



*Women's dignity and sense of self in experiences of support whilst homeless.*

GREENWOOD, Rebecca Jane

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# **Women's dignity and sense of self in experiences of support whilst homeless**

Rebecca Jane Greenwood

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam  
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

October 2024

## Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organisation, whilst undertaking my research degree.
2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
3. I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.
4. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the SHU Principles of Integrity in Research and the SHU Research Ethics Policy.
5. The word count of the thesis is 90,900.

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand women's support choices whilst homeless through exploring how their dignity and sense-of-self is affected by, and affects, their experiences of informal support. Dignity is largely unexplored in homelessness research and, despite an increase in research on women's homelessness, few studies explore women's experiences away from services in-depth. Inspired by recent social care best practices foregrounding the psychological wellbeing of those accessing support, this study employs a dignity-centred methodology. Fourteen women with experiences of homelessness participate through interviews (face-to-face, written or walking) and observations. Seventeen support workers and informal supporters, a perspective rarely included in research, participated in semi-structured interviews. An organisation observation was conducted with five workers.

These perspectives are used to develop an original conceptualisation of informal support in the context of women's homelessness. The definition captures more nuance than in existing research by considering quality and motivation for support. It sees informal support as wider than family/friend support relationships, with examples of communities mobilising, and support workers going beyond or outside their professional roles.

The study's theoretical framework combines societal discourse and capital theory to construct an understanding of dignity. Using this framework, informal support conceptualisation, and diverse avenues of participant recruitment, this study contributes unique insight into women's homelessness. It finds societal discourse on women, motherhood, asylum seekers and homelessness to affect women's dignity, sense-of-self and consequently their support choices. Women's support choices largely result from dignity maintenance and risk management strategies, but the strategies available to women, and the impact of societal discourse on them, vary depending on their embodied capital. The study concludes that informal support honours women's dignity, viewing them as deserving of support and resources. Yet it can position them as victims of structural disadvantage affecting their agency, ability to build capital and raise their societal status.

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# Contents

<b>Candidate Declaration .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Research aims and questions .....	1
1.2 Definitions and justification of key terms .....	2
1.3 Contribution to knowledge .....	3
1.4 Thesis structure .....	4
<b>2. Women’s Homelessness Experiences, Dignity and Identity: A Literature Review.....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Gendered homelessness .....	6
2.1.1 The scale of women’s homelessness .....	7
2.1.2 The impact of traditional gender roles on women’s homelessness .....	9
2.1.3 Causes of homelessness: a gendered perspective.....	12
2.1.4 Gendered differences in experiences of homelessness.....	13
2.1.5 Summary .....	15
2.2 Geographies of urban homelessness .....	15
2.2.1 Women’s geographies of homelessness .....	18
2.2.2 Summary .....	21
2.3 Informal support .....	21
2.3.1 Non-use of formal services .....	21
2.3.2 Influences on women’s support choices.....	23
2.3.3 Support from family and friends .....	25
2.3.4 Public services/places .....	26
2.3.5 Reliance on others experiencing homelessness .....	27
2.3.6 Summary .....	29

2.4 Homelessness and identity .....	30
2.4.1 The homeless identity .....	30
2.4.2 Homeless identity and women .....	32
2.4.3 Identity maintenance strategies .....	33
2.4.4 Becoming homeless on leaving difficult relationships/environments: Identity implications .....	36
2.4.5 Summary .....	37
2.5 Homelessness and dignity.....	37
2.5.1 Dignity and women experiencing homelessness.....	42
2.5.2 Summary .....	44
2.6 Conclusion .....	45
<b>3. Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>46</b>
3.1 Dignity .....	46
3.2 Capital.....	52
3.2.1 Capital theory .....	52
3.2.2 Cultural capital .....	53
3.2.3 Social capital.....	55
3.2.4 Symbolic capital.....	56
3.2.5 Expanding theory on non-economic capital .....	56
3.2.6 How capital feeds into dignity.....	57
3.3 Societal Discourses .....	60
3.3.1 Social Abjection .....	60
3.3.2 Emotional Discourse.....	63
3.3.3 Othering: Disgust.....	64
3.3.4 Discourse and women .....	65
3.4 The effect of dominant discourse and capital on felt-dignity .....	67
3.5 Marginalised groups.....	69
3.5.1 Subcultural capital.....	70
3.5.2 Local value systems/alternative narratives .....	70

