summarized the various ways participants lost their physical health, sense of personal safety, material possessions, and, most importantly, family relationships. Finally, the end result of all this loss was that participants lost a sense of self and even sometimes questioned their self-worth to the point of contemplating suicide. With this as background for understanding the types of loss homeless people experience and how they emotionally process these losses, I will transition into Chapter 4, where I will focus more on the
logistical aspects of how homeless people navigate the culture of homelessness in search of food, shelter, and other forms of assistance.
CHAPTER 4
NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM

During the summer of 2013 I sometimes had to work a graveyard shift at Good Sam’s. The graveyard shift ran from midnight to 8:00 am and mostly required me to do paperwork, cleaning, laundry, and make breakfast. Overall this was a relatively quiet shift until people began waking up around 6:00 am. On one particular Saturday morning in late July, a single mom, Becky, marched her four young children out into the common area and began pouring them cereal. The children were relatively well-behaved and smiling and laughing with one another while their mother got breakfast ready. Abruptly, their playfulness was interrupted by their mother’s violent temper. “Everyone knock it off and be quiet!” she yelled. She then ordered the oldest, 10-year-old Max, to take his siblings to the table closest to the television set and to turn on SpongeBob SquarePants. Max dutifully complied, carrying 9-month-old Amanda while 7-year-old Jo and 5-year-old Sam followed. A few moments later, Becky delivered three bowls of puffed rice cereal and a warmed bottle for little Amanda and said, “Now you kids sit here and eat!” Jo tried to protest and with her head hung low, she mumbled, “But I don’t like this cereal.” Becky quickly grabbed Jo by the checks and turned Jo’s head so that the two of them made eye-contact. “I don’t care what you want. These bowls better be empty.” Becky pushed Jo’s face away from her and then made eye-contact with Max and Sam. “And if I hear that any of you were acting up while I was gone, you’re all going to get it.”

Becky then left the building and spent the next hour smoking cigarettes at the picnic table out back. The longer she was gone, the more furious I became with her behavior. First, I felt that her children were well-behaved and did not warrant the type of public lashing she had given them so early in the morning. Second, I felt that it was wholly inappropriate of her to leave her
four young children alone in the common area of a homeless shelter while strangers wondered in and out of the shelter all morning. As a staff member, I felt that it was my responsibility to confront her about her irresponsible behavior, and as a researcher, I was interested in why she had engaged in this type of behavior.

When I had calmed down enough to approach Becky, I walked outside and simply asked, “What do you have going on today?” Distraught and exhausted, Becky quietly remarked, “Everything.” She continued,

I have two interviews on the other side of town. Jo’s had a rash now for about a week and I need to finally get her to a doctor. And Max’s dad keeps calling me about visitation. He’s supposed to be with his dad on the weekends, but I don’t have any way to get him over there. Plus, I’m supposed to take this test today in Marion, but I can’t get all the way over to Marion and back so I’ll probably just miss it and that’ll set me back another month until they offer [the test] again.

The short conversation I had with Becky was enlightening and forced me to reconsider the judgmental attitude I had clung to for the previous hour. This is not to say that I suddenly approved of her callous behavior. However, I did have a better understanding of where her callousness was coming from and embraced a sobering amount of empathy for her situation. In short, Becky’s day was full, chaotic, and uncertain. To top it off, she was living in a homeless shelter with her four kids, no job, and no idea where she was going to go once her 30-day stay was up. Without a car, no employment, little money, and four children, the pressure of her situation was simply overwhelming.

11 Marion is a 17 mile drive from Carbondale. In a personal vehicle, it is about a 25 minute trip (one-way). However, many people without personal vehicles have to use a shuttle service between Carbondale and Marion. This trip can take over an hour (one-way) due to stops and pick-ups along the way.
Reflecting on Riis’s (1890) How the Other Half Live, I thought about how ordered my life was compared to the uncertainty that oftentimes accompanies homeless people while they are navigating the culture of homelessness. For example, I knew when I had to work, when I was getting paid, where I could get food, and where I was going to sleep at night. I also knew that if I got sick, I could immediately visit the doctor. However, because the homeless lack basic necessities (Miller, et al., 2004), they must constantly secure food and shelter in a system that Kenneth described as “different every day. I don’t think there’s no such things as a usual day. I just don’t know what I’ll eat or when or if things will pick back up. I’m hoping I’ll be inside tonight, but you never know.” Having to constantly navigate a system in search of basic necessities leaves homeless people little time to further their education, develop job skills, or find stable income. Building upon these ideas, this chapter will illustrate how homeless people navigate the culture of homelessness as well as explain how homeless people secure basic goods, utilize public services, and look for steady income. In moving through this chapter, first, I will discuss how homeless people navigate living on the streets. Second, I will analyze how homeless people work their way through the shelter system. Third, I will discuss the different ways homeless people attempt to get jobs. Next, I will talk about how the homeless rely on the charity of others. Finally, I will look at the process of obtaining government assistance, such as housing vouchers, unemployment insurance, disability insurance, and food stamps.

Navigating the Streets

When I first starting talking with people who slept on the streets, my immediate reaction was to ask them “Why don’t you just sleep at Good Sam’s?” At first, this question seemed innocuous. In all, I could understand why people would avoid hanging around the shelter during the day, but at night, a bed and a roof seemed like a better alternative compared to all of the
sleeping conditions I had witnessed on the street. Yet, as I learned about the experiences of some participants, I realized that the answers to the aforementioned question were oftentimes far more complicated than I could have imagined.

When discussing this issue with Joe, Joe casually said that he slept on the streets because Kenneth preferred to sleep on the streets. “[Kenneth] and I are brothers,” Joe would repeatedly say throughout our interview. And while not biologically related, Joe said that the two had known each other all their lives and that Joe would do anything for Kenneth. When I asked Joe why Kenneth preferred to sleep on the streets, Joe answered,

I don’t really know. I just know that he doesn’t like [Good Sam’s]…He’s never really said much about Good Sam’s. He just doesn’t talk much about it. He just really don’t like being there, so we stay out here. I mean, he really don’t like being out here either, but what other choice do we have?

Two weeks after I spoke with Joe, I was able to interview Kenneth and pressed him on this same issue. After dodging my initial request, Kenneth said that

I used to use Good Sam’s a lot, but I’ve been over there so much in the last few years and I just don’t think they want me back anymore. That’s really the only resource I know. They might let me get lunch and dinner, but I’ve stayed there too many times already. I just can’t stay there anymore.

From these remarks, it sounded like Kenneth felt as if he had overstayed his welcome at Good Sam’s. While it was not clear whether Kenneth was asked to leave by the staff, or whether he felt coerced out for other reasons, his remarks do suggest that there was some type of falling out between Kenneth and the shelter staff. As I further explored why some homeless people no longer felt welcomed at Good Sam’s, I came up with two possible answers.
First, as part of a larger policy, Good Sam’s does have an extensive “Banned List” of people who are no longer allowed to stay at the shelter due to previous violations including violence, possession of weapons, possession of drugs, and threatening behavior. Depending on the severity of the violation, people can be placed on the “Banned List” anywhere from six months to life. While I am not suggesting that Kenneth necessarily falls into this category, I am concluding that the “Banned List” does provide at least one answer as to why some homeless people live on the streets instead of staying at the shelter. The second possible reason people might avoid the shelter is the issue of safety (see Walsh, 1992; Ravenhill, 2008). As highlighted in Chapter 3, interpersonal relationships among homeless people can become abrasive, threatening, and even violent. Consequently, if a homeless person feels threatened by other members of the homeless community he or she may simply choose to sleep on the streets as opposed to staying at a shelter and risk coming face-to-face with confrontation. Therefore, it is plausible that when Kenneth mentioned that “they” do not want him back at Good Sam’s, he might have been talking about other patrons with whom he wanted to avoid confrontation. Whatever the specific reason, Kenneth no longer felt welcomed at Good Sam’s and since Good Sam’s is the only shelter in town, he was compelled to sleep on the streets in the company of his loyal friend Joe.

Aside from those participants who were forced to sleep on the streets through a banned list or interpersonal intimidation, there were also participants who simply preferred sleeping outside. For example, Tiffany and her husband occasionally chose to live in the woods because they wanted a type of privacy that the shelter did not afford. Tiffany explained that in the woods, “We have our privacy when we live in the tents. We have our own little spot to go to when it gets
hectic [in the shelter]. Nobody knows where it is. It’s nice and clean and secluded.” When I asked about how she initially discovered her home in the woods, Tiffany said that

To find a spot, you have to walk around for a long time and just look for a spot. When we found our spot, we called the police department and asked if it was okay that we stayed there cause there were no “No Trespassing” signs or anything like that. So [the police] said we were fine. You just have to walk around and look.

I was rather taken aback by the thought of Tiffany asking the police for permission to set up residence in the city’s woods and she elaborated with

Yep, the police, Sergeant [Baker]\(^\text{12}\) said, “Out of sight, out of mind.” Just as long as the public doesn’t see your tent and as long as property owners, you know business owners, don’t mind. We have like three or four business owners in front of us that we can see from the woods, but they all said that [they are] okay with [us staying there] because we keep it clean and don’t make any noise.

Like Tiffany, James also sometimes chose to live outside because of how crowded and public the shelter became. At the time of our interview, James was sleeping in an alley between two businesses that had “a little porch over it that’s holding up [his] roof.” He was coming to Good Sam’s during the day to take a shower and eat. I visited his sleeping quarters a few days after our interview and discovered that the roof he had spoken about consisted of layered cardboard that he had tied to the metal piping and metal fire escape that ran just overhead.

During our interview, James admitted that the outdoor shelter he had created for himself was not as safe as staying at Good Sam’s, “but it [kept] the rain out.” Additionally, James was vigilant about his safety. For instance, he mentioned that the summer was the best time to sleep outside

\(^{12}\) Not his real name.
because of how active people were at night; specifically around the bars and late-night restaurants. Sometimes James said, “I feel vulnerable as far as somebody trying to come up and hurt me or whatever. But as long as I sleep in well-lit areas where I know people will be hanging around businesses at night, I feel pretty safe.”

In addition to safety, participants who lived outside also mentioned other challenges such as the weather and personal hygiene. Whereas James stayed within walking distance of Good Sam’s so that he could frequently use their shower, restroom, and shelter from extreme heat or extreme cold, this was not the case for all participants. For example, Joe would have liked to use Good Sam’s daytime resources more often, but “getting around is hard because the only way [he] can get around is by foot.” Therefore, when those who lack transportation need shelter from the weather or need to use the restroom, they are oftentimes at the mercy of local businesses. Unfortunately, not all businesses are hospitable to these needs.

On one particularly hot day in June 2013, Tiffany and her husband tried to cool off by sitting in a local restaurant. Since the restaurant was mostly empty, Tiffany did not think it would be a problem for them to rest in the air-conditioning for a few minutes. However, as Tiffany recalled,

Some businesses mind. Some businesses you can’t go in unless you’re buying something. Some of them don’t mind; especially when it’s hot. They understand. But, yeah, we were told to leave Pag’s. You can’t go in there unless you’re buying something. They didn’t care how hot it was. We only wanted a glass of water for like 10 minutes. Nope. They threw us out and they’ll throw you out too unless you pay for something. It’s terrible.

Stories about being asked to leave businesses were conveyed by seven different participants and the context by which most of these stories were told was in relation to using the restroom. As
previously discussed in Chapter 3, Kenneth was banned from using the restroom in McDonald’s because of his bad hygiene. Others told stories about having to buy something before they were allowed to use the restroom. Interestingly enough, these types of restroom restrictions made some participants actively prepare their daily restroom routines. For instance, while having to go to the restroom outside “isn’t that big of a deal for guys,” said Tiffany, “it’s kind of a problem for girls.” Therefore, to plan for this problem, Tiffany always makes sure she has enough change in her pockets to buy a cup of coffee just in case she is asked to make a purchase.

Navigating the Shelters

The alternative to living on the streets is attempting to navigate the shelter system. In southern Illinois, the most difficult part of navigating the shelter system is the fact that most community shelters only allow residents to stay up to 30 days. After 30 days are up, a person has the choice of sleeping outside for the next month or traveling to a different town and staying at a different shelter for 30 days. However, this choice is oftentimes dictated by external circumstances. For example, Kristen was a 42-year-old female who was sleeping in her truck during the time of our interview. She had recently been discharged from Good Sam’s on July 19, 2013 after her 30-day-limit was reached. She now had to wait 30 days post-discharge to readmit herself. She said that “I would love to be staying indoors right now, but I’ve been living right out there in my truck for the past two week because I can’t come in [to Good Sam’s] until [August] nineteenth.” When asked why she did not just drive to Marion and stay at The Lighthouse Shelter, which also followed the 30 days stay/30 days wait for readmission model, Kristen replied,

I don’t really like going to Marion because it’s a hassle getting from here to there. Plus it cost me a lot in gas money. It’s just too difficult to travel if I ever have to come back [to
Carbondale] for anything. I am trying to find work around here and if they call me for an interview, it’s just too much. I’d rather just stay in my truck and wait it out.

For Kristen, who had a rather small build, sleeping in her truck did not pose the type of physical challenges that it might have caused larger people. Additionally, because she parked her truck next to Good Sam’s and “under a street light,” she felt “perfectly safe.” However, she did talk about “how cold it gets out here at night” and that sometimes she wakes up “five or six times a night just shaking.” For Kristen, “the nineteenth can’t come soon enough.”

For those who were able to travel from shelter to shelter every 30 days, there were other barriers that sometimes stood in the way. One of the most egregious barriers discussed was race. On no fewer than seven occasions, I observed people at Good Sam’s talking about perceived racial discrimination at The Lighthouse Shelter in Marion. More specifically, Black male patrons would talk about having “no place to go” once their 30-day-limit was up at Good Sam’s because The Lighthouse Shelter “don’t let Blacks stay there.” When I attempted to gather more information about these claims, people’s remarks became more measured with statements such as “you can’t have a criminal record; period” and “you can’t be an addict.” However, each of these conversations always ended with a variation of “but they let white people in who have criminal records and are addicts.” For example, Tiffany discussed being turned away from The Lighthouse Shelter and said that

The lady turned us away because we’re an interracial couple. There was me and my husband and then this other guy and his girlfriend behind us who was an interracial couple. Then there was this white couple behind them. Both of us got turned away, but the white couple didn’t. I mean, everybody talks bad about [The Lighthouse Shelter] because of racism. It’s not a secret.
Without talking to the staff members who turned away these clients and without having better data regarding The Lighthouse Shelter’s intake breakdown along racial, criminal, and addict demographics, it would be presumptuous of me to conclude that race discrimination definitely took place. However, it should be noted that many homeless people believed racial discrimination was happening and it seemed to them as if The Lighthouse Shelter used standards like “criminal” and “addict” as a cover for racial preferences. At the very least, there are real questions The Lighthouse Shelter should look to answer. Mainly (1) who feels welcomed at The Lighthouse Shelter and (2) why does The Lighthouse Shelter have a negative image regarding racial inclusion?

In addition to perceived discrimination, other barriers to accessing shelters included obtaining photo identification, passing a drug screening through a urine test, and passing a warrant check. While Good Sam’s did allow people with criminal records to stay at the shelter, Good Sam’s did not permit people to stay who had outstanding warrants or who were convicted of sex offenses. While all of these different types of barriers could sometimes be a hassle, overall, participants stated that they felt a sense of relief once they were admitted to the shelter. Now a part of the shelter, the residents not only enjoyed access to a bed and a roof, but they also felt that they had more access to food, medication, employment services, welfare services, counseling services, toiletries, and clothing. As Brandon explained,

When I got out [of prison] I had no clothes at all except what [the prison] gives you.

When you get released from prison, [the prison] gives you a pair of sweat pants, sweat shirt, underwear, and socks, but I didn’t have nothing else on the outside so that’s all I come out with. But as soon as I got out, the shelter hooked me up. They always had snacks out and stuff like that. When I got there, they automatically gave me extra shoes
and socks and underwear and pants. There’s always donations that people give out. So all
your personal stuff – you know, toothbrushes, underwear – that’s always pretty good and
that’s positive.

While Brandon found all of these services to be helpful, the one thing that remained unclear to
him was a basic understanding of the shelter’s rules. In short, Brandon felt as if the shelter staff
took the rules for granted and simply assumed the clients would comply. For instance, the staff
expected clients to clean their rooms, do their chores by 8:00 pm, obey an 11:00 pm curfew, not
bring in outside food or drink, not smoke inside, not enter the shelter drunk, not be in the shelter
between 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm, and not argue with the staff. However, Brandon said that he had
to learn these rules from the other residents. He went on to say that “[the other residents] tell you
the rules of the shelter and all that stuff, but I’m still not real sure about what [the staff] wants me
to do.” Brandon did mention that the staff had “been pretty nice.” However, he was anxious
about interacting with the staff or asking too many questions because he “had been kicked out”
of a different shelter for “some reason” that was still unclear.

