From Good Works to a Good Job:

an Exploration of Poverty and Work in Appalachian Ohio

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is a report of a nine month ethnographic research project designed to explore discourses of homeless workers, for-profit businesspeople, and non-profit service providers as they partnered together to make employment accessible and successful for those without homes in Appalachian America. A program was implemented that sought to bring those without homes into dialogue with their bosses through the use of narrative and dialogue. It was hoped that this strategy and partnership would provide the ongoing support that those in acute poverty need to do their jobs well, and to have their employment empower them toward successfully addressing other problems and issues in their lives. Via a grounded theory approach, augmented by narrative and feminist research methods, emergent themes are investigated that include the strategic use and constraints of invisibility/visibility among homeless workers; competing motivations and rewards of work among workers and bosses; the “masculine/feminine” roles and voices of for-profit and non-profit partners; and the dialectic of dependence/independence among the working homeless of Appalachia.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Lynn M. Harter
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For Anne, to whom I owe so much of my lack of poverty.

And for my entire spiritual and physical family who provide for me a firm place to stand.
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CHAPTER ONE

From the Monongahela valley, to the Mesabi iron range
From the coal mines of Appalachia, the stories always the same
700 tons of metal a day, now sir you tell me the world’s changed
When once I made you rich enough, rich enough to forget my name (Springsteen, 1995, n.p.)

So goes Bruce Springsteen’s mournful lament from the perspective of a former steel worker caught in the gears of economic change. Springsteen sings of the early 1980s when steel production went global and disrupted nearly two centuries of heavy-industry-driven prosperity in northeastern Ohio. I graduated from high school in a northeastern Ohio steel town in the 1980s and cut my teeth in a world of work that in a few years had morphed from hard work and high wages, to no work or minimum wage. Where there had been stable, well compensated work for generation after generation, now one could not buy a job at the local McDonalds. My hometown soon shrunk in size by one quarter, claimed the highest per-capita crime rate in the state of Ohio, and was ravaged by drug abuse and the social problem of homelessness. Most everyone was in shock. The world had shifted beneath our feet without us taking even a step. Our world had taken a giant leap backwards for us. These experiences continue to weigh heavily into my standpoints toward work, and the lack of it.

Years after leaving my hometown, I had the chance to spend nearly a decade living and working in a region where even bigger economic changes were under way. The shift from heavy industry to a post-industrial economy in northeastern Ohio pales in comparison to the tectonic economic, political, and ideological shifts that took place in
eastern Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s. In Sofia, Bulgaria I witnessed a shocked and unprepared populous struggling with the fall of a system that had offered the ultimate in security and stability for the average person. Everyone had worked for the state, and everyone had been overtly promised a workers’ paradise. The state had provided housing, education, work, medical care, stable prices for goods, and even free vacations in exchange for each person doing his or her job. Yet, by the time I arrived the promises of paradise had degenerated into hyper-inflation, rampant unemployment, massive corruption, and social breakdown in nearly all aspects of the culture. When their system collapsed, I found similar sorts of hurt and questioning in Bulgarians that I had witnessed in my hometown. In short, they cried out: Why are we now trapped in this poverty and chaos when we were promised so much more by society, our leaders, and our economic system?

At the time of this research I lived and turned my research focus to Athens County, Ohio, which lies in southeastern Ohio on the perimeter of what is known as Appalachia. This region is situated in the heart of the most prosperous nation on earth, yet is racked by poverty and lack of opportunity. Appalachia “was once a land of promise during the great industrial revolution. However, the potential to bring new wealth to the area was never realized, as profits created by the coal and timber industry (sic) were not reinvested locally, but moved out of the region” (Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, 2005, n.p.). Here again, I found a population struggling to deal with unrealized promise, and largely unprepared to compete and prosper in the economic climate in which it finds itself.
I present a research project for my doctoral dissertation that explores discursive constructions of poverty and work in and around Athens, Ohio, and in and around the organization of Good Works Incorporated. Good Works is a non-governmental, non-profit provider of multiple services to those in poverty, including job-readiness training and job placement. I set out here to shed light on the complex and multi-voiced dynamics that surround “poverty and work.” I suspect that poverty and work are “loaded” terms (meaning terms that carry a heavy burden of many meanings) in American culture, terms that are often assumed to be mutually exclusive, even antithetical, to one another. Yet, constructs like poverty and work are also dialectically bound and interdependent among and for many stakeholders involved in any particular context. I investigated a multitude of countless experiences and belief systems surrounding the discourses of poverty and work within the globalized and competitive capitalistic environment of the early 21st century. Specifically, I investigated the workings of “Good Job,” a program of work placement and support sponsored by of the non-profit organization Good Works Incorporated. This investigation focused on how various stakeholders from non-profit organizations, government agencies, and for-profit businesses partnered, dialogued, and cooperated toward the goal of helping those living in poverty find, keep, and succeed at jobs and at working out of poverty.

In Bakhtin’s (1981) terms, I am endeavoring to analyze a theme (i.e., poverty and work), and I will take a language-focused approach to analyzing this theme. Yet at the same time, I intend to work hard to avoid separating the realities of this symbolized, discursive theme from the embodied physical lives of those who are entangled around and within it. As I stated above, poverty and work are discursive constructs that carry
diverse and “heavy” meanings for a variety of stakeholders from various standpoints. At the same time, they are constructs that represent very real physical realities and consequences. I believe that the powerful discursive and corporeal manifestations of this theme make it a rich and important one deserving rigorous investigation from a communication perspective.

I justify taking a language-centered approach to such physical realities as poverty and work because I believe with Bakhtin (1993) that the word is an act, and that acts have meaning through words. This realization led Bakhtin (1984b) to posit that, “to be means to communicate” (p. 287). I reconcile the two—the simultaneous symbolic and corporeal nature of lived reality—by believing with Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) that “the relationship between discourse and the material world is dialectical—discourse is fundamentally material, while the material world is discursively constructed” (p. 117). In order to investigate the discursive and material construction of my theme I focused on the language, the stories, the discourses, and the symbol use of a variety of stakeholders and organizations involved in it as they intersect and mingle in dialogue with each other. My focus was on language, but my investigation aims to shed light on the material and discursive making and remaking of “poverty” and “work” for and among participants.

This is an attempt to better understand the way participants construct and manage meaning within the tension-filled, often unruly, yet rule-bound cacophony of languages, discursive dialects, ideolects, words, and utterances that collide and intermingle in dialogue and competition with one another, crowd around the theme, and help make sense of lived realities. I begin this chapter by sketching some of the social landscape of the area and the organization, I then articulate my theoretical sensibilities as they apply to
this project, and utilize those sensibilities to read current theory and research that pertain to my thesis.

*Changing Patterns of Life and Work in Appalachia and Beyond*

Radical disruptions of expectations for life and work are nothing new in human existence. Famine, disease, and war have served to keep even the simplest pre-modern patterns of life stirred up (Diamond, 1999). Since the industrial revolution, however, and particularly now in late modernity or early post-modernity, the pace of change has accelerated. Natural and political factors are now further complicated by technology-driven global market realities (Friedman, 2005). We now live in a shrunken world where boom towns can turn into ghost towns in record time, driven by forces from around the world. Locally, these forces can seem more mysterious than ever, as distant foreign factors work to make some rich while others are driven into poverty. As argued by Wilson (1996):

> Today’s close interaction between technology and international competition has eroded the basic institutions of the mass production system. In the last several decades, almost all of the improvements in productivity have been associated with technology and human capital, thereby drastically reducing the importance of physical capital and natural resources. (p. 151)

Although “globalization” is arguably one of the most important and contested terms in contemporary life, communication scholars have remained notably silent about its causes and consequences (for exceptions see Zoller, 2004; Holmer Nadesan, 2001). In fact, Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney (2005) urged organizational communication scholars to enter the discursive terrain of globalization specifically and work and (dis)empowerment
more generally “in order to deal with issues of social inequality, resistance, and processes of social change wrought by global markets” (p. 170). Meanwhile, related issues such as poverty and homelessness are scarcely visible in the pages of the communication discipline’s journals (for exceptions, see Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005; Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hopson, & Carson-Stern, 2004). Although sociologists, political scientists, and economists have entered public dialogues and debates about pressing social issues, communication scholars too often remain on the sidelines (see critiques by Ganesh et al., 2005; Frey, 1998). This dissertation represents my attempt to bring issues of poverty and work center stage in communication theory and praxis.

Traditionally, when one thinks about work in Appalachia it is natural resources and physical capital that come to mind. Coal mining, logging, agriculture, and other land-and-labor-based activities have driven the economy of the region for hundreds of years (see Shaw, 1996). Now, it is a “region [that] finds itself up against a changing world: a globalized economy that has drawn away blue-collar jobs and an information technology-driven economy in a region in which computer skills and high-speed internet access are limited” (Sewell, 2006, n.p.). Appalachian history has served to expose the region to the harsh side of globalization and the technological revolution, Yet, Appalachia is surely not alone in straining to cope with the shifting world of technology-driven market forces and the work they supply or deny. All over The United States and much of the Western world, manufacturing has given way to a new economy that has been a boom for some and holds promise for the highly trained and educated, yet is a bust for many others, particularly those struggling with poverty (Best, 2005).
Greater Appalachia spans 13 states from northern Mississippi to southern New York as it roughly follows the geographic footprint of the Appalachian mountains. Athens County is one of 29 Ohio counties that fall within Appalachia. The population of Appalachia tends to be rural (42%, as opposed to 20% nationally), white, poor, and undereducated. The college-going rate in The United States as a whole is 62%, in Appalachia that number is 41%, while in Appalachian Ohio it is just 30% (Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education, 2006). Approximately 12% of Americans live at or below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), but in Athens County, Ohio, the poverty rate soars at 18%, placing it among 10 Ohio Appalachian counties considered to be in economic distress (Appalachian Ohio regional investment coalition, 2006).

Chronic or episodic homelessness often accompanies abject poverty. Rural homelessness in Appalachia remains a salient problem because of a complex interplay among psychological factors (e.g., mental illness, substance abuse), societal patterns (e.g., lack of low-income housing), economic issues (e.g., livable wages), and government policies (e.g., deinstitutionalization). Although scholars, government officials, and other stakeholders struggle to even define homelessness (see Jencks, 1994) due to the complexity of the problem and differing ideologies and approaches, most agree that coordinated efforts across inter-organizational relationships are necessary for the survival and long-term recovery of people without homes (see Smith & Smith, 2001; Dail, 2001).

As indicated earlier, Good Works is a non-governmental, faith-based non-profit provider of multiple services to those in poverty in and around Athens. Good Works utilizes a network approach to address the diverse needs of its clients. Guided by
narrative and dialogic theory, this dissertation relied on ethnographic fieldwork to explore Good Works and its host environment as a “net of collective action” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 41) in order to: (a) explore the discursive realities of work and poverty from the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders involved in and around the parent organization of Good Works, and more specifically within the Good Job program; (b) explore the communicative dynamics of inter-organizational partnerships as community resources for social change, particularly as they coalesce around work and poverty; and (c) emphasize the fluid and unbounded nature of service provisions, organizations, and employers/employment opportunities for people in poverty.

The needs of people living in severe poverty run the gamut from food and shelter to health care, job training, and counseling. Working in isolation, agencies rarely have the resources to adequately address these needs. Good Works, via a functionally integrated network of vital partnerships, seeks to “improve the quality of life of those we serve by helping each person make connections with people, programs, services and opportunities in our community” (Good Works, 2005, n.p.). Good Works aims to help people (re)make connections, and in doing so foster systemic and sustainable change. In describing its community suppers, Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2005) argued that Good Works “helps to spark social change by connecting the disconnected to build community across different socio-economic groups who otherwise may never come in contact with one another” (pp. 209-210).

Social capital is the growth of social trust, cooperation, and coordination built through interpersonal networks (Putnam, 1995; 2000). Social capital develops capacity, engagement, and a better sense of mutual obligation among various community members.
The Founder and Executive Director of Good Works, Al Wasserman, remains acutely aware of the need for social capital, “The homeless have a need to connect … both among themselves and with others in the community. Good Works makes these connections possible.” As an organization, Good Works embodies that same vision as it partners with numerous agencies representing a wide variety of standpoints. Of particular note are the relations between Good Works and for-profit businesses in the area.

For years, Good Works has tried various initiatives to provide work for clients and to generate funds to serve them, with varying levels of success. Most recently, Good Works began an initiative with profitable local businesses to cooperate closely in training, enabling, and providing successful work situations and work support for current clients without homes and for former clients struggling to find and keep jobs. However, stakeholders like Wasserman, business owners, and the clients themselves tend to come to the dialogic table with radically differing discursive definitions and experiences of constructs like work, discipline, personal accountability, authority, service, care, and “bottom lines.” I argue that the gaps between the for-profit world of work and the non-profit/governmental world of organizations addressing the needs of the poor must be better understood and breached, as must the working relationships between organizations serving the poor.

I had the privilege of working with Good Works’ executive director Al Wasserman on the formative architecture of a program designed to provide job placement and ongoing job support for clients and former clients of Good Works. With the “Good Job” program we hoped to bridge the gap between meeting the emergency needs of the poor/homeless and sending them out to find work. Good Works identified that gap as a
treacherous one for the homeless due to lack of support to help them succeed and grow at and through work. We sought to recruit partners from for-profit businesses in Athens to work with us to provide job readiness help, employment, training, and support to the homeless as they work actual jobs.

Agencies like Good Works, the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, and others in the Athens area touching on work-related help for the poor, are rarely if ever equipped or able to follow clients into the for-profit world of work for extended periods. Yet, the workplace is where those experiencing severe poverty often sink or swim economically and socially. Through helping Good Works implement the Good Job program I had a good opportunity to both serve and observe the bridging of the non-profit/for-profit gap. Good Job was intended to be a partnership between Good Works and employers to ready people for work and support them as they endeavor to succeed at work while battling the many difficulties in their lives. For me it offered the opportunity to witness and study close-up the discursive dynamics and experiences of work and jobs from a wide variety of standpoints. When I began Good Works already had a commitment from a local pizza shop to implement the Good Job program, we then sought more employers to be resources for employment, training, and support for those seeking to re-enter the work world. The forming of these new partnerships, and the intersection, colliding, and dialogic intermingling of a diverse array of discursive realities around work and poverty proved to be a fruitful field for the exploration of my theme. From a communication perspective, the work-centered dialogues between those in poverty and Good Works, as well as other agencies, businesses, and individuals are of monumental importance.
Using the work of Mikhail Bakhtin as a theoretical backdrop, I explored how inter-organizational partnerships and interpersonal relationships are formed and sustained. Bakhtin (1981) wrote that, “actual social life and historical becoming create within language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems” (p. 288) In their innate vastness, words, utterances, and discourse all represent fertile, yet complex ground for the exploration of meaning, and meaning-making. As such, a discourse-centered narrative approach focused on and through dialogue can bring differing stakeholders together to make real gains in an atmosphere where “dialogue suggests that the world is co-experienced by two or more people. Each one’s perspective is necessarily partial, and each needs to gain a more adequate sense of the world by sharing perspectives” (Frank, 2004, p. 20). How is trust and cooperation fostered among individuals? What forces forestall the development of social capital? How do participants understand and experience self, other, poverty, and work through institutional rituals (e.g., Good Works’ Friday night community suppers) and in the midst of inter-organizational partnerships, and partnerships that span the non-profit/for-profit divide? How, if at all, is lived difference or otherness acknowledged? What does Good Works do, if anything, to cultivate productive interactions between people who may hold profoundly different standpoints due to diverse and dynamic social, material and political circumstances?

In order to explore these questions I took a narrative approach in hopes of learning from and better discerning the meaning-making of the vast array of stake and story holders gathered around Good Works and its goal of fighting poverty.
Arthur Frank (2000) maintained that stories are relationships that entail becoming more aware of, and more reflexive about, our own standpoint as we are exposed to the standpoints of others. Much of what we do when we put life into words through narrative is to expose our individual and social standpoints so that others can know us better, and so that we can come to know others and ourselves better by cross-exposure to various standpoints and their interactions. Standpoints are “self-consciousness about how the fate and choices in your life have positioned you in the world and with whom you have been positioned” (p. 356).

Standpoints are key to making sense of any narrative. Harter, Japp, and Beck (2005) pointed out that narrativeforegrounds at least two contextual settings: The setting of or in the narrative itself, and the setting of its telling (see also Babrow, Rawlins, & Kline, 2005). Both these settings, of course, also interact with countless other contexts, experiences, and meaning-making that made and make them what they are. Thus standpoints are always “unfinalizable and capable to outgrow” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 59), and are at the heart of narrative and the meaning-full social worlds we build through narrative.

Therefore, I feel the need to deepen and reflect on my personal narrative in order to give the reader a better glimpse of my standpoint, and to serve as a starting point for laying out my theoretical perspective on narrative. My understanding and application of the theory and research presented here are firmly wrapped up in the standpoint through which I make sense of them. This is also very true of the co-constructed meaning-making that engaged in with participants in the field. It is through and in the context of my
standpoints (shifting as they are) that I will find meaning in the narratives and dialogues I encountered around the theme of work and poverty.

*A “Balkanized” Storied Standpoint*

I once found myself in a “social change” situation that brought home to me the importance and subtle power of narrative and narration. I was working in a Balkan country, Bulgaria, where societal narratives about social interaction very much echoed what became known in the West as “balkanization.” Many Bulgarians recounted that their country was suffering due to the fact that no one trusted anyone else, and no one could be counted on to tell the truth about much of anything. In fact, much of society came to be based on the assumptions that everything you heard was a lie, and that you could count on your neighbor to double-cross you if she or he was given any chance to do so (the definition of balkanization, really). Four hundred years of cruel Ottoman Turkish occupation and servitude (punctuated by using Bulgarians against Bulgarians), and forty years of totalitarian communist rule that used similar tactics for control, were no-doubt responsible for much of the troubling and debilitating discourses at work in Bulgarian society – but that historical discussion is beyond the scope of our present one.

I was employed by a non-governmental organization to go to Bulgaria and use my resources to try to help the country in any way I could. When I arrived, the country was a few years past the fall of totalitarian communism, but had made little, if any, gains. No one understood where the country really stood, nor where it was headed. I knew for sure that I understood almost nothing about the culture (including the language), and so my family and I settled in a typical high-rise Stalinist apartment block in the heart of Sofia, to
learn. For five years we learned the Bulgarian language and culture from the ground up, as I taught English linguistics at a university there in the capital city.

To make a very long story somewhat short, we came to realize that teaching and bringing outside aid, advice, and investment could only help salve the surface of what ached Bulgaria. Talking about things like hard work, honesty, the importance of not using your power to corrupt, and the dignity of every human being, made good conversation in Bulgaria (which by this time had sunken to being the poorest country in all of Europe, passing Albania for the honor), and most would agree wholeheartedly about the importance of these virtues, but little change was happening.

I came to realize that in a country where words mean very little without “proof,” we would have to get more involved in action in order to really serve the suffering people of Bulgaria. Further, we became convinced that Bulgarians needed to be directly involved in action that might give meaning to “good” ideas like “tell the truth.”

We opened a business in downtown Sofia that we dared to market to our investors as a “business for social change.” It was through this experience that I was changed as I learned the real power of experience fully lived out through narrative and dialogue. We talked to our employees about doing a business that might “change our little corner of Bulgaria instead of just talking about what is wrong with it.” We hoped to do this by practicing things that most in Sofia claimed were better ways, like telling the truth, working hard, and not stealing – although almost everyone I consulted warned that we would be put out of business by employee theft and governmental corruption. These are the values that I, as the owner and manager, imposed on the business. We summed up our philosophy as “DHS:” development, honesty, and service. We would seek to develop
people first – both each other and our clients – even ahead of our own gain (even if it meant some monetary sacrifice, or more importantly in Bulgaria, giving up some personal power to others). We (I was the only foreigner involved) would endeavor to behave and talk honestly with others, again even if it might entail some perceived loss, and we would make ourselves the servants of others. Focusing on service might seem natural as the business was a restaurant, however, in a very power sensitive society like Bulgaria, what we call service was almost non-existent at the time, especially in restaurants. These were the values I imposed – but we all realized that I could not demand that everyone “buy in” to these values, as they were too counter-culture. We knew that most could not commit to working by these guidelines, but would gladly agree to do so verbally in order to secure valuable and scarce employment.

We were asking our employees to practice things that were in many ways outside their lived experience and socialization. For instance, there is an old proverb in the Balkans that says only a small child or a fool will tell the truth. There was also the constant example of communists and post communist thugs in Bulgaria that personified the “truth” that to get ahead means to trample on those with less power than you. This led to the often heard societal belief that if one builds anything of value it will only be taken away by the unrighteously powerful, and even more devastatingly, that Bulgarians were somehow morally deficient in their work ethic and dealings with others. Many religious leaders, politicians, and normal Bulgarians were decrying these beliefs and calling for change in Bulgarian society so that they might take their place among the nations of the world – yet these ways, these “truths,” were reinforced, entrenched, and rewarded in life experience that spoke much louder than words.
Into that environment we established our restaurant around development, honesty, and service. The business was designed to first bring more (or some) lived reality of the desired discourses into the lived experiences of our employees. Then we sat down regularly to talk about how it was going at the restaurant and what might be changed. In the context of a different kind of work environment – one in which all participants were listened to, hard work rewarded, and conflict worked through as an opportunity to grow, learn, and change – our weekly staff meetings were built around everyone telling their stories of the week. These weekly talk times were where the abstracting, the working through, and the making and shaping of meaning occurred from and around the once-lived event life we had actually experienced that week. To facilitate this, we ran our business by consensus – a consensus that ran on each person telling his or her stories of how they were experiencing our life and work together. These stories coalesced into an atmosphere of open dialogue in the midst of a culture that did not overtly value of dialogic vulnerability or flexibility. The combination of communication about lived event life, coupled with narrative, joined in dialogue, proved to be a most powerful force for change, growth, and freedom.

A country like Bulgaria – where words mean very little, or even the opposite of what they may literally mean – taught me the valuable lesson that for real change to take place the lived event lives, the experiential lives, of real people must be a big part of the dialogic meaning-making that comes through the abstraction and generalization of symbol use. The example was a slap in the face to my logo-centric Western world view which holds that ideas drive change. In Sofia, I learned that ideas, abstractions, and symbol use that contradict or do not resonate with lived experience can work to paint
people into a discursive corner from which the only escape may be taking on a load of
self-shame (for example, “honesty is best, but I am deviantly incapable of it”), or
“swallowing whole” the discourses of others that may later have to be vomited out in
painful bitterness as they do not coincide with one’s lived experience. Examples of this
would include Bulgarians hearing from the West that trusting others is better than
suspicion, but being burned by the application of that “truth” over and over again in their
culture, or hearing from Western experts in capitalism (they are rich after all) that free
markets will bring prosperity, but experiencing increased poverty instead. We saw a lot
of both of these in Bulgaria. At our restaurant we sought to continually process together,
through stories and dialogue, what enabled participants and why, and what constrained
and why. We then all learned and grew from those stories of lived experience as we
respected each others’ standpoints.

I never learned more in my life.

Key Tenets of Narrative Theory

My theoretical perspective on narrative begins with an idea I have gleaned from
both John Dewey (1934) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1993). In *Art as Experience*, Dewey
agonizes over the human tendency to separate, or distance, experience from the
expression of experience:

> Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism
and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of
interaction into participation and communication. (p. 22)

When humans interact with their environment, when an event takes place, that event can
result in an experience, and this experience lived out to its human fullness is
communication. To experience is to communicate, and communication is a fundamental part of human experience. I strongly agree with Dewey that our human (or modernist) tendency to separate and classify constructs has led us to create a chasm between experience and the expression of experience, when those two ideas might better be thought of as integral and intertwined parts of a bigger whole. A few lines below the passage quoted above, Dewey criticized the creation of oppositional binaries as having their origin in “fear of what life may bring forth,” and called those binaries “marks of contraction and withdrawal” (p. 22) from the true living and experiencing of human life to the fullest. If we have chopped up the process of human experience so that we can hide from some parts of it, or so those who favor some aspects may gain an advantage over others (a typical function of binaries, see Mumby, 2000) who might savor different aspects – such as “rationality” of experience over the relational and emotional expression of it – then we are limiting the abundance that full human experience can hold.

On the surface, narrative would seem to fall naturally onto the “expression” side of the (false) binary of experience/expression. After all, is not a story or narrative the putting into words (or other symbols) of that which has been experienced? The fact that this seems such a natural and logical conclusion may not, however, be as much a result of clever and insightful theorizing about narrative, as it is a consumption of the false binary of human experience being separate from the expression of that experience. Many scholars have critiqued the notion that narrative is, or can be, “true” representation of physical reality (see Bruner, 1986; Harter, Kirby, Edwards, and McClanahan, 2005; Mumby, 1987; Somers, 1994; Trethewey, 2001). My task here will be to explore and complicate the experience/expression binary in hope of gaining a better look at the
process of narrative. I deliberately contort my grammatical aspect here by mixing the ongoing noun “process” with what can be perceived as the very finalized “narrative,” rather than “narrating”.

I would like to state clearly that in order to explore the holistic process of human narrative I will also engage in some very “modernist-like” parsing of elements. My intent is not to reify oppositional binaries or to separate that which is really one, but I find that in some cases investigating the integrated parts of a whole does shed light on the bigger complete concept. Additionally, my personal exploration of narrative has been illuminating due to the problematizing of separating divisions that were already part of my thinking via my discursive experience to date (such as the experience/expression dichotomy), and such divisions must be explored. In the spirit of Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) communicology, I hope to look at narrative from the crossroads of what might be labeled modernism and postmodernism. In fact, I view the human process of narrative as a natural bridge between modern and postmodern communication theorizing, because any theory of narrative must deal with the very “pomo” ideas of fragmented, un-adhered, shifting, and fleeting “chunks” of original experience yet also include the more cohesive, thematized, and order-infused constructs of story, narrative, and discourse. I see this as a beautiful thing, since as Ashcraft and Mumby deftly point out, postmodernity is really just modernity that “considers itself” (p. 66, italics in original).

It is Bakhtin’s (1993) attempt to lay out a philosophy of the act that really helps complicate the seemingly simple experience/expression binary for me. Ironically, Bakhtin does this by insisting on a firm and grand separation between what I have been calling experience and the expression of experience. Just as in his theorizing about
dialogue – which many of us might intuitively think of as the *bringing together* of disparate voices – Bakhtin insists that maintaining *separation* is key (for dialogue and narrative). If two voices in would-be dialogue lose their separateness, their distinctive difference, then the promise of productive dialogue is minimized (while the potential for domination and control is greater than ever). However contrary to our thinking it may seem, to Bakhtin, difference and separation are the keys to dialogue. I believe he has a similar message for us when it comes to narrative theorizing. To begin to understand the human mystery of experiencing life events and expressing those experiences through the manipulation of abstracted symbols, we must keep the difference, the separation between those two things, clearly in mind. Ironically, if we lose sight of that difference we embrace a blind spot that will surely skew our focus on the bigger whole.

Bakhtin (1993) thus began *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* with radical statements about the existence and complete separation of the lived world of actual occurring events and the world of processing and articulating that experience in words, art, aesthetics, or other objectified units of symbolized culture.

Aesthetic activity is powerless to take possession of that moment of Being which is constituted by the transitiveness and open event-ness of Being. And aesthetic activity is not, with respect to its meaning, actual Being. (p. 1)

Bakhtin thus separated human life into two parts, two lives that must not be mistaken for one another. Further, when both are recognized, the relationship between them can shed much light on what it means to be human. Here again, when expounding on that relationship, Bakhtin stresses separation.
Two worlds confront each other, two worlds that have absolutely no communication with each other and are mutually impervious: The world of culture and the world of life – the world in which the acts of our activity are objectified, and the world in which these acts actually proceed and are actually accomplished once and only once. (p. 2)

Perhaps the thought of life consisting of two distinct parts, events and the abstraction (communication) of those events, is stunning to me because in my logo-centered world of linguistics and communication studies I have for so long been lasered in on the formation and management of meaning. Perhaps Bakhtin’s words hit me as a soothing corrective of a lop-sided view of human being-ness. Yet, two mutually impervious worlds with absolutely no communication between them? This is more than a reminder (such as that offered by feminist perspectives) not to forget nor neglect the lived experiences of symbol using creatures. This is taking it to another level – a level that begs we investigate the two lives of humans anew, and make honest attempts at understanding the nature of the relationship between them.

Two Life-worlds

The first life-world of Bakhtin (1993) is the actually lived, event world. The world in which each person’s acts actually proceed and are actually accomplished one time only. This is life lived through the “uniqueness of actually occurring Being-as-event” (p. 39). Bakhtin (and his translators) preferred to use ever-changing strings of noun phrases and phrasal adjectives to describe this life, perhaps to avoid boxing it in too tightly (or perhaps to mirror its unique, ephemeral, and once-occurring nature). Bakhtin referred to this world as the; “singularity of present-on-hand Being” (p. 40),
“transitiveness and open event-ness of Being” (p. 1), “Being that is unique, never-repeatable” (p. 40), “the lived act” (p. xii), and in many more ways that all stress the once occurring, never repeatable and unique events that form this important life of each human. In more context, Bakhtin put it like this:

I participate in Being in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner: I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never-repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else and is impenetrable for anyone else. In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located, no one else has ever been located in the once-occurrent time and once-occurrent space of once-occurrent Being. And it is around this once-occurrent point that all once-occurrent Being is arranged in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner. (p. 40)

For simplicity’s sake, I will dub this once-occurrent, unique, and unrepeatable life “Event life.” Event life is the constituent material of any organism’s interaction with its environment. As such, one could say that any one-celled organism can do it. Yet, humans in all their reflective and analytic glory (and sometimes hubris) often forget that this is very much part and parcel of the stuff of life.

I believe that it was this once-occurrent, irreplaceable aspect of life that had been neglected, downplayed, or dismissed in the lives of our Bulgarian staff. When the wall came down the attitude was that Bulgaria would enjoy Western-style freedoms and along with them, prosperity. When this did not happen, it was not the Western discourses that were questioned (they had, after all, been “proven” to be “true” by the wealth and power they had generated in the West), but it was the lived experience of our Bulgarian friends that were “discredited” or rejected. The Event lives of many Bulgarians were stamped
illegitimate and largely ignored. The same could be said for those in poverty in the midst
of American prosperity – it is easily assumed that their Event lives have little to offer, or
that they have been illegitimated due to personal inadequacy or choices. Bakhtin’s word
to my theory of narrative is that Event life is supreme – supremely human, and it is
minimized or reduced at risk of enormous loss.

Bakhtin contrasts this Event life with a different and mutually impervious life
“number two” that takes on a distinctively symbolized character. This is the abstracting
of events and once-occurring Being. We all make sense of lived experience by separating
it (to some extent or another) from any particular material instances as we use symbols to
describe, explore, share, contemplate, and deal with what occurs. This is life translated (if
you will) into language, and art, and any other form of human expression. This is the life
we make a living dealing with as communication scholars. This is human life that,
ironically, we can get our “hands on” due to its abstraction. This is life put into words,
formulated into thoughts, parsed into organized patterns and rules and conventions. This
is life formatted into a share-able form, made pass-on-able and enduring. This is meaning
socially constructed around, and in order to make sense of, Event life. This is the life that
Bakhtin often calls theorized life (living and working as he did in an intellectual world of
literary criticism), and that he warns must not be confused with what to him is real, lived-
event life.

In my reading of Bakhtin (and many readings are possible), he insisted that Event
life is supreme, because once we “perform an act of abstraction we are now controlled by
its autonomous laws, or to be exact, we are simply no longer present in it as individually
and answerable active human beings” (1993, p. 7). I suspect, however, that he wrote to
correct in his time and place an overemphasis on theorizing about life and literature that
may have assumed “true” representation of life events via words. Bakhtin may have been
providing a corrective into an over-abstracting period. His emphasis on Event life has that
same corrective effect on my postmodern, socially constructed, text-dominated world
view. I firmly hold that meaning and meaning-making should be of utmost interest to
scholars and social actors, but meaning-making is more than just social construction.
There is something outside the text. Life and its meaning are also as event-real as a bad
case of poison ivy. Meaning-making and life itself are Event Life plus Abstracted life, and
the keys to the mystery of meaning may lie in the balance of the two.

There must be a balance in our investigation and understanding of meaning in life,
a balance that respects and takes into account the importance of Event life as well as
Abstracted life. That balance will likely be different for each person and for each
particular context, in both time and place. That balancing will likely be shifting and
constantly emerging, but it must always be kept alive, because if one side – either Event
life or Abstracted life – is left out or downplayed, then likely the voices, contributions,
and meaning-making of some people will be downplayed along with it.

Keeping alive and negotiable this dynamic balance is what we were trying to do
in our business in Sofia. We sought to give everyone a chance to abstract, articulate, and
offer up for dialogue their unique Event life, including both their sense-making of their
prior experiences and of what we were experiencing together at the restaurant. This
dignity to abstract one’s life and have others let it affect their abstractions, and bring
about events in others (and in self), is what made the experience so meaningful and
powerful. Conversely, when this kind of articulation is muted – such as with those living
in poverty – the pain and suffering of “unsuccessful” Event life can be very oppressive and debilitating.

I will get more into that later, but for now let me stress the importance of both Event life and Abstracted life in all meaning making, and in the understanding of meaning-making (and of human being in the world). In light of my goal of investigating narrative from the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism I believe now is the time to sum up Bakhtin’s first corrective of narrative theory that may be looking too intently down one of those roads at the neglect of the other. Bakhtin (1993) reminded us that we must not neglect, downplay, subjugate, nor ignore the irreplaceable, precious, and invaluable world of once-lived human event life. There is a balance between Event life and Abstracted life, and tipping that balance too far in one direction or another has monumental consequences. Having stressed that balance, and in service to it, let us return to the relationship between Event life and Abstracted life.

**The Relationship between Life-worlds**

It is in trying to grapple with the relationship between these two Bakhtinian worlds of human existence that I probably begin to depart from Bakhtin’s ideas on the subject. For, as I have stated above, the whole life of a human would seem to me to lie in some (probably mythical) “perfect” balance of Event life and Abstracted life. However, the idealized human life is often of limited importance or help as we live our real lives, so I do not want to go too far towards trying to pin down exactly where this “balance” might lie. Instead, it is the nature of the relationship between Event life and Abstracted life that I find interesting and helpful to my communication theorizing and analysis, and I hold that narrative best describes the ontological nature of a relationship between Event life
and Abstracted life. In the simplest terms, Event life is life without narration, while Abstracted life is fully narrated – thoroughly abstracted through symbol use to the point of “taking on a life of its own.” But this simplified view obscures the real dialectal relationship between Event life and Abstracted life. Together they make up the whole of life, and it is narration that binds them together. Narration is the relationship between them. Better described, Event life is not life void of narration, event life is the stuff of narration, while at the same time abstractions themselves call event worlds into being. Abstracted life is not narration added to Event life like drywall is screwed on to the frame of a wall. Narration is the constitutive stuff that fulfills Event life and makes it into something fully human – into real life, whole human life. Turner (1980) claimed that, “narrative is knowledge emerging from action” (p. 167). Abstracted life without its proper relationship (narration) to Event life is not full human life. So what does the narrative relationship between these two lives look like, how does it “take shape?”

If we go back to Event life, to the point when an event takes place, it is there that both Bakhtin (1993) and Dewey (1934) identified a point of decision or of will on the part of the event liver. Dewey writes that when an event takes place it can remain an action – just a physical occurrence that is not really experienced to the extent that it would enter into one’s Event life. Dewey writes in somewhat psychological terms about an action being too practical or “efficient” to become “a conscious experience.” “It comes to an end but not to a close or consummation in consciousness” (p. 38). Thus, this action, this occurrence, would not be included in the Event life.

Bakhtin (1993) wrote much about the “non alibi for living,” which “transforms an empty possibility into an actual answerable act or deed” (p. 42). Both of these concepts
bespeak some gate-keeping activity, some volition, a choice of whether or not to participate, on the part of the liver. A choice that exercises will over what is let into and included in the Event life out of all that might occur. This is the point at which we choose whether or not we will open an event to narration. If Event life were simply and cleanly un-narrated life, then you may think I jump the gun since I just stated that this is the point for choosing whether to allow an action into the Event life. But I would argue that by allowing an event into our Event life, we are choosing to participate to the point that eventual narration is a given, thus the door into Event life is also the first step toward narration of our Events.

Once we have something in our Event life it is available (and nearly invariably begins?) to be narrated. The process of abstraction is underway. Bakhtin (1993) argued that “the simple cognition of that [event] is a reduction of it” (p. 40). Abstraction means that the event is metonymically reduced, and as Burke (1945) reminded us, with every reduction something may be gained, but something is always lost. Gained is the ability to relate the event to others, to generalize it, to make sense of it in the light of dialogue that is brought in by every word and every perspective we can get on the event. Lost is the unique once-occurent authenticity of the event as it was experienced in its time and place. Some of this is lost. Narrative abstraction will always be partial and indeterminate (Harter, Japp, and Beck, 2005), but we must not let the once-occurent event-ness of experience be too minimized or lost. For to be whole, or true narration that leads to whole Abstracted life, the Event life must never be disappeared. Abstracted life that has lost its narrative link, its narrative relationship to Event life is not whole, it is pseudo life.
Whole Abstracted life is Event life plus narration. Whole Abstracted life is experienced Event life that is made meaningful via abstraction. For Abstracted life without the constitutive presence of Event life is not whole, it is not one’s lived life, it is a counterfeited or gutted life, it is “less legitimate” narrative. Just as children were once labeled “illegitimate” due to the absence of what was considered the proper relationship between their parents, so an abstracted life without the proper relationship between Event life and narration lacks some legitimacy. One of the required partners has not taken his or her proper role, Event life has been erased or shrunken away (given an alibi) so that the life of the offspring – abstracted life – cannot be whole. Bakhtin (1993) wrote along these same lines that, “any thought that is not correlated with myself as the one who is obligatively unique is merely a passive possibility” (p. 43). That is, any abstraction that does not correlate with my Event life is not part of my whole Abstracted life. Whole Abstracted life is the product of the narration of one’s unique Event life.

Imported Abstractions

Yet, we know that not all abstractions stem from our own Event life, nor are “correlated with ourselves.” Furthermore, not all narration is the proper relationship between our once-occurrent unique Event life and our whole Abstracted life. Many abstractions, and/or narrations, enter into our lives from outside, from places and sources alien to our own Event life. Others have abstracted events and passed on “the word.” These borrowed, imported, or imposed abstractions – which may or may not be in the proper narrative relationship with our Event life – carry immense implications for human life. I will call them Authoritative abstracts. This seems a fitting name since they would not be able to enter our life apart from the legitimate door of our will giving them access
to our Event life unless they (appear to) have the power to enter through some side door they create by breaking/kicking in to narration or abstracted life. These Authoritative abstracts are like officials who deem themselves (often with our blessing) above the law, and therefore worthy of breaking Bakhtin’s (1993) “golden rule” that there is no substitution for Event life.

In that sense, these Authoritative abstracts can deny human beings the proper process of whole life – Event life in narrative relationship with Abstracted life. They can substitute for, or by-pass, Event life so that humans are supplied with an alibi. An alibi that gets us off the hook which demands that each human narrigate their own life (narrigate being my attempt to blend the abstracting of narration with the event-ness of navigation). Once we are “allowed” to import abstractions for “free” without being required to narrate them from our unique Event life, we deny, or are denied, whole life. This counterfeit process reduces or erases the Event life, and/or denies the human actor their right to narrate that Event life. An alibi has thus been imposed, or supplied, that prevents the living of whole life. The voiced abstraction of a unique human Event life is lost, or silenced. Other alien Event lives or narrations have silenced the precious, never-repeatable, unique whole life voice. A human life (or part of it) is lost. This is Bakhtin’s (1984) “absolute death, to be unheard and unrecognized” (p. 287). A permission slip excusing us (an alibi) has been provided that allows us to not fully live our unique life, and an alibi has been created that allows some (those with “authoritative” voices) to take life from others. Thus imposed abstracts that violate, or do not correlate, with one’s Event life could be labeled a violence.
It is obvious to see how the alibi of authoritative abstracts can work to take away the value and uniqueness that every human (via their Event life) possesses. The marginalized (those “excused” from whole life) have their Event lives erased (by-passed really) by the imposition of alien abstractions. Then the marginalization comes full circle when anyone whose Event and/or Abstracted lives do not jive with imposed abstractions are de-legitimized. So if, for example, the authoritative abstract dictates that the free market will always correct itself and provide plenty for all, and you find yourself out of work and/or in poverty, then your Event life is dismissed, and the obligatory narration easily ends up being that you yourself are abnormal, the kink that is clogging the “normal” abstraction of life from playing out as it should.

I by now means intend to imply that outside, alien, abstractions are always a bad thing. We use many of them to simplify and get by in life. I, for instance, have no idea at all how a television works, its workings are outside of my Event life. Yet, I have often watched television and been grateful for what I have learned (perhaps that a tornado is approaching my city). You could say that all education or loving parenting are authoritative abstracts imposed from outside. They can work for our good.

I believe we may import authoritative abstracts into our life and have it remain true and without alibi if the import resonates, or is true to, consistent with, our own Event life. Bakhtin, if he had delved into narrative theorizing, may well have disagreed with me here due to his staunch insistence on the supremacy of the once-occurrent, actually performed, unique act of life. On the other hand, Bakhtin (1981) argued that any event we make sense of cannot help but brush up against myriad other events and abstractions. It could be argued that no event stands alone just like no word stands alone. I hold that
when these “alien” abstractions reach us they may be rather helpful if they do in fact resonate and correlate with our unique Event life. They may be abstractions of an Event world that is not ours, but connect usefully to our Event life. They could be thought of as possible abstractions of our Event life that we just had not yet made. These, I think, would pass the no alibi test because they are true and consistent with our Event life. Fisher (1984) called this passing of the no alibi test narrative fidelity, and defined it as “whether the stories we experience ring true with the stories we know to be true in our lives” (p. 8).

This concept of narrative fidelity is of great importance, but I shy away from the term “fidelity” as it may again suggest a role of narrative to recreate, or represent in words some “real-world-ness” that is out there somewhere (much like high fidelity audio equipment seeks to do with lives sounds). To avoid the suggestion of representation, I will use Burke’s (1969) term consubstantiality, which means an area of overlap (see also Cheney, 1983). Narrative consubstantiality, then, is the level to which we find, in the imported abstractions and authoritative abstracts we “consume,” common ground with our Event life and Abstracted life to that point.

