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Work Lives of Homeless Men

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WORK LIVES OF HOMELESS MEN

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To my parents and my sisters, for endless support, and to Lauren, for putting up with me while I finished.
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WORK LIVES OF HOMELESS MEN

ERIC WALLACE

ABSTRACT

This study sought to better understand how currently homeless men have met their work needs through a mix of formal and informal work across their lives. The Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM), a qualitative method that seeks to analyze biographical narratives related in interviews, was utilized to collect and analyze the data. The loss of blue-collar jobs, criminal histories, and substance abuse difficulties all served to circumscribe the work available to these men. Nevertheless, participants negotiated these circumstances, as well as early traumas, to build complex work histories. Social connection emerged as a central need participants met through work. The status provided by jobs was also very important, as many participants wanted to be viewed positively, especially given perceived societal biases against them. Participants described several other psychological needs met by work, including survival, time structure, competence, and autonomy. Interconnections between needs and societal phenomena, such as the loss of blue collar jobs, were observed in the narratives.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... vi
LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................ xiii

CHAPTER:

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................... 1

   Defining Homelessness ................................................................................................. 6

   Ostensible Causes of Homelessness ............................................................................. 8

      Structural Explanations ............................................................................................ 9

         Housing Cost ........................................................................................................... 10

         A Shifting Economy and Work ............................................................................. 11

         Deindustrialization ................................................................................................. 12

   Personal Explanations .................................................................................................. 13

      Mental Illness and Substance Dependence ......................................................... 13

      Issues with Causality .............................................................................................. 15

      Lack of Personal Responsibility ............................................................................. 17

   Defining Work ............................................................................................................... 18

   Psychological Needs Filled by Work .......................................................................... 21

   Integrating Psychological of Working and Latent Benefits of Work ..................... 24

   Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 25

II. LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................................... 27

   Pathways, Careers, and Biographies ......................................................................... 28

      Models of Homeless Careers ............................................................................... 29

      Challenges to Ideal Biographies ........................................................................... 34

   Work in Homelessness ............................................................................................... 37
Drug and Alcohol Funding .......................................................... 58
Social Status & Identity ............................................................... 59
Work Choice ............................................................................. 60
Presentation Strategies .............................................................. 61
Geographical Influences on Work Choice ................................. 62
Collective Effort ....................................................................... 62
Time Structure ......................................................................... 64
Autonomy .................................................................................. 64
Social Connection ...................................................................... 65
Social Capital and Weak Ties ..................................................... 66
Summary .................................................................................... 66

III. METHOD .............................................................................. 68
Rationale for BNIM .................................................................. 68
Philosophical Premises ............................................................ 71
BNIM Research Design .............................................................. 73
Procedures ................................................................................ 77
Sampling ................................................................................... 77
Interviews .................................................................................. 78
Primary Researcher ................................................................. 78
“Kick Start” Panel ..................................................................... 80
Participants ............................................................................... 81
BNIM Data Analysis ................................................................. 82
Conclusion ................................................................................ 89
IV. RESULTS..............................................................................................................90

The Cases .............................................................................................................91

Henry ....................................................................................................................92
David ...................................................................................................................101
Robert ...............................................................................................................112
John ..................................................................................................................119
Jason ..................................................................................................................126
James ...............................................................................................................131
Michael .............................................................................................................139
Harold ...............................................................................................................147
Edward ...........................................................................................................153
Paul ..................................................................................................................160

Case Comparisons .............................................................................................172

Narrative Structural Patterns ............................................................................172
Are Narratives Shaped By Work That Was Available ......................................176
Life Events and Circumstances .........................................................................178
  Work Experiences and History .................................................................179
  Childhood Events .......................................................................................183
  Blue Collar Work .......................................................................................185
  Criminal Offenses .......................................................................................186
  Substance Abuse .........................................................................................187
Meeting Need Through Work Across the Lifespan .............................................189
  Social Connection and Relationships .......................................................190
Social Connection at Work .................................................. 196
Status/Identity .................................................................. 196
Survival ............................................................................ 199
Collective Effort .............................................................. 201
Autonomy and Time Structure ....................................... 203

Conclusion .............................................................................. 203

V. SUMMARY .................................................................................. 205
Narrative Structural Patterns ........................................ 208
Life Circumstances .......................................................... 206
Meeting Psychological Needs Through Work ............... 212
Survival .................................................................................. 213
Social Connection ............................................................... 215
Social Status/Identity .......................................................... 218
Collective Effort ................................................................ 218
Implications for Theory .................................................... 219
Recommendations for Further Research .................... 222
Implication for Practice ...................................................... 224
Limitations .............................................................................. 228
Summary .................................................................................. 230

REFERENCES .................................................................................. 233
APPENDICES ................................................................................. 242
A: First Interview Prompt ................................................ 245
B: Second Interview Following Up .................................. 246
C: Demographic Questionnaire..................................................................................247
List of Tables

Table 1. Taylor’s Model ..............................................................19

Table 2. Homeless Involvement in Work .........................................50

Table 3. Results ........................................................................179
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On any given night in the United States over 600,000 people, a very visual representation of extreme poverty, stay in homeless shelters or in places not intended for human habitation (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2013). HUD (2012, 2013) estimates that about 1 million people cycle through shelters yearly, though this number does not count those who stay in other places (such as with friends). The HUD estimate is conservative, and some estimates are higher than those reported by HUD, above 2 million (Cronley, 2010). Moralizing discourses have long been utilized to explain why these one to two million people do not have a home in which to stay, and the average person (as well as the average policy maker) assumes either personal deficits or laziness lie at the root of homelessness (Cronley, 2007; Gowan, 2010; Hopper, 2003; Knecht & Martinez, 2004). This is not the reality. The majority of homeless people do not have a mental disorder, with some estimates suggesting less than 13% have psychotic disorders (Fazel, Khosla, Doll, & Geddes, 2008). Greater numbers struggle with depression and substance use disorders, but a proportion developed these disorders in
response to becoming homeless (Gowan, 2002; Johnson, Freels, Parsons, & Langeest, 1998). A study from Australia, for example, suggests two thirds of homeless participants developed substance abuse issues after becoming homeless (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008). Homeless people are not lazy either; the majority work (O’Flaherty, 1996; Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010). They work in and out of the legal labor market, under-the-table, at small time criminal activities, at recycling, and occasionally at criminal tasks such as drug-dealing and sex work (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002).

Approximately 60% of homeless people are nonwhite minorities, who in turn make up approximately 1/3 of the population nationally (HUD, 2012). This overrepresentation of minorities amongst the homeless is a clear illustration that race plays an influential role in individuals becoming poor enough to be homeless. This is not surprising given the unfortunate intersectionality between race and poverty in the United States (Massey, 2007). Race plays a role in hiring, especially for those with felonies, in the likelihood of incarceration in the first place, and even in hiring for day labor and the informal work that will be explored in this study (Alexander, 2012; Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2007; Williams, 2009). Race is not an initial focus of this dissertation, however, issues and themes related to race may emerge in the interviews and analysis.

Researchers have examined some of the factors that constrain homeless people’s vocational decision-making, but have rarely looked at how homeless people choose among their circumscribed options in order to meet their needs. Researchers are more aware of the factors that limit the agency of homeless workers than of how these homeless workers deploy their limited agency. This study is largely concerned with the latter. Scholars have studied the types of work homeless workers sometimes do (e.g.
Balkin, 1992; Lei, 2013); the thoughts of homeless men on types of work such as sex work and day labor (e.g. Lakenau, 1999; Lee & Farrell, 2003; Williams, 2009); have analyzed the stratification of street tasks (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002); the way that urban and geographic factors can circumscribe such work (e.g. Marr, DeVertuil, & Snow, 2009); the remuneration work can provide (Schoeni & Koegel, 1998); and the lived experiences of homeless men working at recycling (Gowan, 2002, 2009, 2010).

This investigation will address how those who have experienced homelessness make vocational decisions to meet psychological needs, even when vocational options are limited. Life history study, also known as the biographical approach (Wengraf, 2001), has been recommended as crucial for understanding how the homeless make decisions in the face of difficult social realities (Fopp, 2009; May, 2000). A greater understanding of this limited decision-making in this context has the potential to impact homeless workers on two levels. First, because evidence suggests that the homeless work for reasons other than making money to survive, such as to meet psychological needs (Blustein, 2006; Gowan, 2010; Jahoda, 1988; Lakenau, 1999, Williams, 2009), gaining knowledge about how homeless people negotiate work choices to meet psychological needs could inform vocational psychology theory with such people to help them better meet these needs, and potentially thereby improving mental health. Second, understanding more about what types of work the homeless choose, and why, may facilitate the development of interventions that would assist homeless workers in finding better remunerated work. Work that is better remunerated could allow homeless workers to eventually move out of homelessness.
The circumstances faced by homeless workers – limited options in the paid workplace – can be viewed as analogous to, albeit in circumstances direr, of the situation facing many Americans workers today with few options. This study may therefore contribute a unique perspective on vocational decision-making, potentially providing new ideas concerning factors informing the decisions of poor and powerless workers. This is consistent with recent calls from vocational psychologists for more attention on workers with limited agency (Blustein, 2006; Prilletensky & Stead, 2012). Vocational psychology does not often focus on work’s contribution to needs that lead to individual well-being, especially not with the segment of the population that possesses less agency in decision-making (Blustein, 2006; Prilentensky and Stead, 2012). Instead, much vocational psychology research has focused on how relatively wealthy people make vocational decisions, or on how to match work personalities to workplaces, thereby helping people on a putative path of personal development (Blustein, 2006). Many Americans, however, are denied such opportunities. Limited economic power, for example, means that many Americans cannot access high quality secondary and tertiary education to provide opportunities for job choice freedom to focus on such personal development through career. Studying the connection between work and the decision-making of a population with circumscribed agency – such as homeless men – may have the benefit of contributing to the overall understanding of how it is that workers with few options make decisions about work (Blustein, 2006). It may have the added benefit of contributing some knowledge to the understanding of how economic oppression impacts those at the bottom of society’s socioeconomic structure. Such insights are thin on the ground in vocational psychology, though efforts have been made to address this recently. Insights
provided by homeless workers, while not necessarily generalizable to other populations, could help to generate ideas about how other groups of people who are struggling with difficult work negotiate their work to fill psychological needs.

The study focused on men who are homeless, and despite its relevance to homelessness, will not focus on race, though issues related to race are likely to emerge during the study. Women’s homelessness is certainly worthy of research attention; however, it originates in different sources and follows different patterns than men’s homelessness (Klodawsky, 2006; Liebow, 1993). Also, several factors combine to make men more likely to be working when they are homeless. Men are more likely to be homeless in general, especially as individuals, making up 72 percent of individuals in shelters (HUD, 2012). This ratio is likely higher for those homeless on the streets (Schoeni & Koegel, 1998). Homeless women are more likely to receive public benefits and resources than homeless men, for a variety of reasons, thereby providing homeless women with another choice for funding and housing (Gowan, 2010). Third, homeless women are more likely to have children with them, creating a wholly different set of challenges for women (O’Grady & Gaetz, 2004). None of these factors make women’s challenge in surviving homeless any less complex, but they do mean that homeless women are less likely to be working for any form of pay, and paid work is a central component of this study (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; 2004).

The purpose of this study was to better understand how biographical and environmental factors influence homeless men’s ability to meet psychological needs through work. The study explored the work biographies and decision-making of non-psychotic homeless men over the age of 30. These biographies were analyzed using a
combination of biographical narrative (Wengraf, 2001, 2013) and grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The central research question was: how have currently homeless men adjusted to events in their lives to meet psychological needs through work across their biography? Subquestions were: what structural patterns emerge in men’s narratives, are narratives constructed around what work is available rather than their work choices shaping their narratives; what life events or circumstances do men perceive as having significant impacts on their life and work; and what are the most important needs that homeless men have focused on when thinking about jobs? Interviews with participants will help to provide information about the patterns in decision-making about work influenced by life events, and add clarification to how it is that needs are perceived by participants to influence their vocational decision-making.

**Defining Homelessness**

The definition of homelessness has been contested since the 1980s (American Psychological Association [APA], 2009; Blau, 1992; Hopper, 2003). Generating a definition that can encompass all possible segments of the homeless population is not easy, even when researchers agree what groups of people are relevant (Blau, 1992). Generally, people agree that those staying in homeless shelters are homeless, as are those sleeping out of doors, but there are issues when considering men staying in flophouses and cheap motels, young adults on friends’ couches, single mothers with friends, or people squatting in abandoned buildings (APA, 2009; Blau, 1992). For the purposes of this study, a homeless person is defined as anyone sleeping somewhere other than an individual residence. This includes shelters, “rough” sleeping spots such as abandoned buildings and cars, and flophouses and cheap motels where they are available. It does not
include staying in someone else’s home. Some reports, such as the one prepared for the APA (2009), choose more inclusive definitions that also attempt to document those living with friends or family, in permanent supportive housing (apartments intended for mentally ill long-term homeless people), and institutions such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons. The less inclusive definition adapted for this dissertation draws from definitions used by the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the National Alliance to End Homelessness (HUD, 2012, 2013; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2013).

Difficulty defining homelessness has been accompanied by debate over the actual number of homeless people (APA, 2009; Burt, 1992; Shumsky, 2012). Political beliefs, profession, and accompanying biases (e.g. sociology, economics, psychology), methodological differences, and other factors have influenced this debate (APA, 2009; Cronley, 2010; Shumsky, 2012). This debate is not a central focus of this dissertation, and therefore the now common practice of using estimates provided by HUD (2012, 2013) will be followed (it should be noted that some scholars consider HUD estimates conservative; Cronley, 2010).

HUD uses two main methods to estimate the number of homeless in the U.S. (APA, 2009; HUD, 2012). The first, called the point in time estimate, utilizes regional level organizations, known as Continuums of Care (CoCs), that plan homeless treatment (as well as distribute federal funds) across a region such as a city or part of a state (HUD, 2012). HUD (2012) requires these organizations to utilize the treatment providers under their aegis to provide a census of their shelters and to send out staff to count those who are sleeping “rough” around the city (HUD, 2012). HUD then has a rough estimate of
how many Americans are homeless during any one night, not including those sleeping with friends or in permanent supportive housing. On the most recently reported point in time nightly count, in January 2012, 633,782 were homeless (HUD, 2012, 2013). 12,335 of these were homeless in Ohio, with 2129 homeless in Cuyahoga County (COHHIO, 2013). HUD (2012) also provides what is known as the Homeless Information Management System (HMIS) yearly estimate of homeless. This estimate is arrived at by aggregating numbers of service users reported by the CoCs and service providers that participated in the (HMIS) database and statistically adjusting for those that do not (HUD 2012). HUD (2012) reports that participation in HMIS is considered good because participation is linked to funding. This estimate, however, does not count the unsheltered homeless. According to this estimate, approximately 1.5 million Americans spent the night in a shelter in 2011 (HUD, 2012). HUD (2012, 2013) also breaks these numbers down demographically. In both years of the point-in-time counts, approximately 62% of the homeless were individuals and 38% were families (HUD 2012, 2013). Approximately 63% of these homeless were men, 51% were between the ages of 31 and 61, and approximately 22% were below the age of 18 (HUD, 2012). 60% of the sheltered homeless are minorities, including 38% African-American and 8.9% Latino or Hispanic (HUD, 2012). HUD also reported that family homelessness is more likely to occur in suburban and rural areas, while individual homelessness is more typical in urban areas (HUD, 2012).

Ostensible Causes of Homelessness

The overall goal of this dissertation is to explore the relevance of work to homeless men. Work is so intertwined with other aspects of homelessness, however - as
both a cause and an effect of homelessness, and as impacted by factors associated with homelessness - that a short review of the debate on the causes of homelessness is relevant. Homelessness is essentially caused by one thing: poverty. It occurs when an individual or family cannot afford housing, either because income is insufficient or because housing has become too expensive (Blau, 1992; O’Flaherty, 1996; Quigely & Raphael, 2001). Scholarly argument about homelessness is largely over whether income loss or housing cost is more central (Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992; Koegel et al., 1996; O’Flaherty, 1996). Given this, researchers have typically provided one of two types of explanations for homelessness: structural explanations and personal explanations (Blau, 1992; Cronley, 2010; Koegel, Burnham, & Bauhmohl, 1996; O’Flaherty, 1996).

Structural explanations point to broader economic and social phenomenon – such as the price of rental housing, the level of regional unemployment, income inequality, or deinstitutionalization – as potential causes. Personal explanations implicate personal deficits – serious mental illness, drug abuse, or just laziness or shirking - in making the homeless unable or unwilling to participate in competitive employment and earn a living wage (APA, 2009; Cronley, 2010; Koegel, Burnham, & Bauhmohl, 1996). Many recent scholars point to mixed explanations, noting an interactive effect between the difficulties homeless men and women have and the likelihood that they will be homeless (Cronely, 2010; Hopper, 2003; Nooe & Patterson, 2010).

**Structural Explanations**

The ranks of homeless people in the United States expanded significantly in the 1980s (Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992; Hopper, 2003; O’Flaherty, 1996). In 1984, HUD provided a point-in-time estimate at 250,000 to 350,000 (though this estimate is
considered low for 1984; Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992). By the end of the decade HUD point-in-time counts were over 600,000, suggesting a large increase (Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992). The rate of increase made scholars suspect some broader social or economic phenomena should be implicated (Koegel, Burnham, & Bauhmohl, 1996; Mathieu, 1993). There is precedent for this – homelessness appears to ebb and flow with national economic fortunes. During the boom-bust era of American Industrialization for example – from perhaps 1870-1920 – significant money was spent by cities to house homeless men (Hopper, 2003). The vast majority of these men were unemployed and unable to find work (Hopper, 2003). The 1980s obviously featured different economic issues, and three main structural explanations were posited for increasing homelessness. First, something caused housing to increase in price very quickly, across the entire nation. Second, the incomes of one or more large segments of the American population may have dropped following radical changes in the American economy that came with the deindustrialization of the 1970s, and radical changes in the American political economy that came with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992). Third – and this explanation mixes structural and personal explanations together – deinstitutionalization of American psychiatric hospitals in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s may have caused increases in homelessness in 1980s because former patients were unable to sustain themselves.

**Housing Cost.** Changes in housing cost are probably one of the central explanations for changing homelessness during the 1980s, and apparently the most popular one with economists who have investigated the topic (Blau, 1992; O’Flaherty, 1996; Quigely & Raphael, 2001). Though there is much disagreement about the
economic mechanisms, scholars agree that the stock of housing available to poor people fell precipitously in the 1970s and 1980s (Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992; Kerr, 2011; O’Flaherty, 1996). Housing that might be available to the extremely poor, such as homeless men and women, can essentially be broken into four types: low quality housing and apartments, single-room occupancy or low-quality hotels, dormitory style hotels, and rooming houses (O’Flaherty, 1996). All of these types of housing decreased in the late 1970s and early 1980s, though no one is entirely sure why. Profits from this housing fell enough that much low-quality housing was destroyed by arson so that landlords could extract insurance money (O’Flaherty, 1996). For example, Kerr (2011) notes that the rate of intentional arson in Cleveland, Ohio went from less than 1000 per year before 1970 to nearly 5000 per year by the end of the decade. Much of the city’s lower cost housing stock was destroyed. Cheap hotel rooms, once plentiful, also plummeted in availability across the United States. Approximately 1 million inexpensive hotel rooms were lost during the 1970s (Blau, 1992). As an example, the quantity of low quality hotel rooms in Newark, New Jersey dropped from 2331 rooms in 1971 to 69 rooms in 1991 (O’Flaherty, 1996). Similar losses occurred in dormitory type lodging houses and motels all across the country (Blau, 1992, Koegel at al., 1996). A national statistic that measures how much income is being spent on rent, the rent-to-income ratio, correlates well with the increases in homelessness (Quigely and Raphael, 2001). The question remains as to which piece of the ratio is more important, however: rent or income. This loss in housing was accompanied by a boom in homeless shelters during the 1990s (Gowan, 2010).

**A Shifting Economy and Work.** That large portions of the U.S. population had stagnant or dropping incomes in the 1970s and 1980s is not particularly controversial
Hardin (1996) notes that in 1967 the national unemployment rate in the United States was 3.8%. It has climbed since, and at times in recent years has been nearer 9%. This number does not count those no longer looking for jobs, nor those working in informal work. Stagnating and falling incomes during the 1970s and 1980s meant people had to work more hours to sustain standards of living they had become accustomed to (Hardin, 1996). Such shifts in both the amount and quality of employment typically have disproportionate impacts on the poorest and lowest skilled workers, many of whom may have joined the ranks of the homeless due to losses in income (Blau, 1992; Hardin, 1996).

**Deinstitutionalization.** The mentally ill make up a minority of homeless people, but are a very visible minority (Fazel et al., 2007; Phelan & Link, 1999). Some scholars have suggested that the release of large numbers of residents from long-term psychiatric facilities between 1955 and 1985 – approximately 400,000 – may have played a significant role in expanding the ranks of the homeless (Blau, 1992). Some simple arguments militate against deinstitutionalization as having a major influence on homelessness. First, most of the deinstitutionalization process took place before spikes in homelessness (Blau, 1992; Hopper, 2003). Second, a substantial proportion of the increase in the 1980s was not single, mentally ill people, but families (Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992). This was a distinctive change, given that in the 1950s and 1960s most homeless were single, older men (Gowan, 2010). Third, a relatively small percentage of the currently homeless have serious mental illnesses, yet numbers remain high (APA, 2009; Fazel et al., 2007). Finally, evidence suggests that a substantial proportion of those
deinstitutionalized were re-institutionalized into nursing homes and the prison system (O’Flaherty, 1996).

Personal Explanations

Three main personal explanations for homelessness are typically used: mental illness, drug and alcohol dependence, and sheer laziness. All are suspected to impact the ability to maintain consistent, competitive employment. Some researchers will lump all forms of mental illness with drug and alcohol dependence, and therefore generate very high numbers of homeless men and women with mental illness (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008). Given this tendency literature on mental illness and substance abuse will be discussed together. Following this, some issues with the direction of causality between mental illness, substance dependence, homelessness, and lack of work will be discussed. The section will close with consideration of the belief that homeless people are lazy and shirk work (Gowan, 2010).

Mental Illness and Substance Dependence. Research suggests that most people, including many policy makers, assume that serious mental illness is a significant cause of homelessness (Cronley, 2007; Knecht & Martinez, 2009, Mathieu, 1993). Estimates in the research literature vary considerably based on the methodology and professional affiliation of the researchers. Reviews of studies that attempt to assess the extent of mental illness among the homeless note estimates ranging from 1 to 70% (Koegel et al., 1996). A recent review of studies in Western nations (including the United States) included only studies that used validated interview protocols based on DSM-IV or ICD-10 criteria. The review found that estimates of alcohol dependence ranged from 8.1 to 58.5%, drug dependence from 4.5% to 54.5%, and 2.8% to 42.3% for
psychotic illness (Fazel et al., 2008). A pooled prevalence estimate of psychotic illness provided a percentage of 12.7% (Fazel et al., 2008). Collectively, reviews estimate the percentage of diagnosable mental illnesses excluding issues with dependence (including anxiety disorders and personality disorders) at 20-40% (APA, 2009; Blau, 1992; Koegel et al., 1996). The best estimates from reviews and independent studies of substance abuse among the homeless suggest lifetime substance problems around 50% and current substance problems of around 20-30% (APA, 2009; Lehman & Cordray, 1993; Zlotnick, Robertson, & Tam, 2002).

The theory that mental illness is a cause in homelessness has been heavily criticized, however. Blau (1992, p. 78) blamed professional predilections, referring to this explanation as the province of “politicians and psychiatrists.” Hopper (2003, p. 117) referred to mental illness as a “talisman” in the hopeful search for explanations of homelessness that are not a function of economic conditions. More substantively, most studies measuring the level of mental illness in homeless populations have been cross-sectional, akin to point-in-time measures described previously (Phelan & Link, 1999). This is problematic because only the most struggling homeless men and women remain in a shelter or on the street for a long period, yet these same people may make up two thirds of a shelter population in a cross-sectional study. The majority of homeless people in a year are the other third who rotate out of homelessness more quickly. Making accurate judgments about mental illness can also be challenging. Homeless men and women often appear highly eccentric for functional reasons linked to their environment (Snow et al., 1994). For example, hygiene is much more challenging when homeless,
and women who are homeless will sometimes intentionally avoid maintaining hygiene to protect themselves from sexual assault.

**Issues with Causality.** The direction of causality should be considered in any discussion of the impact of mental illness and substance abuse on the potential to become homeless. Homelessness can be an enormously stressful condition for many reasons, and can include major shifts in personal identity, how one is perceived by others, as well as debilitating decisions associated with extreme poverty (APA, 2009; Gowan, 2010; Snow et al, 1994). The depression and anxiety disorders the majority of homeless people are diagnosed with may be, in part, a byproduct of such stress (APA, 2009; Fazel et al., 2007; Hopper, 2003; Koegel et al., 1996). Both psychiatric interviews and pen and paper assessment may indicate affirmative endorsements of depression symptoms (e.g. little hope, weight loss) that could be better described as accurate reflections of homeless life (Snow & Anderson, 1994). For example, Snow et al. (1994) noted that homeless men and women are sometimes diagnosed as having an anti-social personality disorder due to petty criminal offenses. The crimes of the homeless are often functional – trespassing during the winter to stay warm, panhandling, or minor thefts for money to survive (Snow et al., 1994).

Drug and alcohol use is also likely to be influenced by homelessness. Several sources describe social pressure on the newly homeless to abuse alcohol if they wish to be welcomed into homeless subcultures (Gowan, 2002, 2009; Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008). An evocative example is provided by Gowan, referencing her 5-year ethnographic research project with the homeless in San Francisco (2002). She noted that alcohol consumption was such a strong norm among the culture of homeless men that she was
unable to avoid drinking herself while researching, and some of her interview subjects who had recently become homeless experienced the pressure to drink in front of her (Gowan, 2002). Johnson, Freels, Parson, and Vangeest (1997), using a proportional hazards model with a sample of homeless men in Chicago, found that homelessness and job loss significantly increased the likelihood of diagnosable alcohol abuse in their sample. In an Australian context, Johnson & Chamberlain (2008) found that approximately 2/3 of homeless men and women utilizing two large homeless services in Melbourne described their problematic drug use as beginning after they became homeless.

Work may be relevant to impacts on mental illness and substance abuse. Specifically, the quality of work available to homeless men and women may compound other effects of homelessness. Unemployment has been found to significantly impact psychological health (Paul & Moser, 2009). Underemployment – not having enough work to pay bills or doing work that underutilizes one’s abilities – likely has similar effects to unemployment (albeit with slightly less force; Dooley, 2003; Dooley & Prause, 2003; Paul, Geither, & Moser, 2009). Likewise, underemployment has been found to increase the incidence of depression and alcohol abuse (Dooley & Prause, 2003).

Overall, a moderate proportion of homeless people are likely to struggle with functioning due to mental illness and substance abuse difficulties. This explanation for homelessness likely has some merit for a subgroup of homeless people. Psychotic disorders, for example, make being successful in any arena of life challenging. Still, the majority of mentally ill people in the U.S. do not struggle with housing (Koegel et al, 1996; O’Flaherty, 1996).
Lack of Personal Responsibility. A major and long-term feature of the literature and public opinion on homelessness implicates laziness or an unwillingness to take necessary steps to manage personal difficulties (e.g. alcoholism) as a cause of homelessness (Gowan, 2002). This was especially the case in research and policy during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, psychiatrists crafted a special pathology, a wanderlust fugue, for the indigent and transient men from the late 19th into the early 20th century (these men were looking for work; Gowan, 2010). Assigning this blame to the homeless has continued into the present. In New York City during the 1980s, for example, public policy began to move toward designating the homeless as a kind of intransigent category of the mentally ill, and this move appeared to be more a function of the city’s difficulty in managing the homeless than an accurate appraisal of the presence of mental illness (Matthieu, 1993).

Evidence indicates that the homeless are anything but lazy, but the stereotype of their laziness is pervasive enough that some researchers investigating homelessness report that discovering the work ethic of the homeless was a personal surprise (Hopper, 2003; Kerr, 2011). When one looks exclusively at work in the formal labor market, a minority of homeless people appear to work. In a sample from Oakland California, Zlotnick, Robertson, & Tam (2002) found that 47% of their homeless sample worked in formal employment across a 15-month period. Many homeless people work outside of the formal labor market, however. In a survey of 209 homeless visible on the street in New York City, almost 60% reported working at some money-making task seven days per week, and 65% reported working over 7 hours per day (O’Flaherty, 1996). Gowan (2002, 2009) found that homeless recyclers in San Francisco woke early and worked
most of the day at a high pace, and were proud of the pace they could maintain. Many homeless who use day labor as a work strategy wake at 5am (or earlier) to get to the labor agency, wait 2-4 hours to see if they will have a job that day, then work a full day (Kerr & Dole, 2005; Williams, 2009). Understanding homeless people’s work requires that the very concept of work be redefined.

**Defining Work**

In vocational psychology (as well as sociology and other fields) there used to be a strong distinction between work and non-work, with work being broadly defined as formal relationships resulting in an individual being paid for labor (Blustein, 2006; Taylor, 2004). This began breaking down when feminist scholars made forceful arguments that such definitions should be expanded to include the unpaid, yet extensive and important work women performed (and continue to perform) to maintain households, raise and educate children, and sustain the social functioning of families and communities (e.g. Hochschild, 1989; Oakley, 1974; Richardson, 1993). For the purposes of this dissertation, the definition of work will be extended yet further, following the work of Taylor (2004). Taylor (2004) noted that interviews with a range of workers – largely at a middle socioeconomic status level or higher – showed that people balanced a mix of types of work, and that many forms of work that people do would not be considered work under traditional definitions. Therefore, rather than defining work as either paid work or unpaid care work, Taylor (2004, p.38) argued that work should be defined as an activity that “involves the provision of service to others or the production of goods for the consumption of others.” Both formal and informal versions of unpaid volunteering might
be included, as would working as a caregiver. Taylor (2004, p.39) provided a visual model of her definition of work:

Table 1
Taylor’s Model of Types of Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Paid Work</th>
<th>Unpaid Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Formal</td>
<td>Formal, paid employment in the public or private sector.</td>
<td>Formal volunteering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Informal</td>
<td>Informal Economic Activity</td>
<td>Unpaid work for someone in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Informal</td>
<td>Household or family work that is remunerated (e.g. babysitting)</td>
<td>Parenting, household, or caregiving work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taylor (2004) suggests that an individual’s overall work can be mapped across this figure.

Literature suggests that the definition of work used in reference to homeless men needs to be similarly revised. For the purposes of this study, Taylor’s definition of work as a provision of goods or services, with or without pay as a result, will be used. Much previous research on homelessness has defined work in the formal labor market as work,
and work in the informal labor market as crime (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Karbanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, & Patterson, 2010). Much of the work that homeless men do is informal yet paid, meaning not taxed and technically not legal (e.g. Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; O’Flaherty, 1996). Using Taylor’s (2004) figure, this type of work would fit into the left middle block of informal economic activity. Sex work or drug dealing, though also criminal activities, will be considered informal forms of work because the homeless person is exchanging a service or good for money. Informal work could also include under-the-table tasks, recycling or other scavenging activities, selling plasma, stealing, selling various products, and panhandling. It may seem a stretch to define panhandling as work; however, literature suggests that panhandling is often seen by its practitioners as providing a service (Karbanow et al., 2010; Lakenau, 1999; Lee & Farrell, 2003).

When the definition of employment is expanded to include informal types of employment, the percentage of homeless people working is much more substantial, though unfortunately no researcher has been able to tabulate the overall percentage (because the work tasks sometimes overlap, tabulation is difficult; Lei, 2013). Using samples of homeless adults across three cities, Snow, Anderson, Quist, & Cress (1996) found that 57.3% had engaged in informal labor in the previous month. The mix of specific opportunities available appears to be contingent on the city and region (Snow at al., 1996). Panhandling (asking for money from passerby) can be used as an example of the diversity across studies: 33.6% of homeless youth in a five-city U.S. sample panhandled (Ferguson et al., 2012); 24.3% of adults across a three-city sample (Snow et al., 1996); 9.9% using a U.S. Census survey (Lei, 2013); and 23.3% in Los Angeles sample of adults (Schoeni & Koegel, 1998). While some variation between studies is
present, they all strongly suggest that substantial numbers of homeless people are working at panhandling, legal work, or some other form of work.

**Psychological Needs Filled by Work**

To facilitate an understanding of the work decision-making process of homeless men, it is necessary to identify which psychological needs may actually be being met by work. The work of two theorists will be combined to generate this list: First, the psychology of working developed by David Blustein (2006); second, the theory of the latent and manifest benefits of work developed by Marie Jahoda (1981, 1988).

The psychology of working identifies several recent efforts to address theoretical deficits in vocational psychology (Blustein, 2006). Vocational psychology has largely focused on vocational decision-making – especially decision-making that matches a worker’s personality, or leads to putative actualization and self-fulfillment – and the career trajectories of workers who work at one job. Often the focus was heavily on college students, likely because students have the broadest range of job choice options and are an accessible research population. This focus may have been appropriate for many workers – sometimes including blue-collar workers who spent a lifetime in one job - in the flourishing economy that developed in the United States during the 30 years following World War II. It was likely never appropriate for all or even the majority of workers, however, and new economic realities – deindustrialization, globalization, and neoliberal economic policies – have made a focus on self-actualization less sensible. The psychology of working seeks to illuminate the working lives and decision-making of this new majority of workers by shifting focus from the why of decision-making to a conceptualization of the psychological needs met by work (Blustein, 2006). Blustein
(2006) suggested that three essential needs are met by work: the need for survival and power, the need for social connection, and the need for self-determination (Blustein, 2006). Survival is essentially the ability to make money, or the financial wherewithal to feed and clothe oneself, and typically to house oneself. Power refers to a person’s financial ability to make displays of their social status or social class membership, mainly through the power conferred by consumption. Social connection takes on a broad array of meanings in Blustein’s theory (2006). It includes relationships with people at work, as well as the impact work has on work-family balance. Self-determination, drawing inspiration from the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000), suggests that people are happier if they provide their own motivation for work rather than being motivated by the threat of job loss or trouble with a boss. Deci & Ryan (2000) argue that the more these three needs can be met, the more likely people will feel internally motivated: the need for autonomy, the need for relatedness, and the need for competence (Blustein, 2006). The essence of self-determination in Blustein’s theory is that people perceive themselves as intrinsically motivated at work or not.

Marie Jahoda (1988) was a major theorist on unemployment and one of the first people to seriously research it. Along with Paul Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel, she spent many months during 1931 and 1932 – in midst of the worldwide Great Depression – studying the effects of mass unemployment on a small, one-factory Austrian community (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1971). This study that resulted – known as the Marienthal study, from the pseudonym the author chose for the town – is now considered a masterpiece of community-based research (Fryer, 1992; Neurath, 1995). The authors found that unemployment had ill effects on both health and mental health (Jahoda,
Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1972). Research since has substantively borne these conclusions out, implicating unemployment as a causal factor in negative impacts on mental health (Paul & Moser, 2009).

Jahoda continued to theorize about the relevance of work during her career. Specifically, she theorized that the depression and suffering engendered by unemployment came when six psychological needs were no longer met by work (Jahoda, 1981, 1988). One of these needs was fairly obvious: the need to make money to pay for food and housing, akin to Blustein’s notion of work for survival. Jahoda referred to this as the manifest, or obvious, benefit of employment (Jahoda, 1982). She posited that other needs were met by work without people even being aware of them, and she therefore referred to these needs as the latent benefits of working (1982). First, work provides a time structure to the day (Jahoda, 1982). Jahoda (1982, p.24) noted that people complain about being constrained by time – or being busy – but the loss of time structure when work is lost turns into a “major psychological burden.” Second, work provides a sense of purpose defined vis-à-vis others, or a feeling that one is relevant to society. Third, work is a major source of social contact. Jahoda (1982) noted that family is an obvious source of social contact, but it is rarely sufficient. Even when one despises the people they work with, this social contact is likely still beneficial. This demonstrates an interesting aspect of Jahoda’s theory that is relevant to the work of homeless people: even when work is onerous for one reason or several reasons, it still provides psychological benefits (Jahoda, 1982). Fourth, Jahoda (1982) believed that people who worked were forced to think about life in realistic ways. Her use of this concept is difficult to define succinctly, but writ large Jahoda means that work limits the tendency to meet one’s needs
through fantasy which she believed to be problematic (Jahoda, 1958, 1981, 1982).

Finally, work provides a sense of identity and status in society. Jahoda (1982) noted that people often identify themselves by what they do, and what people do often defines their social position. Jahoda’s theory has received extensive support from research, though it appears that certain of her postulated needs may be met through other sources contingent on the particular conditions of a given society or culture (e.g. Jackson, 1999; Martella & Mass, 2000; Paul & Batinic, 2010). A particularly interesting finding from the research is that people who are doing work that is not formal and paid – students, homemakers, the underemployed, and black marketeers – appear to meet some latent needs and are under less duress than the unemployed (Jackson, 1999; Paul & Batinic, 2010; Paul, Geithner, & Moser, 2009). They meet fewer needs than those who are employed full-time, however, and appear to be in more distress than those who are employed full-time in the formal labor market. Jahoda (1982) thought the five needs were not exclusively met by the experience of working; rather working provided one of the most effective ways to meet these needs. She also did not consider these needs exclusive. Work could meet a large variety of psychological needs. Instead these were the broadest categories of needs met by work.