3.5.3 Sub-group comparison .....	71
3.6 Conclusion .....	72
<b>4. Methodology and Method .....</b>	<b>75</b>
4.1 Research philosophy .....	75
4.1.1 Trauma-informed methodology .....	76
4.1.2 Person-centred methodology .....	81
4.1.3 A dignified methodology .....	84
4.2 Reflexivity and positionality .....	86
4.2.1 Professional background .....	87
4.2.2 Insider/outsider .....	88
4.2.3 Cultural capital .....	89
4.3 The research process .....	90
4.3.1 Ethical considerations .....	90
4.3.2 Data collection .....	91
4.3.3 Participant recruitment .....	98
4.4 The analytical process .....	107
4.4.1 Transcribing and fieldnotes .....	107
4.4.2 Reflexive thematic analysis .....	109
4.5 Conclusion .....	111
<b>5. Findings: What does informal support look like for women experiencing homelessness? .....</b>	<b>112</b>
5.1 The nature of informal support .....	112
5.2 Levels and types of support .....	114
5.3 The formal extreme .....	117
5.4 Workers motivated by personal care within their role .....	121
5.5 Workers going beyond their role .....	123
5.6 Communities .....	126
5.7 Family and friends .....	130
5.8 Space and place .....	132
5.9 Conditionality and Harm .....	133
5.10 Exchange vs. communal relationships .....	136



5.11 Conclusion .....	139
<b>6. Findings: To what extent do women experiencing homelessness come to rely on informal support and why? .....</b>	<b>141</b>
6.1 The impact of societal discourse on women's support choices.....	142
6.1.1 Neoliberalism .....	142
6.1.2 Patriarchalism.....	151
6.1.3 Fear of others .....	153
6.2 The impact of risk management on women's support choices .....	157
6.2.1 Fear of victimisation .....	158
6.2.2 Fear of services.....	161
6.3 An individual's access to resources: Capital .....	165
6.3.1 Economic capital .....	165
6.3.2 Cultural capital and identity .....	167
6.3.3 Social capital.....	171
6.4 An individual's access to resources: Services .....	177
6.5 Further barriers to support .....	180
6.6 Conclusion .....	182
<b>7. Findings: How does informal support affect women experiencing homelessness' feelings of dignity and sense-of-self?.....</b>	<b>184</b>
7.1 Dignity and human connection/disconnection.....	185
7.2 Dignity and restricted resources/poor conditions .....	192
7.3 Dignity and poor opportunities/capabilities (to raise societal status).....	199
7.4 Dignity and going against your own moral values .....	204
7.5 Effect on self of dignity violations .....	210
7.6 Identity and dignity management.....	214
7.7 Conclusion .....	222
<b>8. General Discussion and Conclusions .....</b>	<b>224</b>
8.1 Key findings .....	225
8.2 Understanding dignity in this study's context.....	242
8.3 Summary of contribution to knowledge .....	243
8.4 Implications for policy and practice .....	247
8.4.1 Services: ways of working which encourage dignity.....	248

8.4.2 Public spaces and beyond services: ways to encourage dignity .....	252
8.5 Limitations/points of discussion .....	253
8.5.1 Women's 'choices' .....	253
8.5.2 The changing landscape of gender .....	255
8.5.3 Methodological limitations .....	256
8.6 Suggestions for future research .....	257
8.7 Final reflections .....	258
<b>References.....</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>278</b>
Appendix A: Participant information sheet for women with experiences of homelessness .....	278
Appendix B: Participant information sheet for supporter .....	280
Appendix C: Participant consent form for women with experiences of homelessness .....	282
Appendix D: Participant consent form for supporter .....	283
Appendix E: Example informal interview schedule for women experiencing homelessness .....	284
Appendix F: Example interview schedule for women with previous experiences of homelessness .....	285
Appendix G: Example of customised interview schedule, second research encounter with woman with previous experiences of homelessness. ....	286
Appendix H: Written interview for women with experiences of homelessness.....	287
Appendix I: Example interview schedule for supporters .....	288
Appendix J: Research flyer for participant recruitment .....	289

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> Capital, Societal Discourse and Dignity .....	72
<b>Figure 2:</b> Marginalisation .....	73
<b>Figure 3:</b> Informality Scales of Support.....	226

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1:</b> Participants: Interviews with supporters .....	101
<b>Table 2:</b> Participants: Women experiencing homelessness .....	105
<b>Table 3:</b> Perpetrator, Victim and Survivor-thriver .....	239

# 1. Introduction

Although 'dignity' is an ambiguous term, we know what it feels like to have our dignity respected or violated. As a worker in homelessness services, I saw how policies, procedures, systems and restricted resources violate people's dignity, undermining their control, autonomy and privacy. Dignity and respect are greatly important to those deprived of it, who are positioned as of low value and worth to society (Skeggs, 1997; Sayer, 2011). Therefore dignity, vital in understanding homelessness experiences, yet largely overlooked in existing research, is central to this PhD.

