Community Profiling: Exploring Homelessness Through a Social Capital Lens

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> **Abstract_** *Efforts to redress the impact of homelessness are numerous and varied. This creates a complex space in which people experiencing home-lessness inhabit and are immersed within. At times, it can be difficult to identify the plethora of stakeholders involved and discern sources of support. Adopting social capital as a lens may be useful in understanding important features, relationships, and resources embedded in environments and between individuals. Due to the context-specificity of social capital, it is important to gain greater understanding of the population and community of interest. This research aims to gain greater understanding through exploring how people with experiences of homelessness understand their community and what aspects are important to them. Focus groups are used to conduct a community profiling exercise with people with experiences of homeless-ness (n= 23). Through thematic analysis, three overarching themes have been identified, with corresponding subthemes: Understandings of community, affordance of community, and dark side of community. The research serves as an essential descriptive phase to social capital research in the context of homelessness. The identified themes contribute to framing*

discussions around important features, relationships, and resources in the environment. Further, they help to elucidate potential functions and implications of membership to a community.

❯ **Keyworks_** *social capital, homelessness, community*

Introduction

Homelessness – understood as a range of precarious living arrangements – can have a profound and diverse impact on an individual's life; including housing exclusion (Abbé Pierre Foundation and FEANTSA, 2018), health inequality (Canavan et al., 2012; Groundswell, 2020a), employment issues (St Mungo's, 2020a), and difficulty accessing much needed welfare support (Downie et al., 2018; Groundswell, 2020b). As such, attempts to redress its impact often involve a multitude of stakeholders. This non-exhaustively may include local councils and governments (UK Parliament, 2017), the housing sector (Pleace, 2019), the charity sector (Downie et al., 2018), and peer-support networks (Groundswell, 2017). Due to the numerous stakeholders involved, it can be difficult at times to discern the role and the support provided by each.

Social capital may be a helpful lens to navigate this complex terrain and interrogate the resources and support available to people experiencing homelessness. In a broad sense, social capital can be understood as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.119). It may be helpful to adopt the theoretical framework from social capital research to enable a structured and nuanced exploration of support relating to homelessness.

Social capital may be theoretically subdivided into *structural* and *cognitive* capital. The former identifies observable aspects, such as the existence of and access to services (e.g. whether an individual has sufficient local facilities or access to healthcare services). Structural capital may speak to the barriers people experiencing homelessness encounter when trying to access needed services, such as problems registering at the GP, disparate services, and no recourse to public funds (Crisis, 2002; Canavan et al., 2012; Mental Health Network, 2016; St Mungo's, 2020a). Whereas the latter – *cognitive* capital – explores subjective aspects such as feelings towards individuals in a social network, sense of belonging, and perceived emotional support (Harpham et al., 2002; Kawachi et al., 2008). Perceived supportive

relationships between hostel staff and residents can promote social inclusion and well-being, whilst also assisting with improving drug and alcohol use (Stevenson, 2014). Additionally, positive connections among residents in temporary or transitional accommodation provide support, encouragement, and a sense of being welcomed, all of which were reported as important in getting through homelessness (Johnstone et al., 2016).

Distinguishing conceptually between *structural* and *cognitive* capital can promote clarity and nuance in discussion. Additionally, it is an important distinction, as there is evidence to suggest that they may have differential associations with outcomes such as mental health (De Silva et al., 2007). For example, for mothers in four low income countries (Peru, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and India), high *cognitive* social capital is associated with reduced odds of cases of common mental health problems. Whereas the association between *structural* social capital and common mental health problems is more inconsistent; in some contexts demonstrating an association with increased odds of common mental health problems.

Another common distinction is to conceptualise social capital as comprising three subcomponents: *bonding* (ties amongst individuals of homogeneous groups), *bridging* (ties amongst individuals within a heterogenous group), and *linking* (ties with institutions of authority and power such as the Government) (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). There is evidence to suggest that peer-relationships (bonding capital) are particularly compromised in the context of poverty and marginalisation (Granovetter, 1983; Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Mitchell and LaGory, 2002). This appears to be a complicated picture, as bonding capital in the context of homelessness may promote group cohesion and a sense of belonging (Stablein, 2011) whilst also being associated with drug and alcohol use (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009). In regard to bridging, evidence suggests that it can be a reliable source of support (Neale and Stevenson, 2015) and facilitate pathways out of homelessness (Robinson and Baron, 2007). Linking can contribute to increased housing tenure and increased rates of employment (Glisson et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2002; Luchenski et al., 2019).

