# The Lived Experience of Homeless Youth: A Narrative Approach

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Homeless youth are an understudied and stigmatized group. In their daily lives, these youth confront negative social perceptions and harrowing circumstances related to survival, which may present challenges to the construction of a meaningful, coherent identity. Using the theoretical notion of *narrative engagement* (Hammack & Cohler, 2009), this study explores how youth experiencing homelessness make meaning of their lived experiences and engage with dominant discourses about homelessness that stigmatize and devalue them. A narrative analysis of 4 case studies, drawn from in-depth life story interviews with 11 unhoused youth in the United States, suggests that despite experience of struggle and loss, participants demonstrated the ability to (a) resist contamination through the construction of redemptive narratives, grounded in agency and resilience; and (b) resist dominant narratives about homelessness by attributing their circumstances to external causes and by critiquing institutions and figures perceived as holding power. In doing so, participants refused to adopt a "criminal" or "client" master narrative of homeless identity, instead affirming the value and worth of their knowledge, experiences, and identities. This study reveals the active agency of homeless youth to construct counternarratives in which they may restory their identities to find resilience in the margins.

*Keywords:* culture, emerging adulthood, homelessness, identity, narrative

In the wake of the recession following the financial crisis of 2008, poverty and unemployment climbed more dramatically for young adults ages 18 to 24 than any other adult age group in the United States (US), making them especially vulnerable to lose housing (Danziger, Chavez, & Cumberworth, 2012; Saulny, 2012). A study from the National Health Care for the Homeless Council reported that young adults also generally tend to have less income, fewer benefits, less savings, less social support, and less knowledge about housing rights and resources than older adults (Ammerman et al., 2004). The number of young people in the US

who experience an episode of homelessness in a year is estimated to be between 750,000 to 2 million (Ammerman et al., 2004).

Beyond the challenges of daily survival and material deprivation, homeless youth also face numerous psychological challenges. Negative public perceptions and stereotypes about homeless youth, stemming from a dominant cultural narrative that attributes poverty to individual failure (Bullock, 2008), contributes to the criminalization and social alienation of impoverished young people, and leads to an overall reduction in life chances (Ferrell, 1997; Gaetz, 2004; White, 1993). Moreover, homeless youth are more likely than their peers to experience trauma, neglect, and physical and mental illness (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2011). In constructing a coherent narrative identity, these youth likely confront the difficult task of negotiating stigma as well as making meaning of traumatic and disruptive life experiences. In this study, we used a narrative framework to explore how homeless youth in the US make meaning of their lived experience and discursively position their identities in relation to stigmatizing dominant discourses.

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## Homelessness, Stigma, and Identity

Stigma is a "deeply discrediting" and "undesired differentness" from social norms that places one in a subordinate position (Goffman, 1963, p. 3, 5; see also Foucault, 1982). Research suggests that a large segment of the US population subscribes to stigmatizing views toward individuals experiencing homelessness (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997). The unhoused are frequently portrayed as mentally ill, drug addicted, lazy, and dangerous (Kendall, 2005; Link et al., 1995; Snow, Anderson & Koegel, 1994). A critical discourse analysis conducted by Toft (2014) on city-level policies found that descriptions of homelessness most often revolved around "dirtiness," "drugs," and "danger." Using fMRI technology to study neural activation patterns when viewing images of "extreme out-groups," Harris and Fiske (2006) demonstrated that homeless individuals were perceived as less than human, eliciting fear and disgust. Higher endorsement of negative attitudes toward the unhoused is associated with a higher degree of social distancing, less support for public assistance, and higher support for antihomeless policies that prevent people from panhandling, sitting, and sleeping in public (Belcher & DeForge, 2012; Link et al., 1995; Phelan et al., 1997). The result is the criminalization of homelessness, making unhoused youth more prone to displacement, unwarranted searches, and police brutality (Amster, 2003; Barak, 1991; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty & National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). The stigmatization of homelessness as criminal may push youth into more remote and dangerous spaces where, with increased exposure to the elements and violence, they face an increased likelihood of abuse, injury, or death (Wright, 1997).

Research suggests that homeless youth in the US are highly aware of the stigma they face. Interviews and surveys conducted with homeless youth in the US and Canada found that reports of stigmatization and discrimination were high, especially among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth, youth who engaged in sex work or panhandling, and youth who had been homeless for extended periods of time (Kidd, 2007). Negative social perceptions present challenges for the identity development of these marginalized youth, as the meaning and relative status of the groups to which we belong assume a prominent role in self-understanding (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Navigating a stigmatized, low-status social identity likely has implications for the development of a personal narrative to provide a sense of meaning and purpose for unhoused youth. In Kidd's (2007) study of homeless youth, experiences of stigma were associated with negative mental health outcomes including low self-esteem and feelings of alienation, hopelessness, and helplessness. Ethnographic research with homeless youth conducted by Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) discovered that participants attempted to manage their stigma by aligning themselves with mainstream youth and the dominant culture. They used "inclusion strategies," attempting to blend in with the nonhomeless, and "exclusion strategies," distancing themselves from perceptions of weakness and inferiority through verbal, physical, and sexual posturing. These strategies often resulted in negative consequences for homeless youth, whose attempts to gain acceptance were frequently perceived as deviant and aggressive, therefore reinforcing their low status (Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004). Interviews with homeless youth in Australia conducted by Farrugia (2011) revealed the common experience of denigration and judgment, leading to feelings of disempowerment and unworthiness. Studies with adults experiencing homelessness, which are much more abundant than studies with youth, suggest that self-perception may vary by age and duration of homelessness (Farrington & Robinson, 1999; Snow & Anderson, 1987), finding that the longer one is without housing, the more contaminated and devalued one's perception of their identity becomes (Boydell, Goering, & Morrell-Bellai, 2000).

