

# **Exploring Constructions of Self and Identity amongst South Africa's Homeless Population**

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PSY5003W (Master's Dissertation), Clinical Psychology

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02 February 2023

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## Abstract

Homelessness in South Africa has rapidly increased in recent years, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the majority of research into homelessness has focused on its causation and alleviation through macro-levelled interventions concerning housing, poverty and unemployment, not enough research has been dedicated to understanding homelessness from the perspective of those experiencing it. The following cross-sectional, qualitative study sought to investigate homelessness by exploring constructions of identity and self amongst a sample of 15 self-identified homeless individuals in Johannesburg, South Africa. Guided by the social constructionist principle that “language produces and constructs” one’s experience of oneself as well as that of the other, the study focused on participants’ use of language as a representation of their reality, experiences and consequently their identities (Burr, 1995, p. 44). Following the transcription of semi-structured interviews conducted with participants, the study utilised a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to determine the various identity discourses unsheltered individuals drew on as well as the subject positions they occupied and lastly to discern the agentic possibilities available to participants within these positions. Of the seven discourses identified, the two most prominent related to absence and the homeless identity itself. While subject positions were polarised between “good” and “bad” homelessness responses, they revealed sites of power and resistance along with mediated expressions of agency. Although these findings did not produce tangible intervention or policy outcomes, they illuminated the complexity not only of homelessness but the construction of identity and self within marginalised sectors of society. As a final contribution, the study presents a discursive base to consider the interpellated implications of discourse, power, and resistance within a subset of South Africa’s homeless population.

*Keywords: Homelessness; Identity; Social Constructionism; Discourse Analysis; South Africa; Absence*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and express heartfelt gratitude to the following people:

To Densie O’Callaghan for providing me with an opportunity to volunteer with the Angel Meal Scheme during the COVID-19 lockdown. I am truly grateful for your friendship.

To each participant for sitting down and sharing their experiences of living on the street with me. Without you, this dissertation would not be possible.

To my supervisor, Wahbie Long: thank you for your guidance, encouragement, and unwavering support. You made this daunting task appear possible and dare I say it, even enjoyable at times.

To Graeme, thank you for moving cities with me, for having faith in this journey and being an ever-present and passionate sounding board.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to Dylan Calasse, for giving me the courage to change course.

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## Chapter 1

Homelessness has been understood as a universal phenomenon, affecting countries across the development spectrum. Although it has been intricately linked to a lack of resources and poverty, most studies exploring the condition have been contextualised in well-resourced, developed economies as opposed to developing economies or those in transition, resulting in a homogenous conceptualisation of the problem, and failing to recognise the diversity of contextual challenges that contribute to homelessness in different regions (Cross et al., 2010; Kriel et al., 2017; Morrow, 2010; Roets et al., 2016; Somerville, 2013).

The principal aim of homelessness research thus far has been to document and quantify causes and risk factors with the hope that doing so will either eradicate the problem or illuminate interventions. While this has been an important area of study, there is an equal need to understand homelessness from the perspective of those experiencing it as well as the resultant effects (Makiwane et al., 2010; Meanwell, 2012; Olufemi, 2002; Roets et al., 2016; Somerville, 2013).

*Homelessness mean[s] the lack of shelter, rootlessness, alienation, instability and vulnerability. The sense of powerlessness of homeless people... cannot be ignored. To be homeless is to be socio-politically and economically vulnerable... Homeless people are doomed to live in a world of non-recognition and become the invisible and voiceless victims of national and local socio-political structures. (de Beer & Vally, 2017, p. 385)*

As illustrated in the above description, being homeless fosters multiple sites of vulnerability and marginality. Dominant discourses of homelessness have perpetuated this, merging stereotyped traits, narratives, and images into a single classification- “the homeless identity”-and consequently failing to acknowledge individual experience (McCarthy, 2013; Nichols, 2020; Rayburn & Guittar, 2013). The impact of this has been reflected in policies and protocols that are removed from the people they intend to serve (de Beer & Vally, 2017; Naidoo, 2010). As a result, there has been a recent increase in research studies focused on the life stories of homeless populations, drawing on qualitative research methods (de Beer & Vally, 2017; Kriel et al., 2017; McCarthy, 2013; Nichols, 2020; Olufemi, 2002; Somerville, 2013; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Accordingly, the following research study situated itself within this realm of exploration. Utilising a social constructionist framework, it sought to consider constructions of self and identity amongst individuals experiencing homelessness in South Africa through discourse analysis.

## Defining Homelessness

There has been little consensus regarding a universal definition of homelessness, with definitions often shifting to align with varying policy goals (Naidoo, 2010; Roets et al., 2016; UN-Habitat, 2020). Research suggests that definitions are contested based on scope and available resources, reflecting perspectival, ideological, and political differences in approaching homelessness across the world. Consequently, this prevents comparable data from being collected and limits an overall assessment of research methodologies and the impact of differing policy interventions (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2020).

Globally, homelessness in its most minimal form signifies a lack of abode or shelter (de Beer & Vally, 2017; Somerville, 2013). As discussed in several studies, the definitions of homelessness should be embedded within a contextual understanding of the socio-economic drivers, historical and cultural factors as well as the political environments that contribute to the current milieu (Cross et al., 2010; Makiwane et al., 2010; Naidoo, 2010; Olufemi, 1998, 2002). In doing so, stakeholders and vested parties have the opportunity to acknowledge that homelessness is a socially constructed phenomenon, one that symbolises “a societal failure”, to remove the focus from individual pathology and minimise the associated culture of blame (Desjarlais- de Klerk, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2020, p. 4).

In 2015 The Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH) developed a framework for understanding homelessness and attempted to provide a cohesive definition that could be applied to all contexts. In doing so, three domains were categorised as indicated in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: IGH's Three Domains of Homelessness**

<b>Security Domain</b>	Legal access to housing Minimal exposure to eviction The ability to exclude others from the dwelling The ability to cover rental costs
<b>Physical Domain</b>	Durability of the dwelling Protection from the elements Provision of basic services/amenities Safety from external threats
<b>Social Domain</b>	Ability to enjoy social interactions Safety of oneself and possessions from other occupants

*\*The Institute of Global Homelessness's framework of homelessness as cited by UN-Habitat (2020)*

Importantly, if any category within these domains was not met, an individual was deemed “lacking access to minimally adequate housing” (UN-Habitat, 2020, p. 19). Although this framework intended “to define homelessness in a way that was meaningful across the world, resonating in both the Global South and the Global North” (2020, p. 19), it failed to recognise that many developing countries may not have adequate resources to address all of these categories (Naidoo, 2010; UN-Habitat, 2020).

Within the South African context, defining homelessness is not as straight forward as the IGH’s framework suggested. High levels of poverty, poor access to basic services, food and housing security are examples of the challenges SA faces. As a result, predominant local definitions centred around the concept of street living, “rough-sleeping” and rooflessness, indicating an individual’s lack of shelter or use of outdoor spaces for an extended duration to live and sleep in (Department of Social Development & Early Childhood Development, 2018; Hopkins et al., 2019; Olufemi, 1998). However, this definition excludes other experiences of inadequate housing as listed in the IGH’s framework (across all domains) such as township dwellings, shack and informal settlements where the structural quality may be deemed inadequate, as well as those who may sleep in cars or on the couches of friends and family, having no secure and consistent residence of their own (Naidoo, 2010; Roets et al., 2016; UN-Habitat, 2020).

Furthermore, the prevalence of informal settlements in South Africa prompted policy makers to discerningly consider criteria constituting homelessness. Research indicated that 40% of informal settlement occupants were employed, suggesting that although occupants fall within the cycle of poverty due to lack of formal residence among other factors, they were still able to participate in the economy and were not as vulnerable as those experiencing homelessness with no job, shelter, or refuge (Roets et al., 2016). In addition, social services such as RDP housing and social grants, were found to be more accessible to informal settlement occupants in comparison to persons who were homeless.

A final aspect considered under policy definitions were the various stages of homelessness (duration of time spent living on the street). Research often focuses on chronic homelessness where an individual was consistently on the street for a minimum period of a year or repeatedly returned to the streets over several years (Department of Social Development & Early Childhood Development, 2018; Hopkins et al., 2019; Olufemi, 1998).

### **Homelessness in South Africa**

Homelessness in South Africa has been considered a complex social issue, consisting of multiple and often overlapping drivers at interpersonal and structural levels (Roets et al., 2016; UN-Habitat, 2020; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Often cited as a result of RDP housing shortages, poor governance and overwhelming poverty, the proverbial antidote sought to address policies, increase social grants and increase available housing (Cross et al., 2010; Makiwane et al., 2010; Naidoo, 2010).

Research into South African homelessness reached a peak in 2010 when findings from the Human Sciences Research Council's multidisciplinary study were reported in a special issue of *Development Southern Africa* in response to the burgeoning number of dislocated individuals in South African cities. Although these investigations were conducted over a decade ago, at the time they cautioned of an increase in homelessness (Cross et al., 2010; Cross & Seager, 2010).

In a 2018 report on the country's levels of poverty and inequality, Statistics South Africa in collaboration with the World Bank suggested that despite South Africa's high levels of poverty for "an upper middle-income country", the country had made great strides to close the poverty gap in the past 20 years. This statement may be regarded as hard to digest for the majority of South Africans, for whom poverty is a daily threat. Currently understood to be experiencing high levels of poverty persistence (chronic poverty), 40% of South Africans earn less than R950 per month with a substantial sector of the population on the brink of poverty or "the non-poor but vulnerable" merely two pay checks away from it (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

Homelessness in South Africa cannot be considered without recognition of its oppressive past (Morrow, 2010). The foundation of South Africa's homelessness has been traced back to Apartheid's spatial planning and racial segregation policies. The Group Areas Act of 1950 resulted in systematic racial segregation of the population and the dispossession of land for black South Africans. The Act endorsed forced removals and sought to peripheralise people of colour from cities and economic centres to homelands and hostels for labourers in a hierarchical order. These areas experienced overcrowding and many only permitted single men to reside in hostels, separating families and communities. Homelessness grew out of these experiences of dislocation as more people became displaced, removed from families, resisted the regime or contested living conditions (Kriel et al., 2017; Morrow, 2010; Olufemi, 1998).

An interplay amongst policies on race, land and labour contributed to extreme and structurally entrenched poverty. National legislation meticulously alienated black South Africans, eradicating rights to land, access to work and fair compensation, rights to the city, and access to education. Simultaneously, these policies enforced relocation to homelands, becoming a source of cheap labour for farming and mining and appalling living and working conditions. As described by Morrow, “these men were prised off the land by taxation and the impoverishment of the increasingly overcrowded and environmentally degraded reserves into which the African population was penned” (2010, p. 54). These reserves or homelands became sites of poverty: as desperation increased, so did migration to urban areas despite the risk of removal, resulting in the erection of makeshift shelters on the peripheries of cities. Although the proximity to the city brought hope for employment, poor living conditions persisted, and for those who were unable to secure jobs, the threat of homelessness became imminent (Makiwane et al., 2010; Morrow, 2010; Olufemi, 1998). While these historical drivers still linger today, the prevailing socio-economic climate perpetuates conditions of homelessness. Research indicates factors such as poverty, substance abuse, unemployment, rural-urban migration, disability and gender-based violence as central drivers (Cross et al., 2010; Hopkins et al., 2019; Kriel et al., 2017; Makiwane et al., 2010; Morrow, 2010; Somerville, 2013).

Moreover, the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a protracted lockdown. This inflicted additional economic hardships, pushing people already on the brink of poverty further into the abyss due to sudden loss of income, contracting the virus and poor access to support systems. As a result, there has been a dramatic increase of visible street homelessness in cities (Bowman, 2020; Geldenhuys Kotie, 2021).

Subsequently, South Africa’s cities have adopted uncompromising positions on vagrancy, often trying to suppress visible street homelessness by relocating persons experiencing homeless to shelters or institutions. However as Cross and colleagues observe, “the homeless themselves do not disappear but are pushed further into marginality: spatial, social and economic” (2010, p. 8). The tendency to peripheralise ‘the poor’ away from income-generating opportunities reflects a lack of insight into their struggles whilst enforcing the idea that the presence of homelessness in cities contributes to economic disinvestment, problematising homelessness further (Holston, 2009; Naidoo, 2010; Olufemi, 1998; Wasserman et al., 2012).

### **Social Constructionism and Identity**

One of the key assumptions of social constructionism is that “knowledge is sustained by social processes” (Burr, 2003, p. 4), meaning that knowledge and understandings are co-created in reciprocal interactions amongst people using language (Burr, 2003; Liebrucks, 2001). Language represents an intentional action, that “pours meaning into the world, that then defines how one subsequently experiences that world” (Wasserman et al., 2012, p. 333). These interactions occurred constantly, constructing the social fabric by emphasising certain practices, perspectives, and actions while minimising others. These linguistic constructions are not random, they actively devise what is deemed acceptable, and consequently reinforce power relations (Burr, 2003; Parker, 1992). From this perspective, the concept of homelessness has been understood as a social phenomenon actively constructed through language and discourse. Following various studies which defined homelessness as such (Nichols, 2020; Wasserman et al., 2012; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004; Zufferey, 2017), this study explores the construction of identity and self amongst individuals experiencing homelessness from a social constructionist perspective.

Social constructionism requires a critical outlook, one that is cognisant of situational specificity deeply grounded in context while equally valuing socio-cultural and historical relativity. It requires a level of flexibility and an ability to acknowledge differing perspectives, rejecting notions of absolutes. Within this context, discourse represents the ontological frame from which to view the world, constructed through language and interaction amongst people and institutions (Burr, 2005; Liebrucks, 2001; Nichols, 2020; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004).

“Our identities, our selves are constructed through language, manufactured out of discourses...discourse is all there is” (Burr, 2003, p. 106) . While classic interpretations of identity are linked to personality traits, attitudes and dispositions, Burr (2003) argued that these descriptors merely articulated a discourse of individualism, essentialising the person and negating social constructions of identity. From this standpoint, social constructionists turn to discourse and language, where identity has been understood as a multifaceted concept consisting of “subtle interweaving of many different threads” (2003, p. 106) and informed by a myriad of culturally available discourses. These identity threads can be combined harmoniously or in contention, and are simultaneously associated with socially produced expectations (Burr, 1995, 2003).

*Who we are is constantly in flux, always dependent upon the changing flow of positions we negotiate within social interaction...our subjective experience of ourselves, of being the person we take ourselves to be is given by a variety of subject positions, some permanent, some temporary and some fleeting, that we take up in discourse (Burr, 2003, p. 120).*

It is not a problem if one aligns with dominant discourses where subject positions are neatly defined and uncontested, but for those on the edges of society, the claiming and resisting of subject positions is arduous with the potential to reinforce powerlessness and perpetuate vulnerability. It is important to note that some discourses have been deemed limiting and have the effect of maintaining hierarchical power relations (Olufemi, 2002; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004; Zufferey, 2017).

The language associated with homelessness, provides clues about the discourses surrounding it (Liebrucks, 2001). On the one level there is a description of individual pathology attributing becoming homeless to drugs, crime or laziness and various other stereotypes that functioned as blaming mechanisms. At a larger structural level terms such as “*the homeless problem*”, suggest that those experiencing homelessness are indeed the problem, placing strain on government resources in an attempt to “free-load,” instead of a scenario where institutions should assist vulnerable members of society (Wasserman et al., 2012). The term “homeless identity” is indicative of a homogenous group that eradicates all other subject positions held by the individual, therefore restricting them to a single description and attribute, namely, their *homelessness*. This risks people experiencing homelessness being positioned as particular kinds of discursive objects, separating them from agentic possibilities (Desjarlais- de Klerk, 2018; Horsell, 2006; McCarthy, 2013; Olufemi, 2002). As such, the discourse of homelessness restrains subject positions available to individuals. It is disempowering, limiting how people in this position may come to see and understand themselves (Burr, 2003; Horsell, 2006; McCarthy, 2013).

In becoming homeless, individuals experience detachment, dislocation, and disconnectedness (McCarthy, 2013). They are slowly removed from supportive relationships and institutions. Here, language becomes a tool to exert or resist power relations. It frames how policies are viewed and engaged with. It shapes everyday social interactions even when one may be approached by someone who is homeless at a traffic light. Language is political (Burr, 2003; Horsell, 2006; Meanwell, 2012; Olufemi, 2002; Parsell, 2011; Parsell et al., 2014; Wasserman et al., 2012); it constructs reality and within its remit, it has the ability to erect “barriers to the way in which homelessness is interpreted” (Olufemi, 2002, p. 463). Correspondingly, Horsell (2006, p. 218) concluded that the definitions of homelessness

adopted at a macro-policy level informed and reinforced “individualistic and blaming discourses” resulting in on-the-ground implications amongst those living on the streets.