**Integrating Psychology of Working and Latent Benefits of Work**

Combining Blustein’s (2006) ideas about the psychological needs met by work with Jahoda’s (1981, 1988) will provide a conceptual framework to analyze the categories of needs work may fill for participants in this study. Combining the two theories, I postulate that work may fill the following needs. *Survival* is the central function of work, and is defined as the ability to make enough money to meet as many
needs as is possible (Blustein, 2006). *Social status/Identity* is an identity drawn from work that helps a person know where he or she is placed in a society’s status ladder (Jahoda, 1982). Even low status jobs prevent people from the worse fate of feeling in limbo (Jahoda, 1982). This is comparable to Blustein’s (2006) notion of Power, which is linked to status. *Time structure* is a subjective sense that one’s days are organized on schedules, rather than being largely open. Ostensibly, one could create a time structure ex nihilo, but Jahoda (1988) suggests that this is difficult and time structure needs are best filled by work tasks. *Collective effort* is the knowledge that one is participating with other people in a task that is relevant to society, or just that the work one is do is contributing the larger society (Jahoda, 1982). *Autonomy* is a simplification of the complex Blustein category self-determination, is the ability to feel some control of one’s own work life, and to not feel controlled by a boss at work in a way that is emotionally painful (Blustein, 2006). *Social connection* is a combination of the two theories, and therefore broadly captures the interaction with people outside of the family that can and often takes place at work, and the work-family interface (Blustein, 2006; Jahoda, 1982).

**Conclusion**

This study will explore homeless people’s work using biographical methods (May, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). Biographical methods are useful in this context because they provide a sense of how homeless workers (or others adjusting to difficult life events) have adjusted to events in their lives across time (May, 2000; Wengraf, 2002). Previous research (Gowan, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1993) has explored homeless biographies as secondary elements in studies, but these explorations have been not been focused on biography per se.
The purpose of this study is to use biographical methods to gain an in depth understanding of homeless men’s work lives. Homelessness comes in many forms (APA, 2009), including living with friends or family, living in designated shelters, and living in places not intended for full time human habitation (such as cars and abandoned buildings). The study will focus specifically on nonpsychotic homeless men living in shelters or living in places not intended for human habitation. Men in long-term habitation such as supported living will be excluded. The central research question was: how have currently homeless men adjusted to events in their lives to meet psychological needs through work across their biography? Subquestions were: what structural patterns emerge in men’s narratives; are narratives constructed around what work is available rather than their work choices shaping their narratives; what life events or circumstances do men perceive as having significant impacts on their life and work; and what are the most important needs that homeless men have focused on when thinking about jobs?
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work in homelessness is in no way ideal. The idea presented in this study that homeless men have some agency in pursuing psychological needs - even in constrained circumstances - is not meant to suggest the mélange of work options typically available to homeless men could ever be optimal. Research suggests that when given the option of returning to regular work that pays sufficiently, homeless men will do so without a second thought, and most men would strongly prefer to be working at full-time jobs (Borchard, 2005; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Rather than celebrating the work homeless men do, the idea is that homeless men may be making the best out of a very difficult situation. The transition to understanding this difficult situation, with its new, lower set of expectations about what is possible is so painful and difficult that one researcher referred to it as “existential vertigo” (William, 2009, p. 219). It represents a fundamental rearrangement of priorities and perceptions, and choices about work that are then made in a different psychological context.
This chapter will begin by exploring research on this fundamental rearrangement of priorities. A fair amount of ethnographic research has been conducted on the day-to-day strategies homeless people use to survive, including work (e.g. Gowan, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1993a; Wagner, 1993; Wasserman & Clair, 2010; Williams, 2009). Often these studies touch on biographical elements, as well as elements related to work and meaning in work. Researchers have developed schematic kinds of biographies – variously known as homeless careers or homeless pathways – that illustrate the series of typical events that they believe to be channels into homelessness. These will be reviewed below, along with the limited previous efforts at dedicated biographical research on homeless workers. Following this, the chapter will review research on the work options available to homeless workers following their transition into homelessness, as well as the barriers that interfere with homeless workers finding both formal and informal forms of work. The chapter will close with an analysis of the psychological needs filled by work – survival, social status, time structure, autonomy, social connection, and collective purpose – that emerge in previous literature on homelessness (Blustein, 2006; Jahoda, 1982).

Pathways, Careers, and Biographies

Accompanying the expanding cross-sectional research during the rise in homelessness in the 1980s – most of it cross-sectional studies investigating the potential personal flaws of homeless people - were researchers interested in conducting qualitative research (Snow, Anderson, & Koegel, 1994). Ethnographic efforts by Snow & Anderson (1987, 1993) and Hopper (2003) were notable attempts to move closer to the lived experiences of homeless people. Elements of biography were contained in these studies,
and Snow & Anderson (1993) were the first to introduce the notion of a type of ideal biography, with defined stages of progress into homelessness, which they referred to as a homeless career. Such schematic biographies have since become more popular. Snow and Anderson (1993) focused on the progression into homelessness after initial entry into homelessness. Other researchers have looked more at biographical elements that precede, then lead into, homelessness, and have generated typologies of entry into homelessness with their own pathways (e.g. Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2006; Williams 2009). The models are similar; the difference is one of chronological starting point. These models are useful, but researchers admit that such models may oversimplify the lives of homeless workers. Both Williams (2009) and Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006) referred to these typologies as ideal-typical and admit that these studies leave out most of the fine-grained biographical detail. Such loss of detail is criticized by May (2000) and Gowan (2010). Given that the concept of a homeless career originated with the seminal work of Snow & Anderson (1993), this review will begin with their study. Next, studies illustrating the concepts of homeless careers and homeless pathways will be discussed in more detail. Third, one of the only true (published) biographical studies on homelessness, May (2000), will be discussed. Finally, the section will close with a discussion of biographical elements contained in Gowan’s (2002, 2009, 2010) recent ethnographic work.

**Models of Homeless Careers**

Snow & Anderson (1993) conducted a multi-year, multi-source, ethnographic study of homeless people in Austin, Texas. Their ethnography rarely deployed interviewing techniques per se; instead they made a distinction between what they called
perspectives-in-action and perspectives-of-action. Perspectives-in-action occur when a researcher embeds him or herself in the activities of the participants in his or her study. Perspectives-of-action involve asking questions after the fact such as typically might be the case in an interview protocol associated with a qualitative study. The goal was to gather perspectives-in-action (Snow & Anderson, 1993). To gather these perspectives-in-action they spent 400 hours with 168 homeless people – with the number of interactions ranging from one time to twenty-five – in 25 different settings. All of this took place across a two-year period (Snow & Anderson, 1993). Each of these encounters was considered an ethnographic encounter. They described their research observational position vis-à-vis their participants as one of a “buddy researcher,” essentially building friendships with homeless people over long periods and participating in their lives with them (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 24). Following each day, they would take notes on their encounters and what they had observed and heard that day.

To gain enough variation in perspectives-in-action Snow and Anderson (1993) used a sampling strategy known as maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling requires the researcher to interact with participants in as many contexts as they possibly could until exhaustion in categories or behavior is reached. The goal is to build the broadest array of responses possible. Snow and Anderson interacted with as many homeless people as they could, in as many contexts as possible, in order to create categories that were saturated. To do so they first identified as many areas of the city known to be frequented by the homeless as possible. Included were day labor agencies, plasma centers, sleeping areas, drug and alcohol treatment facilities, and places where the homeless were known to sleep rough. All of the in vivo data gathered led Snow and
Anderson to generate types of homeless practice towards survival. Inevitably, though not intentionally – remember that they did not want perspectives-of-action – they gathered a fair amount of biographical data. From the analysis of this data they generated the concept of a homeless career (Fopp, 2009; Snow & Anderson).

A career emphasized sequential movement from one stage to another, influenced at each transition by factors associated with being homeless. They argued that homeless people, starting from a dislocated, frightened stage, either exited homelessness quickly or followed a sequential movement deeper and deeper into homeless. Intermediate stages, which Snow and Anderson somewhat inelegantly called “straddling,” led to longer-term homelessness through transitional events. An example of an event that might move someone from an initial stage of homelessness to a deeper stage might be several rejections from potential jobs while developing a relationship with someone who was able to teach them to more successfully be homeless (Snow & Anderson, 1993).

This conception of the homeless career has clearly influenced the interpretation of qualitative data on homelessness, both in and out of the United States (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2006; Chamberlain & Johnson, 2011; Fopp, 2009; May, 2000). A similar set of stages was generated by Auerswald and Eyre (2002). Originally intending to research the way that membership in street groups influenced risky sexual behavior, they found that homeless youth they interviewed would change the topic of the interview and discuss their arrival in homelessness, so they altered the trajectory of their study. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 homeless youth (aged 18-24), six of whom were women in the San Francisco. Questions in the interviews focused on how homeless youth learned to survive – to find food, shelter, etc – after first arriving on the street.
Auerswald and Eyre used a form of convenience sampling, approaching adults who appeared under 24 and who also appeared to be engaged in the street (informal) economy. Following analysis of their interview data using Grounded Theory, they generated stages in a youth homeless “life cycle” (essentially the same concept as career or pathway).

The stages created by Auerswald and Eyre were more detailed than Snow and Anderson’s. They suggested a move onto the street is a fear-inducing experience until a mentor initiates the newly homeless person into strategies for survival. There is then a form of stasis that develops as a person finds a niche in the homeless economy. These niches are subject to the unstable nature of such poverty, and a single negative event (such as the theft of one’s things) can significantly disrupt the stasis a homeless person finds him or herself in (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002). In rare instances this leads to exit from the street, but in the majority of cases a new stability is found and the homeless person returns to stasis (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002).

In the Australian context, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006) posited similar models, though they described each model as a type of homeless career: the youth homeless career, the housing crisis career, and the family breakdown career. They conducted a survey with two groups: school social workers and government-funded homelessness providers. They asked each group (from locations throughout Australia) to send them case histories of how homeless youth, families, individuals, or other homeless people participating in their services became homeless. School social workers from across Australia sent them 1220 case histories, and government agency workers 812 case histories. These case studies were analyzed using grounded theory methods, and the
typology of careers described previously was generated. In the youth homeless career, an at-risk young person moves from conflict with his or her family, to homelessness, to eventually dropping out of school. In the housing crisis career an already impoverished person moves from increasing debt – debt to survive – to loss of accommodation and finally to chronic homelessness. Finally, in the family breakdown career, domestic violence results in a woman starting to move in and out of a dangerous home before eventually moving out permanently and experiencing homelessness. Chamberlain (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2011) later conducted another, similar study using case files from two large homeless nonprofits (case files \( n = 4921 \)) and 65 semi-structured interviews. They amended their previous careers and renamed them pathways. Housing crisis remained as a pathway, men who left or were kicked out of a home were added to family crisis, youth pathway was retained, and substance abuse and mental health pathways were added.

Others have suggested different models for different contexts. For example, Williams (2009) described three homeless pathways in Nashville, Tennessee: a layoff from a blue-collar job, a conviction for a felony criminal offense, and a significant drug or alcohol problem. He conducted 15 months of ethnographic research in Nashville, Tennessee. He participated in many homeless services – including sleeping with shelter residents in a shelter – and spent a great deal of time with homeless men and women. He also conducted 35 in-depth interviews with homeless day-laborers, believing that day labor is the modal form of labor for homeless workers. Williams (2009) found that a layoff from a blue-collar job would often result in downward social mobility. When unemployment benefits were exhausted, workers to whom this happened typically found
less well remunerated and less stable work, beginning a chain of negative life events. A felony offense often made finding work very difficult, and without family support men and women with such offenses can often end up homeless. Finally, the worsening effects of drug addiction can steadily wear away a worker’s ability to participate in the formal economy, due to poor or negative work participation.

Challenges to Ideal Biographies

Challenges to the oversimplified nature of these models have come from May (2000) and Gowan (2002, 2009, 2010). May (2000) is the only published study that I was able to find using explicitly biographical methods. He makes a forceful argument that biography should be used more often with homeless workers. He notes that a detailed biography may be the only way to get at the lives of homeless people during periods when they are not homeless, because most homeless research documents only the homeless periods of their lives. May found that homelessness is rarely totally chronic; rather it takes on intermittent forms that do not appear to have a pattern except in the context of the individual homeless person’s biography. His focus was on the housing histories of homeless residents of a southern resort town in the United Kingdom. He gathered biographies of 43 homeless men and women with a mean age of 31. These were what he called triple biographies, because they investigated housing, employment, and personal events. Participants ended up homeless for a broad variety of reasons, some of which were similar to the ideal scenarios in homeless pathways research. They included unemployment, relationship breakdown, drug and alcohol problems, or escaping a poor accommodation (May, 2000). These are similar to those found in other studies. May,
however, suggested that creating ideal or typical scenarios may not be worth the loss of detail present in unique biographies.

Gowan (2002, 2010) conducted ethnographic research similar to the work completed by Snow and Anderson (1993). Ethnography typically involves placement into a cultural group so that one can understand that group. Engaging deeply in the lives of her participants, Gowan participated in activities such as rough sleeping, recycling, and dumpster diving (going into dumpsters for food and materials) with homeless men of San Francisco. She engaged in these activities intermittently for a five-year period. Gowan made innumerable ethnographic contacts during this five-year period with a core group of informants consisting of 26 San Francisco recyclers, and 12 men deriving income from other informal activities. These contacts were sufficient to build relationships with these individuals, akin to Snow and Anderson’s (1993) “buddy researcher” relationships. Gowan described herself as having regular but less consistent contact with 30 other homeless people in San Francisco, but stated that she did not consider these relationships. In comparison, Gowan (2002) also spent 7 months with 7 recyclers and 39 other informal laborers in St. Louis, Missouri.

Though her study was similar in scope to Snow and Anderson’s (1993) ethnography, Gowan’s (2010) conclusions were somewhat different. Snow and Anderson (1993) implied that homeless people work almost exclusively in order to survive, and this need is so strong that homeless people will take whatever opportunities are available. Gowan agreed that work choices are certainly circumscribed – though not entirely – and noted that several homeless people she met constructed an identity around their work they ended up doing. She (2010) stated that the larger society uses three
central discourses to explain homelessness: sin talk, sick talk, and system talk. Sin talk blames the worker for their failings – alcoholism, laziness, irascibility. Sick talk blames homelessness on mental illness. System talk blames homelessness on systemic inequalities. Homeless workers may co-opt the three explanations for their own work identities. Those that commit crime may emphasize the application of sin talk to themselves. Homeless recyclers might emphasize system talk, or broad inequalities.

Gowan noted, for example, that many recyclers were familiar with Great Depression era definitions of the hobo – a homeless man who worked – and counted themselves among this group. This identification with hoboes suggests more complicated influences on work decisions than the need to survive alone. These identities then might be discarded if the person should have the opportunity to exit homelessness, illustrating the point this chapter began with: most homeless workers would gladly discard their informal work for a return to the mainstream economy. Their choices may be the best possible in a difficult situation.

Wagner (1993) conducted an extensive, broad ethnography into the overall experience of homelessness. He observed and formally interviewed 65 homeless people of both genders in a New England city over the course of two years. He also informally interviewed many more during the same period. Wagner’s formal interviews questioned the history of participants’ life in depth, with an especial focus on the three years preceding the interview, and questions around homeless people’s perceptions of their structural circumstances. His work looked at trajectories into homelessness, which he believed frequently started with negative family events and ended in problematic work opportunities. A major finding of his work was that homeless people resist societal
attempts to shape and control their behavior and perceptions. His interviews may come closest to matching with the biographies described in this study.

All told, little published research has addressed a detailed, non-“ideal” set of biographies that begins before homelessness began then moved through homelessness starting (Wagner, 1993, is a partial exception). Several authors, however, have addressed potential way that homeless workers bring elements of their previous work identity with them into homeless work (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gowan, 2010; Williams, 2009). This will be explored in the section reviewing how psychological needs emerge in the research on homeless workers. First, however, it is necessary to survey what appears to be available to the newly homeless worker when initially homeless.

**Work in Homelessness**

Crossing into homelessness represents a radical change in living circumstances, but does not appear to represent a radical change in the desire to work (Shier et al., 2012; Williams, 2009). In a large cross-sectional study, Acosta and Toro (2000) assessed 301 homeless adults (men $n = 222$) across 23 sites utilized by homeless people in Buffalo, New York. They had homeless people rank what services they most wanted to receive from community agencies using a survey tool call the Needs Assessment Questionnaire (NAQ). Education, job training, and job placement placed 2nd, 7th, and 8th respectively in the list of needs (only physical safety beat out education as a need, understandable given that many homeless people live in shelters and on the street). Job placement and training, however, were considered by participants the most difficult needs to fill (Acosta & Toro, 2000). Snow et al. (1993) found that the majority of homeless people in their sample hoped to eventually secure long-term, full-time, regular work. Temporary and informal
work is sometimes perceived as a bridge to full-time work for homeless workers (Karbanow et al., 2012; Williams, 2009).

Three areas of research have shed light on homeless work. First, research has looked at the types of work available to homeless people, which has generated categories of work. Second, research has investigated barriers to working for homeless workers. Potential homeless workers face many barriers to securing regular work, and even the more limited types of informal work are subject to barriers and difficulties. Third, research has considered the numbers of homeless workers who pursue each type of work. This research is more limited, but can provide a sense of how much of each type of work is being done on average.

**Types of Work**

Homeless people do a variety of forms of work. Some work is in the formal labor market, including what an average person would consider a job or work. Much of this formal work is a very short-term type of temporary work known as day labor. Other work is known as informal work, with “informal” intended to specify that the remuneration from this work is not taxed. An example might be working informally as a laborer. Tasks that might not typically be considered work, such as panhandling or scavenging activities are also considered informal work (Lei, 2013). Herein any work that is not formal, whether under-the-table, panhandling, criminal, or other work, will be referred to as informal work. Formal work performed by the homeless can be broken into three types, regular work, day labor, and institutional work. Institutional work is formal, but is a mix between paid and largely unpaid; informal work can be separated into five
types: informal day labor, scavenging activities such as recycling and dumpster diving, panhandling, selling, and criminal activity.

**Regular Work.** Some homeless men work in regular jobs – meaning being on the formal, taxed payroll of one employer (and not through an intermediary like a temporary agency) – though the numbers of homeless people with access to regular work are small (Lei, 2013). Estimates of the percentage of homeless people working at regular work also do not always disaggregate regular work from day labor work. Those that do disaggregate these numbers estimate the number of homeless people working at regular jobs between a low of 14% and a high of 28.6% (Ferguson et al., 2012; Zuvekas & Hill, 2000). Holding a regular job makes a homeless respondent statistically more likely to exit homelessness, and therefore cross-sectional studies likely do not accurately count all homeless people who do regular work across a year (Caton et al., 2005).

**Day Labor.** Much of the formal work done by the homeless is in the exploitative and underpaid day labor industry (Ferguson et al., 2012; Lei, 2013; Williams, 2009). Day labor is a kind of temporary work, though unlike other forms of temporary work day labor rarely if ever leads to permanent positions with companies. Temporary agencies often hire workers out for extended periods and will allow temp-to-hire arrangements, allowing workers to parlay temporary positions into eventual full-time work (Purser, 2012). Day labor agencies hire people out for a single day at a time, and day labor agencies often frame their contracts such that a worker is considered to have quit when a day is over, requiring them to be hired again the next day (Purser, 2012). Day laborers may be sent out to the same site several times, but research suggests that these agencies
will often take steps to avoid allowing workers to move toward permanent positions (Purser, 2012).

Day laborers typically must show up at a day labor agency early in morning (5 or 6 a.m.) then wait until the agency staff tell them later in the morning if any local manufacturing concerns or other small businesses will need assistance (Kerr & Dole, 2005; Williams, 2009). Often these agencies are located in the center of cities and the jobs they are supplying workers for are located in the suburbs, and therefore the agencies transport homeless workers to jobs, then charge these workers for this transportation. Agencies may also charge workers for equipment they must use, including safety equipment such as gloves. With such charges deducted from a check, it is not unusual for a day laborer to work 10-12 hours (when you count waiting for a job to be assigned) and make just over $30 (Williams, 2009). Typical day labor tasks are often described as dirty, undesirable, and occasionally dangerous (Kerr & Dole, 2005). Day laborers have little to no leverage with employers, and therefore are often exploited, including being denied sufficient safety protection for dangerous industrial jobs (Kerr & Dole, 2005; Williams, 2009). Estimates suggest that anywhere from 20% to 45% of homeless people in a given area are working regularly at day labor (Ferguson et al., 2012; Lei, 2013; Williams, 2009). Day labor agencies maintain a significant presence in the midsized, midwestern city in this study, mainly to address short-term needs of suburban manufacturing concerns, and are often used by homeless citizens (Kerr and Dole, 2005).

**Institutional Work.** Sheltered homeless men may often work at jobs in the context of their shelters (Borchard, 2005; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Typically, these jobs may be a requirement of residence in a shelter and offer at best a nominal
remuneration (perhaps $5/week), and are probably best categorized as a form of formal volunteering (Borchard, 2005; Snow et al., 1993). Such formal volunteerism can turn into paid positions, but these positions are few in number and competitive (Borchard, 2005).

**Informal Day Labor or Tasks.** Many homeless people work at small service tasks. Day labor corners leading to under-the-table construction or landscaping jobs are not unusual in large cities, but are more associated with immigrant workers than with homeless workers. Nevertheless, homeless workers do them as well, though in such informal relationships there is a danger of not getting paid. A survey of staff at 24 Chicago area shelters about forms of work found that homeless men might work informally at: handyman tasks, car washes, landscaping (including rolling a lawnmower around a neighborhood knocking on doors), delivering newspapers, and carrying people’s groceries for a potential tip (Balkin, 1992).

**Scavenging and Recycling.** Homeless people, and poor people in general, often use scavenging to make money. People will sometimes scavenge for food or saleable items, but for the purposes of this study scavenging refers to the gathering of material that can then be sold. Scrap metal is often scavenged. Pallets, the wooden frames used to hold large amounts of product delivered to stores (fork lifts can get underneath them) are another popular item to scavenge if a person has a car (Borchard, 2005). Both metal and pallets may be scavenged legally (e.g. pulling pallets from the back of a store with the approval of store management) and illegally (stealing copper piping from abandoned homes). Contingent on context, other forms of scavenging are sometimes possible.
Homeless men in Las Vegas sometimes circulate around a casino gathering loose silver change from floors and from slot machines (Borchard, 2005).

Recycling is generally a community specific activity, contingent on the remuneration offered for items such as aluminum cans in a particular city or state. Cans and bottles typically bring strong returns in some states and not others, therefore recycling is popular in some states and not in others. The homeless in California, for example, do a considerable amount of recycling because recycling is politically popular in California, and therefore recycled cans and bottles bring in more money. Cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles have entire homeless subcultures built around recycling (Gowan, 2010; Schoeni & Koegel, 1998). For example, Schoeni & Koegel (1998) found that up to 20% of a homeless sample in Los Angeles use recycling as a way to make money. In other communities this number may be as low as 2%, largely due to the possibility of making money in recycling (Ferguson et al., 2012; Gowan, 2002; 2010).

Circumstantial evidence for recycling occurring in Cleveland exists, and Cleveland has an array of scrap metal centers that might facilitate scrap metal collection, though Midwestern winters influence the potential for scrap metal collection as a viable means of making consistent money relative to a warm weather climate such as is present in California cities (Cleary, 2012; Cleveland Plain Dealer Editorial Board, 2015).

**Panhandling.** Panhandling is the common name in the literature given to what is - in essence - begging for money, typically in pedestrian thoroughfares. Panhandling is probably the form of homeless work that seems most implausible as work, but panhandlers regularly make the argument that they are providing some form of service (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Lakenau, 1999). At times this is because the panhandler is
offering some sort of performance (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1993). At other times panhandlers are the object of public gaze and often draw either the ire or care of passersby, clearly allowing these passersby the opportunity to satisfy a need to contrast themselves with someone they feel is less deserving or less fortunate than they are (Karbanow et al., 2012; Lakenau, 1999a, 1999b). Panhandlers thereby feel they are offering a service (Karbanow et al., 2012; Lakenau, 1999a, 1999b). Panhandlers often work long hours at a single spot (O’Flaherty, 1996). The presence of panhandling is not clear in terms of numbers, but numbers are significant enough that many city governments continue to pass restrictive ordinances in an attempt to limit panhandling (North East Ohio Coalition for the Homeless, 2015).

**Selling.** Some homeless people sell inexpensive items for small profits, such as items discovered in dumpsters, items or crafts they have made themselves, or items provided by others for sale (such as homeless newspapers; Lei, 2013). Papers are a viable option utilized by some homeless individuals in the Cleveland area, for example (Cleveland Street Chronicle, 2015). Homeless people may also sell their blood or plasma (Ferguson et al., 2012; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Duneier (1999) explored the variety of sales taking place on a single block in New York City. He found that some homeless venders sold magazines they rescued from various garbage sites, while others sold found items of a large variety. Sometimes homeless people will also sell personal items to other homeless people (Borchard, 2005). Estimates of homeless people who work at selling range from approximately 12% to well over 20% (Ferguson et al., 2012; Lei, 2013; Schoeni & Koegel, 1998).
Criminal Activity. Finally, homeless people may engage in criminal activities such as prostitution, theft, and selling drugs. Using national census estimates from 1996, Lei (2013) found that 4% of homeless workers use illegal activities to make money. Census workers are unlikely to obtain accurate estimates from homeless workers, for a variety of reasons, and local estimates of criminal activities are often higher. Chicago shelter staff estimated that selling drugs was one of the top ten sources of income for their residents (Balkin, 1992). 10% of young homeless people interviewed in Toronto engaged in sex work at times, and 18% engaged selling drugs or theft (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002). Working with a similar population across five US cities, Ferguson et al. (2012) found that 20% engaged in selling drugs and about 6% engaged in prostitution or sexual activity. Engagement in criminal activity appears to be the lowest status task amongst homeless workers, though it is one of the best remunerated (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; O’Grady & Gaetz, 2004). Engagement in sex work, for example, is correlated to several factors, including history of sexual abuse and a mentor in how to engage in such work effectively, but these factors are not necessarily determinant, and reasons for engagement in sex work appear unclear (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Lakenau et al., 2005).

Barriers to Work

Numerous factors may limit the ability of homeless people to work at both formal and informal work. Major factors that limit the engagement of homeless people in formal work are criminal history, race, and education level. The majority of individuals who are homeless are people of color. A minority of people who are homeless have criminal histories. Both make it much more difficult to find jobs, excepting day labor. Factors associated with being homeless – difficulty with maintaining hygiene and no regular
address for example – can influence the access to both formal and informal work. Factors associated with urban setting, or geographical factors, can heavily influence both formal and informal work.

**Criminal History.** The stigma of a criminal history, especially a felony conviction, is a major barrier to finding formal work. Scholars in the early 1970s attempted to count the number of proscriptive state laws and policies restricting ex-offenders from becoming licensed in various professions, and found nearly 2000 (Harris & Keller, 2005). Now, 40+ years later, such restrictions are so numerous that they defy counting (Harris & Keller, 2005). This includes fairly obvious professions, such as lawyers, doctors, and teachers, but can also include unexpected professions such as barbers. Thirty-eight states allow employers to restrict employment based only on arrest records (Harris & Keller, 2005). In other words, the applicant for a position does not even need to have been convicted of a crime. Perhaps more important for many ex-offenders – few of whom were involved in vocations requiring a professional license before being incarcerated - are the less explicit social effects of felony conviction. One scholar usefully sums up this effect by referring to it as a negative credential (Pager, 2007). A credential (e.g. a degree, a professional or trade membership) provides those who have it to experience a variety of positive expectations from potential employers, perhaps even when they sometimes do not deserve them. The reverse is the case with a negative credential. Potential employers make negative assumptions about ex-offenders even when they are undeserved. Research using sending fake applicants (who are actually connected to the researcher) suggests that a felony reduces the number of callbacks for even an initial interview by about 50% or more compared to non-felony controls (Pager,
Many ex-offenders who have just exited prison end up doing day labor work (Raphael, 2007; Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008).

**Race.** Sixty percent of homeless men in 2011 were people of color (HUD, 2012). The research on homelessness rarely documents how race may play into their chances of being hired for various positions. One exception is Kerr and Dole (2005), who found that race influenced hiring decisions in day labor agencies, with white workers sometimes more likely to get the best positions or to get positions more quickly. An extensive research literature has investigated racial biases in hiring in other contexts (Pager, 2007; Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009; Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009). A great deal of research with university participants – who are ostensibly less likely to be racist – has found systematic discriminatory bias in hypothetical hiring experiments when applicants had resumes or applications of mixed quality (unequivocally qualified applicants faced no bias; Pearson et al., 2009). Participants are often not even aware that they are consistently making decisions based on race, and instead justify their decisions based on putative flaws in applications (Pearson et al., 2009). Perhaps more relevant for homeless men of color, Pager et al. (2009) sent black, white, and Latino research confederates to apply for job openings requiring a high school degree in New York City. All of Pager et al.’s (2009) applicants were male university graduates, and therefore well-spoken and good at presenting themselves (though university degrees were left off resumes). All had been matched in race pairs based on relative attractiveness. White male applicants received double the job offers of black applicants, and white applicants with felonies were 30% more likely to receive job offers than black applicants with no criminal record (Pager et al., 2009).
**Education and Training.** The average homeless person is not well-educated or well-trained (Snow & Anderson, 1993). Looking at the initial reported occupations of homeless registrants at a state run job search agency in Austin, Texas, Snow & Anderson (1993) found that 81% of applicants reported blue collar labor type jobs. Another 12% reported food industry jobs (Snow & Anderson, 1993). In a survey of homeless adults in Buffalo, Acosta and Toro (2000) found that further education was 2nd behind only physical safety in their participants’ ranked list of needs. Participants ranked education higher than free meals or housing, which suggests that homeless workers are aware of how their lack of education impacts their work prospects. Interestingly, Gaetz and O’Grady (2002) found evidence that education levels may impact even what types of informal work a homeless worker does. Homeless workers in their study who left high school without graduating were much more likely to engage in lower status informal jobs such as squeegeeing and sex work.

**Geographical Limiting Factors.** The region in which a homeless person lives influences what work that homeless person might pursue. In part this is due to regional differences in laws, climate, labor market factors, the level at which recycling is remunerated, and laws against various homeless activities that restrict panhandling or access to good recycling spots (Gowan, 2002; Marr, DeVerteuil, & Snow, 2009; Snow & Mulcahy, 2001). For example, recycling is a more tenable activity on the West Coast of the United States because strong political support for recycling means recycling is better remunerated (Gowan, 2002). Some scavenging activities are especially limited by geographical region. For example, Borchard (2005) describes the scavenging activity of searching for silver coins, unique to Las Vegas. Selling is similar. Due to high
population density and concentrations of pedestrians, cities like New York and San Francisco are much more amenable to sidewalk sales of found objects (Duneier, 1999; Gowan, 2010). Likewise, winter in many cities influences how often certain tasks may be accomplished outside.

Placement inside large cities can influence the opportunities available to homeless workers as well. Homeless people often end up concentrated in particular areas of the cities in which social services – shelters for example – useful to homeless people are located (Marr et al, 2009). These areas typically have fewer opportunities to engage in formal labor (excepting predatory day labor agencies) and people experienced with homelessness often describe such areas as difficult to escape from. These areas provide resources necessary to surviving on marginal forms of work, yet the local (meaning in a particular region of a city) economic opportunities are so limited that the likelihood of ever escaping the area or homeless is very low (Marr et al., 2009; Williams, 2009).

**Factors Associated with Being Homeless.** Numerous factors associated with being homeless, even when staying in a shelter, impact the chances of finding work. Shelter rules and public transit can limit the times homeless people are available to work (Shier et al., 2012). Shelter residence can cause unexpected difficulties with work, such as how a worker negotiates times when he or she eats (shelters often have very regimented eating times; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002). Often local employers become familiar with the address of large homeless shelters, and may reject an applicant if one of these addresses is on his or her resume (Williams, 2009). Obviously sleeping rough, though also sleeping in shelters, limits the ability of homeless men to present the appearance (middle class dress, good hygiene) insisted upon at many formal jobs (Gaetz
& O’Grady, 2002; Williams, 2009). Evidence suggests that such an appearance is favored even at day labor type jobs (Kerr & Dole, 2005).

**How Much of Each Type of Work?**

Some research (e.g. Lei, 2013; Snow et al., 1996) has been conducted on what numbers of homeless individuals are working at each type of task. Like all research into homeless populations, methods, samples, and aims of the research differ, and therefore a considerable variance in numbers. Some of the research has been conducted with adults, some specifically targeting young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. With such disparate samples, any generalization will have to be limited. Nevertheless, reviewing this research will provide a broader understanding of the types of work described above, as well as the way that some of the barriers described above interact with such work.

Perhaps the most frequently cited study of the work of homeless adults was conducted by Snow et al. (1996). They conducted interviews with 400 homeless adults in Philadelphia (n = 102), Detroit (n = 162), and Tucson (n = 136). Each participant was asked their sources of income during the previous month. Across the three cities, 33.9% worked at wage labor (formal labor, both regular and day) and 57.3% engaged in some form of informal work (Snow et al., 1996). Twenty-one percent scavenged, 16.8% sold things they had found, 22% sold their plasma, 24.3% engaged in panhandling, and 18.1% engaged in criminal activities.

Schoeni & Koegel (1998) used data collected in a study interviewing 1548 homeless adults in central Los Angeles. Lei (2013) used a U. S. Census sample that was gathered by Census staff, who conducted six to eight interviews during visits to shelters in 1996. Schoeni & Koegel (1998) found quite similar numbers to Snow et al. (1996; see
Lei (2013) found high numbers for formal employment, with 35.1% of his sample working at regular jobs and 20.0% working at day labor. He found lower numbers for all non-formal labor tasks, including 4.0% for criminal activities and 9.9% for panhandling. This likely reflects the sample, which was largely gathered in homeless shelters (Lei, 2013). Evidence suggests that people who live in shelters are more likely to be engaged in regular or institutional forms of work. Gaetz & O’Grady (2002) and Ferguson et al. (2012) both used young adult (age 18 – 25) samples. Gaetz & O’Grady’s sample was drawn from the Toronto area, and Ferguson et al.’s sample was drawn from five U. S. Cities: Los Angeles, Austin, Denver, New Orleans, and St. Louis. Interestingly, the youth samples featured lower levels of regular work and much higher levels of criminal activity. Why this occurred is unknown, but may be because younger homeless people have less ability to make money at activities like recycling. Gowan (2010) found that homeless recyclers often entered recycling when they were taught by other homeless recyclers.

Table 2.

Rates of Homeless Involvement in Particular Work Tasks Reported by Various Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Snow et al., 1996 Adults</th>
<th>Schoeni &amp; Koegel, 1998 Adults</th>
<th>Lei, 2013 Adults</th>
<th>Ferguson et al., 2012 Y. Adults</th>
<th>Gaetz &amp; O’Grady, 2002 Y. Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 400</td>
<td>n = 3909</td>
<td>N = 1402</td>
<td>N = 229</td>
<td>N = 360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Day Labor</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
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<td>Work</td>
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<td>Informal</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day Labor</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scavenging</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Recycling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panhandling</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>8.8%*</td>
<td>9.2%*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Activities**

Zlotnick, Robertson, & Tam (2002) and Zuvekas & Hill (2000) provide information on how much homeless people worked at formal labor during multi-month periods. Both studies are based on research with an initial sample of 564 homeless people in an around Alameda County, California (Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco) between 1991-1993 (Zlotnick et al., 2002; Zuvekas & Hill, 2003). The two studies do provide slightly different perspectives by focusing on slightly different variables and by using different exclusion criteria. Zlotnick et al. (2002) kept participants who stayed in the study for a full 15 months, resulting in 384 participants. They found that perceived
disability (physical or mental health) and recent drug use both limited labor force participation in the previous 30 days (Zlotnick et al., 2002). Over a 15-month period, however, almost 80% of the participants did some sort of work, though a little less than 50% maintained work over the entire period (Zlotnick et al., 2002). Zuvekas and Hill (2000) looked at the sample that remained after a six-month follow-up, rather than at 15-months. This left them with 471 homeless participants (male \( n = 304 \)). They found that 48% of the sample worked during this period, though only 14% worked full-time.

Perhaps most notable in all of these studies is the substantial proportion of the homeless population that worked at some type of work. Even when measuring only formal, regular work, over 80% of homeless people worked at such tasks during a 15-month period (Zlotnick et al., 2002). Qualitative research strongly suggests that people do not work exclusively because they need to survive – though survival is obviously important - but because some sort of satisfaction is derived from such work (Duneier, 1999; Gowan, 2010; Williams, 2009).

**Meeting Psychological Needs in Work**

While no research has directly assessed the psychological needs met by homeless people’s work decisions using a model similar to that presented here, research has explored the meanings homeless workers attached to certain types of work. This is especially true of identity vs. survival issues. Gowan (2010) explored the meaning that homeless recyclers assign to the work they do, as well as the impact such recycling has on identity. Williams (2009) did something similar with day laborers, exploring the meaning they attach to often miserable work tasks. Several other studies make incidental or unintentional reference to the needs homeless workers meet through work. These
studies will be reviewed for the examples of and comment on the psychological needs articulated in Chapter 1. These needs are survival, social status and identity, time structure, collective purpose, autonomy, and social connection (Blustein, 2005; Jahoda, 1982).

First, however, a quick summary of the studies from which much of the discussion of potential work meaning will be drawn. Several studies discussed earlier in the chapter touch on issues of work needs: Snow and Anderson (1993), Gowan (2002, 2009), and Williams (2009). Other qualitative studies touch on work needs as well.

For periods during summers between 1992 and 1999, Duneier (1999) conducted an ethnography of a city block of largely (though not all) homeless sidewalk salesman in New York City. His ethnography explored the culture, strategies, and thoughts of these salesman. Duneier’s study included discussion with sidewalk vendors, participation in sidewalk vending, and consultation with the same vendors on the accuracy of his research.

Lakenau (1999a, 1999b) published two articles articulating different pieces of his ethnography of panhandling in the Washington, D.C. area. He spent nearly two years exploring areas where panhandling occurred, observing panhandling at a distance, observing panhandling up close, then finally spent two days posing as a panhandler. Lakenau noted that he did observational research or interviews on 80 separate occasions. He also conducted semi-structured interviews with 37 panhandlers, 3 of whom were women. The vast majority of his participants were African-American males, though Lakenau does not specify the actual percentage in either article. Lakenau noted that
questions focused on self and identity issues, the work of panhandling, and relationships with the public.