Just as Dewey (1934) and Bakhtin (1993) claimed that each of us has a will to decide what enters into our Event life, so we have the same sort of will that can control what it is that has narrative consubstantiality with our life and is thus allowed to enter into our abstractions and abstracted lives. This is the second big correction I see when trying to look at narrative from the intersection of postmodernity and modernity through a Bakhtinian lens. For in enlightenment modernity the choice of what has narrative consubstantiality for us, and what does not, was taken away from us. Absolute truth via
objectivity from the scientific method, the discovery of the way things really were “out there” from some imaginary point outside of human abstraction, imposed a priori truth that humans had no choice but to admit into their lives. Narrative, in contrast, by its call for narrative consubstantiality, helps put this act of admittance of foreign abstractions back within the will of each person. This holds a strong mandate for me as a communication scholar, for it is part of my job to help people not to take an alibi on important abstractions that may serve to hinder them. It is my job to make clearer the discursive realities of contexts so that the abstractions and the choices become more transparent and optional. For I believe that it is of utmost importance that we not take an alibi on our power to choose. Instead we must fight for awareness of our choices, of the abstractions that confront us, and of those grown out of our Event lives.

But how is it that we humans deal with the fundamental disconnect between what we have experienced in our once-occurrent unique Event life (that then narratively manifests in our Abstracted life), and those abstractions and narrations that have been imported from outside our Event life? How can this disconnect be reconciled?

I see at least three possible outcomes when our Event lives and authoritative abstracts do not “match up.” First, we can throw out the authoritative abstracts (and the authority behind them) and go with the narrated abstractions derived from our own Event life. This can be very difficult to do. One must have sufficient power to cast aside these authorities. Even when possible, the throwing off of authoritative abstracts often comes at a high cost. Many potentially valuable pieces of information, relationships, and much rootedness and security often must be forfeited. More difficult still is identifying these abstracts as alien to our Event life. They seem so “natural,” so obviously and logically the
way things are, and should be. They are rooted in stealthy disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980) and strengthened by hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). This overthrowing of Authoritative abstracts (and some authorities that go with them) can be done, but for many people and in many instances it is too much to ask or hope for. At our restaurant in Sofia we dealt a lot with this sort of grappling with authoritative abstracts that did not seem to match with life. New Abstracts like being kind to everyone and serving others seemed to be recipes asking for abuse, and so we worked them out (individually and together) by coming up with levels of “niceness” with different groups in order to avoid abuse on one hand and “fast food fakeness” on the other. Similarly, some of our workers had already rejected truth-telling as a Western ideal that only worked well in rich Western settings. We continually talked about experiences with truthfulness and many were won over to its virtues (at least in some circumstances).

The second option that can be employed to reconcile the gap between Event life and authoritative abstracts is to buy and embrace authoritative abstracts even if they do not correlate with one’s own Event life. When we do this, we end up with a fundamental disconnect between our lived experience and what we have come to believe is meaning or truth about living. Like the above example of the person in poverty, we usually deal with this disconnect, this dishonesty or unfaithfulness to our own Event life, by taking on a load of shame and guilt, much like I described in my Sofia narrative. Something about us, or about our experience, or about our narration of life is off, in error, illegitimate. This is no path to a whole and abundant life. Yet many, due to powerlessness or to the unexamined nature of the authoritative abstracts working in their lives, live much of life in this mismatched world of fear and shame.
Lastly, I believe we can (and must really) put the authoritative abstracts we encounter into dialogue and negotiation with our lived Event life. Here, we admit that both our (legitimate) Abstracted life and the authoritative abstracts that enter via “foreign” experience are living and possible interpretations of experienced Event life. We exercise some amount of will over both. The question to be answered is whether these abstracts hold narrative consubstantiality for us or not. Some may be useful to us as they ring true with our experience and other helpful abstractions, while others may need to be exposed for the alibi giving, non-consustantial abstracts that have imposed themselves on our lives and may best be resisted or jettisoned. Yet all are open for negotiation via narration. Narration is a relationship, a relationship between Event life and Abstracted life. Relationships are not systemic science. They are constantly shifting, open to re-definition, dynamic, and growing. As such, the narrative nature of the stuff of whole life begs that we keep exploring what is “native” to our Event life, how and why we have narrated it as we have, what has passed through a side door of authoritative abstraction, and how that has manifested itself in our lives, relationships, and society. All levels of life and meaning must be opened to this process, from the smallest bit of Event life, to the largest grand narratives, to the processes of entry, assimilation, and application of them all. This is what I hope to foster through my communication and narrative research and analysis, as well as in organizational research/praxis, educational, and personal life. I believe that this process of dialogue and negotiation is made possible due to the inherent nature and characteristics of narrative and narration that are themselves constitutive to the Event life/Abstracted life process of living. I will delve more into the process and characteristics of narrative below, as they are at the heart of dealing with human Event
life and the abstracts that enter into our experience and are expressed in and through our Abstracted lives.

**Meta-communicating and Theorizing Narrative**

So what is narration? What is this process we take Event life through that “translates” it into (or brings it into proper relationship with) what I dare to call “whole life?” Put very simply, narration is the abstracting of events via language or other symbol use via the addition of *plot*. Plot can be defined as the plan of action of a story. As a plan, plot adds the human dimensions of motives, goals, intentionality, and cause-and-effect sequencing to the recounting of events. Plot is cohesiveness added to events, usually by way of a chronology of sequence, character development, and some leap to causality, that brings a meaningful wholeness to those events (Bakhtin, 1984, 1993; Boje, 2001; Bruner, 1990, 1996; Czarniawska, 1998; Dewey, 1934; Ricoeur, 1980). Plot is the glue that binds events together into something we find interesting and meaningful, things we call stories, narratives, histories, and discourses.

A very important point for my discussion of narrative is that plot must be assigned to events in order to form narrative. Czarniawska (1998) put it well: “Plot must be *put* there” (p. 2, italics in original). Plot is not inherent to events, plot is bestowed on events (or the recounting of events) by humans. Plot is about interpretation, analysis, and the making and taking of meaning from Event life. Plot is bestowed, assigned, proffered, supplied to Event life in the process of abstraction that completes the “cycle” to whole abstracted life. Probing by whom, how, and why plot has been assigned helps move us to being able to identify imported abstracts and determine their level of narrative consubstantiality.
Czarniawska (1998) wrote that a story (something close to Event life, or at least minimally narrated Abstracted life, which she dubs “narrative in its most basic form”) “requires at least three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs” (p. 2). These basics do not give one much on which to build meaning or make much sense. Plot must be added to do that.

In narrative analysis then, it becomes of extreme importance how much abstraction has occurred (not to mention who has done the abstracting and how and why). To talk about the level of abstraction, or you might say the distance from actual once-occurrent Event life, narrative scholars like Boje (2001) have used hierarchically arranged terms like “story,” “narrative,” and “discourse.” Boje described his use of the term story for an account of events. Someone tells a story when they tell what occurred in the simplest of terms. The idea here is akin to the intention of the classic line of the poker-faced cop investigating a crime, “just the facts, ma’am.” The idea is to stay “closer” to Event life by minimizing abstraction. In actuality, this verbal recreation of “facts,” this story telling as uncomplicated relaying of occurrence, can never really happen – there is no such thing as recounting events purely with perfect representational language.

As cases like Rodney King evidence, a video camera may do a better job than words at presenting bare fact, but even a camera’s view is subject to such variables as angle, and lack of context as to what happened before, after, and outside the lens’s gaze (not to mention the viewers’ interpretation of what is seen). But when a human being tells a story about what has transpired, the event has already been run through all the human context that follows every word used, every related experience and story that this event
bumps up against, all the emotion and meaning attached to the event by the teller, and the
dynamics of the storytelling situation itself, just to name a few. This is what led Scott
(1991) to conclude that “experience is at once already an interpretation, and in need of
interpretation” (p. 779). So we must admit that we are not dealing with Event life in
narrative inquiry. But with the term “story” narrative scholars connote a minimizing of
abstraction. This gets back to Czarniawska’s (1998) three basic elements, which describe
pretty much what officer Bob Friday wanted from witnesses – a description of the
(mostly physical) situation before, what transpired as seen by or clearly evidenced to the
witness, and an account of the final result. A recounting of an incident or incidents that
remains relatively undeveloped as compared to a narrative, this is the idea behind the use
of “story.”

The usual usage of “narrative,” in contrast, is story with plot and cohesion added,
or better, enriched. Plot is what a police officer hopes to piece together as a result of
gathering stories, “the facts,” or accounts of incidents, from a variety of witnesses and
stakeholders. Many witnesses or informants might piece together very different narratives
to explain or describe the same event. The reason that an officer might ask for only story
from witnesses would likely be because she or he does not trust the witness to assign plot
to what happened (they may not know enough, or they may have motive to mislead).
There is much power in the assigning of plot. Let it suffice for now to note that
“narrative” is “story” with (more) plot added.

If we take language and meaning one more step into codification from story and
narrative, we arrive at what is usually referred to as “discourse.” I will use discourse to
describe the situation when there is further cohesion and stabilizing of plots,
interpretation, and meaning-making/management. It then follows that discourse takes on a greater political nature. As language/meaning becomes more fixed some will be served by that (and have an interest in further fixing or maintaining the fixed meanings) while others may be further and more “systematically” constrained by it. There is more political incentive here than there was with narrative and story because there is even stronger cohesion and more enduring and stabilized meanings that carry more fixed benefits to some, as well as posing more and longer-term threats for others. As Dennis Mumby (2004) put it, “actors and groups struggle to “fix” meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests” (p. 237). It should be noted, however, that much of this benefit and harm may lie unnoticed behind the seemingly “natural” way that language becomes fixed (Foucault, 1980; Mumby, 1987). For our current discussion it is important to note that discourse connotes a very high level of abstraction from events, stronger and more stable plots (still imposed from outside) and greater cohesion as compared to narrative. Czarniawska (1998) put it nicely in one line by writing that discourse is “formalized, extended expression of thought on a subject” (p. 66).

I give this quick outline of the uses of story, narrative, and discourse so that we can engage in meta-communication about the process of narrative and have somewhat common connotations in mind for key constructs. These three widely used terms are really getting at a continuum of “smaller to bigger” chunks that are more and more abstracted (bigger in that they are more adhered to other things, but not really bigger in size at all, perhaps even “smaller” in size as they are increasingly metonymically reduced from the Event life they come to represent). These three terms are by no means sufficient to describe the stages of abstraction, which are surely not stages at all, but something
closure to a continuum from un-abstracted, un-adhered bits of Event life up to large so-called grand narratives (see Lyotard, 1984) of worldwide human society.

Scholars like Boje (2001) and Barge (2004) have claimed that even “story” is too closed, too codified, and too adhered-to of a construct to use in the narrative analysis of human relations and meaning construction. For them a pre story “antenarrative” offers more room for negotiation and freedom. Of course, antenarrative could also be pushed further toward Event life and be labeled the unconscious, or experiences of the soul, or the spiritual encounter of life, or a myriad of other things. For me the spiritual word-picture may best sum up the “ends” of the continuum. Perhaps the first “traces” of our Event life are personal spiritual encounters with life, experienced long before we have a chance to sense them or to process and abstract them. Then perhaps at the other “end” of the process the largest grand narratives fade into an ultimate social, shared, and universalized spiritual state of oneness with others and the universe. If all that were somewhat true, then the continuum might really be an enormous circle, a big turning whole that would be best termed a dialectic. Perhaps narrative is the dialectic whole of life. This might be fitting, since narrative is the leap that one takes from unique one-time actual occurrent Event life into the abstraction of words and symbols, whereas Kierkegaard (1985) described the leap of faith as the reverse – a departure from the world of words into another magical dimension. Perhaps narrative is tied to the innate human call and ability to circumscribe states of being. Perhaps we really do narrigate our way through life.
Enough philosophizing. I now turn back to the nature of narrative that makes it the relationship between Event life and Abstracted life and enables it to be so powerful in making sense of and coming to terms with both.

Narrating as Sensemaking Process

There are three characteristics of narrative that I believe make it a “fundamental human way of giving meaning to experience” (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005, p. 4), and give and reward us for our “predisposition to organize experience into narrative form” (Bruner, 1990, p. 45). They are narrative’s negotiability, relational nature, and its relationship to (or the ability to deal with) disruption. These three characteristics are of course intertwined, inseparable, and interdependent, and they only begin to scratch the surface of the sensemaking nature of narrative activity. Yet, as I have reviewed literature on narrative, I believe that they give us a good picture of how and why narrative is so instrumentally and ontologically important and inseparable from human experience and expression.

Narrative is inherently negotiable. Much of this trait derives from the fact that plot must be added to events from outside, as discussed earlier. Almost by definition, there is no plot in events as experienced in a once occurrent time and place. Since that plot must be added by event experiencers and abstractors, then the plot (which determine the meaning of events in abstracted life) is changeable as those experiencers and abstractors change. That change can be across various and different experiencers/abstractors, or can be change in and around the same person over time, and with and through dialogic interaction with new events, abstractions, and those who live and do them. As Harter, Japp, and Beck (2005) put it, “narrative explanation’s of one’s past do not stand still in a
way that allows for certainty” (p. 35). Narrative is always on the move, and thus open for negotiation.

Bruner (1996) claimed that “narrative construals of reality lead us to look for voice” (p. 138). Everyone’s voice is as unique as their Event life, and narrative form begs the question of whose Event life is being represented (and how). Bruner goes on to posit that narrative carries with it “ambiguity of reference” that keeps “what a narrative is ‘about’ always open to question” (p. 140). Since we cannot know the actual events that have been experienced outside of our Event life, it follows that the voice of the one who represents them is of major importance. Ambiguity of reference focuses us in on who is doing the referencing, or abstracting. This leaves us with narrative that is open-ended and thus open to negotiation.

I argue that narrative is by nature open to negotiation as it makes no claim on “truth” based on factuality that resides outside the story. Bruner (1990) explained this well as “story’s indifference to extralinguistic reality” (p. 44). Czarniawska (1998) posited that “in narrative, the perceived coherence of the sequence of events rather than the truth or falsity of story elements determines the plot and thus the power of the narrative as a story” (p. 5). Narrative does not require the “empirical” outside knowledge of a scientist or “expert.” The internal cohesion of events is all that is required to make a story credible. Narrative does not require credentials of the teller that lie outside of the story itself. Thus, almost everyone has the qualifications needed to do narrative, to tell a story, as the hope to represent an external reality with our narrative abstractions is exposed as a myth. Czarniawska held that narrative more than compensates for its lack of extralinguistic reality due to its heightened sensitivity to internal linguistic reality. If the
plot holds together well with itself, that is what counts with narrative (Fisher, 1984). This demand for interlinguistic reality, or perhaps better put, interlinguistic cohesion, is what makes us look for voice (Bruner, 1996) in narrative. We look for who is providing the cohesion, not what factual objects are providing/assuring it, and since that voice has an Event world foreign to us, and we to it, the narrative remains open to negotiation.

This negotiable nature and the looking for the voice of the abstractor leads us to narrative’s relational nature. We are looking for the person – the whole life narrated via the relationship of their unique Event life and unique abstractions of it – when we listen to and tell stories. Arthur Frank (2000) wrote of narratives’ relational nature like this:

People tell stories to reaffirm, possibly to create, and possibly to redirect the relationship within which the story is told. Put more strongly, stories as acts of telling are relationships. Although I write of storytellers and listeners, I should refer only to the storytelling relation. One person may be speaking, but the stories are told with—not only to—listeners who are part of the storytelling. (p. 354, italics in original)

While our own unique Event life is ours alone and is precious to us, humans are social and symbol using animals, and as such we abstract in order to share our world, to get help in understanding it, to help others, and to just be heard and to hear. We narrate to form and be in relationship with others who are also experiencing and abstracting their lives.

Somers (1994) argued that, “narratives are constellations of relationships. The chief characteristic of narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network of relationships” (p. 616). The plot or narrative that we impose or add to something like
Event life is intended to connect the events we and others have lived, and as such, narrative emplotment is bound up in the connections, in the relationships. Frank (2000) claimed that the purpose of engaging in storytelling is relationship building.

The negotiable and relational nature of narrative serve to make it especially suited for dealing with disruption. If science is about predicting and controlling through the study of continuity (via systematic governing laws and constants), then narrative – which demands interlinguistic reality that holds true according to internal cohesion rather than outside “truth” – could be said to be about working with and finding meaning in disruption. Harter, Japp, and Beck (2005) argued that the “primary impetus to narrative is expectations gone awry” (p. 12), and Bruner (1996) claimed that “a narrative must run counter to expectancy” (p. 139) to be worth telling. Narratives are about making sense of life, and working out who we are as we matriculate through it. As most adults will admit, life does not always “make sense.” Mark Twain is supposed to have said that life is of course stranger than fiction, because fiction has to make sense.

Rather than insisting on clean systematization, narrative invites, even demands disruption and transformation (Polkinghorn, 1995). Narrative is the tool for dealing with the unexpected that life brings, for moving toward healing from life’s hurts (Frank, 1995), and even for providing some distance (through abstraction) for storytellers from what is painful or threatening (Frank, 2000). Bruner (1990) argues that narrative “specializes in forging links between the exceptional and the ordinary” (p. 47). Narrative “concerns disorder and the human desire for coherence” (Harter, Japp, and Beck, 2005, p.). Narrative offers much to those trying to deal with the disruption brought to their lives when the events of that life do not coincide nicely with “the way things are suppose to
go” according to authoritative or other imported abstracts, or just according to expectations. Things like poverty and unemployment are not suppose to be normal, or the way the “system” works. For those who find themselves in them, narrative is well-equipped to serve in both making sense of those situations and working to resolve it.

All these characteristics, aspects, theories, and uses of narrative only begin to touch on its full nature, which is deeply enmeshed in the nature of humankind. This is why we humans show a predisposition to abstract and organize our lived experiences in narrative form (Bruner, 1990). The study of that form can yield much understanding into human sense-making.

I have now given the reader a snapshot of my standpoint and experience, which has led me to a favorable bias toward living life with others in a context of storied realities that pay due respect to each person’s lived experience. But that lived experience is never isolated, but rather is an ever-dynamic co-construction of many experiences, narrations, and their interpretations. This sharing and interweaving of perspectives, this ever-overlapping and inter-affecting nature of narrative life leads us to what has been called dialogue with others. Dialogue could crudely be described as the collision or intersection of narrative realities. For a deeper look into the nature of that intersection I again turn to Mikhail Bakhtin.

*The Dialogic Nature of Storied Meaning-Making*

No story stands alone. Every word or utterance that can be generated is a product of the countless usages, meanings, contexts, and intersections from its history and the history of participants (Bakhtin, 1981). Words are crowded places, they are a sort of condensed dialogue unto themselves. By extension, phrases, sentences, and larger
utterances represent great throngs. Languages may be conceived of as riots—massive, uncontrollable, difficult to understand in origin or purpose, and yet powerfully charged with meanings and intentions. Languages are so big, they contain worlds. As Bakhtin put it, “actual social life and historical becoming create within language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems” (p. 288). In their innate vastness, words, utterances, discourses, and languages all represent fertile, yet complex, ground for the exploration of meaning, and meaning-making. As such, meaning-making through narrative is an inherently dialogic process.

In order to explicate my dialogic orientation to this storied journey I have organized the following into major headings that I hope both draw out and highlight important aspects of dialogue as it relates to this study in particular, and to human life in general.

Holistic Heteroglossia

My intent was to follow my theme through what Bakhtin (1981) dubbed its “dialogization,” that is, “the movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia” (p. 263). Poverty and work are experienced, thought about, talked about, and made sense of (or not) in myriad ways by countless social actors in infinitely differing contexts. These perspectives are further refracted when passed through more macro, shared lenses and subject positions like, “non-profit, for profit, (non)governmental, employer, unemployed, welfare recipient, homeless,” and so on. By looking through a lens of dialogic theory I sought to analyze and better understand the theme of “poverty and work” as I traced its dispersion in, through, and by way of social heteroglossia. Like water making its long
trek from mountaintop snow to the lowest depth of the salty sea and then back again to the highest altitudes in the form of invisible vapor, this theme surely meanders through many “rivulets” and is fragmented into countless “droplets.” I hold that looking at the larger whole of the theme as a composition of dialogized voices can bring greater understanding. As Stewart, Zediker, and Black (2004) reminded us, Bakhtin-influenced dialogue theory (as well those of Freire, Buber, and others who influence my perspective) is about investigating questions and issues as holistic and tension-filled. That is, to approach a construct of interest as broadly as possible, and also as something dynamic and emergent in nature (rather than static) as it disperses through the social heteroglossia.

To Bakhtin (1981, 1984) this heteroglossia, or more literally translated, “various-voicedness,” of any theme is a very complex and never-finalized matter. First, any word itself (which could be viewed as the smallest unit of a large theme) proves to be a large and sloppy unit for understanding and analysis, as each word carries its own dialogic heteroglossia. As Bakhtin (1981) put it,

> No living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized. Any utterance is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien judgments and accents. (p. 276, italics in original)

In short, every word is a dialogic mess, or more positively stated, a dialogic gold mine. Between every speaker and his or her signifier, and between every signifier and that
signified, there exists the slippery, knotted-up, dynamic milieu of previous usages, meanings, intentions, connotations, and contortions that make it impossible for any word to “fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads” (p. 276). If each word is shot through with so much history, heritage, and hegemony, then the mind boggles at the complexity of a language and of social discourse surrounding a theme. A dialogic perspective demands attentiveness toward the contextual framings and re-framings of meanings, identities, and social and organizational processes. This calls for a heteroglot investigation that gathers information about the theme from wide and multiple contexts and perspectives.

Tensionality

A holistic view of dialogic meaning-making holds that around any theme there will be countless differing perspectives and variations in and among voices, as well as in and across time. A plethora of voices constantly moving in time, space, and perspective will ensure ongoing tension. Dialogic theory and practice call for embracing, celebrating, and investigating that inevitable and indefatigable tension as the very source and impetus for generative growth and change. Human language and language use (communication), although bound by rules and convention, is generative (Chomsky, 1965). Burke (1965) wrote that “though the materials of experience are established, we are poetic in our rearrangement of them” (p. 218). Somehow, humans are ontologically endowed with the capacity and the calling that allows them to find, arrange, and utilize their own unique voice (albeit dynamic and tension-filled) within, despite, and even via the riotous threads of heteroglossia that inhabit every utterance, discourse, and interaction. Beyond finding a voice in the heteroglossia, it is the tension of so much “material” rubbing and competing
and colliding in heteroglossia that provides us with the equipment we need to make and
find meaning in life (Burke, 1967). It is not in the straight-forward exchange of clear
communication representing physical “reality” that humans form and reform their
identities, perspectives, and lived experiences. Rather, it is in the kinks, bumps,
collisions, and rubbings of various competing, colliding, and reinforcing voices that
meaning is constantly forged and reconfigured (see Peters, 1999; Kierkegaard, 1985).
Tension is a must for movement and growth.

Both Bakhtin (1981) and Burke (1965) used the idea of centripetal and centrifugal
forces to describe the inherent tension in language use. Just as every word or utterance
can be seen as a complex dialogue involving the speaker and all the extant voices that
have used and formed that word, so every discourse, theme, or language could be seen as
a dialogue of any particular participant with the deep history behind and around that
language. To Bakhtin,

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top
to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions
between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between
different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools,
circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. (p. 291)

There are powerful forces and forms that tend to pull us in and keep our language
or discourse uniform—in consensus with some centralized standard. Any language—
whether it be what Bakhtin called a national language such as Russian, French, or
English, or a “language” of discourse that surrounds a theme (like “poverty and work”)—
is subject to these unifying forces. Bakhtin describes these languages as “posited” (p.
That is, they are assumed to be proven as factual (the definition of “posit”). They are taken for granted as the way things are. Lupton (1994) described discourse as “patterns of words, figures of speech, concepts, values, and symbols, that is a coherent way of describing and categorizing the social and physical worlds. Discourses gather around an object, person, or social group or event of interest, providing a means of making sense” (p. 20). Discourses are patterns, and as such they provide a commonality in ways for making sense. They are commonly held ways of thinking, being, and communicating that pull individuals together as these discourses “run about” in contexts.

In Burke’s (1966) terms, humans are symbol using animals, and as such our symbol systems and our shared experiences do tend to make us fix some meanings, operate in some patterned regularities (of language, discourse, and materiality), and set up structures to enable us to do what we deem desirable, to constrain what we see as bad, and generally keep us from constantly “reinventing the wheel.” We are, to some extent, “goaded by a spirit of order” (p. 15). But the other side to this coin is the constantly generative, creative, poetic, and powerful agency that each person possesses as part and parcel of being human. This side of the human coin accounts for the centrifugal nature of language use. If we are the symbol using animal then we have all the powerfully poetic possibilities at our disposal that a generative and living language system offers – the combinations and nuances available to us through our complex system of sense-making are infinite.

Although more coherent and enduring “languages” tend to bring some level of discursive closure as they provide order, simplicity, and uniformity, they themselves are formed by the input of myriad voices, and are under constant revision and subject to
constant change, to at least some extent. Although some voices may prove very powerful at resisting change to discourses that serve them, even these “formalized and orderly” (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 66) centripetal forces are still words and language that can be analyzed and better understood by a look at the tension at work through and in their heteroglot nature.

For Bakhtin (1981) the utterance is the focal point where the centralizing and decentralizing, the unifying and divergent aspects of language converge. In everyday communication the centrifugal and centripetal forces behind our meaning-making collide, meld, intersect, and collaborate. Therefore, “it is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattles tendencies in the life of language” (p. 272). Around constructs like “poverty” and “work,” and around a theme like “poverty and work,” many centrifugal and centripetal discourses and voices make the same kind of dialogic analysis both possible and fruitful.

I do not entertain notions that any such analysis, albeit “concrete and detailed,” can be simple—surely not as simple as (only) two opposing forces joining together. This is not the prosaic merger of two clean and purely divergent and oppositional vectors. Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia in any word, utterance, or discourse complicates things too much for that. I would contend that for Bakhtin (and for me), all symbol use is saturated with multiplicity due to its inherent heteroglossia. So centripetal and centrifugal forces are present and powerful, but they are only one way of conceptualizing the more holistic heteroglossia that enters into any language use. Many forces and voices come together to form the “new” utterance or discourse being used/experienced in any local,
situated context, by a real participant. The many forces at work are not rigid polarities at all, nor are all the parts necessarily experienced as independent and in conflict. Rather, all this heteroglossia (via myriad centrifugal and centripetal forces) may provide interdependent and interconnected parts of a bigger whole—but a bigger whole that will always be tension-filled and shifting.

Burke (1965) attempted to illustrate this point by describing the orbit of planets. He posits that humans, being bound to language that tends to polarize, explain the flight of an orbiting planet as the end result of two opposing forces; centripetal and centrifugal forces. One pushes out and the other pulls in. Yet in “reality” Burke posited that these two forces are just a human translation—a way of putting the flight into words to try to understand it—when this flight is really a single unitary motion. As Burke wrote, “a planet does not continually strike some kind of bargain between pulling away and falling back; it moves in a path” (p. 93, italics in original).

Our sense-making, our synthesis, or our “dialogization” of the many voices involved in our language and discursive realities may not represent a process or an outcome as unitary and smooth as the flight of an orbiting planet. The point remains, however, that many forces are at work in the tension-filled formation, preservation, alteration, and/or destruction of what appears to be a solitary unit or construct like an utterance, theme, or discourse.

The very conceptualization of centripetal and centrifugal forces must be continually complicated by a dialogic perspective in order to avoid reifying deceptively oversimplified binary oppositions. In discourse, there are never two opposite forces pushing in two clear and opposite directions. In fact, organizational communication
scholars have worked hard to complicate such fixing of discourses (see Mumby, 2000). As Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) put it, “dualisms are binary opposites that are characterized by an either/or relationship. In describing dualisms no assumptions are made about interdependence, simultaneity, or possible unification of opposing forces” (p. 43). Dialectics are greased, movable, dynamic, relationships wrapped up in interdependence, simultaneity and possible unification—even as there may appear to be dualistic opposition. When viewed as dialectics instead of pure immovable opposition, the oneness of (seeming) opposites can be led into the give-and-take of dialogue as their interdependence is revealed. Many of the translations of meanings that keep some (people and possible meanings) down, and keep some up at the expense of others, are insidiously hidden in discourses wrapped up in binary oppositions. Things are discursively packaged as opposing opposites like mind/body, feminine/masculine, qualitative/quantitative, culture/nature, top-down/bottom-up, rational/emotional, or even poverty/work. What is often masked behind such binary oppositions is the fixing, or the attempt at fixing, language as it serves the interests of some and may harm others. A frozen translation of meaning is a prison sentence in the penitentiary of immovable trained incapacities—the term Burke (1965) used to describe routine-induced human disability to find new and better ways of being, knowing, and doing. Binaries serve to codify constructs into a separation of what is possible, and this often ends up in a binary between a “god” term and a “devil” term. Such conditions are antithetical to dialogue. Binaries put forth two possibilities and in doing so linguistically erases other possibilities, or even combinations of the two that are granted.
I see at least three major problems with the binary oppositions that dialogism critiques and complicates. First, one side of the duality is usually favored while the other is marginalized. As Buzzanell (1994) stated, “we are unlikely to re-vision the gray areas between thematic dualities if one side is continually rendered unimportant” (p. 344). When some meanings or perspectives are marginalized those voices are lost and dialogue deteriorated. Second, in a binary only 2 choices are possible— it is “either/or”— which is often a repression of the real options and possibilities within complicated human interactivity. Unfortunately, that activity is often simplified to an “either/or” that masks the interconnected relationships of opposites, or the myriad of choices that might be available if the relationship is seen as the push and pull of a living dialectic rather than a stiff choice of black or white. Dialogue brings a “both/and” perspective derived from interdependence. Third, a focus on 2 points tends to take our eyes off of the other active parameters/constructs that may be, or should be in play, or focused on. For example, the radical or second wave feminist focus on men and women, feminism and masculinity, served to push into the dark the very real struggles and domination that exist around class and race, and that deeply oppress many women and men alike. As Burke (1965) wrote, “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (p. 49), and when seeing through the very oversimplified lenses of a binary we are blinded to much of what should be dragged out into the light of contemplation and deliberation. A holistic dialogic perspective can serve to hear the discourses of the pertinent constructs that may lay outside the visible binary, but are important parts of the meaning of the situation.

Bakhtin’s theoretical perspective of dialogue comes out of a context more focused on language in the linguistic sense rather than discursively. For him the centrifugal and
centripetal forces of language were relatively identifiable (though still complex and ever-emergent). The centralized form of language in Bakhtin’s theorizing was a well explicated and clearly prescribed national language, or at least a high-prestige and clearly discernable dialect of a national language. In discursive work, however, even the most powerful, dominant, and controlling discourses may owe much of their power to control to their stealthy lack of overt identification (see Foucault, 1980, on disciplinary power). These centripetal discourses get little conscious attention as they, by definition, seem to be the natural way things are. So for discourses the biggest challenge may lie in the fact that neither poll of the tension-filled nature of language have been clearly mapped, or “grammared.”

Yet, I would posit that the less overt nature of discursive language works to make the power of Bakhtinian dialogic analysis all the much richer. One advantage is that it is much less tempting, or possible, to set up false binary oppositions. Although centripetal and centrifugal forces are surely at work all around a theme like “poverty and work,” I would contend that the absence of a “received pronunciation” (that is, a particular dialect that has been officially sanctioned by the highest powers) makes for a discursive arena all the much more in need of holistic dialogic identifications, analysis, and the culling out of common and disparate threads and tendencies. In the exploration of “poverty and work” in my context I had no map of the South Pole from which to compare and contrast the North Pole. I had to explore them both, hear the voice of each participant that is helping to form and resist those poles, help explicate the resonances and the dissonances in and among those voices, and hopefully spur others on to explore in more depth after me. That is a fair description of a dialogic approach.
Dialogue, or the investigation of the tension-filled “dialogization” of a theme like mine, thus becomes “both the means of analysis and the means of intervention” (Goodall & Kellet, 2004, p. 163) as it hopefully leads to better understanding and more questioning by enabling all involved toward more complex thinking (see DeTurk, 2006). Tension is a dialogic opportunity for growth, for deeper understanding, and for dialogic re-making that, “embraces contradiction as an important resource for understanding lived experiences, theory development, and praxis” (Harter, 2004, p. 422).

In dialogue there is an affirmation of the tension that comes from difference. “Dialogue suggests that the world is coexperienced by two or more people. Each one’s perspective is necessarily partial, and each needs to gain a more adequate sense of the world by sharing perspectives” (Frank, 2004, p. 20). Difference is affirmed as the ontological stuff of change. But difference is not enough, there must be the sense of respect and responsiveness to the other called for in Bakhtin’s (1981) orientation toward the listener, and Levinas’ (1999) alterity. This respect for the other demands reflexivity toward one’s own perspective, and a willingness to move. This sort of orientation at times existed, and at other times did not exist, among participants in my context, but I believe they influenced one another dialogically across their differences as they sought to address the problems of employment and poverty. All participants had a stake in the better understanding of this theme. It is my hope that their differences facilitated real movement and better understanding. Toward this end, I see at least three obvious “levels” of dialogue in the field context I explored.
First, as discussed above, the language of each participant, of each and every perspective, and indeed, of each and every word, is a complex dialogue unto itself. The dialogized word or theme demands a deep look at the enveloping context of participants, utterances, and relations. Here is where Bakhtin blows the myth of individualism out of the proverbial water. Even within the words and perspectives of any one stakeholder a heteroglot dialogue of discourse past and present is playing out. For me, Bakhtinian dialogue transforms the “I” and “Thou” of Buber (1958/1970) forever and constantly into slightly more realistic plurals; exposed as “Is” (read as the plural form or “I”) and “thous.” The myth of individualism is powerful in what Deetz and Simpson (2004) claimed is the everyday conception of dialogue that gives a “false sense of the individual as fixed and knowable, and as the originator of meaning” (p. 142). Thus, a Bakhtinian view of the dialogized “individual” calls for and makes appropriate a dialogic investigation of the discursive world of any and all stakeholders.

Second, the perspectives and “discursive dialects” of each participant entered into dialogue with those of the other dialects and perspectives I investigated. For Bakhtin (1981), difference between participants and their perspectives is a must for true dialogue, and that dialogue takes place in the space between them as they experience a bit of the perspective of the other. An utterance is always “oriented toward the listener and his answer” (p. 280). There is no “I” without the other, or the “you” (Buber, 1958/1970). Dialogue requires what Heath (2006) called a “mutuality of regard and interest” (p. 346), and Kersten (2006) dubbed “recognition” (p. 362) of the other. If these exist, then in the space between two perspectives each provides for the other “new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own” (Bakhtin, 1984,
Murray (2004) contended that the “self” in dialogue needs the disruption of the other, just as the “other” needs supplication to bring new insight. In this spirit, Deetz and Simpson (2004) claimed that true dialogue is not really about self expression, but about self destruction. Although we do not throw our “selves” into the “space between” when we are in dialogue, what happens there can have powerful and profound effects on us as participants.

Even as she studied the twisting of seemingly dialogic rhetoric in the service of power, Zoller (2004) wrote that:

Dialogue involves heteroglossia, a plurality not just of voices but of relationships that acknowledge difference. Dialogue requires collaboration that does not rule out disagreement and debate but presumes a focus on joint sense making and a willingness to be vulnerable to being changed through the interaction. (p. 214)

Difference (such as those forming the standpoints on which our personal and social narratives rest) is essential to dialogue (see Todorov, 1984; Levinas, 1999) as it provides the “space between” that dialogue demands. Pearce and Pearce (2004) posit that “the defining characteristic of dialogue is holding one’s own position but allowing others the space to hold theirs” while all participants “are profoundly open to hearing others’ positions without needing to oppose or assimilate them” (p. 45). Across the distance between, there must be a granting of value and authority to the voice and perspective of the other, and a realization that self and other are forever “unfinalizable, and capable to outgrow” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 59). Something new and unanticipated may arise out of the dialogic “space between;” something that was neither brought nor owned by any participant prior to the dialogue. “Communication in its dialogic form is productive rather
than reproductive” (Deetz and Simpson, 2004, p. 143). I am hopeful that we brought about such dialogic production among the many stakeholders involved around my theme.

Lastly, as a result of the third layer of dialogue I observed, all the voices I encountered in my research entered into dialogic interaction with my voice. Mine was a kind of authorial voice which forms what Bakhtin (1981) called the “framing context that hews out the rough outlines of someone else’s speech, and carves the image of a language out of the raw empirical data.” (p. 358). What I found in my research investigations was in dialogic interaction, in the push and pull of centripetal and centrifugal forces, with my perspective and voice as an “outsider within,” whose standpoints sometimes differed radically from those I encountered. I hope that I fairly and helpfully “framed their speech and created perspective for it; separating light from shadow, and creating the situation and conditions necessary for it to sound” (p. 358).

Of course, some of the voices I encountered did not readily see the partiality of their perspective, nor sense their need for the perspectives of others that might give them a better sense of the world. The voices of some participants will always reside behind carefully erected “circles of certainty” (Freire, 1070, p. 20) that defend against dialogue (see DeTurk, 2006; Fraser, 1992; Geist and Dreyer, 1993; Zoller, 2004). It was my job to join even these voices into the bigger dialogic milieu as I explored my large and multifaceted theme. I hope that as I explored, analyzed, and represented the theme of poverty and work in this complex context, rich with many perspectives, that all of these types of dialogic encounters bear witness to the claim that, “outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7).
Dialogue and Organizational Communication Research

What might such a dialogic orientation to communication studies look like when applied to a specific research project and context such as mine? How can dialogic theory be applied and explored in the field? Deetz (2001) placed dialogic (or postmodern) research at the intersection of what he dubs local/emergent and dissensus perspectives and practices. A local/emergent research perspective insists that the language that gets used and the questions that are raised and investigated arise from the language of those in the setting. Dialogic work shares this perspective with interpretive research. The dissensus aspect of dialogic research pertains to its relation to dominant social discourse. While favoring and using local conceptions, language, and problem statements, the dialogic is not trying to get the language or discourse “right” according to the use and meaning-making of the local group (as might a more purely interpretive approach). Rather, dialogic research represents dissensus as it constantly insists that the local language resists codification and normatization as it is in constant flux (along with its users and context), constantly deconstructing and re-generating new identities, meanings, subjectivities, and relations; and doing all that in diverse and creative ways (even as it operates among local perspectives within the local perspective). Therefore, the dialogic perspective expects and celebrates paradox, conflict, and the human mystery that allow for new and changing language systems with every encounter, situation, and interaction.

Deetz (2001) stated that for a dialogic perspective the ultimate fear is “discursive closure” (p. 17), as that brings an end to all the deconstructive generation. This generative capacity is what Deetz called “the ability to challenge guiding assumptions, values, social practices, and routines” (p. 15). The dialogic perspective holds that fixing (or freezing) of
enduring language systems is what has given us a skewed view of human communication. This echoes Bakhtin’s (1984) “unfinalizable and capable to outgrow” (p. 59). In Deetz’s (2001) conception this is dissensus, which he characterizes as valuing tension and conflict as the more natural state of human communication and humanness—as opposed to order, which is viewed as an indication of domination and suppression. The dissensus of dialogic research looks for constant reconsideration and new insight as the outflow of the struggle of life, with the researcher as an active agent in that dialogic creation.

The local/emergent aspect of dialogue sees communication as situated, revolving around local narratives that “proceed from the other…forcing reconception and linguistic change” (Deetz, 2001, p. 12,13)—which calls directly back to the work of Bakhtin and Buber. Here the language, problem statements, insights, and what is paid attention to are “worked out as a play between communities” (p. 12), while theory is a sensitizing help toward insight into and about the emerging dialogue and the concepts and meaning-making it represents. The accounts and analysis gleaned from any local situation are seen as valuable for providing possible insight into other sites as well as providing “dialogic” tweaking or reconception of theory, as dialogic research is “guided more by concept formation than concept application” (p. 13).

Before I go on to look at research uptakes of a dialogic perspective I would like to add something about the relationship I see between that perspective and similarly emergent interpretive perspectives on communication and communication research. For Deetz (2001), the interpretive perspective shares the local/emergent aspect of dialogue, but differs in that it falls on the consensus end of the “relation to dominant discourse”
continuum. With interpretive work’s language/discourse–centered focus on getting right the local language of meaning-making, the researcher could be seen as seeking to come into consensus with that “dominant” local discourse. But I would hold that in starting with an interpretive approach that privileges and explores the local emergent language and narratives of a setting, all stakeholders can gain the awareness of the local language (“conscientization” in Freire’s, 1970, terms) that enables it to enter into generative dialogue with the local languages, narratives, and perspectives of others. The interpretive approach may be seeking consensus if looked at only in the most micro, local sense, but it can lead to dissensus when that better-understood local discourse is exposed to “other.” For me, the conscientization brought about by interpretive work aids the local language in being an aware “I” that has more to offer, and more possibility to gain from “you,” or that may be better equipped to resist the language of others. I contend that good interpretive work is dialogic. After all, “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). “The word in language is half someone else’s” (p. 293). Even the most “local” and seemingly isolated discourse is really in dialogue with countless “others,” from, with whom, and through which it is making meaning. Among us are strong and somewhat enduring patterns of shared language and meaning-making that an interpretive approach can uncover, display, and translate in order to bring them to the light of fuller consciousness. They are then available to be offered in dialogue where the “I” and the “Other” can generate something altogether new, something different, and even bigger, than the sum of the parts or actors who came together to create it (Geist & Dreyer, 1993).
If we look at dialogic research like that of Trethewey (1997) we see this orientation worked out. Trethewey entered a human services organization in order to "give voice to the submerged voices of clients in a human service organization" (p. 281). This is dialogic to the core- as it takes a multiplicity of perspectives and voices to have dialogue, and without the submerged voices our larger dialogue is incomplete. Deetz (2001) posited that the "hope" of the dialogic perspective is to "claim a space for lost voices" (p. 17), just as Trethewey sets out to do with her research.

