

# Narrative Analysis: Understanding the Story of a Formerly Homeless Man

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## Article abstract

This article focuses on the methodological process in examining a portion of one in-depth interview with a formerly chronically homeless man. Implications for housing policy with chronically homeless populations and the role of narrative analysis in social work research are discussed. Data was analyzed using models of narrative analysis developed by Gee (1985, 1986, 1991); Labov (1982, 1987; Labov & Waletzky, 1967); and Richardson (1993). This article demonstrates first, the utility of narrative analysis in social work research, and second, how narrative analysis reveals important insights into understanding the chronically homeless population.

## **Narrative Analysis: Understanding the Story of a Formerly Homeless Man**

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This article focuses on the methodological process in examining a portion of one in-depth interview with a formerly chronically homeless man. Implications for housing policy with chronically homeless populations and the role of narrative analysis in social work research are discussed. Data was analyzed using models of narrative analysis developed by Gee (1985, 1986, 1991); Labov (1982, 1987; Labov & Waletzky, 1967); and Richardson (1993). This article demonstrates first, the utility of narrative analysis in social work research, and second, how narrative analysis reveals important insights into understanding the chronically homeless population.

This article outlines the methodological approach I followed in examining a portion of an interview in which a formerly homeless man discusses his transition into a Housing First site. Applying three processes of narrative analysis increased my understanding of the transcribed interview and led to new interpretations. The concept of narrative has achieved a great deal of popularity and we now have a diverse range of narrative analytic methods available to us. However, as Riessman (2008) posits, in contemporary usage narrative has come to mean anything when someone speaks or writes more than a few lines. For example, news anchors, some qualitative researchers, and politicians (to name a few) speak of the need for “new narratives” to guide opinions in popular culture (Riessman, 2008). I believe as scholars working in the social sciences it is our job to draw boundaries around the concept of narrative. With this in mind, I chose to analyze the data presented in this paper using models of analysis developed by Gee (1985, 1986, 1991); Labov (1982, 1987; Labov & Waletzky, 1967); and Richardson (1993) as classical barometers for narrative analyses. William Labov’s structural method of narrative analysis provides a benchmark for narrative inquiry, and is used by most narrative scholars as a point of departure (Riessman, 2008). Unlike Labov’s analytic approach, Gee’s method requires close attention to the audio recording to see how pitch signals the focus of a

sentence. In addition, Richardson's model of writing an interview as an in-depth poem began the trend of challenging traditional definitions of validity in narrative practices. I believe revisiting founding practices of narrative analysis helped frame my understanding of basic constructs in narrative inquiry and provided a deeper understanding of the text.

Through this deepened understanding of the text, I discovered important insights about the experience of chronic homelessness and transitioning into housing. This account illustrates how the ways in which interviews are transcribed can reveal nuances in the narratives of the most vulnerable in society that might otherwise be overlooked. Narrative researchers do not over-structure their interviews or interrupt responses unnecessarily (Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2008; Poindexter, 2002). Narrative researchers listen closely to natural forms of expression such as language, significance, and context rather than standardized codes (Poindexter, 2002). To analyze text, narrative researchers choose a portion of a transcribed interview in which a respondent recounts past events (a story). The purpose of focusing on specific stories within the text is to understand what the respondent intended to convey through word choice, phrasing, tone, pace, and word emphasis (Poindexter, 2002). Ultimately, closely listening to words and expressions will inform the researcher of the respondent's intended meanings (Poindexter, 2002).

To demonstrate how three models of narrative analysis contribute to achieving greater insight into the chronically homeless population, I examined one in-depth interview carried out in 2014 with a formerly chronically homeless man then living in a housing site. Examination of this interview with Samuel (pseudonym), who was chronically homeless for ten years and has now been sheltered for three years, led to a closer examination of a specific story in which he reminisced about his time living outdoors. I use Samuel's account of his time outdoors and his transition into housing to illustrate how different forms of narrative analysis contribute to deeper understandings of research participants' responses. Therefore, the overarching research question for this study was: "How does narrative analysis deepen the understanding of a story told by a formerly chronically homeless man?"