Kerr & Dole (2005) conducted 77 structured interviews with largely homeless people from several locations around the Cleveland, Ohio area. All of these homeless people worked in the day labor industry. Eighty-eight percent were men, 62% were African-American, and 21% did not identify as homeless (some were day laborers who were not homeless). Kerr and Dole’s specific goal was to investigate the employment relationship between day labor firms and day laborers, including pay, employment relationships, treatment of workers at jobs, and protection of worker safety. The structured interviews reflected these goals.

Karbanow et al. (2012) conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 youth in Halifax, Nova Scotia seeking to better understand the day-to-day routine of young, homeless workers. The average age of participants was 21, 39% were women, and about ½ were sleeping “rough.” Interviews explored labor, including daily routine, preferences, mentors, and dream jobs. Analysis and sampling were guided by Grounded Theory, including sampling to saturate categories. Seven interviews were also conducted with service providers to homeless youth in 6 Canadian cities.

Finally, Borchard (2005) conducted an ethnography, with observation largely in or near shelter contexts, and 48 in-depth interviews with homeless men in Las Vegas. The goal of his research was to develop a broad sense of how being homeless men in Las Vegas survive and function. He describes his interviews as in depth but unstructured, and explored the survival strategies of these men (akin to what is addressed by Snow et al.,
Sampling was by convenience and did not have any theoretical basis. Borchard (2005) simply approached men he knew were homeless for interviews; some agreed.

**Survival**

Probably the central reason most people work, and this includes homeless people, is to make enough money to survive (Blustein, 2006; Jahoda, 1982). While survival seems a relatively unambiguous word, when used in Western societies it is often more relative. For Blustein (2006) it is a relative term, and appears to mean the ability to purchase items for consumption at a desired level of social status. Evidence from qualitative research suggests that homeless people experience a substantial (and very painful) shift downward in their material expectations; nevertheless, they still buy items technically unnecessary to survival such as cigarettes, alcohol, and reading material (Borchard, 2005; O’Flaherty, 1996).

**Actual Versus Relative Survival.** Public perception may question whether or not homeless people struggle with finding enough food to eat or a place to keep from being harmed by inclement weather in various regions. Indeed, research suggests that homeless people have access to some food resources, especially in urban contexts (Lee & Greif, 2008). Perhaps one of the best variables on which to base judgments on this issue is food. Lee & Grief (2008) noted that while homeless are not starving, substantial proportions do suffer from food insecurity. Food insecurity is self-reported concern over how much food one is eating or fear that food security is at imminent risk. Fifty-seven percent of the sample reported infrequent meals, 39% reported spending at least one day in the previous thirty without food, and 61% perceived their food intake as insufficient (Lee & Grief, 2008). Regression results indicated that newly homeless and younger
homeless people appeared to struggle with food insecurity more than those who have been homeless for longer time periods. This may be because those who have been homeless longer are savvier about where to find food.

**The Meaning of Relative Survival.** Work goals in homelessness may be contingent on the type of homelessness, as people who are newly homeless are often deeply concerned about escaping homelessness (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Those who have been homeless for longer are still interested in escaping, but have started to become accustomed to homelessness, and therefore become more concerned about (and more skilled in addressing) homeless specific survival needs. Based on his interviews and ethnography, Williams (2009) argued that homeless men in Nashville essentially had three central reasons for working: extrication from homelessness, meeting daily needs for money, and making enough money to engage in substance abuse. Research on the details of these three reasons – extrication, daily needs, and drug and alcohol costs – as well as the money that can be expected and the money that can be expected will be reviewed below.

**Extrication From Homelessness.** One of the primary concerns of the initially homeless person is generating a plan to extricate him or herself from homelessness (Snow & Anderson, 1987a; Williams, 2009). Men in Nashville initially perceived day labor as a potential way to extricate themselves from homelessness (Williams, 2009). Homeless workers in Canada viewed other kinds of homeless work in a similar light, as a financial bridge to cover gaps while looking for more regular, better remunerated work (Karbanow et al., 2012). Very few forms of work that are available to homeless workers – even the regular work available to them – are sufficient to help someone exit from
homelessness. One of Kerr and Dole’s (2005, p. 92) participants described this well, stating

“How can you help somebody help themselves if they come back after eight hours of work and only see $25.00 to $30.00 on their check and they’re homeless. That’s impossible! And with the rent here in Cleveland, it’s nothing!”

Participants in the studies by Kerr and Dole (2005) and Williams (2009) indicate that homeless participants are quickly disabused of any notion that they will be extricating themselves through the work available to homeless workers.

Meeting Daily Needs. Once disabused of notions of escape and reconciled to lower living expectations – some of Duneier’s (1999) participants referred to this as the “fuck it moment” – concerns are more focused on day-to-day wants and needs, and less on extrication from homelessness. A participant in another study articulated this focus along with lowered expectations in the context of day labor: “…the money you make out it…almost everything you get…it’s spent on taking care of yourself and there’s none left…it’s useless working for them” (Williams, 2009, p. 224). Once they have accepted that they will not escape homelessness, homeless people sometimes begin setting targets for quantities on money they might need for some set purpose (O’Flaherty, 1996). Considerable variation in goals for daily means no set quantity can be arrived at, and typically there is a low ceiling of what can be earned overall (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2004; Schoeni & Koegel, 1998; Williams, 2009). Targets appear mainly to provide homeless workers with a limiting factor the length of day they spend working (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2004; O’Flarherty, 1996). Interestingly, homeless workers often seek some creature comforts as part and parcel of daily survival (Borchard, 2010; Snow et al., 1996).
Homeless workers in Las Vegas noted being interested in having wireless access to pursue internet work, radio so that they can listen to British Broadcasting Company broadcasts on a local National Public Radio Station, and savings for date nights with girlfriends (Borchard, 2010). These same homeless people described wrapping a laptop in an old plastic bag and sleeping on it so that it would not get stolen, saving money and pooling vouchers to stay in a cheap motel, and other difficult living circumstances that contrast with attempts to pursue activities that remain interesting (Borchard, 2010).

**Remuneration Available For Formal and Informal Work.** Research has been conducted in an attempt to determine the actual dollar value remuneration associated with homeless work. On their best day in New York City, recyclers had a mean of $30.30, and their worst day had a mean of $6.70 (O’Flaherty, 1996). For panhandlers it was $38.20 and $8.90 respectively; for those who did sales it was $60 and $15.30 (O’Flaherty, 1996). A more recent study by a business group in San Francisco indicated panhandlers there make a mean of $25 per day (Knight, 2013). This research makes it appear as if homeless workers might at times be making a quite comfortable income, though it may be a partial artifact of sampling. O’Flaherty’s (1996) researchers approached people on the street who were obviously working and asked if they were homeless. With a stronger and more representative sample, Schoeni & Koegel (1998) found that the median monthly income for homeless workers was $236, or about $7 per day.

**Drug and Alcohol Funding.** A segment of the homeless population works almost exclusively to feed drug and alcohol addictions. As noted in Chapter 1, caution is necessary when analyzing drug and alcohol use amongst the homeless. It is a common
and inappropriate assumption that many homeless people have diagnosable drug and alcohol difficulties (Gowan, 2010). Caution in making this assumption is needed not only because such abuse has a complex causal relationship with homelessness, but also because some homeless people drink and use for recreation and social interaction in the same way that housed people do (Gowan, 2010; Williams, 2009). They may use for recreation more often in fact, because homelessness is dull, alienating, and sometimes a frightening experience (Williams, 2009). O’Flaherty (1996) reported that approximately 23% of his sample reported plans to buy cigarettes and alcohol, while 11% reported an intention to spend the money they made on drugs. Such abuse does not appear to be wholly concentrated among one work type of homeless workers, though some research (both quantitative and qualitative) suggests that panhandling and selling are marginally more connected to drug and alcohol abuse (Gowan, 2010; Lei, 2013).

Social Status & Identity

As Jahoda (1982) pointed out, while social scientists undoubtedly see a difference between the concepts of social status and identity, average people rarely see the distinction. Also, even for social scientists, the concepts are heavily tied to one another where work is concerned (Jahoda, 1982). Issues of identity as a worker and status in society (and among other homeless workers) likely play into homeless workers decisions about work (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gowan, 2010; Hopper, 2003; Karbanow et al., 2012; Williams, 2009). Three strategies appear to help homeless workers maintain a sense of social status through work. First, homeless work exists on a gradient, and homeless workers choose work on this gradient contingent both on comparisons with other homeless workers and consistent with their own biography. Second, homeless
workers define and present the work they do in particular ways. Third, many homeless think carefully about where they want to be homeless – certain geographic locations have stigma and identity issues – and this in turn influences the types of work available.

**Work Choice.** Gaetz & O’Grady (2002) found evidence that homeless work exists on a status gradient amongst the homeless. Regular, paid employment was at the top of this gradient, followed respectively by: panhandling, criminal activity of a sexual nature, and other criminal activity. Unfortunately not much research informs the decision-making concerning how individuals make decisions concerning which work they choose, nor the reference group they use to gauge whether the status of the work is satisfactory. Where a homeless person chooses to be on the gradient can be contingent on education level, socioeconomic level of family of origin, and the experience of sexual abuse while a child. Young homeless male sex workers typically come from poor families and have experienced previous sexual abuse (Lakenau et al., 2005). Duneier (1999) described several homeless people who moved from being panhandlers to assisting in the sale of scavenged magazines to actually selling the magazines themselves. This clearly illustrates a move forward in homeless work at different status levels. Homeless workers likely choose work that suits them on the gradient based at least in part on biographical factors such as the socioeconomic status of their family of origin and previous work experiences. Day labor is often a degrading form of work; nevertheless for some workers it provides a positive link to previous work in manufacturing (Williams, 2009). It might therefore be construed as building a link with a previous work identity.
**Presentation Strategies.** Homeless people present, or even think about their work in ways that enhance their identity. Snow and Anderson (1987) found that homeless people deploy three presentation strategies to explain aspects of their current work and life situation: distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. First, Homeless people may distance themselves from other homeless people, from typical homeless patterns of behavior, or from homeless institutions. Clear evidence of this is presented by some homeless who explicitly separate themselves from the homeless who work at lower level tasks. For example, a day laborer might distinguish him or herself as a harder worker than a panhandler or a person employed institutionally in a homeless shelter (Borchard, 2005; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Williams, 2009). A frequent way this is done is to distinguish the informal work one is doing – peddling, panhandling, plasma donation – from criminal activity (Karbanow et al., 2012; Williams, 2010).

Second, homeless people may embrace their role as homeless people. This includes embracing homeless types of work – even to the point of being proud of one’s mix of panhandling and theft – and embracing social connections with other people who share the same interests (Gowan, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1987b). For example, Gowan (2010) described spending time with a homeless man who was generous to her, often offering her food or beer, who was quite proud of his ability to string together theft and panhandling to make a living on the street. Third, many homeless people engage in fictive storytelling. Such storytelling can be broken into two categories: embellishment and fantasization (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Embellishment occurs when the homeless exaggerate what they are currently doing, such as exaggeration of pay; fantasization occurs when homeless workers imagine to themselves what is possible. Fantasization
features implausibly positive and well-remunerated self-employment schemes, such as becoming a web-designer for websites (Borchard, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1987).

**Geographical Influences on Work Choice.** A connection is present between geography and status that influences work indirectly. Homeless workers may choose to live away from homeless services – which are usually concentrated in single area of American cities – so that they feel distinct from larger concentrations of homelessness and thereby avoid an identity as homeless (Marr et al., 2009; Snow & Mulcahy, 2001). Some homeless people also perceive such environments as a trap, full of people who have given up on their lives who are willing to adapt themselves to institutional living (Gowan, 2010; Marr et al., 2009). If you are homeless, living away from such an environment can be challenging, because advantages come with living near the services. These advantages include easier access to free food and shelter, which one then has to purchase in other areas of the city.

**Collective Effort**

One of the central features of homelessness as being a liminal status, where one that exists between societal categories, without any sense of one’s relevance to the larger society (Hopper, 2003). This is essentially what Jahoda (1982) implied about loss of collective effort – feeling irrelevant to the larger society. This is distinct from social status/identity, which has more to do with the identity and status placement that one gets from having an occupation. Collective effort has more to do with a psychological need to feel useful to other people in general. Taylor (2004), though not discussing homeless workers, implies that one can find such collective effort even in unpaid volunteer
positions. Such a feeling of irrelevance clearly has an impact on homeless workers, who want to feel part of the larger society.

Several authors suggest that homeless workers are concerned about their relationship to members of the housed public (Gowan, 2010; Karbanow et al., 2012). Such relationships are taken as putative evidence of the legitimacy of the work one is doing (Gowan, 2010; Lakenau, 1999a, 1999b). Due to negative public perceptions of homeless work, many kinds of relationships can invite very negative interactions with the public. Lakenau’s panhandling participants (1999a; 1999b) describe many very negative interactions with people who walk past them and voice and act out various insults, occasionally including of variety of physical attacks (Lakenau, 1999a; 1999b). Often these insults aim at the lack of legitimacy these men and women have as workers and citizens, and these types of insults appear to cut deeply (Lakenau, 1999a; 1999b). One of Karbanow et al.’s (2012, p. 48) participants, who engaged in the similar task of squeegeeing for money, articulates this clearly:

“A lot of people always give squeegeers a hard time because ‘we don’t want to be part of society.’ We are really part of society; we’re out there every day.”

Homeless recyclers in San Francisco would sometimes go well out of their way to get a few cans from people they knew well, not because of the financial gain, but because they enjoyed having social contact. She noted that the homeless recyclers would occasionally share home maintenance tips with younger people. One of Lakenau’s (1999b, p. 313) participants, a panhandler, sums up the crucial nature of such relationships, noting in regard to people who regularly gave him money,

“They are my friends, my family. They don’t realize how much they mean to
me. It more than just the change. At times, it’s lonely, you’re by yourself, and they are my family.”

Though not connected to work per se, findings suggest that those having fewer relationships with people who are not homeless have greater levels of suicidal ideation, clearly indicated the impact a feeling of irrelevance to the larger society may have (Fitzpatrick, Irwin, Lagory, & Ritchey, 2007).

**Time Structure**

Time structure may be one of the most important needs work fulfills for many workers (Jahoda, 1982). Discussion of time structure is not directly addressed as is the case with identity issues, but it is present nonetheless. One of Karbanow et al.’s (2012) participants notes that “you kind of get depressed after a while because like you’re not doing anything. Like you just feel useless.” One of the central difficulties some homeless people have with being homeless is the sheer boredom that it engenders (Borchard, 2005, 2010).

**Autonomy**

Autonomy appears relevant to homeless workers, though research suggests that for homeless workers autonomy may be a more complex idea. Some workers note not wanting to be subject to the demands of bosses or to too many rules, and because of this enjoy self-guided, informal work (Gowan, 2010; Karbanow et al., 2012). Such work also avoids the mandated pace of work at a formal workplace, potentially returning a worker a pattern of work more typical of human beings before the industrial era regimented expectations of human work ethic (Rogers, 2014). Some authors even suggest trying to help homeless workers become more successful in moving towards self-employment
(Balkin, 1992). Other workers appear to adapt to such rules and enjoy the protection of institutional contexts (Borchard, 2005; Snow & Anderson, 1987a). Duneier (1999) suggests that some of the apparent autonomy that homeless people feel comes in essence from no longer caring or believing that life will reward them, a sort of autonomy by shock. This actually constitutes a reverse meaning to autonomy, indicating that it may arise out of an unwanted separation from the expectations of the larger society that releases one to do whatever one likes. On the other hand, other research indicates that the shock of homelessness can actually have a positive impact on some homeless people, helping to highlight simpler pleasures in life (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010).

**Social Connection**

Social connection is complex among homeless workers, because the desperation of homeless workers often causes them to commit crimes against one another, breaking down trust (Molina-Jackson, 2008; Snow & Anderson, 1987a). Some researchers suggest that connections between homeless workers provide no psychological benefit (Fitzpatrick et al., 2007). A considerable amount of evidence, however, points to homeless mentors facilitating newly homeless people’s successful adjustment to both homelessness in general as well as to homeless work (Auerwald & Eyre, 2002; Gowan, 2010; Karbanow et al., 2012; Molina-Jackson, 2008; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Relationships among communities of youth appear especially important (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Karbanow et al., 2012). Older homeless workers often view similar homeless workers as a part of their group, however, providing a kind of collective identity and occasional meaningful social connection, and even subgroup identification.
Overall, relationships among homeless workers is a complex and under-researched area.

**Social Capital and Weak Ties.** Research evidence with workers in the formal economy has long suggested that “weak ties,” or casual acquaintances, significantly influence job searches (Granovetter, 1974; Molina-Jackson, 2008). Social disaffiliation, or loss of social connections, was long thought a consequence of homelessness. This would have obvious consequences for job hunting, for example. Homeless individuals do appear to become disaffiliated, though only with people who are not homeless (Eyrich, Pollio, & North, 2003; Molina-Jackson, 2008). This has a complex influence on their job searching, as the loss of connections outside of homelessness may make the hunt for formal work more challenging. An increase in connection amongst homeless people, however, makes seeking out resources and learning to deploy multiple work strategies more successful, as homeless individuals do mentor one another as well as exchange information (Gowan, 2010; Molina-Jackson, 2008). This may serve to make the move into certain types of employment more challenging than others.

**Summary**

A central premise of this study is that all people want some form of work to fill psychological needs. This is as true of homeless workers as it is of other people, but newly homeless people must adjust to a change in their previous perceptions of meaning in work (Williams, 2009). As the newly homeless person adjusts to homelessness the factors limiting vocational choice are extensive, including lack of education, previous work experiences, local conditions, daily needs and wants, identity issues, tolerance of humiliating interaction with the public, and other factors. Despite these limits, choices
are still present. Looking at the pattern these choices take across a lifetime, both in and out of homelessness, may suggest more about the meaning of work in general. Therefore, this study will explore the work of homeless men using biographical methods, looking across a large section of the life span (May, 2000; Wengraf, 2001).

Previous research (Gowan, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1993) has explored homeless biographies directly in schematic ways limited to certain sections of life. This study will attempt to capture more detail from a longer time span before making generalization, thereby capturing decision-making issues in a finer grain (May, 2000). This broader time span will require men with some experience of work, likely more than one type of work, and therefore participants must be homeless men who are not psychotic. Being actively psychotic makes working highly challenging. In the case of interviewees in their late teens or early 20s, analysis may prove more limited due to the limited time available to such interviewees to develop a work history. The central research question was: how have currently homeless men adjusted to events in their lives to meet psychological needs through work across their biography? Subquestions were: what structural patterns emerge in men’s narratives; are narratives constructed around what work is available rather than their work choices shaping their narratives; what life events or circumstances do men perceive as having significant impacts on their life and work; and what are the most important needs that homeless men have focused on when thinking about jobs? Men living in shelters or living in places not intended for human habitation will be considered for the study. Men in long-term habitation such as apartment, or with family, will be excluded.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

The purpose of this study is to analyze the biographies of homeless workers, and the strategies they have deployed to meet their work-related needs across time. To do so, the Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM; Wengraf, 2001) will be used. The BNIM method will be explained in greater detail below, as will the philosophical presuppositions underlying this study. These philosophical explanations will be followed by the methodological structure of the study, including participant selection, researcher biases and training, procedure and interview format, and the strategy for analysis. First, however, the rationale for using the method will be explained.

Rationale for BNIM

Two main strategies are used in qualitative research when analyzing interview data: categorizing and connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2012). Categorizing strategies typically use coding techniques, such as are present in Grounded Theory or Consensual Qualitative Research methods, while connecting strategies might analyze thematic
narrative structures (Maxwell, 2012). Each strategy has its own advantages and drawbacks. BNIM analyzes biographies utilizing connecting strategies first, though categorizing strategies may be utilized later.

Coding requires the researcher to label small segments of the data, then categorize the codes to summarize steadily larger groupings of data (e.g. Charmaz, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Doing so has the advantage, when conducted across well-selected participants, of generating categories of behavior or experience for a group of people experiencing a specific phenomenon (Charmaz, 2005; Maxwell, 2012). Often a theory can be created that is useful in a local context or time period (Charmaz, 2006). The drawback of using such categorization strategies is that they lose the context in which participants are interacting, the context of the personal construction of the story, and much of the sense of the action participants take to negotiate these contexts (Maxwell, 2012; Wengraf, 2002).

Connecting strategies partially resolve this loss of context. They are often explicitly used to analyze narratives, and retrieve some of the agency of the participants as authors (Maxwell, 2012; Riessman, 2002; Wengraf, 2002). Typical analyses in narrative studies might consider the structure of the story, the cultural references or metaphors deployed by the author, and the strategies the teller of the story uses to persuade the listener (Maxwell, 2012; Riessman, 2002; Wengraf, 2001). Riessman (2002) notes that because researchers do not have direct access to others’ experiences – narratives only provide representations of experiences – the central target of narrative analysis is the subjective perceptions, feelings, use of cultural tools, and representations of memory employed by the story-telling participant. Narrative analysis has the benefit of not only providing information about participants’ sense of their own agency, but also
of developing a much closer sense of how participants feel and think about an issue, often using participants’ own words.

The drawback of narrative analysis – at least as it is most frequently practiced - is the continued loss of the context of actual life events (Maxwell, 2012; Wengraf, 2002). The context – the community, social relationships, family, work - in which the participant operated may remain unaddressed (Maxwell, 2012). Perhaps more importantly for this study, structural forces – facts in a person’s life - may be considered theoretically inaccessible and therefore be overlooked. Constructivist researchers (e.g., Guba and Lincoln) often assume that “realities are apprehended in the form of multiple, intangible, mental constructions,” and therefore very difficult to generalize across people (1994, 110). As is hopefully evident from the first two chapters, homeless people are operating in a social context that has significant impact on their choices, though their subjective perceptions obviously inform their choices as well. They are constrained in their work decisions by many social phenomena operating at all levels of society, from national economic trends to regional decisions about the importance of recycling, to very local laws about the legality of selling on a sidewalk. The method chosen to analyze and explicate homeless men’s stories needs to address the force of these social and contextual constraints on decision-making, without losing the subjectivity and highly personal nature of their narratives.

The desire to address these social and structural forces homeless people are experiencing is the reason for choosing the BNIM method (Wengraf, 2002). It allows for the connecting strategies mentioned by Maxwell (2012), thereby maintaining the agency and subjective voice of the story-teller participant. The BNIM approach is also interested
in the impact of environments, however, and assumes that through careful attention and questioning it is possible to learn something about the environments and contexts the participant has inhabited, as well as the participant’s history in these contexts. BNIM seeks to reconstruct “the interrelation between specific social contexts… and the responses of actors” (Breckner & Rupp, 2002, p. 295). To do so, this method requires that the researcher extrapolate the following from the interviews with a participant: 1) an inferred record of what the actual life events were, what Wengraf (2000, p. 145) refers to as “the uncontroversial hard biographical data”, and 2) how it is that the person viewed their negotiation of these situations through the narrative they provide. The first step is also referred to as the “lived life,” and the second step as the “told story” (Wengraf, 2001). Once these two records are completed they are compared and brought back together (Breckner & Rupp, 2002; Wengraf, 2013). BNIM maintains categorizing strategies at the end, however, aiming for “a systematic comparison with patterns of other cases and the construction of specific types of responses to a specific topic, for example long-term unemployment, lone parenthood, or migration” (Breckner & Rupp, 2002, p. 300).

Aside from having some of the drawbacks of connecting strategies – the data generated by different participants can be difficult to generalize – BNIM uses broad, open questions to capture as much biographical data as possible. Such questions have the advantage of providing a breadth of biographical information. It has the disadvantage of possibly not gathering enough information to clarify specific research subquestions.

**Philosophical Premises**
Exploring the aspects of the social and environmental context of a participant’s biography requires the researcher to believe that a participant can relate actual information about the historical contexts in which they made decisions. Ontologically speaking, doing so requires taking on at least a limited form of realism, and BNIM scholars generally subscribe to a critical realist perspective. In his guide to conducting BNIM research, Wengraf (2001) advocates the critical realist perspective articulated by Joseph Maxwell (2012). Maxwell’s (2012) version of realism combines a realist ontology – one that suggests there is a real world, that we can know, albeit not fully – with a constructivist epistemology. Maxwell (2012) points out that others have viewed his perspective as simply a continuation of post-positivist perspectives (some radical constructivists argue there is no distinction between ontology and epistemology; e.g. Guba & Lincoln, 1994), but he believes this view of his perspective to be inaccurate.

Qualitative research under the aegis of a critical realist paradigm does not constitute a slow but careful progress towards building correspondence with reality. Such a search for knowledge that corresponds to reality is considered part and parcel of positivist and post-positivist perspectives (Maxwell, 2012). Rather, while critical realism rejects the notion that there are multiple, incommensurable realities, it does not reject the notion that there are differing yet valid perspectives on the same reality. The goal is to explore some of these perspectives, without dismissing the potential for knowledge of the powerful external realities that shaped these perspectives. Maxwell’s (2012) argument and his realist perspective is not to develop ideas about truth that will then dominate other ideas because they are truer or more accurate, nor to advocate one perspective against another. Instead it is to acknowledge that there are external physical and social realities
that very much impinge on meaning-making and decision-making, and it is important to acknowledge and even study these influences (Maxwell, 2012).

Maxwell’s (2012) realism comes with methodological assumptions as well. Given their belief that social and physical phenomenon impact people, realists believe in the notion of cause. Generally neither positivists nor social constructionists believe in causality (Maxwell, 2012). Positivists follow David Hume in arguing that we can only know the regularity with which two events are connected to one another (e.g. correlation, variance explained), and social constructionists believe that any view on causality is likely to be highly idiosyncratic and therefore interesting, but essentially pointless for proving anything. Critical realists believe that we can and should, with due caution, make assertions about how events and phenomena are connected. Further, they believe that we can take other’s assertions about how events are connected seriously, rather than viewing them exclusively as their unique constructions of reality (Maxwell, 2012).

Maxwell (2012) notes that when a researcher views participant perspectives as constructions, the goal of the research is to categorize these constructions into groups, even if in doing so they are removed from their context in the interviews. When the researcher is looking for cause and effect, however, the goal is to look at how events are linked in participant’s narratives, given that these linkages could be causal (Maxwell, 2012). This study will look for the impact of environments on both lives and on subjective perspectives on life.

**BNIM Research Design**

BNIM requires that participants be interviewed two times (Wengraf, 2001). The first interview is to elicit the narrative without interruption (excepting nonverbal encouragers
to demonstrate attentive listening), and generally features only a single, long question or prompt. This question should be broad enough that it does not limit the narrative in question, and both Wengraf (2013) and Breckner and Rupp (2002) recommend not addressing the research topic directly in the construction of this question. They note that, while doing so can cause a lot of anxiety in the researcher that useful interview data will not be gathered, “too concrete a question...addressing a researcher-defined problem...might foreclose the generation of a more complex account in which the meaning of a topic (such as unemployment) emerges in more implicit terms” (Breckner & Rupp, 2002, p. 294; Wengraf, 2013). Wengraf (2013) makes several recommendations about how to construct this initial question, which he calls the SQUIN (Single QUestion aimed at Inducing Narrative), to promote a more helpful story. He points out that poorly constructed SQUINs often result in poor interviews:

1) The SQUIN should begin with a brief description of the researcher’s interests informing his or her research project.

2) The prompt in the SQUIN should not in any way include part of the research question, as doing so will create a mental frame that constrains the narrative of the individual in question. The participant should not have to spend mental energy sorting their thoughts to suit the researcher’s question, because it distracts him or her from reporting what is most personally valuable in a narrative (Breckner & Rupp, 2002; Wengraf, 2013). Interestingly, Wengraf (2013) notes that describing the research being conducted will often provide a light frame that helps ensure the participant provides information useful to the researcher.
3) The researcher should be careful not to circumscribe the SQUIN – i.e. “tell me the story of your work experiences while homeless” – because doing so results in the potential loss of a great deal of historical context potentially relevant to someone’s work experiences. Instead the ideal is asking for a life story with constraints. Wengraf (2001) notes that should the researcher feel it necessary to limit the narrative in some way, a temporal limit is preferable to circumscribing narratives to a domain of someone’s life. Later interviews allow follow up in an area of interest to the researcher.

4) The SQUIN must include the request that the interview focus on things important to them personally, so that they are telling their story rather than trying to meet the researcher’s needs.

5) The SQUIN should include the statement “begin where you like” for very similar reasons.

6) Finally, the SQUIN should close with a promise not to interrupt, because the goal of the initial interview is for the participant to tell whatever story seems right to him or her.

The SQUIN for this study was:

   I am interested in the work experiences of men who have experienced homelessness, and in how different types of work, good or bad, make people think and feel. Please tell me your life story, starting wherever you like. Include any events that were important to you personally. I’m not going to interrupt you, and take as much time as you like.
The second interview, following a short break from the first interview, exclusively featured narrative-enhancing questions, which are defined as questions that ask the participant to elaborate on specific points in the story (Wengraf, 2001). These points, and the questions about them, were articulated using the participant’s phrasing which the researcher noted during the initial interview. Wengraf (2013) refers to such notes, taken during the initial interview, as cues. Cues might be described as central statements, statements with emotional content attached, or events the person puts emphasis on. Cues can be hints at a significant event (e.g. When I was 16 I had a teacher get really angry at me), a sweeping summary statement (e.g. I have always felt stupid), an unusual event, or interest areas of the researcher. Many cues can be selected from the initial interview; however, ten cues are selected from the first interview, and the participant is asked to elaborate on the events described in the cues (Wengraf, 2013). There is no prescribed way to select these cues, rather the researcher makes a judgment about which are most likely to contain important longer narratives. In cases of generalized statements like “I have always felt stupid” the researcher asks the participant to describe a specific event in which this was the case (Wengraf, 2013). A specific protocol for framing cue questions is provided by BNIM researchers, and will be described in Appendix B. Wengraf (2013) notes several rules about how to proceed in the 2nd interview: push for specific stories rather than general descriptions, use the participant’s language, do not seek explanations, and keep the cues you bring up in chronological order.

Wengraf (2001, 2013) notes that the initial interview can range from 5 to 150 minutes in length. Interviews in this study ranged from 10 minutes to two hours. Both
interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were told their interviews will remain confidential, and several steps were taken to protect their confidentiality. The potential that participants might be discussing elements of criminal histories was the single greatest ethical issue associated with the research. Transcripts of interviews do not include identifying information, and all recorded conversations are stored on an encrypted thumb drive in a locked office. In the write-up of the data and study, any information that can identify a participant will be altered to limit the possibility they could be identified.

**Procedures**

**Sampling**

Sample selection in BNIM should ideally not be based on convenience, but in practice some selection is necessary (Wengraf, 2001). BNIM can function using several forms of sampling, including the saturation sampling more associated with Grounded Theory approaches; however, the high time demands of single BNIM case analyses limit the size of the sample possible in this study. Therefore, the central goal was finding participants who were capable of providing interviews of high “intensity,” or in other words, interviews rich in detail (Cresswell, 2007, p. 127).

All participants were selected from a large urban shelter. The time required to seek out and build trust with people who are currently residing on the streets was too significant in practice given time limitations inherent in the study. As part of their IRB process, shelter leadership selected one community within the shelter – there are five total communities - from which to draw participants. This community is intended for men believed to have a positive likelihood of transitioning out of homelessness. Therefore,
Residents of this community are characteristically some of the most currently stable in the shelter, though the participants histories indicated they have not always been so. Communities from which participants were not selected included: a community focused on veterans (working in this community would have required additional permissions from the Veterans’ Administration); a community focused on men with serious mental illnesses, largely schizophrenia; and two transitional communities the shelter was concerned would create logistical difficulties for the researcher due to the transience of the participants. There was obviously concern that selecting participants from one community in a shelter would limit sample diversity too much. This worry was partially mitigated by interviews with participants from this community, who proved to have diverse histories both in terms of their experiences with homelessness and work, but this is a limitation of the study as well.

**Interviews**

All interviews were conducted by the primary researcher. Participants were remunerated for their time with a rate of $10/interview. This incentive was provided following the completion of the interview process. Interviews were conducted in a private office away from other shelter residents, though other shelter residents were aware of the interviewing process (more residents desired to participate in interviews than it was possible to accommodate). Before the initial interview began, a demographic questionnaire was provided to each participant to complete (see Appendix D) asking about age, race, history of homelessness, education, criminal history, and work history.

**Primary Researcher**
In 2010, I began exploring the possibility of conducting research with homeless populations while on a research team focused on marginalized populations led by Justin Perry, a member of my dissertation committee and a faculty member in the Cleveland State University counseling psychology program. Following initial, abortive attempts at research with residents at a local shelter as part of this team, I began volunteering in the shelter’s computer lab. We were provided entre to the shelter simply by asking if they needed assistance, and I began volunteering when we asked what type of volunteering might be useful to shelter staff given my experiences and abilities. I assisted participants in creating resumes, looking for work, and in solving other problems. At times these problems were not related to work, but frequently they were, and because I was assisting in job searching there were many conversations about work. Four things were observed while working with residents: that men often had significant work histories, that residents were struggling to find work, that they had not always struggled to find work, and that they were continuing to work in informal or short-term types of jobs despite difficulty finding full-time work. Residents knew these shorter-term jobs were unlikely to help them exit homelessness, and discussed this difficulty. I wondered: why are these men working at jobs that they know are not going to provide sufficient remuneration to exit homelessness? I considered the possibility that they were meeting psychological needs through working, even if they were not being paid enough to exit homelessness. I wondered if they were meeting needs they had always met, or if these needs changed over time.

In any qualitative research the perspective of the researcher is bound to influence the interpretation of the research. I am committed to social justice, and believe that
situation and circumstance has more influence on people’s lives than does personal agency or personality. This informed even my desire to research the homeless population. My social justice orientation was an object of awareness as I analyzed the data, to prevent the power of circumstance and situation from being overemphasized in the analysis. I am doctoral student in counseling psychology, and have trained in the interviewing used in clinical mental health settings and have a great deal of practice with the same. I also have been trained in qualitative research and have participated on several such research projects, and doing so has provided me with some experience in the both the iterative (revisiting qualitative data multiple times to create new ideas) and the collaborative (arguing different interpretations of data with others) processes inherent in qualitative research.

“Kick Start” Panel

During early portions of the analysis, described below, I asked others to help me analyze sections of the data to make certain I am generating enough hypotheses about the data. These other researchers were only intended to start the process, or to use Wengraf’s (2001, 2013) language, to “kick start” (a metaphor referring to a forceful movement used to start old motorcycle engines) the process. Once the process had been kick started on a single interview, I completed the rest of the analysis. The Kick Start panel mitigated the impact of my biases if they were causing me to interpret the data in too circumscribed or unidirectional a manner. The “kick start” panel consisted of a white, female, PhD level education researcher who works for a local nonprofit, and a white female doctoral student who manages a community based mentoring program. Both panel participants had taken
doctoral level qualitative research courses and had previously participated in qualitative research. The BNIM method was explained at length before beginning the panel.

**Participants**

This study was announced and explained at a community-wide meeting in the community in which it was conducted. Residents were asked to sign a sheet to indicate desire to participate, and twenty-five residents signed the sheet. Eighteen of the 25 residents who signed the sheet participated in some form, the other 7 left the shelter before they could be interviewed. Eight of the 18 participants were excluded, because: three did not finish the interviewing process for various logistical reasons; three participants appeared to be highly guarded in their interviews, refusing to disclose almost any details of their lives; one very young participant had no work experience; and one participant was excluded because he did not appear to understand the prompt and did not provide even a rudimentary biography.

Participant ages ranged from 44-60, with a mean age of 52 years. Nine of ten were people of color, with two of those identifying as multiracial and the other seven as African-American. One participant was white. One participant had been homeless once, two participants had been homeless twice, one participant 3 times, four participants had been homeless four times, and two participants had been homeless over 5 times. Eight of ten participants had experienced homelessness for over a year living in the shelter(s). All ten participants had felony records, and four had been adjudicated for sexually oriented offenses. Nine participants had spent time in prison at some point in their lives, with durations in prison ranging from 1-3 years (not counting stays in local jails). One participant spent 17 years in prison.
All participants had worked in full-time, formal labor. Estimates they provided of their longest tenure at a full-time job ranged from 1 to 10 years, though the individual who reported only having held a job for one year spent many years working at one job while in prison, and did not count this job. Using data reported from the demographic questionnaire, the longest mean reported time spent in a formal, full-time job was 4.8 years. There was a great deal of variation in the number of jobs participants estimated having across their lifetimes, ranging from 7 to 100s of jobs. This broad range likely reflected variations in participation in the day labor industry, where a worker could potentially work at five different locations in five days, and where all of the participants had worked at some point in time. Participants who spent a longer time working in the day labor industry, likely had many jobs across their lives. Six of the ten participants reported having worked “under-the-table,” or in informal but paid work, with estimates ranging from two to 100s of times. Two participants noted having done illegal activities to make money, including prostitution, drug sales, and theft (five participants admitted to working illegally). One participant reported donating plasma to make money. Eight of ten participants had volunteered during the time they were homeless.

**BNIM Data Analysis**

Analysis using the BNIM method requires inference and extrapolation to two different segments of data, the lived life and the told story. BNIM researchers begin with what they call the Biographical Data Chronology (BDC). The BDC is an attempt, using the interview narrative, to create a chronology of major events in the person’s life. This chronology may be sparse if working exclusively from the initial narrative, and he recommends using the 3rd interview as necessary to clarify some of this information.
A typical Biographical Data Chronology will have lines in a table, and might look something like the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Charged with and convicted of assault following a conflict and fight with another high school student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Released from prison.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Begins culinary school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extensive amounts of detail are unnecessary, and Wengraf (2001, 2013) explains that it is necessary to be cautious about going beyond what you are able to establish. He suggests stripping away descriptions in regard to events. In some cases informants may lie. Where possible, outside sources can be used to clarify information. Otherwise, the assumption is that researchers should only include what appears uncontroversial.

Wengraf (2013) argues that the BDC does not have to be perfect in accuracy. Rather, a tacit philosophical assumption of the approach is that most participants will be able to relate most core events in their lives as they occurred, especially when descriptive and evaluative language is stripped away from their narratives.