Trethewey did not merely end up in her article with a few codified codes, or strategies, or identities that she observes clients in this organization employing. Rather, she concluded (very dialogically) that while "the effects and consequences of local resistance are hard to measure and predict" (p. 299), they (resistances) are in fact alive and well among these clients in myriad forms, and that in fact the heart of empowerment and change for clients lies in "the capacity to create a new definition of oneself" (p. 298). So the change, the chances for empowerment, and even for voices to be heard lie in the unsettled, the non-fixed, the constantly unfinalizable-and-capable-to-outgrow nature of people, language, contexts, definitions, sense-making, and lived realities.

Trethewey’s dialogic research began with a thorough and open exploration of the language and culture of the context. I do not believe that Trethewey was able to get at her “information” or view of this local meaning system without first adopting somewhat of an interpretive stance of researcher as learner, going into their world to piece together their language systems. Her methods bespeak it. She used “ethnographic interviews as the primary method of data collection” (p. 286). Interviews that let the “interviewee determine, in large part, the flow of the conversation” (p. 287), as she as researcher tried
to be “sensitive to each client’s unique voice” (p. 286), and in the final report “replicate the collaborative knowledge building” that had occurred in the interviews. To me sensitivity to their voices as the researcher replicates the collaborative knowledge building, is what the interpretive orientation is all about, but this research then takes it into the realm of complication (deconstruction) and change (generation) that is truly dialogic.

An article like Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hopson, & Carson-Stern’s (2004) *Organizing for survival and social change: The case of Streetwise*, highlights two “discursive moves” at work in and around an organization—organizing for (financial) survival, and organizing for social change/justice. These are two overarching themes that emerged from the discursive context and represent some centripetal common ground among participants. This study again “embarks from a standpoint that privileges the lived experiences of individuals” (p. 407), but rather than just identifying those “codes” and allowing them to become perhaps even more reified by placing participants in certain discursive camps, Harter and colleagues took a dialogic tack at examining what was going on in the organization. Instead of two defining and enduring codes set up in opposition to each other on a WWI-type battlefield complete with trenches and a zero-sum outcome where “the presence of contradictory experiences in organizing (and theorizing) are viewed with suspicion and as indicative of problematic reasoning, patterns, and practices” (p. 422), Harter et al. saw the tension as a dialogic opportunity for growth. Deeper understanding comes through dialogic re-making as she “embraces contradiction as an important resource for understanding lived experiences, theory development, and praxis,” where “Streetwise’s efforts at learning to live more
comfortably with tensions illuminates how individuals negotiate the complexity and disorder of social life” (p. 422). This “conflict,” and these differing perspectives are just the stuff needed to bring about life-giving dialogue and growth, so that no one and no discourse need be left as trapped or finalized.

This same sort of dialogic orientation or sensitivity is what led Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002) to be able to discover that in the non-profit organization they investigated volunteers were actually dis-empowered by the same sort of freedom and autonomy that other studies and theories had touted as being empowering and enabling to workers. Their study screamed the postmodern message that empowerment isn’t empowerment isn’t empowerment in all situations for all people—what empowers is fluid, situated, dynamic, and local, and there is much to be learned from every differing nuance of it in dialogue with others. Context and perspective (standpoints) are everything. From a dialogic perspective the discursive notions of what exists, what is enabling and constraining in and about what exists, and what is changeable in all that, are themselves up for negotiation, change, re-definition, and re-generation as they rub one another in the mystery of situated human interaction. Mumby (1997) put it well when he wrote that scholars writing from a dialogic perspective “demonstrate that reason and truth reside not in the representational mirroring of an already existing world but rather in our ontological status as linguistic beings who engage dialogically with an “other” (person, text, community, etc.)” (p. 6). In Burke’s terms, that engaged dialogue holds great potential to bring out the poet (who re-arranges) in, and among, any of us.

That sort of human rearrangement of the realities and abstractions of life very much affect the way constructs like work and poverty, and their relationships, are viewed
over time and across cultural divides. On the societal level, in the world of research, and in the everyday lives of people, grand narratives, conceptual narratives, and discursive meaning are constantly being made, re-made, maintained, and challenged. In the following section I take a macro look at some enduring historical discourses that surround notions of work and poverty, and at conceptual narratives (Somers, 1994) that have driven, shaped, and resulted from research around the theme and have thus influenced (and been influenced by) those historical discourses.

_Shifting, Competing, and Colliding Narratives of Work_

Conceptions of work, jobs, occupations, and careers have always been influenced and formed by deep socio-historical and material forces (see Clair, 1996; Clair & Thompson, 1996). Both labor, the toiling to produce that which is consumed, and work, the production of durable products (see Arendt, 1958/1998, on both), were seen as the lowest of human callings in ancient Greece and its descendant civilizations. But via the American pioneer spirit and the Protestant work ethic both labor and work were elevated to mythically high status in the new world. Those from Europe who were bereft of the entitlement of nobility or inheritance came to this continent for the freedom, the personal agency, that both allowed for and demanded that a person carve a life out of the land, and work to create something enduring. It was labor and work that _brought forth_ on this continent a new nation.

One could argue that no region of the United States is more rooted in labor and work than Appalachia, with its agrarian roots, traditionally low mobility, and historical dependence on natural resources to provide sustenance. But the industrial revolution is over in the West. Large industry producing vast quantities of finished durable goods from
raw materials is a thing of the past (see Nadesan, 2001), or rather, a thing we now import from “developing” nations. Gone are the stability, the security, and the mutual commitment between large employer and employee that a blue collar worker could count on in decades past (Ciulla, 2000). In place of signing on with a coal mine, steel mill, or factory as a new high school graduate and working there for life, Arthur, Inkson and Pringle (1999) argued that careers are now “enacted by workers upon the surrounding environment” (p. 12). Thus the “can-do” ethos of American pioneerism again places the responsibility and burden on the worker to enact, via personal agency, a career out of the dynamic landscape of job opportunity constantly in the shift and adaptation called for by ever-fluctuating market forces. Workers must adapt themselves to what Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle (drawing on the work of Karl Weick, 1996) called weakening employment situations.

“Strong [employment] situations are characterized by clear structures and salient guides to behavior” (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999, p. 13), while the new “weakening” situations are characterized by fewer boundaries, more empowerment, and a lack of clear and stable job descriptions and hierarchy of authority. There are clear advantages to such a shift from strong to weak (or “feminized” p. 13) work environments, as feminist organizing has argued and exemplified. Yet, the new job situations we see today in the West in many ways offer to the worker the freedom, autonomy and risk of weak organizing, without the commitment, security, care, and belonging that are also irreplaceable linchpins of feminist theory and practice. As Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002) discovered, sometimes freedom and autonomy can have a dis-empowering effect on workers. Many who are experiencing or are at risk of poverty may be in need of the
structure and stability that “strong” work environments offer. The question thus becomes, are workers (and particularly those coming from impoverished environments) prepared, trained, and ready to be such autonomous masters of their own employment survival?

Buzzanell and Goldzwig (1991) noted the shift from what have been called steady-state careers to more “spiral” or multichannel work trajectories. They astutely noted that while steady-state positions, where a worker might stay for his or her entire career, could be seen as dead-ends, some workers “may be fulfilled in the work itself and may be very effective at specific task accomplishment” (p. 488). Contrastingly, the newer “spiral” career is exemplified by movement between jobs/occupations with a stress on “knowledge acquisition, personal development, and freedom of choice” (p. 489). These can be good things, but may represent a rather high bar for those accustomed to and comfortable with the stability of steady-state work, or deeply acculturated to have one’s identity wrapped up in physical labor (see Conrad, 1988). Gibson and Papa (2000) argued that blue collar workers are socialized toward job expectations, and are trained for those jobs, over their entire lives (and even over generations of lives). Weick and Berlinger (1989) posited that the new multichannel careers develop, and I would argue demand, a secure and flexible image of self that is constantly open to re-invention. Buzzanell and Goldzwig (1991) wrote, “actualization of nonlinear career conceptions and strategies requires energy investment in self-awareness, self-development, metaskill, and value-alignment training during anticipatory socialization phases prior to and concurrent with organizational entry” (p. 494). One wonders where and how this training of workers will be accomplished, particularly for those in crisis and at the bottom of the pay scales.
Those in poverty may not be able to afford, nor have had the chance to cultivate, such secure and open self images.

Wilson (1996) has noted extensively how shifts in the economy of the United States in the last 15 years have worked to increase poverty and make it tougher for those in poverty to earn a living. For many decades immigrants came to the United States to fill the shortage of labor constantly produced by mass production facilities, yet today most well-paying jobs require high levels of training and education that these traditionally labor-based groups often lack. Part of the problem is that our public system of education was developed to “provide low-income students with the basic literacy and numeracy skills required for work in mass production factories, service industries, or farms” (p. 151). This is the sort of education that increasingly falls short of preparing workers to compete in international markets from a country that is largely post-industrial.

The United States is not alone in facing this tough world of international competition and increasing technology. Yet, I believe that research and theorizing point to a particular set of discourses, values, and attitudes about life, work, and poverty that guide, characterize, and produce the (United States of) American response to a shifting economic world of work. These discourses may enable some to better compete in a globalized world, while at the same time they represent and create constraints in the path of those struggling with poverty and work.

Wilson (1996) suggested that companies can stay competitive in today’s internationalized world by either improving quality and productivity, or by paying workers less. The United States (much more so than Europe and other industrialized regions) has by-and-large gone the low wage route, despite the social problems that come
from low wages for the laboring segments of a population. Further, since economic
growth has continued at a steady pace in the United States, it has become evident that the
rich are continuing to get richer, the middle class is shrinking (see Strobel, 1993), and the poor are getting poorer.

In the highly integrated global marketplace of today, economies can grow, stock markets can rise, corporate profits can soar, and yet many workers may remain unemployed or underemployed. (p.153)

Those at the “top” of the economic chain in the United States have continued to reap large profits, even larger than during the heavy industrial age of this country, in large part because cheap labor is now done for them in foreign locations that pay less, and may treat workers worse, than has been done for hundreds of years in the West. You might expect that this sort of massive and growing inequality would bring about mass demonstrations (as in France and other parts of Europe in the early 21st century) or government action designed to bring about more economic equality (as in Latin America during this decade). Yet, in the United States very little is heard in protest of economic disparity.

Equity and Equality

Kluegel & Smith (1986) concluded that, overall, Americans believe an unequal distribution of economic gains is fair and normal (see also Verba & Orren, 1985). Economic equity, meaning that those who put in the most should get the most out (Wagstaff, 1997), has been argued to be the overriding value of economic distribution in the United States. Equity is considered the standard of justice over notions of equality, which call for uniform distribution (Schement, 2001). Of course, it is no clear-cut task to decipher who really has “earned” equity, to assess who has, in actuality, invested the
most and thus deserves to gain the most. Deetz (1992) argued that managers have usurped the discourse of equity by taking the rhetorical privileges that owners once held as those who took the risk and deserved the lion’s share of the reward, when, in fact, workers could be argued to have more “invested” than does management. The discourse of equity comes full circle when it is assumed that those who are getting rich are the ones who have done the most work, or assumed the greatest risk. This may be the situation in the United States today as exhibited by public and political willingness to accept unprecedented levels of economic inequality.

I believe that the stealthy, largely unquestioned, disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980) of the discourse of equity was sunken even more deeply into the psyche, politics, and language of many in the United States by the decades-long cold war waged against Communism. Communism is seen as the grand experiment of equality, while at the same time it was forged into discourses of Americanism as perhaps the greatest of all un-Americanisms. Equality has become the disgraced term of the equality/equity binary that was sold into our discourse at the high price of wars fought, billions of dollars spent, and an “evil empire” overcome by way of decades of strategy and sacrifice. Equality was exposed, through communism, as the “gateway drug” leading to godlessness, broken economic systems, poverty, corruption, and totalitarian demagoguery. It is little wonder that we, as native speakers of American discourse, have put so much stock and faith in equity when the alternative has “proven” through recent history to be so destructive.

Whatever the causes, and they are no-doubt countless, equity as just and equality as dangerous remains one of the major defining discourses of both work and poverty in our culture. This Equity versus Equality binary through which we tend to view work in
our society no doubt has its roots deeply embedded in what may be among the biggest of all dominant discourses, or grand narratives, in The United States: The discourse of individualism.

*Individualism*

Individualism is basic to American identity. We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, it not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1994, p. 142).

Hofstede’s (1980) landmark study of more than 100,000 IBM employees from all over the world singled out the United States as the most individualistic society on earth. In the United States, individuals tend to show more concern for themselves than they do for the community (Noe, 2001). The individual person is the dominant unit of selfhood—the unit of identity and of action—far above collectives based on ethnicity, tribe, region, or even family. In the work and market environments, employees and consumers are expected to act in their own specific interest over the interests of a larger grouping. Consequently, in individualistic societies when one fails (at work, to find and keep work, or in anything else) it is usually assumed that the failure is due to poor performance, or personal inadequacy on the part of the individual actor. In more collectivistic cultures failure or poor performance would more likely be attributed to larger forces or to a misalignment of the task to the person or situation (Hofstede, 2001). Sevenhuijsen (1998) describes individualism by claiming that in such cultures the social contract “generally
presupposes a detached, self-sufficient, independent or atomistic individual, primarily engaged in pursuing his self-interest” (pp. 11-12).

The bright side of American individualism is that it has functioned to help provide the American dream of upward mobility to millions of immigrants from all over the world who were previously bound and restricted by their bloodline, caste, class, religion, or other group status. Freedom from the lock of group stigma, however, tends to put the focus on the individual as the dominant unit of autonomy and action. DeSantis (1998) outlined eight themes that comprise the American dream; freedom, equality, democracy, religious independence, wealth, the puritan work ethic, new beginnings, and the promise of consumption and leisure. What may be most interesting for my present discussion is that in giving one sentence definitions for each of these eight themes, DeSantis uses the word “one” ten times. America is a place where “one” has the right to be free to succeed, or to fail. These promises, or these myths, of the American dream are for individuals and are about individualism.

Fisher (1973) described the American dream as made up of two parts, one moralistic and the other material. The material aspect “promises that if one employs one’s energies and talents to the fullest, one will reap the rewards” (p. 161, italics added), while the moral aspect focuses on the dignity of each individual. Both are wrapped up in the individual, which holds great attraction for the restless, repressed immigrant who is ready and waiting for the opportunity to make something. Absent from the discourse, however, are any promises of help or support should failure or disaster strike. The inscription on the Statue of Liberty, inviting the world’s “homeless, tired, poor, wretched refuse” was obviously (or maybe not so obviously) understood to mean the wretched who were tired,
poor, and homeless due the scourge of collectivism, and who could work hard, take initiative, and have the individually-driven entrepreneurial spirit, talents, and skills to rise, self-reliantly, out of their “wretched” state. The goal of social service agencies and programs in the United States has even been dubbed “independent living” (Collins, 2001). The American dream seems to argue that independence breeds success, and success comes through independence. This is consistent with views of the middle class as those aspiring to reach the next level, and as those that Bellah et al. (1996) claimed to be most associated with individualism. The inverse may then be deduced; that dependence and poverty go together (see Nelson, 2002).

Viewing actions and consequences in highly individualistic terms, as is common in the culture of the United States, may serve to enable, reward, and build up those who are healthy, talented, well prepared, and well positioned. These folks often succeed, making them all the more equipped to go out and conquer the world and make things better. However, for those who are ill-prepared, are burdened with handicaps of any kind, who require care, or simply value a more collectivist approach (see Fletcher, 2004), the discourse of American individualism can be highly debilitating, and even damning. Individualism can be a discourse that discourages care (both giving and getting, see Frank, 2004), casting it as an aberration that “figures in politics as a handicap, as a burden or as a necessary evil” (Sevenhuijsen, 1998. p. 28).

This faith in independent individualism is a strong link connecting work and poverty in American discourses. For if work and career success depend and reside on and in the individual, then surely poverty is also contributable to the individual. Wilson (1996) concluded that “Americans remain strongly disposed to the idea that individuals
are largely responsible for their economic situations” and are “far more concerned about the duties and social obligations of the poor than about their social rights” (pp. 160-161, italics in original). Kluegel (1990) found that white peoples’ explanations of the gap between white/black prosperity, and for disproportionately high poverty rates among blacks, overwhelmingly centered on individual parameters, especially motivation. This coincides with earlier studies (see Kluegel and Smith, 1980) that found character issues (lack of effort, lack of ability, lack of thrift) to be most cited in surveys about causes of poverty, while systemic issues (low wages, educational systems, racism, etc.) were least cited. Research (Tickamyer, Henderson, White, & Tadlock, 2000; Wilson, 1996) shows that those in poverty also tend hold to the individual initiative paradigm when accounting for economic prosperity and failure. Wilson (1996) further claimed that this same lens has led scholars in the United States to investigate poverty from the viewpoint of individual differences, and for interventions against poverty to be primarily aimed at the motivations of the poor.

Structure and Agency

The rhetorical positioning of poverty as the outcome of individual attributes, choices, and responsibility has been shown by researchers like Nelson (2002) to demand much resistance and redefinition by those in poverty if they are to protect and build up both their self-images and their ability to survive economically. Another key discourse, strongly related to and, no doubt, stemming from individualism, that may determine the success of such resistance by those in poverty is the tendency to focus on personal agency (or action) over parameters contributed by larger structural forces. Conrad and Haynes
(2001) claim that “an action-structure dualism is the defining characteristic of modern Western social and organizational theory” (p. 49).

On one side of this dialectal coin is the view that favors the efficacy of the individual to act on and create society. Here, the social world is seen to “emerge through the actions and interactions of its members” (Conrad and Haynes, 2001, p. 49). People choose and act to create the world that they determine to have, with the emphasis placed on “subjective experience and voluntary/creative action” (p. 49).

The flip side to the action-structure dialectic is the structure imposed by social systems that do allow for some freedom of choice, but here, choices are always seen as bound, circumscribed, and restricted by situational variables. “The result is a complex set of constraints that determine individuals actions” (Conrad and Haynes, 2001, p. 49).

Many scholars (see Giddens, 1979, Dawes, 1978) have debated and investigated the interplay of these related and intermingled perspectives on the social world. But few would argue that dominant discourses of the United States hold true to their historic bias toward individualism by stressing action over structure when it comes to explanations, understandings, and policies surrounding social phenomena and problems such as work and poverty. In fact, the belief in human agency may account for much of the work-focused ethos of American culture, since “work takes on a greater importance in a society where people believe that they can master the material world and shape their own destinies, and less where they believe they can’t” (Ciulla, 2000, p. 37). In the United States we see individual action as the major determinant in economic success or failure, in stark contrast to many countries where “citizens favor structural explanations over
individual explanations for the causes of poverty by a wide margin” (Wilson, 1996, p. 160).

Burke (1945) purposed a dramaturgical approach to understanding social life and the communication that occurs in it, forms it, and talks about it. In this approach he stressed the massive importance of the ratios of the five terms of dramatism; act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. If we pay attention primarily to the scenes and agents involved in any discussion of poverty and work, we see how the ratio assigned to agent/scene determines much of the meanings associated around work and poverty. In the Gestalt-like handling of complex social phenomena like poverty and work, the “container/thing contained” (p. 3) relationship and dynamic determines much of how we will come to understand constructs and “realities.” Research bears out what I believe most Americans hold to be intuitively obvious; that when it comes to work and poverty, the discursive ratio in the United States is heavily weighted toward the importance of the agent, who is generally viewed to operate in a weak and background-like scene that can be readily manipulated through the exertion of a determined human will.

Scholars like Jimenez (1999) and Tickamyer et al. (2000) reminded us that during the mid 1990s when the Clinton administration and the Republican controlled congress set out to “reform” welfare (reform means to make better via the removal of faults/defects), the bill that ultimately passed into law was called the Personal Responsibility act of 1996. Thus, a strong political and social message is reinforced, one declaring that in order to make society work better the government should act to get human agents to take more personal responsibility to act on and take control over any pesky structural problems that might exist. Gring-Pemble (2001) pointed out that in
congressional rhetoric about poverty, those (who are positioned as the minority of cases) who seem to be victims of structural causes of poverty are talked of needing only temporary help and are deemed the misfortunate, and worthy poor. In contrast, those who are seen to have flaws of character or as irresponsible, are painted as being unworthy of help. These would seem to have committed the unforgivable sin of faulting on the more important, and less forgivable, agent side of the agent:scene ratio, since “most witnesses and legislators adamantly maintain that in the United States, self-improvement is possible through initiative, perseverance, and hard work without any public assistance” (p. 349).

DuGay (1996) posited discourses of entrepreneurialism around work that make success a matter of individual achievement largely disconnected from the structural forces of politics. Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hobson, and Carson-Stern (2004) argued that “debate about homelessness specifically and poverty in general continues to be primarily waged in terms of self-sufficiency and character flaws rather than in terms of structural causes for poverty” (p. 422). All this is despite research findings such as those of Weinger (1998; 2000) showing that even as young children the American poor (and those of the middle class) seem to be getting the message that there exists a “class structure that is powerfully determinative of career success” (p. 13).

Clearly, any political or social action aimed at poverty and work, and any research designed to investigate discourses of poverty and work in American, will have to take into account the strong tilt that our culture maintains toward the importance of personal agency far and above the influence of structural forces.
Public and Private

Deeply rooted in American discourses purporting that each person should swim or sink as an autonomous and efficacious individual in a work-centered world where you get out according to what you put in, are historical discourses prescribing what activities are properly part of the public realm of social life and which should remain shrouded in a private realm. A discursive bifurcation of life into two realms is instrumental in making possible the preservation of the equity over equality, individualism over collectivism, and agency over structure biases. For I would argue, and I believe it is self-evident, that all of these dualisms (equity/equality; individual/collective; agency/structure) are in actuality dialectics of human existence (as are public and private). All humans are at some points unable to contribute enough to be able to draw enough to survive (nearly all of us face infancy, sickness, and old age, for instance). By the same token, no human can survive and thrive as a self-sufficient individual, and at times everyone will face structures that are much bigger and stronger than can be overcome by any agent’s will or hard work. Yet, these binaries have survived and thrived in American discursive life, with one end of each being valorized while the other is vilified.

This preservation of unequal binaries has in part been accomplished by disappearing one pole of the binary into the unseen private life, while the other is publicized. Scholars like Habermas (1962/1991) have both described well, and helped to reify more fully, the historical bifurcation of public and private realms in Western history. It is easy to see how constructs like equity, individualism, and personal agency are both bound and essential to capitalist ideologies that have been served by and insist on a separation of human activity into public and private spheres. At the same time,
constructs like equality for all regardless of input, collectivist interdependency, and strong structure, are things that our culture equates more with the care and belonging we have come to expect only from the conjugal family. It seems that only a mother could love someone who is needy, cannot pull his or her own weight, and is not able to elevate themselves above that situation.

Feminist scholars (see Ferguson, 1984; Fraser, 1990; Hochschild, 2003; Lopata, 1994) have argued that the values of care, cooperation, and watching out for the subjugated, have long been hidden and dismissed into the private realm (with work along these lines considered low-prestige and poorly compensated). Shaped as it is by capitalism, the public sphere is, by contrast, one that calls for and demands competition among the able. In fact, scholars like Sennett (1975) have argued that the problem with the modern public sphere is that people drag their personal lives, needs, wants, emotions, and relationships into the public realm. The public sphere is a place for playing public roles, the argument goes, and not for care or watching out for others. The implications for those who find themselves with unmet or special needs (perhaps stemming from the breakdown of such traditional bastions of “the private” like religion and family), or whose “roles” may no longer exist (like factory workers or coal miners), are stark, yet to help them may somehow be a discursively prohibited perversion of a properly functioning public realm of human social activity.

In many ways the theme of work and poverty is a head-on collision of what have traditionally, in the United States, been activities that discursively existed in two separate spheres. Yet, I agree with Palmer (1981) that “the public and the private are two halves of a whole, two poles of a paradox that work together dialectically, helping to create and
“nurture one another” (p. 31). Any investigation of poverty and work must be sensitive to the historicity of public and private. Perhaps then the two can work together dialectically to better understand both the constructs and the lived realities they describe.

Summary and Research Questions

The discursive worlds swirling around huge constructs like work and poverty are immense. I have, above, tried to touch on some of the grandest of social narratives of United States culture that may have implications for my theme in this context. I did not, however, enter the context in search of these particular realities, nor was I on a quest to prove or disprove these or any other theories or hypotheses of poverty and work. I do, however, take the research above and the accepted existence and power of these cherished American discourses very seriously, and held them dear in my own cultural and theoretical sensitivities as I entered the much smaller world of my research context.

I set out to understand the lives of those who are trying to (or are helping others try to) find, obtain, and succeed in our modern American world of work, and who do it from the unenviable position of poverty. Many operated from the severe state of poverty we call homelessness. Most scholars and practitioners agree that such severe poverty is multifaceted in causes and effects. Domestic/family violence and instability, de-institutionalization of the mentally ill, substance abuse, lack of job opportunities, and lack of affordable housing (Dail, 2001; Jencks, 1994; Wright, 2005) surely all play important parts in the poverty and work picture being lived out by many in America. Yet, I strongly agree with researchers like Waldron and Lavitt (2000), and Miller, Scott, Stage, and Birkholt (1995) who called for inductive, ethnographically informed investigations and
interventions that “listen closely to the voices of clients and are responsive to their needs” (Waldron and Lavitt, 2000, p. 14).

Poverty, homelessness, and unemployment cause and are caused by what Lee and Schreck (2005) have called “disaffiliation” (p. 1060). People are separated, disintegrated, and disenfranchised from others and from larger society (see Warr, 1987,1999 and Jahoda, 1981, on how employment alone can help address the ill-effects of social separation). This separation is what Bakhtin (1984) termed “absolute death” (p. 287), something that no human being can survive. I believe that communication is an ontologically endowed cure for the death of separation. As such, I hold that a communication approach to the investigation of poverty and work is not only barking up the right tree, but holds the promise of barking in the right language that may be able to bring all those involved together to help better address the problems at hand.

In this chapter I have taken a macro approach to poverty and work in order to sensitize and thus prepare readers for the micro ethnographic approach I took as I explored the standpoints, stories, dialogues, and meaning-making of my fellow participants in Athens county, Ohio, U.S.A. It is not my intent to box anyone in with a priori notions of their lived event lives, significant narratives, or meanings, based on gross assumptions about Appalachia, about American culture, or even about the nature of narrative and dialogue. I hope, however, that sensitivity to prior research, to theory, and to a variety of historical standpoints (including my own) supplied me with ready tools, awareness, and discernment that aided in fair and helpful co-constructions of new narratives with those I encountered in Athens. I particularly hope that my investigation may serve those suffering in the vulnerability of poverty, and others seeking to serve
them through the collective action of agencies, organizations, and businesses, and through partnering together to better serve those seeking to get and do a “good job.”

In that spirit, I mapped out my project of inquiry around the following research questions:

RQ1: How do stakeholders from a variety of perspectives in and around Good Job experience, form, and re-form discursive realities of work and poverty?

RQ2: How do participants understand and experience work, poverty, self, and other in and through inter-organizational partnerships?

RQ3: How do various stakeholders experience the job readiness and work support program?
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

It is no small balancing act to lay out transparent and precise methodology for a proposed investigation that one hopes will be emergent and co-constructed with a wide variety of participants. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) urged qualitative research scholars to evaluate their work from various and alternative motivational and methodological standpoints, “including verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, an ethic of caring, political praxis, multivoiced texts, and dialogue with subjects” (p. 10). I believe that ethnographic narrative research has the potential to accomplish much good in and through all these areas, and did so through my explorations in and around Good Works. Ethnography strives to be holistic (Stewart, 1998) and open minded (Fetterman, 1989), yet can never cover everything, nor be neutral (Van Maannen, 1988). What I found, and the stories I tell of my encounters with others, are part of a much bigger whole, and are shot through with my standpoints, even as I labored to keep them shot through with the standpoints of those I seek to understand (see Moustakas, 1994). After hearing and experiencing their narratives I am sure I will never be the same, and I take seriously the power of those stories as I seek to convey their meanings to others, that they might also be changed.

As a report of my interpretive, ethnographic, narrative research, I would not want anyone to read (or read into) this dissertation with finality, as if I, qua expert, were summing up these people and this context. As all others, the perspectives and insights that may be gleaned from my research are partial and indeterminate, and represent frozen moments on lifetime journeys as well as relational dynamics of a certain present that will
never be fully replicated. Additionally, any way of seeing through and about these words and insights also represent ways of not seeing (Burke, 1965). For every human lens, standpoint, and focus inherently entails blind spots that could have, had they been illuminated, offered a different look. I attempted to maximize the breath and depth of my look into, and experience of, the field settings by using a variety of research methods, but no investigation can be complete nor definitive. As argued by Frank (2005):

The research report must always understand itself not as a final statement of who the research participants are, but as one move in a continuing dialogue through which those participants will continue to form themselves, as they continue to become who they may yet be…Narrative analysis can never claim any last word. (pp. 966-967)

The preceding paragraphs are not intended as a disclaimer apologizing for the weaknesses of my approach. On the contrary, they are my attempt to put into words the reflexive honesty of interpretive narrative methodologies. I hope my work reflects that honesty, an honesty that not only admits, but insists on and celebrates the unsearchable depths and complexity of human existence and social activity, and the meaning making that characterizes both.

Mason (1996) broadly outlined the interpretive research process as starting with getting to know the setting and the nature of the phenomena under investigation followed by an articulation of the intellectual puzzle, or what it is that the researcher wishes to explore and help explain. Puzzle is a good word for articulating the multifaceted and polyglot nature of both the social phenomena I encountered and the investigation of them. As Pauly (1991) put it, “the ‘something’ that qualitative research understands is not some
set of truisms about communication but the awful difficulties groups face in mapping reality” (p. 7). I sought to gain insight and understanding into the difficult mapping of reality done by participants, and the meaning making that they do, re-do, and un-do as they follow those ever-shifting maps. I then worked to capture and present that well as both a picture of participants’ experiences and as my co-constructed dialogic interaction with them.

This chapter is intended to describe my research design. I will begin with an orientation to my view and approach to interpretive ethnographic narrative fieldwork, followed by a description of the settings and participants. I will then explicate my methods of discourse collection including participant observation, in-depth interviews, participatory photography, and analysis of organizational documents. I conclude with a discussion of how I went about analysis of the discourses I collected.

**Interpretive Ethnographic Fieldwork**

Deetz (2001) described interpretive research as being local and emergent. The interpretive researcher hopes to “get right” the linguistic realities and meanings of the context and participants being studied. The researcher hopes to learn their language, so to speak, in order to gain understanding into their life worlds. When learning a language the outsider hopes to learn the meanings and usages of native speakers enough to be able to understand them and communicate with them. If this language learning is being done in its cultural context, then this “getting right” of language will enable the learner to get along and live life in the language culture enough to begin to experience it more first hand (as led by native speakers).
In the same way, interpretive researchers hope to enter into such a cultural emersion process by “getting right” the language of the native speakers. Thus, the criterion for the “getting right” of interpretive research is not some previously prescribed or generalizable theory or model, but the language, the discourse and the meaning systems of the local group that he or she is studying. In Deetz’s (2001) terms, interpretive scholarship is seeking consensus, but it is a consensus with the people in the local and emerging situation so that they (the researcher and the people involved) can together piece together the inductive “pie” that is a good picture, or translation of their lived reality and language. Cheney (2000) described it well by stating that interpretive perspectives have a high “regard for sense making itself as an object of empirical investigation” (p. 22). Sense-making is being studied in context. As an ethnographic scholar I explored how the people I encountered made sense of and in their context, what those sense-making processes looked like, what affected them and how, and what were the consequences.

One cannot learn a language-culture by simply studying words and sentences, one must learn how the language is used and what effects it has. Much of this is dictated by the standpoint of the users, both past (as determinant of the languages/meanings that exist today), present (how that language/meaning is working and shifting), and future (what that language/meaning can and is making people and contexts into). In other words, to learn about real people’s real languages of meaning one must experience them in the context of real lived reality over time. This brings my interpretive meaning/language learning right back to the narration described in the previous chapter, and to the standpoints creating and deriving from that narration.
Burke (1965) wrote that “though the materials of experience are established, we are poetic in our rearrangement of them” (p. 218). As an ethnographic narrative scholar I dig into what the pieces of that “material experience” have been and are, and how participants arrange and rearrange the linguistic and discursive abstractions of their experiences. This calls for “thick,” in-depth description of their standpoints, stories, and use of language—their language about their local and lived experiences.

This is not to say that interpretive work is just a matter of gathering language and narratives and describing and/or categorizing them. I set out to do interpretive ethnography, and ethnography in the classic anthropological sense is about description (from the Greek “ethos” or character—the idea being to describe the character or nature of something). But as the adjective “interpretive” implies, the researcher is involved in the interpretation and analysis of the language and meaning making—done collaboratively with participants. Participants share narrations of their lived realities and language as the researcher also shares his or her “outsider within” experiences in their context, as well as the theoretical sensitivity and experience that he or she brings. Together through all of that I hopefully was able to decipher, or translate the meaning and sense making going on in my study contexts.

Deetz (2001) described the basic role of interpretive scholars as “translating the interests and concerns of one people into the interests and concerns of another” (p. 24). To translate one must understand well the culture and language of the context – an author who is using language to him/herself “translate,” make sense of, and describe experience that is deeply rooted in cultural contexts. The translator must then be able to craft that understanding into language that communicates well to the culture for which it is
intended. To understand any narrative, and to translate well its meaning, interpretive
work calls for observation, emersion, and interaction with storytellers in their context.
This is the leg work of interpretive narrative research. Contextual involvement with
participants doing and communicating about “their thing” while bringing in theoretical
sensitivity, experience, and knowledge to illuminate sense making—for participants and
for other audiences.

Deetz (2001) put it well: “While theory may provide important sensitizing
conceptions, it is not a device of classification or tested in any simple and direct manner.
The key conceptions and understandings must be worked out with the subjects under
study” (p. 24). My theoretical sensitivity hopefully provided sensitivity for the research
context due to my exposure to theory (and then what I found will hopefully serve to
inform theory). Research thus becomes “an interactive process shaped by [the
researcher’s] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and
those of the people in the setting” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 4). This collaboration and co-
construction with participants (hopefully) gave me a picture that I could then
communicate to other scholars, students, groups, and of course to (and from) the
participants who are gaining meta-communication knowledge of their own context. I
strive for the sort of narrative ethnography that gains from and adds to theoretical
understanding even as it “allows [participants] to hear themselves speak their lives in
ways that may be new to them” (Frank, 2005, p. 971) and yields a dissertation that
“offers an account of how researcher and participant came together in some shared time
and space and had diverse effects on each other” (p. 968, italics in original).
Settings and Participants

The logo reads: “Good Works, Inc., A Community of Hope since 1981” (Good Works, 2005, n.p.). Good Works began in the basement of (then) Ohio University College student Al Wasserman who used that space to provide shelter for those experiencing rural homelessness. As the logo implies, beyond a bed and a roof over one’s head, community is the goal. “We seek to improve the quality of life of those we serve by helping each person make connections with people, programs, services and opportunities in our community” (Good Works, 2005, n.p.). I used Good Works as my hub to investigate the “net of collective action” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 41) that exists within that organization, but more specifically among stakeholders in the “Good Job” program, including area organizations, businesses, agencies, and individuals serving the rural poor, as well as those suffering in poverty.

Good Works is a faith-based 501(c) non-profit charitable organization “providing a care-community for the rural homeless and a wide range of outreach services to widows, citizens with disabilities, at-risk children, and others” (Al Wasserman, personal communication, June 29, 2006). Good Works serves the eight rural Appalachian counties surrounding Athens, Ohio. 85% of those served are residents of these counties, while 15% are travelers. Approximately 60% of Good Works’ clientele are male, while 40% are female.

The organization is led by its founder, Al Wasserman, who serves as executive director, and is overseen by an eight member board of directors. Good Works currently employs 18 staff and works with over 100 volunteers each year. 80% of the
organization’s annual budget of $500,000 comes from individual private donors and churches, while the remaining 20% is provided by year-to-year grant money.

Organizational literature describes Good Works as a “Christian community compelled by the biblical vision to love the stranger, defend the widow and care for the fatherless” (Good Works, 2005, n.p.). Good Works’ executive director described the organization’s religious philosophy as follows: “The organization takes a Christian world-view to the care we provide. Therefore, the staff seek to create an environment where everyone is treated with respect and dignity. No religious meetings or activities are required” (Al Wasserman, personal communication, June 29, 2006), nor are any formally held on site.

Good Works operates primarily from two sites. The Timothy House is the organization’s emergency shelter. The 15 bed facility provides an average of 4500 people nights of shelter a year to those in crisis. Stays range from one night to 120 days, with the average stay being 30 days. The mission, beyond safe lodging, is:

Helping each person identify the underlying problems that led to the situation they are in; helping them discover a starting place and empowering them with the courage to take responsibility for those matters that they can do something about. Our goal is to help our residents propel their personal growth through loving accountability which comes from participating in a community where each person makes a significant contribution. (Good Works, 2005, n.p.)

Good Works’ other site of operation is its Luhrig Road property, where the organization offers longer term transitional housing in its “Hannah House.” This facility is designed to give residents (usually ex-Timothy house residents) more extended periods
of stable living as they address the issues of their lives. The Hannah House grounds are also the site of the Friday Night Life public suppers offered by Good Works for the last 14 years (and noted in Chapter one of this volume). These suppers regularly draw around 150 people and are designed to foster interaction and community among Good Works residents, former residents, staff, volunteers, and a wide range of “friends” from the broader community.

The Luhrig Road property also houses Good Works’ administrative offices, a small gift store where items from developing nations are sold, and a one-room Bed and Breakfast business. Finally, the Luhrig Road property is host to the Good Works Transformation Station, a program to provide citizens in poverty with cars, furniture and appliances though an economy of time rather than money. Citizens are invited to volunteer their time to serve others in the community in exchange for items they need.

Although Good Works was at the center of the hub I investigated, this research was not intended to be an investigation of the organizational operations of Good Works, Incorporated. Rather, I used Good Works as my base from which to explore the inter-organizational and interpersonal discursive dynamics that some experience as they attempt to address – especially through work – the poverty they are experiencing. I have been granted access to do research to better understand the way Good Works’ clients have and are experiencing both work and the interventions, education, and training they have experienced.

Investigating clients’ experiential worlds of work and work related constructs is essential to help Good Works better understand where the real needs are, how existing and past programs have impacted them, and what remains to be done. This is the
inductive leg-work of research that many experts call for (see Waldron and Lavitt, 2000; and Miller, Scott, Stage, and Birkholt, 1995) and lament the lack of in the fight against poverty and homelessness. I believe that the opportunity I had to work for and with Good Works, and forming and implementing the work support program dubbed “Good Job,” offered unique access that led to new understandings.

That access brought me into contact with a variety of partner groups and lent me the credibility to research in and among various agencies, organizations, and businesses to find out how they envision creating a better “net of collective action” (Czarniawska, 1997) with others addressing the needs of the poor, particularly the needs that revolve around employment. I also conducted research into identifying and recruiting work resources in wide-ranging aspects of the public and private sectors who might be willing partners with Good Works in fighting poverty and unemployment.

Discourse Collection

I employed a variety of methods for discourse collection toward the goal of providing “thick” (Geertz, 1973) descriptions of my settings, narratives, themes, and participants. After obtaining permission from Ohio University’s Institutional Review Board I began discourse collection while keeping a complete research log (see Creswell, 1997) of all activities, and the time and spaces in which they were conducted. I was on site at and around Good Works for approximately ten months, beginning August 1, 2006. This extended period in the field allowed time to achieve a good level of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) described as theoretical saturation, in which new discourse and findings begin to repeat what has already been encountered. I collected discourse using participant
observation, in-depth interviews, participatory photography, and document analysis. I outline each of these collection techniques below.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation is perhaps the most commonly agreed upon and utilized investigative technique within the ethnographic traditions. Ethnography is “grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation” (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland & Lofland, 2001, p. 4). Participant observation is intended to give the researcher as outsider a (more) inside look into the context. By participating, or “doing with” participants, the researcher gets the chance to “study a scene from the vantage point of one or more positions within its membership” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 147). Participant observation hopefully leads to a “familiarity with opaque background knowledge and practices” (Pollner & Emerson, 2001) that is required to really get at deeper meanings and meaning making.

I enjoyed a bit of a jumpstart when it comes to gaining access, acceptance, and understanding into this research context. I entered into the context in and around Good Works as somewhat of an opportunistic researcher (Riemer, 1977) as I was a past volunteer and employee of Good Works. I volunteered at the emergency shelter in the 1990s and worked as a night shift manager for 10 months in 2003. I knew many of the staff personally, and had been invited by the organization to both study and serve them in their efforts to help their clients find, grow through, and succeed at employment.
My level of belonging at good works brings up the (dis)advantages of being an insider or an outsider when it comes to ethnographic scholarly inquiry. Naples (2003) noted that:

Advocates of ‘insider’ research assert that non-natives may be unable to gain the deeper understandings of cultural practices and beliefs that are available to insiders. Insiders have greater linguistic competence, can blend in more easily, and are less likely to affect social settings. (p. 46)

I agree that my past experience and interpersonal connections at Good Works helped reduce some of my linguistic learning curve and the affect my presence had, but this advantage was limited solely to the staff of the organization. I met all Good Works clients for the first time, and the focus on work and jobs in the setting was new to me as I previously served only in the emergency shelter. That outsider-ness hopefully served me as per the argument that “non-natives can be more objective in observing and analyzing social contexts and cultural beliefs” (Naples, 2003, p. 46). As the old proverb goes, the last one to know what water is is a fish. I believe that my position somewhere between insider and outsider allowed me access to study these contexts and themes with the flexibility to observe, experience, and analyze the discursive and material worlds I encountered from a variety of angles.

I was invited to fully participate in all Good Works staff activities, including staff meetings and interviews with clients and prospective employers (as agreed upon by all parties involved). Further, I was endorsed by the leadership of Good Works to represent the organization as I investigated its cooperative workings with other organizations and agencies. Management of all the for-profit businesses that participated in the Good Job
program also agreed to give me access to Good Works’ residents and former residents while they trained and sometimes even while they did their jobs.