In addition to the stigma associated with homelessness, unhoused youth are more likely than their housed peers to experience traumatic and disruptive life events. Homeless youth are disproportionately affected by abuse, poor health, mental illness, sexual exploitation, unplanned pregnancy, and substance abuse, and they are at greater risk for low academic achievement and experience higher rates of dropping out of school (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2011; Fast, Small, Wood, &

Kerr, 2009; Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Kral, Molnar, Booth, & Watters, 1997; Newman, 1999; Tyler, 2008). These youth are more likely than their housed peers to experience socioemotional problems and suicidal ideations (Boivin, Roy, Haley, & du Fort, 2005; Kidd & Carroll, 2007).

In sum, homeless youth face material and psychological challenges that affect their health and wellbeing in numerous ways documented by previous research. Given the stigma associated with homelessness and the cultural narrative of homelessness as rooted in personal failure, as they construct their identities, they face the specter of contamination—a term used in narrative psychology to describe a narrative sequence which progresses from good to bad (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). Contamination narratives have been found to be associated with higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem and sense of coherence (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Qualitative studies have begun to illuminate the ways in which homeless youth navigate these social and psychological challenges, and our research seeks to further interrogate the lived experience of homelessness.

## Homeless Youth and the Theory of Narrative Engagement

Although it is valuable to understand the vulnerabilities and risks faced by homeless youth, we seek to move beyond a deficit model that defines youth by what they lack to explore how youth actively navigate challenges and make sense of their experiences through narrative identity development. A growing body of research has begun to focus on the resources and strengths of homeless youth (e.g., Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Rew & Horner, 2003). These studies suggest that youth exposed to trauma and disruption can construct personal narratives that affirm the value of their identities and resist the stigma of homelessness (e.g., Farrugia, 2011). Some common themes in these "resilience narratives" included self-reliance, social networks, caring for others, street smarts, and spirituality (Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000).

Frequently missing from existing analyses, and what this study seeks to illuminate, is the inherently political nature of meaning-making by exploring relationships of stories of homeless youth to narratives of domination (see Hammack & Toolis, in press). Stigma toward the unhoused is instantiated through the belief that homelessness is the result of personal failure rather than structural disadvantage (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). This belief is likely associated with a *master narrative* (see Hammack, 2011) of the "American Dream," rooted in values of individualism, meritocracy, and the Protestant work ethic, proclaiming that anyone may achieve prosperity through their own labor and virtue (Bullock, 2008; Limbert & Bullock, 2009; Weber, 1930). This narrative maintains the myth that the distribution of wealth is just and deserved, even as racism, classism, and sexism continue to limit upward mobility (Bullock, 2008) and income inequality continues to rise (Hochschild, 1995; Krueger, 2012).

To understand how youth experiencing homelessness position themselves vis-à-vis stigmatizing master narratives, we adopted a theoretical approach rooted in Hammack and Cohler's (2009) notion of *narrative engagement*. Narrative engagement refers to a process through which youth make meaning of inherited meaning systems and either appropriate or challenge the status quo through their own personal narrative construction (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; see also Hammack, 2008, 2011; Hammack & Toolis, 2014). Thus, this study aims to interrogate the ways in which narrative can act as a tool for cultural reproduction *or* resistance. This story is seldom told. As hooks (1990) observed,

> Since we are well able to name the nature of . . . repression, we know better the margins as sites of deprivation. We are more silent when it comes to speaking of the margin as a site of resistance. We are more often silenced when it comes to speaking of the margin as a site of resistance (p. 342).

The current study is situated within a larger movement in social, personality, and developmental psychology that uses qualitative methods to interrogate how individuals engage with the meaning of social categories as they construct coherent life stories. This approach has its foundations in psychology's "interpretive turn"

(e.g., Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; Tappan, 1997), the move from a positivist paradigm that conceives of meaning making as "information processing" to an interpretive paradigm that conceives of meaning making as an active process of narrative engagement (e.g., Hammack, 2008, 2011; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Hammack & Toolis, 2014). Guided by this paradigm, we sought to examine the meaning homeless youth make of the dominant discourses that stigmatize and devalue them.

Marginalized youth such as the unhoused represent an understudied group in narrative research (Arnett, 2000; McLean, Wood, & Breen, 2013; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). While narrative psychologists hold that lifestory construction is a universal process of human development (e.g., McAdams & Pals, 2006), scholars have increasingly called attention to issues of variability and power asymmetry in the process of personal narrative development (e.g., Fivush, 2010; Hammack, 2008). Our study contributes to this growing literature in psychology of interrogating narrative identity development at the margins and in relation to hegemonic master narratives of social categories, such as gender and sexual identity (e.g., Fivush, 2010; Hammack & Cohler, 2011; Thorne & McLean, 2002; Weststrate & McLean, 2010), indigenous people (e.g., Ramirez & Hammack, 2014), and racial and ethnic minorities (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010; White, 2006). Our intent is to illustrate the utility of narrative analysis to reveal the way in which individuals engage with a stigmatized social category (i.e., homelessness) and construct personal narratives to make meaning of subordinate social positioning. We thus situate our study within the broader movement of narrative psychology and the application of narrative methods to the study of social identity.

## Method

### Overview

Methods used included narrative interviews and ethnographic observations conducted in the tradition of narrative inquiry (Josselson, 2011). This tradition is rooted in an epistemology that meaning is discursively and socially constructed and that truth is multiple, thus challenging the notion that reality is objective and nat-

uralized (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986). Narrative inquiry aims to understand life as it is lived and interpreted in the participant's own words. Thus, rather than focus on demography and statistics, this study sought to understand how youth ascribe meaning to homelessness and define themselves. Narrative inquiry takes meaning to be inherently personal, social, and political (Hammack & Toolis, in press), and is therefore a particularly strong method for investigating issues of social justice (Brown, 2012). As Ewick and Silbey (1995) note: "By allowing the silenced to speak, by refusing the flattening or distorting effects of traditional logico-scientific methods and dissertative modes of representation, narrative scholarship participates in rewriting social life in ways that are, or can be, liberatory" (p. 199). Interviews were conducted in two locations: a transitional youth housing center in Chicago, Illinois and a youth drop-in center in Seattle, Washington.

