

## **A Second Bite at Society: Exploring the Transition from Homelessness. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Social Abjection.**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the experience of social abjection by looking at participants' experiences following their move from populations normally identified as abject, focussing on the transition out of homelessness and back into secured residential living. The study used a semi-structured interview method, with four formerly homeless participants (three males, one female), to open a dialogue with the intention of shining some light on the transition out of homelessness. The data gathered was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This research discovered three master themes, each with three emergent themes. These are: *Identity* a) No universal concept of homelessness; b) Power of stigma over self-identity; c) Homeless identity resilience; *Security* a) The familiarity of homelessness/fear of unknown; b) Possessions as an anchor; c) The power of responsibility; *Structure* a) Work as a chore; b) Support as a crutch; c) The power of distraction. The literature used as the foundation for this research (Tyler, 2009; Goffman, 1963; Coleman, 1988) has been supported by the findings. Furthermore, perceived lack of autonomy and poor self-confidence both remain following the transition, suggesting that the psychological impact of social abjection remains a salient part of participants' identities following their change in circumstances.

*Keywords: social abjection, homelessness, interpretative phenomenological analysis, stigma, identity salience.*

## Introduction

The UK Housing Review (2015) suggests that the number of people in Great Britain who are struggling financially is increasing at great pace (Perry, Wilcox & Williams, 2015). Fiscal austerity, which aims to reduce increasing levels of national debt and rising budget deficits by cutting government expenditure, has driven the British government's economic policy for over three decades (Antonakakis & Collins, 2014). According to Labonté and Stuckler (2016) the political clamour to reduce public spending has only increased since the monetary crisis of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Fiscal austerity and the neoliberal ideology which encourages it has come to dominate not only British politics, but also the politics of most Western nations (Labonté & Stuckler, 2016). Neoliberal capitalism, has three fundamental principles: the deregulation of financial markets; the reduction in labour force protections; and the decrease of government interventions in economic and social activities (Navarro, 2007). What is more, Neoliberalism is the bedrock of the policies of the numerous international agencies which play a vital role in the economic policies of developed and developing countries across the globe (Navarro, 2007).

While there is no conclusive evidence of a causal relationship, the dominance of neoliberalism has been strongly correlated with the growth in global financial inequality (Piketty, 2015). Hodgetts, Stolte and Groot (2014) highlight that the reduction in government interventions, along with the move to reduce tax, has meant that the funding traditionally available to interventions which aim to mitigate poverty is no longer available. A recent Oxfam (2017) report recognised the increased ascendancy of the top one percent of earners and highlighted an increase in global inequality which has seen an increase in the number of families and individuals whose social situation is ever more precarious (Hardoon, 2017).

Imogen Tyler identifies these groups, besieged at the periphery of society, as abject populations (Tyler, 2009), and her work highlights the plight of some of the increasing number of abject populations (Tyler, 2013a). The concept of abjection is most commonly associated with Julia Kristeva and what she termed "the abject" (Kristeva, 1982); she does not identify abjection as primarily a social condition. Kristeva's concept of abjection, with its roots in philosophy and psychodynamics, is predominantly focussed on the interaction between self and other; gender; and the physical body (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011). However, Kristeva (1982) also suggests that abjection can be anything which disturbs system order (Linstead, 1997). George Bataille (1999) focusses on the social elements of abjection. He

conceives social abjection as the subjugation of the lower classes and suggested that the exercise of power by the dominant over-class, on what he identified as the 'dregs' of society, was fundamental to the concept of social abjection. This research has focussed on the Bataillan concept of social abjection and the work of Imogen Tyler.

It is difficult to present accurate discreet data expounding precisely how great a problem homelessness is across the UK (Ryan, 2017), however, a recent report by homeless charity Crisis (Fitzpatrick, Pawson, Bramley, Wilcox & Watts, 2015) suggests that this group are a rapidly growing abject population, and the importance of homelessness as a global problem has been increasing since the 1980s (Scullion, Somerville, Brown, & Morris, 2015). Research into the aetiology of homelessness has focussed on the dichotomy between individual dispositional factors and societal factors (Belcher & DeForge, 2012); the structural view suggests that the impact of existing social structures and financial factors are the most powerful influences in many people becoming homeless (Clapham, 2003). Belcher and Deforge (2012) specifically explored the stigma attached to the homeless. The theory of Social Stigma (Goffman, 1963) analyses the experiences of individuals who are labelled abnormal by society. Goffman defines stigma as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (Goffman, 1963, p. 9) and suggests that stigmatised individuals fail to be fully accepted by society, subsequently they are permanently working to alter the social self they present to others.