As Poindexter (2002) posits, methodological decisions lead to critical reflection on theory. My perspective on narrative theory is particularly guided by the work of Carr (1986). He explores the concept of an awareness we all have of the past, and explains that this awareness exists in our ordinary experience of time; the key to its nature is the storytelling of that experience. Carr suggests that in the physical space we

inhabit we also hold our past, present, and future. I found Carr's perspective important as I transcribed and analyzed the text of Samuel, because it helped me to understand how people who have experienced trauma, specifically chronic homelessness, construct their present narratives against the backdrop of a history of a difficult and dangerous life on the street. This past experience of pain and trauma influences how individuals tell their stories in the present.

Narrative inquiry has become increasingly popular in the field of social work to understand the experiences of those who have experienced, and are currently experiencing, homelessness. For example, research utilizing a Photovoice<sup>1</sup> approach—one that generates narratives from the perspective of participants in marginalized populations—is increasingly used in multiple projects worldwide. Analyzing the stories of the formerly chronically homeless population can reveal the interconnectedness and significance of seemingly random activities to inform practice and policy. It is important to consider the complexities of homelessness when constructing housing policy and developing social work practice. Narrative analysis can reveal the unspoken meaning behind the words of the homelessness population to prevent homeless recidivism and improve housing interventions. For example, as Samuel talked about moving indoors, he mentioned food often. In one instance he said,

Well now I'm faced with the responsibility of cooking every meal I eat. I liked that; I liked not having to cook my own meals. That was a good thing about being homeless you know we could eat 4 times a day 5 times a day wouldn't have to prepare our own meals. At first when I moved in here I enjoyed cooking my own meals but it gets ... it gets ... it gets old.

Samuel constructs his narrative around the concept of food, yet further analysis of this excerpt reveals a longing for community, a shared experience with other people. Therefore, adding a communal component to housing interventions may lead to lower rates of recidivism.

Samuel told me:

Well you know homelessness it wasn't an all the way bad experience. Living carefree without responsibility and just being

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<sup>1</sup> Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique and storytelling (Wang & Burris, 1997).

outdoors, and you know constantly getting fresh air you know being homeless. Its, um good things about it you know a lot more people to associate with you know, um, the churches were constantly coming to see us, bringing us stuff, you know you felt like part of the community.

Samuel discussed fond memories of friendships he developed, and a freedom he experienced while living under a bridge. In the literature, homelessness is traditionally linked to negative experiences and behavioral outcomes. Throughout my time with Samuel, he expressed both positive and negative memories of his time as homeless. This was the narrative constructed by Samuel when asked, “What do you remember about being homeless?” It was how Samuel organized his narrative to reveal his positive notions of his time living outdoors that drew me to narrative analysis in understanding his story.

### **Chronic Homelessness and Housing**

#### **Chronic Homelessness**

In 2003, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) established an official definition of chronic homelessness: to be chronically homeless means that one is either a homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, or an individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. HUD adopted this definition from a federal standard that was arrived upon through collective decision making by a team of federal agencies including HUD, the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). In its definition of a chronically homeless person, HUD defines the term *homeless* as referring to a person sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets) or living in an emergency homeless shelter.

The people who fall into the chronically homeless category are not only living in abject poverty but most often are socially isolated, mentally ill, abusive of drugs and alcohol, physically disabled, and recurrently sick (Kosa, 2009; Wright, 2005). The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2018) claims that chronically homeless people are among the most

vulnerable people in the homeless population. This population tends to have high rates of behavioral health problems, including severe mental illness and substance abuse disorders, conditions that may be exacerbated by physical illness, injury, or trauma. Consequently, they are frequent users of emergency services, crisis response, and public safety systems. Samuel fits the criteria of having experienced chronic homelessness.

