

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS POINTING BEYOND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Human life experiences can be arranged and told as stories. This telling of stories involves interpretation also. The story teller is responsible for the interpretations. The role of the facilitator is to throw light on the unique outcomes in the stories and help the story teller to create alternate stories based on these unique outcomes. This process helps the story teller to view his/her life story differently and create hopeful new stories. Through narrative counselling, the homeless youth find alternate stories, which lead them to a better, more hopeful future.

“The stories that we have about ourselves not only determine the meaning of our experiences, but also select out certain parts of the lived experience for the ascription of meaning and are constitutive or shaping of our lives” (Dwivedi & Gardner 2000:32). These aspects are not immediately visible in the dominant story, and are known as unique outcomes. They are helpful for the construction of alternate stories. In this thesis I tried to narrate the total experiences of my journey with the homeless youth, through which we discovered the discourses of homelessness and the economic factors involved in these discourses. This process not only helped the youth to construct alternate stories, but also taught me to rediscover and reconstruct stories.

Through interdisciplinary investigation I helped uncover new realities in the experiences of the homeless youth. As I narrate my experiences in this journey

and my efforts to interpret their stories through interdisciplinary means, other unique outcomes evolve, which point beyond the local context. By becoming aware of my own experiences and searching the discourses that appear in this story, I sense a need to move beyond my personal experience. Therefore I will analyze the constructs that lie behind the unique outcomes, story lines and alternate stories I have reported, in an effort to bring my readers to more widely relevant realities.

7.2 TELLING AND RETELLING STORIES

Extracting the universal from stories is not the same as generalizing the context of stories. It involves challenging the reader to move beyond the particular context of the story. The creation and telling of stories has been used universally by cultures, communities and individuals to provide hope, meaning, purpose and understanding in life. Stories perpetuate knowledge and connect succeeding generations to the richness of their heritage. Traditional ways of telling stories promote specific goals of moral regeneration and spiritual revitalization in the community. When retold to the next generation a story takes on new forms which are relevant for this new generation and interpreted by them accordingly. When the same story is told in another place, far away from the original context, it finds new meanings to suit its present context. Thus stories are a vehicle through which people are able to develop understanding of and coherence in their worlds. Stories provide a very wide range of implicit communal resources for each individual facing the inevitable developmental conflicts posed by life. “It can be argued that every telling is a re-telling. Nevertheless, we can distinguish re-telling from telling by the degree of active reconstruction in a narrative account” (Dwivedi & Gardner 2000:27). A re-told story is a story that evolves. Story telling and listening together make up story making, the sharing of experiences as they emerge during the course of a narration. “Narrating’, therefore, turns out to be a more basic category than either explanation or understanding: unlike either of these it does not assume punctiliar facts or discrete meanings. ...If textuality is

the condition of all culture, then narration – of events, structures, institutions, tendencies as well as of lives – is the final mode of comprehension of human society” (Milbank 2001:267).

7.2.1 Traditional story telling

In a traditional culture, stories are set and designed by the community to have certain goals and functions in society. The language used for this story telling is always a communal vocabulary. In order to understand, we need to know the meaning of the words and the rules of their use. “It is believed that language has a homogeneous sphere of understanding. It thus presents all participants with an overarching vocabulary allowing the ‘sender’ to transmit these universal meanings of words to other ‘receivers’” (Van Wyk 1999:87). The rules and assumptions for interpreting the meaning of stories are not universal, but always unique to an interpretive community. The community decides what is right and what is wrong, what is legitimate and what illegitimate. Thus the members of a community are the custodians and interpreters of their truth.

Thus in traditional story telling itself we can identify postmodernist trends, which help the story teller to retell and externalize problems, to invent new meanings through telling and re-telling stories. Biblical narratives, which are examples of traditional stories, give new insights in the world of stories and paradigms of story telling. The Old Testament “provides the materials for the social construction of reality and for socialization of the young into an alternative world where YHWH lives and governs” (Brueggemann 2003:26). This possibility of new constructions leads us beyond the particular context of such traditional stories, and makes them universal.

7.2.2 Modern story telling

The modern paradigm of story telling is an orderly narration of fixed meanings and defined ways of interpretation. Questioning is not allowed. The leader tells the story and interprets its meaning. “The idea and implied possibility of an orderly world is a familiar feature of modernity as an accomplished form of social life, a form of life bound up with the growth of Enlightenment” (Smart 1993:41). The scientific approach and individualism, which arose out of technological advancement, promoted this way of giving meaning in a systematic social life.

Tester describes this modern paradigm by comparing the individual or the social group to a pilgrim engaged in a process of historical and spatial movement. On this journey the identities and the norms used to evaluate these identities are fixed givens. Thus “the basic difficulty for the pilgrim is that the individual or group which sets out on the journey does not possess the same identity as the individual or group which arrives at the destination” (Tester 1993:74). That is not the same understanding of identity shift through social constructions as in a post-modern paradigm. Rather, the leaders, individuals with greater access to the secrets of the journey than others, determine any change. This basic assumption of modernity makes any change in relation to a specific context or certain experiences impossible. All experiences are interpreted by the leaders of society using a given set of norms which match the design of the journey. From the modernist perspective therefore the leader is very powerful; he/she controls story telling and its interpretations. In the modern understanding, information flows from respondent to researcher and the researcher selects what is relevant. “[T]he story-based researcher must prompt and probe storytellers to provide adequate details to render the story meaningful to researchers” (Musheno & Maynard-Moody 2003:34).

7.2.3 Post- modern story telling

Post-modern thinking is based on the search for various possible interpretations of an experience. The facts in the experiences may vary according to the context. In post-modern thought, story telling and re-telling is not telling the 'truth' of an incident. Instead, it is telling the interpreted experiences of a person, which are influenced by the context of the story telling also. There is no question of telling a true story, but rather of telling a real story in the context of the story teller. As Van Rensburg puts it, the aim is not to establish a truth. "Thus we will never really be saying what we mean, we will not have to mean what we say and we will not need to worry about telling the truth because there is no truth, only a metaphysics of truth, a story behind the story, a multiplicity of meanings" (Van Rensburg 2000:48). The meanings will be decided on and interpreted by the story teller. When a story teller shares his experiences of powerlessness, for example, it is not for me as facilitator to define powerlessness. I may have my own concepts and understandings of power and powerlessness, but I must not let these influence the interpretations of the story teller. In this sense the story teller is the researcher, in that he/she is the sole author of the experiences and their interpretations. The teller has the full right to re-tell the story and reinterpret its meanings. The facilitator is a co-researcher, who can supplement the interpretations of the researcher through interdisciplinary investigations that thicken the teller's account.

"We naturally story our experience. The constructivist approach sees the person as putting together events in a way that makes sense to him or her. So in remembering the past, we do not simply recall events as they happened; rather, we selectively recall, narrating a story of the past that makes sense to us" (Burr & Butt 2000:201). The facilitator provides the conditions from which the teller can speak of him/herself, thus avoiding the possibility of posing as superior to the teller while still determining the form which action on the part of the teller might take (Mills 2003:77). This is how a narrative approach to story telling and

listening functions. The question is not the degree to which the stories are true or the experiences valid and relevant. The story teller has the full right to create new meanings for his/her experiences and construct alternate stories. “In opposition to modernism’s Utopian dream to create a universal life-experience and language based on reason’s rule, postmodernism announces that incommensurability (persistent difference) between languages, experiences, histories, and discourses cannot and should not be overcome” (Amariglio 1990:20). This possibility of multiple forms of knowledge decentres the individual and results in an anti-humanist vision. One danger of this approach, which must be carefully avoided, is a tendency to make the experiences and story telling more important than the individual teller.

Post-modern story telling affirms the newness of each story in the telling and re-telling. “Once we have spelled out and committed ourselves to a new story, it often acquires the status of an insight, and yesterday’s tale seems like a self-deception. The theme of foundationlessness insists that there is no story that ever captures the whole truth” (Burr & Butt 2000:197). This is clear in the story telling experiences of the homeless youth. In the second or third session with the same person, I noticed that the teller retells the same previous experience in different ways, with other interpretations. These interpretations sometimes contradict previous interpretations and sometimes complement them. To a modernist thinker, this inconsistency would be disturbing. But in a post-modern, post-foundationist, social constructionist paradigm such inconsistency is simply an opportunity to construct alternate stories for my experiences as a facilitator.

7.3 DEVELOPING BY SEARCHING FOR DISCOURSES

Each counselling session in the narrative approach is a step towards developing new discourses of hope. Part of my experience is viewing the session from outside, and part of it is standing beside the homeless youth, moving with them in their journey to new realities. The sharing is like a wonderful and exciting journey

through woods for which there are no route map or guides, an adventure without any particular goals except discovering new realities and new experiences. The viewing from outside is another exciting experience of discovery, involving interpreting and writing down these experiences. Observing and tracing the development of discourses and seeing these discourses in closer and more intimate versions are glittering parts of this journey.

