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## Re-building bridges: homeless people's views on the role of vocational and educational activities in their everyday lives

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Short title: Homeless people: meaningful activities

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## ABSTRACT

Homeless people face everyday challenges of marginalisation and stigmatisation. Consequently, they can suffer from low self-confidence, self-efficacy and agency. Empirical research in Britain on educational, skill-building and meaningful activities for homeless people principally emphasises the instrumental value of training and learning as a route to employment rather than the impact of activities on homeless people's everyday lives. Theoretical literature suggests that psychosocial benefits related to the development of self-efficacy, agency and empowerment can be gained from such activities. Participants' experiences and perceptions of educational and recreational activities were examined through 29 interviews at three homeless day centres in London. Thematic analysis suggests the restorative power of engagement in activities and shows that participants value activities, not only as the foundation for future goals of finding employment and housing, but as an immediate way of restoring a sense of self and finding positive experiences with a focus on the present. The findings underline the importance of viewing these interventions from a 'bottom-up' perspective. The study tentatively concludes that accepting and emphasising the immediate personal benefits as a positive achievement of activities may be a valuable approach to better engage homeless clients.

## INTRODUCTION

Becoming homeless entails a host of challenges, both practical, e.g. finding shelter, occupation or income, and psychosocial, e.g. finding oneself stigmatised, marginalised, disempowered or discouraged (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Jones & Pleace, 2010). Research on the role of vocational and educational activities has typically emphasised the instrumental value of such activities in terms of progress towards hard outcomes of becoming housed or gaining employment (Singh, 2005). However, theoretical literature suggests that such activities may also have psychosocial gains for homeless people, in terms of their development of a sense of agency, empowerment and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995; Samman & Santos, 2009). This study, based in London, investigates the views of homeless people on the role of vocational and educational activities in their everyday lives. Building on the tradition of researching this topic from homeless people's perspectives (Hodgetts et al., 2007), it aims to explore the value of these activities from a 'bottom-up' perspective, to potentially widen the understanding of their role in homeless people's lives.

### **Homelessness in the UK**

Recent statistics show an increase in homelessness in the UK. For the period April to June 2013 there was a national increase of 5% compared to the same quarter from the previous year (DCLG, 2013). In London, homelessness appears to be growing even faster with a reported 26% increase in the number of households accepted as homeless in this quarter (ibid.). Rough sleepers and the 'hidden homeless' (those who temporarily stay with friends, squatters or those living in overcrowded accommodation) are not included in these figures

and are inherently difficult to quantify (Homeless Link, 2012). In London, rough sleeping is reported to have increased by 13% in 2012/2013 compared with 2011/2012 (Broadway, 2013). Given a continuing weak economy and the effects of welfare reforms, such as caps on Housing Benefit, Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) argue that the upward trend is likely to continue.

At the same time as the number of rough sleepers and homeless people is rising, funding for services offered by homeless centres has decreased (Homeless Link, 2013). According to a recent survey, 42% of homeless centres reported that they had to decrease the delivery of 'meaningful activities', i.e. purposeful vocational activities such as arts and crafts, music, creative writing and gardening. A further 27% reported that their education and training services had been affected (Homeless Link, 2013). Homeless people thus have decreasing access to vocational and educational activities.

In this paper, we refer to vocational activities as described above and educational activities (which may be informal or formally accredited) such as classes in literacy, numeracy or English language and training in catering, decorating or carpentry. Day centres and homeless charities deliver many of these services in-house or by referral to an external agency.