### **Housing Strategies**

Chronic homelessness is a complex social problem, and there is a range of strategies to housing people, depending on how this problem is understood. For example, three common approaches to homelessness are rapid rehousing (RRH), permanent supportive housing (PSH), and a Housing First philosophy that has been applied to both PSH and RRH. Rapid rehousing places priority on moving a family or individual experiencing homelessness into permanent housing as quickly as possible. Subsidies are shallow (they generally last only a short period of time) and services focus primarily on overcoming immediate housing barriers. Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is for people who need long-term housing assistance with supportive services in order to stay housed (USICH, 2014). PSH refers to living long term indoors, rather than returning to shelters or living outdoors. Permanent supportive housing is a component of the HUD's Supportive Housing Program, HUD's principal program to meet the needs of homeless people with disabilities and mental illness. Housing First is a philosophy that has been applied to both the rapid rehousing and PSH models. Housing First provides permanent, independent housing without prerequisites for sobriety and treatment and by offering supportive services through community treatment teams (Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007).

### **Under the Bridge: Stories from the Street**

In the spring of 2013, I was awarded a grant to facilitate a series of storytelling groups with both formerly and currently homeless individuals. This project was implemented at the Urban Ministry Center in Charlotte, NC, and was called *Under the Bridge: Stories from the Street* (a name given to the program by the participants themselves). Through this project, I worked to further understand the struggles of individuals trying to escape cycles of homelessness. This project also had artistic significance, as it integrated the arts and social sciences to develop

a more extensive and critical understanding of homelessness as a social problem. I met Samuel through this project. Our rapport developed as he helped me recruit former and current homeless individuals to participate.

## Methods

Samuel was part of a small purposive sample of formerly chronically homeless individuals who participated in a storytelling program at a soup kitchen. Before moving into a Housing First site, Samuel spent decades homeless in numerous cities across the United States. Through this project, I worked to further understand the struggles of individuals trying to escape cycles of homelessness. I also explored the use of storytelling as an innovative approach to understanding the needs of this population. The participants communicated through non-verbal gestures and utterances, some with limited literacy levels during the project. Closely listening to the participants led me to the overarching research question: “How does narrative analysis deepen the understanding of a story told by a formerly chronically homeless man?” In addition to filling a gap in knowledge regarding the chronically homeless population, this question seeks to advance the utility of narrative methods in social work research.

This interview took place at a housing site in large southeastern city. The interview was conducted at a time when Samuel was comfortable, in the library at the housing site where no one else was present. The entire interview was recorded and transcribed. IRB approval and Samuel’s informed consent were acquired for this study. Data collection procedures included the construction of interview questions guided by the previous work of narrative researchers (Mishler, 1986; Riesmann, 2008). Eliciting narratives is a complex and recursive process. For theoretical and methodological reasons, I was drawn to Samuel’s story regarding the pleasant memories he had while experiencing homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

Mishler (1986) posits that the ways in which we transcribe and represent an interviewee’s story is highly interpretive and that can be problematic. Poindexter (2002) explains that research findings are shaped in some way by the researcher. Therefore, the analytic methods used to understand Samuel’s story in this paper provide just one demonstration of how findings generate consecutive interpretations. I used Gee, Labov, and

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<sup>2</sup> The interview guide, full transcript of the interview discussed in this article, informed consent letter, and IRB acceptance may be accessed upon request.

Richardson's analytic methods to gain a deeper understanding, from the perspective of Samuel, of what happens when someone transitions from chronic homelessness to living indoors.

### **Gee's, Labov's and Richardson's Methods**

The first approach I utilized is that of James Gee. Gee's method requires close attention to the audio recording to see how a sequence of utterances is performed (Gee, 1991; Riessman, 2008). The second approach I utilized is that of William Labov. The systematic study in social linguistics of narrative form began with the work of William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967), who developed the first model of narrative structure (see also Poindexter, 2002; Riessman, 2008). The third approach I utilized is that of Laurel Richardson (1993). Richardson challenges traditional definitions of validity by presenting what she refers to as "writing transgressions": writing an in-depth interview as a poem. These methods are discussed further as I explain in detail my analysis of Samuel's story.