Like Brandon, I found other clients who chose to maintain a low profile at the shelter for
fear of violating some unknown community norm or fear of giving the wrong impression to
shelter staff. When I interviewed Michael, he mentioned that he had not even talked to the
caseworkers until the day before our interview because he “didn’t even know [he] could talk to
them until a few days ago when [he] learned that they could help [him] with housing.”
Unfortunately, Michael said that he cut the conversation short because “it was moving too fast”
and that he “wanted to slow down and hold on because [he] didn’t want to mess anything up.”
Essentially, Michael was getting to the point in his housing application where he would have to
disclose his criminal history to the caseworker and he was afraid that once he disclosed this
information, the caseworker would no longer want to help him, and would possibly find a way to discharge him from Good Sam’s. Ultimately, Michael’s situation demonstrated a clear culture barrier between the caseworkers and the clients. If the caseworker wanted to help Michael make progress, then there needed to be a mutual understanding regarding how personal information might influence the caseworker’s ability to help. If the caseworker was willing to help Michael regardless of personal history, then this needed to be stated up front, so that Michael would feel safe disclosing personal information and thus, would be better positioned to receive available benefits.

Beyond negotiating boundaries with staff, participants also had to negotiate boundaries with other residents at the shelter. Most personally, they have to navigate roommate relationships with people whom they may or may not know. In the temporary housing area of Good Sam’s (30-day-stay), there were eight rooms that each housed between three and five people. Additionally, the rooms were segregated by gender (unless a couple is married) and, if space was available, families with children were given their own room. Besides these small regulations, most rooms were randomly filled with individual clients based on available space. During the interviews, only one person seemed to accept this inevitable roommate situation at face value. Brandon said that

Rooming with other people isn’t too bad. I’m used to it being in prison. You get bunkmates and all that stuff…we shared a room and a bunk bed and I’m used to bunk beds and other people being in rooms with me, so it’s never been a big problem.

As mentioned, Brandon’s attitude was the exception. Every other person I spoke with talked about the negative aspects of being placed with a roommate that he or she did not know. The most common roommate complaints included bad personal hygiene, unclean living habits,
bringing food and drink in the room (fear of attracting bugs or mice), lack of privacy, snoring, and theft.

Even when roommate confrontation could be avoided, there were other concerns about living in a shelter with 20-25 strangers. When I interviewed Ashley, she flat-out refused to stay at Good Sam’s and instead opted to stand at an intersection and collect money every day so that her family could continue to stay at a nearby hotel. Explaining her reasons, Ashley said

Having a kid is a huge concern out here. You know, I’ve heard stories about the Good Samaritan’s and some of the people that stay there. You got men sneaking hookers and drugs through the windows at night. A bunch of the people are criminals or addicts. Or at least they were at some point. Plus, the place is just dirty and I don’t want my kid around that.

Ashley’s concerns, while damning, were not unfounded. Because temporary housing was located in the basement of Good Sam’s shelter, the windows to each of the temporary housing rooms were at ground level. In the past, several residents had been caught sneaking people, drugs, and alcohol through those windows. Residents had also been caught sneaking in and out of those windows at night in an effort to avoid curfew violations or to avoid being caught intoxicated by the staff. Because of safety codes, these windows had to remain unobstructed and had to open far enough for a person to get out of the building in the case of an emergency; e.g. a fire. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to curb the types of behavior that caused Ashley’s concerns.

As Ashley and I continued to talk about families and homeless, Ashley mentioned that she would be open to staying at Good Sam’s if her family could stay in transitional housing. Transitional housing is a program that allowed people to stay at Good Sam’s for two years and is located upstairs; away from temporary housing. However, Ashley pointed out that
Good Samaritan’s does have transitional housing, but no kids. So even if my husband and I could get in as long-term residents, you can’t have kids. So we really need a longer-term place for families, but no one really has one.

Joe, who was living on the streets while his family stayed with his in-laws, shared similar sentiments about adequate shelter for homeless families. Joe said that

I know of three families that are just out and about right now with no place to go because the shelter don’t really work for families. They’re better just staying in their car. So, I think they need to make the shelter a lot bigger and just have a place sectioned off for families.

Notably, Ashley, Joe, and Tiffany all mentioned that The Women’s Center in Carbondale was a good option for families with children who needed temporary shelter. However, as Ashley mentioned, “they don’t take men. So, I’d rather be out here with my family than make us split up.”

In all, the shelter system could be a rather complex organism to navigate; especially for those who had never been homeless. There were concerns about safety, transportation, community rules, roommate situations, and family options. While these daily concerns were the main focus for the homeless, as a researcher I found myself wondering about the larger implications of shelter policies. In short, I was troubled by the fact that several of the homeless people I had interacted with during my research (summer of 2013) were the same homeless people I had known while I was working at Good Sam’s from 2009-2010. Quite frankly, it looked as if shelter policies were not helping the homeless transition into independent living. Instead, some of the people I interacted with had become trapped in the perpetual state of homelessness.
As I began to look for answers as to why people remained stuck in the system, I thought about Conover’s (1984) notion that the homeless are part of a culture that housed people can never understand. Therefore, some of the help provided by shelters, caseworkers, and government assistance is not necessarily compatible with how some homeless people move through the world. Nor does the help necessarily create a foundation for long-term success. For instance, during our interview, Tiffany lamented the lack of long-term help she was provided to fit her specific goals. As she flung her arms violently into the air, she screamed,

Yeah, nobody’s been asking me what I need! A few places will help you get your birth certificate, social security cards, IDs, driver’s license, and they show you some place to live. But they don’t help with the financing. Plus there’s the first month’s rent and security deposit. What am I suppose to do with a place to stay but no way to pay for it? They just tell you that you need a job, but they don’t actually help you get a job.

Versions of Tiffany’s insight were heard throughout several interviews. There was an agreement among participants that social services often helped with immediate needs such as photo identification and temporary shelter, but without any long-term strategy regarding education, job skills, and employment, many homeless people, including Tiffany, ended up back on the streets within a few short months. As Kristen pointed out,

If I go to a shelter, I want them to help me get a job. Not just look for a job, but placing me in a job. And they need to extend their stay beyond a few weeks because you can’t really get anything done in a few weeks as far as finding a job and getting [housing].

Sure, they’ll feed you for a few weeks, but after that, you’re out on the street again. So they need to set something up longer than a few weeks so that people can get a job, save some money, and never have to go back [to the shelter].
These ideas speak directly to the conclusions of Lundahl and Wicks (2010) as well as Shipler (2005) who write about the need of equipping the homeless with job training and life-skills (budgeting, banking, writing a résumé) in an effort to help them live more independently once they leave a shelter system or relinquish government benefits. Without this type of long-term thinking on the part of social agencies, some of the homeless simply got shuffled from one 30-day shelter to the next without ever obtaining independent living skills.

Navigating Employment

While it may be simple enough to understand how the absence of jobs is a major contributing factor to homelessness (Reeves, 1989), understanding the relationship between the homeless and full-time employment can be far more complicated. For instance, one of the obstacles that faced several of the participants was their lack of formal education and/or certification. In the case of Joe, he had an extensive background in auto mechanics that he had acquired from a very young age, and he had “built three cars from the ground up” over the past decade. However, because he had not gone to school and was not a certified mechanic he could not get hired at any local car repair shops. Joe had tried to enroll in a few “Continuing Your Education classes at John A. [Logan Community College]” during the spring semester of 2013, but he said that

I don’t have the money to go to school right now and I can’t get a grant. I tried to get one, but they just said that they can’t give me a grant at this time. And that’s all I get out them. I probably talked with five or six different people in their mechanic program just so I could start on my certificate, but it’s always “We can’t give you money at this time.” So, pretty much, I’ve just given up on going back to school right now.
In this excerpt, Joe highlighted his willingness to learn a new skill so that he could support his family. However, without money he could not pay for a formal education, and without a formal education he could not obtain a steady career as a mechanic. Therefore, he was stuck in a situation that had very few options for improvement.

In addition to education and/or certification barriers, there were also barriers with regard to gaps in work history as well as employer internal hiring. Like Joe, Kenneth also had plenty of experience in his chosen profession: the food service industry. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Kenneth had worked delivering pizzas for nine years until he was laid off in 2008. Since he had been laid off, Kenneth continued to put in applications at nearly every restaurant in town with no luck. Describing his experience, Kenneth said,

Right now, I just try to get out here every day and walk up and down this strip. I usually go and apply for jobs pretty regularly: Burger King, Steak N’ Shake, Wendy’s, Arby’s. Basically all those businesses over there [he points to an area with several restaurants]. I’ve been up and down this strip a million times applying for jobs. Pretty much, I’ve been all over town the last four years. I try to put in a new [application] at each location at least every two months, but haven’t gotten any calls back yet.

Kenneth’s routine was exhausting. He tried to fill out one application every few days and made a schedule so that he could revisit each business once every two months. When I asked him why he felt he did not have any success, he said that employers “wanted somebody with recent experience.” With the shortage of jobs in southern Illinois, employers could afford to be picky about whom they employed. Even though Kenneth had experience in the food industry, his experience was five years old and if “somebody [already working in food services] wanted that position, then [the employer] had to take them first.” Unfortunately, the longer Kenneth
remained out of the food service industry, the larger the gap became in his work history, and the harder it would be for him to reenter the work force.

In searching for these types of entry level jobs that would provide them a steady income over the long-term, participants also negotiated the short-term relationship between the amount of time they had each day to make money, their expected job earnings with a new job, and their current welfare/charity benefits. In short, participants asked themselves, “Is searching for a job worth my time?” or “Will I earn more money if I spend my time panhandling and/or applying for government assistance?” Philip talked at length about this problem and said that “with the time I put out here [panhandling], shit, if I had a job, it’d probably be easier. But I stay out here [panhandling] because I have to make rent at the hotel.” Philip went on to say that

There’s no way that I can keep up paying [the hotel rent] daily and try to look for a job at the same time. But [the hotel] don’t take no shorts, so [my wife and I] have to make the money every day or our kid’ll be out on the streets.¹³ Other than that, if I could get someone to pay up a little bit for me, like a week or two, maybe I could go out and find a job and it wouldn’t be a problem. But finding the daily rent is hard, so there ain’t no time for job searching.

This example illustrated the complicated trade-offs of short-term and long-term objectives. Of course Philip would prefer to have a “regular job because just standing out here all day is a shame and embarrassing.” However, because panhandling “is a full-time job,” it was hard for him to make time to search for employment.

¹³ This portion of my interview with Philip happened before DCFS removed his child from his and his wife’s custody (a situation that was discussed near the end of chapter 3).
Ultimately, Philip’s long-term goal was to find work as a machine operator or a metal worker. Yet, finding this type of work required him to travel dozens of miles out of town just for an interview. Without a car, Philip would have to hitch a ride or buy a bus ticket and probably would have to be away from his wife and child for a few nights while he was traveling. While the transportation and lodging cost would be worth it if he landed a job, his short-term reality required that his family made $46 a day to keep a roof above his little girl’s head. Therefore, every day Philip had to choose between panhandling for his (likely) guaranteed income and searching for a job. If he did not panhandle and could not secure an immediate job, he faced eviction for not coming up with the day’s rent. For those who spend so much time searching for immediate resources in order to survive, it is difficult to figure out where they might find the time to obtain job skills, further their education, and/or apply for employment; especially if any of these endeavors require a great amount of transportation or financial investment.

In all, Joe was the only participant I spoke with who was willing to make the financial investment to travel a great distance on the hope that he might find employment working for a semi-truck company in Indiana. Discussing his upcoming travels, Joe said,

At this point I’ve got nothing else to lose. I’m leaving Saturday and that’s why I’m out here now [panhandling]. I need to make $300 between now and Saturday to go to Indiana. It’s $137 for [the orientation class] and then food for three weeks because I don’t get paid for three weeks if I get on a crew.

At the time of our interview, there was no guarantee that Joe would be hired by the semi-truck company nor did Joe have a clear understanding about what he would be doing for the company. He had made contact with the company through his cousin, and based on his phone conversation with the employer, the company had training programs for drivers, loaders, and warehouse
workers. In truth, Joe did not want to travel so far away from his family for a job opportunity that might not work out, but as he told it,

I don’t have much of a choice but to go and do it. Don’t neither [my wife or I] want it to happen, but we can’t keep going like this either. Even if I get on, I don’t want to do it because I’ll be gone all the time [from my family]. I mean, it’ll pretty much be like it is now with me not really seeing my kids. Either I’ll be living and working in Indiana at the warehouse or the best thing would be that I get to be a driver. But even then [drivers are] gone eight days and then home for two…and on some jobs I could stay out for as much as three months at a time. But I don’t want to do that cause I have three kids. But what other choice do I have?

Quite frankly, Joe did not have much of choice if he wanted a chance at securing employment and reestablishing some financial stability for his family. He had exhausted all of his leads in southern Illinois and now had to look for employment elsewhere, even if that meant crossing state lines. Yet, even these efforts did not guarantee him work and after spending $300 on travel and expenses, he might end up back where he started.

In all of the aforementioned cases, there were unique situational barriers that made it difficult for Joe, Kenneth, and Philip to become gainfully employed: lack of education, lack of current work experience, lack of transportation, and the need to negotiate short-term needs with long-term goals. Additionally, some participants, such as Maddy, said they needed more access to “computers and the internet because all the jobs are online” and others, like James, were concerned about overcoming strongly-held prejudices from potential employers. As James put it

14 Maddy further clarified this point and said that she would like to use computers to find job openings, fill out applications, take employment tests for different companies, and research different companies so that she felt more confident going into interviews.
“it’s not like companies are just out here handing out jobs to homeless people.” Instead, “they’d rather take a chance with a college kid who has a legitimate address.” Truthfully, it should be recognized that some of the employment barriers some homeless people faced stemmed from previous actions of their own, such as dropping out of high school, past drug addiction, or having a criminal record. Understandably, it might also be challenging for some people to feel empathy for those who cannot get a job because of these types of behaviors. Yet, I suggest that it is unwise for society to let sophomoric mistakes permanently prevent a person from entering the workforce. Instead, it might be more productive to help the homeless find meaningful ways of supporting themselves on a path toward financial stability and housing independence. Otherwise, it is likely that some of them will end up permanently homeless, uneducated, without job skills, and completely reliant on social services.

One possible solution to the unique employment challenges faced by the homeless was offered by Philip. Because Philip felt like he always had to negotiate the finite amount of time he had to search for a job, panhandle, and apply for government assistance, Philip said that it might be better if the government simply provided homeless people “a house to stay in while [they] worked [for the government]” instead of providing homeless people with monetary benefits. At the time of our interview, Philip did receive food stamps, but did not receive cash benefits, for which he was qualified, because the cash benefits welfare program required him “to volunteer 35 hours a week for only $300 a month” in assistance. Philip went onto say that he “made more

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15 Four participants admitted to dropping out of high school. One had since completed her G.E.D.

16 Five participants admitted to abusing drugs and/or alcohol at some point in their lives. Three were still addicts at the time of the interview.

17 See Brandon’s brief employment story on page 82.
money just panhandling” and therefore, there was no incentive for him to apply for cash benefits. In laying out his plan, Philip said,

   It would be nice if the government had some assistance program where at least you could work for them for your rent; for your place to stay. Like I can go out and do work cleaning parks, or streets, or washing windows and they can put me in housing or in the projects instead of paying me. You know, I’d swap work for rent. That’d be a good idea for [the government], too. They don’t have to give me no cash and, I mean, there’s plenty of housing units. Hey, that’s a good idea! Yeah, I should write somebody about that.

   That’s a pretty good idea [laughs]!

Philip also mentioned that it would be a good idea for the homeless shelters to adopt a similar policy “instead of having an open door policy” because people need to “be motivated to help themselves out” and should “contribute to the shelter by working.”

   Whether Philip’s plan would work is yet to be determined. However, I believe that Philip’s insight and creativity helps bring us closer to solving three major concerns with regard to the homeless and employment. First, homeless people who signed up for Philip’s program would no longer have to worry about securing shelter on a daily basis. Hopefully, this would relieve some housing anxiety and allow people to concentrate on other issues such as furthering education and developing new job skills. Second, Philip’s program could help people develop new job skills, which would put them in a better position for achieving full-time employment. Granted, much of the work Philip described would be entry-level custodial work. However, even these types of entry-level jobs are constantly changing with new technologies, machines, and operating procedures. Plus, these types of entry-level jobs put people in the position to eventually become crew supervisors and managers. Finally, Philip’s program would help homeless people
avoid long droughts in their employment history. Avoiding long droughts in one’s work history would hopefully show a potential employer that the person is motivated and willing to work. Of course, there are potential downsides to Philip’s idea, such as loss of work for current city employees who perform custodial work and there is even the risk of the government exploiting the homeless for cheap labor. However, given Philip’s in-depth knowledge about his experiences with being homeless and looking for work, I believe that it is important to seriously engage these types of creative ideas that are generated by the homeless in an effort to find long-term solutions to the unemployment problem that plagues the homeless community. Ultimately, policies generated within the homeless community provide knowledge to policymakers about what the homeless community needs to be successful as well as gives the homeless a sense of ownership over the policies that dictate their daily lives.