BNIM researchers next build what they call the Text Structure Sequentialization (TSS) of the “told story.” The told story is the narrative that participants related in the interview. Essentially creating the TSS involves going through the narrative from beginning to end and separating it into textual chunks. Each chunk is categorized, with the goal of gaining a sense of the flow of the narrative rather than on eventual grouping of these categorizations into themes. Transitions can include changes in topic, changes in
the way the participant is describing a particular issue, or changes in speaker from the interviewer to the participant.

Wengraf (2013) recommends using the DRAPES acronym to categorize and analyze the interview data, and this typology will be used here. D is description, stating that certain things are certain ways as a matter of course. R is report, a summary of events in one’s life that is very brief and thin. A is argumentation, a group of thoughts about the meaning of the past from a present perspective. P is particular incident narrative, or PIN, a detailed description of a specific narrative that one is asking for in interview #2. E is evaluation, what Wengraf (2001) describes as best summarized with the idiom ‘the moral of the story.’ It typically follows a narrative. Finally, S is condensed situation, or a generalized narrative about the way something always happens to a participant. To organize this chunking, a three-column table is recommended. The first column contains the line number in the transcript, the second a name for the structure or typology of the text chunk, and the third a brief summary of the text chunk itself. Summaries may just be a few words, but are typically several sentences to paragraphs in length (Wengraf, 2001). Generation of these summaries moves away from the interview transcript, and one of the central goals of creating the TSS is to condense long interviews into a shorter, more manageable document (with a goal to decrease the length by perhaps 75%). A second goal is to paraphrase what a participant is saying in careful manner, thereby forcing the researcher to deeply consider the meaning of an individual section of text.

Both the BDC and the TSS are essentially unanalyzed data organization tools (Wengraf, 2001, 2013). Researchers have actually constructed studies using only these
tools, but ideally researchers will further analyze each of them (Wengraf, 2013). In both cases, the goal is to work through the data chunks step-by-step and generate hypotheses about the meaning of each chunk. Initially, this researcher gathered together a group of other people in a kick-start panel to start the process, making sure a good number of hypotheses are being generated (Wengraf, 2001). Many forms of qualitative research (e.g. Consensual Qualitative Research; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) analyze data exclusively using collaborative processes. Such analysis is possible in BNIM projects, but unnecessary because it would be exceptionally time consuming, in BNIM research (Wengraf, 2013). Instead the goal is to deploy the kick-start described above to the hypothesizing process (Wengraf, 2013). The collaboration during the kick-start also serves as a tool to limit the interpretive biases of the main research thereby increasing the credibility of the research. After conducting a starting panel it is possible for the researcher to conduct these activities her or himself (Wengraf, 2013).

In the analysis of both the BDC and TSS, the panel that generated initial hypotheses was presented with individual chunks of data one at a time from printed PowerPoints. This data came from an individual participant (Henry) who provided the first suitable, data rich interview. Wengraf (2001, 2013) noted (correctly) that data analysis is a slow process, and states that the researcher should only expect to get through 10-15 data points in a three hour period after which she or he should take over data analysis. The kick start panel for this study met for a little over 3 hours and went through a little over 20 data points.

In the Biographical Data Chronology (BDC) panel, the hypotheses are about how a specific event may have been experienced by a participant (including ideas about how
her or she may have experienced an event at that point in his or her life), how a specific event could shape the future life, and what types of events might occur because of a specific event. Using PowerPoint slides, the panel generated several potential experiences that will each have possible actions branching from it. Again, this analysis is of a single participant. These hypotheses about action and associated experiences were then confirmed or disconfirmed as possible, or partially confirmed or disconfirmed, as the researcher(s) move(s) further through that data (Wengraf, 2001). In other words, the 10th chunk of data may disconfirm a hypothesis (for example, a prediction about the future) about the 4th.

In the Text Structure Sequentialization (TSS) panel, again panel members hypothesized what the participant is experiencing and what he may do, but in this case all of the hypothesizing is about what the participant actually said in the interview. Wengraf (2013) describes the questions that the TSS panel should use to hypothesize about a given data point in the TSS:

1) How did the participant experience the events described at the time they occurred?
2) How did the participant experience the interview/interviewer at that point?
3) What might have influenced a change in topic or presentational style during the interview?
4) What was that participant experiencing when they decided to change topic or presentational style (i.e. description, argument, etc.)?
5) What are the underlying concerns that might have shaped a particular section of the participant’s interview?
Predictions about what might come later in an interview are also welcome (Wengraf, 2001, 2013).

Following these kick-start panels, the analysis of the rest of the interview reviewed by the panels was completed by the author, who generated hypotheses for the data chunks not considered in the panel. This process was completed from the beginning by the author for the other interviews. Following hypothesizing about the data points (whether with the panel or by himself), BNIM requires the researcher to construct a summary narrative of the BDC and TSS. There is no set way to construct these summaries, and continually revisited each summary over a matter of weeks before completing it to develop the best strategy (Wengraf, 2013). BNIM recommendations are to keep the summary of the BDC tentative and relatively short, because you are predicting material that may later be touched on in analysis of the TSS. When summarizing the analysis of the TSS, the researcher should summarize both the narrative the person tells – with understanding improved by the analysis – and the overall pattern of the narrative.

Once the analysis of the BDC and TSS was completed and the summaries were written, the next step was to compare the two in the context of a single participant (e.g. comparing one participant’s BDC with his TSS). The idea is that through a comparison of hypotheses about the biographical data and hypotheses about the told story – both of which were generated independently – the researcher might gain a sense of how it is that the two interact in an individual’s life. There is no simple procedural advice available about how to do so, but Wengraf (2001) suggests gathering all sections of text from the analysis of the TSS that appeared to be presentations of seminal events or turning points.
in the person’s life, then connecting these events to biographical details and documenting the connections. A typical way to do this comparison is to use a three-column table and line up summaries of the analysis of the TSS and BDC, then write a combined summary that attempts to answer the question: how did the life lived, as described in the BDC, lead to the presentation in the TSS? The end goal is to gain a sense of how the person’s perspective has changed across time, through looking at explicit changes in perspective, changes in perspective (in the TSS) that seem unusual in the context of the BDC, changes in narrative style (remember the DRAPES acronym), and through hypothesizing about areas of a life left unexplained. Once these analyses are completed, the BNIM analysis is essentially complete, and researchers will use it to analyze a single case (Wengraf, 2001). The final step is to write a summative description and narrative for each participant that combines the TSS and BDC together with associated analyses conducted by panels and the researcher.

Here a methodological note is relevant. A crucial piece of maintaining credibility (or validity) in qualitative research is to continually revisit data, and ideas and conclusions about that data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Wengraf, 2001, 2013). Concern about credibility are warranted if the researcher is doing a great deal of the data analysis on his or her own, which was the case in this study. In this study, the researcher was required by the method to revisit the data to make choices about summarizing or decisions about meaning no less than 5 times, and data on individual participants was continually revisited. First, when making decisions about what events to follow up in the 2nd interview; second, when creating the BDC with its’ summary chunks; third, when creating TSS with its’ summary chunks; fourth, when summarizing the two; fifth, when
creating the comparative final summary of the BDC and TSS analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this process of being forced to iteratively reconsider the meaning of qualitative data as crucial to good analysis.

**Conclusion**

A wide array of potential factors that may influence the stories homeless men tell about work and the strategies they have used to meet needs through work, though it is not known for certain that this is the case. To better understand these strategies, this study will deploy two methods of qualitative analysis: the Biographical Narrative Interview Method (Wengraf, 2001, 2013) and borrowing memoing and interpretive tools from Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The central research question was: how have currently homeless men adjusted to events in their lives to meet psychological needs through work across their biography? Subquestions were: what structural patterns emerge in men’s narratives; are narratives constructed around what work is available rather than their work choices shaping their narratives; what life events or circumstances do men perceive as having significant impacts on their life and work; and what are the most important needs that homeless men have focused on when thinking about jobs?
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Narratives in this study explored homeless men’s biographies, with a special emphasis on work. The goal was to learn more about how homeless participants met psychological needs through work across their lives and in the context of their experiences, both when they were homeless and when they were not. Across the participants, five of the six hypothesized needs – survival, social status/identity, time structure, collective effort, and social connection - were mentioned in connection with work. Participants’ narratives pointed to two of the hypothesized needs as central, however. These needs were social connection and status. Social connection and status drew participants towards certain work choices, while also linking participants with structural phenomena. These structural phenomena – drug abuse, criminal records, difficult childhoods, and the loss of blue collar work – appeared then to exert their own influence on participants’ choices. Other needs were not irrelevant – participants did
mention them as influencing work-related decisions – however they were not represented as having nearly the influence that social connection and status did.

Narratives were analyzed utilizing the Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM). BNIM seeks to reconstruct “the interrelation between specific social contexts...and the responses of actors” (Breckner & Rupp, 2002, p. 295). The first step in BNIM is to analyze individual cases, then to compare these cases. During the case comparison process, there are three steps. Initially, the form of the narratives themselves was considered, because initial narratives provide the framework by which other information is understood (Wengraf, 2001). Next, the social context described by the researchers quoted above was considered, meaning the experiences participants describe of being subject to larger societal forces must be considered. Finally, actual behavior of the actors in context was considered, inside of these contexts, through the lens of the narratives. The central research question was: how have currently homeless men adjusted to events in their lives to meet psychological needs through work across their biography? Subquestions were: what structural patterns emerge in men’s narratives; are narratives constructed around what work is available rather than their work choices shaping their narratives; what life events or circumstances do men perceive as having significant impacts on their life and work; and what are the most important needs that homeless men have focused on when thinking about jobs? Given the structure of the BNIM analysis, this chapter begins with presentation of individual cases, then case comparisons are provided, followed by conclusions. Each of the research subquestions are addressed within the case comparisons.

**The Cases**

91
Each case presentation is organized using the research questions. They begin with a biography drawn from interview data. A narrative analysis follows in which particular attention is paid to how participants constructed their narrative, including the shaping influence both historical events and work experiences may have had on these narratives. A third section entitled “Work in the Narrative” closely examines the manner in which participants met their work needs across the course of their lives – at least as far as the same is articulated within the interviews - preceding their most current homeless event. The fourth section, “Working while homeless and the future” considers work while currently homeless, as well as hopes and beliefs regarding work available to the participant in the future. Finally, each case closes with a brief conclusion.

**Henry**

Henry is a 46-year-old African-American who lived his entire life in and around a large midwestern city, both in the city itself and in the suburbs. Henry has been intermittently homeless since 2005, following being released from prison for domestic violence. His homelessness has included staying with family members, friends, and three separate stays in shelters. Henry has a criminal record, and has also struggled intermittently with substance abuse, though he has never had a serious addiction. He has worked almost exclusively in the blue-collar sector, typically in well-remunerated positions in machine shops and light manufacturing settings, though he has also worked in a variety of other capacities, legal and illegal, above the table and below it, including drug sales and under-the-table handyman roles.

**Henry’s Biography.** Growing up, Henry experienced a series of highly negative, traumatic, and painful events. He was raised believing his step-father was his father,
until his step-father died when Henry was 12 years of age. Students in his school – who knew they were related to Henry, though Henry did not know – told him that his step-father was not, in fact, his father. Henry then insisted that his mother introduce him to his father, and she consented. A year after meeting his father for the first time, Henry’s mother committed suicide with a handgun while he was in the home. Henry witnessed the aftermath of this incident, running downstairs after hearing the gunshot. Following his mother’s death, Henry went to live with his maternal grandmother during the school year, and his biological father in the summer. His biological father lived in rural Southern Ohio, and while there Henry encountered open racism. This surprised him, as at the time he thought

“...that only happened back in the 60s. And you know, 50s and whatever. But then for someone to actually ride by in a pickup and ‘hey nigger, get your black ass blah blah blah.’ You know. ‘Whoa!’ You know. ‘Whoa!’ And um, I said ‘damn, that shit still exists?’”

After these encounters with this racism, Henry reported he then avoided visiting his father for many years, and stopped spending summers with him.

Henry was at first raised by his step-father and his mother. Both were successful in their jobs, the step-father as an insurance agent and the mother as a designer and seamstress, and the family was financially stable. Interestingly, while conducting the initial panel to analyze Henry’s interviews (and to “kick start” the data analysis process), panel members noted their astonishment when they realized that Henry is African-American. Upon reflection, they realized that this expectation was largely due to
automatic, stereotyped assumptions that African-Americans: a) do not have two parent families, and b) do not generally have successful professional careers.

In the latter stages of high school, Henry began dealing and using drugs. His original career plan had been to enter the military following high school; however, his selling of drugs (and a failed drug test) precluded this possibility. Henry dealt drugs for a time to make a living, though he worked other “little” jobs to provide some “cover” for the large amount of money he was taking in on a week-to-week basis. While dealing drugs he met his future wife, who was also a drug dealer. He adopted her daughter, and they had a son. During this period Henry stopped dealing drugs, submitted his first resume, and was hired full time in a large machine shop at a good rate of pay. He worked at this shop for four years. Two years into this job, Henry’s wife’s parents both died within a period of a week. He described his wife as grief stricken at this event, and indicated that due to his inability to tolerate her grief they began to fight frequently. Eventually these fights became physical, and Henry was arrested on several occasions for domestic violence, causing him to lose his machine shop job due to absences.

Knowing he needed another job after losing his machine shop job, Henry trained as a truck driver after seeing a commercial on television. Initially he drove “long-haul,” national routes (e.g. to other states), with some trips taking several days. He noted that his wife expressed frustration at being expected to manage the children, the home, and their rental properties while he was gone. Henry’s adoptive daughter began to have serious behavioral difficulties, including spending time with a problematic peer group and committing crimes such as theft. In an attempt to eliminate this behavior and relieve some of the stress on his wife, Henry
“even tried giving her [his daughter]...a nice allowance. You know, a very nice allowance. To see if it was just that she felt she needed to have money in her pockets. It wasn’t that...”

This was not successful, and Henry’s adoptive daughter continued to struggle, and he and his wife continued to argue. While describing these events with his wife, Henry repeatedly stated “I just got burnt out.”

Eventually, these interpersonal disappointments reached their apogee in a major arrest following a fight with his wife, which marked the beginning of Henry’s cycles of homelessness. In an attempt to provide more assistance to his wife, Henry had quit his long-haul trucking job and began a local delivery job. During one delivery his truck broke down, so he returned home much earlier than expected. Henry discovered his wife in bed with one of his friends. He and his wife entered into a physical altercation, and when the police arrived he was accused of attempted rape and arrested. Henry spent 6 months in county jail, and eventually plead to a non-sex offense charge, then spent six more months in prison. Upon exit from prison, Henry moved in with his sister, his first stint of homelessness, albeit homelessness with a family member. He eventually got back together with his wife. He began smoking marijuana again for the first time in many years to manage the emotions generated by conflicts with his wife. Henry was rearrested for probation violation and sent back to prison, then upon release lived in friends’ houses and on couches for several months before entering a homeless shelter for the first time in 2006. Henry began a multi-year cycle of attempting to restore the relationship with his wife, being arrested for probation violations, being sent to prison, then spending periods of his life homeless. Each of the three times he lived in a shelter
he was able to stabilize his life and find quality jobs. Once stable, he attempted to reestablish family relationships, only to have the relationships disintegrate. The most recent incident was Henry’s adult son attacking him - Henry did not fight back – resulting in Henry fleeing their shared home and his current stay in shelter.

**Henry’s Narrative.** The structure of Henry’s first interview narrative had several implications. Analysis using BNIM text sorts indicates Henry spoke almost exclusively in narratives, with some narratives taking the Report form, and many narratives taking the PIN form. Henry rarely spent any time using Evaluation or Argumentation to interpret the meaning of events in his life, events during his life, his own narratives, or abstracting away from his story in any way. He appeared to go in depth to address particularly stressful incidents, while providing a more basic “report” of incidents that were not stressful, though he provided some in depth narratives for positive events. This variation between in depth and shallower forms of story-telling appeared to take on a pattern in his first interview, with more in-depth stories specifically documenting frustrating interpersonal relationships with family members, such as his wife or his son. Henry placed a significant emphasis on relational events: the overall theme of Henry’s narrative is a presentation of a long series of deeply frustrating relational events, all of which have had substantive impact on his life. Stressors in his personal life appeared to be significant shaping factors on the course of his working life as well, with family disruptions repeatedly resulting in work and life disruptions, despite considerable positive identity derived from work related experiences.

Henry’s in-depth narratives about relational problems all appear to parallel his narrative regarding his mother. Henry provides a sort of template for later stories about
relationships when he breaks into a rare evaluation of events, in considering why his mother did what she did. He related he did not understand why his mother died by suicide, as “My step-dad was an insurance agent…we were well taken care of…the money was there.” The idea is that what his mother had financially, along with her children, should have been enough to satisfy her. That it did not satisfy her did not make sense to Henry. Similarly, following the death of his wife’s parents, she frequently complained that she and Henry’s lives were falling apart. This complaint frustrated Henry, and led to frequent disagreements between the two of them. He was frustrated that his wife did not perceive their lives as good enough, as they “weren’t the Huxtables, or the Trumps,” but were ok financially. When her parents died, Henry was working full-time and took care of the family’s rental properties after work, all while having these conflicts with his wife. On one occasion, Henry’s wife asked him “Are you in my corner? Are you here for me?” He noted that his response at the time was “I can’t prove it to you anymore…I come home from work every night…I put my paycheck on the table. I pay the bills.” Henry described another parallel when he noted giving his adoptive daughter a substantial allowance. Despite this allowance, she remained unsatisfied, and her criminal activities eventually led police to find Henry during one of his parole violations.

**Work in the Narrative.** Henry has a history of well-remunerated positions, even when working illegally. Money, or survival, was not perceived as an area of difficulty. He implied there were connections between his family’s success and his expectations of remuneration from the jobs he worked. In the 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview, Henry described his
relationship to his mother as influencing the ease with which he pursued work. He reported:

“…my mom would always tell me ‘you can go out and you can do anything you want…Somebody close the door, you walk in the next one, and present yourself and make that person listen to you.’ I think that’s why I don’t have no problems getting jobs...and you know, don’t have fear of a job.”

Since Henry perceived himself as having clinched survival, money was not as important as other work needs, including social status, social connection, and collective effort or group contribution.

Henry presented his first job in 1994 as near revolutionary in his understanding of what about work he found satisfying. He contrasted this job with his work selling drugs, for which he noted he made very good money. He found the social status his first job provided to be very important:

“I was able to live what I felt like a man…I would go to work, come home…eat off the food truck…have an income tax return…I got a lot of respect. You know, not street respect. I was able to get respect from my neighbors…family members who saw me out in the street…people just saw me in a uniform and it was totally different.”

Henry’s perceived ease in finding jobs, and his reported success once in those jobs, also highlights the degree to which personal, relational events influenced his life. In purely work terms, Henry likely should not have been homeless. The influence of relationships on his life, however, might have been expected given the early trauma that Henry experienced. This influence suggests that the most central needs that work met for
Henry were relational ones, specifically in providing for his family and having time to balance family responsibilities with work. Unfortunately, a strong theme in his narratives is that his work – or more specifically the money he earned – was not sufficient to keep other people happy with his contribution to the relationships. This expectation that work would keep others happy created a vicious cycle for Henry, because each time his relationships collapsed so did his ability to successfully maintain his work. Henry’s expectation may have something to do with people he dated and chose for his family. It is notable that every time Henry left to live in a homeless shelter he was able to find decent work he enjoyed and stabilize his life. Henry voiced some confusion regarding this tendency in himself, asking rhetorically in a later interview “why am I attracted to these people?”

Social meaning and contribution to the society was important, and this has been a central reason he has enjoyed the types of work he has done:

“You work at a machine, you know what I’m saying, and you’re making something...like I used to make clutch covers. And I would just think ‘how many people are riding around in a car with a clutch cover I made?’”

The structure formal work provided to his days, the time structure, was important as well:

“Wake up to an alarm clock, gotta get up. Fix my coffee. You know...you know...just like routine. A good routine thing...it was exciting.”

Henry also linked his routine to his relationships – the routine allowed him to be home in time to welcome his children from school, which he enjoyed and found important. His preference for this routine again points to the centrality of relational needs – specifically
the linkages between family and work – being most important all the needs met by work for Henry.

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** Each time Henry was homeless in a shelter, he was able to obtain a job that allowed him to leave the shelter. During periods when he was unable to find legitimate forms of work, he often relied on his handyman skills in order to sustain himself or to barter for housing. During his current stay at the shelter he has begun working as a handyman for the shelter which he reported helped him to pass the time. He began this position after meeting the shelter’s employment coordinator following an interview associated with this research.

Henry eventually wants full-time work again, but due to his age he is hoping to find a job where he can sit. Henry noted that he had certification as a pipefitter, but “I really could still get into it, but I’m getting kinda old now to be doing construction. I kinda like really wanna now like…uh…sit down job, just a little bit. You know. But uh…I think I’m getting to old to do too much manual labor, you know, do a lot of manual labor.” Henry believes that a simple job and basic apartment would be the best transition out of homelessness. He noted that he is not trying to rebuild the relationship with his ex-wife any longer, and now longs for the basic structure work provides:

“Driving me nuts not to be working somewhere. You know? I was working over at the stadium [meaning poorly remunerated temporary cleaning work at a baseball stadium] all last week. You know, just work.”

Henry simply wants a job so that he feels less idle. He noted that he is attempting to move away from the past centrality that family relationships had in his life. Henry also
believes that his history of blue collar work, and under-the-table handyman and maintenance work, will allow him to make needed money even if the job he finds is financially insufficient.

Conclusion. Henry’s slide into homelessness was heavily influenced by family events. He has generally been able to find good work, but family disruptions repeatedly resulted in work disruptions. Henry’s thoughts about what needs work met for him, and what it meant, were nuanced and featured work meeting needs beyond simply making money. Across repeated periods of homelessness, however, Henry’s ability to secure high quality work with a livable wage appeared to lessen, in part because of age and inability to do the same sort of physical labor that he had performed in the past. At present, any job that meets needs for time structure and feeling a part of something constructive is satisfying. Henry’s aspirations are to find a job not too hard on his body, and that allows him to leave homelessness and find a small apartment.

David

David is a 52-year-old African-American born in a large city in the Midwest. His parents were successful financially, he attended private schools through high school, and is a university graduate. David struggled with intermittent substance abuse, specifically to crack-cocaine. David is gay, which he believed had some negative impacts on his work opportunities. By his description, romantic relationships have had a significant impact on his life, often to his detriment. David has worked in many jobs during his life, several of which he believed to be “good” jobs that he then lost. He also repeatedly described himself as being easily bored, and not worried about money, which resulted in his quitting numerous jobs. David has committed felony level fraud on several
occasions, and he has spent several periods in prison. He has never slept rough or experienced street homelessness, and has only begun spending time in homeless shelters in the late 2000s.

David’s Biography. David was born in 1962. He has one sister who is older than he. David described his childhood as very pleasant, and he was involved in many activities both in and out of school. His parents were extremely busy—his father was a medical doctor and a university professor, and his mother worked in corporate leadership for a national corporation—and he noted that he felt at times that his parents were not as engaged with him as he would have preferred. This financial success allowed him to have many opportunities to participate in activities, as well as to own nice material things. David added that they frequently bought him items, and it was his supposition that these purchases were due to their guilt regarding being unavailable, which he exploited by attempting to get them to buy him more things. He also defended his parents, however, noting that they strove to be attentive despite their busyness, always attending activities he participated in, such as school plays or Cub Scouts events. David described his relationship with his father as a difficult one at times. To illustrate, when David was a teenager his father took him along to a summer teaching appointment overseas, with the intention that they would stay there together. David noted that following their arrival

“I got on my father’s nerves so bad, three days later he put me back on the plane by myself and sent me back home.”

Nevertheless, David described his father as frequently attempting to engage with him positively. Not long after David’s parents discovered he was gay in the late 1970s, the
AIDS epidemic arrived in the United States. David noted that his father took a strong interest in AIDS out of concern for David, and would frequently advise and update David and his friends, though infectious disease was not his area of specialty.

David’s parents discovered he was gay when he was 16 years old. His mother came home unexpectedly from work and found him in their basement with a male partner. David described an awkward dinner table discussion that evening where his mother told his father what happened in front of the family. He stated that his mother appeared to be shocked, but that his father asked his mother how “she didn’t already know.” Despite this uncomfortable beginning, David stated that, overall his parents did not appear to treat him differently due to his sexuality, despite the fact that they were “old school” and very religious. Several subnarratives about his father indicated otherwise, however, and David’s father may have occasionally become frustrated with him. They welcomed his friends into their home, even taking care of another gay youth from the neighborhood when he was thrown out by his own parents. David’s parents also later helped to support his relationships later in life, including allowing male partners to live in their home during periods when David was struggling financially.

David attended a university in the Western United States. He graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in 1986, despite frequent partying, as well as “trying to date half the state.” Following graduation, his sister secured him a job at a large corporation, where he “made more money than I ever had in my life,” but she had to fire him from due to his inconsistent work. David then moved to city in a Southern state where another family member had secured him a job; however, he noted - while laughing - that he quit this job “because I had to be to the club before too late.” In 1988-1989 he moved back to the
Midwestern city he grew up in, and secured a job working for a local bank. While working at this bank, he committed fraud, drawing money from other people’s bank accounts. David described his fraudulent behavior occurring for three reasons at different points in his narrative: first, because he had a close friend who was essentially a professional criminal, committing frauds for a living, who influenced him; second, because he felt he was not living up to high family expectations regarding how successful he should be; and third, to finance a burgeoning cocaine habit. Following his fraudulent activity David went to prison for six months in 1989-1990. He described a repeated relationship between committing fraud and going to prison during the 1990s, and noted that his crimes were frequently committed to finance substance abuse, though he provided other explanations as well. This pattern continued until David’s last stint in prison, which ended in November, 1998. David also spent two periods in substance abuse programs during the 1990s, though his narratives related to these periods were somewhat unclear. He has continued to struggle with substance abuse to the present day.

While David was in either treatment or prison, both of his parents died. His mother died in 1996 while he was in treatment, and his father in 1997 while he was in prison. David was allowed to leave treatment to tend to his mother. He described his mother’s death as particularly stressful, as he was close to her. He noted that his father was heartbroken by his mother’s death, and his sister was busy, therefore he planned much of the funeral. His planning resulted in a conflict between he and his sister regarding who had been more responsible for planning their mother’s funeral, and who had cared about her to a greater degree. David’s father died while he was in prison, though he was allowed to leave to see the body. David’s father left a considerable sum of
money to him, but David was spending this money so quickly that his sister intervened and secured power of attorney over his resources out of concern that he would spend his entire inheritance.

David’s relationships had an impact on his working life. He described himself as never being out of a relationship until 2015-2016, but highlighted one particular relationship in detail. In 2001 David met Frederick, with whom he fell in love and had an important 15-16 year relationship. Frederick struggled to a greater degree than David with substance abuse, and Frederick was rarely able to sustain work. David noted that he was almost solely responsible for their financial well-being. During the 2000s David had multi-year jobs providing technical support for a large retail corporation, and doing field research for a large urban transit authority. In both cases these jobs required laptop computers so David could work in the field; in both cases Frederick stole and sold these laptops for money. Nevertheless, David continued a close relationship Frederick until discovering that Frederick had cheated on him with a man who was HIV positive around 2014. He described this event as the beginning of the end for their relationship; they were still together, but David was no longer comfortable having a physical relationship with Frederick. He continued to care for Frederick financially out of concern that Frederick would not be able to survive on his own, but their relationship totally ended in 2016. David described Frederick as encouraging him to use more, and Frederick also pushed for certain living circumstances while they were together. In addition to at least two apartments, they stayed at a drug treatment program, a large urban shelter, a publicly supported housing program, and a flophouse type hotel before finally splitting up.
Following their move out of the flophouse hotel, at which point David moved into his current shelter, their relationship was fully over.

**David’s Narrative.** When David spoke, his thoughts spilled over one another, with many qualifications, parenthetical asides, and PINs. In general, he was a sophisticated story-teller. He tended to ascribe complex meanings to events in his life, telling detailed stories then offering several competing explanations for a single event. In terms of the BNIM text sorts he used, he used the “Evaluation” text sort – the sort indicating consideration of the meaning of a narrative – especially frequently. This usage implies that he has actively considered his life, or was actively considering his life during his narrative.

Several potential reasons may explain why David was actively considering events in his life. For starters, David did not feel that he had been particularly successful. David noted that

“...I’m at the age now where I feel there’s a whole lot more I could’ve done with my life. There’s a lot more I could’ve done with my life. I could’ve been in a whole different place, but it’s just the choices that I’ve made.”

David’s description of his own lack of success stands in contrast to the strong expectations placed upon him by his family. David’s parents would be considered successful by any measure; his older sister obtained a graduate degree and works in a corporate setting. David felt considerable pressure, including frequent discussions regarding the obstacles his parents had overcome, even in the face of racism:

“I had to hear this all the time. [Dad] graduated back in the ‘60s. He still was not considered as good as his white counterpart. And he fought hard to get where he
was...and he got a plaque for being the first black guy to do something, this, that, and the other. My mom was the first, you know...so there was a lot of that in the family. Dealing with that.”

David noted that his lack of success, and especially his stints in prison, were a considerable embarrassment to his parents and sister.

David may also have perceived his life as complex. He often provided multiple explanations for a single event, such as for the crimes he committed (all fraud of one form or another). They are presented in the same order in which he presented them in his narratives. First, by referring to family expectations:

“But for me being the way I grew up I was expecting everybody to expect me to have certain stuff and everything. So I continued on doing things, frauds and all this other stuff to maintain whatever level I was living.”

Next, by referring to his drug abuse:

“So...make a long story short, I ended going back in drugs. But um the main reason I was going back to jail was because I have...I had been dealing with a drug issue since I was in my 20s.”

Third, in the 2nd interview, he described enjoying a sort of passive challenge to his family’s expectations, noting that his immediate family would attempt to mask his legal troubles, not telling others he was in prison. When they did so, he responded:

“...I was one of those people that would say it: no, I was in prison. You know, just because I knew it pissed my parents off. You know. And um...I loved my parents dearly, you know.”
David follows this statement by immediately referring to the fact that he is gay for the first time in his narrative. It is interesting that this portion of his life narrative immediately follows describing the complexity of his relationship with his parents, and suggests the response of his parents to David’s sexuality may have been more difficult than he let on in his initial narrative. In any case, this exploration of sexuality serves to highlight to the complexity of influences on David’s narrative and David’s life.

**Work in the Narrative.** David worked in a variety of contexts, including: offices, both public and private; in the community; in sales; in restaurants; and even in a food factory. The majority of his work experiences, however, were in customer service. David’s narratives demonstrated a complex relationship with one need characteristically met by work: money or survivor. His parents’ money meant that David was unconcerned with money, and this lack of concern meant that other concerns predominated for a time; David spoke frequently regarding “boredom” in regard to his life, and boredom informed his work decisions. The tonic for David’s boredom appeared to be his need for social interaction, and he was able to mention two specific jobs that provided him with sufficient social interaction to provide this release. Finally, like others, David described relationships outside of work as highly influential of his work.

Frederick appeared to have a considerably negative impact on David’s working and work decisions. David repeatedly took care of Frederick financially, only to have Frederick leave or harm him – such as by stealing work tools like laptops. Frederick would return and David would again take care of him. Frederick was a significant substance abuser and an influence to abuse substances, and David admitted that Frederick had influenced him to make very poor decisions.
David had a complex relationship with money, necessary for consumption or survival. His parents’ success meant that David had access to considerable additional financial resources for much of his life, and he described these resources as impacting his self-sufficiency into his late 20s and early 30s:

‘Now mind you…my parents was paying for EVERYTHING [participant’s verbal emphasis]…I really didn’t actually realize I was an adult – I can remember this – ‘til I was 35 years old. And I was standing in line at – it was a grocery store somewhere – and I was standing in line to pay my electric bill. And it actually dawned on me, right then and there, I was an adult. I just said ‘oh damn, I’m an adult now.’ It just, cause I had my own apartment I had to pay my own rent on – it was the first time ever – I paid my rent, paid my gas and electric for the first time, it just dawned on me. I was 35 years old.”

He noted that - given his financial advantages - he never placed much value on money:

And umm…as money has been such a part of my life…I never had any value for it. And…I do now. Sometimes I do now. I do have a habit of just spending it, as it it’s just going to naturally pop back up again. You know, but I never had an issue with it. I mean it’s always been there. You know, but it’s never been my money. You know, even if it got to the point where it wasn’t my money I was going to steal it from the bank.”

David, like many participants, did not find himself homeless until much later in life. This late arrival to homelessness likely reflects the financial resources that were available to him earlier.
This perspective on money appeared to provide the background of much of David’s decision-making. Since he did not require the ability to sustain himself for the first 35 years of his life, David focused more on his relieving his sense of boredom, another dominant theme in his life. He blamed his boredom, for example, as driving his experimentation with drugs. David described himself as regularly quitting jobs when he found them boring. For example, he quit his job at the food factory, which he obtained directly following his first release from prison, because:

“I got a brand new car. And I was sitting in the lunch room – this is what happened, actually – I was sitting around looking at my car, and I wanted to drive my car. And I quit! That was stupid…I was making good money there.”

Elsewhere in the 2nd interview, he added:

“some jobs if I get bored, and/or most of the time it’s either me getting an attitude and snapping smart, or me and somebody getting in argument and I’m like I don’t need this job and I’ll walk off the job.”

As mentioned above, the facet of work that appeared to relieve David’s boredom appeared to be sufficient social interaction. Almost directly followed discussion of his boredom, David discuss a job he very much enjoyed in an illuminating passage:

“...the last job that I really like was the technical support job. Me and this girl named ____ would literally get into it, and the office was not big…We would get into arguments where we wanted to…literally that loud to the point where we’d kill each other…And the funny part about that, which is surprising: 15 minutes later, I’m either calling here talking about what the fuck…what we going to get for lunch. So, our relationship ended up like that. Because as a people we could
get everybody… so I never actually quit that job. It was funny. But other jobs I would get… most of the time it’s bored, I’m just bored. It’s like screw this.”

Clearly something regarding the social connection at this job made it more satisfying to him. He later clarified “I wasn’t making a lot of money there, but I loved getting up to go there.” This interest in social interaction was later substantiated in references to retail work and field research, both of which he enjoyed because he liked interacting with customers and other staff.

David repeatedly committed fraud. Given the repeated occasions during which he did, it is difficult to believe that he did not draw a sense of satisfaction from it. David described some of his frauds in great detail, providing further evidence they were a source of pride. He described the friend who influenced his initial fraud as “a scam artist entrepreneur.” While this could be construed as a sardonic description, it did not appear to be so; instead, this description appeared to be an appreciative one. These are inferences, however, and any reflection on David’s frauds is speculative in the end.

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** David described contrary perspectives regarding working while homeless. First, he noted that he did not enjoy being unemployed, because he felt that he had little structure in his life, reflecting a lack of time structure. He felt confident he could get a job if he wanted to, however:

“I never had a problem finding a job. Cause if it’s just a customer service position, I can get it. I don’t’ care what it is, sales, I could sell water to a…I mean, I could do that and it’s nothing. And I use those as gap jobs, like if I lose a good job…”
Like others, however, David was concerned with finding a job that was consistent with
his age. He did not want a job that would cause him considerable stress:

“Sales jobs are too much pressure, you don’t know if you’re going to have a job
next week, if you don’t get those quotas, you know what I’m saying, so. That’s a
younger person’s job, I said I’m too old for that, I’m 50. Shoot.”

Despite his perceived ease in finding a job, David was concerned regarding his
potential lapses into substance abuse, and the influence this substance abuse had on his
ability to function. He noted that he had potential work already lined up, but was
uncertain if he should enter treatment before beginning to work again. He may have a bit
of an advantage in that his relationship to Frederick has ended, and Frederick appeared to
have had an influence on David’s desire to use.

**Conclusion.** David is well-educated and grew up with many advantages. He
attended private schools and obtained a university education. Despite these advantages, a
combination of factors – including lack of concern about money, boredom, substance
abuse, and a difficult relationship - led him to commit white collar crimes and to become
embedded in substance abuse. David presented his development of sexual identity in
largely positive terms, yet hinted in his narrative at greater difficulties. These difficulties
likely had an impact of David’s functioning both in and out of work; however, he did not
clarify the influence of his sexual identity. Clearly a central need in work appeared to be
sufficient social interaction to limit David’s boredom, and one wonders if knowing this
earlier might have mitigated some of his inclination towards substance abuse.

**Robert**
Robert is a 58-year-old African-American male who lived his entire life in and around a large midwestern city. Robert experienced extensive bullying as a child due to a skin condition, and until this skin condition was remediated in high school he experienced considerable social difficulties. In junior high school he began to “party” in order to improve his social engagement with other students. During high school Robert secured a certification as a nurse’s assistant and spent several years after high school working in the nursing home industry. His drug habit also worsened, however, and Robert struggled with active addiction to crack-cocaine from the late 1980s until the late 2000s, though periods of substance abuse were interspersed with periods of sobriety. He developed a criminal record due to drug related convictions, and spent time in prison in the late 2000s. Robert has worked in a variety of other jobs as well.

**Robert’s Biography.** Robert described two early categories of experience that had a significant impact on him. First, he was raised in a section of the city where considerable racial tension and instability was present when he was a child in the early 1960s. He noted remembering explicitly racist incidents in the neighborhood his family helped to integrate, such as a white woman who would spray people of color with a garden hose when they walked past her home, after they began moving into her neighborhood. Robert was around major race riots in the mid-1960s. He described himself as being astonished at the level of destruction these riots caused, and confused as to why people were so destructive. Later in his life, in his teens and 20s, he remembered encountering open racism while walking through predominately white inner ring suburbs with friends, including being physically chased from some neighborhoods, as well as open racism while working in restaurants in these communities.
Second, Robert had a skin condition during his childhood that was very visible to others, and that doctors struggled to generate a solution for. When he arrived in high school, doctors established that Robert was suffering from a severe form of eczema. During elementary and middle school, Robert endured high levels of teasing due to this condition. He noted that

“They used to call me all kind of names, from Captain Rash, to Powdercoat, to Lizard, to Baloneyman. Sandman. And that used to hurt me a lot. And then…the fights.”