7.3.1 Identifying homelessness

It is easy to characterise homelessness in the particular context of the story tellers in this study. They all are in one sense or another homeless. My journey into their particular contexts and sharing in their journeys of discovering did not begin in any special intention of mine, but rather evolved out of creative social interaction. The opportunities I encountered at the Street Centre to interact with the homeless community were opportunities to discover the discourses that inform their experiences and the discourses that inform my experiences too. “The participants engage in processes of societal self-interpretation and self-diagnosis by means of which societal knowledge is produced about what the problem amounts to and how it could be dealt with” (Strydom 2006:56).

My special interest in interacting with the young people was being with and participating in the experiences of the poor. In this interaction I realized that homelessness is not only their experience but also their dominant discourse. Also I noticed the unavoidable economic factors inherent in the dominant discourses of homelessness. All the young homeless people have negative views about homelessness, which tamper with their lives and attitudes in different ways, constructing negative inner discourses that must be identified and deconstructed. Thus Joy’s complaint of unemployment and economic powerlessness reveals his inner discourse about power and money. Joseph’s story of feelings of desperation points to the harsh experience of homelessness. Andre’s story of hope for a better future, of a successful plan for starting a

business on the street, shows how re-telling a story can open the way to more hopeful alternative discourses. Salin reveals an attitude of hate and desperation in his account of life on the street. All these discourses became clear through story telling and re-telling in narrative interaction.

7.3.2 My reasons for studying homelessness

I did not plan my involvement with the staff and visitors at the PCM Street Centre in Pretoria. I believe this was part of God's plan for me. Through my work at the centre I began the narrative journey with the homeless youth which led me to discover new realities. When I met Lizy, the staff worker at the Street Centre, and started mingling with the homeless community of Pretoria, I had no plan to do research among them. Instead, I joined them out of my concern for the poor, because I enjoyed being with them and because I was curious to know more about their lives. After some months I was admitted to the Masters course in Pastoral Family Therapy at the University of Pretoria. As a part of the course I had to work in a social organization so as to experience relationship with others. My first thought was the PCM street ministry, because I was already involved with the people there. So I gained further opportunities to listen to their stories and the discourses involved in these stories. My curiosity spurred me to search out their particular contexts of homelessness and the discourses involved in these, so as to understand them better. I found that my efforts helped the homeless community in various ways. They appreciated my presence, involvement and listening to their stories very much. This is the personal context and reason for selecting homelessness and its discourses as my research area.

Onset of my duties at the Street Centre was leading Bible classes for the homeless people. This gave me a chance to search for discourses of homelessness in the Bible and to interpret biblical teachings in the particular context of the homeless youth of Pretoria. I began this process by naming the problem, as in the externalizing process of narrative therapy. I named the series

of Bible classes as “The Homeless Jesus”. In the course of the classes I traced various possible meanings of poverty and homelessness in the Bible and interpretations of these relevant for the homeless community. I taught that in the Bible, “the poor man is the man without rights, the man who no longer has any value. In the Bible poverty is never accepted; it is challenged at a variety of points” (Boerma 1979:29). I interpreted the Ten Commandments as teaching against the accumulation of possessions. I presented Jesus as a homeless person who had no roof over his head or bed to sleep on (Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58) from his very birth as a vagrant (Lk. 2:7) to his lonely death at the Place of the Skull, when all other places on earth were barred to him.

Then I encouraged the homeless people to interpret the Bible classes themselves, according to their own experiences. In the beginning I tried to correct them according to my own belief system. Later I came to realize that they have their own reasons for their interpretations. As I began to listen to their stories, I began to see vividly the various discourses of homelessness. In these discussions after the Bible classes, the homeless people sometimes questioned my views, sometimes interpreted and enlightened them and sometimes shared their experiences in the light of the teachings they had heard. All this lead me to new insights into the experience of homelessness, humiliation and poverty. These stories often reflected hopelessness and self-pity. This is not surprising, since “poverty is like a disease. It stigmatizes and humiliates. The poor man has to fall back on himself, and at the same time he becomes reserved. He begins to doubt his own capacity. Perhaps he is inferior; perhaps there is nothing he can do about his inferiority. He no longer believes in change” (Boerma 1979:76). When they hear the hopeful stories of the Bible, many homeless people become confused. The Bible stories teach a God who understands and cares for the poor, but their context seems to teach them they are helpless.

Through narrative interventions with the youth, in groups and individually, I created a platform for preparing them to reach towards a better, more hopeful

future. Their personal stories reflected their confusion about their life experiences and the hopeful interpretations of the Bible stories. By helping them to tell their stories more slowly and carefully and by patiently listening to these stories I could help them to come to a new way of telling their experiences. Homelessness and its discourses are clear in their stories, as are the economic factors involved in these discourses. The homeless youth's interpretations of these led them and me to new discoveries of their experiences.

7.3.3 Development of discourses

“We each carry a social discourse in our heads and, therefore, we have an internal controller and we risk being diagnosed as mad or bad if what we say is not part of the dominant narrative” (Milner & O’Byrne 2002:22). Thus the beliefs and affirmations in our mind which inform our daily activities and attitudes can be understood as the discourses of our minds. If I do not understand the inner discourses of a person to whom I speak, the social discourses we share and the discourses in my mind, I will not be able to understand that person’s story.

The development of discourses during the story telling process is the mechanism by which understanding develops. John shares his feeling that there is nobody to help him. Thus his story reveals the innermost discourse of homelessness in his experience, namely homelessness as helplessness. He does not want to stay trapped by this discourse, but to deconstruct it, which is why he searches for a job and looks for other options. From his original position, the belief that nobody is there to help, he moves to a discourse that believes that somebody is there to help, through narrative interaction in which he discovers the possibilities in his story and seeks alternate stories.

All the homeless youth with whom I shared stories have similar dominant discourses of homelessness. Many of them are hopeless, because of the influence of these discourses. “[W]hen we look at discourses in their historical

context, it becomes clear that they are quite incoherent, and that as they are elaborated by academics and in everyday-life they become more carefully systematised” (Parker 1992:3). Thus a counsellor has to be very sensitive if he/she is to detect the scattered dominant discourses inherent in the stories told by the youth using their own language and context, and so help the youth in an effective way. Thus this effective help is not applying the techniques of traditional directive counselling, but rather identifying the discourses in their stories and searching for unique outcomes. As counsellor I have to move with them to new hopeful understandings of reality. “The researcher has to be aware of the different discourses in the community that have an impact on the action and the people involved. Awareness of such discourses could lead to a very wide spectrum of perspectives, which might make it difficult and even impossible to focus clearly enough on the action to be researched” (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2006:5, 6). An example is my experience with Andre. When I first listened to his stories, I thought him to be confused. He shared his stories of changing from one religion to another and ending up nowhere, of swapping between jobs and searching for congenial employment. But as I journeyed with him I realized that this all actually springs from his interest in alternatives. He was and is searching for new realities with an innovative attitude. In listening to his stories I realized the development of his discourses into new directions and better understandings.

All discourses have a cultural context, and so our interpretations of experience according to these discourses will form our world view, and determine the course of our lives. The various factors that cause the youth to end up homeless and jobless are the same factors that create the discourses that entrap them. Through careful narrative intervention we can unwrap these discourses and help the young people to rewrite them better, as part of creating new alternate stories. “Although we are shaped by our context, there is always ‘the more’, lived in the body, about to be formed out of the person’s actual experiencing now. No experience is a repeat of an already known patterning. In actuality, human living

is an interaction in which the organism can bring its own responsive order to cultural meanings such that a known meaning is transformed into a furthering of newly patterned living” (Katonah 2006:67).

7.3.4 Economic factors in discourses of homelessness

The stories of the homeless youth clearly show that they became homeless because of some or other type of economic deprivation. The vocabulary that economists use to discuss economic realities differs from that used by the people who experience negative economic realities directly in their particular life contexts. “As a mode of discourse, economics, the stories that economists tell, and/or the knowledge that economists purport to affirm are all affected by the structure and content of the words that they use – by their language” (Samuels 1990:4). Thus we have to trace in the accounts of the homeless youth the economic constructs and factors discussed in economic theory.

The stories of the homeless youth show the adverse economic effects of globalization, though the young people do not use this word. “Poverty has various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion” (Iyer 2000:29).

Homelessness is part of poverty caused by irresponsible global institutions which are less concerned with eradicating poverty or homelessness and providing job opportunities and affordable homes than with profit. Thus globalization results in increasing rates of homelessness all over the world, including South Africa. The homeless people experience these global trends in a much more immediate manner. They understand that they are homeless because they are excluded from economic resources. They feel inferior because of their poverty. They sense clearly society’s judgment of poverty as a morally inferior status. Thus their

economic alienation becomes part of their self awareness and self concept, which are part of their inner discourses.