Navigating Charity

Absent of any current long-term employment strategies, all of the homeless people I interviewed spent a substantial part of their days navigating charitable donations to help supplement their daily needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. These charitable donations came from large organizations such as churches and shelters as well as individuals such as family, friends, and strangers on the streets. In seeking out charitable donations, participants had to overcome three distinct obstacles. The first obstacle was personal pride. All told, it should be noted that not a single homeless person I talked to enjoyed asking people for help. Kristen succinctly summed up this sentiment when she said, “I don’t want to ask anybody for help. I hate it. I hate asking people for help.” In addition to Kristen’s comments, several others described asking for help as “embarrassing,” “shameful,” and “degrading.” In particular, the men viewed receiving charity as an indictment of their masculinity by calling attention to their failures as
fathers, sons, and overall providers. As Brandon mentioned, “I’m a 38-year-old man now and should be able to take care of myself.”

Despite feelings of inadequacy, all participants eventually swallowed their pride and sought help from charitable organizations. In turn, finally seeking out help presented new obstacles. Mainly, participants talked about being denied services because of certain organizational policies. This seemed to be most prevalent among faith-based charities such as churches. As Kenneth put it,

Most [churches] don’t want to help you unless you are a member. Like some have a food pantry and you can get food there, but that’s basically it. But when I tried to get my apartment, I tried to get a deposit from them, but I couldn’t. Members can get help with bills and stuff, but I couldn’t because I’m not a member.

To be fair, Kenneth was introspective and theorized that perhaps many churches had limited funds and therefore “helping their members first” seemed reasonable.

Beyond churches, some secular organizations also had policies that kept certain participants from receiving support. For example, Joe was unable to obtain a security deposit for a family-unit apartment because his wife and children were staying with her parents and therefore, his “family was not technically homeless” according to the organization. Additionally, a non-profit organization denied Brandon a $25 security deposit for public housing because he had a felony record. According to Brandon,

No one’s really helped me with filling out an application or getting a deposit. They might tell you a few things about how to get one, but no one will help you with [the deposit]. If I didn’t have the felony that I do, I think more people might be able to help me with the rent. But there’s other people without felonies, so I get pushed to the back of the line.
All told, charitable organizations have the right to create policies that they believe are beneficial to their mission, their staff, and their clientele. Whether these policies are reasonable is truly a matter of personal opinion. However, what cannot be ignored is the fact that certain policies regarding declarations of faith, family status, and criminal record are denying some homeless people access to certain services. At the very least, organizations should recognize the structural barriers faced by some homeless people because of certain policies and perhaps look into creating new policies that will provide more opportunities for more homeless people to access services.

The third, and final, obstacle participants faced when trying to obtain charitable services was government ordinances. Similar to the ordinances described in the literature review (see Flaccus, 2012; Feldman, 2004; “Homeless Camping,” 2012), participants in this study had been cited for vagrancy, panhandling, consuming alcohol in public, and sleeping in public. In one uniquely ironic situation, Kenneth was cited four times in one day by the police after he called the police for help. Explaining the incident Kenneth said,

I did come across a guy out here about a week ago. He come up and he was hollering at me through the McDonald’s parking lot. I couldn’t hear him and he got closer and said, “I’m asking you a question!” I’m like, “What?” He said, “Did you hurt that kid’s arm?” I said, “No.” And he started yelling that I was always out here trying to get money and no one else could panhandle in this spot and finally he picked up a damn rock and threw it at me and then started saying that he was going to stab me. So I ended up running to get a phone and calling the cops. And that got me in trouble because I was out here panhandling and the cops were trying to shut [panhandlers] down.
In the end, Kenneth said that the police never tried to get information about the man who was responsible for threatening Kenneth and that the police seemed more interested in getting the homeless to stop panhandling than catching violent agitators. The police returned to Kenneth’s corner three more times that day and Kenneth “ended up with four tickets” for panhandling. According to Kenneth, two of the tickets had already been dropped, but the other two carried $125 fines. Because Kenneth was unable to pay the tickets, he had “to go to court soon” where he faced possible jail time.

When Ashley faced a similar situation with the police, she decided to push back. Well aware of her legal rights to panhandle, Ashley told the police

“If you’re standing on a corner holding a sign – not verbalizing any request – then that’s okay.” But the cops didn’t like my attitude and I got four tickets altogether. You see, approaching people is illegal, but we were just standing there with our signs. And we were just trying to stay out of trouble and the police said, “Well, I can make trouble for you.” You know, it was just really harassing. Then [the police] got real aggravated because we knew our rights and they were like “Well, it’s going to cost you $150 to pay your fine and I’ll just keep writing tickets until you go to jail.”

Fortunately, Ashley found an advocate in a local city council member. She contacted Councilman Don Monty to see whether her panhandling was illegal and, according to Ashley, Monty told her that “what you are doing is fine.” After a few phone calls, the tickets were finally dropped and Ashley is “sure that the cops are kind of pissed off because Don Monty did take those tickets away” [laughs]! Ashley concluded her story by telling me, “you have to make sure to write a ‘thank you’ from us to Mr. Monty. He’s as cool as a cucumber and he really went to bat for us. If it wasn’t for him, we wouldn’t be out here.”
While not all advocates are as well connected as Don Monty, the homeless do come in contact with charitable citizens nearly every day. As Ashley stated, “People can be really generous. I’ve got people who go to the store and hook me up with food when we got nothing to eat. And they give me clothes in the winter for my daughter.” Furthermore, Kenneth admitted that

Life isn’t all bad. I’ve got a few people who stop by regularly. If they see me around town, they’ll stop by. I got one lady I know that stopped by the other night and she gave me a milk shake cause it was pretty hot out. I probably see her once a week.

Joe also shared a story about a person who regularly stopped by to check on him. Joe said,

He asked if I was staying in a hotel and I told him “No.” “Well,” he said, “put your sign down and I’ll take you back and pay for your room.” So he took me back and we got to talkin’ about my kids and the story must have touched him because he ended up givin’ me $300 to pay for the whole week! He said, “Well, at least you’re being a man, you know, don’t feel too bad about what you’re doing out here because you’re trying to do right by your kids. A lot of guys would fly the coop, but I’m going give you this and pray for you because you’re sticking up and being a father.”

These types of experiences illustrated the impact that personal relationships between homeless people and non-homeless people had with regard to helping participants access food, clothing, and shelter. Additionally, while the material goods were necessary in order to survive the day-to-day struggles, Joe also mentioned that “sometimes it’s just nice to talk to someone who will listen.”

Finally, it should be noted that participants were quick to pile on endless amounts of appreciation for all forms of charity. This appreciation was in response to large offerings such as
hotel bills as well as small offerings such as spare change and half-eaten sandwiches. Markedly, participants discussed two important reasons for offering appreciation. First, participants recognized the potential sacrifices that went into the charitable giving. These sacrifices might have included volunteer hours, clothing donations, food donations, and monetary donations. Additionally, participants recognized that these sacrifices might have caused temporary hardship for the person offering help. For instance, Philip stated,

> Even if they only give you a couple of pennies or part of a sandwich you say “thank you” because maybe that’s all they got. Maybe they just gave you their lunch for the day and now they can’t eat. So you don’t want to tear people down because you don’t know what they’re going through. I’ve been torn down. I don’t want to do that to other people. So always be polite and appreciate what other people give you.

Second, participants offered appreciation because even the smallest donation helped alleviate some level of anxiety and hardship. In speaking about how much she appreciated the smallest donations, Maddy energetically stated,

> I appreciate pennies. I don’t care. A can of soup. People can give me food they have cleaned out the refrigerator. Hell, I’d appreciate that. I just want everyone to know how much I appreciate everything. Even if it is just a few pennies or a half-a-sandwich. I was standing out here the other day and somebody said, “All I have is some water that I already drank out of.” Man, I will take it. I’m so thirsty out here. I’m a beggar and I can’t be a chooser.

In the end, participants were well aware of their dire circumstances and understood that they were often at the mercy of other people’s ability and willingness to give. This not only placed the participants in a position of intense vulnerability, but also placed them in a position to be
extremely grateful for even the smallest offerings. Therefore, seemingly insignificant charitable
donations such as half-eaten food, spare change, and used clothing really did make the difference
in someone’s day.

Navigating Government Assistance

The final area participants found themselves navigating was the tangled web of
government assistance. In total, participants emphasized four main programs within government
assistance that held the most influence in their lives: housing, unemployment insurance,
disability insurance, and food stamps.\textsuperscript{18} To be fair, many participants, like Ashley, said that

The process to get public aid has gotten easier. I have a thirteen-year-old daughter and
when I first applied when she was a baby, I had to go into the office to apply for the
medical and food stamps. And I had to be interviewed in the office and fill out paperwork
there. But now you can do it over the phone or mail it in. So, since I don’t have
transportation, it’s much easier.

However, Ashley went on to say that “financially, there’s just no resources.” This sentiment was
shared by all participants. While everyone I interviewed was actively seeking out more
government assistance, each participant lamented the fact that benefits were being cut and that
the screening process for some programs could take months or even years. In other cases,
applicants were flat-out denied before they could even fill out the paperwork. This was the
situation Tiffany faced when she attempted to enroll in public housing.

At first, Tiffany did not want to enroll in public housing. She had worked all her life, but
after an injury she lost her job at a factory and the medical bills began piling up. Some of her

\textsuperscript{18} Five participants briefly mentioned medical coverage such as Medicaid, but nothing substantive was said about
the process of receiving this form of government assistance.
expenses were turned over to a collection agency and her “credit [score] tanked overnight.” With regard to housing, Tiffany told me that “trying to get help finding a place to stay has been the biggest challenge because if you don’t have good credit you’re basically screwed anymore because [landlords] do credit checks.” Tiffany eventually decided to try public housing, but immediately found out that she did not qualify because she was a convicted felon. During the interview, she asked,

What are [felons] supposed to do? They won’t hire you. It’s hard to find a place to live. I don’t know what they expect us to do. And some of [the crimes] are honest mistakes. I can understand that if you’re a felon and it’s a gun charge or you’re a pedophile, but little misdemeanors and felonies like drug possession charges?¹⁹

Once again, Tiffany’s story brings to light essential questions regarding homeless people who committed crimes, served time, and have not committed any crimes since being released. Without some type of process that can help reintegrate homeless people who are convicted felons into jobs and housing, many convicted felons without financial resources, education, or job skills will remain homeless with dismal opportunities for regaining independent living.

That being said, even participants who did not have felony convictions sometimes found it difficult to navigate the public housing application process. For example, both Ashley and Kristen had applied multiple times for public housing, but had so far been unsuccessful in receiving aid. Ashley claimed that “the waiting list is five miles long” and that she had “never been able to sign up for [public housing] because [the waiting list had] always been closed every time [she] tried to sign up.” Kristen did say that she had made it onto the waiting list in May

¹⁹ Tiffany said that she was charged and convicted for possession of “just one hit worth of heroin” over 15 years ago. She spent “only a few nights in jail” and was put on probation for two years. Tiffany said that this was the only time she had ever been convicted of a crime and that she has been clean ever since.
2013, but that the government worker who helped her fill out the application told her that “it
would be 18 months before something opened up.” What made Kristen’s public housing
application process even more complicated was that she was currently looking for a job. She had
gone through the résumé process and was waiting to hear back from the employer, but Kristen
was hesitant about the job opportunity because “once [she] start[ed] this job, [she was] going to
lose [her] spot in line” on the public housing waiting list.

In short, public housing has certain income thresholds that applicants must fall below.
Given that some waiting lists are 18 months long, it is easy to see why some applicants would be
hesitant about taking an entry-level job while they are on the waiting list. For instance, Kristen
might take the job and earn enough money to make her ineligible for public housing.
Consequently, she would be removed from the waiting list. If she happened to lose the job
shortly thereafter (she might not be able to perform the job and, in turn, get fired), then she
would have to reapply for housing and her application would be placed at the end of the line
where she would have to start the 18 month waiting period all over. Ultimately, one of the
problems seems to be that public housing applications do not account for fluctuating incomes
and/or job searches over the course of 18 months. If the goal is to help people obtain financial
independence, then people like Kristen should not feel conflicted about “keeping her spot in
line” or looking for work. Instead, Kristen should have felt empowered to start working without
fearing that her application would be sent to the back of the line because she suddenly made too
much money. This does not mean that Kristen should get to save her spot in line indefinitely nor
does it mean that Kristen should have received public housing if she could support herself.
However, perhaps the application screening process might think about saving spots on the
waiting list for six to twelve months for people who are adjusting to jobs they have found during
the application process. Conceivably, the security of knowing that their spots would be saved while they attempted to obtain long-term employment might be enough to encourage people like Kristen to take advantage of more employment opportunities.

Unlike Kristen, most of the participants in this study had no prospects for employment opportunities. This situation encouraged participants to file for unemployment insurance or disability insurance. Unemployment insurance is a government benefit provided to people who are currently unemployed and looking for work (“Unemployment Insurance,” 2014). In contrast, disability insurance is a government benefit provided to people who are currently unemployed and cannot work (“Disability Insurance,” 2014). While these two government assistance programs are supposed to address the needs of two different demographics, during my research I discovered that among some beneficiaries, these two programs are often used in tandem with one another.20

The most common way participants became involved with both programs was by starting off with unemployment insurance and then trying to move onto disability insurance once unemployment insurance benefits ran out. Kenneth explained the reasoning for this when he stated,

Unemployment is probably the most beneficial in terms of getting money quick and easy. All you really need to do is show them that you had a job and now you don’t. I lived off unemployment for the first couple of years after I lost my job and then that run out. I tried using computers [at the library] to look for a job. I’ve been to Manpower,21 but they’ve

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20 A 2012 report from the Government Accountability Office found that “in fiscal year 2010, 117,000 individuals received concurrent cash benefit payments from the Disability Insurance (DI) and Unemployment Insurance (UI) programs of more than $850 million…” (“Income Security,” 2012, para. 1).

21 Manpower is a temporary employment agency that helps people find short-term employment.
basically shut down unless you have an appointment. So, then I just applied for disability. Disability is a lot harder to prove and it took a few months before I got a check, but now at least I have a little bit of income.

Even though disability insurance is meant to provide benefits to people who cannot work, Kenneth was looking for a job during the time of our interview and said that he “would take any job [he] could get.” Similar to Kenneth, Brandon was also trying to utilize both insurance programs even though the programs were designed to fit the needs of two different demographics. Unlike Kenneth, Brandon was denied unemployment the first time he applied because he had recently been released from prison and therefore, had no immediate prior work history. While his unemployment insurance claim was in appeal, Brandon decided to apply for disability although he admitted that he wasn’t “really disabled” [emphasis in the original]. However, because he needed income, he thought it was a good idea to “apply for everything and see what [he] got.” Brandon also mentioned that “disability takes forever; something like six months to a year,” but went on to say that the wait was worth it because he “had to get something; disabled or not.”

In contrast to Kenneth and Brandon, Tiffany could not work because she injured her back in 2008. She ended up having a $400,000 back surgery in 2009, but the surgery could only correct so much and Tiffany was left with “permanent nerve damage in [her] left leg” and could “no longer feel [her] left foot.” Tiffany lost her job and had been in and out of homelessness ever since. If Tiffany was able to collect disability, she would be able to move into an apartment. However, she had been waiting for her disability insurance application to be accepted for five years and was no longer confident that it would ever be processed. When I asked her why it was taking so long, she said,
The hold-up is because everybody that applies to disability is denied the first time. Then you have to appeal it. So, it’s a long process waiting for the appeals to go through and a decision to be made whether you’re disabled or not. For me, I can’t work anymore and I’m eventually going to lose my left leg. Some people wait months for disability. Some people wait years. It just depends on how quickly they can verify your condition.

Listening to Tiffany’s talk about the appeals process, I could not help but think about how her situation was directly affected by Kenneth’s and Brandon’s actions. In short, disability insurance personnel had to take their time verifying Tiffany’s claim because other applicants had attempted to collect benefits for which they were not entitled. This added scrutiny slowed the process and created life-changing circumstances for Tiffany, such as loss of income, poverty, and homelessness.

While it would be easy, and justified, to blame people like Kenneth and Brandon who abused certain benefits and made it harder for others to collect, there are also bigger structural concerns that should not be ignored. For example, while Kenneth was receiving unemployment, why weren’t there job-training requirements in place to ensure that he had a job opportunity once his unemployment benefits ran out? Furthermore, why didn’t the unemployment application process and the disability application process make it clear to Brandon that he could not benefit from these programs concurrently? While Brandon’s disability application may ultimately be denied, the fact that his application is in the system and needs to be processed means that the disability insurance process will be slowed down for others. If his application is accepted, then there will be less money in the program for other beneficiaries. Notably, in June 2013, there was bipartisan legislation introduced in the United States Senate entitled the “Reducing Overlapping Payment Act” that at least began a conversation about how to end the practice of people trying to
benefit from unemployment and disability in tandem. As Senator Jeff Flake from Arizona put it, these types of reforms are needed to bring “greater solvency to the disability insurance program which so many Americans truly in need depend on” (“Senators Introduce,” 2013, para. 3). In the long term, perhaps creating a process that only allows people to apply for one benefit program at a time and forbids people from jumping from one program to the next would decrease the number of applications each program processes and allow people like Tiffany to have their applications processed much more quickly.