Robert noted that he frequently fought throughout elementary and junior high school, attempting to defend himself from bullies. He felt rejected by other people, noting that

“Back in the day kids didn’t know…they thought it was like contagious and stuff. Even though in class you might have a person sit this close, they slide this way back from you. Like a big gap.”

He provided an additional example, noting that a Caucasian teacher once insisted that another student brush his hair, as his hair was left not brushed by his mother due to concerns about the sensitivity of his skin. He noted “she didn’t understand…it ended up puss and blood. I shut down.”

Robert noted that he began smoking marijuana in middle school, in part to cope with the social rejection he felt. When he entered high school, his social fortunes improved. Robert described this change as being the case in part because his doctors solved his eczema problem, in part because he began playing sports, and in part because he was part of the drug subculture. He noted he believed that it was during this era that he made an unfortunate connection: using drugs helped to manage painful emotions.
Robert finished high school with a certification as a nurse’s assistant. He noted that working in the medical field was an interest of his since he was young due to his difficulties with his skin condition. Robert graduated high school in 1976.

Following high school, Robert worked in various nursing homes and residential care facilities. He received his first nursing home job in 1977, and worked in nursing off and until 1988. He frequently lost jobs in these settings due to his temper; Robert would become angry with other staff members if he felt they were mistreating a patient. He summed his experiences in nursing homes as follows

“...half them staff, I'm not saying all of them, but some of the staff and some of my peers, they was crooked. They was inconsiderate. And they was dirty...I seen so much.”

This behavior upset Robert, as he noted feeling a strong sense of connection and meaning in working with people in these settings:

“I wasn’t making that much, but it was something. But I was feeling them people, them patients. See a lot of people don’t know what I mean when I say feeling. You can feel ‘I don’t want to be like this, this hurt.’ See I know because of what I went through.”

Robert reporting that he would threaten to fight other staff members if he felt they had mistreated someone. He also noted a deep sense of satisfaction when residents were pleased with his help, even if they were nonverbal. Robert reported working extensive hours in these settings due to the sense of satisfaction it provided him. When he got in trouble for his combative style of interacting with other staff, however, Robert believed he increased his substance abuse to cope.
Robert reported that he was actively drinking and smoking marijuana from high school through the mid to late 1980s. At some point in the late 1980s he began using crack-cocaine, and developed an addiction. In the late 1980s he experienced his first bouts of homelessness, sleeping rough, or in one case in a burnt out church. He noted that his first bouts of homelessness occurred while he was still working. Eventually his drug addiction progressed to the point that Robert was eating from dumpsters and living rough. Robert went into drug treatment on at least three occasions: in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and late 1990s. Following stints in treatment Robert experienced periods of greater stability. For example, in the early 1990s he worked for several years as an on-call home health care aide. Robert experienced several arrests during these years, and developed a criminal record. He went to prison in 2008 due to a Breaking and Entering charge associate with a theft to secure money for drugs. From 2011 to 2015 Robert lived in a stable apartment while working for Home Depot for several years.

**Robert's Narrative.** Robert told a sprawling narrative that at times was difficult to follow, as Robert tended to deviate from chronological order, slip into sudden side-narratives, and to make discursions into personal opinions about the meaning of current events. He made considerable use of what the BNIM textsort Argument, or, in other words, reflections on people’s behavior, choices, or patterns of thinking. Many of these discursions demonstrated ideas that Robert has developed over time, or knowledge that he has developed through difficult experiences.

Robert told many detailed narratives from his life. Incidents he related in detail were characteristically explosive conflicts, from which Robert emerged the better for ware, or very ugly events Robert witnessed. Examples included: specific incidents
observed in nursing homes, including a resident who died due to sloppy care, with accompanying observations of patient suffering that attended these incidents; a massive argument with an ex-girlfriend’s landlord in which a gun was pointed at him, but in which he refused to do the wrong thing; and observing someone die while out to lunch with a fellow nursing home employee. These narratives appeared to serve two purposes: first, to illustrate that Robert has a store of hard-earned wisdom from his experiences; and second, to illustrate that Robert has endured a considerable amount of suffering and trauma in his life.

Robert’s narrative was also very lengthy. Robert may have been attempting to build a narrative of accomplishment, even where he may feel his accomplishments have been more limited. He may have sought to “replace” some of the status and contribution to others that he was not able to accomplish through working. Instead he can offer his suffering and the knowledge that came with it. This idea is supported by his extensive reflections on current events, as these reflections tended to displace his narratives.

**Work in the Narrative.** Robert spent more time discussing painful incidents than discussing work, especially when following his time in nursing homes. These discussions may have been due to his time in nursing homes coming to an end aligning with the onset of a serious crack-cocaine addiction. Nevertheless, his descriptions of his time working in nursing homes provides some sense of his views on the needs met through work.

Robert described working a lot. He noted that at some nursing homes he would work 6-7 days per week. The frequency certainly implies that he found this work reinforcing, and Robert specifically disavowed being overly concerned with the pay he
was receiving. He noted a great deal of satisfaction in understanding and alleviating the suffering of others, as he believed his own experiences had contributed to his ability to understand what people were experiencing. Conversely, Robert struggled in his relationships with fellow staff members, and often found himself in conflicts with others. Taken together, these events likely mean Robert needs to have a positive impact of people around him, as well as a strong need for positive relationships at work. When these relationships were less positive, work could become overwhelming.

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** Robert noted that he always attempted to keep busy while in the shelter. He said, with some pride, “I always have things to do because people know I love to work.” As mentioned above, Robert worked for several years at a large hardware store, including when he was homeless. He also painted for a friend who is a contractor on occasion, and would pick up “odd jobs” for people that knew him. Both his painting and his odd jobs were informal work or work that was paid “under the table.”

Robert retained his hope to continue contributing to the wellbeing of the community, however. He noted that he hoped to become involved in helping other negotiate community resources, and believed he had a line on how he might accomplish this. Doing so likely more directly reflected or allowed him to utilize his hard-earned wisdom. Robert hoped to potentially return to nursing, thought he believed doing so would likely be difficult as he now had felonies. He further noted that his fantasy, should he ever get his hands on some money (with the implication that he knew this would be unlikely), was to become involved in disaster relief.
**Conclusion.** Much of Robert’s life, though by no means all, has been consumed by difficulties with substance abuse. The dominance of substance abuse in his life likely colored much of his narratives, which explored experiences Robert has had that have develop various forms of wisdom in him. Robert may feel he has less to show for himself in work terms. Robert enjoyed working in nursing homes, and was quite proud of the contributions he made to other people’s well-being and to the community when he was doing so. He hopes to do similar work in the future, or at least work in which he is able to help others.

**John**

John is a 57-year-old African-American male who has lived in several cities across two states in the Midwest. He was born in a midsized Midwestern city, from here on referred to as his “hometown,” with an economy based almost exclusively on heavy industry. He has spent a considerable amount of his life living in another state, in a large midwestern city where he felt he was more successful in finding work. This city will be referred to from here on as “the large city.” John has been homeless, initially staying with family members and friends, then eventually sleeping rough and in shelters, since the late 1990s. He became homeless when he was in his late 30s, following a job loss and the collapse of his marriage. John has a felony conviction for home invasion, but did not have any criminal convictions until the mid-2000s, when he was in his 40s. By his own report, he struggled at times with alcohol abuse between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s. John has worked a variety of jobs in the blue collar and manufacturing sectors, and has held several positions for many years at a time.
**John’s Biography.** John was born and raised in a medium sized midwestern city. He had little to say about his childhood years, aside from noting that his parents were successful, and owned and rented several properties in a nice working-class neighborhood. When John was a teenager, his father took him during the summers to his workplace at a major automobile manufacturer. While there, he showed John several of the workplace tasks, allowing John to attempt some of the typical jobs in the sector of the workplace. He remembered that he was taught how to drive a HiLo, or forklift.

While still in high school, John sought and obtained a position at the same plant where his father worked, though on a different shift, again driving a forklift. John worked full-time and pretended to go to school – even ostentatiously packing up his books in front of his parents – but actually went to work. Eventually John’s father discovered he had not been attending school, but was not excessively upset as John was working and had even been paying rent to his mother! At age 21 years John, along with other workers at this company, took a buyout as the company downsized. He moved to another midwestern city, where he worked for approximately one year at a welding company, before eventually leaving due to a perception that working at this company was damaging his health. He noted that safety was somewhat limited compared to today, with this workplace, for example, having poor masks to protect welder’s eyes from the intense light by welding. John noted that he learned a lot, but that “at night, you’d try to go to sleep, and all that you would see is that flash, that flash, that flash.”

In 1984, John returned to his hometown, and secured a job at a facility that packaged car parts. He worked in this facility for 6-7 years, and was promoted to shift supervisor. John reported that he met his wife at this facility, and they were married
while working there. In 1990-1991 this company – which serviced a single manufacturer’s packing needs – was driven out of business when they were underbid by another company. John was unable to secure another full-time job, and spent many years working for a temporary agency in his hometown, and during this time his marriage disintegrated. John noted that after he was laid off from the packaging company,

“things got tight, and we had a second kid on the way, and it was just... I guess it was just too much for me to handle so I started drinking a lot. So... that really pushed her away... we got a divorce... she told me I had gave up.”

John had not been a heavy drinker preceding this time period. John noted that he struggled to ever find consistent work after this period, instead largely working for short periods at temporary manufacturing positions. He noted that some jobs were akin to his welding job, too health averse to continue doing.

When his marriage dissolved, John initially lived with friends and family, staying for short periods with different family members. He noted that he tried so hard to obtain another manufacturing job while working with a temporary agency, that he traveled further and further from home to secure jobs, even to the point of driving several hours per day in commutes. He began staying in abandoned buildings while continuing to work in temporary jobs, before eventually entering a shelter in his hometown. In 1998 John moved to the large midwestern city, where he spent major portions of his life after this period, as he found getting jobs easier in this city. He secured many temporary jobs that were “steady tickets,” meaning that he was able to stay in a job for an extended period of time. During this time period John continued to sleep rough, for example living in an
abandoned hotel, which he found comfortable because the water and heat had not yet been disabled.

In the mid-2000s, John returned to his hometown. Short of money, he entered a local fraternity party, drank with people there, then stole the wallets of students who had passed out. He was arrested and pled guilty to home invasion charges. John was not sent to prison and instead was released on home monitoring probation, and lived with his mother. For reasons he described as uncertain even to himself, however, John cut his ankle monitor off with one month remaining in his probation, and he moved back to the large city. There he entered a homeless shelter and secured work; again, a steady ticket. A warrant was issued for John’s arrest, though he was not captured for three years. Following his capture, in John’s words, “I guess the judge wasn’t very happy.” John was sentenced to prison and spent two years there. Upon exit from prison, despite being on parole, John eventually moved back to the large city due to frustration at not finding work. He was required to check in with his parole officer once per month, and when this time came John worked full-time, then would take time to ride the Greyhound back to his hometown and meet with the officer. One December, a major snowstorm prevented this trip, and he couldn’t make the trip, and therefore John violated his parole. John turned himself in, and was referred to a diversion program, where he spent 90 days. His probation was shortened, and he returned to his hometown where he finally completed his probation before returning to a large midwestern city in 2015. Ever since he has been going through what he referred to as the “homeless process,” attempting to secure consistent employment and housing.
**John’s Narrative.** John worked steadily from high school until his job loss in the early 1990s. Following this loss his marriage and his life unraveled. Therefore, his narrative might be expected to focus on the second half of his life rather than on this first, as the second half was considerably more eventful. This focus is indeed the trend in the narrative, with considerably more attention paid to events following his divorce than preceding it. John’s initial narrative was short in length, with few expansions on specific events. Instead he reported general events largely utilized the “Report” textsort until he arrived at the breakup of his marriage. At this point, John used a combination of report and “Evaluation,” which meant he spent some time making judgments about his narratives. The overall thrust of the narrative was a mix of bad decisions in the face of declining work opportunities, before giving up in the face of declining opportunities and a failed marriage. This thrust stands in contrast to his current reported beliefs about his life, where he noted that he always stayed optimistic regarding his opportunities.

Major events John perceived as influencing his life included the loss of his marriage and his interaction with the justice system. John did not expand considerably on his marriage, but the terms with which he described it suggest that events in his marriage had a major impact on his life and work decisions. More time was spent exploring his time in the criminal justice system, including both his time in prison, and his choice to break parole. John was not certain of his motivations for breaking parole, but his hometown experienced a major economic downturn in the late 1980s, and John appeared to be eager to have work.

**Work in the Narrative.** John spent many years working, and therefore had considerable work experience upon which to reflect. Status appeared important to John,
which was tied closely to manufacturing types of work. He noted that he liked “factory work, working with my hands.” This preference was part of the reason that he left high school to work in manufacturing, and appeared to be linked to a desire to feel competent in what he did, and John reported that while welding he enjoyed learning, even if his concerns regarding his health eventually resulted in him quitting this work. John was good at his packing job as well. He was promoted to shift supervisor at the packing firm he worked for, and noted with pride that “I didn’t know I was working that good.” He noted that

“Every job I try to get something I like, because the worst thing you can do is get a job you dread going to every day. Sometimes the pay isn’t worth it if you dread going to a job and are not able to perform right.”

John did not appear to consider alternative forms of work from manufacturing type jobs, instead working through temporary agencies and sometimes having to drive large distances to work in manufacturing settings. He referred to manufacturing jobs as being “right up my alley,” perhaps due to some forms of work appearing to poorly remunerated to be worth sustaining; however, John may also have felt that he was not willing to work outside manufacturing. This is a curious position to take given something of the difficult circumstances John has found himself in, as well as the pressure that was on him to find work (for example while living with his wife).

Staying busy was important, both when in inopportune situations and when in more opportune situations. John’s need to stay busy, however, was clearly tied in to a factor not considered in work needs: hope. He noted that while working at temporary jobs he had
“kind of gave up on myself because the temp jobs I knew were just money to get me by and I was just surviving.”

Despite giving up hope, John kept striving, kept himself busy. He noted that shortly after arriving in prison he went on a work pass, cleaning all of the prison offices, and got his Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED). He later left his hometown “it was real slow” and he “was getting odd jobs here and there.”

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** John managed his time while homeless largely by continuing to find temporary jobs in manufacturing settings, though when he was unable to do so he volunteered. While homeless in his hometown he volunteered, in one case tutoring others to work towards their high school diplomas, and in another case working to rehabilitate local homes. When he finished his parole in his home state in 2015, he returned to a local staffing agency in the large city, and he noted that they were excited to see him and immediately found him work. Both seem consistent with John’s need to feel competent and to stay busy, though John noted that volunteering helped him take perspective on his difficulties by seeing that other people were also struggling. This highlights a need to feel he is making a social contribution, and is confirmed by his current circumstances. As he looks for more long-term work, he was working for the shelter at present, taking care of residents at night. He noted that “is just a way to keep busy,” but also makes him feel “like you contributing, doing something.”

John has long-term hopes of securing a more regular manufacturing position. He realized that he would not able to work at jobs that were physical given his age. He reported he had interviewed for a job working as a Quality Control inspector at a small
manufacturing company, and they told him he was likely to obtain the position. John contrasted his old loss of hope with his present view:

“I’m just keeping my head up. Not going to give up anymore. Once you give up, you’re lost. So I just keep trying.”

**Conclusion.** John began his career successfully working in manufacturing settings, though as these jobs have become scarcer, or more contingent, John has struggled. Difficulty finding work appears to have contributed to drinking problems and the eventual end of John’s marriage, after which he experienced a steady decline in his circumstances until he was living in abandoned buildings. Competence and making a contribution to the larger society appear to be major factors in what John looks for in work, and he will volunteer in order to sustain these needs. Social status also appears to be a factor, however, as John appears to be loath to seek work outside of the manufacturing sector.

**Jason**

Jason is a 49-year-old Caucasian male who lived his entire life in and around a large midwestern city. Following graduation from high school, he worked a variety of service sector jobs, several for extended periods. Jason is married. He was arrested for looking at child pornography in 2012, and pled guilty to charges in 2014. Due to his responsiveness to treatment and court, as well as his willingness to plea, he was given probation in lieu of prison time. Jason noted that he was required to leave his home, however, and has struggled to find work since leaving home. He further noted that he struggled with significant depression following being adjudicated on charges. More recently, health problems have limited his ability to seek work.
**Jason’s Biography.** Jason provided limited information regarding the early years of his life. He noted that he was the youngest of five children, and all of his siblings were adults who had left the home as he grew up. Jason described his home life as “pretty rough,” though he did not elaborate on the reasons it was “rough”. He noted that his two brothers both had “skills” – one worked in logistics and trucking, the other in home repair and maintenance – and he compared himself to them unfavorably as having a lack of skills.

Following high school, Jason worked for some time in customer service at a movie theater. He then switched to work in apartment cleaning in 1997 or 1998, when he was 29 or 30 years of age. He met his future wife in this job, as she lived in the apartment building he was cleaning. In 1999 Jason lost his job cleaning apartments because his managers felt he was moving too slowly; however, he reported that after he left management realized their mistake and had to hire two people to do the job he used to do on his own. He noted that he enjoyed working cleaning apartments because he had been able to work on his own. In 2000 he obtained a job at a “big box store” retail establishment, and worked for this establishment for 10 years. Jason was eventually laid off from this job in 2010, following several errors in his work. He noted some frustration with this layoff, as the company had been laying off older workers who had worked with the company for a long time, and he believed his “mistakes” were actually just a pretext to get rid of him (Jason was 42 years of age at this time). He obtained two successive jobs at other retailers during the next two years, and enjoyed working for another, similar big box retailer.
In 2012 Jason was arrested for having looked at child pornography. He noted that the investigation into his crime took another year; in the meantime, he sought counseling and attempted to do what he could in order to work through his problem. In 2014 he pled guilty to child pornography charges, was given five years probation, and was ordered to register as a sex offender. The suburb where he lived refused to allow him to stay in his residence due to his offense. With few financial resources and without a job, Jason had to move away from his wife and into a homeless shelter. Jason found moving away from his wife very stressful, as was living in a homeless shelter. He struggled with depression, and was eventually moved to another shelter where his depression could be treated. During this period Jason’s wife was so convinced he was near suicide following his move to the shelter that she insisted he take himself to an emergency room, which he did.

Jason’s depression was mitigated by treatment, and he devoted himself to finding work again. He noted that during 2016 he submitted several hundred applications to various jobs, stating:

“Everyday I’d go and I’d put in an application…even if I knew I wasn’t – with the felony – going to get it, I still put in the application hoping that they would overlook it…that’s one thing they said downstairs [at the shelter]. They said this guy has probably put in more applications and been rejected more times than anybody total in this place.”

Eventually Jason’s diligence paid off, and he received a job in a factory in 2016. He felt the workers were mistreated at this factory, but he enjoyed the work nevertheless because it allowed him to counter the perceptions he felt society had of him as a sex offender and a homeless person. He noted that he felt he was proving that “people with felonies…they
can be productive you know...just cause you have a felony doesn’t mean you’re bad.”

The high physical pace of this factory, however, caused severe damage to Jason’s Achilles Tendon, to the point that he now struggles to walk. He noted that doctors are determining whether to do surgery or a rehabilitation program, and told him he would not be able to work in factories again even if his tendon is surgically repaired.

**Jason’s Narrative.** Jason’s initial narrative was brief. His narrative pace was deliberate, largely without emotion, and appeared to exclude extraneous information. His deliberate pacing appeared to reflect his style of thinking rather than any attempt to manage his interaction with this writer. His narrative was characterized by understatement, even when describing extremely difficult events. To illustrate: when describing the impact that being homeless with a felony had on his work prospects in retail — where he had spent most of career — he noted that it put “a kink” in his job search. Before 2012, Jason’s work life, though having several ups and downs where jobs were concerned, appeared to have a career trajectory until he was arrested. Following this event, his life as he knew it collapsed. Therefore, his lack of elaboration and understatement in his narrative may reflect a masculine communication norm — Jason became somewhat more emotionally communicative in later interviews — but may also reflect a sense of defeat in the face of events, given the speed in which his life changed. This sense is likely only compounded by Jason’s injury. While approaching the interview Jason was wearing a boot designed to protect his Achilles, and his narrative seemed to reflect the sense of defeat he must have felt regarding the loss of work he found after hard searching.
**Work in the Narrative.** Jason’s reasons for enjoying work in the past largely centered on status and experiencing a positive social environment at work. His focus on feeling that others perceived him as being good at his work, or at least his concern about it, was foreshadowed by his negative comparison of his own abilities with those of his older brothers. Jason repeatedly noted frustration with fast paced work, feeling that he was unable to be successful in doing it. He noted that when he attempted a job at his retail store in which he had to work in a fast-paced warehouse environment, he was not successful. Jason preferred to feel not rushed, and successful in what he was doing.

Jason’s views regarding social interaction at work were more complex. He noted more than once that he enjoyed working on his own; however, he also noted enjoying working with customers. His preference for working alone may have had more to do with feeling frustrated with leadership. He reported frustration when he was mistreated by leadership in jobs, or when he observed other people being mistreated. He reported feeling that he had witnessed several of his jobs mistreating people, and noted that he did not enjoy observing this. Jason perceived mistreatment at his first big box store, where he felt fired for dubious reasons, and his 2016 factory job, which as a whole Jason viewed negatively due to the manner in which leadership treated staff, but which was a relief given the effort Jason had to put into finding a job following his felony.

Jason appeared to have found his work niche in retail. His arrest for a sexual crime destroyed this possibility, and therefore he had struggled to find any work that had replicated the experience. His life had not so much digressed, or run down, as it simply collapsed following the adjudication for his crime.
Working While Homeless and the Future. Jason was probably one of the least hopeful of all participants regarding his future. Noting that his felony had essentially removed the possibility that he would work in customer service again, and that his tendon injury had removed many blue-collar possibilities, he said “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” As February 2017, he was largely filling his days trying to get his injury repaired.

Conclusion. Jason had a life that collapsed following his being caught for a sex offense. He lost his job, had to leave his family’s home, moved into homeless shelter, and became seriously depressed. At present he is not hopeful regarding his future work prospects, and uncertain what he might do given his tendon injury. Jason’s central hope was to eventually find a way to live with his wife again.

James

James is a 45-year-old African-American male who has spent his entire life in a major midwestern city. His father was a skilled blue-collar worker, and James followed in his footsteps, working in a series of skilled and well-remunerated blue-collar jobs, including truck driver, steel worker, security supervisor, and house remodeler. He was married at age 21 years and has three children, though he is now divorced. James described himself as having had a pornography addiction, and he viewed child pornography in 2007. In 2008 he was arrested for the same, was adjudicated, then imprisoned for two years. While imprisoned, his wife divorced him. James has experienced repeated bouts of homelessness since being released from prison in 2011. He has had several work experiences; however, only one of them has been full-time work. The rest for temporary or partial volunteering type tasks.
James’ Biography. James described few difficulties for the first 36 years of his life, describing the continual progress he and his wife made financially. He grew up in a two-parent household, with his father a successful blue-collar worker and a pastor, and his mother a homemaker who James described as “very loving.” James noted that his parents insisted on their children being self-sufficient, regardless of gender:

…”my parents taught how to iron, how to cook...umm...how to keep a house, how to do all of these things. They explanation was they never wanted me to have to depend on a woman to do anything for myself. Anything that me as a man should be able to do for myself. Umm...and I carried that with me throughout my life.”

James did encounter some difficulty in high school. For reasons he did not clarify, James had to transfer schools in 9th grade, and was bussed across the city. He attended school in the era when bussing was much more frequent. Due to a heavy presence of gangs in his school and an accompanying concern about violence, James eventually dropped out of school.

In 1993 James, at age 20 years, James applied for and obtained a job at a small manufacturing concern specializing in steel products. Shortly thereafter he married his girlfriend. He described himself and his wife as making a good combined income. James was well remunerated working at the steel company, and his wife managed a small restaurant before eventually obtaining a bachelor’s degree and working for a bank. After 10 years with the steel company, James left for a job working in security because the steel company often laid staff off during slow periods (before rehiring them), and James did not like these layoffs because he felt they made his pay too inconsistent. He qualified
quitting this job by describing himself as “young and cocky,” and noted that even in the 1990s jobs seemed plentiful enough that he could quit one and easily secure another.

James noted that he had always wanted to work as a police officer, and had family who were officers with the State Highway Patrol. James also had many friends who were police officers, but his wife told him she did not want him to become a police officer because she was afraid he would be hurt or killed while working. In a kind of compromise decision, James became an armed security guard instead working for a security company. He noted that he progressed to leadership position while working at this job, but did not enjoy the job due to the frequent need to physically confront patrons who were misbehaving where he worked. Eventually he obtained a security position with a large corporation which was better paid and much less likely to result in conflicts with people who were violating security situations. James enjoyed this job; however, he eventually lost the job due to absences when his car broke down. Following losing this job, he began his own home improvement business, which he worked in from 2003-2008, up until his arrest.

James reported that he had a pornography addiction. At some point in 2007 he progressed into viewing child pornography. James described he viewing as short-term, infrequent, and ending in shame at some point the same year:

“one day I saw my oldest son – I looked over my shoulder – my oldest son was standing was looking in. He was in shock. I don’t know if he saw anything or not on the computer screen. But at that point I deleted everything off of my computer, I rebooted my computer, I felt real bad…uh…for what I was doing.”
James believed that this event was the end of his experience with child pornography, and he reformatted his computers and stopped viewing pornography. Officers showed up at his house with a search warrant approximately a year after his encounter with his son. James noted that he thought he should have simply replaced his hard drives rather than formatting with the hope that there would have been no evidence of his misbehavior.

James described his eventual arrest as particularly humiliating because the arrest was featured by local news, with James described as a “ring leader” of a child pornography distribution network. He denied that he was, stating that he viewed child pornography but never distributed it. James later plead to a pandering offense, as prosecutors had accused him of distributing pornography he had found online. He was in prison from 2009-2011, and while in prison his wife divorced him.

Research indicates that finding work with a sexual offense, especially a sexual offense against children, is very difficult. Things have been no different for James. Upon exit from prison in 2011, he was only been able to sustain one full-time job for a little over one year. When he left prison he initially resided in two homeless shelters, before one shelter helped to find a well-remunerated job at a small manufacturing facility, where he worked from 2012-2013. The high pace of this facility resulted in a workplace injury for James, and he was eventually released by the company for absences. While working for this company he and his ex-wife attempted to reconcile, but James noted that this attempt was a failure, and shortly following his job loss she asked him to leave and he again became homeless. His work since was largely short-term or in the context of the shelter itself as a volunteer with stipend. James noted that he has been close to securing other manufacturing jobs, but that his criminal record often results in difficulties for him.
James’ Narrative. James’ initial narrative was of moderate length, with much longer and more detailed narratives in later interviews. The length of his interviews did not appear to be tied to any presentation strategy per se, rather James appeared to be attempting to answer interview prompts in the most effective manner possible. In his initial narrative he used a balanced mix of narrative strategies, including both shallow narratives or Reports, more in depth narratives or PINs, Evaluations of his decisions, and Arguments about the meaning of particular events. James tended to reserve the use of in depth narratives for describing difficult events, especially those following his arrest, while more successful periods of his life tended to simply be reported. James had a tendency to mix honest Evaluations with less honest appraisals. He may have been attempting to balance honesty with some preservation of positive self-concept. He preceded in depth narratives with a positive or self-protective qualification of his own behavior, before eventually describing events in which he had not behaved well. In these initial appraisals he tended to represent himself as the victim of forces beyond his control, or he downplayed his failures and represented himself as being overly punished. Interestingly, however, following narratives James tended to make more honest assessments of his behavior and decisions.

Work in the Narrative. James reported enjoying work, on several levels, and went into great detail regarding things he had enjoyed about working. Status and positive social connections at work were both important, but status appears to potentially be most important, as it crosses other areas of James’ life. Being perceived as competent in what he did, with skills developed through learning and challenge, appeared to be an especially
important need met in his work. For example, he described his ten years at the steel company as follows:

“It was a great time… I started driving a forklift, umm, learned how to operate the overhead crane, and I just took it from there. That’s where I stayed. I had actually started training to become a burner, that’s a machine operator there.

Specialized machine operator, they had just brought in the plasma machines.”

James noted that he wished he had stayed at this company, but he did not appreciate that manufacturing jobs would become more difficult to secure over time. He told specific narratives about security work, all of which were engaging as anecdotes, and all of these narratives ended with James behaving competently. It was clear that he was proud of his accomplishments as a security guard, though he noted that he did not always enjoy the job. In general he appeared to want others to know that he was skilled in the work he had done.

James also noted that some of his security work, as well as his eventual work in home improvement, “burned me out.” He reported not enjoying jobs that resulted in stress due to dealing with other people who were difficult. For example, his initial security job – maintaining security in a high-volume transportation hub – was not enjoyable:

“Alcohol, weapons, drugs, you name it. Umm…quickly got burned out on that, because that was a physical…a physical job where people would physically attack you, almost on a daily basis.”
In contrast, he did enjoy working in corporate security because the relationships there, both with other security workers and with staff of the company, were positive. He did not enjoy working in home improvement, because maintaining a solid work force of assistants was too difficult. He described considerable frustration finding people he could hire that he trusted to help him consistently.

Status, both at work and in the community, was and is important to James. James noted that he had moved up in his security work. While working for the security company, he moved up the ranks:

“I started off...I started off, you know, lower level, and over time I worked my way up to Captain with that company.”

He did the same while working in corporate security, where he was able to move up and demonstrate his competence:

“Generic Insurance promoted me to a training officer. Umm...training officer, my job was to travel to different sites around town. Umm...and learning all of the inner working of the sites, where the security buttons were, the whole nine yards. Once I learned that, my job was to train new officers coming in, new hires.”

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** James noted considerable frustration with finding work after he left prison and while homeless, describing it as a “constant struggle.” He noted that he had lost several jobs due to parole violations, typically due to difficulties around reporting his address due to his status as a sex offender. These job losses have resulted in a bounce effect, where James leaves the shelter then bounces back to homelessness.
Status appears to be have always been important for James – an effect that is only compounded by the social consequences of his sexual offense - and is likely to figure significantly in the type of future work James wants. His valuing of status likely compounded the sense of loss inherent in his arrest, as much of his status loss appears to be permanent. He described his life before he was convicted of his offense:

“Before I went to prison I was a community activist, a community leader, a small business owner, I was the coach of my son’s softball team, sang in the choir at church, was an ordained deacon. Umm…when I went to prison, that changed everything.”

Following his release from prison he was none of these things, but noted determination to regain some of this status.

**Conclusion.** James’ story is one of sudden decline in life and work outcomes following a criminal offense. Before his offense James was largely successful in work, frequently receiving promotions where he worked, and there is little reason to believe James would have stopped working if he had not been convicted. The impact of his offense is likely to prove particularly challenging for James, as status, challenge, and the chance to demonstrate competence were all important needs he met through work. Reestablishing any of these will likely prove difficult given his offense. James described some satisfaction in the volunteering and short-term jobs he had been able to obtain through the shelter, but noted that he did not believe any of these jobs would be sufficient to get him out of the shelter. He noted that he was attempting to return to school to receive training as a CNC machinist, which would allow him to return to work in the manufacturing sector.
Michael

Michael is a 51-year-old African-American male who grew up in a midwestern city, lived in a variety of locales as a young adult, then spent much of his adulthood in a separate midwestern city from where he grew up. By his own estimate, he has been homeless five times, with three of those being due to job loss, one to a substance abuse issue, and the most recent following an arrest for sexual offense. Michael has had repeated involvement with the law, with adjudications for theft, substance possession, and in 2015, the sexual offense. He described his involvement in this sexual offense as related in part to the influence of a significant other. Until this offense in 2015, Michael generally sustained work for extended periods, working a series of mainly food service and blue-collar light manufacturing jobs.

Michael’s Biography. Michael described his life as uneventful until his middle school years, when his parents’ relationship began to deteriorate, and they eventually divorced. Several difficult circumstances arose from this divorce. For starters, his parents had considerable conflict with one another, and his father engaged in behaviors that were clearly damaging to his mother,

“He left, he tore up the house, messed up her clothes, and stuff. And made her life like starting over, pretty hard. You know, and she had us to deal with at the same time.”

His parents physically fought outside of Michael’s school, which he believed was partially responsible for him having to make a transition to from private to public schools.
Second, Michael believed that his mother saw his father in him, and treated him accordingly:

“She would get mean. Ummm…and it seems like she was blaming us for her problems. And, you know, I think me looking like my father a lot, kinda resenting me.”

During this period, Michael had considerable conflict with both parents. His difficulties with his mother worsened, however, and he described his mother as physically abusive, noting,

“…mom was a hitter. She liked to hit…when I was 14 she just slapped me. I don’t know what the heck it was for. And she was like on top of me hitting me for some reason, and so I like pushed her out of the way and then just went downstairs and walked to my dad’s house.”

His father eventually took custody; however, Michael began acting out and was frequently in trouble. He frequently took family member’s cars at night to drive around in. This occurred before he had his license, and Michael was unclear regarding his reasons for taking the cars. He was repeatedly in trouble for doing so, however, and eventually his father’s partner reported him to the police. Michael went to live with an aunt, but also stole her car, then spent several months in a residential treatment center in his city.

Following his parents’ divorce Michael had to transition from the Catholic schools he had attended all his life to an urban, public high school. Michael described his move to public school as a difficult transition. Children in his school did not like him. He illustrated this by noting he was in a fight because:
“I said something that I just assumed wasn’t a big deal, and someone took it very wrong. And I end up getting in a fight. Ummm... I don’t know exactly what it was about, but... I ended up losing this fight....”

He described the differences in teachers in stark terms, as teachers at the public school he attended appeared to care much less about students. Michael described all of these factors influencing a growing hatred of school, and eventually he dropped out of high school.

When Michael turned 18, he followed his mother to a major Southern city, and attempted to live with her again. This move was not successful, and eventually he returned to the Midwest. With few prospects, and having alienated many of his family members, Michael was uncertain regarding where he could live and what he could do. Due in part to this uncertainty, he burgled his father’s home, removing electronics and credit cards. He was eventually arrested for this burglary, and following adjudication spent ages 19-25 years in prison. Michael noted that his father died while he was in prison. When he left prison, he again resided with his mother for a period.

Michael’s experiences of family instability were difficult, but interestingly, Michael did not mention coming out as a gay male in his initial narrative, nor the difficult impact this had on his life. However, he later described quite difficult consequences from being gay, including very negative responses from his family, as well as negative interactions at school. When he reported that he struggled with coming out, he further noted that it was challenging for him to disaggregate what was most difficult during his early school years: the transition to public school, his instability with family, or his burgeoning understanding of his sexuality.
“You know... being... at that time in the 80s, being gay and being in school that was like a bad thing, because you’re worried about people finding out and things like that. And, it’s not like it is today. Today people are young and they can say all that and nobody really cares – in comparison to back then. So... that probably had a lot to do with things, as I was growing up and becoming more aware of myself, and couldn’t really be myself like I wanted to.”

Michael told a friend that we wanted to kill himself when he was 15 years old, and he spent several weeks in a hospital. He gave this event short shrift in his narrative, only noting that he never thought seriously about suicide again. Given both his difficulty adjusting to his new high school, and the statistics on the frequent adjustment difficulties and suicidal ideation and attempts of LGBT youth, this suicidal ideation provides insight into how difficult Michael’s experience of his high school years was. When his family finally discovered he was gay in 1993, when Michael was 27 years old, his mother had an argument with him and never spoke to him again. He has not seen any biological family since 1994, and has no support where family is concerned.

Michael noted that partners have had a considerable influence on him. He described a partner as the first one to influence him to try crack-cocaine, in approximately 1995-1996, when Michael was approximately 30 years of age. Previous to this experience he had no substance abuse difficulties. Michael’s substance abuse difficulties lasted from approximately 1996-2007. He noted that it did not significantly influence his tendency to become homeless – Michael and his partner were stable substance abusers - as he only lost an apartment on one occasion due to spending his money on drugs, and he presented this as a choice – he didn’t care if he lost that
particular apartment. It did, however, have a significant impact on his spending, and he noted that he invested much of his free income into drugs. Crack-cocaine became a foundational aspect of his relationships, including the one most important relationship he described having during much of the decade between 2000-2010. Together Michael and this partner, however, were able to transition away from substance abuse in 2007, following a mutual realization that they wanted to spend their money on other things. This partner eventually died in 2011.

**Narrative Analysis.** Michael’s initial narrative was terse in nature, lasting only several minutes. He provided little elaboration of his experiences, instead repeatedly utilizing what BNIM would refer to as a “Report” style of description, and only providing the barest structure of his biography. His report-type narratives emphasized a history of frustration with family, especially his parents. Michael’s ongoing frustration with his parents - even at age 51 - speaks to the degree of conflict he experienced with them, and his stress regarding this conflict. In later interviews, Michael expanded considerably on his initial narrative. The brevity of his original narrative may be due to a lack of understanding of the task, a lack of comfort with relating personal information, a lack of trust in disclosing personal information, or all of these. Michael tended to describe what appeared to be very difficult events – a painful transition to public school, hospitalization for suicidal ideation, being gay but closeted through the 1980s, time spent in prison, homelessness, and important romantic partners dying - in a matter of fact manner. This matter of fact manner suggests the possibility that these events were traumatic enough that Michael is emotionally withdrawn when relating them.
Work in the Narrative. Despite his history of substance abuse, Michael worked for most of his adulthood, and was rarely unemployed. His first real full-time job was in prison, where he worked for several years building furniture. Within a year of leaving prison, he secured a job for a local furniture rental company for two years, during which time he was promoted from delivery into a higher-level customer service position. He later has had several multi-year stints in both food service and light manufacturing settings. He reported his employers consistently complimented him on his work ethic, but that he has had trouble managing frustration with authority in his work place, and has often lost jobs due to conflicts with bosses.