Thus economic factors unavoidably shape the discourses of homelessness in the stories of the youth in the streets. These factors are directly related to their experiences in the streets, and to the economic and social realities of South African society. “Unemployment affects the whole population in South Africa and averages over 50 percent among the black population. Population growth outstrips economic growth: ...[T]here continues to be real suffering due to poverty....South Africa has been an endemically violent land, where it has been a cliché that ‘human life is cheap’” (Carmichael 1996:187). Economic activities in South Africa used to be controlled by the apartheid regime, and then by new constructs of freedom, but are now increasingly shaped by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. “The impact of HIV is likely to result in substantial shifts in spending, changes in the distribution of income, and the use of savings in order to maintain living standards which are eroded by increased spending on health” (Farham 2004:63). Yet hope remains. Negative discourses can be readdressed and retold with new alternatives.

Another problem is the negative life situations that prompt the youth to live on the streets. “Adaptation is much easier for youths who have had the benefit of a sympathetic upbringing, but there are large numbers of youngsters who only find their course in life after repeated disappointments and several changes of occupation” (Venter 1959:25). Thus the young homeless people, who particularly need good adaptation skills, are often precisely the ones who lack these skills. Repeated disappointments may lead them to desperation. Discourses of desperation are easy to detect in the stories of the homeless youth. Thus these discourses must be identified so that they will no longer hinder the young people’s liberation. Though they are not well versed in economic theories or strategies to overcome their economic deprivation, the young people have to be

shown that they do not have to be satisfied with only the minimum of economic interactions, and urged to do better, and grasp the possibilities of their lives.

The experiences of the homeless youth include disappointment, hopelessness and anger. These feelings and experiences make it difficult for them to create a more positive outlook or believe in a caring community. The young people's morality will also differ from that of a well settled, economically advanced community. A good way to understand the morality of economically marginalised people is "to consider the possibility that economic behaviour might have some non-economic meaning or motivation. After this initial step it becomes possible to look at the effect of economic rationality on morality and to use morality in a critique of economic behaviour" (Fevre 2003:6). Friendship and meaning-making through community interaction should be taken seriously in the economic development process. My involvement at the Street Centre in narrative interaction with the youth thus helped them to improve their attitudes from hopelessness to hopefulness for a better participation in the society. Through a better understanding of their discourses they are equipped for creating a better community with higher morality and living standards.

7.4 INTERPRETATIONS OF RESEARCHERS

According to Furniss (1995:21-22), social construction theory defines the relationship between the individual and the society in terms of three generalizations about the social world, namely:

- a) society is a human product,
- b) society is an objective reality, and
- c) the human being is a social product.

These generalizations point to the importance of conversational interactions which must be interpreted within their cultural milieu. Social realities are constructed through language by the interpretation of the ones involved in the social interaction. Separating human beings and social issues help us to view the

issues from outside and understand their effects on people and on society. This will help us to deconstruct our inner discourses and tell new stories. In the stories of the homeless youth of Pretoria we have seen how interpretations develop as the story develops, based on their particular contexts and cultural backgrounds in the course of discursive experiences. In these interactions the young people construct themselves and their realities in a new, more hopeful way.

7.4.1 Social constructionism and stories

The modern paradigm emphasizes an objective world in which realities can be examined and verified through scientific methods. These realities are set, given and traditionally accepted. There is no question of innovation or multiple choices. The identity of the self too is seen as decided by existing scientific methods and social institutions.

Post-modern thinking, in contrast, celebrates plurality. Even if we tell our stories again and again the possibilities of construction are never exhausted but develop to new areas of knowledge. We will never attain a final and definite description of our experiences. We cannot perceive a reality without interpretation. Thus our perceptions about reality are all constructed socially. “There is no deep real self to be mined, no true inner feelings to be contacted. Social constructionism exhorts us to recognize the truly situated and relational nature of human experience and conduct” (Burr & Butt 2000:203).

Thus in stories tellers construct their reality. “The strength of the constructivist position is that each person’s story is seen in its uniqueness and within its own particular context” (Neuger 2001:67). The basic problems of the story tellers in this study are homelessness and joblessness, with which are associated many other problems. The tellers’ preliminary interpretations show that they tend to own the problem, to blame themselves for it and internalise it, which makes it ever difficult to correct. Many of them struggle to name their problem, because

they know deep inside that if they name it, they will have to face it. Thus externalizing the problem is needed. Dwivedi (2000: 90) narrates a story of a monk to explain the process of externalization.

The monk asks his master, 'I have a terrible temper and I can't cope with it. Please help.' The master says, 'Well, bring it to me and I'll see what I can do.' The monk hesitates: 'I am sorry, at the moment I haven't got it.' So the master suggests, 'Next time, when you have got it, bring it to me.' The monk confesses, 'I am not sure if I can do that.' The master then declares, 'In that case it is not yours,' and suggests that if it comes again the monk should get hold of it and then beat it away with a stick!

Through externalization the problem becomes a separate entity external to the person or relationship, and so its various influences on the person and others can be easily mapped out. Such an exercise renders the problem less fixed and restricting. For example, in Joy's first formulation of his experience he is powerless, but in his second formulation he has a problem with powerlessness. This separation of the problem from his self enables him to deconstruct his discourse about powerlessness.

"Stories have the capacity to 'name the previously unnamed', and to personify the content of internal psychic functioning, thereby making the content of unconscious material, memories of repressed experiences and previously denied emotions communicable in a way which is not necessarily personally threatening" (Harper & Gray 2000:45). Joseph in his story talked of the love he feels for his family. He feels lonely when he is away from them. He interprets the love in his family as 'painful love' because of their poverty, and because he misses their love in his life on the streets. This interpretation can only arise when he makes the comparison he has been unconsciously maintaining between his past experiences of happiness with his present problem of loneliness. Once he has externalised this contrast, he can begin trying to think of his fellow homeless

people as more lovable, and turn his negative discourse into a positive motivation for him to survive on the streets and search for a job. On one side is his family's love and warmth and on the other side their poverty, and both motivate him to transform his condition of homelessness.

According to Bradley and Morss (2002),

a central tenet of [s]ocial [c]onstructionism is that the ways we understand the world are formed by the ways in which we interact with each other in our local cultural milieu....[A]nother is that these relationships are lodged within traditions, being products of particular histories. The nature of these histories remain largely unspecified...but undoubtedly part of the constructionist project is to establish ways on which particular historically constituted social settings afford the specific relationships and understandings associated with them.

Michael's cultural milieu urges him to view the world as evil, because of his past experiences. He and his family are imprisoned in the cages of cultural superstition. Through narrative counselling he begins to realize the influence of his cultural background and to try to find ways to lessen its harmful effects on his family. Though Michael is a Christian he admits that he does not practice Christianity in its full sense, and he realises that this contradiction between his belief and his practice harms his family and disturbs his life in many ways. "[S]ocial constructionist research widens the interpretive horizons to include the cultural and historical context within which the study is located. Social constructionism seeks to understand the ways in which the world is co-constructed by persons living within a cultural tradition" (McLeod 2001:29). Thus an understanding of Michael's cultural background is essential for understanding his stories

7.4.2 Social constructionism and untold stories

Many of the young people's stories show a dimension of desperation, rooted in their family histories, identities, and other influences. These influences are

seldom explicitly mentioned in the dominant stories, but rather form the untold stories which underlie these main storyline. “Many of the problems that people experience may be better understood as products of the identities that they are unable to resist within the context of their family, social group, or society” (Burr & Butt 2000:204). These contexts determine some hidden storylines which have to be carefully traced in the story told.

Through interpretation these other storylines will become vivid. “[S]ocial realities can be recognized in the ways in which people share expectations about the storyline, the types of characters, and associated behaviors and feelings. These storylines or realities are often taken for granted until someone steps out of characters or violates expected routines” (O’Brien & Kollock 2001:362). Searching main storylines for hidden patterns and discovering the social constructions that underlie these give new insight into other aspects of the discourse of homelessness. Roul’s story, a cry for ‘assistance and guidance’, shows the common negative discourses of homelessness. But under these lie the untold story of guilt, rooted in his conflict with his mother. Through the constructionist approach of counselling he became aware of this problem and was able to externalise it and affirm a positive attitude to life by writing down his feelings in a poem. He visualizes a reconciled life with his mother, even though her death has made this impossible in reality. “Often the events cannot be altered – either they are already past or beyond the client’s control – however the client’s view of them can change. If the clients changes their interpretation of events, then their perspective is changed and they have a greater range of choices” (Geldard & Geldard 2006:61). Roul’s changed attitude shows that new meanings are evolving within his specific context through his re-telling of that context. When he externalizes the problem he becomes equipped to construct new meanings for his stories and also to construct new stories of hope.