The final government assistance program participants discussed was food stamps. Distinctly, all 10 participants reported receiving food stamps, making food stamps the most widely-utilized form of government assistance within this study. Additionally, the reported benefits participants received from food stamps ranged from $100 - $300 per month and depended on a participant’s monthly income and family size. For example, the four single men in the study each reported receiving about $200 a month in food assistance. Arguably, this seemed like an adequate amount of money for a single man’s monthly food bill. However, the process of using food stamps as a homeless person usually meant that he only ate once or twice a day (unless he was staying at a shelter) and he often went without food during the last few days of the month.

This reality made more sense as Michael explained his daily food routine. In part, Michael said,

Eating out here ends up being like eight or ten dollars a day. And [food stamps] are kind of worthless because you can’t take food anywhere to store it and cook it. So you have to buy something that’s already made. Like I’ll go and get a six dollar salad at Schnucks and like three or four dollars worth of meat from the deli and eat it right then and there. It
should stretch out a lot more. Like eight or ten dollars should last three days at home, but you have to eat all at once out here because you can’t take food anywhere. You can’t take it to a refrigerator. You can’t save it. I don’t have a kitchen and they don’t let you bring food into Good Sam’s. So you can only buy what you can eat at the store, which is the expensive premade stuff.

Michael went onto say that when he first received his food stamp card he ate three meals a day from the Schnucks grocery store. However, Michael said that

I ran out of money in like two weeks. So, you learn to eat once a day because you can’t financially afford to eat three times a day or you’ll drain your Link card. Just imagine having eight dollar charges three times a day. You’ll be broke really quickly.

Michael’s process of buying food-as-needed was not only common among the participants, but was also the most expensive way of purchasing food. Instead of purchasing in bulk, participants bought premade meals and often threw out the leftovers.

Besides cost, there were also discussions about nutrition. For example, several participants did not have transportation to a grocery store and therefore, used their food stamps at nearby gas stations to purchase snack foods such as soda, chips, candy, and microwavable burritos. Brandon said that he likes to walk down to the Circle K because he “can get hot food there” with his chips and grape soda. As a government regulation, food stamps cannot be used to purchase hot food. However, Brandon, and others, had found a loophole. Essentially, he first purchases a frozen burger, burrito, taco, etc. from the gas station and then heats it up in the gas station’s microwave. While the nutritional options at a gas station are far scarcer compared to a grocery store, Brandon’s meal still cost him “about six dollars.” In the end, just eating this one

22 A Link card is the name of the card used in Illinois to provide people with food stamp benefits.
modest meal every day for a month could cost Brandon $180 of a $200 food stamp limit. These types of margins leave virtually no room for fulfilling meals or adequate nutrition for a homeless person who has no way to store food and no way to cook food. In the end, this food assistance structure seemed beneficial to no one. Not only were homeless people still hungry and eating packaged food, but government assistance was being used on food in the most expensive way imaginable: one microwavable burrito at a time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in Chapter 4 I looked at how participants navigated the culture of homelessness in an effort to secure basic needs and services. First, I discussed the different ways participants navigated the streets and the shelter system in order to secure shelter and safety. Next, I covered how participants worked to secure financial stability by searching for jobs, asking for charity, and applying for government assistance. While Chapter 4 primarily focused on participants’ honest attempts at helping themselves find shelter, income, and food security, unfortunately, honesty was not always practiced. As I move into Chapter 5, I will discuss some of the less honest, and downright fraudulent, ways some participants manipulated the system in order to garner sympathy, cheat the government, and obtain unwarranted benefits.
CHAPTER 5
MANIPULATING THE SYSTEM

Deanna came running into the shelter out of breath with a coy smile across her face. “Holy hell!” she shouted as she bent over to rest her hands on her knees and catch her breath. Deanna was always participating in harmless mischief so I had to ask her, “What did you do this time?” “I came about this close to going to jail,” she said while making a visual gesture with her thumb and index finger. She went on to explain that she had been down at the Circle K convenience store trying to sell off the remaining balance of her food stamps when an off-duty police officer interrupted her deal. Her plan was to sell the remaining balance of $50 for $25 and put the money toward a bus ticket. The cop told her that bargaining government benefits was illegal (which she knew), but that “he wasn’t going to bother writing [her] up because [selling food stamps] happens all the time.”

While getting caught selling $50 worth of food stamps would probably not lead to jail time in most circumstances, Deanna was currently on parole. So, if she got caught doing anything illegal, she would most likely go back to jail. Furthermore, while highlighting Deanna’s ploy to obtain $25 cash from selling food stamps may seem trivial and insignificant, her story actually illustrates a very significant example as to how some homeless people survive on a daily basis. Twenty-five dollars may not seem like a lot of money when you consider the billions of dollars spent on government assistance programs, but to a person who has no financial stability, $25 can go a long way. Arguably, these types of nickel-and-dime hustles shape a large portion of some homeless people’s financial livelihood. Therefore, in an effort to better understand homelessness, it is important to discuss both the honest and dishonest ways homeless people acquire and utilize resources.
Understandably, talking about government benefit abuse among the poor can be controversial and unpopular. However, abuse does happen (see “Profits from Poverty,” 2012; Hall, 2012; Briquelet, 2013). Therefore, in the interest of conveying a more complete narrative about the lived experiences of homeless people, it is important to this research that I write about the stories that give us hope as well as the stories that make us uncomfortable. As I have mentioned previously, when telling stories about benefit abuse it is not my intention to blame the homeless for abusing the system. Instead, I bring these stories to light because I believe they give us a more complete picture of homelessness and thus, can guide us toward creating better policies that more adequately address the needs of the homeless community. In this spirit, I will use this chapter to talk about how the participants of this study manipulated, abused, cheated, lied, and committed fraud\footnote{I am not using words like “abused” and “cheated” to judge people’s actions, but only to describe people’s actions. Furthermore, this is the type of language used by some participants to describe certain actions. For example, when talking about selling government cell phones, James said, “It’s cheatin’ the government, but they owe me!”} in order to acquire different types of benefits. In working through the various forms of deceit, Chapter 5 is organized into three different sections. First, I will continue discussing how some homeless people abuse government benefits. Second, I will talk about the different ways some homeless people scam charity. Finally, I will point out the different types of deception that happen within homeless shelters.

Manipulating the Government

As a person who had known Deanna for a number of years, Michael had seen Deanna sell her food stamp benefits at local gas stations several times. I interviewed Michael the day after Deanna had tried to sell her food stamps at the Circle K and he referred to Deanna as “just another professional hobo.” While critical of her actions, Michael was also protective of Deanna, as if she were his younger sibling. For instance, Michael said,
It’s easy for me to say this stuff about her because I’ve known her for so long. But no one else better talk bad about her [smiles]. You see, she’s always running the system looking for the next handout. Like, I think that if you have a Link card for more than a year, there’s something wrong with you. But she’s pretty much been on that card her whole life. Now, come on, you don’t need no Link card for 25 years. She’s not crippled or nothing. If you do, then fuck you. You ain’t trying to be productive. I understand some people can’t work and, I’ll be generous, maybe you need [a Link card] for five years if you have kids. But [Deanna] doesn’t have any kids. That lady you saw running in here yesterday – she’s just another professional hobo [laughs].

In discussing Deanna’s actions, Michael’s words hint at the complicated relationship between individual and systemic accountability (see Evans, 1988). At the individual level, the obvious critique is to fault Deanna for excessively using a taxpayer funded program and for illegally selling her benefits. However, at the systemic level, critics might ask why a government program allowed a 25-year-old able-bodied woman to continuously receive food stamps without any educational intervention or workforce training, which could have led to financial independence.

As noted by Evans (1988), personal and collective actions create a system that allows for the existence of homelessness. Deanna might have acted dishonestly, but the system allowed her to act dishonestly without consequence. Therefore, there were no incentives for her to change her actions. Without accountability, personal and collective actions don’t change, and the vicious cycle of homelessness continues.

Like Deanna, other homeless people also admitted to selling food stamps for cash. For instance, Brandon and Maddy used the same Circle K convenience store to sell their food stamps so they could buy personal items such as soap, shampoo, razors, tissue, toilet paper, and
cigarettes. At the time of the interviews, each was adamant that the cash received from selling food stamps was not being used to purchase alcohol or drugs. Although Maddy did admit that when she was 20 “there were plenty of times when [she] would bust off a couple ounces of cocaine” after cashing in her food stamps. When asked about why they decided to sell their food stamps, Brandon and Maddy both agreed that food stamps were essentially worthless since they were able to eat three meals a day at Good Sam’s. However, according to Maddy, when a person is homeless “it’s hard to come by good razors and good smelling shampoo.” Effectively, Brandon’s and Maddy’s needs were not being met through government assistance and they found that bargaining with food stamps, while illegal, was a reasonable way to acquire desired resources. Converting food stamps into cash simply made sense given the current situation.

When I pressed Brandon about the process of selling food stamps, I questioned him using words like “complicated” and “secret.” Brandon looked at me rather confused and said, “No man. There’s just a guy around the corner. It’s no big secret. Everybody knows him. I can put you in contact with him if you need some cash.” Brandon’s whole attitude about the process was surprisingly nonchalant and commonplace. He finished his explanation by saying that the guy around the corner “deals with someone higher up so everybody gets a cut. I give him $100 worth of food stamps and he gives me sixty bucks. It’s kinda like drugs, but it’s in the open and no one gets shot [laughs].” While I talked to a few other people who sold their Link cards on the streets, I could never track down the cards’ final destinations. My only two assumptions are that the dealers used them to purchase food, which is unlikely given the assumed quantity of cards bought, or the dealers resold the cards for a profit.

As I soon found out, dealing Link cards was just one of the ways people bent the rules in an effort to acquire cash through selling government benefits. Like the Link card dealers who
bought and sold food stamps, there were also cell phone dealers like James. James first became aware that the government supplied free cell phones to poor people in 2012 when he reapplied for food stamps. Before 2012, James remembered having to apply for each benefit separately. Now, if James applied for one service, such as food stamps, the social service worker automatically started to ask him about other services for which he may be eligible. As James mentioned, “I got one of those government phones. I be texting on it all the time. I mean, it’s free.” While the intention of the free phones is to provide poor people with a lifeline in case of emergencies and perhaps to contact loved ones or set up job interviews, James discovered that selling government cell phones was a profitable side business. James said,

I really found out by accident. I was back here and Nate kept asking me to use my phone, but I didn’t want to let him because I really didn’t know him. But then I did and he took off and I never saw him again. Anyway, I called the cell phone office to say it was stolen and they just gave me another one.

The ease with which James was able to obtain another government-funded cell phone gave him the idea to sell his cell phone every couple of months and then report it stolen. For his efforts, he only makes about $20 per phone, but since he “didn’t pay for them anyway, it’s all profit.” As for his customers, James said they are only able to use the phone for about a month until service is turned off. When I asked him why his customers paid him $20 instead of just getting their own free cell phone, James discussed three possible reasons. First, some people do not know the phones are free. Second, some people do not qualify for free phones and buying a $20 “burner phone” is easier and cheaper than getting an actual cell phone plan. Three, some people have criminal records or warrants and want to stay under the radar.
In all, the biggest motivator that drove this type of dishonest behavior seemed to be the participants’ perception that qualifying and collecting benefits was easy. As previously quoted in Chapter 4, Ashley mentioned that “the process to get public aid has gotten easier.” However, Tiffany talked about what she saw as a downside to this more convenient system. Tiffany said,

Yeah, you got people like José Thomas and Prince Riley.24 They’ve been getting checks every month for disability. They don’t need to be homeless, but they’re wasting all their money on alcohol and drugs. Everybody knows José is an alcoholic, but they just keep giving him money because disability is automatic. It’s not like they evaluate him every year. He just keeps getting it until he tells [the government] to stop. And ain’t no one’s gonna tell [the government] to stop sending them a free check. And it makes the public think that all homeless people are bums or alcoholics or addicts and we’re not. José and Prince were not residents at the shelter, but they did come in for meals a couple of times per week. According to Prince, he received about $1,000 per month through disability, but had been homeless for about “four or five years.” Unfortunately, without accountability José and Prince will most likely continue to use their government benefits to support habits that will drain their finances and keep them homeless.

Michael shared similar frustrations about an enabling system when discussing the pressure he felt from a caseworker to sign-up for disability even though he did not feel he was disabled. Michael said,

Not everyone who is homeless is qualified for disability. I think they’re qualified to get a fucking job, but you got people like this lazy caseworker pushing everyone to disability because it’s easier than helping me get a job. Shit, I’m the last person who wants a

24 Not their real names.
handout. But people keep using [disability] as a crutch. Everyone is just hanging out waiting for help with their disability form….If people aren’t working, it’s really their own fault, but then again, who’s going to hire someone who’s been playing the system for ten or fifteen years. Shit, some of them make more money sitting on their ass collecting disability than working for $9 an hour.

Again, in reporting these observations, it is not my intention to demonize those homeless people who misuse government resources. In fact, in Michael’s case, he places some of the blame on a caseworker when talking about filing disability applications under false pretenses. Quite rightly, he asked, “Why does she think she’s knows I’m disabled? She’s not a doctor.”

Therefore, instead of demonizing the homeless for exploiting loopholes in the system, I continue to lean on Evans’s (1988) idea that homelessness exists because personal behaviors and collective institutions create an environment that leads to poor choices and unintended outcomes. Ironically, free cell phone peddler James fully understood how personal choices and bad policy trapped people in homelessness. James said, “I’ve been around [homeless] people for 30 years. They’re always doing the same shit and they’ll keep doing the same shit as long as you allow it.”

For these reasons, it is imperative to create policies that will encourage the homeless to learn skills that can lead to long-term financial independence (Olasky, 1992) instead of supporting policies that incite them to barter food stamps, peddle government cell phones, and exaggerate disability forms for short-term financial gains.

Manipulating Charity

In addition to government benefit abuse, some homeless people abused charity through exaggeration and dishonesty. According to the participants, they did not act dishonestly to be malicious, but rather dishonesty was “sometimes necessary” in order to survive the daily grind of
being homeless. Rather bluntly, Ashley remarked that “you can’t just make it on the government. You can’t. So, you have to find other ways to scrape together money.” The most common way participants abused charity was by taking advantage of sympathetic friends and family members. Consider Kenneth’s story. Because Kenneth had experience in the service industry, he knew several people in Carbondale who worked as custodians, maintenance workers, and housekeepers at local hotels. He was able to use these connections to get a good deal at a hotel, but after a few nights he ran out of money. Kenneth continued,

I got in pretty good with the assistant manager at this hotel, and since John [the custodian] knew me, the manager let me slide on the rent for a couple of nights. He kinda started a tab for me. But then it got to where I was owing so much money that he said “You gotta go.” Well, I didn’t want to go because it was cold. So I made him feel bad about throwing me out and he gave me a couple more days to get the money together, but I eventually just ducked out early and never paid him.

Kenneth went on to say that “this type of thing happened” at several other hotels and that it ultimately ended his friendship with John. According to Kenneth, John said that Kenneth “took advantage” of their friendship and “made him look like an asshole in front of his boss.” Furthermore, John said that Kenneth would have “figured out how to get the money” if he really cared about John. These types of “taking advantage” narratives were common among participants who had experienced strained relationships with friends and family members. Unsurprisingly, the pattern of each narrative was similar. First, a person would become homeless. Second, the homeless person’s family and friends would help out him or her. Third, according to the family or friends, the homeless person would “take advantage” of the resources by staying at a friend’s house for too long, using money for drugs or alcohol, not looking for a
job, disappearing for several days, or lying about where money was going. Finally, the relationship would dissolve.

In the case of Ashley, her relationship with her father dissolved after she improperly used the charity her father afforded her through his retirement account. According to Ashley, she was supposed to use the money her father gave her to take some additional college courses so she could get a new job that was not physically demanding (with respect to Ashley’s back injury). But Ashley “stopped going to school halfway through the term” and used the rest of her tuition money to buy food, Christmas presents for her daughter, and winter clothing for her family. Upset that Ashley used the money on “unnecessary things” and was no longer trying to learn new skills so she could gain financial independence, Ashley’s father cut off personal and financial support to his daughter. Defiant, Ashley mentioned that her father did not understand what it was like to be homeless and that quitting school was the best option for her and her family at the time. Perhaps Ashley’s father did not know what was best for Ashley and her family. However, Ashley’s father gave her money specifically for tuition and when the money was used for other reasons, Ashley said that her father had felt “cheated and lied to.”

Beyond friends and family, some participants also exaggerated or lied about their circumstances to obtain charity from strangers. As a person who has worked and lived around homeless people, I have heard plenty of stories about homeless people who lied about their circumstances to manipulate a stranger into giving them spare change or buying them some food, clothing, or even a night in a hotel. And while conducting this research, I actually caught a participant in a boldfaced lie as he stood on the corner asking drivers for spare change.