Michael has an overall perspective on work focused on the necessity of work. He noted “I’ll be honest with you, I hate work. I hate going to work…[but] work is necessary to survive.” He highlights the central need he met through work: paying his bills and earning enough to fund his spending on various needs and wants. He noted that the need for money was the reason for selecting the job he worked while in prison – he had no inherent interest in building furniture and could have picked something else – was because he had little support from outside prison, and therefore would need enough money to pay for hygiene and other needed commissary products. The furniture job was best remunerated of his options. Michael, however, made his own views more complex when he noted that he also enjoyed the prison job given the competence he felt – the job was “fun… because I knew what I was doing…I hated jobs where I don’t know what I’m doing.” He also saw it as having a social purpose, “creating something that was used. Everything else I’ve done was customer service.”
Following prison, he noted enjoying other work by-in-large due to the opportunity it provided him to enjoy other aspects of his life, such as his time with his past partner. Interestingly, part of his transition away from substance abuse was related to realizing that he did not like where the money he earned was being spent. Essentially one form of consumption replaced another, but with positive result. He first realized he wanted to change how he spent money when he helped a friend install her flat screen television in 2007:

“...I put this thing up and it was beautiful. It was beautiful, and I’m like and I went back and I’m like “uh uh, we’re stopping this. We’re stopping this. We’re going back…” I thought my 32” box tv was, that was...that was state of the art, you know. Until I seen, I put this tv up. And I told my partner and my partner was not having it. You know, and I was like was telling him like “look, our life is going past us man.” I said “we’re not buying clothes,” you know what I’m saying, “all this crap we’ve got we’re not getting nothing new ever. But the dope man has got our clothes, and our tv, and our car.’ It’s crazy, it’s crazy, but that is exactly what stopped me.”

Michael noted that it took him approximately two months to stop using drugs entirely, and that he and his partner were able to acquire a flat screen television in a similar amount of time.

Survival, or the desire to purchase drugs, or the eventual desire to purchase consumer goods were a central need Michael met through work. As he reflected, however, he described several other needs he met through work. When considering the
experience of being unemployed and homeless, he noted that “when you don’t have anything to do, you feel pretty empty…without purpose.”

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** Michael did not articulate any clear goals, nor even expectations, for working while he’s in a homeless shelter. He noted that work would allow him to escape the shelter, which is linked to his purely survival based hope for the future. Michael did not, however, articulate any hopes for upcoming jobs or any new possibilities. He described wanting to leave the shelter, and feeling limited to do so. His sexual offense likely contributes a great deal to difficulty finding work, and his somewhat flat narrative along with his lack of aspiration implies he may have little hope regarding his future.

**Conclusion.** Michael has a history of difficult relationships with family, and family eventually abandoned him due to his sexuality. His family experiences likely had significant consequences on his ability to trust others – which was likely in evidence in his terse narrative style – and made him want to hold onto the relationships he did have. Significant relationships with important romantic partners, of whom there were only a couple of important ones, had significant influence on his behavior and what he valued about work. Partners influenced him to start using drugs, as well as to engage in the behavior that resulted in adjudication for a sexual offense. Michael described the main need met through work as survival and money, but all of his spending appeared to influenced by his relational needs. Essentially his spending and consumption were influenced by his partners, and likely in turn by Michael’s desire to maintain these relationships. At present, in his early 50s with a sexual offense on his record, Michael is unsure what to expect from the future.
Harold

Harold is a 58-year-old African-American male who was born and has lived all his life in a major midwestern city. He worked extensively in manufacturing until the late 1990s, and reported having a consistent work history with a solid income. In the late 1990s Harold’s marriage began falling apart, and in 1999 Harold was adjudicated for a felony following a Domestic Violence incident with his wife. He spent time in jail, though he avoided prison time. Both Harold and his wife struggled with substance abuse, though Harold was the only one of the two who used crack-cocaine, which he described as having a significant impact on his marriage. Following the domestic violence incident with his wife, Harold’s life slowly unraveled, and he worked a series of temporary jobs. Harold has been homeless on two occasions, once for a few months after a later conflict with his wife, and currently following his mother passing away recently.

Harold’s Biography. Harold was born and raised in a large midwestern city. He grew up in a two-parent household, and his father worked in manufacturing all his life. Harold’s father wanted Harold to attend university, but Harold wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps and work in the manufacturing sector. Other details of Harold’s early life were not clear, as he began his narrative at age 25 years, when he both obtained his first serious blue-collar job, and married his wife.

Harold described the series of jobs he had between 1983 and 1999. He initially worked installing windows, working in this context for two years. He was laid off from this job when the company went out of business. Following a brief period of part-time work in 1985-1986, Harold obtained a new full-time job driving a forklift in an appliance company’s factory warehouse. He was in this job from 1986-1994, and enjoyed the
work. Eventually this company moved the factory out of country, and Harold lost this job. He had forewarning that the plant was going to close, however, and had a new job working in a small steel company immediately following his termination in his warehouse. He worked at this job from 1994-2000, and emphasized that he was often making nearly $50000/year working there.

Harold and his wife married in 1983 and had two children. In the late 1990s Harold’s marriage began to flounder. He remembered, as an illustration of marital strife, that he and his wife had ceased being physically intimate. Harold recounted a significant argument that occurred at Christmas in 1999 as being particularly frustrating. While he was working a high number of hours, including overtime, his wife’s responsibility was to pay their bills. She stopped paying bills, instead spending money they had both earned on other things, including “partying.” Harold only discovered this was the case when he sought to buy Christmas gifts for their children, and he was told there was no money was available to do so. Being behind on bills eventually resulted in Harold and his wife losing their home. They moved in with his wife’s mother, but eventually Harold could not stand to live there.

Harold felt much of the blame for the destruction of the relationship should be on his shoulders, however, noting that

“I didn’t stand up as a man and do what I was supposed to do, I just you know, went out and got high, thought that was, you know, going to sugarcoat it. And it didn’t do not good…we got into a couple arguments and fights and she called the police…the next time…I hit her…[and] turned myself in, because she pressed charges.”
Interestingly, Harold tied his difficulties to substance abuse directly to his relationship with his wife, to the point that in his narrative it was difficult to disaggregate substance abuse from conflicts with his wife. For example, in the quote above, “sugarcoat” refers to using drugs to cover over the difficulties in his marriage. He noted wishing he had gotten a divorce, but he felt obligated to “do the right thing” by his children, as his own father had done. Some equal blame for the failure of the marriage appeared to be present, as both partners were partaking of substances, and Harold was working considerable overtime at the steel company. He noted, however, that his wife never smoked crack, and him beginning to smoke crack was “one of the main issues in our whole marriage.”

Following being adjudicated for domestic violence in 1999, Harold also went to get treatment for substance abuse, and got clean. He returned home and found his wife smoking weed, and he believed this was partially responsible for him returning to substance abuse shortly thereafter. Harold initially attempted to live with his wife and her mother, continuing to work temporary jobs to support his children. Eventually he and his wife attempted to reunite, but this did not work out, and Harold went briefly to a homeless shelter in 2006. He helped his mother take care of her home and her errands while working temporary jobs, and did this for many years before his mother’s death resulted in him having to return to a homeless shelter in 2016.

**Harold’s Narrative.** Harold’s initial narrative was one of the tersest collected in the course of this research, though his later interviews were more expansive. His first interview narrative was heavily weighted towards evaluative statements – also described in the BNIM method as statements reflecting the moral of the story – to the point that narrative events sometimes had to be inferred from negative self-referential statements.
about the meaning of the events themselves. Occasionally Harold’s evaluative statements reflected bitterness regarding the failure of his marriage, but by and large they appeared to be Harold’s describing his failures as a worker and as a person. The negativity of the narrative, along with the tone in which the narrative was provided, implies a sense of loss and of apathy. Very little optimism about the future was in the initial narrative, and Harold’s old life contrasted significantly with his current one. Harold described once making a salary of between $45,000 and $50,000 per year; in the course of this interview he noted that the reimbursement from this study would allow him to keep his phone on, in turn allowing him to maintain contact with his children and to continue job search.

**Work in the Narrative.** Despite the apathy present in his interviews, Harold described several needs work has met across the course of his life. Central is work’s connection with contributing to family, though status was also important. Harold had strong expectations of a man’s ability to take care of their families. In both interviews he repeatedly described his belief that work is about taking care of his family, just as his father had done with his own family:

“...to me my father was A1, he took care of home...when he passed away my mother was set. I wished I could have stayed at one job and set my wife up like that.”

Harold felt he had failed his wife in this domain, though he felt that he had done a better job taking care of his children, and felt “they kinda looked up to me.” When his wife didn’t pay the bills, Harold likely felt she was not respecting what Harold viewed as his
contribution. Considerable disappointment was present in both of their failure, as if they had stayed together and not partied

"...we would be a lot further ahead in life. We would be together, house would be paid for, I mean, you know. But it wasn’t meant to happen."

Interestingly, this family relational need met through work trumped the experience of actually working, as Harold noted “when you’re working for someone else, you can’t really be happy.” Harold also noted that he felt he had little motivation to work if he had no one to provide for, and therefore needed to almost construct a new reason for working.

Harold derived considerable pleasure from knowing how to fix things and work with machines. He described the learning process in several jobs, including learning how to repair and install windows, learning to drive a forklift despite teasing from coworkers regarding a lack of skill at doing so, and developing the ability to manage machinery in a steel mill. Clearly competence was a need in jobs Harold pursued, though at present he noted that any job he pursues “is about the money” so that he can escape homelessness.

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** Harold reported finding some of his options for working while homeless dissatisfying. As was the case in other sections of his narrative Harold blamed himself for not finding work, calling himself “lazy,” but he also noted considerable frustration with the reality of working through temporary agencies:

“There’s no future in them. I even try to put forth the effort to make a future out of them…but there’s nothing there.”
This quote suggests a partially rational decision to give up with frustration, as there is little that can be expected through this type of work. Harold’s options stand in contrast to his previous successes.

Harold does have some hope, though his hopes do not seem particularly concrete, and may reflect some of the apathy described before. Some of his optimism appeared to have been motivated by the conversation during these interviews. For example, during the 2nd interview he noted

“I’m gonna go into the state job website tomorrow and, you know, try to make some things happen for me. I got a couple of applications out there.”

Harold also noted that he was bothered a great deal by feeling idle while homeless, yet the loss of providing for family as a reason to work made being motivated more challenging. He noted that he was going to break down and work for the shelter for a stipend again, though he had previously avoided doing so as he did not like working directly with shelter residents. Now that he did not have providing family as a motivator, Harold did not appear certain what his motivation should be. He describing just hoping for a simple life – in contrast to his more successful days - but with the long-term motivation to again be able to take care of his family. He’d like to

“...work and um, get my own place...I’m not even worried about a car right now. You know, I’m just gonna go ahead on and work, save my money. And I guess once I can do that I can talk to my wife again.”

**Conclusion.** Harold’s narrative was one of family collapse, and disappointment with his life that he attempted to “sugarcoat” by using drugs. Harold had been successful in maintaining a consistent work history for much of his life, and by the middle of his
career had been earning a good income. Conflict with his wife, however, intertwined with substance abuse difficulties, resulted in Harold losing his job. Following an explosive conflict with his wife resulted in Harold having a felony for domestic violence. He is uncertain regarding the future, though he hoped that he would secure a basic job that would allow him to leave homelessness, and secure a modest apartment.

Edward

Edward is a 60-year-old African-American male who was born in a large Midwestern city. When Edward was in high school his family moved to a rural area approximately 60 miles from this city due to concerns regarding safety and school quality. Edward attended university for a time in another large Midwestern city, and later moved to a large city in the Western United States for two years to pursue a music career. Otherwise he spent his entire life in the city in which he was born. Edward worked at various jobs until he was 33-34 years of age, when by his own estimation he became addicted to crack-cocaine. He struggled with addiction from approximately 1989 until he became clean in 2006. During this time he accrued several drug related legal charges, including at least one felony. Since 2006 he has been intermittently homeless, alternating stays in shelters and apartments. He was arrested and adjudicated for sexually oriented offense in 2014. His current status as a sex offender has detrimentally impacted his life. Edward described considerable frustration and bitterness regarding this event, as he believes his act was significantly overstated by law enforcement and not actually illegal.

Edward’s Biography. Edward is the second oldest of four children, with three sisters. While in elementary school he was tested as gifted, and sent to an elementary school targeted towards gifted students. He described this school in positive terms,
noting that the school improved his behavior to a significant degree due to feeling more challenged. When it came time for Edward to matriculate to a similar school for junior high school, Edward’s father refused to finance Edward’s bus rides to this school, insisting that the local public school – which Edward could walk to with his sisters - was good enough for Edward. Edward reported his behavior suffered in this school, his grades dropped, he often found himself in fights, and eventually he was jumped. Given this assault and other factors, when Edward was in high school his parents moved to a rural area almost 60 miles from the city. Edward noted that this father continued to commute to a job in the city, a one-way drive of an hour or greater.

Edward noted the cultural transition to this rural school was challenging, though he was eventually able to adjust by playing sports. He noted:

“I was born and raised in the city…then I’m in a school that was predominately white, I think it was three to five blacks in the whole entire school. Uh…I experienced a lot of things that I had never had to experience before because of racism.”

This was compounded by his own family’s heritage, as “my grandfather was white. So there’s no way I could be prejudice, because I mean, I got a close family member who’s one hundred percent Irish.”

Upon high school graduation in 1974, Edward’s father told him “I’ve done all I can for you,” and told Edward that he had to leave the home as soon as he graduated. Edward abided by this expectation, and began university during summer semester directly following high school graduation. Edward spent two years at this university, in another large midwestern city; however, he noted that he was not prepared for school and
was not successful. In 1976, when he was 20 years old, he returned home to the city of his birth (not to his parents’ rural home). He secured a job selling insurance, and found both success and enjoyment in doing so. During this time period Edward was frequently playing music, and eventually decided he wanted to attempt to play music full-time. He and a friend moved to a large city in the Western United States in 1979. They remained there for nearly three years, until 1982, working and writing music. Edward noted that they found some minor successes with their music, including the offer of a song-writing contract, but by in large they were not successful. Broke, they eventually decided they needed to move back home to find better work.

Once back, Edward secured a job working as a mailroom employee and driver for executives from a manufacturing company. This job, however, ended a year later when the company went out of business. After working temporary jobs, he later secured another full-time job at an office, but was stabbed at a party during this period. Due to time spent in recovery in the hospital, he lost the job at the financial company. Edward described increasing frustration in seeking work as 1980s progressed. He would get temporary jobs he thought were likely to become permanent, especially in manufacturing, but noted “I could never get in like Ford or somewhere where there was opportunities in years past for people to get in and stick with a company.” He further described that “I would get a job, lose a job, and just cycle.”

Eventually – Edward estimated this was during the 1987-1988, when he was around age 32 years - he began to use recreational drugs more frequently, to “party” more often. He linked this change to frustration with his life circumstances, including difficulty finding sufficient work. Edward eventually switched from alcohol and
marijuana and began using cocaine, and “progressed” until in 1990 he had moved to a rooming house and was using cocaine on a daily basis. During the 1990s and early 2000s Edward was arrested on several occasions for substance possession, and eventually had a felony for dealing drugs.

While in the rooming house, Edward noted that he would do various types of street or door-to-door sales in order to make money. In the early 1990s, while working on these sales, he met a neighbor who had a disability, and they became friendly. This man eventually asked Edward to help him clean his home, as his home was so dirty that there was concern it would be condemned. Edward cleaned his home. His friend was pleased. The home was a duplex, and the man asked Edward if he wanted to live upstairs for free. A closer relationship began between the two of them that lasted nearly a decade, during which Edward was able to receive free housing, occasional money for services, and was generally able to assist (and potentially exploit) this individual. Edward noted with pride that he frequently helped this man, elaborating that “I saved him” and “he saved me.” He clearly viewed this as both a form of work and a friendship. Edward helped this man find contractors to repair his home, but would run a kickback scheme with contractors. When he brought contractors to his friend he would receive some of the money the contractors were paid.

Edward was arrested in the early 2000s for substance possession, and went to jail then prison for 27 months. When he returned his relationship with his friend “ran out,” and he began “hitting the shelters.” During his 27-month stay in prison, Edward participated in Narcotics Anonymous, and began a process of moving away from drugs. When he exited prison he began to use again, but eventually during his stays in shelters
he decided he needed to get clean, and went through an outpatient treatment program in 2006. He lived largely in shelters until 2011, when he secured an apartment where he lived for almost three years. During much of the period between 2006 and 2014, Edward made much of his spending money (he had food stamps, and at one point an apartment) by playing poker in various casinos. He noted that he developed a system for making certain he continually made small amounts of money. Edward’s sexual offense in 2014 likely means that he will be less able to participate in casino gaming.

**Edward’s Narrative.** Edward’s initial narrative was one of considerable bitterness. Some of the bitterness was regarding his past treatment by his father, but more emphasis was placed on his engagement with the justice system around his sexual offense. He spent nearly half the narrative discussing the events around his arrest and judicial proceedings. This bitterness against the system continued during the 2nd interview, as is illustrated by the following quote, in reference to one of his earlier drug arrests:

“…one of the cases I caught…they said I was the biggest drug dealer on the west side when I was a user. So that’s what they do, that’s what the media does; that’s what society does; and that’s what this councilman that’s over there did…it’s political.”

In his 2nd interview he softened in regard to his father and his frustration with him was much more nuanced:

“[his work and commute following the family’s rural move] was rough on him too. Trying to sacrifice for me and moving for my sisters. But still, when it came to my personal relationship with him, it was pretty much non-existent.”

157
Even with the considerable resentment Edward described feeling towards the system, he took responsibility for his own substance abuse difficulties, openly described them as having destroyed his prospects earlier in his life.

**Work in the Narrative.** Given the degree to which bitterness dominated Edward’s initial narrative, he articulated very little about the places he worked aside from noting frustration that he was unable to secure steady work during the 1980s. Nevertheless, he did touch on work repeatedly, including considering his parents work.

Edward spent a fair amount of time exploring the work and character of his parents. His father was described as hard-working and sacrificing for the family, and suffering for doing so. His mother worked in several capacities, and frequently used money that she earned to contribute to charity. Edward referenced how he was raised by his mother when discussing the manner in which he wished to treat others.

When he did reference the meaning of his work, he most frequently referenced making money to survive. While working at his insurance sales job, the “pay was great.” He worked in the city in the Western United States as a security guard to “take care of” himself and his song-writing partner. When he came back to his hometown, working at the small manufacturing concern was “easy.” When eventually working in temporary work, temporary work was frustrating but “necessary” to help take care of his own children. As an aside, Edward did not bring up significant romantic relationships at all during his narratives, despite making it known that he had children.

Three examples of work indicated needs in addition to survival, however. First, when writing music, Edward “loved” the experience. He claimed that one of his songs was referenced in the Library of Congress. Whether this is accurate or not, one of
Edward’s goals in work is some kind of social contribution for his work. Second, Edward represented his time spent living with his friend when he was in the midst of drug addiction from 1990-2000 as almost work-like, as if he was his friend’s caregiver. On the surface, the relationship of a man with serious substance abuse difficulties with a handicapped man appeared unlikely to be positive. Edward, however, steadfastly represented it as positive. He concluded that he had helped his friend to significant degree, as all of his friend’s family members had died and no one else had been helping him deal with his life. This furthers the notion that he wanted to make a social contribution, as well as that involved a relationship that was meaningful. He specifically referenced his mother – who contributed socially - in describing his arrangement with his friend. Edward also described any money or benefits he accrued as part of this relationship as a function of the assistance he was providing. Third, while playing poker, Edward clearly enjoyed the social connection this activity engendered, as well as the competence he felt in having developed a system to make small sums of money.

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** Edward experienced difficulty in securing a job where could work for a sustained period during much of his life in the 1980s, and even referenced the beginning of his substance abuse as being linked to these difficulties. Between 1990 and 2000, when he was quasi-homeless as he was only living at the will of his friend, he worked doing under-the-table sales and helping this individual to repair his home, though he also noted obtaining jobs then losing them due to substance abuse. During the period between 2006-2014, he did not report working at formal labor, though he may have; rather, he noted earning much of his spending money playing poker. He noted that he had worked out a system and was able to consistently win positive
quantities of money in his poker matches, and also noted having friends at poker. He was meeting needs to survive and have social interaction. It is likely that at this point in his life, given his age, sexual offense, criminal record, and past history of difficulty finding jobs, Edward likely has few expectations regarding finding work.

That said, Edward worked as a desk monitor at the shelter during the process of his interviews. He did not speak to or expand upon his work, but other men described this job as having a small stipend, and therefore a job you worked to structure your time and to feel useful to the community.

**Conclusion.** Edward demonstrated some promise early in his life, but also faced difficulties in family relationships and transitions as a teenager. His difficult transitions included multiple transitions between schools, including transitions to a school where he encountered open racism. Much of his life from age 18 years to his early 30s appeared to be attempting different routes towards being successful, but Edward struggled. He finally succumbed to substance abuse difficulties in his 30s, then was stuck in substance abuse until his late 40s. Later he found some success in his own apartment, playing poker for money; however, a sexual offense caused him to lose his apartment. He now hopes to secure another apartment and does not appear to have significant hopes or expectations in regard to work.

**Paul**

Paul is a 45-year-old person of color who described his race as “other.” He was born in a Southern state, and after spending his first year and a half with his mother, he was adopted by his paternal grandfather. The reasons for this adoption were not clear. Paul grew up in this Southern state until eventually being sent to a medium sized
Midwestern city to live with his father, then eventually, his mother. He bounced back and forth between this Southern state and Midwestern city as a teenager. Paul engaged in a high volume of violent behavior between 18-19 years old, especially in his Southern hometown, before eventually be sent to prison for a violent sexual offense. Paul spent 17 years in prison in the Southern state. Since being released he has made considerable efforts to lead a legitimate life, but has struggled with finding and keeping work that will pay his bills.

**Paul’s Biography.** Paul was born in the Southern United States. He began his narrative by discussing his adoption by his grandparents, as this was his strongest early memory. Paul noted that his grandfather arrived at his home when he was 18 months old, or perhaps a bit older, and told him he was taking him to McDonald’s. Paul loved McDonald’s. In actuality, they were taking him to their home to live because they were adopting him. That evening Paul remembered being “whupped” by his step-grandmother when he cried to be returned to his mother.

Paul had many positive things to say about his grandparents, but his early years with them were characterized by abuse. He described his step-grandmother’s theory of discipline as follows,

“Extension cords, frying pans, skillets, anything she could pick up to hit me…in her mind, and a lot of older people’s minds, that male child is stronger than that adult female woman. So as her defense, and maybe to put fear in me, she would be excessive when she punished me.”

Paul’s grandfather was infrequently home, which made Paul feel unprotected from his step-grandmother. He described one incident in which he received a spanking because he
refused to drink powdered milk when he thought it tasted wrong. His grandfather came home, and learned of the incident. To investigate, his grandfather himself sampled the powdered milk. Though he did not comment or critique Paul’s step-grandmother, his grandfather was able to tell something was wrong with the milk, and the family always had fresh milk from thereon.

When he was 14 years of age, Paul’s mother came back into his life. She reconnected with him, and he frequently stayed with her or spent time with her, and “as I got to know my mother, things got better.” Then she left, moving to a small Midwestern city. Paul, afraid “everything would go back to the way it was,” demanded he be allowed to move with his mother. His grandparents partially relented; they sent him to live with his father, who lived in the same small midwestern city where his mother had just moved. Paul’s father and mother were not in a relationship and were not connected to each other, and Paul felt being sent to his father was his grandparents being vindictive. Paul described his father at the time as an abusive alcoholic (he is now sober, and they have since improved their relationship), with whom he was even less comfortable than he had been with his grandparents. He illustrated the contrast:

“With my grandparents, even though it was chaotic, you knew what to expect…you had security I guess you could call it. But with my father it was like go to sleep at night, and we’ll see what tomorrow is.”

Paul eventually ended up bouncing around between family members, then moving back to the Southern state where a young woman he was dating became pregnant. He later had another child, and now has three adult children, two sons and a daughter. In 1989, however, Paul began spending time with people who wanted to be “gangsters,” and he
“caught a case” in the Southern state in 1990. Paul described a chain of violence during the period from 1989-1990, which he described as a “hellacious year” with “one piece of violence behind the other.” Eventually he committed a violent sexual offense and was sentenced to 17 years in prison.

Paul was 18 years old when he entered prison. He learned much of what he knows about life and work while he was in prison. His first lessons were in how to better understand other people to successfully interact with them. One prisoner, for example, instructed Paul in a roughhewn personality categorization system based on fairy-tale characters that he used to negotiate the difficult personalities present in prison. Another prisoner helped him understand the principle of working to survive, which in prison takes on a more literal meaning than is perhaps is the case in day-to-day life outside of prison. This discussion is worth reproducing in full:

“...he said ‘if you want to survive in prison, you have to be wanted. You have to be needed. And I was like ‘well, what wanted, what needed?’ He said ‘if you’re doing a person’s legal work, and you have a person’s life in your hands, this is they case, you filling the paperwork for them to get back from prison, whether they win that case or not is not what they care about...as long you got this in your hands, you don’t have to worry about anybody stabbing you, cause that dude that got that life sentence, he going to make sure you ok.’”

Paul took this lesson seriously, and worked to develop his typing ability in order to take up prison clerical work. He soon found guards and administrators seeking his assistance as a typist. Paul taught himself how to negotiate many of the bureaucratic documents associated with his prison system, and was then more frequently utilized to complete
these documents. After being selected to fill this administrative role in the Laundry, however, Paul also began enjoying making extra money by bringing contraband into the institution. Paul would sneak drugs and other substances in to the prison for inmates that paid him a fee. He was repeatedly caught doing so, and sent to solitary or other forms of punishment. Paul would frequently work his way back into the laundry or the kitchen because staff knew he was good at paperwork, and therefore continually re-employed him.

In 1996, when he was 24, Paul encountered his brother in prison, causing him to think more about family, and decided he wanted to begin stabilizing his life. Paul began actively reading, working to figure out how he had come to be in his situation. He noted that his understanding came in fits and starts, but he sought out counseling, requested and moved into a “Therapeutic Community” wing of the prison system, and began stabilizing his behavior and considering what he wanted for himself when he left prison.

Paul was offered a chance at parole after 14 1/2 years. After his parole was granted, numerous delays occurred because the parole board had difficulty finding an appropriate location for Paul to live. Parole requires any potential residence undergo a home study, and some of Paul’s family were not passing their home studies. During this process of waiting for a home study, however, Paul would regularly be told to pack his bags, clean up his cell, and would be taken to the offices of the prison, as if he was leaving that day. He would then be told to go back to his cell. The first time this occurred Paul had given away his non-essential belongings and foodstuffs because he thought he was leaving, and therefore returned to his cell with nothing. Paul eventually became highly frustrated with this experience, and following one visit to the offices he
secured some alcohol and marijuana and got drunk and high to cope with his anger over the situation. Shortly afterward – by coincidence – he was required to take a drug test. He failed the test and his parole was removed. Paul felt justified in being frustrated, but also does not resent the parole board the decision to revoke his parole, noting

“I wouldn’t have gave me parole either… here it is this individual got parole, but you want to get drunk and you want to smoke reefer. I mean that’s some stupid shit.”

Eventually Paul was released when his prison term was up in 2007. He was 35 years old.

Paul returned to the small Midwestern city where his parents lived when he was released. He described being out of prison, in the public, as terrifying. Much had changed between 1990 and 2007, and he did not understand how to perform many day-to-day tasks. He noted, with some amusement, that he used to pretend his cell phone was not ringing while he was in public, because he did not know how to answer it.

Eventually his son realized he didn’t know how to use the phone – he never answered phone calls - and taught him how to use the cell phone. Paul’s anxiety related to the manner in which he would be perceived as well, at least initially, because during an interview

“I’d be soaking wet [with sweat due to anxiety]. Could you see that I was an ex-felon? If you found out I was a felon would you just take off running, screaming for your life?”

Paul secured a series of temporary jobs, mainly in light industrial settings. While working in temporary jobs, Paul lived with a variety of family members. In each case the stays with family members “played out” or fell apart, and he would have to move again.
Paul understood, noting that his family members were not eager to have a grown man sleeping on the couch in the middle of a busy household. He struggled to obtain his driver’s license, and temporarily relocated to another state where driver’s licenses were easier to obtain. Paul obtained a job at a car wash in this other state, but this job didn’t work out, and he moved back to the small midwestern city where his parents had stayed, and moved into his first homeless shelter.

Paul’s move to a homeless shelter, even given his previous circumstances, was very difficult. He noted

“I thought I had went back to prison. The smell, the testosterone, that male cockiness, that alpha male in the room, it was just there. That homeboy clique. I kind of gave up. I said hey man, I am an ex-felon, nobody’s ever going to give me a chance.”

Paul was rescued from his frustration from this situation by a romantic relationship. The woman he was dating helped him regain some motivation, as they were both working and she encouraged him, but he later discovered that she was smoking crack-cocaine. After one more attempt at a job in the small midwestern city in 2008, Paul gave up and moved to a larger midwestern city where his father had moved for work.

Shortly after arrival in this larger city, Paul secured a full-time job at a recycling center that he enjoyed, around 2008-2009. While at this job he had his own place; however, he lost this job in 2009, after a year, due to a conflict with his boss. Paul again had to move into a shelter. Paul immediately decided that this shelter also felt much too much like prison after another resident tried to start an argument with him. He left. Leaving caused him problems, however, as he forgot to register his move in the manner
required as a sex offender. Paul ended up on probation for a several year period. Once off probation he moved to a state in the western U.S. in 2013-2014 for several months. He did not articulate much about this event, nor how he survived between 2009-2014. Because he was in this western state, he did not report his location to authorities. When he returned to the Midwest in 2014 he was placed in the local county jail for six months. Paul realized he especially hated being back in this setting, and made a commitment to himself to not miss another registration.

When he was released from jail, Paul returned to a homeless shelter in the large Midwestern city in 2015. Eventually, while there, he was offered a stipend job in the kitchen of this shelter. This proved fortuitous. Paul learned the shelter would provide kitchen staff with increased stipends if they achieved certifications in different kitchen knowledge bases (e.g. on how to keep the kitchen sanitary). It occurred to him that if he was capable of achieving certifications, he might as well work towards even more marketable culinary skills. “You know, shit. This is a field that’s wide open, they shouldn’t even care if you’re a sex offender.” He decided to attend culinary program offered by the same organization that ran the homeless shelter. Paul graduated from this program. He soon secured a job as a sous chef at a large hotel kitchen, and enjoyed making money in this setting. However, the hotel fired him, ostensibly due to cooking errors. Paul noted that he took this at face value and always seeks to improve his cooking, but felt that something else may have been involved in his firing – such as him being a sex offender – as the cooking complaints were very minor.

Paul noted considerable frustration that he had finally felt that he had stumbled upon a career he could make work despite his criminal history. He returned to his stipend
job in the kitchen, working there for several months. Paul noted that he began to despair that he would even find stable work. His despair was high enough that he walked himself to a local mental health agency and spoke to a crisis counselor for several hours. During this period, Paul had been campaigning for a full-time position in the culinary department where his stipend position was located. Shortly after his visit to the crisis counselor – which helped him - he was told he had been awarded a full-time, full pay position as a chef and instructor.

**Paul’s Narrative.** Paul’s story emphasized the frequency in which he felt powerless, became extremely frustrated, then attempted to gain some kind of mastery of his circumstances, beginning with the removal from his mother’s home and eventual request of his grandparents that he be allowed to leave their home. He described his mother coming back into his life as a teenager as follows:

“...before she came back into my life, the world was like at an end. She came into my life with advice and parenting or whatever, and things did seem to get better sometimes...My life was still chaotic.”

His life was chaotic due to the abuse he experienced, and he attempted to stop the abuse by following his mom to the small Midwestern city. Paul was frequently in fights or struggling with relationships during his early years there. Eventually, he began seeking help and attempting to master himself and his ability to survive in prison. This trend continued outside of prison as well. Where Paul has experienced a repeated pattern of high effort – setback – frustration – redoubling his efforts.

Paul’s narrative appears to reflect his attempt at mastery. His narrative was the longest narrative analyzed. It was well organized, with numerous meaningful
digressions, suggesting Paul had considered the narrative – or heavily considered his life before. His narrative had a high density of the textsort known as a “PIN.” PIN stands for Particular Incident Narrative, or in other words, a detailed narrative regarding a single event. These narratives often appeared to be chosen to enrich the narrative, and generally they did. Paul often split his PINs, beginning a story, providing a lesson in the middle, the resuming the story. This use of PINs appears to be consistent with his life pattern, where he often experienced setback, which often contained a moral lesson, after which he tried hard to repair his mistake.

**Work in the Narrative.** Paul’s first lessons about work, as well as his first work experiences, were in prison. In prison he gained a fundamental understanding of survival, as in prison work kept him out of actual danger. Interestingly, Paul made his school-to-work transition in prison, and tied survival through work to his understanding of this transition:

“...10 years in [to his prison stint, or around 1999-2000], everybody is dead. Everybody who supported me is dead. As I sit here now, it’s kinda like what I was going through in high school, like you had to go to the next level, and I was worried about it. When I was in prison I had to go to the next level. I really wasn’t worried about it, I had to do it, it was survival.”

This understanding of survival followed Paul out of prison; he knew “you got to go out and get it for yourself.” Outside of prison, however – having already proved he could survive – relational needs, status needs, and the need for competence took much greater prominence.
When referring to what he found most fulfilling about work, Paul often referred to his family, and how he might benefit them. He described the joy of receiving his first real paycheck, and what he did with the money:

“...when I got that paycheck...I sent my son $300 for prom. When I got out of prison, that was the highlight of my first six months...that’s what a father do for his son.”

He did not spend the money on himself, and this has frequently been how he uses a proportion of the money he has earned since. He noted “I get [lumped] into this group that don’t want to do nothing...but for real I do! I want to take care of my kids. I want to buy my grandkids shit.”

Paul described the status work brought him, especially since he began working in kitchens, as extremely important to him. His status stands in contrast to his status as a felon. He noted that people at the kitchen where he works would give him “a five star rating [in reference to the quality of his work]. The feeling I get when I walk into that building...that makes me feel so good, because for 17 years I was trash, I was shit, I was nothing.”

Interestingly, however, he noted that this emphasis on status was the case in prison as well, in reference to his work positions:

“I had privilege. It gave me a sense of...uh...status, for lack of a better word. Respectability with the administration, admiration of some inmates, envy of the other ones.”

Status appeared to pull equal to survival, or at least gave making money a different meaning:
“...the knowledge I have, I’m getting paid for. So I put a little more umphh, a little more pride in my work...when people come up to me and say Paul you did a good job, that’s the best stroke [compliment] I can get in this world.

Paul clearly wanted to feel competent in what he did. Interestingly, his desire for competence was even present in prison, where initially he enjoyed getting away with sneaking contraband through the laundry. He learned how to do it from another inmate, who was a “slick motherfucker,” and after that doing it was a thrill because “I learned how to read the cards,” or understand which inmates he could help in which situations. Interestingly, when his grandparents and mother passed away and sneaking contraband became “just a hustle to me.” Paul no longer wished to do it; it wasn’t worth it.

Similarly, Paul described the recycling job he got around 2009 as “a challenge” and noted “I loved it.” The job was outside, and Paul enjoyed trying to find the perfect clothing so that he could brave the elements. He feels the same about cooking.

**Working While Homeless and the Future.** Paul is unique amongst participants in that he may be almost out of the shelter. He does not have to worry about alternative routes to managing psychological needs, because he has full-time work. He has struggled considerably to find his way into work following his exit from prison ten years ago, and has experienced many setbacks. At present, however, his future looks promising. Paul had secured a full-time chef job at the time of his interview, and was looking towards potentially applying for a small apartment in the near future.

**Conclusion.** Paul experienced early trauma, which likely contributed to eventual violence that led him to a 17-year-prison sentence at age 18 years. He learned a great deal about life and work while in prison, though the transition from prison to non-prison
life has been challenging. Paul has continually sought to work through difficult situations, though occasionally the frustration of doing so has caused him to break down, and to make poor decisions. As of this interview, he has full-time job that he is hopeful can be a long-term position.

Case Comparisons

Following the BNIM model, the cross analysis begins by addressing structure in the narratives. Then it moves on to address typical societal circumstances participants found themselves embedded in – the context in which they operate. The sections ends by considering how men addressed psychological needs through work across their lifespans, including during the time they were homeless.

Narrative Structural Patterns

Initial narratives, or first interviews, varied quite widely in length, presentation, and emphasis. This was an expected consequence of the method, given that the first interview is unstructured and without interruption (Wengraf, 2001). All participants elaborated on various subnarratives to a considerably greater degree in the 2nd interview, when more structure was added by the interviewer in the form of prompting from their initial narratives. A feature of narratives appeared to provide a helpful differentiation between them: the use of Particular Incident Narratives, or PINs. PINs are in depth narratives about single events embedded within the larger narrative. Observed through this feature, there appeared to be four characteristic initial narratives: narratives that were well-elaborated throughout, with many in depth stories across the life span; narratives that were well-elaborated only following serious setbacks, and that discussed events in the unravelling of men’s life in greater detail; narratives that featured limited elaboration,
even requiring inferences from more general statements to determine the life; and narratives that were chaotic in their use of in depth PINs.

Well-elaborated narratives were presented by David, Henry, and Paul. David and Paul included narratives of events throughout their lives, including difficult events, humorous events, and positive events. David, for example, related comedic narratives about his own decisions about work in life, his difficulties with responsibility, and his friends’ amusement and discomfort at his mother’s questions about differences between straight and gay couples. Paul related self-deprecating narratives about times when he felt he was immature, or about his experiences re-entering “outside” life after prison. Henry’s narrative was marginally less rich than the other two, but nevertheless included many in depth narratives across the course of his life. All three men appeared to be the least pessimistic among participants regarding their futures. Paul, despite a difficult childhood followed by a long stint in prison beginning at age 18 years, had recently obtained a full-time job as a chef after much effort to achieve this position. David was a university graduate, had frequently obtained jobs with little difficulty and believed he still could do so, and knew that some of the money left him by his parents would be available to him the day he turned 59 years old. Henry also reported he had obtained many jobs without undue difficulty, even following his imprisonment, and had left shelters more than once in the previous decade for well-remunerated manufacturing jobs. His reasons for being in the shelter had more to do with family conflicts than anything else. None of these men had reason to believe they would remain homeless for an extended period.