Similarly, Michael’s love for his mother and sisters form the untold part of his stories. When he tells about his struggles to escape his constrictive experience of

cultural traditions he is also telling a deeper story of concern for his mother and his sisters, and distress at losing his three sisters because of the mistakes of traditional healing systems. In his stories of distress, identifying his cultural and economic discourses will help him to construct new stories of hope, rather than concentrating on the tragic experience and remaining in bondage. “[O]nce people have a different picture of the world and believe in the possibility of change, they regain their self confidence and press for change” (Boerma 1979:85). Michael addresses his problem through an externalizing process and comes to see “a little light ahead” in his future. His untold stories become his unique outcomes and the seeds of alternative stories.

7.4.3 Social constructionism and the narrative approach

The narrative approach in counselling and research rests on the base social constructionism. The story teller constructs meaning and interprets it by narrating his/her experiences. Such a narrative session begins with problem-free talk in which the facilitator gets acquainted with the story teller. At this stage the facilitator does not know what the story teller is going to describe. The facilitator and the story teller establish a rapport, which enables them to communicate freely and creates the necessary conditions for conversation and meaning construction. This initial chatting may cover the tastes, habits, hopes and areas of interest of the story teller, and so resembles social chitchat, though it has a constructive orientation. At this stage the skilled therapist is listening carefully for strengths, skills and resources that can be useful later for understanding the problem and constructing alternate stories.

Social constructionism argues that realities are socially constructed by the members of a culture through social interactions involving beliefs, values, institutions, customs, laws and the division of labour. Its basic assumption is that there is no set or given realities, but that everything is evolved and discovered through social experiences. These evolving realities are interpreted and

described within a particular context. This can be called the ‘storying’ of experience. Thus combining a narrative approach and social constructionism as guiding metaphors for this study suggests that the stories that circulate in society constitute our lives and those of the people with whom we work. “Stories are a useful epistemology through which to understand how collective life comes to have recognizable patterns. Realities, like stories, do not exist unless people tell them to themselves and to others” (O’ Brien & Kollock 2001:363).

Social constructionism as a post-modern paradigm offers new dimensions and possibilities for the narrative approach to counselling and research. Narratives or stories reveal the metanarratives that are the wider context of the teller’s reality. “Metanarratives are not themselves stories or narratives as such, but rather those things that make my own self-narrating possible; they allow me to tell my story within a wider context, a context I can take for granted” (Hemming 2005:15). Thus narrative counselling in this paradigm is not simply the investigation of reality, but rather the process of discovering and realizing realities and their possible dimensions. “It will be rather quickly noted that our mapping of the world of narrative, which extends beyond narrational discourse, inclines us to an ontology of narrative, a notion of emplotment that stands in service of an articulation of our being-in-the-world” (Schrag 1992:91).

Thus in this study narrative interaction opened the way for the story tellers to find meaning for their stories and so of their individual selves. “The narrative approach recognises the narrator as a unique domain of skills and techniques, which enable such a person to derive meaning from his/her perceptions of the world; therefore they should be voiced and formulated through the research process” (Müller & Schoeman 2004:9). Thus my interpretations are all based as closely as possible on the homeless youth’s own interpretations. Of course the possibility always remains for the reader of this report to detect in my story further unique outcomes and realities constructed through the social interaction I report and the reader’s interaction with my account of these.

“Social constructionism is consensual meaning construction through language, thus language comes centrestage and people are seen as being disempowered by dominant narratives. ...Thus while stories provide the frames that make it possible for us to interpret our experience, actively making meaning, we are embraced by the stories we have about life” (Milner & O’ Byrne 2002:19, 20). The stories we construct need to be communicated in language. In my interactions with the homeless youth of Pretoria many different language traditions were involved, since we come from many different cultural backgrounds. Their constructions of their life stories are informed by the constructing style of their home languages and cultural experiences. My listening is informed by my formation in Indian styles of story telling and meaning making. But in a narrative conversation these factors are not necessarily contradictory. They open new possibilities of story making and understanding. For example, in my talk with Mzwasi, I found myself forgetting our language difficulties as his story progressed. We overcame communication difficulties through active conversation and meaning making. Mzwasi shared a story of economic deprivation and the government’s neglect of the poor. His discourse about the government is not a discourse of protest but of sadness. “Crucial in pastoral exploration is not only understanding the feelings a situation generates but also identifying the worldviews that govern our reaction to the situation” (Furniss 1995:4).

The central idea in narrative analysis is that the stories told by informants or research participants can be treated as a primary source of data. A ‘story’ can be tentatively defined as an account of a concrete, specific event, with a beginning, middle and end, an active protagonist and some kind of dramatic climax. As in other branches of qualitative inquiry, competing ideas exist about how to analyze stories for research purposes. However, two general approaches have been developed in recent years. The first is concerned with analysis of the ‘life stories’ told by the people being interviewed. This approach is used in this study. The second approach concentrates on the task of understanding the process of story

telling in therapy, through analysis of session transcript material. My study uses interdisciplinary methods to explore the process of story making.

Riessman's narrative analysis method is built around a set of basic principles:

1. An interview schedule is used that encourages informants to tell stories.
2. Interview data are collected from a number of informants to enable an understanding of different experiences and themes.
3. A few key informants are selected whose stories can be viewed as 'typical' of broader themes in the data.
4. The interview material from these key informants is subjected to detailed transcription and closer reading.
5. Exemplar narratives from within these interviews are selected for use in a paper or report.
6. The paper or report is written *around* the intact narrative text, which is reproduced in full.
7. The goal of the analysis is to assist the reader to understand the meaning of the informant's experience.

My approach shares a number of features with conversation analysis and some forms of discourse analysis namely the display of an intact text and the use of a repertoire of analytic possibilities rather a rigid pre-determined set of procedures (Riessman 1993:105). "Narrative analysis is therefore an approach which 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 fulfillment in life" (McLeod 2001:106). This research study has a background of pastoral care and counselling. By engaging in narrative conversation with the homeless youth I was trying to help them in many ways, facilitating their deconstruction of their dominant discourses and helping them make new discoveries. In this process I too discovered new realities and came to new understandings. "Emphasizing the dialogical character

of pastoral care gives recognition that both care seeker and caregiver are transformed by the pastoral encounter....Care seeker and caregiver are engaged together in a joint activity of discovery” (Furniss 1995:3, 4).

For example, in my conversation with Patrick I gained new understanding of friendship and of God as a friend. Patrick had no friends and was not able to find any. When I asked him about friendship he said: “I am talking to all people, but there is nobody to be my friend. God is my only friend.” Together we deconstructed his discourse about friendship, and Patrick realised that if God is one person’s friend, he is everyone’s friend and this helped him to change his conception of friendship. He realised that he had strict conditions for friendship, which other people could not satisfy. He learned, and I learned through him, that friendship must be without conditions.

In the narrative approach, the story teller is helped by the facilitator to discover hidden problems and discourses. This process is called externalization. “Externalising helps the client stand back from the problem and recover a sense of self-agency as ways of subverting it are discussed. Discovering the cunning ways of the problem helps clients to separate themselves from their own subjugation. It helps if the client can give the problem a name as soon as possible, but this is not always possible without some help” (Milner & O’Byrne 2002:40). Part of the research process is my naming of the research problem, in other words, my externalizing the research content. Thus I am able to evaluate its impact in my life.

7.4.4 Meaning in a postfoundational paradigm

Social constructionism and the narrative approach share the same inherent assumptions as theological and philosophical postfoundationalism. All these approaches question the construction of reality. “The idea of socially constructed

interpretations and meaning is clearly part of the postfoundationalist approach” (Müller 2005:80).

Postfoundationalism has as one of its philosophical premises Schrag’s ‘transversal rationality’, discussed above. The concept of transversality opens up the multiple possibilities of human interactions and stories. Reality and our interpretations of it are viewed as meeting at various points and converging at various points. This is in line with the narrative approach and social constructionism. Also, it provides theologians with better position against the relativist tendencies of post-modernity (Müller 2005:80). Thus a postfoundational approach proposes the reinterpretation of our social interactions and experiences, and the concepts behind these experiences. “Our political struggles, our artwork, our use of resources, our capitalist systems and discursive foundations, utility, happiness- without the individual, all are liable to radical reassessment” (Devine & Irwin 2006:22).

The basic aims of postfoundationalism, as defined by Van Huyssteen (1998:24) in relation to theology and science, are as follows:

- 1) Fully acknowledge the contextuality of any human experience,
- 2) Affirm the crucial role of interpreted experience,
- 3) Creatively point beyond the confines of the local within an interdisciplinary conversation, and
- 4) Conduct an interdisciplinary epistemological investigation into the biological source of human rationality.