### **Research on activities and homelessness in Britain: An instrumental approach**

Empirical research in Britain that specifically focusses on the importance of education, skill-building and meaningful activities for homeless people tends to focus on the objectives of moving homeless people towards employment. Recent studies include analysis of the barriers to employment and training

encountered by homeless people in London produced by Off the Streets and into Work (Singh, 2005). Similarly, Crisis published two reports which examined the benefits of learning for homeless people and the barriers to learning (Luby & Welch, 2006; Opinion Leader Research, 2006). White and Doust (2011) evaluated an employment initiative that centres on coaching and specialist training workshops and found the innovative methodology led to positive work opportunities. Lownsborough (2005) conducted a study highlighting the importance of teaching life skills to help the transition from homelessness back into mainstream society. Finally, Hough et al.'s (2013) longitudinal research on homeless people's experiences of starting and sustaining work found that the success of sustainability lay in continued support and training. Whilst these studies acknowledge the psychosocial benefits of learning, the conclusions focus on greater investment to engage people in learning and skills for employment and the need for more coherence between government and homelessness policy.

### **Positive approaches to the challenges of homelessness**

This study is located in the relatively small body of literature that takes a positive approach to homelessness, emphasising the strengths of homeless people. Studies that have highlighted positive attributes of homeless people include Tischler and Vostanis' (2007) study of homeless women whose use of coping strategies improves their mental health and affects positive change. Other studies highlight women's resourcefulness whilst living in shelters and the need to combine childcare, work and rehousing issues (Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). The socio-psychological aspects of homelessness are explored by Hodgetts et al. (2008) in their study of how homeless men use public libraries to

normalise themselves and interact with housed people. Radley et al. (2006) also employ a bottom-up approach in their research using a photo-production technique that enables homeless people to interpret their world through their own photographs. The contradictions between a positive approach and an instrumental approach are highlighted by Renedo (2014). In her study, she investigates the tension experienced by health professionals in voluntary homeless organisations due to their dependence on statutory resource and its focus on curing homelessness and how this conflicts with their commitment to provide care and to empower homeless people.

### **Theory: self-efficacy, agency and empowerment**

While much of the literature takes an 'instrumental' view of the value of activities, less attention has been given to examine empowerment in homeless people (Anderson & Christian, 2003). Psychosocial theory on self-efficacy, agency and empowerment suggest that there may be a wide range of less 'instrumental' benefits and in this section we review these concepts, together with the small number of studies that have investigated these issues in relation to homelessness.

#### *Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy theory concerns an individual's ability to exercise control over one's life and situations and in this respect self-efficacy is linked to personal agency as it influences 'how people think, feel, motivate themselves and act' (Bandura, 1986:2). Bandura strongly argues that self-efficacy is the key factor of human agency: 'If people believe they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things happen' (1995:3).

## *Agency and Empowerment*

The widely used definition of agency is 'an actor's or group's ability to make purposeful choices' (Alsop et al., 2005:11). Empowerment can be defined as 'the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes' (Alsop et al., 2006:1) and can be related to agency, self-determination, autonomy and self-confidence (Alkire, 2008).

In this way, empowerment is considered to be an expansion of agency (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007); to be empowered, first an individual must have agency. If agency is restricted, it reduces an individual's autonomy and ability to shape their own lives and this in turn will disempower them. Ultimately, agency is a building block for empowerment (Samman & Santos, 2009).

The determinants of agency include individual assets such as housing and savings and human assets such as education (Narayan, 2002). They also include social assets: sense of identity and social belonging and psychological assets, including self-esteem and aspiring to a better future (Samman & Santos, 2009). Taking the definitions of agency and empowerment as an individual's ability to make choices and their ability to shape their own lives respectively, these aspects of agency and empowerment can be applied to homelessness in four ways. Firstly, homeless people may lack housing and financial security. Secondly, they may lack education or life-skills and thirdly, they belong to a group of socially excluded individuals (Flick, 2007; Luby & Welch, 2006). Finally, many homeless people have lost their self-esteem and hope for the future (Boydell et al., 2000). Without these assets, homeless people lose their



ability to make choices and control their everyday lives; they lack agency and become disempowered.

Therefore, in addition to the traditionally established objectives of re-housing and employment, there are a range of other goals that educational and vocational activities may serve. The current study aims to examine how homeless people value such activities, in the interest of developing a more holistic understanding of their value.