I kept detailed notes of my participant observations as they occur, or as shortly after the fact as possible (see Glesne, 1999). I strove to use detailed language and direct quotations of participants in my fieldnotes as much as possible (Patton, 2002) to ensure that the information was clear when later re-encountered for further analysis. As called for by Patton, I recorded feelings, reactions, and any early analyses and insights in my field notes to aid in processing and making sense out of what I observe. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) describe fieldnotes as “accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an involved manner” (p. 4-5, italics in original). Fieldnotes describe what has been observed. However, they are not just logs of behavior, but should begin and lead to the analysis of what the observed behaviors mean to participants. Fieldnotes preserve experience close to the moment of occurrence, and are the start of (and place of) early, in-context, reflections, questions, and analysis. I first recorded fieldnotes in a field notebook designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, and then type out the notes later, as soon as possible to when they were collected.

In-Depth Interviews

Atkinson et al. (2001) posited that “participant observation alone would normally result in strange and unnatural behavior were the observer not to talk with her or his hosts, so turning them into informants or ‘co-researchers’” (p. 5). My hope is that through in-depth interviews I was able to include those I observed and participated with as co-researchers in this project. I tried to learn, understand, process, and translate the discursive languages of my “hosts.” They are the experts on their own lived experience
(Fine, 1998). I sought to start with careful observation in order to inform my choice of questions to ask during follow up interviews so as to get more pointedly at how participants understood, made sense of, and accounted for their worlds. I attempted to interview a wide range of organization members, clients, employers, workers, and other stakeholders involved around my themes and contexts. I had three general categories of participants: non-profit staff workers, for-profit business workers/owners, and the clients/employees of both. I had developed initial and tentative interview protocols for each group (see Appendix B), but deviated from them as necessary. As facilitated by my extended time in the field, I conducted multiple interviews with some participants – particularly Good Works’ residents and Good Job participants – as they transitioned across time and space. After discussing and obtaining signed informed consents, I digitally recorded their words, and transcribed those recordings for deeper analysis.

My preferred genre of interviews are those that are semi-structured so as to give participants the chance to express their experiences and tell their stories in their language (Jensen, 1991). I hoped to foster an emergent, unbound, and relational interview atmosphere so that participants were free to become co-constructor and co-authors with me (see Fontana, 2003; Trip, 1983). I wrote up protocols for each interview conducted (using the same protocol for multiple participants who are similarly placed and involved, such as for the three “care-giving” staff at Good Works), and these protocols proved to be emergent in nature—springing from my participant observations, knowledge of, and relationship with interviewees. Some helpful research-based interview guidelines are available that I believe set me off in a good direction. Madison (2005) called for questions designed to get at behavior/experience (to get at concrete actions), opinion and
values (to get at beliefs and persuasions), feelings (getting at affective responses as well as the sensory), knowledge (getting at information), and background/demographic questions. Calling on these types of general guidelines as well as basic guides for organizational interviews like S.W.O.T. (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), I hoped to foster productive and insight-giving encounters. Insight-giving for my research, for my life, and for my co-participants, for as Frank (2005) astutely notes, “we humans hear ourselves talking” (p. 968) and this talk stimulates processes that change lives.

*Participatory Photography*

I have stated above that I am biased toward a language-centered approach to understanding meaning, but I acknowledge that spoken or written words are not the only way to elicit communication via language. Scholars have argued that the high and privileged position of word-centered communication in social research has led to a neglect of visual forms of expression, understanding, and meaning making (see Collier & Collier, 1986; Lucaites & Harriman, 2001; Prosser, 1998).

The use of photographic and other images in ethnographic research arose in the field of anthropology (see Bateson & Mead, 1962) and has spread through a diverse range of disciplines. Rich and Patashnick (2002) described it as the “study of humans and their behavior through images of and/or created by the people being studied (p. 247).

I gave one-time-use cameras to participants in the Good Job program and requested that they take pictures of whatever might represent what was important to them, toward the goal of telling their stories of daily life experience. Further guidance included capturing images that “said something” about their past, present, and future
work experiences, and about other aspects of their experiences with jobs, poverty, and homelessness. I took responsibility to ensure full compliance with all IRB guidelines on the use of photographs (including signed informed consent from both photographers and all those appearing in the photos) as well as for the development of all photos, which I then presented back to participants.

I allowed participants wide and vast control over what they photographed, and then used the images to draw out verbal narratives. This sort of photo-methodology has been shown to be effective in ethnographic research in a variety ways (see Harper, 1987) that I also believe was useful in this present project. First, photos can be used as beginning points and focal points of dialogue and storytelling to aid those who may not be comfortable, accustomed, or gifted at oral expression. Photos evoke words, and may mitigate the stress of face-to-face interviewing. Second, participant-generated photos serve to empower informants and take the locus of control over dialogue and discourse production out of the hands of the researcher (Asch, Cardozo, Cabellero, & Bortoli, 1991). Third, images have proven powerful in the forming and framing of identity and world view (see Finnegan, 2003), and as powerful tools in reflecting upon both (see Freire’s, 1970, use of photos toward conscientization). Fourth, images have been shown to help people express and acknowledge what may have been repressed, or just taken for granted – by either participant or researcher (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). I believe that participant-generated photography served as a generous starting point and contributor to in-depth interviews and the other discourse collection techniques I employed.

Document Analysis
Document analysis complemented the other forms of discourse collection described above. Hodder (2000) argued for the close investigation of documents as artifacts that can give historical background into events that transpired before research observation began, can confirm and give further insight into data collected in other manners, and can provide a view of formal rules, rationalities, image-management, and cultural norms of groups.

Documents that I analyzed for this study primarily included organizational documents associated with Good Works and the other organizations, agencies, and businesses I encountered. Some of these groups provided policy guides, handbooks, training manuals, mission statements, memos, lists of rules, media reports and websites that I analyzed as discourse.

Above are the four primary means of discourse collection that I used to gather “data” for this ethnographic investigation. Once collected, the discourses were analyzed using the discourse analysis procedures outlined below.

**Discourse Analysis**

I concur with the sentiments of Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) who proclaimed: “We aim to construct a full account, to tell a meaningful story – not to reduce our craft to the canons of ‘normal’ science” (p. 161). In order to build and present a full and meaningful account, I utilized a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to carry out thematic analyses of the discourses I collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, participatory photography, and document analysis. Constant comparison’s ongoing consideration and reconsideration of discourses as they are collected is designed to allow themes representing recurring patterns of language,
behavior, and meaning to emerge from participants’ own words. Boje (2001) described constant comparative methodology as conducting the ethnographic data collection, coding, and analysis “as you go” (p. 51), rather than collecting a large amount of data and then coding and analyzing it after the fact.

Constant comparative methods fall within the larger category of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) labeled as a constructivist methodology that “assumes the existence of multiple realities, the mutual creation of knowledge by researchers and research participants, and aims to provide interpretive understanding of the studied world” (p. 160). These assumptions and aims fall nicely within the scope and hope of my dissertation. Grounded theory could be summarized by the following strategies: Simultaneous collection and analysis of “data;” pursuit of themes that occur via early (and ongoing) analysis; discovery and investigation of basic and patterned social processes that emerge from the “data;” inductive construction of categories/patterns that may explain and group these processes; and the integration of these categories or patterns into theoretical frameworks that may explain their causes, consequences, and conditions (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001).

Constant comparative methodology describes well the processes through which I analyzed the discourses I collected. I continued collecting and analyzing discourse until saturation occurred. After having identified key themes and reoccurring patterns of regularity that I considered significant, I took them back to participants for member checking (Creswell, 1997). Member checking entails “taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognize them as true and accurate” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 242). Member checking facilitates verification of findings by soliciting
participants’ views about the credibility and viability of themes and interpretations. Participants were asked to give feedback about whether or not my interpretations were reasonable in their perceptions, and why or why not. Member checks serve as possible correction to (and modifiers of) researcher interpretation (although differing and varied interpretations should be expected), offer stimulus for new and/or continued dialogue, and hopefully serve participants by bringing to their attention aspects of the communicative dynamics of their contexts.

Chomsky (1965), Burke (1965), and Bakhtin (1981) all noted that human language, dialogue, narration, and experience are about constant generation and regeneration. Frank (2005) wrote that,

this principle of perpetual generation means that narrative analysis can never claim any last word about what a story means or represents. Instead, narrative analysis, like the story itself, can only look toward an open future. Narrative research – both as initial storytelling (whether in formal interviewing or in the course of observations) and as eventual report – participates in shaping this future.

(p. 967, italics in original)

My hope is not that this dissertation can present any definitive last word about my research contexts, themes, nor participants, but rather that my dealings with those I encounter, and my entering in to the dialogue around their meanings and meaning making, might contribute in some way to more open, just, and free futures.
CHAPTER THREE

A Storied Introduction to the Reporting of Empirical Results

As an introduction to the reporting of the empirical “results” of my investigation of poverty and work in and around the Good Job work program, I would like to present an extended narrative from one participant, Dean. Only twice during my field research did I have the opportunity to collect such an extensive and uninterrupted “life story” from a participant. I would like to share one of those stories now, and another near the end of this chapter.

I include this section for the following reasons. First, I want the reader to get a large chunk of “data” as directly as possible from the mouth of a participant struggling with many of the issues of poverty that will be examined in greater scholarly depth, and through more diverse discourse samples, in the grounded theory sections that follow. I feel that having a voice other than my own put in the center of this discourse at the very outset may add valuable context for the reader, and may serve to pique interest in the bigger stories.

Secondly, I want the reader to experience this voice so that I may then reflect on my own experiences of this and other voices in the following section. This research is not a revealing of the Event life of Dean or anyone else. It is an inquiry into the discursive realities of some folks in poverty as experienced by me, with them, in the context I have attempted to describe well for the reader. I want the reader to have the opportunity to experience and react to my reactions and experiences with stories such as Dean’s. This will supply more clues about my own standpoint and how that has shaped and inflected the discourse I encountered. My hope is that Dean’s story and my reflections on it will
aid the reader in understanding why and how the themes that are examined in later sections were identified in the data, were taken through the grid of my own stories (both scholarly and personal), and will offer larger and more in-context examples of similar and related themes, stories, and discourses that will be dealt with later.

A few months after having met Dean at the homeless shelter, gotten to know him, and placing him in a job, I asked him to tell me his “life story.” We then sat down for two long recorded sessions during which he unfolded his past for me – as interpreted in that present. The following account is a minimally edited version of what Dean said. The information comes primarily from those two interview sessions, but I also supplemented those with information that Dean shared with me over many conversations, and also during follow-up interviews in which I requested Dean elaborate more fully about a time in his life, or try to fill in some gaps in the story. The words below are Dean’s. I edited out my interjections as they consisted almost entirely of “uh huhs” and similar markers of paying attention, as well as a few requests for clarification.

Before encountering Dean’s story I ask the reader to recall Harter, Japp, and Beck’s (2005) reminder that every story must be taken in-context, and that every story lugs with it, at minimum, the context in which it was experienced, and the context of its telling. Dean’s story is designed to give the reader a larger view of the context of his life. It must be kept in mind, however, that the story was unfolded in a particular context. I had become Dean’s friend by the time he opened up his life story “in full” to me. I had found him a part time job working in a coffee shop owned and operated by a dear friend of mine that Dean had by this time come to like and respect. I was also involved with a small group of Dean’s friends – most of whom I had also helped with employment issues.
Dean had left the homeless shelter by the time I recorded these interviews and was living in a tent in a nearby state park. He had left the shelter over a privacy issue, as the staff had wanted to know some information that he was not willing to give. He was slightly bitter toward the shelter, and he was aware that I was connected to it, although not officially. I think Dean trusted me. I was, none-the-less, also a doctoral candidate from the nearby university working on a research project, and sitting down with a voice recorder with the little green light ablaze. I would say that Dean enjoyed telling me his story, and felt honored to be so well listened to. More about the context of our encounter will be supplied in my reflections after Dean’s story, but I felt that the reader needed to know at least this much before delving into the narrative.

Dean’s Story

I was born in West Virginia, but in those days, in the 1950s, there was no work, so they laid my dad off and he went to Detroit to find work. There are more hillbillies in Detroit than there are down here because of how many of them migrated up there for work back in those days. Anyway, I was the spoiled brat first-born son in an Italian family. I was spoiled, but I was also sick for a year when I was a kid. From the time I was 4 until I was 5 I was in the hospital for a whole year with Polio. So I kind of got away with murder when I got out of the hospital.

When my dad headed north for work he took me with him. My sisters and my brother and my mom stayed in West Virginia until he got a job. So I was up there with just my dad, but I don’t remember nothing about it. I want to be honest with you, but there are holes in my memory and that period is one of them. Anyway, he got a job in a steel mill and brought mom up and they lived right in the heart of the city of Detroit. The
company was Rotary Electric when he went there, then it was Jonathan L steel after that, I don’t know what’s happened to it now.

My dad was a super straight shooter kind of guy. I mean a super straight shooter. He wouldn’t break the law if his life depended on it. I was brought up Italian, and most people think Italians are crooks, but they’re not. Those are the only ones you hear about, but he was really good with relations. He immigrated to the U.S. when he was just a kid. His mother died when he was young and he won’t talk about it. He was a good Catholic. They went to West Virginia for work probably, probably the coal mines, but I mean the country is beautiful over there. I can’t locate it on the map where he was, but it is beautiful—the mountains and all that. It probably reminded them a lot of where they came from in the south of Italy. I’m sure the winters didn’t remind them of it.

I heard wild stories about what it was like in Italy. Here you go in a store with a wallet full of money and you come out with a grocery cart full of food. Over there you went in with a grocery cart full of money and you come out with a wallet worth of food. That was in the 30s and the 40s dude.

So anyhow, where were we? I started school before we left West Virginia. Because my birthday’s at an odd time, January 1st, they let me start school early. In Detroit I went to public school. I was 5. I’d got out of the hospital already, but because of my birthday they made me start in Kindergarten for half a year and then I went to 1st grade. So I finally got to 1st grade and my folks put me in Catholic school, so I went to first grade for like the 3rd time because the systems were different. I didn’t finish it 3 times, but I was in first grade 3 times and it sucked. So I didn’t like school too much. I’m a curious person, but I didn’t like school too much. I got off to a bad start with all of that.
I got kicked out of school in 6th grade, because in Catholic school you can do that – just kick a kid out. Just because I was a troublemaker. I didn’t want to go, so I didn’t go. And so they put me back in public school and things went OK in public school. I started turning everything around, changed my attitude, and then the old man decides to move to the suburbs and I hated it out there. I used to run away from home and go back to the city. From that point on school wasn’t very good. I didn’t go a lot. In 6th or 7th grade I was a city boy among a bunch of Preps. You know what Preps means? Preppie? I didn’t like it – I wore a black leather jacket with the greased back hair. I didn’t fit there.

This is the beginning of the 1960s. To make a long story short, I figure I finished about 8th grade. Then I quit school and I tried several things. Beauty school, believe it or not – to cut hair. But that didn’t work out because the owner of the school tried to put the moves on me and he kicked me out. I ain’t got nothing against them, they can do what they want to do, but I wasn’t going to do it. Then I worked my first factory job in Detroit when I was like 14. Back then you could get away with it, you just lied. You didn’t need a bunch of paper work to get a job.

So I am 14 years old and I ran secondary machines like punch presses, mills. I worked 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.— twelve hours a day, 6 days a week. So we made pretty good money, but do you know what the minimum wage was back then? I didn’t work for one of the big 3. I worked for the secondary shops. Minimum wage was only a dollar or $1.05 and hour. I made a bit lower than minimum wage. So for the hours it was only $40, think about it. I worked extra hours but it still wasn’t that much, it seemed like it though. Actually, I’m bullshitting because it was a lot of money back then. How many 16 year
olds do you know that can take his girlfriend to a motel instead of the backseat of a car? I thought that was pretty impressive stuff.

I was still living with my parents, but I pretty much came and went as I pleased. Then when I was about 15 my girlfriend finally got pregnant. I guess that’s the downside of being able to afford a hotel, huh? This girl was younger than me. I was only 15, but she was younger than me. But her mother let me stay with them all the time. I think her mother had a crush on me – I’m serious. Cause I’d stay there and sleep with the daughter, unless the father was home. Then she got knocked up. Her dad and my dad kind of took turns beating the shit out of me in the garage one night. I don’t know how that helped anything, but they did it. I ended up getting locked up. You can lock a kid up for anything. Kids got no rights. They still don’t, but it was even worse back then. Kids got no rights.

I finally ended up in the nuthouse. That was my dad looking out for me. He thought. You know what I’m saying? He thought I needed some help and that’s how he did it I guess. But that wasn’t the kind of help I needed. They gave me electric shock therapy.

It was 1964 and I’m 15. That electric shock is another reason my memory is screwed up. Thirteen treatments. I remember getting off the table. As soon as I got done with a treatment I’d be on the phone begging my parents, “get me away from this crazy man.” I’ll tell you this doctor, Dr. Goldman, he was a fuckin fidget. He wasn’t much bigger than a kid. He was bald and did the comb-over thing. I looked over one day, and they put a thing in your mouth and a pillow under your back because you go into convulsions, and you can break you back. Then they hold the electrodes on your head.
And the guy, the orderly or whatever, looked like a monster to me. And I’m not making this up. This guy was scary. When my sister first visited me she screamed when she saw him. And she’s older than me. Because he was so big, and so vacant looking. And that’s that kind of dudes they hired for them jobs back then. He holds the electrodes and all you see is this big guy with the electrodes and then you see this goofy little Doctor with a crazy look on his face and his hair hanging down- it was a scary situation. It all happened in one room and one time I looked at the woman next to me when she got up from the treatment and it scared the freakin’ hell out of me man. They give you enough sodium penathol so that you can’t fight. But you can’t sleep – you’re awake. They were using it like aversion therapy, I think. I don’t remember. I know they were yelling things at other people while they were shocking them. I was already sedated though. I don’t know what I was thinking. I just wanted it to just be over. I guess they were trying to change your personality, I have no idea what they were trying to do. To this day I don’t know. That is probably why I went in to the field I went into – to try to figure out what the hell they were trying to do.

Then while I was in there I get molested by another patient. Raped I mean. And my mom and dad, they are kind of backwards. I hate to say it, but they are. Well my dad’s dead now. My mom was a spoiled brat. She was the youngest one in her family, and then she marries my dad and those Italian men treat their women good. I don’t care what you see in the movies. He treated her like a baby. That man worked his ass off constantly and she finally gets a job, when I’m well into my teens. My dad asked her for something like $5 for gas, and she had the audacity to tell him that that was her money – that she worked for it. I would have knocked her on her fuckin ass. He never hit her. He
never touched her. He wanted to hit her once, I remember, he picked up the stove and threw it down the stairs. I was scared shitless.

So she was the taker and he was the giver. But in retrospect she can’t help who she is, and he helped make her that way. She’s still alive, I don’t get along with her. I probably ain’t talked to her in 12 years. I guess she talks about me all the time, what a great guy I am. Never liked me when I was around though. When my dad moved to the suburbs I didn’t fit in with those people and I didn’t want to fit in with those people. I don’t think I really had mental illness, I think I should have been in jail. I think the old men had more of the right idea – the ass kicking was probably more therapeutic and more in line with what needed to happen. However, I think that caused problems. I think being in that mental place caused me a lot of problems. Getting my head zapped caused a lot of problems. I don’t remember a lot of what happened to me when I was young. Some of the stuff I’ve told you is what has been told to me. I think that is all a result of the electro shock therapy. Thirteen times. Every other day for 13 times. I remember that with no problems. They couldn’t explain what they were trying to accomplish with that, and they can’t now either.

After that I kind of kicked around. I did finally make some friends in the suburbs. My girlfriend at the time was like a straight goody-2-shoes debate club, pep club, whatever. She got pregnant and we got married. I was only like 18. This is a different girl – there were a lot of girls. I guess I was 17. I had 2 kids in 2 years. I couldn’t deny either one of them. My son just got, he just got divorced. I didn’t like his wife. My daughter was with a real jackass – she sells manufactured homes now. She makes a ton of money, she’s got 2 kids. I’m thinking about retiring to her house. She lives in Detroit.
So I had those 2 kids and meanwhile I’m strung out on heroin. I got into heroin really really really bad, and my wife got into other guys really bad, and I just couldn’t take no more, and she couldn’t take no more. I mean I was rotten, it was a rotten life. We were stupid kids. I don’t believe in abortion, and I’m glad it didn’t happen, but it would have been real appropriate. It would prevent things like that.

So my wife, she’s into guys. My friends too. If you want to whore around there are plenty of guys, but my friends? Anyhow, I came down with hepatitis, I didn’t even know I had it. I wanted to get away from using drugs, and get away from all that, so I thought I can jump on my bike and take off right now, or I can go in the hospital. So I went in the hospital, I weighed like 90 pounds or something. They had to give me units of whole blood. I was in the hospital for like 3 months. I had not one visitor the whole time I was there. Not one.

Here’s one of the reasons I don’t like my mom. She came to pick me up the day I got out of the hospital, she took me to my house, which she knew was re-possessed, but she wouldn’t tell me about it until I got there to read the signs. That’s pretty dirty. All the money I gave her to pay the debt, but she wasn’t making the payments. Not that I was giving her a lot.

One time I caught my wife with someone and we was yelling at each other and she threw a crate at me and cut my Achilles tendon. Then she wouldn’t even call an ambulance. I had to crawl over to the phone and when I got close she yanked it out of the wall. I was in my drawers and had to crawl half a block down the road in the snow to call an ambulance for myself. So anyhow, the reason I told you that is because I was in a caste for like a year and a half. And they wouldn’t let me work, and the union let me
down. I was working at Chrysler on the assembly line. When I was able to go back to
work I got fired. I have no idea why. I didn’t do anything wrong – that I got caught at.

I’m like 19 or 20 by this point. Shortly after that I joined the army. I don’t want
to talk about the army. I didn’t enjoy that. I knew it was a mistake the day I got off the
bus for basic training. I was in for 3 years, I did my time and got out in ’73. I never came
home the whole time I was in there. Never heard from anybody. I think I got one letter
from my sister. I still did a lot of drugs in the army. I did a lot of drugs, but don’t get the
wrong idea, I was never addicted to drugs. Well, I guess I was. But I was working, and in
the army. I mean I shot up, went to basic training and did OK.

When I went to basic training I got accelerated promotion out of basic training
and out of the next step and accelerated promotion at my first duty station. My brother
was in the Navy around the same time. Now my brother, when he graduated from boot
camp, or whatever they call it in the Navy, my whole family came to the ceremony. He
didn’t do nothing special, he just made it through. I got accelerated promotion, top of my
fuckin class, you know what I’m saying? You know what I did at my graduation?
Volunteered for KP [kitchen duty] cause I didn’t have no family or nothing there. And it
was the same distance from Detroit as his thing. I guess I was isolated from everybody. I
don’t know how that got to be. They didn’t like the way I turned out. But they probably
should have looked at themselves a little bit. I’m not blaming them, you come to a certain
point where you are responsible for yourself and you can’t blame someone else and I
don’t. I truly don’t. But it was the same with college. Me and my brother are the only 2
that ever graduated from college in our whole extended family. He went to nursing
school, which ain’t really college. I graduated with honors from Daytona Beach
community college, from St. Leo’s college, and from the University of Central Florida, and there was never a soul at any of my graduations. I would have had a 4.0 grade point average all the way through school if it wasn’t for math.

Anyway, in the Army I was in Vietnam and all that. Everyone has to do what they have to do. I don’t want to talk about that.

I got out of the army and the first thing I got was divorce papers. They can’t divorce you in the army. I got out and went to my sister’s. My sister was separated from her husband at the time. I still got one sister I get along with. I get along with my little sister too, I get along great with her because she don’t know me. I had flown the coop before she knew me. I banged around and did little jobs, then I ran off with some girl to Chicago. I loved Chicago, no family, nothing. It was great. I did some factory jobs. I did really good at them. By 1974 I was making good money, but I was getting into partying. I was working 2 jobs and made a lot of money, but I partied. I never saved anything. I never wanted to be my dad. I never wanted the whole thing and have the house. I tried that and lost it.

Anyhow, that girl left. We had a baby. I’m a fertile little fellow. The baby was born without a skull and died pretty quick. So that created a problem between me and her mom and we split. I went back to Detroit for a while. I worked with my sister’s boyfriend doing siding. Then I got bored after a while and got on the road again and went to St. Louis. I had done all this before. I had hit the road and done all this before. I wound up in Florida. My parents had moved down to Florida. I bummed around there. I picked oranges and stuff.
When I got out of the army I applied for unemployment after Chrysler fired me. My dad comes looking for me and there was a stack of unemployment checks at his house. Back then you could collect for 36 months or something. It was cool. I went from pickin oranges one day to having a stack of money the next day. It was $90 a week, which was decent. So I kind of made reparations with the family again. Kind of. I’m easily satisfied. I don’t need a big house and all that. So I got a place at a place called the friendship hotel. I had one of the nicer places, but people judge me, man it pisses me off. I mean I liked the people there and it doesn’t matter to me other than that. Like now, if I go apply for regular disability I can get another $300 or $400 a month, but I don’t want to go through the aggravation. It doesn’t matter, I make enough to live on.

So I got a job, but I didn’t like it. I couldn’t stand it so I went back to school. The unemployment was over by the time the checks caught up to me. They had followed me all over the country. I wish I still had one of the envelops because they had postmarks everywhere. I just wanted to go to school. I didn’t care about a good job, I was a family psych major! I just wanted to go to school, to kind of clean up my act and stuff. I thought it was maybe time to get some things that maybe everybody else had. I met this girl. She was a nice girl. She was like 10 years older than me. She wanted to go to school to. So I took mental health technology. It taught me a lot more than I realized at the time. It was a lot of exposure to group therapy. It was a tough program. We started with 40 people, we graduated 12. I got a job and started moving up the ladder. That’s when I turned in to “Super Dean” – twice a week haircut and Gucci shoes and London Fog. Oh yea, for 20 years.
It was all because of that woman, Nancy. Yea, that’s the way she was, and that’s what made her happy, and I found out it didn’t make me too sad either. It was nice going on cruises 3 times a year, being able to buy the kid a car for her 16th birthday – her kid, not mine. I started buying nice houses around Daytona Beach. In 20 years I missed 6 days of work. I went on vacations and stuff, but I only missed 6 days. I found out I was pretty good at my job, running that sheltered workshop. I worked all over that place. I did job coaching. I did emergency services. I ran a sheltered workshop. That was a separate company. That was in cooperation with the school system, so I worked for the school system for that time. I was still working for the same people though.

I like Nancy’s mom, I liked her better than Nancy. Have you seen the mom on Everybody loves Raymond? You know the mom on there? She was like that. She was fun. You couldn’t help but like her. But to make a long story short. She had a old boyfriend and all I ever heard was Don, Don, Don. so I tracked him down for her in rural West Virginia. So he comes down there and in a fuckin month they were married. They said they were going to live in a trailer park and I said that ain’t going to happen, so I added another room onto the house so they could live there. But I couldn’t stand it. No good deed goes unpunished. She’s dead now.

It gets shady now. Nancy decides she wants to be a cop. Nancy went to school and she had every degree I had. She was like the inspiration I needed. To be what I would have been to begin with. But unfortunately, well she was my boss for a while to, we were already together. We had a good thing man. We had a nice house. A Jacuzzi in the bedroom.
Then I met Linda. I left Nancy because she wanted to be a cop. I hate cops. I always hated cops. You gotta admire her. She was like 40 when she went to cop school, and made it. She smoked like a chimney. How she did it I have no idea. When she graduated I gave her an over $1000 gift. I didn’t want to be around a cop though, so it was over.

So I met Linda. She was a black girl. I should have married her. She was the one I should have married. We were together like 8 years. I was still working my social services job. But I left it. I left Nancy and I left my career.

You ain’t never heard an argument in your life until you’ve heard an intoxicated Italian and a pissed off black woman. We got in a fight and someone called the cops. I took one look at that cop and I knew it was all over. A good-old-boy red neck sees a black and white couple. I beat the charge, cause I didn’t do anything. But it ruined my career. That was 1996. Since then I’ve been so depressed I ain’t done much of anything.

They charged me with battery of a law enforcement officer. Just like I hit him in the fist with my face. They had no case. I still had a lot of money. The company I worked for was a private non-profit that contracted with the state, but I had great benefits. I kept drawing a check from there for like 13 months. I blew most of that money. We went on cruises and like that. Things haven’t been too cool since then. I was so depressed. Not over the money, but I was really good at my job. I went from 1996 to 2000 or 2001 without sleeping more than an hour at a time. I woke every hour, sometimes every two hours, but that was the most for 6 or 7 years.

I decided to just live quiet and ride out the rest of my life, so I got on my bike and road to St. Marys, West Virginia. I got a little job at the McDonalds, and I got a job with
Washington inventory services – they inventory retail stores. I got a room in a big old house. The library was a block away. I had it made. I mean I was happy. Then I met Ruth.

Women! It’s always women. I wasn’t trying with Ruth. She kept telling me all the trouble she was having with her husband and I was trying to counsel her to stay with him. She showed up at my door on a Saturday saying “I’m leaving, you wanna go with me?” I said heck, I ain’t had an adventure in a while. So we took off for Detroit. My life’s been hell ever since. We got married, that was 5 years ago. She left me in Detroit for no fuckin reason. She came back and I took her back. She disappeared again. I let her talk me into coming down here. Her crazy ex-husband shows up and calls the cops on me in Detroit and they arrest me for an old child support warrant out on me. I went to jail for it for 45 days. That old child support just stays there and collects interest. I said, fuck you, I ain’t payin it. By now I probably owe like a million dollars. I don’t know. I don’t pay attention to it. I don’t care. I ain’t gonna pay it. It ain’t going to my kids, it’s going to the state.

Then after all that, and just getting out of jail, I worked my way into a job paying 60 grand a year. I worked for Gemco, a company that makes parts for Chrysler. I bullshitted my way into a job paying 60 grand a year after not working for 5 years and just getting out of jail. I worked there for a year and a half until I let Ruth talk me into moving down here, to Pomeroy. I can do just about anything, and I can bullshit my way through the things I can’t do. The things I haven’t done. You know what I mean?

I think I came down here because I felt sorry for her – that’s why I married her. She’s got high blood pressure, she’s obviously got a bad heart. Now she’s overweight
like a son of a bitch. Anyhow, she was there for me. I figured at least I could take care of her health. I care about her.

I had a heart attack a year ago. You know, I should have never come down here with her. I made the decision, I ain’t blaming her. But you know, we weren’t down here but a month and she was playing around on me with her ex-husband behind my back. She could play around in front of me, I don’t care, but don’t lie to me. She put me out and I stayed in a homeless shelter in Pomeroy for 45 days, and then the guy that was running the place knew I had no place to go so he moved me out to his house. I kept trying with Ruth, but there’s no way. I got a job in Pomeroy and I come home and the locks are changed and all my stuff is outside. She’s bipolar too.

So I bummed around all summer and finally got the money together to get an apartment, moved into the apartment and 2 days later had a heart attack. The VA wanted to put me on disability and I wouldn’t take it. I been working since I was 14 god-dammit and I’m gonna work til I die, right? But I got worse and worse and chest pain going and they put me in the VA hospital for 40-something days. Ruth kept getting worse and worse and worse and I told you I woke up and catch her stealing out of her daughter’s purse, and that’s when I made the call up here and left.

Now I hope the housing authority may come through with a place for me. I like it in this town.

*Mark’s Reactions and Reflections*

I invite the reader to ponder, feel, and consider Dean’s story before embarking on the more cerebral handling of it, and others, that unfolds later in this report.
As I feel and ponder Dean’s story, as far as I know it, the thing that immediately
grabs me is how event-full his youth was. When I met Dean he was in his late 50s, and I
in my mid 40s, yet I had spent my youth building a foundation on which I would “build”
the experiences and adventures of my adult life. In my eyes, Dean’s youth was less of a
foundation, and more of determining destiny. After I had been around the homeless
shelter for a few months and heard many stories of people’s lives, I became fond of
telling people that I was on “welfare” for the first 23 years of my life. They would, at first
assume I meant government assistance, and I was indeed on assistance, on welfare, being
taken care of and having my wellbeing watched over – but by my parents. By the time I
was 23 I was finished with college and was embarking on the scary voyage into self-
reliant adulthood. I had in tow a good education and many tools for “succeeding” in my
world. Dean had been through a very different “training” period.

By the time Dean had reached the age that I was upon graduation from college he
had endured a full year in the hospital as a young boy; gotten off to a bad start at school
by enduring parts of first grade three times; worked factory jobs at age fourteen for 12
hours a day, 6 days a week; been arrested; been beaten up by his own father and father-
in-law; been held in an insane asylum and given electric shock therapy, while being
sexually assaulted by another patient; had two children by age 17; been addicted to
heroin; endured a full year in a full-leg caste and another 3 months in the hospital with no
visitors; and gone off to fight in Vietnam where his experience was so horrendous that he
cannot talk about it. I have to ask myself, how much more horrendous could Vietnam
have been than the rest of his life?
My point in comparing our starts in life is not to argue that either one of us is more or less culpable, more or less responsible, nor more or less deserving than the other. The lesson it holds for me is that I cannot really know, I cannot really imagine, what it is to walk through life in Dean’s shoes. The stories of his Event life enrich my own, while making it shockingly obvious that the narrative “equipment for living” that I have been supplied by my experiences and the narration of them is not nearly adequate to comprehend a life such as Dean’s. His life serves to make this “non-consubstantiality” between lived experiences screamingly clear – and it serves as a reminder that the Event lives of all people are never easily experienced, interpreted, narrated, nor understood.

As I have shared Dean’s story with middle class folks it has been pointed out to me that it is hard to believe. I also admit that reading the story months after experiencing it with Dean, the thought of “outside verifiability” also came to my mind, as it struck me that the written account might be dismissed as pure fabrication, or at least radical exaggeration. I was, and am, comfortable with Dean’s level of honesty with me in conveying his story – mostly because I know the level of relationship we had developed. I also weighed his “what could be gained here” level as best I could, and it was possible for me to verify things like his expertise in social services to some extent. In the bigger picture, however, I argue that the level of “truth,” or the mythical alignment with some outside physical “reality,” is not of paramount importance here. As discussed earlier in the narrative theory section of this report, the telling and experiencing of the story in the storytelling context was at least as important as the literal reproduction of events. Perhaps even more important is the way that Dean’s story is remembered, experienced, and lived by him now (as well as when he told it to me). The power of the story lies not in him
accurately conveying to me (and us) how many volts of electricity were pulsed through his body, and how many times it was done, but more in how he experiences and makes sense of that story.

I do not include Dean’s story in this report so that it may stand as a representative example of patterned regularities of experience, nor reactions, that those without homes “typically” go through. I do not deny that patterned regularities usually exist across human experience. Those patterns and themes are what the Grounded Theory analysis across participants will be better designed to illuminate. Part of the most compelling point that Dean’s story makes to me is that there is no typical “homeless” person, nor experience of poverty. Throughout my inquiry into poverty and work I was shocked at the radical diversity of the people and stories I encountered.

For the sake of brevity I have not included protracted excerpts of other participants such as Jack and Tina, two skilled master printers who had worked for 15 years at a local commercial printing plant until they were both laid off when the plant was sold. They suffer no mental illness, no addictions, and told no tales of frightening childhoods. They were simply working-class Americans who had learned a craft and earned good money doing it. They had a house and two cars, and debt on both of them. Then they lost their jobs and all the rest. I met them in the homeless shelter where they were living with their two young children who were both attending the nearby neighborhood elementary school. I could barely look them in the eye as they told me of their past working experiences and looked to me – the academic with the “connections” to secure food-service jobs for “the homeless” – for some sort of help or hope.
I encountered others, like Mary, whose stories of poverty revolve much more “cleanly” around one main culprit – hers was drug abuse. She had gotten hooked on drugs as a teenager and at age 25 left prison after doing hard time on drug-related charges. Yet, she was from a “good” family with solid local roots. When I met her she was working hard to regain trust and confidence in herself and from her family. She had all the pieces in place, but due to her felony conviction was unable to find the last piece to fit into her puzzle of “rehabilitation.” That piece was a job, as every job starts with a job application that asks, “Have you ever been convicted of a felony, Yes, or No?” I met others whose narratives revolved generally around mental illness, or physical illness, or particular abusive patterns or relationships. Yet, like Bakhtin’s “word,” even these large identifiable problems do not stand alone. They are symptoms, they are causes, they are anesthetic, they are chance occurrences, but most of all they are interactive pieces of complex and ever-shifting and evolving narratives of life.

Dean’s story is not “typical” of the folks I met, even though embedded in Dean’s story are many of the reoccurring themes that are “regulars” around the homeless shelter – struggle with mental illness, failure at school, physical and sexual abuse, addiction and legal problems. Yet, I implore the reader to also see Dean as the unique individual that I came to know and like so well. An articulate, intelligent, and reflective man who was usually willing to tell it like he saw it. His gifts at articulating verbally his experiences were, in fact, what made him in some ways an unusual, or exceptional participant.

From my own point of view, it was always a bit surprising to hear Dean’s stories come out of the mouth of a person I had come to know as so “right-leaning” in his politics. Dean is a true believer in the American discourses of self-reliance and
independence. He was adamantly opposed to the raising of the minimum wage in Ohio (which was voted in during the time of these interviews), as was nearly every other person without a home that participated in our work program. He is fond of stating that you cannot blame others for what has happened in your life, and his work ethic is very strong. Although his story betrays in him a strong ethic of care for others, he once said to me that, “Left-wingers just want to put a titty in everyone’s mouth and take care of them like they were babies.” The strong tension between helping others and being self-reliant was alive and well in many of the conversations I had with Dean.

To me, Dean’s story was one of loneliness, or being alone, and of being disconnected. At the homeless shelter I worked around, the staff are fond of repeating that if the complex causes of homeless can be simplified into one catch-all phrase, “disconnectedness” would be the best way to put it. I felt grieved for Dean’s alone-ness. In the hospital without visitors; graduating with honors multiple times without anyone to share it with; not “fitting” with family or in living situations or at school; and even fighting in a war without hearing from anyone at home. I felt alone as I experienced Dean’s tales. It also seemed to me that Dean embraced loneliness as a way of life to some extent. Seeking the next adventure, or weighing the option that he could always “jump on [his] bike and take off right now” when things got bad.

Through my interpretive lenses, it was through employment that Dean gained most of his self-esteem and grew in confidence. When he speaks of successes they were often at work, where he “did really good” at his jobs in factories, or “found out [he] was pretty good at [his] job” in social services. It was also the loss of work and career that most pointedly seems to have led to his depression in the narrative. Dean also lamented to
me many times, as well as in the narrative, that he could no longer work and was on partial disability assistance. This he often seems to need to justify, and in my experience feels some shame about.

Finally, Dean’s story strikes me as a poignant illustration of a life organized and revolving around relationships rather than tasks, achievements, or even events. In fact, most events and achievements are attributed to relationships. This observation will be treated in much more depth in the Grounded Theory sections, but to me it jumped out of Dean’s story. He himself commented on how his life events went from one woman to the next, and beyond romantic relationships his family and friends are the driving characters and signposts of the narrative.

As indicated above, I wanted the reader to get a more protracted taste of some discourse I encountered in my investigations, as somewhat of a hedge against my fear that my voice might be allowed, or assumed, to dominate the Grounded Theory sections that follow. It is as important to me that the reader gain some insight into my reactions to Dean’s story as it is that the reader understands him, or reacts to him on their own. I have attempted to give you one homeless working man’s story as symbolized in the words of his choosing. I have then attempted to give the reader a bit of a look at how I responded and respond to such stories. With that information in tow, I now invite you into a much more rigorously theory-and-research-informed treatment of the major themes that I was able to cull out of a large amount of data from a variety of stakeholders involved around poverty and work in one corner of Appalachian Ohio.

With Dean’s stories and my reactions to them as introduction, I will now delve into the presentation of my grounded theory results in the form of major themes and
subsequent sub-themes discovered. I have organized the following around the four “mega-themes” of Voice(lessness) in the workplace, Mixing of Motives, Gendered Communication, and (In)Visibility.

One Story, One Vote: Voice via Narrative at Work

Candy: The managers from the shops aren’t willing to hire people from here.

Maurice: A lot of them aren’t. A lot of them look at the address from this place on the application and think, “transients.”

Candy: But the circumstances for being homeless aren’t always the same. They aren’t always your fault.

Maurice: They don’t understand that, they think if a homeless person is that way, is homeless, then how can they be reliable for that job? How can you be trusted to do that job, Okay? You are homeless, you couldn’t even stay in your own home to have a roof over your head. If you are homeless there is a reason for that and why should I trust you to be able to do this job?

Jane: They don’t look past that term. Homeless.

If a picture tells a thousand words, perhaps a word picture tells two thousand. Stigma is a word picture such as “homeless” that tells a person’s story for them, often before they are allowed to speak, or in lieu of them being given the right to speak at all. The stigma bound up in a term like “homeless,” or in and around a physical place like a homeless shelter (see Harter, Scott, Novak, Leeman & Morris, 2006), may be only the beginning of a systematic de-voicing of people in poverty. A de-voicing with many causes and influences.
Although the stated goals of the Good Job work program were explicitly concerned with providing ongoing support and care for workers going into employment from the homeless shelter, the program also provided opportunities for the expression of voice to those workers. The support and care often resulted directly from being better heard. Those who are battling to survive the hardships of poverty may not perceive a construct like “voice” as a critical priority—after all, they are fighting to survive—but they most often are also hurting from that fight, and thus are often in the greatest need of being listened to. If democracy means having a “say” in how things are, and how they are run, then Good Job functioned to provide workers with a more democratic work environment by moving the “say” of workers in poverty away from the realm of stigmatized and stigmatizing fixed symbols and symbol systems, and moving that “say” back into a realm where it is expressed more in the language and context of those experiencing it.

As the conversation above illustrates, often one of the only chances that these workers (and would-be workers) in poverty feel they have to express who they are, who they want to be, what they can do, and what they think, is on a job application. These job applications also function as gatekeepers, or perhaps better said, as the gates that either bar or permit access to the world of work. The perception of not being listened to while doing “the jobs no American wants,” was high among participants, and the converse was expressed often (as it is above)—that certain loaded terms (like homeless) and biased vehicles (like job application questions) of “expression” are very attuned to by employers and bosses, and thus wield enormous power over (prospective) workers.
Consider for a moment the possibilities for a “say” or a voice when you (or someone you know – perhaps a middle-class teenager) worked at entry-level unskilled employment at a fast-food restaurant or in other service industries, or just observe next time you are waiting to be served at such a business. Where are the chances to bring one’s gifts, experience, and voice into those work environments in order to have an impact, or to relate well with others to solve problems, get things done, and make things better? These, I would suggest, are the processes that make work fulfilling to middle class adult workers, and through which more privileged workers craft healthy identities at, in, and around work (see du Gay, 1996). Those workers often have the efficacy, and are in a work environment, that allows them some chances to be who they are on the job in such a way that brings expression, or “voice” to what they bring to the job. However, in the pre-packaged, franchised world of service work for minimum wage such chances are scarce, by design. That sort of chance to be heard often only comes during the initial screening that guards the entrance to the land of “McWork” (I use this as an expression only, and not as a reference to any particular business. None of the participant workers in this study worked for the famous “Mc” restaurant).