“Over against the objectivism of foundationalism and the extreme relativism of most forms of non-foundationalism, what is emerging here is a refigured postfoundationalist model of rationality that is thoroughly contextual, but at the same time will facilitate an interdisciplinarity reach beyond one’s own local group or culture” (Van Huyssteen 1999:139). Thus postfoundationalism’s emphasis on contextuality prevents generalization of the experiences of informants. Listening

to people's stories about their real life experiences is an integral concept in a postfoundational approach. "It does not merely aim to describe a general context, but we are confronted with a specific and concrete situation" (Demasure & Müller 2006:9). Since I was engaging with youth from various cultural backgrounds, the postfoundationalist approach was vital in my dealing with multicultural experiences. Such an approach also provides an enlarged and comprehensive vision about the problem shared in the stories. The role of the therapist becomes important here not as an expert, but as a care-giving facilitator. "A social constructionist frame work has to contribute to non-discriminatory multi-cultural practice. The challenge is for therapists to understand and appreciate the cultural factors that shape the lives of the clients they meet, while being self-aware of their own personal cultural identity and how this impacts their therapeutic practice" (Sharry 2004:6).

7.5 INTERPRETATIONS MOVING BEYOND THE LOCAL

Socially constructed meanings have the possibility of moving beyond the local context and its meanings. "The shift of emphasis from individual to social, from subjective to discourse, which constitutes a new epistemology in the social sciences, is also part and parcel of the postfoundationalist movement. The idea of socially constructed interpretation and meaning is clearly part of the postfoundationalist approach" (Demasure & Müller 2006:10). Thus many possible meanings can be evolved from any experience. Thus a final conclusion is not possible for any story or interpretation. Keeping the story open-ended is better in the postfoundationalist approach.

7.5.1 Interdisciplinary contributions

It is not very easy to identify the disciplinary discourses involved in the stories of the homeless youth. Through interdisciplinary investigation, as described in the

previous chapter, I tried to highlight some themes of the discourses in the light of selected relevant disciplines. The selection of disciplines and the search for themes are the most extreme externalizing techniques used in this study. In the interests of accuracy we cannot ignore the subjective factors that influenced my selection of disciplines and my discursive analysis of the stories. But in a postfoundational narrative project such as this, these factors are part of the journey towards meaning, with their own contribution towards the development of the story and the meaning making process.

Interdisciplinary investigation is necessary for a better understanding of the truth of the stories. “A discipline is not the sum total of all the truths that may be uttered concerning something; it is not even the total of all that may be accepted by virtue of some principle of coherence and systematisation concerning some given fact or proposition” (Foucault 1996:347). Thus the limitations of searching for particular truth in one discipline are compensated for by the possibilities of other disciplines. Some disciplines have developed reputations for accuracy or usefulness over time in particular areas of human reality, and “[d]iscursive historical possibilities can be referenced to other mature discursive systems that have generated confidence over time, as well as to practical issues and possibilities” (Olssen 2006:74). Thus a discursive interaction with other disciplines will greatly help the meaning-making process in a postfoundationalist narrative study such as this one. This interaction does not involve searching for a shared base for the discourses. It is more of a dialogue of the disciplines about the themes inherent in the discourses dominant in the stories of the homeless youth. For example, a philosophical investigation can widen understanding of themes like power and powerlessness. Similarly, sociology sheds light on the area of social intervention. Psychology can help us trace the implicit feelings in the stories, which are part of the untold stories hidden within the told stories, as was the case in Patrick’s story about his loneliness and longing for friendship.

The stories told by the homeless youth cannot be restricted to one way of telling or interpreting. This means that they cannot be restricted to the rules or assumptions of one discipline either. Postfoundationalism offers the possibility of negotiating between these various approaches and assumptions. “Informants engaged in all forms of interdisciplinary research ha[ve] to negotiate, albeit to varying degrees, disciplinary assumptions and methods” (Lattuca 2001:159). The informants may not be fully aware of the assumptions implicit in each discipline involved in the dialogue, so the researcher has to be alert when conducting counselling sessions and writing down the stories and interpretations. The insights yielded by interdisciplinary study of these stories can guide further investigation in similar contexts all over the world. The assumptions and understandings in this work must be translated and retold to make them meaningful in other contexts.

7.5.2 Beyond boundaries

Homelessness is experienced by people in different parts of the world, and so the meaning-making process and the discourses involved in the social condition of homelessness may vary according to different regions of the world. But the basic assumptions and themes involved in the reality of homelessness will be more or less same all over the world. Similarly, a narrative approach to therapy opens a wider world of possibilities wherever it is practiced, since the client takes the main role in telling and interpreting his/her experiences. “The therapist allows the client to take centre stage and lead the conversation. The therapist makes room for the client’s voice and allows the client’s know-how to come to the forefront. Therapy becomes a mutual search for options and possibilities” (Blanton 2005:95). This enables any client in any area of the world to interpret his/her story according to his/her assumptions and discourses. Theories formed in different parts of the world will in no way affect these interpretations. Thus, while the basic themes of the discourses of homelessness remain the same, more research into and understanding of similar journeys in other parts of the

world will thicken the experiences and stories of particular researchers in their particular contexts.

This process will also help the homeless person. By telling new stories he/she will be able to make sense of the experience of homelessness and visualize new possibilities for his/her life. In other words, the new story can help the person to reposition him/herself in relation to the problem. Thus this approach points beyond the local and particular towards better options. “The compatibility and application of post-modern family therapies to the spiritual lives of Christian clients has been described, illustrated, and discussed” (Blanton 2005:100), and this will be the same for clients from other religions. The description, illustration and discussion will help any clients from any faiths and social contexts to express themselves and interpret their stories with genuineness and freedom. The description, illustration and discussion mentioned in this quote can be understood as the telling, interpreting and discursive interaction of the narrative process. Where in the world this process occurs does not matter, because all human beings are constructed out of stories.

7.5.3 Interaction with similar contexts

In most African countries youth make up the majority of the population. Homelessness is a continent-wide urban phenomenon. Many factors contribute to homelessness and homeless people face many problems “Besides poverty and the other factors, some other indicators of street life were family discord, abuse, or neglect” (Nsamenang 2002:76). Our attempt to find general themes in the experience of homelessness is not intended to minimize the importance of the local context. As mentioned above, the experience of life on the street remains the same in many respects continent-wide and world-wide. As African countries used the image of the Black Jesus for their liberation from the bondage of colonialism, we can perhaps use Jesus the Homeless Man to help us visualise a shift from hopelessness to hope, from oppression on the streets to liberation. I

used this image in the Bible classes I led at the Street Centre. The homeless community there comprises people from different parts of Africa, and they all responded to this image, interpreting the bible in their own way and formulating new stories of their experiences. This shows that the theme is relevant for people from all over Africa. These people share the common experience of homelessness and so a set of discourses, which were described and interpreted in this work.

Interaction among homeless people also helps them to retell their stories, and so events can be organised to promote such interaction and such retelling of stories. This is a form of narrative intervention, rather than definite narrative therapy. Such an interaction was the Cape Town Homeless World Cup Soccer Tournament held on Sept 24, 2006. "Research published by the organizers said that of the players in last year's tournament in Edinburgh, Scotland, 94 percent reported a new motivation in life, 62 percent were coping better with alcohol and drug dependency, 40 percent had improved their housing, 38 percent held regular jobs and 28 percent resumed their education" (Homeless World Cup Soccer Tournament 2006). These results show that the events themselves and research done before and after them are extremely valuable, and can contribute to the further efforts to enhance the lives of homeless people.

The demographic figures of homelessness in the United States point to the importance in the field of research among homeless people. Approximately 3.5 million individuals experience homelessness each year in the United States. The primary cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2006), but additional reasons for homelessness vary according to the particular area. The particular experiences of homelessness will also vary. Jencks explains some of the harsh experiences of the homeless people, saying that "those who spend the night in public places are often robbed or assaulted while they sleep, and in winter they also run the risk of freezing" (Jencks 1995:9). Often the reasons for and effects of homelessness together

make up the experience of homelessness. These experiences are similar in many ways with those in South Africa. “People without shelter could easily get frostbite, get infections, or be victims of violence, even in public shelters. They are also more likely to cohabit with drug addicts, alcoholics, and /or others with disease” ([Home](#) Page 2006). Thus research conducted in the context of homelessness of the United States can be very useful in understanding the stories of South African homeless people.