It is important to emphasise that social capital is a lens to understand important features, relationships, and resources *embedded* in *environments* and *between individuals*. There is evidence to suggest that the way in which social capital manifests and is understood by certain groups and communities is context-specific (De Silva et al., 2006; 2007; Agampodi et al., 2017). Thus, certain aspects of social capital present in one community may not resonate and apply to another. For example, in Vietnam, emotional help was not perceived as a form of support and thus not listed in response to questions relating to social support. Rather, participants were forthcoming in listing economic support such as donated money or rice (De Silva et al., 2006). In Peru, for example, the role of trade unions was rarely noted

as an important feature of the community (De Silva et al., 2006). In the case of group membership – a commonly cited component of social capital (Fitzpatrick et al., 2007; Irwin et al., 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2015; Ayed et al., 2020) – it appears important for certain groups, such as hostel residents (Johnstone et al., 2016) – but it is less central for others – such as for pregnant women in areas of rural Sri Lanka (Agampodi et al., 2017). As such, in order for social capital to serve as a useful lens, it is important to have a context-sensitive understanding of the community and population of interest.

To date, little theoretical and exploratory research has been conducted into social capital (Muntaner et al., 2001). Particularly in the context of homelessness, the research is limited and disparate, although of potential importance and utility (Ayed et al., 2020). Social capital in the context of homelessness has primarily been concep-tualised across three dimensions: social relationships, services, and support (Ayed et al., 2020). Social capital has been demonstrated to play an important role in the 'pathways' framework of homelessness. This framework approaches homelessness as an experience, comprising transitions into, influences during, and routes through homelessness and resettlement (Anderson and Tulloch, 2000; Clapham, 2002; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). For example, lack of social capital, in the form of family support, can contribute to individuals experiencing homelessness (Barker, 2012); although structural factors must also be considered. Building relationships during homelessness with others who have a similar experience contributes to a sense of belonging and provides emotional support, without judgment and stigmatisation (Oliver and Cheff, 2014). For individuals being re-housed, having family contacts and receiving support from relatives and friends is positively associated with housing satisfaction and feeling settled (Warnes et al., 2013).

Despite existing research, little attention, thus far, has been given to data-driven exploratory work identifying how social capital manifests specifically in the context of homelessness. It is important to conduct such research to challenge any assump-tions and redress limitations related to applying certain understandings of social capital, rooted in different contexts, to homelessness. For example, due to the transi-ence and frequent movement of those affected by homelessness, it is likely that traditional spatialised understandings of social capital – rooted in an assumption of locality (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2002) – may need adapting and revising.

One avenue for developing an understanding of how social capital manifests in the context of homelessness is to conduct a community profiling activity. Community profiling enables greater understanding of the spaces and communities individuals inhabit and feel connected with, through identifying characteristics, activities, services, institutions, resources, and social relationships local people consider important (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2002). Understanding community is a

prerequisite to exploring social capital as individuals are embedded within spaces which they participate in, leverage, and are influenced by. This can be highly spatialised, such as neighbourhoods, but it can also pertain to digital communities, a sense of belonging, collective identity, cultural connectedness, and symbolic meaning (Anderson, 1983; Cohen, 1985; Amit, 2002; Delanty, 2003; Castells, 2009).

Community profiling, a bottom-up approach, promotes participatory research and co-production, acknowledging the wealth of knowledge among the community and its members. To our understanding, no research thus far has been conducted directly with people with lived experience of homelessness, to explore their understanding of community and its important features. In doing so, the research provides a platform for the voices and narratives of those with lived experience to be heard. This is particularly important as individuals with lived experience often lack visibility (Luchenski et al., 2019), are historically marginalised, and continue to be discriminated against and excluded (Burrows et al., 1997; Priebe et al., 2013; Groundswell, 2020b).

In an attempt to redress the dearth of exploratory research into social capital and homelessness, this research aims to conduct a community profiling exercise with people who have lived experiences of homelessness.

Methods

Ethical approval was obtained from Queen Mary University of London (QMERC2019/29).

Procedure

Recruitment

The research was conducted in London, UK. Participants were recruited through collaborative networks with third sector organisations. Organisations were informed of the research and circulated the information to clients. Additionally, the focus groups were advertised on the wider research project's Twitter account (@H_SocCap_Study).

Eligibility criteria

Participants had to satisfy the following criteria:

1. 18 years old or above;

2. Capacity to consent to the research study;

3. Either current or previous experience of homelessness as operationalised by the ETHOS typology (FEANTSA, 2005).

Community profiling exercise

Three separate focus groups were conducted, comprising individuals with lived experience (either current or previous) of homelessness and two facilitators. In each of the three focus groups, a community profiling exercise was conducted as follows. A brief introduction was provided to participants, highlighting the focus of the research project, namely, to explore social capital in the context of homelessness. It was emphasised that in order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to develop a better understanding of what this community looks like, its parameters, services, resources, and members. Following this introduction, participants were each individually presented with a spider diagram and asked to contribute to building a visual representation of their community. All focus groups were asked the following standardised question, "how do you define your community?" (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2002). Participants were then given five minutes to work on their visual representation before re-convening to share and discuss. All focus groups were audio-recorded.

Analysis

The audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 12, where they underwent thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) by the first and second authors. Thematic analysis was conducted inductively, placing emphasis on closely linking developed themes to the data (Patton, 1990). Thematic analysis was understood by the research team as "… a method that works both to reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.81). As such, throughout the analysis, emphasis was placed on identifying participants' realities and narratives. Whilst also further exploring these and interrogating the ways in which they may be embedded and contextualised in the broader social context.

Results

Sample characteristics

Participants (*n*=23) comprised three focus groups: focus group 1 (*n*=11), focus group 2 (*n*=5), and focus group 3 (*n*=7). Focus groups 1 and 2 were recruited through existing established peer-research groups[1], whereas the participants in focus group 3 were all recruited through an advert on Twitter. The mean age for participants was 46.74 (SD=12.32). There were 15 participants who identified as male, six as female, and two as transgender. At the time of the focus groups, eight

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[1] The sample size for focus group 1 was bigger than preferred, thus making time and group management more challenging. However, it reflected the size of an existing peer-research group who were enthusiastic to participate in the research.

participants were experiencing homelessness, 12 had experienced homelessness previously, and three participants provided no information on their housing status. Further sociodemographic information is provided in appendix 1.

Community profiling

Through thematic analysis of the focus group data, three key themes were identified: *understandings of community, affordance of community,* and *dark side of community*. Each key theme will be detailed below with its corresponding sub-themes.

All names provided are pseudonyms – many chosen by the participants themselves – and are provided in brackets at the end of a quote.

Understandings of community

The first theme concerns itself with setting the parameters of what constitutes a community. This relates to questions such as, what are its notable facets? Who are the community members? What does a community contain? And what does it look like? This theme is comprised of four subthemes, which are detailed below.

Spatiality and localisation of community
Discussions across all three focus groups touched upon to what extent community is spatialised. Spatialised understandings tended to conceptualise community as the local area, or neighbourhood. 007's below comment brings attention to the power of the Government and local councils, who largely determine the *"local area connection"* of a person and where they may live and be supported. As 007 states, this has made the homeless community more spatially restricted, as there is little choice or support to move from the area where you have that *"local area connection"*: *"No, it would be geographical. It's yer-, know where your, where (laugh)… As the government would say, where your local connection is"* (007).

Others echoed similar understandings: *"I'd say about where you live… Community where you live, yeah"* (Ryan). Although, it was also noted that the extent to which a community is spatially restricted may be context specific: *"Because I believe we're all, certainly if you live in a city, maybe if you live in the tail end of nowhere like somewhere I grew up, then you're very geographically fixed, 'cos there's no mobile signal, there's no WiFi connection and the bus is on Tuesday. But, er, so you are very much your local connection"* (Anna).

As discussions progressed, participants reflected upon their understandings of community and began to conceptualise community as something that is not necessarily spatially restricted: *"I was thinking, before it was more geographical, but now it becomes more like, interest-"(Cam).* Many participants contrasted a spatialised community, to a community where one felt connected: *"I think it's a lot more fluid*

than that. I think a community is more, can be geographical, but, it's more the people that you feel connected to, the circle of people that you feel connected to, for a variety of reasons, which may or may not be geographical" (Anna). This fluidity of community and transcendence of spatiality was also highlighted in discussions around maintaining bonds with people who were no longer in the same location. *"And, I'd also add social media, adds a sense of community because I've been in touch with friends in Canada, the U.S, I've known all my life so between the two, erm, it's er, it got me through (laugh) yeah so" (Christian Loiseau).*

Who's included?
This subtheme explores who is considered to be a community member. There was an emphasis placed, throughout the focus groups on community being a place of diversity. *"Community is a diversification of all walks of life, that stand up for each other and look after each other"(007).* This diversity was conceptualised across sociodemographic factors, such as age: *"For me, community is about sort of, cohesion between very, you know, young people and very old" (Deborah).* Additionally, gender: *"… be mindful of people's age-, ages, and people's gender as well" (Barry).* Further, community related to people's religious orientation *"… I'm Jewish, but, so I have social groups at the Synagogue I go to…" (Claire).* Nationality was also a factor noted as connecting members of a community. Although, this was accompanied by a discussion around the choices, or lack of choices, people experience in being included or excluded from certain communities: *"And erm, there's some, some groups which you're kind of voluntarily part of, some which you don't have any, er, real choice… most of us don't have any real choice as to what nationality we are, erm." (Seraphim).*

Others highlighted that community is grounded upon a sense of mutuality and shared interest. *"A group of persons with a common interests… have a group of persons with erm, the same kind of work, or same kind of recreational activities-" (Amara).* Another participant echoed how they are seeking out communities with common interests. *"So we have to find communities where there are interest, common interests" (Cam).* The extent to which people experiencing homelessness are able to attain such relationships was questioned. One participant notes that in hostels, residents are diverse with little shared interest, sharing only a common desire to exit homelessness. *"If you're, if you're homeless… most times you don't have the same interest as people whom you are with… if you are just trying to find a way out, I think your interests are different" (Amara).*

Community facilities and needed services

Throughout the focus groups, participants frequently mentioned services they felt were important to themselves and to other members of the community. *"I mean a community to me is having a lot of services that people can access to, if, if you're dealing with the homeless or vulnerable people" (007).* There was an emphasis on having services that *"a society actually needs to, for it, just for it to run, well" (Barry).*

The services listed were numerous and varied. *"Er- community has the word domestic, social and all that comes into it… And erm relevant services-… Like emergency, and erm, health services, and-… , police, police- law as well-… Police stations" (Barry). "So like, I mean there's things like, church that people have mentioned. Er, a GP who you see regularly. Er, s- maybe a town that you're a part of, and kind of acknowledges you" (Ashley).*

One participant notes the importance of services acknowledging him as a person. *"Erm, I've always seen community as sort of like, it, it-, it, can be both like people who are like supporting you and also I guess just, institutions that acknowledge you as a person" (Ashley).* This speaks both to the importance of having services whilst also embedding individuals within these services to promote visibility and acknowledgment.

Imagined vs experienced

A difference was identified in the way participants described notions of community, from a largely theoretical angle, in contrast to narratives of lived experience. There seemed to be an evident tension between imagined communities and those directly experienced and enacted. For example:

> *For me, community is about sort of, cohesion between very, you know, young people and very old. And that community of people of different ages, working together for positive benefits of each other… what I've noticed myself, say for the past fifteen years is that community has definitely eroded… notice things like the libraries are shutting, where people go for community, where old people go in there just to keep warm, homeless people go in there to use the computer and keep warm. Post offices were shut, kinda still open a bit now, er, people, old age pensioners going in to get their pensions. (Deborah)*

This demonstrates a distinction that imagined ideas of community, for example, a place for inter-generational cohesion, may not mirror reality. Communities as they exist in reality are often undermined and dismantled by political decisions such as austerity and local council cuts, which contributes to a discrepancy between imagined communities and experienced communities.

Another participant noted a similar dissonance between what they imagined communities to be, compared to their lived experience whilst experiencing homelessness:

> *Community, I understand, is a group of people, for a kind of idea they push over. I mean, can be a community, a religious community, can be… the house association of the neighbourhood, can be. But community, in the sense of what, if you're homeless? The community of the crack people, the community of the heroin people, the community of the gambler, the community of the drunkards-That's it (laugh). It's not a community, in the homeless life to be honest…. (Frank)*

Interestingly, although Frank said he doesn't feel part of a community, following a question from Anna around whether Frank supports anyone, he notes *"I help a lot of people in the street, this is true. A lot. I feed hundred homeless every day, six o'clock in (Location in London 1), every day" (Frank).* Evidently Frank doesn't feel connected to a community, but he enacts community through building connections and supporting others. Again, this demonstrates a degree of dissonance between imagined community and experienced community.

Additionally, a noticeable contrast between narratives of experienced communities and that of imagined was that former stories were permeated with a strong sense of solidarity and compassion. *"… It was about Novemberish time, and another homeless guy, somebody had given him two packs of socks – and he just randomly gave me one. And I don't even remember his name. I'd know him if I see him, but I didn't know his name, and he didn't know me. But, we knew yeah, well exactly. And that's community-"(Anna).* Anna's comment indicates the importance of small acts of kindness, solidarity, and communication, with the common interest being survival on the streets. This contrasts accounts of imagined communities, which are described in often factual, neutral, and theoretical ways.

Affordance of community

The second theme concerns itself with what the community may afford its members and the potential implications of such membership. Here participants discussed the role a community may serve in people's lives and how it may enable them to fulfil personal and social functions. This includes ways in which people actively use and are served by the community in meeting certain needs. And also, the unintentional consequences of belonging to a community; both positive and negative.

Identity and belonging

There were discussions across all three focus groups relating to identity and belonging. Many participants outlined their experiences of forging community and belonging while experiencing homelessness. "*… I think a lot of roug-, rough sleepers consider themselves part of a community anyway" (Ryan).* Similarly, Sam notes, "*yeah I experienced that to be honest when erm, I was doing night shelters*

during the winter. Erm, when you'll be with the same people. Going for the day centres, going to another place, going to McDonald's or whatever, then going to the night shelter together-" (Sam).

Whilst participants recalled stories of forging relationships whilst experiencing homelessness and demonstrated a sense of connectedness to the homeless community, many simultaneously had difficulties around personally identifying as experiencing homelessness. For example, when Ryan came off the streets and into a hostel, he struggled with being referred to as homeless and did not initially consider that he was experiencing hidden homelessness. His comments below suggest that a label of 'homeless' can be stigmatising, damaging one's self-esteem and identity, resulting in Ryan rejecting the label altogether:

When I er,… Was taken off-, off the street, or came off the street went to the hostel, I had a real issue with erm, being called homeless… I found it really really difficult, 'cos I thought, well I'm not homeless anymore. I've got a roof over my head, and, you know, b-, people- *tut* – my support worker tried to explain to me, well, well you are in effect, even though you've got a roof over your head you are still homeless because you, you're not in secure accommodation. So you're still regarded as homeless. And I had a really tough-, it took me a long, long time, to, sort of get my head round, that. It's v-, it's a bit confusing to me (laugh). (Ryan)

Recurrently, it was highlighted that homelessness was a stigmatised identity. *"No I don't, no. You're a zero in the life. You are nobody, you are as always I say, the last of the queue. Erm, and will be like that for at least, I don't know… (Frank).* This was felt so strongly by one participant, that they were unable to feel settled in their new neighbourhood.

I find actually the area-, the neighbourhood where I'm housed, erm, because they know it as that house, er they've been very unwelcoming. And I still spend more time, where I was actually homeless, and that's where I've developed bonds er, within the community… Yeah I feel, I still feel welcome in the community where I was actually homeless. And that's where I return to. (Christian Loiseau)

A sense of invisibility and marginalisation permeated many people's experiences.

… I guess when you're homeless, you, you lose all of that, and you don't really have an identity as such. People just see you as kind of an invisible person. So erm, I guess, when you're homeless you don't really have community at all. You're just on the go and you know, you don't really erm, have a set identity. You don't have workplace. Well you tend to anyway… You're, you're very sort of temporary I guess, yeah. (Ashley)

Meeting personal needs

Throughout the focus groups, participants touched upon a range of needs. *"I think everybody needs some protection and some certain care" (Seraphim).* Whilst communities were understood as comprising facilities and services that in principle served in meeting personal needs, this often did not occur. Rather, it was noted that when experiencing homelessness, it becomes increasingly difficult to meet one's personal needs. An example includes difficulty in meeting basic physiological needs. *"I think, we have to go back to what you said earlier, public toilets… And washing facilities… It comes down to the basic body needs really (laugh) – (Chritisan Loiseau).* Other participants discussed the continual search for safety and security:

> *"Some people like to use the night bus, for sleeping on as well-"(Sara)*

> *"Yep, because it's safer." (Anna)*

> *"And, and some people go to Heathrow and come back again." (Sara)*

> *"Yep." (Anna)*

> *"You know, they find it safer than being on the streets. Some people sleep during the day." (Sara)*

Despite the fact that community was defined as a space where there is *"a mutual, understanding of, how each and every one is valuable" (Torrito),* experiencing homelessness appears to create a situation whereby individuals' ability to meet personal needs is profoundly hampered. This is perpetuated by the instability, inadequacy, and transience of accommodation. At times, people find themselves in vulnerable settings in order to obtain some form of shelter:

> *"Where people have literally been put in prison…." (Harvey Stevens)*

> *"And when you're homeless you might be desperate enough that you think of that as a better option." (Claire)*

> *"Cos you've got a bed for the night or whatever." (Rosie)*

Seraphim explains how people experiencing homelessness struggle to meet their basic needs, due to the frequent moving around and upheaval caused by sofa surfing:

> *"So if you're sofa surfing between, like different relatives, you may still have, all those things technically, in-, in place-…"(Seraphim)*

> *"Yeah." (William)*

"Err, but you're having to move, every so often from one place to another to another to another." (Seraphim)

"Yes, it's annoying, innit?" (Rosie)

"… annndddd, which are-, not necessarily always in the same borough, or the borough that you're in or from, or linked to. And certain things, you may have to change your, er, your, address that you give for certain purposes, but not for others." (Seraphim)

"Mhmm." (Interviewer)

"So it becomes more complicated." (Seraphim)

Dark side of community

The third theme speaks to the darker side of community and the ways in which it may be inaccessible and exclusionary.

Changing communities

A recurring theme across all focus groups was concern over the changing face of communities. *"Communities are changing so much in cities like this. Where once you did have a community, it's now, disappearing, amongst, you know, wh-, because, everything's evolving, so fast. People are moving out, er, forced out, certainly in cities like this where, social housing is becoming-"(Harvey Stevens).* This sense of change has been felt by some participants for a sustained period of time. *"So, I've noticed a tremendous erosion of community in the last fifteen to twenty years… So hopefully there are other communities, you mentioned online communities. And I think yeah, they do exist, and erm, there's otherwise of re-building that community. But it's not as what it was" (Deborah).*

Noticeable features of change include the closure of services such as libraries and post offices. Part of this change appeared to be linked with gentrification. *"… cheap affordable housing has been replaced by, all this, all this gentrification, and things. So what we had once, a community, er, is-is-, is slowly disappearing amongst this kind of, you know, modern world of erm, of erm, where changes have to happen-"(Harvey Stevens).* The changing face of communities was noted as a difficult and frightening experience for some *"Because the fear of change factor, which is quite, can be quite scary, for some people, who live in their community, all their life and, and now, for example, say for example, now like, government is planning to shut down their community, so they, they have to kind of like, move on now, and for someone who's been there for like twenty, thirty, fourty, years can be quite, very quite, difficult." (William)*

Digital exclusion

Many participants recognised the numerous benefits of social media, such as sustaining relationships and connectedness with others. *"I'm also part of an online community, that, some of the members I've known for nearly twenty years" (Anna).* *"Cause it's [social media] really helpful for situations with people-, you've known for some time, but don't live in the same area, or even the same country as" (Sam)* "However, it was also viewed as a *"double edge sword" (Sam).*

The following quote from Deborah acknowledges the changes in communities and potential impact of digital discrimination. *"Having that community with old people, and now, everything, a lot is online. A lot of older people are excluded from that now, from online activity, you know, 'cause of various reasons" (Deborah*). Similarly, the quote from Harvey Stevens below illustrates that much communication is done through social media and for people experiencing homelessness, it's not so easy, as these platforms may be inaccessible and exclusionary.

> *It's to do with the social mobility platform, because the modern way of communication now is through social media- That's why. But for a homeless person, it's not so (exasperated laugh)- to be moved around, it's not so easy. But this is the way, this modern society uses the way of communicating with like-minded people is through social platforms, and erm, so yeah. (Harvey Stevens)*

Barriers to community involvement and participation

It appeared that numerous participants had difficulty engaging and participating in their community due to social, personal, and structural barriers. Structural barriers are embedded and entrenched simply in the phenomenon of experiencing homelessness.

> *Yes, yes, because you know, because of the vagrancy laws, erm, two hundred year old vagrancy laws or whatever it is, has been used time and time again, to try and criminalise homeless people. Moving people from pillar to post, even the police, move homeless people to the edge of the borough and say let the other borough look after you there. (Harry Stevens)*

Discrimination was experienced by many participants, contributing to great difficulty in accessing needed services and support. The following comment shows Frank's frustration having tried many times, unsuccessfully, to open a bank account. *"And they never, never do something, never. I have terrible problems for open a bank account and return to work because I'm homeless and nobody is talking about a bank account because I'm homeless. I am very tired of this shit. Very, very-" (Frank).*

007 mentions services for people experiencing homelessness and considers trauma a barrier to accessing services.

> *I mean there are some good organ-, good people that work in certain organisa-tions, that will go to bat for other people, who wouldn't be capable of, er, making those, step forwards, because they just don't have the skills. You know? Or they might have the skills but they're so traumatised-That nothing's clicking in, and, so that they can move ahead. So community is somebody who steps up, and, helps them to, along their road. (007)*

A recurring concern was how certain forms of accommodation served as a barrier to building relationships and accessing needed services. Amara highlights the instability of the homeless community, making it difficult to form meaningful rela-tionships. *"And then, people come and go erm, you see someone there today erm, but before you make any erm, form of meaningful association, person out and someone's in, whom you don't, not really people to be (inaudible). So it's a bit, unstable community. So you're not really able to form any meaningful relationships, most times" (Amara)*. A sense of isolation was also felt in hostel settings, *"erm, and I wouldn't call it a community, that hostel because it was a bit sort of isolated, and whatever" (Deborah)*.

Reliance upon others

Whilst experiencing homelessness, many individuals were reliant on service provi-sions and at the mercy of others' good will. This creates a stark power dynamic, rendering those affected to a profoundly vulnerable position. An example of this includes relying on the good will of individual employees to provide safety and accommodation. *"… the security people at the (hospital 1) in (location in London 2), were brilliant… because they've got like a waiting room outside their A and E department, and homeless people sleep there at night… And there was one particularly lovely guy who made us a cup of tea at half six in the morning, before the day shift came on, and we all had to shoot" (Anna)*. One participant notes her experience being a first time mother whilst experiencing homelessness. *"Or you know, access to, you know I was even given money from the DWP for maternity clothes, children's clothes, a pram. They had to be like second hand, but you could, you got grants that you didn't have to pay back. So those stuff were available. Now, I don't think they are" (Deborah)*.

Some participants had to rely on homeless organisations to provide support in gaining access to systems. *"If you join the (homeless organisation), they will help you open a bank account" (Anna).* Some reported feelings of destitutions and profound vulnerability. *"Nobody cares about me at all… You're a zero in the life. You are nobody, you are as always I say, the last of the queue. Erm, and will be like that for at least, I don't know" (Frank)*.

Discussion

This research aimed to conduct a community profiling exercise with people with lived experience of homelessness. In doing so, we address the dearth of exploratory, bottom-up research relating to social capital in the context of homelessness. This echoes the need to redress critiques that researchers often undervalue descriptive phases of research and make assumptions about the 'nature of the terrain' of interest (Langdridge, 2008).

Through focus group discussions with people with lived experience of homelessness, insights have been gained regarding how social capital may manifest specifically in the context of homelessness. When thinking about social capital in the context of homelessness, three overarching themes are of significant relevance. First, clarity over *understandings of community*. This relates to who the members are, what facilities are available, to what extent community is spatialised, and consideration between theoretical understandings of community (imagined) and lived and enacted community (experienced). It has been demonstrated that understandings of community are varied and multifaceted, broadly reflecting an interdisciplinary perspective on community, which incorporates learnings from sociology, anthropology, and urban studies (Delanty, 2003). It was clear that community, whilst considered by some as highly spatialised, often relating to available tangible services, was also conceptualised as a sense of belonging, mutuality, and plurality. The distinction between imagined and experienced communities reiterates Anderson's (1983) work, illustrating that community is not necessarily underpinned by 'lived' spaces and direct social interaction.

Second, exploring the *affordance of community* particularly relates to how community may serve as a space which creates complexity, and at times ambivalence, around identity and belonging. Additionally, it is important to note the extent to which community enables its members to meet and satisfy certain needs. Affordance of community demonstrates what may be privileged and provided by participation in and membership of a community. This focus on affordance echoes a central tenant to more productive conceptualisations of social capital, which place an emphasis on the resources and support available through engagement in spaces, with individuals and groups (Ayed et al., 2020).

Third, engaging with the notion of community from a more critical perspective, moving beyond an implicit assumption that community is overwhelmingly positive and a tendency to romanticise ideas of community, such as the 'Big Society' (Deas, 2013; McKee, 2014). This speaks to the *dark side of community*, noting the temporal changes to communities and the way in which certain members are left behind through digital exclusion and other barriers. Furthermore, recognising how commu-

nities can create stark power dynamics, rendering certain members reliant and disempowered. This echoed a wider sense of marginalisation, exclusion, and vulnerabilities, which underscored all focus group discussions.

Community appeared to be dynamic and socially rooted; influenced by numerous wider macro factors. For example, it is of note how certain institutes of power colour the discourse of community and permeate peoples' understandings. A recurring example in the focus groups was the role of local councils in shaping community. This partly reflects increasing trends towards localism (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020) – the decentralisation of political power (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). In relation to homelessness and housing, many councils require proof of local area connection (often involving a minimum time lived in the area) before accepting someone onto their social housing register. This practice poses some tension with people's realities, wherein community transcends spatial boundaries. Evidently, macro structures (i.e. the local council) construct and perpetuate certain ideas of community that appear to differ to people's understandings and experiences.

Additionally, due to the precarity of experiencing homelessness and the many barriers encountered when trying to access support (Canavan et al., 2012), people are often rendered reliant on services to satisfy their needs. Experiencing homelessness appears to create a situation whereby individuals have little control over their lives and many struggle to meet basic needs. As such, people's sense of community is influenced and determined by virtue of relying on these services for survival and safety. This speaks to an important attenuation, that for many, community is not a matter of choice but rather a reflection of their means of survival.

Furthermore, there remain ongoing stigmatising (Groundswell, 2020a) and problematic narratives around homelessness (Parsell and Watts, 2017). Much of the discourse is orientated in a debate of morality and individualisation (Desjarlais, 1997; Parsell, 2010) – negating the structural influences that cause, perpetuate, and sustain homelessness (Bramley et al., 2015; Downie et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2019; Pleace, 2019). It is well-established that stigma has a plethora of consequences on identity, and that individuals often try to distance themselves from stigmatised identities (Goffman, 1963; Plante et al., 2014; Brener et al., 2019; Doldor and Atewologun, 2020). This de-identification and distancing were apparent throughout focus group discussions. Thus, wider societal attitudes and discriminatory practices appear an important consideration when interrogating the extent to which people identify with the homeless community or with the status of experiencing homelessness.

The three identified themes reiterate distinctions between theoretical components of social capital (Krishna and Shrader, 1999; De Silva et al., 2007). For example, the subthemes *community facilities* and *needed services* emphasise the more objective features of the environment – *structural* capital, which facilities

and resources are available and to what extent these may be accessible to the community members. Whereas *identity and belonging* for example, speaks to the *cognitive* component of social capital, emphasising the importance of individuals' subjective feelings and appraisals.

It is worth noting too, that the themes do echo, to some extent, theoretical distinctions between *bonding*, *bridging,* and *linking* capital (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004; Fitzpatrick et al., 2007; Irwin et al., 2008). *Bonding* capital can be identified particularly in the subtheme *who's included?,* where individuals reported a sense of connectedness with others through factors such as shared interests. *Bridging* appeared to be a pivotal component of community for many participants, manifesting for example, in the diversification of all walks of life and inter-generational cohesion. *Linking* is reflected by the frequent citing of institutes of power, such as charities and councils, both of which had significant influence over whether an individual was able to access needed support and resources.

The theoretical distinction of *bonding* and *bridging*, which is underpinned by ideas of homogeneity and heterogeneity, should be viewed with caution. As highlighted, particularly in the *who's included?* subtheme, the characteristics which individuals note as a basis for connectedness and mutuality, varied greatly; gender, age, religious orientation, nationality, and interests. As such, there still remains a lack of clarity over what constitutes a homogenous bond and which characteristics this should be decided against.

Further, greater consideration needs to be given to the utility of the distinction between *bonding* and *bridging*. By this we mean, are certain characteristics relating to homogeneity and heterogeneity more pertinent than others and helpful in understanding individual social capital? This point can be furthered by insights gained from the subtheme *imagined vs experienced*. Whilst many participants noted a sense of connectedness with people who shared certain socio-demographics, it appeared that the sharing of experiences of homelessness was particularly salient in bringing people together and colouring encounters. It was also this experience of homelessness that often led to structural exclusion, marginalisation, and barriers in accessing support and resources. This is not to imply that all people experiencing homelessness are homogenous. Rather, that *despite* the heterogeneity within this group, the shared experience of homelessness is often the root for difficulty in participating in and benefiting from a community. Therefore, it can be argued that experiencing homelessness is an important factor when considering bonding and bridging capital, as it helps to elucidate access to and leverage of resources. Adopting an intersectional lens, however, highlights the importance of simultaneously considering a range of characteristics – such as race and gender – and their compounding impact (Collins, 1990; Wing, 1997; Crenshaw, 1989).

Strengths and limitations

There are several notable strengths of this research. First, it provides a sound basis for which social capital research, specifically in the context of homelessness, can be built upon. The community profiling exercise elucidates the important features and resources embedded in the environment, as noted by community members themselves. Second, the participants comprised a plethora of experiences across the entire spectrum of homelessness, contributing to a sense of plurality and diversity in the discussion. This was supported by both facilitators in the focus groups encouraging all participants to have space to speak and creating an atmosphere to share contrary opinions respectfully. Third, through discussions in the focus groups, participants were able to modify and develop their understandings of community. This iterative dynamic reflects the appropriateness and value of the chosen research design. Fourth, the emphasis on data-driven themes attempts to provides a platform for voices that are often excluded from research. Fifth, the research highlights the entanglement between one's sense of community and wider macro factors. The reliance upon services and institutions was demonstrated in participants' accounts of their community, contributing to a recognition of this internalisation and revealing a synergistic relationship.

However, the research has several limitations. First, whilst concerted efforts were made to obtain a diverse sample, there is still an under-representation of women in the final sample; a recurring issue across homelessness research (Bretherton, 2017). Second, whilst two facilitators were present throughout all focus groups, certain participant dynamics meant that some participant voices were more prominent than others. Third, all participants were recruited in London and thus the themes may represent experiences of homelessness and social capital particularly in London.

Conclusion

This research provides a sound basis on which we can map and navigate the terrain of social capital in the context of homelessness. It helps to highlight important resources, facilities, and relationships embedded in the environment. Additionally, it elucidates certain functions the community may serve and affordances it may provide to its members. This research provides a critical lens to the discussion of community, noting the entanglement of marginalisation, exclusion, and stigmatisation. We emphasise the importance of acknowledging wider macro factors, which colour understandings and experiences of community.

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Appendix 1. Sample characteristics – Supplementary material for: Community profiling: Exploring Homelessness Through a Social Capital Lens.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (n = 23)

		Participants (*n*)
Housing status	Currently experiencing homelessness	8
	Previous experience of homelessness	12
	No response	3
Gender²	Male	15
	Female	6
	Transgender	2
Relationships status	Single	17
	In a relationship	1
	Divorced/separated	2
	No response	3
Ethnicity²	African-American	1
	Afro-Caribbean	1
	Black Caribbean	1
	British	1
	Irish	1
	Half British and half Canadian	1
	Mixed	1
	White	2
	White British	9
	White European	1
	No response	4
Country of birth²	Argentina	1
	Australia	1
	France	1
	Ireland	1
	Italy	1
	Norway	1
	Sweden	1
	UK	12
	No response	4
Qualifications	No formal qualifications	2
	1-4 GCSEs or equivalent	2
	5 GCSEs or equivalent	3
	2 or more A-levels or equivalent	2
	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	5
	Other qualifications	4
	No response	5

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[2]   These item were open ended on the sociodemographic form.

Employment	Paid or self-employment (FT)	1
	Paid or self-employment (PT)	1
	Voluntary (unpaid)	3
	Sheltered employment	1
	Unemployed	9
	Student	1
	Retired	1
	Other	3
	No response	3