### Field Sites

The first field site, located in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago, is a transitional housing and drop-in center for homeless youth ages 18 to 21 with the mission of fostering skills for independent living. Youth must apply to live in the dorms and are expected to be attending school, working or actively seeking employment, and receive access to case management, counseling services, regular group meetings, meals, and other resources.

The second field site, located in the University District in Seattle, is a drop-in center for homeless youth ages 13–25 that offers programs in visual arts, music, theater, as well as screen-printing internships. The center functions as a safe space for youth to express themselves constructively while developing relationships with caring adults. Rules and expectations are fairly relaxed: guests must be actively working on a project, treat others with respect, and refrain from using profanity or drug references. The center is open during the day, five days a week.

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited in both locations using nonprobability sampling. Guests of the transitional shelter or drop-in center who were over the age of 18 were approached by the first

author, who developed familiarity with guests in both locations through regularly volunteering, and those who expressed interest were invited to participate and given more information. The first author began by volunteering at the transitional housing center in Chicago for approximately six hours a week for three weeks before starting interviews so as to conduct observations, establish familiarity, and build rapport with interested youth. Overall, volunteering and ethnographic observation was conducted for several hours a week at this location from January through May, 2011. Interviews were conducted by the first author at the drop-in center in Seattle over the course of a week in March of 2011. Having previously been employed at the drop-in center, the first author benefitted from a year's worth of ethnographic observation of guests and familiarity with staff and the organizational structure.

In-depth, semistructured interviews based on McAdams' (1995) Life Story Interview (LSI) protocol were administered to discern the main plot, turning points and themes expressed by participants in regards to the experience of leaving home and life on the streets (see Appendix). Before starting the interview, each participant was given an informed consent form to sign, which was read aloud, explaining that participation was completely voluntary, that participants would be welcome to leave at any time without penalty, that confidentiality would be maintained, and that the interview would be audio-recorded. Participants were informed that these interviews would be read by others and could be made available to the public. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Chicago, the institution with which the first author was affiliated at the time of data collection.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were recorded on a digital audio-recorder and then transcribed verbatim. All names were replaced with pseudonyms; identifying information was changed. The names of the agencies have been removed to protect participants' confidentiality.

Interviewees included 11 youth (five from Chicago; six from Seattle) between the ages of 19 and 23 who currently or until recently identified as homeless. Interviewees included six men and five women, and self-identified as African American/Black ($n = 4$), European American/White ($n = 4$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 1$), Asian American ($n = 1$), and American Indian/Hispanic ($n = 1$). From these respondents, the stories of Alejandro (a 19-year-old Hispanic/Latino male in Chicago), Melanie (a 21-year-old European American/White female in Seattle), Orion (a 19-year-old European American/White male in Seattle), and Lincoln (a 19-year-old African American/Black male in Chicago) were selected as case studies for this article. These cases were selected as highly illustrative of the key themes that emerged across participants as well as reflective of the diversity in the sample with regard to gender, race, and geographical region. However, because all participants interviewed in this study were involved with service sites to varying degrees, it is important to note that these cases may not be representative of the experiences or perspectives of all homeless youth. Thus, the purpose of presenting these case studies is not reduction or generalizability, but rather to interpret and expand upon the meaning that these participants have assigned to their experiences and identities, to highlight patterns and themes shared across participants, and to explore what implications these findings might have to improve the lives of homeless youth.

Personal narratives are dynamic and coconstructed with a particular goal in the context of a particular relationship in a particular time and place (Josselson, 2009; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Thorne & McLean, 2003). Thus, the researcher's experiences, background, and social position undoubtedly come to bear on the process of conducting and interpreting interviews (Mishler, 1986), which are accompanied by certain limitations as well as strengths (White & Dotson, 2010). Feminist ethnographers have noted the dangers of "speaking for others" (Alcoff, 1991) and the importance of considering unequal power dynamics in research settings (Heyl, 2001; Naples, 2003). For this study, the interviewer's position as a volunteer and former employee at the field sites, which exercised power over participants' access to services, influenced her relationship with participants. Her role did not, however, involve enforcing rules or distributing resources, and all information disclosed in interviews was kept confidential from staff. In addition, as a white, middle-class academic who had not experienced homelessness, the interviewer was posi-

tioned in many ways as an "outsider" to the situations she sought to study. On one hand, this dynamic may have placed a burden on participants to educate the interviewer and to emulate more certainty or optimism than they felt, and the understanding that these interviews would be made public may have influenced the presentation of their stories. On the other hand, this dynamic may have also worked to position youth as valuable sources of expertise and knowledge about their experiences, and participants provided positive feedback about the interview experience.

## Analytic Strategy

Data were analyzed using narrative analysis, which emphasizes the importance of meaning making in social context using an inductive, interpretive approach to coding (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Tappan, 1997). In the tradition of those who take an idiographic, holistic approach to the study of lives (see Hammack, 2006, 2010a; Josselson, 2009), we conducted an in-depth, bottom-up analysis of each life story, using line-by-line coding in an initial reading of the transcripts to discover what meaning participants made of their experiences and how they related these experiences to their identities (Josselson, 2011). Multiple readings of the data aided in identifying connections and patterns across participants and deriving themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). Themes were increasingly refined and collapsed into higher-level, more conceptual themes, guided by our theoretical framework and the ways in which these themes linked back to stigmatizing dominant discourses on homelessness. Because narrative inquiry is not rooted in a positivist epistemology in which measures of reliability and validity can be meaningfully assessed, multiple coders were not required (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Mishler, 1990; Tappan, 1997). Rather, attention was devoted to the thematic coherence of the analysis.

