STORIES FROM DANIEL'S DEN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTIVE SENSE-

MAKING OF HOMELESS LIFE IN A HOMELESS SELF-HELP GROUP

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld…one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

Albert Camus (1999 [1943]) in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

To be homeless in America is to be consumed by the struggle to survive without respite. Like a boulder of Sisyphean proportions, oppressive social structures not only confront homeless Americans as an obdurate reality, but force them to impute meaning to a seemingly non-sensical set of life-circumstances. In other words, unhoused individuals who have fallen through the cracks of the conventional status structure are plagued not only with the material problems of subsistence, but also must make sense of their existential problems in living. As they are daily reminded in their contacts with the domiciled of their debased, subordinate positions within the social hierarchy, homeless Americans must adopt mechanisms for both dealing with and understanding symbolic (and sometimes material) attacks on their social selves and physical bodies.

One of the most effective mechanisms for finding meaning within the context of an anomic void is the narration of salient problems in living. As Polletta (1998) notes, humans have a "tendency to tell stories to make intelligible what is strange and potentially disturbing" (422). It is hard to imagine a social status more rife with strange, unintelligible, and bothersome circumstances than that occupied by a homeless

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individual. Thus, the self-narratives homeless people tell provide a window upon the ways in which they make sense of their life circumstances.

Only two previous scholarly works have addressed homeless people's narrative constructions (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1993). However, Snow and Anderson's (1987, 1993) analyses focus on individual narratives constructed by homeless people in the context of a researcher-interviewee context. Thus, nothing is known about the ways in which homeless individuals collaborate to learn, share, create, and tell stories about themselves and the nature of their respective life circumstances outside of an interview context. Furthermore, we know nothing about the ways in which homeless individuals make sense of the conventional status system which casts a dark shadow over their daily life-patterns. That is, no scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which homeless Americans collectively diagnose their oppressive life circumstances via the construction of self-narratives.

One way to fill in a portion of this research lacuna is to analyze the collaborative construction of homeless self-narratives within a group context. Therefore, in this article I will explore the manner in which homeless and formerly homeless members of Daniel's Den, a homeless self-help group, collaboratively construct self-narratives pertaining to the nature, causes, and grievances of homeless life. It should be noted, however, that the collaborative construction of self-narratives in a self-help group context might dramatically differ from the collaborative construction of self-narratives in a less structured group setting (e.g., a clique of homeless people who daily convene in a public park), given the presence of an implicit or explicit group ideology that inhere in self-help groups (Katz 1993). Given the implications of self-help group ideology with respect to

the collaborative construction of homeless self-narratives, it proves useful to take a brief but closer look at the theoretical intersection between the construction of self-narratives and the narrative structures of self-help groups.

Review of the Literature

Self-help Groups, Self-narratives, and Subcultural Narrative Models

The particular ideological structure of a given self-help group tends to dictate the acceptable parameters of self-narratives insofar as it provides group members with a ready-made framework for answering the question: "How should we live?" That is, the ideological perspective of a self-help group provides group members with a source of cohesion, force, and conviction when dealing with respective problems in living (Gartner and Riessman 1984) by "attach[ing] names to diseases and writ[ing] prescriptions for curing them" (Wolkomir 2001: 331). These ideologies tend not to be pulled from "professional" sources of knowledge. Rather, in the overwhelming majority of self-help groups, there is an emphasis on "experiential knowledge," that is, "commonsense wisdom of people's problems as an alternative or supplement to professional knowledge" (Taylor 1996: 19).

Self-narratives, in general, plot the type of moral agent the narrator considers him- or herself to be insofar as they reveal fundamental value distinctions in his or her current life situation (Davis 2002). Kerby (1991) argues that this is accomplished "by selectively plotting only those actions relevant or tributary to central purposes" (56). These self-narratives, however, are not "free fictions," but are fundamentally shaped by one's "web of interlocution" (Taylor 1989), which can be usefully conceived as a group-specific

variation of Mead's (1962) "generalized other."[1] That is, "acceptable" stories are context-specific; they are dictated by the limited stock of plot lines available both in an individual's "web of interlocution" and in the larger societal context within which this web is situated (Polletta 1998). Thus, the social process of narrating salient exigencies in one's life (i.e., "biographical work") is simultaneously enabled and constrained by one's story-telling context (Davis 2002; Polletta 1998; Rice 1995, 2002; Taylor 1989). In essence, cultural models shape the manner in which one tells his or her story.

A "subcultural narrative model" is one manifestation of the above-described phenomenon, and has been found to be present in self-help groups (Pollner and Stein 2001; Rice 1995, 2002). This concept is best defined as a "specific ideological structure framed by institutions and collective actors to embody particular ideals, anticipate a new order, and organize individual self-narratives" (Davis 2002: 23). In several instances, scholars have exposed the workings of a subcultural narrative model (Nolan 2002; Pollner and Stein 2001; Rice 1995, 2002).

In his studies of Co Dependents Anonymous, Rice (1995, 2002) articulates the manner in which group newcomers are exhorted to "get their histories straight." In other words, if individuals sought continued access to group members, they had to conduct "biographical work" by making their personal biographies congruent with the explicit group ideology conveyed through the subcultural narrative model. Similarly, Pollner and Stein (2001) articulated the manner in which Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members reinforced the construction of the "alcoholic self" through the use of self-deprecating,

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[1] I consider this a group-specific form of Mead's (1962) "generalized other" rather than a version of the "game" stage because within the context of a "focused encounter" (Goffman 1961b), the group constitutes a microcosm of society. That is, when one attends a self-help meeting, others present stand to constitute a troubled group member's entire social world.

comedic self-narratives. These narratives of self-deprecation were found to both reinforce AA's explicit ideology and to subtly control newcomer's self-narratives that did not yet fit within the totalizing ideological structure of AA. Denzin (1993) has found a dynamic similar to that of a subcultural narrative model with his analysis of AA, which he refers to as "interpretive structures." However, this concept differs from a subcultural narrative model given its phenomenological[2], rather than rhetorical[3] thrust. In a slightly different vein, in his analysis of the American Drug Court Movement, Nolan (2002) exposed the manner in which those on trial must formulate an "acceptable story" in order to confer the benefits bestowed by the Drug Courts. Scholars of the New Age Movement (Brown 2002; Hetherington 1996) have also uncovered the presence of subcultural narrative models that paradoxically encourage self-reflexivity and the repudiation of self-constraint, rather than the conformity exhorted by other manifestations of subcultural narrative models.

While scholars have shown how a subcultural narrative model (and the ideology of which it consists) sets the parameters for the narration of a collaboratively constructed "acceptable" story, no one has yet considered the implications that a subcultural narrative model might have for the collaboratively constructed self-narratives pertaining to the nature, causes, and grievances of homeless life. Nor has any researcher created a typology of interactive strategies self-help group veterans use to impart a subcultural narrative model to group newcomers. Furthermore, no previous scholar has considered the empowering potential of homeless self-narratives told within the context of a self-help group.

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[2] Phenomenology refers to the study of structures of experience via a cognitive focus.
[3] Narrative analysis focuses on the rhetorical elements of human sense-making. In so doing, a narrative analyst can study human experience via scrutiny of the specific constructions of a given narrative.

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In fact, the term "empowerment," as applied to self-help groups, is more or less uncritically utilized and remains understudied and underspecified (Davis 2002; Giddens 1991; Rice 1995, 2002; Taylor 1996). Taylor's (1996) following assertion, however, can be read as exemplary of the most common argument: "Few would deny that the community-building and positive identities offered by self-help groups, combined with the knowledge and skills associated with their 'do it yourself' attitude, are a source of individual and collective empowerment" (20).

However, it is precisely the implication of this "do it yourself" attitude held by all self-help groups (Katz 1993) that seems problematic for questions of "empowerment" with respect to a homeless self-help group—whether at the individual or collective level. That is, all previous studies of self-help groups from the new social movement perspective[4] (Giddens 1991; Rice 1995, 2002; Taylor 1996) have focused on groups with predominantly middle class constituencies. Unlike the bulk of members who attend more "mainstream" self-help groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, etc) the homeless members of a homeless self-help group are oppressed by social structures to a degree the members of these predominantly middle class groups likely cannot imagine. When homeless people are the members of a support group, the agenda of the "movement" is likely not the same as for other similar self-help groups. In other words, for middle class constituencies the imperatives of survival are not

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[4] New social movement theories emphasize culture's role in movement formations insofar as it shapes collective symbolization and identification (Buechler 1997, 2000; Larana, Johnston, and Gusfield 1997; Melucci 1989). Quite recently, do to the "cultural turn" in the sociological subfield of social movements, some scholars have begun to focus on social phenomena traditionally deemed too individualistic for academic scrutiny. Self-help groups are one social phenomenon on the American social landscape that a handful of social movement scholars have begun to analyze. Given the novelty of such self-help group analyses, it is not surprising that the few studies that exist focus on more conventional, 12-step style groups.

as intricately linked to the manner in which one defines his or her social status in the context of a self-help group.

Self-help Groups and Homeless People's Self-narratives

The preceding discussion leads one to question the implications of the previously found self-help group mechanisms (Davis 2002; Rice 1995, 2002; Pollner and Stein 2001; Taylor 1996) with respect to the collective construction of homeless self-narratives. That is, the intersection of the three research lacunae expressed in the above sections is of profound importance for the analysis of a homeless self-help group insofar as self-narratives of the resistant variety have subversive potential (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Polletta 1998, 2002) that could potentially foment collective action by homeless individuals. As Ewick and Silbey (2003) aptly argue: "[resistant narratives] reveal the tellers' consciousness of how opportunities and constraints are embedded in the normally taken for granted structures of social action. Moreover, the stories make claims not just about the structures of social action and the possibility of resistance but also about the justice and morality of resistance to authority" (1331). The subversive potential of self-narratives told within the context of a self-help group lies partly in the necessity of being in continuous dialogue with others who have encountered similar experiences and who feel a similar need to tell their stories. Thus, the continuous exchange of stories and their consequent moral claims stand to enmesh such practices of resistance in commonly available narrative sources (e.g., stock plot lines for understanding respective problems in living).

However, there are discursive features of narrative that make it prone to reproduce hegemonic understandings of respective life-circumstances (Polletta 1998).

Polletta (1998) argues that "narrative's dependence on a limited stock of possible story lines foregrounds the constraints levied by extant cultural understandings…stories not conforming to a cultural stock of plots typically are either not stories or are unintelligible" (424). Thus, "narratives may serve to contain the disruptive within a familiar form" (Polletta 1998: 422). In essence, resistant narratives and the consequent action that might result from them stand to be constrained by hegemonic story lines. Insofar as stories must be intelligible, narratives tend to be shoe-horned into stock plot lines. To do otherwise might render the narrative exercise meaningless to one's audience. Furthermore, a self-help group's subcultural narrative model could perform this "containment" function that Polletta (1998) articulates. Interestingly, no previous scholar has considered this possible link.

In light of the above discussion and the intersecting research lacunae I have delineated, I seek to explore answers to the following questions in this article: How do homeless individuals collectively make sense of their respective problems in living in the context of a self-help group? Of what does the sense-making apparatus consist in a homeless self-help group, and what are the interactive strategies group veterans use to impart this apparatus to group newcomers? More specifically, how does the group ideology impact the construction of self-narratives within this group context? How might resistant narratives be constrained by a group ideology that is imparted to its members via subcultural narrative model? Does the group ideology "empower" its members to overcome salient exigencies in homeless life? If so, in what ways does the group ideology empower its members?

CHAPTER II

DATA AND METHOD

In order to explore the aforementioned research questions, I conducted an 11-month case study of a homeless self-help group. I began the study in September 2004 and withdrew from the field in August 2005. Insofar as the group constitutes the case, all who attended the meetings were part of the sample. Since access to this group is quite exclusive, it might be more accurate to state that my sampling of this particular case was facilitated by a variation of snowball sampling.

That is, I have spent a considerable amount of time conducting participant observation in a downtown park frequented by homeless individuals. One day in September I struck up a conversation with a park inhabitant. We spoke for nearly three hours about various issues, most of which centered on homeless life. As our discussion concluded she told me of a group she attended every week called "Daniel's Den." She invited me to attend and I readily accepted her invitation. Therefore, this homeless individual acted as my sponsor, thereby facilitating my rapport with the group. Without her introducing me to this relatively hidden group of her like others this study would not have been possible.

Each Tuesday from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. an average of 21 homeless, formerly homeless, and never-homeless individuals convene in an approximately 400 square foot room located in a downtown church in order discuss problems in homeless living. This group has been in existence for just over four years. While its membership composition at

any meeting changes, a core of nine members[5] is present regularly. Additionally, the

group consists of five quasi-core members[6] and ten revolving members[7]. The remaining

group constituency consists of homeless individuals who attend one or two meetings,

never to return.

Table 1: Race, Gender, and Housing Status, by Group Membership Status

	Core		Quasi-Core		Revolving		Total	
Group Membership Status								
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Gender								
Male	78	7	60	3	80	8	75	18
Female	22	2	40	2	20	2	25	6
Total	100	9	100	5	100	10	100	24
Race								
Black	78	7	80	4	80	8	79	19
White	22	2	20	1	20	2	21	5
Total	100	9	100	5	100	10	100	24
Housing Status								
Homeless	33	3	100	5	90	9	71	17
Formerly Homeless	56	5	0	0	0	0	21	5
Never Homeless	11	1	0	0	10	1	8	2
Total	100	9	100	5	100	10	100	24

Table 1 provides a descriptive overview of race, gender, and housing status by

group membership status. Two of the nine core members were white women (22%).

Seven of the core members were African American males (78%). Three of the five quasi-

core members were African American males (60%), while the remaining quasi-core

members consisted of a white woman (20%) and an African American woman (20%).

Eight of the ten revolving members were male (80%). Of these males six were African

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[5] "Core group" membership is defined as regular participation in the group for one or more years.
[6] "Quasi-core group" membership is defined as regular participation for at least four months.
[7] "Revolving group" membership is defined as participation in the group meetings on at least a bi-weekly basis.

American (75%) and two were white (25%). The two female revolving members were both African American. Of these 24 group members (i.e., core, quasi-core, and revolving members in the aggregate), two were non-homeless (8%), five were formerly homeless (21%), and the remaining seventeen (71%) were homeless. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of group attendees that did not fit into core, quasi-core, or revolving member statuses, were homeless. Of the 36 individuals that I observed attend only one or two group meetings, 34 (94%) were homeless.

I collected the data by using two mutually constitutive methods—informal interviewing and participant observation. Participant observation allowed me to study the collaborative constructions of homeless people's self-narratives *in situ.* That is, by becoming an active group member, I was able to observe relatively concrete interactions of homeless persons within this relational web. Over the course of 11 months I attended 45 group meetings and conducted 30 non-participant observations in the soup kitchen adjacent to the room in which the group meetings were held. Additionally, I attended five "leadership meetings," where core members discussed administrative issues mainly centered on funding with respect to the group. On numerous occasions I "hung out" with various group attendees after the group meetings. Also, I have been conducting participant observation in South City areas frequented by homeless individuals (e.g., public parks, homeless shelters, the public library, and prime panhandling locations) for the past two years. As such, in these locations, I ran into many homeless individuals who had attended group meetings. As my research questions developed, if I ran into such individuals, I would take the opportunity to ask them questions to clarify my hunches.

These participant observations guided my informal interviewing, which allowed for the subtle clarification of research questions. I interviewed 6 of the 9 core group members. The interview schedule was semi-structured by evolving research questions, but I also left the participants free to speak about whatever they wished. On average, these interviews lasted 30 minutes and were conducted at a time and place determined by the participant. Also, I would engage group members (veterans and neophytes alike) in informal conversation in order to clarify research questions that developed throughout the course of the study.

I recorded the behavior and conversations of group members via mental and jotted notes in the field, note jotting being used most prevalently. Openly jotted notes were most often taken in an "off-phase" manner (Goffman 2001), thereby reducing the ability of members to correlate their actions with data recording. Immediately upon returning home from the field, I transcribed these raw notes into narrative form, thereby producing detailed field notes.

The field notes were uploaded into Atlas-ti 5.0., a software package that allows for the analysis of qualitative data (i.e., text, graphics, audio). I analyzed the field notes according to the basic tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), but I explicitly utilized the constructivist version of grounded theory (Charmaz 2003; Emerson 2001). Grounded theory methods aid a qualitative researcher in four basic ways: (1) they help the researcher study social processes, (2) they help direct data collection, (3) they help manage data analysis, (4) they aid in the development of abstract theoretical frameworks that explain the social processes being studied (Charmaz 2003; Glaser & Strauss 1967). All versions of grounded theory include strategies for: (1) the simultaneous collection and

analysis of data, (2) ongoing analysis of data in pursuit of themes, (3) the inductive

construction of categories that explain and synthesize social processes, (4) sampling in

order to refine categories via comparative processes, and (5) the integration of the

constructed categories into a theoretical framework that elucidates the causes, conditions,

and consequences of the processes being studied (Charmaz 2003; Emerson et al. 1995).

Rather than conceptualizing the data as "real," hard, and obdurate—as is done

with objectivist grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967)—constructivist grounded

theory conceptualizes data and analysis as the product of shared experiences

between/among the researcher and participant(s) (Charmaz 2003; Emerson et al. 1995).

Equally important in shaping data and analysis is the researcher's relationship(s) with the

participant(s) (Charmaz 2003; Emerson et al. 1995).

This is an important consideration given the class (and race) disparity between me

and these homeless and formerly homeless individuals. That is, my "outsider" status

likely allowed me to notice social phenomena that an "insider" would merely take for

granted. However, insofar as I have never been homeless, and can only imagine the life

difficulties my participants confront on a daily basis, I can hardly claim to have full

access to their inner worlds by studying their statements and behaviors. Furthermore, in

utilizing constructivist grounded theory, I have to acknowledge the theoretical biases I

have brought to bear on the data. I hardly approached the data tabula rasa. Rather, I have

been steeped in the symbolic interactionist and conflict paradigms, and thus tend to see

much of society in these terms. These theoretical orientations likely shaped what I found

worth recording, and shaped what I focused on when analyzing the data. Consequently, I

conceive the grounded theory method as a means to formulating sociological theory, as opposed to an end.

In essence, the goals of constructivist grounded theory are to study the manner in which participants construct meanings and actions. As such, data analysis is a social construction of knowledge, which both reflects the researcher's thinking and is embedded within a particular time period, physical location, and culture (Charmaz 2003). Theory does not "emerge" (as argued by Glaser and Strauss 1967) from the data, but is constructed from data, which is itself a social construction.

I analyzed the content of the field notes according to the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2003). More specifically, I analyzed the content of both newcomers' self-narratives and those of core group, quasi-core group, and revolving members. Therefore, a brief discussion of the main components in self-narratives is in order. Narratives consist of three main components, all of which are interconnected: (1) Emplotment, (2) Valued Endpoint, and (3) Characters (Davis 2002; Ewick and Silbey 2003; Maines 1993). I will briefly discuss these components in order.

First, all narratives account for how a specific configuration of events culminated in one salient event. That is, constituent of every story is a folk "sociology" that accounts for the organization of social life (Ewick and Silbey 2003). Emplotment refers to the process whereby the storyteller imparts "the logic that makes meaningful the events that precede the story's conclusion….As a logic linking events, plot is both heuristic and normative, since the end of the story is also its 'end' in the sense of purpose or telos" (Polletta 1998: 421). Put differently, emplotment attributes causality to otherwise disparate events (Davis 2002; Kerby 1991; White 1980).

Hayden White (1980) aptly notes, "every fully realized story is a kind of allegory, points to a moral, or endows events, whether real or imaginary, with a significance that they do not possess as mere sequence…[Thus, every] narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats" (18; emphasis in original). In more simple terms, all narratives contain a "moral" or "valued endpoint." A narrative's valued endpoint relates to its plot insofar as it is the valued endpoint that guides the narrator's selection and evaluation (i.e., "evaluation structure") of the events she or he chooses to emplot. Additionally, most narratives contain characters that perform a specific function with respect to the narrative's plot. These story agents are not arbitrary byproducts of the story's emplotment, but are meant to be received and interpreted in a specific way by the respective audience (Davis 2002; Ewick and Silbey 2003; Polkinghorne 1988; Polletta 1998).

There are at least three ways the social scientist may utilize narrative analysis in their work, none of which are mutually exclusive: (1) as an "object of inquiry"; (2) as a "method of inquiry"; and (3) as a "product of inquiry" (Ewick and Silbey 1995). This first use of narrative refers to the academic scrutiny of the actual storytelling practice; one might pay attention to the interactive context of narrations and the respective norms, mores, and sanctions present in such a context (Ewick and Silbey 1995), or one might analyze an historical narrative in an attempt to derive a causal interpretation through a rigorous sequence of asking factual and counter-factual questions of the narrative (See Griffin 1993). The second use of narrative refers to the way in which narratives can serve as a portal through which other sociologically significant phenomena can be accessed. For instance, the researcher stands to gain an in-depth understanding of participants'

oppression by virtue of their class status upon analyzing the ways in which respondents narrativize particular incidences that relate to their respective place within the American status hierarchy. The third use of narrative actually refers to the researcher's final product (e.g., a presentation, an article, a book, etc.). Given the nature of the above research questions, I will use narrative as a "method of inquiry," and will also pay close attention to the actual storytelling practice within this self-help group.

In the course of data analysis, I became alerted to the differential capacity of core group members to shape the construction of group discourse. As I placed the data under increased scrutiny, I began to notice that not only were core members sending similar messages to group newcomers, but that the content of the newcomers' self-narratives to which these core members would respond all had similar content. Many newcomers' self-narratives placed external attributions on their respective problems in living. However, core members quickly sanctioned such newcomer narratives, extolling neophytes to place internal attributions on their respective problems in homeless living. Throughout the remainder of this article, I will present findings that convey the process through which newcomers' self-narratives were socially controlled by core group members. I will conclude the article with both a discussion of this social control process and the implications it has for the resistant self-narratives told by group newcomers.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

A lot of times for us to get some peace we have to surrender to the anger, resentment, and fear. We have to ask ourselves, 'What part did I play?' There's a lot of things that we carry that we just don't have to carry.

                                        Juan (Core Member)

When group newcomers constructed self-narratives that diagnosed elements of social structures as oppressive (i.e., when they placed an external attribution on their problems in living), core group members quickly sanctioned them. Core members delivered these sanctions by imparting a subcultural narrative model (SNM) (Davis 2002) to neophytes via three interactive strategies: (1) *Doubling,* (2) *Looping,* and (3) *Direct Rebuke*. By taking a closer look at these interactive strategies, as well as both the SNM and the conditions under which it was delivered, we can gain access to the implicit ideology upon which this group operates.

Doubling refers to the process whereby the core member bifurcates his/her self. By offering a self-narrative that communicates what he or she "used to be like, what happened, and what things are like now," (Denzin 1993; Pollner and Stein 2001) the core member's story conveys the group's implicit ideology into which other group members' self-narratives are expected to fit. *Looping* (Goffman 1961a) consists of the process whereby core members reinterpret the "moral" or "valued endpoint" (Davis 2002) of neophytes' self-narratives. This process communicates to the neophyte that he or she is an inadequate judge of the life circumstances he or she is narrating. This subtle form of rebuke communicates to the novice narrator that he or she must recast his or her narrative

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within the parameters of the SNM. The third method core members use to impart the SNM, *Direct Rebuke*, is self-evident. When neophytes present self-narratives that cut against the grain of the group's implicit ideology, core members sometimes resort to this more overt type of social sanction.

Core members utilized these three tactics to impart five basic sub-themes (all of which are emic terms) that comprise the SNM: (1) *Quit Whining*, (2) *Self-Sufficiency*, (3) *Get Off Your Butt*, (4*) Selflessness*, and (5) *Look on the Bright Side*. Group newcomers, however, were far from naive receptacles of the SNM communicated to them by core group members. Rather, group neophytes tended to respond to the SNM of personal accountability in one of three ways: (1) *Narrative Congruence-Making,* (2) *Overt Resistance,* and (3) *Silent Resistance.* In the first type of response, group newcomers recast their stories within the parameters of the SNM. In the second type of response, group newcomers argued with the core member who sanctioned them in the context of the group meeting. In the third type of response, the group newcomer votes with his or her feet. That is, he or she simply does not return to subsequent group meetings. These newcomer reactions are important. By analyzing the ways in which group newcomers responded to core members' impartation of the SNM, we stand to throw this group's implicit ideology into sharper relief.

In the following section, I will show how core members of the group impart the five sub-themes comprising the implicit group ideology to group newcomers by using one or more of the three interactive strategies outlined above. Specifically, I will show that these interactive strategies are used to impart one of the five sub-themes only when newcomers' narratives focus on external rather than internal sources of their problems in

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living. The second part of this section will focus on the group newcomers' responses to the sanctions they receive when their self-narratives do not fit within the parameters of the SNM. I will then discuss the content of the ideology this SNM communicates to group newcomers. That is, by the end of this presentation of findings, it should become clear to the reader that the SNM communicates to the newcomers an implicit ideology centered on prescriptions of personal accountability for their problems in homeless living.

The Subcultural Narrative Model of Personal Accountability

Quit Whining

Core members imparted the "quit whining" sub-theme to group neophytes by utilizing two of the three interactive strategies outlined above—direct rebuke and looping. In the following interactive sequence, Tim, a newcomer is solicited to share an experience by the core group member who is chairing the meeting. As the interaction unfolds, it becomes apparent that Tim's narrative does not mesh with the implicit group ideology of personal accountability. Donnie imparts this message to Tim by directly rebuking him for sharing a personal story that does not fit within the parameters of group's SNM.

Donnie (core member, homeless): You're new. Do you have something you'd like to share with us?

Tim (newcomer, homeless): Uh, I've been homeless off and on for, uh, twelve years now in this city and other cities. Strung out on drugs, that's what got me started on it. Once a year I end up back out here again. I'm barred from the mission right now…

Donnie: How long are you barred from the mission?

Tim: Until I go kiss Greg's [the shelter manager] butt.

Slim (core member, formerly homeless): Tell 'em how you got barred.

Tim: Well, I got a seizure disorder. Um, and um, I'm supposed to get a bottom bunk. Greg has called the ambulance on me twice for having seizures. But, he insists that I bring a doctor's note every thirty days saying that I need a bottom bunk. And, um, I had gotten that doctor's note. In fact I've got one in my pocket right now. Um, but, um, I had only stayed at the mission for a couple of days…I did 43 days in jail, but I had only stayed at the mission two days. I came back and I was like 'Look I just got out of jail, come on Greg.' And any of you who know Greg, he's not the friendliest person in the world. Without using the expletives that were used, I was barred. We worked our way up to thirty days. It started off at three. I said 'Let's shoot for five.' He said 'ten?' I said, 'Sure, why not.' I called him a few names, he said he'd call the police. I said go ahead. So I just basically avoid that place. Because, I mean, it's a corrupt facility anyway."

Donnie: Look here Tim, this is not a gripe session. This is not the place where you talk about all the wrong stuff that's been done to you. We try to encourage each other and help each other ok? So, if you need some help, we'll help you. But all that whining and crying in your beer, this ain't that place ok?

Tim: I just think it's ridiculous that they know I have a seizure disorder.

Donnie: They still want you to bring a note?

Tim: As a matter of fact, Greg himself has called the ambulance twice. One time, I didn't want to go. He wouldn't let me stay at the mission unless I went with the ambulance.

Donnie: Yeah. But they gotta stay good with those people. If you don't go, they might not come again. You gotta understand that they have rules for a good reason. If you don't follow they rules, it's on you. You the one that gotta live with your decisions. They might get a reputation for being uncooperative, then someone might die.

Tim: Well, that's gonna be me if he puts me up on that top bunk. Those bunks, I've come off of them. It hurts. But I've seen a few people come off of them. I busted my nose good.

Donnie: Well, like I said, they have rules for a reason.

In the interaction displayed above, Tim shares with the group that he has been

barred from the rescue mission. Given the fact that the rescue mission to which Tim

refers is the only free homeless shelter in South City, his being barred has substantial life

consequences. Unless he can procure ten dollars a day to sleep in the local Salvation Army, he is most likely left only with the alternative of "sleeping rough."[8]

Given this context, it becomes clear that Tim is attempting to exert an autonomous self in his personal narrative. He emplots himself in his self-narrative as an empowered individual who pushes the boundaries of the rescue mission undaunted by the implications of being barred from the facility. Rather than passively accepting the rescue mission's rules, Tim confronts the embodiment of the rescue mission's structural imperatives—Greg. By positioning Greg as the antagonist in his self-narrative, Tim simultaneously evades responsibility for his being barred. In fact, the valued endpoint of his narration is that the shelter is "a corrupt facility anyway." However, Donnie, a core member, negatively sanctions Tim for his narration. Donnie takes issue with the "moral" of Tim's story—that the mission is corrupt. As such, Donnie exhorts Tim to abide by the rules of the mission, and if he fails to do so he is responsible for his hardship. Thus, Donnie communicates to Tim that he should take the perspective of those who run the mission when analyzing his situation.

In the following interaction, the newcomer Stan narrates a story where he is given a citation in a local park. After Stan tells his story, the core member Juan is quick to reinterpret Stan's valued endpoint (i.e., loop)—that the citation he received for "assault" was the result of class discrimination.

Juan (core member, formerly homeless): What's your name?

Stan (newcomer, homeless): I'm Stan.

Juan: How are you?

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[8] "Sleeping rough" refers to the phenomenon where one sleeps in a public space not designed for human habitation. For instance, many homeless individuals who do not sleep in homeless shelters sleep under interstate overpasses, in abandoned weed patches, on park benches, in parking garages, etc.

Stan: I'm not having a good Thanksgiving so far. Well, um, I don't know how many are aware but there was an incident over here at the park this Saturday.

Dave (core member, formerly homeless): Which park was it again?

Stan: The park across from the library. And, um, what happened was, there was this guy lurking in the bushes and he's got a camera and was taking pictures. He was taking pictures in the direction of Barbara. Barbara does feedings on Saturday afternoon. And, um, I approached this guy, and said, 'What's with the camera you know?' And he kind of backed off and started walking away. So I tapped him on the shoulder you know and said, 'Excuse me.' He said, 'Hey, hey, don't touch me.' I said this guy is really sensitive. And I said, 'What's going on, taking pictures, who are you?'

He just started walking away, just down the road beside [street name] there. So, I yelled out: 'Hey, does anybody know this guy?' And, you know, nobody said anything. You know, people drinking. Nobody really knew who he was. He just stopped there and started looking. I just tapped him on the shoulder and said 'Who are you?' He got out his cell phone right away and said, 'I'm calling the police right now.' I said, 'Fine, go call the police and we'll find out who you are and what you're doing essentially.'

So he got on the phone he's calling the police, they dispatch the police because it was a fight supposedly. I excused myself and went over to the library because I know the security people over there. I say, 'There's a problem going on in the park.' He said, 'Okay, I'll notify people here so we can intervene and do whatever.'

So I go outside and there's a police officer who told Barbara 'Leave this park now.' So I come out of the library cuz the police are here now. So Mr. Smith [the police officer] sees me and he puts his baton back on his side over here, and I'm walking toward him and he's walking toward me. And he was like, 'You turn around and put your hands behind your back.' So I thought I gotta do this otherwise it's resisting arrest. So I turn around and put my hands behind my back, and he handcuffed me and escorted me to the backseat of his squad car. And, uh, he went back out to talk to this guy who is the unidentified camera man. And, um, the cameraman signed the complaint. The police officer took my name, all my information and um, I said, 'All I wanna know is who the guy is.' He says, 'This guy wants to press charges on you for assault.' And I say, 'Assault? I didn't assault him.' He says, 'Well, he's pressing charges.' So, I get the citation. I gotta go get booked by next Tuesday. Of course, this incident happened on a Saturday. I'm tired of the city discriminating against the homeless. This is just one example. We need to do something about discrimination against the homeless.

Juan: Well, I think we get a picture of what you're saying. Some people are very picky about putting your hands on them.

Johnny (newcomer, homeless): What did the cop say that you were getting arrested for?

Stan: Assault.

Juan: He did it twice. He said 'Don't touch me' and you did it again. I sympathize with
you. It's just one of those things that happens. You probably scared him too. You
gotta be careful when you dealing with people. You can't be touching people. In
fact, you gotta look out, cuz when you scare people a lot of times they call the cops
on you. A lot of em ain't used to dealing with the homeless. But now that it's
happened to you, what are you going to do? Words don't do as much as action. You
griping, but what are you going to do?

The valued endpoint of Stan's self-narrative was that he was unfairly handled by

the police due to his homeless status. His diagnosis of the situation is that he was

discriminated against because he is homeless. He positions himself in the story as the

protagonist with only the most benevolent intent. In his view, he was simply trying to be

a good guy by protecting someone who weekly provides food to himself and other

homeless individuals in South City. Juan, however, invalidates (i.e., loops) Stan's

assessment of the situation by recasting Stan's actions through norms of middle class

propriety. That is, Juan urges Stan to view the situation from the privileged perspective of

his narrative's antagonist. In so doing, Juan sends Stan the message that he is

misinterpreting the root cause of his arrest. Discrimination is not the problem. Rather,

Stan's transgression of the class boundary drawn between the homeless and the domiciled

is the root of the problem. Thus, blame for the arrest is more or less placed on the Stan's

shoulders. Juan places another layer of personal accountability upon Stan's shoulders

when he rebukes Stan for "griping" rather than acting.

Self-sufficiency

Core members imparted the sub-theme of "self-sufficiency" to group newcomers by using two of the three interactive strategies—doubling and looping. In the following example, the newcomer Ted shares his take on South City's public housing dilemma. After Ted is done sharing his personal account of dealing with South City's public housing bureaucracy, the core member Ben responds by doubling his formerly homeless self against his homeless self.

Ted (newcomer, homeless): Monday I came here from [City Name], Kentucky. You can stay in a city like that and they gonna find you housing. Nobody's gonna live on the street. Section 8, those programs are easy. Why is it so hard in [South City] to get people off the street? I don't understand why it's so hard to get housing. Last Tuesday I went down to file for Section 8 and the lady say 'We only got room for the elderly and disabled.' I told her 'I ain't neither but I need housing. How long do I gotta wait for housing?' She say 'It might be a couple years.' I tell her 'Man, I ain't got no couple years. I need housing now.' She just smirk at me and say 'Yeah, well, you and everybody else, your application will be on file.' She talking about my application. I don't need no application, I need housing. This housing situation is stacked against the homeless. We need to do somethin' about this.

Robert (newcomer, homeless): One thing, there's like 1.2, 1.5 million people here. [City Name], Kentucky's small.

Ted: People are waiting on the Section 8 waitlist in South City for 2-3 years. Who's got 2-3 years?!

Ben (core member, formerly homeless): Let me say this to you, people's staying away from the roots of the real problem. I count the folks coming in at the door [of the soup kitchen]. I seen today, four people that six months ago had apartments, they had Section 8. They no longer in Section 8. People's shying away from the problem. Giving people an apartment is not helping nobody.

I stayed in a halfway house for a whole year. I went around to apartment places they laughed at me, said I had no credit. So, someone at the halfway house got me an apartment. That was the easy part, getting an apartment. But I had him [the man from the halfway house] with me probably for two months. 'Ben, don't get your own check, I'm a work with you.' I got an apartment, a couple of dollars in my pocket, food in the refrigerator, I'm a big shot now. But he telling me, 'Ben, when you go get your check next month, I'm going with you…

An apartment don't help no one without skills…January 13th I have five years clean and I credit him…That's why I think people not looking at the real problem. If you give me an apartment, what am I going to do then? When I got my check in my pocket, first thing I'm a do is go to the crack house…You don't get cured in a year…I'm looking at myself, I got money, I'm taking a bath everyday, I ain't got no crack on me, I'm doing good…After about 3 months, he said Ben you on your own…he helped me through the rough times, and that's what's important.

Deloris (core member, homeless): Tell them what the guy told you when you got the apartment.

Ben: He sat me down and said, 'Ben, one mistake and I'll throw you out in the same day.' There might be ten black folks in my apartment complex. When I first moved over there, the white folks did not talk to me… 'He's a crook, he's a con artist, he comes from a half-way house, he a junkie, you have to watch him' [group laughter]…I couldn't trust myself…My momma didn't trust me. She'd say, 'Ben, I'm going to the store, sit on the porch till I come back. Come out the house.' [group erupts in laughter]…*I had to change, people saw that I can change* [emphasis added].

In the interactive sequence above, the core member Ben doubles his self by narrating a personal story in response to the neophyte Ted's indictment of South City's public housing system. In Ben's self-narrative, we see that a formerly homeless self of personal accountability stands against a homeless self of drug addiction and prideful naïveté. That is, the homeless Ben is debased from the perspective of formerly homeless Ben. This personal narrative of self redemption centers not on the most simple structural inducement to homelessness (i.e., lack of housing), but instead holds self-change as its valued endpoint. Put differently, successful extrication from the street lies in a transformation from within; public housing is only a social bandage. Thus, with his self-narrative, Ben both reaffirms the SNM of Personal Accountability and shines a metaphorical lamp down a perceptibly viable path that he believes will lead the group newcomer out of his homeless existence (Fine 2002; Schwartz 1996).

In the following example, the newcomer Alan shares a story that conveys his problems with the holiday season. The core member Juan then loops Alan's valued endpoint.

Alan (newcomer, homeless): This is a difficult season for me. I've caught myself in about the last five years in depression and I'm just now learning how to deal with it. You talk about the homeless situation. I guess what's on my mind, the thing that really got to me is when I heard the mayor say that if he had to make a decision between the homeless and the business, he's gonna choose the business. Every time I see in the holiday season that all these people jump up to help the homeless, then January 1st comes along they disappear. I'm saying, there's people out there that really need welfare. A lot of people can't get they kids nothin, can't even get nothing for they selves. I ain't got no kids, but I can't get me or Suzy [his wife] nothin. I felt so bad the other day. I went to [the local discount store] and couldn't buy her [Suzy] nothin. I was lookin' at all these things I know she would like, but I couldn't buy her nothin'. We need better welfare. People need to help the homeless. Government ain't doin' nothin'. We need to do something as homeless people! We ain't got no voice! Business don't need help…

Juan (core member, formerly homeless): There's a lot of things that are sad in the world. I know a lot of people who are on the streets and are poor and can't provide for their wife or kids… I don't care how far you go down that ladder…in the homeless condition, there's so much to be thankful for. And a meeting like this right now, I'm really thankful. I don't know, there's a dreary feeling in here right now. And I got the Christmas spirit.

It's a thing you gotta want. You gotta work on some stuff. There's a lot of people I work with out there on a daily basis they waitin for somebody to do something for 'em. They asking for a handout. Those are the ones who I feel who are unwilling. You can bring a horse to water but you can't make them drink. There's so much good going on in our society, in our city. Like the Coalition for the Homeless, the mission, the Homeless Center, the churches, we all need to continue. A lot of people just aren't ready, but we gotta be there for them when they are ready.

Another thing…we spend too much time feeling sorry for ourselves instead of looking at our choices. And if we really get honest with ourselves, out of all the stuff we blame on all these other situations, we get honest with ourselves, we ask ourselves 'What part did I play?' And if we come to that place, but until then we can blame situations…we need to look at what we can do to get out. Sometimes misery loves company. But if we can just get out of ourselves and just send out a thought or a prayer to another person…

In the above interaction, the core member Juan loops the newcomer Alan's self-narrative. Alan's valued endpoint—that society needs to help the homeless year-round rather than solely during the Holiday season and that the homeless need a "voice"—is rendered invalid by Juan. Rather, Juan asserts that selfishness and a general lack of self-sufficiency is the root problem of many homeless individuals. Thus, Juan conveys to Alan that his interpretation (i.e., that American society turns a blind eye to homeless individuals) is incorrect. Rather, the real problem lies within the homeless. When one comes to terms with the part he or she played in his or her descending to a homeless status, the process toward extrication from the street can begin.

Get Off Your Butt

Given the hostile flavor of this sub-theme, it is perhaps not surprising that core members only utilized the interactive strategy of direct rebuke to impart the SNM. This dynamic is vividly displayed in the following interaction between the core member Herbert and the newcomer Ronald.

Ronald (newcomer, homeless): Uh, I'd like to thank you for having me. I didn't even know this room existed until today. I'm so glad that some place like this does. Because for me, being homeless in [South City] is a trying ordeal inside itself. Homelessness is not something that I expected to be, but I am and I can't change that. As soon as I can and I'm able. I run into a lot of things that are so very discriminatory toward the homeless since I've been here. You know, really upsetting to me…I was to the point where they was gonna call the police on me. Cuz I'm like 'YOU CAN'T DO THIS!' I have every legal right to come in and go as I please without obstruction.

Here it is, example one, this place here off of [street name], what's that called? [Local Liquor Store]. I'm used to going into a store and buying it, I don't care what it is, if I have the money in my pocket to go do that, that's what I'm gonna do. I have the right to do this without obstruction. It's my right to do so. I'm going into this establishment and I've got two guys standing in front of me and telling me that I cannot come into their establishment because I DID NOT DRIVE UP TO IT. OUTRAGEOUS! I don't care where I've been, Cleveland, Arkansas,

California, ain't never been stopped…If I got money in my pocket I can buy as many bottles of beer as I want. Everybody don't own a car.

It's only one day a week they do this, I think it's Saturday afternoon that they do this; especially if there's a [football] game going on downtown or something, oh, they really won't let you in. There's another place, [Local Gas Station]. I've never been so harassed in all my life. I walk in the store, I patronize the store just to get on the lady's nerve just because I can. I go in there, I buy a pack of cigarettes, she asks me for my ID. Ok, I go and grab a beer and she asks for it again. I was like, 'It's been two seconds and you don't remember what my ID looks like'…Another time I go to buy a pack of cigarettes, and she won't let me buy them cuz she said the guy that I was with looked drunk.

I'm a say this and I'm a leave it alone. It seems like to me there's a bandwagon these people are jumping on. Because this one guy's saying 'I'm doing this.' The others say 'If he can do it, I can do it.' And all of em are jumping on this bandwagon saying 'You can't come in here, you can't come in here.' I run in to it more and more and more, especially in this one particular area where it's been like I can't come in cuz I can't drive up to your establishment. I may not look good enough, my clothes might be dirty cuz I can't wash them or whatever it is. But guess what?! If I got money in my pocket, I should be able to buy what it is I need without obstruction.

Herbert (core member, homeless): Let me tell you what you need to do. Right now there's more people in here who need some encouragement and help. Let me tell you, I've been homeless for four years. Monday I went and applied for housing. That's what you need to do. Instead of complaining you need to do something about yourself. You need to get off your butt, quit crying, and put yourself in a position…

The valued endpoint of Ronald's self-narrative was that his money, and by extension his person, is just as valuable as anyone else's. In other words, he posits that he was discriminated against because of his homeless status. Furthermore, Ronald conveys his agency to the group by narrating his resistance to the gas station cashier and his outrage at the liquor store owners. Herbert, however, communicates to Ronald that he needs to turn his words into action, and rather than "crying" should apply for public housing. Thus, the message Herbert sends Ronald is clear: the problem lies within rather than outside, and the answer is working within the social service system.

Selflessness

Given the stakes of being "selfless," it is perhaps not surprising that core members only utilized doubling when imparting this sub-theme to group newcomers. That is, in this case it seems that core group members found it necessary to convey to the group that they "practice what they preach." In the following example, the newcomer Mick narrates a story that centers on his need to find work.

Mick (newcomer, homeless): I need to lay this one up to y'all, I need a job. And, yes I'm vain, I'm not going out there and flipping no hamburgers. I'm 48 years old, I have the right to pick and choose, I've lived some. But, I'm gonna find me something. I'm really trying to look at myself. I didn't know that this thing had affected me this much. I really didn't. I thought I was ok. When I see people that travel, I find myself walking the streets and angry at everyone who has a car, cuz I don't have one. And, just the stuff that I'm dealing with in my head…And a lot like you was saying Herbert, my family turned me away man. I'd go by my mother's and she'd make me sit on the back porch. Because, her excuse was…because she was working in the hospital for so many years, and I was dirty so she couldn't let me in her house cuz I was dirty. And I started feeling dirty. You know, that there was dirt on me, that *I* was dirty. And, um, I found myself living like that. I find myself sometimes happier under a bridge than I am around people. And I know that's not who I am…My problem ain't really me. I just need a job where I have respect. There ain't no jobs out there that make me feel good. I ain't gonna take just anything. If there was just better jobs I'd be ok. That's hard to find in this city. Jobs just ain't there. A lot of places just want to exploit the homeless—poverty pimps. Man, I been ripped off at the day labor so many times. But, I'm gonna find myself a job that gives me respect. I need something respectable.

Bob (core member, formerly homeless): I think a couple of things when I hear you talk that reminds me of me and the source of the problem. The problem is that you don't want to grow into anything. You just want to instantly become something. You want to go from here to here without going between here and here. So, your statement, 'I'm not gonna cook cheeseburgers God damn it, I'm gonna get a real job.' It's kinda like, 'I'm gonna go from here, no job, to here, success.' Without ever having passed through the narrow way, that squeezes your ass and makes you hurt.

You're just sort of supporting yourself and not having a lot of fun. I think to be kind to one's self, you have to really understand that it's about growth…You have to live yourself into your dreams. You have to do it one step at a time, one day at a time. And bullshiting yourself saying, 'Well I can drink a little bit and

I'll be just fine' is crap. It doesn't make any sense. It sounds fine, it sounds like you're under control, but it's just doing the same old things you've always done.

One, two of the things that keeps me sober, and I think one of the powers of AA is that not a day goes by that I don't tell part of my story to somebody else. It really helps, because, I sort of have a confessional—here's the way I was, here's what happened, and here's the way I am now. And when I do that I'm reminded of what was wrong and I openly share it with someone else. And the other thing is doing things for other people. Performing some selfless act every day that you can. That's the way AA works. AA works because you give your time and attention to other people that are struggling. You're giving your self away. And when you give your self away you aren't so concerned about being wonderful. Because your self is gone, it disappears. The self I think is what keeps us in bondage. 'I deserve this.' 'I need that.' 'I have to have this.' I don't think the world works that way. Although that's the way it works on television and that's the way it works in advertising. Um, you gotta get honest with yourself and say, 'I may have to start with a shitty job. And I may have to eat some shit. But that's just too damn bad.'

Mick: I don't mind eating shit. I just don't want it to be hamburgers [laughs]. Ben?

Ben (core member, formerly homeless): Like Bob saying, I'm a recovering alcoholic. January 13th, I have five years clean. For years, nobody, even me didn't think I could make it through the courts…When I went to [local, low-income hospital] and I got out, I had to be honest with myself. I'm a good bullshitter. I can talk myself into anything. But, here, I'm a forty year old man in [local, low-income hospital]. I don't have nothing. I don't have no house. I don't have nowhere to live. I don't have no money but my check. But when I get my check I blow it in two or three days.

Like Bob was saying, when I did 31 days, I went to a half-way house, I was like y'all should let me out free and clear. I stayed a whole year. I was getting angry cuz these people telling a forty year old man what time I could come in the house. What time I had to go to meetings. But me being an expert, I'm trying to tell them what to do. 'I'm a grown man, I can stay out til one o'clock.' 'I don't wanna come in at 7 o'clock.'

But like he said, I had to work up to a pattern. And one thing I had to learn in treatment is that the drugs and alcohol is only a small part of me. It was me that I know everything, I'm an expert…I'm so full of myself. I had to realize I was putting myself in those situations…I'm having to work if I'm gonna be clean. And, it ain't about me. Now I have my own place. But it's a process. When I was in the halfway house after a month I'm ready to get an apartment, a house on the hill and everything. Cuz that's me, I want it now. Then I'm going to get my apartment, then I'm a tell people who run apartment complexes 'Look at me, I been clean a year you need to give me an apartment.' Them people said,

'Oh, you need to get out of here.' I'm getting frustrated cuz I want an apartment. When I done got a year clean and they still won't give me a chance. I ain't got not money in the bank, no credit, my credit is shot. But now I want an apartment somewhere. But it's like he said [Bob], it's a process… it's a work. You can't get there over night. It takes time.

In the above interaction sequence, Mick's indictment of the system for his inability to find "respectable" work is met with two instances of doubling by core group members. Mick's valued endpoint is that he has too much self-respect to "flip hamburgers" and that the system is flawed insofar as it does not afford him the ability to realize his occupational potential. Furthermore, he indicts many of the jobs available to him for "pimping" the homeless. However, Mick's assertions are interpreted by both Bob and Ben to be an artifact of selfishness. Consequently, they both double their formerly homeless selves against their homeless selves in order to convey to Mick that he needs to release himself from the "bondage" of himself, and realize that finding work and getting off the streets is a process. In other words, he has to be "realistic" and start from his current station in life.

Look on the Bright Side

Core members imparted the "look on the bright side" sub-theme by utilizing the looping interactive strategy. In the following example, the newcomer Bernie conveys salient problems in living by narrating two concrete instances where he became incensed by societal discrimination. Insofar as these external attributions extend beyond the boundaries of the SNM, Bernie is quickly sanctioned by the core member Dan.

Bernie (newcomer, homeless): You know if we can make ourselves a little more cohesive so we can have a little more power. One of the things I hate most about myself is my issues with trust. It's really hard, even in this room as we sit, to be tolerant of people. My level has dropped, maybe cuz of how long I've been on the streets, but I catch myself too many times on the streets thinking bad things

about other people. I find myself a lot less trusting definitely of authority today. Sometimes I think it really gets under my skin cuz out here I feel like I have so little power about anything anyway so anytime an authority figure shows up I automatically feel defensive…I'm so tired of being discriminated against. Last night I went into the mission and they looked at me like I'm scum. They're like 'You gotta leave your bags in the common area.' So I'm supposed to leave all I got so someone can take it? Or, I go in a restaurant and they won't let me use a bathroom. That happened today. They say, 'You gonna buy something?' One day I'm gonna snap on these people. It ain't right. I'm just as good as they are…Sometimes I really want to die, man. I don't like earth! I can't wait to go home. I wanna be in a place where there's no pain, no hunger, no ignorance, no arrogance, I wanna be there.

Dan (core member, formerly homeless): When I was homeless and I had lost all hope, I had a war going on with me—on the inside. That was distrust. It was anger, resentment, it was fear. And that fear came out in so many different ways. Even if I was sitting and people were talking, I would think they were talking about me, and I would get upset. And that's part of loss of hope. Don't worry about them. Worry about you. You the only one who can help you. Those people can't get to you if you don't let them…It's so good for us to have a circle like this where we can come and share our experiences, strength and hope, encourage one another so we can start working towards some healings. It's all about hope, about optimism. You have to see the glass half-full, not half-empty. You have to focus on the bright side of things.

In the above interaction, Bernie narrates two instances where he felt discriminated against. His valued endpoint is that societal discrimination has led him to a point where he eagerly awaits death. That is, Bernie articulates an external attribution to his problems in living. Dan, however, loops this endpoint by emphasizing that Bernie is the only one who can help himself. Additionally, Dan softly reproaches Bernie for his pessimism. That is, Dan exhorts Bernie to look "on the bright side" of things.

The above examples prove interesting. For, as David Maines (1993) aptly notes, "Narratives and narrative occasions are always potential sites of conflict and competition as well as cooperation and consensus" (21). Put differently, narratives serve as both objects and mechanisms of social control within groups (Benford 2002). If a story about the world is to be accepted, it must affirm rather than negate the self-conceptions held by

group members (Davis 2002). When one casts a sociological eye upon the commonalities of the newcomers' narratives exemplified above, it becomes apparent that these narratives are of a resistant variety. Core group members respond to each of these resistant self-narratives by imparting one of five sub-themes all united by one common thread: an emphasis on personal accountability for respective problems in living.

Thus, the above examples convey that in this self-help group, *personal accountability* is a comprehensive symbolic system (Rice 1995) through which group newcomers must learn to filter their existential problems in living if they wish to have continued access to the group. Insofar as the normative conventions of specific cultural or institutional contexts govern the types of stories that can be told (Ewick and Silbey 1995), in this particular context of group story telling, newcomers learn there are rules that govern the appropriate content of personal narratives. I will henceforth refer to this narrative structure as the "SNM of Personal Accountability."

If they wish to be accepted into the group, group newcomers must displace their old "universe of discourse"[9] (Mead 1962) and adopt a new one imparted to them by the core group members (i.e., the SNM of Personal Accountability) (Snow and Machalek 1984). Essentially, the group newcomer must undergo a sort of "conversion" if he or she is to remain in the group. A newcomer's "conversion" can be detected in subsequent narratives he or she tells in the group context. As Snow and Machalek (1984) state, "if it is the universe of discourse that undergoes change during conversion, then that change should be discernible in converts' speech and reasoning" (173).

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[9] The term "universe of discourse" is best defined as "a system of common or social meanings" (Mead 1962: 90). One's "universe of discourse" is derived by taking the standpoint of the "generalized other" (Mead 1962). In the context of a self-help group, the "generalized other" becomes other group attendees.

Newcomer Responses

In this following section I will focus on the group newcomers' responses to the sanctions they receive when their self-narratives do not fit within the parameters of the SNM of Personal Accountability. Newcomers respond in three basic ways when they receive sanctions from core group members: (1) *Overt Resistance,* (2) *Silent Resistance,* and (3) *Narrative Congruence-Making.* The first two types of newcomer responses convey moments in which the SNM of Personal Accountability failed to control the personal narratives of group neophytes, whereas the latter type of response conveys group newcomers' internalization of the SNM. I shall begin with a consideration of newcomers' resistance to the group's SNM.

Newcomer Resistance

The turnover rate for this group was rather sizeable. The group consisted of nine core members, five quasi-core members, and ten revolving members. However, I witnessed 36 homeless men and women attend only one or two meetings, never to return. Sensing that the valued endpoints of their stories were rendered invalid (though they would not use this language), some of these individuals engaged in an outright argument with the sanctioning core member (Overt Resistance), while some simply did not return to the group after attending one or two meetings (Silent Resistance). Of course, the exigencies of homeless life (e.g., high probability of arrest, high probability of being murdered/dying of untreated medical complications, exposure to the elements, the search for "greener pastures," etc.) also likely contributed to the high attrition rate.

However, I crossed paths with a sizeable subset of this population (n=20) in both the soup kitchen adjacent to the room in which the group meetings were held and in

various other homeless day spots around the city (e.g., local parks, the public library, popular panhandling locations, etc.). When I ran into these individuals, I took the opportunity to ask for their explanations as to why they did not return to subsequent group meetings. While the reasons they cited for not attending subsequent group meetings varied, all accounts were woven together by one common thread: resentment over their personal narratives being invalidated. For these individuals, the group ideology conveyed/enforced by the SNM of Personal Accountability that was meant to provide homeless group members both a voice and empowerment (i.e., strength and hope) actually aggravated these individuals as it pulled the rug out from under the autonomy they were attempting to exert through their personal narratives, and rendered their diagnoses of oppressive social structures invalid.

Overt Resistance involved a verbal altercation between group newcomers and core group members. As such, it is necessary to take a look at a salient example of such a process. The following interactive sequence conveys an exemplary instance of overt resistance where the newcomer Raymond "stands his ground" rather than bend to the rebuke doled out to him by the core member Herbert.

Raymond (newcomer, homeless): As a homeless person, I'd like to make clear that…I don't get along with most other homeless people because most homeless people that I'm talking with out there are still doing what they'd do if they were part of established society…partying.

The other thing is that I think these homeless shelters and missions, whether they believe in God or not, I want to give them credit for the good things they do. On the other hand, the administrations need to understand the importance of their staff to be responsible for those decisions. For instance, in the mission, when one of the staff asks me to leave because he don't like me, don't like the way I sit, or pretty much has the mentality of 'Shut up, sit down, be quiet or we'll call the police,' Which is not a professional skill. These people without any kind of skill can do that. Ok, and when that happens the administration needs to be responsible to the homeless like me that are re-homelessed because of these stupid rules. It's

the responsibility of the administration to chastise that person as a not capable person of using the facilities…

I am on the streets, I am not part of the streets…Ten years ago, there was a discussion on how any city can help the homeless. There's a difference in helping the homeless, giving donations for food and housing, it's another thing to capitalize on homelessness. I'm going to be frank, I don't want to step on anybody's toes, but the mission's and the mayor's situation is more capitalizing than anything else…It may be an uncomfortable fact, but for me getting arrested for public disorder, people will have to realize that this will have repercussions.

Herbert (core member, homeless): I understand what you saying, but I know you. You always being disruptive; bringing a negative attitude into God's house and the mission. You're always whining about the mission; about how it's unfair, about how there's some conspiracy against the homeless. The problem ain't ever you. It's always something else. Just today at the mission, a couple hours ago you were outside arguing with another homeless person. I asked you to be quiet, I had already gotten her quiet. But the thing was, that he grabbed you, put his hands on you. I stepped in and put him away from you.

Raymond: I do more for the homeless than you or your little group does! I'm in a better position to help than you are. Last week I was talking with [Congressman]…And you're not understanding what's happening. Number one, no brother was out there to tell the sister to stop cussing. Number two, the brother…I dealt with brothers like that before, he's concerned with the black issue.

Juan (core member, formerly homeless): That's enough from both of you!

Raymond: You know what?! I want to resolve problems!

Juan: You can't run this in here!

Raymond: May God punish you [!]…

Juan: Shut the door man! Welcome to Daniel's Den [sarcasm]. We got to get this into the mode of support and encouragement. And for someone who's not in that mode then they in the wrong place.

In the above example, Raymond narrates a story that indicts the shelter system for unfairly treating homeless people in general and himself in particular. He eludes personal responsibility for his being arrested for disorderly conduct by indicting the mission and the way in which its staff poorly treats its homeless patrons. When the core member

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Herbert directly rebukes him, Raymond firmly stands his ground rather than deferring. Raymond's contempt for Herbert's rebuke engenders a verbal altercation between the two group attendees. As the two exchange verbal blows, another core member intervenes and effectively kicks Raymond out of the room. Ostensibly, Raymond violated the norm of providing "support and encouragement," however, it is apparent that this vision is rather narrow. That is, "support and encouragement" must be doled out within the parameters of personal accountability.

One early summer evening, I was conducting participant observation on a busy South City tourist strip and witnessed Raymond round the corner. He had a briefcase in hand and wore an intense, contemplative look on his face. He recognized me as I called his name and briefly curbed his gait in order to speak with me. After discussing some local issues pertaining to homelessness I suggested on the sly, "So I haven't seen you around at any group meetings lately." "I don't have time for that damn place," he replied as he furrowed his brow. "Those people in there think they got the answer to everything. I'm on a mission to help homeless people. They wanna tell me what's wrong with me," he added further. Raymond's explanation as to why he did not return to subsequent group meetings is exemplary of other individuals who engaged in overt resistance and never returned to the group. That is, the common thread tying the reasons given for not returning was that these individuals resented incurring personal blame for their respective problems in living. Furthermore, these resistors disliked the fact that what they deemed apt diagnoses of oppressive social structures (e.g., the shelter system) were invalidated in the context of the group meeting.

Silent Resistance Throughout the course of my study, I witnessed multiple instances in which group newcomers who were sanctioned for narrating deviant personal stories sat quietly throughout the remainder of the group meeting, but did not return to subsequent group meetings. As one former group attendee bluntly told me as we sat on a park bench watching cars pass by, "Joe [core member] is so damn self-righteous, he thinks his shit don't stink. Who is he to tell me what to think?!" (Field Note Excerpt). This response was echoed by another former group attendee who sat at a table in the soup kitchen adjacent to the meeting room, sopping up the remainder of her spaghetti sauce with a slice of seemingly stale bread: "I can't take it. It's like I'm walkin' on egg shells up in there. Two weeks ago I was talkin' about havin' problems with the mission. I couldn't get in [to the mission] by seven [p.m.] and they locked me out. Juan [core member] told me I need to be responsible for my actions. What was I supposed to do?! Sometimes I ain't got a ride. I got enough shit in my life that makes me feel like crap" (Field Note Excerpt).

An additional instance of silent resistance is captured in the following field note excerpt:

As I walk through the soup kitchen and head toward the room in which the group meetings are held, I notice Ellie sitting on the eastern most bench that aligns the southern wall. She waves me over. "How's it going?" she asks. "Good, how have you been?" I reply. "So, So," she answers. "So, So?" I echo back. She then asks me, "How's it going?" I answer: "It's ok, it's getting a little bit chilly, I'm a fan of warm weather myself." "Are you coming into the meeting today?" I ask her. "I've stepped down," she replies. "Oh no," I say both caringly and curiously. "I've stepped down," she reiterates. "Are you going to come back at some point?" I ask for clarification. "No, I'm through with it," she answers. "How come?" I probe further. "I don't got the same problems they do in there." "What do you mean?" I ask for clarification. "They try to tell me I got problems with me. I know I got problems with me. But when I talk about what people do to me, they make me feel bad. I been on the streets for 20 years and I been tryin' hard just to survive. So, why they gonna tell me I need to start with me?" She then sarcastically parrots a stock phrase of the core members, "What part did I have to do with it? Phew…"

In the above example and those preceding it, we see that rather than returning to subsequent group meetings, these individuals "voted with their feet." The explanations given for not returning to subsequent group meetings are all united by one common theme: these individuals sense that their thoughts conveyed in their personal stories are under the negative scrutiny of core members, and they dislike the emphasis placed on personal accountability.

Newcomer Acceptance: Narrative Congruence-making

While the bulk of group newcomers never return, a substantial subset does in fact stay with the group. I witnessed five members transition into a quasi-core member status and ten members transition into a revolving member status. In order for this process to occur, however, newcomers had to learn the parameters of an acceptable personal story. A group newcomer's adoption of the SNM of Personal Accountability (i.e., a shift in their "universe of discourse") is conveyed when he or she either narrates a subsequent personal narrative utilizing one of the sub-themes of personal accountability, verbally derogates a deviant personal narrative he or she told in a prior meeting where he or she was still a group neophyte, or both.

Mick (quasi-core member, homeless): You know, Dan last week told me about an exercise to try for myself. I'm a real busy brain who's always trying to figure out the meaning of life and that kind of crap. He told me to take twenty minutes of absolute silence. I found a couple of things out about myself…One, yes I'm vain. Last week I said I'm not going out there and flipping no hamburgers. I'm 48 years old, I have the right to pick and choose, I've lived some. But, I'm gonna find me something. Now, I'm really trying to look at myself. I didn't know that this thing had affected me this much. I really didn't. I thought I was okay. And I keep bringing you up Jane but I remember last week you told me some things straight up. One, that I was vain, and that's ok baby, I'm so glad you did, because I thought I was being humble. I was just trying to stand. I'm the middle of five children and I was trying to find my own place to stand. And

in that I ended up getting vain. And with that I stopped respecting other people and thought that everybody is supposed to give me the things that I haven't had, and all those things that I thought I had missed. And today I'm realizing is that it was me. I didn't give a damn. I didn't give me the self-respect.

Elaine (quasi-core member, homeless): This is my third meeting. After my last two meetings, I did some thinking about how homelessness can be solved. I spent a long time focusing on what *happened* to me. How other things put me where I am. Now I realize that blaming other things is not the solution. Like Juan says, 'What part did I play?'…But, this program [on which she saw a presentation] pretty much fits with what we've talked about in here in the past…The [Organization Name] is talking about a program called [Program Name]. They're seeking funding to build a complex where ex-offenders and the homeless can come into the program. The program is extremely selective from what I saw on the video. You basically just address the issues in life that have caused you to be in the situation you find yourself in. It's great because it's talking about self-sufficiency. These men built the place where they live, other businesses, they were running a moving company. If you saw them, you would have thought they were CEOs of a major corporation. They were wearing suits and ties sitting around a board room, making a decision about their future for themselves. They had been empowered to address their problems on an individual basis. It was cool because when they interviewed the person who started the program, she was a real tough head. She said they let you come in and talk about how you were abused as a child and how this person caused your life to be this today. They let you go through this testimony to let you get it out of your system. And then she said: 'So what now? Where are we going from here?' So she wasn't going to let people be poster children. It squarely puts responsibility on the individual's shoulder…That is the program that they're looking at, and once it's up and funded it is run by the folks that it is serving. So, it is truly going to be a blessing to [South City] if it's funded.

Jim (revolving member, homeless): A couple nights ago, I was thinking about what Dan was talking about at the last meeting. He was talking about people not being ready to make changes and about 'What part did I play?' Then he told a story about having a war inside him, losin' hope. Then I thought, 'That's me.' 'That's what's goin' on inside me.' I really would like to make some changes. A lot of me being here I *did have to do with it*. When I was 19 and joined the military, I thought I was doing the right thing. I did not know it would scar me. So I believed in what I was doing then. What I believe to be true about God, life and myself, I believed none of it at 19. I've always changed. I just wanted to say this to you, [another homeless male newcomer] I hope you don't have to stay two months and a day. But, I guarantee you that nobody in this room thought that the first two days that they were out on the streets that they thought they'd still be there. Without a doubt, it's not an easy walk back. And it's difficult to get back. Not that you can't. And there's some people in this room that can tell you how they did it [several core members], and they're helping others. So not only

did they get back in, they were able to reach out and pull some other people back in. They know how it's done. But I guarantee you this... you better start talking to somebody. I mean like Juan, somebody who got out of the situation…People in houses ain't going help you out [group laughter].

In all three of the above examples, there is considerable evidence that these revolving and quasi-core group members displaced their old "universe of discourse" (Mead 1962) focused on external blame, with the new "universe of discourse" centered on personal accountability. In essence, we see a shift in the "causal locus" of their respective life problems (Snow and Machalek 1984). That is, there is a shift from an external to an internal locus of blame for problems in homeless living.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his…condition: it is what he thinks about during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory

Albert Camus (1999 [1943]) in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In rejecting the temptations of World War II academic nihilism, Albert Camus (1999 [1943]) utilized the myth of Sisyphus, the "absurd hero," to remind us that there exists meaning in the world despite the face of suffering and despair. This has been the story of how homeless and formerly homeless individuals collectively construct self-narratives in order to create meaningful lives in the face of extremely difficult life circumstances. However, when a group member attends his or her first meeting at Daniel's Den, he or she comes to learn that not just any personal story goes. The SNM of Personal Accountability exhorts its adherents to transfer blame for their problems in living from an external source (oppressive social structures) to an internal source (the self). Thus, group neophytes quickly determine that they must learn to talk about self, society, and the interrelationship between the two in a particular way (Rice 1995).

Essentially, the sense-making apparatus of this self-help group consists of an implicit group ideology that places an emphasis on personal accountability. The ideology is implicit insofar as there is no formal statement of the group's life prescriptions for ameliorating problems in living. Unlike more conventional 12-step self-help groups, this group's ideology is not crystallized in the form of a pledge or in group-generated

literature (Katz 1993). Rather, the ideology lies solely within the perceptions of the group's veterans and the consequent SNM they invoke/enforce.

Core group members impart this implicit group ideology to group newcomers whose personal narratives place blame on external (i.e., social structures) rather than internal (i.e., the self) sources. These members accomplish this interactive task by invoking the SNM of Personal Accountability via one or more of three basic interactive strategies that communicates one of five basic sub-themes. Group newcomers tend to respond to the core group members' invocation of this SNM in one of three ways. Insofar as no previous scholar has analyzed neither the manner in which implicit self-help group ideologies are imparted to group newcomers nor the ways in which group newcomers respond to the impartation of an implicit ideology, this finding constitutes a contribution to the scholarly literature surrounding self-help groups.

Given the specifics of this collective sense-making model, we see that the implicit group ideology of personal accountability constrains the narration of salient exigencies in homeless group members' lives. Those who do not wish to adopt this ready-made framework for understanding problems in homeless living (i.e., the SNM of Personal Accountability) do not return to subsequent group meetings. Those group attendees who do wish to adopt the SNM of Personal Accountability become quasi-core or revolving members[10], thereby reinforcing and perpetuating the narrative structure of the group. Thus, we have one glimpse into the collaborative construction of homeless individuals' self-narratives pertaining to problems in homeless living.

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[10] There is one exception to this more general pattern, as there is one never-homeless individual who I have classified as a "revolving member."

These findings add nuance to Snow and Anderson's (1987, 1993) conclusion that homeless narratives provide exemption from personal responsibility for being homeless. As one can readily see in the findings displayed above, many of the homeless group newcomers (at least initially) evade personal responsibility for problems in homeless living by indicting elements of oppressive social structures they confront on a daily basis. However, in the self-help group context of Daniel's Den, narratives that convey an evasion of personal accountability are sanctioned by veteran group members. As such, a sense-making pattern similar to that found by Snow and Anderson (1987, 1993) is rendered invalid by the narrative structure of this group. Thus, this small group dynamic suggests that collective sense-making of homeless life problems differ from the sense-making of homeless problems in living within an interview context—at least for this particular group.

Insofar as the data displayed above more or less answer the first four research questions in a straightforward manner, I am left with the need to consider the implications of my answers to these four research questions with respect to the last two research questions, which both center on the question of "empowerment." That is, how does the narrative-constraining function of the SNM of Personal Accountability impact the empowering potential of the group? While my ethnographic method only granted me access to the human social world of this particular group, a theoretically informed discussion stands to flesh out the "empowering" capacity of this homeless self-help group, and thereby contribute to a still underdeveloped discussion among scholars who have analyzed self-help groups from the new social movement perspective (Davis 2002; Rice 1995, 2002; Taylor 1996).

The question of "empowerment"—whether at the individual or group level—must be considered in two senses with respect to this homeless self-help group. First, the implications of the group's ideological prescriptions require scrutiny. Second, empowerment must be considered with respect to the implications the SNM of Personal Accountability has for curtailing resistant narratives. However, before explicitly considering the question of "empowerment" with respect to the group's functional capacity, a caveat is in order. That is, core group members truly believe they are effectively helping group newcomers with the "prescriptions" they write for how homeless newcomers should live/deal with their respective problems in living. These group members do not look down upon group newcomers as much as they hold firm convictions in the efficacy of the group to aid newcomers in successful extrication from the streets. In fact Juan's (core member, formerly homeless) following statement reflects the logic of all core group members: "I'm here to help [homeless] people find the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm gonna show them the way" (Interview Excerpt).

However, insofar as the implicit group ideology both imparts a "do it yourself" mindset and extols the virtues of working within the contemporary welfare system (despite all of its deficiencies), the group's empowerment potential at either the collective or personal level is questionable. It is important to note that within the context of a capitalist society, homeless individuals are necessary for the economic system's smooth functioning (Gans 1972; Wolch and Dear 1993). These "lumpen proletariat" comprise the lowest strata of the (post)industrial reserve army (Marx 1996). Given their suppressive effect on wages, poor individuals in general and homeless individuals in particular, provide a vital function for the capitalist class (Gans 1972). Furthermore, in the context

of a neoliberal[11] political climate, the welfare state that once allowed one to get back on

his or her feet (if not outright keeping him or her from falling to the ground) has been and

continues to be slowly chiseled away as the federal state continues to abdicate social-

domestic responsibility (Soja 2000; Wacquant 1995; Wolch and Dear 1993). Thus,

ideological prescriptions which encourage homeless individuals to work within the

present welfare and economic system are likely misguided.

By reducing the panoply of homeless life exigencies to one cause and one

solution (i.e., personal accountability) the SNM of Personal Accountability likely

provides an overly optimistic basis for calculating the probability of getting off of the

street. This calculus premised on personal accountability transforms a rather dismal

probability into something tangible and positive toward which a group member may

strive with a perceived high probability of success. Given this line of reasoning, it seems

questionable that the group's implicit ideology is empowering for its members at either

the personal or collective levels. If anything, the ideology appears to impart a "false

consciousness" that sets its members up for a fall.

At the personal level, these ideological prescriptions stand to disempower one's

sense of self insofar as the likelihood of successful extrication from the street is abysmal

(Snow and Anderson 1993). Thus, when one attempts to follow the group's life

prescriptions and fails to successfully end his or her homeless status, the member will

likely intensify his or her self-blame. As Herbert (core member, homeless) told me one

day as I drove him to a nearby church after a group meeting: "Man, I applied for housing

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[11] Neoliberalism is characterized by the belief in "increasing privatization of the public sphere, deregulation in every economic sector, the breakdown of all barriers to trade and the free flow of capital, attacks on the welfare state and labor unions, and other efforts to reshape the power of established political and territorial authorities…" (Soja 2000: 216).

almost two months ago and haven't heard nothin. I don't know, maybe I just need to start making more [phone] calls. One thing, I haven't been doing everything I can…It's just that I ain't even got any family to call on. I mean, I don't know, I'm the one that got myself into this situation. I just don't know if I'm ever going to get myself out" (Field Note Excerpt).

Several homeless quasi-core and revolving group members made very similar statements to Herbert's. In fact, Johann (quasi-core, homeless) shared the following with me one day as we walked out of the church in which the group meetings are held: "Man, I been tryin' my ass off to get into public housing. They tell me there's only room for the elderly and disabled. I've also been tryin' to get me a J-O-B. Man, you know me. I got smarts. I can at least flip me some burgers. But the only job I can get is at day labor [which is often looked down upon by South City homeless individuals]. I don't know man, I'm a keep tryin', but I really wonder if I can get myself out of this mess" (Field Note Excerpt).

The empowerment potential of the group in the collective sense also seems questionable. Even if this group's life prescriptions encourages droves of homeless members to utilize the welfare system, we likely will only see the elements that stand to disempower the homeless self further aggravated. There is likely to be an inverse relationship between the number of homeless individuals attempting to utilize the welfare system to their advantage, and the availability of the already scarce welfare resources. Thus, at the very least, increased utilization of the welfare system by homeless group attendees would likely only reduce a homeless individual's probability of attaining

dramatically scarce governmental housing subsidies (Blau 1992; Wolch and Dear 1993) and other welfare benefits (Blau 1992).

This brings one to consider the implications the SNM of Personal Accountability has for the liberating potential of the self-narratives told within this self-help group context. Self-narratives have counter-hegemonic, subversive, and liberating potential (even those that narrate quotidian forms of resistance) (Delgado 1989; Richardson 1990; Polletta 1998). As Polletta (1998) notes, "…anyone can tell his/her own story, even if he or she lacks the institutional resources and credentials typically required of technical-scientific discourse, personal narratives are a way to discover and communicate that which is shared in individual experiences" (425). Through their narration of salient and problematic life experiences, many group newcomers displayed their knowledge that the social structures that cause them grief are organized and made possible by social roles, rules, hierarchies, time, and space (Ewick and Silbey 2003). In fact, in multiple instances, group newcomers narrated occasions where they went beyond mere diagnosis and reversed these elements of social structure they deemed unfair to their advantages, even if only momentarily.

The implications of this pattern are considerable. When we consider the notion of hegemony, the simple fact that these homeless newcomers peeled back the taken-for-granted building blocks of oppressive social structures conveys their agency (Scott 1990). It is therefore questionable that many homeless newcomers are initially sedated by a "false consciousness" as many insights from neo-Marxism would lead one to expect (Gramsci 1971). For this assertion to hold water, however, we must first expound upon what is meant by "hegemony."

According to Anthony Giddens (1984), social systems consist of empirical, intertwined, spatially bounded interactive patterns (e.g., the global capitalist economic system, a municipality, a university, a homeless shelter, etc.). Social structures are the principles utilized by actors that pattern the practices of which social systems are comprised. These practices are repeatedly enacted, thus sustaining a given social system. Power in this conceptualization is produced by a transactional advantage certain actors or groups have when enacting the principles that perpetuate social systems. Therefore, power is not a "thing" that is held, but is a product of continuous interactions among individuals who inhabit particular social systems. However, when the recursive (i.e., repeated) enactment of social structures is reified (i.e., where social process is lost to consciousness and social constructions are treated as "things" not amenable to human alteration), hegemony is produced.

Therefore, resistant narratives signal both the recognition of exploitable cracks within a given social system (Ewick and Silbey 2003), and a reappropriation of social structure. In theory, these reappropriated schemas (i.e., a fundamental component of social structure) (Sewell 1992) hold the possibility of transforming the hegemonic practices that sustain the oppression of homeless individuals. If these reappropriated schemas were extended temporally and socially[12] (Ewick and Silbey 2003) (e.g., collective group memory that would feed the group's SNM), a potentially revolutionary

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[12] According to Ewick and Silbey (2003) the narration of a quotidian subversive act stands to lose its ephemeral quality by being extended temporally and socially. What this means is that a resistant act that would make little material impact and would otherwise be quickly forgotten is made "durable" insofar as it lives on in a particular story-telling context. I have extended the basic idea to include a given self-help group, which is comprised of particular individuals that tend to meet at a regularly specified time and space. In a group context, narrated resistant acts (and the consequent diagnoses of power present in the narratives) stand to be made durable insofar as group members (re)tell such stories thereby contributing to a cultural stock of plot lines which stand to impact the construction of subsequent narratives in the given group. Such resistant discourse could affect the larger social sphere in which this self-help group is situated by providing oppositional schema for dealing with oppressive social systems.

"known culture"[13]could be produced. Not only would the otherwise ephemeral narrated act gain a virtually perpetual existence (Ewick and Silbey 2003), but it would also contribute to an oppositional-schematic well from which both group veterans and group neophytes could drink. For instance, if stories of resistance to the shelter system were allowed to freely circulate within the group, group members might alter the ways in which the homeless shelter operates, in a way similar to how many women's self-help groups have impacted the medical profession (Taylor 1996).

However, in this group, neophyte self-narratives that peeled back the taken-for-granted elements of oppressive social structures were re-obscured by the pall of personal accountability. The SNM of Personal Accountability disallowed the temporal and social extension of these resistant narratives. As such, the narrative well from which these group members must drink is tainted with a softened "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" flavor. Thus, the liberating potential of neophyte resistant narratives is curtailed. Insofar as group newcomers must adopt the SNM of Personal Accountability if they wish to stay in the group, the empowering capacity of the group is again thrown into question—at both the personal and collective levels.

Essentially, I have shown how the collective sense-making model presented in this article illuminates the intersection between literatures pertaining to both self-help groups (Gartner and Riessman 1984; Davis 2002; Katz 1993; Rice 1995, 2002; Pollner and Stein 2001; Taylor 1996; Wolkomir 2001) and the construction of self-narratives (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Kerby 1991; Polkinghorne 1988; Polletta 1998, 2002; Taylor 1989; White 1981). By sifting through the stories from Daniel's Den, we have seen

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[13] "Known Culture" refers to stories that "serve to increase the likelihood that certain participants will decide to join and that others will exit or become inactive" (Fine 2002: 234).

evidence that the SNM of Personal Accountability is likely disempowering for group

members in a dual sense. Not only does this narrative structure serve to "contain" the

resistant narratives of group newcomers within a familiar (hegemonic) form (i.e., an

emphasis on personal accountability which closely parallels the larger American notion

of "rugged individualism") (Polletta 1998) but it also supplants resistant narratives with

an ideological filter that appears to be disempowering at both the individual and

collective levels. Therefore, with respect to this homeless self-help group, the implication

of its implicit self-help ideology for the collaborative construction of homeless self-

narratives is that is serves as a group-specific containment mechanism of resistant

personal narratives.

Given how closely the ideological prescriptions of this group resonates with the

larger culture of individualism present in the United States (Bellah et. al 1996), future

research would benefit from considering how the subcultural narrative models of self-

help groups might be linked to the larger culture in which respective groups are situated.

While a few scholars have attempted to accomplish this task (Rice 1995; Taylor 1996),

there is considerable room for scholarly elaboration, as no one has attempted to link

dominant conceptualizations of the class structure in a given historical moment to a self-

help group's subcultural narrative model.

For instance, just as people's narratives about falling in love have been shown to

be variations of Western culture's "master account" of falling in love (Weber, Harvey,

and Stanley 1987), it appears that that the SNM of Personal Accountability is a variation

of the "master accounts" of homelessness in the contemporary United States (Phelan,

Link, More, and Stueve 1997). That is, core members' ideological prescription of

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personal accountability seems to pull from and reinforce both the notion of "rugged individualism" (Bellah et. al 1996) and the majority of Americans' conceptualizations of homeless individuals as "social deviants" (Goffman 1963; Phelan et al. 1997). To borrow from Goffman (1963), social deviants are: "the folk who are considered to be engaged in some kind of collective denial of the social order. They are perceived as failing to use available opportunity for advancement in the various approved runways of society; they show open disrespect for their betters; they lack piety; they represent failures in the motivational schemes of society" (144).

Aside from the possible link between the conservative implicit ideology in Daniel's Den and a larger American ethos centered on "rugged individualism" and the supporting myth of meritocracy, the "do it yourself" thrust of self-help groups in general (Gartner and Riessman 1984; Katz 1993; Taylor 1996) might also contribute to the ideology's conservatism. Additionally, several core members have attended other 12-step self-help groups in the past (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous). Thus, there is a possibility that the basic tenets of such 12-step groups (e.g., AA's emphasis on "selflessness") have permeated the narrative structure of Daniel's Den in an unconscious manner. Lastly, five of the core members are formerly homeless individuals. These people firmly believe they extricated themselves from the street by virtue of the life-prescriptions they "write" in the context of this homeless self-help group. Insofar as many individuals do not view their life-circumstances/chances in sociological terms (Becker 1998) it is plausible that such formerly homeless members view their processes of extrication as the result of individual effort and personal accountability for one's life-situation and the related problems in living.

The reader should be cautious, however, when considering how these findings might extend to other homeless self-help groups in particular, or to the collective sense making of homeless life in general. The patterns articulated above may be specific to homeless individuals who inhabit South City (a medium-sized Sunbelt city), as the sample is not nationally representative. Also, constituents of this case study may not be representative of the entire South City homeless population as members/attendees of Daniel's Den might constitute a self-selected sample of homeless individuals who feel the need to voice problems in living in a self-help group context. However, given my familiarity with the research site, group attendees in general appear representative of those who visit the church each Wednesday—whether to procure a free lunch, attend a group meeting, or both.

In light of these limitations, future research would also benefit from analyzing other group contexts where homeless individuals collectively construct self-narratives that pertain to their problems in living (e.g., friendship cliques in an urban park setting). Also, a cross-case comparison of homeless self-help groups in particular, or self-help groups comprised of disfranchised members in general (e.g., battered women) would shed further light on self-help group narrative structures and their implications for the lives of disadvantaged segments of the American population.

Before closing, let us briefly return to Albert Camus's (1999 [1943]) consideration of his absurd hero Sisyphus, where he states: "If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?" (512). This is the Sisyphean paradox; lucidity engenders both torture and power. Sisyphus's heroism lies in both his understanding that

his day's work is futile, and in the consequent meaning he imputes to each flake of stone and parcel of dirt he encounters as he pushes his rock up an all too familiar earthen mound. To apply this metaphor to Daniel's Den, it seems that the SNM of Personal Accountability extols its adherents to roll their boulders toward the summit with the overly optimistic hope that at some point the task will be complete. Some day, group members are told, the boulder will achieve stasis on the plateau. Given the structural imperatives of capitalism, however, we must question how much room exists at the summit.

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