Three narratives – those of John, Edward, and James - were well-elaborated only after their lives became more difficult. All three told narratives that generally utilized a
brief narrative, or report, format - until they experienced serious setbacks, at which point they went into considerably greater depth regarding specific difficult events. These difficult events varied; John lost a job, then his marriage and life collapsed over time as his wife felt he had “given up;” Edward was adjudicated for a sex offense, though he felt that his being charged with this offense was unfair; James unequivocally admitted that he committed a sex offense, but spoke with frustration about the manner in which his life unraveled following his arrest. All three men had experienced long stretches during which their lives were stable in both relationships and in work. These long stretches of stability may have provided these men with hope that something else was possible in their lives other than homelessness. Both John and James had worked for over a decade in manufacturing, with good incomes, marriages, and children. Edward had been less successful in obtaining a full-time job, but had worked in several jobs for several years, had attended university, and had experienced other periods during which he found a stable equilibrium (albeit not ideal, one of these periods was during a period of quasi-stable drug addiction). Following giving up substance abuse, he had also achieved stability around playing poker.

Initial narratives presented by Jason, Harold, and Michael were short in length and light on detail, though all three expanded considerably to the prompts provided in the 2nd interview. All three avoided in depth subnarratives, and each appeared to understate even what seemed to be very difficult events. Each appeared to be less optimistic regarding what was possible in their lives. Jason, who has a sexual offense, had dropped innumerable resumes and applications – likely numbering in the hundreds - before finally achieving a job again, only to have a major injury force him to quit. This injury will also
limit his ability to do physical work in the future. Michael had endured very difficult early years coming out as a gay man, eventually having his family sever contact with him when they discovered his sexuality. He then became addicted to crack-cocaine, got clean, had a long-term partner die in 2011, before finally ending up being adjudicating for a sex offense in 2015 at age 49 years old, with the event in question reportedly at the encouragement of another partner. Harold lost his job, lost his marriage, struggled to find quality work, and saw few reasons to work when he no one to provide for, akin to the manner in which his father had provided for his mother. Eventually he was able to find a stable place to live with his mother, but when she passed away he found himself homeless. These men were not devoid of hope for future, but their narratives appeared to reflect low expectations regarding what opportunities coming years held.

Robert’s narrative was unique in being long and detailed, but challenging to understand. His narrative featured many PINs, but they were not organized chronologically, making it difficult to situate his subnarratives in the sequence of his life. In his initial narrative, Robert most frequently engaged in digressions regarding the meanings of current events, using the BNIM textsort known as “Argument.” Robert reported enduring much trauma in his life, accompanied and followed by many years of severe substance abuse and street homelessness. He had little stability until later in life. The chaos of his life may have been manifest in his narrative, and repeated trauma can disrupt the consistency of a perceived narrative. After so many difficult experiences, however, Robert appeared to have developed a store of wisdom about life. He clearly wished to relate this wisdom during his narrative.
Are narratives shaped by work that was available, or did work choices shape the narrative?

This question was intended to address concern over how the narrative was shaped around work and life events: namely, did participants attempt to relate what actually occurred at the time, their choices in context, or did they present historical decisions in a manner that differed from the manner in which they occurred? For example, were narratives shaped to present work choices in perhaps a more positive manner than was perceived to be the case at the time? Several factors may have impinged upon men’s ability to consider their past perceptions and experiences honestly. The interviewing situation itself may have been uncomfortable for participants, with: a formal interview, in essence a request that they review their lives; an interviewer who lived outside the shelter, who was known in the shelter from other activities, educated, and in nine of ten cases was racially different than they; and remuneration them for their time. They may have exaggerated events in their lives to make a better interview, or the interview may have had an added sense of pressure, as homelessness itself constitutes a failure to most of the participants. Most of the participants had also made what would be considered poor decisions at some point in their lives, both regarding work and regarding other issues.

Initially, the original circumstances and decisions informing work choices likely did shape the narratives. As participants’ work options became more circumscribed – due to criminal records, homelessness, and other difficulties – their narratives accurately reflected that they had fewer choices about work. All participants appeared to make an effort, however, to represent events in their lives as they happened at the time. There
rarely appeared to be any significant effort to engage in impression management, especially not where work choices were concerned. Others may have omitted problematic behaviors in other areas, such as their responsibility in family breakdowns or criminal activity.

Several narrative behaviors appear to reflect an attempt to relate events as they happened. Some participants simply stated that they were telling the truth, as if to contrast this with times when they had not done so. Paul, for example, repeatedly utilized the construction “I won’t tell you no lie” before relating difficult stories about himself. Most prominently, participants told narratives about failing. Some even preceded such stories announcing that what they were about to relate was embarrassing. Other participants appeared to struggle with how to view events during the interview, switching causal explanations mid-narrative, voicing frustration with a situation, with significant others, or with larger structural issues, then changing course and blaming themselves for what had happened. These switches were evident throughout Edward’s narratives, where he noted considerable bitterness at the criminal justice system when a prosecutor “said I was the biggest drug dealer on the Westside when I was a user…that’s what they do,” yet also described his own addiction as

“…super denial. I’m a drug addict, I know I’m an addict, I know why I’m there, pretty much used my way there, but I’m overlooking everything, I’m overlooking it. You know. Uh just trying to get to the next day, the next use, and the next situation.”

In another example, Harold noted considerable frustration with his wife and his marriage, noting that following getting clean his wife was still using marijuana,
“she didn’t help me get myself together. She didn’t help me stay off drugs, she didn’t help me, you know, cause like I say I was clean for like six months. You know, I did a little bit of it on my own, went to meetings, things like that when I was on probation. It seemed like the minute I got off probation, I just went, I went crazy. Started getting high again and just said “fuck it”. So you know, that was the wrong thing to do.”

Yet he had earlier described the source of their conflicts as himself:

“I’m gonna basically blame it all on me. Because I wasn’t the one who, I didn’t stand up as a man and do what I was supposed to do…and you know we got into a couple arguments and fights and she called the police…then the next time, you know, we got into an argument or fight and you know, called the police and I hit her and you know I left for a while, turned myself in because she pressed charges… I mean ain’t no reason for me to sit and lie to you and try to, you know, make it seem like it was her fault, I did it, it was my fault.”

There were numerous examples in the narratives of this type of back and forth between expressing frustration and bitterness versus taking responsibility for actions and decisions.

**Life Events and Circumstances**

BNIM features an analysis of participants’ interactions with historically situated structural circumstances. Participants described several experiences that were consistent across multiple participants and were often historically situated. This section will document these experiences and circumstances, beginning with a description of participants’ work histories, then moving into descriptions of: childhood experiences,
including racism; blue collar work commitments; substance abuse difficulties, including the power of crack-cocaine; and ending with the impact of criminal records.

Table 3.

Results Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Societal Circumstances Faced by Participants and Psychological Needs Met by Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Societal Circumstances Faced by Participants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increasingly Marginal Forms of Labor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difficult Childhood Events</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Death of Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Childhood Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Excessive Bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Experiences of Overt Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loss of Blue Collar Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement with the Criminal Justice System</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Difficulty Finding Work with a Felony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Impact of Post-Prison Supervision on Sustaining Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Substance Abuse</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological Needs Met Through Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Connection</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Family Expectations About the Role of Work as “Taking Care” of Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Perception that Partners Did Not Value Financial Contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Impact of Job Loss on Marriages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interconnections Between Work-Life Problems and Structural Phenomena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Social Connection at Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status/Identity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Value of Status Before Life Difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Removal of Negative Identity Through Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survival</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fundamental Sense of Survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dissatisfaction with Changes in Consumption Oriented Survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Effort</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time Structure</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Work Experiences and Histories.** Nine of ten participants in this study had multi-year periods of their lives during which they held stable, formal work positions, and at least eight of ten participants had worked informally, or had even volunteered.
The frequency with which participants worked runs directly counter to characteristic stereotypes of homeless men, who are considered likely to be in their circumstances due to their unwillingness to participate in the workforce. One participant, Paul, was sent to prison at age 18 years, and therefore did not experience formal work outside of prison before he was in his 30s. He did, however, work consistently inside of prison, and secured work soon after leaving prison. Another, Robert, worked at several nursing positions despite describing active substance abuse difficulties he believed to have begun during his high school years, before he began working.

Many of the participants appeared to have the quality of work available to them decline over time, and other forms of work became more prominent for participants after they experienced these declines. Multiple participants had performed some form of formal temporary or spot labor through agencies, including Henry, Robert, John, Michael, Harold, Edward, and Paul. At times these temporary positions would turn into more consistent work. John described moving between two cities to find temporary work that would be more consistent,

“I was in one city and it was real slow. And I was getting odd jobs here and there through the temp services. And so I would abscond [move, described as abscond because he was on parole] to another city, work 7 months, and be back that one week I had to go see my parole officer. Because I only had to see him at the time once every two months.”

Once John moved, he frequently found a “steady ticket,” which means he was able to work consistently at one site through a temporary labor agency. John moved between cities to find better temporary work.
Henry, Robert, Edward, and James had all performed under-the-table repair, maintenance, or home improvement work. Due to his time spent rehabbing homes when his life was more stable, Henry would frequently get informal arrangements such as the following during periods when he was less economically stable. He was able to parlay this work into something more stable:

“You know. I met a guy who was a lawyer. He’s buying houses, foreclosed houses, and rehabbing them and stuff like that. So I went to work for him, it was daily pay…[he] said ‘you can stay in this house as long as you fix it up.’ But it was a two-family house, and um…it had a tenant downstairs. He was handicapped, and I was helping him out, working on the house and everything, then working on other properties. I was, you know, coming back up doing things. My dad bought me a truck. My dad bought me a truck, and uh…I started, you know, being able to do other things on my own. I started planning. Life was getting good.”

James was on his way to perform a similarly informal task, linked to his past skills, following his interview. He did not expect this job to become permanent,

“After I’m done with you, I have to go and do a house inspection for a lady. She’s a friend of Mr. A, so he recommended me to do a walkthrough with her, and tell her what needs to be replaced in the house to bring it up to code, because that was my small business that I owned, home repair [before getting arrested]. I’m a contractor by trade. But umm…everybody asks why I don’t go back into it. One I don’t like it, I just did it to take care of my family. Umm…and two, with my background, it would be kind of hard. So...”
Informal work men performed was likely more extensive than was captured by this study, as participants often did not include such experiences in their narratives, or mentioned them only in passing. Outside of his interviews, Robert noted that he had been engaged in informal work for years by helping a painter paint houses “under the table.”

Participants also volunteered or worked at stipend jobs through the shelter, and this also did not always get mentioned within narratives. John consistently mentioned his volunteer experiences when he was between jobs, as he found volunteering a positive experience. While he was in his home city, in a shelter, between jobs, he

“did community volunteer work in my area. We helped…we finished the houses the ones that we could keep. We did that area, and worked on those crews, that was all volunteering with no pay involved with it…it came natural for me, so it was a pretty good work experience.”

He continued this work during his current stay in the shelter, though he was hopeful he’d have a new job soon,

“Basically now I volunteer out here on the desk, I got the Midnight to 6 in overflow, getting blankets and stuff. And I stay around here and try to stay active in the community, stay out of trouble.”

Edward was also observed “working the desk” in the shelter, but at no point mentioned doing so in his narratives, and he likely engaged in more of these types of activities that was apparent from his interviews. Henry began working for the shelter after the work coordinator observed him interviewing with this researcher.

Finally, participants engaged in activities that were difficult to define as work, but still appeared to be work. Edward may provide the most interesting example, as he
played poker to make spending money, though he was in also in supportive housing and therefore had less concern regarding bills:

“Yeah that’s how I was getting my money pretty much. Cause I had a food stamp card, I didn’t have to worry about food. They paid my rent, my electricity, my gas, I didn’t have to worry about nothing but my phone bill basically. So I won fine, if I lost I’d still come home and gorge, lay up, watch tv. I was good. But I found a way to meticulously win. And not run back with the money. I would save, and I’d wait a couple days before I’d go back. That was my luck cycle type of thing. Basically with luck…I’m a skill player, but there’s a lot of luck involved. And, cause I found out when you win and you keep going, you wind up losing it.”

David was the only participant that acknowledged recent criminal activity to make money, as he would occasionally engage in low level hustles if he saw an opportunity to make extra money and felt he was not harming anyone doing so. Both Henry and Robert dealt drugs many years previous to these interviews.

**Childhood Events.** Seven participants described strikingly difficult interpersonal experiences in childhood. What was striking was not that they had experienced traumatic events in the first place, but that these experiences were either especially severe, or there were multiple events. Henry provides an example. He witnessed his mother’s body after she died by suicide with a firearm. This experience was followed by experiencing overt racism while attempting to reconnect with his father, who he had not known was his father until well into his youth. These types of events, especially in series, would seem to augur difficulties with relationships in later life. Henry did indeed have difficulty with
relationships in a manner that shaped his both his work life and criminal history.

Edward, Robert, Michael and James had described difficulties with being bullied during their childhood, especially when moving to higher poverty urban schools, with Robert describing particularly nasty bullying based on the appearance of his skin. James remembered transferring to a more urban school in his home city:

“Umm... I stopped going to school, I stopped caring. There was a lot of gang activity when I got there. At George Washington [pseudonym], it was either join a gang, or be jumped every day. Since I didn’t join a gang, I got in a lot of trouble with fighting. Because I was a large kid...”

Michael and David had both developed identities as gay men in the 1980s, when American society was still much less tolerant of variations in sexual identity. Michael noted “as I was growing up and becoming more aware of myself, and couldn’t really be myself like I wanted to.” David described an easier time, nevertheless, he hinted at significant challenges.

Three participants described experiences of open, blatant racism when they were children or young adults. This is especially notable as no direct questions were asked about racism due to the open-ended nature of this study. Edward describe culture shock in moving to a predominately white high school as “culture shock,” noting “I experienced a lot of things that I never had to experience as far as racism.” Robert provided a particularly egregious example from when he was working as a young adult:

“I worked for this restaurant, and the guy... the people... and the dude that owned it was very nice. But it was his partner, and he hated blacks... [I was] the dishwasher, when you had to pile everything up, they coming through the door.
I’m there. It ends up…[another employee] open the door, hit me, grape juice spill on her blouse. She goes back and told them I poured it on her, I’m like whoa, where’d this come from. I can’t say nothing, but he came up, I was called a “nigger;” I was some of everything. Say ‘yes sir, nigger.’ This is what he was telling me.”

This racial and ethnic makeup is consistent with the shelter population, as well as statistics regarding homelessness in general. Eight of ten participants in this study described themselves as African-American, and a ninth was a person of color. The vast overrepresentation of African-Americans in homelessness indicates systemic effects of race on these men.

**Blue-Collar Work.** Participants described extensive participation in blue collar work. Four participants – including Henry, John, James, and Harold – worked extensively in manufacturing. Edward wanted to work in manufacturing, but never was able to secure the blue collar work he wished to secure. In describing the 1980s and 1990s, James noted

“…back then jobs were plentiful, so you could basically walk off one job and onto another. So I had some really awesome jobs, when growing up. I’ve been a truck driver over the road… I worked steel… I worked over the road at a company… which distributed heaters and air conditioners, industrial size, that had to be lifted with cranes.”

John became homeless when his marriage ended; however, he described the reason as “those homeless times were when jobs were real tight.” He eventually moved to a different city, as did Paul – in the hunt for work.
Criminal Offenses. All ten participants had criminal records. Four participants had been adjudicated for sexually oriented offenses. Job hunting becomes very difficult under these circumstances. Jason summed this difficulty up with his penchant for understatement: “Umm… took me over a year to get a job [after he was adjudicated for his offense]. Having a felony really puts a um…it’s really difficult to get a job with a felony.” At least four participants had drug oriented offenses; one participant had committed white collar crimes; three participants had theft offenses of various forms; and two participants had domestic violence oriented offenses. Several participants had various additional offenses resulting from various violations of the rules following their release: parole violations, absconding from parole, or failure to report on time as sexually oriented offenders. Participants described a high degree of frustration with these experiences after prison, as they were often making active effort to put their lives back together despite their involvement with the legal system. John described this frustration, as he had absconded from parole to find work,

“While I was in prison I stayed to myself, I got no tickets, I was a good prisoner. I got like nine months before I was going to be released. I got out and they put me on this ridiculous 24-month parole. For a long time I could not finish that because they wouldn’t let me come to [a bigger city] where I knew I could get work.”

John was eventually arrested for violating parole. Getting in trouble after prison was especially frustrating for participants with sex offenses. James noted,

“I’m a firm believer, that what I’m going through, and what countless other people are going through is what’s called double jeopardy right now. Because
we’ve served all of our time. And yet we have to come out on pre-release. We have to do that, and then we have to register and everything like that. You have murderers walking around on the street every day. They don’t have to register. They can live where they want to live. And the neighbors don’t know.”

James had been arrested and re-imprisoned for failing to register. He lost a full-time job and an apartment due to being arrested. These violations then show up in background checks and create an additional challenge in interviews, as some workplaces provisionally allow felonies older than a certain period (7-10 years), but become concerned when they see parole violations. Paul described this experience, as he had been arrested for failing to notify the authorities of his address, but had come to some sort of terms with the experience:

“I’m an ex-felon, I’m a sex offender, my case is not ten years old, the failure to verify address. My original charge is over 19 years, over 20 years old. You know? But umm…man, whenever I go to fill out an application, the first question trips me up, but then the 2nd question is worse than the first one. How old is the felony? I can’t go in there and say the felony was 20 years old, but I’m still repeating the action to keep me on paper. That’s kinda like telling the person well, I ain’t really stealing bubble gum, it’s just a Now and Later.”

When there is a parole violation or a failure to report as a sex offender, the interviewee must explain why he has a new “offense.”

**Substance Abuse.** Substance abuse was also a near universal impact in this study. Eight of ten participants described some level of difficulty with substance abuse. John, Henry, Harold, and Paul described getting into trouble at one time or another due to
“partying.” David, Michael, and Edward also described occasionally partying until encountering crack-cocaine. Those who used it described crack-cocaine – which surged in US cities in the 1980s – as considerably more powerful and addictive than previous drugs they had sampled in other contexts. Michael noted,

“Drinking, marijuana, that has never, ever, ever had…had me to where I would go out and buy it myself…the only reason I’d want to do it is to get drunk…a couple of times a year. But the crack thing, the crack thing, that was different. That shit hit me and it’s over with. It was over with. I was buying it for myself, I was…I didn’t care too much about a lot of things. At that point that it got me, I was working, I was just working to get crack. To get drugs or whatever.”

Michael had been repeatedly pressured by a romantic partner to try crack-cocaine. David described trying crack on a whim, then getting addicted,

“…[life] was boring. So [my friends and I] decided one time that we were going to see what crack was like. So, me and my friends decided to smoke it. Out of all of us that did it, I was the one that really progressed into it. You know, really just went all full force into it.”

Edward and Harold’s experiences were more about becoming addicted over time, often following a segue from other drugs. Both began using due to stress about relationships and work – Harold stated he was trying to “sugarcoat” his marriage – and there substance abuse steadily worsened. Edward’s difficulties intertwined with difficulty finding work and struggling to find consistent housing, to the point that it was difficult to differentiate the cart from the horse in the link between his substance abuse and working:
“Well… I had to move out of my parents’ house. At that time I was 32. So I had to move out of the house. And then I got a room in this house. The only thing I could find. Like a rooming house. And I was pretty much stuck there. And it was… it was uh drug infested. Dope dealers coming all times of the night slamming doors, couldn’t even sleep. It was terrible. So I was in that. I was… my addiction was progressing. And at some point while I was in that house it was pretty much every day, that’s what I was doing. And that was uh… that was uh… that was uh… let’s see, ’88 is when I started recreationally with the cocaine. Like was like ’89–’90, I think it was 1990 when I moved into that… uh… uh… that uh rooming house there. 1990 yeah that’s when it was. And… ’88 I started recreationally. Over two years it progressed. By the time 1990 when I moved in there, it was pretty much full blown. You know. And from 1990 to 2000, was hell. I was in active addiction, I didn’t see no way out.”

A consistent pattern in all of these experiences was the addictive power of crack-cocaine.

Meeting Needs Through Work Across the Lifespan

Participant’s narratives featured a wide variety of needs that had been met by their experiences with working. The needs considered by this study did not appear to take on equal value to participants, with some needs taking considerably greater prominence than others in the narratives. There were interrelationships between different needs, as well as interrelationships between needs and the events in men’s lives described above. These interrelationships proved to be quite important, as in some cases they determined the manner in which participants did or did not meet needs through work.
With an inability to find a place to live, it might be assumed that survival would be the most important need. Survival, however, appeared to take on different meanings in the circumstances of homelessness; namely, even if survival was important, it appeared less important. Some participants did discuss survival openly, but most of the participants only described it in passing or not at all. Two needs stood out as most prominent: social connection and status. The need for social connections at home was especially prominent as affecting these men’s lives, including their perspectives on work. Social connection at work was discussed far less frequently in regard to its impact at work (e.g. relationships with coworkers), though it was mentioned as an influence on why some participants did or did not like certain jobs. Status mattered both in regard to participants’ earlier experiences before they encountered setbacks, and, perhaps more frequently, in their later perceptions of themselves as workers who are homeless and former felons. Collective effort – or making a social contribution – was present, but less prominent in narratives than social connection or status. Others noted losing jobs due to conflicts with bosses. Finally, time structure was rarely mentioned, though it was mentioned. All of these needs will be discussed in turn: social connection, status, survival, collective effort, and time structure. Autonomy did not come up in any narrative.

Social Connection and Relationships. Relationships, especially those outside of work, appeared to exert a pervasive influence on participants’ lives and work choices. Participants represented the impact of relationships as more complex than is perhaps captured by the notion of social connection. Rather than being a need targeted at work – only a few participants mentioned concern with their relationships at work – participants
described a reciprocal connection between work and home, with numerous linkages to other circumstances as well. Participants’ overall situations – and their work choices - were influenced directly and indirectly by issues related to maintaining relationships. Four participants described relationships as having prominent influences on their work and lives: Henry, David, John, Harold, and Paul. To a lesser degree, social connection was also important to James, Edward, Jason, and Robert.

For participants who described relationships and social connection as important, expectations about what role work was supposed play in their families was nested in expectations arising from their memories of their parents. Participants compared themselves - in some cases implicitly, in some cases directly - to the success their parents had working. Seven of the ten participants described their parents, and especially their fathers, as hard working and successful. In Henry’s case “we were pretty well taken care of”; Edward’s father was “a hardworking gentleman who worked two jobs”; James’ father “worked a lot, had to take care of five sons, plus my mom. So he worked a lot”; John’s father was successful enough working in a factory to accrue rental properties, and used to take John to where he worked; and Harold’s father was “A1, he took care of home...when he passed away my mother was set.” David’s view of his parents’ success was presented somewhat more sardonically; however, he was clearly comparing himself to their successes. Even Paul, who had endured abuse at the hands of his step-grandmother, noted

“I’ll say this though, even with the bad points, uh at the age of 15 maybe, here’s the credit card. Go buy your school clothes. You know. It was that type of environment, where I did like the amenities that I had – you never had to worry
about the lights being cut off, you never had to worry about going hungry, you
never had to worry about clothes...you feel what I’m saying.”

The impact of this experience clearly was not immaterial - Paul later insisted that one of
his biggest goals in working is to be able to take care of family members.

Several participants noted that they had become frustrated when their
contributions from working were not honored by their significant others. In each case
these men felt they had earned enough money for their families, or their partners, to have
comfortable lives (though this said little about the quality of these relationships, which
was unknown). In at least three of the cases, participants’ frustration with their partners
appeared to lead to serious conflicts, and in at least two cases – Henry and Harold – to
adjudication for domestic violence offenses. Participants who felt relationships to be
important, however, continued to pursue these relationships, even when the relationships
were falling apart. Participants who described this pattern also noted that they coped
with their frustrations in these circumstances by working harder at the same strategy,
finding new jobs and again trying to provide partners with material assistance or comfort.
Both Henry and David made repeated efforts to care for partners financially, even after
painful setbacks in their relationships occurred. Harold had not been with his wife for
over a decade, though she had refused him a divorce. He continued to think about her,
and noted feeling somewhat defeated and lacking in motivation at present, because why
work if there is no one to take care of with the money you earn.

Other participants felt they lost relationships in part due to the impact losing
higher quality work had on them. John’s wife told him he had “given up” when he was
unable to secure full-time manufacturing or warehouse work following a layoff. John did
not explain this in greater detail, aside from noting that they had another child on the way, and he had started drinking, acknowledging that this drinking was likely hard on his ex-wife. It is unlikely that his wife asked him to leave simply because he lost a job that he was struggling to replace. One can imagine a more likely scenario that he may have become quite difficult to live with due to his emotional response to his underemployment, including his drinking. Similarly, James’ wife asked him to leave after he lost his first real job following prison. They were making an attempt to rebuild their marriage, though she had divorced him following his adjudication for a sexual offense. As with John, it seems unlikely that she asked him to leave simply because he lost a job. Both men, however, perceived their failures around work to have influenced their relationships with their families, potentially reinforcing the centrality of work as part of their contribution to relationships. Neither man was particularly resentful of his wife for choosing to ask him to leave.

To understand how these men perceived relationships as impacting job choices, it was necessary to look at the connection between larger circumstances and relationships in the narrative. For starters, several men’s lives appeared to have been impacted by the lesser availability of well-remunerated blue-collar work. Loss of such work - with its negative impact on participants’ self-perceptions, and the money they had to contribute to their relationships - appears to have been an influence on the deterioration of some participants’ relationships. In these situations, failure of their relationships likely only served to exacerbate participants’ perception that what mattered in their relationships was what they could provide financially. Participants directly related conflicts in either work-life balance or frustrations around money to the dissolution of relationships and even
adjudication for domestic violence. Several participants suggested that their substance abuse arose, at least in part, due the influence of their partners. They described either being pressured by partners to use, or using drugs and alcohol to mask the stress they experienced due to partners (typically after participants suggested this, they then clarified that any substance abuse was their own fault). Criminal convictions and substance abuse both led directly to job loss, and eventually, criminal records and substance dependence led to greater difficulty securing work in the long-term. For men who perceive their value as derived in part from what they could provide their families, this belief likely created a difficult cycle, in which options to secure well-remunerated work might be steadily limited, partners became more frustrated with them, inducing more stress at failing to provide like they were supposed to, then using drugs was to cope with the stress. Introducing a powerful drug like crack-cocaine into this cycle only made the cycle worse, as did the decreasing number of available, well-remunerated jobs.

Some men did describe direct decisions about work intended to improve work-life balances in their families, such as switching to a job that allowed them to be home more often to assist with children. As described in the paragraph above, however, participants’ work choices appear to have been more limited by factors related to relationships – especially over the long term – rather than work choices representing positive moves that increased work quality. Nevertheless, for participants who placed relationships as an important need, future decisions about work hope for their futures often included relationships. Both Henry and David talked in their interviews about finally needing to set boundaries and withdraw from these relationships to put their lives together. Henry noted,
“...it just seems like when something happens it’s dramatic [in family relationships], it’s just so dramatic. I just want to get away from that type of living...and find out who I am. Who I really am, you know, and be me. You know, kids are grown, they’re out, I’m still married to this woman, I want to get that resolved, and just be me. You know, find out why life really is all about, besides just work work work work work...and lose lose lose lose lose.”

David also noted a desire to be by himself, and described a recent encounter with his long-term partner who he separated from, and the beliefs about his life it fomented,

“I feel the need to just take care of him...when he came here the last time, he came here like two weeks ago, he looked so bad and everything. And I asked [the community director], because she said don’t leave out of here like you did the last time. I got a paycheck and just left because he didn’t have nowhere to stay. Then I ended up with no place to stay and ended up back here, you know. So...this is not a conducive thing. And I haven’t been out of a relationship...this will be 20...and I was in a relationship before that, and a relationship before that. I want to be by myself now for a while.”

John, who has a greater distance from his wife, also described a desire for a simpler life.

Other participants aspired to make more positive contributions to their relationships. Harold still believed he and his wife might patch up their differences, even after many years separated from one another,

“I guess once I get a job again, you know, put some money away, I’m going to um, try to get back with her I guess, you know, cause she don’t drink no
more... do some things for her, you know, because I’m still married to her and I still love her.”

He elsewhere explained that he was not sure what his purpose should be in working if he isn’t providing for someone. Paul also hoped to contribute to family, though his desires appeared to be a little more realistic. He noted a hope that he could help his kids pay bills when they needed him to, or to take old partners or friends out to dinner. Jason also longed for something simpler – his wife wants him home, but they do not have the money necessary to move into a rental property that will tolerate his sex offender status.

**Social Connection at Work.** Participants did mention relationships at work, though these relationships were not as significant as were family relationships. David noted that he would not work in jobs where he became bored, and a deciding factor in whether he experienced boredom was the presence of positive social relationships. Robert noted that many places he had worked as a nurse were mired in conflict when he met people who did not appear to care about others. Edward developed a friendship/helper relationship with a neighbor that lasted for many years, and from which he earned many benefits. Edward also made his spending money for several years in the late 2000s and early 2010s playing poker at a local casino. He repeatedly referred to the people he would play with in his narrative, meaning these social relationships were important to him.

**Status/Identity.** Status, or identity in the society, was an important need met through work for several participants, while to others it became important only after their lives unraveled. James, Henry, and Paul all mentioned status being important before they experienced their lives faced difficulties. John implied that status was important, as he
appeared to mostly be willing to work only in manufacturing settings, and would drive
great distances for even temporary manufacturing work. Henry related the importance of
feeling that he and his wife were moving up, and that their lives were legitimate (they
began their marriage as drug dealers). He described their early married life as,

“...everything was going good. New cars, new houses. I mean, you know, we
were buying houses and fixing ‘em up, you know, selling them. You know, what
you call “flipping” or whatever.”

Paul entered prison while still a teenager. For him, however, status was always important
and he managed to establish a sense of status even while in prison by being in demand
with prison staff. He became more troubled by his status as a homeless person, and the
association he believed society had with homeless people, though both statuses bothered
him. James noted that he had been highly involved in the community before his arrest,
and that he had sought higher profile jobs.

Several participants spoke about status in terms of wanting to remove a negative
identity and status that comes from having a criminal record, being homeless, or both.
They felt that society has definite expectations regarding the work ethics of homeless
men and felons. Participants who noted concerns about having a negative identity
included: James, Paul, Jason, Harold, and Edward. Paul articulately described his
experience of being included in a group called the homeless, with stereotyped
expectations regarding their work:

“I was on the radio station that’s online [to talk about homelessness]...they asked
a question about the preconception...preconceived notion that people that are
homeless don’t want to work. And I said, well, I can’t speak about them, and
caught myself getting choked up on the radio. Because here it is, I’m getting lumped back into to this group that don’t want to do nothing.”

Similar views were voiced by Harold and Jason, neither of whom wanted to distance themselves from the putative laziness of homeless people.

Edward described an even deeper bitterness regarding his sexual offense conviction, as well as losing much of his life following his arrest. He was not certain where he would go next for work, primarily concerning himself with seeking to reverse his adjudication for a sex offense through law firms that work to exonerate innocent people. James also noted “a lot of bitterness” regarding the impact of his sexual offense. He captured the sense of loss status – as well as the clear important of status before he found himself in legal trouble - when describing hunting for work and having workplaces search his name and find his sex offense:

“…as soon as somebody googles my name, as soon as any job googles my name, that pops up. It doesn’t pop up that I was a community activist, it doesn’t pop up that I was a community leader, it doesn’t pop up that I was an ordained deacon, it doesn’t pop up that I sang in the choir, it doesn’t pop up that I was my children’s softball coach, it doesn’t pop up that I was in the mentoring program where I mentored youth. None of that pops up.”

James described “trying to become a pillar of society again,” though he laughed as he said this. James has a wry sense humor about it being difficult to accomplish. Nevertheless, he emphasized that he was serious about it, and sought alternative forms of work to get there. As an example, he stopped this researcher in the hall of the shelter one day to show online groups he had started to facilitate other people’s involvement in
church. He was proud that one of these groups had grown considerably. Jason struggled with being perceived as a felon. Following his depression, he submitted many applications before finally securing work in a light manufacturing setting. Part of the heartbreak that arose from Jason damaging his Achilles Tendon in his job is that the job, “gave me a...a sense of worth that, you know, hey...I’m working here and you know...I’m a felon and I’m working here. I’m showing this company that I’m a good worker. And they even told me, they said ‘you’re outstanding.’”

**Survival.** One could have expected survival was a central need for men who participated in this study, who are existing on the margins of society; however, their narratives did not focus on survival as a need. Several men mentioned survival. Only Michael described it as the central reason he worked, even describing it as the only reason he worked, saying “work is necessary to survive.” He had selected a job in prison that allowed him to cover his expenses and stay away from other prisoners, even though he did not think he would enjoy the work. Michel was also the only participant who discussed in depth the connection between work and making enough money to support some form of consumption, though other participants hinted at working to provide for substance abuse.

Survival appears to have taken on two meanings. First, there is the very fundamental form of survival – having enough to eat and a safe place to sleep. Second, there was a kind of consumption oriented form of survival, making enough to buy things one wanted (i.e. drugs, a television) or to keep up with expectations of the social group of which one is a member. Participants mentioned both. Robert described eating out trash cans and sleeping in burnt out apartments at one point in his life, the fundamental sense
of survival. John had “gave up on myself because the temp jobs I knew were just money to get me by and I was just surviving.” John was sleeping rough during this period, including in an abandoned hotel. Michael’s decisions about jobs in prison was closer to the consumption form of survival, as was his decision to purchase a television.

In both forms of survival, homelessness changed participants’ perceptions of survival. They had to acclimate themselves to the fact that fundamental survival was possible even when they had almost no money, finding out they would not die from being broke - and most of them had very little money. In other words, they found out that they could generate, or be provided with, a basic form of survival (perhaps by a homeless shelter), and therefore fundamental survival was not a concern. In essence, survival became less worrisome, and concerns about money became more consumption oriented. A partial illustration of this changing perception is provided by participants’ responses – in conversation with this researcher - to the modest remuneration that they were provided for participating in this study. Several participants noted excitement at the opportunity to be remunerated, as $30 could pay a phone bill or keep a bank account open. Paul, who struggled after leaving prison, articulately captured the pattern more marginal forms of survival living could take, while homeless and living with family. This quote helps to illustrate why participants may not have highlighted survival as important – they did not find it particularly satisfying:

“...I learned about food stamps. Oh, ok, so I went and got my food stamps. I end up moving in with my uncle...went to Work Today [pseudonym for day labor agency], and for a good three to four months it was good. It was cool. I was go out, come back in, I got 35-40 dollars in my pocket. I could buy me a pack of
cigarettes, if I wanted a beer I could drink a beer, I could give my uncle ten dollars to hold for me and five dollars on the bills, you know. I could try to make my way, and that was cool. But uh…it played out in the end.”

Paul noted later that this type of life was not enough, did not feel independent, was not personally meaningful, and was not satisfying. Simply surviving – even with some money to spend on comforts was not meeting other needs through work, including maintaining relationships and a sense of self-worth vis-à-vis the larger society. Participants knew they were not making the money necessary to sustain societal expectations for consumption.

**Collective Effort.** Collective effort defines a sense that one is working either solo or as part of a team to have an impact on the society at large. Multiple participants noted or implied that they had felt, or had a need to feel they were having an impact on the larger community, though this need appeared to be either aspirational or secondary in most narratives where decision-making about work was concerned. Seven of ten participants described experiencing a sense of contribution to the larger society while working. Henry, Michael, John and Harold all mentioned making or contributing to making things at work that people in the larger society used, and the sense of pride this provided them. John repeatedly volunteered while homeless. He noted “you worked with different community projects that helped the community…that was a good experience for me.” Henry described the experience of manufacturing things that other people might use
“This last company I made – that’s why I keep looking at it – we made metal roofing. You see all the trimmings and stuff around there? How many buildings around here has parts on it that I made? You know it’s a sense of pride.”

Jason enjoyed helping people solve shopping problems when he worked in customer service. He provided a reminder that not all contributions to society need be spectacular,

“I had one lady she couldn’t…she couldn’t find a product that she wanted really…really wanted. And I had to call, I called like five or six Targets to get her this product and let her know, you know, it’s at this one. It was out in Strongsville, and I said hey they’ve got it out at Strongsville. I have it on hold for ya, and she was so appreciative.”

This desire to make a collective contribution through work did not appear to influence most of these men’s choices about jobs, nor their future expectations regarding work, with a couple of exceptions. Most interesting may have been Robert. Robert lived a difficult life, with a serious substance abuse problem dominating 20+ years of his life, and resulting in various forms of very difficult homelessness. Nevertheless, looking back on his life he saw that some of what he had experienced could now be a lesson to others, and now aspired to get back into some form of nursing to help others, and ideally to participate in assisting people who had survived disasters. John also consistently volunteered when he had been homeless, though he did not appear to link his enjoyment of doing so with his work choices in manufacturing. This volunteering may have been in part to structure his time, though he did not describe it as such.
Autonomy and Time Structure. Both autonomy and time structure are very prosaic considerations regarding work. This may have influenced their presence in interviews. If participants did mention time structure, they mentioned it in passing, or indirectly implied it. Some participant appeared to prefer autonomy, but none mentioned it directly. Jason mentioned preferring to work by himself, and also noted disgust at having observed bosses patronize workers. This was inferred, however; Jason never mentioned autonomy or any analogue for autonomy. John liked time structure, he noted the need to keep busy. Neither time structure or autonomy came up in the context of participants’ narratives.