## Results

### Alejandro's Story: "We're Not Bad People, but We're in This Bad Situation So Long"

Alejandro was a senior in high school when the interview took place and had experienced homelessness intermittently since he was a child. He recounted the first time he entered a youth shelter on his own, after he and his mother lost their housing:

> When I went into the first program, I felt like shit. I felt like I was nothing. Like I was a nobody, like I was homeless on the street. I never felt like killing myself but I felt like . . . it wouldn't be any different. . . . From that depths, I found myself.

Notably, Alejandro's story begins, but does not end, with this *nadir experience*, or low point. Alejandro's ability to resolve the hardship of his past lies in the way he positions his past to his present and future. His initial description of homelessness—so devastating to his past self that he experienced it as a kind of death—is contrasted to the discovery of *resilience* and strength in his present self. Thus, he has constructed homelessness as a space of transformation. Although homelessness was not expressed as a choice or a positive experience for Alejandro, he was able, through narrative, to redefine his identity on positive terms by constructing a story in which his hardship was necessary for growth.

This narrative sequence, moving from bad to good, and from lost to found, follows a distinctly *redemptive* pattern in which positive meaning is conferred to suffering—a quality shared by almost all participants in this study. McAdams argues that redemptive stories perform a protective function by cultivating resilience and psychological well-being (McAdams, 1996; McAdams et al., 2001). He suggests that "people who see (or imagine) good things coming from bad events in their lives tend to cope better with those bad events and find ways to grow and move forward in life" (McAdams, 2006, p. 33).

One of the languages of redemption identified by McAdams (2006) is that of "development," which describes the journey from immaturity to actualization. Alejandro used this language of development to explain how leaving the comfort and protection of his mother helped him to grow up.

> My mom . . ., she was like boy, no, please don't. She didn't want me to. I could tell . . . I was like, *no*. I'm tired of not helping. I have to be, I have to be grown. Grown! I still felt like, you got me on reserve mom. Now you gotta put me onto the field. I wanna go out there. Put me out there, coach! I gotta learn someday.

I'm not gonna be a kid all my life. I decided to do it early. I'm *glad* I did.

The narrative progression from child to adult, from passive observer to active participant, highlights the theme of *agency* as key to Alejandro's redemptive story.

Although redemptive in form and thematic content, Alejandro's story articulates a painful awareness of inequality and exclusion.

> I thought I was just gonna finish high school and go to college. I thought all these thing were gonna be open for me. What happened to this . . . this *dream* that you see on TV? Where's this kid who supposedly gets all this stuff but he doesn't have to work because his mom and dad are gonna take care of him until he's done with college, *then* he gets a job, then he has his nice fancy suit, he has a car, he goes to his job and everything just seems fine. But it *doesn't*. It doesn't go for the people who are at the bottom. You don't get that . . .. You gotta dig for the things you want. You gotta *scrape* for the things you want.

Alejandro's narrative reveals an engagement with the master narrative of the American Dream in which he experiences exclusion, though he does not attribute personal deficit or failure to this exclusion: "We're not bad people, but we're in this bad situation so long." By attributing homelessness to undeserved poverty rather than a personal moral failing, Alejandro demonstrated resistance to the master narrative of homelessness in US society.

> I had guidance. My mother always taught me the noble things I should do. But because of that *one thing I didn't have*, I was in the place that I was. And that was *money*. Money I didn't have, so I have to live in this government funded program to support myself.

Alejandro distinguished what was outside of his control—experiencing homelessness—with what he perceived as within his control—actively transforming this experience into a source of strength. The theme of *agency* emerged in his narrative in this context. "Everything that I had problems with, I did have help. But the thing is, I was the one who had to make it happen," he said. "The thing is, the reason where I'm at and I know a lot is 'cause I made a lot of good choices."

Throughout his story, Alejandro defines himself as moral, competent, and hardworking, resisting the US master narrative's framing of homeless youth as immoral, lazy, and dependent. This discrepancy was a source of frustration for Alejandro as he navigated institutions and services designed to help homeless youth, which provided valuable assistance but which he narrated often treated him and his peers as delinquent or pathological. "They would say, you don't wanna do this chore, then don't sleep here tonight. . . . For everything, their answer was, you're not gonna sleep here. . . . Everything was threatening."

In addition to critiquing this punitive approach, Alejandro resisted the dominant narrative that homeless youth are homogenous or deficient, arguing that "some kids are actually there to do something. Some of them aren't. They generalize it into thinking everybody's bad, or they don't know how to do anything. Like these kids aren't gonna do shit." Instead, he repeatedly subverted this negative story and offered a counterstory which affirmed the experiences and knowledge of his unhoused peers as valuable and vital to his survival and growth:

> The best learning thing that you can gain from that program was not those grownups supposedly that were helping, it was the kids. The kids are the ones that have the life experience. They're the ones that have these problems that happen to them and they find the solutions to figure them out.

In sum, Alejandro's life story assumed a redemptive form and consistently resisted the potential contamination of inhabiting a stigmatized social category. Themes of agency and resilience emerged as central to the way in which Alejandro constructed a redemptive narrative. His engagement with the master narrative of homelessness in the US revealed a repudiation of the notion of personal attribution for poverty. He constructed a counternarrative that framed him and other homeless youth as "good people" in a "bad situation," thus subverting the potential contamination associated with stigma and exclusion.