Consequently described by Zuffery and Kerr (2004, p. 346), the “subjective experiences of individuals who have lived and experienced homelessness are misrepresented by constructions of ‘the homeless’ as a homogenous group”, ensuring that other threads of identity remain unacknowledged. Through this process of marginalisation, persons experiencing homelessness risk internalising these constructions, adopting negative subject positions through the discourses available to them.

### **Stigma**

Stigma was defined by Nichols (2020, p.585) as “having a characteristic that negatively impacts one’s identity, [stigma] grounds itself in the rejection of the individual in non-stigmatised social worlds”, perpetuated through unequal power dynamics and various identity markers that functioned intersectionally, such as class, race and gender, as well as mental illness, substance abuse, criminal records and homelessness (Meanwell, 2012; Rayburn & Guittar, 2013). Although Erving Goffman’s (1963) stigma framework was applied to different marginalised groups, many of which no longer experience stigma, research indicates that “being homeless remained a negative and deviant identity” (Hudson, 2016; McCarthy, 2013; Nichols, 2020; Parsell, 2011; Parsell et al., 2014; Rayburn & Guittar, 2013, p. 160).

As per Goffman’s (1963) framework, stigma was found to herald a stereotype rather than engage with a person’s unique traits. The homelessness stereotype is presented as self-induced through poor choices, irresponsibility, and laziness (to mention a few); as a result homelessness is often stigmatised (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; McCarthy, 2013; Rayburn & Guittar, 2013; Roets et al., 2016; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). In the process of becoming homeless, individuals are removed and excluded from participating in regular social life due to their inability to meet or maintain societal expectations whilst simultaneously navigating a loss of privacy, dignity, access, and an ability to be heard and seen (Olufemi, 2002; Rayburn & Guittar, 2013). Regardless of unsheltered persons’ responses to their homelessness, whether they adopted or distanced themselves from it, “the state of homelessness was presented as a reference point... constitut[ing] an important part of the identity of those who are homeless” (Parsell, 2011, p. 443).

As a result, tension between the visibility of stigma and the invisibility of shame raises additional questions around how individuals experiencing homelessness navigate, negotiate, and engage with their identities in spaces where their mere presence invites judgement and othering (Hudson, 2016; Rayburn & Guittar, 2013). Discourse analysts hypothesise that “power operates discursively through the individual’s positioning of [themselves] and others within particular discursive categories” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 111). While Parsell (2011) concurred in principle, he was primarily concerned with the manner in which a homeless identity had been given to individuals and their ensuing enactment of parts of the self, speculating that in this instance the homeless identity was not easily measured or quantified.

Many studies on homelessness cited Snow and Anderson’s seminal work on identity and homelessness (King et al., 2009; Meanwell, 2012; Nichols, 2020; Olufemi, 1998; Somerville, 2013), outlining three main strategies for managing stigmatised identities using language and discourse amongst homeless individuals. These mechanisms included distancing oneself from the stereotyped identity of homelessness and associated services, fully embracing and adopting the role of being homeless and, lastly, fictive storytelling where individuals manage their current situation by embellishing or engineering aspects of their lives, in an effort to evade the shame and blame of being homeless (King et al., 2009; Meanwell, 2012). As such, previous research focused on the impact of homelessness on identity, hypothesised that experiences of homelessness “alters personal identities and dissolves non-homeless identities”, eliciting a renewed interest in the everyday experiences of *the homeless*, in order to express the humanity of unsheltered individuals (Meanwell, 2012; Parsell, 2011, p. 444). This is indicative of the prevailing perceptions of those experiencing homelessness as people devoid of humanity and ordinary ways of being. Therefore, the impact of an inscribed, stigmatised homeless identity cannot be ignored, ultimately affecting a person’s self-perception, sense of worth and ability to hope (Parsell, 2011; Schneider et al., 2019).

While studying hidden homelessness amongst teenagers in the United States, Harter et al. (2005) found that stigma enforced binary societal understandings of what was deemed appropriate and inappropriate and, as a result, determined acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, actions, attributes and physical spaces. Harter and colleagues concluded that while teenagers experienced stigmatisation in their daily routines, the stigmatised attribute became “less important than the essence of [their] difference from socially constructed norms” (2005, p. 312). Correspondingly, Desjarlais-de Klerk (2018) observed study

participants' immersion in non-stigmatised identities, often associated with work, sobriety or spirituality, during their transition out of homelessness. She attributed this shift to the participants' desire to shirk the deviant, deficient and stigmatised identity associated with homelessness for a more favourable and positive sense of self as perceived by society.

### **Power, Agency, and Resistance**

“The idea of fragile subjects constituted by, and, or within strong discourse may ascribe too much power to discourse”(Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1132). The denial of any possibility of change within the subject, that an individual could be incapacitated by the prevailing discourse without any ability to adjust or resist their situation represents a discursive shortfall for social constructionists (Burr, 2003; Meanwell, 2012). Consequently, Burr (2003) cautions against the death of the subject, where an individual would be prevented from exercising choice and being reflective; she offers an alternate position to the traditional Foucauldian perspective, suggesting that, given appropriate circumstances, people are able to critically engage and reflect on discourses as they relate to them and are able to exercise choice, adopting discourses that agree with their personal intentions and use (Burr, 2003, 2005). As such, the concept of agency, by constructionist measures, contains optimistic possibilities for developing on-the-ground intervention strategies as well as social protection policies for the unsheltered. Parsell (2011) for example, found that participants were cognisant of dominant societal expectations and utilised their ascribed identities to achieve particular outcomes.

However, this position can also fail to recognise the limitations of exercising agency within a stigmatised population. “Language is so structured to mirror power relations that often we can see no other ways of being, and it structures ideology so that it is difficult to speak both in and against it” (Parker, 1992, p. xi). Given the discourse analytic approach of the study, Foucault's understanding of power, knowledge and resistance provides a robust base to engage with the discourses of homelessness and identity. In line with the social constructionists' views on language and discourse, the Foucauldian perspective theorised that social practices are informed through discourse, subsequently organising the world in a particular manner and therefore constructing social realities. From this view, power occurs through action- it is not bartered or granted but exercised through interaction:

*Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of*

*simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are also always the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power not its points of application (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).*

Lorentzen (2017) corroborated this view in her study of homeless men's negotiation of masculinity. She found that, while power is produced through interaction and normalises dominant ideals, it needed to be thought of in a manner that "acknowledges free will and human subjectivity" (p.105), supporting the phrase "where there is power there is also resistance" (Burr, 1995, p. 75), exercised through the alignment, negotiation or contestation of prevailing discourses (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1980; Horsell, 2006). However, Foucault emphasises that power as articulated through discourse, attempts to hide its agendas, easing its operational reach as society willingly participates in its own subjugation:

*Discourses offer a framework to people against which they may understand their own experience and behaviour and that of others and can be seen to be tied to social structures and practices in a way which masks the power relations operating in society (Burr, 1995, p. 72).*

The manner in which identity is struggled after by unsheltered individuals illustrates the complexity of power and resistance couched within dominant discourses of homelessness. The common assumption held by society suggests that vulnerable populations are subjected to oppression without scope for contention or resistance. Foucault, however, counters this notion stating that power is relative, affording even those on the fringe of society an opportunity to resist unsuitable positions or discourses (Burr, 1995, 2005; Foucault, 1980; Horsell, 2006; Rabinow, 1991).

## **Rationale and Aim**

Despite a lack of definitional rigour, many studies investigating homelessness within the South African context primarily focused on pathways, risk factors and causes of homelessness in a bid to inform national housing policies (Department of Social Development & Early Childhood Development, 2018; Hopkins et al., 2019; UN-Habitat, 2020; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). While the importance of macro-structural level interventions is noted, few research studies have focused on the lived experiences, internal constructions, and identities of homeless individuals as crucial factors that can also inform successful policy and practice for addressing homelessness. As stated by Somerville (2013, p. 384):

*Homelessness is not just a matter of ...a lack of a roof over one's head. It involves deprivation across a number of different dimensions-physiological (lack of bodily comfort or warmth), emotional (lack of love or joy), territorial (lack of privacy), ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope, lack of purpose). It is important to recognize this multidimensional character, not least because homelessness cannot be remedied simply through the provision of bricks and mortar.*

Thus, the aim of this study is to understand how participants negotiate their identities within the contested, hostile environment of the streets by exploring constructions of self and identity amongst a sample of South Africa's homeless population.

## Chapter 2: Method

### Research Design

This study sought to establish how persons experiencing homelessness constructed their identities and sense of self through discourse. To achieve this, a qualitative, exploratory research design was employed using a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to explore how participants “use[d] available discourses flexibly in creating and negotiating representations of the world and identities in talk-in-interaction and to analyse the consequence of this” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 7).

Discourse analysis adopts an anti-essentialist perspective, positing that reality is not stagnant, constructed through external factors resulting in predetermined traits, but rather flexibly evolving out of social and discursive practices; “discourse is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world including knowledge, identities and social relations- thereby in maintaining specific social patterns” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). In line with this understanding, the study explored connections amongst discourse, language and positioning (Willig, 2008).

### Research Questions

The research questions for this study were accordingly as follows:

1. What discourses did persons experiencing homelessness draw on when describing themselves?
2. What subject positions were available to persons experiencing homelessness within these discourses?
3. How did these subject positions function in terms of facilitating and/or constraining agentic possibilities?

### Sample

A sample was drawn from a subset of persons experiencing homelessness in Johannesburg, South Africa. Participants were recruited from a single meal scheme organisation that provided support to unsheltered persons in the area. The Angel Meal Scheme associated with Fountain for the Thirsty, operated from a residential dwelling off Jan Smuts Avenue in Parktown North, and was initiated by an active citizen at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020. The organisation provided persons with sandwiches and coffee, and offered charging stations for devices as well as photocopying and printing

facilities for identity documents and CVs. In addition, dental services were facilitated for those in need.

The nature of the study required detailed explorations of participants' descriptions of themselves and their lived experiences. Fifteen individuals voluntarily elected to be interviewed on a single occasion by the researcher, resulting in a small, non-probability convenience sample. In consultation with the organisation, the researcher provided participants with a basic sanitary/toiletry parcel as a gift following the interview. These parcels had no bearing on the participants' right to withdraw from the study and all participants were duly made aware of this (Carbó et al., 2016; Kriel et al., 2017). However, during the interview phase, I (the researcher) found that these parcels were highly sought after amongst potential participants. After the first two days of interviewing, word of sanitary parcels had spread, and I had to manage many individuals wanting to be interviewed. Following this, I developed a daily roster with three time slots per interview day to allow potential participants to sign up before the interviews began. This system worked well with participants requesting to schedule their names a day ahead for the following day. All participants were assured that they could stop or leave the interview at any point without the sanitary parcel being withheld; despite this, all participants expressed a desire to complete the interview, with many citing the process as a "positive experience".

The sample consisted of fifteen men between the ages of 26 and 54 years old. Consistent with the socio-political origins of homelessness in South Africa discussed above, the racial composition of the sample, consisted of fourteen black participants and one coloured participant. The average duration of homelessness amongst the sample was 4.65 years, with 87% of the sample experiencing homelessness for over a year, consequently defined as chronically homeless. One-third of the sample had utilised shelters with only three participants staying in shelters over a prolonged period; the remaining individuals (twelve) described their experiences of rough-sleeping on the streets. All participants, except for one, were South African. In determining the participants' highest level of education, all the participants appeared to have completed their primary school education (Grade 7). Eight participants did not complete their secondary schooling having dropped out of high school before completing Grade 12. Four participants completed their matric year with another two participants having completed a diploma or tertiary level qualification. One participant did not complete his schooling but entered a skills programme. While the demographic information depicted in Tables 1 and 2 below do not form part of a traditional textual

analysis, this information assisted the researcher in locating the sample within a broader societal context (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

*Table 2: Descriptive Statistics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Duration of Homelessness</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Residence</b>
1	32	6	SA	Rough Sleeping
2	29	3.5	SA	Shelter
3	54	7	SA	Rough Sleeping
4	28	1.5	SA	Rough Sleeping
5	27	5	SA	Shelter
6	29	11	SA	Rough Sleeping
7	36	2.5	SA	Shelter and now rough sleeping
8	45	3	SA	Rough Sleeping
9	52	4	SA	Rough Sleeping
10	43	5	SA	Rough Sleeping
11	33	0.5	SA	Shelter
12	47	0.75	SA	Rough Sleeping
13	36	1	Zimbabwe	Rough Sleeping
14	26	16	SA	Rough Sleeping
15	38	3	SA	Shelter and now rough sleeping

*Table 3: Sample Summary*

<b>Sample Demographics</b>		
<b>Age</b>	20-29	5 participants
	30-39	5 participants
	40-49	3 participants
	50-59	2 participants
<b>Shelter</b>	Temporary Stay	2 participants
	Prolonged Stay	3 participants
<b>Rough-Sleeping</b>		10 participants
<b>Nationality</b>	South African	14 participants
	Foreign	1 participant
<b>Race</b>	Black	14 participants
	Coloured	1 participant
<b>Education</b>	Grade 8-11	8 participants
	Grade 12	4 participants
	Skills Course/Training	1 participant
	Diploma/Tertiary Education	2 participants

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants on a single occasion to gain insight into their ways of discoursing about their homelessness (see Appendix A), resulting in a cross-sectional study (Desjarlais- de Klerk, 2018). The interview schedule consisted of two sections and acted as a guide to cover areas of interest whilst still allowing for the conversation to evolve in a natural manner (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The first section of the interview schedule obtained broad demographic information including age, gender, nationality, level of education and duration of homelessness. The second section of the interview schedule encouraged a discussion around participants' experience of living on the streets, outlining their journey to homelessness, their understandings of themselves before and after becoming homeless as well as experiences that contributed to changes in behaviour and living (Carbó et al., 2016; Kriel et al., 2017).

The interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded with prior consent from participants (see Appendix C). The Angel Meal Scheme provided an outdoor area for the interviews to be conducted. Although this area was shielded from view of other patrons and volunteers, the noise from the street as well as the queue of meal scheme patrons was still audible. Even though the researcher anticipated the duration of each individual interview to last between 45-60 minutes, the majority of interviews conducted were between 30 and 45 minutes long, as many participants expressed the need to "*get to the next place*" (support organisation).

## Procedures

Once permission was granted by the meal scheme (see Appendix F), a poster describing the main aims of the study along with the researcher's contact details and dates for interviews was placed at the front of the patrons' queue area (see Appendix D). The researcher presented a brief synopsis of the study and requirements for participation to the group of patrons at 8:30 am, prior to conducting individual interviews each day. Interested parties were then asked to put their names on the interview list if they wished to participate in the study. The scheduling of interviews happened on the day, with a few participants putting their names down for the next day's interview slots in advance. On occasion, participants were not able to wait for their slot and would move on "*to the next place*" however the researcher found that many of the organisation's patrons were willing to contribute and participate, least of all to be guaranteed a sanitary parcel.

The researcher provided participants with a study information sheet (see Appendix B) and read through its contents before embarking on the interview to ensure that potential participants were aware of the scope, aims and objectives of the study as well as what constituted participation, along with the researcher's and supervisor's contact details. Additionally, all participants were provided with a consent form: the researcher read through this document with each participant, outlining their right to withdraw from the study at any point with no adverse consequences, matters of confidentiality, and the general scope of their participation (see Appendix C). Given that participants belonged to a vulnerable sector of the population, they were permitted to sign using a thumb print or X if unable to write or uncomfortable furnishing their name; however, all the participants wrote their names on the consent forms.

Although interviews were recorded, the researcher took notes during each interview to assist with transcription. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher using Microsoft Word's transcribe tool and checked manually. Audio recordings of the interviews were deleted after transcription. All transcript documents (Word and PDF) were password-protected and stored on a password-protected device, before being virtually uploaded to the researcher's personal iCloud storage.

## **Data Analysis**

One aim of discourse analysis (DA) is to determine “discursive practices through which categories are constructed” rather than merely placing people into groups (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 107). It seeks to demonstrate that people's flexibility and ability to adapt to changing contexts fosters their engagement with different discourses. Here, discourse included verbal and written text in the form of interviews and transcripts, including conversations, experiential accounts, and meanings that played out within social interactions (Burr, 2003; Liebrucks, 2001; Parker, 1992).

In line with research objectives, DA was used to analyse and investigate interviews capturing participants' life experiences of homelessness. The transcripts of these interviews were “observed as social texts” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1125). The purpose of this exploration is not to determine absolute representations or objective realities, but rather to deconstruct what discourses individuals experiencing homelessness draw on and how these discourses inform the subject positions available to them in the construction of their identities (Burr, 2003; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Nichols, 2020).

Discourse analysis is not definitively structured in a step by step process, but has been guided by a theoretical framework which illuminates constructive areas of discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Parker, 1992). With this in mind, DA seeks to establish “connections between language forms, functions and contextual aspects” (Carbó et al., 2016, p. 369); this is achieved through the careful reading of social texts and discerning themes and discursive patterns. Instances of positioning and emphasis were noted as well as variations in discourse (Carbó et al., 2016; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Using Willig’s procedural guidelines for conducting a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, the researcher performed a six-stage analysis of the participants’ interview transcripts as outlined in the table below:

**Table 4:** Willig's Procedural Guidelines for a brief Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (Willig, 2008, pp. 115–117)

**Guidelines for FDA**

<b>Stage 1:</b> Discursive Construction	Identify discursive constructions and objects
<b>Stage 2:</b> Discourses	Locate discourses that construct the identified discursive objects
<b>Stage 3:</b> Action Orientation	Determine the action orientation of discursive objects and associated discourses, in order to determine the capabilities of the discursive object within text
<b>Stage 4:</b> Positioning	Identify the subject positions available within particular discourses.
<b>Stage 5:</b> Practice	Determine the relationship between the identified discourses and practice, explore the opportunities available to persons adopting certain subject positions. “By constructing particular versions of the world and by positioning subjects with in them in particular ways, discourses limit what can be said or done” (Willig, 2008, p. 117)
<b>Stage 6:</b> Subjectivity	Determine the consequences of taking up certain subject positions for participants

As depicted above, the analysis was grounded in what the transcripts conjured: it became a textual exploration of insinuations, references, and implications, and was at times iterative in nature. The researcher formed a fundamental part of the analysis by identifying

the discourses and determining what they did, identifying patterns and selecting appropriate supporting excerpts. As a result, the researcher's reflexivity became an important aspect of data analysis (Carbó et al., 2016; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Parker, 1992; Willig, 2008).

Once the interviews were transcribed, the initial analysis involved a manual reading of each transcript; the data was then entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to track preliminary impressions. Thereafter, the transcripts were imported into QSR International's NVivo 12 for further qualitative analysis. Following the Foucauldian methodology outlined above, the researcher coded relevant nodes for prominent discourses, subject positions as well as discursive practices as they emerged, including annotations highlighting insights as the analysis progressed. Analysis entailed an intricate reading and re-reading of transcripts, isolating extracts and observing constructions of identity and self amongst the shared narratives.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance (reference number: PSY2022-004) was obtained from the University of Cape Town's Ethics Committee (Humanities Research Ethics Committee) prior to the commencement of the study (see Appendix E). In addition, permission to conduct interviews at the Angel Meal Scheme in Johannesburg was secured (see Appendix F).

The associated risks of participating in this study were carefully considered due to the focus on lived experiences of a vulnerable sector of the population. As the content explored during the interviews had the potential to expose participants to emotional discomfort and distress in recounting difficult experiences, recommendations for counselling were provided, redirecting participants to appropriate services such as The Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. As a precaution, participants were also furnished with the details of non-profit counselling organisations such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) or Lifeline if additional assistance was required.

The confidentiality and anonymity of participants was protected by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and removing identifying features such as specific addresses or family members' names from the final research report. Following the interview process, the researcher availed themselves for a debriefing session with participants; however, this session was not attended by any of the participants. Although the researcher wished to present the study findings to participants and the associated organisation once completed, the researcher was informed of the permanent closure of the meal scheme from 8 December 2022

after serving the surrounding homeless population since March 2020. As a result of this closure and the transitory nature of participants, the researcher was unable to re-establish contact with individuals interviewed to provide study feedback. At an organisational level, the researcher is still to present findings to the founders of the meal scheme upon returning to Johannesburg in the second quarter of 2023.

As previously mentioned, there was no monetary compensation for participation in the study. However, bearing in mind the economic challenges participants faced, a basic sanitary parcel was offered as a gift for participation after the interviews were conducted. Participants were not informed of the parcels before the interviews to avoid oversubscription to the study. It should be noted that the parcels were not deemed extravagant enough to be considered coercive, affecting participants' choice to participate in or to withdraw (at any point) from the study. Despite these assurances and measures, the researcher found that there was a demand and desire for the parcels amongst potential participants, and experienced a large number of people wanting to be interviewed. This development was managed on-site with the researcher implementing a daily interview schedule for those wanting to be interviewed. On the whole, patrons of the meal scheme adhered to and respected the roster's schedule, with only a few individuals expressing their disappointment at not being interviewed.

### **Reflexivity**

The concept of reflexivity is central to qualitative research and discourse analysis, taking the role of the researcher into consideration (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). I, as the researcher, recognise my role as a co-constructor of knowledge (Liebrucks, 2001; Parker, 1992). By posing particular questions during the interviews and subsequently identifying and selecting extracts that I felt were meaningful, I actively contributed to the construction of the study's data set, as well as the production of knowledge vis-à-vis the study's research questions (Burr, 1995, p. 180). I acknowledge that I determined what I believed to be pertinent to the study, while other analysts and researchers may have selected other extracts (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Being a young woman of colour and having previously occupied a volunteer position at the Angel Meal Scheme helped me to engage with the participants; most of whom were already familiar with my presence at the organisation and were of a similar age to me. I believe this contributed to the participants' willingness to be interviewed by me and to share

their experiences. However, the contrast between my privilege and background and the participants' experiences and disadvantage cannot be ignored, this highlights the power differential between us, I was concerned that this would hamper participants' willingness to share their experiences (Burr, 1995; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Although all the interviews were conducted in English (my primary language), most participants spoke English as a second or third language. I believe that this an impact on the descriptive quality of participants' responses to questions about their identity, as some participants struggled to speak about how they saw themselves. At times I found myself getting swept up by participants' narratives of their everyday struggles such as looking for shelter, food or a job. Many participants expressed a desperate need for help and connection, often describing the emotional toll of being homeless during their interviews. I felt overwhelmed and despondent over the course of the study by the scale and impact of homelessness as well as the numerous barriers experienced by participants.

I struggled to bear the participants' anger and frustration, In these moments I noticed within myself a deep urge to intervene and offer assistance in some form. Given my position as researcher and affiliation to a university, participants perceived me as being able to help them with administrative problems such as securing driving lessons, printing CV's, finding job opportunities, providing transport and identity documents.

This study prompted me to examine my own struggles with poverty and identity. I was touched by the participants' accounts as well as their resilience, perseverance and hope.

### **Data Management Plan**

The data generated from this study consisted of consent forms, audio recordings and observation notes collected during individual interviews with participants. The recordings and notes were transcribed using Microsoft Word's Transcriber tool and checked manually for consistency.

All data was stored on a password-protected primary device, and all Word and PDF documents were password-protected. Additionally, data was backed up digitally on a personal iCloud account as well as on a password-protected hard drive which was stored in a secure location.

## Chapter 3: Findings and Discussion

Using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), the study sought to determine how people experiencing homelessness constructed their identity and sense of self. The following chapter will present research findings along with a discussion in response to the research questions specified in Chapter 1, commencing with the discourses participants utilised when describing themselves, followed by a presentation of subject-positions available to participants and culminating in an analysis of how these available positions function, considering the agentic possibilities of participants.

### Discourses

In analysing how participants spoke about themselves, their experiences and sense of self, the researcher sought to identify their ways of engaging and understanding as expressed through language. This was achieved through careful transcription, reading and re-reading of the interview texts, noting participants' repetitions, omissions, connections, and difficulties to ascertain how participants imparted, illustrated, and constructed their identities. The emerging discourses indicated an intricate interplay between the influence of structural drivers such as poverty and the psychic, internal consequences of extreme deprivation manifest at an individual level. Whilst at times challenging to extract from the interviews, the following discourses as indicated in Table 5, were employed across participant interviews.

**Table 5: Identity Discourses**

#### Discourses pertaining to:

Absence	<i>Diminished Sense of Self/ devoid of representation</i>
The Homeless Identity	<i>Group Identity</i>
Family	<i>Belonging</i>
Personality traits	<i>Descriptions of Self</i>
Addiction	<i>Mechanisms to escape, cope and avoid</i>
Spirituality	<i>Hope, Future Orientation</i>
Occupation, hobbies, and interests	<i>Sense of Value and Worth</i>

Participants openly discussed their experiences of deprivation, alluding to a cycle of poverty that cut across multiple aspects of self, rooted in trauma. Having explored the relationship between impoverishment and identity, Vahali (2015, p. 238) suggested that, “as a

poor person, one has historically, culturally and intergenerationally been discouraged to think of one's feelings, desires, wishes, fears and worries. The unit status of being a person—an individual with a right to one's felt emotional states—has been denied for so long, one often experiences one's [feelings] as being considered strange and ego alien..." This mirrors Olufemi's (2002) assertion that unsheltered persons internalised these denials (amongst others), experiencing themselves as strangers, railing against detachment, separation and dislocation from their own understanding and experience of themselves. This is also consistent with social constructionist thought, where identity is formed not through an individual internal process but socially constructed through discourse. Participants constructed their sense of self and identity out of the discourses made available to them by mainstream society (Burr, 1995). These discourses facilitated and limited the subjectivities and positions available to participants through language (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019).

Consistent with Sommerville's (2013, p. 385) description of homelessness as "an intentional object albeit a complex one but peculiar because it signifie[d] an absence rather than a presence", the analysis revealed that participants' constructions of identity were saturated with discursive threads of absence. This impeded participants' ability to resist the homeless label prescribed by dominant discourses that determined how homelessness was understood. This was achieved by recruiting mainstream descriptions and stereotypes to inform popular constructions. In so doing, individuals were labelled as diminished, expressing absences in identity and self that signified erosion, non-existence and deficiency. Although difficult to escape, resistance still manifested through discourses that emanated presence and hope leaning on resiliencies of self and the innate human drive to survive. As such, the identity discourses of homelessness became polarised between two domains namely, absence and presence as indicated in Table 6.

**Table 6:** *Discourses relating to Absence and Presence*

**Identity discourses concerning:**

<b>Absence</b>	<b>Presence</b>
Absence	Family
The Homeless Identity	Spirituality
Addiction	Personality Traits
	Occupation, hobbies, and interests

### **Absence: a position devoid of humanity**

When describing themselves, there was a palpable and evident void of self-representation amongst participants. The discourse of absence grew out of elements of non-existence, loss and being less than. Participants defended with apathetic responses, while a lack of choice was communicated through negative self-talk, perceptions, and sombre descriptions.

*You end up feeling like you are not a person, maybe you are a dog or something. Which some people will make you feel like that, there are people who are going to make you feel that way and they're going to make you see that you are not a person, you have nothing...Like teach me, if I don't know instead of just making me go down and down and down, because what you're doing is you're bringing me down, which you're making me like I'm useless you check, I'm not a person. [Bafana]*

The excerpt above was illustrative of the common thread amongst participants when talking about their identity. It represented a diminished sense of self, an identity that was less than, and, in the hierarchy of value, their being was communicated as less than a housed person and less than that of an animal. The participant noted that he was not worthy of engagement with people who were not homeless, describing feelings of irrelevance and non-existence as a result. This sentiment was echoed by Jabu:

*Sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror, I see like I'm not existing. When I look at myself, I think maybe I'm a zombie or what- I don't know. [Jabu]*

Here, the participant did not feel like he existed, his sense of self was so diminished that he could not recognise his own reflection. The comparison to a zombie, a dead creature, without capacity for emotion or thinking but a one-tracked drive for survival based on hunger was indicative of his feelings about his current position in life, living on the street had rendered him absent and emotionally dead. As Bafana later surmises, “it’s not a life, but we just have to survive.” Other participants echoed feelings of non-existence and being dislocated from who they are. The absence of self and the presence of death were illustrated in the excerpts below:

*Living on the streets, you don't know who you are. Um you're not in existence, you, are invisible. [Funani]*

*I'm alone in the bush so I can cancel myself...my life is done already. [Msizi]*

*Even myself I feel like it's not me who lives. [Nkosi]*

*Like most people on the street, they gave, they have given up in life as you can see, like how some are, things like that. They've given up in life to say I'm already dead, so what's wrong, what must I do? [Bafana]*

As per Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, to live a fulfilled life, one's basic needs must be satisfied. Depicting a scaffolded approach to needs, Maslow stratified needs starting with those essential to survival (deficiency needs) ascending to those needed to achieve self-actualisation (being needs) such as "safety, belonging and esteem" towards the top of the pyramid (Henwood et al., 2015, p. 220). Although studies from developed economies suggest that a large sector of society experience a quasi-stable needs base with consistent and viable access to shelter, sanitation and sustenance allowing space for the attunement of other higher-order needs with the goal of "becoming everything that one is capable of becoming" (2015, p. 220), the foundational needs of those experiencing homelessness remain unmet due to extreme levels of poverty. Consequently, the discourse of absence illuminated the scope of deprivation experienced by chronically unsheltered individuals. Where the failure to satisfy deficiency needs not only excluded one from socially acceptable behaviour and growth, it also rendered one internally deficient, devoid of representation, and permeated with emptiness, invisibility, and a lack of engagement with the self. The linear trajectory of Maslow's theory presents little hope for unsheltered persons to fulfil their *being needs*, consigned to remain at the base of the pyramid (Henwood et al., 2015; Horsell, 2006; Vahali, 2015; Wilson et al., 2019). In the extract below, Jerome discussed his rejection from society, he described being shunned because he was unable to maintain his hygiene and unable to secure adequate food, his deficiency needs. As a result, he was reduced to a *dog* and an *outcast*, and excluded from being considered a human being because he did not meet society's expectations of self-sufficiency.

*It's a bit of rejection. I will say you are outcast. You are not actually as a human being, people doesn't look at you as a human being. People address you as an animal, you know um sometimes you are in need of to wash, to clean yourself and some facilities do not let you do those things. They will just give you a little food, wash it up, out, please eat, finish, like a dog like you know, you not supposed to have access to the way like a human being. I think a lot of guys, it make them to go crazy on the streets. [Jerome]*

In his study of homelessness in Australia, Horsell (2006, p. 214) hypothesised that homelessness was a process of social exclusion, achieved through a process of othering articulated by dominant societal discourses where “homeless populations [were] constructed within social relations of power that totalise[d] subordinated groups at the expense of a more thorough exploration of their heterogeneity.” The discourse of absence represents an internalisation of this cauterised state, silencing other aspects of personhood, self and identity. The desire to be a part of society, to fit in and conform was articulated in the following extract:

*Researcher (R): When you were younger... how did you see yourself then?*

*Mpilo (M): There by that time it was good for me, cause I see I'm same like other people. You understand?... I did tell myself that I would be same like other people really, how they are living, gonna be same...*

Mpilo stated that things were good when he was younger, he was still able to participate in regular society because he was like everyone else. He never wanted to be different, he wanted to be the same as everyone else, that was his wish for himself, as if he could not dare to dream a different reality for himself.

### **The Homeless Identity**

The homeless identity has been viewed as an assigned group identity utilising a discourse that reinforces inclusion and compliance with prevalent standards. The main tenet of membership is one's homelessness: this is not an identity one assumed willingly but was one that persons were given based on societal perceptions and values (Horsell, 2006). In this sense, to be homeless, has two manifestations: first, to be without a physical home, and

second to be less-than for being without a home (i.e., not meeting the minimum expectations of society), implying *less* in a material-structural sense, but also in terms of personal value (Olufemi, 2002; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Consistent with these manifestations, Havel (as quoted by Olufemi, (2002, p. 459), theorised that “our homes are an inseparable element of our human identity. Deprived of all aspects of his home man would be deprived of himself, of his humanity.” This underscores an ascribed membership facilitated by broader society through discourse, positioning people experiencing homelessness within a hierarchy of societal ideals (Harter et al., 2005). Regardless of one’s acceptance or contestation, this dubious membership eradicates all other individual identifiers of persons who are unable to afford housing and replaces them with an unsheltered status, redefining people as homeless persons with a homeless identity that heralds a mélange of negative stereotypes (Desjarlais-de Klerk, 2018; McCarthy, 2013; Parsell, 2011).

For participants, conversations, and enquiries about who they were and are, their personal description of themselves as well as their future hopes and desires were mediated within the signifier of “homeless”. As such, being unsheltered, became a central and inescapable component of identity (Horsell, 2006; Hudson, 2016; Nichols, 2020).

*Researcher (R): How do you find people who are not homeless, how do you find they treat you?*

*Sanele (S): People who are not?*

*R: Not homeless.*

*S: Most of them...look at the situation at the first glance: you are here because you do not want to seek job. You are here because you are lazy. You are here because you are ill-disciplined. You are here because you just- you do not love yourself enough. So, they are so judgemental, like that, many of them.*

The extract above highlighted society’s perceptions of homelessness and the manner in which it permeated their treatment of unsheltered individuals such as Sanele. Here homelessness was framed as a consequence of personal frailties and failures, a self-induced state marked by laziness and a lack of self-respect (Horsell, 2006; Hudson, 2016; Nichols, 2020; Olufemi, 2002; Zufferey, 2017). It was apparent that Sanele was aware of how he was perceived, represented and understood by society as someone experiencing homelessness and later stated that he too held those views before he began living on the street (Snodgrass, 2014):

*“I was saying that before I came here, I was always judgemental...But this situation, it has helped me to have a different picture of the person who is on the street.”*

Sanele offered an alternate understanding for his experience, suggesting that homelessness had in fact fostered insight and allowed him to feel empathy for those who were homeless, allowing him to resist the disparaging descriptions in the first extract above (Burr, 1995).

Thulani described how people interacted with him, simply stating that it was unrelated to who he was as an individual in his personal capacity but rather related to his homelessness, surmising that other unsheltered people just treat him “like everyone else”, identifying him as part of the homeless group:

*R: May I ask you, I mean, coming from, um, moving to South Africa, having this experience, how do you find that people treat you, um, now that you are living on the streets?*

*Thulani (T): Uh, I, I, I, I, I don't see any difference because of the people that, that see me on the street, mostly, most of them, they don't know my, my, my life. They don't know my experiences. It's just maybe see me as a guy who is living on the streets only, but they don't know where I come from. They don't know my failures, my achievements and stuff. So ja, they just treat me like, everyone else.*

*R: by everyone else, what do you mean?*

*T: Uh, just like the way they treat each other. Ja. You see in the streets, you meet different characters, wild ones, uh, bubbly ones and stuff. So, it depends who you interact with, ja.*

*R: All right. And how do you find that people who are not homeless treat you? Other people.*

*T: Mm. Ja. I, I think that depends on the, on the character of, of that person. Some of the people they understand, some of the people they still see, uh, homeless people as people.*

However, Thulani simultaneously observed that the rough-sleeping group was not homogenous, containing diverse character traits. He resisted identifying with the homeless group image when he discussed how some people who are not homeless (not all) may

perceive unsheltered individuals: *as people*, avoiding terms such as we and us (Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). In line with Snow and Anderson's (1987) strategies for managing stigma, Thulani distanced himself from being identified as a member of the homeless group, rejecting a representation given to him by both those who identified with being homeless and those who were not homeless (Burr, 1995; Nichols, 2020).

In contrast to Thulani, Msizi explicitly communicated how persons experiencing homelessness were lumped together in a single category, referring to the group identity as *one gender* drawing on a biological discourse of sex to highlight the binary nature of the assignment, us as *the homeless* versus them (everyone else) (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; Hudson, 2016; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). He communicated that simply because he was living through the same struggle as someone else it did not make them the same.

*So, it's such different people so, we've got different people in this area. So, but we have been put in this one gender, as we are one. So, anything that we look for or to find out is not easier because it's like we are in the one group. So, I try to make people understand that that actually here we are in different groups. We are different groups, we are not in the same group, but we are living the same life, jaaa, we are eating, going to eat in the same place, washing in the same place, but we are not the same at all, we are quite different. [Msizi]*

To be sure, statements regarding participants' diversity appeared across the sample:

*You've got different kind of people on the streets. There's moody people, there's caring people, there's loving people, there's other people that you cannot talk to- You know there's vicious people, there's different kind of people you know. It's-I think it's who you associate with, you know, I will always associate with Godly people. That is my people that I can always have a long conversation all day long to, to talk about God you know. And then you've got a group of people who's drug addicts, you've got alcoholics, ja we are different kinds of groups in the streets ja. [Jerome]*

*All of us on the streets are not the same. [Bafana]*

*R: So, do you feel that being seen as one group is a problem?*

*Msizi (M): Mm-hmm, it's a big, big, big, biggest problem. Biggest problem. A big problem. It's a big problem because some people, they get lucky, someone takes them in the house, they come and stay with me in the house and just clean, you know, just do garden and just do anything. Then he steals. Then I need that place. If I got that place, I was gonna go and go and go and find my own place. So, this is the sector of in one, one group in. That makes things worse for all of us.*

*Overall, I can say that you meet different people with the different attitudes. [Kagiso]*

The invisibility ascribed to *the homeless* as a group, functioned to simultaneously ensure their anonymity and sameness. As a consequence of street-life acculturation, persons were peripheralized from their sense of self and identity markers (physical and emotional), forced to focus on survival, and in doing so they became consumed by an identity that rendered them all the same (Harter et al., 2005; Somerville, 2013) as further expressed by Ravenhill (2008, p.140):

There is the initial inertia, the stripping of self-identity as clothes wear out, hygiene and personal care becomes impossible to maintain and the corporate identity is absorbed. This depersonalization includes the loss of their name (street people are often known by nicknames and aliases), personal demonstrable history (photographs, keepsakes, forms of ID) and the loss of “me” (the stories, memories attached to photographs and keepsakes). There is a language and demeanour that needs to be adopted for survival...that is reinforced by mainstream society through labelling [language and discourse].

Some participants alluded to this process of depersonalisation as a loss of dignity, often concerning hygiene, access and stigma. Hygiene became an external marker of one's homelessness representing both a barrier and gateway to support. The stereotyped images of homelessness drew on unwashed, unhygienic, unkempt people. The embodiment of these characteristics facilitated access to shelters, meal schemes and so on, while concurrently preventing access to employment opportunities for people with this visage. Being visibly homeless facilitated both an obvious and inescapable marker of one's homelessness as well as a trait signalling avoidance and lack of worth. Harter et al. (2005, p. 323) described this phenomenon as a double bind: “to make their status visible by seeking help risks public

stigmatization; to avoid stigmatization requires invisibility”. Thus the consequences of visibility and invisibility constructed through the discourse of hygiene and homelessness include internal manifestations of absence and a stigmatised sense of self.

In the following extracts, the ability to maintain one’s personal hygiene acts as a mitigating factor against the stigma of homelessness and the homeless identity.

*I was bathing in the bushes sometimes using a bucket so that time, eish it was difficult, I was going to the bush naked bathing, so people passing see me, bathing, bathing there. So it’s not right. [Vusi]*

Even so, the act of bathing in public reinforced Vusi’s position as homeless: performing private functions in the public domains makes visible his situation, hampering his anonymity and thus his credibility to participate in ‘normal’ society.

*We are not all the same you know. Ja, some of the, some of them can judge me for who I am. You know... Jaa. Especially people on the streets. Some of them are jealous of me, cause ah, I am like a smart, clean uh see things like that. [Thato]*

*If I tell them that I'm homeless, they don't believe it. They say you don't sleep in the street. You understand. A big man, like you, uh, uh cause you always clean, we never see you dirty. The people who are sleeping in the street, are always dirty. That's how I know I always like to keep myself clean. It doesn't matter that I'm sleeping in the street, but I always like keeping myself clean you know... Cause, the people, they can destroy you. You understand? “This man was always like this he’s got wife, he’s got kids. But now it changed, what happened?” You understand the exposure neh? Even now, it looks like people they are running away for you cause now you don’t have plan B, plan A is finished. You understand? So, I just said let me keep quiet. And then when they see me “ah are you ok?” “Jaaa, I’m alright”, “How’s work?” “Ah work is fine” It's my own private, and confidential. I can't let them know that, help me I'm looking for a job, no. I call myself from my heart. You understand? Talking to them, it's a problem just cause you say something to them, they gonna- you know gossiping? “You see this man he was working but now the things is like this, how come?” You understand? It’s exposing. And now you’ve got no dignity. You understand? [Mpilo]*

In contrast to Vusi's statement, Thato and Mpilo discussed the importance of not appearing to be homeless, citing hygiene and being clean as an act of resistance towards the ascribed homeless identity. The visibility of homelessness was difficult to shirk: it manufactured a homogenous understanding of "the homeless" as a group devoid of nuance and diversity thus actively silencing aspects of individual identity and superimposing a perceived image as communicated and internalised through dominant discourses (Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Similarly, participants described being perceived as criminals and mentally unstable in the examples below:

*Being in the street is difficult in such a way that people, they will always assume that you are a criminal, meanwhile, you are not a criminal. So, I mean the most, scapegoats in crime, most of the time, like they find it in the street. Most of the time, the crime that is happening in Joburg, it is not done by the people who are staying in the street. I know the people in the street, they do steal those small things but the real crime that is happening in Joburg, like people mugging people and whatever, it is done by people who are staying in flats but whenever you are walking in town, whenever you see a dirty person, you will try to protect whatever that you have because you think that he is the one who is robbing people but meanwhile, he is not the one who is robbing people. Because I stay with them, I know them. Because I stay in town, I see robberies happening in my eyes most of the time. That is why I am saying normal people, most of the time, they are always judgemental because of the person on the street, they are always judgemental. [Sanele]*

*I'm not happy by the way people look at me, they look at me as if I'm crazy or as if... Instead of trying to help, they will either laugh at you or assault you or ignore you as if you're not human. As if [pause] I don't know, it's just strange looks. I think what used to hurt me in the beginning is the looks. And the mere fact that we'd be walking in the same path and because you're next to me or you're coming towards me, you'd move away as far away as possible. That's also painful. Um, I'm not a criminal. I might smell- I'm actually clean today, but I still feel that people are just gonna walk around me instead of walking you proper, normal direction as it- anyway jaa... People tend to think that we all crooks, criminals [Funani]*

Sanele communicated a connection between being ‘a dirty person’, a ‘scapegoat’ and a repository for all that was criminal or bad. He suggested that this perception was the prevalent one, determined by ‘normal people’ through a process of judgement. This was consistent with McCarthy’s (2013) view on the homeless identity, finding that these common stereotypes had the ability to change the way that people living on the street saw themselves and understood their position within society –by Sanele’s measure as a repository for all that was undesirable. Funani echoed these sentiments in the subsequent extract: he described being seen as mentally unstable, being treated as less than human by being ignored (invisibility). He experienced judgmental looks aimed to other him as hurtful and had internalised the experience of being unwashed as being unwanted and a thing to be avoided. Both of these extracts indicated that the participants were cognisant of the some of the societal discourses affecting them, they were aware of being othered and marginalised and articulated their difficulties traversing them (McCarthy, 2013). As theorised by Burr (1995, 2003), these common-sense views of what constitutes homelessness, what it looks like and what means maintains power relations between wider society and vulnerable populations limit opportunities for participants to resist the designation.

Moreover, given South Africa’s racialised history, an acknowledgement of race should be noted, despite participants’ minimal engagement with race as part of their self-descriptions. All fifteen participants were of colour: fourteen black participants and one coloured participant. These figures were in line with demographic studies on homeless populations in South Africa, and Gauteng in particular (Groenewald et al., 2016; Hopkins et al., 2019; Stats SA, 2019). Wasserman et al. (2012, p. 339) found that while race, was a predictable demographic factor of homelessness, it contributed to the formation of social hierarchies, positioning individuals based on their divergence from the acceptable standard.

### **Family**

The entire sample referenced their families in their self-descriptions, identifying themselves as sons, fathers, husbands (divorcés included), brothers or for one participant, an orphan without family. While traditionally considered a source of support and protection and often cited as an avenue to facilitate a sustained exit from homelessness, participants highlighted experiences of internal and external conflict with their families, relaying a burden of responsibility and expectation.

*I, I've got kids. So. I have, uh, parents to take care of. Mm. So in this situation, I, I can't do all those things. Jaa. [Thulani]*

*If you are staying with the parents, your mother and stuff, small kids, and stuff- at my age, I have to be, like, sort of a breadwinner, so jaaaa. I stayed about six months. Then I came back here to Jo'burg to get a life again... I can't go home empty handed. That's what I told myself. Or at least if I got a two thousand to three thousand at least, at least just to make them happy-just for the time being. [Thato]*

*I am a family member, I've got some kids, so now, when I think sometimes, eish. Um, I'm thinking too much if it wasn't for two kids. So, my wife was, passed away twenty-eight- so, me now, I'm not working. I am supposed to support my kids and um buy food, clothes. So sometimes they don't have money. So that one is stressing me sometimes. [Vusi]*

Like Thato, other participants referenced their position as primary providers for their immediate/extended family, linking their worth and value in the family system to their ability to earn an income. The relationship between mainstream conceptions of masculinity and employment within the context of family responsibility diminished participants' sense of self-worth, exacerbating stress in an already charged situation. This was consistent with Lorentzen's (2017) assumption that unsheltered men may not have the resources available to them to engage with regular aspects of traditional masculinity, because of being unemployed and unable to provide for their families. As a result, the unsheltered men's constructions of masculinity diverged from patriarchal definitions of manhood as head of the home, provider and protector impacting their understanding of themselves.

*But when the work was no more there, I become nothing...Now I became a name, you're useless, you're this or you're that. You cannot provide. [Jerome]*

Jerome illustrated this shift where his identity was downgraded from being employed and a provider to "nothing" and "useless" after he lost his job. Similarly in the extract below, Sanele stated that his identity and integrity as a man and father were in question if he was incapable of providing for his son, proposing that love and affirmation were inadequate in the face of his inability to satisfy his son's material needs. Sanele expressed that his unsheltered

status positioned him in a manner that prevented him from engaging with his son on an emotional level, explaining that he cannot be a man if he cannot financially provide and, as a result, he cannot be a father if he was not financially dependable.

*To show him that, I mean, I can be his father that he can be able to depend on, because, for us men, I do not know. I mean, let me talk about myself. I do not know. For me, I find it very difficult. As much as I really want to show him love. But, without providing him anything, it just pains my heart, because as much as I wish I could talk to him, I wish I could tell him that I love him, but I cannot, because, you know. I mean if I cannot provide for him. I mean, for me sometimes, I think that saying I love him is not enough. I mean, whatever that he needs right now, I cannot give him. [Sanele]*

Considering a different situation, Bafana's homelessness was informed by opposing ideas about his position in the family and his ability to contribute to the family's sustenance by hustling on the street. Despite being a young child (ten years old), he was deemed *useless* when he required assistance or was unable to contribute financially. As a result, Bafana left home and had been surviving on the streets for the past sixteen years.

*What caused us to start staying in the street is because we were fighting like with the family...Fighting because of what? When we ask for something it's difficult for them, but when we go and hustle and we're still kids, we can give them something. So, that's where our hearts started to change, it's like we are useless, so let's go, ja, and be together, we will survive, like we did until now. [Bafana]*

Despite his experiences on the street, Bafana still dreamed of escaping homelessness. Describing his future life, he dreamed of having a family, of working, being a man and a father:

*Bafana (B): A life for me is to have a family, to wake up every day and greet my family, go to work, work and come back, provide for my family. That's a better life because I'm a man, I must be a father, jaaaa.*

*R: You want to be a father?*

*B: And to grow our surname, jaa...Ja, that's a life. [Bafana]*

Some participants discussed hiding their homelessness from their families, expressing shame and disappointment, and blaming themselves for being in this situation. Siyanda said that he could not see his family while he struggled with addiction: he could not share his difficulties with them and as a result he was unable to divulge his homelessness to them.

*Siyanda (S): I don't want- to tell you the truth- eish! I don't want my family to see me uh, uh, uh, again, you see?*

*R: You don't want your family to see you again?*

*S: No like down, or being like uh - you know when you addicted you are always driven by this demon that's sending things... I told them where I stay, I told them in the Easter of last week, that ah I stay at Rosebank, even though I never said where-*

*R: Mmmm so, they know where you are more or less, but they don't know your situation?*

*S: They don't know the situation. Yes, that's it.*

Vusi, outlined his reasons for not revealing his homelessness to his brothers, stating that he did not want to cause family tension or be seen as a burden to his brothers despite them being in a position to potentially offer him a job with their electrical company. The participant went to great lengths to shield them from his homelessness making sure his appearance was maintained, using what little funds he had to 'buy small things' to take to his brothers when he visited in an attempt to mask the extent of his homelessness. Vusi suggested that his family would discourage him if he disclosed his true unsheltered status to them, that he was sleeping on the streets in Orange Grove. It appeared that it was more acceptable for Vusi to be unemployed than it was for him to be homeless even though these attributes are intricately linked.

*Vusi (V): My young brothers, they've got a company there for electricity. I can't beg. Because um, I visit sometimes if you have food, they give me. And I always- because they see me right always. So even him, they don't know where I am staying.*

*R: Mmm ok.*

*V: Jaa, but every time after three days I visit use it, but I never tell him that I'm in the street. So, they see me always clean and say ah he's fine, he's always right.*

*So, they know this one, ah he's always good. Because cause again he got, his, his family, so I can't always beg him, cause I'm old enough now, to beg to my young*

*brother always, asking maybe money, see? So sometimes when I find money, because sometimes I try to play this soccer and the UK numbers. Sometimes I win, then sometimes I buy something small, cold drinks and when I visit there by, I buy something small.*

*R: And, um, why don't you want to tell him? Why, why don't you tell them that you're on the streets?*

*V: Noooooo. Ah, um, because sometimes these people they discourage you. So that's why, when maybe sometimes- when I tell you, they will say that I must come to sleep there together, so eish- Because he is a family member, sometimes you know someone, you've got a wife and kids, sometimes they not treating the same because that one is my brother, that one is my brother-in-law, that his wife- sometimes you know because some, they don't like your family, some they like.*

*R: Mmm. Yeah, it's a difficult one.*

*V: It's difficult jaaaaa. Even them they don't- they stop- maybe when they say you must come, they start saying, "ah this one, you finishing meat or you finishing bread or what- sugar..." they start complaining. So that's why I want to live by myself.*

The familial discourse illustrated aspects of resentment, responsibility, shame and blame while also embodying hope, normalcy, and a sense of community. Olufemi (2002, p. 461) asserts that, conceptually, home is imperative to identity, "reinforcing a sense of a person, family, community and location in both time and space." The dislocation from family, physically and emotionally, highlighted another barrier endured by unsheltered persons, contributing to their peripheralization and isolation from a mainstream society that covets traditional family units and values.

### **Personality Traits**

The discourse of personality communicated by participants expressed an essentialist view of who they found themselves to be. Traditional psychology posits that personality traits informed behaviour: relying on conventional understandings of what it means to be a certain type of person or to have a particular type of personality or attribute, fixes these traits into static, immovable characteristics of personhood (Burr, 2003, 2005). From this perspective, the only aspect that can change one's personality is a key life event, such as becoming homeless. However, as per the homeless identity, homelessness attracts predominantly

negative personality traits (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019). Despite this, when asked to describe themselves during the interviews, many participants described attributes that differentiated them from their homelessness.

*Bafana (B): Ok, Bafana is a nice, open, funny guy who likes to be around people. The reason being around people, I don't like to think too much about my stresses, so I like to talk to people, relieve my mind, you check. That is the kind of person I am: never angry, always happy.*

*R: Ok, never angry.*

*B: Most people call me The Happy Boy.*

*R: All right.*

*B: Ja. Some call me Smiley Man, there is lots of names.*

*R: Ok.*

*B: Ja. And I got street names, Ja.*

*R: And which is your favourite name?*

*B: Smiley man. [laughs]*

*R: Smiley man, that's your favourite? [laughs]*

*B: Ja... [laughs] Because it's always nice to smile...Ja, it shows that you're free, not thinking too much and people like someone who's happy and smiley, not angry, but you need help but you're angry. They never know what you're thinking towards them, things like that you see. So, they get scared to help you, but if you're always happy, kind, smiling, they can help because they can see, jaaa, it's a friendly guy.*

In the excerpt above, the participant described himself as a nice, open and funny individual, he acknowledged his avoidance of stress and the anxieties of being homeless, stating that he did so by being around people. Bafana found that people didn't want to be around someone who was angry; consequently, he did not allow himself to feel angry, perhaps so he was not left alone with his thoughts and was free from dwelling on it. As a result, he assumed (what he deemed) acceptable traits: "smiley", nice, positive traits, relegating 'bad' emotions because in his experience people were more open to helping someone who was happy, not thinking too much and free of anger from his perspective, would make people afraid to help him because they would not know what he was thinking. Bafana's survival and access to help and support required a tempering of emotions, an

avoidance and denial of perceived negative emotions. His position of homelessness denied him the ability to express the dire emotions associated with his unsheltered state.

Burr (1995) maintains that personality is socially constructed, emerging from one's interactions with others, further suggesting that the company or social circle one is immersed in has the ability to impact the way one thinks, acts and feels. Bafana constructed these amenable aspects of his personality through multiple interactions with homeless service providers, supportive and policing institutions, ordinary citizens as well as other unsheltered individuals over sixteen years of living on the street. The cost of relegating negative responses and traits contributed to the construction of an idealised self, one that is impossible to maintain but is necessary for survival, as expressed by Ndumo below:

*I've decided to participate as one of eh, responsible citizens...I see myself as a person who might be able to um, achieve his um, goals and aims. Someone who still have an ability to do more and to be able to use his energy in a resourceful manner or in a positive way, to where I am and where I'm heading. And I see myself as a person, um, whom is like a sponge whereby you- the sponge that you use to wash the dish. Once you, when you put the sponge inside the water it automatically um, drains the water, and then you find it there, a little bit heavy. So I see myself as that sponge, like to sponge whatever, um to grab goodness and, um, ways of surviving in life, positive ways and ah grip, or being able to take or participate in whatever eh, eh activity, which might, um, being able to give me strength to eh, uh strength whereby I will be able to use it in any opportunity which will come across as well as being, um, a strength, which will be, I will, uh, I will be able to use. Uh [pause] to defeat my weaknesses. Jaa. So jaa, I see myself as a strong eh [pause] person whom is in being able to, um, use whatever, uh, um, resource I have to move forward or being able to achieve the goal, the goals and the ends. Jaaaaaa. [Ndumo]*

Ndumo depicted himself as a level-headed and driven individual, eager to learn and to exit homelessness drawing on discourses of positivity and success. He adopted an optimistic and hopeful approach towards exiting homelessness, constructing himself as a rational, goal- and future-orientated individual. In this way, Ndumo attempted to reclaim his sense of worth and identity, countering the personality type bestowed upon him through his homelessness, pitching himself to the researcher as a responsible, worthwhile and employable candidate.

Like Bafana above, a few participants described themselves as “open”, illustrated in the extracts below:

*I'm open ma'am. I will tell you the truth...since I'm saying, even God is listening, what I'm saying to you... I like to be open I can't hide from myself in things like this, no. [Mpilo]*

*I'm normally [overlapping speech] an open person. [Funani]*

*And I'm one of those people whom open themselves to people who are being open, um, in a way or to an extent whereby um, the main reason why I'm being open is [pause] try to come up with the situation or being- or, participate with uh um, those who feel like, um, they want to share their mistakes in life. Um, they want to teach others so that they cannot bump into the same obstacles of which they come across. [Ndumo]*

Participants' survival was dependent their ability to recruit good-will from those in a position to assist; being open to opportunities was an important signifier of one's willingness to exit homelessness, get a job, and to extricate oneself from poverty at whatever cost. Mpilo referred to his honest nature while Funani said that he was “normally” an open person, suggesting that homelessness prevented him from expressing that characteristic at times. Much like Mpilo, Ndumo, drew on a mainstream construction of being an open individual who could exit homelessness through his willingness to engage, participate and share his previous mistakes.

Msizi also referred to his ability to engage with people: “*I'm talkative and I've got that power of speaking to people.*” He construed his communication skills as a “power”, differentiating him from other persons experiencing homelessness and constructing them as an asset. Kagiso, too, spoke about how homelessness had transformed him from being shy and secretive. He suggested that living on the street gave him confidence to approach people regardless of class.

*I used to be shy, but now being the homeless I am no longer shy, I am open to people because I used to be very secretive, and conservative, ja. But since I'm homeless now, I can easily associate with people regardless of financial status, regardless of the*

*financial status. Jaaaaaah. [pause] Jaaa, eish cause sometimes those things get changed, I was very secretive even the way I was growing up. [Kagiso]*

Jabu described himself as “a good guy” but simultaneously spoke of how he had to convince people of this quality. He also alluded to having convinced himself that he could be considered good, using the phrases: “I know in my heart” and “But me what I know about” to preface his goodness, thus countering the impact of the homeless identity and discourse of absence. In addition to this, Jabu enacted his goodness by trying to motivate other unsheltered people, proving his worth, empathy and goodness despite being homeless. In doing so, he, exercised power by seeking to alter his discursive positioning (Rabinow, 1991).

*I know in my heart that I'm a good guy, you see. I don't know maybe how they see. But me what I know about: that I'm a good guy, and I always tell them that I'm a good guy, and I always even motivate them that they always even motivated that they mustn't go into bad things. [Jabu]*

In contrast to the extracts discussed above, Mpilo’s description of himself mirrored his experience of homelessness. He declared that he was “not ok” whilst illustrating his acceptance of his situation with the qualifier: “but it’s life for me”. He did not attempt to describe his individual traits and later simply stated that it was better when he was younger because he was “same like other people.”

*R: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Can you tell me about yourself? How do you see yourself?*

*Mpilo (M): Me and myself, ma'am, uh at the moment, I'm not ok, but it's life for me.*

### **Addiction**

Burr (2003, p. 111), questioned whether the positions available to individuals through discourse minimised opportunities for change, becoming oppressive and totalising for individuals, supporting Wasserman et al’s (2012, p. 333) view that “discursive strategies [could] be actively used to negatively position out-groups while simultaneously rationalising continued marginalisation.” In line with this, the discourses of addiction and homelessness functioned to disempower participants, providing little scope for change or control over one’s

own life, emerging from the perspective that personal frailty or fault caused one's homelessness where addiction featured as a primary component. Half of the sample mentioned their struggle with addiction when describing themselves. The terms addict and alcoholic were most frequently referenced while only one participant spoke about gambling but not in reference to his identity.

Substance use was described as an escape from the "stress" of unsheltered living, as a mechanism to prevent participants from "thinking too much" or as a way to manage hunger. Functioning as an avoidant strategy, participants' identities were subsumed by addiction.

*I started when the, when the lady, the one was paying for me, passed away, and then obviously they take me out of this place because I was not paying anymore I started to stay there in Berea... Eh ma'am, eh what can I say ma'am ey- Jaa, I was having support, but it was very bad for me in my mind. Like, I feel, I feel bad because they were helping me. But now eish obviously when someone passed away, the one was who was helping me, it was very bad for me and I end up on the street obviously. There at the res it was bad for me where I was staying they end up kicking me out. It was very bad. [Jabu]*

Jabu explained his pathway into addiction as a coping mechanism. The sudden death of his benefactor left him unsupported and alone in Durban. He was subsequently evicted, began living on the streets, and started using drugs, unable to return to Johannesburg. His actions were dictated by his need for a high, leaving no space for him to be anything else but addicted:

*You see when you are on drugs all you think is drugs. You don't think for food, you don't think for anything. You don't bath. It's drugs, you see. Everything you get is for drugs... And it's hard, yoh it's hard. There's nothing you do like this. We can't do anything without, you can't even wait. Like maybe you offer me a job, but one thing for sure, I must know that I got this thing to smoke before. [Jabu]*

It can be argued that the discourse of addiction functioned in a similar fashion as that of the homeless identity, reducing the participant's character to a single meaning and position of the addict. This stigmatised position was synonymous with mainstream representations of

homelessness and functioned as a central tenet of the homeless identity, that is: the addict, the “hobo” (de Beer & Vally, 2017, p. 392; Somerville, 2013; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004).

*Alcohol started getting in, you know, I started drinking. I'm happy that drugs I didn't take at all. Ja. But I started drinking alcohol and you know, I started doing, other things that are out of the line of, of what I'm good at. Mm. So He started chasing me away. Ja. From what I see, what God put for me to see. Ja, so it's when things started changing. [Msizi]*

*Nkosi (N): It's alcohol, yeah. Makes me crazy so- fight and stuff like that. It's easy to fight when I'm drunk.*

*R: Are you still drinking?*

*N: Yeah, but only drinks, I don't like to do other nonsense.*

As illustrated by Msizi and Nkosi above, the use of illicit substances was deemed worse than alcohol use, setting up a hierarchy of acceptability within the discourse and presenting stigmatised implications for one's own identity and others (Wasserman et al., 2012). Additionally, the distinction between recovery and active use was emphasised by those who were no longer using, with the dialogue around identity for these participants orientated towards the future, in stark contrast to those who were still using. The majority of participants who disclosed substance abuse, were reportedly no longer using and, as a result, they adopted a certain outlook on usage and those who use. Here the concept of getting clean served a dual purpose: becoming free of addiction in a literal sense through rehabilitation programmes and the symbolic washing away of a stigmatised marker of the homeless identity. In the extract below, Jabu leveraged his experience as an addict to become an example to other people living on the street, thus exchanging the stigmatised identity of addict for that of role model.

*Jabu (J): Jaaaaa, I even started, doing wrong things, man, getting on drugs, things like that, man. You see, I can't lie to you ended up going to drugs, smoking drugs, things like that. After they- I came this side, I went to rehab. [pause] And then I get clean...Jaa, but what I told myself that I would leave drugs, now, now I'm clean.*

*R: ... And how are you feeling off the drugs?*

*J: Hundred percent now ma'am, cause I was on these bad drugs, Nyaope and there in Durban, most of the people they are smoking... I'm always even telling the guys that*

*they mustn't go into drugs. Drugs are bad. I always do example, look at me... I always tell the guys that drugs are bad, very, very bad.*

In contrast to Jabu's experience, Funani expressed his disdain with rehabilitation centres, describing their treatment of unsheltered individuals as ineffectual. In much the same way that society reduced unsheltered persons to homeless, rehabilitation centres reduced the homeless to addicts, only treating a single symptom of their struggle without considering context:

*Majority of the people that are in the streets are doing drugs, and that includes myself... Uh, yes, you try to kick the drug eh, uh, habit because I'm personally, again, I don't believe in, SANCA, I don't believe in rehab centers because all they do is give you detox and by the time you get out of this six months from down the line, you're gonna relapse because you don't get psychological help. And if you're not ready to leave the drugs, no one is going to force you into leaving drugs until you admit that you're done. Yeah, man, I think I've said a bit too much [Funani]*

Funani later contextualised his perspective, referring to society's treatment of people experiencing homelessness as well as the consequences of the discourse of absence:

*No wonder people tend to do drugs because your, your public will, will bring you down. Instead of trying to help, they will either laugh at you or assault you or ignore you as if you're not human. [Funani]*

Similarly, Ndumo cited rejection as a major component of addiction:

*You will find um, some people um, smoking, drinking, or the negative things not because they that's the main aim but it's how they've been rejected by people due to their image. So, [pause] rejection somewhere, somehow still a huge problem of each of us, we experienced from the streets, some people. [Ndumo]*

To be perceived and labelled as homeless rendered one vulnerable to scrutiny, marginalisation and rejection by society, with some people in this situation resorting to substance use as a way to manage the burden and isolation of homelessness.

## Spirituality

The discourse of spirituality emerged across all the interviews conducted. Amidst numerous rejections, participants expressed turning to God for hope, moral guidance, support, and comfort.

*I was once afraid hey, but I'm not afraid anymore and things like that. It's just that I pray every day. [Thato]*

In the extract below, Nkosi described himself as a man of God, drawing on the discourse of Christianity and recruiting the position of a religious man: as a man of God, one can experience oneself as a good and righteous man.

*R: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?*

*Nkosi (N): Nkosi is a man of God. I like to see, I'm in a calling of God actually, so I'm supposed to help people...I am a true believer of God.*

He further stated that in this position he needed to help people, countering to some extent the imposed worthlessness of the homeless identity. Nkosi later says, *"I just believe in God, I trust Him. Uh, people are so disappointed in me,"* suggesting that religion was a source of consistent support, expressing God's ability to see him and accept him as he was, contrasting with how he was viewed by others.

With minimal support structures, participants leaned on religion and spirituality to anchor themselves, finding solace, meaning and protection in God. The presence of the divine provided a positive and forgiving framework to view and understand their homelessness while concurrently representing hope for a different future. Despite the struggle to survive, many of the participants believed that they would emerge from homelessness through prayer and the help of God. This observation was corroborated by Snodgrass's (2014) findings that prayer provided a vital coping mechanism for those experiencing homelessness and was linked with positive psychological well-being. Sanele explained that being in such a vulnerable position brought him closer to God: he believed that homelessness gave him a greater appreciation for a higher power, one that would provide protection and keep him safe. His belief in God provided a sense of security amidst the instability of being unsheltered.

*Being in the street, it has helped me to be very close to God. Previously, you know, like whenever my situations were not going my way, I would be very angry to God, like, there is no existing God, but now I can understand that God does exist, because he is the one who makes me to have food each and every day. It is beyond me why I am getting food each and every day. It is beyond me why I have clothes. It is beyond me that I am safe wherever I am sleeping, you understand... the worst situation is to find yourself in the street. For me, I am already there, you understand. I mean, that is a situation that I am facing each and every day, that is why I am saying it is just beyond me to be safe each and every day, to wake up each and every day, be still alive. It is a very...I would say even if like you do not believe to God but you will have to believe that. I mean, there is, you cannot...because you know, it is not safe being in the street. [Sanele]*

For his part, Bafana expressed a deep desire to escape his homelessness and he looked to God for guidance through prayer longing for his exit pathway to be revealed.

*I'm tired. Tired, I pray to God every day just for him to show me a way, Ja. A way out of this life. [Bafana]*

Vusi communicated that church and prayer gave him a sense of hope that despite his situation things were going to improve. Funani spoke about attending church as a way of helping him regain a sense of self. He described feeling both comforted and motivated by prayer. Spirituality, activated through prayer, became a multifunctional tool, becoming a salve for various hardships, despite participants' isolation and their removal from 'normal' society, by allowing participants to imagine a future sans homelessness (Snodgrass, 2014).

*R: And does going to church help with hope, do you feel hopeful?*

*Vusi (V): Yes, yes when I pray yes, I've got that hope, that one day it's going to be alright. When they (the church) are teaching us, eish yes, I understand that. I'm feeling good.*

*I attend church. Um, I think it helps me a lot actually. Yeah. Church helped me a lot and in getting myself back as much as, um they do... I do have bad days, whereby, I*

*just give up and say you know what, I can't do this anymore but I know that once I'm prayed and when I wake up the following morning I continue pushing. [Funani]*

A less charitable interpretation might emphasise that many of the outreach programmes for the people experiencing homelessness in South Africa are associated with Faith-Based Organisations (FBO's); as a result, unsheltered individuals may have felt obligated to adopt certain attitudes in order to access support:

*Now I'm going there by Blairgowrie there's a church there on a Sunday ... I am enjoying it too much because when I left they gave money for transport when they came back. They are helping you. And the bible, the small bible I have it here (touches breast pocket) [Vusi]*

Vusi alluded to a power differential between himself and the church, where the offer of transport money and help may have placed him in a position where it would be difficult to refuse. In the extract below, Ndumo observed how these services were accessed by persons experiencing homelessness were a necessity for survival:

*So, jaa, when I came here... I found two places as this one, and there are others... As well as go to churches for the help and, um, spiritual healing. So, I've went to such places... So, jaa, I went there and did my research and, um, somewhere somehow bumped to, um, guys on the street. So, they're like, ah hey man, um, we can show you certain places, um, which they might keep you a physical appearance at least moving and then jaa... So, in order to survive and um, get the point that I keep a good image of myself. [Ndumo]*

A final observation regarding the spiritual outlook of this sample was its ability to foster a sense of purpose within participants. Some participants discussed a renewed sense of purpose emerging from their homelessness and expressed the desire to spread the word of God or encourage those around them:

*Maybe I can get the park and then try and play Gospel and talk to the people but I like to teach the young kids because those ones, even the one, the patients at hospitals, yeah those ones they, you know, they're hunger for the God...my job is just to give*

*people the message and then I don't want to argue with them because, just to tell them that Ja, there is God so don't fool yourself otherwise, it's your choice if you say there's no God. You don't have to wait and listen to me cause I know mos. [Nkosi]*

*Jerome (J): Um before coming to the street um, I'm ordained, elder ordained in church called True Life Ministries...I will always associate with Godly people. That is my people that I can always have a long conversation all day long to, to talk about God you know...*

*R: How do you think other people experiencing homelessness see you?*

*J: Um there are a lot of them who really enjoy me, my um, with me, cause my, my, my topics are always Godly, and I always advise them...*

### **Occupation, Hobbies, and Interests**

Over a third of participants made overt references to their previous occupations when talking about themselves. For those who had steady employment prior to homelessness it was a more prominent feature of their identity description as illustrated in the extracts below:

*Thulani (T): I'm a teacher. Jaa. Actually, I, I did, um, originally, I'm from Zim. Jaa. So, I, I, I did, uh, I went to college... Jaaaa, I completed form four, and then completed form six. And after form six, I went to college... Uh, I, I did teaching.*

*R: Did you try and teach when you came this side?*

*T: Y-yes I, I, I tried actually, but the problem, I didn't have proper papers to do it. So, I had to teach in, some, I can say, fly-by-night schools so, ja.*

*I've been working my entire life, for call centres, um, I'm into marketing and sales.  
[Funani]*

*You see, I'm a griller, I'm a chef, I'm a co-ordinator, I used to make there in Fordsburg, I worked for Bimbos, Steers, Nando's I've been there. I'm a back griller, I'm a kitchen manager. I have even been Debonairs, Promise Pizza, everything. I've got a lot of experience understand. I can't just say something to you, maybe, you think I'm joking, I want to show you [passes over CV] ... I want to show you, do you see*

*what I'm saying? It's not something that I'm just talking, you check it yourself.  
[Mpilo]*

While defining oneself in relation to one's profession is not unusual in regular social interactions, for those trapped in a cycle of poverty, the relationship between homelessness and unemployment presented a loss of self-identification, worth, value, and confidence (Parsell, 2011). Participants drew certainty and strength from their previously employed status as a means of discursively distancing themselves from the 'homeless identity' and associated stereotypes discussed above (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; Parsell, 2011). As expressed by Mpilo, there was a desire to confirm his work experience to prove that he was different from others living on the street, that he was earnest in his attempts to find employment and that his appeals for help were not a farce. Mpilo reasserted himself, saying that just because he was homeless did not mean that he was useless: he needed to think about his purpose, he still had the ability (power) to contribute, to earn a living and prove his worth.

*Think for yourself, what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to be? You understand? And then they've just let us have - Ah tsk, I'm useless. No, he's still walking. He's got hands. You've got mouth. You've got- you understand? You still got hands you've got power. So why don't you think, like adults, have something or do something for a living. [Mpilo]*

Another mechanism used by participants to describe themselves was to talk about what they enjoyed doing: consistent with the discussion of previous occupations, these hobbies and interests were indicators of participants' abilities, as well as their hopes for the future as seen in the extracts below:

*R: Can you tell me about yourself?*

*Kagiso (K): Uh, actually I like music and I like to speak, and I like meeting people.*

*What I like to do like, if I was having my own house, I liked, like reading, like reading stories. That's what I like to do. And I like to like, eh, doing gym. Jaaaaaaa. It's what I like to do, and cooking also. And I like to go to church, jaaaaaaa." [Jabu]*

*Eh, I am Vusi, I like to play football, sometimes watching TV. Sometimes reading novels and then be sitting alone like to read. [Vusi]*

These everyday activities were juxtaposed against participants' homeless identity and sense of absence. Kagiso's response, "uh, actually", suggested his surprise at being asked about himself and to be considered more than homeless; he revealed aspects of his creative and social self in response (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; Parsell, 2011). Other participants like Vusi, identified themselves by their names, perhaps countering his experiences as the anonymous beggar by describing the activities they enjoyed (Snodgrass, 2014). These descriptions present participants as regular people enjoying life with attributes unrelated to their homelessness. Indeed, for other participants there was a desire to add value to the community and to give back despite their marginalised status:

*I'm teaching kids in Yeoville dancing, again. Ja. So just to, to remove myself from, from stress, I'm volunteering there in Yeoville. [Msizi]*

*I started last of last year, I started a non-profit organization that will be creating projects. Actually, in town planning, I am passionate in doing parks and sports fields. So, for me, the non-profitable organization that I started is to look for...actually, it is to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas and semi locations. In a lot of rural places, they are being established without considering town planning facts of having parks in areas. So, I mean, I think having parks is very important because every child has a need to play. Have a necessary need to play. A lot of these rural areas and semi locations, they are having established without considering that. And you end up finding children are doing wrong stuff, children being involved in alcohol because they find themselves in so much free time without doing anything, understand. So, that is why I resorted, I mean I started this non-profit organization while I was here [referring to being homeless as here] ... So, it is much better if you start an organization that is going to do a direct impact in a community... So, making a contribution. [Sanele]*

Msizi and Sanele attempt to counter the diminished self associated with homelessness in these extracts by focusing on contributing to the greater good of a community, in order to be seen as good, helpful, and caring.

In summation, seven identity discourses emerged during participant interviews, highlighting the construction of specific social realities for participants, while simultaneously reinforcing ‘us vs them’ power relations and dynamics between those experiencing homelessness and the rest of society. The most prominent and striking discourses were absence relating to a diminished self, devoid of representation, and the homeless identity, capturing the effects of an inscribed group identity. The findings revealed that these seven identity discourses were divided between those that contributed to a conceptualisation of homelessness centred around lack and deficiency (absence) and discourses that provided opportunities for individual resistance (presence).

### **Subject Positions**

As Burr (2003) suggests, an individual’s identity is created and shaped within the social realm by discourses that are culturally available to them within a particular context and time. Following this, participants’ identity construction could be conceived as a consolidation of the discourses outlined in the section above. However, the consolidation process was not frictionless: discourses and their associated positionings were rooted within power dynamics, scaffolding positions against what was deemed socially acceptable or desired. For persons on the fringe of normality, marginality ensued, not merely in a physical sense through active peripheralisation from society, but internally too, where participants expressed being removed from their own subjective experiences through the discourses of absence, where they described being reduced to a single aspect of their existence- their homelessness. While Burr (2005) cautions against identity reductions of this sort, it highlighted how “identity [was] struggled after” by those who were unsheltered. From a social constructionist perspective, this internal conflict was expected, given that prevailing discourses do not always align, requiring individuals to resist or acquiesce to the positions that the discourses in question permit. As Burr (2003, p. 119) describes:

*Once we take up a subject position in discourse, we have available to us a particular, limited set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking, self-narratives that we take on as our own. It entails an emotional commitment to the categories of person we see ourselves as belonging to and the development of an appropriate set of morals.*

While seemingly deterministic, Burr (2003) suggests that a person may inhabit multiple subject positions for varying durations. This became apparent amongst participants, where individuals shifted between accepting a given position to expressing their resistance,

despite being permanently assigned *the homeless* position. However, it is important to note that the overall function of the discourse of homelessness was to maintain a diminished view of those who lack abodes, thus limiting the number of inhabitable subject positions available and reaffirming hierarchical power dynamics.

The available subject positions were contained by rules and boundaries pitched towards maintaining an approved stance or desired outcome; within these positions persons were prescribed certain discursive practices which informed how they spoke and behaved (Burr, 2003). As suggested by Harter and colleagues, “language, then functions as an ideological practice mediating between individuals and the institutional conditions of their existence” (2005, p. 307). Aligning with this understanding, Wasserman et al. (2012) found that these discursive constructions communicated societal norms and were able to reinforce dominant ideals, where the occupied subject positions, had the power to influence individual traits, self-evident descriptions or naturally occurring characteristics endowed through interaction within society. Although these positions might masquerade as optional and flexible, creating an illusion of choice, these choices were in fact facilitated or limited through a set of ideological understandings, presented as reality. Thus, the subject positions available to participants were informed by dominant discourses of homelessness, presenting curated options for unsheltered individuals to either resist these discursive expectations or acquiesce to them (Burr, 2003; Olufemi, 2002; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004).

Accordingly, the analysis revealed that persons experiencing homelessness were invariably located in the homeless position through their inscribed membership of the homeless identity. As previously discussed, membership of this group was not gained through individual application or request but was bestowed as per the prevailing societal discourse of homelessness. Consequently, persons who were without shelter were assigned the discursive position of homeless by others. Despite unsheltered persons being framed as a problem, however, Wasserman et al. theorised that “those who are homeless mix together discourses that assert their value and legitimacy with those that are stigmatizing and denigrating” (2012, p. 332).

Following this, the subject positions utilised by participants reflected a more complex picture than Snow and Anderson’s (1987) three strategies to “salvage the self” and manage the homeless identity suggested (Meanwell, 2012, p. 74). Most participants moved between distancing themselves from their homelessness and embracing their homeless status, at times claiming the group identity while in different situations resisting it. This was consistent with Burr’s (2003) understanding of identity being in constant flux, recruiting different positions

at different times for different purposes. This finding suggests that individuals developed different ways to manage their stigmatised identities since the influential work of Snow and Anderson (Meanwell, 2012; Nichols, 2020).

To be clear, the findings indicated that participants vacillated between positions of acceptable (and expected) responses to their homelessness as determined by dominant discourses, and resistance and apathy towards their homeless status. As such, the categories have been organised around ‘good’ homeless responses and ‘bad’ homeless responses, representing, respectively, alignment with and contestation of dominant discourses as indicated in Table 7 below:

**Table 7: Subject Positions**

**Subject positions pertaining to:**

<b>The Homeless Position</b>	
The ‘Good’ Homeless Position	The ‘Bad’ Homeless Position
Alignment	Contestation

**The ‘Good’ Homeless Position (GHP)**

From this position, participants communicated their alignment with the expectations of prevailing homeless discourses. The first requirement of this position was an appropriate acceptance of one’s homeless state, accepting blame for one’s position as an outcome of personal failure as expressed by Funani below:

*Funani (F): The mere fact that a person is homeless, majority of the times, if not 98 or 99% of the time. It's because of you [pause]...Um, excuse my French but, you fucked up, you did drugs. You failed to respect your parents. You failed- At some point in our lives we did have money. A lot of money. ... I squandered with it. So, the reason why I'm on the streets is because of me and nobody else. And the minute people start taking responsibility for that, I think that's when they'll have- They will move forward and stop blaming your mom, your dad, your uncle, your grandmother. Start blaming yourself because you got yourself there as painful as it is as it is, but jaaaaaa it true, I've got myself where I am. Ja [sighs]...I still blame myself.*

*R: Mmmm, why do you blame yourself?*

*F: I could have been more responsible. I could've been, I could've saved money. I could've, I could've done a lot of things. I could've not did drugs. I could've- [pause] Could've, would've, should've it's too late now for that. I'm where I am right now.*

Funani, drew on the mainstream conceptualisation of homelessness and adopted the perspective that his moral failings lead him to his current position, without acknowledging the context of his experience, the wider narrative of his life or the broader socio-economic and political factors which influenced this outcome. Consistent with Wasserman et al's (2012) findings regarding the semantic construction of a problematised personhood, Funani determined that he was 'the problem'. He fulfilled the discursive expectation of the good homeless position by recognising his mistakes in becoming a part of *the homeless*: he "fucked up", it was his fault and he "could have been more responsible". Through discursive constructions of blame, exclusion, stigma and judgment, dominant discourses inserted participants into a hierarchy of worth, in which being or becoming homeless occupied the lowest rank.

From this position persons were presented with a 'choice': to accept their designation, the system, and their position and seek ascension, or to resist. The 'good' homeless position represented an ascension. It exemplified societal expectations and norms and utilised virtues such as hope, positivity, and a sense of belonging, value and worth, to communicate it. In the extracts below, participants perceived and framed their experiences as points of growth and development; others alluded to a need for punishment, to learn a lesson or an inability to see and determine their own needs. These extracts illustrated participants' chastisement, diffidence and powerlessness, in their efforts to escape their homelessness and be deemed worthy of social inclusion.

*R: Would you say that being in this situation [being homeless] is changing who you are?*

*Siyanda (S): Yes, yes it's changing me. It's changing me [pause] in a positive manner I think, in a positive way it's changing me. Also, ah, I,I,I, now know how to be, even though it's small, I know how to manage and be responsible.*

*R: Do you feel that being on the streets is changing the way that you can express yourself?*

*Vusi (V): Mm-hm*

R: *You do?*

V: *Yes*

R: *And how do you feel that? What, what's happening that's making you feel way?*

V: *Eh, to change my life sometimes. [pause] Because eh, when I, when I, think that maybe this thing give me a lesson uh, next time when I wasting money maybe to something bad, now I know how to save money, but to just spend things for nothing, because sometimes you know sometimes, you maybe want to- you've got the eh eh job. Sometimes you drink beers, you do things, parties you see. So, when now we suffering no-one. Your friend is running away from you, so now you learn no, so listen, next time you are supposed to be alright, go the right direction not bad. Because sometimes before when I, eh, I get paid, I have a lot of friends. Yes. I spend money for sometimes buying nice food alcohol before, because ey before I was drinking. Cause I was buying sometimes maybe two or at least of, eh, of, tsk eh, which one, ah whiskey, maybe sometimes drink, drink. Ja. Because I've got money that time, I was working nice, so I think things is going to always like that. So now I see no man, that time eish- now things are changing. So, some people, they know me before, now when they see me like this ah, eish some are laughing, saying "ah you see this one, now he don't have even a cent you know, ja" So you see I've, I learn a lesson. It's funny, it gives a hard lesson this, living in the street.*

In the passage above, Vusi's behaviour warranted punishment and he was taught a lesson by becoming homeless. As a consequence of his irresponsibility, he suffered homelessness, deprivation, and isolation- a steep penalty. However, Vusi described this life-altering retribution as "funny" and "hard"; his response lacked any expression of anger, sorrow, or malice. The position of good homelessness precluded the expression of negative emotions, opting for appropriate responses that located understandings of homelessness as something in need of atonement. Borrowing from DuBois concept of double consciousness as explored by Wasserman and colleagues, Vusi communicated a dissonance between what he believed he learnt as a consequence of his actions, and his empirical reality, as a result of "support[ing] ideologies that are oppressive to oneself and that therefore support status quo hierarchies" (2012, p. 336).

Ndumo and Msizi highlighted the relationship between those who support *the homeless* and those experiencing homelessness. Ndumo suggested that he was unable to make decisions in his best interest, relying on external supports to determine and fulfil them.

In addition, both participants alluded to the relationship between hunger and anger, where the expression of anger should be managed or better yet avoided:

*I much appreciate the role that, um, we get from the community around here and Rosebank as well...So, we must appreciate the vision and as well as the support that we get, we get from those who've got an eagle eye to see um, our needs and our wants which um, some of us we cannot meet, or we cannot think of when we've got, uh, any capital that we have via our pockets all around us. So, um, at least not everyone is judgemental. According to the image uh, you have or not, everyone is being judgemental about how they see you or how you speak. So, some of people like here, we normally get a bread and, um, tea from Tuesday till Thursday. So, they are trying their level best, um, at least to support us so that we cannot ruin our, like, um, ran out of- food. Cause if you remember, um, or if, you know, um, hunger next to angry.*  
*[Ndumo]*

*Like now they give us tea. So, what can you say? You can't say bad things about them. You understand? [Msizi]*

Msizi explicitly described being censored because he received the organisation's assistance. Ndumo expressed gratitude for non-judgmental spaces, and complied with the subject position that would best increase his experience of them. Although participants exercised power by aligning with the GHP, permitting their actions and behaviours to be perceived in a favourable manner that would facilitate their access to support structures, the position minimised opportunities for participants to voice their own opinions by contradicting or informing helping structures of what would serve them best.

Jerome was another participant who addressed the need for unsheltered persons to change. The discourse of change in the context of homelessness required individuals experiencing homelessness to be transformed into better human beings. In doing so, it discursively positioned *the homeless* as '*the problem*' (Wasserman et al., 2012), as inferior or *bad* people in need of improvement, corroborating the view that homelessness occurred as a result of individual fault and frailty. The interpellation of participants into this diminished position was reflected in the discourse of absence, in which the participants were effectively hailed and then recruited into a powerful discursive formation that inscribed onto them the

social status of homelessness through which they gained a sense of identity and understanding of reality (Althusser, 1971).

*I always advise them to you know, change, because you know it's a possibility that you can change. It doesn't mean that if you are homeless that you cannot be yourself. You can be yourself. You can change to be yourself a better person you know there's um there's still plenty of opportunities, churches like you say you go there. There's, there's, there's Bible studies- there's always things, there's counselling by the church- there's always things if you want to change, you can do it for yourself, and you become a better person. And people can identify you, that you are a better person, jaaa.[Jerome]*

Furthermore, Jerome linked becoming a better person to increased spirituality, measured by one's engagement with the Bible, spiritual counselling and the church. He suggested that unsheltered individuals had agency to change, that the onus was on them to reform themselves and adopt socially acceptable behaviours as prescribed through discourse. Although this position could be viewed as optimistic and pro-social, at a discursive level it also required participants' internal devaluation as a prerequisite before salvation and support could be administered. It consequently positioned individuals as responsible and active agents, framing them as more deserving of assistance because they aligned with societal perceptions of them. Additionally, the discursive aspects of spirituality, agreeable personality traits and positive emotions further encouraged individuals to adopt this position.

### **The 'Bad' Homeless Position**

In contrast to the position above, the 'bad' homeless position (BHP) contained expressions of apathy, negative emotions, unwillingness and nonconformity with the overarching homeless position and identity. This position contested societal expectations of *the homeless*, offering a platform for individuals to resist their stigmatised identity. Accordingly, the position was defined as *bad* for railing against dominant discourses which were perceived as *good* for the status quo. As a result, persons in this position were shunned and further labelled still further, becoming placeholders for all that was undesirable about poverty and street living. The resistance to support structures such as shelters, meal schemes as well as fellow unsheltered individuals may be viewed as an attempt to "supply a sense of

personhood and autonomy [to] bolster an otherwise assaulted sense of self ... Ultimately, maintaining distance between one's self and others is a common subsistence pattern" (Wasserman et al., 2012, p. 341).

*Thato (T): I just want to carry on with my life. I don't care about anybody, what he or she says about me. Ja... So, what I can say is that I don't care anymore.*

*R: And how does that make you feel? How, how do you feel about that?*

*T: Makes me feel strong. Stronger and stronger, each and every day ja... I think uh, know, you know, as us homeless people. Each person is thinking about his or her stuff, you know, jaaaa so. Truly speaking, I don't care how they feel about me or- you know, so. Jaaa. I can say that... I, I, I, you know, it's like the streets taught me everything, you know? Jaaa. I never came here to the streets for anybody else but myself.*

*As I speak to you, I don't know what's going on in the world. And to be quite frank with you I don't care. [Funani]*

Thato and Funani voiced feeling disconnected and indifferent to the wider world. Both participants were acutely aware of their position in society: they expressed their discontentment openly and rejected a pleasing attitude despite the researcher's position to possibly facilitate assistance. They comfortably expressed their lack of interest in others and mainstream society. Thato resisted the expectation that he should care about others' perceptions of him: instead of lamenting his isolation, he described it as making him stronger; instead of mourning his homelessness, he stated that living on the streets taught him everything, simultaneously distancing himself from other unsheltered persons while embracing his own way of life (Olufemi, 2002; Somerville, 2013; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004).

Like Thato, Funani expressed being focused on himself, defining his behaviour as selfish. Despite his awareness of how others perceived his attitude, he linked his selfishness to his survival on the streets, suggesting that putting himself first was not a choice but a necessity. In addition, he made a case for the importance of expressing his anger, regardless of it creating enemies for him.

*Funani (F): Yeah, well, I should, I shouldn't be angry to begin with. I think some things, uh, some things you can ignore and with people in the streets, um, fighting*

*with them a lot, um, tends to be dangerous as well so- [pause] Yeah, the less enemies you have the better.*

*R: And do you find yourself in that situation a lot?*

*F: With me, yes. Because I'll tell you the truth. Irrespective of your age, uh, irrespective how long you been in the streets. Irrespective of anything actually. I'm gonna tell you what I think, whether you like it or not, that's your problem to solve. Not mine. As long as I got it off my chest, I'm done.*

*R: How are you finding it? To express how you are feeling?*

*F: Well, you tend to have a lot of enemies. I think sometimes I just should just shut up. Sometimes I got to learn how to think for other people's views as well irrespective of mine. Um, jaaa. [pause] Yes. I'm being selfish but I'm on the streets. If I'm not selfish then [pause] a lot of bad things are gonna happen. In fact, emotionally to me right now, it's all about me, me, me, me.*

Sanele revealed an important aspect of homelessness in the extract below. He hesitantly pointed out that although the provision of food was important and necessary, people experiencing homelessness were also subjected to an emotional hunger: they hungered for recognition, to be seen as people and to be valued. He addressed the isolation and exclusion felt by those experiencing homelessness, stating that he wished other support organisations would talk to their homeless patrons, highlighting the levels of disconnection and isolation experienced by those living on the streets.

*R: I hope so. I just want to check in with you. How are you feeling about what we spoke about today?*

*Sanele (S): Like I say. Talking, it is a good thing. I find it very good to talk. I mean, I guess, I wish a lot of people who are giving help, they can be able to open up to able to speak with people. I mean, just to talk. Food alone, it does help of course, it is your stomach but the problem is here and in the heart. People, we really want to be valued, we want to be seen. So, if like it is that that is lacking. Sometimes, some people, they are not strong enough to own it, some they become worse.*

Sanele subtly acknowledged the image of the hungry homeless, augmenting it with a plea for people living on the street to be conceptualised as whole beings, in need of community, connection and recognition. He suggested that people experiencing homelessness

should be perceived as more than hungry mouths to feed, drawing on the imagery of an animal in need of feeding while underscoring a desire to be seen as a human being—a sentiment echoed by many other participants in the sample. Despite addressing this absence, his sense that some ‘are not strong enough’ to deal with the invisibility of homelessness reinforced the diminished position of unsheltered individuals.

In contrast to the GHP, the ‘bad’ homeless position functioned discursively to undermine individuals’ worthiness for assistance. As per Burr’s (2003, 2005) understanding, within this position, threads of identity were woven in opposition to the behaviour deemed acceptable by mainstream ideals. Even so, these dissenting participants managed to express their discontent, at times viscerally, despite simultaneously peripheralizing themselves from receiving help—emotionally, socially, or structurally.

### **Agency: Facilitation or Constraint**

*It’s not the end of the world to be on the street, you can still make something out of nothing and be someone, jaa. It’s just that we don’t get the same chances you see, jaaa. When you want those chances, they get to people who don’t need them jaaa. Those who need them don’t get those chances. [Bafana]*

In terms of the final research question, the study sought to ascertain whether the subject positions identified and discussed above facilitated or constrained agentic possibilities for participants. Despite the rigidity of subject positions explored in the previous section, the question of whether homeless discourses permitted individual agency still lingered in the air. As outlined in the early work of Neale (1997), agency had been considered a conceptual and theoretical pillar of homelessness frameworks. Agency was often divided between structural factors where persons, through no fault of their own, became homeless requiring macro-scale governmental interventions, and individual-level factors, where subcategories between persons who were blamed for their homelessness and those who could not be held responsible for their unsheltered status informed constructions of the deserving and undeserving.

From a social constructionist perspective, agency was exercised through participants’ ability to choose which discourses and subject positions they would adopt, confirming that “change [was] possible because human agents, given the right circumstances, [were] capable of critically analysing the discourses which frame[d] their lives and to claim or resist them according to the effects they wished to bring about” (Burr, 2003, p. 122). While this

argument supports participants' sense of autonomy, it fails to recognise the pragmatic complexity of homelessness discourses. As Bafana expressed above, participants wished and longed for opportunities that were not possible given their societal rank, context of deprivation and subsequent powerlessness. The analysis of subject positions available to unsheltered persons suggested that agency was not easily attained but was mediated through the discursive possibilities a subject position afforded an individual. Thus, friction between accepting the imposed discursive position and resisting it ensued.

From a Foucauldian perspective, agency was located within this power-resistance relationship, where power facilitated the normalisation of ideals that were assembled and communicated through discourse. As described by Alvesson and Karreman (2000, p. 1127) who understood “discourses [operated] as general and prevalent systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time, [where] other levels of social reality [were] more or less shaped or even subordinated by the power-knowledge relations establish[ed] in discourse”. From this vantage point, discourse could be conceived as an important structural and organising tool in determining social practices and constructing associated subjects and objects. As a result, the idea of subjectivity departed from traditional psychology's view of personhood; instead, it was discourse that facilitated “particular forms of subjectivity in which human subjects [were] managed and given a certain form, viewed as self-evident and rational”(Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1128; Burr, 1995; Lorentzen, 2017).

In a similar vein, homeless subject positions were informed by social practices created by discourses which were in turn informed by societal power dynamics. Power was reinforced at each tier of the system: by the time mainstream views about homelessness reached those who were homeless, it had already been accepted as objective reality by society and internalised by those living on the street as explored in the sections above. However, this does not suggest the absence of individual agency: “power is relational and productive, not purely repressive” (Foucault, 1980; Lorentzen, 2017, p. 106). Consequently, these positions could be accepted, or contested, negotiated, claimed, or resisted. Despite dominant discourses forcefully drafting unsheltered people into the homeless identity, resistance might yet be achieved through the negotiation of personal goals, desires and needs (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1980; Horsell, 2006; Lorentzen, 2017).

*Mpilo (M): I am in the street because I didn't allow Satan or the evil spirit to do the wrong things, if I was someone accepting that path, I was supposed to do something,*

*maybe I end up going to jail- but I say just forgive, he'll take care of, only God knows. You understand? For me to be in the street, I'm tired. Even these things for going like right now, you know you may leave here asking for food, you go to another place food, food, what is that? It's not good at all. Mmmm.*

*R: And how does that make you feel?*

*M: It makes me sometimes I ended up say, tsk I'm not going there. Let me just starve like this. You understand? Cause I ask myself when I'm going to be ok? Since I was being born, I never go and ask for food. [pause] I have been doing it for myself. When I grow up my parents take me to school, I end up finishing school, get a job, start trying living the good life but now the things must go back down again, start at scratch one. It's not good. You understand? Mmm.*

Mpilo did not accept blame for his homelessness because he attributed it to the work of an evil spirit: a discursive act that illustrated his resistance to the dominant discourses of homelessness and their associated expectations. Despite his inability to address his hunger independently, Mpilo resisted assistance, opting to starve rather than give in to the expected actions of *the homeless*, to move from place to place to beg for food. He refused to participate in the expected behaviours and actions of homeless individuals, and in doing so rejected his position as part of the group, denying his current situation, further distancing himself from the reality of his homelessness. This may be seen as a rebellion against sites of micro-power, defying the expectations society has of those who are homeless by drawing on positive traits such as pride and dignity (Neale, 1997). Consequently, Mpilo conveyed his agency through his contestation of a prescribed group identity and position.

Similarly, Funani illustrated his resistance of the homeless position by refusing to “beg at the robot”- an expected activity of the homeless, citing his pride as an impediment to adopting such a practice. The presence of pride hindered both Mpilo and Funani’s survival, placing them in a precariously situation without access to sustenance, yet they resisted. As a result, these participants might be labelled as undeserving of support, given their defiance of dominant discourses.

*Um, and I can't stand in the robot the whole day. And I can't push a trolley the whole day. And I can't ask whoever that because I've got pride, it becomes a bit difficult for me actually. [Funani]*

As explored by Sanele earlier under the discourse of occupation, hobbies and interests, Msizi contradicted and resisted the perception of the homeless as unworthy and unable to contribute:

*Msizi (M): The way I say it, you getting food, but you not washing dishes. You know, you don't, you get, you, don't give, you, get, you don't give, you, get you don't, you don't give. You, just get. You, just get. You don't give.*

*R: So, would you like to be giving back?*

*M: There's the thing, there's a thing.*

*R: You're looking for a little bit of responsibility?*

*M: There's the thing. And I started already. I'm teaching kids in Yeoville dancing, again. Ja. So just to, to remove myself from, from stress, I'm volunteering there in Yeoville.*

Msizi found it essential to be seen as a productive, caring member of society. He described his volunteering as a way to escape stress, perhaps to regain a part of his former self, identity, and worth in order to counter the effect of absence. This was consistent with Desjarlais-deKlerk's understanding of the self where "identity formation and maintenance in the move from one social status to another may be particularly important to individuals' sense of self and wellbeing, especially as their relations with others change during such transitions" (2018, p. 9) . This point is illustrated once again in the excerpt below:

*I was a person known by older people, you know, like respected by, by older people, seeing the future, this boy going far, you know? So, it's just to come down like that. So, the young ones that I grew up with would they help you? No ways! While even their parents used to tell them, I wish you would be like that guy, not the way you do things. [Msizi]*

In occupying the good homeless position, Msizi articulated positive and acceptable traits to be deemed worthy of assistance or support. He presented as someone who could contribute to society by generously volunteering his time to work with the youth, simultaneously resisting depictions of unsheltered people as unproductive members of society. He was able to identify with the ideals of mainstream societal discourses while also disputing them, ultimately

aligning himself with those in control of crucial resources needed for survival by adopting a certain, if complicated, discursive stance.

These extracts highlight the scope for resistance within different subject positions, with participants “attempting to bring off a representation of themselves that has a liberating, legitimising or otherwise positive effect for them...suggest[ing] that the agency of human beings lies in their ability to manipulate discourse and use it for their own end” (Burr, 1995, p. 92). Accordingly, it could be argued that participants were not entirely discourse-driven subjects. As posited by Davies and Harré “the possibility of choice in a situation in which there are contradictory requirements provides people with the possibility of acting agentically” (1999, p. 49), thus facilitating a pro-active interweaving of identity threads and positions (Burr, 1995).

However, within interlocking social hierarchies, discourses are not equally available for people to engage with: restrictions can come into effect on the basis of attributes such as class, poverty, gender and as discussed here, homelessness, thus constraining claims to personhood (Burr, 1995; Davies & Harré, 1999). From this standpoint it could be argued that participants experienced, in part, the death of their own subjectivities, where individual agency was limited, if not at times annihilated and discourse was afforded more freedom than the subjects they constituted. However, as per the Foucauldian position, this is not a cut and dry argument: “the power to act in particular ways, to claim resources to control or be controlled depends on knowledges currently prevailing in society.” (Burr, 1995, p. 70). Participants gave effect to this, by contesting and resisting some subject positions and discourses whilst also claiming and adopting others.

This analysis revealed that participants tended to exemplify either the ‘good’ homeless position or the ‘bad’ homeless position, but very rarely assumed qualities of both, exercising agency in their alignment with, and claiming of, positions while simultaneously being restricted by these categorisations. As such, participants developed particular understandings of themselves apropos the world, viewing it from their respective positions’ perspectives with the ensuing emotional commitments (Burr, 2005; Davies & Harré, 1999).

In conclusion, participants’ agentic possibilities were embedded in the understanding that homelessness was primarily related to individual pathology and failure. Furthermore, these possibilities were intertwined with societal perceptions of the deserving and underserving homeless individual informed by dominant discourses of homelessness and the corresponding subject positions available to participants (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; Neale, 1997; Somerville, 2013; Zufferey, 2017). Although resistance towards discourses and

positionings discussed above was struggled after and exercised by participants, the ensuing risk for them was dire. Here the power of discourse is emphasised: to resist for the sake of your dignity, identity or sense of self, but at the cost, potentially, of your survival (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1980; Horsell, 2006).

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate how participants negotiated their identities within the hostile environment of the streets using a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to explore constructions of self and identity amongst a sample of South Africa's homeless population. The findings revealed that participants constructed their identities and sense of self out of the discourses made available to them by mainstream society. The prevailing discourses around homelessness facilitated and limited the subjectivities and positions available to participants, using language to maintain power relations (Burr, 1995, 2003). As stated by Carpentier and Doudaki, "a discourse manages to gain a dominant position and to transform itself into a social imaginary that can benefit from the luxury of taken-for-grantedness, normalisation and eventually sedimentation" (2019, p. 73).

The discourses of absence and the homeless identity are examples of this. The language of absence (*dog, zombie, outcast, being dead or cancelling oneself*) functioned to fix participants in a diminished position, at the base of Maslow's needs pyramid, with little hope of being seen as having, or adding, value (Henwood et al., 2015). Similarly, the discourse of the homeless identity recruited mainstream stereotypes of the homeless (such as *lazy, dirty, crazy or criminals*), framing participants' homelessness as the result of personal failure. This reinforced participants' inability to meet societal standards, othering and blaming them in the process, and eradicating all other aspects of their identities for the signifier of 'homeless'. As such, the mainstream conceptualisation of homelessness as communicated by participants shows how these discourses were used to "construct their own subjectivities" (McCarthy, 2013, p. 54) :

*If you are homeless, you do not exist; if you are homeless, you are nothing; if you are homeless, you are not human; if you are unsheltered, you are automatically categorised and identified as less regardless of your circumstances.*

This common perspective illustrates the tension between discourses of absence and presence, where, on the one hand, participants expressed becoming shells or ghosts of their former selves, being dislocated from who they were and are. On the other hand, it begins to shed light on participants' attempts to resist these interpellated discursive positionings through discourses of presence (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; Somerville, 2013).

The interpellation of participants was further explored through an analysis of the subject positions available to, and utilised by, the sample. The interplay between acceptance

and rejection of one's social status as homeless played a crucial role in participants' adoption of subject positions.

*Subjects construct unique identificatory relationships with subject positions. But at the same time, subject positions exercise considerable power, by providing structures of meaning that structure people's subjectivities, how they see, feel, experience and think of others and themselves, and which subjects and groups they like or dislike, consider friends or enemies, or even consider human or not (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019, p. 72).*

Homelessness presents a unique challenge: those who are unsheltered are automatically constructed as deficient due to a lack of shelter and have subsequently been drafted into the homeless subject position (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; Hudson, 2016; Nichols, 2020). Correspondingly, the remaining positions available to participants were polarised between "good" and "bad" responses to their homelessness, where "good" came to reinforce dominant conceptualisations of homelessness perpetuated through discourses of absence, while "bad" represented participants' contestation of, and resistance towards, the homeless position. It is crucial to note that both positions contained elements of condemnation, where the participants recruited into the "good" homeless position had to accept blame for their situation while those belonging to the "bad" homeless position occupied a further stigmatised image of homelessness, with both subject positions mediating and affecting participants' constructions of self (Burr, 1995; Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019). The exploration of available subject positions reiterated Foucault's (1980) view that power operates discursively and maintains social hierarchies, consequently perpetuating perceptions of those experiencing homelessness and reinforcing their diminished status (1980; Horsell, 2006).

In addressing the question of agency, the study found that participants were able to claim, contest, negotiate or resist elements of discourse as well as the resultant subject positions (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1980; Horsell, 2006; Zufferey, 2017). Despite the old adage, "beggars can't be choosers", participants were able to exercise agency: however, the choices afforded to this vulnerable sector of the population were mediated by mainstream conceptualisations of homelessness (through discourse) and the subject positions presented to individuals limited their discursive possibilities (Burr, 1995; Horsell, 2006; Hudson, 2016; Nichols, 2020). As such, the choice to refuse a meal for the preservation of one's dignity or to resist begging at a robot for the sake of one's pride, risked participants' basic survival. These choices support Foucault's understanding that true power resides within the power-resistance

nexus, while simultaneously acknowledging the coercive power and impact of discourse (Foucault, 1980; Horsell, 2006; Lorentzen, 2017).

This perspective calls into question whether “discourse is all there is” (Burr, 2003, p. 106): were participants merely discursive objects? This analysis explored the discursive threads of identity expressed by participants and supported social constructionist and Foucauldian perspectives: persons experiencing homelessness drew on discourses that serve to maintain social hierarchies, structuring an individual’s worth based on their ability to maintain societal expectations (i.e. to have a fixed abode) (Burr, 2003; Olufemi, 2002; Rayburn & Guittar, 2013; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Resistance to said discourses created friction, reinforcing one’s powerlessness and vulnerability as expressed through discourses of absence, and at the risk of becoming a problematised discursive object in a dialogue about homelessness (Horsell, 2006; Nichols, 2020; Wasserman et al., 2012; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). As a result, participants were limited by the discourses of homelessness and identity and the available subject positions were polarised, functioning to constrain how participants came to see and understand themselves (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1980; Horsell, 2006). Such discourses can foster an uncritical, one-dimensional construction of people experiencing homelessness “to such an extent that they become objects of discourse rather than subjects of their own experience” (McCarthy, 2013, p. 53), thus illustrating the compelling power of language to both construct and represent reality. Despite this, the study’s findings counter any notion of the death of the subject (Burr, 2003): participants found ways to manoeuvre, supporting Foucault’s view that power is relative and illustrating how a marginalised sector of the population still has opportunities to negotiate, navigate, contest and resist the identities foisted upon them through discourse. This provides hope that while discourse is a powerful operational tool, there is always the accompanying possibility of resistance (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1980; McCarthy, 2013; Parsell, 2011; Parsell et al., 2014; Pascale, 2005; Rabinow, 1991).

### **Significance of the study**

Qualitative research is often criticised for a lack of objectivity, despite its ability to assess concepts not easily measured through statistical functions, such as identity (Liebrucks, 2001; Somerville, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2020). Although the study did not provide tangible solutions to homelessness, it presented an opportunity to gain insight into ways of discoursing about homelessness, where survival entailed a constant negotiation of available subject positions

(Nichols, 2020). Few Foucauldian analyses have been utilised to explore constructions of identity amongst homeless populations globally, let alone in South Africa. This study investigated which discourses were employed by the sample to construct their identities and sense of self, explored the different subject positions available to participants within these discourses, and finally examined the consequences of claiming or resisting these positions.

The study also addressed the statistical invisibility of individuals experiencing homelessness, by acknowledging participants' life experiences as valid and worthy of investigation, and provided a space for their voices to be heard (Hopkins et al., 2019; Olufemi, 2002; UN-Habitat, 2020). The study illustrated the complexity and multidimensionality of homelessness (de Beer & Vally, 2017; Makiwane et al., 2010; McCarthy, 2013; Roets et al., 2016), by identifying dominant discourses utilised by individuals experiencing homelessness along with discerning the subject positions made available within these discourses in an effort to explore the relationship between discourse and subjectivity (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2019; Horsell, 2006; McCarthy, 2013; Nichols, 2020; Willig, 2008). Lastly, through interviews, participants were able to talk about their journeys and, in so doing, may have had the opportunity to reflect on some their experiences (Rayburn & Guittar, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2020).

## **Limitations**

As previously discussed, "identity is in constant flux" (Burr, 2003, p. 120): the time-limited nature of the study excluded a protracted analysis of how identities evolved or changed as participants sunk deeper into homelessness, remained bound in their situations, or found pathways out of homelessness (McCarthy, 2013; Olufemi, 1998, 2002). Furthermore, as highlighted in the section on reflexivity, the interviews were conducted in English – the vernacular of the researcher and not the participants. Although the researcher felt that the experiences shared during the interviews were not hindered by this, the use of a translator may have helped participants convey their experiences in a more visceral and comfortable manner. However, the use of a translator may also have created an additional barrier between the translator's interpretation of what was being communicated by participants and the researcher's reading of the translated material, thus risking material being lost or altered through translation and compromising the integrity of the overall analysis.

Another limitation of the study was its inability to provide straightforward, actionable, policy-levelled solutions to the condition of homelessness in South Africa. Rather, the study

emphasised its complexity and multidimensionality through an exploration of micro-level constructions of identity in a bid to inform concepts underpinning social policies (Nichols, 2020).

### **Recommendations for future research**

In line with the limitations of the study discussed above, future research into homelessness and identity could consider longitudinal studies with repeated interviews of participants at set intervals. A study with repeated measures could provide more accurate insights into the constructions of identity and self, revealing emergent discursive patterns over time (Desjarlais- de Klerk, 2018). Additionally, the study could be replicated in other major South African cities to gain further insight into identity discourses and subject positions utilised by persons experiencing homelessness across the country; this may help to determine whether other contextual factors and discursive phenomena contribute to the construction of self and identity for participants, as well as the associated agentic implications.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Exploring Constructions of Identity and Self amongst SA's homeless population

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#### Introduction

- a. *Researcher to introduce themselves.*
- b. *Thank the participant for their time, ask the participant if they have any time constraints, recap how long the interview will take.*
- c. *Provide overview of the study and provide the participant with a study information sheet.*
- d. *Read through consent forms, including audio recording consent with the participant.*
- e. *Discuss voluntary participation, confidentiality and right to withdraw from the study.*
- f. *Assure participants that there are no right or wrong answers and that the interview is aimed at listening to their experiences.*
- g. *Ask the participant if they have any questions about participation and if they are comfortable to proceed.*
- h. *Get consent forms signed.*

#### Section One: Demographic and background information

1. Age:  
How old are you?
2. Gender:  
What gender do you identify with? /Do you identify with a particular gender?
3. Education:  
What is your highest level of education/schooling?
4. Nationality:  
What country are you from?  
If international participant, how long have you lived in South Africa?
5. Duration of homelessness:  
How long have you been homeless?
6. Place of Residence (Street/Shelter etc):  
Where are you currently living/sleeping?

*Thank the participant for these details and move to the next section.*

**Section Two: Constructions of Identity**

1. Please tell me about yourself.  
(How do you describe yourself? How do you see yourself?)
2. Can you tell me a little more about what lead you to start living on the streets?  
(How did you become homeless?)
3. How would you describe being homeless?
4. Tell me about yourself before you became homeless.  
(How would you describe yourself back then?)
5. Do you feel that being homeless has changed who you are?  
If yes, in what ways has being homeless changed who you are?  
If no, in what ways do you believe that have you remained the same?
6. Has being homeless changed the way that you express yourself?  
If yes, how so?  
If no, why do you feel this way?
7. How do you think people who are not homeless perceive you?
8. Do you feel that people talk to/ engage with/ treat you differently because you are homeless?  
If yes, can you share an experience of this?
9. How do you feel other people experiencing homelessness see you?

**Closing:**

- a. *Ask the participant for a moment to make sure that all key areas were covered.*
- b. *Check in with the participant:*
  1. Is there anything further that you would like to add?
  2. Is there anything that you would like to ask before we wrap up?
  3. How have you found the interview? / How has the interview been for you?
- c. *Thank the participant for their contribution and their time.*
- d. *Recap feedback process and refer to the information sheet with contact details of the researcher and supervisor, should the participant have any further queries.*
- e. *Provide participant with food/sanitary parcel.*

## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

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Department of Psychology  
Rondebosch, 7701

### Research Topic:

*Exploring Constructions of Identity and Self amongst South Africa's Homeless Population*

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Merushka Francis, I am student completing a master's degree in Clinical Psychology at the University of Cape Town. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study which explores how people living on the streets speak about their identity and their experiences of homelessness.

Should you be interested in joining the study, you will be asked to partake in a one-on-one interview with myself. During the interview, I will ask you to talk about your experience of living on the streets, how you came to be homeless, how you felt about yourself when you were younger, and how you feel about yourself now. The interview should take between 45 to 60 minutes to complete, but this is flexible, and you may leave at any point during the conversation without any consequences.

Participation in this study is voluntary, there will be no consequences if you decide to leave the study, which you are free to do at any point, even after the interview. There will be no repercussions from the support organisation should you withdraw your consent to participate in the study and you may continue to receive support from the organisation regardless of your participation in this study.

Talking about your experiences may be emotionally difficult and may cause some distress. You are not obliged to talk about everything raised in the interview, you may share as much as you feel comfortable talking about.

Should you like to talk about some of your experiences or emotions further, you may contact one of the walk-in counselling organizations below:

- Holy Trinity Church :16 Stiemens Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg (011 339 2826)
- South African Depression and Anxiety Group 24hr Hotline: 0800 456 789
- LifeLine Gauteng: 0861 322 322 or 065 989 9238 (WhatsApp line)

You may ask to remove any information that we have discussed from the study at any point without consequence.

The researcher will ensure that your privacy and confidentiality is maintained throughout the research process. You will be assigned a different name and all identifying features such as addresses, or family names will be removed from my final thesis and any other research publications.

The interview will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. Once the required information is captured, all recordings will be destroyed. Only I as the researcher and my supervisor will have access to the original recordings and the remaining information.

Once the studied has been completed, I will be able to provide a summary and presentation of key findings to all participants.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints my contact details and that of my supervisor appear below. Should you need to contact the University's ethics committee, please contact, Rosalind Adams on [rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za).

Thank you for considering taking part in this study. Please keep this sheet for your information.  
Kind Regards,

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**Researcher:**

Merushka Francis

e: [FRNAIM002@myuct.ac.za](mailto:FRNAIM002@myuct.ac.za)

tel: 076 178 4510

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**Supervisor:**

Dr Wahbie Long

e: [wahbie.long@uct.ac.za](mailto:wahbie.long@uct.ac.za)

tel: 021 650 3901

## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



Department of Psychology  
Rondebosch, 7701

### Research Topic:

*Exploring Constructions of Identity and Self amongst South Africa's Homeless Population*

I \_\_\_\_\_ have read through the participant information sheet (Page 1, *see Appendix B*) and I have been informed of the study.

I have been informed of the interview process and the requirement for audio recording.

I am aware that the recordings will remain private, and that all identifying features will be removed from the study.

I am aware that audio recordings will be deleted once the required information has been captured.

I agree to allow the interview to be audio recorded for the purposes of this study.

I am aware that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any stage of the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D: Poster

*Would you like to share your story?*

*Participate in a research interview and share some of your experiences of homelessness.*

*Let's talk about who you are and how you see yourself.*

*Research goals:  
To explore constructions of identity and self amongst persons experiencing homelessness.*



# **WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT?**

*If you would like to learn more or are interested in joining the study, please contact Merushka on 076 178 4510*

## Appendix E: Ethical Clearance

### UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



### Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa  
Telephone (021) 650 3417  
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

14 April 2022

Aimée-Kariba Merusha Francis  
Department of Psychology  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Aimée-Kariba Merusha

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Exploring Constructions of Identity and Self amongst South Africa's Homeless Population*. The reference number is PSY2022-004.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Lauren Wild'.

Lauren Wild (PhD)  
Associate Professor  
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

## Appendix F: Organisation Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



Department of Psychology  
Rondebosch, 7701

### Research Topic:

*Exploring Constructions of Identity and Self amongst South Africa's Homeless Population*

I \_\_\_\_\_ have read through the participant information sheet (Page 1, *see Appendix B*) and I have been informed of the study.

I agree to assist the researcher, Merushka Francis by permitting her to conduct interviews with patrons of the \_\_\_\_\_ meal scheme.

I understand that participation is voluntary, and that participants' details will always remain confidential. The organisation's name will not be mentioned in the study to further maintain the privacy of participants.

The organisation will / will not require a summary the study's key findings.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date