Conclusion

Results indicate homeless participants in this study negotiated difficult circumstances – including traumatic childhoods, substance abuse problems, the loss of blue collar work, and criminal records - to still meet psychological needs through work. Though this study hypothesized that six needs would be important, participants described social connection and status/identity as far and away the most influential of these needs, with survival and collective effort (making a social contribution) have a lesser impact. Concerns about time structure barely registered, and autonomy not at all. Participants described social connection – especially intimate relationships outside of work – and status as having an influence on both work and life decisions. Both of these needs appeared to be broad in their impact, with both heavily intertwined with life circumstances. For example, loss of blue collar work might make a very important marital relationship difficult, leading eventually to substance abuse to manage. This in turn creates greater difficulties later in finding work, and a cycle begins.
Interrelationships like this between work related needs, personal circumstances, and work were characteristic of these narratives.
Chapter V

Summary

Homelessness is a state that arises when not enough money is available for a person to pay for housing. This inability to pay reflects the work that is available to a homeless person, which is not well-remunerated enough to finance housing. Research indicates this is often due to a combination of personal difficulties and larger structural forces (May, 2000; Williams, 2009). Despite this, homeless people continue to work, likely in part to meet psychological needs characteristically met through working. Homeless people offer an interesting case for considering how people meet needs – especially needs outside of survival – when options for work are circumscribed and work is not ideal. This study considered how these needs are met - not immediately - but across the life span. Utilizing a narrative method had the advantage of providing more context in which needs may have been met than would be the case with a cross-sectional, categorizing exploration using structured questions. The aim of this study was to
determine how men met needs through work, both when they had more options and when they experienced fewer options as societal factors limited their ability to find work.

**Narrative Structural Patterns**

Patterns in narratives were most clearly articulated by the degree to which participants elaborated their larger narratives (and points therein) using more detailed, experience near stories about specific events (PINs). Using PIN elaboration as a criterion, four potential forms of narrative were found: narrative well-elaborated with PINs throughout; narratives well-elaborated only following major life setbacks; narratives that were short and terse; and, finally, one narrative that was fairly chaotic. Greater level of detail appeared to reflect higher levels of hope about exiting homeless, and the men who told the most detailed stories appeared to also be most hopeful that they would be able to exit. This sense of hope has been appeared to be partially predicated on past experiences – a result present elsewhere. When homeless people have been successful in the past, they are more confident they can repeat the experience in the future (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010). Unemployment researchers also speak about the degree of agency people feel, and they have noted that this has been evident in people’s narratives about their lives (Ezzy, 2000; Fryer, 1992). The more elaborated the narrative, the more agentic that participant may have felt.

Research indicates some status/identity work may have been accomplished through narratives themselves. In general, any biographical narrative with homeless men, who are in painful positions, may feature some impression management (May, 2000). Snow and Anderson (1994) described several narrative strategies that homeless men might utilize to salvage their identities in difficult circumstances, including: distancing,
embracement, and fictive story-telling. Gowan (2010) likewise described three different discourses homeless men in her studies might revert to manage identity, contingent on the requirements of the moment: sin talk, system talk, and sick talk. In general narratives in this study did not appear to be utilizing a significant amount of impression management, as is evidenced by the many embarrassing aspects of participants’ narratives described openly, as well as negative self-referential evaluations. Occasionally participants would catch themselves blaming other people, then reverse course and bring the blame back themselves. This tendency may have reflected switching back and forth between Gowan’s (2010) “system talk” and “sick talk.” Gowan described sick talk as a byproduct of forms of psychotherapy (e.g. substance abuse treatment) that mandated recipients accept themselves as flawed and take responsibility for their actions. Many of the participants in this study had received such treatment, either for drug offenders or for felons, and therefore were conversant with sick talk ideas. In general, however, participants appeared to be making a genuine effort to take responsibility. The switching back and forth between discourses – whatever its origin – appeared to be a genuine attempt to make sense of an event.

Participants did appear to utilize the narrative tool of distancing for managing perceptions of self. Multiple participants attempted to separate themselves from other homeless people, especially in terms of their work ethic. This separating was not all narrative strategy, however, as claims appeared legitimate – when men engaged in this distancing, they referenced actual work that they had completed. Participants also mentioned that work choices had allowed them to be respected by people outside of
homelessness. This “distancing” may be an attempt to create distance from stereotypes as much as from other homeless people.

This distancing strategy in service of status and identity was present in research. Both Williams (2009) and Gowan (2010) found that homeless men in their studies – day laborers in Williams’ study, and recyclers in Gowan’s study – viewed their work as distinguishing them from other homeless people. That said – as in this study, their distancing was not just a story-telling strategy, and was not a confabulation. Participants in both studies who were concerned with status/identity also actually worked, frequently at hard physical labor, had chosen that work themselves in lieu of work tasks of lesser legality, and drew identity from this choice. This drawing of identity was the case even if working temporary labor wasn’t as good as full-time labor. Several participants in this study mentioned they could engage in illegal activity and make “easier” money, but they chose not to do so.

**Life Circumstances**

Given the intersection of forces that result in the poverty that causes homelessness, homelessness might be viewed as a marker of marginality, a consequence of several larger forces, rather than its’ own unique social group (Cronley, 2010). Both the structural and personal vulnerabilities that result in homelessness concomitantly make it difficult to find work, and these difficulties will not disappear when a person is eventually housed. Individuals who had been homeless will likely still struggle to find work, because their homelessness was an indicator of larger difficulties. Research also indicates that the state of homelessness itself often has an impact on finding jobs, because of difficulties with having a stable address, maintaining hygiene, or other factors (e.g.
Williams, 2009). However, for the participants in this study, homelessness itself did not appear to be the central barrier to working. Instead four major phenomena were described in narratives as impacting the ability to find work: difficult childhoods, loss of blue collar work, substance abuse difficulties, and criminal records.

Many of the participants experienced difficult, even traumatic childhoods. Such childhoods have an indirect impact on work. Multiple participants had histories of working in blue collar sites, such as factories. Decreases in such work, and more importantly in the amount of remuneration such work provides, had clear impacts participants in the study. Finally, at least eight of ten participants had difficulty with some form of substance abuse, including four with crack-cocaine addictions. Substance abuse problems are corrosive to working for obvious reasons: they decrease the availability of a worker to work, and the quality of work for the person abusing substances decrease (Williams, 2009). All ten participants had criminal records, which negatively impacts their ability to find work across the course of their lives. The negative impact is especially the case since background checks have become pervasive for almost all jobs, and a felony makes finding a job considerably more challenging (Harris & Keller, 2005; Pager, 2007). This effect is compounded for men who have a sexual offense on their records, as such offenses are highly stigmatized (Pager, 2007). Criminal charges also resulted in many men being involved with the justice system after prison, which is a challenging proposition due to various parole requirements contingent on the offense. Many participants were sent back to jail from stable life positions when they did not follow through on a requirement of their parole.
Multiple studies have found a correlation between difficult childhoods, especially difficult childhoods situated in families who are already marginalized or poor (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Lakenau et al., 2005; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). It was not clear in the current study what financial level participants came from, though several participants described having parents that were ‘hard working.’ Research indicates difficult early years predicted eventual severing of contact with family, resulting in turn in a lack of long-term social support that family typically provides protection for people during difficult periods (Snow & Anderson, 1993; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). Other research implied that the influence of problematic childhoods was broader, working through dynamics such as the ability to function in adult relationships, including romantic relationships (Wagner, 1993). This latter view appears to better reflect the complex impacts of difficult childhoods on display in participants’ narratives, though one participant, Michael, had his family sever contact with him after discovering he was gay.

The impact of the loss of blue collar work, noted in this study, has been consistently described across research (Gowan, 2002; Gowan, 2010; Shier, Jones, and Graham, 2012; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993; Williams, 2009). Some participants in this study appeared to be unwilling to move into other professions, instead looking to keep working in blue collar settings, as temporary workers or at considerably reduced rates of pay. This was consistent with findings from several qualitative studies in which workers sought to maintain a sense of pride in professions requiring competence, technical skills, and physical work (Gowan, 2010; Kerr and Dole, 2005; Williams, 2009). Other research on this topic reported, however, that viewing homeless
men’s decision to pursue blue collar work as less a choice than a consequence of a lack of job skills (Snow & Anderson, 1993). The pattern of decisions participants in this study described seemed more supportive of the former reason for deciding to work blue collar than the latter – participants appeared not to want to work in domains that were not oriented around utilizing their skills.

Criminal records have a major impact on the ability to work in the United States, and findings regarding the impact they had on participants in the current study were no different. Both in this study and in the research, criminal records make a person considerably more likely to be rejected from a job, as background checks have become pervasive and modern human resources departments will reject men with felonies (Harris and Keller, 2005; Pager, 2007). Multiple participants in this study described experiences of rejection due to their criminal backgrounds. Perhaps even more important for participants in this study, once they became involved with the criminal justice system, they struggled to extricate themselves from it, and many were sent back to jail for various minor parole violations.

Substance abuse was a difficulty for at least six of ten participants in this study. The pervasive presence of substance abuse was a characteristic finding of many studies (e.g. Gowan, 2010; Williams, 2009). Substance abuse has a powerful influence on people’s lives. This certainly was the case in participants’ narratives, but they also represented substance abuse as a factor in their lives, not an all-encompassing determinant. Research supports this finding, for two reasons. First, research reports that substance abuse often begins or worsens following the stressors leading to homelessness (Gowan, 2010; Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008). Second, researchers point out that only a
small proportion of substance abusers become homeless, indicating that other factors are
intervening in people’s lives if they become homeless, and that the impact of substance
abuse is an indirect one (Gowan, 2010; Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008; Snow &
Anderson, 1993; Vangeest & Johnson, 2002)

Despite difficulties that structural factors in their lives presented, participants in
this study all had diverse work histories, both before and after the events that experienced
led (eventually) to homelessness. Many had extended periods during which they had
worked in formal, legal work, including in factories, warehouses, nursing homes, and
other settings. Participants having a history of well-remunerated, mostly low skilled
blue-collar work before becoming homeless was described in several studies (Gowan,
2002; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Williams, 2009). Following homelessness, participants
pieceed together varying forms of work, including formal day labor (i.e. through an
agency); informal, under-the-table labor; institutional labor (i.e. working for the shelter);
more unusual informal work, such as providing support for handicapped neighbors; and
even gambling. This finding is very much consistent with the research literature (e.g.
Gaetz and O’Grady; Lei, 2013; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Participants in this study,
however, did not represent the full diversity of work related tasks observed in homeless
research (Balkin, 1992). Participants did not, for example, engage in panhandling,
recycling, or street sales (Balkin, 1992). These activities likely do take place in the city
under research; however, participants in the study were drawn from a community in the
shelter that had a higher number of stable homeless people who shelter staff believed
would exit homelessness.

Meeting Psychological Needs Through Work

212
Participants described several needs potentially met through work, or, perhaps more accurately, that exerted broad influence on work. The dominant needs brought up in narratives were social connection and status/identity. Survival came up several times as well, as did collective effort. Time structure and autonomy were rarely, if ever, mentioned in the narratives, though this may have reflected the research method as much as it does the actual centrality of these needs.

**Survival**

Survival essentially has two meanings, a fundamental one – to survive – and a metaphorical one, to continue functioning at some level of consumption (Bluestein, 2008). Homelessness, including the homelessness described by men in this study, is a state in which both forms of survival can be important. Some research indicates hunger is common amongst the homeless, and one of the tasks of the day for a homeless person work is obtain enough to eat (Dacher & Tarasuk, 2002; Lee & Grief, 2008). This is especially the case for younger homeless people, who often have less experience negotiating local community support systems to get their needs met (Dacher & Tarasuk, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1993). Two participants in this study mentioned this literal form of survival when they were still on the streets, and in both cases it was early in their homeless experience.

Participants more frequently mentioned survival as a form of consumption, likely because they had already determined how to get fundamental needs met through available community resources (such as the shelter in which they were interviewed). Participants remained quite poor, however. Some participants were excited to be remunerated with $30 as part of this study because it would allow them to pay bills. This would seem
consistent with research that points to homeless people making fairly small sums of money, and often targeting for certain quantities of money to accomplish discrete tasks (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; O’Flaherty, 1996; Schoeni & Koegel, 1998). Nevertheless, despite being poor, survival as a need was mentioned infrequently. One reason participants mentioned survival less frequently in their narratives is suggested by research. After a time homeless people stop worrying about survival because they find they could survive in the fundamental sense, even in highly marginal circumstances (Snow & Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993; Williams, 2009). Researchers describe an acclimatization process to surviving on the margins during which people who are homeless learn they can survive without formal, paid work (Gowan, 2010; Snow and Anderson, 1993). Many of the participants in the current study had experienced homelessness for long enough, whether in a shelter or in other circumstances, to “recalibrate their hopes, desires, and aspirations to the new-found objective life choices inscribed in their hyper-marginal social position” (Williams, 2009). Participants likely did lose their desire to return to previous levels of consumption, and their bare bones form of consumption was not satisfying; however, the recalibration described in research means that such consumption cannot be central any longer. This recalibration also likely provides a reason why survival was not more frequently mentioned in narratives.

Despite this hyper-marginal social position, the participants in this study would not take just any job. Often they want a job that makes sense of them, or a reason to work that makes sense to them. This desire to find work that fits a person – even when that person needs money - has been noted by other researchers (e.g. Gowan, 2010; Wagner, 1993), but this is a positive finding for vocational psychology as it implies that
even people in extremely marginal circumstances still want to talk about what work means.

Social Connection

Social connection was the central influence on work described by several participants in narratives. In Jahoda’s (1982, 1988) theory, social connection is a need met largely (but not exclusively) at work. In the 2006 formulation of Blustein’s Psychology of Working theory, social connection captures both social interaction at work and the intertwining influence work has on relationships at home. Relationships at work were mentioned in the narratives of two participants, appearing actively important in one of the two cases, but otherwise appeared to be an infrequent concern. Such direct relationships were mentioned infrequently in homeless research, though it did come up in relation to homeless tasks that take place “in the street,” such as recycling and panhandling, where homeless people desire more positive interactions with the public (Gowan, 2010; Lakenau, 1999a; Lakenau, 1999b). None of the participants in this study admitted to engaging in such activities at present, as they may be in a stable enough position in the shelter for street work to be irrelevant. Social connection as described in narratives associated with this study was much more related to family/romantic relationships and the connections they had with work. This concern with preserving important romantic relationships had a broad ranging impact on work choices, in a complex, indirect manner.

Social connection appeared to be high linked to work in the minds of male participants in relation to the degree they felt they were taking care of significant others, and how well respected they felt for having done so. Most of the participants compared
themselves to their parents, and especially to the manner in which their parents had worked hard and had made certain their families were taken care of financially. This became important in their own relationships, and participants’ narratives indicated considerable frustration with significant others when it appeared significant others were not appreciating the work they were doing. Conversely, significant others became frustrated with participants when they were not bringing in a paycheck in a manner that was deemed sufficient. Disintegrating relationships and marriages in the pasts of homeless people, and the impact of these disintegrations, have been observed in several qualitative studies, however, these phenomena were generally noted in passing before moving on to other issues (Gowan, 2002; May, 2000; Williams, 2009). Other studies noted added some form of family disintegration – typically following some sort of setback, such as a job loss – as one of the typical biographies or pathways into homelessness, though they did not go into depth, either because their participants didn’t or this was not part of analyses (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2011; Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 2006).

The impacts relationships have on work when combined with structural phenomena – poor childhoods, loss of blue collar work, etc. – were striking as described by men in this study. This finding was not original - research also points to these types of interrelationships, with rough childhoods and erosion of well-remunerated blue-collar work resulted in family collapse, and often personal collapse into substance abuse (e.g. Wagner, 1993; Williams; 2009) - but it has not been frequently observed, and is meaningful in illustrating the complex influence relationships and work can have on one another through larger structural phenomena. Patterns in participants’ lives that could
evolve from the interaction of these pieces are probably innumerable. An example: two participants in this study committed domestic violence when they felt disrespected by significant others even though they were making good salaries. With criminal convictions it was harder to find work, and they began to use substances to cope, resulting in further relationship problems, and so on. Another example, at least three participants described themselves as becoming involved in substance abuse in part due to the influence or pressure from partners. The relationships would lead to substance abuse, then to problems working, then failing relationships, then domestic violence. These sorts of patterns appeared to be strewn throughout participants’ narratives, with relationships and work always there as major factors.

Participants also stuck with partners - even following problematic events with difficult partners that may have profoundly disrupted their work and lives, men in this study kept going back and trying again. In several instances, for example, partners or family members had a negative influence on work, sometimes directly impacting the ability to function at work, including stealing work items and using family finances to facilitate substance abuse. Events like these sometimes led to domestic violence and prison terms, but by in large participants kept returning to these relationships. This type of relational difficult is a unique finding of this study. Other researchers have identified that problematic childhoods might result in problematic adult relationships (e.g. Wagner, 1993). A second contribution is that when relationships ended, participants felt less meaning in their work, because they no longer had someone to provide for. This suggests an opening for counselors – these men may benefit from developing better relationships and new reasons for working.
Social Status/Identity. Social status/identity was the 2nd major need addressed through work. It influenced the desire for certain types of work, in two ways. First, several participants had a native desire for greater social status, even before they ever experienced homelessness, and this desire continued after homelessness. Participants in this study interested in status characteristically pursued mobility and status both in jobs they selected, and desired their jobs to reflect status in the community.

Negative status as a homeless person, as a felon, or both as was the case for all ten participants in this study only compounded the need to improve one’s status. Participants, especially sexual offenders, sought to find work, or perhaps ways of talking about work, that would reverse a negative identity. Participants spoke especially of challenging the stereotyped expectation that the homeless are unwilling to work. That homeless people in general wish to reverse society’s perceptions of them as unwilling to work was one of the more robust findings in research on homelessness (Gowan, 2010; Lakenau, 1999b; Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993; Williams, 2009). Participants in the current study felt the negative expectations placed on the homeless, and especially on homeless felons, quite painfully. At least three participants described their work after becoming homeless as proof that they did not meet society’s stereotype of homeless peoples’ poor work ethic.

Collective Effort. Collective Effort was the final area some participants referred to in describing their work. Typically, social connection came up in when describing a job in which participants knew they were providing a service or making something, and ranged from helping a customer in retail to manufacturing something that would be used by other people. Participants referenced collective effort when describing helping other
people informally, volunteering, or working in institutional labor, such as in the shelter. Some researchers imply that homeless men who are talking about making a contribution to society are engaging in a form of self-concept protection, arguing directly against a society that believes they contribute nothing (Gowan, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993). The point is plausible; researchers point out that any form of “salvaging the self” is a kind of consolation prize, as homeless people would likely accept the opportunity to work in any job that will take them from homelessness over a less well-paid job that makes a social contribution (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 198; Gowan, 2010). Nevertheless, even in marginal circumstances, homeless people want to contribute. Robert constitutes an interesting example here. If any participant could stand some help salvaging the self, it is Robert. He spent two decades as a drug addict, and considerable stretches of that time was spent in austere and extremely marginal street homelessness. Nevertheless, Robert spoke hoping that he could spend the rest of his life making social contributions. So does this constitute an identity management strategy, or an ingenuous work impulse? Viewed cross-sectionally, it appears to be an identity management strategy. Viewed across the course of Robert’s life, however, it fits with his early interest in helping others given his own medical difficulties (severe skin problems) and the consequences they had for him. In his case, collective effort decisions certainly appeared an ingenuous impulse to meet a need through work (or through fantasizing about possible work), though this does preclude identity benefits coming from it as well.

**Implications for Theory**

Most broadly, this study confirmed other research in noting that work is relevant when working with the homeless population, despite their access to work options being...
highly circumscribed, and despite a prevailing belief that homelessness is best explained by significant personal difficulties like drug addiction (Gowan, 2010; Shaheen and Rio, 2007; Wagner, 1993). Also, considering work decision-making in terms of psychological needs was productive, and warrants further exploration with this population.

Two theories informed the theoretical portion of this study, the Latent and Manifest Benefits theory developed by Marie Jahoda (1982, 1988), and the Psychology of Working developed by David Blustein (2006). Jahoda’s theory (1982, 1988) was developed to address the consequences of unemployment, and the needs she described were what was lost when a person lost access to employment. Homeless people often have lost access to employment, or at least are underemployed, and research reports that underemployment has similar deleterious effects as unemployment (Dooley, 2003; Dooley & Prause, 2003; Friedland & Price, 2003). The loss of Jahoda’s needs met by work have been demonstrated to result in these deleterious effects in underemployment (Paul, Geither, & Moser, 2009). Four the five needs that Jahoda (1981, 1988) proposed were included here: time structure, social connection, social status, and collective effort. All four of these came up in participants’ narratives, though only social status appeared strongly linked to decision-making. Jahoda’s version of social connection – specifically that it occurs at work - was mentioned as impactful for a couple of participants on decision-making. Blustein’s (2006) definition of social connection was broader. Social connection at work was not nearly as prominent in narratives as was social connection away from work, or relationships outside of work. Collective effort played a role in some men’s thoughts about work, but did not appear to be a strong influence on decision-making. Time structure made very few appearances in narratives. This may be partially
due to nature of these needs. Jahoda (1981, p. 189) viewed her needs as prosaic, and in reference to meeting these needs through working she noted “the reality to which we are bound may have little, if any, pleasurable content… even unpleasant ties to reality are preferable to their absence.” That her needs were not frequently present in narratives does not mean they are not important needs participants met through work. Instead, more prosaic needs, while important, may not have informed participants’ conscious decision-making about work, what they remembered as most prominent in their decision-making in the past, or both.

The Psychology of Working postulates three main needs met by work: survival and power, social connection, and self-determination (in this study self-determination was simplified to autonomy; Blustein, 2006). Evidence was provided for both the social connection and survival/power needs – with survival/power in this study split into survival and social status/identity to meld with Jahoda’s concepts more smoothly – but not for autonomy. Autonomy, and especially self-determination that is part of the Psychology of Working, may be too nuanced and technical a concept to show up in narrative interviews. The broader definition of social connection was certainly relevant to participants, especially in the form of relationships outside of work influencing work decisions, as well as influencing circumstances which in turn influenced work decisions. Evidence was also provided for the need to have a status and establish an identity vis-à-vis others in the society, which figured prominently in the thinking and narratives of several participants. Survival – in both its’ literal and metaphorical sense – was at least partially supported by results from the study.
Psychological needs from both theories may benefit from modification. The absence of Jahoda’s more prosaic needs in narratives, and of Blustein’s (2006) more technical self-determination concept (here defined as autonomy), suggest that a distinction between needs that inform the conscious decision-making of participants in research or counseling may need to be distinguished from those understood by researchers and therapists. Then either researchers or therapist could continue to consider these needs – like self-determination – without explaining the technical aspects of the need to participants, or could provide psycho-education regarding needs may prove valuable in expanding people’s understanding of why they work. It may be interesting to research and delineate typical folk beliefs in American culture about needs work meets (such as is contained in a saying like “work to live, don’t live to work”). Also, while results support the needs postulated by the Psychology of Working, these needs had to be parsed into smaller needs (e.g. the need for social connection at work versus relationships at home) to facilitate the description of their presence in narratives. This suggests the needs developed by Blustein (2006) may be too broad, and may in turn require expansion into a greater number of needs.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The first recommendation for research that follows from this study would be to focus on a broader population of homeless individuals, including women and people who are homeless in the street. The men that participated in this study came from a specific community in a larger homeless shelter, and had been partially selected into this community with an expectation that they were capable of moving out of homelessness. Though some of them lacked hope regarding their future, they were nevertheless
expected to eventually leave homelessness. Participants’ relative stability meant that they
did not utilize some forms of work described by the research on homeless workers,
possibly because they now saw it as too risky, or as beneath their pride. Including
homeless people who worked in scavenging, street sales, panhandling, and low-level
fraud or street grifts (e.g. shell game) would add to the generalizability of the findings
above.

Given that, by definition, homeless people in a shelter have not been successful in
exiting homelessness yet, a cross-sectional qualitative study investigating homeless
people, with felonies, who had been successful in exiting homelessness would be
valuable. It could investigate the qualities of people who were able to exit homelessness,
and – if this occurred – the process by which they were able to move into the formal
workplace again. The goal would be to develop new strategies for working with
individuals who are homeless in career counseling contexts. The challenge in such a
study would be finding the participants, but this would likely be possible with the
assistance of shelter staff and homeless people themselves.

Results pointed to a potential intervention strategy, and an intervention study may
be of value. Several men who participated in this study noted that they enjoyed
describing the narrative of their working life, and even felt more optimistic regarding
looking for work following doing so. That simply being allowed to relate their work and
life history would have this impact suggests that it might be valuable as an intervention.
The intervention would feature at its center the construction and reconstruction of a life
narrative around work. Contributions from the counselor would follow recommendations
from the Psychology of Working (Blustein, 2006), including: expanding the definition of
work more broadly, to cover work participants probably didn’t realize they had been doing; psychoeducation regarding needs typically met by work and an attempt to apply these to the participants’ narrative, as well as their aspirations; and work on developing a critical consciousness regarding marginalization and oppression(s). Pre-post outcomes could evaluate the impact of the intervention, assessing (for example): increased effort by a participant to fit work to his or her needs better, measured observationally; increased work volition measured quantitatively pre-post; and life satisfaction measured pre-post.

Biographical research is also likely to be valuable to vocational psychology in a broad sense, potentially to test useful intervention ideas. This researcher did not appreciate the degree of context that can be provided by such research, and the degree to which this contrasts with categorizing forms of qualitative research. Other methods – quantitative and other qualitative methods – obviously have long established their value. Biographical research methods have the potential to contribute new ideas to vocational psychology, especially regarding the manner in which people have made decisions across time, and the manner in which they situate the meaning of their decisions in the context of their lives.

Implications for Practice

A central concern in any practice recommendations for a population impacted by systemic forces is around the value of individual interventions. Participants in this study all had criminal records, and in all cases these had detrimental impacts on their ability to secure work. Results suggest systemic changes would likely be most impactful in helping participants, and likely homeless populations in general, and such changes should likely be a target of advocacy. For participants in this study, laws or policies that remove
some of the stigma that come from felony convictions would likely have a much greater impact than any individual intervention. Policies that provide housing to homeless people before they have secured a source of income – so called “Housing First” policies – may have a significant impact on getting people out of homelessness, where they can make steps towards more secure forms of work (Shaheen & Rio, 2007). Systemic difficulties impacting homeless people are not likely to remediate quickly, and interventions focused on work can improve quality of life in the meantime (Shaheen & Rio, 2007).

This study provides several implications for individual practice with homeless populations, and potentially other underprivileged populations. First, however, the services provided by the shelter already should be mentioned. Shelter staff are familiar with an array of community resources available to residents, including resources to facilitate housing and substance abuse treatment, amongst others, and are often skilled case managers in working with residents. Shelter management and staff are aware of the benefits that part-time and volunteer work can provide. Therefore many volunteer and stipend opportunities are provided in the shelter itself – some of these were mentioned by participants above – and shelter staff seek part and full time work opportunities to which they can refer workers with the type of criminal records frequently present in the shelter. Staff in the community from where participants in this study were drawn were frequently observed working with residents to assist them in making better choices about relationships, as well as life choices related to relationships. These staff also worked with residents to improve social and interpersonal deficits likely to detrimentally impact the
employability of these residents. It can be safely assumed other shelters frequently provide similar services.

Even with positive services provided by the shelter, counselors and psychologists still can contribute to homeless people’s understanding of work. Narratives suggested homeless men have learned to survive, even in incredibly marginal circumstances. Participants described situations in which they learned more effectively to utilize “the system” in order to meet their needs. Doing so was not satisfying, but it was sufficient. Findings from this study and research point to homeless people being “bricoleurs,” stringing together a combination of work and resources in order to meet their needs. To counsel homeless people, counselors would benefit from having the fullest possible knowledge of homeless people’s world of options. Anyone who does career counseling (or personal psychotherapy) with homeless people is encouraged to be familiar with the systems, both local and national, as well as the landscape of local opportunities, both formal and informal. Such familiarity would be beneficial less because men are being provided with additional case management in securing assistance, rather it would be beneficial because the counselor needs to understand these options to understand homeless peoples’ decision-making processes.

When working with a population as impacted by structural phenomena as are homeless people, it can be difficult to determine where to begin, and career counseling can feel inadequate to the task. Findings in this study, however, indicate relationships were central influences on the work lives of participants. The quality and influence of relationships in people’s lives should be familiar territory for psychologists, and results here point to the need to investigate the relationships in homeless people’s lives in greater
depth. Results from this research indicate doing so may facilitate understanding of a major influence on vocational decision-making, either as difficulty in the form of a difficult relationship, a goal in terms of objectives regarding family relationships, or both. Several questions could initiate entry into this area of discussion: who supports you the most at present? Who causes you the most stress? Have your relationships influenced your homelessness at all. And so on. Several of the participants in this study would have benefited from a stronger understanding of their expectations for relationships and the manner with which they may connect to their past, the development of more effective relationships skills, and more consideration of the manner in which they wanted their work to interact with their relationships and vice-versa.

Results point to men not necessarily realizing that some of the alternative activities they have engaged in could be considered work. Homeless workers would benefit from explicit instruction in the types of needs typically met by work, then from discussion of strategies for meeting these needs. Both would be beneficial, as results suggests participants were not able to easily or consciously describe the impact that being homeless had on their perceptions of work, aside from several participants wishing to escape the stigma that says homeless people are lazy and do not work. Participants also appeared to pursue work similar to work they had performed before receiving their felony, or before their family degenerated, or before encountering whatever roadblock brought them into homelessness. Homeless people would benefit from being able to articulate the needs they want to meet, as well as alternative forms of work that could fulfill these needs even if well-remunerated formal work were not accessible. Doing so would make the decision-making processes an object of awareness, and allow workers to
practice a greater degree of conscious control over their decision-making. This would also likely open options regarding work that workers had not previously considered work.

Finally, homeless people are marginalized and often carry considerable stigma as homeless workers, felons, and people who may have sex offense on their records. A central finding of this study is that participants wanted very much to reverse the stigma they felt as homeless felons through working, and through being accepted by a workplace. Helping people address societal generalizations that they have been subjected to should also be familiar territory for psychologists. Validation of stressors and development of critical consciousness in homeless clients are both called for, as may be the development of counter-arguments to societal perceptions. Anyone who works with homeless clients also needs to be aware of their own biases, both in regard to societal stereotypes about the work ethic of these men and the expectations of men with various criminal offenses.

**Limitations**

One limitation is embedded within the method itself, and is not atypical for studies utilizing the BNIM method (Wengraf, 2001). Namely, the open-ended nature of this method, with rules to proscribe intruding on participants’ narrative constructions, means that what is gained in context is lost in control over the specificity of information. In essence the researcher cannot be certain what he or she is going to get. This may not be appropriate for all research questions using qualitative research, and there were times during this study when this researcher desired to ask more specific questions. Results from the current study suggest this is a trade off: the choice not to control what participants talked about meant that some topics were not touched on that would have
been useful to have touched on. Neither time structure nor autonomy were present in men’s narratives as needs met through work. This seems implausible, and may reflect the research format more than the degree to which these needs are relevant to participants’ perceptions of work. This may be simply due to the fact that men did not care about these needs; however, it may also be that it is not possible to access these needs without more specific forms of questioning. That said, a considerable amount of historical context was gained by choosing this method, and participants work decisions could be placed in the context of childhood experiences, early relational experiences, and difficult events, many of which may not have been related to the research if a more structured questioning method was deployed.

A second limitation concerns the selection of participants from the homeless population. Participants were selected from a single “community” of a large urban shelter. Care was taken to select a diversity of participants with information rich, interpretable interviews, and participants in the study experienced many domains of homelessness. Participants, while more stable than may be the norm, nevertheless had diverse histories, with many forms of homelessness represented. Homeless people in some circumstances, however – people living rough for example – would have added a greater degree of generalizability to the study, or would’ve potentially established that homeless people exist in subgrouping rather than as a whole.

A third limitation is inherent to any qualitative research: namely that talkative participants are often included in the research, whereas more laconic participants, or participants who are simply unwilling to participate, often are not. Effort was made to mitigate this limitation in the current study. Considerable variation was present in length
of interviews provided by participants that were included, with both voluble and laconic participants included. The only interviews that were excluded were those in which participants refused to provide personal details of their lives. Those very participants excluded because they appeared to be unwilling to share personal details, however, may have had valuable and unique biographies and perspectives that may have provided a broader view of homeless men’s experiences.

A fourth limitation was that this study did not directly address the impact of going from being housed to being homeless on their perceptions of work. The method used in this investigation were not well-suited to directly investigate changes in participants’ general perceptions and understanding of work from the time they were housed to the time they became homeless. Lacking this information makes hypothesizing about the impact that this transition may have had more challenging. This issue would likely be better addressed through semi-structured interviewing, where questions about the shifting perception of work could be addressed directly.

**Summary**

Results from this study were consistent with previous homelessness research, with interaction between structural forces and individual biographies shaping participants’ lives. This was especially the case in research in which some form of biographical interviewing took place, where – for example - links between difficult childhoods, problematic adult relationships, and lack of money due to disappearing blue collar work interacted to collapse family relationships (Wagner, 1993; Williams, 2009). Research previously identified many of these interactions. Nevertheless, there were two findings that might even prove relevant to the broader homelessness literature. First, the male
participants described considerable frustration at not having their efforts to perform traditional male roles in work recognized, and the lasting effects this appeared to have on their self-perceptions does not appear to have been previously noted by researchers. Participants in this study kept trying to strike a functioning balance between their relationships and work, even when it was clear that the relationships were not functional even when the work was. Once major family relationships collapsed, some participants described themselves as being uncertain what their motivation for working was. Second, even in their very marginalized position, participants appeared to still hope for more from work – including to benefit other people – than just to extricate themselves from homelessness and survive (though participants wanted this too).

This research may make greater contributions to vocational psychology literature than it does to the broader literatures on homelessness that informed the conceptual understanding present in the literature review in this study. Populations as marginalized as homeless men with felonies appear incredibly difficult to support in psychotherapy or career counseling, as the structural forces arrayed against them appear to be so immense. Central influences on vocational decision-making, however – at least as portrayed in the narratives associated with this study – should be familiar territory for psychologists. Psychologists talk to people about the influence relationships have on their lives every day. Talking about the influence relationships, or perceived societal status, or a desire to make a difference have on work should not be outside the pale for psychologists. Even in highly marginalized populations there are points at which support can be provided, and – hopefully – members of these populations’ lives improved, and their exclusion from the larger society decreased.
Most broadly, this study provides support for the notion that work is important, even in a highly marginalized population such as homeless people. Given the evident linkages between early childhood traumas, relationships, and phenomena such as drug abuse and criminal records, work could appear epiphenomenal, at best, to homeless people’s lives. Why not argue that negative childhoods lead to alienation from family members and broken relationships as an adult, destroying potential support networks? It is a plausible explanation, and work need not play a role in it. In this study, however, work was deeply embedded in many of the narratives about broken families or personal failures around substance abuse. This was clearly an intuition of several of the major ethnographic studies of homeless, even if it was not always easy to justify (Gowan, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993), and the presence of work in narratives here was robust. This should be encouragement to vocational psychologists to explore even the work of marginalized workers, and to begin attempting interventions with such workers.
References


Social Behavior, 49, 3-19.


employed, unemployed, or out of the labor force. *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied, 143, 477-491.*


Appendix A: First Interview Prompt

BNIM requires that participants be interviewed three times. The first interview provides a prompt, after which the interview does not intrude with questions, though the interviewer will take notes. The second interview follows a 15 minute break after the first, and asks questions intended to follow up and clarify events in the first. The third and final interview takes place approximately a week following the first two, and is used both for follow up and for additional research oriented questions the interviewer wants to ask.

First Interview

The first interview is to elicit the narrative without interruption using a prompt known as the SQUIN (Single QUestion aimed at Inducing Narrative). The SQUIN for this study is:

I am interested in the work experiences of men who have experienced homelessness, and in how different types of work, good or bad, make people think and feel. Work may include any manner in which you have made money, or have Please tell me your life story, starting wherever you like. Include any events that were important to you personally. I’m not going to interrupt you, and take as much time as you like.

While the participant is answering this prompt the researcher will provide short verbal and nonverbal encouragers to demonstrate attention (e.g. “uh huh,” “I see,” eye contact). When the participant shows clear evidence of being done, the interview should be closed with “Is there anything you would like to add?” (Wengraf, 2013).
Appendix B: Second Interview Following Up

The second interview, which follows after a short break from the first interview, should exclusively include questions that help elaborate on specific points in the story (Wengraf, 2001). It is impossible to describe exact questions in particular here, because the questions will be contingent on what takes place during the first interview and the cues that the researcher documents. The goal of the second interview is to push for specific narratives for about 10 different cues. Cues can be hints at a significant event (e.g. When I was 16 I had a teacher get really angry at me), a sweeping summary statement (e.g. I have always felt stupid), an unusual event, or interest areas of the researcher. Many cues can be selected from the initial interview; however, 10 cues are selected from the first interview, and the participant is asked to elaborate on the events described in the cues (Wengraf, 2013). There is no prescribed way to select these cues, rather the researcher makes a judgment about which are most likely to contain important longer narratives.

The initial question about a cue is recommended to follow a set format (Wengraf, 2013). The question begins with “You said” which is then followed by the participants exact words that made up the cue. Then the researcher asks “Do you remember any more about that _____” with an appropriate noun in the blank space. Possibilities include “event,” “time,” “day,” and several other possibilities provided by Wengraf. The point is that the noun should match the cue in type. Finally, the researcher asks “how it happened.” Reflection of thoughts and active listening follows; however, the goal is always to elicit a narrative and not to be distracted by other aspects of the event (Wengraf, 2013).
Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Information

1. How old are you?

2. What race(s)/ethnicity do you identify with (check as many as apply)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. How far did you go in school (circle one)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>High school graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Technical/Vocational School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Year College Degree</td>
<td>Four Year College or Higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. How many times would you estimate you have been homeless (please circle one)?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

5. What is longest time you have been homeless (circle one)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A few weeks</td>
<td>3 – 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 month – 1 year</td>
<td>Over 1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Do you have health problems that limit your ability to work?

- Yes
- No

7. Have you been convicted of felony?

- Yes
- No

8. How many jobs would you guess that you have had across your life (your best guess)?

247