In short, I had interviewed Kenneth about two weeks before the incident and felt like I knew his background fairly well. However, on this particular day, I drove by Kenneth and saw
that he was holding a sign that read, “HOMELESS. HAVE SON. PLEASE HELP US. GOD BLESS.” Based on our interview, it was my understanding that Kenneth did not have any immediate family, let alone a son whom he had to support. I immediately pulled into a parking lot and approached Kenneth with my audio-recorder. “Kenneth, I didn’t know you had a son,” I said. Kenneth replied, “Oh, I don’t. I just borrowed this sign from Tracy while he’s at work.” Kenneth’s attitude was casual and he remained focused on his panhandling. As I continued interviews with other participants I learned that sign-sharing was fairly common based on people’s schedules. In some cases, current homeless people simply inherited signs from former homeless people who found shelter or left town. As a result, unless the person holding the sign actually created the sign, it is reasonable to question the sign’s accuracy. And then again, sometimes even the sign’s creator just makes stuff up.

While dishonest, when one thinks about the objectives of a panhandler, one begins to realize that the sign’s accuracy is actually irrelevant. Instead, like any good salesperson, a panhandler’s main concern is whether the sign works. Tiffany used to panhandle with her aforementioned colleagues José Thomas and Prince Riley, but stopped once she decided that she wanted to get sober. For her, it was too tempting to use the money on alcohol. Tiffany said,

I know panhandling is wrong, but if people are willing to give, I don’t know what the big deal is. It’s not hurting anyone. What is it hurting for them to panhandle? I mean, if [people] don’t want to give you money, they’re not going to give you money. I’ve known José for 13 years now and people hand him money left and right. We sometimes made up to $600 a day on a weekend and most of it went to alcohol. You just got to know the right spots and give people a good line of bull. If they give you money, it’s not hurting anyone.
Like most people who find themselves in difficult circumstances, homeless people learn to adapt so that they can survive. For example, telling someone that you need spare change because you are a middle-aged alcoholic does not get you very far. However, Tiffany, Kenneth, Joe, and Philip discussed how panhandlers used key words such as “family,” “son,” “daughter,” “child,” “veteran,” and “God bless” to earn sympathy regardless of the validity of the terms’ contexts or merits. Dishonesty aside, there is a legitimate method to these tactics that should be appreciated for its organization and ingenuity. And while I remain conflicted about the manipulative and deceitful strategies employed by some of the homeless to acquire charitable support from well-meaning citizens, I continually find myself reflecting on the ethnographic work of Conover (1984) and Riis (1890) who remind us of the vast cultural differences between those who are housed and those who are homeless. Therefore, even though I am conflicted about the deceit, I also recognize that my cultural circumstances allow me regular access to food, clothing, and shelter. Provided more dire circumstances, I may become less conflicted.

Manipulating Homeless Shelters

The final area where I found manipulation and abuse happening within the homeless community was at the homeless shelter. Like other programs that were being abused, I understand manipulation within homeless shelters as a result of personal choices and systemic shortfalls. Taking note of Olasky’s (1992) conclusions, social programs designed to help the homeless are successful when they uphold rigid structure and require clients to contribute to the shelter’s operation and maintenance. Conversely, while I was researching at Good Sam’s, I observed lenient standards, unclear policies, and general chaos. In Good Sam’s defense, there were a plethora of reasons why such chaos existed. Most notable were the lack of finances that led to staff reductions and a general lack of oversight. Regardless of the reasons, the results were
ultimately the same: Less structure created an environment where clients could manipulate the rules without consequence.

To some regard, many of the ways people manipulated the shelter were innocuous. For example, every day there were always a few people who skipped out on completing their daily chore. Most chores were supposed to be completed after each meal, but some people would eat quickly and leave the shelter before the meal was completed so that they would not have to sweep the floors, wash the dishes, wipe the tables, or put away the chairs. Markedly, these residents were not leaving early for work (employed residents received late-night chores such as laundry and cleaning the bathroom). Instead, these residents were leaving early so they could go hang out with friends. Inevitably, another resident would volunteer to complete the chore, but it bothered me that certain residents were not contributing to the maintenance of the shelter. Effectively, the residents who avoided doing chores were benefitting from the services of the shelter, but were not being asked to change their personal behaviors (see MacDonald, 2000). Systemically, since there were no consequences for their actions, these residents continued to manipulate the daily chore schedule.

People also manipulated the shelter in more serious ways that cost the shelter valuable resources and money. According to Tiffany,

There was a lady who just passed through here last week with two kids. She was just using the shelter as a hotel. People do that more than [the staff] knows. They’ll just call you all when they’re driving and give you some sob story and then end up in the shelter for two or three days, but really that lady was on her way to Memphis, Tennessee. And you hear them out at the picnic table talking and you figure it out and they’re just going
to see a boyfriend or a girlfriend or something like that and they just don’t want to spend the money on a hotel.

In this example, manipulating the shelter for a couple nights’ of sleep during travel might only cost the shelter an occupied bed, food, and some additional cleaning cost. However, it can cost the shelter hundreds of dollars when the shelter decides to help the person with travel expenses. In the following passage, James explains how he and his friend Robert traveled to Florida and back during a winter “10 years ago” for a free six-month vacation. James said,

Some of these hoboes literally get off a bus or a train and they give [the staff] a story and they end up staying here for a couple of day and then you guys end up giving them a train ticket and then they go back to wherever-the-hell they came from. That’s how me and Robert did it. It was a total bullshit story. Hell, you can tell [shelter workers] anything: need to get home, have a job down south, going to rehab. But [shelter workers] are just getting played for free bus tickets.

While traveling to Florida, James and Robert stayed at various homeless shelters along the way until they could find an agency that would give them enough money to pay for the next leg of the trip. James said that they told people they were construction workers heading to Florida to find work during the winter. In reality, they just wanted to spend the winter in Florida. During one night when they could not find a shelter, Robert, a diabetic, allowed his blood sugar to spike so they could stay at the hospital for a few days. With no place to go once discharged, the hospital paid for a cab to drive them 30 minutes to the nearest homeless shelter.

Whereas some travelers inappropriately used homeless shelters as hotels, other people misused homeless shelters as community lounges instead of using them as places to find services. As a shelter intent on helping homeless people transition into a home, Good Sam’s
policy stated that people were supposed to vacate the shelter’s premises every afternoon to look for jobs or meet with social workers. However, a few people regularly ignored these requirements and instead spent the afternoons sleeping in their rooms, watching television, playing video games, playing cards, or smoking out back. While these types of activities are harmless and much could be written about the need for leisurely activities in order to de-stress, I specifically want to highlight those individuals who participated in these activities every day. As a result, these individuals left the shelter after 30 days with no more resources, job prospects, or abilities to obtain housing. Critical of some of his fellow residents, Michael said,

Some people here are just concerned with rolling their tobacco and getting a hold of their next tobacco bag because they don’t want anything else. I mean, they’ve got a bed and they’ve got some food and they’ve got another shelter to go to after this one because that’s what they do. They just travel from shelter to shelter.

While I have no qualms with people who choose to live this type of lifestyle, I would point out two concerns. First, I am concerned that some people might be making these choices by default because they are unaware of how the shelter can help them obtain housing. If this is the case, then the shelter needs to do a better job promoting structure, job skills, and benefit opportunities. Second, for those people who are voluntarily choosing to “travel from shelter to shelter,” I am concerned about how organizations are allocating finite resources. In short, should homeless shelters subsidize people who actively choose not to support themselves (see Schiff, 1990) at the expense of allocating fewer resources to people who are trying to support themselves? To this question, shelters might consider instituting more rigorous community standards in order to create an environment where all clients must actively pursue education, work, and housing or face eviction.
These kinds of policy changes were anything but hypothetical and were fiercely debated among staff members during my time at Good Sam’s. For example, during one particularly heated rant, my supervisor, Tony,\(^{25}\) said that the shelter’s social worker responsible for overseeing intake was too nice and allowed too many people to overstay their 30 day limit. In her defense, Maria’s\(^{26}\) policy was to let people overstay their 30 day limit when they could demonstrate that they were actively securing a job or housing and only “needed a few more days” to finalize. However, Tony’s argument was that people were getting “too comfortable” at the shelter and that providing exceptions to any person meant that the shelter had to provide exceptions to every person. As evidence would show, there seemed to be validity for Tony’s argument. When I first started this research at Good Sam’s, the daily “resident log” listed about three out of twenty-five residents staying at the shelter for longer than 30 days. Within three months this number had climbed to nearly half of the residents staying longer than 30 days. A few residents had even been allowed to stay longer than 60 days; far beyond the “few more days” exception. Again, these examples point to breakdowns at both the personal and systemic levels.

Of course, this breakdown in policy did not go unnoticed by residents. Discussing how residents stayed beyond the 30 day limit, Brandon said,

I haven’t seen one [resident] yet leave on their own. Like you just get here one day and leave when you want I guess. Most people aren’t really worried about the next step….As long as you show Maria a piece of paper from the county or some application, she’ll let you stay as long as you want.

\(^{25}\) Not his real name.

\(^{26}\) Not her real name.
A shelter extension policy that allows residents to turn in paperwork proving their efforts to obtain a job or housing may work with residents who are honest about their efforts and honest with their paperwork. But, according to Michael, this was not always the case. Michael said,

All I know is that I’m allowed to witness things that [the staff] will never be subjected to because you work here. You know they’re not going to tell you the truth. You think I always told the truth to my probation officer? It doesn’t take a genius to forge a piece of paper that says, “I looked for a job today.” I never looked for no job while I was selling [drugs]. But I had to get the paperwork so I was legit.

When asked about how he would address the loopholes in the policy that allowed some residents to lie about their paperwork, Michael continued,

You just have to be observant. Obviously I’ve heard people talking when they’re outside and there’s no staff around and they’re free to talk. You have no idea who these people are or what they do to manipulate everybody. I just don’t trust them about anything.

While Michael’s comments seemed cynical about the ability to trust other residents, it is important to remember that his comments are rooted in personal experiences: first, experiences where he lied about job applications to appease authority and second, experiences where he witnessed others lying about job applications to appease authority. Therefore, while I might debate the extent to which forgery and manipulation happens among the homeless, it is still important to recognize these types of lived experiences as valid and useful to my understanding of the homeless community as a whole. As Michael reminded me, I am an outsider who is not allowed to witness everything that he is allowed to witness. Consequently, there are simply times when I have to humble myself and trust the reported experiences of those who are homeless.
In the end, the root of this research is to embrace the narratives of homeless people as sites of knowledge production. Therefore, communicating narratives about manipulation is just as important as communicating narratives about job loss, home loss, illness, substance abuse, and fractured families. Collectively, all of these narratives provide us a more complete understanding of how homeless people navigate their daily lives. As policymakers continue to create models aimed at ending homelessness, they must be willing to listen to the comfortable and the uncomfortable truths. By embracing both the honest and manipulative ways homeless people navigate the culture of homelessness, we become better informed about the culture of homelessness and thus, can create policies that better addresses these realities.

Conclusion

In Chapter 5 I discussed how some homeless people manipulated the system to receive additional benefits. First, I talked about how some homeless people exploited government benefits by selling food stamps, government-funded cell phones, and exaggerating disability claims. Second, I covered how some homeless people scammed charity by misleading family members, friends, and strangers for money and other resources. Finally, I wrote about how some homeless people abused homeless shelters by ignoring policies, treating shelters like hotels, and swindling shelters for travel assistance. In the first three chapters of analysis, I discussed how homeless people narrated experiences about losing everything, navigating homelessness, and manipulating the system for additional benefits. In the final chapter of analysis, “Seeking Recognition/Finding Community,” I will discuss the aspirations of the participants and talk about how the participants create a supportive community with other homeless people.
CHAPTER 6
SEEKING RECOGNITION/FINDING COMMUNITY

During the data collection process I was always able to tell when the interview was coming to a close because each participant exhibited the same non-verbal cues: sunken shoulders, eyes focused downward, slowed speech, and a quieting voice just above a whisper. These were the signs of exhaustion. Each participant had just shared his or her story of homelessness and the emotional toll of sharing that story was visible. Under the breathlessness of these closing minutes participants spoke more philosophically about the complicated relationships between the homeless and the housed as well as discussed their long-term hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Instead of driving the conservations with specific questions during this portion of the interview, I usually sat back and listened to the participant openly reflect on his or her life. It was almost as if I were not there and the participant was simply thinking out loud about the broader implications of homelessness, home, and his or her sense of belonging.

The most poignant closing remarks came from Kristen. While working at the shelter I had gotten to know Kristen over the course of five weeks before I approached her for an interview. Our relationship was warm and friendly and she expressed no hesitations about our meeting. In fact, her face lit up when I asked her if we could talk after my shift ended at four o’clock in the afternoon. The interview had its predictable ups and downs as Kristen shared her struggles and her joys. However, her final thoughts caught me off-guard and stirred deep emotional conflict. As Kristen talked about her relationship with the shelter staff, she said,

You know, a little bit of thought goes a long way. And a little bit of compassion. You all don’t need to treat us like we’re just a part of your job because this is our lives. For you
this is a job. You all come here at eight o’clock in the morning and you leave at five, but I’m stuck here 24/7. You know what I mean?

Her tone was not malicious, but calm and composed. The question was rhetorical. Yet, I found her words alarming and damning and this prompted me to initiate an immediate defense of my work at the shelter and my work as a researcher. While I did not interrupt Kristen’s soliloquy I did stop actively listening to her in that moment and focused my internal thoughts toward self-affirmation and research-confirmation. My work was justified!

When I finally returned to the audio during the transcription phase, I listened to this portion of Kristen’s interview numerous times. Each time I listened I became less defensive and could better hear her critique. Kristen was right and even the most well-intentioned and knowledgeable volunteers, social workers, and academics sometimes fall short of fully embodying the type of care, consideration, and compassion necessary when addressing the issue of homelessness. Continuing to voice her frustration, Kristen mentioned that “no one seems to care that I have a family and I’d like to get back home. I have dreams just like everyone else, but you treat me like I’m just your job.” Admittedly, straddling the line between broad shelter policy and individual empathy is difficult. On most days there were simply too many people to manage and too many tasks to complete for me to provide any resident with meaningful and extended personalized attention. As a staff member, it was my job to make sure that the shelter ran smoothly, not that people’s emotions were validated or dreams actualized. I wasn’t a therapist. However, this policy-first approach had clearly upset Kristen and her statements made me think more deeply about the humanizing effects of individualized recognition and encouraged me to be more receptive to Kristen’s dreams. More specifically, I asked myself, “What were Kristen’s dreams?” and “Would my work help her achieve her dreams?”
As discussed throughout this research, those who are marginalized are often at the mercy of those who have power (see Mendoza, 2005; Moon, 1996). For those who are homeless, their lives are shaped by the policies and influences of the housed. This includes everyone from very powerful politicians who shape welfare programs to less powerful shelter workers who shape chore schedules and dictate bedtimes. While these policies may come from a desire to end homelessness, Kristen’s remarks remind us that listening to the desires of the homeless should be an important factor in this process. After all, the homeless are the people whose lives are most affected by these policies. Without recognizing the dreams of those who are homeless, policymakers might craft policy that is out of sync with homeless people’s ambitions and thus, make it less likely that a homeless person will want to participate in a certain program. Worse yet is the notion that the homeless are made to feel like “projects,” as opposed to people, when they are not included in policy discussion. In the end, even if certain policies remain unchanged, making sure that the goals and desires of the homeless have been heard can still help to create a sense of ownership, empowerment, inclusion, and community.

With these ideas in mind, this final chapter of analysis is specifically concerned with how the participants articulate their aspirations as well as how they create a sense of belonging with other homeless people. First, I will discuss how the participants are seeking recognition from the housed population. Second, I will emphasize how the participants are searching for stability by entering rehab, reuniting with family, and looking for work. Finally, I will highlight how the participants are finding community with other people who are homeless. By better understanding the aspirations of the homeless, my hope is that this chapter will provide some insight about how we might build stronger intercultural relationships between the homeless and the housed as well
as how we might work together to forge policies that can better help the homeless reach their goals while validating their humanity and cultivating a sense of community.

Seeking Recognition

Quite frankly, most of the time the participants felt like no one cared about them or their situations. These feelings are in line with DePastino’s (2003) observation that homeless people are not recognized by the larger culture because the homeless have no tangible space of belonging. The homeless have no land, no house, and very little property. These materials are symbolic of a person’s establishment, usefulness, and contributions in society. Without these items, people are relegated as less important and prone to becoming invisible. In this study, the most jarring example of how the homeless became invisible was offered by Tiffany. When speaking about the need for southern Illinois to address the increasing homeless population, Tiffany said,

I thought they were going to do something when they had it on the news about the homeless guy who was found dead on that porch next to the laundry mat a few months ago. And then [the news coverage] was all that happened! People quit talking about it the next day! They just don’t care! They don’t give a shit! They don’t!

During this portion of the interview, Tiffany was speaking fast and shouting. She was using this moment to indict both the callousness and indifference of southern Illinois residents. She continued her tirade by explaining the complicated matrix that sometimes prohibited homeless people from accessing shelter. Tiffany said,

There’s a lot of homeless people right now who can’t even come into Good Sam’s or go to The Lighthouse or Herrin27 and they’re just basically in the weather all the time and

27 Herrin is a town 15 miles from Carbondale that also has services and shelter for the homeless.
it’s just not fair. I can understand banning them if they’re die hard criminals or if there’s alcohol or drugs, but there’s got to be a different way. You can’t just let people freeze to death on the streets.

