An ethnographic study of the day-to-day lives and identities of people who are homeless in Brisbane

Cameron Parsell

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School of Social Work and Applied Human Services
**Declaration by author**

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None.
Published Works by the Author Incorporated into the Thesis

Parsell, C. 2008, ‘Problematising the ‘homeless identity’: considering people beyond their homelessness’, Referred paper from the 3rd Australasian Housing Researchers’ Conference, hosted by RMIT University, Melbourne – incorporated as chapters five, six and seven.

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Abstract

People who are homeless are portrayed to be a distinct type of ‘homeless person’. Within scholarly research literature, their state of homelessness has been presented as informative of who they are. On both an individual and collective level, people without homes are ascribed with identities on the basis of their homelessness. Their voices and perspectives rarely contribute to broader knowledge about who they are as people. As such, the imposed ‘homeless identity’ has the consequence of positioning them as ‘other’ than the ‘normal’ people with homes.

Using an ethnographic approach, this study aims to understand the day-to-day lives and identities of people who are homeless. Approximately one hundred people who slept and interacted within inner suburban Brisbane’s public places participated in this research. To learn about how they lived and who they saw themselves as individuals, I observed them, socialised with them, engaged them in informal conversations and formal interviews. This approach to fieldwork, conducted over a six month period, provided me with the opportunity to witness diverse aspects of daily lives. Further, the ethnographic engagement enabled a consideration of the ways people enacted and displayed different aspects of their identities across different social and physical places.

For the individuals who participated in this study, there was a stark distinction between how they lived, on the one hand, and the type of people they identified themselves as, on the other. They were comfortable describing their lives in ways that deviated from what they saw as the ‘mainstream’, but at the same time, they aligned themselves with this ‘mainstream’. Research participants expressed a strong view that their experiences of homelessness did not offer any purchase in explaining who they were, and how they thought about the world.

The public places in which they lived were perceived as problematic. Public places were dangerous and the site of unwanted interactions. Although living in public places meant that interactions and friendships with other people who were homeless was a reality, these interactions did not constitute a ‘homeless collective’. More fundamentally,
however, living in public places meant having no legitimate places, and having limited capacity to control day-to-day lives.

The participants in this research articulated stereotypical notions of what home meant to them – home was a physical structure, a house. Similarly, home was a solution to their lives as homeless. Their constructions of home can also be seen as symbolic of their aspirations to find their ‘place’, and engage in the ‘mainstream’ society they feel disconnected from.

While public places were associated with limited control over daily lives, the people in this research also exercised agency in enacting different aspects of their identities. Mediated by the social and physical constraints within their environment, they displayed an awareness of social expectations and emphasised elements of the self to achieve specific ends.

Identities matter. An understanding of the identities of people experiencing homelessness, from their perspectives, can contribute toward the development of homelessness practice and policy responses. A distinction is made between solving problems people may have and solving homelessness. In terms of the latter, the thesis concludes that the provision of ‘normal’ housing and the availability of support, as distinct from mandatory engagement with case management, is the most appropriate response to the needs of the people who participated in this research.

**Keywords**
homelessness, ‘homeless people’, identity, ethnography, public places, home

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

[Homelessness is] something that you can either push to one side and sweep under the carpet or you can say, actually, this is just dead wrong. We need to do something about it… We don’t believe it’s something which a country as wealthy as ours in the 21st Century can just ignore. Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd (Rudd 2008a)

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the day-to-day lives and identities of people who are homeless and living in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. My focus is people who are literally without shelter – those sleeping on the streets, in tents or abandoned buildings. These people are commonly referred to as ‘sleeping rough’. Within Australia, this form of homelessness is also defined as ‘primary’ homelessness (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992). Although ‘sleeping rough’ may correspond with a stereotypical view of homelessness, people literally without shelter are thought to constitute the statistically smallest section of Australia’s homeless population (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008).

During the research, homelessness, and by implication, the more than 100,000 Australians defined as homeless (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008), became a topic of national interest. Kevin Rudd’s newly elected government made reducing homelessness a social policy priority. As a result of this policy focus, homelessness was located within a wider public discourse.

With the greater recognition that homelessness was widespread throughout Australia came important questions about how this had happened, what could be done about it, and who are the people experiencing homelessness. The present research is concerned with this last question. In the years prior to this study Australia had experienced unprecedented economic growth. As the Prime Minister’s comments indicate, people experiencing homelessness during this period of widespread prosperity cannot easily be ignored. Further to this, ignoring the situation of people who are homeless is in tension with the
popular notion of Australia as an egalitarian country. During the same speech, Prime Minister Rudd suggested that, unlike many countries where homelessness is acceptable, “Australia is not like that” (Rudd 2008a).

The circumstances of people without homes also resonated with many Australians because housing and home are of everyday importance. Australia has been described as a ‘home owning’ nation (Kemeny 2005), with government policy driving this (Berry and Dalton 2000). House prices and mortgage rates are rarely out of the national media. Home and ‘home ownership’ are often thought to be synonymous in Australia (Mee 2007). Living the ‘Australian dream’ is often viewed as contingent upon owning, or buying one’s own home (Rudd 2008b). Buying a home is the aspiration, and until recently, the presumptive norm for most Australians. People who are homeless on the other hand, are living different lives that deviate from this ‘home owning’ aspirational norm.

The substantive empirical component of this thesis centres on the day-to-day lives and personal identities of people experiencing homelessness. I want to understand how they see themselves on an individual level. This study is located within a context where those who are homeless are not only thought about as living differently, but also as being different: i.e., as belonging to a different category of ‘homeless people’. As will be shown in chapter two, contrasting with those individuals ‘made’ homeless by bushfires and cyclones, for example; homelessness is a concept usually used to refer to a specific type of ‘homeless people’. There is a dichotomy between the silent ‘normal’ people with homes and the ‘different homeless people’. People without homes are identified by, or with reference to, their state of homelessness. Identities matter. Identifying people on the basis of their homelessness influences how they are thought about, and thus responded to by policy makers, service providers and the public.
1.2 Aim

The primary aim of this study is to explore and understand the personal identities of people who are homeless. To add both depth and context to personal identities, the secondary aim is to document how people experiencing homelessness live on a day-to-day basis, and how they perceive these experiences. Approximately one hundred individuals who were homeless participated in this study; these people are referred to as the ‘research participants’.

Central to the primary aim is my intention to hear and document how research participants describe their lives. I seek to understand how they see themselves. This includes learning about their aspirations, their worldviews, their values, and the elements of life that are important to them. In this study I therefore aim to convey an understanding of research participants’ subjective experiences. The research is not premised on an assumption that people who are homeless need to be given a voice. As Fopp (2007) recognises, they are not passive and powerless subjects who require me to speak on their behalf. Rather I strive to actively hear their voices and understand what is important to them.

Despite the vast research literature about homelessness in Australia, little attention has been paid exploring how people without homeless organise their day-to-day lives. This thesis is concerned to grapple with this aspect of research participants’ lives. I endeavour to make sense of how they prioritise their days, and to understand how much freedom and control they have over their lives.

Exploring day-to-day lives is an important aim in its own right, and it is also a means to achieve the primary research aim of contextualising personal identities. Drawing on a concept of identity as a socially located phenomenon, this research examines the nature of research participants’ use of public places, and what these public places mean to them. As will become evident in the following chapter, a prevalent theme from the research literature emphasises the salience of social interactions and relationships as denoting
membership within a ‘homeless collective’ or ‘subculture’. This study is concerned with understanding how the research participants interact and form relationships with other people: both people who are homeless and those who are not.

Central to the realisation of these aims is the ethnographic approach taken. I embedded myself in many aspects of people’s daily lives to witness firsthand how they lived. To gain insights into their lives and personal identities, I spent six months observing and talking to them. Underpinning this ethnographic approach was the premise that diverse and nuanced elements of day-to-day lives and identities could be more fully understood by extensive and close engagement.

As I will explain in chapter three, I construct personal identities as interactive, multiple and fluid, but something that is meaningfully and subjectively experienced nonetheless. The ethnographic approach was a means to observe and understand the diversity of people, and how people can express different aspects of themselves, or be constructed differently in various physical and social contexts. Throughout this thesis I will both implicitly and explicitly demonstrate that the long-term ethnographic engagement was a necessary means to achieve the research aims.

1.3 Research questions

Following on from the research aim, the primary research question is:

*What are the personal identities of the people participating in this study?*

This overarching research question is both simple and broad. The simplicity of the question lies in the commitment to understand personal identity from the perspectives of those people studied. This question aims to explore how people see themselves. The development of a theoretical framework to respond to this question, however, added complexity and breadth by constructing personal identity as a social phenomenon. A number of realities associated with homelessness for people participating in this study,
for example, reliance on others, limited power, relationships among other people who are homeless, and the importance of place, meant that the relevance of the social context to locating and understanding their personal identities was heightened. From positioning personal identity firmly within a social context important to research participants lives, three secondary research questions have been developed. These are:

How do the people participating in this study live on a day-to-day basis?

What do research participants perceive influences, or acts as reference points for their personal identities?

What constitutes home for research participants, and what do their meanings of home suggest about their personal identities?

Following Lawler (2008, p. 104), each of the research questions are attuned to the constraints and contexts within which research participants’ identities must be understood. As noted in the section above, the first secondary research question is not simply about documenting day-to-day lives, but understanding this is a means towards extending and adding complexity to personal identity. This will be demonstrated in chapters five, six and seven.

The theoretical framework draws on a diverse body of work (Bauman 2004; Brekhus 2003; Foucault 1972; Lawler 2008; Taylor 1998), that in differing ways, have all shown how identities can be imposed from above, and in particular, how powerless and stigmatised individuals/groups are ascribed with negative labels and identities. Secondary research question number two is derivative of the idea that identities may be an imposition. Similarly, this research question recognises that people can come to see themselves in a manner similar to how they are seen by others. Differing from this, and in line with the overarching aim of understanding individuals’ subjective experiences of the self, secondary research question two does not take it as a priori that the ways in which they are identified has any bearing upon how they see themselves. In this respect, this and
each of the research questions are attuned to the ways research participants can exercise agency in how they live and the identities they construct, but their capacity to exercise agency is mediated by their social and interactional context.

The third secondary research question is informed by ‘place identity’ theory on the one hand, and some homelessness literature on the other. The notion of ‘place identity’ shows how people actively incorporate and locate their identities within place (Casey 2001; Easthope 2009; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). Researchers focusing on people defined as homeless have shown how they have alternative ideas of what home means (Coleman 2000; Robinson 2002; Veness 1993; Wardhaugh 1999; Zufferey and Kerr 2004).

At the introduction to chapters five, six and seven, the link between the research questions and the relevant themes to be discussed will be noted. These questions will be returned to in chapter eight, where conclusions are drawn in light of the empirical material.

1.4 Significance

The aim of this study, to understand personal identities, is premised on the contention that people experiencing homelessness are often ‘misrecognised’. In the following chapter I support and delineate the parameters for this claim. The research significance follows on from this premise.

Implicit in the suggestion that people experiencing homelessness are misrecognised is the view that dominant representations are not sufficiently informed by those individuals who are homeless. Parker and Fopp (2004) suggested that most Australian research is about ‘the homeless’, rather than hearing from people who experience homelessness and thus taking their perspectives seriously. Chapter two makes a similar argument, where it is suggested that the identities ascribed to people without homes are constructed and imposed upon them by researchers. Although not referring to identities, Horsell’s (2006)
accounts explain this disparity. He suggests that knowledge about homelessness in Australia reflects the power/knowledge axis, where the perspectives and insights of those who are homeless are overlooked or “reconfigured through an expert gaze” (Horsell 2006, p. 221).

I will argue that focusing on people’s identities in ways beyond and unrelated to homelessness is important to destabilise dichotomies between people with houses and ‘homeless people’. My research aims to create space and add to a small body of Australian literature (e.g., Zufferey and Kerr 2004) where people experiencing homelessness speak for, and about, themselves. This study is significant because people experiencing homelessness talk about their homelessness and what this does, and does not, mean for them. While the process of conducting and writing about this research meant that I also analysed and ‘reconfigured’ research participants lives and identities, I have made conscious efforts to stay close to their subjective meanings, and constantly reflected upon the challenges of doing so. My prioritising of the perspectives of people who are homeless in constructing their own identities is a means to undermine reifications about them (Fopp 2008). This is an important aim in its own right, but it can also lead to a broader significance.

Informed by the philosophical accounts of Fraser (1997, 2003) and Bacchi (1999, 2009), this study’s significance can be demonstrated in the potential this ethnographic knowledge has for understanding how people experiencing homelessness are responded to by policy makers and service providers. First let us consider Fraser’s (1997, 2003) ideas. Fraser was concerned with the way recognition supports redistribution. Indeed, she strongly argued that the former is essential to achieving the latter.

Central to Fraser’s thesis are notions of cultural and economic injustices. Economic injustices are thought about in terms of political and economic structures that result in exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation. These injustices can be redressed through either altering structures or redistributive policies that occur within existing structures. Cultural injustices on the other hand, are those injustices rooted in social practices of
representation. Fraser (2003, p. 31) suggests that they act as impediments to “people’s standing as full members of society”. Representing groups with disrespected or disparaged identities (Fraser 1997) is an example pertinent to the current discussion. Fraser suggests that this type of cultural injustice or misrecognition can be redressed through recognition, or through a “wholesale transformation of social patterns of representations” (1997, p. 15).

For Fraser, misrecognitions are not simply a form of cultural injustice, but they lead to or exacerbate, economic injustices. She asserted that challenging cultural injustices and working towards positive changes in the ways groups are represented, also serves to promote justice on an economic or redistributive level. Applying Fraser’s ideas to the present study, it can be suggested that understanding how people who are homeless construct and articulate their own identities, is not simply a means to redress misrepresentations about them, but this knowledge provides a platform to more comprehensively understand and thus respond to, their needs.

The problems with misrecognitions noted above are primarily of a redistributive measure – this theorising suggests that if people are misrecognised then subsequent redistributive policies may be limited accordingly. Fraser’s ideas have further relevance to this research as they also illustrate how the process of responding to people, when the basis for those responses are premised on a misrecognition, may lead to problems beyond inappropriate responses. If for example, people are responded to with services or supports that do not alter structures or redress their economic marginalisation, these redistributive measures also “create strongly cathedcted, antagonistic group differentiations” (Fraser 1997, p. 25). Here Fraser is arguing that if misrecognised groups are responded to with inappropriate policy responses, such as welfare benefits instead of equitable access to employment, it is not simply the case that these measures are ineffective at addressing their marginalisation. Rather, their continued receipt of this type of response may inadvertently position them as deficient, thus supporting their misrecognised state as dependent on welfare.
At this point the work of Bacchi (1999, 2009) is instructive. Bacchi is concerned with the assumptions that underlie ‘policy problems’. Rather than focus on specific policies, Bacchi argues that policies are geared towards problems that leave many questions unasked and assumptions taken for granted (Bacchi 2009, p. 5). I will suggest that homelessness policies contain assumptions about the policy problems, i.e., homelessness policies are informed by assumptions about the personal identities of people experiencing homelessness.

Below I give a brief overview of homelessness policy in Australia. Notwithstanding the current emphasis given to affordable housing, I will suggest that policies which prioritise case management of ‘homeless people’ are informed by assumptions that these people are both different and deficient in some ways. Either in addition to housing or prior to being able to access housing, people without homes are positioned as deficient, and are assumed to require case management. Indeed, the Prime Minister (Rudd 2008a) asserting that solving homelessness is not simply about putting ‘homeless people’ in accommodation is illustrative of the assumption that they are deficient and unable to sustain ‘normal’ housing. With the exception of a critique of case management in the broader Australian social work literature (Kennedy et al. 2001), the Australian homelessness literature rarely questions the necessity to case manage ‘homeless people’.

Drawing on Fraser’s ideas, it can be suggested that by merely accessing specific homeless case management services, the status of people experiencing homelessness as different is reinforced. Indeed, it has been argued that this is one of the broader functions of the homelessness system (Fopp 1996). The significance of this study stems from the aim to understand people who are homeless, who are also thought to be different. I argue that an understanding of their difference, or indeed similarities, can be informative in thinking about how they can most appropriately and effectively be responded to. I return to these philosophical theories about misrecognition and policy responses in chapter eight. This chapter draws upon the personal identities of people in this research to consider what policy and practice responses would be most in accordance with their needs.
1.5 Research context

This section provides a context to the study and some broader influences on research participants’ lives more generally. This first includes a discussion of the geographical places in which the research was conducted. Following this, the relevant housing market and homelessness services are outlined.

1.6 Geographical context

This ethnographic study was conducted over a number of sites across inner suburban Brisbane. Chapter four outlines the sampling methods and details about the methodological component of these sites. In line with the ethnographic tradition, here I introduce Brisbane and the specific places within Brisbane where research participants lived and carried out much of their day-to-day lives.

1.6.1 Brisbane

Brisbane is the capital city of the Australian state of Queensland. The city is located within South East Queensland (SEQ), which is the third largest region in Australia (Queensland Government 2009). Brisbane has a subtropical climate. In 2008, Brisbane had a population of approximately 1.9 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009a). 13.8% of the population were born in culturally and linguistically diverse countries, but the majority were born locally, spoke English as a first language and identified as Christian (Brisbane City Council 2009).

The broader SEQ region comprised two thirds of the state’s population with approximately 3 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009a). During 2009 the official unemployment rate was below 4% (Australian Government 2009). Brisbane’s mean (gross) weekly household income rate was $1941, which is slightly below Sydney but above the national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009b). The local
economy predominantly compromises a mixture of white and blue collar industry, with the local and state government making concerted efforts to establish additional science and technologies based industries in the region. In the years leading up to and continuing throughout the research period, Brisbane and the SEQ region had benefited particularly well from Australia’s resource based export economy.

Based on projected population increases, forecasts suggest that the SEQ region will require the construction of an additional 754,000 dwellings by 2031, with 156,000 of these required in Brisbane (Queensland Government 2009, p. 91). At the time in which the research was conducted, Brisbane and the broader SEQ region was thus burgeoning and becoming increasingly prosperous. At a state and local government level politicians have used the economic and population booms as a means to market Brisbane as Australia’s ‘new world city’ (Newman 2009). The economic prosperity Prime Minister Rudd spoke of, taken together with the positioning of Brisbane on the world stage as a site for science and technology, is in tension with the lives of the people who were homeless participating in this study. The white lines on Map 1.1 indicate the general areas in Brisbane where this study was conducted.
1.6.2 Fortitude Valley

Fortitude Valley is a residential, commercial and industrial suburb located on the north-eastern fringe of the Brisbane Central Business District (CBD). After trebling over ten years, Fortitude Valley’s population in 2006 was 6,048 (Brisbane City Council 2009). In large part the population increase was a result of urban renewal and the influx of new residents. There is low unemployment among this group, and many are engaged in professional and service based employment. In addition to this, Fortitude Valley is one of Brisbane’s most popular entertainment districts. Numerous restaurants, cafes, licensed premises and adult entertainment venues are located within Fortitude Valley.

Prior to the recent urban renewal, like many other inner-city Australian suburbs, Fortitude Valley contained considerable low cost and often poorly maintained accommodation. The
area has traditionally had a large number of people who are visibly homeless (Coleman 2000; Ward 1977, 1979), and there were, and still are, many social services which operate out of Fortitude Valley. At the time of the research a number of services that cater for people experiencing homelessness were located in the suburb, including: boarding houses, homeless drop in centres, charities providing food, and medical services dispensing opiate replacement medications. Numerous charities and government agencies also delivered food and medical outreach services to people who are homeless in Fortitude Valley.

Due to these services, and despite urban renewal initiatives marginalising their access to public places (Coleman 2000), many people who are homeless live and conduct much of their day-to-day lives in Fortitude Valley’s public places. I conducted this study in the areas of Fortitude Valley where people who were homeless most frequented. This included the Fortitude Valley outside mall, in a park, in the area immediately surrounding the train station, and in a homeless specific service that provided food and social work services, referred to hereafter as the ‘café’. Map 1.2 shows these areas within the suburb of Fortitude Valley.
1.6.3 West End

West End is a suburb located approximately 1.5 kilometres to the west south-west of Brisbane’s CBD. Similar to Fortitude Valley, West End has been subject to considerable urban renewal, and the suburb’s cafes, restaurants and bars are an attraction for both locals and out of area visitors. West End’s 6,504 inhabitants reside in a mix of primarily owner-occupied and privately rented housing stock (Brisbane City Council 2009). There is also limited social and low-income housing, including boarding house accommodation in West End. Similarly, West End is home to a number of charitable and homelessness specific services, including hostel accommodation. Many of the charities and government agencies that deliver outreach services in Fortitude Valley likewise work with people in West End’s public places. Like Fortitude Valley, West End has a visible population of people who are homeless who sleep and access services within the suburb, alongside
people frequenting restaurants and cafes, and residents of newly constructed and renovated expensive accommodation.

Map 1.3 shows that of the 193 hectares of West End, only a relatively small area was sampled for this research. An area known as Riverside Drive (map 1.4) was also sampled, and this area is located within both West End and the adjoining suburb.

1.6.4 Riverside Drive
Riverside Drive represents a tract of council land located in the suburbs of West End and South Brisbane. The area of land is geographically and socially separate from these suburbs. Riverside Drive includes a public road. Running along the northern edge of the road is a grass area that separates the road from the Brisbane River. Along the southern edge of the road is a grass area that divides the road from industrial buildings. It is in this grassed area between the road and the industrial buildings where approximately 45 people slept in tents – some of whom had been there for many years. Map 1.4 shows Riverside Drive and the location where the people slept and socialised.

Map 1.4 Riverside Drive

Employees from the industrial buildings parked their vehicles in the Riverside Drive area. Cyclists and people walking and exercising along the Brisbane River also accessed this area. For the most part, however, Riverside Drive was frequented by the people who lived and socialised there, and the people who delivered services to them. The visible site of this homelessness so close to Brisbane’s CBD and tourist districts was in contrast to
the idea of a prosperous and ‘world city’ (Newman 2009). An extract from my fieldwork journal written on the day I first saw Riverside Drive illustrates this:

Walked my bike along the road that runs from the QLD rowing sheds to Kurilpa Park [Riverside Drive]. Along the grass bank, there were about 20 or 30 tents set up. Some of the tents were set up in what appeared to be groups of two, three or four, and other tents seemed to be located as if they were away, about 20 meters or so, from other tents. Most of the tents were a modern style currently sold in camping shops – from a distance, most seemed in good repair. There were also some tents that were falling down, and other tents that were added on to with odd bits of plastic and tarpaulin. A few old bikes were lying around, and I saw a barbeque and a shopping trolley full of bags. I saw two twenty or thirty year old males with a similar aged female standing near some of the tents, they were talking and looked briefly at me as I walked past. Their presentation could be described as untidy, but not dishevelled or anything overtly indicating they were sleeping rough. This place really stands out compared to the city immediately across the river, the beautiful apartments just down the road, and the Gallery of Modern Art just up the road. I am sure property developers are waiting to access this place. Fieldwork journal, Riverside Drive (12 December 2007)

1.6.5 Botanical Gardens and Roma Street Parklands

Also sampled were two small and specific places within a broader location of the Brisbane Botanical Gardens and the Roma Street Parklands. These two places were locations where two outreach services stopped to meet and deliver services to people who were homeless. I accessed these places as a volunteer with both outreach services. Maps 1.5 and 1.6 respectively show these two specific sites within the broader context of the parkland and gardens. Roma Street Parklands borders the north-western edge of the Brisbane CBD, whereas the Botanical Gardens sits between the southern aspect of the city and the Brisbane River.
These places were visited by the outreach services as part of a scheduled routine. The service providers strictly adhered to these schedules, and as such, people congregated in these areas at predictable times. The high public visibility and public access of these specific sites meant that people did not routinely sleep in the immediate area. Likewise, while up to forty people who were homeless congregated in these sites to access services, not long after the outreach service had departed, most if not all of the people would depart. Conversely, people did sleep in the broader and more concealed spaces of the Botanical Gardens and Roma Street Parklands. Unlike Riverside Drive, however, people did not sleep in the one area for extended periods of time, nor did they set up tents in the Botanical Gardens or Roma Street Parklands.

1.6.6 Housing

Prime Minister Rudd’s election commitment to respond to homelessness took place within a broader context of what is widely referred to as Australia’s ‘housing crisis’. For
much of the new millennium, housing affordability has decreased (Disney 2007), with 2007 and 2008 some of the most unaffordable years (Phillips 2009). Private rental markets have also progressively become less affordable, especially for people with low incomes (Yates and Wulff 2005). Further to this, funding for social housing has declined throughout the 1990s until recently (Hall and Berry 2004). Arthurson (2008) has argued that during this period of defunding, social housing has become residualised, with State Housing Authorities required to allocate housing only to those deemed to be in greatest need.

The decrease in housing affordability has been particularly pronounced in Brisbane. Median house prices in Brisbane more than doubled during the first five years of the new millennium (Australian Property Investor 2009). Despite the recent global economic downturn, Brisbane’s house prices have continued to increase throughout 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009c). Access to housing through the private rental sector has similarly become more expensive in Brisbane (Residential Tenancy Authority Queensland 2009). This housing affordability problem, taken together with the difficulties involved in accessing social housing that constitutes less than 4% of Brisbane’s housing sector (Brisbane City Council 2009), means that the notion of a ‘housing crisis’ is particularly important for the immediate context of this research. Indeed, many of the people who participated in this study were acutely aware of the difficulties they faced when interacting in the housing market.

Toward the completion of this study, however, the federal and state governments have taken action to respond to this ‘housing crisis’: including measures to promote further home ownership and widen access to social housing and the private rental sector (FaHCSIA 2009). The timing of these initiatives means that they had no bearing of the lives of people during the period of study.
1.6.7 Homelessness

Although homelessness was elevated to a social policy priority within the period of this research, people have experienced homelessness in Australia since the arrival of the first European colonisers towards the end of the eighteenth century. Similarly, many sections of the population and levels of government have made concerted efforts to respond to the needs of people experiencing homelessness throughout Australian history.

European colonisation dispossessed Aboriginal people of, and from, their land. In this sense Aboriginal people were Australia’s first homeless (Reynolds 1982, 1996; Rowley 1972). The disproportionate rate of Aboriginal Australians experiencing social and economic disadvantage also means that they have been overrepresented in the homeless population ever since their original dispossession. The linking of homelessness to forced dispossession from land is associated with different ideas of what home and homelessness mean for Aboriginal Australians (Memmott et al. 2003). Further, forced dispossession often took place in the context of forced containment in Aboriginal missions, and as such, traditional homelessness responses for Aboriginal people have also differed. Responses to Aboriginal Australians who are homeless also differ in contemporary policy. These differences relate to questions about what constitutes an adequate dwelling (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003), as well as difference in terms of engagement, delivery and nature of homelessness services to Aboriginal people (Keys Young 1998).

While national and reliable enumerations of homeless populations have not existed until recently (Chamberlain 1999), a disparate body of research from various regions of Australia illustrates that non-Aboriginal people have also been homeless throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Conley 1982; Cornwell 1968; Dickey 1987; Garton 1990; Jordan 1994). Reflecting the influences of the British approaches at similar times, responding to people experiencing homelessness in Australia was undertaken by Christian based charities and benevolent societies. These responses, especially during the 19th and first half of the 20th century, were of a refuge and temporary nature, and have
been described as a harsh form of social welfare (O'Brien 1988; O'Connor and Callahan 1989).

The introduction of the *Homeless Persons Assistance Act of 1974*, and then the Homeless Persons’ Assistance Program (1983) represent the first attempt to respond to homelessness at a national level. This program delivered funding for the development and continuation of innovative and non-institutional programs to support people who were homeless to participate in all aspects of ‘mainstream’ society. Building on the recognition that homelessness was a nation wide problem and that a national approach was required, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) was developed in 1985. Since its inception, SAAP has been Australia’s vanguard response to homelessness, and is funded by the federal and each of the state and territory governments. Through the mechanism of SAAP, funding is allocated to non-government, local government and community based providers, which deliver in excess of 1300 homeless services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2006).

SAAP initially focused on providing crisis accommodation, but with recognition of wider client needs, from the early 1990s (Eardley et al. 2008) and then officially recognised in 1997 (SAAP 1997), SAAP services have also included case management and related support services. The provision of case management finds support in the SAAP evaluations that have found, while effective in many respects, SAAP cannot meet the needs of some clients (SAAP 1993; SAAP 1999; Wyatt et al. 2004). On the one hand, this is due to the lack of exits out of SAAP (Fopp 1996; Thompson 2007), and on the other, it is explained by way of the characteristics of some SAAP clients. These people are routinely thought to use alcohol and illicit substances, have a mental illness, and experience literal and long periods of homelessness. Individuals for whom SAAP is relatively ineffective are referred to as having ‘complex needs’ (Wyatt et al. 2004).

Underpinning the positioning of homelessness as a matter of national importance was the recognition that SAAP, together with current housing systems, was not able to reduce homelessness. Following an election promise, in 2008 the White Paper (FaHCSIA 2008)
outlined the Federal Government’s future direction of homelessness policy in Australia. Through a more integrated whole of government approach, the White Paper sets an ambitious target of halving overall homelessness by 2020. Moreover, explicitly recognising that people ‘sleeping rough’ have not been appropriately responded to, the White Paper aims to “offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it by 2020” (FaHCSIA 2008, p. 17).

The White Paper has been applauded by the homelessness service sector (Parity 2009) for both the broad approach taken and the central role that a lack of affordable housing plays in its analysis. Similar to the approach taken by the SAAP model, the White Paper also focuses on the importance of supporting and case managing people who are homeless. Indeed, and again consistent with much previous policy, people sleeping on the streets are referred to as having ‘complex needs’ (FaHCSIA 2008, p. 50), and it is argued that services which ‘wrap around’ them are required to respond to their needs (p. 47).

### 1.7 Homelessness, policy and the specific focus of the present study

The idea within policy that some people have ‘complex needs’, and that these are the individuals whom SAAP services have found most difficult to respond to provides a context to my study. First, the identification of a section of people with ‘complex needs’ within a wider homeless population is illustrative of the broad and diverse nature of homelessness in Australia. This includes diversity in terms of types of homelessness. For instance, people who are literally without shelter, those in boarding houses, homeless accommodation and people staying with friends with nowhere else to go are all commonly defined as homeless (see Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992).

Next, since the late 1970s, it has also been recognised that the homeless population consists of women (Edwards et al. 1977), children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1989), older people (Judd et al. 2004) and families (McCaughey 1992), including single fathers with children (McArthur et al. 2006). The diversity of the
homeless population is also recognised with reference to the many pathways into (Johnson et al. 2008) or causes of (FaHCSIA 2008) homelessness.

An appreciation of this diversity is required to understand the specific focus of this research. This study’s focus is not simply ‘rough sleepers’, but exclusively on adults who ‘sleep rough’. Due to complexities with enumerating people who are literally without shelter, the numbers and characteristics of people who ‘sleep rough’ are limited. On the basis of the most recent national census in 2006, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2009, p. 84) estimate that there were 6500 people ‘sleeping rough’ nationally on census night. Of these, 288 were estimated to be ‘sleeping rough’ in inner Brisbane (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2009, p. 55). This data also shows that nationally (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008), as well as in inner Brisbane (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2009), most people who ‘sleep rough’ are male and single and a disproportionate number are Aboriginal.

This study is also focused towards individuals who have experienced long-term homelessness. Within both Australian (Coleman 2000; Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a; Johnson et al. 2008) and international (Farrington and Robinson 1999; Zlotnick and Robertson 1999) literature there is ongoing debate about what should constitute long-term homelessness. These debates centre on whether it should be months or years, and whether a period of incarceration indicates an exit from homelessness. Nearly all of the people who participated in this study had been homeless for at least one consecutive year. Most of them had experienced numerous years of homelessness periodically throughout their lives.

There is limited data identifying the length of time people who ‘sleep rough’ have been homeless. Australian researchers have suggested that people move in and out of different forms of homelessness (Chamberlain et al. 2007; Chamberlain and Johnson 2001; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008; Robinson 2003). When referring to the national census, Chamberlain and MacKenzie estimated that between 60 and 70% of the broader homeless population had experienced long-term
homelessness (2008, p. 33). On the basis of a large sample of people from Victoria, Chamberlain and colleagues theorised that as homelessness becomes long-term, people are more likely to ‘sleep rough’ (Chamberlain et al. 2007).

Due to a focus on long-term and literal homelessness, this study deliberately targets a statistically small section of the Australian homeless population. Some of the characteristics of people in this study suggest that they may even represent a small section of people within the long-term ‘rough sleeping’ population. Between 75 and 85% of the research participants in this study used, and routinely self-defined as ‘misusing’, alcohol and/or illicit substances. Recognising that comparison is difficult because existing representative research is limited and the criteria for substance use/misuse varies, studies drawn from other Australian cities have identified the prevalence of illicit substance misuse among homeless populations as 20% (Zaretzky et al. 2008), 24% [intravenous use] (Walsh 1998), 36% (Hodder et al. 1998; Teesson et al. 2003) 37% (Horn 1999), 43% (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008b) and 50% (Sibthorpe et al. 1995). The prevalence among people in this study is much higher than these studies found. Further, these existing studies are drawn from samples of people who are both ‘sleeping rough’ and experiencing other forms of homelessness. Other than knowing the rates of illicit substance misuse is much lower in these studies, it is not possible to know what the rates are for people who ‘sleep rough’ elsewhere in Australia.

The experiences of research participants in this study of ‘rough sleeping’, long-term homelessness and a high prevalence of illicit substance and alcohol use does more than illustrate their status as a small section within a broader population of people who ever experience homelessness. In policy terms, these experiences and characteristics would be taken to denote their status as people with ‘complex needs’. They not only constitute a collective of people with experiences that differ to what is known of the broader homeless population, but they are also a group of people thought about as the most ‘different’ within this population. They represent the group for whom the policy response of ‘wrap around’ support is directed towards. When the Prime Minister suggested that putting all the ‘homeless people’ in accommodation not being the solution (Rudd 2008a),
it can be inferred that he was primarily referring to the different section of the homeless population with ‘complex needs’.

Due to my empirical focus on a small section of people within a broader homeless population, much of the homelessness literature I draw on is focused accordingly. When I suggest, therefore, that people experiencing homelessness have been misrecognised, when I argue that they have been positioned as different, I refer to research literature that focuses on people who have experienced literal homelessness, and often those people also defined as long-term homeless. This vast and diverse literature is examined in the following chapter.

The targeted and specific focus of this study means that this thesis will have little to say about the majority of people defined as homeless in Australia. Further, this ethnographic study with people purposively selected means that empirical generalisation is not appropriate – that is to say, I cannot make empirical generalisations about the characteristics of the broader population of people who ‘sleep rough’ in inner Brisbane, or anywhere else. On the other hand, in chapter four the notion of ‘moderatum’ generalisation is explained. This concept is returned to in the final chapter, where in addition to policy and practice implications for the specific individuals in this study, I suggest this research has generated the capacity to make tentative ‘moderatum’ generalisations to other populations of people ‘sleeping rough’.

1.8 Overview of thesis structure

Chapter two explores some of the ways people experiencing homelessness have been represented in research literature from Australia, and to a lesser extent, the United States. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how people without homes have been characterised with reference to, and in the context of, their state of homelessness. In accordance with the research aims and questions, chapter three outlines the concept of personal identity informing the study. This theoretical framework constructs personal identity as a concept that is subjectively experienced and socially located. Chapter four
details the ethnographic methodology used in this research. Describing how the methods were used in some detail, I show how an ethnographic approach was a necessary means to engage with research participants to understand personal identity.

In chapters five, six and seven, I report on the empirical material from this study. In these three chapters I discuss some important aspects of research participants’ daily lives and personal identities. Chapter five provides considerable detail pertaining to their biographical histories and day-to-day lives. The relevance of discussing day-to-day lives is further illuminated in chapters six and seven. Chapter six locates research participants’ identities within a context of their social relationships and uses of public places. It is suggested that these relationships are reflective of their personal identities, and also strategically engaged in as a means to overcome the challenges experienced in public places. Despite this, chapter six argues that people did not see themselves as members of a collective based on homelessness, and public places were seen as the antithesis of home.

Drawing primarily on the observational component of the fieldwork, chapter seven initially explores the way research participants exercise agency in enacting identities. The specific identities enacted are shown to be contingent on the social and physical context. Extending the analysis, this chapter concludes by suggesting that conducting day-to-day lives in public places is implicated in the public perception of ‘homeless people’. I propose that the ‘out of place’ behaviours people who are homeless engage in convey a disproportionate amount about the identities they are imposed with. The discussions of enacted and imposed identities in this chapter rest upon the descriptive accounts outlined in chapter five.

The concluding chapter critically reflects upon the adequacy with which the research questions have been responded to, and then ties together the disparate empirical material. This chapter concludes by considering the implications of the study for policy and practice responses to the needs of research participants. The appropriateness of the Housing First approach is explored.
Chapter 2 Portrayals of ‘homeless people’

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the way people who are homeless have been represented in academic research literature. This literature is drawn primarily from Australia, but a consideration of literature from the United States (U.S.) is also offered. This overview documents a range of diverse and at times competing portrayals. Despite this diversity, this chapter will demonstrate that identity is an important concept underpinning these portrayals.

The significance of identities to this literature is twofold. First, people experiencing homelessness are identified as a distinct social group. They are represented as ‘homeless people’, and thus ascribed with identities on the basis of what they are assumed to lack. Rarely is it demonstrated how the accounts and perspectives of people who are homeless inform the identities they are ascribed. Secondly, the state of homelessness, as suggested by a number of researchers (Neil and Fopp 1992, p. 18; Osborne 2002, p. 45; Smith 1993, p. 105; Stephenson 2006, p. 54; Wardhaugh 1996, p. 708), is presented as altering personal identities or even dissolving ‘non-homeless identities’. It will be shown how people are depicted as appropriating a ‘homeless identity’. This identity is constructed on both a personal and collective level. I will argue that some of the literature which has ascribed people with identities on the basis of their homelessness, has had the consequence of positioning those individuals as a ‘different’ type of people. To identify people in this manner may emphasise them as a type of people distinct from, and other than, ‘the housed’ (Hopper 1991; Kyle 2005; May 2000).

There is an established tradition of exploring and critiquing the way people experiencing homelessness have been portrayed. Given the importance of the media in constructing images and disseminating them to wide audiences, many people have looked at the media’s role in depicting people who are homeless, both in Australia (Fopp 1989; Zufferey and Chung 2006) and internationally (Bogard 2003; Hrast 2008; Marsh 2006).
Statutory legislation and official definitions also have important implications, and sources from the United Kingdom and United States have likewise been analysed for the various ways people who are homeless are represented (Jacobs et al. 1999; Kyle 2005; Schiff 2003). There has, however, been limited critical exploration of portrayals from the Australian research literature.

The review of Australian research literature concentrates on those publications reporting on new empirical materials. This literature is primarily written for, and directed towards, academic and professional/industry audiences, and includes material published in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings and books. This empirical research literature is the primary source of this chapter as it is in this research literature reporting on empirical research where identity is most clearly raised.

In terms of publication volume, the literature salient to this study comprises only a relatively small component of what can be considered the Australian homelessness literature. Arguably, the largest section of the field is that contributed to by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and the various levels and departments of government responsible for delivering homelessness services. The NGO and government literature typically comprises program evaluations, studies of the needs of people who are homeless, and policy prescriptions (Coopers and Lybrand W D Scott 1985; Mackdacy et al. 2005; Pinkney and Ewing 2006). Also contributing to this Australian literature are numerous publications drawing on new and existing data sources providing an overview of homelessness (Thompson 2007), causes or antecedents (Burke 1994; Burke 1998; Healey 2006; Neil and Fopp 1992) and matters related to intervention (Flatau et al. 2006; Fopp 1996; Zaretzky et al. 2008).

Although contributions from these sources are important, they are often unique to a specific service or program, say something about homelessness as a phenomenon more broadly, are sometimes difficult to access, and importantly, do not address issues of identity. Indeed, if it were found that these sources included specific discussions about identity, those sources would have been included for this review. Thus while the
academic research literature informing this review is not representative of the entire Australian homelessness literature, this literature does comprise research which is most relevant to this study.

2.1.1 Chapter outline

For the purposes of this study, the Australian research literature is grouped into four sections. The four sections are characterised by similarities in the ways people without homes have been portrayed. Although these sections deal with dominant themes throughout periods of time, these should not be considered historically isolated. There is a determinable continuation in themes spanning across the four sections, and the sections are not presented to suggest a neat progression in the ways people who are homeless have been understood and represented. Likewise, the ways in which people were portrayed, especially the manner in which these portrayals have changed, took place within a broader social and historical context. This context includes the rise of feminism, communitarian thinking, and debates about the culture of poverty, to name but a few. The specific focus of this chapter means that this wider context will not be considered in any detail, but its importance is recognised.

The first Australian section considers some initial portrayals where a dominant theme of ‘homeless men’ as ‘drunks’ and ‘bums’, experiencing literal homelessness was conveyed. Subsequent to this, I consider representations beginning in the early 1980s whereby an almost exclusive image of ‘street kids’ was presented. The third section details literature where a specific ‘homeless identity’ and ‘homeless subculture’ was theorised. Following this, I review a small, but important body of research that differs in many ways from that considered in the previous three sections. This fourth section includes selected contemporary Australian publications where issues of identity are still important, but homelessness is not seen as all encompassing.

Prior to this review and critique of Australian research, however, I provide a survey of some of the many ways people experiencing homelessness have been portrayed in
research literature from the U.S. The great extent of research from the U.S. means that my review only provides a summary of some key themes. This survey of U.S. research aims to provide a context to the substantive Australian discussion, whereby I make references to both the differences and similarities in portrayals between the two countries. The U.S. was selected for this chapter, rather than the United Kingdom or Europe for instance, because this research literature from the U.S. has been most influential among some key Australian theorists. As will be demonstrated, many Australian scholars have drawn on the work of their North American counterparts to make sense of the identities and subcultures of people who are homeless.

2.2 Survey of portrayals from the United States

Snow et al. (1994, p. 461) argue that homelessness has been researched more than any other social problem in the U.S., and it is in the U.S. where the largest body of homelessness research exist (Fitzpatrick and Christian 2006). Recognising that homelessness has existed since at least the eighteenth century (Kyle 2005; Rossi 1989a; Snow and Anderson 1993), I focus solely on academic research beginning at the early twentieth century, a period when homelessness became established in U.S. society (Kusmer 2002, p. 169). Furthermore, unlike the Australian context, numerous authors have conducted historical analyses and reviews of the representations of homelessness in the U.S., and I draw upon their works.

Anderson’s (1923) Chicago study is an important sociological work, representative of typical portrayals in the early part of the twentieth century. The image of homelessness put forward was that of the seasonal labourer – those who travelled the railways in search of employment: known as ‘hobos’ (Anderson 1923). Indeed, it was the ‘hobos’ transience and life outside of family that exemplified their positioning as different (Rossi 1989a). For Anderson (1923) therefore, the ‘hobos’ way of life was central to their difference, not simply their lack of a conventional dwelling. Cresswell (2001) cites this study as not only influencing much subsequent research, but by isolating an assumed distinctiveness of a
section of the population, the ‘homeless’ were thus reified as a distinct group for many future researchers.

The ‘hobo’ was treated with suspicion for their rejection of family and married life, but their travelling existence represented something of the more positive ‘American frontier’ (Kusmer 2002, p. 10). Thus they were not solely portrayed in a negative light, but they were also romanticised for achieving independence, political freedom and rugged individualism (Barak 1991, p. 14).

The rise of the Great Depression in the 1930s saw both the ‘hobos’ and the inner-city locations in which they congregated to access employment become further economically disadvantaged and thus stigmatised. These inner-city areas became known as skid row. Skid row areas were synonymous with the local inhabitants: people who could no longer contribute to society (Hopper 1990). Kusmer has highlighted some of the complexities inherent in the portrayals of people who experienced homelessness at this time. During the great depression there was a degree of sympathy towards some sections of the homeless population who were depicted as unfortunate victims of factors outside of their control (Kusmer 2002, p. 209-210). This sympathy, however, was not generally extended towards people living on skid row.

Following on from some images presented during the depression that differed from the transient worker, or the hobo from the early twentieth century, research conducted in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s represented the homeless population to be comprised of older men, often who misused alcohol and had disabilities (Bahr 1973; Bahr and Caplow 1974; Blumberg et al. 1973; Bogue 1963; Wallace 1965). In light of these perceived changes in the population’s demographic, people without homes were often portrayed as feckless, lazy, and hence “undeserving of sympathy and aid” (Kyle 2005, p. 42). Unlike the seasonal traveller, by the 1970s they were known as ‘street people’ (Kusmer 2002, p. 12), and as Hopper (1990) notes, depicted as disreputable and dangerous.
When referring to the research literature from the 1950s and 1960s, Kusmer (2002, p. 230) suggests that, while images of ‘homeless people’ focused on their negative attributes, such as alcoholism, these negative portrayals were not the intention of some of the authors. More explicitly, however, an overwhelming body of research from this period overtly portrayed people experiencing homelessness as deviating from social expectations. Their social interactions and interpersonal relationships, for example, were contrary to accepted norms (Caplow 1970). Bogue (1963) noted how almost no people living on skid row were married, and most had no or only infrequent contact with family. They were portrayed as disaffiliated from mainstream American society. As Rossi (1989b, p. 10) notes, almost all post-war social scientists commented on their social isolation. In light of their isolation and assumed status as ‘outsiders’, skid row was presented as a geographical space that enabled inhabitants to become reaffiliated within the homeless subculture (Bahr and Caplow 1974; Caplow et al. 1968; Wallace 1965).

Fundamental to this social isolation and disaffiliation was the prevailing depiction of people experiencing homelessness as “subjectless agents” (Barak 1991, p. 24). This research literature provided little indication of how portrayals about ‘homeless people’ were informed by those people’s perspectives. On the other hand, retrospectively Kusmer (2002, p. 160) postulated that the term skid row, with all the associated negative connotations, was in tension with the experiences of those who lived there. Nonetheless, he went on to observe that studies which portrayed people who were homeless differently, in more favourable lights, were inaccessible and therefore did not alter dominant representations (Kusmer 2002, p. 230).

Changing images of people who were homeless began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Numerous studies from this period disseminated portrayals of the ‘new homeless’ (Rossi 1989b). Like Bogard (2003), Rossi (1989b) depicted the ‘new homeless’ as differing from the ‘old’ because of changing demographics. As opposed to the white and middle to old age men who comprised the ‘old homeless’ (Kusmer 2002), the ‘new homeless’ were younger, more likely to be Hispanic or African American, and included families, mostly single female headed families. Moreover, the ‘new homeless’
were far more likely to experience literal homelessness, and have fewer financial resources (Rossi 1989b, p. 20). Nonetheless, disabilities, including alcohol and substance misuse, were presented as important to explaining the ‘new homeless’ as a collective (Koegel and Burnam 1988; Rossi 1989b; Sosin et al. 1990). They were described as inhabiting a ‘culture of chronicity’ (Wolch et al. 1988), and the ‘new homeless’ of the 1980s, consistent with dominant images throughout the century, continued to be portrayed as disaffiliated (Grigsby et al. 1990).

It has been suggested that academic images from the 1980s did downplay alcoholism and other problematic attributes as a means of garnering public sympathy (Rossi 1989a, p. 32). Barak (1991), however, argued that the focus on disabilities, social isolation, or even sub-sections within the homeless population continued to convey people who were homeless as inherently different to the non-homeless. Homelessness was presented as if it were a trait of ‘homeless people’, rather than a circumstance people experienced (Barak 1991).

This idea of difference is further evident in a number of portrayals from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Rather than view people who were homeless as a distinct type of people, a number of studies overtly set out to represent their ‘ordinariness’. As a result of the experiences of homelessness, however, these ordinary people made extraordinary changes in their identities. Wolch and Dear (1993) and Snow and Anderson’s (1993) two studies exemplified these portrayals of people who were homeless as both ordinary and extraordinary.

Central to Wolch and Dear’s (1993) contributions was the proposition that the hardship of life on skid row transformed personal identities. Social interactions among others who were homeless mediated the negatives of skid row, but these interactions helped to further transform identities; people begun to see themselves as a “homeless community member” (Wolch and Dear 1993, p. 296). The acceptance of these identities then worked against the development of long-term projects aimed at re-entry to ‘mainstream’ society.
Snow and Anderson’s (1993) portrayals were underpinned by the diverse ways people lived. They argued that it was the adaptive strategies and day-to-day lives of people who were homeless that transformed their identities into ‘homeless identities’. People were portrayed in a range of ways, for examples, as ‘bums’, ‘tramps’ etc – at times, they were depicted as embracing homelessness as part of their self identities (Snow and Anderson 1993, p. 219). In their view it was the condition of homelessness that created these differences, and under various circumstances, people could exit homelessness and assume different identities.

On the one hand, the subcultures so important to the homeless identities Snow and Anderson (1993) constructed were reminiscent of the disaffiliated thesis. On the other hand, Snow and Anderson’s depictions included far more detail about disaffiliation and reaffiliation. The homeless were not ‘subjectless agents’, but within the constraints and opportunities available to them, they exercised agency at appropriating identities. Indeed, even appropriating ‘homeless identities’ were presented as acts of individual agency. Further, although their distinct and derogatory identities, such as ‘bums’ and ‘tramps’ represent people in problematic ways, Snow and Anderson did recognise that the people they identified in this way, “up close and in context, are remarkably like most of us” (Snow and Anderson 1993, p. 314).

Considerable diversity characterises more recent representations. For example, Osborne (2002) took a ‘homeless identity’ as a given, with portrayals of ‘homeless people’ mediated by the extent to which they were deemed to encapsulate this difference. Whereas Boydell’s et al. (2000) Canadian study, while conscious of the ways the state of homelessness may pose challenges for personal identity, depicted people who were homeless in ways distinct and unrelated to their experiences of homelessness.

Also informed by the direct contributions of people who were homeless, both Ruddick (1996) and Taylor (2002) similarly presented homelessness as unimportant to the identities of young people who were homeless. These latter studies also find relevance in other contemporary research from the U.S., which while not focusing on identities or
explicit portrayals of people experiencing homelessness, emphasises the importance of economics and housing markets, not individual pathology and characteristics in explaining homelessness (Quigley and Raphael 2001).

From this brief survey on some major studies from the U.S. (and one Canadian), two things are clear. First, portrayals have changed considerably throughout the twentieth century. Not least of all, this is because homelessness has assumed many forms in U.S. history (Kusmer 2002). The demographics of the homeless population have changed, and in many respects, the portrayals of people experiencing homelessness changed accordingly. Differing to this straightforward explanation, there are also political elements that have influenced the ways in which ‘homeless people’ have been represented. As Rossi (1989a) noted, in the 1980s activists were important in ensuring that social scientists portrayed people who were homeless in more favourable, more deserving lights. Indeed, numerous researchers have shown the importance of certain depictions of ‘homeless people’ as a means to achieve, or not, certain policy ends in the U.S. (Bogard 2003; Kyle 2005; Schiff 2003).

It is also evident from the research literature cited above, that to varying degrees and in differing ways, homelessness has been presented as something important to people’s identities. Perhaps most notable among this difference is their isolation from family and ‘mainstream’ society. Indeed from Anderson’s (1923) study it was this isolation and lack of connection that primarily characterised their identities. Equally central to many portrayals was the idea that people who were homeless formed collectives, or became reaffiliated. Building on this, Snow and Anderson (1993) showed how people experiencing homelessness were not homogenous, and the collectives they engaged in took many forms and comprised many different groups. In fact their study, similar to Wolch and Dear (1993), showed that people who were homeless were not necessarily different as such, but the process of homelessness led to them developing different identities based on their homelessness.
Compared to the U.S., the Australian research literature is far smaller and has not been subject to the same depth and extent of analysis. Nonetheless, I will argue that like much of the research from the U.S., the Australian literature predominantly presents homelessness as important to the identities of ‘homeless people’.

2.3 Australian research literature: ‘bums’ and ‘drunks’ (men)

In this section, I will illustrate how various studies have identified people without homes on the basis of their homelessness. Much of the language used to define people mirrored that used in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s. Within this section of the literature people were defined by what they lacked, and on the basis of this, they were depicted as a different type of person. Differing to portrayals from the U.S. of people as ‘feckless’ and ‘lazy’ (Kyle 2005), however, these Australian portrayals tended to emphasise individual deficiencies that people could not be held accountable for. Due to a dominant focus on literal homelessness, these ‘homeless identities’ were essential male identities. It was not until the late 1970s that other forms of homelessness were seriously considered, and thus women’s experiences of homelessness recognised.

Linsell (1962) and Jordan’s (1965) journal articles represent the two earliest published accounts of homelessness in Australia. Both studies focused exclusively on homelessness among adults in Melbourne, and homelessness was presented as an exclusively male phenomenon. From these initial contributions, people without homes were assumed to be deficient, and the descriptions of them reflected these assumptions.

These men need a firm, benevolent father figure to guard them from the pitfalls of their own limited intelligence. To set and pursue goals, even the elementary ones of employment, good food and comfortable lodgings, seems beyond them. Linsell (1962, p. 9)

He is a childish and dependent but rather engaging person, and that he appears to be neither motivated to improve his condition nor capable of improvement. If a doctor or psychiatrist has to put a name to what is basically wrong with him, he may describe him as an ‘inadequate personality’. Jordan (1965, p. 27)
Throughout these two works, people were constructed with identities as ‘derelicts’, ‘bums’ and ‘drunken’ – they were described by their problematic attributes. In fact, these descriptions and the attributes they were based upon were also seen as explanations. The disproportionate rates of alcoholism and mental illnesses among the homeless population, for example, explained people’s homelessness. They were portrayed as unable to improve their lives. Homelessness was a result of individual deficiencies, but individuals should not be held entirely responsible for their deficiencies. Linsell (1962, p. 10) suggested that even when alcohol misuse was linked to homelessness, people could not be blamed for drinking to deal with such an unpleasant experience.

Moving the responsibility further way from the individual, Linsell also suggested that the ‘homeless’ had been emotionally deprived at birth, and that their mothers contributed to their alcoholism by encouraging dependency (1962, p. 9). Jordan did not go so far to link an individual’s homelessness to their mother’s problematic parenting. He did, however, portray the ‘homeless’ as people who have overwhelmingly “suffered during childhood from deprivation and disturbance” (1965, p. 29).

Consistent with the notion of disaffiliation from the U.S., people who were homeless were also examined in the context of their problematic social relationships. They were unable to give or receive love (Linsell 1962, p. 9), and it was this inability to form intimate relationships that explained their social isolation (Jordan 1965, p. 28). Stemming from this isolation from ‘mainstream’ society, they engaged in “unstable” (Jordan 1965, p. 28-9) and “shallow” (Linsell 1962, p. 9) relationships with each other.

The existence of these relationships, however, was not presented as constituting a homeless social identity or meaningful collective – they were not portrayed as becoming reaffiliated. Jordan (1965, p. 28-9) believed that the ‘homeless’ never identified themselves with a homeless group. Furthermore, while portraying them as deficient and outside of ‘normal’ society, both Jordan and Linsell recognised that the homeless population was a heterogeneous group. Jordan’s accounts noted above were only relevant
for a group of “hard-core derelicts” (1965, p. 28).

John de Hoog (1972) conducted what appears to be the first Australian published ethnographic study of homelessness based on five months fieldwork during 1968. He concealed his identity as a sociological researcher and lived among people who were homeless. Primarily, the people in this study lived in boarding house and homeless specific accommodation located in inner city Sydney. de Hoog’s close engagement meant that he was able to convey a detailed understanding of the lives and social interactions of people experiencing homelessness, or ‘stiffs’, as he referred to them.

Most compelling in this study was the image of people living unhappy and miserable lives in what de Hoog, borrowing from the U.S., termed ‘skid row’. They saw themselves as “blokes who have got nothing and never will have nothing” (de Hoog 1972, p. 58). People were portrayed as powerless, and as such, de Hoog described their day-to-day lives as boring and monotonous. Daily lives were presented as roughly structured around unemployment offices, hand out shops, clinics and consuming alcohol. Most people were either heavy or problematic drinkers, and the consumption of alcohol not only organised their day-to-day lives, but also led to what de Hoog argued was their victimisation by the police.

Living among people without homes and portraying himself as a ‘stiff’, meant that de Hoog was able to experience the nature and significance of social interactions. The importance of alcohol consumption for most people meant that social interactions were often organised around drinking alcohol. But because de Hoog engaged with people closely, and also participated in group social interactions, he was able to pick up some of the nuances and limitations of these interactions. He found that the shared boredom, alienation and the experience of homelessness did indeed create a bond. This bond, however, only created a tenuous security in a hostile skid row. He cited a research participant who commented that:
I suppose you’re best to stick to yourself … but then … sometimes that might even be worse. de Hoog (1972, p. 28)

In addition to noting that people did not trust each other, and that real friendships were impossible (1972, p. 111), this quote highlights how social interactions were perceived as negative. Interactions or groupings not only led to police involvement, but these interactions among people who did not trust each other routinely resulted in theft and violence. The strength of de Hoog’s contribution comes from his recognition that living and interacting with other people who were homeless was not tantamount to a collective identity. de Hoog captured the unhappiness and unsatisfactory social interactions that characterised people’s lives, and showed how these social interactions were only marginally better than the alternative of loneliness. Similar to Jordan (1965), but differing to the idea of reaffiliation coming out of the U.S., people were portrayed as living together in skid row in “collective isolation” (de Hoog 1972, p. 15).

Based on fieldwork conducted during the 1960s and then reported in a 1973 thesis, is Jordan’s (1994) book about people who were homeless in inner city Melbourne. Other than using the term ‘derelicts’, Jordan (1994) does not use the derogatory language to describe people who were homeless that he used in his 1965 article. The most significant contribution lies in the understanding he conveyed of people’s daily lives and thoughts on their homelessness. Like so many other contributions, Jordan portrayed the lives of people who were homeless as unpleasant. Indeed, he outlined a number of life experiences prior to homelessness to clearly illustrate that people’s negative experiences during homelessness were largely a continuation of disadvantaged lives (Jordan 1994, p. 38). Jordan’s depictions recognised that people did not intentionally become homeless as a rejection of “the rat race” (Jordan 1994, p. x).

Jordan worked as a social worker at an inner-city homeless service, and his fieldwork was informed by over a thousand interviews with people who were homeless, nearly all of whom were male. He understood that people had too much time on their hands, and little to do with it (Jordan 1994, p. 28). Consistent with earlier portrayals (de Hoog 1972;
Jordan (1965), Jordan (1994) did not identify a ‘homeless collective’, but rather a group of people who had meaningful, but seldom intimate relationships with each other. In fact, it was the consumption of alcohol that brought people together, and those who did not drink, interacted only infrequently.

In comparison to earlier research, Towers (1974) offered a much less detailed account of the day-to-day lives and identities of people experiencing homelessness. The images of people presented by Towers (1974) were informed by her experiences as a female worker working with males living in homeless dormitory accommodation in Sydney. Similar to what Linsell and Jordan had written ten years earlier, Towers portrayals focused on “emotional immaturity” (1974, p. 23), “alcoholism” (p. 24) and “dislike for responsibility” (p. 25). On the basis of these problematic attributes, people experiencing homelessness were assumed to require a woman they could relate to “in the role of substitute mother” (1974, p. 23). Unlike other Australian (de Hoog 1972; Jordan 1965; Linsell 1962), and U.S. (Bahr 1973; Bahr and Caplow 1974; Blumberg et al. 1973; Bogue 1963; Wallace 1965) research that provided detailed accounts of people’s day-to-day lives and social interactions, Towers offered no such consideration. She depicts the individual failings of ‘homeless people’ as so significant that they were unable to form social relationships that relied on reciprocity. Instead, the best they could hope for was a ‘dependent mother relationship’ with professionals.

While Towers portrayals of people without homes were not informed by the social context of their lives in the same way other studies were, she similarly portrayed her subjects with reference to what they were deemed to lack, namely a home and individual competence. Similar to this prevailing image of men, whose state of homelessness represented their distinctiveness, were images presented by Ward (1977, 1979).

Contrasting with dominant understandings, however, Ward’s representations highlighted what he believed was the positive lives of ‘hobos’. Homelessness was depicted as the conscious choice of a man (sic) who had learned to see the superficiality of the long-term approach to work (1979, p. 72). Compared to low paid and mundane work, the ‘hobo’
was portrayed as living a leisurely life in the park, consuming alcohol and talking to friends. Accordingly, in a world ruled by the clock, the ‘hobo’ could:

Ignore the tyranny of time. He may get up on this particular morning, but tomorrow he may decide to sleep all day. Ward (1979, p. 126)

Further to this lifestyle, the ‘hobo’ was depicted as a person at home in skid row, a place where he (sic) could be himself (1977, p. 260). Similar to Jordan (1965, 1994) and de Hoog (1972), Ward (1977, 1979) recognised that in Australia the ‘hobo’ had not formed a cohesive group identity. On the other hand, Ward suggested that the Australian ‘hobo’ should come together in a similar way to their North American counterparts had, to form a strong collective. This collective identity would enable them to legitimise their difference, and to develop a more clearly defined skid row – home territory. Ward romanticised the ‘homeless man’, not only noting their difference, but also arguing that they had chosen this difference, and that their existence constituted an important part of a diverse city.

It was not until the latter part of the 1970s that Australian understandings of homelessness were informed by the reality that it was a phenomenon also affecting women (Edwards et al. 1977). Although women were theoretically considered earlier (Report of the Working Party on Homeless Men and Women 1973), this study’s focus on literal homelessness meant that the predominant image of male homelessness was confirmed. Differing from the derogatory language germane to male homelessness, Edwards’ et al. (1977) accounts clearly distinguished the state of homelessness from the identities of the people who experienced it. Consistent with other Australian studies at a similar time (Darcy and Jones 1975; Geikie 1977; Kelley 1975; Nairn et al. 1972), homelessness was not portrayed as a defining characteristic, nor was it attributed to the individual woman’s failings (Edwards et al. 1977).

An understanding of homelessness among women took account of a subjective definition of homelessness. On the one hand, this allowed for recognition that homelessness also
occurred away from public view. On the other hand, homelessness, and women’s subjective experiences of it, had to be understood with reference to the lack of alternative accommodation, safety fears, and social expectations and pressures that kept women housed (Edwards et al. 1977, p. 122).

2.4 Australian research literature: ‘street kids’

The previous section illustrated how homeless identities were almost exclusively male. In this section the experiences of both males and females are recognised, but the focus is on young people experiencing homelessness. Drawing on studies conducted during the 1980s and early 1990s, here it is shown how researchers nearly always depicted ‘homeless youth’ as alienated from both their families and society at large. These portrayals emphasised anti-social behaviours, mental illness and problematic experiences. Further to this, I will show that young people were routinely constructed as literally homeless. Although some work did acknowledge youth homelessness in the context of family homelessness (McCaughey 1992), the dominant images from this body of work were unaccompanied youth on the ‘streets’ – who were portrayed as ‘street kids’ engaging in a ‘homeless subculture’.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, Wilson and Arnold (1986) contended that society perceives homeless youth as ‘social junk’. From this perception, young people without homes were depicted as unable to find a place in the world. ‘Street kids’, as they referred to them, were not accepted by society, and because of their alienation and unfulfilled desires, their day-to-day routines were characterised by drug and alcohol use, self-harm, suicide and criminal activity. On the one hand, these behaviours portrayed ‘street kids’ in unambiguously negative ways, but on the other, they were understood to have engaged in these behaviours to escape reality (Wilson and Arnold 1986, p. 104). Nevertheless, the image of ‘street kids’ as misguided and engaging in ‘deviant’ behaviours, sought to perpetuate their alienated state. Accordingly, alienation, together with engagement in ‘deviant’ activities that perpetuated
it, were presented in a manner that depicted ‘street kids’ as members of a ‘homeless subculture’ (Wilson and Arnold 1986).

Similar portrayals of ‘homeless youth’ living on the streets or in inadequate shelter characterised representations conveyed in the *Burdekin Report* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1989). The *Burdekin Report* had a national focus and made a considerable contribution to documenting the lives of young people experiencing homelessness. A structural analysis informed the overall research, whereby young people experiencing homelessness were the victims of problematic family experiences, inadequate income support and a paucity of affordable housing or appropriate homelessness responses. Young people were, however, understood to exercise individual agency, albeit in a way that gave emphasis to undermining their well being. In ways reminiscent of a large body of research that both preceded and followed it, ‘homeless youth’ were portrayed as participating in a range of deviant activities, including alcohol and substance misuse, criminal activity and violence.

The *Burdekin Report* went to great lengths to explain young people’s illegal activities in the context of their deprivation, for instance, poverty and hunger. Differing from other portrayals of young people without homes (Davis 1993; Davis and Costello 1992; Wilson and Arnold 1986), the *Burdekin Report* did not equate this involvement in illegal activities with the existence of, and engagement with, a ‘homeless subculture’.

Based on empirical work conducted in Sydney and Northern New South Wales with young people living on the streets, Davis (1993), Davis and Costello (1992) and Davis et al. (1995) illustrated how their day-to-day lives were routinely characterised by drug and alcohol use, crime, prostitution, self-harm and at times, suicide. Consistent with other research with young people at a comparable time (Pears and Noller 1995; Wilson and Arnold 1986), Davis (1993) and Davis and Costello (1992) also represented young people living on the streets as members of a ‘homeless subculture’. Indeed, it was the collective engagement in ‘deviant’ activities that constituted the ‘homeless subculture’ – a ‘subculture’ characterised by norms and rules, as well as mutual support and protection
(Davis 1993, p. 29; Davis and Costello 1992, p. 119). As members of a ‘homeless subculture’, young people experiencing homelessness were depicted as the “the new and distinct underclass” (Davis and Costello 1992, p. 119).

A number of psychological based studies also contributed to, and largely confirmed, existing images of young people who were homeless. These studies depicted ‘street kids’ as engaging in alcohol and substance misuse, together with criminal and self-harming behaviour (Hier et al. 1990; Pears and Noller 1995). The problematic lives ‘in which street kids’ were portrayed as living were seen as a continuation of the abuse and neglect they had experiencing prior to homelessness. Indeed, because of these experiences, ‘streets kids’ were presented as psychologically harmed (Hier et al. 1990; Hirst 1989; Miner 1991; Pears and Noller 1995; Schweitzer and Hier 1993).

Sykes (1993) too acknowledged the prevalence of alcohol and substance misuse among young people who were homeless. Differing from prevailing images at the time, however, Sykes’ (1993) portrayals emphasised young people as individuals beyond their homelessness. Their experiences of homelessness did not define them as individuals–‘street kids’, nor as members of a distinct collective–‘homeless subculture’. In contrast to the pervasive understandings, Sykes (1993) was attuned to the strength and courage many young people displayed in responding to situations imposed upon them. Young people experiencing homelessness were portrayed as ‘normal’, with the capacity to exercise agency and improve their lives.

The positioning of ‘street kids’ engaging in a ‘homeless subculture’ differs to what others had found with adult homelessness much earlier (de Hoog 1972; Jordan 1965). As will be shown in the following two sections, however, people experiencing homelessness have been portrayed as engaging in a ‘culture’ or even ‘community’ of homelessness by numerous researchers across Australia since the 1980s. The images of people as participants in a ‘homeless subculture’, especially when that subculture is premised on distinct norms and values (Davis 1993; Davis and Costello 1992), glosses over their
individuality on the one hand, and positions them as deviant on the other. I will return to this critique later in the chapter.

Finally, the emphasis on individual ‘deviant’ behaviours notwithstanding, the portrayals of ‘street kids’ positioned their parents and broader social and economic structures, rather than the young people themselves as responsible for their homelessness. Unlike the images of ‘bum’ and ‘drunk’, homelessness was not presented to be a result of the individual’s deficiencies. Consistent with some changing perceptions in the U.S. associated with the ‘new homeless’ (Bogard 2003; Kyle 2005; Rossi 1989b), their status as young people meant that they were largely portrayed as deserving of assistance.

2.5 Australian research literature: ‘homeless identity’ and ‘subculture’

Research by Chamberlain, MacKenzie and Johnson (Chamberlain and Johnson 2002; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003) conducted during the 1990s and early 2000s represent an influential contribution to the way people without homes are identified and understood. Underpinning these portrayals is the proposition of a ‘homeless identity’. Further to this, these studies portrayed some people who were homeless as participating in, and aligning themselves with, a ‘homeless subculture’. These constructions of who ‘homeless people’ are and the distinct ‘subculture’ that organises their daily lives were derived from the authors’ model of a ‘homeless career’. They developed this concept first for youth homelessness and later adult homelessness. As their understandings of the ‘homeless career’ evolved, representations of the people assumed to be travelling this career path also became more nuanced.

Portrayals considered in this section, while containing some similarities with previous research, for instance, a focus on youth homelessness, and a ‘homeless subculture’, are distinct from past portrayals in a number of important ways. First, Chamberlain, MacKenzie and Johnson’s ideas are informed by the theoretical construct of
homelessness as a ‘career process’. Previous representations have either offered no theoretical support for justification, or have drawn upon a range of disparate rationales or perspectives. Second, unlike previous research derived from interviews with people experiencing homelessness, the identities of ‘homeless people’ considered here were mostly based on a secondary analysis of material written about them. Next, the stated premise for the area of theorising that leads to these portrayals aims to assist people who are homeless. Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006, p. 208) suggest that the ‘homeless career’ is a device to “identify points of intervention along a continuum of time”.

The considerable influence on policy knowledge about homelessness also distinguishes these representations. Although Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s (1992) cultural definition of homelessness has been subject to critique (Chapman 2001; Coleman 2000; Horsell 2006; Robinson 2002), they have successfully employed this definition to enumerate the homeless population for three national censuses for the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996, 2001, 2006). In fact, their measurable definition of homelessness, coupled with their ability to disseminate the prevalence of homelessness to a wide audience has provided strong support for the Rudd Government’s elevation of homelessness as a problem of national significance.

Despite the far-reaching influence of these understandings of people who were homeless, there is a paucity of Australian research critiquing the ‘homeless identity’ or ‘subculture’. With the exception of Fopp’s (2009) critical analysis of metaphors such as ‘homeless careers’, the ways that people experiencing homelessness are identified have rarely been subject to detailed published analysis in Australia.

Young people were the first section of the homeless population portrayed with a ‘homeless identity’ and as members of the related ‘homeless subculture’ (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995). As noted earlier, informed by secondary analysis of case notes from homelessness services and fieldwork conducted with schools, these portrayals were informed by the proposition that homelessness was not most appropriately conceived of as static, but
rather a ‘career process’. As a means to provide context, in this section I will outline these portrayals with an examination of the ‘homeless career’.

Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1994, 1998) and MacKenzie and Chamberlain (1995) recognised the diversity of experiences that characterised youth homelessness; homelessness could, for example, be short-term, long-term and chronic. If, and as, young people moved from short, to long, and then to chronic homelessness they were said to be progressing along the ‘homeless career’. As people progressed along this ‘homeless career’, they could make biographical transitions in their identities.

Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s notion of the ‘homeless career’ and the subsequent biographical transitions to identity is fundamental to the way young people in Australia were portrayed, and these transitions included: a tentative break, permanent break, and transition to chronicity (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998, p. 71). These transitions are related to the length of time a young person is homeless, but they stressed that the most important determinant for biographical transition was people’s subjective experience of time (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994, p. 5).

Chamberlain and MacKenzie argued that if young people had not returned home soon after entering homelessness, a tentative break, the initial two, three or four weeks of homelessness would often constitute a young person having made a permanent break from their families. The notion of a permanent break is used metaphorically, to denote the major transformation in a young person’s identity (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998, p. 55). Young people who have made the permanent break are referred to as long-term homeless.

The next likely, although not inevitable, stage in the ‘career’ is the ‘transition to chronicity’. This is believed to be the third, and final biographical transition. It is this understanding of biographical identity change, the ‘transition to chronicity’, which is used to support portrayals of people as accepting homelessness as a way of life.

Young people who are chronically homeless often refer to themselves as streeties and youth workers recognise that there is a distinctive street vernacular. Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1994, p. 9)

All people who had made the ‘transition to chronicity’ were represented as people with a ‘homeless identity’. The transformation of a young person’s personal identity to that of a ‘homeless identity’ was closely associated with their engagement in a ‘homeless subculture’. As they make and sustain the break from their families, their personal identities change. Young people at this stage of the ‘homeless career’ were portrayed as “no longer thinking of themselves as belonging to the family unit” (1998, p. 71). The absence of family connection was believed to be an impetus for two things: personal identity transformation on the one hand, and subsequent engagement in the ‘homeless subculture’ on the other hand.

Itinerancy is common, and most of the time they no longer express a strong disposition to change their lifestyle. They have made the transition to chronicity and they have become deeply involved in the homeless sub-culture. Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1998, p. 57)

For Chamberlain and MacKenzie, the ‘homeless subculture’ or new skid row as they also referred to it, was more than a collective of people who all shared the experience of homelessness. In fact, they dismissed suggestions by Tait (1992) that a youth ‘subculture’ did not exist as “novel” (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994, p. 9, 1998, p. 57). Consistent with the images of ‘street kids’ from previous researchers, Chamberlain and MacKenzie unequivocally portrayed young people as members of a ‘homeless subculture’. They were not simply people who used similar social services and public places. Members of this ‘homeless subculture’ were portrayed as rejecting conventional standards (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994, p. 21).
In a more recent study, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006, p. 199) aimed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the youth ‘homeless career’ outlined in their previous work. They continued to portray ‘homeless youth’ as not belonging to their families (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006, p. 202) and accepting homelessness as a way of life (2006, p. 203). While Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006, p. 203) cite references they put forward in early work (1994, 1995, 1998) to suggest that this biographical transition is characterised by accepting petty crime, substance abuse, drug dealing and prostitution as a normal part of everyday life, the ‘more nuanced’ understanding comes from their conception of a youth ‘homeless subculture’.

Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006) aligned themselves with Snow and Anderson (1993) in offering an unconventional understanding of a youth ‘homelessness subculture’. Although no mention or retraction of comments Chamberlain and MacKenzie previously put forward about members of the ‘homeless subculture’ rejecting ‘conventional standards’ is offered, their portrayals of this subculture do differ from their earlier work. Citing Snow and Anderson (1993), Chamberlain and MacKenzie explained the ‘homeless subculture’ as:

> Neither anchored in nor embodying a distinctive set of shared values. Rather its distinctiveness resides in a pattern of behaviours, routines and orientations that are adaptive responses to the predicament of homelessness. Snow and Anderson 1993, p. 76, quoted by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006, p. 203)

In three publications (Chamberlain and Johnson 2002; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003), adults were also constructed as individuals with self-identities as ‘homeless people’. These portrayals were likewise explained by reference to a ‘career process’. The ‘homeless career’ model was adapted for the trajectory of adult homelessness. As homelessness progressed, adults would similarly make biographical changes in their identities. Differing from the youth ‘homeless career’ which was characterised by uncertainty as young people move in and out of home, the initial stage for adults when they lose their accommodation is characterised by:
A sharp break, and there is no ambiguity that they are homeless. Chamberlain and Johnson (2002, p. 29)

Unlike young people’s initial experiences, adults entered the ‘homeless career’ because of a housing crisis, domestic violence and substance misuse (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003). These differences in the early stages of the career for adults compared to young people, however, had no bearing on the biographical transitions subsequent to the initial phases. The homeless career for adults, as with young people, progressed towards the ‘transition to chronicity’. Recognising that this transition for adults was not inevitable (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006, p. 199), and that adults could exit homelessness prior to chronicity (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003, p. 29), the ‘transition to chronicity’ for adults, nonetheless, equated to representations of them as ‘homeless people’:

Homelessness should be considered as a career process, whereby people pass through various phases before they develop self-identities as homeless people. MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2003, p. 1)

As outlined for young people at the end of the ‘homeless career’, the biographical transition for adults amounts to a change in personal identity and the acceptance of homelessness as a way of life (Chamberlain and Johnson 2002, p. 29). As homelessness became chronic, the ‘transition to chronicity’ resulted, with both adults and young people similarly portrayed as having ‘self identities as homeless people’. There are two differences in these understandings of identity transformation for adults compared to young people. First, unlike young people, the development of the adult ‘homeless identity’ was not explained by reference to the void that followed family separation. Second, contrasting with the ‘homeless identity’ for young people which was explained in the context of a ‘homeless subculture’, no mention is made of the existence of a ‘homeless subculture’ for adults (Chamberlain and Johnson 2002; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003).
Consistent with the ‘street kid’ identity, or the gendered identities of ‘bums’ and ‘drunks’, although in a much more detailed and theoretical informed manner, Chamberlain, MacKenzie and Johnson have characterised sections of the homeless population as having ‘homeless identities’. In unambiguous ways, the people identified as homeless were presented as accepting ‘homelessness as a way of life’. Although the transformation is not inevitable and not solely determined on the basis of ‘clock time’, little detail or explanation as to what constitutes a ‘homeless identity’ for those who do make the ‘transition to chronicity’ was provided. On the other hand, the paucity of information that is provided to explain and contextualise the ‘homeless identity’ results in portrayals of people on the basis of what they are deemed to lack. They are ascribed with identities on the basis of being without conventional homes, and living unconventional lifestyles.

People who have developed a ‘homeless identity’ are those who were assumed to no longer possess a strong disposition to change their lifestyle (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998, p. 57). They are constructed as people who see their personal-identity in terms of their homelessness. ‘Homeless identities’ are signified by the normative acceptance of criminal and amoral activities (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006, p. 203). Young people’s ‘homeless identity’ was not only characterised by their problematic individual attributes, but also by their engagement in a ‘homeless subculture’ where these attributes are condoned and normalised. After twelve months of homelessness, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1994, p. 10) assumed that “a young person has become part of a homeless subculture”.

With reference to the depictions of young people, it can be seen that they are identified in a manner that not only elevates their state of homelessness as constituting their identities, but also in a manner that constructs them in a problematic light. This is evident in some of the early portrayals, whereby the only difference between an Australian youth subculture of homelessness and an American underclass of wandering poor is that the former is a smaller and less visible group (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998, p. 169-170).
Mirroring the distinct norms and values central to Davis and Costello (1992) and Davis’ (1993) notion of a ‘homeless subculture’, Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s (1994, p. 21) early representations of young people participating in a homeless subculture where “conventional standards are rejected” further positions them as ‘different’. While their more recent conceptualisation of a ‘homeless subculture’ does not rest on the distinctive shared values of members (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006, p. 203), assigning them to a ‘homeless subculture’, nonetheless, portrays them as distinct. As Tait (1992) suggests, ‘homeless subcultures’ transform individuals into, and position them as, discrete entities. Ascribing an individual with a ‘homeless identity’, and then assigning them into a ‘homeless subculture’, creates another scale in which ‘normal’ people can be compared (Tait 1992, p. 17).

In addition to questioning the consequences of such portrayals, questions can be asked about both the means of collection and nature of the empirical materials drawn upon to support them. It is not evident, for example, that the portrayals and identities ascribed to ‘homeless people’ were based on their perspectives. On the basis of the empirical information provided, there is no indication that any person who was homeless explained to Chamberlain, MacKenzie and Johnson that they had a ‘homeless identity’, or that they were members of a ‘homeless subculture’. Findings from the six studies were primarily derived from secondary analysis of case notes and census surveys, as well as fieldwork at schools that did not appear to involve talking to students. There is no detailed explanation or justification of how this methodology resulted in empirical material to derive an understanding of personal identity.

Despite the consequences and justification for the identity constructions, these portrayals have been widely accepted in different and important contexts. For instance, Australian researchers (Saade and Winkelman 2002), a State Government policy document (Social Inclusion Board 2003) and a number of influential SAAP reports (SAAP 1999; Bisset et al. 1999; Wyatt et al. 2004) have adopted these ideas. Similarly, Pinkney and Ewing (2006, p. 69) point out that the Commonwealth Government’s 1999 ‘Reconnect’ program
was specifically developed to intervene with young people before they had made the biographical transitions outlined by Chamberlain and MacKenzie. Hence, and as argued in chapter one, representations contained in academic research literature about the identities of people experiencing homelessness can have important policy and practice implications that bear on their lives.

2.6 Australian research literature: homelessness and identity

Three recent contributions (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a; Johnson et al. 2008; Zufferey and Kerr 2004) and one older piece of research (Coleman 2000) add considerable depth and context to representations of the lives and people who have been homeless in Australia. In the discussion that follows, I consider these four studies together. I will argue that the portrayals discussed here share important similarities that can be seen as offering more detailed understandings than found in previous studies.

Zufferey and Kerr (2004) argued that the prevailing policy and academic discourse homogenises ‘homeless people’, thereby failing to understand them on an individual level. Based on qualitative interviews with people who were homeless, this study highlighted that they, just like anyone else, have diverse and shifting identities influenced by many factors such as their gender, age and sexuality (2004, p. 351). Rather than homelessness, people’s identities were understood with reference to experiences or traits they saw as more salient to their lives.

Notwithstanding this recognition of diverse and shifting identities, the experiences and stigma of homelessness was presented as detrimental to an individual’s personal identity. As such, people in the Zufferey and Kerr study were seen as holding negative self-views, with homelessness constituting an undesirable experience. Without romanticising individual capacities, Zufferey and Kerr also recognised how people shaped and asserted identities and aspects of themselves to achieve specific ends. Indeed, people were even portrayed as embracing a ‘homeless identity’. In taking on a social activist role, for example, one of their research participants overtly emphasised their homelessness:
We are homeless Australian citizens ... here we are, we’re not hiding, we’re homeless, the system needs to be reviewed and looked at. Research participant seven: Zufferey and Kerr (2004, p. 347)

Zufferey and Kerr did not position the state of homelessness as constituting people’s personal identities, but they did show how individuals could present homelessness as an element of the self. People were understood as having the capacity to exercise agency and some degree of control over their situation. Despite the deprivation of being without a home, they illustrated people’s capacity to purposively use their experience of homelessness to achieve specific ends.

Like Zufferey and Kerr (2004), Johnson and Chamberlain’s (2008a) comments about the identities of people without homes were based on qualitative interviews with them. In fact, this research represents a significant progression in the representation and understanding of people who are homeless outlined in their previous research (Chamberlain and Johnson 2002; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003). Rather than exploring homelessness as a ‘career process’, they examined homelessness as a social adaptation process. The authors articulated an understanding of homelessness and people’s experiences of homelessness, but they did not conflate the two.

People were represented as not endorsing homelessness as a preferred lifestyle (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a, p. 576). Similarly, on the whole, individuals made conscious and continued attempts to exit homelessness and alter their situation (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a, p. 575). Distancing themselves even further away from their own and other previous representations, they commented:

What may appear as acceptance of a way of life is often a form of pragmatic acceptance that can change when alternatives are available. Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a, p. 566)
The social adaptation account overstates the extent to which the long-term homeless normatively accept homelessness as a way of life. Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a, p. 575)

Johnson and Chamberlain’s accounts were sensitive to the possibility that homelessness did not define the individual. Their experiences as homeless, however, had considerable implications for how they were shown to live. Day-to-day lives were geared towards the ‘here and now’ (2008a, p. 574). People focused on the ‘here and now’ so that their immediate needs, such as shelter and food, could be met. But in addition to this, illicit substance acquisition and use was also presented as explaining the ‘here and now’ focus.

Unlike other Australian research which has merely noted the prevalence of substance and alcohol use among homeless populations (Davis 1993; Davis and Costello 1992; Pears and Noller 1995; Wilson and Arnold 1986), here Johnson and Chamberlain illustrate how the use of illicit substances played an important function in bringing order to daily routines. Like previous research, however, the use of illicit substances among people who were homeless, in part at least, constituted a ‘homeless subculture’:

One important practice is substance use which is often a form of initiation into the homeless subculture. Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a, p. 570)

While not linking a ‘homeless subculture’ to the ‘homeless identity’ as they had previously, people who used illicit substances were depicted as members of the ‘homeless subculture’. Furthermore, the social interactions and even the boarding house environment associated with substance use also equated to a ‘homeless subculture’ (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a, p. 566). In contrast to previous ideas where young people were the only section of the homeless population engaging with the ‘homeless subculture’, Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a) now represented adults as active subculture participants.

An important contribution outlining the lives and experiences of people who were homeless is found in Johnson et al. (2008). Drawing on a significant number of
qualitative interviews with people experiencing homelessness, this research focused on how people enter, experience and exit homelessness. They suggested that people’s ‘pathways’ into homelessness are important for understanding their experiences of homelessness, and how and when they are likely to exit it. The five pathways into homelessness are: domestic violence, housing crisis, mental illness, substance use and a youth pathway.

Some sections of the homeless population are still portrayed as having a ‘homeless identity’ – these people are almost exclusively drawn from the substance use and youth pathways. Primarily, Johnson et al. (2008, p. 136) contend that as single people have repeat encounters with homelessness, they are likely to accept a personal identity as a ‘homeless person’. The idea of a ‘homeless identity’ is still important, but considerable detail is offered to explain exactly what constitutes this type of identity. They recognise, for example, that homelessness does not represent a categorical identity (2008, p. 199). Instead, homelessness is a contextual and relational identity. They go on to suggest that:

Even after years of homelessness, normatively acceptable social identities still provided a clear point of reference for many. Johnson et al. (2008, p. 187)

The idea of a ‘homeless identity’ is still presented, but homelessness is not assumed to amount to who they are, nor does it represent a person’s rejection of societal norms. Their specific understandings and portrayals of people mean that the ‘homeless identity’ is not only relational, but also only relevant for a small section of the homeless population, and in specific contexts. For instance, people who feel marginalised from ‘mainstream’ society, especially young people who are also alienated from family, are believed to invert the stigma of homelessness and appropriate the negative identity to create a sense of belonging (Johnson et al. 2008, p. 208). On the other hand, sections of the homeless population, including some young people, people who enter homelessness after domestic violence and housing crisis, and some people with mental illness, also actively distance themselves from the stigma of homelessness, and a ‘homeless identity’.
The depictions are sensitive to the diversity that can constitute both the homeless population and people’s varied experiences during their homelessness. Further, portrayals of people who are homeless acknowledge that they play an active role in shaping their circumstances (Johnson et al. 2008, p. 120). This contribution takes account of how duration of homelessness, life experiences prior to homelessness, and specific context are all important in understanding people who are homeless.

Inseparable to Johnson’s et al. (2008) portrayals are the detailed accounts of day-to-day lives. A dominant theme underpinning this book is the belief that a ‘homeless subculture’ plays an important role in shaping some of the daily behaviours of ‘homeless peoples’, as well as the identities they adopt. Consistent with previous studies, the ‘homeless subculture’ is closely related to and indeed partially explains, the ‘homeless identity’. Those who appropriate the ‘homeless identity’ are also active participants of the ‘homeless subculture’. They explain the subculture with reference to interactions among people who are homeless, a focus on the ‘here and now’, sharing resources, substance use and use of homeless services (Johnson et al. 2008, p. 237).

These characteristics of the ‘homeless subculture’ both denote the ‘homeless identity’ and explain how people organise their day-to-day lives. In some detail, Johnson et al. (2008) explain how people engaging in the ‘homeless subculture’ live. As with the ‘homeless identity’, however, the ‘homeless subculture’ is only relevant for a small section of the homeless population, namely those who adopt the ‘homeless identity’. As appropriation of the ‘homeless identity’ requires the social interactions and behaviours that constitute the ‘homeless subculture’, people who entered homelessness after domestic violence and housing crisis, as well as people with mental illness, the same people who distance themselves from others who are homeless, are not accepted by, nor do they associate with, the ‘homeless subculture’.

In one of the few (de Hoog 1972) ethnographic studies of homelessness in Australia, Coleman (2000) explored the significance and meaning people experiencing homelessness attach to the public spaces in which they live. By documenting this
meaning on the one hand, and the practical ways people use public spaces on the other, Coleman provided unique insights. Coleman was interested in highlighting the ‘normality’ of people who spend their lives living and interacting in public spaces. She illustrated how people thought to be without homes use public spaces in ways that “correspond closely with that of other local groups” (Coleman 2000, p. 163).

Coleman’s research strongly argued that, contrary to popular belief, people who live in public spaces are not rootless, disconnected from society or deviant. Underpinning these understandings of normality, were Coleman’s assertions of the rights ‘homeless peoples’ have to use public space. Coleman’s (2000) research was located in a social and political context where she saw people being marginalised from public spaces in which they lived. She wanted to portray people who were homeless as ‘normal’, premised on the assumption that their ‘normality’ would enshrine their rights to public space.

Her research participants were shown to use public spaces for every aspect of their day-to-day lives. Public spaces were assumed important to people because of a lack of alternatives. Like Johnson et al. (2008) and Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a), Coleman (2000) also showed how it was public spaces where people engaged in illegal activities, such as substance and alcohol use. But perhaps in tension with her assertions of the ‘normalness’ of these people, Coleman also shows how public spaces have importance beyond the practical function people carry out in them. She portrays ‘homeless people’ as safe and comfortable living in public. Indeed, in a similar way to Ward’s (1977, 1979) research also conducted in Brisbane some thirty years prior, Coleman portrays ‘homeless people’ as being at ‘home’ in the public spaces they reside (Coleman 2000, p. 145).

Although it is in stark contrast to the stated intentions of the research, some of these images of people at home living in inner suburban Brisbane’s public spaces do give the impression they are in fact a different type of people.

Notwithstanding this, these four research publications add depth to the Australian portrayals and understandings of people who are homeless. Homelessness is not presented as the sole and definitive determiner identity. In fact, Johnson and Chamberlain
recognised the misunderstandings contained in previous research where people have been defined with reference to their homelessness:

When people start to sleep rough it is commonly assumed they have started to accept homelessness as a way of life… The social adaptation account overstates the extent to which the long-term homeless normatively accept homelessness as a way of life. Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a, p. 574-5)

The four contributions considered here therefore can be seen as representing a progression in the way people experiencing homelessness are portrayed. On the one hand, homelessness was not seen as an all encompassing and defining trait. On the other hand, individuals were depicted with the capacity to exercise agency to assert different aspects of themselves (Johnson et al. 2008; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). In particular, the recognition by Johnson et al. (2008) that people can embrace a ‘homeless identity’ as a means of inverting stigma and finding belonging illustrates a nuanced understanding of a people who are homeless rarely considered in earlier Australian research.

In some important respects, the suggestion that the state of homelessness can and does lead to changes in identity (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a; Johnson et al. 2008; Zufferey and Kerr 2004) finds relevance with some influential ideas from the U.S. (Snow and Anderson 1993; Wolch and Dear 1993). Like their North American counterparts, these Australian studies set out from a premise that people without homes are normal, but through the process of being homeless, especially social interactions and alcohol and substance use, people develop and take on new identities.

The methodologies underpinning these studies, I argue, explain the more detailed and illuminating representations of the lives of people theorised about. These qualitative studies not only enabled research participants to provide their perspectives and assert their identities, but also to talk about how they lived on a day-to-day basis.
Consistent with a long line of previous Australian studies (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994, 1998; Davis 1993; Davis and Costello 1992; Pears and Noller 1995; Wilson and Arnold 1986), however, some sections of the homeless population continue to be represented as participants in a ‘homeless subculture’ (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a; Johnson et al. 2008). Building on previous understandings of a ‘homeless subculture’, important insights are detailed into the day-to-day lives of people who are homeless, together with considerable information provided to explain exactly what characterises a ‘homeless subculture’ (Johnson et al. 2008, p. 236-9).

The ‘homeless subculture’, however, is a theoretical devise drawn from other research in international contexts (Snow and Anderson 1993) and used to make sense of a range of social interactions and behaviours, especially illicit substance and alcohol use. The studies reviewed provide little indication that the people ascribed to this ‘subculture’ would either acknowledge the existence of one, or assert their membership to it. Coleman (2000) appears to use the romanticised term of ‘homeless community’ instead of ‘homeless subculture; whereas Robinson (2002) employs the phases ‘networks of connections’ in another Australian study. Similar to my suggestion in the previous section, therefore, constructing people as participants in a ‘homeless subculture’ can portray them in both a distinctive and problematic light (see Tait 1992).

2.7 Conclusion

Drawing on Australian research literature across five decades, this chapter has demonstrated how people experiencing homelessness have been portrayed. Both implicitly and explicitly, identity has been a dominant theme running through these portrayals. First and perhaps most strikingly, some early depictions drew upon derogatory language to define individuals without homes. They were not simply ascribed with identities as ‘bums’, ‘drunks’ and ‘emotionally immature’ (Jordan 1965; Linsell 1962; Towers 1974), but these identities were also presented as explanations for their homelessness.
These people were represented as an embodiment of the negative identities they were ascribed with. The overtly derogatory language used during the 1960s and 1970s is no longer socially acceptable, and thus more contemporary depictions closely reflect changes in the way other groups are represented (Lawler 2008, p. 140). Today, overtly derogatory language to describe minority groups and labels considered offensive are rarely found in academic or research publications.

A diverse body of literature concerned with ‘street kids’ was presented to show how young people were ascribed with ‘homeless identities’. Consistent with preceding understandings, young people were portrayed as disconnected from both their families and ‘mainstream’ society. Accordingly, they were living in ways unconstrained from expectations about norms and behaviours. It was not simply illicit substance and alcohol use that defined this section of the homeless population, but also criminal behaviour, violence and self-harming and psychological dysfunction. Stemming from these day-to-day lives removed from family and broader society at large, ‘street kids’ were identified as inhabiting a ‘homeless subculture’.

The existence of this ‘homeless subculture’ distinguished the ‘street kids’ from the gendered identities of ‘homeless men’ prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. This ‘homeless subculture’ so fundamental to portrayals of ‘street kids’, however, was not the only or perhaps even the primary distinction between the image of this group and the one that preceded it. Rather, even though the ‘deviant’ activities were presented as almost synonymous with their homelessness, unlike the older men from decades before, the young people were not portrayed as deficient or incapable of exiting homelessness. ‘Street kids’ were identified as different on the basis of their homelessness and disconnection from ‘mainstream’ society, but this difference was generally presented as resulting from broader structural conditions they had limited control over.

I suggested that some contemporary depictions (Chamberlain and Johnson 2002; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995; MacKenzie and Chamberlain...
2003) added more depth and theoretically informed representations that nonetheless, identified people in a manner similar to the ‘street kids’. These studies were concerned with the way the state of homelessness led to changes in day-to-day lives, and resultant transformations of the self. On the one hand, the transformation of personal identity was explained with reference to ongoing experience of homelessness, or a ‘homeless career’. Concurrently, the separation from family that accompanied homelessness for young people left a void or an absence of ‘normalising’ influences that were filled by others who were homeless. Indeed, it was the social interactions and day-to-day lives as homeless that not only increased the development of a ‘homeless identity’, but also embedded this identity within a ‘homeless subculture’.

While representations of individuals participating in a ‘homeless subculture’ have changed, whereby the ‘subculture’ was no longer presented as constituting distinct and collective values (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006), questions can be raised about both the premise and the consequences of depicting people who are homeless in this manner. Drawing on Tait (1992), and other researchers (Cresswell 2001; Hopper 1991; Kyle 2005; May 2000) in the homeless field in different contexts, I have suggested that by positioning people as inhabiting a ‘homeless subculture’, their individuality is overlooked on the one hand, and their status as problematic and distinct collective is reified on the other. As members of a ‘homeless subculture’, they are identified as a collective ‘other than the housed’. This is pertinent to latter conceptualisations of a ‘homeless subculture’ characterised by illicit substance use (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a; Johnson et al. 2008).

Differing from these views of identities and subcultures premised on homelessness, Zufferey and Kerr (2004), and especially Johnson et al. (2008) also portrayed the identities of people who were homeless in different, and I would argue, more positive lights. Giving emphasis to people’s individual agency, and recognising that people who are homeless have a range of identities beyond their homelessness, these studies showed how people consciously appropriate a ‘homeless identity’.
Changing portrayals of people who were homeless can be explained by both the changes in the demographics of who is thought to constitute the homeless population, and also changing social expectations and norms of the time. Further to this, the methodologies drawn upon to inform the various pieces of research also have played a role in the subsequent understandings and representations documented. For instance, a detailed knowledge of social interactions outlined by Jordan (1965, 1994), de Hoog (1972), and understandings of identity considered by Zufferey and Kerr (2004), Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a) and Johnson et al. (2008) were all informed by close engagement with the people they represented. In comparison, notions of a ‘homeless identity’ that glossed over individuality were primarily based on an analysis of reports and statistics written about the people theorised (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995). Methodology that enables a close engagement with people is an important means to obtaining empirical materials necessary to understand their identities.

At the beginning of this chapter I offered a summarised overview of some of the dominant ways people without homes have been represented in research from the U.S. The purpose of this was to locate the Australian research within a broader context. Notwithstanding the social, cultural and economic differences between the two countries, and thus the many different forms homelessness has assumed in the United States (Kusmer 2002), portrayals from the two contexts share more similarities than differences. In terms of the latter, while people who are homeless have hardly been looked upon as quintessentially positive in Australia, the literature reviewed here shows how their counterparts in the U.S., especially during the 1960s and 1970s, were far more likely to be seen as ‘feckless’, ‘lazy’ and responsible for their homelessness (Kyle 2005).

In the U.S., there has been a long tradition of portraying people who are homeless as disaffiliated from ‘mainstream’ society, and to a lesser extent, reaffiliated within a ‘homeless subculture’ (Bahr and Caplow 1974; Caplow et al. 1968; Wallace 1965). In Australia the terms disaffiliated and reaffiliated have not taken hold, but as we have seen
common depictions, nonetheless, have continued to position people who are homeless as outside of mainstream society, and inhibiting a subculture of homelessness.

Finally, further important similarities can be seen in the way the state of homelessness was presented as transforming identities. Indeed, some of Chamberlain, MacKenzie and Johnson’s collaborative research drew heavily on studies from the U.S. (for instance, Snow and Anderson 1993) to explain an Australian homeless subculture, and the transformation of personal identity that results from extended periods of homelessness.

It is this proposition of identity, either a collective of ‘homeless people’, or as ‘homeless individuals’ that informs the next chapter. Chapter three outlines a theoretical framework that enables the identities of people who participated in this study to be explored and understood. This is located within a prevailing theme in the literature whereby the subjective perspectives of people experiencing homelessness do not adequately inform the identities they are ascribed with. Thus, I have argued that the limited consideration given to their voice in constructions about who they are is a gap in the research literature. Accordingly, by using ethnographic methods to explore people’s subjective experiences of the self, this study draws on an underutilised but necessary approach to make a contribution towards filling this gap.
Chapter 3 Personal identities, a theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Maxwell (2005) suggests that a theoretical framework should explain the concepts, assumptions and theories that support and inform research – a theoretical framework details a plan of what will be studied (Maxwell 2005, p. 33). Through the lens of the concept of identity, I plan to explore and understand the day-to-day lives and personal identities of a group of people experiencing homelessness. This theoretical framework is located both within the context of the Australian research literature considered in the previous chapter, and discussions of social theory pertaining to identity.

As a concept, identity is often under theorised (Bendle 2002) and used disparately in the social sciences (du Gay et al. 2000). Nonetheless, it can be used in a manner that is relevant to my research aims. In chapter one I drew on Fraser’s (1997, 2003) notion of cultural and economic injustices to suggest that misrecognition in identities can lead to or exacerbate inappropriate and problematic policy responses. Conversely, identity also provides a means of redressing misrecognitions by offering accounts of how people see and define themselves. Identity allows for a consideration and illumination of many diverse aspects of people’s lives. Taking heed of C. W. Mills’ (2000) warning that sociological concepts can become abstract and remote from the content of the lives they are called upon to explain, I have drawn upon identity as a mechanism to understand people, from their perspectives. With the benefit of identity, for instance, I aim to analyse the ways in which people live on a day-to-day basis; their social interactions; the ways in which they see and articulate who they are, and finally, the ways they are portrayed by others.

In a way similar to Ferguson’s (2009, p. 40) positioning of identity, I see personal identity as bringing “coherence to everyday life”. Personal identity is therefore central to my theoretical framework. In order to explain my conceptualisation of personal identity,
however, the following discussion details my use of the related concepts of agency and power.

This chapter comprises four sections. The first three sections outline the parameters of the theoretical framework by offering an examination of theories of identity relevant to the purposes of this study. This discussion progressively moves towards the conception of identity that shapes my research focus. The framework is integrated and developed in the fourth section, whereby I locate the study within theoretical perspectives that see agency as important to personal identity. Similarly, the perspectives adopted in this study also take account of agency within a broader social context: a context where interpersonal relationships, social interactions and the way people are seen and represented are all important to understanding personal identity.

3.2 Identities: static, ‘true’ and subjectively experienced

The idea of an identity or self has its theoretical roots in the writings of Descartes and Locke from the beginning of the Enlightenment. This is a period when notions of identity first emerged (Taylor 1989). For Descartes and Locke, the self was created through the accumulation of experience and knowledge in the mind. Benwell and Stokoe (2006) have shown how a range of early modernist conceptualisations saw identity as a project of the self. Identity was thought to represent an individual’s absolute and essential sameness. Modernists conceived of identity as a unified and internal phenomenon (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 18), and as such, an individual could only have one identity (Ferguson 2009, p. 90). Early modernist accounts offer little consideration to externalities, or even personal identity within a broader social or interpersonal level.

Theories of identity have evolved beyond the early modernist understandings. The modernist identity presented as essential and unified, however, is strikingly similar to contemporary notions presented in self-help books; for example, where individuals need to free themselves in order to realise their true selves (Lawler 2008, p. 67).
Further to this, modernist notions of identity are evident in contemporary academic understandings, where personal identity is not only taken to be something individuals feel, but also something unique, that distinguishes them from all others (Goffman 1963, p. 57). As Ferguson (2009, p. 26) observes, fundamental to this personal identity is a consciousness of difference from others. Within the scholarly literature, personal identity is presented as encompassing and expressing an individual’s experiences, worldviews, aspirations, values, and things of fundamental importance to them (Brekhus 2003; Layder 2004; Oyserman 2004).

This understanding of a personal identity is something subjectively experienced; it is therefore meaningless to impose a personal identity upon another. An individual’s personal identity reflects their perspectives of, and meaning in, the world (Eckert 2000, p. 41). Thus it is often experienced in an unconscious way, and as Frosh and Baraitser (2009, p. 158) note, people often feel that their personal identities are not only fundamental to who they are, but also predetermined.

Slightly differing to this understanding of personal identity is social identity (Tajfel 1978, 1981, 1982). Social identity is still concerned with whom individuals see themselves as, but the focus is on the self as part of a larger group. A social identity is the collective self. Turner and Reynolds (2004, p. 261) theorise social identity in terms of the ways individuals self-define themselves as members of a ‘we’. While social identity leads to a depersonalisation of the self (Hogg and McGarty 1990), like personal identity, the concept of social identity means that it is subjectively experienced as real and meaningful (Hogg and Abrams 1988, p. 7). There is considerable overlap and similarity between personal identity and social identity, and they are usefully thought about as constituting different levels of the self (Stets and Burke 2000). As the previous chapter illustrated, while the authors did not specify, the identities drawn upon to explain people who were homeless included both social identities—members of a homeless group or subculture, and personal identities—seeing one’s self as a homeless individual.
Early modernist understandings that perceived identity as constituting a ‘true’ inner-self, together with related recent conceptualisations that have thought about personal identity as representing someone’s individuality and place in the world, are useful. These contributions emphasise the importance of personal subjectivity – they enable identities to be articulated and understood from an individual’s perspective. Thus, the idea of a personal identity resonates with my theoretical lens, as individual agency is given primacy. The relevance and specifics of agency to my study will be further discussed throughout this chapter. For now, however, the discussion moves towards an examination of a number of critiques and developments on this idea of a personal identity. The contributions from these critical developments will then be used to inform my theoretical framework.

3.3 Identities: plural, fluid and discursively constructed

An extensive body of academic research has conceptualised identity differently to modernist accounts of an essential self. On the one hand, these different notions of identity have built on previous work, to show that people can and do have multiple and fluid identities. These broad contributions are in tension with the notion of identity representing a unified and one ‘true’ inner-self, but are still consistent with the idea of identity representing something subjectively experienced. On the other hand, and developed in direct response to modernist or modernist influenced notions of identity, some postmodernist and poststructuralists have sought to totally undermine identity as something that people experience. These broader and more critical understandings, first the idea of identities as plural, and second, identities as discursively created outside of the individual, are discussed below. These ideas constitute an important component of the way identity is conceptualised in this study.

Postmodernists and those influenced by this broad paradigm have developed the concept of identity to take account of plurality, flexibility and fluidity. Lawler (2008, p. 3) shows how individuals simultaneously hold, or identify with, varying identities. An individual may simultaneously identify as male, heterosexual and Australian, for example. Plurality
of identity in this respect also finds relevance with the notion of ‘diaspora’ (Hall 1995): the moving between and identifying with multiple and hybrid cultural identities. In a slightly different way, the plurality of personal identities is also understood with reference to the enactment or performance of multiple identities on a daily basis. Lemke illustrates this understanding of multiple identities:

We act differently with children and with peers, in formal situations and informal ones, in our professional settings and in our intimate ones... We are always ourselves, but who we are, who we portray ourselves as being, who we are constructed as being changes with interactants and settings. Lemke (2008, p. 18-9)

Differing from the one essential ‘true’ identity, the many different aspects of the self, or differing presentations in differing contexts, are illustrative of multiple identities. For these more contemporary thinkers (Lawler 2008; Lemke 2008), as well as social constructionists (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), these multiple identities are all considered to be valid representations of the self. Individuals do not have one true identity, but rather many identities. This deconstruction of a unified and essential concept of identity is strongly influenced by, and often credited to, writers from postmodernist and poststructuralist traditions. While the influence of these two schools of thought is considerable, researchers outside of these paradigms have also presented similar conceptions of identity.

Social psychologists have long shown this with reference to identity (Stryker 1968) and social identity theories (Tajfel 1978; Turner et al. 1987). Stets and Burke (2000), for example, describe how people activate and emphasise particular aspects of their identities on the basis of the social requirements of the situation – “the activation of an identity in a situation allows individuals to accomplish their personal and/or social goals” (Stets and Burke 2000, p. 230). Other social psychologists have done similar. Antaki et al. (1996) drew on empirical material to illustrate how individuals invoked not only numerous social identities, but also how the one identity may take many forms (1996, p. 489).
The recognition that identities are multiple and changing, and that individuals have the capacity to actively emphasise them, differs from the idea of one ‘true’ identity. This recognition nonetheless, is largely consistent with the idea that identities are something people actively experience as ‘real’. In contrast with these understandings, however, are other contributions from some postmodernist and poststructuralists.

Extending the argument that identities are fragmented, decentred and dislocated (Laclau 1990), some postmodernist and poststructuralists have discounted any notion of a ‘real’ identity altogether. They take it that there can be no such thing as a ‘real’ identity that people feel. Elliott (2001, p. 136-7) cites Lacan as an example, who contends that the contemporary self is so fragmented, multiple and dispersed that the symbolic consistency and narrative texture of experience disintegrates – the constructed identity is superficial, fleeting and empty. Writers such as Derrida (1976) and Baudrillard (1990) have argued similarly, suggesting that the self is passive; thereby rendering it obsolete and subjectified through language. These postmodernist and poststructuralist positions undermine the concept of human agency, as the self is presented as merely produced by a set of identifications in discourse.

The idea that there is no individual identity outside of discourse is a theme in some of Foucault’s earlier work (1970, 1972, 1977). He set out to critique the assumption of a unified subject with an autonomous inner life. For Foucault, there is and can be no true identity, or subject as he referred to it. Rather, Foucault (1972) regarded identities as the product of dominant discourses that are tied to social arrangements and practices – meaning is located in representations and language. Further, Foucault (1983, p. 212) showed how through the processes of ‘self-subjectification’, people can come to see themselves in ways consistent with how they are seen.

The importance of the diverse contributions to identity considered in this section is wide ranging for this thesis. Instead of a ‘true’, essential and static self, postmodernists and social psychologists alike have all shown how identities are plural. People identify with many identities, and the concept of identity is still useful to signify and understand
individual subjective experiences of the self. Likewise, rather than one, true static identity, identities change throughout the lifecycle. In the fourth section, I will demonstrate how the lens through which I approach this study is strongly influenced by these understandings of identity. Hall’s notion of identity underpins my approach, and provides an early indication of the way identity is used in this study. He argues that identities are not:

Essential, but strategic and positional. The concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end throughout vicissitudes of history without change. Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. Hall (2000, p. 17)

The centrality given to identity within a broader context is a strength of the diverse ideas considered in this section. Locating identity within a broader context is nothing new, and has been thought about in numerous ways (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Mead 1934; Taylor 1989) since Hegel’s The Phenomenology of Spirit [1807] (1977). Towards the end of this chapter, I will consider how the plurality, fluidity and flexibility of identity may be shaped by an individual’s social, interpersonal and political context. Further to this, some postmodernists and poststructuralists have extended this understanding of a social context, to consider how social structures and discourses are implicated in identities. Foucault is instructive here. He highlighted how identities can become a colonising force, shaping and directing the individual (Foucault 2002). Power assumes a central role to this view of identity. Power is important for Foucault’s ideas on identity because he believed that power permeated all aspect of society – not something simply possessed by a dominant agent. Rather, power was distributed through complex social networks (Foucault 1981). For Foucault, it was “this form of power that makes individuals subjects” (2002, p. 331).

Insights recognising the way identities can be imposed, which in turn have subsequent negative effects for those identified are important to my theoretical lens. Many of these postmodernist (Baudrillard 1990) and poststructuralist (Derrida 1976; Foucault 1972)
contributions, however, do not adequately consider agency – a disproportionate focus is directed towards identity constructions occurring within a broader context. As such, some of these thinkers have not fully considered how people identified in a certain manner can reject those discursively constructed identities. In this respect, some postmodernist and poststructuralist views of the subject are less relevant to my theoretical lens as too much emphasis is given to the self passively emerging through a complex process of subjectification, and thus having no existence or continuity in identity (Hall 2000). The self is presented as powerless. On the basis of Elliott’s reading of Foucault, he argues that Foucault’s focus denies individual agency and knowledgeability, and therefore pessimistically presents individuals as ‘passive bodies’ (Elliot 2001, p. 84). Others, however, cite Foucault’s later work to suggest that he does recognise that the subject can express agency and is therefore more than just discourse (Foucault 1984, cited in Danaher et al. 2000, p. 152).

Nonetheless, the postmodernist and poststructuralist theories that construct the subject as passive, empty, abstracted and thus lacking essence (Gubrium and Holstein 1995) are incommensurate with an active view of the subject. In the next section, I turn to various other conceptualisations, whereby the self is understood to be an active agent. I consider theories of identity that provide a more optimistic view of agency, which also recognise the non-essential nature of agency. While some postmodernists and social psychologists cited above do note how people actively and purposively embrace identities, they have not outlined coherent theoretical explanations to the barriers to identity enactment, or the opportunities to resist structurally determined identities.

The next section builds on these gaps, exploring the way people are subject to being identified – having identities imposed upon them. This discussion of imposed identities, however, is considered in the light of contributions that show how the discursively created and imposed subjective positions can be resisted. In this respect, the next section builds on the theoretical framework by considering contributions to identity where the subject is afforded more agency.
3.4 Identities: imposed, resisted and enacted

Central to the concept of identity presented in this discussion is the rethinking of assumptions about human agency within a social context relevant to people’s lives. The previous two sections, while clearly not exhaustive, have illustrated some of the ways that modernists and postmodernists, or theorists broadly influenced by them, have contributed to understandings of identity. There has, however, been little explanation of identities imposed, or resisted, for people thought to constitute marginalised groups. In the wake of some postmodernist and poststructuralist assumptions, what Rosenau (1992) labels a ‘pessimistic’ view of identity, this section ‘rescues the subject from discourse’, outlining an ‘affirmative’ position on identity (Rosenau 1992). My theoretical approach is premised on the assumption that research participants are engaged social actors ‘doing’ identities within various forms of social constraint rather than culture dupes ‘having’ identities (Lawler 2008, p. 145). Here, I look more closely at identities within ‘the social’, exploring how the social context—broadly conceived, is implicated in the way people can be identified on the one hand, and resist and enact identities on the other hand.

Foucault and other poststructuralists provided what are primarily philosophical accounts of how people are subjectified through discourse. Notwithstanding the critiques noted above, the main utility of these insights is the recognition that, in contrast to some modernist ideas, identities are not natural. Foucault also shapes the lens through which I understand identity by pointing out that through the process of subjectification, people can come to see themselves in ways consistent with how they are seen. Moving beyond and extending these discursive contributions, the structure of the theoretical framework is now developed with a consideration of specific examples where groups of people, by virtue of their assumed status, have identities imposed upon them. The specific examples of imposed identities considered here are taken from socially and economically disadvantaged, as well as stigmatised groups. I highlight these examples, returning to them later to ask if they offer any purchase in understanding the personal identities of the people who are homeless who participated in this study.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, people who are poor, and those who have stigmatised attributes, are susceptible to having identities imposed upon them. This reality recognises that sections of society, for example the state, not only hold physical and material resources, but also by virtue of their position they have the means and authority to identify others. This represents something of a dominant and top-down view of power: the capacity and right to exercise power over another (Hindess 1996). This dominant view of power differs from the aforementioned Foucauldian position of power rooted in the whole network of the social, and also from the Foucauldian premise that power enables resistance and thus power can be productive (Danaher et al. 2000). From this dominant view, however, the state, although not seen as a unified or static whole (Marston 2001), wields considerable power. Through mechanisms such as policy development and service delivery, the state assumes both the legitimacy and capacity to identify others. Identifying who is, and who is not, the recipient of public services is an example of identities being ascribed to sections of the population. Thus, and again perhaps unsurprisingly, the representations from groups that wield considerable power carry significant weight (Joffe 2007, p. 212).

The power dynamics involved in identity construction have been well documented. From both a dominant and a Foucauldian view of power, groups in society with the opportunity to influence how power is exercised construct negative identities for people with less capacity to exercise power. For instance, a number of theorists have argued that people who are poor face not only the prospect of having identities imposed upon them, but their position as poor means that they find it difficult to have their identities valued (Bauman 2004; Lawler 2008; Taylor 1998). The importance of the social context to identity has already been briefly noted. Further to this, the social context includes social relationships and interpersonal interactions. Identities are not unilateral; people’s identity claims require others for verification and endorsement (Jenkins 2004; Lawler 2008). Bauman extends this in the context of the present discussion:

(For) the disadvantaged in society, access to identity is barred – they are given no say in deciding their preferences. They are burdened with the identities enforced or imposed by
others; identities which they themselves resent, but are not allowed to shed. Bauman (2004, p. 38)

In addition to the opportunity to exercise power in order to identify the ‘marginalised other’, Bauman’s central thesis is that the imposed identities are not subjectively experienced by those identified. Taking these and related ideas further, other authors have highlighted some important assumptions about stigmatised and disadvantaged people that go some way to explaining why they are identified as the ‘other’. Brekhus’ (2003) contributions are informative here.

Brekhus shows how stigmatised attributes, he uses the example of homosexuality, are assumed to be central to the bearer of that attribute’s identity. Attributes that the stigmatised person has which all people share in common, for example voting preference, are assumed to be unremarkable in explaining their identities – their homosexuality is taken to constitute the totality of who they are (Brekhus 2003, p. 13-4). To take another example, examining the way in which working class people are identified in the UK, Lawler (2008) points out that they are assumed to not even know themselves. On the other hand, the true identities of working class people are mistakenly assumed to be “easily readable by the middle class” (Lawler 2008, p. 133). The working class or other marginalised groups are collectively known as the mob, whereas the middle class reserves the right to be defined as individuals (Lawler 2008, p. 146).

These two examples make clear that people can be identified as the ‘other’, but not simply because they are in a relatively powerless position. Rather, using stigmatised attributes and socio-economic position as examples, it suggests that certain groups of people are assumed to embody both difference and inferiority. Their voice and agency is overlooked (Joffe 2007, p. 198). Writing in a social policy context, Taylor (1998) shows how this process of identifying the other is predicated on the misconception that difference and identity are synonymous. He goes on:
Dominant welfare discourses seek to totalise social categories of difference into an exhaustive representation of subjectivity in order to position or fix subjects through an ascribed identity with typical essential characteristics. Taylor (1998, p. 342)

Drawing on different groups of people, within different contexts, the central argument presented here is that marginalised people do not have a voice in the identities they are ascribed. Further to this, these ideas about the imposition of identity raise important questions relating to, for example, consciousness of imposed identities, whether individuals consider being identified in negative ways important to them, or what impacts they consider these identities have upon them? The examples of Joffe (2007) and Bauman (2004) cited above rest on a dominant and deterministic view of power. The reliance on this notion of power raises other questions about the ways disadvantaged people are identified by others not considered powerful, for instance their peers. These areas of enquiry find relevance in secondary research question number two. *What do research participants perceive influences, or acts as reference points for their personal identities?*

Extending this, the discussion now turns to a consideration of how people can reject identities imposed, and more generally, enact or perform identities. This raises the issue of capacity for agency. People can actively reject or reappropriate imposed stigmatised identities. Indeed, the movement known as ‘identity politics’ was borne out of this reappropriation. An element of identity politics involves appropriating imposed and devalued identities, uniting under shared characteristics, and re-inverting stigmatised or marginalised position for political means (Lloyd 2005). Differing again, informed by the interactional nature of identity, psychologists and those from symbolic interactionism have also shown how people reject identities.

On the one hand, people actively process information about how they are seen. Gecas and Burke (1995) and Milkie (1999), for example, demonstrated how people do express agency, and by no means do they passively accept the identities they perceive others ascribe to them. Kaufman and Johnson (2004), on the other hand, showed that people
who felt their homosexuality was stigmatised by society at large, simply focused their social interactions and relationships with people who viewed their sexuality positively. In spite of imposed identities based on stigmatised views of homosexuality, these people actively created positive personal identities by focusing their social relationships (Kaufman and Johnson 2004).

Differing to these examples drawn from empirical material, Butler’s (1990, 1993, 1997) theoretical contributions also situate human agency as central to identity. Like others have done (Gecas and Burke 1995; Kaufman and Johnson 2004; Milkie 1999), Butler constructs the subject as an active agent with the capacity to transcend imposed identities. Equally important, her work also locates identity within social structures, namely cultural norms, which both constrain and enable human agency. Building on poststructuralist and psychoanalytical theories, with a focus towards gendered, sexual and racial identities, some of Butler’s ideas on subjectivity, especially the performative aspect of identity, provide a useful means to integrate, and overcome some of the weaknesses of identity considered throughout this chapter.

Underpinning Butler’s (1990) notions of identity is the starting premise that there is no core to gendered or sexual identities – men and women are not seen as having distinct and fixed selves. In a manner similar to Foucault, Butler saw these antithetical gender identities as disabling and constraining. As such, her overall contributions to identity argued for a destabilising and recognition of the contingencies of all fixed identities.

Similar to Foucault, Butler (1990) presents identities as being both constructed and constituted by language. Equally important, however, and as distinguishing her from some of Foucault’s early ideas, the self is not constituted entirely in discourse. Drawing on a complex distinction between performance and performativity (see Salih 2002, p. 63), for Butler there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender. Moreover, it is the expression, or the performative nature of identities that brings identity into affect (Lawler 2008, p. 114). This conception of identity allows Butler to locate individuals as inhabiting and employing discourse.
It is her destabilising of core identities, and the proposition that identities are not static or innate, that allows Butler to explain the role of human agency. Indeed, and importantly for this thesis, because the subject is not given, but rather always in an endless process of becoming, identity for Butler can be reassumed or repeated in different ways. Salih (2002) argues that Butler conceives of identity as a process without origin or end. Nonetheless, while Butler has located agency as important to the process and even progression of shifting identities, she does not present the individual with unlimited agency to choose any identity. The ‘acts’ or performative aspect that constitutes the identity occur within a highly regulated frame (Butler 1990, p. 33). Butler elaborates upon this, explaining that the performative nature of identity is compelled by norms external to the individual (Butler 2004, p. 345). The subject for Butler is “never fully determined by power, but neither is it fully determining” (Butler 1997, quoted in Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 32).

Individuals therefore express agency, but agency occurs within a structured frame of norms and expectations. These norms and expectations not only limit the actor’s performance, but also influence how others will interpret the performance (Butler 2004, p. 345). This structuring frame is not simply deterministic therefore. Butler’s subject marks the death of the static essential self, and the birth of the constructed one characterised by subversive possibilities and agencies (Salih 2002, p. 67). While individuals cannot entirely transcend discourse, Butler conceives that through performance, they can exercise agency to change and move beyond structurally imposed identities.

It is Butler’s positioning of an active agent, but balanced against the constraints to agency, for example, social norms that constitute agency, that is fundamental to my theoretical lens. This understanding of identity has been described as “reformulating Foucault’s unnuanced account of the subject” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 33), and as “steering a middle course between voluntarism and determinism” (Salih 2004, p. 9). In
Butler’s work, the subject has been reconfigured to accommodate both structure and agency – the subject is an active, but not autonomous agent.

Consistent with my non-essentialist notion of identity, the concept of human agency is also conceived in non-essentialist terms. While the capacity to exercise agency is central to identity, I do not see people as unlimited and unrestricted to employ agency. Like Butler’s positioning of the subject as an active agent within an interpersonal and social context, my understanding of agency finds relevance with Rose (1998). I see agency as a central force to identity, but not “as an essential property of the subject” (Rose 1998, p. 188). Rather, agency arises out and is mediated by, “the ways in which human have been-assembled-together” (Rose 1998, p. 188). Informed by this understanding, my conceptualisation of agency is thus sensitive to people’s capacity to enact and display identities. By means of human agency, identity is something individuals can both shape and express. Informed by Rose again, the non-essentialist notion of agency I draw upon positions research participants as “neither actors essentially possessed of agency, nor as passive products or puppets of cultural forces” (Rose 1998, p. 189).

In this section, I have explored identity in the context of being identified. Building on the postmodernist and poststructuralist contentions in the previous section, I showed how some groups, namely people who assume marginalised positions or who have stigmatised attributes, can have identities imposed upon them. This aspect of identity was considered in light of some empirical findings and Butler and Rose’s theoretical work that illustrated how individuals can and do express agency and move beyond and shape identities imposed upon them. The capacity individuals have to exercise agency, however, varies and is contingent on discourses and structures. In the next section I outline my position on identity where individual agency and social structures are both important. I draw on the contributions already considered to illustrate my theoretical lens.
3.5 Identities: an integrated lens

It will not do, in other words, to define the self as either modern, late modern or postmodern. For one can see a formidable mixture of such identities at work everywhere. Elliott (2001, p. 151)

Elliott’s comments resonate with the structure of the lens presented throughout this chapter. I have shown how modernist, postmodernist and poststructuralist conceptions of the self have contributed to and built on understandings of identity. Rosenau (1992) refers to these influences as the ‘sceptical postmodernist’, as detailed in section two, and the ‘affirmative postmodernist’, as exemplified in section three. It would, however, be oversimplifying things to suggest that theorising about identity has progressed in a linear way from modernism to postmodernism. Similarly, the discussion has shown much overlap among contributors from diverse philosophical perspectives, and I am thus reluctant to identify my theoretical lens as exclusively aligned with any position. Instead, the lens through which I approach this study is influenced by a number of contrasting, but not incompatible, ideas about how identity can be a meaningful concept used to understand the self as both subjectively experienced and socially located.

As would now be clear from the focus on human agency within a social context, I take it that personal identity is a social form, at both collective and individual levels (Ferguson 2009, p. 40). In this respect, I approach identity as something that individuals subjectively and actively experience. The experience of identity, however, indeed the positioning of the subject, occurs and is influenced by a number of external or social factors.

Central to my positioning of the subject as an active agent, I am drawing on identity as a mechanism to explore and understand research participants’ subjective experiences of the self. Consistent with the many ways in which personal identity has been presented, I see the concept as broad ranging, comprising: worldviews, values, aspirations (Brekhus
2003; Layder 2004; Oyserman 2004), and also constituting an experience of individual difference and uniqueness (Ferguson 2009).

My position on identity is critical of the view that identities are characterised by overt fragmentation, or that the self has no ‘real’ essence outside of discourses, and is merely the result of a process of self-subjectification. As ethnomethodologists (Francis 1994) and others (Brah 1996; Jenkins 2004) have found, I approach identity from the premise that people do in fact experience their identities as meaningful and coherent. Despite this, and unlike modernist accounts of identity, or the ‘true’ inner-self waiting to be discovered, however, I do not see identities as embedded in nature, or as representing an individual’s essence.

The conceptualisation of identity I have constructed is sensitive to the plurality of identities. This position on plural identities recognises that, on the one hand, people feel numerous identities concurrently (Lawler 2008), and that identities are not static, but change throughout the day (Lemke 2008) and life course (Hall 2000) on the other. This understanding of multiple and changing identities is consistent with my positioning of research participants as active agents: individuals can express agency to purposively and strategically enact multiple identities.

My theoretical lens recognises that an individual’s capacity to activate agency and enact identities is, of course, influenced by the available resources (Gubrium and Holstein 1995), and hence mediated by the social context they are embedded in. Following Rose’s (1998) non-essentialist conception of agency, and consistent with my positioning of the subject, agency is not something that individuals can freely use at their will, but neither are they passively controlled.

Research participants’ relationships are also understood as constituting an important part of their social context. In highlighting the importance of social and interpersonal relationships, Taylor (1989, p. 36) noted “one cannot be a self on one’s own”. His comment recognises the comparative nature of personal identity, whereby the
consciousness of others is required to make the feeling of a unique self meaningful. I also contend that interpersonal relationships and positioning are important to the way individuals reflect appraisals of others into their self-perceptions (Burke 1991; Gecas and Burke 1995). Of likewise importance to the way I understand identity, is the recognition of the role of interpersonal relationships and the reliance on the other as a source of validation, or not, for identity claims (Jenkins 2004; Lawler 2008). My theoretical lens takes into account the influence interpersonal relationships can have on identity. I approach identity as a concept with potentially wide ranging influences.

I do not, however, take broader interpersonal and social influences as a given, and I do not approach this study assuming the way people are identified in the research literature has an influence on subjective perceptions. In agreement with Elliott (2001, p. 93), I do not see identities, as put forward by some postmodernists (Baudrillard 1990; Derrida 1976), as the result of a one-way movement of power over and above the individual. My approach centres on exploring the perspectives of research participants. Premised on the actively and subjectively experienced notion of identity, for example, I am interested in how, and to what extent, research participants perceive the influence others have on their identity. In particular, I will explore the existence and meanings of any homeless groupings or subcultures. Using the notion of social identity theory (Tajfel 1978, 1981, 1982), I am interested in whether people in this study feel that they are part of, or their personal identities are tied to, a larger collective of ‘homeless people’.

Further in line with my assumptions that personal identities are a social phenomenon, my conception of identity is sufficiently broad to take account of place. I draw on a tradition of identity literature referred to as ‘place identity’. Casey exemplifies the importance of place to identity when she notes: “there is no place without self; and no self without place” (Casey 2001, p. 406). Place has been shown as important for identity at the immediate house level (Moore 2000), the neighbourhood level (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996), the country level (Jackson and Penrose 1993), as well as a combination of all three (Cuba and Hummon 1993). Specifically, I am interested in the way people in this study actively incorporate place into how they see themselves.
Rather than seeing place as something research participants identify with, for example, identifying themselves with a location, following Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996), I will explore how the absence or presence of certain places signify how they see themselves. In this respect, I am particularly interested in place as a home, and what constitutes home for people in this study. The importance of this aspect of identity is reflected in secondary research question number three: *What constitutes home for research participants, and what do their meanings of home suggest about their personal identities?*

Finally, and in addition to interpersonal relationships and place comprising a social context, my theoretical framework takes account of identity as a potentially imposed concept. I have made a number of references to theoretical and empirical contributions to illustrate how people can be identified, and even, how identities can become colonising forces, shaping and directing the identified. Indeed, as the previous chapter contests, this study is located within a context where people who are homeless have been imposed with identities determined on the basis of their homelessness. I have drawn on some insights from Butler to integrate the potential of human agency on the one hand, and the constraints from the social context, including interpersonal relationships and societal norms, on the other.

Notwithstanding the positioning of research participants as active agents, Butler’s insights about social norms and structures can be drawn upon to illustrate how people who are homeless perform identities, but their performances are limited and conditioned by the situation (Butler 2004, p. 345). Overtly sleeping in public places and accessing homeless services are two obvious examples where the context of the identity performed is contingent on external factors. As Butler (2004, p. 345) goes on to explain, the meaning of the performance is established not solely by the actor, but by and within the context it is received.

Butler’s ideas about the social context’s influence on identity, together with other specific examples about the enactment of identity, are taken up in chapter seven, whereby I draw
upon them to understand the enactment of a ‘homeless identity. Some of Butler’s related theorising about the potential for individuals to actively resist, and reshape socially constituted identities also supports my theoretical framework. Consistent with Butler’s model, I position research participants with capacity to take on identities inconsistent with how they are identified. Through day-to-day life and engagement within social structures more broadly, I not only see that people in this study can transcend imposed identities, but their very behaviour constitutes, to varying degrees, how those identities are constructed. It is the expression, or the performative nature of identities that brings identity into affect (Butler 1990).

3.6 Conclusion

Located within a context where people experiencing homelessness are ascribed with identities on the basis of their homelessness, I have draw upon social theories of identity to construct a theoretical framework to explore subjective experiences of the self. Guided by an overarching and broadly conceived notion of personal identity, I take it that identity can be a meaningful concept used to understand the self as both subjectively experienced and socially located. The framework outlined in this chapter provides a means for the personal identities of people who are homeless, as experienced by them, to inform the Australian homelessness literature.

In the first chapter I argued for the significance of understanding the personal identities of people who are homeless on the basis of two principles. First, that existing knowledge about who they are as individuals has not adequately or even primarily been considered, with assertions about their identities routinely not informed by their subjective experiences.

Next, the importance of constructing a theoretical framework to explore the personal identities of people who are homeless rests on the positive impact such an understanding can lead to. The positioning of individuals as active agents, together with the notion of identity as multiple and fluid, but still something experienced as meaningful, allows for
an understanding of some diverse aspects of people’s day-to-day lives, how they live, their aspirations and worldviews. By constructing a theoretical framework that is sensitive to how identities can be enacted and resisted, but also sensitive to a broader interpersonal and social context that presents both opportunities and challenges to these elements of identity, an understanding of people can be arrived at that has relevance to the development and implementation of policy and service provision.

In the following chapter, I outline a methodological approach, and two research methods in particular, that are consistent with this theoretical framework. Chapter four describes how I went about conducting fieldwork with people who were homeless to arrive at some understandings about their personal identities.
Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology adopted in the study. In this qualitative study, I used the ethnographic methods of participant observation and qualitative interviewing to obtain empirical materials. This qualitative approach was adopted to explore, understand and theorise the day-to-day lives and personal identities of people who were homeless. In light of these aims, the initial part of this chapter considers some important tenets underpinning qualitative and ethnographic enquiry to illustrate the suitability of the approach. The latter part of this chapter provides detailed accounts of how I conducted the fieldwork and analytical processes. By providing these detailed descriptions of how the research was conducted, the reader is better able to understand and evaluate the credibility of the themes explored in subsequent chapters.

4.2 Qualitative research

The qualitative paradigm is a broad and diverse approach to social research. Definitions of qualitative research are contested. There are numerous types of enquiry that are considered qualitative, and these types of research and the ways in which theorists define them are continually evolving (Denzin and Lincoln 2008a). Much of the diversity that constitutes the qualitative paradigm, both in understanding and application, relates to the contrasting philosophical and sociological perspectives qualitative researchers adopt. On the one hand, qualitative research is interested in questions about how truth can be known – epistemology, about the existence of social reality and social beings – ontology, and about the importance of race, gender and sexuality. On the other hand, the different ways in which these questions are approached and responded to represent some of the different ways qualitative research is practised. Within this diversity, however, there is a commonly agreed upon understanding of the focus and aim of the qualitative paradigm. Research which focuses on understanding meaning, often the lived experiences of those
researched, is usually qualitative (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 21; Rubin 2000, p. 174; Schwandt 2000, p. 200; Snape and Spencer 2003, p. 3).

Qualitative research attempts to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 5)

People’s subjective meanings, their perspectives, the things that qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of are always partial. Qualitative researchers employ a myriad of methods and approaches to make sense of people’s meaning, but it is widely accepted that the meaning sought is but one perspective (Brewer 2000). Drawing heavily upon descriptive accounts, qualitative research aims to document the world from people’s points of view (Bryman 1998, p. 8; Hammersley 1989, p. 165). As Wolcott (1994) notes, however, the reporting of descriptive accounts about people’s perspectives involves the researcher’s analysis and interpretation of their perspectives. The research process and the researcher therefore influence the perspectives and meanings obtained from research participants.

Thus qualitative research usually involves an overt interpretivist view of the world (Bryman 2004, p. 20). As Denzin and Lincoln have explained, however, qualitative research is not characterised by a single theoretical perspective or paradigm, and there are often contradictions and tensions over the form of interpretation it takes (Denzin and Lincoln 2008b, p. 8-10).

The qualitative approach adopted in this research has enabled me to explore and provide descriptive accounts of research participant’s day-to-day lives. I have sought to understand the meanings they ascribe to their lives, to understand how they see themselves, the world and their place within it. I have tried to report research participants’ lives from their perspectives, but recognise that my documentations of their perspectives are influenced by how I understood them. In order to address this issue, I introduce the concept of reflexivity. While recognising the limitations of reflexivity in qualitative and ethnographic research (Edwards 2005), I show the concept’s usefulness.
Reflexivity demands I consider how the lens through which I saw research participants and the relationships we formed played an important role in the perspectives I have reported.

4.3 Ethnographic research

Similar to qualitative research, ethnographic research is a broad school, lacking a single or uncontested definition. It is an approach to research with a long history, and over time, ‘ethnographic researchers’, like qualitative, have employed a range of research designs and methods. Originating in anthropology, ethnographic research traditionally focused on people in their lived environment, and always ‘different’, non-Western people (Gobo 2008, p. 2). The evolution of ethnographic research throughout the twentieth century, however, has seen ethnographic studies also focus on people in Western culture, although often the deviant ‘other’ (Hobbs 2001). More recently, this progression has moved further away from the study of ‘others’, to include autoethnographies where elements of the self are revealed (Jones 2005).

The shift in the ethnographer’s gaze to include people from her/his own ethnicity, culture and social group, can be explained in ethnography’s embracement among more diverse disciplines, such as sociology and human geography. As I will discuss at the conclusion of this section, ethnographic research has also been shaped by the influence of postmodernist and social constructionist sensibilities.

Despite the changing philosophical perspectives that inform ethnographic research, and the various range of disciplines that now draw upon this approach, a fundamental tenet has endured. Ethnographic research is about exploring and understanding people in their day-to-day environment. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that this type of research is about understanding how people view their situation, and the people they live and interact with. But perhaps more importantly for this study, central to ethnographic research is a desire to understand how peoples “see themselves” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 3).
Ethnographic research entails close engagement. Erving Goffman suggested that in order to gain an understanding of people, an ethnographer must artificially force himself or herself to witness how people respond to what life does to them (Goffman 2001, p. 154). Or as Coffey (1999, p. 23) suggests, it involves the enactment of social roles and relationships, which places the self at the heart of the enterprise. Wolcott (2005, p. 58) captures these sentiments by arguing that ethnographic research is characterised more by intent and personal involvement than research practices.

Notwithstanding the priority given to intent to closely engage and understand those studied, key ethnographic theorists agree on a number of methods required to achieve this end. First among these and in some respects the most definitive method (Davies 2008, p. 77) is participant observation. This method involves the detached observation of people’s behaviours, mannerisms, interactions and relationships. In fact, ethnographic researchers use participant observation to observe all facets of people’s day-to-day lives.

Observing the diversity of people’s lives and the close engagement this requires means that participant observation is a method that also involves more than detached observations. Ethnographers engaged in this method do considerable listening. Gobo (2008, p. 167) notes that the listening in on research participants’ conversations, informal conversations among the researcher and person researched, as well as the researchers interactions and participation in groups of people studied, are all important components of participant observation. The aspects of people’s lives that ethnographers aspire to understand, involves close and careful observation on the one hand, and engagement and active participation in their lives on the other (Brewer 2000). This close engagement blurs distinctions between participant observation and qualitative interviewing.

Despite this blurred distinction between the two methods, qualitative interviewing is recognised as an ethnographic method separate to participant observation. While qualitative interviewing is frequently used outside of this context, when used to further understand the meanings and perspectives of those observed, it is considered to be an
important ethnographic method (Gobo 2008, p. 191). As such, qualitative interviewing is often conducted during phases of participant observation; with interviewing predominately taking an unstructured form. This type of qualitative interviewing can also be defined as ethnographic because it normally takes place between individuals who share more than the one-off interview encounter (Davies 2008, p. 105).

4.3.1 Postmodern and reflexive influences

Ethnographic research is continuously being shaped by a reflection upon the close researcher-participant engagement, and the depth of knowledge that this close engagement is assumed to generate. This critical reflection focuses on the manner in which the ethnographer’s relationship with those researched influences what is learnt. Much of this critique is informed by a reflexive understanding of research, whereby the researcher acknowledges that they are a part of the social world they attempt to understand (Brewer 2000). Madison (2005, p. 8) highlights how as researchers, we need to not only be conscious of our subjectivity, but “how our subjectivity in relation to the other informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of them”.

Moreover, there have been considered contributions from those who recognise how the ethnographer’s individual characteristics, or worldviews, shape every facet of the study, including what they construct. It is now, for instance, widely accepted that getting close to those studied is not a means to represent social reality in a straightforward way (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 13). Ethnographic researchers informed by reflexive perspectives widely recognise that the research process involves interpreting what is observed, and then developing constructions based on their mental scheme and practical needs (Gobo 2008, p. 71).

These contributions have been pivotal in shaping the approach to fieldwork and the study more broadly. This reflexive outlook on ethnographic methods demands that I recognise the influence both my perspectives and presence in the field has had on the research. During fieldwork, analysis and writing, I have consciously attempted to reflect upon how
my background and worldviews have shaped the way I have constructed the study. I am, for example, aware that my experiences in direct service provision with people who are homeless influenced my belief that the research literature on ‘the homeless’ appeared to overlook their individual and non-homeless characteristics. Reflexivity demands that I highlight and examine how my motivation for the research influences the conclusion I draw (Brewer 2000, p. 131). My life experiences partially explain the lens through which I have made sense of the research participant’s experiences.

In addition to the salient influences of my individual perspectives, the exchanges, interactions and relationships I had with research participants played an important role in what I learnt about them. Had I not felt comfortable spending several hours a day in the places people who were homeless lived and interacted, or had I felt uncomfortable talking with them, who I understood them to be would have greatly differed. Likewise, in most cases my gender, cultural identification, sexuality, and age, closely approximated those of most research participants. My own characteristics would have influenced how research participants engaged me, and thus their willingness to participate in the research.

Similar to Snow and Anderson’s (1993) findings in their seminal ethnographic study, the comfortable relationships I had with research participants determined my physical access to places important to them, the depth of questions I could ask, and the likely responses I received. I believe this enabled me to gain a depth of understanding that would have been difficult to obtain in the absence of such relationships. The relationships I had with research participants, developed over six months of fieldwork, meant that I could understand comments they made, and responses to questions they provided, within a context of observing how they lived. In this respect, my fieldwork was situated in my subject world, but also in the worlds of – and between – participants and myself (Denzin and Lincoln 2008a, p. 29). Throughout this chapter, I provide relevant examples of how my perspectives and presence during fieldwork influenced the research process.

Recognising that reflexivity is more than just a declaration of the researcher’s perspectives (Fopp 2009), I return to the concept towards the end of this chapter, where I
critically reflect upon my role in the analytical processes.

4.4 Introduction to fieldwork

Having provided a brief review of qualitative and ethnographic research pertinent to this study, I will now explicitly outline all aspects of fieldwork, analysis and interpretation. I explain the methods used, how I used them, and why they were deemed most appropriate. Following this, two aspects of sampling are considered: whom I sampled, and where I sampled. Issues of sampling lead into a discussion of representativeness and generalisation. I then detail the analytical processes, before concluding with a discussion of three ethical tensions raised during fieldwork.

4.5 Research methods

I obtained ‘empirical materials’ for this research using two methods: participant observation and qualitative interviewing. The term ‘empirical materials’ rather than ‘data’ is used as this more appropriately reflects the qualitative and ethnographic strategy adopted in this study (see Denzin and Lincoln 2003, p, 37). I observed people who were homeless while they carried out their day-to-day lives in public places. I also engaged twenty people who were homeless, whom I had previously observed, in relatively formal qualitative interviews.

All empirical materials were collected over a continuous six-month period from November 27, 2007 until May 27, 2008. I collected empirical materials approximately four days per week – two hundred and ten hours of fieldwork in total. During a day of fieldwork, I spent from one and a half hours to six hours in the field. Empirical materials were collected at all daylight hours, on weekdays, weekends and public holidays. Due to safety concerns and practical constraints, no fieldwork took place during the night. I experienced a wide range of climatic conditions, including: extreme heat, relatively cool temperature, and monsoonal rain. Participant observations were carried out for the entire six months, whereas formalised interviews occurred intermittently for the last four
months of fieldwork.

With few exceptions, fieldwork proceeded according to plan, with no interruptions or unforeseen problems hampering my efforts. I observed for the length of time envisaged, and engaged a large number of people experiencing homelessness which I had hoped for. While my initial plan did not require the support of any services to facilitate fieldwork, throughout the fieldwork three homeless services did assist me with access to people who were homeless. The support provided by these services was an unexpected and beneficial contribution. My decision to exit the field after six months was determined solely on the basis of completing the research according to a pre-determined timeframe, rather than a loss of interest or belief that I had obtained ‘theoretical saturation’.

4.5.1 Participant observation

I observed people who I both knew to be, and assumed to be, homeless in Brisbane’s public places. To varying degrees, all of these people informed the themes discussed in the following chapters – all of these people are research participants. While my initial observation focus was broad, in that I did not know in advance what information I needed (Wolcott 1994, p. 160), I did pay particular attention to observing people’s social interactions. Interest in social interactions was borne from the literature alluding to a ‘homeless’ social identity on the basis of group participation and solidarity. Initially, observations were focused towards the social interactions between people who were homeless. As recognised within the ethnographic literature (Jorgensen 1989, p. 84), my focus became refined and more targeted as the fieldwork progressed, and thus the focus of the overall study more defined.

After approximately two months of observing, it became apparent that social interactions between people who were homeless and those engaged in service delivery to them were especially important. These types of interactions, and the overt way people presented when in receipt of services, were aspects of research participants closely observed during the latter months of fieldwork. I paid particular attention to observing how research
participants’ behaviours and interactions changed in accordance with the public places they were in. The understanding gleaned from this area of focus contributed significantly to chapter seven’s discussion of ‘enacted identities’.

Earlier in this chapter it was shown that ethnographers use the method of ‘participant observation’ to encompass more than detached observing. Gobo (2008, p. 167), for instance, conceives participant observation as a means to participate with people subject to research, where the ‘observer’ closely engages them in conversations, informal interviews, and listens in on their conversations among themselves. The ‘observations’ I conducted also included the close engagement with those people I observed. In fact, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 108) have noted, I often found it difficult to distinguish between participant observation and informal qualitative interviewing. Locating myself in places with those observed, first and foremost, meant that I could often hear their conversations among themselves.

Further to this, the process of conducting observations resulted in exchanges and conversations between them and me. In some cases, these conversations were fleeting, and did not move beyond pleasantries. In other cases, especially when my presence was recognised and trusted, the conversations I had with research participants were long, sometimes more than an hour; some conversations were deep, exploring personal aspects of their lives. In these cases, observing and listening enabled me to more closely engage with them, often resulting in conversations that constituted informal ethnographic interviewing.

4.5.2 Qualitative interviewing

A distinction can be drawn between the ‘informal’ ethnographic interviews noted above, and the ‘formal’ qualitative interviews conducted with twenty interview participants. In this discussion I distinguish between the two related types of interviews, and note how the twenty people I conducted formalised interviews with represent a subsection of ‘interview participants’ within the broader section of research participants.
I engaged twenty people in ‘formalised’ qualitative interviews. The twenty ‘formal’ interviews can be distinguished from the numerous ‘informal’ ethnographic interviews in a number of ways. In contrast to the latter interviews, the former were audio recorded, and I requested interview participants read a ‘participant information’ form (appendix one), and sign consent (appendix two) to participate. Each of the twenty interview participants were paid twenty-five dollars for their participation. In contrast to the numerous informal interviews that occurred organically and had no clear commencement or conclusion, engagement in a ‘formal’ interview was made explicit to each participant.

While the twenty qualitative interviews are referred to as ‘formal’, they were relatively unstructured. I had several areas of discussion I was interested in having interview participants respond to, but I equally attempted to have them lead the interviews in aspects about their lives and beliefs important to them. I adopted an approach to interviewing, formal and informal, consistent with Madison (2005, p. 32) and Wolcott’s (1994, p. 348) approach. I emphasised the little I knew about the people I interviewed, and how I was reliant upon them to understand. As both Madison and Wolcott found, I may have come across as ‘dense’ and ‘unsophisticated’, but like them, I believed this approach facilitated research participants’ engagement in the process and willingness to talk about themselves.

Interview partners were invited to engage in the interview at a time and place of their choosing. Six interviews were conducted in an office at the café, thirteen in public places where people lived and interacted, and one in a pub. Providing interview participants with the option as to when the interviews took place meant that on some occasions interviews occurred months after people agreed to participate.

4.6 Rationale for methods

I chose both methods to gather empirical materials as they provided an appropriate means to learn about how people lived- through observing and listening to them, and how they
saw themselves- through asking them.

4.6.1 Participant observations

Further to the usefulness of this method in observing interactions, participant observations were a means to elicit additional empirical materials, and to facilitate and inform qualitative interviewing. Participant observation enabled me to learn about how people lived on a day-to-day basis. I was able to witness daily behaviours, and as Goffman (2001) suggested, observe how research participants responded to what life did to them. For instance, I saw what research participants did in response to police intervention, or when approached by outreach workers or people offering unsolicited donations.

The process of observing people who were homeless in public places meant that I gained an understanding of them in an environment and with people they ordinarily engaged with. This type of ‘backstage’ access to people, especially marginalised people, is deemed important in understanding who they are (Scott 1985, p. 287). Conducting observations with a collective of people over a six-month period similarly followed the logic that a greater length of involvement with people will lead to a greater depth and breadth of knowledge about them (Wolcott 2005, p. 75).

Implicit in the justifications for conducting participant observations to learn about the depth and multiplicity of people’s identities is the recognition that I did more than simply observe. During these observations, I deliberately and consciously listened in on research participants’ conversations. I used this method to access what Snow and Anderson (1993, p. 22) refer to as ‘perspectives in action’, in contrast to ‘perspectives of action’. ‘Perspectives in action’ are accounts that take place, and only make sense in, a naturally occurring setting. On the other hand, ‘perspectives of action’ are constructed in response to questions. My intention was to understand both types of ‘perspectives’, but participant observation was seen as the primary means to obtain ‘perspective in action’.
The benefits of observing and listening lie not simply in what could be witnessed and heard separate to an interview context. Rather, participant observations were a means to gain a tentative understanding of people which could be further explored during subsequent formal interviewing. Consistent with a long line of previous researchers who have employed participant observation before and during qualitative interviewing (Beazley 1999; Dordick 1997; Kenedy 2006), the experiences and understandings gleaned from observations, or ‘perspectives in actions’, informed questions and areas explored in later interviews. Questions about illicit substances, for example, were developed on the basis of observing people’s day-to-day efforts to acquire and use them.

Finally, participant observation further complemented the study in terms of recruitment of interview participants. In a study with people who were homeless, Coleman (2000, p. 58) found that the time spent conducting observations enabled her easy access to potential interview participants. The months I spent immersed in public places where people who were homeless lived and interacted, not only gave me an idea of who they were, but the process of conducting observations meant that the people I approached recognised me as a familiar, if not strange, face. It was this familiarity that no doubt helped explain that out of all the people approached, only one refused to participate in a formal interview. This person, nonetheless, spoke with me informally.

### 4.6.2 Qualitative interviews

I engaged people in qualitative interviews to learn about who they were, and how they wanted to be seen. Interviewing was used in two separate ways to elicit this type of information. First and perhaps most obviously, qualitative interviewing was a means for people to directly tell me who they were. Green (2006, p. 102) suggests that this type of interviewing facilitates people providing complete and accurate responses about themselves. Drawing on an ‘interview guide’ (appendix three), I asked people to respond to questions such as: “Who are you?” “Can you tell me about your identities?” or, “If you were writing about who you are as a person, what would you write?” Chapter two illustrated how people experiencing homelessness can have identities and descriptions
about who they are imposed upon them. The type of direct questioning used in qualitative interviewing was a means to understanding research participants’ own perspectives.

Next, qualitative interviewing was employed more broadly to learn about aspects of people’s identities they were not explicitly asked to describe. I considered the topics and things of interest they chose to speak about as providing an understanding of who they were. Similar to Peel’s (2003, p. 12) approach, I wanted to engage with people and explore life experiences that were not merely beyond their homelessness, but which they perceived as positive. With only limited use of direct prompts or questions, interview participants were encouraged to articulate their self-perceptions and worldviews – to talk about life events and experiences that were important to them. This type of approach meant that they routinely chose to speak about things I did not expect. Chris, for instance, spoke about Asian politics, and the manner in which British colonisation influenced language in India. On other occasions, research participants chose to ignore topics I did expect to be the focus. A notable topic often not raised without my prompt was homelessness. Research participants tended not to mention homelessness when they were speaking about themselves. I interpreted this as supporting their responses to my questions about its unimportance to the type of people they saw themselves as. That is to say, information obtained from interviewing supported the information obtained from participant observations and informal conversations.

4.7 My role as researcher

Much has been written about the researcher-participant relationship in ethnographic research, specifically the level of engagement this relationship takes. Important among this work is the classification of the varying types of roles the ‘participant observer’ assumes. These roles include a detached observer who is merely ‘peripheral’ to those studied (Adler and Adler 1987, p. 36), an observer who interacts with those studied, but maintains a distance as to be considered ‘moderate participant’ (Spradley 1980, p. 60), and a ‘complete participant’, or ‘going native’, whereby the observer is a member of the
group she/he is observing (Gold 1958, p. 219-221).

4.7.1 Detached observer

The first month of fieldwork was characterised by my nervousness and hesitation about conducting observations. Although I had comfortably worked with people experiencing homelessness in various service provision roles previously, my initial nervousness was a result of feeling as though I was intruding upon people’s day-to-day lives and personal spaces. Similarly, in contrast to my previous experiences of closely engaging with people without homes to provide services, I felt that my role as a researcher conducting observations was less legitimate due to the little direct positive impact I saw it having upon their lives.

In this first month where feelings of nervousness and hesitation were dominant, observations were physically detached in that I would not position myself close enough to people to be able to hear what they said. They made no overt acknowledgement of my presence and thought of me as no one more than an uninterested bystander. The physically detached position meant that early observations were limited; I was unable to listen to research participants’ speech that preceded, followed or accompanied their actions (Gobo 2008, p. 167).

4.7.2 Moderate participant

Throughout the second and subsequent months, however, I became more comfortable observing. My level of comfortableness increased as relationships and an understanding of the people observed developed. They did not convey the impression that my presence was an intrusion. On the contrary, a number of research participants expressed interest in the study, and many more were just happy to break the monotony of their day by speaking with me. Some displayed a considerable willingness and capacity to reflect upon their lives and were candid in the way they shared their insights with me. While I am a middle class male with a home, I did not feel that the social and economic divide
that separated us was a concern, for either them or me.

As relationships developed throughout the period of getting to know people, my role as ‘participant observer’ roughly approximated what is referred to as ‘moderate participator’ (Spradley 1980, p. 60). As an observer, I interacted and spent considerable time with those observed, both alone and in groups. At no point, however, was I a complete participant. I was always conscious that despite my level of comfortableness and the number of positive relationships I formed, I was still an outsider. My outsider status was most obvious in that I exited the field at the end of each day and returned home. Further to this, while I had built up considerable rapport and trust, and participants were often comfortable describing themselves in ways that they deemed socially unacceptable and portrayed them in negative lights, my outsider status was evident in a number of our conversations and interactions.

Two separate interactions with research participants where they attempted to conceal their substance use from me, illustrated my position as an outsider. On the first occasion, after about ten minutes into their discussion, one of the group members said loudly, “he’s (referring to me) not stupid, he knows we’re talking about drugs.” On the second occasion, I commented on how they had just been speaking about drugs (but without mentioning it), and they responded with surprise, “Oh, I didn’t think you would have known about that”. In both examples, I had been invited to participate and made to feel welcome in their group. Their reluctance to openly talk about their drug use in front of me, however, demonstrated that while my presence was welcomed, I was considered an outsider to some aspects of their discussions.

Notwithstanding my outsider status, and despite Duneier’s (2001, p. 173) belief that an absence of rapport and trust with those researched is not necessarily a barrier to learning about them, I did consciously and deliberately try to forge relationships with research participants. Davies (2008, p. 85) has noted the important ways being too close to those observed can act as a barrier to picking up on the subtleties of their behaviours and identities. The interactions and relationships I had were sufficiently detached; the insights
I overlooked, or any misunderstanding arrived at could not be attributed to unreflexively close relationships. In fact, contrasting with Duneier (2001), I felt that my knowledge of who the people participating in this study were significantly increased as rapport and trust built. As is recognised in the ethnographic literature, however, my capacity to determine my role, either detached, or engaged, is limited. Emerson and Pollner (2001, p. 241) note how people subject to research can simply ignore or challenge the researcher’s intentions to have them perform a close or distant role.

Research participants were not passive; they initiated interactions with me when they wanted to and thus determined my observer role as a ‘moderate participant’. In more cases than I could record, people came up to me and asked me for a cigarette, which often led to subsequent conversations and my closer engagement. I found these requests particularly beneficial at initiating discussion, but my non-smoker status meant that I did not smoke cigarettes with people, which no doubt lessened opportunities to engage with them further.

My presence as a volunteer and observer with the outreach teams and in the café, a service centred on the provision of social work services, also meant that people I observed engaged me in a social work type role. An individual I met through the outreach team later approached me alone requesting that I follow up his housing applications. Another research participant requested I appear at his Public Guardianship Tribunal; two other’s requested my assistance with child protection issues. Coleman (2000) researched people who were homeless whom she previously worked with as a social worker, and she experienced similar requests. Given that I made conscious attempts to advise research participants that my primary interest was research, I saw no problem providing what limited assistance I could while conducting my research. Not only did I see this as an opportunity to give something back to those participating in the research – research that will benefit me more than them, but also the process of engaging them on these important issues provided further opportunities to learn about who they were.

On the other hand, on some infrequent, although memorable occasions, people rejected
my presence, or attempts to interact. This included a group of people I wanted to initiate conversations with turning their backs on me and excluding me from their conversations. In the second case, a middle aged male I attempted to speak with (after he asked me for money) aggressively proclaimed that I was “too full on”, and he subsequently departed. While these examples are illustrative of my limited capacity to control the nature of all observations and interactions, there were some situations where I was required to be more in control.

Throughout the entire fieldwork period, and in a number of settings, I routinely observed people engage in the trade of illicit substances. Ethical approval for this study was premised on the undertaking that I would not observe illegal activities (University of Queensland 2007). But in addition to the university imposed obligation not to observe the trade in illicit substances, I consciously endeavoured to not observe, or shifted my gaze when I inadvertently observed people purchase or sell illicit substances.

I was an overt observer of people who were homeless. I carried a note pad and at times openly recorded my observations – no attempts were made to conceal my researcher status. It was important, however, that my observations or research intentions were not misconstrued; that is to say, I did not want people, especially those selling illicit substances, thinking that I was observing, or recording, their illegal activities. This conscious decision to refrain from observing the trade of illicit substances meant that I complied with my ethical guidelines, as well as facilitating personal safety and ensuring my continued access in the field.

4.8 Sampling

Following Gobo (2008, p. 98-100), sampling for this research had three dimensions: the unit of observation, or who I sampled; the settings, or where I sampled, and the incidents, or what I observed. The incidents have already been considered, whereby I explained that it was social interactions and people’s physical presentations that I primarily observed. This will not be further considered here. People experiencing homelessness were the unit
of observation. In this section I will further elaborate upon the distinction between those people referred to as research participants and the twenty interview participants. As was shown in chapter one, the research was carried out in inner suburban Brisbane. This section will conclude by providing details about why and how these places were sampled.

4.8.1 Interview participants

Notwithstanding the contested terrain that deals with homeless definition (Chamberlain and Johnson 2001; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992; Veness 1993; Wardhaugh 1999), I adopt a subjective definition of homelessness (Beazley 1999; Robinson 2002; Watson and Austerberry 1986), whereby ‘interview participants’ in this study are defined as homeless only when they self-identified as such. In this respect, recruitment and sampling of the twenty people who participated in ‘formal’ interviews was relatively straightforward. I had identified them during my ongoing period of observations, built up varying degrees of rapport with them, ascertained whether they identified as homeless, and if they did, invited them to participate in the study. Some demographic and biographical information about these people is included as appendix four.

4.8.2 Research participants

I observed approximately one hundred people who were, or who I assumed to be, homeless. All of these people I refer to as research participants. In contrast to the straightforward and verifiable means of determining ‘interview participants’, identifying people as homeless to be observed was far more ambiguous. Of the one hundred people I define as ‘research participants’, approximately forty of these I only observed on one or two occasions. Most of these forty people I did not speak with, or observe physically closely enough to hear speak. The homelessness status of many of these research participants therefore remains uncertain.

Until, and if, I had the opportunity to verify an individual’s homelessness, I tentatively assumed homelessness, and thus based my observation sample selection on a
combination of four factors. First, homelessness was assumed if people were observed accessing homeless specific services. After numerous conversations with users, staff and volunteers of these services, it was widely assumed that most people accessing these services did see themselves as homeless. An evaluation of the café, one of the services where people were observed, supports this assumption. This evaluation estimated seventy percent of café customers to be homeless (Spall and Watters 2007).

Secondly, due to the close association between begging and homelessness in the United Kingdom (Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2001) and the United States (Williams 1995), I suspected homelessness among people I observed begging. Thirdly, homelessness was assumed among people I observed sleeping in public places. Finally, dishevelled physical presentation, especially if coupled with the carrying of significant personal belongings, for example bedding, was also taken to convey homelessness.

Rather than assuming I could identify homelessness with any certainty from people’s behaviours and physical presentation, I developed this sampling strategy to focus my observations on a small group of people. Throughout the six months I conducted observations, I was acutely aware that this means of identifying people to observe was tentative. The following field note illustrates a weakness of the strategy, and my consciousness of it:

I have observed and recorded notes on Vicki more than five times over a one month period, and was sure that she was homeless. Vicki spends much time interacting with people I know to be homeless, and what’s more, she sleeps in the mall, both during the day and overnight. I was amazed today when Vicki told me she had a house, but especially her reasons for often ‘choosing’ to not sleep there. I know my method of identifying homelessness would lead to no certainties, but I am surprised in this case. Fieldwork journal (24 Feb 2008)

Vicki also presented as physically dishevelled and accessed homelessness specific services. She, like some other people I observed who I later learnt to not be homeless, presents a stark illustration of the inability to determine an individual’s homelessness
without speaking with them. Further, even by the standards of a ‘cultural definition’ (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992) of homelessness, Vicki is not homeless. On this basis, the homeless status of any research participant observed, but not spoken with, is always tentative. Notwithstanding this cautiousness and the examples where I incorrectly assumed homelessness for some individuals, the overwhelming majority of people whose homelessness I assumed and thus observed, did in fact later self-identify as homeless.

As would be expected from the distinction between ‘interview participants’ and ‘research participants’, I gained what I considered to be a better understanding of people with whom I conducted formalised interviews, compared to those I did not have an opportunity to formally interview. While acknowledging the disparities in the breadth of information obtained, I did not identify any notable differences in terms of demographics, experiences and perspectives between the two groups.

### 4.8.3 Sample setting

In the first chapter I described the geographical places I conducted the study. These were public and quasi-public places. Quasi-public places are those generally open to the public, but access to the place is contingent upon specific activities (Morrill and Snow 2005, p. 14); for example, accessing a café is contingent on being a customer. The places sampled consisted of footpaths, parks, an outside public mall, and a café. The café was operated by a non-government organisation specifically to deliver affordable food and drink, and social work services, to people experiencing homelessness. The café was located in the suburb of Fortitude Valley.

The specific research sites were chosen prior to or at the commencement of fieldwork. The Fortitude Valley and Riverside Drive area were identified in the literature as locations where people experiencing homelessness congregate (Coleman 2000; Lawson 2002, p. 14; New Farm Neighbourhood Centre 2004, p. 26). I accessed the Botanical Gardens, Roma Street Parklands and café through my role as volunteer/researcher.
Rather than focus on one setting and gaining an extensive understanding of that place, I chose to sample multiple settings (Falzon 2009) where people without homes frequented. Sampling multiple settings increased both the number of people that could be observed, and the period of time I could observe certain individuals. Many research participants moved from place to place throughout the day to meet their needs. People slept in some places, accessed services in others, and consumed alcohol and socialised in different places again. Sampling a range of the places people frequented during a day meant that they could be observed engaging in a range of activities at different times of the day.

Physically accessing most public places in Fortitude Valley, West End, the Botanical Gardens and Roma Street Parkland was relatively straightforward. In addition to the people who were homeless that used these places, a broader section of the population routinely frequented them. In many respects, therefore, my presence easily went unnoticed, as most people using these places were not homeless. In contrast, people who were homeless mostly frequented the Riverside Drive area and the café. I stood out as different in these places. My continued and welcomed access to these latter two places was reliant upon the support of a number of gatekeepers.

The ethnographic literature is replete with information outlining the importance of gatekeepers and building relationships to enable fieldwork (Emerson and Pollner 2001, p. 240). My experiences paralleled the advice given in the literature, where I had to build and maintain relationships with people who both sanctioned and facilitated my access. Most clearly, these gatekeepers were managers of the two outreach services and the café that permitted my access as a volunteer and observer.

More ambiguously, although equally important, were a number of assertive and influential people who assumed leadership roles in the Riverside Drive area. Chris and Tim were two such people. They appeared interested in my research, or at least interested in speaking with me. Their interest and confidence in me facilitated other people living in the area likewise accepting my presence. I understood that my presence would be continually accepted by recognising that people did not want a consultant or social
worker to come in offering a solution to homelessness. My relationships with gatekeepers was further facilitated because of the subtle and non-expert approach I assumed, whereby I did not portray myself as an all knowing researcher, but rather as a student interested in learning about people.

4.9 Generalisations

There is ongoing debate about whether qualitative and ethnographic research has the capacity to make generalisations to broader populations. Some have argued that generalisations are undesirable and not appropriate for qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 1995; Guba and Lincoln 1994). The debate has also been reframed to more suit the qualitative perspective, whereby ‘transferability’ is presented as a more useful concept (Lincoln and Guba 1985). From this perspective, qualitative and ethnographic researchers provide ‘thick description’ to enable ‘transferability’, and to generalise to theories more broadly (Bryman 2004). Similar to the proposition that qualitative research has a different philosophical premise, others have suggested that qualitative research can make generalisations, but the types of generalisations possible differ to empirical generalisations made from a statistically representative sample (Payne and Williams 2005; Williams 2000).

Developed by Williams (2000) and then later refined with Payne (Payne and Williams 2005), this different type of generalisation is defined as ‘moderatum’ generalisation. ‘Moderatum’ generalisation provides qualitative researchers a theoretical and methodological justification to generalise in the absence of a statistically representative sample. This type of generalisation requires ‘inductive inferences’ and is premised on drawing ‘categorical equivalences’ (Williams 2000). In order to advance ‘moderatum’ generalisations, sufficient detail must be given of the “characteristic being studied, and crucially, on the similarities of the research site to the sites to which generalisation is to be attempted” (Payne and Williams 2005, p. 305).
‘Moderatum’ generalisation not only requires considerable detail about the population studied, but also a depth understanding of existing research so that the differences and similarities between populations can be analysed. The more similar the populations are in terms of relevant characteristics than the greater capacity to make ‘moderatum’ generalisations. As is recognised in qualitative (Williams 2000; Payne and Williams 2005), and especially ethnographic research (Gobo 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), however, ‘moderatum’ generalisations should always be tentative, with a focus towards explaining where further research would be appropriate.

Although I have purposively selected research participants to meet my predetermined criteria of ‘rough sleepers’, this method has not resulted in a sample that can be considered statistically representative of people who ‘sleep rough’ elsewhere. I cannot therefore make empirical generalisations. Nonetheless, drawing on empirical materials from this study and other pertinent Australian homelessness research, in the final chapter some tentative ‘moderatum’ generalisations are made and some directions for further research suggested.

4.10 Analysis

All empirical materials were analysed thematically using a tool called Framework (Ritchie et al. 2003). This section illustrates what constituted ‘empirical materials’ before detailing the analytical processes and the role of and justification for Framework. Important to this section is the recognition that analysis was an ongoing and iterative method. The term analysis is used broadly to encompass the ‘management’, ‘analysis’ and ‘interpretation’ of empirical materials. Management involved structuring and organising; analysis involved identifying patterns, categories and themes; whereas interpretation consisted of attaching meaning and significance to empirical materials (Brewer 2000, p. 105). While these components of the analytical process are distinguishable, I agree with Wolcott who notes that they are closely related, and their differences are perhaps better thought about in terms of emphasis (Wolcott 1994). Where
meaningful, a distinction is made between these processes, otherwise this section recognises their interrelated nature, and I use the more broad term analytical processes.

4.10.1 Empirical materials

Empirical materials analysed included the fieldwork journal and each of the formal interviews with twenty people. During fieldwork, in note form I made record of all pertinent observations, including things observed, comments overheard, conversations I had and my general impressions and hunches. These incomplete notes, often hurriedly taken down at or soon after the time of incident, I transferred and extended each evening in the fieldwork journal. This method of briefly recording observations in the field, and then further developing them after exiting the field, while liable to inaccuracies between what was observed and what was later recorded, is recognised in the ethnographic literature as appropriate (Brewer 2000, p. 88; Bryman 2004, p. 306; Emerson et al. 2001). I also recorded in the fieldwork journal two biographical poems given to me by Oliver, an interview participant.

The second source of empirical materials was the formalised interviews from twenty people. All interviews were audio recorded, and then transcribed into verbatim text. When transcribing interviews, I recorded interview participants’ speech exactly as it occurred, including grammatical inaccuracies, profanities, pauses and word emphasis. Both the interview transcripts and the fieldwork journal were subject to the analytical processes outlined below.

4.10.2 Analytical processes

Numerous qualitative and especially ethnographic researchers recognise that empirical materials are subject to management, analysis and interpretation throughout fieldwork (Gobo 2008) and writing (Miles and Huberman 1994). I commenced the analytical process at the early stages of fieldwork, and continued throughout fieldwork until the completion of the final written draft. For example, a number of my tentative
understandings derived from observations I further explored and clarified with people during formal and informal interviewing. This progressive method of analysis, whereby I continually extended and refined my understanding, helped to narrow my area of focus. Despite the ongoing analytical process that characterised my approach, at the completion of fieldwork, I did subject the voluminous empirical materials to an analytical phase distinct from collection and prior to writing.

Framework (Ritchie et al. 2003), a tool for analysis developed by the National Centre for Social Research (United Kingdom), facilitates analysis in terms of managing and organising the empirical material. With the benefit of empirical materials organised, the matrices from Framework provided structure to aid in generating meaning and interpretations. The first step of this method of management/analysis involved closely reading all empirical materials to get an overview of the coverage. Because I had collected, recorded and transcribed all empirical materials, from the early stages of analysis I had a good sense of what appeared important. On the basis of this initial (re-) reading of all empirical materials, I developed a ‘conceptual framework’. The ‘conceptual framework’ was a list of latent broad concepts, and under them, related sub-concepts.

Following the development of the ‘conceptual framework’, the empirical materials were re-read and concepts initially identified as important were ‘tagged’ or ‘labelled’. This tagging process is also referred to as coding, and involved identifying and labelling (coding) words, phrases and sentences important to the research questions (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 56).

All tagged empirical materials were then transferred into corresponding ‘thematic charts’. Each chart represented a broad concept, and within each chart were columns that represented related sub-concepts. For example, public space was concept number 3. Under this broad concept, and thus developed as columns within the ‘thematic chart’ public space, were a number of sub-concepts, for example: ‘public space and privacy’ 3.1; ‘satisfied with public space’ 3.2; and ‘public spaces as dangerous’ 3.3. The words,
phrases and sentences that corresponded to sub-concepts were tagged and transferred into their relevant column in the ‘thematic chart’. Whenever ‘public space and privacy’, for instances, was identified in the empirical materials, it was tagged with 3.1 and copied into the corresponding column in the ‘thematic chart’. Each ‘thematic chart’ comprised rows that represented research participants. Reviewing a thematic chart therefore made it easy to identify whether a concept was relevant to individual research participants.

At this stage of the analytical process minimal interpretation was engaged in, with the labelled materials transferred into ‘thematic charts’ in a way to retain original language. Transferring labelled materials into ‘thematic charts’, however, reduced the empirical materials, but care was taken to retain as much original context as deemed important. Thus these initial phases primarily sought to organise the empirical materials, displaying them in a synthesised form where further analysis and then interpretation was more manageable.

Synthesising empirical materials and displaying them in a series of ‘thematic charts’ was a means to make sense of them. As empirical materials were recorded so that the original source was identifiable, emerging themes were developed with the benefit of their original context. As Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 243) suggested, I never assumed that ‘chunks’ of information pulled from their original source contained meaning unless that information was verified with the context of raw material.

Information recorded in ‘thematic charts’, I subjected to further scrutiny to detect the substantive content and dimensions of the phenomenon. I then categorised the materials, displaying themes in ‘descriptive analysis charts’ where they were assigned classes (Ritchie et al. 2003, p. 237). I looked for patterns and themes. Wolcott (1994, p. 40) refers to this as ‘inductive reasoning’. I moved beyond research participants’ words and direct observations of their behaviours to infer broader meaning. This broader meaning took account of the homelessness research and theoretical literature outlined in the preceding chapters. Although the way research participants lived and described themselves was of primary importance to the analytical process, in agreement with
Bourdieu et al. (1999, p. 181), I believe that in order to understand their lives, I needed to look beyond them and explore the social context in which their identities were constructed.

The analytical process described can be referred to as moving step-by-step up the ladder of abstraction (Miles and Huberman 1994). While initially staying close to the empirical materials in the stages of management, in each subsequent phase I interpreted meaning from that material. Through this analysis and interpretation of empirical materials, I was reconstructing and reproducing research participants’ lives (Coffey 1999, p. 136). These reconstructions were organised into themes, and these themes organise the structure of the following three chapters.

Finally, using Framework to manage and structure empirical materials further strengthened the analytical process by providing an audit trail. Insufficient documentation as to how qualitative findings are reached raises questions about trustworthiness – documenting the analysis process is a means to enhance rigour (Anastas 2004; Beaman 1995; Cresswell 1998; Padgett 1998). Each of the concepts detailed in the following chapters can be traced back to their original source, either comments people made during interviewing, or notes from the fieldwork journal. Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that this structuring process is subordinate to the importance of intellectual and conceptual engagement with the empirical materials during the analytical process (Ritchie et al. 2003, p. 220). It is my engagement in the analytical process, and the lens through which I approached it, that is now considered.

4.10.3 Analytical reflexivity

Recognising my close and intellectual engagement with empirical materials analysed is consistent with the aforementioned understanding of my influence on research participants during fieldwork. Reflexivity not only requires an awareness and exploration of how I was in the social world I analysed (Mason 2002), but how I have made sense of research participants lives through who I am (Grills 1998, p. 10). By highlighting ‘who I
am’, and my presence in the research and analytical process, however, I have not sought to neutralise my subjectivity (Edwards 2005, p. 70). On the one hand, my belief that the homeless literature contained insufficient understanding of the people who were homeless separate to their homelessness motivated me to conduct this research. On the other hand, this belief, informed in part by my experiences working with people who were homeless, all shape the lens through which I have engaged in analysis and interpretation.

In analysing and interpreting empirical materials, however, I have not sought to privilege my views over those of research participants. I follow Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 205) who note the importance of reflexivity in the ethnographic and analytical process, but who similarly argue that reflexivity is not about putting the ethnographer above the research participants. I have not conducted this research in a dispassionate way, but I have only included discussion on my presence and subjectivity where it appeared relevant (Wolcott 1994, p. 352).

### 4.11 Ethics

Prior to the commencement of fieldwork this study was granted ethical approval from the School of Social Work and Applied Human Services’ ethical review body at the University of Queensland. There are three ethical issues relevant to this research: intrusion, informed consent and beneficence. I was aware that these three factors were important at the conceptual stages of the study, and have endeavoured throughout to address them. Notwithstanding this, the following discussion illustrates that observing people experiencing homelessness in ‘public’ places for a study with no tangible benefits for them raises ethical questions not easily answered.

#### 4.11.1 Intrusion

As mentioned above, I was not only conscious that observing people going about their day-to-day lives may be perceived by them as intrusive, but also I felt some hesitation
about doing so. By observing people as they slept, ate breakfast, and had intimate
discussions, I was essentially witnessing aspects of their lives, which for those of us with
a house, occur in ‘private’ and out of the ‘public’ view. The ‘public’ nature of these
observations, however, meant that they were sanctioned and deemed not intrusive by my
university’s ethical guidelines. So long as observations were of legal activities, and not
activities likely to result in stigmatising those observed, the university guidelines permit
public observations (University of Queensland 2007). The observation of people in public
places is likewise recognised in the research literature as unproblematic. Morrill et al.
(2005, p. xii) argue that ethnographers are ethically free to observe people in public, as
their actions are no different or more intrusive than those of other citizens observing day-
to-day life. Jorgensen had noted a similar explanation:

The participant observer has no more or less of an ethical obligation to the people
encountered in the course of research than she or he would have under other everyday life
circumstances. Jorgensen (1989, p. 28)

This understanding of the ethical appropriateness of observing people in ‘public’ does not
appear to consider the perspectives of people who live in ‘public’ places. People who
have no access to traditional ‘private’ places, for example, houses, may not in fact
perceive the ‘public’ places in which they reside as ‘public’. The utterances of a research
participant when commenting on his experiences living in public places poignantly
illustrated his expectations of privacy and ‘personal space’:

They walk through our, like, you know, out the front of our tents. And that’s say, our
hallway or whatever. You know what I mean? Like that’s disrespectful. Andrew

The important functions public places can have for people who are homeless, while not
specifically considered in the research literature, is a matter I paid considerable attention
to during fieldwork. In short, I conducted observations in a manner mindful that
observing people engaging in ‘private’ acts in ‘public’ places also meant that I was
observing their ‘private’ lives. Although it is not possible to determine whether I
inappropriately observed ‘private’ acts, or intruded on research participants ‘private’ use
of ‘public’ space, I did attempt to respect their use of ‘public places’. Wherever possible, especially in areas where people slept, rather than socialised, I made my research intentions clear, and I asked people if I could observe, or enter certain ‘public’ places. They appreciated being asked, and no one expressed a concern about my presence.

4.11.2 Informed consent

Gaining research participants’ informed consent, or not, raised two significant ethical tensions. The first is closely related to that of intrusion. Because of people’s fluid and fleeting engagements with public places, I observed a number of research participants whom I did not have any reasonable opportunity to speak with. This meant that a number of people, whose contributions inform this study, did not provide their consent to participate. The ethnographic research literature recognises the impracticalities of gaining informed consent from all people to be observed in public, and also accepts as ethical observing people in public without their consent (Bryman 2004, p. 512; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, p. 266). Irrespective of these accepted principles, I endeavoured to gain consent wherever possible.

I attempted to obtain people’s consent as the research was essentially about them, and I did not want to include anyone in the study who voiced an opposition to being subject to participation. No person did, however, express a concern about participation. The process of approaching people and gaining their consent, moreover, meant that I was able to initiate conversation and engage with them more closely than detached observations would otherwise permit. In this respect, my attempts to approach people and obtain their consent enhanced both the ethical nature of the study and the depth of knowledge I gained.

The second tension with obtaining informed consent relates to research participants’ capacities to actually provide ‘informed’ consent. The university’s ethical guidelines, consistent with broader expectations, makes it clear that in order to give informed consent, an individual must ‘comprehend’ what their participation, including the risks,
entails (Australian Association of Social Workers 1999; University of Queensland 2007). The overt symptoms of psychiatric illnesses and intoxication from alcohol and illicit substance I observed from many research participants, however, raised questions about their capacity to comprehend what their participation entailed. Because people presenting in ways that question their ability to provide informed consent represented such a large number of those observed, I was reluctant to automatically exclude them. Excluding people who appeared intoxicated and displayed overt symptoms of mental illness would have not only greatly diminished the sample, but would have meant the sample represented a small minority of people observed.

Instead of excluding people on the basis of mental illness and intoxication, I attempted to engage them at times which facilitated their ability to provide informed consent (National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007, p. 65-6). My attempts to address this issue were only relevant for those research and interview participants I had an opportunity to speak with, rather than those I merely observed. Addressing a potential inability to provide informed consent often meant interviewing people in the early morning, prior to their use of alcohol and substances. For people who disclosed or displayed psychiatric illnesses, I discussed with them their perspectives on obtaining informed consent. With one interview participant, this meant conducting a number of short interviews over a several weeks.

4.11.3 Beneficence

Making a positive contribution to those studied is recognised as a useful and important sign of ethical research (Alston and Bowles 2003, p. 22). Indeed, ‘action research’ takes this further to suggest research participants should have a say in what the benefits to them will be. This commitment to involve and ensure benefits go to those studied, is premised on the acknowledgement that disadvantaged groups are both disproportionately represented in social research, and that they receive disproportionate, if any, benefit from their participation. These issues have particular relevance for people in my study, as they not only constitute a ‘disadvantaged’ group, but as homeless they are frequently asked to
participate in research (McNaughton and Sanders 2007, p. 888). Neil and Fopp (1992, p. 19-20) have also noted how people without homes routinely spend considerable parts of their day disclosing their life experiences and homelessness in order to secure services.

Recognising their status as disadvantaged, over-researched, and perhaps frustrated with recalling their predicament, Third (2000, p. 460) strongly asserts that researching the lives of people experiencing homelessness can only ever be justified when it contributes to beneficial policy and/or practice. I hope that this research not only makes a positive contribution to knowledge, but that the knowledge generated informs understandings of who people experiencing homelessness are. Taking this further, I hope that this better understanding can shape initiatives and policies aimed at ending homelessness. While these ideals are in line with Third’s (2000) comments and the notion of beneficence equating to ethical research, they are by no means realised. Both the complexities (Jones and Seelig 2004) and the power dynamics (Atkinson and Jacobs 2009; Marston 2008) inherent in academic housing research have been well documented. I can partially address the ethical questions about the value of my research by noting my intentions to inform homelessness policy and service provision.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter has argued for the suitability of the ethnographic approach adopted in the study. In some detail, I have explained the manner in which I engaged with the people who participated in this study. Following on from the limitations identified within the homelessness research literature, I have presented this ethnographic approach as a means to develop a comprehensive understanding of day-to-day lives and personal identities. As the seminal ethnographer Geertz’s (1973, p. 20) has noted, however, “it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something”.

Taking heed of this, in the following chapters I outline my understanding of research participants’ lives and identities. While I make no claim to know the full extent of their identities or ways of living, by describing a number of significant, but disparate, aspects
of their lives, I show that I know something about who they were. The themes discussed are those aspects of research participants’ lives they considered meaningful and important to whom they were. These include: day-to-day experiences and activities, interpersonal relationships, social interactions, worldviews and aspirations. I extend this discussion in chapter seven, where I consider identity with reference to how homelessness can be both used and implicated in the way they enact, and have identities ascribed to them.

Throughout the chapters that follow, I bring together information obtained from participant observation and interviewing. In a straightforward manner, I report directly on the information obtained from these methods with descriptive accounts. I also augment these descriptions with my interpretation on their meaning, and relevance to my research questions.

My focus on exploring and understanding people’s lives – elements of their personal identities, is located within a diverse body of literature reviewed in chapter two and chapter three. These chapters showed that the state of homelessness is often presented as important to the identities of people without homes, and that the concept of identity provides a mechanism to understand the self as subjectively experienced and socially located. I continually refer to this literature in the next chapters, noting similarities and tensions to add context and depth to what I learnt from research participants.
Chapter 5 Homeless, it’s what they were, not who they were

5.1 Introduction

By way of introducing the lives and identities of research participants in this study, this chapter first describes their day-to-day lived experiences, and second, details accounts of their worldviews. Important to this discussion, and differing from chapter seven, my understanding is informed by observations and research participant’s accounts: either their direct assertions about themselves, or comments they made more generally.

The first half of this chapter addresses secondary research question number one: How do the people participating in this study live on a day-to-day basis? It concerns people’s lived experiences during homelessness, particularly during the fieldwork period. As a prelude to these descriptive accounts, however, I also briefly comment on their lives prior to homelessness. In the second section of this chapter, three aspects of research participants’ personal identities are considered. These are grouped under the broad theme ‘worldviews’, and consist of: views on homelessness, choice, and values. By having research participants explicitly describe and speak about themselves, this discussion responds to the primary question: What are the personal identities of the people participating in this study?

The discussion in this chapter of two aspects of the self: lived experiences and worldviews, captures an apparent tension in the lives of people in this research. This tension represents a key argument of the thesis, and can be summarised as people describing their lives in negative and ‘abnormal’ ways on the one hand, and espousing ‘mainstream’ perspectives and values, on the other. In short, the way people lived and perceived their day-to-day lives as problematic, were in contrast to how they saw themselves as people, that is, ‘normal’. This tension is pivotal in illuminating how research participants positioned their experiences of homelessness in the context of their personal identities.
5.2 Life experiences prior to homelessness

Prior to documenting the way people lived during this study, and the perspectives and values they expressed, here I briefly discuss some of the ways they described their lives before they first experienced homelessness. While they spoke about their lives prior to homelessness in extremely negative and problematic ways, this discussion does not intend to link these experiences in a causal relationship to their subsequent homelessness. This brief life history discussion, rather, illustrates two important points.

First, it is recognised that anyone can become homeless (FaHCSIA 2008). Others have also shown how life events such as family separation, domestic violence, and an accumulation of debt or unemployment constitute pathways into homelessness (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; Johnson et al. 2008; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003; Stephenson 2006). For the people who participated in this study, however, their lives prior to becoming homeless were characterised by disadvantaged and problematic experiences. Due to these life histories, most research participants could not identify any event or specific situation that constituted a pathway into their homelessness.

Next, and relatedly, the significant and chronic hardship that people had survived prior to their homelessness, I will later demonstrate, provides some insights into understanding their negative self views, perspectives on home, and future aspirations.

Can you tell me about some good things in your life, or some good times in your life?
Cameron

Man, I don’t think I’ve had any good times to be honest… I’ve been on my own ever since I was born. Alex

I don’t know. I’ve got to think about that one don’t I. Good, good – not a lot of good mate… When my son was born I suppose. That was pretty bad as well. Jim
Good times, um, when I was little. That’s the only good time I’ve had in my life. Michelle

I came into this research with a conscious intention to learn about aspects of people’s lives that were not merely beyond and distinct from their homelessness, but aspects that people perceived as positive and productive. Indeed, it is in response to a theme within the academic research literature whereby people are identified on the basis of their homelessness that this study is located. The reporting of positive aspects of people’s lives prior to homelessness, however, was a rare occurrence. I asked all interview participants similar questions, although at times worded slightly differently, to the one posed above. Alex, Jim and Michelle’s answers to this question unambiguously portray their lives in exclusively negative ways.

Similarly, although often articulated less dramatically, each of the other seventeen interview participants’ lives prior to homelessness were characterised by negative and traumatic experiences. In many respects, the life experiences prior to homelessness reflect risk factors, or social issues, associated with homeless populations (Culhane and Metraux 2008; Daly 1996; Fertig and Reingold 2008; Tomas and Dittmar 1995). People were not directly asked about the presence of certain negative experiences; the prevalence of the issues discussed below are known only by people raising them without direct prompt. Thus, the absence of such experiences reported is not necessarily a reflection of their non-occurrence, but rather a reflection of those topics interview participants raised of their own volition.

When discussing negative life histories, people nearly always reported their experiences as children and adolescents. Sixteen out of the twenty explicitly stated that they had negative experiences of foster care, adoption and in the case of Pat, living in an Aboriginal mission. Those who elaborated upon these experiences typically referred to severe physical or sexual abuse. Although with probing and leading questions, some people were able to note one or two positive experiences during childhood, no one described their overall childhood as positive. Childhood and adolescence were recalled
with reference to poor educational outcomes – most people spoke about finishing school too early. As adolescents, many described their involvement with the criminal justice system. Jim and Oliver convey the feelings of sadness and not belonging similar to most other interview participants’ experiences of childhood and adolescents:

I’ve always felt out of place. And um, like I was fostered out when I was very young. Like I didn’t know, but I always felt different. Like even before I knew that I wasn’t their family, I felt real, like I don’t know, like, left out or something. Then when I found out that I wasn’t theirs, it just confirmed that I was strange. I’ve never had any goals in my life. You know how some people, like when they’re a kid, or when they’re a teenager or something, they start, “oh I want this, I want that”. I’ve never ever had that. Jim

When I was a young boy I never had much fun, looking for some happiness to an island I would run. Where I could dream of a better life pretend I was someone else. I was so hurt, felt so sad, but only I knew how I felt. And when I had the courage I would walk that well worn track, would hope and pray that things might change when I got back. But in a way, I always knew I was better on my own, would hope that maybe this time, I would get some love and hugs. But it would always be the same. They could never understand, only scream and yell. Was told that I’d never get to heaven, that I would go straight to hell. Oliver, taken from one of his autobiographical poems

While I construct the present discussion as people’s ‘experiences prior to homelessness’, for Michelle, Glen, Jim and Tolly it was difficult to establish a time where their status changed from housed to homeless. These four people described literal homelessness and feelings of being homeless throughout their childhood while living in the family house. Similarly, other interview participants not only described ambiguities as to when they first considered themselves homeless, but more saliently, they felt alienation and loss extending beyond, and separate from occasions of homelessness. Without exception, and both related to and distinct from experiences of homelessness, people recalled childhood experiences that were overwhelmingly negative.
Negative family experiences were also common when interview participants commented on their own children or families as adults. Many people lost their children to child protection authorities, or their former partners. All interview participants were estranged from at least some of their significant family members. Often, people linked estrangement to violence, as both a perpetrator and a victim. Four people spoke about estrangement in the context of alleged sexual abuse. Keith, for example, was estranged from his children because he was registered as a sexual offender. With the exception of Geoff, no one, however, spoke about the negative family experiences as immediately preceding homelessness. These experiences were not presented as antecedents to homelessness. As was the case with their own childhoods, people’s experiences of estrangement from their children, and what they referred to as dysfunctional families, proved influential in the type of lives they wanted for themselves, or for their children.

Like my kids are doing a lot better than I ever did. I’ve never raised a hand to them in discipline. I’ve never smacked them. Um, basically, I don’t want my kids to have anything like I’ve had it: none of the violence, none of the alcohol. Tolly

I don’t want my kid turning out like me. Down on the street and shit. I’ll make sure my kids get a way more better life than what I ever had man. Glen

Tolly and Glen’s remarks are not only illustrative of how their experiences have shaped their aspirations for their children, but also these comments suggest they perceived their experiences as homeless in negative ways. I return to, and elaborate upon this point later in the chapter. Tolly and Glen, and sixteen of the other interview participants, also explained how their lives prior to homelessness, both as children and adults, were characterised by serious alcohol and illicit substance use and self-defined misuse:

We used to be heavy on drugs. Every fucking day we used to go and get morphine. We can’t miss one day without it. Michelle

I went to Darwin. Had a heroin habit when I was 14, which I kept going by these, these guys that you know were pretty heavy duty sort of people, they were using me to go to
Sydney, and bring drugs back. But I didn’t know they were just setting me up the whole time. They ended up raping me. And that was when I tried to OD. Oliver

I first started using when I was 16. My brother actually give me the first shot. Wayne

Michelle, Oliver and Wayne, as with fourteen of the fifteen other people who disclosed their alcohol and substance addictions prior to homelessness, initially used drugs during adolescence. It is interesting to note that when recounting problematic childhood experiences, for example, sexual assault or foster care, not one person linked their subsequent alcohol and substance misuse with those experiences. All traumatic experiences and self-defined problematic behaviours were discussed in ways unrelated to each other. No one rationalised or explained alcohol or substance use with reference to experiences of abuse.

Jane and Craig, the only two interview participants who did not mention alcohol or illicit substance use prior to homelessness, were the only people who made no reference to using substances and alcohol during homelessness. Their experiences prior to and during homelessness can be further distinguished from all others, as they were the only ones who spoke about ongoing periods of involuntarily hospitalisation in psychiatric units. Underpinning the consistency and diversity which characterised people’s pre-homeless experiences of substance and alcohol misuse, and mental illness, however, were unanimously expressed feelings of lives alienated and disconnected from what they perceived of as ‘mainstream’ and ‘normal’ society. Jim articulated the sentiments of many when he spoke about always feeling “out of place”, and “different”.

As noted, I have not documented the prevalence of childhood abuse, institutional care, and alcohol and substance misuse to elevate them as causes, or even pathways into homelessness. Indeed, people participating in this study overwhelmingly rejected this link, which they saw as an excuse to avoid individual responsibility. Wayne, for example, said: “I don’t cop that excuse, you know like, you get over it; you conquer it. You get dealt a hand, once it’s in your lap you’ve got to play it out”.
These experiences highlight that the socially disadvantaged position characterising their lives as homeless, appears to be a continuation of longer life histories. The experiences in turn shaped, often unconsciously, how they saw the world. Bourdieu highlights this well when remarking on an individual who never experienced rejection from the labour market as a major trauma:

When marginalisation becomes part of the order of things, it deprives one of the consciousnesses of exclusion. Bourdieu et al. (1999, p. 153)

It is pertinent to this study that, by offering a brief pre-homeless context to interview participants’ lives, the subsequent discussions of their expressed thoughts and values – part of their personal identities, are more easily understood. People in this study described lives where they had never, or rarely felt like they fitted in. Prior to their experiences of homelessness, people felt like they were not part of society as a whole, and many did not feel as though they had been part of their own families. These expressed feelings will be returned to in the next chapter, where I suggest they go some way in explaining their understanding of, and desire for, a ‘home’. Furthermore, the stark absence of any linking of childhood traumas to subsequent alcohol and substance misuse, offers further insights into their views of individual responsibility. This point too, will be elaborated upon at the end of this chapter.

5.3 Day-to-day life

In this discussion, I outline some activities that go some way to characterising the day-to-day lives of most research participants. In a manner similar to McNaughton’s (2008) ethnographic study with people who were homeless in the United Kingdom, I believe that an understanding of people’s day-to-day lives provides some important insights into their personal identities. This contention is consistent with the broad notion of personal identities embedded within a social context outlined in chapter three.
In the introduction to this chapter, however, I suggested there was a stark, and seeming tension between what people did, and how they saw themselves. I do not uncritically suggest, therefore, that understanding these day-to-day activities offers a sufficient and straightforward understanding of their personal identities. On the contrary, I consider these frequently engaged in daily activities in a broader context of research participants’ views, aspirations and comments more generally. Considering and understanding this broader context, I later suggest, adds complexity to, and extends their identities beyond their day-to-day experiences as homeless and their lives in public places.

Rather than document and account for research participants’ day-to-day activities in a structured manner, for example, recording everything done through a day, or a cycle, similar to traditional anthropological ethnographies (Wolcott 2008), this section discusses three activities engaged in by most research participants, most days, and frequently. These include: ‘sitting around’, accessing services, and alcohol and substance acquisition and use. For the period I conducted fieldwork, these three activities taken together constituted almost the entirety of many people’s day-to-day lives. The prevalence of these three activities was evident from observation. Their importance to research participants was evoked through our conversations in which they explained their engagement in these activities. It was evident that alcohol and substance use were not only prevalent, but also important to how they saw themselves, and their homelessness.

5.3.1 Sitting around

‘Sitting around’, hanging out, or just ‘taking it easy’, as many research participants referred it to, constituted large parts of their days. This included people spending many continuous hours in the café; at times consuming food and drink, but more frequently just sitting. People also spent considerable parts of their day sitting on the ground in the Fortitude Valley Mall, or sitting on the ground, or on portable seats, located near their tents at Riverside Drive. These brief extracts from the three field notes are indicative of my observations over the seventy separate days I conducted fieldwork, and are noted to
convey the consistency with which I observed people in this study ‘sitting around’:

Auntie Vicki and young male sitting on the ground from 1000 until 1100, they did not appear to communicate and I did not engage them. I exit mall at 1100 and return at 1230. Upon my return Auntie Vicki still sits in the same location, now with a female. I spoke with Vicki briefly; she is not up to much today. Left the mall at 1315, Vicki and other female stay sitting in same location. Fieldwork journal, Fortitude Valley Mall (02 March 2008)

Brad, Jim and two other middle aged males sitting outside the front of Brad’s tent about 0830. After returning from my walk to West End with Chris at about 1000, Brad, Jim and one of the males from earlier that morning still out the front of Brad’s tent. I sit around with Pat and Oliver and we talk about the library, and how it’s a peaceful and quiet place. Walk past Brad’s tent at about 1110 and Brad, Jim and both of the males are sitting in the same place (the other male had returned). Fieldwork journal, Riverside Drive (12 January 2008)

Waited from 0900 until 1330 for Glen to arrive for our planned interview. William sat in the café all morning, he had one cup of tea, and tried to make conversation with people who did not seem to want to engage. Most of the people William tried to engage with I have observed previously, and they normally sit in the café for extended periods, without drinks or food, and keep to themselves. Fieldwork Journal, café (26 April 2008)

While it is difficult for these extracts to convey the routine consistency with which I observed people ‘sitting around’, I observed people sitting in public places, often for more consecutive hours than I had time to observe, every day of fieldwork. The presence of people who are homeless simply sitting around in public places, day-after-day, throughout the day, may inform perceptions of homelessness. Some theorists note a romanticised view of homelessness, where homelessness is associated with the free life, whether it be “free of the tyranny of clock time” (Ward 1979, p. 126), or worldly goods and attachments (Glasser 1994, p. 14). Research participant’s views on their homelessness are considered later in this chapter, but for now it can be noted that they perceived sitting around in ways far removed from notions of freedom or happiness.
Rather, people spoke about their days in ways that I assumed them to be and in ways others have found (Wolch and Dear 1993, p. 267): as boring with too much time to kill.

It was this boredom, and the sitting around for long periods of the day, however, that enabled me to easily access and engage with them. Research participants were a captive audience. The consistency with which I found them sitting around, and the times we sat around together, supported and confirmed their assertions that a significant part of their days were mostly spent as they described – ‘sitting around’. Research participants, for example, were not engaged in the labour market, education/training, or caring for family. The absence of these commitments and the structure they provide does partially explain why people were able to spend so much of each and every day ‘sitting around’, and indeed why they perceived their days as boring.

In addition to unemployment, ‘sitting around’ should be considered in the context of literal homelessness. The frequency with which I observed this is not simply attributed to an abundance of free time, or limited financial means to participate in other activities. Instead, literal homelessness meant that any ‘sitting around’ was clearly observable to me, and the public. Even those research participants residing in homeless accommodation or boarding houses, were either required to exit the accommodation during day-time hours, or in the case of the latter, chose to enter public places as a means to interact with other people. The behaviours and actions of people who are homeless are frequently on public display, and as such, one must consider their actions, and the observed frequency of them, in light of the reality that they have few places to conceal them. Indeed, this public display may inform and support a prevailing public perception in Australia as homelessness being explained by individuals not making an effort (Batterham 2009). I return to this argument about public display and public perceptions towards the end of chapter seven.
5.3.2 Accessing services

Notwithstanding the caveats noted above about assumed frequencies, boredom and sitting around in public places with time to kill was not the complete picture. Research participants also spent considerable time attending appointments and making themselves available to access services essential to them. In fact, their accessing of these services was so important that they organised their daily routines to meet the structure and requirements that the services dictated. Unlike other Australian studies (Davis et al. 1995; Johnson et al. 2008) that have found people who were homeless dedicated considerable time to finding a place to stay, people in this study only infrequently accessed accommodation services. Rather they structured and prioritised their days to access and comply with services that provided food, money and medication, especially opiate replacement medication.

5.3.3 Food

Although I did not speak to every person who could be considered a research participant, each person I had spoken with about food suggests that the majority of research participants accessed at least some of their food or drink from charitable services. With the exception of Jane who only accessed charitable food occasionally, most people accessed at least two, and sometimes three meals a day from charitable services. In the following chapter I explore some of the broader negative implications research participants’ associated with accessing charitable food. On a day-to-day basis, however, they were positive about the charitable services they were reliant upon. On the infrequent occasions when people sourced food elsewhere, this was explained in the context of the day each fortnight they received their welfare entitlements. Other than the times when money was available, the acquisition and consumption of food from charitable organisations played an important structuring role in the days of research participants.

I counted more than fifteen services which provided meals and drinks, free of charge, to people in this study. Nearly all of them were Christian based, including: schools,
churches, or church-funded organisations. While there was overlap in service provision, for example, on Friday mornings during the school term, people could access breakfast from five different outreach services within close proximity, the delivery of services was otherwise structured around time and place. So in addition to days that were characterised by ‘sitting around’, people consciously organised their activities, even when they could and could not ‘sit around’, on the basis of schedules put in place by charities providing food. The routine and scheduled times and locations that charities provided food was made evident by a volunteer of an outreach service who proudly informed me of the impressive history of delivering food and coffee on time, and at specific locations, every day, with the exception of two, for thirty continuous years. I observed likewise consistency among other charities delivering similar services. Research participants, moreover, were cognisant of the times specific services provided meals, and they explained to me how they managed their days to attend these services. Craig, for instance:

I come here every morning at six so I get coffee, two bananas, and two sandwiches.

Luke demonstrated not only how he organises his day to attend charitable lunches, but how he travels three kilometres further each Wednesday to attend a better lunch than his local service offers during the other weekdays. Chris, an interview participant I initially experienced difficulties interviewing because of substance use, agreed to be interviewed at sunrise, as he would not have used drugs at this time. He apologised because he had to cut the interview short, however, as the outreach van arrived at the campsite at six thirty every morning. While Chris displayed great generosity towards me and my study over a four month period, his commitment to attending the outreach breakfast, a service he had attended daily for over six years, took precedence, and confirmed to me his commitment to adhering to his routine.

The positive regard research participants had for the charitable services, and the food and drink they provided, is illustrative of the significant contribution these services make to their day-to-day lives. While they were by no means obligated to attend any of these
services, their limited financial situation, and their inability to access cooking and food storing facilities, explains the importance of organising their daily routines around acquiring free food. They also organised their day-to-day lives in order to access and fulfil the requirements of mandatory services.

5.3.4 Money & Medication

The importance of accessing and consuming food is self-evident, and while I argued that research participants organised their days in accordance with the charities dispensing the food, they were under no obligation to do so. They made no appointments to receive food. Often, they had a number of different options to choose from, and if they did not attend these charitable services, there would be no repercussions. The type of food consumed dictated their routine, but they also exercised choice about which of the many services they accessed. This choice, however, can be contrasted to people’s routine engagement with the statutory welfare authority, and medical services providing medication as part of opiate replacement programs. In this brief discussion, I will suggest that in the same way outreach food services played a role in structuring research participants’ days, their engagement with these two types of services also assumed a structuring role. This structuring, however, was largely required of them.

Each of the interview participants accessed their sole legal income through the Federal Government’s universal social security service dispensed through ‘Centrelink’. Two other research participants gained income through selling the ‘Big Issue’, with this income supplementing their Centrelink welfare payment. I heard of only one research participant who did not access Centrelink entitlements. Apart from this person, I assumed that most, if not all, research participants received welfare entitlements. Centrelink provided an essential function in research participants’ lives, which subsequently meant that Centrelink played a fundamental role in organising their daily routines.

In order to receive welfare payments, recipients are required to meet certain Centrelink obligations. A number of people in this study were recipients of the ‘Disability Support
Pension’, and thus had relatively minimal requirements to meet. For these people, Centrelink did not play a major role in organising their day. On the other hand, for the majority receiving unemployment benefits, a considerable amount of time and effort was dedicated to meeting Centrelink requirements. To continue to receive unemployment benefits, for instance, research participants were obligated to demonstrate their active search for employment. Further, all people in receipt of Centrelink benefits had set up an address, usually at a homeless service, so that Centrelink could contact them. Following this, they actively, sometimes daily, others times weekly, checked the service to ascertain whether they had received correspondence. Receiving benefits further required them to present at Centrelink to deliver paperwork, and to attend appointments and ‘job ready’ training.

Meeting Centrelink obligations was spoken about as an annoying inconvenience, but people prioritised this inconvenience above almost everything else. They organised what they could and could not do in a day on the basis of Centrelink requirements because complying with this statutory body meant a continuation of money. Failing to take account of these requirements within a day, however, resulted in a ‘breach’, and a suspension of welfare payments.

The requirements of medical authorities prescribing and dispensing opiate replacement medication also played an important role in structuring research participants’ days. Fourteen interview participants and a number of other research participants all indicated their participation in opiate replacement programs. Their compliance with opiate programs required them to attend appointments six days a week, at a predetermined location and time, to collect their medication. There were great incentives to adhere to scheduled appointments, and significant consequences attached to failing to make appointments:

Yeah, I want to do that interview today – I really need the money, but we’ve got to pick up our dose now. I’ll get crook if I don’t. Bruno
And I’m reducing, I’ve got to stick with the program and I’ll be altogether off it before too long. Shelly

Is Phil around? Cameron

No he leaves every morning at nine to pick up his juice. Pat

Organising daily plans, determining what can and cannot be achieved, on the basis of acquiring opiate medication for people with opiate addictions is obviously understandable. In the immediate term, the importance of acquiring the medication relates to the body’s physiological needs. Shelly acknowledged these needs, but she saw her continuation on the program as a means to totally withdraw from the medication over the long term. Bruno framed the negative consequences in terms of physical illness. Glen, Michelle, Tim and Andrew on the other hand, all spoke about how a failure to attend appointments would result in termination from the program. For those research participants who spoke about selling and trading their opiate medication, the importance of organising their day to meet this service’s requirements had considerable financial rewards attached to it.

With the exception of scavenging (Eikenberry and Smith 2005; MacKnee and Mervyn 2002; Richards and Smith 2006), begging (Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2001; Williams 1995) and engagement in the informal labour market (Snow and Anderson 1993; Stephenson 2006) identified in international studies, the structured and organised day-to-day lives I observed in inner suburban Brisbane are partially reflected in both international (Elias and Inui 1993; Murray 1984; Snow and Anderson 1993; Wardhaugh 1996; Wolch and Dear 1993) and Australian studies (Ali 2001; de Hoog 1972; Johnson et al. 2008). Also like others have reported (Ali 2001; de Hoog 1972; Wolch and Dear 1993), the people in this study considered their lives to be predictable and tedious.

Further to this predictable boredom, and as Murray (1984, p. 157) has noted, this structuring is determined by the homeless organisations people depend upon. For people in this study, medical organisations also provided their day-to-day lives with considerable
structure. The timetables of opiate replacement medication programs determined to a large extent what many research participants did during a day, and when they did it. The aforementioned researchers have not noted this previously. I will extend this in the following discussion, where I suggest that the acquisition of legally obtained and prescribed opiate medication is closely associated with illicit substance misuse. For now, however, this structuring and boredom that I observed and other researchers have reported on is an important response to the belief that people who are homeless are living a life ‘free from clock time’ (Ward 1979).

The capacity of people in this study to live an autonomous, or life ‘free from clock time’, was constrained by their engagement with income support services, and the medical and voluntary services they depended upon. Further to this, the way that people prioritised their daily routines, illustrates that while their day-to-day activities, for example, acquiring and consuming donated food and opiate replacement medication, are activities uncommon among the broader population, research participants’ reasons to engage in these ‘uncommon’ activities are not specific to this population. While constrained by external organisations and legislation, they exercised agency and organised their day-to-day lives to access the necessities important to their lives.

5.3.5 Alcohol & substance use

Thus far, I have shown that while people in this study spent large amounts of their days ‘sitting around’, this was mediated and constrained by their engagement with a number of services that were important to their lives. Both ‘sitting around’ and accessing services, therefore, were related parts of people’s days, in that one could only occur in the absence of the other. People could not, for example, ‘sit around’ if they were in a Centrelink interview. Substance and alcohol use, on the other hand, were not simply activities engaged in frequently, perhaps more frequently and for larger parts of the days than any other activity, but alcohol and substance use co-occurred with the activities already discussed. When research participants were both ‘sitting around’ and accessing services, although not regularly medical appointments, they also used, and were affected by,
alcohol and illicit substances. In this section, I note that alcohol and illicit substance use accounted for large parts of people’s day-to-day lives. Extending this later in the chapter, it is argued that alcohol and illicit substance use also plays an important role in shaping how people viewed themselves and their homelessness.

By way of introduction into interview participant’s lives, I noted that eighteen out of the twenty disclosed alcohol and substance misuse prior to homelessness. All of these people continued with this self-defined misuse throughout their homelessness. In fact, the majority of all research participants also used alcohol and illicit substances daily. In response to a typical type of question I asked research participants, for instance: What are you up to today? a number of responses were strikingly similar:

   Um well, basically I’ve got a needle in my arm 10 days out of 14 when I’m on the riverbank. Tolly

   Drink, I drink everyday. Floyd

   Same as I do everyday (took a swig of beer), get drunk. Leanne

   Getting drunk. Mark

Research participants who used alcohol included Floyd, Luke and Mark. On each and everyday, these people consumed alcohol from when they woke at sunrise, throughout the day and evening. Alcohol was, however, used far less, and among fewer people, than illicit substances. Sixteen interview participants spoke about using illicit substances almost daily, and six of these stated that they never, or rarely consumed alcohol at all. It should be noted, however that after many continuous years of substance addiction, half way through the fieldwork Michelle and Glen had sustained abstinence for nearly a month. Remarks from Jim and Oliver convey how substance use consumes their day-to-day lives, and they reflect the priorities of a number of other research participants:
As soon as I wake up in the morning that’s all I want to do is get stoned. And until I do, that’s my mission. Jim

Chains of addiction hold you down. Living in a private hell, caught in the grip of heroin spell. Just went along for the ride, stole your soul, you have no pride. You have to have it everyday, got to have it underway. Oliver - taken from one of his autobiographical poems

These utterances: “to have it underway”, and “my mission”, illuminate a fundamental factor of research participants’ days related to, but beyond mere substance use. People in this study who used illicit substances, and to a lesser extent, alcohol, dedicated a considerable part of each and every day to its acquisition. Those for whom alcohol and illicit substance use was a daily occurrence demonstrated an overarching desire to acquire alcohol and substances. For the small number of people who misused alcohol on a daily basis, acquiring it was relatively straightforward. As alcohol is readily available, their priority was sourcing the money to purchase it. One of the first in a series of informal interviews I conducted with Mark took place over a two hour period as we walked around Fortitude Valley while he attempted to get money together to buy a cask of wine. The more I began to know him, and the many times I attempted to locate him, I learnt that most days revolved around acquiring and then consuming alcohol.

For the people who used illicit substances daily, acquiring them was often observed and spoken about as a challenge. Similar to what Johnson et al. (2008) found, however, this challenge was approached as an overarching priority nonetheless. People would ask acquaintances, friends and strangers if they could obtain them. In other cases, people would walk or travel by public transport around Brisbane seeking out illicit substances. Often this included what people referred to as ‘doctor shopping’; that is to say, attempting to obtain pain killing prescriptions from a range of different medical practitioners. On many occasions, however, people simply waited for their substance to arrive. Indeed, when research participants were ‘sitting around’, they were often not simply affected by alcohol and substances, but also waiting for their substances to be delivered. This involved prior planning or knowledge, and interactions among people. Moreover, people were assured their substance would arrive, and thus justify their
waiting, sometimes for a whole day, because the anticipated substance was acquired through a prescription at a pharmacy, and delivered by a friend or acquaintance.

With the possible exception of marijuana, which was spoken about by nearly everyone, most people misused either their own, or more often, medication not prescribed for them. The medications most often misused were opiate derivatives. People accessed these through both painkilling prescriptions and opiate replacement programs, such as the ‘methadone program’. Misusing prescription medication, either using that which has not been prescribed, or intravenously injecting a medication that is supposed to be taken orally, was seen as a favourable alternative to substances made illegally. Tolly explains:

Um and now, at least you know if you buy a morphine pill you’re going to get a result. If you buy the heroin that’s around here, you might not. You’re lucky if you get a couple of percent. Waste of money. You know if you going to pay 50 dollars for a morphine pill you’re at least going to feel it. You going to get out of it. But if you pay 50 dollars for a packet of heroin around here you might not. And we can’t afford to waste that type of money.

It was not simply the case that research participants acquired and used alcohol and illicit substances on a daily basis, but I have tried to demonstrate in this discussion that this acquisition/use was both a conscious and planned act. Comments from Tolly, Oliver and Jim exemplify this. Most research participants, especially eighteen of the twenty interview participants, organised their day-to-day lives around this activity. Building on this, the following chapter explores the importance of substance and alcohol use with reference to social interactions. In the same way that alcohol and illicit substance use constituted significant parts of people daily lives, it has shown how this use organised social interactions and friendships.

I am conscious that documenting how the majority of research participant’s days were characterised by alcohol and illicit substance use may portray them in a problematic light. Indeed, this documentation may support the proposition that their failings – their alcohol and substance use, explains their homelessness. There is already a disproportionate
literature that focuses on negative attributes, or problematic co-occurrences of people who are homeless (Fertig and Reingold 2008; Hodder et al. 1998; Kamieniecki, 2001; Teesson et al. 2003). Yeich (1994, p. 26) suggests this literature has the consequence of justifying individualised homelessness responses at the expense of structural considerations. Irrespective of how the documentation of the high rates of substance and alcohol use may portray people in this study, to accurately represent aspects of their lives – to convey something of their personal identities in a manner that is meaningful to them, it is important to include their use of alcohol and illicit substances.

People spoke openly about their use, and often misuse of alcohol and substances. But of greater significance, people overwhelmingly described elements of who they were, and how they understood their lives, with direct reference to their use/misuse of alcohol and illicit substances. By reporting on these self-defined problematic behaviours, I can juxtapose them to their aspirations and worldviews, which they perceived as ‘mainstream’. This juxtaposition challenges a one-dimensional suggestion that the problematic behaviours people engage in amounts to who they are, and how they think.

Further, the significance of the discussion on alcohol and substance use, together with the descriptive accounts of day-to-day lives, becomes further evident in the following two chapters. In these chapters it will be demonstrated how this discussion provides a necessary platform to understand social interactions, the meaning of home, the enactment of identities, and the manner in which the display of these day-to-day routines is implicated in the ways ‘homeless people’ are represented.

5.4 Worldviews

Consistent with some of the underlying themes presented in the second chapter, the present discussion has documented aspects of research participants’ lives, both prior to and during homelessness, that do in fact convey a side of them as ‘different’. They had experienced problematic childhoods and adolescence. In most cases they were estranged from people they considered significant, including their own children. Their lives during
the period of this fieldwork appeared to be a continuation of these similar histories. Research participants’ days were characterised by alcohol and substance use; no one was engaged in the labour market, education or training, and no one was providing care for family. They described their day-to-day lives as boring and tedious.

Coming into this study, I did not expect people would perceive, and describe to me their lives in such overwhelmingly negative and problematic ways. Indeed, it was with initial apprehension that I reported on these stereotypical aspects of people’s lives. As already pointed out, however, these life events, experiences and activities were all important to research participants. Likewise, they were eager to show me that how they lived, did not account for who they were. In the remainder of the chapter, I argue that research participants’ perspectives on homelessness, their values and understandings of what constituted ‘mainstream’ society, are inconsistent with the way they lived. By illustrating their ‘mainstream’ and otherwise unremarkable side, this ‘worldviews’ discussion challenges an assumption of them as ‘different’.

The term ‘worldviews’ is used to encompass the ways in which people thought about themselves, their values and their aspirations – the ways in which they saw the world and their place within it. From the onset of fieldwork, it became apparent that many research participants were not only happy to engage in ‘worldview’ discussions, but many had given this area of thought much prior consideration. People expressed an overwhelming belief that how they were living was contrary to social norms. With equal consistency, they also unambiguously stated that how they were living was contrary to how they wanted to live. Their state of homelessness, therefore, was not something enjoyed, and people articulated a desire to live differently. Indeed, people valued housing, and the ‘normal’ life they associated with it. A number of research participants, however, expanded upon and even seemingly contradicted this view, to point out that in some sense they had chosen the state of homelessness they described as both problematic and contrary to their aspirations and values.

In this section, I bring all these views together, illustrating that people’s perspectives
were in stark contrast to how they lived. Initially, I document how they recognised that their current ways of living – their homelessness, were at odds with what they thought was ‘normal’ society. Research participants spoke about homelessness as negative with specific reference to the ‘normal’ and ‘mainstream’ life from which they were excluded. The ways in which ‘mainstream’ society was seen as the ‘normal’, and homelessness problematic, importantly, was rationalised with the benefit of lived experiences. Next, I outline assertions that, while not enjoyable and distinct from ‘normal’ society, research participants generally saw themselves as responsible for their homelessness. I conclude this section by suggesting that they recognised that their self-perceptions as ‘normal’ were contrary to public perceptions.

5.4.1 Perspectives on homelessness and ‘mainstream’ society

I said “when we get a house Wayne, build yourself another bike”. I said “don’t get no mad big bike; just get something we can cruise around in, and head out into the country. You know, and lay it out on the river bank somewhere. Something we can do quietly and enjoy”. Shelly

At first, Shelly’s comments appear innocuous: when she gets a house she wants to lay out on a riverbank. At the time she made the comments, however, she lived in a tent on the riverbank. Shelly did not experience this as ‘normal’ or moreover, desirable. Rather, she wanted a ‘normal’ life in a house so the riverbank could be perceived as ‘normal’ and pleasurable. Shelly’s remarks convey the essence of this section: research participants saw their lives in ways far from ‘normal’; nonetheless it was ‘normal’ lives they wanted. People in this study articulated a clear understanding of what they perceived as ‘normal’ society, or a ‘normal’ way of living, and expressed these views in the context of, or juxtaposed to, how they perceived their lives were in reality. A ‘normal’ person, or way of living, furthermore, was not something that people described in ambiguous or contested ways. Rather they were clear: ‘normal’ involved employment and having a home. When people spoke about abnormality, I asked them to explain what was normal:

I don’t really care about these junkies, but normal people I do, I feel real weird. Alex
So when you say normal people, who, what do you mean by that? Cameron

Workers, people who work mate you know. Alex

Live a normal life. Bruno

And what’s a normal life for you? Cameron

Just get off the street, you know, have somewhere to stay, watch TV, cook. Fucking do our washing. Live just a normal life, like normal people do. What we haven’t been doing. Bruno

I’m a failure, I’m a failure. All my family are successful people with homes and businesses. I’m a failure; all I’ve got is a dog. Chris

The ‘normal’ life was something that was not only clearly described, but something that people thought they were not living. Normal life was distant from their problematic life, and as Alex makes clear, they spoke as if they were not living like ‘normal’ people. Research participants’ beliefs about what constitutes a ‘normal’ life challenge and extend the proposition that the ‘homeless’ are outside of ‘mainstream’ norms (Marsh 2006; Stephenson 2006), or hold “antithetical values to the mainstream” (Chamberlain et al. 2007, p. 30). People in this study were not living in a homeless vacuum, where they either normalised their lives, or were unaware of how people not experiencing homelessness were living. While I have previously shown how their day-to-day lives may be considered outside of social norms, their comments overwhelming suggest that they were aware that how they were living was distinct from how the majority of people lived.

Further to this awareness, research participants felt that they held ‘mainstream’ norms similar to those in broader society. On the other hand, they expressed a view that their current ways of living were in tension with the ‘mainstream’ norms they held. Tim and Wayne’s comments illustrate these sentiments:
I’ve got to get back into the workforce; this is not like me at the moment. Like me dad you know, he’s 65 and he’s still working. That’s what I want to get back into. That’s more like me. Tim

See me wife, it upsets me, but I’m letting her down. I feel like I’m not looking after her, which is the way it’s meant to be. I need to step up to the plate. I need to sort this out, get a house, so I can do a proper job. Wayne

I understood that people’s comments about their lives as problematic, and their desire to live what they saw as a ‘mainstream’ life reflected what homelessness meant, and what exiting it would mean to them. Some postmodernist (Baudrillard 1990; Derrida 1976) and some of Foucault’s earlier (1970, 1972, 1977) ideas were considered in chapter three. While these accounts differ, they can been seen as taking a view that the subject is created through discourse, and that the views individuals express can be understood as an imposition, or the result of dominant influences or discourses. In this context, these views closely approximate the work of Marcuse (1972, p. 19), who argued that people have both ‘true’ and ‘false’ needs. The latter views are those superimposed on people, indoctrinating them into a state of ‘false consciousness’ (Marcuse 1972, p. 24). From this perspective, a contrasting interpretation of research participants comments about the undesirability of homelessness vis-à-vis the desirability of the ‘mainstream’, would consider how these asserted views represent ‘false needs’, or are merely the product of dominant discourse.

Arguably Marsh (2006) exemplifies this contrasting interpretation. She believes that when people who were homeless spoke about an awareness of social norms, they were unconsciously internalising social norms to try and fit in (Marsh 2006, p. 99). Stephenson takes a similar view, arguing that people who are homeless can only attempt to have a “symbolic connection to mainstream society” (2006, p. 31). These positions tend to suggest that people experiencing homelessness possess social norms distinct from the ‘mainstream’, and comments they make about aligning themselves or desiring to more fully participate in the ‘mainstream’ are not reflective of their true position.
I question the applicability of this ‘false needs’ or ‘false consciousness’ account to explain research participant’s thoughts and desires to participate in what they saw as ‘mainstream’ society. Scott (1985, p. 287) suggests that it is the time spent with ‘marginalised’ people among their peers – an ethnographic engagement, that is important to understand whether the views they express about ‘mainstream’ society are constructed for the benefit of the dominant, or whether these views reflect how they think separate to the dominant. In situations where research participants were both among peers and members of what they considered ‘mainstream’ society, they not only spoke about a ‘normal’ life distinct to their own, but they spoke about how their lives were unpleasant and negative. My understanding that people were not passively recalling a dominant image of homelessness and ‘mainstream’ imposed upon them, but rather were speaking views free from external impositions is supported by the specific comments they made. If for example, they described homelessness or their lives as problematic, I asked them to elaborate:

You can’t lie in a bed; you haven’t got a shower or a toilet. You have to go up to Ozcare to shower, which is absolutely filthy, and half the blokes are punching on. Shelly

Why would you choose to live like this, and not have a bathroom and, or shower, and be able to, you know, go and have a tub when you want, go to the toilet when you want, you know. Andrew

We’re in hell; we’re walking around in hell. Michelle

In addition to Michelle’s remarks that homeless life was simply hell, people described the specific aspects of their lives that contributed to their negative experiences. In many cases, comments centred on practical things associated with homelessness, for instance, no bathroom or bedroom, which made the experience negative. As will be elaborated upon further in the next chapter, it was the practical things that they did not have access to during homelessness that informed their negative views. Indeed, they believed that these things lacking in their lives, things which made their lives problematic, would be
present if they were not homeless.

It is this reasoning about what the state of homelessness excludes, and what ‘normal’ life includes, which supports my interpretation that when research participants spoke about what homelessness meant to them, they were not expressing dominant and mainstream views imposed upon them. Lived experiences informed their views of homelessness. Research participants’ views of what constituted a ‘normal’ life, and what one would be like, were informed by the harsh experiences and deprivation of living in public, and the perceived benefits that come with participating in what they saw as ‘mainstream’ society. They outlined clear understandings of what constituted this society. Their experiences of homelessness were not expressed as a rejection of the ‘mainstream’. On the contrary, it was their experiences of homelessness that made ‘mainstream’ society look appealing.

5.4.2 Choice

Despite the many comments which portrayed their lives as homeless in negative and problematic ways, and their desires, clearly rationalised, to exit homelessness, eleven interview participants articulated a view that they had chosen homelessness. The notion of homelessness as chosen, or not, constitutes a significant area of the homelessness field, which has its origins in sociological debates about whether homelessness is best understood in either structure or agency terms (Chamberlain and Johnson 2003). With specific reference to choosing homelessness, Jordan (1994) has distinguished intentional choices from inadvertent choices. The former including romanticised portrayals of homelessness as the ‘free life’, and the latter including things like choosing to gamble which inadvertently leads to homelessness.

More contemporary researchers have thought choice is more appropriately understood in the context of decision (Beazley 1999), and the limited access to alternatives that make homelessness the decision of last resort. This position problematises the notion of choice – consideration is given to constraints and contexts that narrow and shape choices. For instance, women and children who experience ‘home’ as dangerous and problematic
places, ‘choose’ homelessness, but only over fear, abuse, oppression and violence in the ‘home’ (Robinson 2002; Wardhaugh 1999).

Consistent with reports from numerous studies (Clapham 2003; McNaughton 2008; Randall and Brown 2002; Ravenhill 2008), many research participants did note that they had chosen literal homelessness over other types of homeless accommodation, for example, boarding houses and hostels. No one mentioned choosing homelessness, however, in the context of last resort, or even as a constrained choice. Rather, homelessness was spoken about by each of the eleven interview participants as an indirect choice; a choice, moreover, subordinate to other ‘choices’ they made. Here are some representative examples of how choosing homelessness was rationalised:

What money I get, it’s not enough for me to indulge how I want, and pay rent. So I’ve decided to skip rent, so I can indulge myself more – that’s why. That’s the same as nearly everybody, especially down here. You know. I know people by accident, and by misfortune do become homeless, but those that do, that are wanting a place, get it very quickly you know. It’s only those that want their money for other reasons. They’re the ones that stay homeless… And once you work out that, shit I can stay down here for nothing, and go up there and get fed for nothing, and go over there, and people come here and, all of a sudden, it’s too easy to stay out here you know. Yeah and I’ll be honest with you you know, its drugs that keep most of the people down here, or out on the street. Its either drugs or alcohol. Jim

Yeah well down here – the reason I’m on the riverbank is because of my drug habit. I can’t afford to go out and pay rent, because every cent I get goes to drugs when I’m here. So whatever’s left after visiting the kids, goes up my arm. Tolly

These sentiments underscore both the importance of substance misuse in their lives, and the way substance misuse is perceived to explain their life situations. People understood their experiences of homelessness as resulting from their choices to misuse alcohol and illicit substances. Thus homelessness was a choice, even though, as we have already seen, homelessness was perceived as undesirable. At first, this may appear as a contradiction.
Why indirectly choose homelessness, if it is experienced as undesirable, and a barrier to living a purported desired ‘normal’ life in the ‘mainstream’? If people are choosing homelessness does this mean that they do not want the life they told me they did? Interview participants rationalised this apparent contradiction by emphasising their feelings of powerlessness, limited capacity, and always self-blame.

While Chris and Pat were the only two people who mentioned structural factors, such as lack of housing, all interview participants, including Chris and Pat, blamed themselves for their homelessness. This self-blame, expressed as individual choices, explains why people were able to say that they were choosing something that they did not like. They took responsibility for their actions, which were primarily substance misuse, and expressed powerlessness, and in many cases frustration, at an inability to overcome them. This frustration was evident when people explained why they had chosen homelessness:

Yeah, why can’t I, on pay day go get a room or something, you know. Why don’t I do that, instead of go buy drugs. That’s some sort of problem there, isn’t there. Isn’t there really. Why can’t I just go up there and get a $120 room or something you know. Alex

But no, I’ve cocked up my life. But in a nutshell, we’re here because of our own fault. When it comes down to it. And you know people say no, no, no, but we are because if we hadn’t chosen that side of life we wouldn’t be here. You know, so. We’ve got no one to blame but ourselves … Um I definitely do blame the drugs for that, but I blame me for the drugs. Shelly

Yeah in a way I chose it. Um because I don’t want to keep going up to my family, and saying, I’m 45 I can’t get my shit together, I can’t get my shit together, can I stay here until I get all my shit together. Um I don’t want that. I’m big enough now, to sit down, and try and work my own problems out, without people saying this is what you’ve got to do, this is what you can’t do. I don’t need that. I’ve got my own mind, my own brain, my own body, and I want to try and work it out without anyone helping me. It might take a while, but eventually hopefully I get there. Or if not, I die on the street. Pat

It’s not just not being able to get a house. It’s a full mental disorder almost I think. Because
I’ve had plenty of opportunities to get a house really, when I think about it. Every payday
I’ve got the opportunity to go out and buy a fucking, you know, pay 240 bucks and move
into a boarding house if I really wanted to. With a TV and a fridge. 135 a week, so what’s
that, 260 I’d have to pay, no 270. You know it’s not that much when you think about it out
of 400 dollars. It would still leave me with 130, 140 to play with. Which is plenty for a bit
of alcohol, and you know some cigarettes, and payoff my methadone. Keith

Eleven interview participants expressed a view that they had chosen homelessness. When
this view was explored, it became apparent that homelessness was an indirect choice; a
choice subordinate to their choice to use illicit substances. While they strongly argued
that they had chosen, and were continuing to choose, homelessness, this was not because
they enjoyed it. Each of them provided concrete and unequivocal examples of their
negative homelessness experiences. Rather homelessness was a choice, only in that it was
consequential to their choice of substance use. When I asked the people who stated they
had chosen homelessness, whether they would choose homelessness over their own
house, they all stated that they would choose their own house if it was a conceivable
choice.

People referred to homelessness as a choice, but this choice was constructed from a
position where they did not perceive their own house as an option. Rationalised in the
context of a consequence stemming from addiction, people felt powerless to choose to
participate in the ‘mainstream’ they idealised. Jim’s comment is indicative of this view:

I can’t see any way out of it. Can’t see any way. Jim

They emphasised their individual responsibility – they had chosen homelessness, but
people felt relatively powerless to do otherwise. This was further evident in the way Alex
and Keith, for example, spoke about “getting fixed” by the methadone program. Or the
way Mark, Oliver, Tim, Andrew, Wayne, Shelly, Chris and Phil all spoke about their
only ability to exit homelessness on the basis of being given a house. As other Australian
researchers have found (Zufferey and Kerr 2004), when discussing entry to
homelessness, research participants emphasised their responsibility – their agency – their
choices to misuse illicit substances and alcohol. This is in contrast to remarks made about exiting homelessness, where they spoke exclusively about their powerlessness, which was framed in the context of addiction.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to speculate about the causes of homelessness, and especially to unpack research participants’ comments about where responsibility for their homelessness lies. Their remarks about these matters, however, offer some insights into their personal identities. Consistent with the idea of ‘false needs’ or dominant influences and subjectification considered earlier, Peel (2003, p. 79) posits that disadvantaged people who reflect upon their own actions to explain their disadvantage are “successful products of an understanding of poverty in which the first question is what you did to cause your own suffering”. Parker and Fopp (2004) note a similar perspective; while acknowledging individual capacity for agency, they also suggested that people experiencing homelessness voicing the types of self-blame comments research participants made are an illustration of the powerful influence of what Foucault calls the “technologies of domination” (2004, p. 151).

The applicability of these analyses notwithstanding, by asserting their role in choosing homelessness, research participants were emphasising their agency. They were not passive or deficient individuals who were made homeless. While recognising the barriers they confronted to accessing their own tenancy, by positioning themselves as autonomous and individuals, they were emphasising the similarities they shared with the individuals they thought made up the ‘mainstream’. The emphasis they placed on individual, albeit problematic, choices can be seen as de-emphasising the difference that living in public spaces creates between them and the ‘mainstream’ they aligned themselves with.

5.4.3 Values

Consistent with an espoused desire to exit homelessness and live a ‘normal’ life, were people’s self-perceptions and values. While they experienced the state of homelessness as making them feel inadequate, they felt like ‘ordinary’ people, who held what they
considered to be ‘mainstream’ values. The ordinary values that research participants spoke of differ to the values historically ascribed to those ‘disaffiliated’ (Bahr 1973; Bahr and Caplow 1974; Caplow et al. 1968; Wallace 1965), or those engaging in an Australian ‘homeless subculture’ (Chamberlain et al. 2007; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Davis 1993; Davis and Costello 1992). Perhaps more importantly, however, research participants expressed a range of values which were in tension with the ways they described their day-to-day lives as ‘problematic’ and ‘out of the ordinary’.

I gained an understanding of people’s values and how they thought about themselves, through spending time with them alone and in groups, informally conversing with them, and listening in on their conversations. Insights I gained through these means, I further explored with interview participants during more formalised interviews. In the formalised interview context, I specifically asked questions such as: “Who are you as a person”? “What things are important to you”? People’s routine response to this avenue of inquiry overtly emphasised how they were not only ordinary, but they would like others to see them in this ordinary light:

*Easy going, helpful. I’m not a troublemaker, you know I’m not out to cause trouble or nothing. Just try to be normal and average I guess. But um, yeah just see me like everyone else yeah. Phil*

*Just an average everyday person, that’s trying his best to get along with life. Um and to work his problems out the best way he can … yeah all I want in life is to be treated with respect like everyone else gets treated. Pat*

*Um as a normal person. You know as just a normal everyday Joe Blow, whose just trying to survive. Know what I mean. That’s all it is. It’s not living, its just surviving at the moment. You know, I want to live. Eventually I want to be, have a car, have a boat. Maybe find a new misses and maybe settle down. Maybe wake up next to someone in their arms in the morning would be nice. So just to be able to sit back and relax like an old man on the porch with a pipe hanging out of my mouth and a newspaper, that would be fine for me. You know just some relaxation time is what I’m looking for now. And a house. Keith*
Well, us getting off the street, having a stable place to stay, and staying clean, and just staying on the program, not using. Bruno

Yeah, if I ever won um, even 20 thousand dollars, I would get myself, depending on how much money of course, acres out in the bush. I would be happy out there. Sitting out there, brew me own beer, grow me own pot. That’s it. Having a veggie garden you know. Jim

People tended to elaborate upon their responses to questions about who they were, or what was of importance to them, by describing their self-proclaimed ordinariness. They were ordinary people, and they wanted to just live ordinary lives. An ‘ordinary’, or regular person, was seen as someone who valued and participated in ‘mainstream’ society. Their comments about what constitute an ordinary person, and their alignment with this ordinariness, supports their aspirations to exit homelessness and live differently.

In addition to this emphasis on their ‘ordinariness’, people highlighted more positive aspects of themselves. In fact, in response to my direct question: “Can you tell me about what type of person you are”, thirteen interview participants mentioned, and then gave examples of their caring and generous side:

Yeah I think I am pretty caring, pretty caring giving, you know considerate to my fellow man. Tim

I know I would be a good father and um – pretty compassionate person um. I will help anyone out, give anyone a go. Andrew

There’s a lot of things I’ve done that I’m not proud of. Um, but I’d like to be seen for the caring thoughtful person I am you know. I love my son dearly. Oliver

I would say I believe, and I have been told by other people that, I’m a good person at heart, but I make a lot of silly decisions … Yeah I’m a drug addict; I’m an anomaly I suppose. I see myself as a good person, I just do bad things, but not bad to people. Wayne
This idea of caring is further explored in the following chapter when considering social interactions and friendships. The examples above, however, are not related to specific incidences of people expressing care. These comments were expressed to convey a side of themselves they wanted me to know about. Indeed, from all of the comments made about their ordinary and caring nature, it would appear as though they were aware of a prevailing image of people who are homeless as uncaring and unusual. When speaking about how he would protect, with violence if necessary, a female who was sleeping rough at Riverside Drive, Chris made his understanding of this perception most clear, when he loudly proclaimed to me: “just because we live like this doesn’t mean we don’t have morals”. Glen did similar, explaining to me that he wanted housing because he “had morals”.

These remarks indicate that they were conscious I would understand their comments on violence, or their state of homelessness, to be an illustration of moral deficiency. When given an opportunity to describe who they were, they tended to emphasise their caring nature with reference to the negative person they were not.

I understood the comments and claims people made about themselves and the values they held as important to understanding aspects of who they were. First, while the veracity of their claims are not easily substantiated, these claims illustrated that interview participants were eager to emphasise to me their positive attributes beyond their state of homelessness. The consistency with which people emphasised their ordinary and ‘mainstream’ identities and values, can be seen as an attempt to challenge and undermine perceptions of them as negative. As made evident by Chris and Glen, these may be perceptions they assumed I had. But further to this, research participants on the whole were clearly aware that the manner in which they lived was contrary to many societal norms. As such, they appeared conscious that other people would interpret this way of living as characterising the people they were. They did not feel that this was the case, and their comments about their ordinariness can be seen as an illustration of their efforts to counter a perception that they believed the broader public may have.
Observations and understandings of interview participants I gleaned separate to their direct self-assertions provides further context and support for their self-proclaimed caring and thoughtful sides. I understood people’s conversations among themselves, their general presentations, and remarks they made to me informally to be further telling of their values and identities. Indeed, what I heard and observed in these contexts is consistent with the ‘mainstream’ values they spoke of.

An interaction I had with Chris is a salient example. When visiting him in hospital where he was receiving treatment for burns he received while incapacitated from illicit substances, he demonstrated that the concern and empathy for others he had spoken to me about previously was reflected in his behaviours.

Chris was visibly upset and crying. He described to me how an hour earlier, a nurse taking blood from him pricked herself with the needle – penetrating her skin with a ‘dirty’ needle used on him. Chris explained how he was hepatitis C positive, and the needle prick would have likely resulted in the nurse contracting the disease. He continually said, becoming more upset each time, “the nurse now has a nervous wait”, and how “she will now have to go home and explain this to her family”. In expressing empathy towards the nurse, Chris also blamed himself, saying it was unfair that his drug use had this affect on someone trying to help him. Fieldwork journal, Chris (16 April 2008)

Another example which supports the ‘mainstream’ and caring values people expressed during interviews comes from a conversation I was privy to between Tim, Andrew, Oliver, and two other people who were homeless as we sat at Riverside Drive. A male and his pregnant female partner approached us sitting as a group, where the male enquired about the availability of illicit substances. Members of the group refused, and advised they did not know of the location of any substances. After the male and his partner left, the group spoke about their outrage at the prospect of the female using illicit substances whist pregnant. They expressed a clear view that the child protection authorities should remove the child upon birth, or otherwise the cycle of abuse would continue.
Most clearly, this exchange demonstrated research participants’ values that are both consistent with the Queensland child protection legislation, and I would suggest, consistent with broader Australian expectations. While each of them was happy to use and sometimes sell illicit substances, they were concerned about the impacts of illicit substance use upon a foetus who could not choose otherwise and thus deserved protection. Further to this, their values expressed in relation to this challenged some of my initial assumptions about how the people in this study thought. During the time of fieldwork, I was also employed as a child protection worker. I decided, however, to conceal this position to research participants, as I had, incorrectly it appears, assumed they would hold negative views about child protection authorities.

When either responding to questions about the type of people they were, or when engaging in everyday conversation, research participants emphasised aspects of themselves separate to their homelessness. In fact, some research participants explained this by pointing out that their values and things that they considered to be important were the same throughout their lives, regardless of their homelessness status at the time. Homelessness only appeared important in that research participants appeared cognisant that their values would be interpreted through this lens. Other researchers have noted that people experiencing homelessness employ strategies to distance themselves from a problematic homeless role (Farrington and Robinson 1999; Johnson et al. 2008; Osborne 2002; Snow and Anderson 1993). People in this study saw themselves as good people in ways unrelated to their homelessness. But they similarly recognised that public perceptions of homelessness were at odds with how they saw themselves. In turn, they ensured that I was aware they considered themselves good people, whose experiences of homelessness did not determine their ordinariness, or indeed difference.

5.5 Conclusion

In closing this chapter, I want to bring together, and emphasise two of the most important themes discussed thus far. The first highlights a contrast between how people lived, and how they saw themselves as people. The second theme suggests that homelessness, while
a negative experience, was seen as a consequence of other life problems. More importantly, homelessness was expressed as largely inconsequential for how they saw themselves as individuals. The former theme has been clearly discussed throughout, and further consideration of it here, will be brief, primarily noting how it will be extended in the two subsequent chapters. I have only implicitly alluded to how homelessness assumes a subordinate role to other aspects of people’s identities, and I will dedicate much of this conclusion to drawing this point out more clearly.

Pleace (1998, p. 57) notes that the homeless literature is not inherently bad or inherently good, but the mere fact that there is a homelessness literature in its own right demonstrates a fundamental methodological flaw. Here Pleace is pointing out that homelessness, while objectively real, is not a unique problem that can be studied independent of society. I concur with Pleace’s comments, and add to them. Homelessness not only needs to be understood with reference to a broader context, but the people who are homeless, and their life histories and experiences separate to their homelessness, must be considered when understanding who those people are. In varying ways, people in this study all demonstrated how their experiences of homelessness were largely unimportant in understanding who they were and how they saw themselves.

By suggesting they were responsible for their homelessness, I understood that research participants were emphasising their agency. They were not deficient people who were passively made homeless. In this respect, I suggested that they positioned themselves as individuals not dissimilar to those they saw making up the ‘mainstream’. Homelessness was secondary and consequential, and by linking homelessness to choices they had made, they were not a specific type of person, but an ordinary individual who had made bad choices.

No one self-identified with the term ‘homeless person’, or thought homelessness was something that best defined them. Unlike participants in the study conducted by Johnson et al. (2008, p. 208), research participants did not even align themselves with a ‘homeless identity’ to invert the stigma of homelessness and find a sense of belonging. Personal
identities, rather, were linked to major life problems, for example, substance and alcohol misuse, and major life experiences, such as family and family separation. Indeed, it is these lived experiences and life histories prior to homelessness that may explain why homelessness was not spoken about as important to personal identities. Unlike other studies that have documented how the state of homelessness, especially as it becomes long term, represents a dramatic shift in people’s lives (Chamberlain and Johnson 2002; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003; Snow and Anderson 1993; Wolch and Dear 1993), homelessness and the associated life experiences that accompanied it for people in this study appeared to be a continuation of life histories.

Prior to homelessness, people spoke about feeling alienated and disconnected from family and society. Literal homelessness in adulthood therefore, did not constitute a transformation in identity. Understanding personal identities, and why the present state of homelessness did not constitute a part of that identity, required understanding the lives and indeed personal identities of research participants prior to homelessness.

Further to this, individual identities were expressed as ‘ordinary’; ordinariness was explained as wanting to exit homelessness and participate in ‘mainstream’ society. This notion of ‘mainstream’ society is extended in the following chapter. Obtaining housing is central to participating in the ‘mainstream’, with housing constructed as synonymous with ‘home’. I argue that an understanding of their day-to-day lives and broader life experiences and histories illuminates the meanings they associated with the ‘mainstream’ and home.

The next chapter also explores how, in addition to homelessness not being definitive on a personal level, contrary to what others (see chapter two) have found, people did not identify as part of a homeless collective or social identity. Consistent with the importance of alcohol and illicit substance: both important to their day-to-day lives and their sense of self, I show how the few people who spoke about themselves as part of a collective, did
so with reference to illegal substances and alcohol.

By providing selected examples of research participants’ day-to-day activities, and documenting some of their worldviews, I have noted a tension between the way they perceived their daily lives, on the one hand, and the type of people they were, on the other. A detached observation or reporting on the activities that constitute research participants day-to-day lives would indeed support their positioning as ‘different’. Through the process of engaging with them through ethnographic research, however, an appreciation of their commonalities was realised. People in this study were not only aware that how they lived was different, but they strongly argued that this difference did not characterise who they were. They saw themselves as ‘normal’ individuals in ways unrelated to the experiences of homelessness, but they held a view that their experiences of homelessness were far from ‘normal’.
Chapter 6  Friendships, place and home

6.1  Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous by documenting the role of social interactions and public places in research participants’ day-to-day lives. These two areas are interrelated, with social interactions occurring in public places, on the one hand; and public places being perceived as problematic because of social interactions, on the other. Initially, the significance of friendships is demonstrated. To varying degrees, emotional support, reciprocity and substance and alcohol use underpin the nature and importance of friendships. I will argue that an understanding of the friendships formed and the reasons for doing so, all offer insights into research participants’ varied personal identities.

As with the contention in the previous chapter, by highlighting these aspects of people’s lives, this discussion similarly serves to de-emphasise the salience of homelessness to explaining either their social or personal identities. Although research participants mostly interacted with others who were homeless, these interactions and relationships were not symbolic of a ‘homeless social identity’. Likewise, research participants did not perceive of these relationships as influencing or supporting a personal view of themselves as homeless individuals. With a focus on social interactions, the initial part of this chapter responds to secondary research question number two: What do research participants perceive influences, or acts as reference points for their personal identities?

Drawing on ideas important to the concept of ‘place identity’, the second half of this chapter explores uses of, and ideas about, public places and home. I argue that this discussion provides an understanding of the pragmatic way places are approached, and subsequently, that research participants’ use of place offers further insights into their personal identities. As such, secondary research question number three is of importance to this discussion: What constitutes home for research participants, and what do their meanings of home suggest about their personal identities? Public places were specifically
used on the basis of the functions they enabled. Research participants lamented at the lack of control and safety experienced in public places. Likewise, when they described what home was or meant to them, autonomy, security, and places where control could be gained and exercised were important.

6.2 Friendships

This discussion on friendships is located within the socially embedded nature of identity informing the study, whereby it is understood that “one cannot be a self on one’s own” (Taylor 1989, p. 36). A consideration of research participants’ identities within the context of their friendships and broader social networks is particularly important. Recall from chapter two that social relationships and friendships were central to explaining a distinctive collective, or ‘subculture of homelessness’ (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998; Davis 1993; Davis and Costello 1992; Johnson and Chamberlin 2008a; Johnson et al. 2008; Pears and Noller 1995; Wilson and Arnold 1986). This following discussion aims to describe the types of friendships research participants had, and consider what these friendships meant to them.

Friends assumed a significant role in the lives and day-to-day routines of nearly every person in this study. Further to this, these friendships were primarily between research participants and other people who were homeless. Rarely did I observe, or did research participants refer to, friends who were not homeless. As I will discuss below, however, often they did not know the homelessness or housing status of the people they engaged in ‘friend-like’ relationships with. When speaking about their friends, who they were and what they meant to them, for example, many drew what at times were ambiguous and fluid distinctions. On the one hand, they spoke about their ‘true’ friends, and on the other, they spoke about people who they engaged in meaningful ‘friend-like’, but emotionally detached, relationships with. I will now offer some examples and a brief explanation of the differences between these two types of friendships, before considering what these friendships say about their identities.
When speaking about a ‘true’ friend, all research participants routinely evoked the importance of trust and good character. These types of friendships occurred among people who shared similar interests and enjoyed spending time with each other. Indeed, the boredom that characterised their daily routines, the long periods of time they spent ‘sitting around’, meant that friends helped alleviate this boredom. The day-to-day lives reported in the previous chapter, I observed in the context of interactions and engagement with friends. Research participants also linked their broader life histories and experiences to what a ‘true’ friend meant to them:

You know like, I just kind of need someone that that would, is willing to listen and talk to me. That’s where Chris, that’s where Chris comes in handy, because he does listen, and talk, you know, he lets me talk. And he talks to me too, about what happened when he was forty. Tim

See these couple of guys here are so straight up and up front, and there’ve made life a lot easier for me. And it’s the sort of friendship, where it’s really out in the open. There’s no, I don’t have to be somebody else, I can just be me. It is important to me at the moment. Oliver

Having friends that are there to listen to you and help you. I have a lot of friends around here. It makes you feel more, not as insecure. Geoff

A ‘true’ friend was considered important because of the emotional and intrinsic value they provided. This type of emotional support was emphasised as important to help deal with personal problems. Although it is difficult to convey by quoting research participants, they also spoke about a true friend as being a nice, friendly and likeable person. When describing to me his two close friends, Chris conveys this by simply saying that they “are just good blokes”, and because of this, “we’ve been friends for years now”.

From this perspective, their ideas of friendship were unremarkable. For research participants, consistent with the scholarly literature exploring the concept of friendship (Asher and Parker 1989; Bukowski and Hoza 1989; Castan 2004; Furman and
Buhrmester 1985), friends were people they could talk to, people who would listen to them, and people with whom they shared similar worldviews and personalities.

So while the importance of a ‘true’ friend was heightened because of loneliness and personal problems, from the discussion presented thus far research participants’ ideas of friendships are not most appropriately understood with reference to their homelessness. ‘True’ friends were good people who played a significant role in their lives, and ‘true’ friendships were formed and premised at an individual personal level, rather than a homeless group or collective level. No one ever spoke about a ‘true’ friend in terms of their homeless or housing status.

Differing to the ‘true’ friend characterised by intrinsic value and emotional support, most research participants also described the ‘friend-like’ relationships they engaged in. As with a ‘true’ friend, ‘friend-like’ relationships were considered to be important. This importance, however, related to the physical resources and practical benefits that ‘friend-like’ relationships enabled. ‘Friend-like’ relationships were emphasised with reference to the use and access of resources. These comments are representative:

Like don’t get me wrong, I’m still into drugs and that, but I’ve got friends that you know, like pay days we help each other and that. Um, yeah I’m the same as people around here – most of them. They just try and work off each other. You know, when they get paid and that. Alex

Yeah I know like, one of my mates has gone off now to get his daily doses. He’s on 300 mls of Cafenol every day. Um, and I know that he’s going to give me the wash out of that. And to me, that’s as good as me going out and spending 50, 100 dollars. And I’m going to get it for nothing. … Without these guys help, I couldn’t afford it. I’d last two or three days, and my money would be out, and then I would be straight for the next 9 days or something. Yeah, I mean I’ve been broke all this week, but I’ve managed to have a taste everyday. Tolly

Nothing for nothing in this world anymore. Because I’m sick of being nice and getting
nothing back in return. Uncle Ikky, he lends me money every payday. On good faith that he will get it back on my payday. And it works, it works really fucking good. Because he gets paid on my off pay week. So I get 10 or 20 bucks off him, or sometimes 50 bucks off him. And on my payday I go and give it back to him, and buy him a cask on top. And that makes him happy. Keith

These types of ‘friend-like’ relationships were emphasised with reference to the practical function other people provided. In many cases, the practical function was companionship to consume alcohol or use illicit substances. I rarely observed people use alcohol alone. The use of illicit substances, while not always as clearly observable to me, was regularly described as taking place within the context of small groups. Similarly, other people played a central role in the acquisition of illicit substances. Consistent with international research with people who are homeless (Dordick 1997, p. 75; Wolch and Dear 1993, 254), exchange of practical resources underpins these relationships. As such, research participants’ ‘friend-like’ relationships can be understood within the context of addiction and the boredom that characterised their lives.

This understanding of a friend as provider of practical resources differs from the emotional support provided by a ‘true’ friend. Indeed, it was to my initial surprise that research participants so overtly emphasised the difference between the two types of friendships they had. They were seemingly happy to explain to me that some of the people they interacted with, they did so exclusively on the basis to acquire practical things – many in fact, used the terms ‘sort of a friend’, ‘like a friend’, or ‘friend-like’. This idea of a ‘friend-like’ relationship can be further distinguished from a ‘true’ friend, in that the latter was not only a person they had an emotional connection with, but also a person invariably described as positive. ‘True’ friends were always referred to as good people, or as Chris explained, as ‘good blokes’. This is in stark contrast to those people whom research participants had ‘friend-like’ relationships with, who were routinely described as annoying, untrustworthy and as thieves.
You know, you might be having a chat, and you get interrupted. Or they just stroll through here, instead of walking around. People around here annoy me; they’re disrespectful.
Andrew

You’ve got to watch out for the vultures around here. Tolly

People always going through your stuff think you’ve got drugs. Geoff

You know, and you’d watch them, come out of one tent, and go into another tent you know, because they know he’s not there. Go back, everyone will be sitting, the other bloke come back, “oh who knocked off me thing”. And I know that, that fella went in there, and they’d all be saying, “oh if we ever catch this bastard”. And I’m thinking yous are the one’s that’s doing it mate. Jim

These comments refer to people whom, to some extent, Andrew, Tolly, Geoff and Jim had ‘friend-like’ relationships with. They exchanged things and used alcohol and illicit substances in groups with them. Nonetheless, they also perceived of these people in negative and problematic lights. This perception of other people as potential threats is further considered below in the discussion of public places.

Consistent with my assumptions based on observations, research participants described their friendships as significant to them. Some broader meaning about their identities based on these friendships can also be inferred. First, on the basis of my understanding of their accounts, I have drawn a distinction between friendships that were intimate and those detached and premised on practical functions. Caution must be taken with extending this distinction too far. Pahl and Spencer (2004, p. 82), for example, have shown how a lack of intimacy with a person is not necessarily a signifier of their distant status. Also, drawing a distinction between friendships on the basis of whether they were spoken about as primarily resource based, or based on emotional connection, is not attuned to how friendships and relationships have elements of both.

Despite the blurred distinction between, and ambiguity within, these types of friendships,
they provide some insights into how research participants see themselves. ‘Friend-like’
relationships played an important function in promoting the access and exchange of
resources. This was often highlighted in the context of alcohol and illicit substances.
People engaged in these relationships so they could trade in illicit substances, pool money
together to purchase them and use them collectively. It is clear that these were strategic
and seemingly well structured relationships. They were based on reciprocity, and
compliance with certain obligations was required to maintain them. With people who
were homeless, similar types of relationships have been referred to as constituting a
‘homeless subculture’ (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1994; Chamberlain and MacKenzie
1998; Johnson and Chamberlin 2008a; Johnson et al. 2008).

Rather than seeing these structured and organised reciprocal relationships among people
who are homeless as characterising a ‘homeless subculture’, I would argue the contrary.
Although most of the people comprising these ‘friend-like’ relationships were homeless,
sometimes they were not. In fact, frequently research participants were unaware of the
homeless or housed status of people they consumed alcohol and illicit substances, or
engaged in ‘friend-like’ relationships with. This status was unimportant to them, and it
struck them as a strange question for me to ask.

On the other hand, it was the use and acquisition of alcohol and illicit substances that was
important to many of these ‘friend-like’ relationships and interactions. Homelessness did
not appear to be. In response to my questions about feeling part of a collective or
grouping, no one mentioned the existence of, or their membership in, a grouping
resembling a ‘homeless subculture’. There was no indication that homelessness was the
organising or defining trait of the relationships research participants had. Leaving to one
side the homogenising consequences that stem from using the term subculture (see
chapter 2), if the idea of a ‘subculture’ was a useful term to use, rather than a ‘homeless
subculture’, it may be more reflective of most research participants’ perspectives and
behaviours to refer to some of their friendships and relationships as substance and alcohol
use ‘subcultures’. Tolly’s comments are illustrative of this proposition. When describing
groupings and collectives at Riverside Drive, he did so with reference to alcohol and specific illicit substances used:

Like in the middle there, you’ve got you’re subi-kings [prescription medication Subutex]; they sell subi. Um than you’ve got you’re morphine users. Than you’ve got you’re alcoholics in the middle… You know which ones to stay away from, and you know which ones to go to. Tolly

Similarly, while these relationships were structured and organised, people in this study were acting independently and working towards individual ends. Instead of a subculture of people based on homelessness as such, they were individuals who engaged in reciprocal relationships to obtain and use illicit substances and alcohol. Their sole interest in the other person was what that person could provide them with – be it company or practical resources. These were individuals engaged in important relationships with each other, but these relationships did not extend beyond the function of exchange or use of substances/alcohol. As we saw in chapter three, a social identity, or an identity based on a collective or group membership such as a subculture, requires the individual seeing themselves as part of the group, and tying their individual identity within the broader schema of the group identity (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel 1981; Turner and Reynolds 2004). Living in public places meant that social interactions occurred primarily among others who were homeless, but research participants did not see their engagement in these relationships as denoting their collective ‘homeless identity’.

Research participants’ comments about their ‘true’ friends also provide some understanding of their perceptions of the self. They chose their ‘true’ friends on the basis of the positive qualities they thought these people had. They described ‘true’ friends as trustworthy, supportive, and good people like themselves. Other researchers (Snow and Anderson 1993, p. 195-6; Stephenson 2006, p. 63; Wolch and Dear 1993, p. 239-40) with people who are homeless have suggested that people seek friendships among those deemed to be in a similar situation to oneself as a means to achieve social validation. Research participants in this study formed friendships with people who were not only
homeless, but more importantly, with people they thought to possess good qualities like their own. From both observations and research participants’ direct assertions, there was no indication that ‘true’ friends were seen as a source to validate a ‘homeless identity’. Instead, ‘true’ friends were people who were seen as positive, and in a manner unrelated to their status as homeless.

The significance of friends and peer groups in validating and endorsing (Jenkins 2004; Lawler 2008) personal identities was considered in chapter three. Within this context, Kaufman and Johnson (2004) illustrated how people who perceived their homosexuality to be stigmatised, purposively engaged in social relationships with people who would support their positive self-perception. Most research participants can be seen to have behaved in a similar fashion. Even though their social relationships and friendships were drawn primarily from people who were homeless, as we saw in the previous chapter, they did not identify as a ‘homeless person’. They did not see their homelessness as important to explaining who they were, or how they saw the world. Research participants’ ‘true’ friends can be seen as supporting their identities which were positive and not based on their state of homelessness. Whereas many of the people they engaged in exchange based relationships with they saw as untrustworthy, the people they referred to as ‘true’ friends were always spoken about as positive and caring. Despite the negative perceptions they held towards some people who were homeless, and the recognition that homelessness was considered to be outside of ‘mainstream’ society, they formed ‘true’ friendships with those individuals seen in a positive light.

6.3 Public places

People in this study slept, engaged in relationships, and carried out their day-to-day lives in public places. Public places were important as they provided a physical context. Public places, however, were more than the backdrop to people’s lives. This section first discusses how research participants described their problematic lives as homeless with direct reference to the public places in which they lived. Extending the discussion on ‘friend-like’ relationships, a consideration is then given to what they did to negotiate the
problems associated with living in public places. I will demonstrate that while they exercised agency at shaping their lives in public places, by no means did they experience the public places in which they lived as home. The chapter concludes with a consideration of what home meant for research participants, and what this, together with their uses of and experiences in public places more generally, can illustrate about their identities.

While recognising the ambiguities in distinguishing between public and private places (Lofland 1998, p. 11-4), and that these distinctions are oriented towards domiciled populations (Wardhaugh 1996, p. 704), I conceptualise public places as those open and accessible to any citizen. Furthermore, I follow theorists who distinguish between the concepts of space and place (Casey 2001; Easthope 2004; Sack 2001), and refer to the latter in this thesis. Places are socially constructed, which people actively make (Massey 1995). The idea of place as something that people actively make is useful for capturing the experiences of research participants. They actively made places in which they lived and interacted, and, as opposed to spaces, these places held particular significance for them (Easthope 2004, p. 137; Lofland 1998, p. 64).

### 6.3.1 Public places as inhibiting control

As we have seen throughout this and the previous chapter, all of the people in this study have described much of their day-to-day lives as homeless in problematic terms. We saw, for example, that their daily lives were perceived as boring and monotonous. Indeed, it was briefly noted that many engaged in ‘friend-like’ relationships, partially at least, to overcome boredom and to secure and use alcohol and illicit substances. The problematic nature of research participants lives in public places cannot simply be attributed to their boredom, but perhaps more fundamentally, living in public places meant living a dangerous and insecure existence.

The majority of people in this study explained how being homeless meant they had limited capacity to secure their belongings. For the people who did not sleep in tents,
such as Jim, Mark, Keith, Floyd and Bruno, this problem was particularly acute. Floyd for instance, ‘stashed’ what belongings he had in secret positions in parks. In doing so, he knew that this only provided relative security, recognising that his hiding position would be located before long, and thus what he had stored would be subsequently stolen or thrown in the rubbish. Jim described the futility in accumulating possessions for this reason.

This lack of place to secure belongings was also apparent for the individuals who lived in tents at Riverside Drive. Each of them explained to me an expectation that their possessions would be stolen out of their tent, either while they were away, or when they were incapacitated from substances or alcohol. Comments already considered (section 6.2) from Tolly, Geoff and Jim about the people they had ‘friend-like’ relationships with also being people they did not trust highlight the lack of security people had over their personal belongings. Indeed, the formation of ‘friend-like’ relationships was presented as a means to mitigate these insecurities:

We’ve slowly got a group together now, like Gazza, although Warren’s moving, Tolly – we’re helping each other out. You know looking out for each other. We’re going to put our tents together, so you know when one’s got to go off they’re watching their tent. Wayne

In addition to life in public places equating to an inability to secure personal possessions, was the threat to personal safety. Many research participants explained how they both perceived and had experienced public places as dangerous:

Yeah, I could have been dead, I could be dead now. The fella who used to, you know, buy me, well he was going to take me out bush and kill me. Then Glen ends up coming along. Michelle

Yeah just getting her safe in case I get locked up. You know cause, to be down here as a women. Its just, well you know, I would be fretting everyday. Wayne
Do you feel like a part of a group with those people you were sitting with, or any people in here you hang out with? Cameron

No. I know I’m all right to sit with them. I will be safe with them at night. Because I have been beaten up here. But, if I sit and have a chat to them, I feel safe. But they’re not close friends. Jane

These comments, and the many other people who expressed their fear for personal safety, did so with exclusive reference to the dangers other people who were homeless posed. There is similarly a gender dimension to this perception of danger. For Michelle and Jane this was from lived experiences – they had experienced physical assaults in public places. For Wayne, this was a perceived threat to his wife if he was incarcerated, thereby leaving her to live in public without him to protect her. Although most other research participants did not have a female partner, like Wayne, they too expressed a strong view that females were at a particular risk of experiencing violence. This heightened threat to females living in public places has been widely considered and cited to explain the limited number of females who experience literal homelessness (Daly 1996, p. 13; Kennedy and Fitzpatrick 2001, p. 2004; Marsh 2006, p. 67; Wardhaugh 1996, p. 710; Wolch and Dear 1993, p. 280).

Many males participating in this study also spoke about violence they had experienced while living in public places. Some of them even linked this violence, in a manner consistent with the female participants, with a perception that their day-to-day lives were dangerous. Craig described how he doesn’t sleep when he ‘sleeps rough’, whereas Keith explained how, in his current ‘squat’, he sleeps with a smashed bottle. Although the female research participants more frequently and more explicitly described public places, and thus their lives, as dangerous, than did the male research participants, both groups used similar strategies to minimise this danger.

Like on the street, you don’t camp on your own, cause you could get robbed, mugged, raped. You know, get your guts kicked out of you. Pat
It is interesting to note that Pat and Keith were young, large and seemingly strong males. Their perceptions of danger were similar to Craig’s, a man aged in his sixties who could be described as vulnerable. Nearly all people in this study spoke about these perceptions and experiences of danger and violence, but gender, age or other variables did not appear important. To respond to these dangers and threats of violence, many of them formed friendships and interacted with each other to overcome the dangers associated with living in public places. While most had ‘true’ friends they trusted, most of the people they interacted with – people they had ‘friend-like’ relationships with, they did not trust. Other people who were homeless were generally seen as a threat to security and personal safety. For instance, when the people cited above spoke about having belongings stolen from their tent, or feeling physically threatened, they were referring to other people who were homeless as the threats. Nonetheless, research participants engaged in ‘friend-like’ relationships with people whom at times they did not trust, as a means to enhance their security and personal safety.

This illustrates the intertwined nature and importance of social interactions and public places. Other people experiencing homelessness are important to research participants because of the problematic aspects associated with living in public places. Interestingly, the problematic aspects of public places and the means to address them both involve other people who are homeless. It is other people who are homeless that the problematic experiences in public places are attributed to. That is to say, research participants perceived public places as problematic, because they are the venue for their interactions with other people who are homeless.

These perspectives differ from accounts in the research literature. A study from the U.S. found that people experiencing homelessness face the serious threat of assault from people outside of the homeless population (Wachholz 2005). Further, both Australian (Coleman 2000; Goldie 2008; Spooner 2001; Walsh 2005, 2006; Walsh and Taylor 2007) and international (Amster 2003; Fitzpatrick and Jones 2005; Mitchell 1997, 2003) studies have shown how it is state legislation that most negatively impacts upon the day-to-day
lives of people who live in public places. For people participating in this study, by contrast, public places were perceived as negative due to other people who were homeless posing threats to their personal safety and to the security of their belongings.

To address the negative experiences in public places, however, research participants engaged in ‘friend-like’ relationships with other people who were homeless. As I have shown, at times they did not even trust the people they engaged in these relationships with. Thus, these relationships with people who were homeless who they did not trust were a means to mitigate the risks these and other people who were homeless posed.

This discussion about public places and relationships can be seen as offering further support for the picture emerging of research participants as individuals whose identities are not adequately thought about with reference to a collective based on homelessness. Their relationships were strategic, and premised on their negative experiences in public places. These negative experiences in public places were essentially negative experiences with other people experiencing homelessness. Their strategic engagement and relationships with people perceived as problematically different to them, do not therefore, constitute their ‘homeless’ social identity.

In addition to this, it can also be seen that the experiences associated with living in public places contributed to feelings of homelessness. People in this study linked their negative experiences in public places with the dangers public places posed for them. By emphasising the insecure and dangerous nature of public places, a lack of agency was being emphasised. Living in public meant that otherwise taken for granted and indeed fundamental aspects of life were unachievable. Having limited agency over a physical place, meant that personal possessions could not be secured, and the threat to personal safety was always a reality. This lack of agency was not only about insecurity and danger, this lack of agency contributed to feeling homeless. Likewise, and as elaborated upon below, the lack of agency experienced in public places influenced how research participants understood and constructed the notion of home.
These negative experiences in public places offer only a partial account of research participants’ perspectives. Building on this, the next section turns to a consideration of how public places were also sites where they could exercise agency on the one hand, thereby achieving a degree of stability and satisfaction with their day-to-day lives, on the other. I return to this towards the end of the chapter by arguing that, despite some control and satisfaction, research participants’ ideas of and aspirations for home, are embedded within the context of their day-today lives in public places and their lived experiences more broadly.

6.3.2 Public places as control

As a means to contextualise the relative agency research participants exercised in their uses of public places, I will first return to the literature considered above that has demonstrated the way people experiencing homelessness are thought to be subject to control in public places. It has been suggested that the lack of agency experienced in public places, not only contributed to feelings of homelessness, but that this lack of agency was primarily the result of other people who were homeless. Living in public places meant that research participants had limited control over other people in those places, and they in turn experienced this as limited control over their lives. I also juxtaposed this with a prevailing image from the limited, but important literature which has shown that people who are homeless are subject to state legislation that has draconian and controlling impacts upon their lives in public places.

Originally from the U.S., this literature shows that legislation has both deliberately and inadvertently marginalised people who are homeless from certain, often desirable, public places (Amster 2003; Mitchell 1997, 2003; Snow and Mulcahy 2001; Waldron 1991). In the United Kingdom (Fitzpatrick and Jones 2005) and Australia (Spooner 2001; Walsh 2005, 2006; Walsh and Taylor 2007), a body of research has also shown that Anti Social Behaviour Orders and police ‘move-on’ powers have a likewise negative impact upon the use of public places for people who are homeless. Indeed, Goldie (2008) strongly argues
that legislation in Australia’s Northern Territory strips people who ‘sleep rough’ of their human rights.

Differing from the experiences of participants in previous research based in the same region (Spooner 2001; Walsh 2005; Walsh and Taylor 2007), those participating in this study made no reference to Queensland police exercising ‘move-on’ powers to control or restrict their use of public places. Neither did they explain, nor their movements illustrate, that they felt constrained by legislation that targeted their homelessness as such. On the other hand, research participants did clearly illustrate, both in their comments and their actions, an awareness of their restricted uses of public places. This restriction was primarily spoken about in terms of alcohol and illicit substance use, and to a lesser extent, their ‘rough sleeping’. Snow and Mulcahy’s (2001) insights drawn from a North American context help explain research participants’ experiences of constraint and agency in public places.

Drawing a distinction between ‘prime’ and ‘marginal’ places, with desirable property characterising the former, and undesirable the latter, Snow and Mulcahy showed how people experiencing homelessness were subject to social and legal pressures to use marginal places. In Australia, as in the U.S. where Snow and Mulcahy’s (2001) study was conducted, there is no official distinction between prime and marginal places. For research participants in this study, just like those in Snow and Mulcahy’s (2001), however, I will show how these informal distinctions played a determining role in their day-to-day lives.

The marginal places are those that other sections of society do not want to use at the time. The distinction between what constitutes a prime and what constitutes a marginal place can change throughout a 24 hour period, for example, the city centre may be marginal during the evening but then becomes prime during business hours. Also, when certain places become desirable to certain sections of the population, the distinction between prime and marginal place can change over the medium to long-term. Bearing this potentially fluid distinction in mind, many research participants conducted much of their
lives in marginal places, for instance Riverside Drive – an area not widely visible, and bordering an industrial site. Only strategically, and hesitantly would they enter prime places. These comments indicate an awareness of the prime-marginal distinction, and how it is reinforced:

We don’t get hassled by the police that much. Um it’s alright. We can even have a campfire here now and again when we like to. Phil

I sat around the Valley [Fortitude Valley] for a while in the mall, oh the coppers just harass you too much. So you come over here, hide over here, during the day its better. Jim

The police leave us alone here, as long as we do what we do inside, they don’t care, right. Chris

Get checked for warrants if you go there [Fortitude Valley]. Andrew

The prime-marginal distinction is informally created by police presence in the former, and their relative avoidance of the latter. Prime places are those where research participants would expect to be approached and questioned by the police. Referring to the amount of times he is approached by undercover police trying to bait him for illicit substance trading, Tim refers to certain prime places within Fortitude Valley as the ‘Bermuda Triangle’. Whereas in marginal places, for example Riverside Drive where many people slept and socialised during the day, their presence was largely accepted by police and other government authorities.

While research participants never used the terms prime and marginal places, their actions and comments illustrated that these distinctions were meaningful to how they lived. By engaging with marginal places, and making conscious efforts to avoid prime places, research participants were exercising agency and taking control over their day-to-day lives. The extent of this agency should not, however, be over emphasised. The agency exercised by engaging with, or avoiding certain types of public places was largely constrained within the parameters maintained by the police. Interestingly, while research
participants were annoyed with being questioned by police when they were in prime places, rather than feeling like their use of marginal places was an imposition, they were grateful and happy to have such places.

What do you think about the council moving you on from here? Cameron

Not really upset in one way, we’re lucky because I’ve been here for 12 months and there’s never been a problem with it. Geoff

Geoff’s comment represents a level of appreciation expressed by many research participants about their uses of certain public places. All places that research participants used were subject to laws that prohibited sleeping, and alcohol and illicit substance use. Despite this ‘official’ legislation, for much of the duration of the research police and council authorities did not routinely enforce these laws. Thus research participants were appreciative of having public places where their illegal camping and alcohol and substance use was ignored. By using marginal places; that is to say, places where they were not widely visible to the broader population or places the broader population did not want to use, they were relatively free, from government authorities at least, to engage in their day-to-day lives.

Marginal places were not, however, a lawless territory. The manner in which research participants used and thought about these places is further illustrative of their awareness of ‘mainstream’ norms and their capacity to exercise agency. From lived experiences, they were conscious that the relative freedom enjoyed in marginal places required their understanding of, and compliance with, expectations. They were not only appreciative of being able to access marginal places, but they did what they could to sustain their long-term access, and were frustrated by others who did not. These remarks arose when research participants spoke about the places they lived and the people they were required to share those places with:

We clean up the fits [used syringes], the dirty bastards just throw them on the ground. I mean how hard is it for them to clean up after themselves. They whinge when the police
come around though. Shelly

If we didn’t have any foolish people throwing rubbish around, smashing things, throwing things at people. Some guy we knew, was throwing human shit, excuse the language but at people going along the road. That triggered things on a bit. It’s a park, not a camping ground. Geoff

I’m sleeping out the back of a shopping centre. I just go camp there. They don’t seem to mind, a guy rocks up and drops off different types of bread and stuff about 4 o’clock in the morning. And I haven’t touched one of the rolls yet. I haven’t touched any of the orders. You know what I mean. But I sit there and I watch them. So you know if anyone else comes up and has a go to try and get into them, like one bloke has, I gone hey, fuck head, I’m going to bash you cunt. And if you take that, I get the blame for it, so get the fuck off. Keith

A lot of them just annoy me, and they just um, like they’re disrespectful, and they don’t think. Like lighting a fire; the other week they lit a fire and brought the fire brigade out here. And it was near, near an 8-inch gas line. Andrew

As argued in the previous chapter, people were conscious that many of their behaviours were contrary to social norms. Some of the ways they used and spoke about public places also indicates how they endeavoured to act in ways so those behaviours did not overtly conflict with social norms. Using public places in ways consistent with ‘mainstream’ expectations, for example, keeping them clean and tidy; concealing drug use and minimising noise, were all acts to ensure that their behaviours did not conflict with social norms. These acts, I would suggest, illustrate an insightful awareness of the likely consequences for breaching social norms. In fact, on one occasion during fieldwork police officers did present at Riverside Drive and charge a number of research participants with possession and use of illicit substances. The views expressed by research participants I spoke to following this incident, however, attributed the police presence to people at Riverside Drive acting inappropriately. Pat, one of the people charged with possession of illicit substances, suggested that the police conducted the drug search only after receiving complaints that people sleeping in the area were causing
disturbances to a neighbouring factory.

In a way similar to the nature of social interactions and friendships, research participants displayed practical approaches to their use of public places. They sought out marginal places where their presence was not interfered with. The satisfaction and benefit derived from their strategic uses of marginal places, however, should not be understood to mean that they identified with, or gained any positive sense of self from these places. The places they resided and interacted were only important to them in that these places allowed them to exercise relative freedom.

The seeming lack of connection research participants felt with the public places they resided and spent much of their days was evident in a number of ways. Most research participants living at Riverside Drive, for example, expressed their desires to obtain housing and leave the area. At the initial stages of fieldwork, Tim and Andrew were expecting to be given priority allocation of a social housing tenancy. In the weeks leading up to the day they expected to be allocated the property, they were not only excited, but expressed their considerable annoyance when they later found that had missed out on the housing. Chris, an individual who had lived at Riverside Drive for some years, spoke to me with relief in hospital. He explained that the burns to his body meant that he had to be discharged into housing, rather than the potentially unhygienic Riverside Drive area. The lack of concern Chris expressed in hospital about leaving Riverside Drive supported comments he made during the initial months of fieldwork about his desire to secure a social housing tenancy.

The lack of connection people felt to Riverside Drive was perhaps no more apparent than when they were forcibly removed. During the final week of my fieldwork in May of 2008, the marginal place at Riverside Drive became a major construction site for the Hale Street Bridge. This area thus became transformed to a prime place, and all people sleeping in and using the area were removed within a 24-hour period.
Interestingly, this forced movement from Riverside Drive also afforded me the opportunity to observe that, consistent with comments made throughout the research, research participants did not have a strong emotional connection to the place. Removal from place is thought to evoke in people the often otherwise unrecognised importance and meaning of place (Fullilove 1996). After speaking with research participants prior to and immediately after leaving Riverside Drive, it became apparent that their concern was with how long their Brisbane City Council funded accommodation in motels would last. Like Chris who could not return to Riverside Drive from hospital, none of ten people I spoke to articulated a concern with leaving the area.

As these examples illustrate, people did not experience a connection with the marginal, albeit appreciated and relatively enabling place. As will be elaborated upon below, no one in this study described the public places in which they lived as home. Wayne’s comments about his tent at Riverside Drive exemplify this:

> It’s not a home you know. A home is where you can go, and you’re safe. You know you can lie down and relax. Like not here, sort of. I’m a deep sleeper, but you wake up with any little noise. Yeah it’s not a home. Just somewhere that’s better then sleeping out in the rain, or outside. No, it’s far from a home. Wayne

### 6.4 The meaning of home

In this discussion, some of the complexities and broader meanings in research participants’ constructions of, and ideas about, home are considered. Most clearly, I build on the previous discussion about a lack of safety and security to show how the public places in which they lived were not perceived as home. Home was presented as the antithesis of what they had in public places. It is also argued that research participants’ constructions of home provide some insight into their desires and aspirations to participate in what they saw as ‘mainstream’ society. In describing what home means, I draw upon some elements salient to the ‘place identity’ literature to gain a broader understanding of personal identities.
The sampling criteria for participation in this study meant that subjective definitions of homelessness were given priority. Homelessness was confirmed only on the basis of research participants self-defining as such. For most people, their state of homelessness was described in unambiguous terms. Living in public places meant that they were homeless. Shelly and Andrew’s responses to my questions about why they were homeless illustrate this:

That’s not my land. I don’t pay rent there. We are homeless. I don’t care whether we live in a tent there or not at the moment, but we are homeless. And at 45 this month, I never dreamed things would turn out like this. Shelly

Yeah, I’m homeless. Um, I don’t have a roof over my head. Don’t have a secure so called base, like home. No shower, toilet, you know which is pretty hard. Andrew

Many other research participants also routinely explained their homelessness in a straightforward sense. They explained to me that they were homeless because they were literally without shelter. In fact, many were confused, or thought that I was somewhat confused, by asking whether they were homeless. To them it was obvious, and they considered my questions about this redundant. They saw their lives in public places to be an overt illustration of their homelessness.

Building on homelessness as literally without shelter, a number added their personal experiences and perceptions to explain why they felt homeless. As was noted earlier in this chapter, the lack of security and compromised safety that characterised day-to-day life was equated with feeling homeless. The realities of living in public places meant research participants had an inability to exercise agency and take control over these fundamental aspects of lives.

Extending this idea of a lack of control equating to feelings of homelessness, are Andrew’s comments considered above. By explaining his homelessness in the context of the essential facilities he does not have access to, his comments are illustrative of a
broader theme about life in public places meaning that control over otherwise taken for
granted tasks like toileting and eating could not be realised.

The realities of literal homelessness not only meant that people had limited capacity to
store, prepare and cook food, but because of this, they were reliant on charitable services
which responded to their day-to-day needs. Many people spoke about the shame they felt
at accessing voluntary outreach food vans. When I asked people to elaborate upon this,
Jane and Phil explicitly linked accessing donated food with feeling like they were
homeless:

Using the charity services makes you feel stupid. Why can’t I go off and get my own food?
You know you’re homeless when you’re using the charity vans around here. Jane

I don’t feel independent, you know, always relying on food vans and Ozcare [service
provider]. Just living like this you feel homeless. Phil

While all research participants unequivocally spoke positively about the charitable food
services that provided sustenance, reliance on this type of services was also linked with
feeling homeless. Using these services represented their lack of control over simple, but
important elements of their lives. Conversely, dependence of charitable services
amounted to other people, albeit well meaning and well respected people, assuming too
much control over them.

The public places they resided in were experienced as anything but home – no research
participants considered the public places they resided as home. Most obviously, these
places were not home as they were public; they associated these public places with a lack
of legitimacy and an inability to exercise agency. Without the capacity or authority to
exercise control over other people, or even to take control over their day-to-day function,
research participants were not only homeless in a literal sense, but they were without a
place of their own. Alex, Floyd and Bruno all emphasise how living in public places
means they have no place:
What makes you feel homeless? Cameron

Well not having a place to live. Alex

What are you keen for? Cameron

Have a flat, or a caravan, or something that I could call home. Floyd

And what’s getting you down around here? Cameron

Um, just basically not having a place, a home, of our own. Bruno

A subjective definition of home and homelessness was central to my position approaching this study. Giving primacy to individual subjectivity, I wanted to explore some of the nuances and subtleties inherent in research participants’ understandings of home and homelessness. As Coleman (2000, p. 17) notes, the meanings of home and homelessness for people who are homeless are rarely considered. My study was informed by Coleman’s point, and by the recognition that the relationship between home and homelessness is more complex than the presence of a house (Kellett and Moore 2003). Further to this, informed by the Australian (Coleman 2000; Davis and Costello 1992; Davis et al. 1995; Robinson 2002; Zufferey and Kerr 2004) and international (Veness 1993; Wardhaugh 1999) research that has found people defined as homeless can and do experience non-conventional places and indeed public places as home, I had anticipated research participants to construct alternative definitions of what home and homelessness meant to them. As we have seen, however, by explaining homelessness as lacking shelter, control and a place of one’s own, research participants’ definitions of homelessness cannot be considered alterative to the research literature. Similarly, when they spoke about what home was and meant to them, common images of home presented across a broad and interdisciplinary literature were evoked. It is the meanings of home that is now considered.
6.4.1 Home… a house, and a place of one’s own

Given that all research participants felt homeless and that they did not want to be homeless, I asked them directly about what constituted a home, and what a home meant for them. In responding to these types of questions and in discussing this topic more broadly, they spoke about home as a physical structure. This physical structure, this home, was also presented as a means to make broader life changes, and a signifier of normality.

The most prevalent and clearly articulated theme was home as synonymous with housing. For an overwhelming number of research participants in this study, a home meant a house of their own. A home meant that they had their own place, which in turn meant they would have the capacity to exercise agency and assume control over their lives. These are some responses to my enquiries about what home looks like or means.

You’ve got a nice bed to sleep in. You’ve got sheets, clean sheets, you’ve got blankets, you’ve got a pillow to lay on. You can get out and go to the toilet when you want to. You can have a shower when you want to. You can make a coffee or something to eat when you want to. Here you can’t. Pat

You know, have a home, where you can watch TV, cook, fucking do our washing. Bruno

Like I know, its home, it's a lifestyle change. It’s away from here. Cook our own food and not have to rely on food vans and stuff like that you know. Oliver

It is not difficult to see that home was constructed as opposite to what they had as homeless. Pat, Bruno and Oliver’s remarks show that home was a means to live in a way that involved simple and taken for granted aspects of life. For Jane, Phil Oliver and Tolly a home also meant that they would be able to entertain friends and family. When speaking about what home was, most people noted the presence of comfort and relaxation.
Similarly in the context of their experiences as homeless, home for many research participants meant a safe place. A home meant control over a place and thereby the ability to restrict access to other people. Craig spoke about his ongoing fear of being stabbed on the streets as why securing his own housing was the only way to feel safe – to feel at home. Other research participants made similar comments about personal safety and security when I asked them to explain what home meant to them. Phil for instance:

Oh your freedom. Instead of watching all your stuff all the time – you know, having a bit of security around yourself like your own space. You know your privacy. You don’t get much privacy here. Phil

Dupuis and Thorns (1996) proposal that the meaning of home arises from, and reflects specific sets of historical and social circumstances is particularly pertinent in the context of this study. Research participants’ ideas of home reflect the realities of their lives in public places. Moreover, of the vast and diverse body of research literature on the meaning of home (Ahmed 1999; Bogac 2009; Crow 1989; Dupuis and Thorns 1996; Jones 2000; Mallett 2004; Oakley 1976; Schrader and Birkinshaw 2005; van der Klis and Karsten 2009), we can see that the manner in which research participants understand and construct the meaning of home shares both important similarities and differences with this literature.

On the one hand, their accounts are in tension with a dominant theme that housing should not be conflated with home (Easthope 2004; Mallett 2004; Ravenhill 2008). This literature is diverse, but is underpinned by the premise that home is a subjectively and emotionally experienced concept, comprising things such as memories of family (Bogac 2009; Crow 1989; Dupuis and Thorns 1996; Jones 2000; Mallett 2004; Oakley 1976; Schrader and Birkinshaw 2005; van der Klis and Karsten 2009), feelings (Ahmed 1999; Douglas 1991), and ontological security (Newton 2008). Indeed, studies that have found people defined as homeless do have home-like connections with public places in which they live, have noted the importance of these emotional dimensions of home (Coleman 2000; Robinson 2002; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). As we have seen, most people in this
study experienced public places as dangerous and undermining their agency. In turn, no one spoke about an emotional connection with the public places in which they lived.

In this respect, when explaining home as a place where control can be exercised, research participants were emphasising aspects of home that have been widely noted by researchers in this area (Clapham 2005; Daly 1996; Darke 1994; Dupuis and Thorns 1996; Kavanagh 1997; Kellett and Moore 2003; Tomas and Dittmar 1995). Home was their place; indeed for research participants to have their place – their home, a physical structure in which they had control was necessary. This physical structure of a house was where the independence and autonomy they lacked as homeless, could be rectified.

Unlike Australian research that has suggested home means home ownership (Mee 2007), research participants only emphasised ‘their’ place with reference to having legitimate control, not ownership. Hostel and homeless accommodation was not deemed satisfactory – this was not considered a place of their own. Nearly all research participants perceived this type of homeless accommodation as equally, if not more, dangerous and undesirable than literal homelessness. Rather, and as Keith’s remark below shows, home was a ‘normal’ place. A ‘normal’ place where they had authority and could exercise control. Home was a physical structure that came with a tenancy lease:

So would you say you chose homelessness? Cameron

Yeah, over jail. Um, over certain sorts of accommodation. I have chosen it over Pindari and Ozcare [homeless accommodation]. I even choose it over boarding houses because I refuse to live in a boarding house. Can’t stand the drugos, can’t stand the people I would have to live with – drive me crazy. Do you know what I mean? I want a self-contained unit. I want a normal place of my own, just like anyone else. Keith

6.4.2  Home: a means to, and a signifier of, belonging

The previous section has illustrated how housing – a home, was presented as a solution to dangerous and disempowering day-to-day lives experienced in public places. Research
participants constructed home as a means to take control over their daily lives; for example, use their own bathroom and kitchen, interact and socialise with whom they chose to, and to protect themselves. Their undesirable experiences living without shelter reinforced their feelings of homelessness. Their lack of shelter defined their state of homelessness. Their subsequent lack of place and inability to exercise agency and take control of their lives meant that they felt homeless.

Extending this previous discussion, here it will be suggested that the way home was spoken about also suggests a meaning beyond the important functions shelter enables. Nearly all research participants idealised home. On the one hand, home was presented as a panacea to their problems, and a sign of their normality on the other. First, acquiring a home was perceived as an essential means to make broader personal and social changes. When talking about what home was or would be like, these types of views were common:

Well, you know, with this house, I can see, I can see a future. Won’t be so down on myself. We will have a home, to work on, you know, we’ll have something we can call our own for a little while – instead of a tent. I reckon it would probably lead to a few opportunities. I could do some courses or something maybe. Start doing gym work and that again. If we get this house. Tim

It so hard to get a house. Its so hard. Um privately I’ve got no hope. Its only if one of these people help us. Um then we’re OK; honestly we could kick goals, I just know it. And then go to community club for dinner. Meet other people. People that know nothing about this sort of life. I love tennis. Go off and hire a court and play tennis. Shelly

I respect the fact that I need a home to live in, to be able to get my life to move forward. Because then I can’t get as much money which means I can’t drink as much alcohol. Keith

Of course I need somewhere stable to live, and a stable kind of work, earn some money. That will get me going properly. Me old self, up again. I do need to get a place of my own and get some occupation. To get my mind more stable of course. Instead of being scattered all over the street, not knowing what I’m doing one day to the next. Geoff
The manner in which Tim, Shelly, Keith and Geoff idealised home, was not only constructed as opposite to their problematic experiences in public places, but indeed a solution to their broader life problems. Differing from studies noting the link between exiting homeless social interactions and a perceived capacity to make positive changes (Johnson et al. 2008; Snow and Anderson 1993; Wolch and Dear 1993), the four comments suggest that home was seen as a means to gain the necessary control to make life improvements. This is consistent with the discussion in chapter five where it was shown that research participants tended to idealise ‘mainstream’ society and the lives of those people assumed to be living in it. Accordingly, when they obtained a home, their lives would be similarly positive.

In presenting home as a panacea, none of the negative aspects of home life were mentioned. As the brief discussion on their ‘pre-homeless’ lives demonstrated, nearly all people in this study had never or rarely had positive homes or life experiences prior to homelessness. They overwhelmingly spoke about past family ‘homes’ that were abusive, or families and experiences at ‘home’ they felt unconnected to. Numerous studies with people experiencing homelessness have found likewise (Hallebone 1997; Johnson et al. 2008; Kellett and Moore 2003). None of these life experiences, however, were mentioned when research participants spoke about what home was to them. Their constructions of what home was, and their expectations of what life would be like with a home, therefore, were often not informed by their lived experiences.

Perhaps the ideal of home (Kellett and Moore 2003) had a powerful influence on people in this study. After all, they largely articulated stereotypical images and romanticised understandings of home. Somerville’s insights may explain this further. He argues that:

> Home is not just a matter of feelings and lived experiences but also of cognition and intellectual construction: people may have a sense of home even though they have no experience or memory of it. Somerville (1992, p. 530)
The way home was idealised may be suggestive of meaning beyond the pervasive influence of stereotypical images. Here aspects of the ‘place identity’ literature are illuminating. Research participants not only tied their identities to a place (Casey 2001), but they actively incorporated who they were, what they wanted to achieve (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996), with the place of home. Their understandings and desires for this place of home may be understood as their desires to be part of what they perceived as ‘mainstream’ society. While no research participants explicitly stated so, on the basis of their comments about living in ways outside of the ‘mainstream’, it can be inferred that their ideas and aspirations for home were aspirations to belong, to find their own place. For example, acquiring a home meant they could:

Live just a normal life, like normal people do. What we haven’t been doing. Bruno

Be like normal people. You know people who work, have a roof over their head. I need a house. Alex

A home, which they saw as synonymous with a house, would be a concrete illustration that they had a place in society. A home not only represented a way of living ‘normally’, but also a signifier of ‘normality’. Other researchers have likewise found that people experiencing homelessness associate obtaining housing with ‘normality’ (Johnson et al. 2008; Kellett and Moore 2003). The constructions of home research participants put forward can be understood as their commitment to and place within a society they saw themselves as living distinct from.

As suggested above, understanding the meaning of home for research participants required an understanding of their day-to-day lives as homeless. Further to this, and in agreement with Dupuis and Thorns (1996), their meanings of home need to be understood within the context of their broader life histories. As homeless, they felt like they were without a place, and their life histories showed that their feelings of ‘placelessness’ stretch beyond the lack of a physical structure. Informed by their broader social histories, and day-to-day lives in public places, it can be seen that research
participants’ ideas about home are embedded within the context of being without a place. As Casey (2001, p. 406) notes, there are no identities without place. Research participants actively construct aspects of themselves in place (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996); the place important to who they were and what they wanted was home. Home was a means to find a physical and symbolic place.

While housing should not be seen as the same as home, and recognising that the meanings of home have been extended by psychological and emotional dimensions, for people in this study, housing and home were synonymous. Or more specifically, the physical structure that housing provides was a necessary requirement in order for them to ‘feel at home’. Future families, comfort, privacy and security, all of which are noted in the broad literature as important to the experience of home, were seen as unachievable living in public places. Housing was a means to attain these things, and this is why housing meant home to people in this study.

### 6.5 Conclusion

To be without a home, to live and interact in Brisbane’s public places, meant that those places assumed considerable practical importance. The realities of living and spending a significant part of time in public meant that other people who were homeless also assumed importance to how research participants lived. In this chapter, I have shown how they formed friendships with other people, most of whom were homeless. Unremarkably, but in tension with the notion of a homeless social identity or subculture, I argued that the social interactions and interpersonal relationships did not constitute a ‘homeless identity’. When I asked people about collectives they identified with, they did not define themselves as members of a homeless group, or see themselves with reference to other individuals on the basis of their homelessness. Rather, people who were homeless in this study interacted and socialised with other people to provide and receive emotional and practical support and to form friendships. Relationships were strategic and pragmatic. Research participants engaged with others whom they saw as similar to themselves, and importantly, who engaged in similar activities.
Due to a lack of control, public places were perceived as unsatisfying places to live. Living in public places rendered their capacity to take control over their day-to-day lives, for example, eat, wash and socialise when and how they wanted, impossible. Rather than regulations or legislation, research participants attributed this lack of control in public places with other people who were homeless. For the most part, these other people, rather than being seen as members of a collective or broader group, were largely perceived as untrustworthy, dangerous and inconsiderate.

The negative perceptions of other people who were homeless, however, highlight the close relationship between living in public places and social interactions. As a means to mitigate the problems in public places, which were essentially problems with the untrustworthy, dangerous and inconsiderate ‘others’, research participants generally formed social relationships with them. People in this study, therefore, on the one hand spoke about their negative experiences in public places, which they described by reference to other people who were homeless. But on the other hand, they formed relationships with many of those same people.

People approached public places and social interactions from a pragmatic perspective. They exercised agency and sought out public places where their presence was less likely to be contested. Their capacity to exercise agency and their uses of public places, however, were subject to considerable constraint. Due primarily to their public use of illicit substances and alcohol, they were constrained to marginal places. The constraints on research participants’ use of public places, even marginal ones, were further highlighted when they were forcibly removed from Riverside Drive. The transformation of this place from marginal to prime, and the subsequent removal illustrated the fluid nature of this distinction. Importantly for this research, people’s responses at being removed or leaving this area illustrated the lack of connection they felt with this place. The people moved on from Riverside Drive were concerned with where they would stay, but not with leaving the place many had resided for months and sometimes years.
Their ideals and aspirations of home were presented as consistent with their experiences in public places – home was the opposite of what they had, and home was what they wanted. As most clearly stated, having a home meant having control. The importance of this control and its association with home can be understood by considering the limited control people experienced as homeless. The manner in which this type of control was constructed emphasised the link between home and a physical structure. Aspirations for home were also closely linked with a desire to control one’s day-to-day lives – home was perceived as place where food consumption, social interactions, and bodily hygiene could be controlled. In fact, for a number of research participants, home was not simply about a place where important, otherwise taken for granted functions could be controlled, but home was seen as a solution to their problems.

Finally, and less explicitly stated by research participants, I suggested that their experiences of not fitting into either society or their own families, shaped their constructions and aspirations for home. Differing from homelessness studies (Coleman 2000; Veness 1993; Zufferey and Kerr 2004) that have documented how people defined as homeless construct alternative definitions of home, research participants’ understandings of home were what could be considered ‘mainstream’ and stereotypical. I understood the meanings of homes they presented as signifying their aspirations to participate in ‘mainstream’ society.
Chapter 7 Identities and public places

7.1 Introduction

As with the previous two chapters, my focus in this chapter is to describe some aspects of research participants’ lives, and to link these descriptions to a broader discussion of personal identities. In a point of departure from the preceding chapters, however, consideration is given to how people overtly enacted aspects of the self. Two specific enacted identities are discussed: ‘passive, meek homeless person’, and an ‘assertive empowered customer’. By considering two different aspects of identities, this discussion shows how research participants exercised agency in constructing selves. It is also shown that their scope and capacity to enact identities was mediated and dependent on specific places and prevailing social contexts.

Moving beyond the discussion of identities enacted, in the second part of this chapter I draw on some elements of research participants’ day-to-day lives to suggest that the public display of certain behaviours is implicated in the ways people experiencing homelessness are perceived as different. It is argued that the public visibility that accompanies a lack of place means that people are not only observable, but also their overt and stigmatised presentation is taken to convey a disproportionate amount about the identities they are attributed with.

This chapter’s focus on aspects of identities as something overtly enacted and on public display, means that, in contrast to chapters five and six, my understanding is almost exclusively informed from the observational component of the methodology. Further, I arrived at the analysis and interpretations long after exiting the field, and was therefore unable to discuss the aspects of identity considered here with the people whom they are about. The linking of identity within this broader social context means that this chapter responds to secondary research question one: How do the people participating in this study live on a day-to-day basis? As well as secondary research question two: What do
research participants perceive influences, or acts as reference points for their personal identities?

7.2 Identities enacted

Informed by the understanding of identities as fluid and multiple, chapter three constructed a framework of personal identities that took account of how individuals not only have plural identities, but also that different identities, different elements of the self, can be enacted. Seeing identity in this manner required a theoretical framework that positioned people with the potential to exercise agency to enact identities. Identity was not conceived as something pre-determined or static, but rather something that people work at and manage on a day-to-day and long-term basis. In this discussion I show how research participants enacted two contrasting identities. The first is a ‘passive, meek homeless person’ identity, whereas the second identity focuses on people as ‘assertive, empowered customers’.

Without idealising the agency of these people, I suggest that the enactment of identities served to achieve their specific ends. The agency they exercised and the scope for identity enactment was, however, dependent upon the place and social context in which the enactment of these identities was observed (Butler 2004). I will show how research participants were therefore attuned to the prevailing social norms and expectations. By purposively enacting specific identities, I will likewise suggest that they may have also had little commitment to them.

Prior to documenting these two enacted identities, some explanation and justification is required. First, similar to my understandings outlined below, others have shown how place can be a site for identity enactment. Using homosexuality as an example, Brekhus (2003) has demonstrated the spatial dynamics of identity enactment by showing how people consciously assert and highlight aspects of their identity by travelling to places known as ‘gay enclaves’. Also exploring identity enactment in the context of place, Parr and Philo (1995) showed how people with mental illnesses are not only expected to
display certain behaviours in psychiatric settings, but these are “key sites in which people ‘learn’ to be mad” (1995, p. 203).

The enacted identities considered in this section are identities I constructed on the basis of analysis and interpretations from the observational component of fieldwork. They are aspects of research participants’ identities that they were not asked to construct, nor verify once constructed. Given that disadvantaged groups often have their identities constructed for them (Bauman 2004, p. 38; Layder 2004, p. 130), with people who are homeless thought of as especially powerless in this area (Smith 1993, p. 105), adding another construction about them, without their direct input, is potentially questionable. In justification for the constructions that follow, it should be emphasised that they are not all-encompassing and defining characteristics of a person, but rather two aspects of identity. Research participants did display numerous and diverse aspects of their identities not considered here. Next, rather than being derogatory or showing a side of people based on a problematic uniqueness, the identities emphasise research participants agency and diversity – identity does not constitute the person.

Finally, building on the premise of identities as multiple and malleable, theoretical support for observation as a means of identity construction is found in ‘performative theory’ (Hull and Zacher 2007; Urciuoli 1995). Performative theory posits that personal identity is observable through the physical enactment of the self. In addition to the importance of language, narrative and how people define themselves in particular, individuals are thought to represent a sense of their identity through their gesture, dress, posture, and demeanour (Hull and Zacher 2007, p. 79). Physical presentation can be seen as both a representation and illustration of the identity people are trying to convey. In short, body language may express an individual’s sense of self in ways that what words do not (Urciuoli 1995).

7.2.1 ‘Passive, meek homeless person’

The receipt of voluntary donations was an illuminating site for identity enactment.
Primarily, receipt was from charitable organisations providing ‘outreach’ food and drink, and also, but less frequently, from people in ‘public’ places who were asked for money. It was research participants’ presentation, or enactment of the self, while in receipt of charity that I refer to as the ‘passive, meek homeless person’. The following fieldwork journal extract is informed by observations I made while volunteering at a charitable ‘outreach’ service. This observation is strikingly similar to others I conducted in similar contexts over a six-month period:

Approximately twenty five people, mostly male, a number presenting as dishevelled, some carrying large plastic bags full of personal belongings, line up waiting for hot drinks and sandwiches from van. The line is impeccably orderly; no one pushes or speaks loudly. Nearly all of those lining up have little expression on their faces, and their heads are slightly bent down. For the most part, people are appreciative as they take their drink and food from me (and my co-volunteers). Nearly all say thank you, those who don’t, take what is given to them gently. Some people make eye contact and mention the weather, but most don’t make eye contact, and keep their head lowered, without speaking. Fieldwork journal, council park (04 February 2008)

Although some research participants in similar settings were observed to have behaved and presented differently to what is recorded above, they were rare exceptions. On two separate occasions, for instance, two individuals accessed the voluntary outreach services while they were intoxicated. All of the other people accessing the services kept their physical distance from the intoxicated people. I spoke to one of the intoxicated individuals, and was advised that she had only just arrived in Brisbane from rural Australia. This woman explained that she had just left a nightclub to come over to the ‘homeless people’ and see what was happening. These two ‘rare exceptions’ of people presenting as overtly intoxicated stood out. Not only did the majority of people seem to be disassociating themselves from these individuals, but also these two examples of obvious intoxication stood out as unusual and thus illustrated the consistency with which nearly all people enacted a ‘passive, meek homeless identity’.

The enactment of this identity was more than research participants presenting as quiet
and orderly as they waited for and received donations. It was more than simply displaying gratitude. This identity is characterised by the display of submission and the absence of any overt assertiveness or drive. Their faces and postures suggested that they needed support. They held their heads slightly lowered. It would have appeared as if they knew what volunteers giving their time, and charitable donations, expected. For instance, it has been suggested that ‘deserving homeless persons’ are those who are assumed cannot look after themselves (Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2001, p. 552-3). The lowered heads and overt submission can be seen as research participants displaying their inability to look after themselves.

Building on this, contributions from historical accounts of charity are salient for understanding this notion of an enacted ‘passive, meek homeless identity’. Jones (1971) and Stern (1984), for example, have shown how traditionally, the giving and receiving of charity underlines the social position of both parties. Not only was the giving of charity associated with benevolence and control, but importantly, to receive charity firsthand required the recipient to understand their inferiority, and to be docile (Stern 1984, p. 296). Jones argued likewise, noting that the ongoing receipt of charity would be sustained when the receiver emphasised gratitude and humility toward the giver (1971, p. 252).

The research participants I observed receiving donated food and drink, and infrequently money sourced from begging, overtly displayed all of the attributes Stern and Jones identified. Indeed, it is the overt, but equally subtle, display of humility, gratitude, and most notably, docility, which characterise the ‘passive, meek homeless identity’. But in addition to this, while I found the overwhelming majority of volunteers I worked with and observed to be humble and not highlight their role as ‘benevolent controller’, comments from one male who had been volunteering for eleven years do resonate with the assumptions behind traditional charity.

Craig (volunteer) made some comments today on users of the service which support some of my observations around presentations. He described a group of young, mainly Indigenous ‘kids’ who previously (approximately a year ago) used the services of the van.
Craig explained that these kids were unappreciative of the service, would push in line, and caused everyone to be upset, both users and volunteers – noting that they were disrespectful. By pointing out as noteworthy these undesirable behaviours, Craig was suggesting that there were certain expectations about how services users should, and should not behave. By noting their behaviour as out of the ordinary, he was also confirming my observation that people overwhelmingly behaved differently – that is, respectfully and appreciative. Fieldwork journal, Craig (30 April 2008)

There were no other remarks, or anything I observed to suggest that Craig’s comments are representative of any other volunteers I met. I cannot, moreover, comment on what impact, if any, Craig’s views had on research participants in receipt of voluntary donations. Nonetheless, it is clear that Craig both expected and appreciated the enacted identity displayed by people at the food and coffee van in which he volunteered. Indeed, Craig’s comments suggest that he was unhappy with anything less.

Stern’s related contributions have further relevance for understanding research participants’ enacted identities in the context of charity. He shows how, contrary to popular belief, the determination of ‘worthiness’ and ‘unworthiness’ is beyond a group’s ‘objective’ demographic attributes, for example the ‘homeless’. Stern (1984, p. 299) suggests the sections of the poor population who present as polite and grateful, are more likely to be considered ‘worthy’, compared to ‘poor people’ who are loud and unbowed.

The people receiving donations I observed consistently downplayed aspects of themselves that displayed confidence, eagerness and individuality. Likewise, of the numerous loud, humorous, proactive and even aggressive behaviours observed throughout the entire period of fieldwork, none of these were observed while research participants were in places where they received donations. In Stern’s terms, the way they behaved in the context of charity highlighted their ‘worthiness’. They displayed aspects of themselves that illustrated they were unable to look after themselves on the one hand, while being appreciative of the assistance they received on the other. Without using the words ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy’, Craig’s comments suggest he linked ‘worthiness’ with humility and docility, and ‘unworthiness’ with unappreciativeness and assertiveness.
When describing to me his experiences and approach to begging, a research participant named Dale cogently outlined a sophisticated understanding of some of the unspoken expectations associated with the procurement and receipt of donations. Dale explicitly explained the enactment of a homeless role as a means to obtain money:

On Friday night I laid my swag out and played homeless – I even asked some guys in a poor voice for money. Fieldwork journal, Dale (17 March 2008)

It can be reasonably inferred that the ‘poor voice’ Dale refers to means poor as in impoverished. Similarly, as opposed to an assertive and confident voice, the poor voice denotes that he is unable to address this impoverishment himself. While it is beyond Dale’s words, his ‘playing homelessness’ suggests that he is emphasising his deservingness. With further insight into what people would consider to be a ‘worthy homeless person’ deserving of charity, differing from a gang; the latter which is less likely to be the recipient of voluntary donations, Dale said:

I make sure me tribe don’t sit with me when I’m trying to get money and things. Fieldwork journal, Dale (17 March 2008)

It is clear that Dale understood how identities are likely to be interpreted. He was both explicit about the identity he enacted, and the purpose of doing so can reasonably be inferred. While not using the term ‘enacting identity’ or drawing upon specific identity literature, other researchers have noted similar to what I am describing as the enactment of a ‘homeless identity’. Fitzpatrick and Kennedy (2001, p. 55), Stephenson (2006, p. 22) and Williams (1995, p. 36), for instance, all point out that people begging are conscious about attributes and behaviours they need to emphasise in order to be seen as ‘worthy’, and thus increase their chances of acquiring money.

People experiencing homelessness have also been observed as ‘playing the homeless’ role in order to secure access to accommodation and other social services (Johnson et al.
2008, p. 85; Marvasti 2003, p. 121; Ravenhill 2008, p. 35). In contexts removed from the acquisition of services or money, people have been seen to embrace a ‘homeless identity’ for social activists ends (Zufferey and Kerr 2004, p. 347). Or in the case of females experiencing homelessness, they have been reported to present an ‘artificial’ side of themselves as masculine to promote safety (Casey et al. 2008, p. 911).

The ‘passive, meek homeless person’ identity I observed, therefore, is broadly consistent with homelessness literature reported in Australia and elsewhere. As noted, my understanding of this enacted ‘homeless identity’ was primarily informed by observations. With the exception of Dale, research participants did not explain their enactments of this identity to me. To further support this identity construction, and to illustrate the fluid manner in which research participants displayed aspects of themselves, I now turn to a different identity enacted in different social contexts where the receipt of charity did not occur.

### 7.2.2 Assertive, empowered customer

When research participants were observed in the ‘café’, a place where they assumed the status of either customer, or social work client, the identities they enacted differed significantly to those I observed when they were in receipt of donations. This identity I refer to as the ‘assertive, empowered customer’. Recall, in contrast to the ubiquitous charitable services that provided food and drink free of charge, the café sold food and drink.

In the café, research participants enacted an assertive self; they overtly displayed their confidence. In contrast to the quiet or unheard voices noted above, they spoke in loud voices and ensured that the social worker or employee was aware that they knew what they were entitled to. They held their heads high, their postures were often more upright, and they moved quickly. In places where research participants took on the status as customer, they displayed anything but docility – they were anything but ‘bowed’. As customers of the café, they displayed an assertive side of themselves.
When they presented in a way that I am referring to as ‘assertive, empowered customers’ they did not simply engage in overtly discernable language and body postures, their actions were also in stark contrast to those of the ‘passive, meek homeless person’. The ‘assertive, empowered customer’ would frequently use their mobile phones, they would talk openly among each other about money, either loaning money or purchasing alcohol or illicit substances. Research participants displayed their identities distinct from their homelessness, and by purchasing food and using their mobile phones, demonstrated their active participation in ‘mainstream’ society. Likewise, by openly discussing money and showing their use of possessions that require money, they illustrated a degree of self-sufficiency, their ability to look after themselves. There was no indication that the ‘assertive empowered customer’ required charitable support.

The enactment of this assertive identity can be juxtaposed to the identity presented as a receiver of donations. The two distinct identities considered in isolation from each other, would be less notable. It is the stark tension between the two, however, that illuminates aspects of each one. In fact, the same research participants I observed enacting the ‘passive, meek identity’ in one context, I later observed enacting the contrasting identity in a different context. Neither identity therefore, accounted for their entirety, or their ‘stable, core self’ (Hall 2000). The context played an influential role in the identity enacted.

Although overt boisterousness was central to the assertive identity, and clearly distinguished it from the meek identity, it should not be inferred that aggression or anti-social behaviour characterised the former and was absent in the latter. Rather, research participants enacting the assertive identity comfortably challenged and made jokes with each other. The following two extracts are derived from approximately three hours observation over two days in the café:

Conversation between café staff member and customer about nutritional qualities of food, and how this level of quality has digressed over recent months. Customer explains that
while food is still affordable and the café a desirable places to attend, he believes that the price should have declined commensurate with the quality. Customer suggests that he should contact the café’s head office and advocate his case. Fieldwork journal, café (15 February 2008)

Customers debating merits of rugby league team with counter staff, as another customer enters café, interrupts them, and makes derogative joke to staff member about music being played, and thus the type of person he is. A number of people walk in-and-out of café talking on mobile phones and walking down the street and quickly returning. A different customer speaks with social worker about expected dividends from compensation about to be received. After loud comments from a friend, another customer explains to staff member how he would not ask her out on a date, as she is married. Fieldwork journal, café (23 April 2008)

These notes illustrate identities never witnessed in six months observing people in places where they received donations. They illustrate, perhaps first and foremost, an assertive, although unremarkable, side of people. Individuals who have a point of view, who debate football, have jokes, have friendship or business discussions over the phone, and are interested in intimate relationships. This was similar with the way they challenged, and often engaged in mutual jokes with café social workers and other staff. Rarely did research participants present as rude to staff, they were just not humble and bowed. Differing from Craig’s comments about disrespectful users of the ‘outreach’ service, it is interesting to note that I heard of no remark from any staff at the café which suggested they perceived the service users assertiveness or overt confidence as disrespectful.

While research participants were observed to display aspects of themselves different to the two identities discussed, the reported identities were enacted consistently and were strongly linked with differing contexts and places. On a straightforward level, this is consistent with the literature already considered which recognises the multiplicity of identities, and how the individual interacted with and the environment determines the identity enacted.
When they accessed the café as social work clients or as people with the power to purchase food, they were customers whose relationship with the place was based on exchange (Weller 1997). It is reasonable to suggest that the contrasting identities reflected the relative power research participants possessed in the relationship. Indeed, identity enactment is not simply purposeful, but influenced by the meaning and resources available to the individual (Gubrium and Holstein 1995, p. 557). The enactment of the ‘passive, meek homeless identity’, therefore, while purposeful, would likely be influenced by the powerlessness associated with the receipt of donations one has no legal or citizenry entitlement to. Furthermore, complying with roles assigned or expected, Scott (1985, p. 281) has shown, is for many people with limited power a means to gain control: to “exploit a system that exploits them”.

This idea is perhaps reflected in Dale’s comments. While he presented in a manner I refer to as ‘passive, meek homeless person’, it is clear that he purposively did this to acquire money. If anything, Dale’s comments show that he was not only conscious of ‘the system’, but that he also employed considerable insight to ‘exploit’ it. Hull and Zacher (2007) do not use the words exploit when they describe performative theory, but their model of identity enactment is premised on the recognition that the identities people enact are often those which are socially desired. People exercise agency and express aspects of themselves, but they do so because the moment calls for it, not because they have ownership to the identity (Hull and Zacher 2007, p. 99).

### 7.3 Identities ascribed and public places

In this final section, I want to bring together some of the observations I have made on research participants, and suggest that some of these behaviours play an important role in who ‘homeless people’ in general, are constructed as being. This idea that people experiencing homelessness are constructed as ‘different’ or ‘other’ than the broader population was outlined in chapter two. While I showed that some research literature has detailed nuanced and in depth understandings, a general theme within most of this literature positions people who are homeless as different. I have argued that there is a
dichotomy between the silent ‘normal’ people with homes and the ‘different homeless people’.

As I have described in the previous chapters, day-to-day lives were carried out in a range of public places in and around inner suburban Brisbane. It was illustrated that these places were primarily marginal, but the close proximity of these marginal places to the Brisbane CBD and tourists’ districts ensured that members of the wider public did frequent them. Furthermore, research participants, just as others (Snow and Mulcahy 2001, p. 158-9) have found, also frequented and spent considerable time in prime places. Often this was to access services and other amenities not available in marginal places. Hence the daily lives occurring in public places, both marginal and prime, were observable to all members of the broader population.

It has likewise been shown that living in public places was associated with a range of problematic experiences for research participants. I suggested that a home, which was seen as synonymous with a house, was presented as a means to address many of these problems. Additionally, a home provides privacy from public view. Lacking a physical structure meant that research participants, in contrast to those people who have houses, were unable to conceal behaviours otherwise conducted in privacy. It is the public display of these otherwise ‘private’ behaviours that are now considered.

7.3.1 ‘Out of place’ behaviours

Here research participants’ public displays of three behaviours are discussed. These include: alcohol and illicit substance use, overt symptoms of mental illness, and verbal and physical violence. I follow this discussion with a consideration of Creswell’s (1996) ideas to suggest that these three behaviours are considered ‘out of place’. Based on behaving in a manner which is ‘out of place’, I argue that the public display of these behaviours informs perceptions of people experiencing homelessness as different. This display is taken to convey a disproportionate amount about the type of people they are. This presentation of ‘the homeless’ as unique and different is not only evident in research
literature, but indeed accords with a more general public perception highlighted in a recent national study conducted by Hanover Welfare Services. The study found that mental illnesses, substance and alcohol abuse were central to public perceptions of homelessness in Australia (Batterham 2009).

Alcohol and substance use characterised significant parts of most research participants’ days. The consumption of alcohol and illicit substance, of course, can lead to intoxication. In the marginal places at Riverside Drive where many research participants lived, and in the prime places of Fortitude Valley where many socialised and interacted, I frequently observed what I understood to be the overt result of alcohol and substance use.

Bruno and Michelle stumble through the mall together. Michelle’s eyes are almost completely closed as she stumbles, her chin knocking against her collarbone. Bruno holds Michelle up, but his eyes are also partially closed, and they routinely nearly fall and hit objects. Pedestrians in the mall notice their obvious intoxicated state, and give them a clear berth. Both look in a semi-conscious state, and seemingly unaware of the environment. Fieldwork journal, Fortitude Valley Mall (04 May 2008)

Mark, Leanne, and five or six other adults not observed before sitting at seating in the park. They are extremely noisy, and consistently yell out profanities. Two cartons of beer sit on the table; each person has a beer in their hand. One male urinates to the side of the group. Fieldwork journal, council park (24 January 2008)

These are but two examples from my field notes used to illustrate the frequent occasions I observed research participants presumably affected by substances and alcohol. It is difficult to establish with any certainty whether the illustrative extracts above, or indeed the numerous other occasions I observed people stumbling, or dropping their heads and closing their eyes, can be attributed to illicit substance and alcohol use. Other explanations may be more informative. Nonetheless, I suggest that people who present as homeless, that is, physically dishevelled, carrying personal possessions in bags, accessing homeless services, who are also publicly seen consuming and experiencing the presumed affects of alcohol and substances, convey an image of the homeless as alcoholics and
drug addicts.

This consumption in public, as Stephenson (2006, p. 64) has observed, “signifies their social exclusion”. They are not freely choosing to consume alcohol in public, in the way that people with a house can consume alcohol at picnics, barbeques, and festivals. When people who are homeless consume alcohol in public, their lack of access to their own space is publicly illustrated for all to see. They consume and are affected by alcohol and illicit substances in public because they have no alternative.

Observable, or perhaps more correctly, assumed observable signs of mental illness in public places also support notions of the ‘homeless’ as different – as ‘crazy bag ladies’ (Wardhaugh 1999, p. 104), for example. Although with much less frequency than the assumed affects of alcohol and substances, I regularly observed research participants displaying characteristic signs of mental illness.

Karl, walks through the mall, wearing air force flying overalls, bright white gloves, and very large snow skiing goggles that take up most of his face. He stops at two rubbish bins and searches for what appear to be cigarettes. Fieldwork journal, Karl (19 December 2007)

A female, late teenager or perhaps early twenties, presenting as extremely dishevelled – old and visibly dirty clothes, tattoos, and a number of small wounds on exposed skin, sits on seat in middle of mall. During the half hour I observe her, she engages in a loud, and at times confrontational conversation with the vacant space beside her. Her facial expressions and voice tone give the impression that she cycles from sad to happy. Fieldwork journal, Fortitude Valley Mall (11 January 2008)

These two examples were particularly notable; the majority of behaviours I observed which may suggest mental illness were more subtle, including things like individuals briefly and quietly speaking to themselves, or shouting out and screaming for no apparent reasons. The association between homelessness and mental illness is well documented in Australia (Hodder et al. 1998; Kamieniecki 2001; Zaretzky et al. 2008). As Chamberlain and Johnson (2003, p. 10) note, however, little research exists explaining whether the two
are associated in a causal relationship, and their later research suggests that mental health
problems may be brought on by homelessness (Chamberlain et al. 2007). Indeed, some
have suggested the display of assumed symptoms of mental illness exhibited by people
who are homeless may simply be their ‘normal’ responses to a traumatic situation (Snow
and Anderson 1993, p. 213; Superson 1999, p. 142). The validity of this causal
relationship or the suggestion of ‘normal’ responses aside, I will argue that these
behaviours displayed in public places do provide the general public with a view that
emphasises mental illness and homelessness as closely related. The observed behaviours,
therefore, lend support to the assumption that the ‘homeless’ are in fact different.

The third and final frequently observed behaviour I want to discuss before offering some
interpretation is violence. I observed appropriately twenty-five incidents of what could be
referred to as violence: eighteen of these were incidents where the violence was
exclusively verbal. All of this violence occurred in public places. At times, I observed
violence in the sparsely populated areas of Riverside Drive, but more frequently, violence
occurred in the heavily populated areas of Fortitude Valley, especially the mall and the
café.

In addition to occurring exclusively in public, all participants to the violence, both
perpetrators and victims, were homeless, and they knew each other prior to the event.
Indeed, much of this violence, especially the verbal assaults, was between a male and a
female who were, or appeared to be, in a relationship together. The arguments and
comments that preceded and followed the violence, suggested that the fights were about
personal issues, such as infidelity, spending money, and alcohol and substance use. The
violence I observed between people in relationships, therefore, if taking place in a
‘home’, could also be referred to as ‘domestic violence’.

7.3.2 The ‘homeless other’

Public intoxication, overt displays of mental illness and violence, are all ‘out of place’ in
public. Cresswell (1996, p. 37) has shown the power of place to construct normality and
deviance. The acceptability, or not, of a behaviour is considerably reliant upon the place in which it occurs. With reference to homelessness, Mitchell (1997) has built on Cresswell’s work to show that it is the way people who are homeless use public places, the way they sleep in them when sleeping ‘should’ be done in ‘private’, which portrays them as particularly deviant. By displaying ‘private’ activities in ‘public’ and thereby being ‘out of place’, Mitchell suggests, “the homeless threaten the proper meaning of that place” (1997, p. 321).

Following Cresswell (1996) and Mitchell (1997), I want to suggest that these ‘out of place’ behaviours do more than threaten the ‘proper’ meaning of place, but importantly, the display of the behaviours noted above support assumptions that the ‘homeless’ are different. Before explaining this proposition, a brief note is made of how the ‘out of place’ behaviours research participants were observed to engaged in, occur frequently across the broader Australian population.

Statistics drawn from a number of national surveys have consistently identified the high number of people in Australia who misuse alcohol and illicit substance (Hall et al. 1999; Summerill et al. 2008), who have a mental illness (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007), and who perpetrate and experience domestic violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005). Based on these statistics, therefore, the behaviours I observed in public places are not unique to research participants. They are reported as a reality for a significant number of people drawn from the broader population. While my sample size and the purposive strategies used to recruit them precludes any statistical comparisons, on the basis of the prevalence noted in the statistics above reasonable inferences can be made.

First, however, it must be acknowledged that the disclosed rates of illicit substance use for people in this study are vastly higher than other studies have identified among the broader population. With this high prevalence in mind, an important difference between my sample and the broader Australian population is that when the former use alcohol and illicit substance, when they display overt signs of mental illness, or when they are involved in violence, especially within an intimate relationship, the public are not usually
an audience. In the case of alcohol use, even when this is observable for the broader population, this normally occurs in socially sanctioned public settings such as: hotels, bars, picnics, barbeques etc. In these public places, this behaviour is not ‘out of place’.

People who are homeless, on the other hand, are unable to retreat to private places, to their houses, where these behaviours go unnoticed to the majority. In contrast to those with houses who have opportunities to conceal ‘undesirable’ behaviours, people without homes often have little opportunity but to display them. It is my contention that the ‘public’ display of these behaviours both signifies and reifies ‘homeless people’s’ difference. It supports prevailing public perceptions (Batterham 2009). This difference is assumed for two reasons. First, following Cresswell (1996) and Mitchell (1997), people experiencing homelessness are different because they act in ways contrary to what the ‘proper’ meaning of place dictates. Notwithstanding the high rates of illicit substance misuse noted above, people who are homeless engage in many of the same type of activities research suggests is relatively prevalent among the broader Australian population. A noteworthy difference for people without homes, however, is that they do these things in the ‘wrong’ places.

Secondly, because all of the behaviours of people experiencing homelessness are observable to the general public, differing from people with houses, it is considerably more difficult for them to conceal ‘undesirable’ behaviours. Brekhus’ (2003) ideas drawn from observations about taken for granted gay and lesbian identities were considered in chapter three and they are also informative here. He has shown that people take stigmatised attributes/behaviours to be most informative of who the bearer of those attributes are (Brekhus 2003). For people who are homeless, the public display of the behaviours noted above, for example, behaviours which ‘should’ take place in ‘privacy’, provide a distorted view of who they are. The behaviours are not only stigmatised and/or ‘out of place’, but because of this, taken as informative of their identities. In the same way that people may assume they know the identities and personalities of individuals because they are overtly gay (Brekhus 2003), the public display of homelessness means that the identities of people experiencing homelessness are assumed to be obviously
People who have a house are not simply able to conceal these undesirable behaviours to people outside of the house, but the implications of this concealment are significant for identity. If a person’s stigmatised and undesirable behaviours are unknown, then they do not contribute to the person’s public perception. The perception of the homeless as different to the broader population, therefore, cannot be simply attributed to their engagement in activities ‘different’ to what the broader population engages in, but to the realities that the broader public knows their engagement.

This public ‘knowledge’, thus, informs public perceptions of who ‘they’ are. This is not to say, however, that people who are homeless, or perhaps more specifically, the individuals that participated in this study, do not do things different to the broader population. In fact, through the previous three chapters I have demonstrated how much of their day-to-day lives are different. I am not, moreover, simply attributing the difference I observed to a lack of privacy to conceal behaviours. Rather, in this section I have tried to argue that, the differences in daily lives notwithstanding, perceptions of people who are homeless as different are also informed by the reality that most of their lives are on public display, which can have negative consequences for their public image.

7.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, empirical material has been presented to suggest that the physical and social context played a role in how research participants enacted different aspects of themselves. I understood that the enactment of different types of identities was purposeful and people did express agency, but identities enacted were most influenced and even restricted by the context in which it occurred. One aspect emphasised by many highlighted characteristics which suggested they were powerless, meek and in need of support. Upon closer examination and with the benefit of observations in contrasting ‘public’ places, however, it was evident that this enacted identity was but one aspect of the self, and highlighted exclusively when in receipt of charitable donations.
In public places and social contexts removed from the provision and receipt of charity, I described how research participants, in stark contrast to their presentation in charitable contexts, enacted an assertive and empowered identity. Their status as a customer, either derived from the purchase of food or from citizenry entitlement, enabled them freedom to assert themselves beyond their state of homelessness. In some respects, the enactment of what I referred to as an ‘assertive empowered customer’ identity was unremarkable. It was the unremarkable nature of this display, however, that illustrated aspects of the self beyond their homelessness, while also illustrating agency. By engaging in jokes, referring to sport and media stories, and by using their mobile phones, they displayed a side of themselves separate and indeed unrelated to the experience of homelessness. While there was variation in the behaviours and general presentation I referred to as empowered and assertive, each illustrated aspects of research participants that were consistent with their aspirations of living a ‘normal’ life as part of ‘mainstream’ society.

Differing from the ways research participants’ enacted aspects of who they were, the final part of this chapter considered how the display of ‘out of place’ behaviours can be implicated in how the ‘homeless’ are perceived and portrayed. Following Cresswell’s (1996) observations of the power of place to construct ‘normality’ and ‘deviance’, I argued that with nowhere to conceal ‘undesirable’ behaviours, they are not simply ‘out of place’, but taken as informative of identity. Just as Brekus (2003) demonstrated with reference to homosexuality that stigmatised attributes have high explanatory value, I suggested that overt displays of alcohol and substance use, mental illness and violence are taken to convey a disproportionate amount about who ‘the homeless’ are.

In addition to critically reflecting upon the adequacy with which the research questions have been responded to, the next chapter outlines some potential policy and practice implication of the study. Following on from the descriptions of research participants as active agents with identities meaningfully understood in ways separate and unrelated to their homelessness, the Housing First approach is presented as an appropriate strategy to
respond to their needs.
Chapter 8 Conclusion

Being low income doesn’t define who we are, doesn’t define our essence. Hull and Zacher (2007, p. 83)

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will first outline a summarised overview of the major themes from this study. These themes will be discussed with reference to the research aims and research questions. I will critically reflect upon to what extent I have successfully responded to the research questions. I set out suggesting that the significance of this study is evident in the potential to better understand, and thus meet the needs of, people who are homeless. The discussion of daily lives and personal identities has raised a number of policy and practice issues. The second part of this chapter, therefore, considers what, and how, an understanding of the people participating in this study can contribute to a better response to their needs. The purposively selected sample of people recruited from one Australian city, means that the study’s broader implications are tentative, rather than prescriptive. Recognising this, the chapter concludes with a brief note on how the contributions from this study could be generalised and extended.

8.2 Aim and research questions

In considering the homelessness literature and some theoretical debates about identity among sociologists and social psychologists, I constructed a notion of personal identity to understand the self as both subjectively experienced and socially located. At the immediate level, I drew on personal identity as a mechanism to understand how the people in this study understood and constructed their sense of self. The impetus for this was my reading of the Australian research literature where the voices and direct contributions of people experiencing homelessness rarely inform the identities they are ascribed. Similarly, within much of this literature they are subject to having identities
imposed upon them which has the consequence of positioning them in the context of, or with reference to, their state of homelessness.

The people who participated in this study, especially those twenty individuals whom I was able to engage in formal interviews and explore their perspectives at depth, did not think that their experiences of homelessness accounted for who they were. In answering the primary research question: *What are the personal identities of the people participating in this study?* I argued that people spoke about who they were with reference to their individual qualities and ‘mainstream’ aspirations. Nearly all research participants expressed a view that they had achieved little in life, but they saw themselves as ordinary and good people nonetheless. They emphasised these personal qualities in the context of the problematic people they were not. People overwhelmingly articulated concrete understandings of how their lives as homeless were contrary to ‘mainstream’ society. In turn, they appeared conscious that living in public places removed from the ‘mainstream’ could be interpreted as denoting their separation from, and rejection of, that society.

When explaining who they were and what was important to them, however, they cited examples of their qualities and their ways of thinking that aligned them to the ‘mainstream’ society they were living outside of. It was important for them to show that how they lived did not account for how they thought, and thus, did not account for the type of people they were. Extending my interpretations, I suggested that their life experiences prior to homelessness helped explain why their state of homelessness did not amount to a transformation in identity. In many respects the physical deprivations, the substance and alcohol use, and the feelings of not belonging that characterised their experiences as homeless were a continuation of life histories. Homelessness, and all that went with it, was thus not experienced as something radically different to their lives prior to being homeless.

Furthermore, I understood that the manner in which research participants emphasised their individual responsibility, and highlighted the choices they were responsible for, also
said something about their personal identities. Instead of seeing these views about individual responsibility as ‘internalised oppression’ or an imposition (Parker and Fopp 2004; Peel 2003), I have suggested that by explaining their homelessness with reference to choices to use alcohol and illicit substances, research participants were illustrating their ‘normalness’. They were not a passive, and importantly, a deficient type of ‘homeless person’ made homeless. Rather, they expressed their ‘ordinariness’ by way of pointing out how they, just like anyone else, had made bad choices. It was clear to them that they were living differently to people in the ‘mainstream’, but by emphasising this with reference to their agency and choices, they were showing that this way of living did not signify their status as a different type of people.

This idea that people participating in the study were living ‘differently’ was important to secondary research question one: How do the people participating in this study live on a day-to-day basis? On the one hand, responding to this question provided important information to contribute to the limited understanding of this aspect of people who are homeless. On the other hand, a description of day-to-day lives provided depth, and added complexity to personal identities. The descriptive accounts of daily lives, for example, provided a necessary context to locate and understand social interactions, the meaning of home, the enactment of identities, and the manner in which the display of these day-to-day routines is implicated in the ways ‘homeless people’ are represented.

Consistent with much of the available Australian and international research, I suggested that research participants’ day-to-day lives were characterised by structured boredom, alcohol and illicit substance acquisition/use, and social interactions and friendships. Each of these three elements was interrelated. For instance, the daily use of alcohol and illicit substances has to be understood in the context of boredom. Social interactions and friendships, even with people who were disliked, were also partially motivated by boredom. Likewise, both the use and acquisition of alcohol and illicit substances led to social interactions and friendships. Participation in opiate replacement medication programs also provided considerable structure and routine to day-to-day lives. It was
further shown how opiate replacement medication was closely associated with social interactions and substance misuse.

With Murray (1984) I noted that the structure and routine of people’s day-to-day lives could meaningfully be understood in the context of the services and organisations they relied upon. Extending this, I also showed how research participants were conscious in planning their daily activities, while similarly exercising agency and playing a determining role in those activities. They largely organised what they did each day, and when they did it, on the basis of what they wanted to achieve in the day. For most people, their overarching aim was to acquire and then consume alcohol and/or illicit substances. To achieve this, they would travel to certain places where alcohol and illicit substances could be obtained and used; they would interact with people they could acquire them from, and they would use the money they had to purchase alcohol and substances. For those individuals who did spend their money on alcohol and illicit substances, they then organised their lives around accessing food and drinks provided free of charge by charitable organisations.

Day-to-day lives were consciously planned and played out by people who exercised control over what they did. By understanding day-to-day lives, it can be seen that it is not best to think about people in this study as passive, nor being controlled by homelessness and broader social services. Furthermore, while they all self-defined as homeless, while each of them meet the objective definition of homeless, and while services that focus on homelessness play a vital role in their lives, it is clear that alcohol and substance use assumed the greatest importance in explaining the agency exercised on a daily basis. It was not best to think about their day-to-day lives in terms of their homelessness.

It is this understanding of lived experiences that added complexity to personal identity. I have already shown that people were aware that their ways of living were distinct from what they saw as the ‘mainstream’. Further, they did not see this way of living as signifying their status as a ‘homeless person’. From an understanding of their day-to-day lives, and how research participants exercised agency at prioritising them, it can be seen
that homelessness, although a problematic experience, was not seen as the major factor in their lives. On the contrary, and consistent with their perspectives on individual responsibility, homelessness was subsidiary and subordinate to alcohol and illicit substance use. It was alcohol and substance use that research participants saw as explaining their entrance into homelessness, why they continued to be homeless, and what they did each day. In turn, homelessness was also seen as unimportant in explaining who they were.

Research participants describing themselves and their day-to-day lives mostly informed my understandings about them. Although the observational component of the study was important, in accordance with the study’s aim I relied on them explaining to me who they were and what they thought of as important to them. The socially located nature of the personal identity I drew upon, however, meant that this study went beyond research participants’ direct accounts about themselves to understand elements of their identities. Secondary research questions two and three more specifically considered personal identities as a social phenomenon.

The importance of other people in the context of boredom and alcohol and substance acquisition and use has already been noted with reference to expressing agency in day-to-day lives. Research participants’ engagement in social interactions also provided some insights into how they constructed and perceived their personal identities. Recognising the interactional nature of personal identity, secondary research question number two explored: What do research participants perceive influences, or acts as reference points for their personal identities? Other people were shown as important to how research participants saw themselves in two ways: as a negative reference point, and as a positive reference point.

First, living in public places meant that research participants were forced to interact with many people, most of whom were homeless. Most of these people they did not like and did not want to interact with. By describing these people in negative terms, for instances, as untrustworthy, as annoying and as dangerous, research participants illustrated their
positive differences to these problematic individuals. Other researchers have noted similar types of strategies where people experiencing homelessness distance themselves from others who are homeless (Farrington and Robinson 1999; Johnson et al. 2008; Osborne 2002; Snow and Anderson 1993). Johnson et al. (2008) and Snow and Anderson (1993) refer to these strategies as ‘associational distancing’, whereby people consciously differentiate themselves from a homeless social category.

The notion of differentiating from a homeless role did not appear most pertinent to this study. Research participants did not see the problematic attributes of other people in terms of their homelessness. Similarly, they did not see themselves as members of a positive homeless collective (Farrington and Robinson 1999). Rather, other people were problematic on the basis of what they did as individuals, and research participants saw themselves as positive, on the basis of their individuality.

Despite the perceptions of other people as problematic, research participants also engaged them in emotionally detached, but pragmatic relationships. By highlighting their capacity to form strategic and emotionally detached relationships, they showed that homelessness did not signify their membership to a homeless collective identity. Instead of seeing themselves as a ‘we’, relationships were formed with other people who were homeless to exploit opportunities and mitigate risks that were present in their environment.

Secondly, and in contrast to these emotionally detached and strategic relationships, the people research participants referred to as ‘true’ friends also showed the role other people play in how they see and locate themselves. In a manner consistent with their espoused ordinariness and positive qualities, they always spoke about their ‘true’ friends as good people. It was not only the case that these ‘true’ friends provided emotional support, but these people acted as a positive reference point for how research participants saw themselves. In the same way that they disassociated themselves from negative individuals to illustrate who they were not, they associated themselves with positive individuals who held ‘mainstream’ values to show who they were as people.
In these respects, while the people in this study mostly interacted and socialised with other people who were homeless, homelessness was not a reference point for their identities. A homeless role or category was not used to denote their difference. On the other hand, homelessness was by no means a group identity they belonged to, nor did they construct their personal identities in the context of their state of homelessness. Individual research participants identified themselves with individuals they saw as positive and in ways unrelated to their housing status.

Some of the different ways people in this study presented themselves on a day-to-day basis raised important questions. Covering secondary research questions one and two, the social context was shown to be a reference point for the day-to-day enactment of the self. In a manner similar to other Australian research literature, I observed what appeared to be research participants emphasising their homelessness, or at least characteristics and traits commonly associated with it. Through their lack of assertiveness, drive and overt docility, they enacted what I referred to as a ‘meek, homeless identity’.

After further reflection, analysis of my fieldwork journal and broader reading of identity literature, it became clear that research participants were enacting elements of their identities that emphasised homelessness. The enactment of this identity was context specific, and differed considerably from identities I observed enacted in different contexts – indeed, it differed significantly to how they described themselves. It was this understanding that led me to think about the ways research participants portrayed themselves and the people they were expected to be, were all contingent and mediated by constraints and the social context. Consistent with my overarching conceptualisation of identity, I sought to explore what constraints and in what contexts research participants’ identities could be understood (Lawler 2008).

A consideration of these constraints and contexts placed research participants as active agents in the identities they enacted. The enactment of the ‘meek homeless person’ was shown to illustrate how they could access and secure the long-term receipt of charitable donations that contributed to their day-to-day well being. Rather than seeing their
individuality in terms of the identity they enacted, this identity was presented as something they employed, but not necessarily something they identified with. This was in line with Hall’s (2000) notion of identity as positional, and not something that signals an individual’s stable core.

Both the socially located nature of identity underpinning my theoretical framework and contributions to the homelessness field emphasising the importance of subjective definitions of home and homelessness informed secondary research question three: What constitutes home for research participants, and what do their meanings of home suggest about their personal identities? In responding to this area of enquiry I relied on research participants’ day-to-day lives in public places on the one hand, and their life experiences, histories and future aspirations on the other.

I argued that making sense of what constituted home for people required understanding what made them feel homeless. They were homeless because they did not have a place of their own. They had no place in a literal sense – most of them were literally without shelter. The implications of this were significant. For the individuals in this study, life in public places, that is to say, life without a place of one’s own, meant that they had little control over their lives. This powerlessness was spoken about in the context of many aspects of life, including: access to amenities that enabled daily functioning, safety, and a capacity to make broader life improvements.

A home, by contrast, was both the opposite of what they presently had as homeless, and indeed, perceived to be a panacea to what was wrong in their lives. It mattered not whether research participants expectations of what home was, and what home could achieve, were realistic or not. Their constructions of home illustrated how their day-to-day lives were experienced, and they also, although less explicitly, illustrated what they wanted in life.

By locating home as a means to, and signifier of their ‘normality’, it was shown that research participants’ meanings of home demonstrated their desire to live differently.
Most simply, this was to live in a manner different to how they lived as homeless. A home was a means to find a sense of belonging. Home was a way to feel connected to a society, or even connected to families many had felt disconnected from. On this level, home assumed greater significance, whereby home represented the presence of many things in life that research participants had not experienced, but wanted nonetheless.

I approached this study with expectations that the people would construct alternative definitions of what home and homelessness meant to them. Given that homeless and boarding house accommodation was both available in Brisbane and financially accessible to research participants at the time of the study, it was conceivable that their decision to sleep in public places could be explained by different notions of what constituted home. Research participants, however, described stereotypical and ‘mainstream’ notions of what home meant to them. Public places were not home; they were perceived as less undesirable than homeless and boarding house accommodation, and living rent-free meant more money for the purchase of alcohol and illicit substances. Their constructions of home and explanations for ‘sleeping rough’ therefore challenged some of my expectations entering this study.

8.3 Implications

Homelessness is not just the result of too few houses – its causes are many and varied.
Kevin Rudd and Tanya Plibersek (FaHCSIA 2008, p. iii)

Here I consider some policy and practice implications from the study. As the introductory discussion showed, reducing homelessness is considered a matter of national importance. Moreover, at the time of writing there is considerable political impetus and funding available to achieve this end. In this section it is demonstrated how the contributions from the people who participated in this study can be analysed to indicate some policy and practice responses that might be appropriate to them. Building on this, the chapter concludes with a consideration of ‘moderatum’ generalisation, whereby it is asked how
could the study be used to inform homelessness policy and practice in Australia more broadly.

Prior to a consideration of specific responses, it is useful to briefly reflect upon what is meant by responding to homelessness, or even more specifically, reducing homelessness. Discussions about responding to homelessness often conflate two related, but separate issues: the solutions to reducing homelessness on the one hand, and the problems individuals who are homeless have on the other. Throughout the White Paper (FaHCSIA 2008), for example, the complexity of homelessness and the importance of comprehending the extent of this complexity as a matter beyond housing are emphasised. This emphasis given to the complex nature of homelessness, linked with the subsequent sophistication required to address it, is not unique to the White Paper. The link has a long history in policy discourse in Australia (Bisset et al. 1999; Good Practices in SAAP Services 1999; Greenhalgh et al. 2004; Mackdacy et al. 2004; Neil 1994; Plibersek 2009; Wyatt et al. 2004).

On the basis of my understanding of the people who participated in this study, below I will suggest that ending their homelessness is not as difficult as is usually assumed. Indeed, others have argued similarly about ending homelessness more broadly:

In the case of homelessness, the solution may not always be isomorphic with the problems. Shinn et al. (2001, p. 97)

Although homelessness is a complex phenomenon, its solutions are not. Johnson et al. (2008, p. 221)

Addressing or solving the many complex problems people who are homeless have, however, is far more difficult. After six months of ethnographic engagement with the individuals in this study, I recognise that addressing many of the non-housing related problems they had may be particularly difficult. Addressing these problems would require far more than housing. As documented in this study, a high proportion of them had alcohol and opiate addictions, and many more had experienced significant traumas in
their lives. Exacerbating these problems, nearly all research participants spoke about feelings of disconnection and alienation from family members they considered significant. These are complex issues to respond to. In the discussion that follows I do not suggest that housing for some is a sufficient means to address these complex problems, and indeed, it is recognised that these problems can act as barriers to sustaining a tenancy over the long-term.

Moving beyond this suggestion that the complexity of reducing homelessness is often conflated with the complex problems people who are homeless may have, a policy and practice implications from this study indicates that solving research participants’ homelessness would not be contingent on having their problems addressed. Much of the policy discourse emphasising the complexity of homelessness or the ‘complex needs’ of individuals, however, tends to infer that addressing an individual’s problems is a prerequisite to addressing their homelessness. This is evident in the policy emphasis, both current (FaHCSIA 2008) and previous (Bisset et al. 1999; Good Practices in SAAP Services 1999; Greenhalgh et al. 2004; Gronda 2009; Mackdacy et al. 2005; Neil 1994), directed towards ‘wrap-around’ support and case management.

On the one hand, the need for case management is premised on the belief that it is considerably more difficult to assist people who are chronically homeless to exit homelessness (Chamberlain et al. 2007; Chamberlain and Johnson 2002). On the other hand, there is also the suggestion that people who have been homeless, especially those with ‘complex needs’, find it difficult to sustain tenancies (Bisset et al. 1999; Chamberlain et al. 2007; Mackdacy et al. 2005; Seelig and Jones 2006; Robinson 2003). If for instance, people re-enter the homeless population after securing accommodation, they are deemed to be unable to sustain a tenancy. This is referred to as the ‘revolving door of homelessness’ (Gale 2003). This ‘failure’ to sustain a tenancy supports the assumption that people are deficient and they require case management type interventions (Sahlin 2005). I will draw on North American literature and my understanding of research participants to suggest that case management may not be necessary, or at least
should not be prioritised, and that solving their problems may not be a pre-requisite to ending their homelessness.

The Housing First approach illustrates that having significant social and personal problems and exiting homelessness are not mutually exclusive. This is an ideological approach to responding to homelessness rather than a specific model. Fundamental to the Housing First approach is the distinction between housing and support, and the premise that housing is a human right. In practice, this has meant that people are provided with ‘normal’ housing with a standard tenancy (Atherton and Nicholls 2008). In New York City, this routinely involves head-leasing apartments from a private landlord – no more than 15% of people in the one apartment building are participants to the Housing First program (Stefancic and Tsemberis 2007).

Once housed, people are assertively offered a multi-disciplinary team of support, but their housing is not tied to their engagement with support, and with the exception of tenancy laws, their housing is not tied to any other conditions, for instance, abstinence or sobriety (Stefancic and Tsemberis 2007). Harm reduction is promoted (Padgett et al. 2006). Addressing individual needs for housing is an overarching priority of the Housing First approach. Evaluations have consistently demonstrated that people who have experienced long-term homelessness can exit homelessness into housing and sustain their own tenancies (Gulcur et al. 2003; Padgett et al. 2006; Stefancic and Tsemberis 2007; Tsemberis 1999; Tsemberis et al. 2004).

This type of homelessness response does not alter structures that cause homelessness (Culhane and Metraux 2008), and individuals who are housed in this way may not address non-housing related problems they may have (Padgett et al. 2006). Nonetheless, the Housing First approach provides clear evidence that the solutions to reducing homelessness are not as complex as it may be assumed, and not reliant on addressing the full range of problems a person who is homeless may have.
The remainder of this discussion explores the principles of the Housing First approach more deeply, suggesting that this approach, or any approach based on similar principles, would be particularly appropriate at responding to the needs of the specific individuals in this study. I demonstrate this on two levels. First, this approach would ideally meet their practical and immediate needs for housing. Next, the philosophical premise of the Housing First approach is consistent with the sense of self and individual responsibility people in this study articulated.

The usefulness of the Housing First approach is highlighted in contrast to the ‘case management’ focus prevalent in Australian policy and practice discourse. This contrast between the approach I argue for, vis-à-vis the current case management model should not be taken to the extreme. While the White Paper makes no mention of the Housing First model, the importance of housing is clearly acknowledged (FaHCSIA 2008). Further, it is now recognised that case management without the provision of housing is limited (Gronda 2009). The Housing First approach also involves the availability of support. As such, my argument for the Housing First approach is a matter of emphasis. I do not discount the need for the availability of support to some people who are homeless to enable them to exit homelessness and sustain housing. Instead, I suggest that the provision of appropriately located (Chamberlain et al. 2007; Johnson et al. 2008) ‘normal’ housing should be the first priority – housing should be emphasised above everything else. Support should be subsidiary to housing, and where possible, individual tenants should determine what, if any, support they require to sustain their tenancy.

The relevance of the Housing First approach to people in this study lies not simply in the evaluations that have documented its effectiveness, but also in the people Housing First has proven effective for. The literature illustrates that the Housing First approach works with people who experience long-term and literal homelessness, have mental illnesses, are excluded from mainstream services, and/or misuse illicit substances and alcohol (Gulcur et al. 2003; Padgett et al. 2006; Stefancic and Tsemberis 2007; Tsemberis 1999; Tsemberis et al. 2004). These are people with similar experiences to those individuals who participated in this study. As we saw in chapter one, these people are defined as
having ‘complex needs’, with SAAP consistently being unable to respond to their needs. Policies of case management and transitional housing are premised on a belief that these people either cannot, or are not ready to sustain their own independent tenancy. The research from North America questions these assumptions and the appropriateness of the responses that are based on them.

The Housing First approach, therefore, rests on the premise that individuals can maintain their own housing – a premise supported by the aforementioned evaluative empirical research. An understanding of the agency and capacity demonstrated in the way research participants lived on a day-to-day basis would lend support to the premise that they are indeed capable of maintaining their own housing. While a major focus was the acquisition and use of alcohol and illicit substances, the way they achieved this focus illustrated their personal efficacy. They were not incapable people living chaotic and unorganised lives.

For instance, people in this study developed clear plans and networks to acquire illicit substances. This involved a sound understanding of, and compliance with, the welfare system so they could receive the money needed to purchase illicit substances. Their daily lives also illustrated their capacity to work in accordance with health bureaucracies in order to maintain participation in opiate replacement medication programs. Likewise, they also showed their capacity at sourcing prescription medication from numerous practitioners and pharmacies throughout greater Brisbane – otherwise known as ‘doctor shopping’. After consciously spending their money on illicit substances and alcohol, they subsequently organised and prioritised their daily routines in order to access food and drink free of charge.

In addition to this planning and adherence to appointments, research participants’ were individuals conscious of the ways their actions and behaviours may have implications on other people, and thus themselves. This level of consciousness was evident in the ways they used illicit substances and alcohol in a manner that minimised their impact upon those around them, including the police. Aware that their uses of public places were often
illegal and contrary to the ‘mainstream’, they did what they could to minimise disturbances. Research participants thus knew how to be a ‘good neighbour’. All of this suggests that they are people capable of fulfilling the obligations of maintaining a tenancy. As Tsemberis et al. (2004, p. 652) have argued in the context of people with mental illnesses, if research participants could survive on the streets, then they could manage their own tenancies. Indeed, this is not just speculative. With the exception of Michelle and Glen who were relatively young, and Craig who had not lived in Australia his whole life, most spoke about periods in their lives where they had sustained their own tenancy.

The Housing First approach is premised on the belief that housing is a human right; but housing is voluntary, and people must therefore desire to exit homelessness. It has been well documented that people in this study desired housing. Their desires for housing may, however, be in tension with a perception, although not dominant nor always explicitly stated, that some individuals who experience literal and long-term homelessness may neither desire nor require housing. Coleman’s (2000) participants in the ‘homeless community’ were portrayed as not wanting housing. From my professional experience, I am aware of a perception among some service providers that a number of people who are homeless do not want housing. While the precise meaning is open to interpretation, this perception can also be seen in the current White Paper on homelessness, whereby accommodation is only offered to “rough sleepers who need it” (FaHCSIA 2008, p. 17). The emphasis on those ‘rough sleepers’ needing housing suggests that a considerable number at least, do not need housing. The perspectives of people in this study challenge these perceptions.

Further consistent with research participants needs, the Housing First approach emphasises the importance of providing ‘normal’ housing under ‘normal’ tenancy agreements. Due to a number of reasons, including past negative experiences, research participants refused to reside in homeless accommodation. They, like people in numerous other studies (Clapham 2003; McNaughton 2008; Randall and Brown 2002; Ravenhill 2008), wanted ‘normal’ housing over homeless accommodation, even if this meant they
would be literally without shelter. The Housing First model would not only meet research participants’ needs for housing, but the philosophy of the model is most in accordance with their self-perceptions and values. Rather than homeless accommodation and case management that isolates and reifies their status as different (Fopp 1996; Fraser 1997, 2003), the ‘normal’ tenancies provided through the Housing First approach positions them as ‘normal’ individuals in the same ways they see themselves.

This positioning of ‘normal’ housing as a human right, together with the priorities given to individual need and choice, also highlights the suitability of the Housing First approach to research participants. Unlike the ‘continuum of care model’ where treatment and ‘support’ occur prior to graduating to housing (Greenhalgh et al. 2004), the Housing First approach does not require tenants to abstain from, or reduce use of, alcohol and illicit substances. Similarly, there is no obligation to participate in illicit substance misuse and alcohol programs. Tenant choice underpins the Housing First philosophy (Atherton and Nicholls 2008). The centrality of alcohol and illicit substances to research participants’ lives has been clearly illustrated, and by their own admissions, they either felt they could not, or they are unwilling to, abstain from this use in the immediate time. The Housing First model would not only ensure that these people can exit homelessness, but research has suggested that the assertive support that is linked to, but not contingent on, the housing, means that people engage in the support that is most in accordance with their needs, and at a time when they are ready to engage (Padgett et al. 2006). In fact, comparative studies have found that people whose housing was contingent on accessing illicit substance programs did not present with lower rates of illicit substance use when compared with those individuals housed through the Housing First approach (Padgett et al. 2006; Tsemberis et al. 2004).

Moving beyond problems associated with substance and alcohol use, the Housing First approach recognises that many people who are long-term homeless have other significant problems in their lives. Indeed, research participants, while not seeing themselves as homeless individuals, were conscious of the many problems they experienced. The importance of the Housing First approach would be in accordance with their views on
agency and individual responsibility, as they would be in control of identifying what problems they have, and similarly assume a controlling role in the nature of support required to address those problems. This approach would be in contrast to their passive engagement with services that undermined their capacity and reinforced their feelings of homelessness. The voluntary nature of the Housing First approach would provide a balance that enables them to engage with the support they require, but in a manner where they can assume greater control of the direction and nature of that support.

8.4 Moderatum generalisation

It has already been noted that the purposive method of recruitment to this study precludes the capacity for empirical generalisation to the broader population of people who ‘sleep rough’ in Australia. Nonetheless, drawing on the notion of ‘moderatum’ generalisation (Payne and Williams 2005; Williams 2000) introduced in chapter four, I will now consider what relevance this specific ethnographic study in Brisbane has for people who are homeless, especially those who ‘sleep rough’, elsewhere in Australia. Demonstrating this relevance to homelessness outside of the study’s sample, albeit tentative and cautious relevance is fundamentally important. As has been noted, the Federal Government’s goal of ending homelessness with a particular focus on helping those ‘sleeping rough’ (FaHCSIA 2008), provides an opportunity for the knowledge generated in this study to contribute towards policy and practice outcomes that can have a direct bearing on people’s lives.

In order to make ‘moderatum’ generalisations from my sample, I am required to have an understanding of the characteristics of the people generalised about. If it can be shown that the populations are similar, for example, by drawing on existing research, then ‘inductive inferences’ (Williams 2000) can be made. As was alluded to in chapter one, however, existing information about people who are homeless in Australia makes comparisons difficult.
To demonstrate, although everyone in this study either was, or had been ‘sleeping rough’, it is not clear as to which other people should be the basis for comparison. Research shows that many people who experience homelessness move in and out of different forms of homelessness (Chamberlain et al. 2007; Chamberlain and Johnson 2001; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008). Australian research has likewise shown that people move in and out of the homeless population (Johnson et al. 2008). Those individuals who ‘sleep rough’ are therefore not a static or unique group of people that can unambiguously be differentiated from the broader homeless population. Indeed, the realities of people in this study confirm existing research, whereby nearly all of them had experienced different forms of homelessness, and had also sustained their own tenancies.

On the other hand, if other people who ‘slept rough’ in Australia were the section of the homeless population about whom generalisations could be made, two difficulties arise. The first relates to geography and place. Important to my understanding of people in this study was their day-to-day lives in Brisbane and their relationships with the public places in which they lived. In fact, I drew on ‘place identity’ literature to gain insights into how they saw themselves. The public places in which they lived and carried out their daily lives were closely implicated in how they understood their homelessness, their relationships and their aspirations.

It would be particularly difficult to generalise the experiences of people from this study towards those who ‘sleep rough’ in other urban public places in Australia. I cannot demonstrate that the places of inner suburban Brisbane so fundamental to this study are statistically representative of other areas (Small 2009). Moreover, it can be by no means inferred that the people in this study have similar experiences and perspectives as those who ‘sleep rough’ in rural and remote Australia. For instance, the day-to-day lives of people in this study were closely associated with their use of a number of statutory and charitable organisations. These services are far less accessible outside of major Australian cities. What implications does this have for how people live? Are social interactions and
homeless collectives more important when there is an absence of formalised support and
easy access of services?

The second difficulty with generalising this study to other sections of the homeless
population relates to limited information to adequately illustrate the similarities and
differences in characteristics. Many of the empirical studies with people who have ‘slept
rough’ are either too old to make meaningful comparison (Darcy and Jones 1975; de
Hoog 1972; Jordan 1965; Linsell 1962), or have not outlined material that is relevant for
comparison (Coleman 2000). The most recent national census does show that the people
in this study approximate those defined in the ‘primary’ homeless group who reside in
capital cities in terms of gender and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal status (Chamberlain
and MacKenzie 2009). The national census was not, however, able to elucidate more
detailed characteristics of the people who experienced this form of homelessness.

As noted in chapter one, it may also be the case that people in this study used alcohol and
illicit substances at a much higher rate than the broader homeless population.
Recognising that comparison is difficult because existing representative research is
limited and the criteria for substance use/misuse varies, studies drawn from other
Australian cities have identified the prevalence of illicit substance misuse among
homeless populations to include 20% (Zaretzky et al. 2008), 24% [intravenous use]
(Walsh 1998), 36% (Hodder et al. 1998; Teesson et al. 2003) 37% (Horn 1999), 43%
(Johnson and Chamberlain 2008b) and 50% (Sibthorpe et al. 1995). The prevalence of
illicit substance use among people in this study was between 75 and 85%, and is thus
much higher than these studies found. With reference to illicit substance use, it is possible
that people in this research differ from other homeless populations.

This study’s focus on life in Brisbane’s public places, together with the existing research,
demonstrates that the capacity of this research to make ‘moderatum’ generalisations to
the broader homeless population outside of Brisbane is somewhat limited. To put it
another way, my sample was deliberately chosen to include people who ‘slept rough’, but
on the basis of what can be known about other people who ‘sleep rough’ in Australia, I
cannot say that these people represent all ‘rough sleepers’ directly (Payne and Williams 2005). Nonetheless, and in keeping with the basic principles of ‘moderatum’ generalisation, the lives and identities of the people reported in this study raise a number of questions that future research could focus on.

Given that Aboriginal Australians are overrepresented in the homeless population, and particularly so in terms of ‘rough sleeping’ (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2009), further research could focus on Aboriginal people. Although I did not specifically target places in Brisbane where Aboriginal people are known to ‘sleep rough’, approximately 15% of my research participants identified as Aboriginal. I have made very little note of Aboriginal issues throughout the empirical chapters. This is because I identified nothing specific about research participants that could be explained by Aboriginal status. Other than Mark identifying himself as an elder, none of the Aboriginal people in this study linked their experiences of homelessness, their ideas of home, or their social interactions with their Aboriginality. Indeed, Pat, an Aboriginal male, stated that he lives in his tent next to Tim, Andrew and Chris – three non-Aboriginal males because they use similar substances and they offer each other protection. Whereas these three people do not consume alcohol, so Pat explained that he does this with Aboriginal people he knows who do consume alcohol. For Pat, his or other people’s Aboriginal status did not appear to determine or influence day-to-day lives or social interactions.

Other Aboriginal research participants were not as explicit as Pat, but similar to him, none of them spoke about the issues I have considered in this thesis which I understood to be Aboriginal specific. This may, however, be a reflection of the non-directive and participant directed style of interviewing, where I did not raise specific questions about Aboriginality.

In respect to the meaning of home and homelessness, my conclusions differ to the seminal study of Aboriginal people ‘sleeping rough’ conducted by Memmott et al. (2003). This study emphasised the importance of spiritual connection/disconnection with place, and did not so strongly highlight the importance of a physical structure to the
meaning of home. Future research could further explore the meaning of place and the importance of social interactions and groupings for Aboriginal people ‘sleeping rough’, and consider how these factors influence experiences of home and homelessness.

While the high rates of substance use among people in this study render comparison with other homeless populations limited, these high rates, and how people in this research understood their alcohol and substance use, provides fertile ground for future research. Building on studies that have noted the prevalence of alcohol and substance use (Fisk et al. 2006; Hall et al. 1999; Hodder et al. 1998; Johnson and Chamberlain 2008b; Teesson et al. 2003), and how these constitute a pathway into homelessness (Johnson et al. 2008), more research is needed about addiction and exiting homelessness, and addiction and people who sustain housing. For instance, many people in this study clearly asserted that they decided to use the entirety of their welfare benefit to purchase illicit substances and alcohol rather than to pay rent in the private market. Acquiring housing in the private rental market, was not only difficult for research participants, but payment of rent in the private sector would account for more than one half of their weekly income. On the basis of what could be obtained after forgoing rent, many research participants made calculated decisions to respond to their addictions. Is this type of calculated decision making common among other people who ‘sleep rough’?

If prioritising an opiate addiction over rent explains homelessness for some people, and that they also see this homelessness as undesirable, it would have policy implications for how their homelessness could be ended. This is where the distinction between addressing personal problems and ending homelessness is important. Ending homelessness for many people in this study may require housing that is not necessarily or immediately related to abstinence or overcoming their addictions. Similarly, because addictions assumed such a controlling aspect of many people’s lives, the housing required to end their homelessness may need to be subsidised so that the ongoing payment of rent was not a barrier to the sustainment of the tenancy. The idea of no evictions for financial reasons has already been trialled (Mackdacy et al. 2005, p. 163). This idea warrants further consideration.
In a closely related manner, literal homelessness for people in this study, consistent with international research (Clapham 2003; McNaughton 2008; Randall and Brown 2002; Ravenhill 2008), was explained in the context of a refusal to access homeless specific accommodation. Either in addition to or separate to addiction, are research participants’ decisions to avoid homeless accommodation representative of other people in Australia who ‘sleep rough”? If people ‘sleeping rough’ are making conscious decisions to avoid homeless accommodation, but still have aspirations and desires for ‘normal’ housing, this too, has implications for how they could be respond to.

Moving away from exploring how unique or representative people participating in this study are, an important second consideration pertains to the applicability and cost effectiveness of the Housing First approach in Australia. In supporting my argument about most appropriately meeting the needs of people in this study research from North America was cited. This research is unequivocally positive, because it has shown that people otherwise thought difficult to house can in fact sustain their tenancies. Moreover, when compared to the financial costs associated with ‘rough sleeping’, research has shown that the Housing First approach is cost effective (Culhane et al. 2002; Gulcur et al. 2003).

Australia’s social, economic, welfare and housing systems differ in many ways to those in North America. Research would be required to determine if the achievements from North America could be replicated in the Australian context. For instance, the cost effectiveness of the Housing First approach has no doubt been important in garnering wider public and political support. Existing Australian homelessness program evaluation models (Pinkney and Ewing 2006; Zaretzky et al. 2008) could be drawn on to establish whether the Housing First approach would be likewise cost effective in Australia.

The questions about transferability notwithstanding, in agreement with Atherton and Nicholls (2008) speaking about the potential applicability in Europe, I can see no reason why a Housing First type approach would not work well, and indeed, represent an important strategy towards meeting the Federal Government’s current aims of reducing
overall homelessness, and offering all ‘rough sleepers’ accommodation. In the case of the latter, future research could identify whether the Housing First approach would result in offering accommodation to ‘rough sleepers’ that is most in accordance with their needs.

8.5 Conclusion

Following on from Fraser’s (1997, 2003) ideas about misrecognition considered in chapter one, we can see that the positioning of people as individuals in ways unrelated to their homelessness can contribute towards policies and practices directed towards them. This positioning, for instance, supports the proposition that they, just like everyone else, require housing. Instead of ignoring the evidence illustrating the importance of the availability of support to people post-homelessness, I suggested support should be subsidiary to housing, and individuals should assume the driving role in the nature and timing of any support they engage with. For the individuals in this study, the provision and prioritising of ‘normal’ housing with a ‘normal’ lease would also speak to their desires to acquire this type of housing and participate in what they perceived was the ‘mainstream’. The Housing First approach not only seemed appropriate on this level, but it is designed in such a way “that it would be particularly difficult for a client not to maintain their housing” (Atherton and Nicholls 2008, p. 294).

On the other hand, by positioning people who are homeless with reference to their homelessness – as ‘homeless people’, it is easy to think about them as ‘different’ and ‘inadequate’. This positioning supports assumptions that they are distinct from society, and thus have different values and priorities about housing. Likewise, it can reinforce the assumption that ‘homeless people’, especially those with ‘complex needs’, are unable to sustain their own housing. The assumptions are that they require to be case managed; they require transitional supported housing, or they need to participate in programs to develop life skills so they are able to enter ‘conventional’ housing (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, p. 135). As Sahlin (2005, p. 118) notes, positioning people who are homeless in this manner shifts the focus away from affordable housing and moves it towards ‘individual deficiencies’.
Rather than idealising the lives of people who were homeless (Coleman 2000; Ward 1977, 1979) and ignoring many of the problems they experienced, this thesis has explicitly highlighted them. Indeed, it has been suggested that people were conscious actors, who among other things, contributed towards and exacerbated some of their problems. Nonetheless, I similarly argued that these problematic life experiences and behaviours did not account for all of who they were. Further, their experiences of homelessness did not constitute how they thought: about themselves; their homelessness, or what they saw as the ‘mainstream’. Extending this, it was suggested that the manner in which they organised their day-to-day lives and presented different aspects of themselves illustrated their agency and capacity. They were people with conscious plans, and meditated by constraints, they developed strategies to achieve those plans.

In addition to the potential policy and service provision implications from this study, it is important to conclude by noting that understanding the lives and identities of people who are homeless, from their perspectives, is important in and of itself. In the process of undermining misrepresentations about them, this study has highlighted their similarities with the broader population in terms of worldviews, values and aspirations. It is not only meaningful to understand the people in this study in ways distinct from their homelessness, but as individuals. They are individuals with desires to find a place in ‘mainstream’ society. Finding ‘their’ place in society would also constitute a means to recognise their individuality.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – interview participant information form

Project title: Day-to-day lives, identities and people who are homeless

Researcher: Cameron Parsell, PhD student
School of Social Work and Applied Human Services, University of Queensland, St Lucia, 4072,
Phone: (07) 3365 1468, email: c.parsell@uq.edu.au

Supervisors:
Associate professor Andrew Jones (University of Queensland Social Research Centre)
University of Queensland
Phone: (07) 3365 2556
Dr Greg Marston (School of Social Work and Applied Human Sciences)
University of Queensland
Phone: (07) 3365 3024

Purpose of the research:
The research project is being undertaken as part of my PhD. The purpose of the research is to understand how people experiencing long-term homelessness understand their identities. To do this, people who are homeless will be interviewed, where they can talk about how they see themselves, how they see their identities and their homelessness. It is important to know what people who are homeless think about their homelessness and identities. This way, policies and services can be influenced by what things are like for people who are homeless. This research is only interested in what people who are homeless say about their identities and homelessness.

Your role in the research:
If you choose to participate, there will be a one-off interview, which will take about an hour. If you would like more time, the interview can go for longer. The interview will be conducted by the researcher, and can be held anywhere convenient to you. During the interview you will be asked questions about how you see yourself, and about how you see your self is influenced by being homeless. If you find talking about your homelessness or self as upsetting, then there may be some risk in participating in this research.

At the completion of the interview, there will be an opportunity for you to provide any feedback, or discuss any questions or concerns you may have about the interview or research. You will also be welcome to provide feedback or ask any questions about the research during the interview. Should you feel in need of support following the interview, support options will be discussed with you. With your permission, the interview will be tape recorded. If you would like, a written summary of your interview will be made available to you after the interview is finished.
The researcher:
Cameron Parsell is a PhD student at the School of Social Work and Applied Human Services, at the University of Queensland. Cameron has seven years experience working with people who are homeless, and he is particularly interested in hearing what people who are homeless say about themselves. You are welcome to contact Cameron directly if you would like to ask any questions about the research, or your participation in it.

Voluntary participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary and if you agree to participate you may refuse to answer any question. You may also withdraw from the study at any time without reason. If you do choose to withdraw from the study after participation, any information you provided will be destroyed.

Confidentiality and privacy:
All information provided by you in relation to the research will be kept strictly confidential. Your name or any identifiable information will not be included in the analysis, or in any written or verbal report or publication on the research. All data will be stored in password protected electronic files or in a securely locked area. The researcher is the only person who will have access to this information.

Benefits of the research:
If you choose to participate, you will be given $25 as recognition of your contribution and time. Other than this, there are no direct benefits for you to take part in this research. The research is concerned with learning about how people who are homeless see themselves and their homelessness, and using this information to improve the way homelessness is thought about, and improve homeless policy and services. The research results will be presented at conferences and published in academic journals.

Ethical review:
This study has been cleared by one of the human ethics committees of the University of Queensland in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s guidelines. You are of course, free to discuss your participation in this study with the researcher, Cameron Parsell, contactable on 3365 1468. If you would like to speak to an officer of the University not involved in the study, you may contact the Ethics Office on 3365 3924.

Thank you for your involvement in this research

Cameron Parsell
PhD student
School of Social Work and Applied Human Services, University of Queensland
Appendix 2 – interview participants consent form

**Project title:** Day-to-day lives, identities and people who are homeless

**Researcher:** Cameron Parsell, PhD student

I have read the participant information sheet for this study and hereby consent to be interviewed to take part in the study.

- I have been given clear written and verbal information about the study. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand what is required of me.
- I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary. I can refuse to answer any questions, and can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded and transcribed.
- I understand that any information provided by me will be stored securely and only accessed by the researcher.
- I understand that all information provided by me will be kept strictly confidential, and that no names or other identifiable information will be included in any report or study.
- I understand that I may receive no benefit from the research.
- I understand that I may ask further questions about the study or my part in it at any time.
- If I identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, I can speak with the researcher about any Indigenous issues in relation to participating in this research.

Participants name……………………………………

Participants signature……………………………..                    Date……………………

Witness name……………………………………..

Witness signature…………………………………                    Date……………………
Appendix 3 – interview guide

This interview guide is not a prescription of the exact questions asked, the precise wording used, or representative of order the questions were asked (questions and conversation to build rapport were used prior to asking questions listed below), but rather, following Patton (2002, p. 343-4), this guide served as a list of topics or possible questions covered. The guide was applied flexibly enough to discuss other issues that became more important to individual respondent’s, and indeed exploratory and probing questions were developed on an ad hoc basis; for example, after hearing responses such as yes or no, respondents were asked to explain their closed answers in more detail. Moreover, many questions outlined below are similar in nature, and sometimes extended or detailed responses made them superfluous. The interview guide does, however, document the main areas explored, and the types of questions asked.

**Thoughts**

Please tell me about who you are?

What things are important to you that are not related to being homeless?

Do you have friends who are homeless, or do you hang out with other people who are homeless?

Tell me about your friends? Who are your friends?

Are you a homeless person? If so, how does this view change from day-to-day?

**Perceptions self**

Do you see yourself as long-term homeless? Please tell what would be long-term homeless for you?

Please tell me about how you see yourself?

Please tell me how being homeless effects how you see yourself?

How did you see yourself when you were not homeless?

How do you think the way other people see you effects how you see yourself?

How do you think you would see yourself if you were not homeless?

How important does being homeless amount to how you see yourself?

Is being homeless the most important thing in how you see yourself.
Do you think you’re the same as other people who are homeless?

Do you think the way other people see you effects how you are treated?

What does the way others see you mean to you?

What is home to you?

Do you feel homeless?/ Do you feel at home?

**Perceptions others**

How do you think other people who are homeless see you?

How do you think other people who are not homeless see you?

**Closing areas**

Who would you like to be known as?

How would you like to be seen?

What’s your main concern or problem in life?
Appendix 4 – interview participants

Mark

Mark is an Indigenous male aged somewhere between fifty and sixty. His Aboriginality was important to him. On numerous occasions he declared his elder status and displayed initiation markings on his torso. During the fieldwork he was sleeping in an inner-suburban park. It was not clear how long Mark had been homeless. He once told me that he had been sleeping outside since the 1970s, but he also frequently mentioned periods over the past five years where he had tenancies. He was well known to many people in the area. Mark had consumed alcohol on a daily basis for as long as he could recall, and he suffered from significant memory loss.

Tim

Tim identified as an Anglo-Australian and aged forty. Throughout fieldwork Tim was sleeping at Riverside Drive and had done so for approximately one year. Prior to this he resided with his brother in a house and in several boarding houses in and around West End. Tim spoke about a long history of substance misuse and minor criminal activity. At the time of the fieldwork, he was before the courts for alleged theft and break and entries, which he thought he had a fifty percent chance of being incarcerated for. People at Riverside Drive knew Tim for his talkativeness, and he came across as extremely friendly and helpful. Indeed, Tim played a considerable role in introducing me to other people at Riverside Drive and facilitating my fieldwork.

Andrew

Andrew is an Anglo male aged somewhere in his forties. Andrew lived in a tent at Riverside Drive and had done for approximately six months prior to me meeting him. He spoke about two periods where he was incarcerated, previous homelessness, and a short period where he lived with his former partner. Andrew’s former partner gave birth to his
only child while he was last incarcerated approximately three years earlier, and his separation from this former partner, and child in particular, caused great distress for him. Nearly all conversations I had with Andrew centred on his family.

**Chris**

Chris identified as an Anglo-Australian, and he is approximately sixty years of age. Chris lived in a tent at Riverside Drive, and with the exception of a brief social housing tenancy, had done so for nearly eight years. Indeed, Chris asserted that he was one of the original non-Indigenous people to camp at Riverside Drive. Chris was an extraordinary man, who assumed somewhat legendary status with the service providers and people who slept rough in the area. He had an extensive knowledge of current international relations and leftwing politics. He read widely, and many volunteers and service providers would give him books, many of which he stored in his tent. Chris was charismatic and acted as a spokesperson/leader for the area. Chris seemed to like me, and because of this, other people accepted my presence. He sustained considerable burns to his body towards the end of fieldwork, and he was going to be discharged from hospital into housing.

**Alex**

Alex is aged forty and he identified as an Anglo-Australian. I met Alex three months into the fieldwork, and during the time I knew him he slept in public places in the Brisbane CBD. He spent at least sometime each weekday at the café. Alex saw the café as a lifeline, and drew upon and greatly appreciated the support and company this service provided. He spoke about spending a number of years in prison, and some brief stays in homeless accommodation as well. Alex was estranged from all family members, and he was excluded from all local homeless accommodation. He blamed himself, and his drug use and aggression for this estrangement and exclusion. Alex was working with social workers to try and find his family and he was also trying to recommence the methadone program after a recent relapse.
Glen

Glen is a thirty year old male who identified as Anglo-Australian. For the period of fieldwork, Glen was sleeping on a friend’s couch. Prior to this, he had lived on the streets and in ‘squats’ in Brisbane for what he described was many years. Glen also disclosed significant illicit substance use for half of his life, although he had sustained abstinence for approximately three months. Glen was on the methadone program. He lived with Michelle, his partner of three years, and they were trying to have their first child. Glen was focusing on exiting homelessness, and with the support of the café, he had applied for housing towards the end of the fieldwork.

Craig

Craig is a sixty year old male who identified as Serbian-Australian. He had lived in Australia for approximately fifteen years. During the fieldwork, Craig resided in an inner-suburban boarding house. He spent most of his days in Fortitude Valley’s public places, and he has a history of sleeping rough. I met Craig six years prior to conducting this research when I worked as a welfare worker in homeless accommodation in Sydney. Craig did not remember me, but this link initiated his participation in the research. He wanted to return to Sydney, but was restricted from doing so by the Public Guardian. Craig was a statutory mental health patient, and throughout his life in Australia he was routinely subject to involuntary hospitalisation. Craig rejected his diagnosis as mentally ill, and he was both paranoid and fearful of health and other state authorities in general.

Michelle

Michelle is approximately twenty five and identified as an Indigenous woman. Michelle was in a relationship with Glen, and during the fieldwork she resided with Glen on their mutual friend’s couch. Michelle spoke about living on the streets for many years, and first started doing so during early adolescence. Michelle made frequent references to her problematic life on the one hand, and her recent efforts to improve it on the other. She
explained that her mother left her in hospital after birth, and if it were not for an aunty, she would have had to live with a “white family”. As with her partner Glen, during fieldwork Michelle had sustained abstinence for a number of months. Michelle participates in the methadone program, and is actively trying to have a baby. She wants to recommence education and training, and be a role model to other girls living on the streets.

**Oliver**

Oliver is a fifty year old man who identified as Anglo-Australian. For the duration of fieldwork, and for approximately eighteen months prior, he lived in a tent at Riverside Drive. Immediately prior to this Oliver resided in boarding house accommodation, but the loneliness of this was associated with a suicide attempt. He described his life in a remarkable way. After an abusive and unhappy childhood, he left home at fifteen and moved to the other end of Australia where he worked for drug dealers. From this time Oliver has been addicted to heroin. In his later teenage years, he started working on fishing boats, where after a number of years of continuous employment, he was promoted to the role of boat captain. Oliver described an extremely successful career on fishing boats alongside a heroin habit. He said he managed this balance by abstaining during the fishing season. After a relationship breakdown, Oliver was unable to control this balance, and he lost control of his life. Oliver was participating in the methadone program and hoping to regain employment in the following year. He is a prolific poet, and some of his work is included in this thesis.

**Phil**

Phil is aged between thirty and forty. He identified as an Anglo-Australian. He lived in his tent at Riverside Drive and had done so for approximately one year. Prior to this he lived in boarding houses, and described literal homelessness and insecure housing throughout much of his adult life. Phil presented as extremely shy and quietly spoken. He disclosed using many different illicit substances, and a considerable part of each and
every day was spent sourcing them. I never saw Phil alone, and he always seemed to be in a hurry. On the few occasions he did speak about his life beyond homelessness, Phil routinely mentioned being a groomsman in his brother’s wedding. Phil said that he was far too ashamed to ever tell his family about his homelessness, and he saw acquiring a house as a means to building a closer relationship with family members.

Jim

Jim is an Anglo-Australian aged in his mid forties. He lived in a squat at Fortitude Valley, and he spent most days interacting with people at Riverside Drive. By Jim’s own accounts, his daily mission was to acquire, and then use illicit substances. Jim had an extremely negative self-perception, and he constantly reflected upon his life, and what he had done to make it miserable. Indeed, Jim saw the problematic childhood he experienced, which led to him leaving home and experiencing homelessness as a child, as his own fault. Jim had a child he was estranged from in another part of the country. Due to breaching bail conditions and a domestic violence order, he was unable to return to another state in Australia that he saw as home, or have contact with his child. While he saw the achievement inconceivable, Jim aspired to have a little bit of property in the country, so he could grow his own food and marijuana and live quietly.

Tolly

Tolly is a fifty year old male who identified as Anglo-Australian. Even by the standards of those around him, his life was extraordinary. Tolly lived in a tent at Riverside Drive. Between two and four consecutive days each fortnight, however, he also resided at the home of his former partner with their seven children. Tolly would stay with his children in the days immediately after receiving his welfare benefits. During his stay, he played the role of what he called the typical father: he would take his children to school, change their nappies and help with the dinner. His children were his priority, and Tolly explained that he spent time with them upon receiving his welfare entitlements because it was important for him to provide for them.
In contrast to this lifestyle, Tolly would reside at Riverside Drive for the majority of the fortnight where he would use opiate based illicit substances on a daily basis. He spoke about two entirely different lives, and more importantly, Tolly described the importance of maintaining this division. He said that he never wanted his children to know about his illicit substance use or homelessness. On the other hand, living with his children fulltime was perceived as difficult, due to his opiate addiction and the structure of the welfare system that would mean his children would receive less money.

**Wayne**

Wayne is forty five and identified as Anglo-Australian. With his wife Shelly, he lived in a tent at Riverside Drive. This was the second period Wayne had stayed at Riverside Drive in a year, and he described periods in boarding houses, literal homelessness and successful tenancies throughout his adult life. Approximately two years prior to the research, Wayne sustained a brain injury. He linked this injury to some subsequent problematic behaviour that had led to his serious involvement with the criminal justice system, which he was expecting to be incarcerated for. Wayne was extremely proud of his wife, and took great comfort in knowing that despite a traumatic live characterised by ongoing heroin use, he had managed to maintain and build on a successful marriage. At the same time, by not providing a home and income to Shelly, Wayne felt that he had failed her as a husband.

**Shelly**

Shelly is a forty four year old woman who identified as Anglo-Australian. She had been married to Wayne for ten years, and in a relationship with him for fifteen years. As such, she too disclosed ongoing periods of homelessness, broken by successful tenancies, for much of her adult life. Shelly described her life in terms of family and illicit substance use. On the one hand, she was a proud mother and grandmother. Shelly also took pride in her status as a wife, and helping Wayne since his brain injury in particular. On the other
hand, Shelly positioned herself, and her choices, in the context of a life-long battle with heroin. She saw heroin use as the reason why she has lost contact with a family. Her focus was to overcome addiction to finally meet her grandchildren.

**Pat**

Pat identified as an Aboriginal male, aged forty-five. He resided at Riverside Drive for the last two months of fieldwork. Immediately prior to this, Pat spent a few months doing farm work with his brother in north Queensland. Over the years, Pat had spent some time staying at Riverside Drive and other homeless accommodation in Brisbane. Pat’s former partner is pregnant with twins, and their relationship ended after her dissatisfaction with his illicit substance use. The two months I knew Pat, he was engaged in a constant struggle with deciding upon what role he should play in his soon to be born children’s lives. He spoke about his children and parenting as important to him, but he was unsure how his deal with other life problems that made it difficult for him to be a parent.

**Jane**

Jane is a fifty year old woman who identified as Anglo-Australian. She had a social housing tenancy, but due to a violent former partner whom she shared this tenancy with, Jane spent more time away from this house than she spent at it. As such, she frequently slept in Fortitude Valley’s public places. She said that other than a relatively brief period many years earlier, her current two years of periodic homelessness represents her only experiences outside of the housing market. Jane described growing up in a wealthy family and attending private schools. She said that for more years than she can remember, however, her parents and siblings had turned against her. Jane felt rejected and alienated from her family. She suggested her family made up allegations about her mental health. Jane has spent considerable time as an involuntary patient in mental health institutions. She strongly denies any mental illness, and sees her controlling family and an oppressive health system as the cause of hospitalisation.
Keith

Keith identifies as Anglo-Australian and is approximately thirty years of age. Throughout the period of fieldwork, he resided in a ‘squat’ in inner-city Brisbane, and also in Fortitude Valley’s public places. Keith left home at aged fifteen and lived with numerous friends, but he said he did not see himself as homeless until he had no friends left to stay with at about age eighteen. He described periods of literal homelessness throughout his adult life. Keith says that he has Attention Deficit Disorder, and he uses alcohol and illicit substances to try and slow himself down. Keith is a father of three children, but because of a conviction for child sexual offenses, he is estranged from all of his children.

Geoff

Geoff identifies as an Australian with Italian background; he is aged forty. He lived at Riverside Drive, having done so for approximately one year. Geoff described a life working on dairy farms in north Queensland. He said that he married the women of his dreams, whom he had three children with. Three years prior to the fieldwork, Geoff’s wife died unexpectedly. This, he suggested, led to catastrophic changes in his life. For example, he developed a problematic illicit substance abuse addiction, had his children removed from his care, and lost all possessions. He described his life as directionless, and he had no idea what to do without his wife. On each occasion I spoke with Geoff he was under the influence of illicit substances.

Floyd

Floyd is a fifty year old male; I did not ascertain his cultural status. He was living in Fortitude Valley’s public places, and he had done so for many years. Floyd was diagnosed with terminal tongue cancer, and he suspected that he had very little time left to live. He refused medical intervention or treatment, and instead said that alcohol was his way to deal with it. Floyd presented as physically unwell, and did not move freely. Due to the involuntary removal of part of his tongue, he spoke with unease. Apart from
social work staff at the café, I rarely observed him interact or speak with anyone. Floyd told me about his life working as a labourer on the railways. He was clearly uneasy about his current physical presentation, and took great pride describing to me the tough physical work he had previously engaged in.

**Bruno**

Bruno is approximately forty years age, and identifies as Anglo-Australian. When I first met Bruno during the initial part of the fieldwork, he was residing in Fortitude Valley’s public places and in a ‘squat’. In the last weeks of the fieldwork, Bruno and his partner moved into his partner’s daughter’s house. Both Bruno and his partner had recently been incarcerated for illicit substance use and trading offenses, and they saw leaving Fortitude Valley as a means to avoid reoffending. Bruno was a participant in the methadone program. His motivation for abstinence, however, was not simply about avoiding reoffending. Bruno wanted to change his life so that he could achieve a ‘normal’ relationship and way of living with his partner.