Gee (1985, 1986, 1991) developed a structural presentation that arranges text in poetic units, such as idea units, lines, stanzas, strophes, and parts. Gee (1991) argues that researchers need to understand how people are making sense and that linguistic units, sequencing, pace, tone, and phrasing are significant for coherence and congruence. The second round of analysis was based on Labov's (1982) research on the elements of a coherent story. Labov identified key narrative structures while examining stories regarding violent traumatic injuries. The final method of analysis consists of two poems constructed from Samuel's words using Richardson's approach. Richardson (1993) proposes that poetry "can touch us where we live, in our bodies" and "invite us to vicariously experience the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation" (p. 695).

### **Findings**

Traditional transcription is often assumed to be a mechanical task amidst the many tasks associated with data analysis (Padgett, 2008). Initially, I transcribed Samuel's interview in its entirety using a traditional approach by which I captured the conversation verbatim, leaving out utterances, gestures, or pauses, for example. From the traditional transcription I was able to identify common themes in his recollection of



his time homeless—specifically, the positive memories he recounted regarding being with other homeless individuals. Once I identified the parameters of his community and relationship stories, I transcribed this section three times using the models discussed. Traditional transcription proved less advantageous in revealing the complexities of his experiences than the models of narrative analysis proposed by Gee, Labov, and Richardson.

In each section below, I recount how insights occurred to me and helped me understand Samuel's lived experience as I applied the three different methods to his interview. Two recurring themes emerge from how individuals in Housing First programs articulate their experience of transitioning from being chronically homeless to living indoors: the importance of interpersonal relationships and of being part of a community. Gee's model of analysis revealed Samuel's unspoken emotional reactions to memories of his time homeless. As he spoke, he put certain emphasis on pronouns that reflect the importance of interpersonal relationships and community (i.e., "we" instead of "I"). Labov's model of analysis revealed how Samuel emphasized the importance of his positive experiences while homeless. Richardson's model revealed the emotional connections Samuel has with his memories of his time homeless.

### **Gee's Model**

Gee's method requires close attention to the audio recording to see how a sequence of utterances is performed. Gee (1985) proposes that pitch signals the focus of a sentence and highlights the information that the speaker wants the listener to hear as relevant. Simultaneously, listeners pay attention to features such as intonation because they offer cues to what is important in a long stream of speech. The application of Gee's model revealed subtle shifts in pitch as Samuel discussed his transition from homelessness to housing.

When I began to use Gee's model,<sup>3</sup> I discovered complexities in

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<sup>3</sup> Gee transcription key:

CAPS	Vocal emphasis
?	Rising intonation
.	Falling intonation
{p}	Short Pause
{P}	Long Pause
/	Separation of idea units

Samuel's story that were not evident in the first round of transcription. Listening to this one segment of the interview a second time showed me how laughter, sighs, and changes in intonation indicate how he decided to speak more about a specific situation. For example, his emphasis on the word "there" in regard to being homeless led him to reflect on how being without a home is a physical place:

- 15     with the fixins and sat right THERE on our uh cardboard  
         boxes and ate it right there
- 16     that was like one of the happiest times out THERE {p}
- 17     yeah I was sleepin right THERE and someone was  
         sleeping next to me and a long line of
- 18     people were sleeping together

If I had not used Gee's technique in this portion of the analysis I would not have noticed how in Samuel's memory, homelessness is a physical place. If the text had been left in a traditional transcription format, I would not have realized how linguistic emphasis influenced Samuel's telling of the story or his memory of the story in general.