**Melanie's Story: "Your Past Is Really Just the Past"**

Like Alejandro, Melanie's story illustrates the capacity for resilience in the face of adversity. Melanie grew up with an older sister, a physically abusive father, and a mother who was molested as a child and wouldn't let the girls leave the house for fear of danger. At age 11, her mother left, leaving Melanie with her father, who then "took all his anger and frustration out on me." She attributed her journey into

homelessness to the escalating tension she faced at home: "I just remember living with friend after friend after friend, just to avoid being around my dad."

Although much of Melanie's story is marked by struggle and loss, she ultimately constructed a redemptive narrative in which challenges are confronted and surmounted. She described this process of self-defined transformation:

> Some things you really can't control. . . . But you can always take something from it, learn something from it. And then leave it. Your past is really just the past. It's like a painting—you can't change anything about it once it's dry, so you might as well make a new painting. . . . You gotta make it clear to yourself there is a difference between then and now . . . if you wanna make things better than they were in your past.

By distinguishing her past from her future, Melanie identifies the possibility of change and poignantly emphasizes the power of agency in the form of authorship. During the interview, she showed the interviewer the book that she was writing about her life, suggesting that she views her life story as inspiring. "I like that I'm determined," Melanie noted, highlighting her resilience. "I get stepped on and I just wipe myself off the sidewalk, I get back up . . .. I'm like the bug that you can never kill."

Melanie's story also illustrates master narrative engagement. In addition to navigating the difficult circumstances she faced, Melanie frequently had to navigate negative social perceptions and treatment, often experiencing neglect and blame by those in positions of authority. She described being passed from school officials to police officers to group homes and finally back to her father:

> After my dad punched me, there was, like, bruises on my wrist . . . And I went and told my principal about it, 'cause she, uh, the police came and got me for truancy and they brought me to the school . . . And then they just, they told me where to go and they gave me a counselor but she was never there . . . Then they put me in a teens at-risk home and then I got kicked out of there. And then they put me in a secure home and stuff . . . They never did anything to him. Like they just kind of made me feel like it was all my fault.

Melanie's story reveals the way in which some homeless youth struggle to be seen as credible authorities on their own experiences. Her narrative frames the policies at the group home—which she likened to a jail—as overly punitive and ineffective:

> If you didn't come back on time, they'd call the cops. But there was a friend there that I wanted to hug and I got in trouble for hugging them so they kicked me out and we got in a big argument over it. 'Cause . . . you're supposed to be three feet apart from everybody. So they put me in this weird place, it was almost like a, a jail . . . But they wouldn't let me go to school and I just ended up staying there for a week and then my dad came and got me.

Being treated as unruly and untrustworthy by these policies and public authorities eroded Melanie's trust in such institutions. Her narrative reveals a feeling of betrayal and loss of faith in the authorities that she claimed were unresponsive. "I was just really mad that nobody ever listened to me," she said.

> I even go to my principal with bruises and it doesn't seem like anybody truly believes me. You know, they don't put actions into, like they could have, you know, I'm not gonna say punished my dad, but he didn't learn anything out of it.

Melanie's resistance to being subordinated by perceptions that she was "at fault," not credible, and not worthwhile was expressed through challenging the competence, legitimacy, and efficacy of the adults and institutions that held power over her and, eventually, disassociating from them. Dropping out of school and moving in with her boyfriend was one way that Melanie attempted to gain a sense of agency and distance herself from the powerless feeling she associated with being a minor:

> I was 17 and I was like, you know what, this is my decision. I don't want to go to school because I had a full time job. And so it just felt like I had time that I could do what I wanted with . . . We had our own place and stuff. It kind of felt just *nice* . . . I think a part of me wanted to feel like, almost like a household. Like you're running the show.

Melanie, who had learned not to rely on people and institutions that did not, in her perception, appear to want or respect her, learned to instead rely on herself, whom she described as a "really independent person." However, it is important to note that simply being in resistance to authority is unlikely to allow Melanie to make a sustained transition to adult maturity. A key to her eventual extrication from poverty will be to discern the difference between benign and malevolent authorities, and to acknowledge dependencies in addition to asserting her independence.

Although much of Melanie's story is marked by hardship, it is crucial to observe how she makes meaning of these memories and uses them to construct her identity. Melanie may have internalized a sense of civic alienation and mistrust of authority, but she did *not* internalize a devalued identity. Her story demonstrates master narrative engagement in critiquing unfair systems of power while attempting to salvage her own sense of self. Stigmatizing narratives about homeless youth rest on the assumption that individual characteristics cause homelessness, obscuring the role that situations and structural disadvantage may play. Melanie's story counters these individualistic attributions by highlighting the violence, neglect, and alienation that led her to leave home.

### Orion's Story: "People Really Do Take Good Care of Each Other Out Here"

"When I came out on the streets, that was really big for me," Orion confessed, "'cause I had gone from this cushy lifestyle, just like, oh . . . I'm fine, and finding out like, oh, we might lose the house. Oh, we don't have enough money to buy food." In addition to his family's worsening financial situation, Orion struggled with constant fights with his parents and trouble at school. Feeling devalued at school and powerless at home, Orion sought to change his story, saying,

> I never made really any big decisions in my life. Like, I was pretty sheltered . . . it's like, no, I'm taking control of my fate . . . Once I became homeless I felt like I really said, no, I'm going to change things. And I'd never been able to do that, so it was really empowering.

Rather than internalize a storyline of contamination, Orion resisted defining himself as pathological or deficient by instead constructing a redemptive storyline. Like Alejandro and Melanie, his narrative used the redemptive language of development (McAdams, 2006), chronicling his transition from immaturity to maturity:

> When I left my house I was the standard teenager, arrogant. Like, oh, I'm so bad, I don't have to listen to anyone . . . my parents didn't really know if I was alive or dead . . . And when I came back around the five month mark, my back was straighter, I noticed . . . Like, I had matured.