For Tiffany, the death of this man was personal because she identified with his situation. She may have been expressing anger on his behalf, but her comments were also prompted by the general lack of recognition she had felt on a daily basis. His death represented her invisibility as a homeless person in southern Illinois. She finished this part of the interview by bringing attention to her own story. Tiffany concluded,

The community needs to open their eyes up to the homeless. We’re not all bad people. People lose their jobs. The community automatically thinks that if you’re homeless it’s drug-related or alcohol-related and it’s not. It’s loss of jobs. It is. Darren\textsuperscript{28} lost his job.

We had our own place that was $500 every month. Now it’s gone. And when you don’t have anything everybody acts like you don’t matter anymore. It’s hard.

Even though she felt invisible, Tiffany refused to give up and even discussed her long-term goal of giving back by helping the homeless. Because she was living through homelessness, Tiffany felt that she was in a position to best understand what the homeless needed as well as what the larger southern Illinois community needed to understand about the homeless. Once she and Darren got a house, Tiffany planned on being more active with the city government and also joked that if she won the lottery, she was “going to build a big-ass homeless shelter” so that no one had to sleep outside anymore.

While recognizing the presence of the homeless through government policy, news media, and community awareness seems like a positive step toward helping the homeless, some

\textsuperscript{28} Darren is Tiffany’s husband. Darren is not his real name.
participants pointed out the unintended consequences of increased attention. As discussed by Ashley when recalling her story about panhandling, “Once the cops know where you are, they might stop by five or six times a day and tell you to move.” Ashley’s husband Philip shared a similar hesitation about public exposure as he discussed his family’s appearance on a local news network. The news story was intended to be a human interest piece about homeless families in southern Illinois. While Philip originally embraced the interview as a chance to bring attention to the plight of homeless families in general and his family in particular, he was not pleased with the final version of the story. Philip said,

You know the [news] had us portrayed as bad people because they left out so much stuff. And after doing that interview, that led to us getting kicked out over at the [motel] because of the bad publicity. [The motel] didn’t want to be associated with us living there. The public was really nice to us before all of that and we really appreciate what [the public was] doing, but when the news came out [the news] switched [our story] all around like we were just out here to scam people.

The alleged “scam” Philip was discussing was the fact that he and his wife sometimes had their four-year-old daughter with them when they panhandled. According to Philip, she was only with them when other family members could not babysit her and Philip “couldn’t very much leave her alone in a hotel room all day.” Essentially, she was with her parents all day like any other four-year-old would be with his or her parents all day. However, Philip said the news sensationalized his family’s story and made it sound like he and his wife were “using her to get sympathy” from the public.

In addition to sensationalizing their story, Philip was also upset that the news made him look ungrateful. When discussing the story’s omissions, Philip said,
The news just put what they wanted out there and they didn’t put anything about us thanking the public or anything like that or anything about our gratitude. You know I’m very grateful to the public because I used to be the person in the car driving by and helping people. So I know what it takes to help a stranger.

To Philip, communicating appreciation was important because it created a bond between him and the public. As Philip put it, “You have to say ‘thank you’ because we’re all in this together.” Philip’s gratitude was his way of recognizing the public for recognizing and supporting his family. The relationship was supposed to be reciprocal as a means of strengthening the bond, but since the news edited out his “thank you,” Philip felt like the news was responsible for weakening his family’s relationship with the public. Philip’s story demonstrates the difficult choices some homeless people face when seeking recognition. In one regard, it might be a good idea to use the media to highlight homelessness within one’s community. However, as Philip learned, once you agree to make your story public, you do not always know how it will be edited and interpreted. Therefore, it was not solely recognition that Philip sought on behalf of homeless families, but recognition that challenged negative stereotypes. Unfortunately, one story with unfavorable editing may actually reinforce those negative stereotypes and create an even wider relational chasm between the homeless and the housed.

Of course negative interpretations of public stories like Philip’s have broader implications for other members of the homeless community as well. For example, as Kenneth discussed the negative stereotypes associated with homeless people, he mentioned that some people go out of their way just to shout insults at him. In response to these individuals, Kenneth said,
The heartless people are difficult. If you don’t want to give me anything, then don’t give me anything. You don’t have to holler at me. Just go about your own life. Don’t worry about me like you basically don’t anyway.

In this passage, we once again see the difficult terrain that is navigated by the homeless when they make their presence known. Kenneth clearly wanted to be recognized by the public because he was standing on a public corner with a sign asking people for assistance. However, when confronted with negative recognition Kenneth mentioned that people should “just go about” their own lives and not worry about him.

The broader implications of both Philip’s and Kenneth’s stories are their lack of control over personal narratives. Each man wanted recognition where he could have greater control over both content and context. For homeless people who are already vulnerable to negative stereotypes, ignorance, and invisibility (see Smiley & West 2012; Wasserman & Clair, 2010), the ability to control one’s public image is increasingly important. However, controlling one’s image may prove difficult since housed people are more likely to get their information about homelessness from government officials, medical professionals, or local news stories rather than speaking directly with a homeless person (see Campbell & Reeves, 1989).

Ultimately, Kristen said that homeless people do not want any special treatment and that they are tired of being looked down upon all the time. They just want to be recognized “as any other normal person in your neighborhood” who happens to be going through a “rough spot at the moment.” There is no need to demonize, sensationalize, or even lionize their experiences. Homeless people simply want to be treated like people. Grabbing my hand on top of the picnic bench, Kristen humorously reaffirmed this when she closed our conversation with, “You tell ‘em that it’s okay to talk to us. We won’t bite.”
Searching for Stability

The invisibility participants felt was simply one more layer that made homelessness mentally and emotionally difficult. Beyond the physical challenges of finding work, income, and housing, homelessness was also described as a state of mind. For example, while fighting for physical survival, participants also fought for affirmation, sobriety, and family relationships. Even though many of their situations were dire, participants discussed the need to focus on their short-term and long-term goals and, according to Maddy, “just get out of the bed every morning and pound the pavement.” These mental and emotional struggles often determined participants’ optimism, and a steadfast focus on their aspirations provided participants hope for the future. While income and housing gave participants a solid financial foundation for survival, many said that successfully conquering their mental and emotional tribulations is what would truly give them a sense of stability.

One of the first major struggles some participants discussed was alcohol and/or drug abuse. Notably, substance abuse among these participants was a complicated subject because sometimes the abuse led to homelessness and other times the abuse began as a way to cope with homelessness. Whatever the case may have been, each participant who struggled with substance abuse understood sobriety as an important step in their journey out of homelessness. At the time of the interviews, three participants admitted to regularly using alcohol or drugs and were self-described addicts. Two additional participants had previously been addicts and were now sober, but would “always struggle with this demon.” One current user, James, indicted that he “wishes” to be sober and described his current alcohol abuse as the “last big hurdle.” James said,

Oh, I can [work], but no one wants to hire me because of my drug charge. And since I can’t work, I drink. I can’t get a job anyway. It’s just back-and-forth. Maybe if I could
stay sober for six months or a year and have some caseworker vouch for me, then an employer might say, “Well all that’s in the past, so we’ll hire you.” But who wants to stay sober when you have to live out here. Hell, I couldn’t live out here if I didn’t drink [laughs].

Like James, other participants described the temptation of alcohol and/or drugs and the impact it had on their ability to find financial, mental, and emotional stability. While she had been sober for more than five years at the time of our interview, Maddy still attended Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous meetings at least once a week. For Maddy, attending these meetings was necessary so she could remind herself never to abuse alcohol or drugs again. However, these meetings also reminded her of her past and each time she went it was “like a reminder of how [she] messed up [her] life.” Maddy continued,

I mean, I want a normal home life like everybody else, which sounds kind of stupid because I don’t even know what a “normal home” is. It just sucks because I made stupid mistakes with drugs when I was younger and I’m still paying for it and I’ll always be paying for it because I have to go to these meetings all the time. Going to A.A. isn’t “normal.”

For Maddy, going to these meetings was her choice. She was not under any sort of court order or parole obligation. Her attendance was completely voluntary and put her in a bind. If she did not attend, she worried that she would relapse. Yet, her attendance made her feel like she was still an addict and incapable of living a normal life. She had not yet figured out to be at peace with this paradox and until she could, she worried that she would never “be happy.”

In addition to sobriety, participants also wanted to reestablish relationships with family members. By healing family relationships, participants hoped that they would be afforded a fresh
start. Much like Maddy’s description of alcohol and drug abuse, lingering family friction reminded participants of their past lives and many believed that they could not move forward with their lives until they had made amends. In one example, Tiffany said that nothing would feel more like “home” than having her son back in her life. However, about two years ago, Tiffany and her son had an argument over him losing his job. Tiffany said,

I blew up at him because he had a career with the Army National Guard and he wouldn’t listen to them and he messed up real bad and got kicked out. So I got real mad at him for screwing up his life and some words were exchanged and that was it. And he’s homeless like we are now and I don’t want to see him homeless.

Tiffany’s son still lives around the southern Illinois area and she sees him “every once in a while.” However, they never speak to one another because “he’s never forgiven” her for some of the things she said about him. If Tiffany had to choose, she said she would rather have a relationship with her son and live on the streets than get an apartment right now because an apartment “is a building” whereas her son makes her feel like she “is home.”

Finally, participants talked about finding stability in work. For many, work was not only about the money, but about helping them feel like productive members of society. According to Brandon, “Work just makes you feel good.” After spending time in jail, Brandon said he waits for the day when he “can have a normal job like a normal person.” He continued,

I just want to get all of these fines paid off, get off parole, and stay out of trouble. I’m gonna get me a job and just stay with my family and work. That’s my main goal. I don’t want to be no CEO of no company or anything special like that. I don’t need to be rich or

29 Tiffany would not say what she had said to her son because she couldn’t bring herself to “repeat those awful things.”
nothing. I just want to have a regular job so I can see my family and maybe they’ll finally be proud of me [laughs].

Brandon’s final remarks about his family “finally being proud” were in reference to his lengthy criminal past. In addition to financial stability, work was Brandon’s way of turning a corner and creating a new life for himself. The importance of steady work was its ability to prove to Brandon that he could have the life he imagined. Instead of being a criminal, he could be a family man. Instead of always taking from society, work provided him a means of giving back. And with any luck, work would bring him peace.

Finding Community

The compounded search for work, family, and stability coupled with the lack of humanizing public recognition caused many of the participants to express feelings of intense loneliness and desperation. To help alleviate some of these feelings the participants formed small groups or partnerships. While these partnerships were no substitute for family, there was reassurance in knowing that many participants had a supportive community that was willing to stand by them while they navigated homelessness. In addition to camaraderie and empathy, these interpersonal relationships also served a practical function. Mainly, because the possibility of becoming homeless is so foreign to many people, few people ever prepare for the day when they may have to live on the streets. Therefore, living in community with other homeless people was a way to share knowledge, resources, and burdens.

Joe remembers his first few weeks living on the streets and how thankful he was to have Kenneth by his side. When Joe became homeless, Kenneth had already been living on the streets for four years and had cultivated a lot of practical experience. Joe said,
This is my first time being on the streets. When you’re 34 and never been homeless before you really don’t see it happening to you. [Before you become homeless] you think, “Well I made it this far in life without any real problems so I’ll be fine.” But when you get out here you have no freakin’ idea what to do. But luckily I had Kenneth and he’s helped me with some of the ins and outs. He really showed me the ropes; like dealing with all the people. I’ve never been much dealing with new people, but he helped me go to this welfare office and this church and now I’m out here asking people for money. So he really helped me in that way so I can interact with people now because you have to [interact with people] so much.

Joe felt fortunate to have found a partnership with someone as experienced as Kenneth who could help him with the daily tasks of navigating homelessness. However, practical experience is not the only characteristic these types of partnerships bring. These partnerships also bring solace and the comfort of knowing that someone else understands your situation and your burdens. These were the kinds of sentiments expressed by Tiffany when she spoke about her relationship with her husband Darren.

At the time of our interview, Tiffany had been homeless, on and off, for four years. When she first became homeless she was in a relationship with a man named Dominic.30 In the following passage, she describes the difference between being homeless with Dominic and being homeless with Darren. Tiffany said,

Homelessness is a lot to take in. I mean, it’s easier having someone going through it with you who is committed to getting out. With Dominic, he didn’t want to work. He didn’t even want to work at getting work. So it was like I was pulling weight for two people and

30 Not his real name.
at the time I had no idea what I was doing. So I was kind of figuring it all out by myself.

With Darren, he had a job he lost because of my surgery, but we pulled together and we’re working on getting out together. I don’t think I could make it alone. I don’t think anyone can make it out here alone. With Dominic I was pretty much alone anyway and it wasn’t working. I don’t feel alone with Darren. We’ll get out.

While Tiffany was literally in the same financial and housing situation with Darren as she was with Dominic, her attitude and outlook were different. Whereas Tiffany and Dominic clashed over expectations and work ethic, Tiffany and Darren shared the same expectations regarding how they could work together to find stable housing and stable income. Sharing these goals with Darren provided Tiffany hope and relieved her of some emotional angst. Instead of Tiffany navigating homelessness alone, Darren was willing to carry part of that stressful burden.

To be sure, not every working relationship within the homeless community was as amiable as Tiffany and Darren’s relationship. Instead, like most communities, the participants in this study had interpersonal conflicts with other homeless people whom they needed to interact with on a daily basis in order to survive. The most colorful story I encountered that illustrated how some participants negotiated community standards involved ongoing tensions between Joe, Kenneth, Philip, and Ashley. In short, Joe and Kenneth panhandled together at one corner while Philip and Ashley panhandled together at a different corner. When Kenneth described the conflict, he said,

Me and Philip were fighting over this corner because it gets the most traffic. The way I think it should go is that if you want the corner – and I told him this – then I said, “If you

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31 According to Tiffany, Darren lost his job because she had surgery and his company was not willing to pay for the increasing price of his health insurance.
want the corner, then get your lazy ass out the damn bed and get the corner!” But his wife [Ashley] was trying to crowd me off the corner and said it was unfair that I only got the good corner cause I sleep right over there.

During her interview, Ashley discussed her perspective on the situation. Ashley said,

> You know, I’m a big girl and I can’t walk very far or very fast. So I always tried to take that corner and I’d sometimes wake up at 6:30 in the morning just to beat Kenneth there, but I could never get there fast enough. And we had some pushing wars and stuff and finally we all just sat down and said, “Hey, this is crazy. There’s plenty of corners out here for everyone.” So we started switching days. “You out there one day and we’re there the next day.” Now it’s pretty cool and everybody gets along.

For his part, Philip claimed to be the person who came up with the schedule. When discussing his role in the agreement, Philip said,

> Now we work together. And when new people come out here we kind of show them what territory they can have. You know, because people used to call the police on me and Kenneth when we was out there arguing. But it ain’t worth all that attention cause it gives the wrong impression to the people about who we are and what we’re about. We had our little turf war, but we had to come to an agreement because if we fought all the time, then no one gets nothing. I mean, you don’t have to like everybody out here, but you have to learn to help each other out and watch each other’s back because we’re all out here struggling.

The two partnerships still bickered about the corners, but each recognized the need to resolve the conflict in a way that would be beneficial to everyone. Furthermore, each partnership recognized
that their individual reputations were tied to the public’s overall perception of the homeless community. According to Joe,

Some of the people I’ve met out here I wouldn’t have even thought twice about associating with because I thought I was better than them. But [Philip and Ashley] actually turned my outlook on things completely around because I saw that we were all in the same boat. Do I like them? No. But we all kind of have to get along because we’re all kind of doing the same job, if that makes sense.

In this passage, Joe began to recognize that he was part of a homeless community and that the actions of one member within that community reflected on the community as a whole. Furthermore, Joe explained that his success on the corners was intrinsically linked to Philip and Ashley’s success because most drivers viewed all panhandlers the same way. Therefore, it was in his best interest to work with other homeless people (even those he did not care for) so that the entire community could benefit.

This situation is just one example where I witnessed homeless people coming together to solve problems that were unique to the homeless experience. These types of unique experiences created community standards and bonded homeless people together in a way that distinguished the culture of homelessness from the culture of the housed population (see Ravenhill, 2008). These bonds were also present at the shelter where community members regularly leaned on one another for resources, strength, and support. As reiterated by several participants, working together was inevitable because “We’re all in this together.” This recognition of shared struggle and shared objectives (mainly, working their ways out of homelessness) was what opened the doors for endless acts of selflessness and hospitality between complete strangers. For example, while working at Good Sam’s, I regularly witnessed experienced clients clamor around new
residents to take them on tours, explain the rules, teach them how to properly complete chores, and show them the information board, which provided information about jobs, government assistance, and bus schedules. Residents like Christina, who had a physical disability, regularly received help from strangers who carried her and her wheelchair up and down the stairs when the wheelchair lift broke.