The number of homeless people in India is also considerable, suggesting that comparison with stories from India would also be illuminating for South African research. Descriptions of the experiences of homeless people in India, such as the homeless and slum dwellers of Mumbai, are identical to those of South African’s homeless people: “the conditions of life under which they live are characterised by terrible poverty, squalor and deprivation which are not captured adequately by measures of income poverty” ([United](#) Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HAITAT) 2007:61). Powerlessness, lack of dignity, lack of friendship and widespread abuse are common themes in the Indian context, as in the South African. Listening to the findings of other researches will help Indian researchers to find new meanings in the stories of the homeless people of India and construct new interventions relevant to their particular context. This process would be equally useful the other way around, with South Africa learning from India. Thus research goes beyond geographical and sociological boundaries. “An opinion can be completely validated because the objective relationships whose existence it asserts are confirmed on the basis of experience and observation with unobjectionable instruments and logical conclusions, and it can moreover be of practical use to its holder or other people” (Horkheimer 1993:196).

Any research into homelessness also draws on the knowledge and experience of the reader of the report. “The considerate researcher identifies findings that seem to have implications for other settings, and, as often happens with case studies, suggests that it is for the reader to generalize on the basis of correspondence

between the research and the reader's understandings and experiences" (Arksey & Knight 1999:58,59). A dialogue between the research findings and the reader's understandings will construct new meanings for the themes of homelessness and lead the reader to new stories. It is through stories that those who listen come to know how others have made meaning, what their world looks like from their point of view. "Stories are a clear and simple way for one to see the other sees" (Walsh 1992:2). Though this inevitably involves a kind of generalization, it also helps us to move beyond the local. An empathetic reader does not simplify the local context discussed and discovered in the work, but uncovers its relevance for the wider community.

7.5.4 Dialogue within discourses

Discourses are part of the identity formation process of young people, in which identity confusion is a common feature. Through their particular experiences, through telling their stories and finding alternative stories, they design their identities. This process is often accompanied by frustration. "The frustration is probably most evident in adolescent's two most intimate areas of relationship – the family unit and the subculture. Here the youth are working their hardest to achieve identity, to accomplish self-determination, to become somebody" (Poerschke 1977:31).

Many factors come together in dialogue within discourses, including sociological, psychological and economic factors. Their influence in the discourses of homelessness of the youth in Pretoria was discussed in the interdisciplinary investigation in chapter six. The most important themes uncovered were dignity, powerlessness, friendship, loneliness, culture, gender roles, providence of God, helplessness, guilt, hardness in the streets, family love, plans for the future, feelings of unworthiness, survival and poverty. The interconnectedness of these themes and their implications in the lives and identities of the homeless youth were described and analyzed in this work.

This dialogue of factors also occurs between me as researcher and the homeless youth as informants. Our relationship is rather like that of a community development worker and the members of the community in which he/she works. “The development process is a convergence of stories. The story of the development practitioner is converging with the story of the community and together they will share a new story for a while” (Myers 1999:20). The homeless youth share their stories with me not only for psychological reasons, to find satisfaction or peace, but also because of economic factors, for example; they seek economic relief, asking for bread, clothes or even a job. These economic factors are particularly important. Even if family or other social factors lie behind the young people’s experience of homelessness, economic factors are most vivid in their experiences and the stories they tell. Being homeless they have to face the economic reality of poverty, joblessness and marginalization. By identifying these discourses and their economic impact the story teller is equipped to construct alternate life stories.

We can see this clearly in the case of Roul, who through the process of telling and retelling his story came to see his past as something to be condemned. ‘I repent’ is a phrase he often used about his past experiences. It is his interpretation of his past. In our first session, as I listened to his story I could see the reasons for this repentance implicit in his account, such as his irresponsible decision to leave his home while his parents were still alive, his addiction to drugs and so on. As I helped him to explore this history I helped him to re-engage with it. Through a shared re-reading of his story I facilitated his viewing of his future in a different way. The second time I saw him he was just recovering from an illness. He was weak and found it difficult to speak. However, even though he was not physically fit his outlook was much more positive; he viewed his life in the future as better with God and God’s providence. Spirituality and God-consciousness were now prominent in his discourses. He interprets his future story in the light and strength of his spirituality.

7.6 REFLECTIONS: LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

7.6.1 My effect on the limitations and possibilities of the study

As I am a pastor from India, I have particular limitations of language, culture and social background. I come from a land that has enjoyed political freedom for the last 59 years, and a province that boasts 100 percent literacy. I came to South Africa as a pastor to the Christian community here. The social, political and cultural differences I experienced challenged my perspectives and attitudes. English is not my first language, nor that of my informants either. Though India has a rich heritage of cultural differences from province to province, the diversity of South African tribal cultures differs in many ways from the diversity of cultures in India. I tried to overcome these limitations by reading about traditional African culture and seeking meaning in the traditional, modern and post-modern ways of story telling and retelling.

My personal motivation also affects my research. “For some qualitative researchers, the purpose of qualitative research is obligatory – something that has to be done because of a class assignment or a job. For most, however, it is a kind of personal passion: the satisfaction of a boundless curiosity about the social construction of our social worlds” (Warren & Karner 2005:26). I position myself in this second category, because this study is not intended to lead to any personal economic benefit or job advancement. Rather I hope to improve my job satisfaction through being better able to practice narrative counselling in light of my discoveries in the course of this project. I have been empowered as a person to help other people to be empowered. This experience has enhanced my knowledge, restructured many of my attitudes, revitalized my approaches and reconstructed my discourses. Listening to the stories of the young people, I felt both pained and privileged. When he/she invites people to share their stories, a researcher asks to hear the raw truth. The pain I felt stemmed from the young people’s narratives of suffering and economic deprivation, the sense of privilege from my part in helping them to deconstruct their discourses and move to

alternate hopeful stories through the therapeutic process. I undertook this work out of my eagerness to know more and my curiosity to be among homeless youth. It was an exciting experience, from which still further possibilities of knowledge and experience continue to open.

The externalization that is part of narrative counselling helped me as a person to externalize my problems as I helped others to externalize their problems. “Externalising conversations, which occur all the time in narrative therapy, are ways of speaking that separate problems from people. Externalisation is the foundation from which many, though by no means all, narrative conversations are built” (Morgan 2000:17). Externalising is not a technique or skill, but an approach to stories. I came from a client-centred approach, which works by internalizing problems, but as I moved into narrative therapy externalization became part of my personality, not only in therapy, but also in daily interaction. Listening to and writing down the stories of the homeless youth allowed me privileged access to their experiences. Exploring their discourses and interpretations led me to new understanding. The interdisciplinary investigation of their stories and interpretations helped me to move beyond the local and its interpretations.

7.6.2 Limitations and possibilities of my role as a pastor

As a Christian pastor, I find that spiritual and biblical language and discourses dominate and in a way control my behaviour and conversation. In the process of narrative counselling, of course, I try to deconstruct spiritual meanings and concepts. A positive effect in this research study of my being a pastor is that I was able to lead Bible devotions at the Street Centre, since through these classes and the discussions afterwards I was able to interact closely with the community, and so engage in dialogue with my discourses and those of the homeless youth. After each bible class I got feedback from the community about the theological themes I had introduced and various interpretations of these.

Sometimes this discussion turned into the open sharing of experiences related to the biblical themes. This was inspiring and eye opening for me and enriching for the community as they shared their stories.

As a pastor I have some individual biases concerning pastoral care, counselling, homelessness and poverty. How I deal with these realities depends upon these individual assumptions and concepts. One danger in interacting with poor people and listening to their pathetic life stories is over-sympathising, which can hinder my work as a pastoral counsellor. Along my journey with the homeless youth, I realized that pity is not what they need. Rather, they need somebody to listen to them and move with them to new alternate stories for their lives. “While much popular theology suggests that we should look for real changes only in ‘the world to come’, the New Testament persistently affirms that God’s reality, the realm where Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah, has already begun to bump into, destabilize and threaten, and finally tear down the most cherished notions of reality our broken world can offer” (Sanders & Campbell 2000:32). Realizing that God is active in the contemporary world encouraged me to be active in the present, in my interactions with the homeless people. Our journey of discovery is not just towards the distant future, but rather involves moment-by-moment discoveries along every step of the journey.

Another lesson I had to learn involved hope. I came to understand that any deliberate effort I made to bring hope into the lives of the homeless people instead had the opposite effect, destroying the rapport I had with them and defeating the purpose of the interaction. This urge to be immediately effective is a problem for pastors and counsellors, who “have to find ways to cope with these high expectations to be a guardian of hope for people, and at the same to find guardians of hope in their own struggle” (Müller & Howell 2006:7). I learned that as a counsellor I must not overemphasize my active role as the counsellor, but rather let it evolve as I proceed on the journey with the client. This also involves resisting the high expectations the client may have of me as facilitator.