The Gee approach to analyzing Samuel's story also led to the realization of how often Samuel said "you" and "we" instead of pronouns such as "me," "he," or "she." There are numerous examples of this tendency; it first happens in the excerpt below, when he tells me that being homeless isn't a totally bad experience and speaks about constantly getting fresh air. I noticed throughout the transcript that Samuel referred to the people who were homeless as "we" and "everybody" and the people who brought supplies and food as "they." An example of this is when he discusses how a church might come and deliver pizza and sodas to "everybody." Moreover, listening to this portion of the transcript over again provided clues about what Samuel valued as important in these accounts. For example, Samuel slows his pace and tone down when he reflects on being outdoors and puts a heavy vocal emphasis on constantly getting fresh air. Using Gee's attention to pitch glides and pace, I was able to hear when Samuel changed the tone and speed of his voice depending on the topic, indicating what he found valuable for me to know:

- 1       well {p} not you know homelessness / it wasn't an all the  
         way bad experience
- 2       Living carefree without responsibility {p}

- 3 and just being/ outdoors/ and YOU know constantly  
getting FRESH ? air YOU / know being homeless  
4 and its um {p} its um good things about it you know a lot  
more people to associate with  
5 YOU know um the churches were constantly {p} coming  
to see us bring us stuff  
6 you know you felt like part OF the community  
7 you know now that I'm not homeless I'm sheltered indoors  
I don't associate with many people in the community  
anymore  
8 YOU know constantly interacting because you're  
homeless so homelessness wasn't all out a bad experience  
9 WE had some GOOD times being homeless {P}  
10 you know um WE might just be sleeping on the sidewalk  
of a church will pull up (pause) boxes of PIZZA! {voice  
raises} and soda for everybody  
11 {laughs} we had a GOOD time man

Additionally, following Gee's approach, I arranged the text into stanzas, which helped define Samuel's topical and situational shifts, such as when people brought him food or supplies versus fun times he had while living on the street. Gee's model showed that he spoke emotionally and nostalgically of his time being homeless. The strength of Gee's model in this project was that it uncovered subtle emotional differences in emphasis, word usage, and structure. After the first transcription and without using Gee's approach, it had been unclear to me how much Samuel missed being a part of a larger community and how important being outside was to him as part of his homeless experience.

### **Labov's Model**

I transcribed the same excerpt using Labov's principle that stories consist of distinct parts with unique functions. Labov asserts that fully formed narratives follow six stages: Abstract (AB): what is the story about; Orientation (OR): who, when, where, how; Complication action (CA): then what happened; Evaluation (EV): how or why is this interesting; Resolution (RE): what finally happened; and Coda: closing. Samuel's account took the classic form of a story identified by Labov and Waletzky (1967). Using this model, analysis revealed how Samuel's

account moves chronologically through time, reports specific past events, and tells us what the story is about in the beginning:

- 1 well not you know homelessness it wasn't an all the way  
bad experience **AB**
- 2 Living carefree without responsibility **AB**
- 3 and just being outdoors and you know constantly getting  
fresh air you know being homeless
- 4 and its um its um good things about it you know a lot more  
people to associate with **OR**
- 5 you know um the churches were constantly coming to see  
us bring us stuff
- 6 you know you felt like part of the community
- 7 you know now that I'm not homeless I'm sheltered indoors  
I don't associate with many people in the community  
anymore **CA**
- 8 you know constantly interacting because you're homeless  
so homelessness wasn't all out a bad experience **OR**
- 22 that was like one of the happiest time out there **EV**
- 23 yeah, I was sleepin right here and someone was sleeping  
next to me and a long line of the boxes all around us
- 25 and we just breakin bread together and having a good time  
**CA**
- 26 under the bridge **OR**
- 11 {laughs} we had a GOOD time man

The story Samuel told me was about happiness even while living in abject poverty. He drew me into his experience and convinced me that these events really happened. Samuel also contextualized the event in lines 10-11 (**OR**), that gave background information about what made him happy (the people and the churches) and in evaluative statements such as line 22 (**EV**), that describe memories and happiness: "that was like one of the happiest times out there." He could have organized the plot in many ways but chose to move between people he knew while homeless (**OR**), confirmation (**CA**), and evaluative statements (**EV**).

Labov's model was helpful in identifying the boundaries of Samuel's stories of community and relationships. Samuel's explanation of why homelessness was not always "a bad experience" educate why community and relationships are significant when transitioning from homelessness to housing. Examples are lines 8 and 9, where Samuel

explains that now that he is in housing he does not associate with people in the community as often. Similarly, line 25 illustrates Samuel's regard for community: "We just breakin bread together and having a good time." However, Labov's method of analysis is limited; I found it is the researcher's interpretation of the text that brings meaning to the story. Compared to Gee's model, Labov's model leaves out researcher and participant utterances, pauses, and vocal emphases. The disadvantage in the absence of these is that the participant's perspective is not central to the interpretation of the text.