On the streets, participants talked about always sharing their knowledge of panhandling with new people. Even though new panhandlers created increased competition for drivers’ spare change, Joe, Kenneth, Philip, and Ashley each shared stories about helping people get started. Joe said,

There was this new kid out here just a few days ago doing it all wrong. So I went up to him and gave him a little advice and said, “Look, if you want to make any money this is how you do it.” And I showed him. “Don’t sit on your ass. Don’t make yourself look comfortable. People don’t like that. They think you’re lazy and you don’t want to do nothing. And make you a bigger sign. Darken the words. And put a shirt on. Cover up all those tattoos.” You know, just trying to help him look presentable where he doesn’t offend people.

Again, Joe’s actions demonstrated a connection among homeless people that reinforced their shared community and indicated that Joe understood “this new kid’s” struggles. Joe was teaching “this new kid” lessons much like Kenneth had taught Joe when Joe first started living on the streets. Perhaps, “this new kid” would someday pass these lessons on to someone else.

In the end, the help and guidance that happens among homeless people reinforce the ideas of shared struggle and shared community. Furthermore, help and guidance are unique to
the homeless community because the challenges the homeless community faces are unique.

When I asked why homeless people go out of their way to help one another, Brandon said,

Sometime there’re people at Good Sam’s who are acting like they’re more worse off than anybody, but they’re not. I mean, there’s people that get depressed, but everybody talks to them and tells them, “Hey, just forget it. Don’t worry about it.” We kind of talk them up and tell them, “Hey, it’s no big deal. We’re all going through it too and we’ll help you out.”

While Brandon does not offer any tangible solutions for a person trying to escape homelessness, loneliness, or depression, he does let people know that they belong to a community of people who understand the distinctive challenges that come with being homeless. Moreover, Brandon validates and emphasizes with their emotions. This is not the type of validation and empathy that can be given by a social worker, a benevolent politician, or even a loving family member because none of these individuals “are going through it.” This type of empathetic support can only be given by someone who is homeless: someone who resides in the homeless community and experiences the same emotional difficulties, doubts, and vulnerabilities every day.

Conclusion

In closing, this chapter discussed the participants’ aspirations and talked about how the participants found community with other homeless people. First, I outlined how and why the participants wanted to be recognized by the housed community. Second, I covered how the participants labored at finding stability by engaging in substance abuse programs, healing broken family relationships, and contributing to their community through work. Finally, I discussed how participants built supportive community with other homeless people as a way of sharing knowledge and resources and as a way to alleviate physical, mental, and emotional burdens. This
concludes the analysis section of my study. In the next and final chapter, Chapter 7, I will offer my thoughts and interpretations about what this study has accomplished and what these narratives can teach us. In doing so, I will outline specific implications for social policy; discuss why it is important to continue doing this type of research; and make recommendations for future studies.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Summary

The overall purpose of this research was to create a space where homeless people could narrate their lived experiences and simultaneously draw attention to the value of these narratives as a site of knowledge production for creating more informed public policy. In Chapter 1, I summarized the academic literature on homelessness and argued that the issue of homelessness should be studied in the field of intercultural communication. Next, in Chapter 2, I argued for using the narrative paradigm as a theoretical framework because the narrative paradigm embraces storytelling and lived experiences as sites of knowledge production. Chapter 2 also outlined my methods for data collection and data analysis. In short, I interacted with the homeless community of southern Illinois for one summer by working at a homeless shelter, visiting with homeless people on the streets, and collecting formal interviews with 10 participants.

The data produced four main themes and these themes were arranged chronologically in Chapters 3-6 to reveal a story about how the participants moved through homelessness. Chapter 3, “Losing Everything,” discussed how participants lost income, privacy, family, and sense of self when they became homeless. Chapter 4, “Navigating the System,” summarized how participants became familiar with government programs and charity agencies to secure food, shelter, and other basic amenities. Next, Chapter 5 outlined how some participants cheated, misused, and abused social welfare programs to obtain additional benefits. Finally, Chapter 6, “Seeking Recognition/Finding Community,” discussed participants’ long-term goals of finding work, getting sober, and reconnecting with family. In this final chapter, Chapter 7, I will
highlight the accomplishments of this study, discuss the implications of this study for shaping policy, and expose the limitations of this study as well as make suggestions about future research.

Accomplishments of the Study

Perhaps the most significant accomplishment of this study was that it centered homeless people’s voices. In most research and public policy, the voices of the homeless are ignored and therefore, many politicians and scholars are failing to capitalize on the wealth of knowledge that resides within the voices and experiences of homeless people. Consequently, most public policy is crafted from the vantage point of those who are housed and financially stable, while personal insights from those who lack adequate housing and/or who are hurting financially are marginalized (see hooks, 2000). This can lead to the creation of policies and programs that fail, not because politicians and scholars are depraved, but because politicians and scholars are not in touch with the cultural differences of those who use social welfare programs (Murray, 2012). In an attempt to interrupt the pattern of politically-driven policies that have generated poor results, this research intentionally leaned on the experiences and the narratives of the homeless in an effort to better understand how the homeless moved through the world. By doing so, this research gathered a wealth of knowledge from those who are homeless and made it possible to use this data to envision policies and programs that are driven from the experiences of homeless, instead of driven by the theories of the scholars.

In addition to gathering knowledge that can be useful in creating better functioning policies for the homeless, this study also highlighted the importance of creating communities that are emotionally supportive and respectful of the homeless. While knowing how the homeless use food stamps, unemployment benefits, shelters, and transportation is practically important for
creating better policy, listening to the difficult stories about personal turmoil, sense of loss, and abject desperation can be emotionally important for everyday support. Too often housed people make assumptions about the homeless regarding addiction, criminal behavior, and laziness (Wasserman & Clair, 2010; Smiley & West, 2012). As many participants stated, they were tired of being prejudged by housed people who did not, or would not, take the time to learn about their experiences. As Joe remarked, “at least know my situation before you judge me.” By engaging in conversation with the homeless, I attempted to offer respect for the participants’ viewpoints and insights. Instead of assuming what the participants needed (or needed to be lectured on), I took the time to ask and listen. I have no grand illusions that my short conversations with each participant somehow “solved the problem” or made me more enlightened about the issue of homelessness. However, upon completing this research, I am convinced that narrative-centered research is important because it showcases the human aspects of homelessness through the voices of the homeless, and it creates a medium for the homeless to dialogue with the housed in a world that oftentimes ignores their voices.

These intentional dialogues between the homeless and me created the circumstances where both parties could experience growth and change. For example, I gained an enormous amount of knowledge about how homeless people in southern Illinois managed their lives. As a researcher interested in proposing public policies, this information will help inform my political opinions and policy suggestions. For the participants, dialogue can be an important tool on the journey toward empowerment (see Montalbano-Phelps, 2004). Through the interview process, participants were allowed to “talk back” to caseworkers, shelter staff, politicians, former employers, the media, and the public. While speaking to me may have been a feeble outlet for some of the anger and frustration directed toward others, the storytelling process can act as an
empowering exercise where participants give voice to their experiences as a way to make sense of the current situation (Montalbano-Phelps, 2004). In this study, participants were given questions that asked them to reflect on their experiences. In doing so, participants discussed how they became homeless, how they moved through homelessness, and their goals for surviving and/or escaping homelessness. While articulating these experiences does not guarantee that a person will escape homelessness, articulating these experiences can create a sense of ownership over these experiences and interpersonal dialogues can help make sense of these experiences.

Reflecting on the intimate dialogues I had with people during this research led me to recognize another important accomplishment of the study. Mainly, relationships matter. More specifically, relationships between scholars and participants matter. Fostering a healthy relationship between myself and the participants was important because of the genuine personal differences that existed. For example, I had a house, I had an income, I initiated the conversation, and I asked the questions. While I did my best to engage in power-neutral dialogue, the truth is that social conditions created an imbalance of power that could not be erased. In my mind, this complicated issues of trust and mistrust and brought forth concerns about how much knowledge I could actually glean from the participants. If information was withheld because the participants did not trust me, how accurate was my retelling? My struggle with this unshakable imbalance is shared and captured by other scholars. Of his five-year ethnographic work among the poor and homeless, Duneier (2001) wrote,

…there were times when the trust I thought I had developed was nothing more than an illusion: deep suspicion lingered despite an appearance of trust. In some cases, perhaps it always will. Surely it takes more than goodwill to transcend distrust that comes out of a complex history. (p. 14)
Notably, I do not interpret Duneier’s words to mean that scholars should disengage with vulnerable and marginalized populations. Instead, I cling to his words as a reminder that I have a responsibility to constantly and consistently engage in relationship building and maintenance in order to earn participants’ trust. If scholars want to learn about homelessness from those who are homeless, then we need to recognize the power that comes with our class standing and understand the skepticism this might cause for those who are homeless and/or financially unstable (see Whiting, 1971; Reeves, 1989).

Finally, the last accomplishment of this study I will discuss is that executing this study further solidified my earlier assertion that homelessness should be studied from within the field of intercultural communication. Like Daniel (1970), Whiting (1971), and Philipsen (1976), I believe that class status is an important cultural distinction. Moreover, I would add that housing status increases the cultural differences between socio-economic classes. To be clear, I am not asserting that people who are homeless have drastically different wants, needs, and desires compared to those who are housed. On the contrary, the homeless and the housed share many of the same long-term goals. However, the ways the homeless move through the world embodies a culture and a lifestyle that many of us could never imagine. This makes the culture of homelessness unique and worth studying within intercultural communication.

For instance, there is little sense of permanency in the culture of homelessness, and the homeless must adapt to new circumstances every day. When the participants of this study woke up each morning, they did not always know where they would sleep that night, what they would eat during the day, or with whom they would interact. Saving money was seldom an option and some participants spent hours gathering change just to buy a sandwich, or if they were lucky, a hotel room for the night. Furthermore, gathering resources sometimes meant blurring the lines
between legal and illicit activity. For instance, people trading food stamps, cheating unemployment benefits, or lying when panhandling was socially acceptable within the homeless community and many homeless people talked openly about this type of behavior.

The culture of homelessness also maintains social norms that deprive members of personal privacy and limit agency. For the most part, the homeless live a very public lifestyle. They live in public, sleep in public, eat in public, use the restroom in public, and continuously interact with the public for resources. While housed people also move through public spaces, there are two key differences in the interaction. First, housed people have the choice of returning to private space. Second, housed people are often welcomed in public spaces because it often means they are purchasing goods and services. On the other hand, the homeless are often castigated in public spaces for making paying customers uncomfortable.

Additionally, many homeless people seeking public help must submit all their private information to caseworkers and government employees. This type of vulnerable exposure would make most people uncomfortable, notwithstanding the embarrassment of telling a stranger you are homeless. Regarding agency, most of the participants’ days were dictated by other people, such as shelter staff, caseworkers, and government employees. These individuals told the participants when to wake up, when to eat, where to go, what to do, and when to go to bed. As a housed person, it is hard to imagine the lack of privacy and limited agency that comes with having your daily actions exposed and controlled by others. For these reasons, I will continue to argue for communication studies to expand its ideas about intercultural communication and to support intercultural research that is more inclusive of class and housing differences. By positioning homelessness as a distinct culture, scholars are better positioned to explore the unique cultural differences and challenges of homelessness. Recognizing these differences
allows scholars to explore innovative solutions best fitted for confronting these unique cultural challenges.

**Implications for Policy**

Throughout this study I highlighted the narratives of the homeless and drew attention to the challenges they faced and lifestyles they lived. In doing so, the participants of this study provided a wealth of knowledge about how they lived, worked, ate, and slept. With the knowledge provided by the participants, I believe that there are concrete implications that should be considered when crafting future policies that address homelessness. I do not claim that the following suggestions are generalizable, nor do I claim that these suggestions will yield positive results for every homeless person in every circumstance in every community. However, I strongly feel that we need new and creative policies for addressing homelessness and I believe that these policies should be driven by the narratives of the homeless. The following section is my attempt at offering policy solutions based on the narratives and interactions I had with the participants of this study. My hope is that the implications I am offering for public policy, shelter policy, and the housed community will add to the conversations currently happening about how we might better address homelessness in our communities.

**Implications for Public Policy**

In writing about government policies aimed at helping the poor, economist Walter Williams (2011) states,

Decent people promote policy in the name of helping the poor and disadvantaged. Those policies can make their ostensible beneficiaries worse off, because policy is often evaluated in terms of intentions rather than effects….Compassionate policy requires
dispassionate analysis. Policy intentions and policy effects often bear no relationship to one another. (p. 3)

Before diving too far into my recommendations for public policy, I want to take a moment to draw attention to the first two words of this passage: “Decent people.” As a scholar engaged in the debate over social welfare programs, it is important that I recognize the hard work and genuine care of politicians and scholars who devote their time to finding solutions to various social problems. Therefore, it is not my intention, nor do I believe that it should be anyone else’s intention, to demonize politicians and scholars who devote their time to solving these issues, yet happen to come up with conclusions that some find objectionable. My intention is to follow the data and research I have been consuming and to come up with recommendations I feel will be most beneficial in fostering positive results. Others may reach different conclusions, but I trust that they are simply following the data they have been given. I only ask for the same generosity.

My first implication for public policy is one that I have advocated since the conception of this dissertation: Homeless people should have a voice in crafting public policy. By listening to the voices of the homeless, policymakers will have a better understanding about the culture of homelessness and therefore, a better understanding about how homeless people use public benefits. This is why I also support giving local communities more control over benefit distribution. Currently, state and federal officials are mostly in charge of benefit distribution and rarely interact with those who receive benefits. I suggest that local communities be given the money currently allocated for state and federal benefits on the condition that local policymakers reach out to the homeless in their community and thoughtfully discuss with them city budgets, the shelter system, job placement, and benefit distribution. By including homeless people in these discussions, local policymakers strengthen their relationships with the homeless and the
homeless get a voice in determining how local benefits are distributed. Most importantly, local policymakers can better respond to the needs of the homeless in their community.

For example, if southern Illinois policymakers knew how hard it was for the homeless to effectively use food stamps, then local policymakers may consider not allowing homeless people to obtain food stamps from the local governments and instead choose to invest that money into soup kitchens and shelters. Unlike homeless people, soup kitchens and shelters can buy in bulk and refrigerate. This would also make it easier and more affordable for homeless people to consume fresh produce and nutritious meals since soup kitchens and shelters would now have more financial resources. Once a homeless person secured a living arrangement and could verify his or her address, food stamp benefits would be reinstated. On the surface it seems counterintuitive (and cruel) to take food stamps away from homeless people. However, if we want to create a system where homeless people have access to nutritious meals and, collectively, we are only willing to spend a limited amount of public money on food security for the poor, then this idea is worth considering. In the end, I believe that it would provide much better food options for the homeless in southern Illinois if shelters were given more money to provide healthy food in bulk, as opposed to each homeless person having to buy expensive pre-packaged meals at convenience stores.

Now this idea may not work in every community because not every community has a shelter or a soup kitchen. For some homeless people, food stamps may be the only way they can obtain food. However, if local communities are given the money and allowed to budget the benefits to their community’s needs, then decisions over food security, housing, and job placement programs can all be made at the local level in conversation with the local homeless population. These individualized decisions simply cannot happen at a state or federal level.
because each local community’s homeless population has such different needs. Of course, the state and federal government would provide oversight to ensure that all the money given to a local government for the homeless was being allocated for the homeless. That being said, there is a finite amount of government resources allocated to address homelessness and it is important to use those resources wisely. By taking a local approach that includes the voices of the homeless in city budget discussions, relationships are made stronger at the local level and the homeless are given the power to decide how local resources are allocated.

Finally, when it comes to public policy, this research has led me to agree with other scholars who concluded that receiving public benefits should be contingent on work requirements (see Olasky, 1992; Lundahl & Wicks, 2010; Shipler, 2005). Those who oppose linking benefits to work requirements may accuse me of advocating this idea because I think the homeless are “lazy” and the only way to get them to work is by holding their benefits hostage. I do not think this at all. I have witnessed homeless people who woke up early, panhandled all day, walked 10 miles to a job interview, and performed manual labor around the shelter. I know homeless people are willing to work. Therefore, I do not advocate work requirements because I believe the homeless are “lazy.” Instead, I feel strongly about linking benefits to work requirements so the homeless can maintain job skills and avoid lengthy gaps in the work history.

Of course the difficulty with implementing a work requirement is opportunity. Therefore, I suggest that these opportunities come through local government departments. Moreover, if a person is already receiving government benefits, then it makes sense that he or she should contribute to its daily functions. For example, in exchange for $500 per month in combined benefits, a homeless person could be required to perform 40 hours of work per month through his or her local government. As you may recall, a version of this idea was given by Philip in Chapter
4 when he talked about working for the government in exchange for rent money. Some of the jobs people could perform include park maintenance, buildings maintenance, custodial work, office assistance, or recycling and trash collection. While these entry-level jobs are not the most glamorous, they would promote job skills, fill work history, and provide current references. Of course, this model also encourages accountability on behalf of the beneficiary. In short, if a person does not complete his or her work hours, then he or she would temporarily lose benefits. In the end, a person who stays active in the workforce is in a much better position for securing full-time work in the future.