The job application as a communication vehicle, or genre, proved to be highly problematic for participants living in poverty and seeking work. To illustrate this to donors and friends of the shelter, the Good Works organization held a “Walk for the Homeless,” that I attended, during which each participant was given a fictionalized homeless persona, complete with a name tag with a short biographical history on it. A walker’s tag might include a small story of how the person came to lose their home, a description of problems that the person was struggling with, or other experiences that this
walker’s homeless persona had been through or was now (imaginarily) facing. Some 80 walkers were then led to a fast food restaurant where they were told a few non-fiction stories, by a sympathetic manager, of people living and battling poverty that had worked at the restaurant. The stories were compelling. I was very moved by a young man working at the restaurant who told his own story of how he had been kicked out of his mother’s house at age 17 and then spent over a year (through a winter) sleeping on the porches of acquaintances until the police had noticed him doing this and cracked down on him. He then got a job at the fast food restaurant and worked it for 2 years as he slept in an old car that someone had lent him money to buy. At the time of the telling he had worked at the restaurant for 7 years and had purchased a small piece of land with a mobile home on it. I sat there thinking, “Oh my goodness, this guy should be President of the United States for all the toughness and determination he has shown,” and my sentiments were echoed by many in the crowd. After hearing the stories, each walker was given a job application and asked to fill it out in the role of the person described on his or her name tag. This is where the dilemmas arose that I was later to hear from so many folks without homes who were looking for work.

Job applications begin by asking for information that seems relatively benign: Name, address, telephone number. For my participants the trouble has already begun at this point. As in the dialogue that began this section indicated, to put the address of a homeless shelter on a job application as one’s place of residence often ends the application process. In a small Appalachian town, every hiring boss is sure to know that “51 State Avenue” was the shelter. You were thus immediately labeled “homeless” and perhaps much more. As Marshal put it, “51 State Avenue” was a communicative
synonym for, “you couldn’t even stay in your own home, so why should I trust you to be able to do this job?” It was well known that at certain local businesses it was a fruitless endeavor to apply for employment while employing that deadly address. At any business it was a risk. Yet, for most folks without homes the address blank is, by definition, impossible to fill out at all. A lack of address, and all that it communicates, is something so taken-for-granted by the middle class participants in the “walk for the homeless,” that the exercise illustrated graphically how without such an address (or with the wrong one) a homeless job seeker is presented with, and presents up front, an obvious, enormous, and “abnormal” hole in his or her identity. A hole that the job application allows no space nor vehicle to explain.

“Phone number” is a similarly dangerous unexploded bomb for the job seeker in poverty. Without a home can often mean without a phone. At the shelter it meant a communal phone that could only be accessed during certain hours of day, and that might be answered by any resident in any state of mind. Just trying to stay available and in touch with a would-be employer is a giant obstacle. Many of my participants used “no contract” rechargeable cellular phones to try to overcome these barriers, but often they had no money to buy the relatively expensive minutes.

The walk utilized public fictionalized narrative resources to make visible to a middle class audience the dilemmas faced by job seekers in poverty. The effect on “walkers for the homeless” was not lost. Even the seemingly simplest lines of a job application seemed to paint us into inescapable corners. This was much more complicated for those in the crowd whose “bio” stated that they could not read, or could read at only a low (say second grade) level.
For many of my participants the interactions they experienced with job applications was much more than an educational exercise – it was near life and death. To the corporate workers or the industrial psychologists who develop job applications, small spaces allowed for the entry of data like “Address” may seem logical. However, to someone in Dean’s or Candy’s position the question of “current address” can only be told delicately and perhaps with a long story if it is not to be the last question asked in the conversation. As they stand alone, the mere number and street name, or lack thereof, may signal the end of opportunity, and the end of their voice in the conversation. Thus, even the simplest questions on a job application, and particularly those questions – due to their simplicity – create situations so intuitively “normal” to the middle class actor that they have become beyond redefinition (Goffman, 1959) for the applicant struggling with homelessness. At the very least those simply questions tell a strong and persuasive story that left alone may be the only one that gets a hearing.

Another problem for job applicants coming out of poverty that I encountered often in my research was how to fill out the job application section entitled “work experience.” I had never thought of that term as being “loaded” before my experiences with Good Job, but I quickly learned that the definition of the term “work” itself is a socially and politically complex one.

From a communication perspective, Clair (1996) and others (Clair & Thompson, 1996) have investigated webs of constitutive symbol use surrounding ideas of work, and what socio-historical influences have effected discursive notions of “a real job.” Factors such as high pay, the requirement of an advanced level of education and training, as well as working for an established and for-profit organization seemed to be notions deemed
important to those investigated when they considered what constitutes a “real job.”

Unfortunately, those participating were what might be characterized as well-educated and middle class (or higher). I found a much less articulated, yet perhaps even more influential (when judged by the immediate effects on those “applying” the discourse) understanding of what counts as a “real job” exhibited, or enacted, by people in poverty as they filled out job applications.

Bruce and Bob were 2 of the first 3 people from the homeless shelter that we attempted to place in partnering for-profit small businesses. They both offered an early, and oft-applicable, lesson in “legitimate work” that was succinctly summarized in the words of a Good Works staff person: “They [shelter residents] often don’t see their own [work] experience as counting.” Just as jobs may be surrounded by meanings that render them either “real” or “unreal,” some work experience appears to “count” and some not to count when a potential worker in poverty attempts to translate that experience on a job application.

Bruce had worked extensively at an auto repair garage/gas station owned by a family member. He had done almost everything at the garage, from repairs to working with customers in the convenience store in the business. We thought Bruce could really be helped by some ongoing work support, so we had him stop by the restaurant of one of our partnering “bosses” to fill out an application. Yet, when we met with Bruce’s would-be boss to discuss whether he thought Bruce was a good candidate for work at his establishment the boss expressed surprise that we would want to start with someone with no work experience at all. Bruce had not filled in one word in the application section labeled “work experience.” It turned out that Bruce had worked for his relative at the gas
station, and also extensively for a local construction contractor (with whom he also had a personal relationship) completely “under the table.” He could do auto repairs, run a cash register, and even frame a house, but on paper he had never done a day’s work in his life, for pay. This turned out to be a very common tale as I interviewed folks at the shelter about their work histories and abilities. “Under the table” work is often preferred in order to save taxes and hide from other government entanglements. Several residents at the homeless shelter approached me asking if I could connect them specifically with such unofficial work. One man’s request went like this: “I was wondering if you could hook me up with some work under the table?” “I know I shouldn’t be asking you that, I’m sorry to be asking you that, but that’s the kind of job I need right now, you know?” Such undocumented work has the effect of generating the maximum amount of much needed cash in the shortest amount of time. Under the table work puts food on the table in what appears to those in crisis to be the most expedient manner. Unfortunately, such unofficial work also serves to de-legitimize the work lives of many in poverty.

Bob also left blank the “experience” section of his initial job application with us. This struck me as very odd at the time since everyone in the shelter knew that Bob had worked for five years at a famous chain retail store in our town. We all knew it because that experience was often the centerpiece of Bob’s conversation, and the store’s artifacts cluttered his personal space. Bob usually wore an X-mart baseball cap, and had an X-mart t-shirt pinned to the door of his room (at this time he was living in the transitional housing and had his own room). The shirt was complete with signatures of fellow employees and their best wishes, which had been expressed via felt-tipped marker on the shirt during the last day of work before the store went out of business. A few years had
passed since Bob’s store had fallen victim to competition it could not keep pace with, yet
Bob’s pride in his work, and loyalty to his former employer, burned strong. It may have
even hurt him:

   Yea, I admit I have been waiting for X-mart to re-open. I heard rumors about a
year ago that they were going to re-open. I really liked that job. I had a good way
of dealing with the customers and my manager knew it. I was great at just talking
to them, especially when they had their kids with them. I have been waiting for
them to come back. I really liked working the cash register there.

So why had Bob not recorded any work experience on his job application? When
I asked him about it later his reasoning was not very clear to me. Some of the blank
application appeared to be out of confusion over what the questions were asking for, but
he also expressed that his reluctance to tell about his work past had something to do with
the gaps he had experienced between his jobs, and the gap that existed since the retail
sales job had ended and the time of the new application. It was clear to me that Bob
suspected those gaps in his work life, along with the fact that he had been put on partial
disability during one gap, would communicate to potential employers that he was not
stable enough to work.

   Interestingly, both Bruce and Bob had gone through training at a local
government sponsored non-profit that existed to offer low income people job search and
placement assistance. There they had been instructed in the ways of filling out job
applications. Yet when it came to what would seem like the basic regurgitation of past
employment situations, dates, and responsibilities, the application process and vehicle
communicated to them that their experiences were not legitimate enough to be mentioned.

For these men, and for other job seekers without homes I encountered, the meaning of “real” job experience meant that the jobs had an official paper trail, that past bosses could be contacted (which was most often not the case), that skills utilized could be verified or were credentialed, and that the work history told a continuous and cohesive story of one’s work life. These characteristics do not describe the lives and experiences of most of the people we encountered through Good Job. As Bruce put it to me: “I can do the work, I know how and I’ve done it all before, but I lack that piece of paper that is suppose to prove that I can do it so someone will give me a job.”

The “legitimate” story of work is expected to follow a particular emplotment, however mystic and out of reach that emplotment might be for some. This discourse of “real” job experience, as it “should be” expressed on a job application, thus served to cancel, to nullify, to de-legitimate many real job histories, skills, and assets of the applicants in poverty, and along with it perhaps much of the applicant’s life history and identity. This expectation of linear work narratives is in line with what scholars like Frank (1995) have argued is our trained inclination to value “restitution narratives” – orderly stories that make easy sense and end happily or hopefully – over “chaos narratives” that do not. The ironies lie in the simple facts that many of the stories of our lives are anything but clean or linear, and for those in crisis the chaos narrative may be much more common.

Job application blanks asking for “Address” and “Phone number” proved to bring discursive closure, but even more powerful is the question on most all job applications
that asks if the applicant has ever been convicted of a felony. Answer yes to that question, as Mary in the introduction to this chapter had to, and the gates to employment, to self-sufficiency, and to rebuilding one’s life are usually shut. Yet for Mary there was a long and complicated story of abuse, but also of recovery and reconciliation that never could be told due to the roadblock of that “yes or no” question.

From a Bakhtinian perspective I would thus claim that the Event lives of these folks in poverty were deemed illegitimate. Thus, meaningful dialogue is precluded, and meaningful dialogue about who one is and what one can do is what one usually hopes for in a job application process. The job seeker in poverty thus reaps some of Bakhtin’s (1984) “absolute death of being unheard and unrecognized” (p. 287). This de-legitimizing or silencing of the Event life often leads people in poverty to internalize a low view of themselves and what they have to offer. This often leads to what one Good Works staff person described as “the downward spiral” of employment experience through which residents are unable to find work and thus fall into deeper hopelessness, or find the worst of jobs that in the end often serve to reinforce their already low self-images.

Recall that Good Works as an organization pinpoints disconnectedness as the greatest overall culprit that leads and keeps people in poverty and homelessness. Burke (1937) used the term alienation to “designate that state of affairs wherein a man no longer ‘owns’ his world because, for one reason or another, it seems basically unreasonable” (p. 216, italics in original). For many of the participants in Good Job, the world of work seemed very unreasonable from the very first words of the job application process. For many varied reasons they had become alienated from the world of middle class work that seems so normal to many of us, but had become so unreasonable in their
experience. Is having one’s own home a prerequisite to being able to perform well at a low skill job? Does a mistake in one’s past forever disqualify that person from attaining gainful employment so that he or she can secure housing? Is one’s valuable work experience wiped out because past bosses offered only “under the table” work so as not to have to pay social security and workman’s compensation taxes? These and similar discourses of work were very unreasonable to many participants. Burke posited that such alienated people have been “deprived of the ‘goods’ which society decrees as ‘normal’” (p. 216). Through lack of a voice to further explain and give context, these folks often have been deprived of their very Event lives.

Narrative intervention into the employment process. The Good Job work program was designed to bring employers and job seekers/workers from the homeless shelter together in an atmosphere where both could be heard by the other. The hope was to minimize the disconnection that separates many at the shelter from the world of for-profit work. An underlying goal and belief is that “the downward work cycle” can be reversed so that work becomes part of the solution to getting residents out of poverty and to dealing with the issues in their lives that led to poverty.

To strive toward these goals the staff of Good Works and I recruited six local businesses to partner with us in giving ongoing support to workers from the shelter. At first no one was exactly sure what kind of support people would need and what we could offer, but the Good Works staff felt strongly that ongoing support was needed to help give folks without homes better chances to have positive work experiences that build them up for better things, rather than tearing them down. The first and original goal was to bring people in poverty into better communication with the people who hire and
employ them. It was hoped that this communication could foster development in the workers and also help stem problems before they jeopardized or ended the working relationship. The hope was also to expose more businesspeople to the complex factors at play in the lives of those in poverty, with hopes that they would gain a bigger vision for how they might use their businesses to serve the community. One Good Works staff person put it like this:

I think it’s cool that [a participating businessperson] is willing to take time to listen to the reasons why someone may not be doing a good job all the time at work. I think a lot of employers are just like, “no excuses, if you’re not hustling and making us money, you can’t stay.” I think it’ll be an eye-opening experience for him to meet more people and see the actual reasons – not excuses, but reasons – real reasons why they’ve lost jobs before, and why sometimes they’ve stopped trying a while ago.

The program focused on communication between the worker and his or her employer, primarily, but was also designed to bring and keep the resident’s case worker as well as myself – the program director and communication specialist – in contact with what was happening at work.

Good Job was designed to enhance communication, and it did that, but beyond that I strongly believe that it brought empowering democracy into the workplace. The democracy it enabled was a natural democracy that stems from the power of narrative and the narrative nature of human life.

Working from a communication perspective, Cheney (1995) defined workplace democracy as:
A system of governance which truly values individual goals and feelings (e.g., equitable remuneration, the pursuit of enriching work and the right to express oneself) as well as typically organizational objectives (e.g., effectiveness and efficiency, reflectively conceived) and which actively fosters the connection between those two sets of concerns by encouraging individual contributions to important organizational choices, and which allows for the ongoing modification of the organization’s activities and policies by the group (pp. 170-171).

I would like to use the narrative telling of a story from Good Job to illustrate how the program’s use of narrative helped usher in fulfillment of Cheney’s definition of workplace democracy for some workers without homes. These folks were in extreme conditions of weakness when compared to the description of empowerment that Cheney’s definition brings to mind. They were working the lowest, least prestige, and most disposable jobs in our economy, and for poor wages. They have no union, no real power, and often have below average social skills. Many suffer from debilitating diseases, both mental and physical. Yet, when the power of their stories was allowed more free play in the workplace; more than a half inch space, or a YES or NO on an application; more than a totalizing term like “homeless;” then real and effective resistance to fixed and oppressive inequalities arose. As their stories were honored by being listened to, these stories “fought” harder for some of these workers in poverty than their labor unions ever had.

One simple structural change that our employers allowed us to make that had very profound rhetorical consequences was to simply switch the classic order in which the job search process proceeds. As described above, the application form can present myriad
obstacles when it is employed to describe, or tell the story of a person in poverty. As Bruce’s case worker put it to me: “Bruce is reasonable literate, but he’s not very good with writing.” Starting with the paper or online written application assumes that applicants can read and write well enough to present a good case for themselves and do it succinctly, and thus it tends to frame their stories in ways that disqualify/de-legitimize them as people.

With Good Job we simply put the face-to-face interview first. So before the employer ever saw the application, the applicant was given the chance to tell her or his story. Furthermore, the applicant was encouraged to bring the work advocate (usually the Good Job director, but sometimes her or his case worker, and at other times both) along for support, or even to talk for the applicant if she/he wanted help. In this way the worker was much more in charge of what was put up front, of what was pushed more to the periphery, and of how their history, experiences, and problems were explained and framed. At most of the places our people sought work the standard procedure is to have the applicant fill out an application and then call if they want you to come in for an “interview.” We put the interview first so the worker’s story could go first. We originally did that because we had to (no one would allow our people past the application), but it turned out to be pivotal toward ensuring that our workers could be heard for who they are, and for them to exercise voice in the workplace.

Such a voice could be argued to be a rudimentary yet important form of workplace democracy. It is a “vote” by being and acting. A vote, or active participation, that influences the workings of the work place. This is the sort of influence by being, or participation, or democracy, that many workers “at the bottom” of organizational charts
(actually, these workers probably never make the organizational chart) often do not enjoy, but that Good Job helped to enhance through the use of narrative.

Illustrative of this voice-giving is Darlene’s work story. Darlene was an early participant in Good Job. She was placed in a local pizza shop with an owner manager who had approached the homeless shelter with interest in giving jobs to homeless people to “help them get back on their feet.” Darlene was involved so early, however, that not all the participants were in place to give full and active support. But Darlene needed a job and Brad, the owner/manager was ready and willing to hire her. She began working at the pizza shop and did well for about 2 weeks. Then she disappeared. Normally, the Good Job work support person would be in regular contact with Darlene to make sure things were going alright and that bumps in the road were dealt with before they became impassable roadblocks to employment (like not showing up for work). I would become that support person for most workers, but at this time I had not yet begun my field work at the shelter. So Darlene became a “no show,” which is not an uncommon category of workers at pizza shops.

When I re-entered the situation I found out from Brad that he had heard nothing from Darlene for 3 weeks. That, of course, would normally be the end of the employment relationship. As I investigated, however, I found an interesting story behind Darlene’s actions. It was unfolded to me by both Darlene and her caseworker at the shelter.

The whole episode began when Darlene came down with a bad case of the flu. She was so sick that she could not get out of her bed at the shelter. She wanted over-the-counter flu medication (which she could have gotten for free from the shelter, but did not think or know to ask for it) but had no cash, nor the strength to walk the mile or so to the
bank and drug store. In desperation, she gave her debit card and PIN to one of the other women with whom she shared her room at the time (there were five women living in the 12 foot by 12 foot room). She considered this woman a friend, and indeed it was a very friendly deed to run such a hefty errand. The woman carried out the task, but the next day disappeared from the shelter. It turned out that the woman had drained Darlene’s account of all the money she had. This left Darlene with no money to buy her other medications, which were prescription, and she quickly fell into a mental health crisis resulting in a “breakdown.” As a result of her breakdown she was placed in a residential mental facility where she stayed for several days. By the time I heard the story Darlene was doing some better and was again living at the shelter, but she had never contacted Brad, nor returned to work (her mental health professional had forbidden her to work for at least 6 weeks), although she expressed strong desire to go back to work when she could (which she later did).

Upon hearing the story I immediately began trying to organize a meeting with Darlene, Brad, Darlene’s case worker at the shelter, and myself. Darlene was not yet mentally healthy nor confident enough for such a meeting, but gave me and her case worker permission to share the story with Brad.

When we first sat down with Darlene’s boss and his manager, they were most intent on getting to why Darlene had not contacted them. Instead of offering excuses about her being sick in bed and then being under locked-down psychiatric care, we unfolded the story for them in it’s entirety, including contextual details about what it is like to live at the homeless shelter. When we finished telling the story (including in it everything that Darlene had given us permission to tell), the focus of their inquiry had
shifted from why Darlene had not called to how it was she was able to work the job at all while living under those conditions. The owner commented, “Wow, I could never make it if I had to share a room with 5 other people I didn’t know and couldn’t shower in the morning.” The manager added, “I could never work this job if I couldn’t get coffee in the morning.”

The two businessmen then began discussing how they could get Darlene back to work, and how they could explain to their other employees why she was to be given her job back. Since allowing her back would be a breach of policy for an extended no show, it was decided that I would come to a staff meeting and discuss (in general terms without using names of any of the folks working at the business, nor evoking actual events involving them) with the team what we were trying to do for workers without homes, as well as the challenges and conditions they might be battling in order to work at all.

Through this encounter the policies and even the ethos of the restaurant were changed a bit. Some elements of Cheney’s (1996) definition of workplace democracy began taking hold: The system of governance better valued individual goals and feelings as the goals and feelings of the Good Job workers were better understood, and individual contributions to important organizational choices was exhibited which allowed for, and in fact brought about, the modification of the organization’s activities and policies.

The voice and experiences of those that were probably the least powerful and influential people in that business had changed something due to the power of a narrated life given a hearing. Rorty (1989) posited that in a liberal democracy, “ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, and by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new
practices” (p. 60). Darlene’s story was heard in an “open encounter” (relative to the norm), and thus led to some new practices. Darlene and the other workers without homes at that restaurant became a bit less unheard and unrecognized, and it is my hope that other employees gained both respect for those workers and increased courage and space to bring their own voices more fully into that workplace.

**Mixed Motives**

Work is hard. It takes motivation to work, and to keep working. Money, purpose, advancement, belonging, power, identity-building, and a chance to impact our world might make a cursory list of what comes to the middle class mind when considering the motivations that get one out of bed everyday and push us to work. The workers in the Good Job program, however, were not enjoying the fruits of being middle class, instead, they were working amidst the crises of severe poverty. Those crises seemed to have profound impacts on their motivations for work. Just as importantly, their histories and situations often seemed to have produced, and to be produced by, discourses of motivation that were very different, and at times incompatible, with understandings and expectations of work motivations held by their bosses. Often when trying to bring workers in poverty into better and more cooperative communication with their bosses it became clear that the two were speaking different discursive languages of motivation for work.

In the field of psychology, the term motivation has been used to describe the conditions responsible for changes and variations in quality and intensity of a behavior (see Vinacke, 1962). Most would agree that work is a behavior that requires constant motivation in order to maintain good quality and the sustained intensity to “get the job
done.” In order to exert the energy and exhibit the tenacity it takes to succeed at a job, one must be motivated. A variety of factors might supply both the internal and external motivations needed by the successful worker, yet those motivating factors may at times be oversimplified and overgeneralized – being taken for granted as obvious and “natural” – when in fact they vary radically among different individuals with different life and work experiences.

Consistently, and from the very first days of the Good Job program, questions arose across the “management-worker divide” about motivation. It proved to be one of the toughest areas for getting workers and their bosses “on the same page.” It was usually not that much of a strain for me, with my middle class socialization, to understand the motivations and expectations of the bosses. When we began partnering at his pizza shop, Brad, the owner, was frank about his motivations.

I’m a big critic of welfare, and of people taking advantage of the system. I have seen it so much even in my own family. People who can work but don’t and the government pays them not to. Then I pay a ton of taxes to support that. Then it’s not the people who really need help who get it. The thing that really gets me motivated is knowing how much work I put into making a living myself. We need to get people out of government programs sooner and get them self-sufficient.

Often a common ground surrounding motives was expected before the work relationships unfolded. Brad again, before he began with his first employee without a home:

That would be a good thing. Get everything straight up front. I want them to see the job as a reward, a chance for them to be on their own. I’d like them to see that. It can be hard in the beginning, but a job should be its own reward. My
expectations of people from here will be about the same as with everyone else – with maybe a little bit more lee-way. But I need to make money.

Brad’s hopes and motivations were to get people off of government aid and get them back into what he has experienced as the rewarding world of paid employment. He was willing to help people out (with some “lee-way”), but making and preserving capital was the understood bottom line around which the entire business enterprise revolved. As long as we could “get everything straight up front” about expectations, rewards, motivations, and essentials, then things should progress toward our common goals.

As it often turned out, the “up-front-ness” of rewards and expectations was relatively easy to arrange. Wages, benefits, and expectations could be easily stated from the start. However, the “down-the-road” meanings of constructs like reward and motivation proved to be much harder to come together around. Just as ADDRESS had seemed to be a logical and fair start to the job application process, but in fact was fraught with pitfalls for the job seeker in poverty, so the deeper discursive world of what drives one to work, and what rewards one to keep working, and to keep working well, proved to be loaded with diverse and colliding meanings that called for dialogue and learning on the part of all the participants involved. To illustrate, let me unfold more of the work experiences of a few Good Job participants from the shelter.

It was not long after making the statements above that Brad began to hire Good Job participants. The first one who took a job at the pizza shop and stuck around for an extended time was Bob. Bob had worked for Brad for 4 weeks when Brad met with me and Bob’s caseworker at the shelter with one big question. He needed to know what motivated Bob. It was a fair question, and one that we had all discussed together even
before Bob’s initial job interview with Brad. Bob was on partial government disability
due to a variety of physical and mental illnesses. This, coupled with the fact that Bob was
living at the Good Works transitional housing facility where his rent was very low and
his food free, minimized his need to make money to survive. Beyond money, it seemed to
all of us that Bob would benefit from work as he often talked of his good old days
working at X-mart and enjoying it so much. That was about all we understood at the time
about what would motivate Bob to work.

When Brad met with us his questions and comments revealed more about how he
(Brad) viewed the motivations and rewards of work.

I would like you all to try to find out what motivates Bob. We talked about him
not needing money right now, but he talks about buying a house. He could learn
more here and move up and get more hours if he would do more things like wash
the dishes. That would lead to being able to do more.

We were all a bit baffled about what might motivate Bob to work since money seemed
not to be a big issue for him (although at times he contradicted that idea with notions of
buying a home, although this goal seemed rather lofty to us). Brad’s next “default”
motivation was moving up, learning more, and getting more hours. Bob was not
responding to these ideas the way Brad expected, and so Brad asked me to investigate
Bob’s world of motivation.

I began by meeting with Bob and asking with words about his work motivations.

It went like this:

*Mark: Tell me about your motivation to go to work and what you get out of it. What’s the
biggest part of it?*
Bob: For me, it’s easy for me to – people ask me, “why do you enjoy doing that?” I says...

Mark: Working here you mean?

Bob: Yeah, Just folding boxes. They say they hate doing it, but it's a job, and some people don't understand it because I use terminology that they don't understand. I say, "Dad told me if you don't work you don't eat". You know what I'm referring to, don’t you?

Mark: Got me.

Bob: (Laughter) People don't understand. To me, a relationship between me and God has gotten so close where I can call him Dad, everybody else says God or Lord or something. I really believe that if I do what Dad tells me to do, I don't know how, but he made a promise, and he will keep it. But that’s another subject.

Mark: So other than that I know the money thing –I'm not sure how that works now that you're on partial disability.

Bob: It's supposed to be full disability, but things are going on right now, I may be losing that disability. I make enough income.

Mark: So why would you lose it? You just got diagnosed with diabetes; it doesn't seem like you're –

Bob: They know about that. I’ve got a 15 or 16 page document they gave me that was so confusing, and I actually don't read legalese.

Mark: So who fights for you in that?

Bob: I'm getting me a lawyer, so somebody will.

Mark: So how does making the money at the pizza shop... that's why you can only work up to 20 hours?
Bob Coin: That's so I can report it. But they should – I don't think it will affect much of anything.

Mark: So the money isn't really much of a motivation.

Bob: No. It's just something for me to do, that's all I care about.

Mark: Tell me more about that, what's it do for you; if you didn't have that to do?...

Bob: If I didn't have that to do, I'd be home making my bracelets. Just something to do.

Mark: Right. So it's important for you to keep it.

Bob: Yeah.

Mark: Why, what does it do for you to keep working?

Bob: Keeps – gives me the proper mindset.

Mark: You're pointing at your head.

Bob: I got problems up there too, that's when I got into my disability. And they're now saying, "Oh he's well enough, he don't need it no more." I may be well enough, but I still have problems. My biggest thing is if you have to – you were at Friday night, the last dinner, right?

Mark: No, I was out of town until Saturday.

Bob: Oh, well I usually I'm more on the edge because there's a lot of people. I'm not very good in crowds, and that's my biggest thing right now.

Mark: There aren't any crowds at the pizza shop, it's all take-out and delivery.

Bob: I don't know why, but it makes me like nervous.

Mark: Do you get anxious?

Bob: I don't know what sets it off, it's just too many people or something.
Mark: So you feel like your whole mental package is better when you're working? I know mine is; I go crazy if I have nothing to do.

Bob: If I have something to do, I can focus. And it seems like if I focus on it, it makes things better around me.

Bob is not an inarticulate, nor an unintelligent, man. Yet even he seemed to be fishing for motivations he could sink his teeth into. He began with a reference to his relationship to God, went on to explain that the money he’s earning shouldn’t have much impact on his government disability support and that money is not that much of a motivation for him, and ended up by saying that the job is mainly something to keep him active and mentally healthy (then after the last line above he changed the subject completely). In my dealings with Bob, references to God were very rare, and I never heard that again in connection with work motivation, and money was almost always something that I brought up. In this interview he most often and emphatically hit on “something to do” as the value of his job and what keeps him at it.

After talking with Bob, I struggled over what I might tell his boss that I had discovered about his work motivation. In a bit of an awkward telephone conversation I basically ran down some of what Bob had said and concluded that at that point I was not sure what really motivated Bob to work. Brad continued to bring up the subject of Bob’s motivation for months, being continually surprised by Bob’s job performance and his words about what seemed to motivated him, or not. In hindsight, I see that this was the beginning of a valuable lesson for both me and Brad, a lesson on how much we assumed, and how little we knew, about many of our workers’ motivations for employment.
It is relatively clear from Bob’s words above that his boss’ assumption that motivation would be supplied by the chance to “learn more here and move up and get more hours… that would lead to being able to do more” was not the case. Bob was more motivated by being allowed to stay focused in order to keep anxiety to a minimum. This mis-match of motives and rewards between “moving up” and learning and doing more, versus keeping things safe and simple, was an important one and will be dealt with more later.

For now let me unfold more of the narrative of Bob’s work experience at the pizza shop to further reveal meanings and understandings of motivation.

As Bob worked the next few months he settled into a routine of just folding pizza boxes as his complete job description. Most of us thought that he was capable of more, but since Brad needed a lot of help folding boxes and since Bob seemed to be flourishing with just that one task, everyone was satisfied to let things proceed as they were. Bob was working 15 to 20 hours a week and all was going well. Then Bob was informed that he would no longer be receiving government disability support (as he foresaw for almost a year). I informed Brad that this had happened and he and I both assumed that this would motivate Bob to work more, and perhaps learn more tasks at the shop in order to become more “valuable” there and get more hours. Much to our surprise, however, as the weeks went by, Bob showed no signs of being motivated to make more money to replace his disability.

Then Bob began to have some problems with breaking some Good Works rules for residents. The matters were totally unrelated to work, and I was not fully in the loop
on what was going on. I did know that his housing might be in jeopardy. My
communication with Brad about these events went like this:

Mark: Brad, I just wanted to let you know that Bob might be asked to leave the
transitional housing soon and move back into the shelter. You know that the conditions
there are a lot less comfortable, and I’m not sure how he feels about it.

Brad: Okay, thanks for letting me know. I’ll sort of keep an eye on him to make sure he’s
doing okay.

Two weeks later:

Mark: Bob is living at the shelter again now, so he can’t be there during the day, and is
rooming with a bunch of other men, and can’t shower in the morning and all that. So I
was wondering how his work is holding up?

Brad: Really? I figured nothing happened with that because he never said anything and I
don’t see no difference in his work at all. He seems fine.

About one month later:

Mark: Brad, I wanted to let you know that in about a week it looks like they are going to
ask Bob to leave the shelter. I asked him about it and he has no idea where he might stay.
I’ll let you know what happens, but I figured you’d better know, since I have no idea how
he will handle it.

Brad: Okay. He still hasn’t mentioned anything to us about any problems. He is doing
fine with work. I will watch even closer and have (the manager) watch too. He will have
to leave and has no where to go? Wow.

About a week later:
Mark: Bob did get kicked out of the shelter. Now he is living in a tent somewhere in someone’s back yard in town. I’m not sure exactly where.

Brad: Oh man. I can’t hardly believe that ‘cause he seems to be doing great. He still hasn’t said anything about it. I will ask him about it now. He seems really happy.

About a month later, Bob still living in the tent:

Brad: I just don’t understand it. Bob has done his best work for us and seems to be doing the best since he’s been living in that tent. How can you live in a tent and do a good job at work? He seems the happiest I’ve ever seen him and he’s doing great at the shop.

As best I can figure, Bob was relieved to be done with the conflict and relational strain at the shelters and was freed from that stress to work better when he was living in the tent. He lived in that tent for months, until the cold of winter finally drove him elsewhere, and to this date that period was his most productive at work. Shortly after our last conversation above, Brad gave Bob a raise in pay to reward him for his good work.

Bob was happy about that, not because he saw the increase from $5.35/hour to $5.50/hour making any significant difference in his life, but because it was evidence that his boss was pleased with him.

My lesson was that Bob is accustomed to living on very little money, and is really quite unmotivated by it, or has given up on earning much of it. He is much more motivated to keep his stress at manageable levels, to stay occupied, and by his relationships with those around him.

The importance of relationships as motivator was pointed out to me even more strongly when I gave Bob a one-time-use camera and asked him to shoot pictures of whatever he wanted to describe his life. Out of the 16 photos Bob took, 12 were of his co-
workers at the pizza shop, or of other participants in the Good Job program. One was of a friend, two of himself, and two of his cats. All those photos are about personal relationships and 75% are of his co-workers. As I looked at the photos I couldn’t help but wonder what had been going on in Bob’s life a few months before, when we had not yet started Good Job? Only one friend and 2 cats represented all that came before. Whatever that means, the photos, and the brief oral captions Bob provided to explain them, clearly indicated to me that the job for Bob was very much about connecting and relating to others (see figure 1). Bob’s motivations to work were complex and shifting, and perhaps most important here; they rarely matched up well with his employer’s understandings of what should and does motivate people to work.

Figure 1
Prior to beginning this research project and the Good Job program, I had worked as a night shift manager at the shelter for 8 months. Part of my duties included conducting intake interviews with new arrivals. The protocol for those interviews included questions about the person’s short term goals. I cannot remember an intake interview in which the applicant did not list getting a job and enough money to afford housing as among their first priorities. Housing as priority number one makes sense, one would expect a person asking to stay at a homeless shelter to have such goals. Yet, during the in-depth and ongoing investigation into discourses of work with Good Job participants (and would-be participants), I was surprised how gaining money was often far down the list of what motivated people to work. As with Bob, non-pecuniary needs and desires often seemed to take precedence over making money, even for those that collected no government benefits.

To further illuminate the array of motivations for work we experienced via Good Job, I would like to introduce the reader to Maurice. I met Maurice at a focus group meeting we had at the shelter. At this point in his life Maurice exhibited a lot more fear toward work than he did motivation to work. Some of our conversations went like this:

*Another resident:* *I think the managers from the shops aren’t willing to hire people from here.*

*Maurice:* *A lot of them aren’t, a lot of them look at 91 State Avenue as transients, but for me it’s more about potential to do the job.*

*Mark:* *What do you mean, potential?*

*Maurice:* *Potential, I don’t feel I have the potential, the capabilities, the mental health well-being to hold down an 8-hour job.*
Another Resident: But you are a very diligent man

Maurice: Yes, but I’m saying, if I can get upset about that little thing [that just happened] out front- I mean that has got me wired.

Another Resident: But you have the ability to put up with me.

Maurice: I’m running around like a chicken with my head cut off. I mean he can see it, [the staff here] can see it. What happens when I try work an 8 hour job, a 10 hour job?

Another Resident: Once you’re used to it you won’t do that.

Another Resident: But they don’t give you enough time to get used to it

Mark: How about a 4 hour job?

Maurice: Whatever, I can forget, I turn my head and I can forget. I can forget where I’m at and where I’m going. I can just forget. That’s what I mean by job potential. If I get a job they ain’t gonna keep me. They can’t keep me.

Another Resident: At the job they are going to say, hey I’m tired of telling you what to do

Maurice: Let alone say that, look at the responsibility the job will have with me with metal plates in my head. In my particular situation I have 2 lives. I have “B.A.” and “A.A.”; Before aneurism and after aneurism. And I can’t get used to after aneurism, because it’s not me, it’s not who I’ve been for 49 years. They [the surgeons] had to go in cerebral. I’ve got 3 metal plates in my head, one clip and one band.

Mark: So let’s think about what it is the job program we’ve got going on right now with bosses that know what is going on in your life. To try to walk you through, so maybe you can work just a little bit.

Maurice: [They] can’t empathize. They might be able to sympathize, but they can’t empathize. They don’t know what it’s like.
Maurice: I was asked this afternoon at my meeting if I want to keep trying to get my disability or do I want to go out and try to work? And I was told by staff that even after aneurism that I show more potential than many of the other people [here] do.

Another Resident: Do you believe that?

Maurice: No. To a degree yes.

Another Resident: I’ve seen Maurice’s work at The Safe Place and it’s beautiful. All he needs is someone to kind of walk him through it, once he starts he’ll be fine. Once he starts he getting more self confidence he’s going to whip through it.

Another Resident: But who is going to be willing to do that? He’s saying, how many managers are going to be willing to work with him?

Maurice: Yea. Three years ago I was fired from the job I had. I had never been let go from a job. Until 3 years ago. I worked at Shipment Express, and I was fired for sexual harassment before my aneurism. And that was totally bull, but once sexual harassment was mentioned you are out the door, it don’t matter. All they hear are those 2 words and you are gone. From there its been just a downhill ever since, and then the aneurism. I wish I never lived through it.

Mark: I know your confidence is low about being able to do a job, but do you feel like work could be part of the way to turn things around and start your life going up?

Maurice: I don’t know, ‘cause I can see myself doing 2 or 3 jobs a week. Screw up there and you’re let go. Screw up another one, and you’re let go. I mean that chain got started 3 years ago.

Mark: So think about the best job you ever had. What made it good? What things made it good?
Maurice: I worked as a beauty supplier. I mean I love to drive. I started out as a driver and I’d delivery to the salons. And all the Salon owners used to love me, me and one other guy I worked with. We got unbelievable Christmas tips because we went above and beyond just bringing an order in. There was a group of 4 of us that the sales rep nicknamed us “the fantastic 4.” If you wanted a job done right, you gave it to one of us and they know they had it done.

Mark: So what made it such a good job for you?

Maurice: Because of my knowledge of the job. Because I was able to do such a good job. I can do it, I know it. Satisfaction in doing good at it. Satisfaction of knowing you did a good job. They know you, customers or whoever.

The discussion progressed about the current jobs held by some in the shelter, all of which were at fast-food franchises.

Mark: So you don’t get that much support working a minimum wage job, do you? I hear you saying you only hear it when you screw up, is that right?

Maurice: To me, it’s like I was a sales rep, and now I gotta go sling hamburgers? I did that when I was a kid. Not thirty years later.

Another Resident: You only get bad words if you mess up. You hardly ever hear a nice thing. If you did your job right you wouldn’t make that mistake.

Mark: And in the good jobs you had that encouragement was built in, wasn’t it? People were telling you that you were a great supplier, that you are great with my kids. But you are not getting that now? Is that right?

Many Voices: Yes/Yeah/Exactly.
At the time of the above conversation Maurice was only contemplating seriously looking for work. It was apparent that he had very little confidence in his prospects and in his abilities to perform. He felt fragile and was faced with entering low wage, low prestige labor that was at once beneath him, but perhaps would prove too much for him to handle. He saw himself as only part of the man he had been before his health problems. He identified often with a lack of “potential,” of “capabilities,” and of the “mental well-being” to cut it in the work world. He feared that his forgetfulness and his tendency to become easily upset would undermine efforts to work. Maurice’s words are telling when it comes to his potential to succeed in employment: “If I get a job, they ain’t gonna keep me – they can’t keep me.”

For many of our participants the fear of falling into that “downward spiral” of bad work experiences was a powerful de-motivator to seek work and stay with it. As Maurice put it, you, “screw up there and you’re let go, screw up another one, and you’re let go,” and for him “that chain got started 3 years ago.” When one’s perceived deficiencies have contributed to enough negative experiences that one has ended up homeless, re-entering employment (especially at the entry level) rarely seems to appear like an appealing part of the solution. The other residents provided a lot of encouragement to Maurice during these small group sessions, but like many I worked with, work was a place where one took a beating, and lost, or failed to gain, confidence, skills, standing, and other benefits. Employment often meant needing a little extra help to “walk you through it,” but getting “I’m tired of telling you what to do” from bosses with such differing life experiences, work experiences, and work motivations from yourself that it seemed that they could “never empathize.”
Maurice had been motivated to work in the past because he knew his job, he knew those he worked with and for, and he was “able to do such a good job.” Now, as a middle-aged man, he would be in need of that rare boss who would be willing to “walk him through it” in order to manage a minimum wage service job. As one of Maurice’s friends put it above, “who is going to be willing to do that?”

Maurice and the other participants had enough life (and employment) experience to intuitively sense what Hochschild (2003) theorized – that negative emotions tend to be expressed downward – where Maurice now resided and would be forced to work. For a person in crisis to seek “low-level” employment often means setting themselves up for “deflected anger and resentment that tend to get deflected down” (p. 85). This represents an enormous challenge for the vulnerable.

My purpose behind telling Maurice’s story so-far is to provide background for events that followed. Soon after the discussions above took place, Maurice was given a mandate by the shelter staff to find work. He was given a deadline by which to either be employed or move out. This motivated him past his fears and other barriers.

A week later our conversation went like this:

Mark: How about non-work, what’s going on in life? It’s all connected, but besides just work, how’s life?

Maurice: At the moment that’s a big issue for me. Because I’m not working because I need to work. You know? So that’s it, because I feel like I can’t. I can’t devote the hundred percent that’s needed. They [the shelter staff] feel I can. They put that as a stipulation. A stipulation for my staying here.

Mark: How long have you been here Maurice?
Maurice: 120 days plus.

Mark: Does living here stress you out?

Maurice: No, it’s more structured. To me it’s more structured, it’s that safety net. It’s that structure rather than this big fear I have of being out all my own. I mean I’ve been on my own my whole life basically. But for some reason I have this big fear of being on my own. Since surgery. Here, I am with friends, they almost have become like a second family. They’re there, I means they are there if you slip up or something. They give you that little kick in the pants type thing to. Did you forget to do that again? I mean they see my forgetfulness, but they are there. This has only been since my surgery. It’s like the more independent I try to become the more I realize how dependent I am. The more independent I try to become, the more I realize I’m more dependent than I want to be.

Mark: So that’s why you kind of want a job that’s structured?

Maurice: Yes. Yes, even just now just been talking about it I’m almost in tears just talking about it. Do that on a job? That won’t work. Can’t do it.

Mark: So you are not stressed out by sleeping in the room here at the shelter?

Maurice: No at the moment, I’m only in a room with one other guy. It might be two guys tonight, I don’t know.

Mark: See that could make you an excellent team player. In the right job.

Maurice: Well, in the one job I had we were a team. There were four of us, and the four of us were called the fantastic four. We were called that because if you wanted a job done anywhere in that beauty business, taking in order, or delivering an order, or all points in between, they came to the one of the four of us. They knew that one of the four
could get it done and get it done right very and I was one of the four. We got all the good
tips at Christmastime from both the salons in from the sales reps.

Mark: That’s something that most people like about work, that they are part of a group.
Like in the job that some of you have, even in fast food, there’s the a lot of people
working there. You have some connection with them. That’s something that most people
get out of a job. People that are stuck in homelessness a lot of time lack that connection.

Maurice: And I’ll admit a lot of that connection was from that job. I lost that Job in
1997. I had it for 12 years. You are working fine at the job and then one Monday you’re
told you and everybody else is out of a job come Friday, because they are selling the
business. I mean everybody out. From the lowest peon in the warehouse to the highest
selling salesman. Everybody’s out of a job at the same time. And I’ve been kind of
bobbing and floating ever since then. Then the surgery didn’t help after that. So here I
sit. I can get upset. My fault, your fault, it doesn’t matter who’s fault. I can get upset.
And it’s not like something I can do to stop it.

A Shelter Staff Person: You don’t think there’s any way that you can work on trying to
get control of it?

Maurice: Well I mean that’s what I’m going to, when I talk to my counselor; she needs
another goal because I’ve been there like a month and a half. And we’ve achieved the
one goal, but she needs another goal so that’s the goal I’m going to talk to her about.
The fact of me being too easily upset. I mean I’m really fragile at the moment. And I
don’t like being fragile because I’ve always been resourceful and being able to do it all
my own.
In his pre-employment discourse Maurice’s expressed needs for structure and belonging due to his “really fragile” state. He told me, “I need an easy repetitive job that is low stress, something with lots of structure.” Structure to help him deal with his stress and unstable emotions, and belonging to offer the support needed to move forward. He did not mind life at the shelter, with all its discomforts, as it offered both. It was structured, and there he felt a sense of belonging with others who “are there if you slip up or something.” He assumed he would get neither at any job he might attain.

Shortly after the last conversation above, Maurice found work at a local franchise of a national fast-food chain. Maurice had filled out a job application at the restaurant completely on his own, but asked me to come to his first day of work to talk with his new boss. He had expressed in his first meeting with her that he only felt confident cleaning the lobby of the store, as the kitchen was much too stressful for his mental state. She had agreed, but as she was not a partner employer in the Good Job program, Maurice wanted me to reiterate his concerns. He gave me permission to share more of his story and to reconfirm that he could work no more than 20 hours per week (his request was for no more than 10), and would do only the lobby. The employer afforded me divided attention and gave the distinct impression that I was taking up valuable time that she did not really have to spare. Yet, she allowed me to tell her some of Maurice’s story explaining how insecure he felt about working, and how his number one goal was to ease into it and keep the stress low. I stressed to her that, in my opinion, the only way to keep Maurice working there was not to give him more than he thought he could handle. The manager, who was preparing her fast-food place for the return of thousands of hungry college
students after the summer break, was desperate for laborers and happy to compromise and have Maurice sign on.

I met with Maurice about a week after he began work and he had some good success to report. He had worked 16 hours the first week and said, “I’m surprised how much I’m remembering, and how much I’m being able to work.” He also talked of how good it felt to be working again and how “when the other employees or the manager say ‘good job’ it really feels good.” He was experiencing the benefits of work that his friends and those who worked with him had hoped for. He was seeing and focusing on what he could do rather than so much on his deficiencies, and was gaining confidence with his new found successes.

The problems did not come for Maurice as a result of his shortcomings, but oddly, as a result of his success. I spoke with Maurice after his second week of work and he began to speak of feeling more stressed, as he had worked 20 hours that week and they had begun giving him a bigger variety of tasks to perform. He asked that I talk to his boss and request no more hours and no new duties until he had become more settled with those he already had. I did so over the phone with his boss (she had no time to meet me face to face), and was met with a tepid response. By his third week on the job, Maurice’s hours had ballooned up to 36 and he was being given more and more responsibilities and varieties of tasks to perform. When I sat down and talked to him for an extended time after his third week of work he said,

I did lobby work for 2 ½ days and then, bam, I’m doing the fryer, and it’s on a timer, and it’s really stressful. I am a pin ball in the machine. Tons of timers going off all the time - it really stresses me out. I saw a manager’s note saying ‘he is
really slow on the fryer.’ I am boiling stuff, and also doing dishes. I have really come close to blowing my top. I am really keyed up.

Marshal had become a victim of his own success, and one that illustrates well the lack of consubstantiality we often found between what our workers considered to be motivations, successes, and rewards of/at work, and what were considered the same by their bosses. Maurice’s boss saw in him a worker that was doing fine. One who had his limitations, but was eager, conscientious, and available. In her world that called for reward, and in fast-food and other minimum wage jobs reward usually equates with hours. The best workers are those that can and will do a variety of tasks, and those workers are rewarded by being giving more working hours on the weekly schedule.

Unfortunately for Maurice, just as for Bob, and Darlene, and many others I encountered, more hours and more responsibility are unwelcome. They are experienced as negatives, and as the very things that are most feared about work – things that lead to lack of stability, and too much stress. More hours and more tasks are the makings of unsustainable at work. I wrote the following in my field notes after meeting with Maurice:

[Maurice’s boss] at [the fast-food restaurant] sees in Marshal a guy who is doing well, and she really needs those, so she naturally moves him up to more hours and duties since that is her idea of success. THIS IS IRONIC since I just talked with her less than a week ago and told her that he is fragile and hasn’t worked in years, since his brain surgery, and that he needs to take baby steps. But I can’t blame her – she sees a job well done and wants to “reward” it.

My notes from that meeting with Maurice reflected on more hours and more job tasks:
Maurice wants neither of those. For him those are both negative reinforcers. It is both his invisible disabilities and maybe his priorities that make both of those “rewards” into punishments for him. Maybe he doesn’t want to give up relationships for success, or maybe he can’t handle more work or pressure due to all his medical and housing pressure. Whatever it is, the world of competitive employment is holding out very few carrots for him. In fact, the carrots are sticks!!!!!

Even more ironic was the fact that a few weeks later, as Maurice nearly buckled under that strain of his hours and work responsibilities (and as our requests for relief went unheeded), he was getting overtime for working more than 40 hours per week, and was named “employee of the month” at the restaurant. When a group of us from Good Job met to congratulate Maurice, he talked of quitting and finding new work at a nearby box retail store where he had heard they let workers do just one job over and over again, and often put people on regular weekly schedules.

Maurice stayed at the fast-food place, and did gain some relief (less hours) when his job performance began to wane. Then when Christmas break came at the local university he found himself working less than 10 hours per week again.

Maurice’s boss was not a particularly unsympathetic woman. When I had first met with her and explained Maurice’s situation and what it was we were trying to accomplish with our job support initiative, she had greeted the idea with enthusiasm, adding: “In my opinion owners should have an allotment of money set aside to employ people who need help as part of their civic duty or whatever.” She went on to add that “everyone thinks I’m too nice.” I too think that she is a nice person, but I have come to
understand a bit better the kinds of pressure such managers are under to create profit. Further, the languages and subsequent economies of motivation and reward between such bosses and workers in poverty often just do not seem to match up well.

Working at a fast-food place or other entry level minimum wage jobs would rarely be seen as sources of stability and connection. Many of our workers complained of the instability ushered in by having a new and differing work schedule every week – one that is often not known until Sunday night. Add to that the cyclical nature of many low-wage jobs, and stability and sustained connection are hard to come by. On top of these challenges are piled low prestige, poor pay, and the disposable nature of such labor, all leading to what I began to refer to as the round hole of low-skilled jobs in our economy to which the poor often play the part of the “wrongly-shaped” square pegs.

One of our partnering fast-food managers talked (privately) of the jobs she could offer the poor as being “stepping stones” at best – stepping stones that could hopefully lead to better things. But for many like Maurice, the initial stones of the working walkway in our economy are too far apart to navigate as they hold too little reward and promise, and offer too much suffering. That manager, who works for one of the burger giants of the American economy, lamented to me that today even her chain demands that workers be able to do a variety of tasks. We were discussing a Good Job worker who was not succeeding at the restaurant when the manager said, “I love her on the grill, but that one thing just isn’t good enough any more, now-days the company wants everyone to be able to do everything in the store.” If even fast-food jobs now require multitasking and high degrees of flexibility, where can workers in poverty, or with other challenges and
limitations, go to find the stability that work can provide and that they so desperately need?

Many of the workers we were trying to help dig out of poverty longed for what Buzzanell and Goldzwig (1991) called steady-state jobs where workers might do the same things at a job over long periods of employment. Those sorts of jobs bred stability and connection. But that is the “old economy” that was characterized by “strong” employment (see Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle, 1999). We now live in an economic environment with no less competition, but much less stability. The question thus arises, where will workers like Maurice find the entry doors to get back into the market-based economy of our age? How can the markets shift enough to serve those at every level of skill, health, and privilege? Instead of training, or a stepping stone to better things, many of the jobs that are available to people in poverty are (as described by a Good Works staff member), “benchmarks of how far they’ve fallen from wherever they’ve been.”

I am hopeful, however, that bosses at all levels of employment can envision new ways to offer their employees in various situations work environments that help foster the stability needed to grow and prosper the workers. With the social support offered by our little group, and with partnering employers like Brad who are willing and listening in order to learn new discursive meanings for constructs like motivation and reward, I am confident that new pathways to successful employment and lives can be forged, even for those in the deepest of poverty. Bob and Maurice are still working their jobs as I write this report. They have their ups and downs, but the work is never-the-less a valuable part of their lives, and they are motivated to do it for reasons that usually seem quite removed
from money, chances for advancement, prestige, power, or an opportunity to impact their world.

For decades debate has flourished around and between those theorizing motivation from a behavioral point of view, and those who see it as being more a matter of human needs. Behaviorists in the B. F. Skinner (1938) tradition posit that given the proper stimulus, animals (like humans) will respond in patterned and predictable ways. It would follow that in order to motivate humans toward work – something that usually entails exertion – the correct stimuli must be presented in order to elicit the desired response. However oversimplified this may seem, few would argue that there is some practical truth in behaviorist thinking. For example, I am grateful for the stimulation of a deadline offered to me as I write this dissertation. It helps stimulate me to keep going.

In contrast, a more needs-based approach to motivation has been championed by Maslow (1943) and others in his tradition. Perhaps humans are motivated to meet their needs when it comes to work and other behaviors and activities. This idea served to move the source of motivation toward a more internal locus within the person. We do difficult things like work because we are driven to get what we need to live and thrive.

Kenneth Burke (1950), and others, have urged us to see that human action and the motives that drive it are created through symbols, and that, in fact, humans create their world via symbol use. Motivation is never extra-symbolic, arising from some virgin inner psychic reservoir, but rather is created and located in and through human symbolic sense-making. From such a discursive point of view, I would posit that both stimuli and needs effect the way humans feel, think, and behave around motivation and its consequences. Both external and internal stimuli, as well as internal and external needs, come to us, and
are made sense of by us, via and amidst the discursive milieu we have lived in and are living in.

Discursively, we may gain insight into the motivations of work for my participants by looking at it in Burke’s (1945) terms. Burke offered a pentadic approach to interpret any “text,” urging the critic to consider the scene, act, agents, agency, and purposes in play. For my investigation, the “scene” of work, and work motivations, may be of paramount importance as it may be easily overlooked, or become so taken-for-granted that it becomes nearly beyond scrutiny. Burke does not use the term scene in reference to just background or setting, but reminds us instead that “one thinker uses ‘God’ as his term for the ultimate ground or scene of human actions, another uses ‘nature,’ a third uses ‘environment,’ or ‘history,’ or ‘means of production,’ etc.” (pp xvi-xvii). Through such a lens, one could argue that the fundamental nature of the perceived scene of work has profound, yet often unrecognized, implications for what might motivate a participant to act in one way for another at and around work.

In Burke’s (1945) terms, the scene created around, by, and within the text of capitalism and work for many of the owners and managers I encountered consisted largely of money and tasks. That is, the ground, the foundation, and the impetus for work is to perform tasks and make money. Yet, for many of our participants in poverty, the constructs that comprised the ultimate ground or scene of human employment action (i.e. work) were belonging, connectedness, and structure.

This sort of diversity in the meaning of the scene of work itself creates what Burke (1950) called difference, which he theorized in turn creates a sense of guilt, which must be reconciled. The difference in scene and motivations of work in the contexts I
investigated has been elaborated above. The guilt created by those differences largely fell on the heads of the workers in poverty, who were often sold the narrative that they did not “measure up” to the normal scene and expectations of capitalism and work. Put another way, their scene, their motivation, and their experiences of work were not legitimate, as they do not fit easily within the dominant interpretation of the overall scene and subsequent actions of work. During much of my study, the staff of Good Works read together a book in which the authors posited that social service practitioners must adopt the role of teaching those in the “poverty class” the hidden rules of the middle class. One such “rule” stressed throughout the text was that those in poverty must learn to “give up relationships for achievement” (Payne, DeVol, Dreussi Smith, 2001, p.8). Thus, if one’s “scene” of work evokes relationship and belonging more than the achievement of tasks and money, one is stuck in “the rules of poverty,” inheriting all the guilt and shame therein.

While a large part of the “occupational psychoses” (Burke, 1965) of current dominant discourses of work may revolve around concepts akin to task and money, I never-the-less see hope for consubstantiality, and thus more ultimately some level of redemption, for and between what Payne et al. (2001) termed the “poverty class” and the “middle class” scenes, or understandings, of work and work motivation. Few, if any, managers and owners would claim that people, belonging, and structure are not key ingredients of a functional work environment. In fact, most I encountered desired to better understand and foster the “human” element of their businesses. Likewise, no person in homelessness that I have talked to totally disassociated work with taking care of tasks in order to earn monetary reward. The grounds for “consubstantiality” (Burke,
1950) are there, but so are the barriers of difference in the values, meanings, and underlying scene of work. Much of the difference stems from radically different experiences of that scene, and much of the redemption (via greater consubstantiality) in my examination came via the hearing of narratives of experience, and dialoguing around them.

I suggest that as experiences, needs, and discourses of work radically differ among individuals, so might their motivations to work. Bob and Maurice, and many others I encountered, had work motivations quite different from my own, and from those of their bosses. Moreover, their motivations shifted. Before we put them into better dialogue, through narrative, with their bosses, however, their motivations were almost always hidden, and remained mysterious. The discourses of motivation for work held by some (more dominant) segments of society will surely dominate, but if the motivations for a behavior like work are understood only through those discursive lenses, then those motivations may not hold up among people whose experiences vary radically from the dominant. Again, if the Event life of some is not honored in our meanings and practices of motivation around work, then the risk is that motivation will suffer as the worker becomes more alienated from a world that is to her or him “unreasonable” (Burke, 1937). I believe that my empirical findings from the Good Job program uncovered some rather major differences in the ways various participants understood motivation for work, and that these differences can have profound consequences, but that redemption is never beyond possibility.
Traditional “Masculine” and “Feminine” Discourses and Organizing around Work, and a Complex Marriage Between them around Good Job.

In this section my aim is to describe and offer evidence that Good Job brought (through its use of narrative and dialogue) what have been considered traditional “feminine,” or “feminist” ways of communicating and organizing into the contexts of for-profit businesses that are usually dominated by traditional “masculinity.” Further, I agree with Ashcraft (2006) that organizational forms, norms, and discourses “emerge as members invoke them in interaction” (p. 59) in everyday, lived situations. The goals, the ways of operating, and the people that Good Job introduced into for-profit business contexts brought with them divergent ways of interacting, of making sense, and of managing meanings around work, and what work is and does (or should do), and I contend that this helped influence organizational discourses and norms.

In many ways the discourses I encountered in the field form a strong case that the non-profit often “talks” with the language and values of care-giving (traditionally attributed to feminity/women), while the for-profit favors the views and discourses of hegemonic masculinity and instrumental rationalities. However, when a deeper look is taken, I believe that the evidence begs us to consider the mixing, colliding, and collaborating of traditional discourses that were ushered into both for-profit and non-profit contexts when the complex lived narratives of those in severe poverty were allowed a real hearing. I argue that Good Job created situations where (often) unintended, unexpected, and emergent blendings and fusions of traditional masculine and feminine discourses of work and poverty arose and had influence.
Let us first quickly examine traditional “masculine and feminine” discourses and how they have been described. Buzzanell (1994) offered three broad themes that transcend various forms of feminist theorizing. She contrasted these feminist themes to those of traditional “masculine” organizing and stated them as cooperative enactment in lieu of individualism; integrative thinking instead of linear thinking; and connectedness rather than autonomy and separation.

Competition could be summed up with the colloquialisms “every man/woman for himself or herself,” and “it’s him or me.” Meaning that in traditionally masculine-dominated forms of organization there tends to be a constant pressure, and constant reward offered, to excel over others. Some will “rise to the top,” and it is understood that they can only do so because there will be those that sink to the bottom (a top and bottom are thus discursively created). “At the heart of the competitive orientation is the need to excel over others, to stand out against the performance of others” (Buzzanell, 1994, p.345).

Feminisms have contrasted competition and individualism to the feminist/alternative ideal of cooperative enactment. Here group/organizational members are encouraged to reject dichotomous thinking (“self and other”, “us and them”) and power relationships (the “winners” having power over the “losers”), in favor of working together as a collective unit. “Collectivist organizations engage in consensus processes for negotiation of decisions with minimal rule use, little differentiation among members, and value fulfillment incentives rather than advancement in hierarchies” (Buzzanell, 1994, p. 352). Cooperative theories of organizing call for members to share resources and
authority in order to move together toward the fulfillment of common goals determined by common values.

Linear thinking assumes that there exists a shortest and most efficient way (a straight line) to get from point A to point B. Linear thinking in organizing assumes that there is a best way (often the way that “worked” in the past) to operate, and this way is asserted to be rational and direct. In research and theorizing, this sort of cause and effect thinking has driven us to look for and posit “covering laws” that can then be relied upon to sift through the complexities of many future problems/dilemmas. In organizing it diminishes the possible contributions of those who don’t think or operate “rationally,” or think in creative or alternative ways and thus may offer up “wrong” answers.

By contrast, alternative/feminist organizing values integrative thinking that encourages organization members to think outside of the proverbial box, and to do it together. It is much more of a dialogic orientation, asserting as a given that everyone has a unique perspective and possible contribution. Therefore, problems, questions, and modes of operation are open for discussion and negotiation in order to best facilitate the creation of collective knowledge toward the fulfillment of goals. This demands freedom from the tyranny of the “best answer.”

Buzzanell (1994) posited that traditional organizing encourages the autonomous individual to distinguish (and thus separate) himself from others. This tendency toward separation can lead members to internally separate moral ideas of truth and what is right, from emotionality. It also fosters a separation of gendered roles, with the stereotypical female roles of relating and nurturing, getting along well with others, caring for others, and having a family (which have been largely relegated to a “private” realm and thus
given little exposure, and offered little status or reward) to be undervalued. Under traditional organizing there is separation and thus “attempts to integrate mind, body, and emotions, to display varied realities, and to deconstruct layered meanings of organizational practices and constructs, are insufficiently valued” (Buzzanell 1994, p. 368). By contrast, the alternative or feminist organization tends to value diversity and connectedness while downplaying division. Connectedness among members—both relationally and in working together—is a high value. The connectedness between heart, mind, and emotions is not denied or downplayed as weak or inefficient, but nurtured. Connectedness, or at least permeable membranes between such concepts as past and present, or work and family, are stressed as a way “to create more balanced lives for both men and women” (Gibson & Schullery, 2000).

A decade before Buzzanell published her concise summary and contrast of traditional discourses, Ferguson (1984) summarized that with “feminist” organizing “groups are decentralized; they rely on personal face-to-face relations rather than formal rules; they are egalitarian rather than hierarchical; and they see skills and information as resources to be shared, not hoarded” pp 189-190).

From the first early meetings I attended between Good Works staff and future employers of workers without homes, I was struck by how differently individuals from the two perspectives talked about what Good Job was trying to do. Those from the nonprofit sector often talked of “care,” of “helping and serving,” and Good Works staff often talked of giving workers “grace” when they made mistakes. The for-profit bosses sometimes used the word “care,” but it was almost always in contrast to “not caring” (as in having no regard for), not in reference to actively offering care to another, or care-
giving. In place of “grace” the for-profit businesspeople usually talked of giving some “lee-way,” or being a bit more “lenient” with workers in poverty. As one partner about to hire his first worker from the shelter expressed it: “My expectations of people from here would be about the same a with everyone else, with maybe a little more lee-way. But I need to make money.”

Leniency, or “lee-way,” are references to how exactingly one is held to a formal rule, or standard (which are assumed to be strictly held in place by the demands of the market), while “grace” is less focused on the rule and more on the person. Additionally, “leniency,” as used by the for-profit businesspeople, was often much more qualified than it was with the non-profit workers. That is, those who would be given some “lee-way” would be those who showed they really wanted to work, or were “just down on their luck,” as opposed to being individually responsible for their situations or deficient in some way. As one manager put it: “If someone is fully capable and they just had bad luck or something, I’d like to help keep those people self-sufficient.” One must prove worthy of leniency, which contrasts sharply with the Christian idea of grace that I heard used by Good Works staff on occasion. Grace is undeserved favor for which every human being is qualified and worthy. Good Job proved to provide fertile ground for the colliding and mingling of divergent discourses around such constructs as leniency, rules, “grace,” and worthiness.

Consider the following conversation with one of our for-profit business partners:

Mark: What about for a place like Good Works, and the people that live there, what do you think would be a thing that you could offer them by working together?
Manager: Well what I think I offer them is showing like the community that the program is something that's really working for the people instead of taking care of people. I think they're getting in a comfort zone, that people just think, “oh it's just taking care of the homeless like.” I think that it's gonna show the community that people are willing to help them get established and get them back out.

Mark: So you're not just taking care of people, but…

Manager: Right. Showing the community that there's people here that do care about people and we're not here just to make money. We're here to help those people that wanna work.

In light of traditional “masculine and feminine” discourse, the conversation above reveals that this manager clearly saw his business as counter-balance to the non-profit’s “just taking care of people.” He could offer “working for the people” as an alternative to care – and particularly for the worthy. This also served as a good example to “show the community” that his business wasn’t there “just to make money,” but also to “help those people that wanna work.” Here, Good Works was offering a balance to his for-profit businesses, showing that it does not exist only to make money. The ongoing tension between “just” making money and caring about people seems to highlight the difference between the two ways of being and operating in the world. That difference, and the guilt it has been argued to create (see Burke, 1950), seem to be addressed well by the hybrid program of Good Job.

Our conversation progressed as follows, with the manager continuing to walk the line between the instrumental rationality to make money (which would seem to arouse
suspicion if it stood alone as sole motive), and that of being a good community member who cares for others:

Mark: Yeah. Other than that, or building on that, what would you like to get out of it, or what do you see yourself getting out of it?

Manager: Well definitely public recognition; knowing that we are a business, we are people that care about our employees, we're not just some random place come in and just making money and don't care about community. I mean, we give a lot of money back into the community, and instead of money, this was another thing we- essentially we are giving money because we're paying them. We're giving them paychecks. Pretty much that. Just letting the community know that we care about them. And hopefully they order from us, and help us keep doing it.

I then pulled the context of the conversation into the personal, or what has been often dubbed the “private” realm. This is the realm that feminists have long argued to be a discursive construction of traditional masculinity created and maintained to relegate traditional feminist values and roles (like care-giving, relationships, and cooperation) to inferior status.

Mark: What about you personally, what are your hopes?

Manager: There's nothing really personal except the satisfaction of knowing I'm helping people. I mean, just letting them know there's people out there that does like to help people out. That's what it's all about. I mean, I'm not like – I mean, by any means it's nothing to make money on, it's not anything like that, it's just hopefully down the road I'd like to see my taxes cut down and things like that. So I guess if I'm really looking for something, that's what it is. We're trying to
hopefully just get like one person to be able to get out from their care and get on
their own, start making their own money, and the chance for a job reference
where they can actually have someone that they can say they worked here for this
long, and be able to move up and get actual jobs and be able to support
themselves and their families.

The manager quickly takes the conversation out of the personal or “private” realm
(“There's nothing really personal”) and turns it back to getting “people out there” so the
public knows that his business is helping people out, which, in turn, comes back to a
discussion of money and taxes.

This part of the conversation ended as follows:

Mark: Yeah. So would it be fair to say what you'd like to see is just kind of be a
stepping stone?

Brad: Yeah. Definitely this is a – that's a good term, a stepping stone. Stepping
stone into reality; knowing exactly what you gotta’ do, what kind of responsibility
you have to be able to handle, and how to handle your money too.

For this for-profit businessperson the Good Job program was a stepping stone from care
to the “reality” of competition, and personal responsibility of self, task, and money.

It may seem intuitively “natural” that our for-profit partners stressed (traditionally
“masculine”) competition, autonomy, and control toward instrumental goals, while the
non-profit partners tended to communicate the (traditionally “feminist”) values of
cooperation, care, connection, and relationships. Yet, as the Good Job project progressed,
bringing greater and greater cross-pollination between the for-profit and non-profit
participants, and as the workers in poverty gained and exercised more voice in both
contexts, I found the discourse to be much more of a mixing and blending of traditional masculine and feminine ways of talking about, and making sense of, work, poverty, and “helping” people in poverty succeed at employment.

Before I had entered the field of supporting workers in poverty as they were employed at for-profit businesses, I interviewed a government official whose job dealt with vocational training and support for those with disabilities. I was struck by how the official used the adjective “competitive” to describe the kind of work that we were hoping to place Good Works residents into. This official told me, “some people just aren’t ready for competitive employment yet.” Competitive employment, that was a new phrase and thought for me. I had never really considered employment at a pizza place or in a fast food restaurant as “competitive.” That is a phrase I would have equated with climbing the corporate ladder, or battling for contracts and customers. My field notes about this subject read as follows:

I have been thinking a lot about that phrase and mindset of the “COMPETITIVE” work world. The market that [a fast food restaurant chain we were partnering with] and other businesses work in, and compete in, is very competitive – but does the daily work environment have to be like that for all the workers, even for those at the “bottom” who are getting very little pay for their work? Wallace and Darlene and Dean don’t want competition – they would rather have belonging, security, and peace. That reminds me of [feminist scholar Nancy] Fraser and feminist “enclaves.” Maybe they need enclaves against things like “competition” that some people just don’t want to, or can’t, live with. Our folks sure could use some enclave-ing.
The statement that our participants in poverty did not want competition was based on their explicit discourse. At one focus group the conversation went as below. Jane was talking about her work at a national fast-food chain store:

Jane: Peggy works the grill, and according to [Jane’s manager] she may give Peggy’s hours to me, and I’m thinking, NO! That isn’t right. I don’t like competition. I really don’t. I don’t want to compete with other people, especially those that are more needy than me. If it takes away from those who are needier. I have never felt the neediest. Does that make sense? Mark: Yea, sure.

Jane: I don’t know that much about Peggy, she is probably my age. She is slower than a snail, but I just don’t want to take away from the locals. If you have a spot for me, that’s great, I’ll work it, but don’t pit us against one another, that isn’t good.

Bob: That’s the way I am too. I just don’t like competition.

Jane: If it gets stressed too much I will walk away. I don’t feel bad about it because I can always pick up another job somewhere.

Mark. That’s the kind of stuff I would rather see you communicate with your boss about. Especially things like, “I don’t want to take hours from these other people if I can help it.” Communicate with your boss that you don’t wanna do that to the other people.

Jane: I just feel bad, you know?

Jane’s and Bob’s attitudes were not untypical for the workers I encountered. Overall, they exhibited a very strong ethic of care, and a very low tolerance of competition. Jane was
more than willing to quit her job rather than have her boss “pit” her against other
employees for hours. An ethic of cooperation, of care, and of community most often
prevailed over the idea of competition with our workers in poverty. As one very
experienced Good Works staff person put it, “They [Good Works residents] have an
incredible system of taking care of each other, and they will not sacrifice those
relationships easily, because they know that sooner or later they may need that person,
and need them badly, to survive. It’s not like with richer people, who figure they can just
buy their way out of jams.” Dean once told me that, “it’s easy to do things for others.”

Those (feminist or feminist-like) values of relationship and care, over other more
“market-based” instrumental concerns, entered the for-profit businesses with our
workers. Just as Bob’s boss had to scratch his head in amazement (as did I) at Bob’s
apparent lack of motivation for money, yet intense drive to belong relationally at the
restaurant, so Jane’s boss was informed that Jane would quit before taking hours from her
coworker.

Through channels opened and maintained via narrative and dialogue, Good Job
also challenged and changed the usual practice of limiting the “private life” from entering
into the workplace, where separation has been a traditional masculine trait and mode of
operation. Feminist scholars like Ferguson (1984) have long assailed bureaucracy and its
hierarchies that serve to socialize workers to “substitute technique for connectedness” (p.
56). Meaning that affect, relationships, needs, and personal caring are to be kept out of
the “public” realm of work. At the other end of the spectrum from feminisms cry that the
personal is political, traditional public sphere scholars like Sennett (1974) have theorized
that allowing the personal lives of individuals to enter the “public” sphere is what
disables humans from playing the proper public roles needed to keep order and build healthy society. Sennett wrote of a “fratricidal rhythm” that erodes the proper working of the public sphere. In this “rhythm” people turn on each other when too much personal information or intimacy is shared because, “they reveal themselves to each other, they have mutual expectations based on those self-disclosures, and they find each other wanting” (p. 300).

This socialization, or fear, of allowing the personal to enter into the workplace can be seen in the reluctance of bosses like the manager quoted at the beginning of this section who stated, “There's nothing really personal.” Talking about that same boss, a Good Works staff person later exclaimed to me that he, “can’t quite bring himself to just say it, to admit that he wants to help people, there’s always some business reason for him doing what he’s doing.” Yet, the program itself, and the vulnerability of the applicants and workers – who were willing and often eager to share their (personal) stories in order to obtain and keep much needed work – assured that the personal would be ushered in. In fact, their past and personal histories were sometimes the biggest topic of discussion at their job interviews. I remember a slightly awkward exchange during a job interview between a would-be worker and a manager that began like this:

Manager: “So tell me about your..um, tell me about what you’ve done in the past. Your work history, and...um what has been going on in your life.”

Interviewee: “You mean, how I got like this?”

Due to the sensitivity of that job interview I did not record it, but after jotting down the above quotes my fieldnotes read like this:
She tells a bit of her story. Mostly about how she lost her last job, about how she had been living with [a relative] who abused her and kept her from making it to work on time – she had no car and so lost her job. IT IS A VERY BRIEF TELLING – THERE IS A LOT ON THE LINE.

[The manager] responds by telling some of his story. He goes much farther than he has before. I think because he senses her nervousness. He talks about being from around here and how he got going in business.

This is the pattern we saw evolve as the employers became increasingly comfortable with, and saw the value in, the sharing of “personal” narratives. The bosses began to open up and share their stories, which encouraged the applicant/employees to share theirs more openly. At another job interview the interaction went like this:

Manager-Interviewer: Do you have any limitations on what you can do at work?
Applicant: No, no. The only problem I have is that I am ADD. I take [a prescription medication] for that, and it’s no problem at all.
Manager-Interviewer: I’m ADD too. I know exactly what that’s all about.

And another like this:

Job seeker: I came down here because my [family member] is in drug rehab at [a local site]. I came down here to be close to her and to help her. That is my first priority right now.
Owner-Interviewer: Oh yea? My sister has had real bad drug problems for years. I know all about that. She has been in and out of tons of re-hab programs.

My field notes from that time read:
Wow, two times now the bosses have “come out” about their own problems.

Fascinating. I didn’t expect this thing to be so two-sided when it came to sharing struggles.

It seems that the “fratricidal rhythm” that the traditionally masculine workplace feared would usher in disillusionment and lack of proper role playing as people “found each other wanting,” could instead be a “sororital rhythm” (my play on words) through which participants admitted up-front that they were flawed, and then committed to work together for success. They revealed themselves to each other through narratives, and dialogue around those narratives, and even though they came from often radically different backgrounds via radically differing experiences, some space for cooperation and connectedness was opened.

Ashcraft (2006) both theorized about, and researched empirically, such hybrid manifestations of bureaucratic/feminist organizing that we saw facilitated by Good Job. She contrasted bureaucracy (which could also be called traditional masculine organizing) with feminist organizing in key forms and features of any organization. To summarize, I would like to use Ashcraft’s observations to reiterate how Good Job helped to hybrid-ize the traditional bureaucracies of fast-food franchises and restaurants through the use of narrative and dialogue.

The first key feature of organizing that Ashcraft (2006) examined was the goal or purpose of the organization and its main mode of operation. Traditional bureaucracies tend to operate along instrumental or functional lines, with the main goals being to survive and to optimize performance. With the participating bosses in Good Job the bottom line was commonly stated as making money, and the business was a means to that
end. By contrast, feminist organizations tend to see the organization as an end in itself, with moral purposes. Good Job clearly stated up front that work was viewed as a means not to common instrumental goals, but toward connectedness, structure, self-esteem, and other humanistic goals. Good Job introduced workers like Bob and Dean into workplaces — workers who often weren’t even that interested in making money (and were given a chance to voice that), but desperately needed work none-the-less. Our worker-participants tended to have a variety of differing “goals” for work that clearly stretched the very stated goals of the businesses to perhaps include a bigger space for “people here that do care about people and [a]re not here just to make money.”

Second, Ashcraft (2006) contrasted the power structures and the qualifications for hiring and promotion between bureaucratic and feminist organizations. Bureaucracies tend to use centralized and formal power authorities and criteria for positions. Feminist organizations, in contrast, tend to be more egalitarian and use more informal criteria such as life experience for qualifications, as the goal is to create community. Clearly, a main pillar of Good Job was that many of our workers were not formally qualified, but when given a chance to tell their stories and be hired, often performed well since the jobs meant so much to them in many “community-like” ways. As argued in the section on “voice,” they did not overtly challenge the power of formal authority or rules, but the power of their stories and lived experiences did secure them jobs and make discursive room for their way of knowing and being in the workplace. The life experiences of the workers in poverty, as facilitated through narrative, were further unleashed in the workplace in order to give new context to criteria for hiring, rewards, success, and even the exercise of power through decision making.
Ashcraft (2006) described member relations in traditional bureaucracy as being rational, impersonal, and professional, while feminist organizing calls for more fully integrated selves to relate personally and emotionally. Again, the discourse above, and the very founding principles and strategies of Good Job ensured that the “private” would be brought into the “public” realm of work, and that more fully integrated, or whole, selves would be opened up at work, allowing for more “personal” relations, even across power and cultural divides.

Finally, Ashcraft (2006) described control mechanisms in organizations. Bureaucracies tend toward formal, rule-bound control based on universalism. Basically, one-rule-fits-all. Whereas in feminist organizing justice and control is based on subjective particularism. Again, while Good Job generally operated within very universally rule-bound work settings, the very goal of its narrative mode of operation was to bring in the particular so that those often shut out by universal assumptions or grand narratives of constructs like “homeless” or “convict” could get a foot in the door and be given a chance to succeed at work. Good Job’s “job” was to particularize decisions and justice – to encourage employers and managers to take a closer look at circumstances on a case-by-case basis to benefit those at the “bottom” who tend to be the most “over-generalized” of all workers. This all took place within the otherwise standardized and normally rigid work environments of businesses like franchised restaurants.

From this cursory overview of traditional masculine and feminist organization of work and workplaces, it seems obvious that in many ways, and in many instances, Good Job “feminized” workplaces for and through it’s participants and their stories. Yet, it should be noted, that when it comes to the division of labor (Ashcraft’s, 2006, last feature
of organizing), traditional feminist organizations have favored informal divisions with
task rotation preferable, over the formal, specialized division of labor traditionally found
in more bureaucratic environments. Our Good Job workers tended to buck the feminist
trend on this count, as many of them preferred, or required, fixed, formal, and stable
assignments and tasks. Their backgrounds, abilities, disabilities, and experiences often
called for less change and more repetitive tasks. Their stories, again, helped them
particularize this facet of labor in order to better facilitate their success. As Bob’s boss
once put it: “We like to have everyone be able to do everything, but if Bob’s happy just
doing boxes, he can do just boxes.” I suspect that Bob’s boss would never identify
himself as a feminist, but through the subtle, yet powerful, introduction of feminist
principles into his business via his relationship with Bob, he has moved along as a
humanist, even at work.

(In)Visibility

Communicatively, many of the participants in poverty that I had contact with
walked a delicate line of what to bring out into the open, and what to leave “hidden” in
the shadows. In many ways Good Job was designed around the goal of helping and
encouraging workers in poverty to share their stories and experiences with others in order
to win them additional space at the discursive table, in order to gain better access to
services or opportunities. Revealing one’s experience, however, is never without risk.
Like all exposure, discursive openness brings vulnerability. Poverty already entails a
heightened level of vulnerability, and it seemed obvious to me that the risks of sharing
one’s stories weighed much more on the participants in poverty than I was accustomed to
in my middle class experience. “Hiding,” or the choice to stay hidden, was often a default
strategy for survival, as the risks involved in making oneself visible often seemed to outweigh the possible gains. As Philipsen (1976) found in his classic study of the communication of blue collar workers in “Teamsterville,” sometimes choosing not to speak is a most consequential communication strategy. My findings suggest that the strategic value of (in)visibility, and the choices made surrounding it, were of critical importance to those in the crisis of poverty.

Some of the tensions between rendering oneself visible and remaining hidden revealed themselves in subtle ways, others became quite obvious. Below are my field notes from my experience with Mary. As I noted in an earlier section, Mary was trying to turn her life around after long involvement with drugs, and after spending time in prison. She had relayed to me her disappointment in not being able to find a job, due in her mind almost entirely to the fact that she had to answer “yes” on job applications when asked if she had prior felony convictions. In that situation she had been held back – denied a chance to prove what she could do on the job – because she had no choice but to render visible certain aspects of her past (and to render them visible in a manner not of her choosing, nor framed by her particular experience). In other instances she displayed a good practical understanding and utilization of strategic invisibility. At the point of writing my field notes below I had found Mary an employer who was willing to give her a chance. I had a job interview lined up, with almost total certainty of her being hired. One problem remained, however, and it proved to be a common one as I worked with those in poverty and homelessness – Mary had moved on. She had quite literally disappeared. She had rendered herself physically invisible to many of us. Unsettled coming and going, and moving on with very little notice, may be obvious parts of
homelessness. One has no physical “home” or permanent base of operation. This shifting transience can be used as an advantage for those not wanting to be found (by seekers considered a threat – as Mary now saw her drug-culture ties – or by authorities, those owed debts, or by those with whom relationship was no longer wanted), but it can also be a source of invisibility that denies benefit. Mary had left the homeless shelter and I was looking for her to give her the good news of possible employment. But I could not find her. My notes read like this:

I don’t have a contact number for Mary. She hasn’t been gone very long, but [Good Works] doesn’t have a number for her either. No one there knows where she ended up going. [Her care-giver] tells me that she thinks that Mary’s mom works at [a small diner in a nearby town]. I’m a bit shocked that she doesn’t know more – her and Mary seemed so close.

I have a job interview for her at [one of our participating businesses]. She has been dying to get the chance to work, and now I can’t find her.

I decide to go to the diner where her mom is suppose to work. [My wife and daughter and] I go to the diner for breakfast today to leave my card so Mary can call me. I suspect they might be suspicious of anyone looking for Mary since she has had so many law and drug problems, so we dress extra “family” and innocent.

The lady behind the counter acts like she never heard of Mary when I ask. She has no idea who I’m talking about. I am a bit shocked, so we order and sit down to eat. I didn’t even get to leaving the card because it seemed crazy and insulting to even suggest it when the woman told me she is sure that no one there
knows of any such person. [My wife] tells me to leave the card anyway, and when we leave I give the woman my card with “Mary, job interview” written on it. The lady behind the counter again acts like she has absolutely zero idea who that might be. Another older woman walks in from the kitchen as we are talking and says she has worked there for 13 years and has no idea of anyone like that – or of any relatives of anyone like that working there.

I leave the card, but am sad that the “lead” to finding Mary appears to have been a dead end. I am convinced they are sincere and figure that the informal information network about Mary’s family failed me.

Then just ONE HOUR LATER Mary calls me and says her mom told her to call. Wow, they move around, they hide, and they have good reasons a lot of the time, but sometimes it keeps good things from finding them! In my middle class mind I was about to give up on finding Mary. I almost believed the woman and didn’t even leave the card! I was thinking/feeling that it would be an insult to her since she had just thoroughly explained that she was sure that no one there knew of any Mary. I decided to “risk” giving her the card anyway. I believed the words. She was covering for Mary and her family. What a communication difference! That stuff keeps them hidden, but also can keep them un-helped.

A week later Mary had her job interview, and a new job as a result. Occurrences like this were not uncommon, even among those with less critical problems than drugs and criminality. I once called a man with the intention of delivering the good news that I had found him some temporary construction work. Our phone conversation began as follows:
Answerer: Hello

Mark: Hello, is Ernie there?

Answerer: [delay]… No.

Mark: Do you know when he might be back?

Answerer: [another longer delay]… No.

Mark: Do you know how I can get a hold of him?

Answerer: [long delay]… No.

Mark: Am I calling the right number? I am looking for him about some work at [a cite].

Answerer: Oh, this is Ernie.

In this instance it turned out that Ernie often labored “off the record” and was always cautious about who might be trying to find him as a result. The non-documentation of work is a strategic disappearing act that offers tangible benefits, but also proves constraining due to the unintended negative consequences of disappearing the work experience and practical credentials of the worker, not to mention the risks of getting caught by authorities. In this case, had I not been trained by my Good Job experience to keep probing, and to expect that Ernie might not be easy to find, I may have given up on the call too soon and never reached him. Thus, he and Mary chose to hide behind certain layers of invisibility, as their vulnerabilities seemed to demand, but at the same time they risked being hidden from the opportunity that this particular middle-class (and thus often not so persevering) seeker had to offer.

The above are perhaps the most obvious and blatant examples of the strategic and communicative uses and implications of visibility and invisibility that I encountered, but
the larger theme represented itself in many manifestations. Just moving on, disappearing, often with little or no notice, proved to be a very common strategy for achieving invisibility. Just as Dean had expressed to me that during hard times he had often thought, “I can jump on my bike and take off right now,” so, pulling up all remaining stakes (or just leaving them where they lay) and moving on proved to be among the strongest of all communication “strategies” we faced. As a Good Works caseworker put it; “…the whole idea that people in poverty tend to just say, “I’m going to chuck this and start all over again – they do tend to start all over.”

Recall Darlene’s story, in which she became sick, was then robbed, and then could not buy her prescription medication and as a result fell into another illness. She dealt with these problems, when it came to her boss, by just disappearing. She did not call, she did not ask anyone from Good Works to call or intercede for her. One of the mantras of the Good Job program became the need to resist and overcome the knee-jerk reaction of our workers to hide from authority figures (like their bosses) when trouble arose. We were, in fact, trying to implement a very counter-culture act on the part of our workers in poverty. Contrary to their previous training and experience, we were endeavoring to get them to go to their bosses and explain what was going on when problems came up.

This counter-culture communicative about-face that calls for making oneself and one’s situation visible to one’s authority when things become difficult, was perhaps the single most important and challenging aspect of Good Job. In a Bakhtinian sense, opening up to authorities was largely outside the experience – at least the positive experience – of most of our participants. They were told by our participating bosses from
the very beginning that they should immediately come to them and tell them what was going on if troubles arose, yet they rarely did this without explicit training and support and ongoing encouragement to do so. No doubt most of them had heard similar things from teachers, police, social workers, medical personnel, parole officers and other authority figures, but the real lesson learned had become that it is often, or even usually, more advantageous to stay invisible to those types of authority figures when trouble arises.

These authority figures, I believe, represented to our workers systems that had largely become alien to them – alien and even dangerous, but seldom advantageous. One factor that compounded the mistrust that led to strategies of invisibility was the fact that these figures existed in the lives of our workers in poverty largely without any relational connection. As argued above, connectedness often seemed to be among the highest of goals for our workers, while technique, had often proved illusive and even punitive to them. As a Good Works caseworker explained it to our first partnering boss: “Once they get to know you they will talk, but until they get to know you they don’t communicate well.” I interpret that, and other similar expressions uttered by those who knew their clientele well, to mean that folks in the crisis of severe poverty may tend to hide communicatively from figures like bosses and other “unknown” persons who wield positional but not relational authority, at least until relationships are established.

We had originally sought to model our program of ongoing work support for those in poverty after an employment program offered by a local sheltered workshop serving those with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. In that program employers usually give workers with disabilities a “head start” on a relationship of trust
and patience, because they (along with other employees and customers) know, and are constantly reminded by the visible nature of the workers’ disabilities, something of what the workers are challenged with by way of their disabilities. The visible nature of these workers’ disabilities constantly “speak out,” advocating to all that they are no average person working under average conditions. We were warned early on in our planning that working with those with “invisible disabilities” could prove more challenging. The director of the employment program for those with MRDD put it like this:

We have a young man who advocates for other people's disabilities, and he speaks on that. And he calls it the invisible disability. That's very much what he talks about, because you know, you wouldn't know he has a disability, but he knows, and he knows his limitations. And you're right; the expectations – it's kind of sad sometimes, you could have two employees doing the same job and having the same problems, but if one has a very obvious disability, they probably get more support or benefit of the doubt or what have you, and if the other one doesn’t have very obvious disabilities, the tolerance is not as great. It's tough, and other people probably could help you more; people who work with individuals who have just been released from prison and a placement agency such as that. I think that they have more challenges than we do.

A government worker-rehabilitation administrator echoed those sentiments, telling me, “the easiest people we work with are MRDD or physically handicapped, the invisible stuff like mental health issues are much tougher.”

No disability is easy, and those with visible disabilities must deal with the stigma, the stares, and other often unjustified assumptions instantly made about them based
solely on appearance. For our participants, however, the opposite was often true. As described above, they had serious and real disabilities, things that dis-abled them from working “normally” at times, but they were almost never apparent in such a way that they “spoke for themselves” on behalf of the struggling worker. Mental health problems, social problems, addictions, and other causes of disconnect from the supports needed to live and work successfully often were missing, but also went missing to the naked eye of the outside observer. In the words of a Good Works staff person, “it’s like, their disabilities don’t show.”

One of our workers lamented to me about his struggle to keep up with his job, “because I can walk, I can talk, I can appear normal, and that’s what people don’t understand, I don’t look sick, I don’t look unhealthy. I don’t look sick, but I’m not the person I used to be.” This man actually carried around, in his wallet, folded up X-ray images of his brain, complete with plates and other surgical repairs, to “prove” to others that he had real debilitations, and that he had previously been more capable. This was his strategy for making his often invisible struggles more tangible to some. w Japp and Braithwaite (2006) have studied and written on the struggles of those afflicted with medical problems that are not apparent. The lonely suffering, and often unrealistic expectations brought about and exasperated by invisible disabilities can themselves be debilitating. As a Good Works case working said to me as I was explaining to her the struggles one resident was having at work; “They never see any of her problems at work, because she just disappears when they flair up.”

This lack of trust, and of the willingness to open oneself up – to make oneself visible – was arguably most evident in the attitude our participants had toward
government services. My sample way well have been “skewed” by the fact that my participants had all sought shelter at a private service provider. None-the-less they were people in need who had, and often were, being aided by government and private agencies who had taught them well the advantages of remaining invisible. One participant, who knew that he likely qualified for more government assistance, summed it up well when he told me, “If I go apply for regular disability I can get another $300 to $400 a month, but I don’t want to go through the aggravation.” Much of the aggravation was opening one’s life and story up to the scrutiny of a “machine” much more adept at “technique” than “connectedness.” Comments like the one below were very commonplace among our participants. The non-linear flow of the conversation below also seems to be metaphorical for the confusion being described.

I’m not even sure exactly how it works. I have to work within the system again, and it’s the system that says I make too much money for medical assistance. My income exceeds their state minimum. I can pull that letter and show you that letter right now.

Listener: What income?

Exactly. Exactly my problem. That’s my point, and when I mention that to her [a government worker], and she called up and said, “no that’s for something totally different.” And it’s like does it matter if it’s not for this or for that? You say my income exceeds it. I haven’t had an income for two plus years!

Such complaints about institutional services and bureaucracies are nothing new, and are not surprising, but they did seem to strongly reinforce the idea that trouble comes from those in authority, who are part of ‘the system’, and who control resources. A strong
belief among our participants seemed to clearly be that invisibility was often the most practical strategy in the face of that “reality.”

However the strategies and discourses of (in)visibility were learned and maintained, they proved to be well reinforced through the work and life experiences of our Good Job participants.

One factor that seemed to keep our participants living and working in semi-invisibility was the discourse of disposability associated with their jobs. It became clear that to employers and employees alike a cornerstone of low wage entry-level jobs was that both the positions and those who filled them could be swapped out, switched, rejected and replaced by other jobs and people in very short and easy order. The workers knew that they had options when it comes to jobs “at the bottom.” Jane’s comment was typical: “If it [her job] gets stressed too much I will walk away. I don’t feel bad about it because I can always pick up another job somewhere.”

These workers also know that in their employers’ eyes they are rather “disposable” pieces of the retail apparatus. As another worker described it to me, “And like these fast food, minimum wage jobs, they can get someone else. There is so many people to take your place that they don’t care. In a town like this there are so many people to work the job.”

The fact that there is always another low wage job to be had, combined with the fact that in our region of Appalachia there is always another low wage worker to be had, made it both feasible and convenient for both workers and employers to view one another (and themselves, in the case of workers) as capable of disappearing and reappearing at any time.
This discourse of invisibility via disposability applied not only concerning hiring and firing/quit-ting, but also on the job. Maurice, who worked at a fast food chain, once complained to me about never knowing what his schedule would be from week to week:

They put up the schedule on Tuesday night, and it’s like, ‘if you don’t like it, goodbye.’ Even if I ask for Wednesday off to go to my therapist. Then when I’m at work they want me to go on and off the clock. It’s like I work an hour and then there are no customers so they want me to ‘take a break’ and they don’t let me come back on the clock for another hour, or even two hours, when there are more customers. You are expected to stay there and wait in case they need you again. So basically, I never know when I will be working, even when I’m at work. It doesn’t help my stability one bit. At minimum wage…I’m starting to think it’s not worth the aggravation.

This is the same man who had been named “employee of the month” and had also relayed to me how good it felt to work a job and earn a wage again. He was living in the tension of being very “present” at times – feeling good about being valuable at work when seasonal demand rendered him very “visible” – yet at other times living in threat of being “disappeared” from the weekly schedule, and even from the official gatekeeper of existence at work – the time clock – when he actually was at work. He could become an invisible man of whom no tangible record exists at the moment, waiting in the small break area for hours at a time waiting to be rendered visible again.

These folks working low prestige jobs for low wages know that a “real” worker in a “real” job – like the ones many of them had once held – are rendered “visible,” and their identities rendered more “permanent,” via a number of vehicles that usually seemed
beyond their reach. Better employment situations render workers visible, and honor that visibility by way of health insurance, retirement plans (which both assumes and assures long term “visibility” to the system), better job security, or collective bargaining power. Workers in better paying employment may also be rendered visible (that is, they must be “dealt with” seriously by those with power over them) by the fact that they may have the knowledge and skill, as well as the personal power, connectedness, understanding, and perhaps the savvy to work legal and regulatory systems that allow the “normal” worker to fight against such injustices as forced breaks off the clock, or ever-shifting schedules.

Good Job sought to aid workers in poverty to resist the forces of invisibility at work through much nurturing of relationships via the creation of “safe” environments that fostered constant solicitation and sharing of experiences and interpretations. However, even under such conditions our participants in poverty often expressed their reluctance to render themselves “visible” for fear that they would not be believed. I was shocked early in my tenure as a night shift manager at Good Works when a woman I took to be very sincere told me a short and very unremarkable story about why she needed temporary emergency shelter and then concluded with, “and that’s my situation, and it’s the truth and I’m sticking with it.” I had not even considered that she might be lying, but she obviously assumed that I would doubt her sincerity. This expectation of not being believed proved to be a constant theme with our Good Job participants, and it often hindered their desire to become more visible by way of sharing stories of experience. After all, why go to the trouble and risk of telling your stories if you doubt the hearer will take seriously much of what you say. Assumed insincerity – built up and reinforced by
the lived experience of many in poverty that participated in this study – inhibited the flow of communication.

I once did a 45 minute interview with a homeless man about his background, during which he disclaimed six times that he was not lying. He repeating lines like, “I know I’m having trouble keeping some of the times straight, but it’s not because I’m lying to you,” and, “I really am being straight with you, I’m not bull shiting,” even though I had no reason to think he was lying and could think of very little reason it would have served him to lie to me in that situation. Through many such encounters I began to realize how much assumed sincerity was a constitutive and foundational assumption in my overall discursive reality and communication experiences. I primarily learned this from the stark contrast that many participants’ assumed insincerity brought to our interactions. I came to the conclusion that the assumed (in)sincerity factor alone constitutes a major difference in the discursive worlds of those in poverty and those not suffering poverty.

For these participants in poverty a heightened level of disbelief in the sincerity, or the “truthfulness,” of conveyed experience adds new levels of complexity and paradox to communication contexts. On top of all the unknowns concerned with the consequences of sharing stories of lived experience, one must consider as paramount how much of what one is saying will be believed, how much, and what, is likely to be considered untruthful, and how all that might affect the communicative and relational interaction. The implications of the assumption that a large amount of what is communicated is falsified are enormous, and extremely difficult to manage, particularly for interlocutors who may be at a severe power disadvantage.
As Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, and Brokaw (2005) noted, invisibility can be an effective strategy for survival for those in severe poverty, but the dark side of that strategy is that, “when the ‘hidden homeless’ remain invisible, their life experiences too often are sequestered, opportunities for emancipation too often diminished, and potentialities too often suppressed rather than actualized” (p. 307). Perhaps for those in severe poverty, where “survival” is often in the balance, the sequestering of life experience, the reduction of opportunities, and the suppression of potential are too often of secondary concern. If one seriously doubts whether one will be believed even when opting for communicative visibility, then perhaps the choice for invisibility becomes all that much more attractive.

To this point I have explored participants’ patterns of expression, attitudes, choices, and actions of communicative visibility and invisibility via the consideration of factors such as transience, distrust of authority, invisible disabilities, the disposable nature of those in poverty and the work available to them, and assumptions of (in)sincerity. I believe that all of these sub-themes affecting (in)visibility must be viewed as constantly swimming in the contextual waters of highly valued independence. Independence/dependence was perhaps the overarchingly “grand,” influence that arose from my field work that seemed to greatly affect (in)visibility in all the forms I encountered it. As O’Brien (2001) and others have noted (and as discussed earlier in this report), independence is a fierce and longstanding historical grand narrative efficaciously thriving among Appalachian peoples (as it is in American culture in general). In the contexts of my research, independence often translated into choices for communicative invisibility. To keep to oneself, to guard one’s thoughts, experiences, and stories, seemed
often to be both a consequence and constitutive part of living independently. To share one’s story, especially if it was a story that pointed to a need, a failure, or even to challenges, could easily be interpreted as not being able to “cut it” on one’s own. Discourse collected from participants was rife with such sentiment. Independence was offered as reasoning to not seek government assistance: “Well, if that vocational bureau can help me the way the county has ever helped me – they haven’t. I’ve always done it on my own!” Dependence was often framed as failure, and weakness, but not often as resourcefulness: “I mean I’m really fragile at the moment, and I don’t like it because I’ve always been resourceful and being able to do it all on my own.”

“Doing it all on my own” is in many ways diametrically opposed to the dialogic sharing of experience that leads to the interdependence and mutual support that Good Job sought to foster for bosses and workers in poverty. Both dependence on others and independence from others (as well as the myriad gray areas between the two) can be both helpful as well as constraining at different times and in differing contexts. However, in my research a sense of betraying the sacred value of independence often seemed to work to lead participants into the invisibility-creating world of hiding, of not seeking support, or of seeking support only from others in poverty who often had very few resources to offer.

Perhaps because I myself swim in the American discursive milieu of independence worship, I found the dynamics of rugged Appalachian independence difficult to parse out of my participants’ discourse, and even harder to make sense of. Partly as a result of that, I would like to wrap up this section by offering the reader a
more extended discourse excerpt from Mary. It should serve to offer more context and depth to both the theme of (in)visibility and to the other themes identified earlier. Below is the unedited heart (only introductions and small talk before and after this discourse were deleted for the sake of space) of my first interview with Mary.

Mark: So we are trying to serve people so they can go out and get a job and have it be part of getting their whole life together, instead of having it be part of being crapped on and having it be another bad experience. So we are trying to give a little bit of support to people after they get the job, instead of just saying, “GO FIND A JOB!” So what I’d like to hear from you is basically what your work history is, what you’ve done, what you can do, what you’d like to do. And again I don’t work here, you don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to tell me. But a little bit of your story will help. You already told me you are in drug re-hab, right?

Mary: Yea

Mark: That is the kind of thing that with a sympathetic boss, [a participating boss at a local restaurant], I would tell [him] that, and he wouldn’t use that against you, but he would take that into consideration so that if you have, well whatever that means, if it affects work, then the work would help you do even better in the program that you’re in. Instead of having that be a problem, and it wouldn’t be a problem, because he wants to help people out who are trying to get back on track.

Mary: I have worked at [a fast food restaurant], I have worked at [a local grocery store], I was a cashier at both places. I worked at [another fast food restaurant], as a cashier. I worked at [a local hotel]. My last job was at [the grocery store]. I
was into drugs really really bad and I did breaking and entering at my Mom’s work, and I went to [a large state] prison and did 17 months. Nine in [the prison] and then I went to the ------ program, which is a behavior modification rehab, and that helped me live life. It gave me a lot of tools to use everyday. And now I’m back here in Athens and I’ve been struggling everyday to get a job. I’ve had applications in everywhere and they look at my past and they are just like, “ok, no.” So it really sucks. And it’s really aggravating. I am really aggravated. I’ve worked really hard. I’ve come a long way, I really have. And I need a job. I’ve got 2 children that my Mom’s got, and everyday is a whole ‘nother struggle for me. I’m getting a divorce. It’s just really hard. I’m from that area, my family is well-known. I’m the black sheep of the family. So it’s really hard.

Mark: So do think with the jobs, you can’t get on primarily because of your criminal record?

Mary: Yes, I do believe that that is what it is.

Mark: Do you just have the one breaking and entering or what else do you have on your record?

Mary: No, there’s breaking and entering, escape.

Mark: Did you escape from [the large state prison]?

Mary: NO

Mark: I was going to say, that shows some skill.

Mary: No, when I was really really bad the county sheriff, [she names the sheriff], he’s known me since he I a kid, and he arrested me and read me my charges and I was so high and so out of my mind that I took off running from him, they found
me in my apartment and did a bunch of pills and they found me. He saved my life. That is how I got the escape charges, because I ran away from the Sheriff’s officer.

Mark: Have you had… well is there anything else?

Mary: I had six of them. Two breaking and enterings, theft, escape, forgery, falsification, and I don’t remember what the other one was.

Mark: Was it all stuff where you were trying to get money for drugs.?

Mary: It was all wrapped up in drugs. There was a bunch of us and I took the fall for it and I did the time. I still got a lot of time on paper, 5 years. I do HRS, I do tri-county, I go to meetings, I don’t want to go back to that. I’m getting divorced because my husband is a user. I was really bad off. I was on the needle. I had cancer so the Doctors always gave me pain medicine and that’s what I used. I don’t want that anymore.

Mark: Wow, you had cancer too?

Mary: Yea. SO I’ve had a really hard life. I’m 27 now and I’ve been dealing with all these problems. I’ve been a drug addict since I was 18. My husband has always had it and always done it and I seen him do it and I started following him. So since I’ve been home I just try to stay away from all that. He’s around here and he’s bad off and still doing it. My kids, my daughter’s mine and our son is, my Mom’s got him. She’s had him for a couple years because I was really off the hook. My mom’s had him, and its hard between him and I with the kids. I don’t want to have nothing to do with him and my parole does not allow me to have anything to do with him. He’s still using. So when it comes to him picking the
kids up it’s hard, because he’ll be really high. And my Mom doesn’t see it like I do. I used so I know what he’s doing.

Mark: Right

Mary: So it’s just a real nasty battle. Everyday I try to get a job, and I do so much. And I’m really sad. I even signed up for Shelter Plus care, and since I’m married I have to go under his name, and I got denied because he’s got an application in. So I have to re-apply again, you know. Just when I start getting above the water, I start sinking.

Mark: Have you been to BVR [The Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation]?

Mary: Yes, I had an appointment with them on the 9th, but I didn’t get the letter until after that, so I changed it to use my Mom’s address, so she can tell me, Mary you got mail, you know? Because here it goes in different stacks all through the day, so this way I can get it better. So, yes, I signed up for that.

Mark: Good, because they might be able to help us, um, because even if people are leery of your record, BVR might be able to give you a job coach, maybe. Somebody that could be there and make sure you are fine. I mean, I might be able to get around it with my relationships. My best place is [a local participating restaurant], and I’ve already got 2 people there. So it comes and goes on whether he needs people. Then Jane works at [a local fast food restaurant], and the lady there really wants to give people a shot, but once you’re in there it’s not any – it’s just like working at [that fast food restaurant chain], anywhere else, basically. She’s not working with us to make the job part that much better, but she might give you a shot.
Are you open for anything?

Mary: I’m open for anything. Yea.

Mark: This might seem like a ridiculous question, but why do you want a job?

Mary: I want to be independent on myself. I want to earn my own money. I want to have housing. To have my kids with me. That’s why I want a job. I want to be dependent on myself.

I don’t want to have to ask my mom for something that I need. I’m 27 now. I was honest and hardworking, and when I got into the drugs my whole world just went away.

Mark: Yeah

Mary: So give me a time line on when you did the [fast food restaurant and hotel work]. So you were 18 and you started getting into drugs.

Mark: Did you graduate from High School?

Mary: No. So I’m working on my GED at ------. And

Mark: What is you timeline on that, do you know?

Mary: I take the test tomorrow to see where I’m at.

Mark: OK.

Mary: And then [a fast food restaurant], I was a senior in High School. [The grocery store] was right before I was arrested. That was my last job before I went to prison.

Mark: SO you worked at [the fast food place], that was your first job?

Mary: Uh. I stayed there forever, about a year and half. Then I had the cancer really bad and I quit and I stayed at home and was really sick.
Mark: How old were you when you had cancer?

Mary: I was 18.

Mark: So you already had 2 kids before that?

Mary: yeah.

Mark: And then..?

Mary: Then I stayed home for say about a year. And then I went to [The hotel] all the way to [the grocery store].

Mark: So how long at [the hotel]?

Mary: um,

Mark: more or less

Mary: A little over a year

Mark: OK, and what were you doing there?

Mary: Housekeeping

Mark: OK. While you were working at [the hotel] you were doing the drugs?

Mary: Yea

Mark: But you were able to do your job anyway?

Mary: Yes

Mark: And then that went up to, what happened next?

Mary: I went to [the grocery store]. I was a cashier.

Mark: And you did that for..?

Mary: Only a couple months, because I got in trouble.

Mark: And that was right up until…

Mary: July ’04.
Mark: Is that about when you…when did you go to prison then?

Mary: I went to prison in October

Mark: October ’04?

Mary: yea

Mark: None of the law trouble you got into was at work? Is that right? Or had to do with work, right?

Mary: No, none

Mark: That’s a good thing

Mark: So when you worked you did drugs at night and when you got desperate you would do something stupid, or how did that work?

Mary: Yea, when I was at work I just worked. Then at home my husband was really bad and I would do things that I would never do in a right state of mind. My mom is the manager at the Sundae shop, she’s worked there for 11 years, she’s well known, you know, and that was her job that I broke in to. And if I would have been sober and thought about things before I did things I would have never, but when you are an addict and on the needle real bad, you don’t think. You don’t think, you don’t even think about yourself, you just think about where you’re going to get that next drugs at. Since I’ve been clean and been through [the state prison] I’ve not been in no trouble, I have really changed. The way I think, the way I act, is so different.

Mark: Did you get help in [the state prison] for the drugs?

Mary: I went to groups but it just wasn’t a place to try to be clean and sober.

Even in prison there’s drugs. It’s a real hard life, so I asked the judge to send me
to a program and it was there that I learned how to respect myself and to respect other people the right way. And how to look at life different, cause before I didn’t really care about how I was or how people were, I was more worried about where I’m gonna get that next drug. In there I learned a lot. I learned how to be myself, how to be a daughter, to be a mother. And I did it alone. I didn’t call my mom or rely on anybody. Since I been home, my mom and I are just now building our trust relationship back, because I really hurt her, and my sisters, and my kids. It’s really hard. That’s why I take every opportunity I have to get them on the bus, or get them off the bus, or do homework with them,. For five years I’ve been a drug addict, and it hurts them. They go to counseling and I make sure that they see me and I’m different, and they love the new mom. They don’t want to see the old mom.

Mark: Great. So that program you were in was that a residential thing?

Mary: Yea.

Mark: How long were you there?

Mary: Its 180 days, but I completed it in 101 (with pride).

Mark: Wow, man I hope you make it. Sounds like you’re doing well.

Mary: I’m trying

Mark: It’s a courageous thing.

Mary: Scary

Mark: yea. A job would be a great thing, wouldn’t it?

Mary: Yes. I’m trying. I’ve been home 30 days, and it’s so aggravating.

Mark: It’s just what you need, isn’t it?
Mary: Yes. I can’t believe I’d ever do those things that I’ve done. But I can’t keep dwelling on the past or I’ll never go on in my future.

Mark: Yea. So where have you applied?

Mary: [she names three local restaurants and a hotel], you know. I got a whole list of them.

Mark: When I talk to the potential employers I won’t tell them your whole life story, but I’ll tell them the reason that you need some help. Because everyone wants to know what kind of risk they might be taking. Like at [a local restaurant] you can forget about a job if you put 91 State Street as your address. He won’t even look at it. But these folks want to know within boundaries what is going on in your life, why you are living in a homeless shelter. Is this somebody I can trust? So wherever it would be it would be a place where I wouldn’t feel like I was putting you at risk to tell them that you are at Good Works and that you are trying to get your life back together after having drug problems. That would probably be it. When you fill out the application they will see you have a record so it would probably be in our best interest for me to say up front that your law problems were all about the drugs and that none of it had to do with work. Normally they wouldn’t be allowed to ask you those questions, they can’t ask about that stuff, but if they are going to work with us its better for them to know, because then they’ll hire you if they know what the people here know and I know – that you are really serious, and trying to do everything right and get back on track. That’s exactly what we are trying to do.
So what I’m trying to say is that it takes a little bit more vulnerability on your part.

But that vulnerability lets us tell them a little bit more about you and that will help you get past the hurdle that you can’t get past right now. Which is “have you ever been convicted of a felony? Yes. Forget it”

So you want me to try that?

Mary: Yes

Mark: Okay. I will be working at it.

Mary: Thank you

I did eventually find Mary an employer who was willing to take a risk on her (and I re-found Mary to interview for the job). The business owner worked together with us to make the employment a good situation for everyone involved. Mary was thrilled to be working again, and did well with her responsibilities. Mary took the risk of rendering herself visible via the sharing of “private” details about her life in order to gain more voice and some room for “extra” support and care. She was motivated by her needs and situation to give up some independence and give expression to her needs and failures, trusting that it would work out for good. The job did work out for good for Mary, she re-entered the job market and later left the restaurant with a positive recommendation, she further proved to many around her that she was serious about getting her life back together, and she earned enough (with HUD support) to get her own housing.

Unfortunately, there was also a cost to her vulnerability. She left the restaurant after a few months because, in her words, “[An assistant manager] keeps harassing me and
making hurtful jokes about my past.” The power of experience shared in open dialogue proved once again that it is formidable, as well as both enabling and constraining.

*A storied conclusion.* To conclude this chapter reporting on the themes I encountered in my study, I would like to include one more extended excerpt. The following interview transcription highlights the voice of an Appalachian man I encountered at the shelter who assigns an extremely high priority to work. This man’s work has been his life, yet I found him homeless and unemployed. I hope that a bit of his story will add more dimensions to the reader’s picture of the voices that swirled around Good Job. His manhood, his voice, his motives, and his walk of (in)visibility echo some of what has preceded it, yet his standpoint is in other ways all its own. I include this story in the same spirit and with the same hopes with which I offered Dean’s story to begin this chapter. I invite the interested to read it within the context of the other voices contained in this report (including mine), and to reflect on it in light of the larger themes of voice(lessness), motives, gendered communication, (in)visibility, (in)dependence, and the other sub-themes that I have identified above as reoccurring with regularity in my investigation.

Mark: So tell me about yourself and your work experience.

Kurt. My name is Kurt Dudley. I’ve been a tree trimmer 27 years. My father was a tree trimmer for 45 years before he got killed playing golf on the golf course over here on golf course Road. Lightening struck and killed him. So I know what tragedy is, and I know what a hard days work is. I believe in a hard days work. Tree trimming was definitely rough. They say block tending is rough, I was out of work once and I tended block in Columbus, and I can tend
block a lot easier than climbing trees. But anyway, I’ll share something with you. I’ve been from Austin to Boston and I’ve seen a lot of people. I can go to any town in good health and get a job. Any town in good health and get a job in the tree industry. Climbers are not plentiful, to go up to near power lines with 75,000 volts, they’re just not out there. A lot of guys tell you they will, and work one day, but when they have to go out there by that, why they will come right back down. Yes I’ve been shocked. I’m a like a stallion in the pen looking at a hot wire. Have you ever seen a horse that’s been shocked, and he’s looking at that wire? Because he knows,-that’s the way I am. So you’ll learn, but I’ll share something with you, in West Virginia, where I was working, I’ve been sick for almost 4 years with Diverticulitis that went into Colitis, damn near killed me. I’ve got cat guts inside of me and stuff. Over the four-year period I’ve been from job to job, I go in and block tree trimmers, I’d tell them I could do it and I wasn’t able to do it. I was so sick. And they’d fire me or let me go because you just can’t do your job. I lost everything I had doing that, but I’m back on go, I hope. Okay? I’m headed for a job this week. Maybe even Friday I’ll be climbing trees again.

Mark. For who?

Kurt: For Davey tree service in [a town about 2 hours away]. They will start me out at $15.50 and take me to $17.50 an hour once they see I can climb. And I’m hoping I’m ready. I think I am. But anyway, when I was in West Virginia I was working for D&L Tree Service, and I worked for Manson Tree Service, these are private individuals. It wasn’t nothing to do with power lines, but occasionally power lines would be there. In back yards, side yards, what ever. But basically
the trees are hanging right over your house, and I’m the tree guy. I can rope it up and put it down, you’ve got to have guys built stocky, I’m a little guy, big guys drag it to the chipper, and cut up the wood, and load it on the truck. My frame ain’t built for that. I can’t do that kind of work. It would wear me out and kill me. But I can get up there and cut it off, and then rope it off and send it to you, and you untie the rope. I’ll pull it back out and tie it on another one, and do you do it all over again when those guys don’t show up. Well say you’re the owner, you don’t want to do anything, you want to sit in that air-conditioned truck. You want to sit there and make money, or answer your bids, you’ve got to talk on the phone. Your next customer. So if he doesn’t show up, you’re looking for somebody, you don’t care who, as long he can do it, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that out. Raking leaves, putting it in the chipper, physical and no brain, you know? They have a place called Work Ready. It’s the homeless. In West Virginia. Right on the main drag. These guys have to be clean cut. Their ad in the paper said, no need to pay steeper, our guys work cheaper. Clean-cut men. You have to be out there at 6:30 or seven o’clock in the morning. You are clean-cut, you’re shaved, your teeth are brushed, you don’t stink and you’re standing there ready to go. You know what? That’s where my boss got his men. Roofing companies pulled up right behind us, drywall companies, everybody, even the haircutting people. If they needed somebody to cut hair and they had a cosmetologist in that place , and she was standing out there, they took her. You know what I mean? Because they are work ready.

Mark: Where was that?
Kurt: Not far from here in West Virginia. It’s going on today down there. It’s happening right now. Every day. They don’t lay in bed until nine or 10 o’clock. You ain’t getting a job at 10 o’clock. I was out here the other day at 5:30 in the morning riding my bicycle to [the local electric utility]. That’s where I was at. You don’t get no job at 10 o’clock. At 10 o’clock all those jobs are gone. The boss is gone. You need to be there in the morning. So I don’t know why this company [gesturing around the room of the homeless shelter] don’t do a little bit of that. You know, have them stand out here ready. Hey, so what if they just drive on by, you know what? I’ve been out here every morning. I got my rules change so I don’t have to do my chores until 10 o’clock so I can be out of here. But I’ve seen companies I’ve never seen before. Smith, never heard of it. Smith construction, he’s all over this town. I’m not from here, but I’m reading their trucks going by. He’s in business. There is roofing. VanNye roofing. I’ve never heard of him, but he’s here, he’s going by. I guarantee you there’s some day his guy’s got him aggravated, or he doesn’t show up, cool weather is coming, they’ll drop off like flies, it’s cold and they’d rather lie on their couch. If you’re standing out here “work ready” he’s going to say, “I’m going down the block man, I want to get this job done.” “I’ve got 15 jobs lined up, and you aren’t showing up to feed the chipper, I’m going down there to see if some of those old boys are standin’ their.” Pick up the biggest stockiest one. You got a job.

Mark: How do they make that legal?

Kurt. It is legal. You can fill out an application right here today and go to work. If they want you and you’re qualified and you fill out an application and give a
Social Security number, only questions they ask is are you an illegal alien, if you aren’t, and you have a Social Security card, you can work here. That’s what they do everywhere. How did you get your job? If you’re qualified, you’ll get it. Or even if you’re not, if you’re willing to be trained, and he ain’t got nobody. I don’t care if you’re picking up trash, man, the trash truck is a private individual, the roofing guy he don’t care, if you can’t roof, can’t nail ‘em down, you pack them to me. because I can roof. But I’m not a roofer, I’m a tree trimmer. But I do know how to roof. I’m saying that there are opportunities here. Another thing, my daddy taught me how to be a tree trimmer, how to run the saws and everything. I told my daddy, you make $200 a day, and that’s what kind of money I made down there. They paid me $200 a day cash, under the table, and I like that. And I was tying all the knots and was head of the show. The man in the tree has the green light. If I tell you to do something you need to do it, otherwise we’re all going to get killed. If I tell you to take a wraparound that buffer three or four times, it’s going to be a big piece, you better wrap it around three or four times, and then don’t give a bunch of slack, it comes up and, “whooh man,” it took it away from me. That was your fault. ‘Cause you’ve should have been smart enough to work with it a little bit, you know what I mean? You have to have somebody who has somewhat of a brain or you’re all going to get hurt. My fingers didn’t look like that when I was born [holds up hand]. These was all glued back on, I had $11,000 worth of surgery. I wasn’t born like this, and that wasn’t a fight [takes out a dental plate holding a row of artificial teeth], it was a piece of wood that swung back and hit me.
But back to helping you all out, and why you asked me to come down here and talk. I think from what I’ve seen in the newspaper this week there’s jobs all in there. Evening hours with an elderly person, somebody looking for them to take care of him, until he gets better. It says in the paper their sickness and needs help until he gets back on his feet. Willing to pay somebody money to sit with him. Nobody tells anybody here, you ain’t posted it up on the wall. Somebody here could do that. You know what I mean? If I was in charge of the show, I would be bustin’ all these people, and they’d all be shaved, looking good standin’ out here on the corner. I don’t care if it’s cold, you’re going to be cold, I’m sorry. Or hot. I’m sorry. You wouldn’t be in this boat you’re in if I was running the show. I’m not going to just feed you and let you sit in here till 10 o’clock. I’m hard-core, but I told you all when I came here, that I wasn’t going to be here forever, didn’t I? I told you I wasn’t going to be here forever. I thank God that this facility’s here. When I went to the hospital here they told me my bowel was about ruptured, and I’ve got an emergency piece of paper that says my bowel could rupture. My bowels was about ruptured, and the manure was going into my system because they was leaking. Which shut me down. I mean, I looked yellow jaundice, I didn’t know what happened, I thought I had appendicitis. They said, “no you don’t.”

Mark: Your bowels ruptured?
Kurt: Started to. Perforated. They were dripping. Actually in the colon. You’ve got bowels and you’ve got colon. But I’ve got thinning of the bowels. They got real bad where I haven’t eaten fiber for years. I caused this for myself. The last
four years doing what I’ve been doing, I’ve been making it happened because I didn’t know. McDonald’s food, sesame seeds, peanuts, popcorn, all of this stuff was hanging inside of me and got infected, and they’d give me antibiotics and it wasn’t enough to keep up because I just kept putting more in their. Now they told me don’t ever eat that again the rest of your life. You’ll feel a lot better. And you know I won’t eat any of it. I won’t eat a pickle seed or nothing. But anyway, back to helping you again.

Mark: If I might say, you’ve got a real Appalachian work ethic.

Kurt: Yeah.

Mark: And the strong individual, it’s-on-you outlook.

Kurt: Well, you see I made $60,000 a year working for [The Electric Company] under Carter’s. When I went to work for them the guys that had been there 15 years said, “Kurt, you don’t have to work that hard.” They said, “you can shut down about one o’clock and go down to the Dairy Queen or whatever, they ain’t going to say nothing to you.” “We are working under [The Electric Company] and they have plenty of money, man.” “They ain’t going to say nothing to you.” Well I ran a brand-new truck and I’ve run junk all my life, and they gave me a brand spanking new truck and a new chipper, and I was like a kid man. You know what? They had one ground man. They had to give me two men. I had three guys on the ground and I buried them, sweat all over them until quitting time. This is five o’clock. We barely got in by five, sometimes it was 5:15 before I got in. Because I was workin’ hard. The other guys say you don’t have to do that. You know what happened? They had to cut back. They had 37 men
working for them. They cut back to 15 people. I’d only been there for three years, well they were cutting back to 15 people, so I fear I’m done, and there are people who have been working here for 15 years. I even told my wife I’m probably laid off. I was already calling other people looking for jobs. I was working, and I had a nice car and a home and all that stuff. I said, man I’m done. You know what they did? They handed me the keys to that new truck. They said go trim trees, Kurt, and laid-off guys that had been there a lot longer than me. One S. O. B. threw his hat down in the parking lot and said, “That guy’s only been here three years and I got 15 years of seniority.” They said, “his truck never stops, it flies man, his bucket never stops.” “Every time we come by He’s flyin’, man, he’s working.” So that hard work paid off some. And I was just having fun. That was just a normal day to me. But I come from the old school of hard work. If you told me today, Kurt I want you to take eight hours and rake that yard up, I’d probably have it done in four. Maybe even rake the neighbor’s yard to, and you’d say, “Wow.”

WOW! is my last comment on Kurt’s story, and a fitting summation of my reaction to my experience with all the folks of Good Job.
CHAPTER FOUR

In the course of completing this dissertation I encountered a lot of poverty, a lot of work, and a lot of communication about both. I set out to investigate how those involved in and around the Good Job work program understood and experienced work, poverty, self, and other in the midst of the partnerships we formed (my research question number one). My research was communication-based, and admittedly communication-biased. I sought to uncover, probe, and better understand the large trends and small nuances that characterized the discursive realities formed, maintained, re-made, and resisted among those I encountered. Just as the grand narratives, the themes, the patterned regularities, the stories, and the ante-narrative bits I collected varied radically in their level of cohesion, codification, and “bigness,” so did my analysis and understanding of them. I would like to begin this discussion chapter by explicating what I consider to be my broadest lessons learned.

Before I do that, I would like to state the I am hesitant to add too much more to this dissertation’s “discussion” with this chapter. To this point I have striven to offer enough context, enough discourse, and enough analysis to enable the reader to form his or her own pictures, conclusions, and criticisms about the settings, the participants, the perspectives, and the analyses of this dissertation. I hope that I have told a complete enough story to enable the reader to find in it, or in parts of it, narrative consubstantiality, or not.

A discussion or summary of this type is by nature a reduction and a simplification of bigger realities. In any such reduction things are lost, some of which perhaps ought not to be lost. With that risk – of losing the valuable – ever in mind, I would like to suggest
that much of the differences I found in meaning making occurred across the boundary of poverty. It could be said that I encountered two language communities when it came to the management of meaning around work. The first community had jobs and earned living wages. The second community consisted of those who either had no jobs, or had jobs that paid poorly enough to keep them in poverty. According to my evidence, in this context at least, the existence of first-person poverty is a real difference maker when it comes to communication.

Perhaps the biggest overriding ontological difference I encountered between the communication of those in poverty and those not in poverty (who could thus be described as middle class) was the level of importance attached to words. Generally, those I encountered who were in poverty exhibited a lower level of trust in, reliance on, and even use of words as the most important carriers and markers of meaning. By contrast, the middle class stakeholders tended to “stake much more of their claim” on and around words. It could be stated like this: Perhaps the biggest overall difference I found in the communication in, around, and of work, was that those in the middle class tended to be logo-centric in their management of meaning, while those in poverty tended to be logo-phobic.

In fact, much of the communication I encountered by middle class bosses and government/non-profit workers that revolved around work and was directed at those in poverty was attempts or pleas to the poor to be more logo-centric in their dealings with work. “Talk to me, tell us what’s going on, keep us up-to-date, let me know all the reasons, stay in touch, read the rules, open up,” and similar supplications were indicative of much of the discourse offered by the middle class participants in their dialogues with
workers in poverty. On the contrary, those in poverty seemed to put much more stock in communication done by actions, and to shy away from words. Looking at this logo centric/phobic continuum in light of the four mega themes through which I have organized the presentation of my research results reveals that middle class participants tended to put much more faith in words than did those in poverty. The dialectic of visibility and invisibility was often about how much those in poverty chose to reveal in words, on paper, or for the record, who they were and where they were coming from. Invisibility was often about avoiding the abstraction of life experiences into words, and was often accomplished by the physical action of presence and disappearance, or avoidance of contact. It is often assumed that communication in its essence is about rendering self, ideas, and meanings visible through the symbolism of words. That may not equally be the case for everyone, and many in poverty may be those who tend to opt for other manifestations of meanings.

Under the broad heading of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine discourses, much of the “feminine” values placed on care, community, and relationship had much less to do with words than did the “rational,” systematized, and instrumental discourses of traditional masculine organizing. Furthermore, these two discursive systems proved to be constructed on the foundation of very different “bottom lines” for those in poverty and those not. It could be generally stated that one system runs on the discourse of the well articulated and logo-saturated world of market discipline. The other bottom line appears to often be driven by relationships and care for others, and these foundations have been subjugate to the private realm where their word-centered articulation is not nearly so well known.
Perhaps those in poverty have been driven toward logo-phobia by the modernist discourse that only credible voices with means to the magical art of outside, material verification of “facts” should be heard in the public realm of work. The entire Good Job program was an attempt to help working poor folks find and wield their voices at work, and enter them into dialogic conversation with more powerful voices in that context. It was a bit of swimming against the tide. Through their experiences, many of the workers in poverty had come to operate around an important linguistic axiom (that few if any could articulate, which is consistent with my point) that the traditional means of communication and meaning management at work are the words that have not proven to be their friends, and ought to be avoided when possible.

I would suggest that communication research dealing with poverty might be well served by probing the level of logo-centrism and logo-phobia among participants in various settings.

Related to the question of logo phobic/centric communication as encountered across the divide of poverty, I believe that my experience and research results point to another possibly useful communication construct that seemed to make a meaning-full difference on the ground around Good Job. The level of assumed in/sincerity proved to be a powerful communication dynamic for those in, and not in, poverty. I found a huge divide between members of one broad language community who more often than not expected to be believed and to be told the truth, and another that expected to not be very well believed, and also to have less than truthful communication come their way. As compared to what I perceive to be the middle class expectation of reasonably truthful interaction with others, my participants in poverty often communicated and interpreted
communication from within the assumption that almost any words were likely less than truthful or sincere. That can change everything. In fact, assumed insincerity erodes the very foundations of a logo-centric orientation to life and interaction. When anything that is communicated is assumed to likely be less than sincere, words lose much of their power, or that power shifts as meanings shift.

Under the scourge of poverty, the pleas of authority figures like bosses and social workers to stay in close touch, to communicate honestly and often, and to follow and obey written and spoken directives, are ever undermined (at least from the middle class logo-centric perspective) by a deep suspicion of the very meaning-carrying words and other symbols that make up the communication. I would hold that this assumed insincerity, and its sister, logo-phobia, are not the result of any moral deficiency, nor of a warped culture. Rather, I would conjecture that it most likely is a result of the ignoring or invalidation of the Event Lives of these workers in poverty by middle class communicators and culture. These folks have learned this language well, the language of assumed insincerity, through many years of native speaker training in the way things work. I contend that if we want them to communicate and perform differently within the realm of a different language community (perhaps the middle class logo-centric, assumed sincerity world of most work environments) then language and cultural training is of paramount importance and must be thoughtfully carried out. Language learning is never easy, but that is much of what may be called for.

On the other side of that communicative dyad (again, speaking here in very generalized terms) I hold that much of the efficacy of Good Job to bring bosses and impoverished workers into meaningful communication was the training of the bosses to
approach the worker and work setting via the less “outside, verifiable, truth-dominated” setting of narrative. As argued within this report, work has been a very traditionally masculine setting in its insistence on “logical” and modernistic forms of operation and communication based on mythical standards from some “divine” site outside the setting. This orientation can be made immediately more subjectively particularized by a greater emphasis on narrative and its characteristics as described earlier in this dissertation. Such a narrative-induced increase in subjective particularization provided my participants in poverty with “stronger” voice, safer “visibility,” more connection, and greater empowerment to more fully participate in the work environment. This, again, calls for language learning on the part of managers, bosses, and others working with those in poverty. Language learning is never easy, and usually demands a long term, in-context approach to really “get it.” The strength of Good Job lied in the fact that both workers in poverty and their middle class bosses were committed to long term language learning that was “taught” by native speakers, largely via narratives in dialogue.

Just as language learning in a classroom rarely yields fluent, capable speakers, so the language learning done in Good Job had to be carried out in context. By necessity it had to be lived, acted out, and experienced, rather than just talked and heard. Words alone had proven to fall short for making the world of “competitive” work make sense to those in poverty, and for making the world of poverty make sense to managers and owners employing homeless folks. Words had to be lived and recounted in relationship in order for them to translate well across the cultural/linguistic divide of poverty. That was the strength of the Good Job program, it was work experienced differently, and narrative provided the vehicle for that experience to travel across the divides of difference.
Narrative worked to grant authority to each participant to add plot to experiences as they deemed appropriate, and this helped cultivate the cross-poverty language learning that was needed. But beyond this, narrative ushered in and kept central another key element demanded, yet often denied, to those in poverty and at work: Relationship. I contend that the communication that worked to bring success and best foster worker/boss understanding was, and had to be, experience-based, and also relationship-based. As discussed above, Frank (2004, 1995) stressed that stories are relationships, and it was the narrated telling of stories (in an open, learning environment of dialogue) that I believe brought our workers and bosses into enough shared relationship for real learning and change to take place.

Tools like Bob’s photographs illustrated how relationships were of critical importance to most of our participant workers, even if they were less so for bosses better trained in the traditional masculine separation of the workplace. Narrative helped bring about relationships of shared experiences and meanings, thus assuring better and safer visibility, voice, and understanding among participants across the divides of difference. From the discourses I gathered around Good Job I would conjecture that narrative is much closer to the natural language genre of those in poverty than is the traditionally masculine and modernistic language of the workplace. The folks around the homeless shelter and those involved in Good Job lived and communicated a much more narrative-based culture, and narrative (when invited into the worker-boss relationship) helped create discursive space for the often subjugated and dismissed Event Lives of those in poverty. Perhaps narrative relationship is to the poverty class what “reason, objectivity,
and verbal representation of a concrete reality” are to the post-enlightenment science that still dominates the workplace.

It is no doubt obvious to the reader that I found narrative and dialogue to be both excellent theoretical lenses through which to view my context, and practical procedures by which to operate within it. As I argue above, I interpret the bakhtinian view of both narrative and dialogue to be founded, and ever-dependent, on difference. Narrative allows for, calls for, and ushers in a focus on difference, and without difference dialogue has no chance to take place, nor to be generative. In a nutshell, it could also be stated that Good Job and the communication investigation of it undertaken in this dissertation were also founded and centered on difference. The program sought to bring two groups together that are often held apart by large differences. Those two groups see a need for one another (one needing employment and the other needing workers, among other motivations), but are often irreconcilably held apart by their radically different experiences and standpoints. Good Job sought to utilize, as well as investigate, narrative and dialogue as bridges over those differences.

In a very real way, Good Job was conceived and operationalized in such a way that narrative and dialogue could perhaps be the only lenses through which it could be understood. Further, this investigation is unashamedly skewed by my view from a linguistics and communication standpoint that insists differences across cultural divides are really language/discourse dilemmas. This could be a weakness of the study in that many other parameters, theories, and even explanations could be found to be at work in this context. By focusing so intently on what I did focus on, I could have missed much of the unequal power of politics, gender, race, education, and other factors (both macro and
micro) that went beyond the scope, or perhaps off the radar, of the relational/language dynamics of narrative and dialogue. Every way of seeing is a way of not seeing, and I fully own the limits that are inherent in the “seeing” I have done with Good Job. Concomitantly, I hold that the lenses of narrative and dialogue brought into sharp focus much about the differences, and the overcoming of difference, that was at work among my participants.

Another limitation, or perhaps better put, tension in my research design was my level of personal and emotional involvement with my participants and setting. As I outlined in the methods section of this report, my prior working experience at Good Works and my personal relationships with many of the staff there, and also at some of the for profit businesses that participated in Good Job, afforded me access, trust, and insight into the contexts I investigated. The insider, or at least the outsider within, position I held opened a lot of doors. The flip side to that advantage could be that as a result of being so close to my settings and participants, I could have missed some of the moisture that was to me the water I have become accustomed to swimming in. Objectivity was never my goal, and I have tried hard in this report to be open about my subjectivity, yet being so close to many participants, especially when many were in crisis, did at times make it hard to think and act qua communication researcher, with the corresponding sensitivity to theory and prior research, and not primarily act and react with emotion and the desire to offer care. That is a line I gladly walk, and a tension I happily embrace. It is one that also keeps me thankful for the applied nature of my discipline and the socio-historic room for activist research that academia currently enjoys. I do recognize that in such a role, as
activist researcher, I easily could have parochially missed some of the forest in favor of a focus foremost on the trees.

At the time of this writing, however, I am fairly satisfied with how my field research and the writing of this report have navigated the tensions inherent within my ethnographic and activist positions. I believe that Good Job made a difference “on the ground” for participants in poverty, for participants working with those in poverty, and for those running businesses that hired those in poverty. Yet, while the program had specific goals and methodology from its outset, I feel confident that as an ethnographic researcher I was fairly successful at getting at participants’ stories, experiences, and meaning-making in their own languages.

One set of circumstances that was effected by both my insider status and the desire to stay true to participants’ telling of this story was my relationships with the mother organization of Good Works. The final product of my research ended up being much less about Good Works than I had originally envisioned. Good Job proved to be more than enough of a rich setting through which to engage with those in poverty and those employing them, while Good Works ended up playing the part of background and facilitator of Good Job. The rules, the culture, the values, and the influence of Good Works on my participants were alive and real, but were secondary from my work-centered perspective. The vast majority of what I interacted over with those in homelessness was their dealings and relationships with work, not with the shelter. Thus this report could seem to some to play down the setting and influence of Good Works, and this could, again, be argued to be in part a result of my familiarity with that setting and institution, but overall I argue that it just did not come up much with my participants,
and thus as an ethnographic researcher I probed Good Works’ influenced on the work lives and realities of my participants, but not a whole lot of interest came up along that line of inquiry.

Another limitation (this one a moral limitation) of this study and its methods and use of theory could be that, by design, we were asking the vulnerable – those in poverty – to make themselves even more vulnerable via narrative. It is true that the bosses, the social workers, and I were all ushered into higher levels of vulnerability by participating openly in narrative-centered dialogue with those in poverty. Yet, it is the most vulnerable who have the most to lose by further opening themselves up. This is much of the reason why participants often chose to hide from their bosses and authority figures. They had a lot to lose, and very little left to give. The bosses opened up as a response to contact with others that were doing the same. They volunteered to share of themselves (the level of which I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Good Job). The workers, in contrast, volunteered for the program, but what real alternative choices did they have? They needed work desperately. So I tried to be sensitive and guard to the greatest extent possible the stories and vulnerability of the workers, but as the example of Mary proved (she quit her job as the result of being joked about as a “jailbird” by another worker), the power of personal narratives can be very useful, but also very negatively impacting. I trust, and I think, we did more good with narrative than bad. I received much positive feedback from the workers, from Good Works staff, and from the businesspeople who participated. More importantly, we found dignity-giving job situations, and offered long term job support, to many in poverty who had not worked for years. Some are still
working those jobs as I write the last of my research findings, and almost all worked their jobs longer and more successfully than the staff of Good Works expected they could.

It remains self-evident that I – as co-architect of Good Job, its primary administrator and field worker, and the researcher generating this project – may not be the best voice to critically address its faults, weaknesses, and areas of “not seeing.” That is part of the price I was, and remain, more than willing to pay in order to create the opportunities, serve the participants, and study the communication dynamics from an inside vantage point.

Communication and cooperation across differences has long been an intense interest of mine. Now, I have the opportunity to observe and study at close range the mixing, mingling, and colliding of difference in these work settings. As stated above, in some ways I hate to end this report with such large and generalized brush strokes that obscure and may warp many of the individual and context-particular differences that we encountered and attempted to breach. Yet, in the biggest of pictures, I believe my research allows me to firmly claim that poverty is a sea changer when it comes to the living of life experiences and the communicating of life’s meanings. Poverty creates differences as it is created by differences. To help “all boats rise” above the suffering of poverty, those differences must be better understood, more effectively worked through, and more skillfully worked with. I hope this work contributes something toward that end. Further, I hope that this work encourages more communication-based research that studies and applies narrative and dialogue as they pertain to the differences that poverty makes in experience, in communication, in the communication of experience, and in the experience of communication.
Rorty (1989) claimed that “ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force” (p. 60) when there are free and open encounters. Yet a free and open encounter can be a communication bridge too far for those suffering the poverty of misunderstood motives, lack of voice, a poorly comprehended discourse language, and other dynamics explicated above that often render them invisible to their would-be interlocutors. I hope this research showcases the constitutive importance of communication and argues well for the leveling effects of narrative, and the dignity-granting approach of dialogue to enhance both connection and persuasion for all humans.

I also gained connection and was “persuaded” (read: moved) as I mixed it up with new discourse communities and individuals in the course of this research. My personal and professional standpoints will never be the same after the experiences I had via Good Job (and continue to have as I remain in touch with many of my participants). As I write the last part of this dissertation about my experiences with workers in poverty in Appalachian Southeastern Ohio, I do so from deep in the heart of the inner city of Cincinnati, Ohio, where I have begun another immersion into poverty and work. Here I will be involved with mostly African American folks in poverty and hope to further investigate and serve through long-term work support, as well through the provision of affordable quality housing.

As I began my work here in Cincinnati I set out to buy a residential building in a low income area and was immediately reminded of the lessons learned at Good Job. Lessons about differing discursive and physical realities of work and markets, and how those differences often must be experienced to be “learned.” As I was buying a large duplex house in our neighborhood I was surprised that the woman who had been living in
one of the units with her grandsons did not want to buy the place herself. After all, she had lived in that half of the house for ten full years and desired to stay there. I marveled at how much rent she had paid over that long tenure there, and over the fact that her monthly rent would more than pay the mortgage on the bank repossessed sale price of the home. I reasoned that this family matriarch would be much better served by buying the house and gaining equity, and that the neighborhood would be better served by having more local and occupant ownership.

Home ownership and equity are important themes in my discourse world. However, as I proceeded in the purchase I learned just of few of what may be some of the reasons that this woman seemed never to consider buying the house. I will include a couple small examples here in order to draw parallels and contrasts between my new setting and what I encountered as we re-introduced people in poverty back to employment through Good Job. First, negotiating the sale of the property with a large bank proved much more difficult and intimidating than any residential housing purchase I have experienced. The power imbalance between myself and the corporate lawyers I was dealing with was immense. Second, after the purchase I was continually rejected for property insurance due to the condition of the house, the condition of the neighborhood, and the large difference between the sale price and the replacement cost of the building. All those things made insuring the house a “bad risk.” I have a lot of experience in real estate, yet I have never before considered those risk factors when buying property or homeowners insurance. The entire sale proved so difficult that I confess to having pulled in powerful contacts (a lawyer I went to college with, a friend of a friend whose family
owns a large insurance business) to help me finalize the sale, and to finally procure insurance on the property.

I have no idea how much of those troubles my new neighbor could have foreseen when (and if) she considered buying our house, but I do know that the material and communication realities of homeownership are much different in this community than they have been in any other in which I have been involved. I have found myself thinking and talking the discourse language of the middle class in a neighborhood, and market, where that language is not the native one, and for good reasons. I have a lot to learn if I am going to serve and empower folks in my new neighborhood to successfully navigate the discourse of work and real estate here.

Having been shocked by the (largely unrecognized) depth of my cultural/discursive assumptions, I look forward to much more narrative-centered dialogue with those from this culture in order to begin learning their discourse languages of participation/non-participation in the work and housing markets. Markets dominated by the predominately white middle class.

Big differences exit between those that are participating and succeeding in the markets of work and housing, and those in my new community and in Southeastern Ohio that are not. Those differences, and the communication that constitutes, maintains, creates, and can resist them, are of great interest to me. I am now in a very different context than that I encountered for my dissertation, and it is a cultural context that again demands the “bottom up” respect and approach of ethnography. At the same time, it may be one that can be positively impacted and served by the application and study of narrative and dialogue at work across difference. I hope the experiences and learning
around those differences prove to be as rich as those I enjoyed at Good Job, and that my research experiences from Good Job have helped to prepare me for this and future action research settings and challenges.

To sum up, I would like to leave the reader with a statement that I firmly believe to be true and to be evidenced by my research with those involved with Good Job: *People in poverty have a lot to offer on the job, and a lot to teach the middle class about communication, and about life.* To borrow that often-heard phrase, “That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”
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## APPENDIX A

### Research Log

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<th>Activities</th>
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APPENDIX B

Initial Interview Protocol for Good Job Workers

Time of interview: ____________________  Date: _________________________

Place: ______________________________  Pseudonym: ___________________

Organization/Purpose: ________________________________________________

Start with explaining consent form, uses of data, protection from identification, and why I am doing this and my role as their advocate/helper between the job and Good Works.

1- Tell me your story with work. What kinds of jobs have you had? How did they go? What did you like and not like about them?

2- What does it mean to you to have a job and work? What do you (hope to) get out of it? What motivates you to work?

3- How would work for a business affect your finances? Do you have a ceiling on how much you can work/earn (for SSI)? How do you feel about that? How do you feel about the time you have been on assistance? How has it helped you? How has it not been helpful? Tell me about the balance/difference for you between working and SSI?

4- What do you think others think about SSI? What have those around you made you feel like concerning it?

5- How do you feel others are reacting to your new job? (elicit reactions if possible).

6- How has Good Works affected your job search and the way you think about work? How have the Work Station or BVR (or other agencies) helped you (or not) get ready to work and to find a job? Tell me your story about your contact with them.

7- How is it going at [Hungry Howie’s]? Tell me about the best things that happen, and the worst things about it.

8- Do you look forward to going to work there? Why/why not. Do you look forward to going to work there more or less than other jobs you’ve had in the past? Why?
9- How do you feel about communicating with your boss? What do you think she/he thinks about you and your work? Do you like working for him/her? Why/not/examples.

10- How is it working with the other people there? (Try to get a “good” story and a “worst” story).

11- What would your ideal job be? Why? How do you feel about working the less than ideal one?

12- What would you like this Good Job job to lead to? What would be your hopes for where this would lead? How could you see that happening?
APPENDIX C
Initial Interview Protocol for Good Works and other Org/agency staff

Time of interview: ____________________  Date: _________________________

Place: ______________________________  Pseudonym: ___________________

Organization/Purpose: ________________________________________________

Start with explaining consent form, uses of data, protection from identification, and why I am doing this and my role with Good Works and Good Job.

1- Tell me a little bit of your story. How did you get into this work and why? How long have you been at Good Works? How would you sum up the experience? What are the parts of the job you like best/least, why?

2- How would you describe the work/job initiative we have begun?

3- What would be your highest hopes for it? What would be the best outcomes? What do you think is most realistic out of those?

4- What do you see as the biggest challenges – the things that could prevent it from being affective?

5- When you think of those you work with, what are their biggest obstacles/hurdles in general? When it comes to work specifically?

6- In broad terms, what is your “typical” client’s relationship to work like? Tell me a few stories that you think illustrate where they are in relation to work/jobs.

7- Is there a “type” of Good Works client that you think Good Job can best serve? What would they look like (and why)? What kinds of folks have you seen here that probably wouldn’t be helped by what we are doing, and why?

8- How would you describe Good Works’ working relationship with other organizations/businesses/agencies? How do you work with them? (try to get “good/bad” stories about working relationships).
9- Specifically for jobs/work who do you work most closely with? How does that look? Can you tell me a success story, a non-success story?

10- How do you think your working with other orgs could best be improved?

11- What do you see as the biggest cracks between what is offered as help to Good Works residents from various organizations/agencies? What could be done to fill those?

12- What do you envision as the biggest contribution that for-profit businesses can make to what you do at Good Works? Tell me a story about working with businesses (get positive and non-positive experience if possible)

13- If you could wave a miracle wand over the world of employment for your residents here, what would you do with that wand to help them most?

14- If you could help/make me understand one (or a few key) thing about the realities of life and work for you clients, what would that be? What do you wish you could understand about their lives and work?
APPENDIX D

Initial Interview Protocol for For-Profit partners of Good Job

Time of interview: ____________________  Date: _________________________

Place: ______________________________  Pseudonym: ___________________

Organization/Purpose: ________________________________________________

Start with explaining consent form, uses of data, protection from identification, and why I am doing this and my role with Good Works and Good Job.

1- Describe what we are doing with Good Job in your words and perception.

2- What is your motivation to partner with this program? Tell me a story that motivates you.

3- How would you describe your role in Good Job? What would you like to be able to do more/less of?

4- What are your expectations for Good Job? What are your highest hopes for it? For the workers and for you/your business? What is your vision for this program and what it can do?

5- What would you guess are some of the biggest things that you as a business person can offer to Good Works’ clients? How about to Good Works as an organization?

6- What are the ways that you think you see the world differently than the staff at Good Works? Than the clients? Than your workers here?

7- How do your other employees perceive Good Job and the Good Job workers you have hired? How do the Good Job workers compare with your other employees in general? (Try to get stories of actual occurrences).

8- From the experience of having ______ work for you, what do you think are the biggest challenges/threats that our Good Job participants might face in finding and succeeding at work? What do you think will be the hardest things for them? Why?
9- What “kinds” of employees should we seek out to work in your business? What might they be like to be the kind of people you need?
APPENDIX E

Application to IRB

Ohio University
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Project Outline Form

Title of Research Proposal  From Good Works to A Good Job: An exploration of poverty and work in Appalachian Ohio.

Investigator(s) Information

Primary Investigator
Name Mark A. Leeman
Address 037 Lasher Hall
Email ml287003@ohio.edu
Phone 593-4833
Training Module Completed? X Yes □ No (Attach Certificate as Appendix H)

Co-investigators
Name __________________________ Department ______________
Address __________________________
Email __________________________
Training Module Completed? □ Yes □ No (Attach Certificate as Appendix H)

Advisor Information (if applicable)

Name Dr. Lynn Harter
Address 012 Lasher Hall
Email harter@ohio.edu
Phone 593-4830
Training Module Completed? X Yes □ No (Attach Certificate as Appendix H)

Anticipated Starting Date 08-1-06 Duration 11 mos 0 yrs
(Work, including recruitment, cannot begin prior to IRB approval. This date should never precede the submission date)

Funding Status
Is the researcher receiving or applying for external funding? □ Yes X No
(Note – This refers to funding from entities outside of Ohio University)
If yes, list source N/A
(NOTE – If an application for funding has been submitted, a FULL copy of the funding application must accompany this form as APPENDIX G)
If yes, describe any consulting or other financial relationships with this sponsor.
N/A
Is there a payment of any kind connected with enrollment of participants on this study that will be paid to persons other than the research participants?

☐ Yes  X No

(If yes, describe.)

N/A

Review Level

Based on the definition in the guidelines, do you believe your research qualifies for:

_____ Exempt Review  Category ______________________

X  Expedited Review  Category ______________________

_____ Full Committee Review

Final determination of review level will be determined by Office of Research Compliance in accordance with the categories defined in the Code of Federal Regulations

Prior Approval

If this or a similar protocol been approved by OU IRB or any other, please attach copy of approval and label as Appendix E.

N/A

Recruitment/Selection of Subjects

Estimated Number of Human Participants ___________ 35 ___________

Characteristics of subjects (check as many boxes as appropriate).

___ Minors  ___ Physically or Mentally Disabled  ___ Elementary School Students

X  ___ Adults  ___ Legal Incompetency  ___ Secondary School Students

___ Prisoners  ___ Pregnant Females  ___ University Students

___ Others (Specify) ______________________

Briefly describe the criteria for selection of subjects (inclusion/exclusion). Include such information as age range, health status, etc. Attach additional pages if necessary.

Participants will be selected for inclusion in this study based on their involvement with Good works, Inc, a homeless shelter and service provider that is located in Athens, Ohio. Participants will come from various populations within and around Good works, including staff members, members of other organizations, agencies and businesses that partner with Good Works, and Good Works clients.

How will you identify and recruit prospective participants? If subject are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval for the use of the records. If records are "private" medical or student records, provide the protocol, consent forms, letters, etc., for securing consent of the subjects for the records. Written documentation for cooperation/permission from the holder or custodian of the records should be attached. (Initial contact of subjects identified through a records search must be made by the official holder of the record, i.e. primary physician, therapist, public school official.)

Participation in this study will be voluntary.

How will you identify and recruit prospective participants? If subject are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval for the use of the records. If records are "private" medical or student records, provide the protocol, consent forms, letters, etc., for securing consent of the subjects for the records. Written documentation for cooperation/permission from the holder or custodian of the records should be attached. (Initial contact of subjects identified through a records search must be made by the official holder of the record, i.e. primary physician, therapist, public school official.)

Participation in this study will be voluntary.

Please describe your relationship to the potential participants, i.e. instructor of class, co-worker, etc. If no relationship, state no relationship.

I will be a volunteer at Good Works while I am participating in data collection. The organization knows of my intent to study them and my position as a researcher will not be withheld from anyone.
Attach copies of all recruitment tools (advertisements, posters, etc.) and label as APPENDIX B

Participants will be recruited based on recommendations of responsible potential participants from the Executive Director of Good Works.

Performance Sites
List all collaborating and performance sites, and provide copy of IRB approval from that site and/or letters of cooperation or support.

Interviews will be conducted at the Good Works offices. A photocopy of the letter from Good Works’s Executive Director, Mr. Al Wasserman, is attached as Appendix E. This letter confirms that they have granted access to their organization.

Project Description
Please provide a brief summary of this project, using non-technical terms that would be understood by a non-scientific reader. Attach an additional page, if needed, but please limit this description to no more than one typewritten page.

My dissertation, overseen by Dr. Lynn Harter, will explore the following research questions: RQ1: How do stakeholders from a variety of perspectives in and around Good Works experience, form, and re-form discursive realities of work and poverty?

RQ2: How do participants understand and experience work, poverty, self, and other in and through inter-organizational partnerships?

RQ3: How do various stakeholders experience the job readiness and work support program offered by Good Works?

Approximately 12% of Americans live at or below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In Athens County, Ohio, the poverty rate soars at 18%. Chronic or episodic homelessness often accompanies abject poverty. Rural homelessness in Appalachia remains a salient problem because of a complex interplay among psychological factors (e.g., mental illness, substance abuse), societal patterns (e.g., lack of low-income housing), economic issues (e.g., livable wages), and government policies (e.g., deinstitutionalization). Although scholars, government officials, and other stakeholders struggle to even define homelessness due to the complexity of the problem and differing ideologies and approaches, most agree that coordinated efforts across inter-organizational relationships are necessary for the survival and long-term recovery of people without homes (see Smith & Smith, 2001; Dail, 2001). Good Works is a homeless shelter in Athens that utilizes a network approach to address the diverse needs of its clients. Guided by dialogic theory, my dissertation will rely on ethnographic fieldwork to explore Good Works and its host environment as a “net of collective action” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 41) in order to: (a) explore the communicative dynamics of inter-organizational partnerships as community resources for social change; and, (b) emphasize the fluid and unbounded nature of service provisions for people without homes.

The needs of people without homes run the gamut from food and shelter to health care, job training, and counseling. Working in isolation, agencies rarely have the resources to adequately address these needs. Good Works, via a functionally integrated network of vital partnerships, seeks to “improve the quality of life of those we serve by helping each person make connections with people, programs, services and opportunities
in our community” (2005, n.p.). Good Works helps people (re)make connections, and in doing so fosters systemic and sustainable change. In describing its community suppers, Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2005) argued that Good Works “helps to spark social change by connecting the disconnected to build community across different socio-economic groups who otherwise may never come in contact with one another” (pp. 209-210).

Social capital is the growth of social trust, cooperation, and coordination built through interpersonal networks (Putnam, 1995; 2000). Social capital develops capacity, engagement, and a better sense of mutual obligation among various community members. The Founder and Executive Director of Good Works, Al Wasserman, remains acutely aware of the need for social capital, “The homeless have a need to connect ... both among themselves and with others in the community. Good Works makes these connections possible.” As an organization, Good Works embodies that same vision as it partners with numerous agencies representing a wide variety of standpoints. Of particular note are the relations between Good Works and for-profit businesses in the area. For years, Good Works has tried various initiatives to provide work for clients and to generate funds to serve them, with varying levels of success. Recently, Good Works has begun an initiative with profitable local businesses (e.g., Wendy’s, Hungry Howie’s) to work closely in training, enabling, and providing successful work situations for clients. However, stakeholders like Wasserman, business owners, and the clients themselves tend to come to the dialogic table with radically differing discursive definitions and experiences of constructs like work, discipline, personal accountability, authority, service, care, and “bottom lines.” From a communication perspective, the dialogues between an organization like Good Works and other agencies, businesses, and individuals are of monumental importance.

Using the dialogic work of Bakhtin (1981, 1993), Buber (1970), and Freire (1970, 1994) as a theoretical backdrop, I seek to explore how inter-organizational partnerships and interpersonal relationships are formed and sustained. Bakhtin (1981) wrote that, “actual social life and historical becoming create within language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems” (p. 288) In their innate vastness, words, utterances, and discourse all represent fertile, yet complex ground for the exploration of meaning, and meaning-making. Meanwhile, homelessness and its effects are also corporeal in nature. I contend that the word is an act, and that acts have meaning through words (Bakhtin, 1993; Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004). As such, a discourse-centered approach focused on and through dialogue can bring differing stakeholders together to make real gains in an atmosphere where “dialogue suggests that the world is co-experienced by two or more people. Each one’s perspective is necessarily partial, and each needs to gain a more adequate sense of the world by sharing perspectives” (Frank, 2004, p. 20). How is trust and cooperation fostered among individuals? What forces forestall the development of social capital? How do participants understand and experience self, other, poverty, and work through institutional rituals (e.g., Good Works’ Friday night community suppers) and in the midst of inter-organizational partnerships? How, if at all, is lived difference or otherness acknowledged? What does Good Works do, if anything, to cultivate productive interactions between people who may hold profoundly different perspectives due to diverse social, material and political circumstances?
My research approach is one of pursuing the discursive “realities” of a wide-range of stakeholders through interpretive ethnography, in expectation that better awareness, or “conscientiazation” (Freire, 1970), by all will facilitate and make possible generative dialogue. I will triangulate methods including: (1) in-depth interviews with clients and staff of involved agencies; (2) participant observations over a period of one year; (3) document analysis of trace artifacts of Good Works and partners (e.g., mission statements, minutes from meetings); and, (4) participatory photography. During and after observations, I will compose fieldnotes. I will digitally record and transcribe interviews. I will engage in a constant comparative analysis of data from across sources in order to identify patterned regularities and reach an appropriate level of theoretical saturation (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, I will engage in member-checking sessions through which participants can respond to my findings (see Cresswell, 1998).

Describe any potential risks or discomforts of participation and the steps that will be taken to minimize them.

I anticipate no potential risks or discomfort based on participation in this research project.

Describe the anticipated benefits to the individual participants. If none, state that. (Note that compensation is not a benefit, but should be listed in the compensation section on the next page.)

There are no immediate benefits to participating in this study. It is my intent to make a formal presentation to the organization after the end of fieldwork. It is my hope that based on the findings of this project, the organization will be better equipped to serve its various clients, and to cooperate more closely and effectively with its partners. Describe the anticipated benefits to society and/or the scientific community. There must be some benefit to justify the use of human subjects.

Although scholars, government officials, and other stakeholders struggle to even define homelessness due to the complexity of the problem and differing ideologies and approaches, most agree that coordinated efforts across inter-organizational relationships are necessary for the survival and long-term recovery of people without homes (see Smith & Smith, 2001; Dail, 2001). Good Works is a homeless shelter in Athens that utilizes a network approach to address the diverse needs of its clients. Guided by dialogic theory, my dissertation will rely on ethnographic fieldwork to explore Good Works and its host environment as a “net of collective action” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 41) in order to: (a) explore the communicative dynamics of inter-organizational partnerships as community resources for social change; and, (b) emphasize the fluid and unbounded nature of service provisions for people without homes.

Good Works has tried various initiatives to provide work for clients and to generate funds to serve them, with varying levels of success. Recently, Good Works has begun an initiative with profitable local businesses (e.g., Wendy’s, Hungry Howie’s) to work closely in training, enabling, and providing successful work situations for clients. I will explore the effectiveness of this program in order to find out what is helping and what else can be done to help those in poverty find and succeed at work. Stakeholders like Wasserman, business owners, and the clients themselves tend to come to the dialogic table with radically differing discursive definitions and experiences of constructs like work, discipline, personal accountability, authority, service, care, and “bottom lines.”
From a communication perspective, the dialogues between an organization like Good Works and other agencies, businesses, and individuals are of monumental importance. I will explore those relationships and will investigate the cracks between non-profit and agency work-related services to the poor to seek out what is working, what is not, and what the gaps between services might be as the homeless transition from the non-profit sector to the market-driven world of work. Using the dialogic work of Bakhtin (1981, 1993), Buber (1970), and Freire (1970, 1994) as a theoretical backdrop, I seek to explore how inter-organizational partnerships and interpersonal relationships are formed and sustained in these contexts. For these are the relationships that can support those in poverty as they seek, find and perform jobs. In order to explore these relationships of support I have been granted access to people at Good Works, since access to human “subjects” is absolutely essential to this investigation.

Describe procedures in place to protect confidentiality. Who will have access to raw data? Will raw data be made available to anyone other than the Principal Investigator and immediate study personnel (e.g., school officials, medical personnel)? If yes, who, how, and why? Describe the procedure for sharing data. Describe how the subject will be informed that the data may be shared.

Only the primary and the dissertation director will have access to the raw data. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. However, once transcriptions are created, there will be no identifying characteristic on the transcripts. The raw data and transcripts will not be provided to any party who might be able to connect a person with their specific answers. If requests for data are made, only the anonymous transcripts will be provided. Additionally, all interviewees will be made aware of the confidential nature of the interviews and the anonymous nature of the interview transcripts.

Will participants be: Audiotaped? X Yes □ No

Videotaped? □ Yes X No

If so, describe how/where the tapes will be stored (i.e. locked file cabinet in investigator office), who will have access to them, and at what point they will be destroyed.

Audio files will be transferred directly from digital audio recorder to the primary researcher’s laptop computer that will be with him at all times or stored in a locked office. The laptop computer is password-protected, meaning only the primary researcher can use the computer containing the audio files. Once all audio files have been transcribed, the original files that identify the participants by name, will be deleted and only the anonymous transcriptions will remain.

Provide details of any compensation (money, course credit, gifts) being offered to participants, including how the compensation will be prorated for participants who discontinue participation prior to completion.

No compensation will be offered to participants.

Instruments

List all questionnaires, instruments, standardized tests below, with a brief description, and provide copies of each, labeled as APPENDIX C.

Three interview protocols are listed under Appendix C as different participants will receive slightly varied questions.
How will the data be analyzed? State the hypothesis and describe how the analysis of the data will test that hypothesis.

There are no hypotheses as this is a qualitatively ethnographical study. The research questions for this project were listed previously in this IRB proposal. Below, I provide the methods that I will use to analyze the data that will be collected.

Data Analysis

I concur with the sentiments of Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) who proclaimed: “We aim to construct a full account, to tell a meaningful story – not to reduce our craft to the canons of ‘normal’ science” (p. 161). In order to build and present a full and meaningful account, I will utilize a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to carry out thematic analyses of the discourses I collect through participant observation, in-depth interviews, participatory photography, and document analysis. Constant comparison’s ongoing consideration and reconsideration of discourses as they are collected is designed to allow themes representing recurring patterns of language, behavior, and meaning to emerge from participants’ own words. Boje (2001) described constant comparative methodology as conducting the ethnographic data collection, coding, and analysis “as you go” (p. 51), rather than collecting a large amount of data and then coding and analyzing it after the fact.

Constant comparative methods fall within the larger category of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) labeled as a constructivist methodology that “assumes the existence of multiple realities, the mutual creation of knowledge by researchers and research participants, and aims to provide interpretive understanding of the studied world” (p. 160). These assumptions and aims fall nicely within the scope and hope of my dissertation. Grounded theory could be summarized by the following strategies: Simultaneous collection and analysis of “data;” pursuit of themes that occur via early (and ongoing) analysis; discovery and investigation of basic and patterned social processes that emerge from the “data;” inductive construction of categories/patterns that may explain and group these processes; and the integration of these categories or patterns into theoretical frameworks that may explain their causes, consequences, and conditions (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001).

Constant comparative methodology describes well the processes through which I intend to analyze the discourses I collect. I hope to continue collecting and analyzing discourse until saturation occurs. To help manage the coding and retrieval of my information I propose to heed Richards and Richards’ (1998) advice to employ computer-assisted software. Specifically, I intend to use NVivo, not to identify themes, but to aid in the management of what will be a large amount of text. After having identified key themes and reoccurring patterns of regularity that I consider significant, I will take them back to participants for member checking (Creswell, 1997). Member checking entails “taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognize them as true and accurate” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 242). Member checking facilitates verification of findings by soliciting participants’ views about the credibility and viability of themes and interpretations. Participants will be asked to give feedback about whether or not my interpretations are reasonable in their perceptions, and why or why not. Member checks serve as possible correction to (and modifiers of) researcher interpretation (although differing and varied interpretations should be expected), offer
Informed Consent Process

Attach copies of all consent documents or text and label as APPENDIX A.

Informed consent is a process, not just a form. Potential participants/representatives must be given the information they need to make an informed decision to participate in this research. How will you provide information/obtain permission?

I will be completely clear with any potential interviewees as to the purposes of the project. I will show participants the interview protocol before the interview begins or I will read them all potential questions. If the participants have any questions regarding the nature of the research either myself, Dr. Harter or Good Works Executive Director Al Wasserman will have the ability to answer questions regarding the research.

How and where will the consent process occur? How will it be structured to enhance independent and thoughtful decision-making? What steps will be taken to avoid coercion or undue influence?

The informed consent process will take place prior to each interview. The interviews will take place at the Good Works offices. In order to enhance the potential participants thoughtful decision, I will first explain to them the overall goals of the project, their contribution to that project should they choose to participate, and I will make them aware of their ability to choose to not participate in the study.

Will the investigator(s) be obtaining all of the informed consents? X Yes □ No
If not, identify by name and training who will be describing the research to subjects/representatives and inviting their participation?

N/A

Will all adult participants have the capacity to give informed consent? If not, explain procedures to be followed.

Yes, all participants will have the capacity to provide informed consent.

If any participants will be minors, include procedures/form for parental consent and for the assent from the minor.

No participants will be minors.

Are you requesting a waiver or alteration of Informed Consent? □ Yes X No
An IRB may approve a consent that does not include, or alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent. Provide justifications below for the waiver.

N/A
a. Describe how the proposed research presents no more than minimal risk to participants.

N/A
b. Why will a waiver of informed consent not adversely affect the rights and welfare of participants?

N/A
c. Why is it impracticable to carry out the research without a waiver or alteration of informed consent?
d. How will pertinent information be provided to participants, if appropriate, at a later date?

N/A

Even if waiver of written informed consent is granted, you will likely be required to obtain verbal permission that reflects the elements of informed consent (if appropriate). Please specify below information to be read/given to participants.

N/A

Will participants be deceived or incompletely informed regarding any aspect of the study?  ☐ Yes  X  No

If so, provide rationale for use of deception.

N/A

Attach copies of post-study debriefing information and label as APPENDIX D.

Investigator Assurance

I certify that the information provided in this outline form is complete and correct.

I understand that as Principal Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, conduct of the study and the ethical performance of the project.

I agree to comply with Ohio University policies on research and investigation involving human subjects (O.U. Policy # 19.052), as well as with all applicable federal, state and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects in research, including, but not limited to the following:

The project will be performed by qualified personnel, according to the OU approved protocol.

No changes will be made in the protocol or consent form until approved by the OU IRB.

Legally effective informed consent will be obtained from human subjects if applicable, and documentation of informed consent will be retained, in a secure environment, for three years after termination of the project.

Adverse events will be reported to the OU IRB promptly, and no later than within 5 working days of the occurrence.

All protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. Research must stop at the end of that approval period unless the protocol is re-approved for another term.

I further certify that the proposed research is not currently underway and will not begin until approval has been obtained. A signed approval form, on Office of Research Compliance letterhead, communicates IRB approval.

Principal Investigator Signature ___________________________ Date ________

Co-Investigator Signature ___________________________ Date ____________
Faculty Advisor/Sponsor Assurance

By my signature as sponsor on this research application, I certify that the student(s) or
guest investigator is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research
with human subjects and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular
study in accord with the approved protocol. In addition:

- I agree to meet with the investigator(s) on a regular basis to monitor study progress.
- Should problems arise during the course of the study, I agree to be available,
  personally, to supervise the investigator in solving them.
- I assure that the investigator will report significant or untoward adverse events to
  the IRB in writing promptly, and within 5 working days of the occurrence.
- If I will be unavailable, as when on sabbatical or vacation, I will arrange for an
  alternate faculty sponsor to assume responsibility during my absence.

I further certify that the proposed research is not currently underway and will not begin
until approval has been obtained. A signed approval form, on Office of Research
Compliance letterhead, communicates IRB approval.

Advisor/Faculty Sponsor Signature ___________________________ Date _______

*The faculty advisor/sponsor must be a member of the OU faculty. The faculty member
is considered the responsible party for legal and ethical performance of the project.
Checklist:
X Completed and Signed IRB-1 (this form)
X Appendix A - copies of all consent documents (in 12 pt. Font) including
X Informed Consent to Participate in Research (adult subjects)
N/A Parental Permission/Informed Consent (parents of subjects who are minors or children)
N/A Assent to Participate in Research (used when subjects are minors or children)
N/A Appendix B - copies of any recruitment tools (advertisements, posters, etc.)
X Appendix C – copies of all instruments (surveys, standardized tests, questionnaires, interview topics, etc.).
N/A Appendix D - Copies of debriefing text
___ Appendix E - Approval from other IRB, School District, Corporation, etc.
N/A Appendix F - Any additional materials that will assist the Board in completing its review
N/A Appendix G – Copies of any IRB approvals
___ Appendix H – Copies of Human Subjects Research Training Certificates (for all key personnel involved in non-exempt research)

All fields on the form must be completed, regardless of review level. If a field is not applicable, indicate by inserting n/a. Incomplete forms will result in delayed processing. Forward this completed form and all attachments to:

Human Subjects Research
Office of Research Compliance
RTEC 117

Questions? Visit the website at www.ohio.edu/research/compliance/ or email compliance@ohio.edu
Appendix A
Ohio University Consent Form Template (must be in 12 point font)

Title of Research: FROM GOOD WORKS TO A GOOD JOB:
AN EXPLORATION OF POVERTY AND WORK IN APPALACHIAN OHIO
Principal Investigator: Mark A. Leeman
Co-Investigator: Dr. Lynn M. Harter (Advisor/Dissertation Director)
Department: School of Communication Studies

Federal and university regulations require signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

Explanation of Study
Purpose of the research – The purpose of this study is to better understand how Good Works and organizations that partner with Good Works can better prepare and help those who are homeless or poor to find and succeed at jobs.
Procedures to be followed – The procedures of this study involve interviewing Good Works clients, staff, and staff of other organizations that partner with Good Works.
Duration of subject's participation - Your participation will include the time spent in this interview which will be approximately 75 minutes.
Identification of specific procedures that are experimental – There are no experimental procedures in this research.

Risks and Discomforts
There are no risks involved with your participation in this study.

Benefits
There are no benefits involved with your participation in this study.

Alternative Treatments (if applicable)
N/A

Confidentiality and Records
All interviews will be confidential (your identity will be known only to the researcher) and all interview transcriptions will be anonymous (no one will be able to connect you to your answers).

Compensation
There will be no compensation.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Mark Leeman at ml287003@ohio.edu or by phone at 740-589-6406.
If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I
understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.

Signature_________________________________________ Date____________
Printed Name_________________________________________