### **Richardson's Model**

According to Richardson (1993), writing data as a poem does two things: first, it unexpectedly changes you personally; second, it exposes "the truth-constituting, legitimating, and deeply hidden validating function" (p. 696) of poetry and prose. Using the words of participants to construct poetry is not only empowering to the participants in the study but reveals layers of narrative construction. Similar to Poindexter (2002), my emotional connection to the material led to my decision to experiment with crafting Samuel's text into poems. Samuel is a self-proclaimed lyricist and spends his free time writing spoken word and song. Therefore, Richardson's model seemed a natural for analyzing my conversation with Samuel. The poems are rearrangements of Samuel's words into a literary form. As Richardson (1993) argues, I discovered that poems are emotionally charged and are representations of the human experience.

After reconstructing Samuel's transcription into poems, I felt a deeper emotional and empathetic connection to him and his struggles to find himself in a newly housed world. The first poem, "Living Carefree," was taken from the first part of the transcript, when he talks about how being homeless was not a completely negative experience. The second poem "Breakin' Bread," was constructed from Samuel's recounting of sharing meals with his fellow homeless friends and members of a church. What became evident after creating the poems is that there is a certain amount of loneliness represented in the transcription. I initially thought Samuel was telling me a story about being happy while on the street, but after crafting the poetry it became apparent he was at the same time expressing an undercurrent of loneliness:

### **Living Carefree**

You know homelessness isn't an all the way bad experience  
     living carefree without responsibility.  
         just being outdoors you know constantly getting fresh air.  
 You know being homeless had good things you know  
     a lot more people to associate with.  
     churches coming to see us.  
 You know you felt like part of the community  
     now that I'm not homeless I don't associate with that many people  
     in the community anymore.  
 You know constantly interacting because you're homeless  
     Homelessness wasn't an all out bad experience,  
     we had some good times man,  
     being homeless.

### **Breakin Bread Together**

Sleeping on the sidewalk a church will pull up  
     boxes of pizza and soda for everybody,  
     we had a good time man.  
 One time this church pulled up with Bojangles  
     we just took the chicken out of the box with the fixins',  
     sat right there on our cardboard boxes,  
     that was one of the happiest times out there.  
 We were just breakin' bread together and having a good time  
     breakin' bread together with friends,  
     under the bridge.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This methodology involving these three approaches to narrative analysis not only expanded my knowledge of the utility of various analytical methods, but also led to different interpretations and increased understanding of the text. Gee's model revealed the way that Samuel expressed his experiences through certain intonations and illuminated new meanings in the text. Labov's model was helpful in understanding that narratives are complicated, in that they fluctuate in time sequence and

much of the action is internal with evaluative statements stippled throughout. Richardson's model brought emotional and empathetic points forward, clarified and made the account more compelling, and told me something about Samuel's lived experience, which I did not previously understand.

### **Social Work Research**

Making mistakes in hearing and transcribing interviews are common validity errors in qualitative methods (Poindexter, 2002). By listening to interviews and presenting data through numerous analytic techniques, narrative researchers can bring greater rigour to qualitative research methods. Examining the interviews in greater detail can reveal underlying assumptions we may have about our participants. This was especially powerful for me when I transcribed Samuel's interview into poetic form. I assumed he was recounting to me a memory of being happy on the streets when, in fact, he was communicating to me the loneliness he was experiencing currently. In order to ensure that researchers are interpreting other's lives in the most ethical and respectful ways, we can strive to focus on the respondent's intonations, expressions, and perspectives (Gee, 1985; Poindexter, 2002).