Implications for Shelter Policy

Regarding shelter policy, there are two primary implications that stand out: Access and accountability. First, access is an issue that can best be addressed by the shelter staff. As mentioned by several participants, shelter policy can be confusing. There are rules about who can stay, how long a person can stay, and what a person should accomplish while he or she is staying at the shelter. To help streamline these rules and make them easier to understand, I suggest that shelters implement an “open door” policy and allow people to stay for longer than 30 days. For example, there are rules that prohibit some former criminals or addicts from accessing shelter. If shelters prohibit these individuals from accessing shelter based on past behavior, then these individuals remain trapped in homelessness with no initial support. Additionally, the 30-day policy that forces people to leave most southern Illinois shelters after a month is arbitrary and, in some cases, counterproductive. As Brandon summarized, shelters “need to make the time longer so people can get their footing.” Otherwise, people tend to move from one shelter to the next without establishing any foundations for long-term success.
Now, access is only one-half of the equation. The other half is accountability, and that must be accomplished by the clients (see Olasky, 1992; MacDonald, 2000; Schiff, 1990). Currently, a person can enter a southern Illinois shelter, do nothing for 30 days, and then get asked to leave. This helps no one. Therefore, I propose that when clients enter a shelter, they set up a plan with a caseworker immediately. Based on a client’s skills, needs, and goals, the caseworker would help the client create a plan for achieving certain benchmarks while living at the shelter. This might include enrolling in an educational program, securing a job, saving money, or entering rehab. As long as a person continues to reach these personalized benchmarks, he or she can continue to stay at the shelter. However, if, for example, a person fails to attend G.E.D. classes, then the shelter can ask that person to leave immediately. This type of system encourages shelters to give each homeless person a chance as well as allows shelters to hold clients accountable. Of course, things like drug use, violence, or curfew violations can be grounds for immediate dismissal. However, if a person stays clean and is making progress toward financial and living independence, then it does not make any sense to ask him or her to leave after 30 days. This will only work to undercut progress.

Other forms of accountability may include mandatory A.A. meetings or N.A. meetings for former addicts and required work around the shelter, such as cleaning, cooking, construction, and lawn care. Another way that shelters can encourage clients to contribute is by mandating that clients forfeit their food stamp cards to purchase food for the shelter. This helps the shelter with food expenses as well as connects the clients to the overall wellbeing of the shelter. Ultimately, what I find encouraging about an access/accountability model is that it requires no additional money or resources. It only requires a policy change that tells clients, “You can stay here as long as you want, as long as you meet personalized benchmarks.”
Finally, I suggest that local shelters share client information with each other. This will help shelter caseworkers figure out who is trying to manipulate the system by moving from one shelter to the next every few weeks. If clients know they can move from one shelter to the next every 30 days with no accountability, then the system is not encouraging them to make the necessary changes needed to escape homelessness. Instead, shelters should work together to help create a solid foundation for their clients that encourages clients to invest in long-term strategies for success. By sharing client information, shelters can better assess where people have been, what type of progress they have made, and how to hold them accountable for their actions.

Implications for the Housed Community

While direct social welfare programs affect the policies of government agencies and shelters that provide benefits to the homeless, I feel this study also has implications for housed community members who interact with the homeless. Mainly, this section argues that the housed community ought to become better educated about homelessness and the local resources available to the homeless. I believe that educating the housed community about local resources for the homeless would benefit the homeless as well as the housed. For instance, if shelters adopt more “open door” policies and allow clients to stay as long as they need (provided that the client is making progress), then the local community needs to be aware of these policies. This would help accomplish two things. First, the housed community members who interact with the homeless would be able to provide this information to the homeless people they encounter. If a homeless person is new to the area and needs help securing food and shelter, then a housed person could inform the homeless person where these resources were available. If the homeless

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32 This section is specific in only addressing monetary and physical resources. Advice regarding personal interactions and support will be discussed in the closing section of this chapter, “Returning to Camden.”
person acts on the information, then the homeless person accomplished his or her objective of securing food and shelter.

Second, education about local resources provides the housed community with the confidence needed to interact with the homeless. Quite frankly, interacting with a homeless person can sometimes be awkward or even intimidating for a housed person; especially if the homeless person is asking for money or assistance. When strangers approach strangers asking for money, some people may be unsure about how to respond. I know that when I started working with the homeless I was uncertain about how to respond to money questions. I thought about things such as “How much should I give this person?” and “Does this person really need money for food?” However, by educating the housed community about local resources, the housed community has the information needed for creating dialogue about resources, as opposed to feeling pressurized to hand over spare change and quickly leaving. For instance, if a person asks me for money to buy food or shelter, I can say “There is a local shelter that has an open door policy that can give you food and shelter for as long as you need.” In some instances, I may even offer to drive the person there. When I have personally used this approach in the past, some people have accepted my offer and some people have rejected it. Either way, knowing information about local resources creates the possibility for having a dialogue about resources, needs, and long-term goals.

Arguably, some may find my approach tasteless and may even argue that questions regarding someone else’s financial intentions are “none of my business.” These assessments are fair, and to be clear, I am not advocating that every housed person needs to interact in this way with regard to resources. All I am proposing is that housed people learn about the available resources and policies in their communities so that they can engage in conversations with the
homeless in a way that makes them feel knowledgeable, confident, and comfortable. Some housed people may know that a local shelter has an abundant amount of food and plenty of spare beds, yet still choose to give homeless people money with no required accountability. While I am personally hesitant about this approach, I respect a housed person’s right to engage in this activity. My only objective in this section is to insist that housed people know what resources are available, where they are available, and how they are available to the homeless community. This way a member of the housed community who is interested in helping the homeless can at least make informed choices about how he or she wishes to allocate personal resources.

Limitations and Future Research

While I stand firmly behind the aforementioned implications for policy, I recognize that my recommendations were proposed based on the limited scope of this research. In reflecting on the scope of this research, the following section offers insights about the limitations of this dissertation as well as how these limitations might be addressed in future research. I am sure that others will come to different conclusions about the limitations of this dissertation and propose new methods for studying homelessness in future research. I welcome these critiques and remain very interested in learning about how other scholars are approaching research with the homeless. However, reflecting on my dissertation, there are four specific areas where I hope to expand future research: Number of participants, length of data collection, additional focus on political and shelter operations, and location.

The first limitation of this study was the number of formal participants interviewed. While there were casual conversations with a few dozen homeless people on the streets and in the shelter, the primary points of data analysis were the 10 formal interviews. As I have mentioned numerous times throughout this dissertation, the voices of the homeless matter.
Increasing the number of participants in future research would enrich the overall narrative and produce more information about how the homeless move through the world. Beyond increased data for analysis, interviewing more people would also serve as an outlet for more homeless people to share their stories. Access to voice is important for any person (Burke, 1968; Fisher, 1984). However, in this particular situation it is important to remember that public policy regarding food, housing, and welfare is constantly being debated and these debates directly impact the lives of the homeless, usually without their input. By interviewing more participants in the future, I hope to produce a sizeable amount of narrative-driven research that will amplify the voices of the homeless and create more room for their opinions within public policy debates.

The second limitation of this study was its length. Due to time and monetary constraints, the data collection process only took place over a period of three months. In future research I would like to expand the data collection process to at least one year for two primary reasons. First, it is my assumption that weather conditions affect how the homeless utilize shelters and other charitable services. In the summer months (the period when this data was collected), it is my assumption that the homeless have more choices when it comes to shelter. For example, if a person wishes to avoid shelter policies about drug use, drunkenness, or curfew, he or she usually has the option of always outside because the weather conditions are more favorable. However, when the weather conditions are dangerously cold in the winter, then sleeping outside is less of an option. Therefore, I would be interested in learning about who accesses shelter resources at different times throughout the year and why.

The second reason I would like to conduct a longer study is simply so I could access more participant feedback during the writing process. Unfortunately, the dissertation process is time-sensitive and demands an approach that keeps moving towards a defense date. If I had more
time, I would like the opportunity of writing up my analysis, giving the analysis to the participants, and using their feedback to rework the final manuscript. While the participants were provided an opportunity to narrate their lived experiences through the interview process, they were not provided an opportunity in crafting how those narratives would be edited alongside other narratives. More time would mean that I could work with several participants as co-authors instead of creating a single-authored dissertation.

The third limitation of this study was the limited attention paid to political and shelter operations. In conducting this research, my primary focus was learning about homelessness through the perspectives of the homeless. However, this is only one approach in a much broader story about how homelessness is managed in our communities. To gather more perspectives about homelessness, future research could interview non-homeless people who deal with homelessness on a daily basis. This might include politicians in charge of budgeting benefits as well as shelter workers who make policy. While I tend to favor listening to the stories of the homeless because I believe that their voices have been largely silenced in public debates, I am sympathetic to those politicians and shelter workers who have to create budgets and enforce policies. I may disagree with some of their decisions, but I recognize that making budget and policy decisions is challenging and can involve very complex hierarchies of many people and groups. Furthermore, there are limited resources in these hierarchies and compromises have to be made. Looking at the political process and shelter structure through an organizational communication lens could provide some great insight for better understanding the challenges individuals face when trying to make implement new policies and budgets. Regarding narrative analysis, it would be useful if future research included interviews with shelter employees and government service workers and analyzed their narratives alongside the narratives of the
homeless for comparison. By researching homelessness through different perspectives, I might find where different groups agree and disagree on certain policy issues, which could lead to figuring out how to create better-functioning policies that are satisfying for all parties.

The final limitation of this study was its location. Not only was this study conducted in a relatively small physical area, but also in a region with specific population demographics. While an unlimited amount of time, energy, and resources could perform this type of study in communities across the globe, I am primarily interested in using my future resources to perform a similar study in an urban environment. My assumptions are that urban environments pose different challenges for the homeless community and offer different benefit systems that the homeless must navigate. Some of my research questions would look at the size of the homeless population and compare whether larger populations of homeless people using shelters and services affect how people narrate loss, privacy, and community. It would also be interesting to listen to the narratives of the urban homeless and compare their needs, wants, and desires to those of the rural homeless. If there are need differences between urban and rural homeless people, then that would be a testament for more need-specific services. Finally, it would be disingenuous not to admit that my aspiration to do future research in an urban area is also deeply rooted in my desire to return to Camden, New Jersey to collect the narratives of my loved ones and friends, and to reconnect with the homeless population in a city where this research began over eight years ago.

Returning to Good Sam’s

As I consider the interactions I have had with the homeless community of southern Illinois during the past year of research, I constantly return to a story I wrote in 2008. The story focuses on a deep friendship I had developed with a man when I lived in Camden. After working
with him at the homeless shelter, Frank’s Place, for several months, I saw this man in downtown Camden on a weekend afternoon. We spoke briefly about work and about seeing each other on Monday morning. When we parted, we hugged each other and he said, “I love you” (Phillips, 2008). Wrapped in these simple words were complex feelings of honesty, trust, compassion, and care.

I share this story as a reminder of why I believe this research is important. I have worked and volunteered with the homeless for eight years and have developed close relationships with many of the people with whom I have worked. As an academic I am interested in asking critical questions and solving difficult problems. However, as a friend to many people who are homeless, I simply want policies to work so that my loved ones can successfully transition off the streets and into housing. Homelessness is a problem begging for well-reasoned academic solution and for reasons I have already highlighted, I am not convinced that simply throwing money at failed policies is part of that solution. Instead, academics have to interact and talk with the homeless about their lives, their needs, and their long-term goals. The academy holds power and scholarly recommendations carry weight with the politicians who create policy. Therefore, embracing narrative-driven research and prioritizing dialogue between the homeless and scholars is important. If scholars want to make recommendations about what the homeless need, then scholars need to develop relationships with the homeless. While the reach of my dissertation is limited, I do hope that it might persuade some readers to embrace more inclusive dialogue with the homeless, because without listening to the narratives of the homeless community, all the money-driven policies in the world will not end homelessness.

Of course the narrative approach is not without its limitations. For example, because narrative-driven research is located in the intimate experiences of the participants, there is a
tendency to want to find closure for that one story. Readers want to know “the ending,” and one emotionally-charged story can create academic tunnel-vision that begs for answers to questions such as “Did Kenneth ever find work?” or “Did Philip and Ashley ever get their child back?” Unfortunately, the answer to both these questions is “I don’t know.” While these questions are significant, it is important to avoid academic tunnel-vision and to balance our desire for narrative closure with larger understanding about the cultural systems that drive homelessness. In short, narrative-driven scholars like me need quantitative research to help us put our work in perspective. The narratives of the homeless are daunting and can sometimes feel hopeless, but if scholars use these narratives as a way to craft better-functioning policies at a systemic level, then I am confident that we will witness progress.

At the same time, scholars who willingly share their expertise about the quantitative aspects of homelessness must also be willing to receive the embodied expertise of homeless people if an honest and productive intercultural dialogue about homelessness is ever to take place. Moving forward as a scholar engaged with homeless populations, I continually reflect on what research can mean when we choose to engage with people on such an intimate level as to gain their trust and their love. My year in Camden was rooted in trust and love, which allowed for the mutual exchange of personal respect, personal insights, and personal narratives. This dissertation was performed in a similar spirit. In the end, I want to produce good research because I want homeless people to know (not just feel, but know) that they have a voice in public debates about food security, affordable housing, and other public benefits. I want homeless people to know that their voices matter. Additionally, I want to be a good academic writer so that these voices will be heard by non-homeless people who influence public policy and shelter policy. Through this dissertation and future research, I hope to create spaces within the academy
where homeless people can share their narratives and where scholars embrace these narratives as critical sites of knowledge production. This is only one dissertation, but it is my first step toward creating this sort of academic inclusion. My second step is sharing these findings with the clients and staff members of Good Samaritan Ministries. By offering my findings to the Good Sam’s community, I hope to continue a robust dialogue about how southern Illinois addresses the issue of homelessness and how Good Sam’s might implement new policies based on the narratives and experiences of people who are homeless.
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### APPENDIX A

List of Participants and Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Hometown/Previous Residence</th>
<th>Duration of Homelessness*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Western Kentucky</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip**</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Carbondale, Illinois</td>
<td>8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley**</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Carbondale, Illinois</td>
<td>8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial Black/White</td>
<td>Cape Girardeau, Missouri</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Southern Illinois</td>
<td>2 years (on and off)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial White/Latina</td>
<td>Southern Indiana</td>
<td>1 month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Carterville, Illinois</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Carbondale, Illinois</td>
<td>4 years (on and off)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Carbondale, Illinois</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Herrin, Illinois</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All durations are continuous unless marked otherwise, and are dated as of August 15, 2013, the final date for data collection.

**Philip and Ashley were married to each other and were interviewed separately.
APPENDIX B

Consent Form

My name is Joshua Phillips. I am a Ph. D. Candidate in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University. I am working on my dissertation and asking you to participate in my research.

The purpose of this research is to collect narratives from individuals who are currently homeless and to analyze the ways people who are homeless narrate their lived experiences as well as analyze how they use various economic and social support services. In doing so, this research will be able to create an academic account of homelessness that is rooted in the narratives of people who are homeless and, hopefully, create better functioning support services.

To participate in this study, all participants must be over the age of 18 and self-identify as a person who is currently homeless. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. I will collect information about your experiences through a face-to-face interview that will take approximately 60-90 minutes. This interview will be audio-recorded.

All of your responses to these questions will be kept confidential. After the interview is complete, the audio-recordings will be transcribed and the tapes will be destroyed within 90 days.

Do you grant permission to be directly quoted through a pseudonym?

Yes_____ No_____ Pseudonym___________________________

Do you grant permission to be audio-recorded?

Yes_____ No_____

I agree to the terms of the study.

Participant (sign) _____________________________ (print) _____________________________

Date_______

I agree to the terms of the study.

Researcher (sign) _____________________________ (print) _____________________________

Date_______
If you have any questions about the study, you may contact me or my advisor.

Joshua Phillips (Researcher)    Dr. Suzanne M. Daughton (Advisor)
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This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
APPENDIX C
Guiding Interview Questions

1) Could you tell me a little bit about yourself? Name? Age? Where you are from?

2) How did you arrive at Good Samaritan Ministries?

3) Where were you before you arrived at Good Samaritan Ministries?

4) Tell me about some of your experiences.
   a. What are some of the challenges about being homeless?
   b. What are some of the biggest surprises?

5) Besides Good Sam’s, where else have you gone for resources?

6) Could you tell me about some of the resources/services you receive?
   a. How do you use those services?
   b. Do you use those services for their intended purpose?

7) Have you received resources/services from both charitable and government agencies?
   a. What are some of the differences?
   b. Do you have a preference?

8) Tell me about a positive experience you had while being homeless.
   a. Is there a particular resource/service that helped you?
   b. Is there a particular person who helped you?

9) What resources do you feel are missing? (housing, food, jobs, etc.)

10) If you could create an organization that helped the homeless, what would that
    organization look like? What would it do? How would it help?

11) What do you want to tell service providers that could help them be more responsive and
    sensitive to your needs?
12) What piece of advice would you give to other homeless people who are new to the system? What will be their biggest challenge, in your opinion?

13) What do you want to tell people who are not homeless about being homeless?

14) Is there anything else you would like to share? Any other experiences or stories?
VITA

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Dissertation Title:
  From Losing Everything to Finding Community: How Homeless People Narrate their Lived Experiences

Major Professor: Dr. Suzanne M. Daughton

Publications:


