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Seeking "Home": Personal Narratives and Turning Points in the Lives of Adult Homeless

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Abstract

The way homeless persons construct their self-narratives and shape their identities has recently become the subject of narrative studies in the western world. The present inquiry adopts the theoretical notion that narration is the means by which the self-constructs and re-constructs her identity. This construction is organised around life's perceived "turning points". Eight interviews with homeless adults living in Athens, Greece were conducted. The main question guiding the interviews was: "How did you get at the present point in your life?" We focused on their past, present and future, with emphasis on possible turning points. The interviews were combined with a story-line graph which participants believed to be representative of their unfolding lives. The narrative analysis indicated that experiences of homelessness were not marked as turning points per se. Rather, four emerging themes describe other important turning points: repeated loss, (dis)connection, new "home", freedom. Homeless persons experienced a continuity in hardship and trauma since childhood. However, their experiences, following the loss of home, were not always negative, and they expected the future to be brighter. Discussed are implications for social caring in exploring the deeper meaning of "home". Particular suggestions are put forward for social and counselling services.

Keywords: homeless, narrative construction of self, turning points, narrative inquiry

> "Besides, we are too Hamlet-like to make [a self-narrative] all of a piece
> – too torn between the familiar and the possible." (Bruner, 2004, p. 12)

The social impact of homelessness in Greece, as everywhere in the western world, is immense. Studies -conducted mostly in the Athens area where almost half of Greece's population lives- indicate that the problem is growing, despite new housing programs being launched and more funds being available (see Greenwood, Stefancic, Tsemberis, & Busch-Geertsema, 2013; see also Arapoglou, Gounis, & Siatista, 2015; Kourachanis, 2015; Kourachanis, 2017). As in other capital cities in the western world, the homeless in Athens struggle for daily survival, but they also face social prejudice and stigma, stemming from the negative dominant rhetoric which attributes poverty to individual characteristics (see Papadopoulou & Kourachanis, 2017; Papatheodorou, 2014; see also Belcher & DeForge, 2012).

Given the psychological challenges and the social stigma that the homeless persons face (Farrugia, 2011), the way they construct their self-narratives and shape their identities has recently become the subject of narrative

studies in western world countries. We wished to expand the spectrum of countries to include Greece. Even though the study was conducted in Athens, we believe that the key notion of "turning points" around which homeless adults appeared to construct their autobiographies has usefulness beyond borders.

The Narrative Construction of Self

Our study adopts a narrative psychological perspective as its theoretical framework (Bruner, 1990, 2004; Sarbin, 1986) for understanding the way homeless persons construct their identities. The self, as Bruner (2004) teaches, is a self-narrative or autobiography which is ever on the making, a lifelong struggle, "never completed, only ended" (Bruner, 2004, p. 8). Self-narratives, he explains, "conform to a tacit *pacte autobiographique* governing what constitutes appropriate public self-telling" (Bruner, 2004, pp. 4-5). The process of constructing an autobiography entails several audiences, the presence of which– even if invisible – shapes the content of the self-narrative to a considerable degree. Of course, the only constantly present audience is none other than the self.

The construction of an autobiography should unfold in a way that secures a "well-formed", intelligible story, creating a sense of historical continuity, directionality and coherence (Androutsopoulou, 2001; see also Eakin, 1992). Persons – being reflective and able for internal dialogue – simultaneously place themselves in the role of author and reader (or audience) so that anything written or said is re-edited almost at the same time.

Forming Self-Narratives

The way persons recount their histories, "what they emphasise and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience" shape what persons can claim of their own lives. "Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned" (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 1).

"Well-formed", complete, intelligible self-narratives are crucial in our sense of well-being, both mentally and physically. Singer (2001) explains that in the western world, healthy persons' life stories reflect a mix of loving relationships and meaningful independent activities. The stories of healthy persons tend to be hopeful, they tolerate contradictions and reversals, and they contain specific memories of positive turning points. On the contrary, when persons face serious emotional difficulties and trauma, their narratives become broken or disrupted (Wigren, 1994). Stories often lack hope, they are incoherent, full of unacknowledged contradictions and gaps, and they do not contain any specific memories of positive turning points (see also Androutsopoulou, Thanopoulou, Economou, & Bafiti, 2004; Dimaggio, 2006; Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998).

Research shows that it is vital to assist persons to complete broken narratives in order to promote not only their psychological but also their physical health (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Lysaker, Wickett, & Davis, 2005; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). But not everybody agrees. Critics of the "coherence paradigm" (e.g., Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010) claim that disrupted or broken narratives should not be interfered with. They believe that seeking to create coherence may be restricting persons lives, especially the lives of those living with trauma; their narratives lack meaning, they say, simply because meaning cannot exist (Andrews, 2010). As a response to the inherent lack of meaning in trauma, Freeman (2010) argues that coherence may be understood as "meaning [which] is found through being made", and highlights "the constructive, imaginative dimension entailed in the process of meaning-making" (p. 181). Persons struggle to create mean-

ing even amidst the worst hardship, by creating stories than can embed their experiences in "critical junctures" or "turning points" of their lives (Bruner, 2004).

Turning Points in Self-Narratives

Bruner (1990) suggests that we rarely encounter autobiographies, written or told in interviews that are without turning points: The protagonist as hero of her own story emerges with new wisdom or consciousness "aroused by victory or defeat, by betrayal or trust" (Bruner, 1990, p. 21).

Turning points or "turns in the road" (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001) are life events experienced as critical moments or crucial periods of transitions. They are often seen as opportunities for reorientation and reinterpretation of one's life (Clausen, 1993). The stories we tell of those turns help us in the continuous process of shaping our autobiography, in dealing with challenges, and in determining the nature of interpersonal relations and of our position in the world (McAdams et al., 2001).

Sometimes persons are aware of undergoing a period of transition, but other times they are unaware of experiencing a turning point until much later, when their lives have undergone drastic change. Turning points can be changes for better or worse, but even tragic events may later be interpreted as positive. An example is given in Schultz's (2001) psychobiography study of the famous Irish author Oscar Wilde who unexpectedly became homeless. Wilde mentioned "two great turning points" in his life: an episode of achievement when sent by his father from Dublin to Oxford; an episode of shame when sent by the British court to prison for two years of hard labour charged with "gross indecency", connected to his love affair with a man of an aristocratic background.

Life's turning points are examined by McAdams and Bowman (2001) as stories of either "redemption" (from bad to good) or "contamination" (from good to bad). It is an idea with many similarities to the progressive and regressive story lines discussed by Mary Gergen (1988), which informed our own study of homeless persons:

Being interested in narrative form, and particularly narrative plots and structure, Gergen (1988) has suggested that "traditions of story-telling, dramatic performance, literature and the like have generated a range of culturally shared forms of emplotment or narrative structures that can be analysed in terms of three basic story lines: *stability* (life as monotonous and directionless), *progression* (life is getting better) and *regression* (life is getting worse)" (p. 96). Persons with less emotional difficulties would normally anticipate their life to have its ups and downs, and their retrospective and prospective macro-narratives to reflect the notion of continuing saga. Persons with more emotional difficulties would probably describe their lives in terms of stability or regression (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

The *content* of self-narratives is expected to shape itself in relation to narrative structure, persons' selection of topics is expected to support the single macro-narrative pattern of their lives as perceived (stability, regression, progression). But as clinical experience shows, this pattern may be perceived differently by speaker (client) and audience (therapist), when, for instance, the therapist praises the client for having managed her life well given the circumstances and based on her narration (progression), but the client is disappointed and sees her life as being in a downhill (regression).

Homelessness and Self-Narratives

In this section, we choose to review in some detail studies of identity formation that fit our narrative research paradigm, even though there are many other qualitative methods that some studies have used that could help expand our understanding on this matter. For instance, Rew and Horner (2003) used a "secondary qualitative analysis" to highlight personal strengths and resources that protect homeless youth's health. Likewise, Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, and Nackerud (2000) used a "constant comparative method" to indicate personal strengths and resources that help homeless youth make successful transitions. Snow and Anderson (1987) used ethnography to illustrate three generic patterns of identity talk: distancing, embracement, and fictive story-telling. Farrington and Robinson (1999) used a "covert participant observation" method to show that identity maintenance strategies differ as a function of longevity of homelessness.

In the limited number of studies that have used narrative inquiry to date to investigate the way homeless persons construct their self-narratives and shape their identities, at least two threads appear common:

Continuity Between Hardships and the Presence of Trauma: Looking Into Narrative Content

In this first thread, researchers are mostly interested in themes emerging from the analysis of content. These studies highlight crucial negative events in the lives of adult homeless beginning form childhood, with emphasis placed in the presence of traumatic events, such as family abandonment, abuse and social hardships. For instance, Williams and Tickley (2011) conducted a narrative study in the U.K. examining how 8 adults talked about their experiences of homelessness. The researchers found that participants' experiences negatively affected their constructed identity and their mental health. The following themes emerged from the analysis of interview data: identity, family breakdown, rejection and stigma, illicit substances, and hope.

In another example, Baker Collins (2013) explored the connection between youth and adult homelessness for a group of 16 chronically homeless adults in southern Ontario, Canada. She found that participants have had the experience of several stressful and/or traumatic events in childhood, including frequent parental arguments, physical or sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, sexual abuse, parental divorce or separation, substance abuse, sent away from home, time spent in foster home/group home, time spent in custody, long-term parental unemployment, cultural conflict within the family, death of an immediate family member, abandonment by primary care giver. Note that 75% of the participants in that study had been physically or sexually abused. In their adult lives the chronic homeless saw their situation as linked to crucial life events such as the breaking of an important relationship, drug abuse, lack of education, unemployment, mental health problems, imprisonment.

In light of these findings, Baker Collins suggested that "adult homelessness must be contextualized within a life narrative that ties together teen homelessness and chronic adult homelessness, and that addressing trauma must become an essential part of the response to homelessness among youth" (p. 62). Two points are therefore stressed by the researcher, the need for examining the life narrative in terms of past, present, and future (see also Boydell & Goering, 2000), and the need to prevent and/or address the impact of early trauma.

Narratives of "Contamination" Versus "Redemption": Looking Into Narrative Form

In the second thread, researchers are mostly interested in the form of narratives, many using the distinction between "contamination" and "redemption" made by McAdams and Bowman (2001). For instance, Toolis and Hammack (2015) explored how 11 homeless youth living in the U.S. made meaning of their experiences, and presented 4 of these cases in detail based on typicality. Among other findings, all pointing to qualities of agency

and mastery, the researchers found that, despite their struggles and losses, the participants were able to avoid narratives of "contamination" and construct instead narratives of "redemption" and resilience. The four cases studies were titled: "We're not bad people, but we're in this bad situation so long", "Your past is really just your past", "People really do take good care of each other out here", "I don't have anything to be ashamed of".

The distinction between "contamination" and "redemption" narratives also informed one of the largest qualitative studies of its kind: Kidd and Davidson (2007) interviewed 208 homeless youth in New York City and Toronto. They then focused on 28 of those participants, approaching them again and carrying with them more extensive conversations. Interviews started with the general question "How did you become homeless?" The researchers emphasized that participant narratives indicated their struggle to make meaning of their lives, to understand and appreciate their selves, to live a meaningful life and connect with others. Narratives of "redemption" were also characteristic of participants in that study: For instance, narratives of redemption included: "I figured out who I am", "I am finding the strength within myself", "When you get out here and you find genuinely good peo-ple…", "I feel better about myself when I know that I am helping someone else", "I still have faith in something" (issues of spirituality). However, there were also contamination narratives, for instance: "The drugs were always there for me" (a major part of street culture).

A "contamination" narrative of a homeless drug addict was put together by Singer (2001). Singer adopted the life story analysis method to study the life of his client Richard Markham over many years rather than in a single moment of his life. Markham had been Singer's client at several points in time, whenever he made efforts to live a "normal live", but Markham ultimately failed to reconstruct an identity beyond addiction, homelessness and imprisonment. The sad story of this man reveals the continuity between hardships and traumas in childhood, like those highlighted in the study of Baker Collins, and his gradual fall as he relied on heroin to get some relief from his pain.

Method

Aim

The aim of this study was to gain understanding of how homeless persons construct their self-narratives and shape their identities around the key notion of "turning points", a notion which has not been emphasized in pre-vious narrative studies of homeless persons. We investigated both the content and the form of these narratives, thus not restricting our investigation to either one of the common threads found in the relevant narrative inquiry literature on the homeless.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis "combines a discursive emphasis on the construction of meaning through talk and language, alongside a humanistic image of the person as a self-aware agent striving to achieve meaning, control, and ful-filment in life" (McLeod, 2001, p. 106).

The process of self-narrative construction is reflected in both the content and the form of narratives. Lieblich et al. (1998) provide two basic dimensions for reading, interpreting and analysing life stories: (i) holistic versus categorical and (ii) content versus form. In the present study, we were interested in both the *form* and the *con-*

tent of narratives seen in a holistic way (Lieblich et al., 1998). The *holistic-content* mode of reading uses the complete life story of a person, like one would do in clinical case studies. The researcher concentrates on emerging themes. The *holistic-form* mode of analysis looks into the plots or structure of complete life stories. For instance, Mary Gergen (1988) uses "plot analysis", expecting life stories to present a combination of the three basic patterns or story-line graphs previously mentioned: progression, regression, and stability.

Presentation of Data and Quality Issues

In this study, we treated the whole life stories told by clients being interviewed as the primary source of data (see Riessman, 2008). Relying on Kenneth Gergen's (2014) advice for promoting quality in qualitative research, we were careful to show respect or otherwise honour the voice of our interviewees, in a way that reflects a "humanist orientation to inquiry" (Gergen, 2014, p. 55; see also Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015). Josselson (2007), explains that researchers whose work "is designed to *give voice* to participants struggle with the problems of faithful representation of their experiences and with the constrictions of linear forms of presentation to fully re-present what has been told." Such researchers "conceive [their] role as being collaborator[s] and conduit[s] rather than interpreter[s]" (p. 548). Gergen (2014) refers to notable cases, where rather than interpreting participants' experiences, the researchers simply included their verbatim expressions. Of course, these researchers left room to feature their own reflections and more formal theory and outcomes.

In presenting our own data, we tried to combine the more traditional way of putting data across, one that reflects the voice of the researcher, with a less traditional way, one that uses extensive extracts from interviews to present the voice of participants and to allow readers to draw their own conclusions. Moreover, in Gergen, Josselson, and Freeman's (2015) view, qualitative researchers have a political duty of presenting a fair amount of raw data to increase empathy toward less privileged social groups.

Further on the topic of quality, we placed emphasis in the importance of research reflexivity (Gergen, 2014), dedicating space to discuss our own emotions, "fantasies, biases, and horizons of understanding, as the primary tool of inquiry." Of course, full understanding of all these is an ideal, "but an ethical stance in narrative research requires that such an exploration be undertaken as completely as possible" (Josselson, 2007, p. 545) (see also Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999).

Researchers

The first author (A.A.) is a clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, supervisor and research co-ordinator at the affiliated Institute. The second author (M.M.S.) is a sociologist. During this project, she was a trainee counsellor at the affiliated Institute, and chief sociologist at "One-Stop", Athens, Greece. At the time this article was being written she worked at "The Wallich", Wales, U.K. as homeless outreach worker.

Participants

Eight participants took part in this study, aged 27-52 years, 3 women and 5 men. They were homeless for more than two years. They all visited "One Stop", in Athens, Greece. Twice a week, "One Stop" provides first aid, laundry, showers, haircuts, warm food, music, games with the kids, legal advice, supply of important information about human rights. It is an initiative hoping to bring people closer. It is a STEPS project, with the coopera-

tion of teams of the same field, like Ithaca Laundry, ECHO Refugee Library, Society of Social Psychiatry & Mental Health and Civilians (see more at www.steps.org.gr).

At the time of the project, M.M.S. had met with the participants a few times before asking them to participate in this study. The project was carried out with permission from the executive director. M.M.S. conducted all the interviews, each lasting at least 45 minutes. In some cases, the interviewer met with the participants more than once, in order to clarify questions and fill in gaps. The participants signed a written consent, securing anonymity and confidentiality.

The role of the interviewer at "One Step", and her previous encounter with the interviewees, definitely played a role in participants' willingness to talk, and of course in the way homeless persons' narratives were put together. It most probably also played a role in the total absence of complaints expressed regarding the organisations involved in "One Step", and, in fact, regarding any organisation, with the exception of mentioning restrictions placed by shelters.

Interview Process

A crucial question that persons often pose to themselves consciously or not is: "How did I get here?" (McAdams et al., 2001, p. xvi). Similar was the initial question posed to the participants in our study. In the beginning of each interview the interviewer asked: "How did you get at the present point in your life?" The rest of the questions asked emerged spontaneously but served two purposes which the interviewer kept in mind: One purpose was to monitor the course of their lives (past, present, future), and the other was to understand them both cognitively and emotionally ("feel for them") (see Josselson, 2007).

Interviews were combined with the use of story-line graphs. Our initial goal was to ask participants to construct their own graph with help from the interviewer, giving the instruction: "Draw a line of the way you think your life is unfolding and mark important events". This proved an almost impossible task. Life events were presented with many contradictions regarding chronological order, facts and implications and participants showed an inability to construct such a graph. In order to solve this problem, the interviewer asked each participant to choose one of four printed story-line graphs.

The graphs they had to choose from -tragedy, comedy, "happily ever after", romantic saga- were combinations of the three basic story lines: stability, regression, and progression. The figures (see Figure 1, 2, 3, and 4) are adjusted from Gergen (1988).
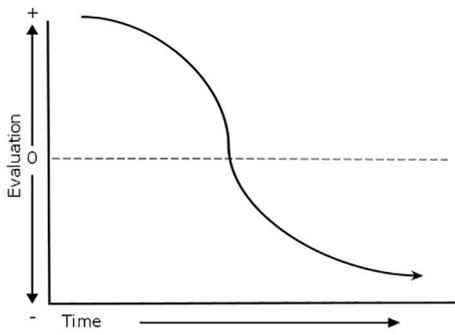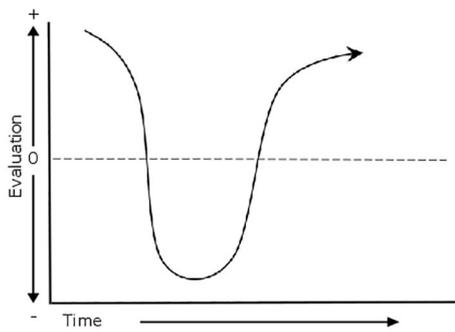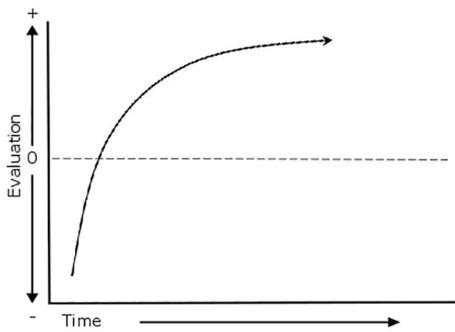
Figure 1. "Tragedy".

Figure 2. "Comedy".

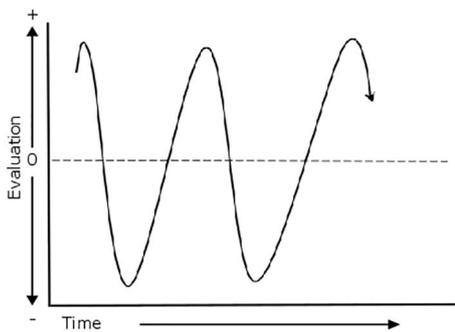

Figure 3. "Happily-ever-after".

Figure 4. "Romantic saga".

The interviewer then asked the question: "Which one of these lines do you think represents your life as it is unfolding and why?" Participants had no difficulty selecting a representative graph, but were unable to provide a reason for making the particular choice other than the claim that their choice reflects: "what they have been talking about" during the interview.

Handling the Data

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated from Greek. We treated the material from each participant as comprising a short case study. We inferred turning points in life narratives from particular forms of speech as put forward by Lieblich et al. (1998): (i) reflections by participants on specific phases (e.g. "it was the worst time in my life", "that was when I suddenly realised"), (ii) use of specific words/phrases by participants in the course of the interview (e.g. crossroad, turning point, milestone etc.), and (iii) responses to specific questions (e.g. "Was that an important milestone in your life?"). We included the inferred turning points in a brief history we constructed for each participant.

We also conducted a vertical thematic analysis of turning points; a vertical thematic analysis is conducted with one or more case studies, where materials regarding one person (e.g. interview and graph) are compared. We chose to present extracts from recent turning points (positive and negative) with the aim of illustrating the central role that such points play in the effort to construct a narrative of the self in the present.

Findings

In general, life's turning points of the past were discussed in relation to family problems, abandonment and loss. Recent turning points were mostly discussed in relation to family of origin disconnection and, in some cases, with an effort to create or find a new family or to gain a sense of freedom.

Interestingly, homelessness per se was not highlighted as a turning point. The actual lack of accommodation was clearly not the main concern expressed by participants. Rather, the loss of "home", that is the loss of stable relationships, through abandonment or rejection emerged as a common thread, and some positive consequences were also mentioned. More specifically, four themes emerged from the holistic-content analysis of all 8 narratives: repeated loss, (dis)connection, new "home", freedom.

For purposes of presentation we selected 4 representative cases, which cover our basic observations of all 8 cases, thus satisfying the criterion of typicality. Pseudonyms were used.

Repeated Loss

Brief History of Dimos

Dimos is 42 years old and was born in Germany. When he was 11 years old his parents divorced and he came to Greece with his father ("I was a daddy's boy"), whereas his mother and two sisters remained in Germany. Dimos has not seen his mother and elder sister in three decades and his younger sister in over a decade. He started on "soft" drugs when he was 11 years old, and then on heroin when he was 16. He served a 10-year sentence in prison for drug-related offences. Four years ago, he met Mary, joined a programme to combat drug addiction, went through rehabilitation, and had a son with Mary. When their son was 6 months old, Mary's moth-

er earned temporary custody of the child. The couple currently sleeps on the beach, waiting for the final court decision regarding their son.

Recent Turning Points: We Had a Baby, but Lost Custody

The most recent positive turning point in Dimos's life has been the birth of his baby, and the most negative, losing temporary custody of his child. This loss appears to have a tremendous meaning for Dimos. His wife on the other hand, as we will see when we present her own interview, places emphasis in different turning points.

Interview Extracts

Interviewer: *So, tell me, how has your life been since you came to Greece?*

Dimos: *It was all right for a decade. But then I got in a mess… with drugs… 15 years? Then I met my wife, Mary, and she said I should join this programme, she really pushed me into it, I was clean of drugs then, rehabilitation and all, then we had our child… and we even had our own home.*

Interviewer: *How long ago was that?*

Dimos: *Well, that was 4 years ago. And now, when our child was 6 months old they sued us, her mother did, and they took custody away… and that sent us downhill again.*

Interviewer: *They sued you for what?*

Dimos: *Well you know, we gave our child some paracetamol, mind you the paediatrician told us to do so, but she [mother in law] said, you can't be living with the damn drug addict and not end up giving drugs to the child. See what I mean? In that sense. And because she had managed to get a pension for Mary on the grounds of her being "slightly retarded", she used this in court, she said, you know my daughter is not well in the head, of course Mary is perfectly fine, so she said she cannot take care of the child with that drug addict she's involved with, and how can she ever take care of the child? See what I mean? He was 6 months old when she took him from me. For 6 months, he was ours. So that was it. I lost my mind, and started on the drugs again. This is where I used to live, in front of this place (points to a big store), with my wife basically. It was a real fall, depression and what have you. A big black thing, it took me years back… [Before that] I was clean for 3-4 years, took nothing. […]*

[When we had the child] I had a home, I rented a home, my child had a home. It was a three-room flat, really nice. Then [when we lost the child] I went downhill, I couldn't pay or do anything… When the child was at home even if I brought home 10 drachmas [old Greek currency] it was well spent. But afterwards, even if I brought 100 euros, they slipped away the same day. Oh, how I wish we could take our little boy back! We are saving some money, I think we will make it. […]

Interviewer: *And how do you imagine yourself in 5-years-time?*

Dimos: *I believe I'll be better off, with a second child… definitely. I have arranged some pensions for us, stuff like that, to be a bit better off, only the necessary, you know, and food, I don't want more than that. And if I sell something [he collects garbage] once a week, some money here and there, that's enough for me.*

Interviewer: *So, this will help you make a living, this is what you're saying…*

Dimos: *Yes, it will. Won't two pensions be enough? That's 1200 euros. That would do me. I will make it. I will make it. (The interviewer does not dispute his unrealistic estimations concerning allowances figures).*

Story-Line Graph

Dimos chose the "happily-ever-after" story-line (see Figure 3) as the most representative of how his life is unfolding. As with all participants, Dimos was unable to explain exactly why he chose the specific graph. We assumed that the chosen progressive graph reflected his expressed optimism regarding the future more than his present or past.

(Dis)connection

Brief History of Mary

Mary is 27 years old and was born in Athens. She says that in the last 6 years her husband, Dimos, has been her only support. Her mother, on the other hand, has been emotionally absent and punitive. Mary is adopted and the family who adopted her is quite wealthy. Mary "is slightly retarded" (she may have Asperger syndrome or be affected by Institutionalisation). In any case, she went to a "special school". Mary's mother has a big house, but Mary prefers to live in the streets with Dimos. Her mother does not want Dimos in the family and as long as she does not leave him she cannot return home. Mary and Dimos have a baby, now 6 months old, but the custody of the baby has been temporarily given to Mary's mother by the court. Mary's father died two years ago.

Recent Turning Points: I Left my Mother but Met my Husband

The most recent positive turning point in Mary's life has been meeting Dimos and the most negative turning point has been the conflict with her mother.

Interview Extracts

Mary: *I am adopted, they are not my real parents. It was fine when I was a child. But when I grew up, you know, became an adolescent, there were many problems at home. […] my mum would not let me go out much, she shouted and screamed, why go here, why go there, don't go out with any boy, you are not up to it, you are not well. […]*

Yes, yes. My husband is my life. My husband is my father, my brother, everything. Since I lost my dad it's been… it's been different.

Interviewer: *You lost your dad… how long ago was that?*

Mary: *Two years ago. He had cancer. The nicest guy… My dad was the nicest man (she is tearful).*

Interviewer: *And has your mother changed at all since then?*

Mary: *Yes, yes. My dad was a saint, he was… what can I say… such a guy…, a man so strong, and good, and kind… This is what I see in my husband, you know. Inside my husband's soul I can see my dad (she is tearful). See, I get tears in my eyes. Yes, inside the soul of my husband I can see my dad. My husband does the same things... […]*

When my husband told me, this is who I am, I got into trouble with drugs, I went to jail, I was in trouble with everything, I accepted him. And I did not mind that he had some problems with his poor legs, I did not no matter what problem he had. I did not mind. I did not mind. He is my man.

Interviewer: *And how has it been for you living on the streets?*

Mary: *Well, all right. It was hard at first. But then I got used to it. I'm telling you, really, I got used to it. I don't mind being dirty. I want to have a shower, I want to get cleaned, I want all that. I like cleanliness.*

But when I can't have that I do my best. Whatever I can, with a bottle of water, with some soap, with anything, I try. As much as I can… […]

Interviewer: *How was your life when you did have the child?*

Mary: *Everything was fine. I had him… he talked to me, we played, it was something else. I changed his nappies, I felt secure. Now that I lost him… (Abrupt change of topic). […]*

Interviewer: *And how do you imagine your life in 5-years-time?*

Mary: *In 5-years-time I want to be with this same man. I want to be with this same man and have many kids. Because he is worthwhile. My mum is not… I am telling you… I am telling you, this is the truth… I am telling you, I see my dad in him, he has such a peaceful face and it calms me down. Other people irritate me, he cannot irritate me. He tries to calm me down. He has done many things for me. I don't mind being in the streets because I am with him. I don't mind if my trousers are dirty, so to speak, I want to be with him. I don't want to go back to my mum. I am telling you the truth. I am not going back to my mum. I don't want to.*

Story-Line Graphs

Mary chose the "tragedy" story-line (see Figure 1) as representative of how her life is unfolding and this was surprising to us. If we were to construct Mary's story-line graph based on her interview, we would depict her life as a "romantic saga" (see Figure 4) with a big fall (regression) in adolescence, a positive turn (progression) when she met Dimos, another fall when she recently lost custody of the baby, and a progressive tendency in the coming years. Mary gave no specific reasons for her choice. She was also the only one of the eight participants in this study to present us with a regressive graph, so in that aspect her case was an exception. We assumed that this graph reflected her deeper fears of having to return to her mother and/or losing her husband on whom she depended entirely.

New "Home"

Brief History of Mania

Mania is 44 years old and was born in a town in Central Greece. She has a brother. When she was 20, Mania left home and went to Athens to study paramedics. She worked in a number of part-time jobs to make ends meet. She had a daughter out of wedlock with a man who left her after giving birth. Her parents did not support her at first, but they later stood by her. She was diagnosed with postpartum depression and was on medication for a few years. She took the decision to stop medication without consulting a doctor. Her daughter lived with her till she was 7 or 8. Mania got fired 7 years ago and could not support her daughter, as she says. She tried to return to her parental home but could not get a job there or feel independent. She decided to move back to Athens and leave her child to be brought up by her parents. She got a job again but was soon left homeless. She mentions she has been taken advantage of in the past due to her homelessness and mentions incidences of abuse from the police. At some point, she became a volunteer at a "social kitchen" for the homeless.

Recent Turning Points: I Became Estranged From my Family of Origin but Found a New Family of Choice

The most important turning point in Mania's life in recent years appears to be her volunteer work at the "social kitchen", and the family of choice she found there. She makes an implicit comparison with her family of origin, where she could not give or take. A common point between the two "families" is the ritual of cooking, as an indication of solidarity and intimacy.

Interview Extracts

Interviewer: *So, then it was like you found real care [at the "social kitchen"], this is what you are saying…*

Mania: *Yes. Great care, great care. My second family. I mean… you know I had these problems with my health last year, I had a stroke […] I would have died. I was standing right here, you know, and I fainted, and this volunteer came behind me, literally behind me, she called an ambulance, she took me to hospital and didn't leave my side. She is still by my side. She is by my side and you feel the love… The love.*

Interviewer: *It's family then…*

Mania: *Yes. This family gives you love… you know, good cooking… (big pause).*

Interviewer: *Let me take you back, when you were a child… How were things with your original family, how was life, you know… compared to what you have now?*

Mania: *Emm, … when I was a child… my family was a simple family. My dad worked in a factory and I have a brother… Mum was at home… But there was… There was… You know I grew up with what you may call solidarity… I mean cooking food and taking a plate to a neighbour when we knew he was in need. I remember my mum saying: "You know what? Today we cooked this food. Why don't you take some next door?" or [she would say] we know this family has kids and they don't… they have kids and they are… they have nothing to eat… and I kept these words inside of me… […]*

Interviewer: *I see Mania that you have lots of love to give…*

Mania: *Yes… It's become a way of life for me…There was once this young guy and he had high blood pressure […] "he is asking for you", they told me. […] I called an ambulance. He wouldn't go in with anyone else. "I want Mania", he said, "only Mania". […]*

I am in a very good point in my life right now, I've been through a lot, you know, and I managed… I managed in conditions I had never … I had never even imagined. […] Being homeless opened my mind, made me a less selfish human being. […]. You change many things… You just have to… there is no other way. I learned a lot through this adventure in the last 5 years. […]

Interviewer: *And how are things now with your family? Are things well?*

Mania: *Yes, yes. They are fine. Thank God. (She looks elsewhere and changes topic). […]*

Interviewer: *And how do you imagine yourself in 5-years-time…*

Mania: *I believe some things will be different. Maybe get a steady job, settle somehow. The most important thing for me is to feel well. And be with the same people I am with now, I want to be with the same people in 5-years-time… and in 10-years-time and in 15… because we are really close. They are like family… I feel they are my people and I would not want to part with them for no reason. Even when I say I want to find a job… and stand on my own two feet, and have my own place and all that… I would still not want to lose them… I wouldn't want to abandon them in any way and do other things…*

Story-Line Graphs

Initially, Mania chose the "happily-ever-after" story-line (see Figure 3) as representative of the way her life is unfolding. She then changed her mind and chose the "romantic saga" line (see Figure 4) as most representative. Since she offered no specific explanation concerning her choices, we assumed that by changing her mind she based her decision on more realistic grounds.

Freedom

Brief History of Sakis

Sakis is 37 years old and was born in a town in Northern Greece. His parents divorced when he was 3 to 4 years old. Both his parents re-married. He has a brother and a half-sister from his father's second marriage. Sakis lived in his home town till he was 15 and then moved to another town, following his mother when she re-married. He had been working as a waiter since he was 17 years old while he was studying to become a computer analyst. He came to Athens to find a job after completing his studies but this effort was unsuccessful. He initially decided to live in the streets to save money and later because he had no money.

Recent Turning Points: I Left my Family of Origin but Gained my Independence (Remaining Devoted to my Family Nevertheless)

Sakis places great positive emphasis in the sense of independence that homelessness has recently offered him. One can assume that having to leave his family of origin had been a negative turning point, but, in fact, he does not refer to any feelings regarding others or to any emotional ties either before or after homelessness. And yet, an invisible thread of loyalty on his part keeps him and his family connected.

<div align="center">Interview Extracts</div>

Interviewer: *And you live in the streets now?*

Sakis: *Well, I stayed at an abandoned building for a while two months ago… Now I'm back to my usual place, at this park, [name of the park]. It's nice there. It's quiet, many trees, no cars. You can't stay in the house, not in the summer. I left this other place at the end of May… You can't stay indoors…*

[In the winter] I have a blanket… I have… so I get warm. I don't feel any… The neighbours there know me… and they supply me with electricity… for my mobile and laptop… […]

Interviewer: *Are you looking for a job?*

Sakis: *No, I am not, because if something happens to my family I want to be able to leave straight away.*

Interviewer: *What do you mean?*

Sakis: *Well, if anything happens to my family… if I get a job it will tie me down here and then I will have to find excuses… that I need to go… and get a leave…*

Interviewer: *What could ever happen to your family?*

Sakis: *Anything. Some accident… touch wood…*

Interviewer: *And so how come you live here and you don't stay with them since they are so...*

Sakis: *I wanted some time alone.*

Interviewer: *You wanted to make a fresh start away from them?*

Sakis: *I needed to get away… Things were too quiet up there… Everything was always the same… I didn't… […]*

Interviewer: *Does your family know you are in Athens? That… that you live on the streets? Do they know that?*

Sakis: *My dad knows. My mum… she knows I am staying… but she doesn't know I am living on the streets. She just knows that I am here. And my brother knows I live on the streets. I don't want to upset her. She is very antisocial and … […]*

Interviewer: *I wonder, when you look back on your life, where there any moments… when you look back… that were important in your life, some type of milestone, one could say. For instance, let's say, finishing school, taking some decisions or steps…*

Sakis: *I… (long pause) I… I can't think of any…. Nothing that important. Simply… simply… it was a simple life. […]*

Interviewer: *Have you looked for a shelter at any time?*

Sakis: *Shelters need documents and I… I can't… you need tax papers and unemployment cards, I don't want to get into that, you know, they file you up, with papers… I don't want to get into that. I may do it sometime, but not now. If I go into some organisation, I know they will do things [to help] … but I don't … and shelters are for six months. Then they throw you out again. They may renew it… Start collecting [documents] all over… And there are restrictions… time limits. You have to be back… They keep you inside… this is what some people I know told me, who have been there.*

Interviewer: *So, ok, when you are out here you feel a bit more…*

Sakis: *I feel a lot freer. […]*

Interviewer: *How do you imagine yourself, let's say in 5-years-time? Would you want something changed?*

Sakis: *(long pause)*

Interviewer: *Do you have some sort of target?*

Sakis: *I am thinking of going back at some point (long pause). And it will be just like before.*

Interviewer: *But you don't want to go back just yet?*

Sakis: *Mmm…*

Interviewer: *But it's something you have in mind?*

Sakis: *Yes, I definitely have it in mind.*

Story-Line Graphs

Sakis chose the "comedy" story-line (see Figure 2) where regression is followed by progression. He repeated that the crucial point in his life was his decision to leave his parental home, but did not give reasons for his choice of graph. His progressive choice surprised us, because he described his life prior to homelessness as being negatively stable and his perspective in 5-years-time as probably "returning to his old life".

Discussion

Use of the key notion of "turning points" in the present study appeared especially helpful in demonstrating one aspect of identity construction of the homeless which de-emphasised the actual loss of accommodation. Participants placed emphasis in being home-less but not house-less! More specifically, the findings of the present

study demonstrate that *homelessness per se was not referred to as a turning point* by homeless participants. Instead, illustrated as turning points were: (i) *disconnection* from the family of origin and *losses*; in some cases, disconnection leading to homelessness was discussed in relation to complete *freedom*, including the intentional breaking of ties with the family of origin or from any type of conventions linked to notions of "home" (e.g. shelters); (ii) the seeking of a "*new home",* of safer and more caring relationships; it was evident in this study that homeless persons place a lot of emphasis in finding an alternative family of choice which can provide them *with* care, show them respect and promote their dignity and freedom (see also Williams & Tickley, 2011). However, they also emphasised the importance of providing *for* this alternative family, a give-and-take which creates a sense of real belonging.

As in other narrative inquiry studies conducted in the western world, our findings indicate: (i) a *continuity in hardship and traumas*, of severe stressful experiences going all the way back to childhood, connected to abandonment and interpersonal/familial loss. Some of or participants were re-experiencing loss in entangled vicious circles; (ii) experiences of homelessness which are *complex but not always negative*; turning points signified changes sometimes to the worse and sometimes to the better, sometimes as part of a saga. The story-line graphs which the 8 participants themselves chose as being the most representative of their lives, were progressive (romantic saga, comedy, happily-ever-after) with the exception of one regressive (tragedy), despite the continuity in hardship and traumas. As mentioned in the beginning, broken narratives are expected to lack hope. Likewise, the theory behind culturally shared story lines expects that persons with many emotional difficulties would describe their lives in terms of stability or regression (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) rather than progression. To complicate matters further, our own guess of which graph would best represent their life narration did not occasionally match their own choices, pointing to a mismatch between the way they-as tellers- appeared to evaluate their life course and the way we- as listeners- interpreted their narratives. We intend to repeat the use of such graphs as adjuncts to life interviews in researching the experiences and identity formation of other populations.

In any case, progressive narratives are probably connected to efforts of creating meaning. As part of such efforts, it is possible that many homeless adults in our study struggled to see the experience of homelessness and their choices (e.g. choice of partner, decision to leave away from the family of origin) as positive or, at least, as less negative. Similarly, progressive graphs may reflect their optimism that life will take a positive turn, with most participants choosing the "romantic saga" as most representative of their course. Schultz (2001) wondered whether Oscar Wilde's claim of turning the catastrophical imprisonment into the beginning of "a new life" was real or some sort of defence or even role impersonation. In discussing alternative interpretations of similar findings among the homeless youth, Toolis and Hammack (2015) mention that it is possible that any other way of telling their story would be too demoralizing. After all, we do have an internal audience that is constantly present. However, the researchers dismiss the idea that redemptive (progressive) stories are products of false consciousness or naïveté. We should also not forget the teachings of narrative psychology that audiences -other than the self- shape the content of the self-narrative to a considerable degree. The same participants might have presented the unfolding of their lives in a different way to a counsellor or social worker, emphasising hopelessness and demoralisation with the purpose of receiving better help.

What matters mostly in our view, is whether progressive narratives can be sustained in the long run. The experience of professionals working with homeless who are often also drug users, indicates that, in fact, good outcomes are linked to the ability of putting together a narrative that supplies meaning and hope, but in an endur-

ing way. Singer's (2001) experience with Richard Markham - discussed earlier - teaches us that it is important to follow a life over many years to be able to say with some certainty whether a person's effort to put a hopeful "redemptive" narrative together has been enduring. We know that after his release from prison, Oscar Wilde wandered penniless and homeless in London and Paris, rejected from his ex-wife and disconnected from his children. His narrative of hope and change -expressed in his famous letter- was not enduring and he died only a couple of years later.

Finally, our findings point to the disrupted and broken nature of self-narratives of the adult homeless, which often rendered them unintelligible to various degrees. Especially evident in this respect were their *chaotic timelines*. The interviewees found it difficult to narrate events in any sort of time sequence and the interviewer often struggled to make sense of what happened and when, or what followed what. Additionally, and even though the aspect of narrative form which regards linguistic features was not the focus of the present analysis, we noticed that narratives of turning points, even if these points regarded the creation of new relationships and the existence of positive experiences, were often full of unacknowledged contradictions. There was also a frequent use of narrative strategies to regulate emotions (e.g., mechanical repetition of words/phrases, unfinished sentences, use of second or third person pronoun instead of first person pronoun and so on) (see Androutsopoulou et al., 2004), and a frequent use of "languages of the unsayable" (i.e., negations, revisions, evasions and silences) (see Rogers et al., 1999). In a future study, we intend to investigate further the linguistic aspect of participants' stories.

Considering our own thoughts and emotions, the most important aspect of the whole project was the emotional side of the homeless persons' stories, in terms of both content and form. We were moved and sometimes shaken by their agony to create some sense of coherence in their tellings, and to provide some meaning to their experiences, good or bad (see also Koutri & Avdi, 2016, who presented the moving efforts of women with breast cancer to make meaning of their own experiences). We hope that some of the empathy we felt has come across to readers.

Implications for Counselling and Caring

Accounting for the Content of Narratives

It appears that the actual lack of accommodation was not the main concern expressed by our participants. However, the loss of "home" through abandonment or rejection emerged as a thread in all narratives.

Baker Collins (2013) criticizes the fact that most current responses to homelessness in the USA and Canada focus primarily on the lack of and need for provision of shelter with little attention paid to: (i) *trauma-informed care* in dealing especially with youth homelessness (see also McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, & McLeod, 2012), and to: (ii) a perspective that "contextualizes trauma and homelessness with deeper meanings of home" (p.77). Baker Collins's criticism could well apply to the European context. Responses focusing mostly on the importance of shelter and linked opportunities for employment (e.g. "Housing First" policies) are also widespread in Europe (see for example, Greenwood, Stefancic, Tsemberis, & Busch-Geertsema, 2013). In Greece, efforts to apply similar "Housing First" policies have been ongoing (see for example, Arapoglou, Gounis, & Siatista, 2015) with a recent emphasis placed in reintegration, including independent housing and employment (Kourachanis, 2017).

Services should take into account that, through the experience of homelessness, homeless people may be negotiating the possibility of creating closer and more meaningful relationships. Promoting "independent housing" may be seen as punishment for those homeless who seek families of choice. Also, whenever counsellors encounter cases where the idea of "home", including all sorts of buildings, is linked to negative experiences and a sense of imprisonment, insisting on providing housing may be a futile and counter-productive effort before deeper psychotherapy work is attempted.

It follows that services need to attend to and address broader issues regarding one's "home" or "feeling at home" or "having a home", alongside the basic survival needs, if people are to be helped. Rather than assuming what the needs of clients are, persons need to be supported in working out what "home" means for them and the best strategies to pursue it.

Some misunderstanding may also occur due to presuppositions of the dominant culture. It is often assumed that in Mediterranean countries like Greece, families are always willing to provide a support network or safety net. We noticed that this was not so in the cases we encountered. Not only families were apparently unwilling to support participants, but participants often felt alienated for good reasons. We also noticed that even though parenthood and an ability to retain an active parental role was a basic concern for some of our participants (see also Diebäcker, Arhant, & Harner, 2015), this was not the case for others, and these differences should be taken into account when making legal or ethical decisions.

Finally, we saw that various traumas, mostly familial, accumulated in the lives of participants beginning in childhood or adolescence. Such unfortunate circumstances have also been reported by the homeless in Greek social policy studies (e.g. Kourachanis, 2015). It follows that early prevention based on counselling and other family interventions is crucial (see the work of Roberts, 2010, with street children and their families living in South America).

Working With the Form of Narratives

Based on the findings of the present study, we suggest that counsellors need to help homeless persons create enduring progressive narratives, narratives that can be presented to their own self and to others with some degree of coherence to make them intelligible. Persons can be helped to:

i. Narrate experiences with continuity and directionality (Androutsopoulou et al., 2004) (e.g., be able to provide a coherent timeline of experiences and future aspirations).

ii. Give more attention to positive experiences and emotions that may even constitute unacknowledged turning points. Help extend stories of trauma to include the present position of empowerment (e.g. active seeking of an alternative "home") (see also Wigren, 1994; Levine, 2010)

iii. Give voice to painful emotions caused by abandonment and rejection (see Levitt, 2002; Rogers et al., 1999). One way to do this is by helping persons develop reflective inner voices (Androutsopoulou, 2015; Hermans, 2004a, 2004b) that can: (i) recognise both negative (e.g. anger toward family of origin) and positive feelings (happiness in the new "home") as acceptable parts of them, and (ii) acknowledge -as well as embed- unacknowledged contradictions as a result of often-conflicting needs that co-exist (e.g. the need to belong and the need to be autonomous).

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Competing Interests

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