7.6.3 Limitations and possibilities of the methodology

The methodology used in this study is the seven-movement methodology developed by Müller. I did my Masters research using the same methodology, so I was confident about applying it to this project. “[T]he term methodology has to do with an overall approach to a particular field. It implies a family of methods that have in common particular philosophical and epistemological assumptions” (Swinton & Mowat 2006:75). I have already explained the basic concepts and constructs of the methodology, which is based on a social constructionist approach with postfoundationalist overtones. “A social constructionist approach is basically *critical* and non-foundational, in the sense of opening up all aspects of a phenomenon to interpretive scrutiny. A good social constructionist study, therefore, will strive to deconstruct the concepts used by both researcher and researcher participants, may question why the research was carried out, may look at the implications of how a paper is written” (McLeod 2001:29). This approach challenged me to formulate a clear research goal, namely to discover the economic factors in the dominant discourses of homelessness of the homeless youth. My approach is not directive, shaped by preconceptions towards any particular finding. Rather my research tried to be a continual process of discovery through a narrative journey with the homeless youth. This is thus also a journey to new possibilities of research. Analysis of the data gathered involved tracing the themes and economic factors in the discourses. As this is a qualitative study, the discourses cannot be quantified or tested with standardized measurement instruments. “A common objection to qualitative research has been that the findings cannot be tested but have to be taken on trust” (Arksey & Knight 1999:15). But the meanings emerging through the narrative research are valid and relevant in the specific context of this study, and can illuminate and resonate with findings from similar contexts all over the world. A significant advantage of this methodology is that it was carried out in actual practical interaction with the homeless youth in their particular context, the Street Centre in Pretoria. “A research design that is fit for the purpose will be one that

has emerged as the best response to practical considerations” (Arksey & Knight 1999:59). Therefore the seven movement methodology’s particularity and practicality suits and enhances the genuineness of this research.

Various practical methods were involved in this methodology, namely questionnaires, interviews, scripting of stories and interdisciplinary discussion. “Methods are specific techniques that are used for data collection and analysis. They comprise a series of clearly defined, disciplined and systematic procedures that the researcher uses to accomplish a particular task” (Swinton & Mowat 2006:74). Thus any method involves particular methodological assumptions. This study assumes a post-modern, social constructionist paradigm, and so the methods used must fit these assumptions. This is why structured interviews and set questionnaires are not used. “The methodology of constructivism does not sustain the method of randomized controlled trials” (Swinton & Mowat 2006:75). It is more experiential and story focussed. Thus unstructured interviews, scripting of experiences and narrative discussion are the most important methods used in this study. The interviews were qualitative, and because they aim to discover the in-depth meaning of stories, were extended over about 18 months. This project is thus a kind of “longitudinal research, where each informant is interviewed on several occasions over a period of months or years” (Arksey & Knight 1999:32). During this long period I experienced all the ups and downs of the lives of my informants, including their physical wellbeing and ailments, their psychological traumas and joys and their various economic experiences.

7.6.4 Limitations and possibilities of the study design

Various features of this study can be viewed as either limitations or possibilities, depending on one’s understanding of the nature and purpose of sociological research. These can be briefly discussed.

Qualitative approach

This study uses a qualitative approach. Such an approach has a variety of unique possibilities for research, of which its openness to emerging realities is perhaps the most important. “All qualitative researchers struggle with what has been called the ‘crisis of representation’, the challenge of conveying on paper the richness of understanding that the researchers has developed, and the various ‘voices’ of informants” (McLeod 2001:146). Experiences are always difficult to narrate and record in writing, but this difficulty also opens great possibilities for interpretation. Thus the qualitative approach challenges me to accurately record the young people’s stories and sensitively search for the discourses implicit in them. “From the point of view of the counselling practitioner, the appeal of qualitative research is that it provides the kind of detail and depth of analysis that makes its findings relevant to practice....However, virtually all of the qualitative therapy research that has been carried out has focused on process rather than outcome” (McLeod 1994:102). The positive thing in qualitative research is that it is not a unified or unitary approach to knowledge, but instead offers the possibility of various approaches.

Qualitative research demands confidentiality, and so I have tried to keep secret the identities of my informants, while publishing their life stories as accurately as possible. The names used in this report are fictional. In doing this I have tried to respect my informants and their human dignity. Of course, someone closely associated with the Street Centre in Pretoria might be able to identify some of the informants, but as time passes this will become more difficult; some of my informants may get jobs and stop coming to the Street Centre, or they may move to some other town, or hopefully they will find homes and will be living peacefully.

Interview method

The main method used in this project is interviews. These interviews are not structured, but rather counselling interviews in which I move with the informants to the new areas of story. The interviews followed a qualitative social interaction

pattern. “[F]or the qualitative interviewer the interview is not only a method; it is a social interaction of the very type that qualitative methods were designed to study! Active listening is also recommended in past and contemporary discussions of how to generate (and not subsequently destroy) rapport between interviewer and respondent” (Warren & Karner 2005:137,140). This rapport helped me greatly in my effort to listen to the homeless people’s stories without prejudice and help them to explore their stories in detail, so that the discourses implicit in them could be identified. Word-by-word analysis of data is not the focus of this research. Rather, I search for the themes of the dominant discourses of the homeless youth evident in our interview conversations.

Empirical data collection and interpretation

A very positive aspect of this project is the fact that the collection of the materials for analysis and the interpretation of these materials were both carried out during direct practical experience and interaction with the informants, rather than on previously formed assumptions or hypothesis. The meaning evolved from the practical context. My interactions with the homeless youth at the Pretoria Street Centre were a unique experience of loving warmth. I loved the homeless people and they loved me, and this love was not selfish, trying to get something. Rather both intentionally and unconsciously we exchanged love and knowledge, and so enriched each others lives.

Specific context

The specific context of the homeless youth at the Street Centre is very important for the interpretation of this study’s results. Unofficial statistics say that there are around 3000 homeless people on the streets of Pretoria. The homeless people who come to the Street Centre number about 100 at a time, maximum, but these are not always the same people. Many of them sleep in night shelters, which they have to leave in the morning, and so they come to the Street Centre and use it as a kind of daytime shelter. In addition to shelter, however, at the Street Centre they get opportunities for personal development, including motivational classes,

Bible devotions, help in job hunting and personal counselling. Despite the difficulties to research caused by the erratic attendance of the homeless people at the Street Centre and the communication problems arising from their varying cultural backgrounds, I was challenged to help them in the plight they all share, their specific context of homelessness. The economic factors involved in their discourses still disturb me, and prompt me to more active involvement in economic and political reform.

Postfoundationalist approach

This study uses a seven movement methodology that reflects the postfoundationalist philosophy developed by O'Schrag and Van Huyssteen. This approach sees meaning as transversal, as created at the intersection of discourses. This transversality, according to my understanding, does not suggest a linear development for understanding, but stresses the immense possibilities of interpretation. In this project I found that it was not practical for me to investigate or record my interactions with the homeless youth using a linear progression of thoughts. Rather I tried to trace a variety of themes and interpretations scattered through the stories searching for each other, meeting together and making a myriad of colourful interactions. For some readers such a plural approach may be a limitation of this work, but I see it as a possibility. Using a postfoundational epistemology enables my study to escape the boundaries of context and individual bias, "to enter the pluralist, interdisciplinary conversation with our full personal convictions and at the same time be theoretically empowered to step beyond the limitations and boundaries of our own contexts or forms of life" (Van Huyssteen 1997:29).

Seven-movement methodology

The seven-movement methodology used for this research is in my opinion exceptionally rich and life-giving. I use these terms to express what I believe is God's power in the functioning of this methodology in this project. The externalization of problems involved in the narrative approach was a blessing for

the informants as well as helping me to trace the discourses inherent in their stories and discover the factors that form these discourses. Also a blessing was the effect of the God-talk we shared, which strengthened the positive features of the discourses of the homeless youth. “It seems clear that religious experiences are influenced by cultural background. Everyone seems to agree that there are different emphases among faith traditions in the way experiences are described, and that these reflect, in parts, different traditions about religious experiences” (Watts 2002:90). Searching out the cultural factors that influence their discourses enabled us to reach a more comprehensive understanding of faith, and of God’s work. The interdisciplinary approach further expanded our views of these discourses. Deepening an experience lightens the burden of owning the problem, and so this methodology helped the young people to deal with their problems in a richer and more effective way.

In the narrative approach, the experiences of story telling and listening are important. The facilitator is not a social activist, agitating for social change. “For us, the aim of research is not to bring about change, but to listen to the stories and to be drawn into those stories. While the structuralist researcher has objectivity in mind by trying to be an observer from outside, and by trying to bring about change from the outside, the narrative researcher has subjective integrity in mind and strives for participatory observation” (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2006:2, 3). Narrative research is an exciting journey with the story teller into the unknown. Though the facilitator works from an assumed position of ignorance, he/she is not blind to the development of the story and the inner discourses revealed during the journey.