### **Social Work Policy, Narrative Inquiry, and the Chronically Homeless Populations**

Through my analysis, I discovered Samuel revealed positive memories of his time when homeless. These narratives suggest that interpersonal relationships and connections to community are important when transitioning from homelessness to living indoors. Interpersonal relationships consist of formal and informal social networks and social support systems (McLeroy, Steckler, Bibeau, & Glanz, 1988). Interpersonal relationships with family members, friends, and acquaintances are important sources of influence on the behaviors of individuals and affect how individuals cope with stress, the maintenance of alcohol and drug use behaviors, decisions about where to live, and the risk of morbidity and mortality (Kaplan, Martin, & Robbins, 1984; Walter, 1985; Langlie, 1977; McLeroy, et al., 1988). The concept of community has been defined in multiple ways across multiple disciplines. For the purposes of this study, I use the definition proposed by McLeroy et al., (1988); community is viewed as having three distinct meanings.

First, community refers to families, personal friendship networks, and neighborhoods. Second, community refers to the relationships among organizations such as social service agencies, hospitals, and law enforcement. Third, community refers to a population with distinct characteristics, in this study chronic homelessness.

Although Samuel's story may not be representative of every individual who experiences chronic homelessness and transitions into a Housing First program, exploring his story is one step in the right direction to understanding this population's collective experience. Understanding how individuals in Housing First programs reconstruct their lives as they go from being chronically homeless to living indoors can inform social welfare policies aiming to end chronic homelessness. Narrative research can contribute to the knowledge base for social work professionals working with chronically homeless populations. Capturing the perspectives of those who have first-hand knowledge of the complicated and oftentimes misunderstood factors of homelessness can reveal solutions for social work professionals who have not themselves experienced homelessness.

### **Limitations**

This study has methodological limitations that were discovered while implementing the research. First, the sampling frame of the formerly homeless man represented only one perspective of leaving homelessness and entering housing. A broader sampling frame would have included additional participants who were incarcerated, living in different housing types, or unavailable at the time of this study. For example, there were a number of individuals I could have interviewed, had I expanded the sampling procedures to contact people who had returned to homelessness or living in alternative housing options. Recruiting participants through the grant I received limited the sample to certain individuals. Including participants who did not want to be associated with the grant project would have provided an additional perspective and layer of understanding. Second, the sampling frame for current residents disproportionately represented those living in a single-site program. A broader sampling frame would have included those currently living in a variety of housing programs as well. Third, this study uses three classical styles of narrative analyses and runs the risk of claiming that everything can be examined as text. Further analyses will



investigate how various objects and the research setting influenced Samuel's recounting of his experience.

### **Self-Reflection**

The experience of using narrative to analyze Samuel's experience of leaving homelessness comes with many challenges. In this study, the challenges were evident, especially when Samuel reminisced about returning to homelessness and at times was at a loss for words. He oftentimes spoke of roaming the streets in search of something familiar to comfort him. In addition, he reported feeling too ashamed to return to shelters or local service providers if he were to return to homelessness. As I analyzed his accounts, I focused on my subjective understanding of his experience moving indoors. However, he also spoke of certain situations that would result in feelings of remorse and guilt that he feared would result in substance abuse and the company of his homeless friends. Most times, those who are transitioning into housing after experiencing chronic homelessness also experience a crisis of identity and loneliness. I believe the modes of narrative analysis in this study touched on these issues, but further investigation is necessary to truly understand Samuel's experience.

### **Conclusion**

As Poindexter postulated, narrative analysis of Samuel's interview using the models of Gee, Labov, and Richardson reveals how different transcription and analysis techniques influence the meanings researchers draw from interview data. Moreover, these exercises in transcription and analysis also speak to how narratives are constructed, especially amongst individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness. Samuel's verbal emphasis on sharing meals with other homeless individuals and church members, as discovered through Gee's model of analysis, revealed the importance of community. Therefore, adding components that foster these variables may impact a person's decisions to stay indoors. The application of narrative methods to understanding the experiences of the chronically homeless population can help improve housing interventions, social work research, and education. Narrative research and analysis in social work is important because it can bring forth nuances that traditional qualitative transcription and analysis may not.

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