Orion's story positioned becoming homeless as a way to reclaim the agency that he felt denied at home, where he took behavioral medication that made him feel like he was "dead inside," or at school, where his repeated placement in special education led him to believe they thought he "was stupid or something."

> They thought I was *broken* somehow and needed to be fixed . . . I put down my foot. I was like, no, if you don't put me in regular classes, I'm not going to school. And I quit taking meds. My dad gave me meds one morning, I just looked him in the face, I just went over to the sink and just went: (spits). Like, no, I'm not gonna do this anymore.

The recurrent theme of seeking agency emerged as central to Orion's story. "I felt free," Orion reflected when asked what it was like when he first went out on the streets, "I had no baggage. I had a backpack but no baggage."

Although the sense of belonging and enthusiasm for street life expressed by Orion was not shared by most interviewees, the desire to feel agentic and valued was. It is important to consider the function of such meaning-making. In constructing these positive contrasts between his past and present, Orion discursively distanced himself from the negative perceptions of others and the constraints of his economic situation and wove his own story of survival and transformation.

In addition to agency, the theme of *community belonging* featured prominently in Orion's narrative as key to his construction of a positive identity. When Orion became homeless, he explained, "I was basically sleeping under a bridge. And I was lost. Nowhere to go . . . no money, no food, no friends, no connections, no nothing . . ." This all changed when Scrap, a young fellow homeless man, took him under his wing.

> Scrap is the closest thing that I've had to a father in a long time. And he taught me everything, everything I know basically about the streets. And I was living with him in a homeless camp . . . It was like a communal squat, in the woods. And we took care of each other.

In his words, the homeless community in Seattle gave him a sense of belonging he had yet to find anywhere else: "It was as if I had found a new family. I found people that loved me for who I was." Orion resisted the dominant narrative that individuals experiencing homelessness are dangerous or immoral, commenting, "We think that, you know, nobody has money so they'll all be at each other's throats. No. You

know, people really do take good care of each other out here."

Coming outside and becoming embedded in this new community marked Orion's beginning of identifying as a "street kid." In his story, temporarily renouncing symbols of his past identity by leaving home, taking on a street name, and identifying with a street community presented itself as a way to recreate his identity. Narrative research suggests that a strong sense of in-group identification can foster resilience and enhance self-esteem, reframing a devalued social identity as a source of pride (Hammack, 2010b; see also Corrigall-Brown, Snow, Smith, & Quist, 2009; Smith, 2008; Stablein, 2011). Orion described entry into the homeless community and his identification with it as a high point in his life:

> The high point for me is probably about a year ago, summer of last year. That's when I first came out and that's when I was really hanging out. I was getting to know everybody like on the streets, like the people who have been here for years—who not to cross, who's cool to chill with . . . I guess it would be during my time on the stage. The stage is the local hangout spot for all the street kids and the travelers in the area. They all converge on the stage.

Orion's use of the phrase "coming out," which arose several times during the interview, suggests an appropriation of the "struggle and success" narrative used by same-sex attracted youth characterized by a sense of identification and pride (see Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009). This appropriation reveals the psychological significance of homelessness as a social identity for some homeless youth like Orion.

Although Orion's narrative initially highlights the positive role of the homeless community, he noted that this community affiliation had its destructive side. Despite the sense of belonging he experienced in Seattle's homeless community, he narrated, "It makes homelessness sticky in a way. Like, you come out and you have the drive to get yourself off the streets, you have the drive to get yourself a job, to be making your own money. And the [street] takes that away." Orion recognizes that, although identity and community provide a source of strength for him, they may also challenge his desire for eventual economic success.

Like Alejandro and Melanie, Orion's story reveals the power of personal narrative con-

struction to provide a sense of meaning and coherence in the midst of adversity (Cohler, 1991). In this narrative, Orion makes meaning of the social and psychological challenges he experienced using the language of redemption and resists stigmatizing narratives which cast him as "stupid" or "broken." However, Orion's narrative was unique in this study in its explicit framing of homelessness as a positive social identity with an accompanying community. Hence his narrative reveals the way in which some homeless youth may find meaning and coherence through identification with the larger community of homeless youth.

## Lincoln's Story: "I Don't Have Anything to Be Ashamed Of"

Lincoln grew up as the oldest of nine children in an unstable household struggling with poverty, moving almost every year. He described his mother's marriage to his stepfather as a particularly low point in his life: "He came in like fucking Castro and shit, and like, made my house Cuba and shit, and my life was turned into hell. It was horrible." This evocative metaphor of tyranny illustrates Lincoln's perceived lack of agency and his framing of the conditions of his home life as oppressive and unjust. He mourned an absence of normalcy and stability:

> I was sad I couldn't be some average kid . . . I don't have a cell phone, I don't have money . . . I don't have anyone to cut my hair . . . and I didn't have money for clothes. I walked around with scraggly clothes with tatters at the bottom, like shoes that had holes in them. You have to do this every day for most of your life. You can't really be outgoing with people, because they judge you and they say stuff.

Lincoln's story also illustrates the role of agency in narrating a story of transformation. When the degree of instability and conflict with his family became unbearable, he explained,

> I jumped out a two-story window. I was like, I constantly have to deal with this, and I don't want to deal with this for the rest of my life . . . I was like, fuck this. I don't have to deal with this. . . . Freedom is right there, and you have to take it. It's your choice, you can stay here, like you can stay here forever, but I'm not gonna stay here.