Co-authoring

The story teller in the narrative approach is a co-researcher, because he/she actively constructs meanings for his/her stories. This approach is thus a kind of participatory research, which “provides a framework in which people move from being the *objects* of research to *subjects* and *co-researchers*. This goal is

achieved by ensuring that the individuals who traditionally have been the object of the research process are given an active role in designing and conducting the research” (Swinton & Mowat 2006:228). I thus take the role of co-researcher to the informant who is the main researcher, and we work together; I co-author the stories through scripting their stories and applying interdisciplinary methods to interpret them. Thus I avoid the role of counsellor with superior skills, and instead work from a position of ignorance. “The ‘not-knowing’ position on the one hand allows the co-researcher(s) to tell their stories as they live them in everyday life, and on the other hand allows the researcher to follow these stories of the co-researcher(s) as they have been constructed within a lived social reality” (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2006:5). Thus a co-authoring approach opens the possibility of social construction of new realities for their lives.

Religious background

This study has a general religious background. The practical data collection occurred among the homeless youth at the Street Centre run by Pretoria Community Ministries, an organization supported and run by six inner-city churches. I am a Christian pastor by profession. The informants also all had some kind of religious affiliation. I am doing this research in the Department of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria, However, this does not limit me or the study, since practical theology is a field that employs “epistemological pluralism to explore, discover, and identify those conditions which would make it possible for the great truths of the various traditions to be living active, and effective in our contemporary context” (McCarthy 2000:202). This openness of practical theology enables me to approach the stories of the homeless youth within their unique context using the techniques of various disciplines.

Moving beyond the immediate context

The limitations of the Street Centre setting can be seen as restrictions for the homeless people. The Street Centre offers help with preparing CV’s, contacting prospective employers, counselling and personal enrichment, it cannot provide

jobs and homes for all the people who come there. “Alternatives for inner-city youth are few, vision is limited, and the self-confidence necessary to ‘make it’ is often lacking” (McLaughlin & Heath 1993:214). This is the importance of the narrative interactions, because through them homeless people are helped to think differently, to hope for positive change. Even if they start out viewing their future as grim and their opportunities as almost nil, narrative counselling can prompt them to change their attitudes to their discourses and help them to reconstruct their stories. “Re-authoring conversations invite people to do what they routinely do – that is, to link events of their lives in sequences through time according to a theme/plot. However, in this activity, people are assisted to identify the more neglected events of their lives – the unique outcomes or exceptions – and are encouraged to take these into alternative story lines” (White 2002:9). These alternatives can extend beyond the local context, and the new story encompasses both new understandings and new convictions.

Personal experience

In my personal experience this is a wonderful journey of discovering meaning in the stories, exploring the impact of discourses in the stories and tracing the effect of both of these processes in me. In the beginning I had set goals that I wanted to reach but this journey disturbed my assumptions that I am not entering into some conclusion, instead passing through some discoveries and still discovering even after writing down of this research report. “The now is never fixed and it never acts as a given or even as a curse. In the narrative approach the now is action, and therefore dynamic in nature. To take the action seriously and to have it told is to open up a possibility, to create a new now for tomorrow” (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2006:4).

In this work I took the freedom to rearrange the themes in their stories and themes related to discourses. There may be some overlapping happened; it is unavoidable because of the development of themes and search for an integrative move to new realities. Those themes are based on their struggle to be in their

particular experiences and their striving for liberation. The themes of survival, hopelessness, gender issues and cultural factors make it clear and they relate all with homelessness and their economic deprivation. At the closing of this research and experiences related to it, I have been transformed to a postfoundationalist thinking in my daily interactions. It encourages me to respect the other persons and their context with an attitude of listening to their stories with patience. It empowers me for searching other alternatives for the realities of life. Thus it becomes an enlightening and enjoyable experience to practice narrative therapy in a postfoundational paradigm.

7.7 CONCLUSION

7.7.1 Our journey through the chapters

The seven chapters in this report follow the seven-movement methodology applied in this study. Within each chapter, however the topics may not necessarily fit with the steps of this methodology, since I sometimes grouped aspects together in one chapter for better discussion of transversal possibilities. Thus some interpolation of ideas is unavoidable. Overall, however, the structure is as follows:

- The first chapter is an introduction to the narrative approach, the study's research model and theological context and my personal motivation.
- The second chapter gives a general overview of youth in the South African context, and the youth studied in this research in their particular context. It opens the discussion of the discourses of homelessness and the economic factors implicit in these.
- The third chapter sets out the general situation and particular economic conditions of the inner-city homeless youth in Pretoria, as reflected in their told and un-told stories.
- The fourth chapter presents these stories in a narrative framework, together with the interpretations of the informants.

- The fifth chapter explains the process of facilitating this story-telling, and sets out the traditions that inform these stories and interpretations, including religious traditions and God experiences.
- The sixth chapter is an interesting part of this work, since through an exploration of interdisciplinary possibilities of investigation, it thickens the interpretation of the stories, concentrating on specific themes directly related to or involved in the discourses.
- The final chapter is a final assessment of the whole work. This involves a discussion of the basic concept of story telling, and of the paradigms of social constructionism, narrative therapy and postfoundationalism. This enables the basic concepts buried in the stories and interpretations to be stated explicitly, so that their relevance beyond the local situation becomes apparent. The limitations and possibilities of this project are discussed.

7.7.2 The findings in a nutshell

The findings of this work can be summarized as follows:

1. Economic factors are directly involved in the stories of the homeless youth in Pretoria.
2. Discourse analyses are based on the construction of discourses.
3. The discourses of homelessness centre around specific themes, discussed in this work.
4. An interdisciplinary approach sheds more light on the stories and helps to identify and deconstruct the discourses contained within them.
5. Facilitating God-talk in conversation with the story-tellers prepares them for more hopeful stories.
6. Readers have to understand the paradigm, methodology and methods used in this study if they are to understand the discourses inherent in this work.

7. Detailed description of my theoretical position and practical experiences as co-researcher helps the reader to assess my interpretations of the young people's stories.

8. The transversality of meaning that arises when a post-modern interdisciplinary approach is applied to the stories creates a varied world of options for further interpretation.

9. The knowledge of economic factors yielded by this study of the dominant discourses of homelessness is universally applicable.

10. The limitations of this study and its methodology are opportunities for further study, of the discourses of homelessness and of the narrative methodology itself.

7.7.3 The experience of the homeless community

It seems to me that the homeless community in Pretoria enjoyed my presence at the Street Centre and interaction with them through Bible discussion classes and narrative counselling sessions. When I said good bye to them, the warmth of their greetings was very meaningful for me. They showed their appreciation of my service in many ways, by saying thank you, smiling, applauding or giving me a hug. They considered me as one of them, even though I am not homeless. Perhaps this reflects the fact that, in another sense, I am also homeless, because as a pastor in my church I always have to move from one place to another. Like the homeless people, I have to trust that God's providence will shelter me in each place in which I find myself.

7.7.4 My personal experience as researcher

My personal experiences with the homeless community have permanently enriched my pastoral ministry. I will remember their love for ever. In the Bible devotions, discussions, counselling sessions and narrative journeys I shared with them, I was exposed to multiple new experiences and possible interpretation for my life. I learned to view others and listen to their stories with respect, and to move into a wider world of new realities. The love and sharing of the homeless

people at the Street Centre challenge me to continue working among the homeless, helping them to construct and move into new hopeful stories of their lives. When I left the Centre the community gave me a present, a glass lamp on a metal base painted with variegated flowers. For me this lamp symbolises my experiences with the homeless people. The metal base symbolises the postfoundationalist paradigm on which this research is based, with its diverse flowers representing the transversality of meanings yielded by this approach. The glass part of the lamp symbolises the narrative interventions and discourses, which are so illuminating yet so fragile. The bulb inside the lamp reminds me to light the lamp of hope wherever I go. This allegory is my interpretation of my experiences with the homeless community in Pretoria.

7.7.5 Relevance of this study

Homelessness as a field of investigation and social action is growing in importance internationally. A better and more diverse understanding of the discourses of homeless people will challenge researchers all over the world to further study, and can enrich social action programmes implemented in homeless communities. This knowledge can also help political leaders to formulate better policies for eradicating homelessness through ensuring affordable housing and empowering the homeless by enhancing their economic possibilities. Also, the findings of this study are not an end in themselves. “Research creates its own story with new possibilities. Therefore, narrative research doesn’t end with a conclusion, but with an open ending, which hopefully would stimulate a new story and new research” (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2006:12). Thus the discoveries of this particular project must be placed in dialogue with similar studies in their specific contexts in other parts of the world, and the transversal possibilities of this dialogue explored to the full. My sincere prayer is that the lives of homeless youth everywhere in the world may become full and happy, so that they can play their part in invigorating society with the myriad possibilities of life.