### **Benefits of learning and recreation**

There are a number of studies that explore the impact learning and recreation can have on a person's well-being. Hammond (2004) investigates the influence of lifelong learning on emotional resilience and mental health and Field (2009) posits that well-being is 'among the most important outcomes of adult learning' (180). In the context of homelessness, Knestaut et al. (2010) discuss how engagement in dance classes by homeless people can promote self-determination. Recreation programmes and their role in empowering homeless people to make positive changes in their lives are also examined by Harrington and Dawson (1997) in their study of homeless shelters in North America. Other research has looked at the importance of social activities for maintaining well-being in homeless people (Dunleavy et al., 2012). The results showed a positive correlation between the two however the study focussed on only one centre with a very small sample size. Grabbe et al. (2013) uncover similar findings in their recent study on the benefits of gardening in helping relieve stress in homeless women. Social inclusion is highlighted in Thomas et al.'s (2012) research of homeless people in Australia. They explore how individuals sustain

subjective well-being through their resourcefulness in staying positive and their social connections.

The benefits of learning and recreation are linked to self-efficacy. Hammond and Feinstein (2005) investigate women who had been low achievers at school and find that adult learning is associated with increased self-efficacy. Similarly, the study of a gardening programme was found to increase self-efficacy and develop self-empowerment in community college students (Hoffman et al., 2007). Self-efficacy and homelessness is explored by Epel et al. (1999). They investigate how individuals' ability to cope with and escape homelessness improves with increased self-efficacy.

This study aims to add to this strengths-based literature an investigation of the positive use that homeless people make of educational and vocational activities. In particular, the study investigates the views of homeless people themselves on the value of these activities.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

- 1. What are the main challenges faced by homeless people and how do these undermine their participation in activities?*
- 2. What are homeless people's views on the value of vocational and educational activities in their lives?*

## **METHOD**

### *Research design*

The study takes an interpretivist approach, understanding qualitative research as an engagement between researcher and participant, to produce knowledge

of the meaning assigned to experiences by participants (Lincoln et al., 2011). The study was designed as an interview study, with the intention of audio-recording and transcribing all interviews. Ultimately, 15 interviews with homeless people, and two interviews with professionals were conducted and audio-recorded. However, audio-recording was not always appropriate or possible, and where participants agreed to take part in an interview, but not to recording, interviews were conducted and written up by the researcher as soon as possible afterwards. Ten interviews with homeless people and two with professionals were conducted in this way.

### *Sample*

Participants were recruited through two homeless centres, which provided educational (e.g. numeracy, literacy, IT skills) and vocational activities (e.g. art, creative writing, knitting) and at three sites of a homeless charity's gardening initiative, all based in London. The centres' staff served as 'gatekeepers', inviting clients to take part in the research. Selection was based on which clients were available, and willing, to be interviewed, which provided a random sample and reduced the risk of recruitment based on staff's preconceptions of what we wanted. Participants were not asked their ages, which are estimated to be between 24 and 60. Participants belonged to various ethnic groups: Black, Asian, White (British), White (European) and Arab.

### *Data collection*

Fifteen semi-structured recorded interviews with clients and two interviews with staff members (12 men and 5 women) from the drop-in centres were conducted. A further 12 unrecorded interviews (documented by detailed notes taken during

and immediately after the interviews) with clients and staff (10 men and 2 women) were carried out at the gardening sites. The interviews at the centres were audio-recorded in a private room provided by the centres. It was unfeasible to record at the gardening sites except on one occasion. Unrecorded interviews contained similarly rich information as those recorded and hence are treated in the same way. Interviews were conducted by the first author and ranged between 30-40 minutes for both the recorded and unrecorded interviews. The main topics addressed were participants' use of centres, involvement in activities and future goals. Questions were open-ended; examples such as: *What does the centre offer you? What do you get out of these activities?* However, they were designed to be flexible and responsive to participants' replies. The interviewer was introduced as an independent researcher, which despite the brevity of contact with participants, may have positively influenced them to talk more freely (see Doyle, 1999). She was very conscious of power relations and attempted to reduce this by keeping interviews informal and non-threatening.

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical approval was sought and approved by the LSE Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of each interview. The inherently sensitive profile of participants and their histories called for extra care. The research focus did not call for probing into participants' lives, and the interviewer did not seek to pursue sensitive issues. She made it clear that participants did not need to respond to questions they did not want to answer. She had information available about supports and

services, in case an unmet need arose in the interviews. Where participants' data are reported, pseudonyms have been used.

### *Data Analysis*

Following transcription, data were analysed using a modified version of Attride-Stirling's (2001) network thematic analysis. Analysis was an iterative process initially divided into two sections guided by the research questions. Determinants of self-efficacy, agency and empowerment were incorporated into the coding frame but analysis also responded to elements identified in the data. Initial codes were produced from keywords (e.g. self-esteem, purpose, stress) and refined into basic sub-themes. Relationships between sub-themes were identified and these were grouped into organising themes. The chosen themes reflect a degree of consensus within the sample and each was built on comments from at least four participants. Selected quotes exemplify the themes from across the range of participants, illustrating their commonalities as well as diversity. The overarching global theme was derived from the main elements of the texts and endeavoured to summarise the data's prevailing message.

## **RESULTS & ANALYSIS**

The analysis produced three principal, interconnected themes: (1) *Dissociation from Society*, relating to the everyday difficulties experienced by the participants and barriers that may prevent them participating or sustaining participation in activities; (2) *Social Reconnection*, referring to the social benefits of activities; and (3) *Personal Transformation*, concerning the personal benefits of activities such as emotional well-being and sense of achievement. Across all the sections, a prevailing global theme emerged of restoration and renewal and

attempts to incorporate the message expressed by participants of the perceived value of activities as a way to rebalance and restore their lives. These themes are portrayed in Figure 1 and discussed in the following sections.

<Insert figure 1 here>

Figure 1. Thematic network.

## **Dissociation from Society**

Setting the context for the consideration of the value of educational and vocational activities, participants spoke about their main daily challenges. The principal issues that emerged were a *loss of self* provoked by participants' inability to exercise control over situations such as housing, finance or employment and *everyday adversities* which were intensified by being homeless. In combination, these factors were described as leading to a sense of dissociation from society. Participants repeatedly stressed the frustrations of trying to function whilst outside of the 'system'.

### *Loss of self*

Participants spoke of their problems dealing with bureaucracy and having to rely on institutions such as welfare or housing departments, which left them feeling frustrated and powerless to change their situation. Being unable to influence important parts of their lives, instead feeling subjected to the logic of 'the system' was experienced by some as a 'loss of self'. Participants were typically bound by multiple 'system restraints' such as immigration issues, inaccessible accommodation or financial dependence:

*...it is very hard because the first time I was an asylum seeker and without papers for three years and for that I, it was my application was rejected [...] I end up with no job and I lived with some friends, I sometimes live homeless, it is difficult without paper and no permission (Osman).*

Services were often experienced as impeding rather than enabling personal control. In recovery from drug addiction, Joe had no sense of being able to make independent and active use of official systems:

*I don't feel like I have much power to change things right now. I don't feel ready for it as I'm still on treatment. I can't deal with the bureaucracy, if I have a problem with the job centre or benefits office [...], I get too stressed out (Joe, field notes, 19/3/13).*

Madiha spoke of her insecurities and difficulties as a homeless Muslim woman. She found herself living in an unknown and unpredictable social context:

*There's a lot of uncertainty. No, I don't have control. I have difficulties finding work, finding a home [...] Also finding work that suits me, as a Muslim, is not easy. I feel emotionally drained some days. Everything is, it's just that nothing is certain (Madiha).*

#### *Everyday adversities*

For many participants, being homeless can intensify the difficulty of commonplace tasks such as budgeting or even being able to access the internet to look for work:

*'cos I go to a lot of libraries as I don't have internet access which is a waste of time cos you have to travel there and then very often it's busy, it's disruptive (Luke).*

Participants also spoke of their experiences of social isolation, insecurity, and the stigmatisation of homelessness:

*...it's just the stigma of it, I feel like, that stigma is huge for me (Susie).*

A number of homeless people described the ramifications of homelessness on their mental or physical well-being. John explained how sleeping rough was



*'starting to affect my health, I have problems with my legs'*. Danita and Sara, both single mothers, spoke about the burden of coping with homelessness whilst protecting their children. Danita tried to hide her stress from her son and Sara suffered from depression after being moved so many times:

*I get stressful days but I don't show my stress to my son. Only at night when he's sleeping, sometimes I do cry 'cos I do get stressed 'cos there's no money and there's no work and I'm really trying to find work [...] I'm getting rejected and that really does get to me (Danita).*

Sara explained that *'sometimes I don't know what I am doing. Sometimes I am not recognise who I am'*, suggesting a loss of self. Relatedly, Boydell et al. (2000) argue how homeless people lose their sense of self through their inability to exercise control over situations such as financial independence or permanent housing.

Among the daily struggles faced by homeless people, participants spoke about the barriers limiting participation in educational and vocational activities. They mentioned being unable to attend due to doctor's appointments or simply not having the money for the bus fare. Accommodation issues were often a barrier; the hostel or street environment is not conducive to attending college. Participants expressed frustration about the difficulties they have in controlling their own lives when there is no structure or predictability:

*[...] they've moved me but I've not slept, I can't sleep and everything's all out so I guess I'm massively frustrated about it 'cos I can't do those things 'cos I can't sleep [...] at the minute I don't know if I'm awake or asleep so I might, everything's out, my routine's not very structured (Susie).*

*I come here and try to get help, but I don't know who to speak to in here, that's the thing [...] but stuck out on the streets, no, that's why I can't go back to college. I can't go to college looking rough (John).*

John also complained about a lack of information to help him access activities or courses. He goes to the same centre every day but says he does not know who to speak to for help. The centre has not enabled John to feel a sense of self-efficacy. Barriers to participation such as lack of information, or issues concerning hostel living are corroborated by other research on homelessness (Opinion Leader Research, 2006; Singh, 2005).

Although participants' homeless circumstances are very diverse, the practical problems faced by them are interwoven with the less visible issues such as stigmatisation, marginalisation and loss of self. Bureaucratic restraints can leave them feeling frustrated and powerless. They are unable to decide where they sleep or even choose what they eat. They repeatedly lament a loss of their ability to 'make purposeful choices' which is a key definition of agency (Alsop et al., 2005:11).

### **Social Reconnection**

When discussing the benefits of participating in an activity, participants emphasised two sets of benefits. The first is social reconnection, expressed through three basic themes: *Social interaction*, *Support networks* and *Life skills (re)development*.

#### *Social interaction*

The opportunity to interact with others and enjoy their company was described as one of the key benefits of participating in an activity:

*I can talk to others, it's good to have other conversation sometimes, not just the same old people or listening to yourself all the time! (Pat).*

The benefits of social interaction have also been discussed by other scholars in terms of reducing social exclusion which suggests that it can help counteract the marginalisation of homelessness (Thomas et al., 2012). Interacting with housed people may help participants 'feel normal'; Susie expresses her desire to regain her lost identity and to appear 'normal' again in mainstream society:

*...it gives me a chance to interact with others, to feel a bit more normal again. Not to feel so isolated or alone (Susie).*

### *Support networks*

Many participants spoke of the support they got from staff, often considered an important source of support and encouragement:

*Actually they don't know many things about me or my situation but my teacher is very nice and sometimes he sees me and asks me alone if I am ok, what is wrong...he can see if there is something wrong (Victor).*

Other studies have shown that access to these support networks and being treated with care and respect can aid homeless people's coping abilities (Irwin et al., 2008).

Participants used metaphors to describe the idea of nurture, growth and recovery. Joe speaks about how the gardening project 'builds bridges' suggesting a sense of reconstruction of self and reconnection with mainstream society:

*The programme helps build a bridge. The people here give me the support I need, not at my hostel; they do nothing (Joe, field notes, 19/3/13).*

Madiha describes how the support she received from a project leader motivated her to look at things from a different perspective. He showed her how simple it is to bring a garden back to life and Madiha uses this metaphorically to

represent her own life and the restoration of her self-identity and self-belief:

*'with encouragement I could bring myself back to life':*

*Greg, he is so passionate and positive about everything. He helps you to see gardening in a different way...he tells me when we look at the earth and it is all dry, we just need to add water to bring it back to life. I sort of compare that to me. I'm not feeling great about myself right now but with encouragement I could bring myself back to life (Madiha).*

Grabbe et al. (2013:7) report similar findings in their study of homeless women who found gardening reflected their 'spirituality and hope'.

Engaging in an activity was expressed by some as a temporary lifeline to help them deal with the daily stresses of homelessness and having nowhere to go once the centres close. The connection between *everyday adversities* and *support networks* is shown here by Luke who describes how a game of chess can provide companionship and respite from the solitude of the afternoon and evening:

*Also, when you're homeless and you're feeling alone if you have someone to sit with, to talk to and to play chess with, under the guise or the excuse of doing an activity then you don't feel so bad, don't think so much about what comes next. It helps you be a little bit more motivated about, about the troubles you have after the centres close (Luke).*

### *Life Skills (re)development*

Continuing with the idea of social reconnection, the importance of relearning life skills such as team work, social skills and decision making is a significant theme in the data. Both staff and homeless clients emphasised how participation in activities helps people to redevelop lost life skills:

*I let them take decisions and do things their way. They learn through that, they learn how to work in a team, learn to make decisions [...] this is important as many people on the project need to relearn how to do*

*normal things we take for granted (Greg, project leader, field notes, 21/3/13).*

*We're a good team here; we work well together most of the time and get on well [...] you just get on with it. That's what life is all about (Frank, field notes, 18/4/13).*

The experience of homelessness has stripped many participants of their life skills and engaging in activities gives them the opportunity to redevelop these lost skills, which reinforces the concept of restorative power. Robert termed this as *'the first step back to normalisation'*. Through engagement in activities, participants are able to restore these abilities. This is supported by Hodgetts et al.'s (2008) study of homeless men in New Zealand. They found that social participation and exercising social skills were important for self-development.

According to our participants, one of the greatest benefits of engaging in activities is the opportunity to socially interact. The global theme of restorative power was very prominent. For many, this interaction is more important than any potential practical or instrumental outcome an activity could give them. Social interaction helps foster social inclusion, restoring a sense of normality; participants commented that it made them *'feel a bit more normal again'*. Other studies have examined the importance homeless people attach to companionship and homeless community ties (Hodgetts et al., 2007). Furthermore, social inclusion is one of the determinants of agency (Samman and Santos, 2009); thus social interaction is an important way of increasing participants' agency.

## **Personal Transformation**

By far the most powerful theme recurring in the data concerns the personal benefits of participating in activities. This is divided into three basic themes: *Lost attributes*, *Restoring self*, and *Empowering change*.

### *Lost attributes*

This refers to participants' perceived loss of attitudinal attributes such as self-confidence or self-belief. Participants frequently referred to losing their confidence when they became homeless. The link between *lost attributes* and *life skills redevelopment* can be seen in the comment from Susie, a young woman who became homeless after illness caused her to lose her job. She viewed herself as unassertive and explained how she felt she needed

*'something to increase my assertiveness, and that would help with lots of things, my self-esteem and things like that...to be honest I've lost a lot of confidence through it'.*

Project leader Greg explained how activities can help rebuild lost attributes:

*It's all about self-esteem, self-worth at the end of the day [...] this is why this is so important, it gives them back their self-confidence and self-esteem (Greg, field notes, 21/3/13).*

### *Restoring self*

Many participants confessed to losing their confidence or self-belief when they became homeless. They spoke of development and growth through different perspectives and described how engaging in an activity helped improve their self-confidence and self-belief. Activities were also important to help combat stress or anxiety. The restorative power of activities was understood by some

as a healing process: *'it's very therapeutic. I like to do physical work too, it makes me feel useful and more positive'* (Dominic); *'wholesome, healthy'* (Grace); *'relaxing for the mind'* (Luke). Participants contrasted a sense of emotional well-being and normality that came from participating in activities, with their typical experience of unpredictability and lack of control in their everyday lives. The healing benefits of activities are echoed by Madiha. She spoke in terms of herself and other women in her shelter: *'lots of women really hurt and this is good for them'*. She went on to describe how the project benefitted her:

*Peace. Coming outside, not having to worry for a few hours, or worry about work...emotionally, this garden gives me a lot. I'm not articulate enough to put into words what it gives me (Madiha).*

Many of the benefits of participation in activities were defined in terms of feeling a sense of purpose and achievement. One member of staff commented *'just the sheer enjoyment of it, the feeling that you are doing something that's worthwhile'* (Joan). Others expressed personal development from having responsibility or having a renewed sense of purpose in life. A sense of achievement could be a personal achievement brought about through participation: Jack told us he *'hadn't had a drink in eight months and I'm hoping to keep it like that'* (field notes, 19/3/13). Achievement was also defined through tangible accomplishments directly related to the activity: *'look what we did this morning; we planted all those trees'* (Tom, field notes, 19/3/13).

Participants expressed how a sense of responsibility had helped them. Joe explained that he felt more in control of his life now that he had responsibility, and this is linked to giving him a sense of life purpose:

*'I don't want to let the team down so I make sure I get here on time, I am very punctual. You need to be to get a job, you can't get up late and just stroll up at 10:30' (Joe, field notes, 19/3/13).*

Dominic said he needed this sense of purpose to stop him relapsing:

*The thing is, when you've been on drugs and you stop, you just sit on the sofa with nothing to do. Drugs take over your whole life [...] so I come here, it gives me a purpose, gets me moving [...] (Dominic, field notes, 18/4/13).*

Both Joe and Dominic are recovering from addictions and here they outline proudly how they are starting to take control and give structure to their lives again. This ability to take control suggests renewed agency and empowerment (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007).

Sometimes, finding a sense of purpose can simply be related to finding a reason to get out of bed. Participants describe a sense of restoring life purpose through the activities:

*These things give me a reason, a reason for getting up and getting on with things, that's life isn't it? You need reasons to motivate yourself. Well, these are mine (Grace).*

Other studies have found that keeping occupied and having a sense of purpose is essential to a person's well-being (Dunleavy et al., 2012). Hammond and Feinstein (2008) discuss how perceptions of achievement and confidence in one's abilities contribute to increasing a person's self-efficacy and motivate them to do more. Further, they argue that self-efficacy is increased by taking on new challenges and responsibilities.

### *Empowering change*

Participants who experienced increased self-confidence and self-esteem from engaging in activities were further motivated because they wanted to achieve



something in the future. Nearly all participants talked of a goal or aspiration. These future goals were often related to housing and employment:

*In a flat which I just feel like is a home, and I can be myself and rest there. And a job (Susie).*

The findings show that participants are motivated to engage in activities because of the opportunities for change that participation can bring. This can be their instrumental value such as Jack's long term goal to become a self-employed gardener, or Victor's plan to '*come back as a businessman*'. Cultivating future aspirations like these has also been described as a renewal of self which necessitates making choices and taking action: two key factors of agency (Boydall et al., 2000). Some participants' goals may not appear so ambitious but the psychosocial value of activities are important for their quality of life. For Grace, her motivation to participate was '*so that my life doesn't go way out of order*' and her future goal was for '*a stable life*'.

### **Restoration and renewal**

The interconnectivity across sub-themes is commented on earlier in this section with examples of links between *support networks* and *everyday adversities* and *lost attributes* and *life skills (re)development*. The overarching global theme which emerged across all the sub-themes has been termed *restoration and renewal*. Participants repeatedly suggested that the experience of participation and the ultimate benefit to them centres on the restorative power of these activities, in the sense that the activities were felt to re-build a foundation for social connections and a sense of self. As described in the previous sections, John considers his gardening programme '*helps build a bridge*' to reconnect

with mainstream society whilst Susie speaks of the importance of social interaction to restore normality to her life. Other participants express personal development and renewal through concrete achievements such as Tom's tree planting or, as Grace explains, activities help renew her sense of purpose and give her *'a reason for getting up and getting on with things'*.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to add to the strengths-based literature an investigation of the positive use that homeless people make of educational and vocational activities and, in particular, examined the perspectives of homeless people themselves on the value of these activities.

Participants expressed their daily struggles to overcome the practical barriers of system restraints as well as invisible barriers such as stigmatisation and loss of self. They describe how this leads them feeling powerless and unable to make purposeful choices, a key definition of agency (Alsop et al., 2005). Self-efficacy is strongly linked to human agency and lack of belief in the power to do something will result in a person making no attempt to make things happen (Bandura, 1986). Engagement in activities where participants are encouraged and motivated to trust in their own capabilities helps to increase their self-belief and thus their self-efficacy (Hammond and Feinstein, 2008). The determinants of agency such as social belonging, self-esteem and hope for the future can be impacted when a person becomes homeless but participants describe how lost attributes such as self-confidence and self-esteem can be restored through

involvement in activities. This supports several studies on the benefits of learning and recreation (e.g. Field, 2009).

To return to the theoretical background, as the building blocks for empowerment are self-efficacy and agency, the findings illustrate that it is the restorative power of activities that help participants recover their self-efficacy and reinforce their personal agency which in turn empowers them. Empowerment is considered a process of change and this study does not suggest that all aspects of a homeless person's life will be changed by becoming involved in activities. However, by supporting a sense of restoring lost attributes and agency, homeless people's overall quality of everyday life may be improved.

This study provides support to the importance of learning and recreation for improving self-efficacy and agency. It also shows how participants value activities, not only as the instrumental foundation for future goals, but also as immediate psychosocial benefits in terms of finding positive experiences and enjoyment with a focus on the present. Soft outcomes such as increased self-confidence or communications skills are not always recognised when evaluating the effectiveness of interventions and statutory funding is often subject to hard outcomes such as employment or qualifications (Cookson et al., 2007). However, the findings underline how important soft outcomes are for homeless people. From a simple game of chess to a diploma in literacy, our participants detailed the power of activities in aiding recovery in, among other things, a sense of self, life skills and confidence.

### *Limitations*

The study was limited to three homeless centres in London and the findings are not intended to be transferable to other homeless populations in different settings. A larger sample may reveal more diverse experiences and perceptions. As most participants were selected by the centres, some individuals may have agreed to be interviewed to appease the staff which may be reflected in the shortness of some of the interviews. Similarly, by mainly purposively selecting participants who actively engage in activities, a bias could be created in favour of participation. However, similar themes and trends converged from the three centres.

### *Implications*

This study contributes to the literature on homelessness in two ways. Firstly, it adds to the somewhat limited body of strengths-based literature on homeless people. Secondly, it is well documented that homeless people may often be suspicious or reluctant to engage with services (e.g. Johnsen et al., 2005). One reason may be that they are objectified and treated instrumentally, as a problem to be resolved. This supports recent studies on how statutory approaches to homeless people impact and undermine the care and practice of voluntary service professionals (Renedo and Jovchelovitch, 2007). Our findings on the personal value of activities suggest that for services to better engage homeless clients, accepting and emphasising the immediate personal benefits as a positive achievement of educational and vocational activities may be a valuable approach. Whilst the ultimate objective of any homeless intervention is to help people move on from homelessness and back into mainstream society, participants' perspectives on the value of activities on a micro level should not be underestimated.

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