Lincoln's narrative suggests that he makes meaning of homelessness by contrasting it positively with his oppressive situation at home. In doing so, he draws from the redemptive lan-

guage of "emancipation," which progresses from captivity and domination to freedom (McAdams, 2006). This story highlights the desire that many participants expressed to have some say in what happens in their lives, even when very few options exist (see also Parsell & Parsell, 2012).

After leaving home, Lincoln worked hard to express a positive self-image by constructing a story in which adversity is essential for growth. According to McAdams (1996), this enables "the suffering person to exert a form of narrative control over daunting personal challenges" (p. 32). Again, he uses the language of redemption:

> People still say I'm different but it doesn't affect me that much anymore . . . Even here [at the shelter] they say I'm different . . . They talk a certain way and I don't talk the same way . . . And you look different from us. Maybe I still look like crap but I stood out a lot—it's okay, you look different, you're going to do something in life. That's what you like. They could always see that under all the horribleness, under the shaggy hair and horrible clothing and tatters.

Through narrative, Lincoln is able to transform his difficult experiences and sense of differentness into something positive and unique: "I had to go through 18 years of bullshit for a reason just to be here, to be successful."

As in the other three cases presented here, Lincoln was forced to grapple with stigmatizing social perceptions in narrating a sense of self. For Lincoln, this stigma was experienced as loneliness. He identified being different as the hardest thing he faced with his classmates: "They make fun of you and you can't defend yourself, and it goes on and you go through life and you don't know what to say to people. I think you just close in on yourself a little bit." Lincoln coped with this social exclusion by locating this differentness outside the realm of his control: "If you don't have the tools to do something, you can't do it, can you?," going on to reiterate, "It's not something that can be blamed on me." By consistently identifying external constraints responsible for his poverty, Lincoln resists internalizing fault: "I don't have anything to be ashamed of. No, it's not your fault."

Lincoln expressed resentment toward narratives that associated poverty and homelessness with delinquency and criminality. He described confronting a suspicious supervisor who wrong-fully accused him of dealing drugs when he had actually been visiting his grandmother: "I told him, that's not cool . . . you think I'm going to sell drugs and shit. You think I live in a bad neighborhood, selling drugs." One way that he resisted these stigmatizing perceptions was through his formal attire, wearing a tie and suspenders every day. "[My mom] always thought I was doing something I wasn't supposed to be doing . . . She thinks I'm selling drugs. I mean, *really*? Because of course, every drug dealer outside wears a tie and stuff," he said sarcastically. "Crack? Don't get it on my suit."

What allowed Lincoln to resist dominant storylines that portray him as delinquent or incompetent was the ability to nurture an alternative vision of social reality, one that recognized him as he sees himself: successful, worthwhile, unique. His resistance manifested itself as hope: "Deep down I always knew there was something that was going to happen . . . I always had a little, tiny hope, and if you have the tiniest bit of hope it goes so far. It's like a mustard seed of faith." "Faith in what?," the interviewer asked him. "Faith in change," he responded instantly. "Faith that I can get out of this situation."

## Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore how unhoused youth construct their identities and make meaning of their experiences as they navigate economic injustice and the cultural stigma associated with homelessness. A narrative approach is particularly valuable to address this question, because it provides an analytic space in which the voice of the subordinate is preserved and represented. Our analysis revealed some of the ways by which youth experiencing homelessness make sense of their economic circumstances and stigmatized identity status.

Each of the narratives examined in this article revealed themes of struggle and loss, whether from domestic violence, instability, or material hardship, which often meant going without adequate shelter, food, clothing, and resources. These stories reveal the likely impact of poverty on these young adults' families, peers, and their own educational outcomes, and they reveal the injustice of the structural constraints they have faced and continue to face. Making sense of these circumstances was made all the more dif-

ficult by the awareness of stigmatizing social perceptions that hold youth personally responsible for their plight—perceptions of homeless youth as unmotivated (as in Alejandro's narrative), drug dealers (as in Lincoln's narrative), unruly (as in Melanie's narrative), or broken (as in Orion's narrative). Nevertheless, rather than passively adopt a devalued sense of self, the youth in this study actively struggled to find self-worth, community, and even hope in the margins.

These youth refused to be solely defined by their circumstances, their trauma, their poverty, and their past, as highlighted in Melanie's poignant statement: "You gotta make it clear to yourself there is a difference between then and now . . . if you wanna make things better than they were in your past." Thus, participants resisted contamination from the disruptive and traumatic situations they experienced by constructing stories of redemption (McAdams, 1996), grounded in a sense of agency. The young people in this study used narrative to achieve a sense of control over the meaning of their stories and their identities, constructing negative experiences as indicators of their ability to survive and become adults in spite of, and perhaps because of, the adversity they have faced. In their transition to adulthood, they have become disillusioned with the hypocrisy of the existing power structure—whether symbolized by their parents or the state—that devalues them and fails to recognize their competence. Their narratives suggest that they believe in their own ability to create something better. The implication is that, in spite of formidable structural disadvantage, many homeless youth find agency in their ability to question the status quo and construct a narrative of resistance to the hegemony of stigmatizing narratives. They establish value on their own terms and assert their own authority and deservingness.

A critical question in this research centered on how individuals who inhabit marginalized social identities make meaning of their subordinate status and engage with the dominant discourses that seek to maintain their subordination. The exemplars presented in this article suggest two major critiques of stigmatizing discourses about homeless youth. First, they point to the existence of inequality and structural barriers, which undermine the stereotype of unhoused youth as deviant, dangerous, or crimi-

nal. Participants subverted the claim that poverty is the result of individual fault or failure, arguing, as Alejandro did, "We're not bad people, but we're in this bad situation so long." Lincoln similarly rejected this perception: "I don't have anything to be ashamed of . . . . It's not something that can be blamed on me."