Goffman identifies three distinct typologies of stigma: stigma of group identity; physical stigma; and stigma of character traits. While physical stigma suggests the presence of visible physical marks, it is important to be aware that this theory was developed over 55 years ago. The notion of health has changed in the last half decade, and apprehension about being stigmatised is often a major cause of psychological anxiety for people who live with invisible chronic illness and disability (Earnshaw, Quinn, Kalichman, & Park, 2013). However, this research was focussed primarily on the stigma of group identity and the stigma of character traits, both of which have few visible symptoms, and as such are often inferred by the observer. Subsequently, factors such as mental illness, being a member of the LGBTQ+ population, or belonging to an ethnic minority, have all at one point been stigmatised (Goffman, 1963). While the concept of social stigma is still valid today, the research is not without its issues. Goffman performs no primary research and he relies heavily on reviewing the existing literature of case studies and autobiographies to analyse how stigmatised individuals feel about themselves and how they feel about their relationships

with people who do not belong to stigmatised groups; those which Goffman refers to as “normals” (Perez, 2014). By using this term, Goffman is already stigmatising these individuals, and the argument could be made that Goffman identifying these individuals outside the norm could potentially have had an impact on his initial research. Nevertheless, the theory does highlight areas which may be vital to any research hoping to elucidate homeless individuals’ experiences, and the experiences of individuals belonging to abject populations. Goffman offers two examples of this; firstly, that stigmatised individuals must have an element of concern for the dispositional judgments others may make about them; secondly, that there must be social norms against which stigmatised individuals can be judged (Perez, 2014). This shows that stigma is a fluid social concept and factors which may see people negatively judged are liable to change alongside the zeitgeist.

Most of the research exploring social abjection focusses on the lived experience of individuals while they belong to populations which are identified as abject. However, this research was focussed primarily on the transition from social abjection and explored the factors which contributed to this transition. Therefore, it is important to consider theories that look at potential factors which could help facilitate an individual’s transition out of their abject situation. Coleman’s (1988) theory of social capital is a cumulative concept that has its foundation in predispositions, attitudes, and individual behaviour (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). Developed from contemporary economic theory, exploring rational actors and maximal utility, Coleman suggests that social capital is not entirely fungible, and there is no one clear definition of the concept. Adler and Kwon (2002) suggest that social capital is the goodwill, created by positive social relations, that can be utilised to facilitate action. In contrast, Brehm and Rahn (1997), propose that social capital is the network of supportive relationships between individuals which help to facilitate the resolution of collective action problems. Coleman proposes that social capital can be defined by its function suggesting that it is “a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions .... making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible.” (Coleman, 1988; p. S98).

If social capital is the sum of the social relationships which facilitate action, then it is important to look at this when exploring abject populations. When considering a transition from social abjection, reflection is needed to contemplate whether there was an absence of social capital before an individual became homeless and whether the introduction of social capital was a factor in the transition from abjection (Clapham, 2003). Although Coleman

(1988) does not explicitly draw a distinction between positive and negative social capital, it is possible to infer that negative social capital exists and this research aimed to show whether simply an absence of social capital contributes to an individual becoming a member of an abject population, or if negative social capital is necessary to facilitate that transition.

The salience of social capital in the transition from homelessness cannot be ignored although, it is important to also consider other possible factors. While the structural approach to the exploration of homelessness and social abjection are the primary areas of focus for this research it is important not to ignore the potential impact of individual dispositional factors (Belcher & Deforge, 2012). One potentially vital factor for the transition from social abjection is motivation and as such it is important to consider theories which aim to elucidate human motivation. Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that the type of motivation, rather than simply the quantity of motivation, is important. SDT posits that there are three distinct types of motivation: Autonomous motivation; Controlled motivation and Amotivation (a lack of motivation and intention). Autonomous motivation consists of intrinsic motivation along with some forms of extrinsic motivation which are vital to the specific task being performed. Controlled motivation consists of external regulation and introjected regulation. External regulation sees an individual's behaviour as a function of reward and punishment; while introjected regulation means action is energised by the keenness to avoid negative outcomes such as shame and reduced self-esteem. While both controlled and autonomous motivation energise and drive behaviour when compared to Amotivation, controlled motivation sees an increase in the pressure to behave in a specific manner (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It is important to consider this when looking at abject populations because the goals and motivations are potentially different for individuals belonging to these groups when compared to those who do not belong to an abject group. For example, questioning whether the motivations to achieve a promotion at work the same as those to realise basic human needs. Maslow's (1943) seminal hierarchy of needs identifies that the realisation of physiological needs (shelter, food, water, and sleep) are of primary importance, and members of abject populations are often the individuals most likely to be without these basic physiological needs. SDT has used empirical research to examine the importance of motivation in the realisation of basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and as such, it is important that motivation is not ignored in this research.

While there is a large body of research exploring the homeless experience (Belcher & Deforge, 2012; Norman, Pauly, Marks, & Palazzo, 2015; Riggs & Coyle, 2002) there is an

absence of research which focuses primarily on the transition from homelessness and from social abjection. The economic policies of the last three decades have seen a reduction in government funding for social initiatives (Masters et al., 2017) therefore, it is vital that individuals who have made the transition from homelessness can tell their story and talk about the factors which facilitated their transition. This research will use a small sample of previously homeless individuals and a semi-structured interview method; the data gathered will be analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This study hopes to tell each participant's story, but also to potentially identify commonalities within each participant's experience. The data gathered as part of this study could potentially be useful in the development of future social initiatives and interventions to improve the situation for the homeless and other abject populations.

## **Methodology**

### **Rationale**

The purpose of this research project was to allow each of the four participants to talk about their transition from being homeless to having a permanent residence. The existing research exploring homelessness focusses almost exclusively on the homeless condition, and very little research focusses on the transition out of homelessness, so it was important to use a methodology which focussed on the idiographic aspect of the experience and allows the individuals participating in the study the opportunity for their unique stories to be heard. The experience of transitioning into having a permanent residence after being homeless frequently involves many individual factors and is typically a very individual and subjective experience (Belcher & DeForge, 2012; Clapham, 2003). Therefore, to explore the subject from a realist perspective may mean that the resulting research would suffer from a lack of depth. While approaching the issue from a social constructivist perspective may see the individual nature of each participant's knowledge neglected. Subsequently, this research used a phenomenological epistemology, which allowed the focus of the research to be on how the participants made sense of their experience and explore the meanings they attach to it. A phenomenological epistemology was used to provide accounts that offer an insight into the subjective "lived" experience of the individuals who took part in the research rather than simply report the lived experience.

## Research Design

**Data collection method.** Due to the potential negative emotions exploring this topic could elicit in participants, recruiting individuals willing to be interviewed for the research proved difficult. As a result, data for this study was gathered using a combination of face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews. Two participants were interviewed face-to-face, while two were interviewed over the telephone. The interviews took place over two separate days, each participant was interviewed on one single occasion, and each of the interviews were recorded. All interviews used the same semi-structured interview methodology. Interviews were all transcribed verbatim and the data from each of the interviews was analysed using IPA, which was selected to facilitate a double hermeneutic analysis of each participant's lived experience. The semi-structured interview method, suggested as the most appropriate methodological choice by Smith (2015), was used for two specific reasons: to allow the researcher to respond to the participant's responses if necessary and to facilitate active dialogue between researcher and participant; and to enable the individuals taking part in the research to expand on their own lifeworld experiences.

**Constructing the interviews.** The interview schedule used for participant interviews was developed using the guidelines suggested by Flowers, Larkin, and Smith (2009), who advocate developing questions from a mixture of nine distinct categories: narrative; descriptive; contrast; structural; evaluative; circular; comparative; prompts; and probes. The purpose of using the nine diverse question types is to develop an open dialogue between researcher and participant; to remove ambiguity; and to allow the experience of the participant to be accessed as completely as possible by the researcher. Due to the focus of the research being on the transition from homelessness, the questions focussed on exploring concepts such as identity, power, and control. Questions such as "how do people view you now that you are no longer homeless? Do you feel like this has changed from when you were homeless?" were used with the intention being to allow some depth of knowledge to be gathered about how participants felt other people viewed them while they are homeless, and also following their transition from homelessness. Another question from the schedule, "could you tell me how your own perception of your situation made you feel; also, could you talk about how this effected your sense of self identity?" was used because it would potentially show how the participants sense of identity was impacted by their situation and what factors were involved.

Each of the four interviews was intended to last for approximately twenty to thirty minutes, with the anticipation that some participants would be more willing to offer information than others. The intention was to collect approximately one hour of total content between all four interviews. Techniques, proposed by Flowers et al. (2009), to build a rapport and allow participants to relax and facilitate trust with the researcher were used. Because the interview would be the initial and only meeting with the participants (in the case of the two telephone interviews there would be no physical meeting, only telephone contact), the interview schedule was used to assist in building rapport. Simple descriptive questions were used initially to put the participants at ease and allow their confidence to grow at a comfortable pace throughout the interview. The research ethical guidelines followed in this research were the Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014) advocated by the British Psychological Society

### **Sampling and participants**

This study consists of a sample of individuals who were formerly homeless. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic which was explored, individuals willing to take part in this research were identified after initial consultation with organisations set up to assist the homeless in Wales and Scotland. This approach was used primarily to minimise the potential impact of the powerful emotions participants may feel while revisiting a period of their life which may have been emotionally stressful. The sample size of four participants was directed by the criteria suggested by Flowers et al. (2009) of between three and six participants for qualitative research. Brief details of each participant and a very brief synopsis of their homeless chronology is shown below in Table 1.



Table 1:

*Participant details, showing gender, age, and a brief description of their homeless chronology.*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Homeless Chronology</b>
Garry	28	Male	Homeless for one year. Found permanent residence again in Spring 2017.
Ross	33	Male	Homeless for three years. Found permanent residence again in Autumn 2016.
Annie	35	Female	Homeless for 18 Months. Found permanent residence in October 2017.
Mike	47	Male	Homeless for 12 years in total, over numerous different periods of his life. Found permanent residence in January 2018.

### **Inclusion criteria**

The four participants for this study were gathered through contact with two organisations set up to help provide residences for homeless individuals. There were only two inclusion criteria for this study: participants must be over 18 years of age; participants must currently have a permanent residence and not be homeless. The first of these criteria was considered necessary because of the sensitive nature of this topic. It was felt that because of the small scale of this research there was limited primary support that could be offered following the interviews if the process was to elicit a strong negative emotional response from participants. The second of these criteria was set to ensure that participants could talk about their transition back into secured residential accommodation, from homelessness. The researcher believed that had participants been interviewed about their transition from

homelessness after their transition been unsuccessful it may have led to a negatively focussed assessment on the part of the participants.

### **Analytical Guidelines**

Due to the idiographic nature of the information gathered as part of this study, the data will be analysed using IPA (Smith, et al., 2015), which was designed to facilitate the in-depth analysis of idiographic perceptions of specific experiences. The fundamental principles of IPA are developed from health psychology, while the theoretical basis is a development of the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962), Heidegger (1962), and Husserl (1999). Husserl claimed that the meaning individuals attach to discrete events could only be accessed through the iterative process, the repeated analysis of the participants knowledge. Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggested that every individuals experience was perceptual, and that perception is affected by an amalgamation of four distinct factors: time, world, mind, and body. The information gathered in each interview was analysed using the four analysis stages set out by Langdrige (2007). The four stages are: stage one, the transcripts of each participant's interview were read and re-read, necessary comments were added throughout; stage two, emergent themes were recorded in the margins of the transcript and then developed into cogent observations; stage three, themes were recorded in order and then developed into common themes; stage four, an emergent theme table was produced by the researcher. Themes were labelled and linked to specific quotes and sections of text identified from the transcripts.

### **Reflexivity**

This research has used the four core principles, advocated by Smith et al. (2015), as the framework to assess the validity of this qualitative study. The four core principles are: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; impact and importance; and coherence and transparency. The impact and the importance of the study is shown by the absence of previous research exploring the transition out of homelessness. Previous research (Belcher & Deforge, 2012; Norman et al., 2015; Riggs & Coyle, 2002) has primarily focussed on the knowledge gained by individuals while they are homeless, rather than looking to explore the lived experience of people after they have found a permanent residence. Sensitivity to context has been a paramount concern throughout this research. While it is difficult to completely remove emotion from such a sensitive issue or eliminate the possibility of participants becoming emotionally upset by revisiting a potentially traumatic period of their lives, all possible effort was taken to minimise emotional trauma caused by participation in this

research. Participants were informed at each stage of the process of their right to withdraw. Furthermore, participants were sourced from organisations which were involved in working with the homeless. This was done for a number of reasons, primarily to facilitate the introduction between researcher and participant; potential participants were made aware of what involvement entailed before primary contact was even made by the researcher. Also, the hope was that by having contact with participants which was facilitated through agencies they were familiar with, it would help to minimise any potential negative effects caused by taking part in the research.

Consideration was given by the researcher that the analysis may be influenced by the ignorance of the researcher to the subject. However, this would also be the case as an insider with broad knowledge of the homeless experience and the double hermeneutic approach is always going to incorporate some partiality of the individual carrying out the analysis. Another factor which was also given consideration while carrying out the study was the researcher's conception of homelessness. As an outsider, the researcher conceptualised homelessness as a negative state which required a solution, in this case a positive transition from homelessness. However, the potential exists that homeless individuals may not see homelessness as a negative state, the researcher was careful to be considerate of this potential bias and to be as open minded as possible, particularly when analysing the data gathered. While it is difficult to definitively eliminate bias or preconception from the research, every effort was taken to consider its existence at each step of the process, and not let either cloud the research.

## **Analysis**

### **Analytical Overview**

The three master themes, and the accompanying nine emergent themes are displayed below (Table 2).

Table 2:

*Table showing the three master themes, and the nine emergent themes identified from the raw data.*

Master Theme	Emergent Theme (a)	Emergent Theme (b)	Emergent Theme (c)
Identity	No universal concept of homelessness	Power of stigma over self-identity	Homeless identity resilience
Security	Familiarity of homelessness/fear of the unknown	Possessions as an anchor	The power of responsibility
Structure	Work as a chore	Support as a crutch	The Power of Distraction

### **Master theme 1: Identity**

In Master theme one, Identity, the participants' feelings of Identity are explored. All participants talked about identity, although the master theme title of identity is rather broad, it is a consistent theme throughout the interviews. The three emergent themes to be discussed are: a) no universal concept of homelessness b) power of stigma over self-identity c) homeless identity resilience.

**Emergent theme 1 (a): No universal concept of homelessness.** Each participant experienced homelessness in a different manner and this theme highlights that the experience of being homeless is more than simply living on the streets. Garry and Mike both articulate their individual concept of homeless.

“mostly I just kind of sofa surfed for a while. I was never living on the streets. I was just, you know, like I stayed with like 5 different friends all the time. I was always on the move.” (Garry 4-5)

“really, I’ve been homeless forever. It’s like even when I’m living somewhere I’m homeless, or like I’m waiting til [sic] something happens.” (Mike 5-6)

Garry and Mike both show a different concept of homelessness. It is important to be aware of the multifaceted individual nature of each homeless person's life, especially when looking at the transition from homelessness. However, it is worth considering that while the quotes are identifying the uniqueness of the homeless experience, both quotes identify one of the commonalities in their experience, the transient nature of the existence. Garry identifies this by his use of the phrase always on the move, while Mike articulates this concept through his use of the phrase waiting until something happens. So, a theme identifying uniqueness also succeeds in identifying commonalities of the homeless lived experience.

**Emergent theme 1 (b): Power of stigma over self-identity.** This theme explores stigma and how participants experience stigma. Mike highlights the power that stigma has over his own self-concept, even following the transition from homelessness:

“have you ever walked into Tesco while you're homeless? Well, even after you're not living on the streets, they know, them security guards can smell it on you.” (Mike 24-25)

This quote highlights the impact that stigma can have on individuals. Mike suggests that the impact of the humiliation he feels as a stigmatised individual remains, even following the transition from homelessness. One potential reason as to why that happens is conceivable by Mike's use of the term smell, which is almost ephemeral. By using that term Mike could be perfectly describing the ineffable nature of stigma, while it is difficult to say for certain whether the security guards were knowledgeable about Mike's situation, when he felt their gaze, it is possible that the effects of stigma made Mike feel uncomfortable in that situation. This shows the power that the homeless identity has, even after an individual regained residential status.

**Emergent Theme 1 (c): Homeless identity resilience.** Ross demonstrates the resilient nature of the homeless identity following his transition from homelessness.

“it's just part of who I am to be fair but [sic]. Even now, with a job and a house, I still worry that it'll all go tits up”. (Ross, 31-32)

This quote demonstrates the strength of the homeless identity. Even following eighteen months of having a secure permanent residence, homelessness remains a salient component of Ross' identity. Looking at this in terms of social abjection, it is possible to see why the

effect on identity remains, by using the term worry, Ross shows that he still feels powerless to affect the path his life could take, and almost like a passive participant in his life.

### **Master theme 2: Security.**

The impact of Security following the transition from homelessness is a recurring theme throughout all of the interviews. Each participant articulated the fact that the security of a permanent residence impacted their lives, although not always in a positive manner. The three emergent themes to be discussed are: a) The familiarity of homelessness/ fear of unknown. b) Possessions as an anchor. c) The power of responsibility.

**Emergent theme 2 (a): The familiarity of homelessness/ fear of unknown.** Mike discusses homelessness almost as if it is a skill, or a personality trait.

“pal, I am fucking awesome at being homeless. I mean I don’t want to be homeless again, but at least I know what I’m doing then.” **(Mike 52-53)**

In this quote Mike identifies his ability as a homeless individual. It is perhaps that although Mike accepts that his life is not how he wants it to be, he also feels that he has an element of control over his situation. It is possible that Mike feels that he is more competent at being homeless, and he lacks the confidence in his ability to maintain his transition. This experience is not unique to homelessness. Research by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade, (2005) exploring how people made sustainable changes in their lifestyle, demonstrated the difficulty many individuals have when trying to make maintainable alterations in their lives, Mike is potentially just articulating the power of the safety of the known rather than the fear of uncertain situations.

**Emergent theme 2 (b): Possessions as an anchor.** Annie highlights the power possessions have over her concept of home.

“I remember I bought this little thing for the bathroom, only like a cheap towel stand. But that’s when it first felt like a home. Like it was my home then.” **(Annie 29-30)**

By suggesting that the purchase of one item changed her perception of her home, it is simple to conceive that Annie is demonstrating the power possessions have over individuals. However, it is possible that Annie is associating a sense of safety with her possession. It could be that Annie is simply trying to make sense of a transitional period in her life and

associating the change in her concept of home with the item, and one specific moment, rather than looking at it as a collection of moments.

**Emergent theme 2 (c): The power of responsibility.** Annie demonstrates the power responsibility has on helping her to remain permanently homed.

“even when you just want to stop trying, you kind of know that you can’t. Cos you’ve got stuff you need to pay for. It’s like a stress, but also it keeps you going.” (**Annie 54-55**)

This suggests that Annie is aware of the difficulty she has in maintaining her recently regained residential status. By articulating her consistent desire to give up, she shows the internal struggle that lots of people have. However, she also shows the power that responsibility has, to enable her to keep going, by using the phrase kind of, she shows that she is, even now perhaps prevaricating over the life choices she has made, and her desire to remove some stress from her life.

### **Master theme 3: Structure.**

The importance of structure, following the transition from homelessness, is a frequently repeated pattern across each participant’s interview. Each of the individuals interviewed for this research discussed the impact structure had on their lives following the transition. The three emergent themes to be discussed are: a) Work as a chore. b) Support as a crutch. c) The power of distraction.

**Emergent theme 3 (a): Work as a chore.** Ross discusses the paradox of working life following his period of homelessness.

“I’ve had like 20 jobs since I got a place to live. I’ve seen me travel 3 hours a day man, just to go to a job, probably one I fucking hate too (laughs). Honestly, people don’t know how hard you’ve got to graft just to stand still.” (**Ross 41-43**)

This quote highlights the conflict that some formerly homeless individuals may feel regarding the effort it takes just to maintain their residential status. Ross demonstrates his willingness to continue working even though he may hate what he must do to remain living in his current house. Additionally, by talking about how hard he must work just to remain in his current position, he is possibly alluding to a feeling of impotence at a lack of autonomy within his life.

**Emergent theme 3 (b): Support as a crutch.** Mike talks a little about how the support he received when trying to transition out of homelessness helps him.

“some people think, look at this clown, he just keeps fucking up. And I do (laughs), but you can’t believe how much difference it makes when you get just a little fucking help man.” **(Mike 38-39)**

Interestingly, even when Mike is talking about support which assisted him to change his life, he still begins the quote with a negative focus. It is almost as if his experience of being homeless has greatly impacted his self-confidence. Furthermore, he also attributes negative dispositional judgements to others. Not only does Mike judge himself negatively, but he also believes that other people judge him in a similarly negative fashion. This is potentially an excellent example of the power of stigma and in a context where he has achieved something that many people would believe was a positive transition, so the negative assessment is not congruent with the behaviour. It is therefore important as an analyser of this data not to assume that a change in circumstances is positive.

**Emergent theme 3 (c): The power of distraction.** In this theme Annie talks about the beneficial effect of not having time to think about her situation.

“home kind of means you’ve just got to get on with stuff. Like you’ve got to keep going now, cos what else can you do. Being homeless is not better. I don’t even want to think about that.” **(Annie 62-63)**

While Annie clearly articulates the benefits of being busy, she does seem to be unsure whether that is a positive or a negative aspect of her life and Annie does not seem to commit to her new life being an improvement on her old life. By using terms like kind of and got to, she shows that she is aware of the lack of options in her life. However, it could be that she is using avoidance as a coping strategy; it is almost as if not thinking about her situation allows her the confidence to continue. Perhaps, like Mike, she feels an absence of control and this negatively impacts her confidence in herself.

## Discussion

There were three master themes identified by this research: Security; Identity; and Structure. The complex notion of homelessness, identified in master theme one (identity), is



echoed in Tyler's (2013a) work looking at social abjection. Tyler recognises that although abject populations take many different forms there are consistent commonalities within them. One of the most significant common qualities found by Tyler (2013a), and one which is supported by the work of Bataille (1999), is the concept of powerlessness. Each of the participants talks about feelings of powerlessness in diverse ways. For example, Annie talked about feeling a lack of control over the future outcomes of her life, while Mike gave voice to his own lack of confidence over his situation, and suggested he felt more of a sense of control in his former, familiar homeless situation. This is something which is echoed throughout the interviews in various forms and this feeling remains following the transition from homelessness, for example when Ross identifies a feeling of powerlessness even though he has a job and a house.

A further consistent theme throughout the research is the power of Stigma (Goffman, 1963). Mike mentions that he feels that others judge him negatively even following his transition from homelessness, as a result the impact of stigma, and the perceived negative judgements of others, remains powerful. This is perhaps a result of the stigma of group identity which Goffman (1963) identifies, and participants mentioned that even after finding a permanent residence they still felt the impact of their former homeless identity. In terms of social abjection, they may feel that they have left one abject group (homeless) for another (disadvantaged). Participants talked about their precarious employment situation, even following their transition from homelessness, this suggests that they are still struggling. It is easy for an outsider to look at their situation and believe that it is greatly improved but this research suggests that the participants are still under a great deal of stress even after becoming homed again. Belcher and Deforge (2012) speculate that while whole groups may be judged negatively, most negative dispositional assessments are on an individual level, this suggests that once an individual has experienced the feeling of abjection they may believe they are negatively judged forever, although the nature of this relationship may be difficult to isolate.

The power of social capital (Coleman, 1988) is visible throughout this research. The positive influence of the presence of structure and support show that positive social capital takes many forms. This research suggests that something which many would consider simple, such as having social responsibility, could be a positive form of social capital. While participants mention the benefit of individual help, a more consistent theme throughout the research is participants' recognition of the positive impact social responsibility has on their

continued residence. This is something which is discussed in other research exploring solutions to homelessness. Norman et al. (2015) introduce the concept of the homeless industry (the things one must do to survive while homeless); the findings of this research suggest that the specific tasks that individuals must perform (regardless of their nature) to maintain their residential status, are enough to keep them feeling a part of the social milieu. Norman et al. (2015) suggest that anything which enables members of abject populations to feel they have control over their own life has a substantial positive impact. Both Ross and Annie mentioned that they felt that the tasks they had to perform to maintain their transition from homelessness allowed them to feel an element of control on their own situation.

Perceived control over one's own life is an excellent description of autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2008) suggest that competence and autonomy are both big factors in human motivation. Competence seems to be absent in a lot of the participants' self-conceptions following their transition from homelessness; however, interestingly Mike was very aware of his competence as a homeless person and how the transition from a familiar situation to an unfamiliar situation led him to lose the feeling of competence. Conversely the presence and the absence of autonomy is something which was consistently mentioned by participants about their lives after their transition from homelessness, with many feeling less autonomous control over their own lives following the transition. Participants seemed to keep working simply to maintain a lifestyle in which they lacked confidence, autonomy, and even potentially relatedness. However, this is perhaps not an issue which impacts formerly homeless individuals in isolation. The rise of precarious employment, a topic explored by a variety of researchers (Hardgrove, McDowell, & Rootham, 2015; Quinlan, Mayhew, & Bohle, 2001; Tompa, Scott-Marshall, Dolinschi, Trevithick, & Bhattacharyya, 2007) suggests that there are a growing number of individuals who are working simply to be able to live.

Annie identified the connection between the purchase of one item and feeling that her new house had become a home. McNaughton (2008) discusses homelessness as psychological trauma and while it is beyond the scope of this research to conclusively suggest that the transition from homelessness, back to residential living, is a panacea for psychological trauma, it does not seem like too great a stretch to infer that Annie had felt some potential relief from her trauma assisted by the security of her new living arrangement.

### **Limitations and future research**

One likely failing of this study is the lack of follow up interviews. While a concerted effort is made to consider all potential interview questions and responses, and to follow them up during the interview, it is often not until the researcher is analysing the data that the poignant nature of a seemingly benign comment is revealed. For example, the concept of home, or homelessness to an outsider seems simple, but when examining the data, its complexity is evident. One potential solution to this issue would be to use the methodology advocated by Murray et al. (2009). They suggest that longitudinal qualitative research affords considerable advantages over the more popular single interview techniques in understanding participants' lived experience. They also serve to facilitate the development of an ongoing relationship between researcher and participant, and can potentially ease discussion of sensitive and emotional issues; however, it was felt that this research design was beyond the scope of this study, and hopefully this research has succeeded in identifying areas which could be explored in more depth by future research.

A further possible avenue for future study was identified by the researcher's conceptualisation of the homeless as an almost homogenous group, that every homeless person's experience of homelessness would be the same. The results of this research show that the homeless experience is very unique; and that there are diverse types of homelessness. For example, individuals who have precarious living conditions, but live with friends and 'sofa surf', or individuals who have been living on the streets for an extended period. Future research could look to see whether different forms of homelessness resulted in different psychological impact.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the limitations of this research, the findings do have potential social and political relevance. The continued impact of the homeless identity, even following the transition from homelessness is something that needs to be considered. Looking at that in terms of social abjection it means that potentially people who find themselves in abject situations will be impacted by the effects of that situation for a protracted period, even if they are able to change their lifestyle circumstances. This is important because it means that the effects of social abjection could be very difficult to reverse, and therefore the focus should be on prevention rather than remedy. The difficulty when endeavouring to attend to an issue such as social abjection, or homelessness specifically, is that societal and structural

transformation are required for any individual change to be significantly effective over the long-term (Fitzpatrick-Lewis et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there are initiatives which aim to use some of the themes identified in this research to combat the problem of homelessness. An excellent example of this is Social Bite, an enterprise which is concentrated predominantly in the Scottish central belt. To address the homeless issue they use different initiatives to approach the problem from multiple angles. Alongside programs to feed those who are currently homeless, a quarter of the people they employ in their restaurants have struggled with homelessness, and they have recently developed homeless villages as housing for individuals struggling with homelessness. While these interventions are not a panacea for the homeless issue, they do support some of the observations made by the participants in this research. They allow people suffering with homelessness to have some level of autonomy and control over their life, and they also provide positive social capital which can work as a support for individuals to further improve their situation. Additionally, they highlight that societal and structural change can occur on a relatively small scale, and if interventions like these are successful then they show that minor changes can yield large results.

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