Second, they point to the importance of agency, which contradicts the stereotype of homeless youth as passive victims of circumstance, in need of treatment and regulation. This was evident in Orion's narrative, in which he rejected the perception that he "was stupid" or "*broken* somehow and needed to be fixed." Alejandro lamented that this model, which he encountered from various service providers, did not recognize the variability and competence of homeless youth: "They generalize it into thinking everybody's bad, or they don't know how to do anything. Like these kids aren't gonna do shit." Although the stories of these youth did not deny their vulnerability or risk, they revealed a desire to be recognized as adults with credibility and agency.

The lived experiences of the youth interviewed for this study resonate with observations that homelessness has increasingly been understood through the lens of criminalization (Amster, 2003; Ferrell, 1997; Gaetz, 2004; Kidd, 2012) and medicalization (Bessant, 2001; Kidd, 2012; Lyon-Callo, 2000; Soss, 2005; Snow, Anderson, & Koegel, 1994; Wasserman & Clair, 2011), encountering master narratives that frame homeless youth predominantly as either *criminals*—at fault—or *clients*—at risk. Our data suggest that neither the criminal nor client narratives told *about* homeless youth are aligned with the reality and diversity of the narratives told *by* homeless youth, who may see their circumstances, needs, and assets quite differently. This research advocates for the need to conceptualize homeless youth as valuable sources of insight into the structural barriers they face and the strategies they use to survive, and to engage with youth as partners in creating social change.

There are several alternative interpretations of the present data that bear mentioning. Social psychological research has shown that individuals, even those who belong to oppressed groups, have a tendency to uphold system justifying ideology and deny personal disadvantage (Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O'Connell, &

Whalen, 1989; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Other scholars have shown that length of time on the street is negatively related to self-perception, suggesting that the positive framing in these stories could be attributed to the participants' youth (Boydell et al., 2000). Alternatively, it is possible that any other way of telling the story would be too demoralizing to carry on (Benight & Bandura, 2004). We argue, however, that dismissing these stories as products of false consciousness or naïveté risks robbing these youth of the very agency that they have fought so hard to claim. Not being heard was arguably one of the most painful and difficult obstacles that these youth faced. Thus, it seems important to let these stories speak for themselves. The issue is not whether narratives of youth reflect some "true" reality. Rather, consistent with the interpretive philosophy underpinning narrative theory (Bruner, 1990), narrative represents a tool through which individuals make meaning of adversity (Cohler, 1982, 1991). Future research might focus further on the active agency of youth experiencing homelessness and their use of narrative as a liberatory resource (Rappaport, 2000).

Our study offers a window into the processes of counternarration undertaken by members of a subordinate group, contributing to the growing number of narrative studies addressing issues of marginalization and the meaning of social categorization (e.g., Fivush, 2010; Hammack & Cohler, 2011). The study was limited by its reliance on homeless youth as volunteer participants who were engaged with institutional services in some way. Hence the agency and optimism revealed in their counternarratives might be unique to homeless youth who seek services. Future research with larger and more diverse populations of homeless youth is needed to provide further insight into the narrative identity development of members of this socially marginalized population.

In spite of these limitations, the narrative data examined in this study reveal valuable insight to bear on the meaning that homeless youth make of their situation. As they engage with master narratives, participants in this study actively resist stigma and contamination and construct narratives characterized by redemption and agency. In doing so, youth offer a counter story

that affirms their knowledge, experience, and identities as valuable.

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# Appendix

## Interview Guide

*Thank you so much for volunteering to participate in this interview. I believe that you are the expert of your own experiences and that only you can tell your story. I appreciate you taking the time to share your insight on homelessness.*

### Getting Started

- Are you from Chicago/Seattle originally?
    - *If yes:* what neighborhood are you from?
    - *If no:* what city/state are you from?
  - How did you end up here?
  - What do you think of it here?

### Timeline

- Before we go into more detailed questions, could you give me a brief timeline of your life up to this point?
  - What was a high point in your life?
  - What was a low point in your life?
  - What was a turning point in your life, when things really changed?

### Home

- How long have you been living at/coming to this center?
  - What do you think of it here?
- Would you mind if I asked you to tell me a story about your home?
  - What was it like growing up in your home?
  - What were the reasons that led to your leaving home?

  - Do you feel that it was your choice to leave home?
- Can you tell me a story that happened to you after leaving home and before coming to live here?
- How have things changed since you left?
  - How have you changed?
  - Were there any turning points?

### Education

- When you think of school, what comes to mind?
- What do you remember most about school from when you were young?
- Can you tell me a story about a positive experience at school?
- Can you tell me a story about a negative experience at school?
- Are you still enrolled in school?
  - For what reasons did you stay/leave?
  - What would have had to change for you to stay? Do you ever regret leaving?
- What does your family think about school?
  - What were their expectations for you?
- What do you think were the hardest things about going to school?
- If you could change anything about school, what would you change?
- Did you have a particular group of friends at school?
  - *If yes:* Can you tell me about them?
  - *If no:* Why is that? Did you have a particular group of friends outside of school?

(*Appendix continues*)

## Belonging

- Outside of school, what groups would you say you belong to?
  - What community are you a part of?
  - What holds your community together?
  - What do you have in common?
- Can you tell me a story about a time that someone hurt your feelings, was not there for you, or did not help you?
- Can you tell me a story about a time when someone was there for you or helped you?
- Can you describe a time and place when you felt a sense of belonging?

## Self Perception

- Can you tell me a story about what your future might look like?
- If you could change three things in your life, what would it be?
  - Do you feel like those things are possible? What would you need to pursue those changes?
- What are three things that you like about yourself or your life?

## Ideology

- In your words, what does it mean to be successful?
- What does it mean to live a good life?
- What does being an American mean to you?
- How would you describe your religious or spiritual beliefs?
- How do you describe your political identity?
- What values are most important to you?

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