This thesis does not only tell a story of inequality, disrespect and dehumanisation. It also explores kindness, empathy, human connectivity and warmth, which is rarely found in existing literature yet of great impact on me during fieldwork and on the women participating. Dignity was seen to be honoured through human connection indiscriminate of the connection being with a partner, relative, professional or stranger. Connection makes others see an individual's identity and shared humanity, not the stigmatised and stereotyped identity, which influences how a person is treated (Watson et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2004; Pascale, 2005).

This PhD explores women's relationships with dignity and their sense-of-self whilst homeless. It explores how homelessness 'attaches' differently to different bodies, based on societal discourses circulating about women, motherhood, asylum seekers and capital amongst others, and how the effects of these discourses on women's identities influence their opportunities and support choices. The research provides an important contribution to the field by exploring the under-documented experiences of women surviving less visibly when homeless.

## 1.1 Research aims and questions

This research aims to understand women's support choices whilst homeless through exploring how their dignity and sense-of-self is affected by, and affects, their experiences of informal support. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What does informal support look like for women experiencing homelessness?
2. To what extent do women experiencing homelessness come to rely on informal support and why?
3. How does informal support affect women experiencing homelessness' feelings of dignity and sense-of-self?

## **1.2 Definitions and justification of key terms**

### **How we speak about gender**

This research contextualises gender as socially constructed. Gender “is a matter of culture” (Oakley, 1972, p.16) with social characteristics assigned as masculine and feminine changing based on place and time. Despite this, it is acknowledged that gender influences how we understand each other and interact (Green, 2004). Gender affects experiences when homeless, a person’s vulnerabilities and the survival strategies they use (Huey & Berndt, 2008). As discussed expansively in Chapter 2, gender differences are amplified when homeless, where bodies become important because they are often one of the few resources available (Watson, 2016).

The participation criteria included transgender and cisgender women, but no transgender women participated in this study.

### **Informal support**

The task of empirically defining informal support in relation to women’s experiences of homelessness is one of this study’s research questions and therefore developed as the study progressed (addressed in Chapter 5). Formal/informal support is typically seen as dichotomous with support from professional/personal sources in existing literature (see Chapter 2), which is critiqued by the findings from this study.

### **Supporter**

During fieldwork it became apparent that it is difficult to clearly distinguish between formal and informal supporters. For example, there were professionals working with

women experiencing homelessness who went beyond their formal job roles, using their personal resources to provide support, and there were professionals whose roles had no association with homelessness, but they were providing support whilst at work. This is thoroughly discussed in this thesis, however, as a result the term 'supporter' is used when encompassing those providing support in all contexts.

### **Homelessness**

In this study, the English statutory definition of homelessness is used (defined in the Housing Act 1996) which considers people who have no home available that it is reasonable to expect them to occupy, as homeless.

### **Societal Discourse**

Societal discourse refers to the ideas and representations that govern the meaning people give to events and experiences (Braham, 2013). It influences what is seen as 'truth' in society. Discourses discussed in this thesis are circulated in "popular culture, news media, policy documents, political rhetoric, academic discourses – and within a range of social spaces" (Tyler, 2013, p.10).

## **1.3 Contribution to knowledge**

This PhD constructs a unique understanding of informal support, developed through the accounts of women with experiences of homelessness and informal supporters (accounts rarely featured in research). Importantly, by featuring these, motivation behind support is incorporated into the understanding, a key distinguishing factor of informal support.

This study's theoretical framework brings together three areas of study (capital theory, societal discourse and dignity philosophy) in an innovative way to explore women's experiences of homelessness. The framework helps understand how support choices can affect women's dignity and status in society.

Using this theoretical framework and conceptualisation of informal support, this PhD draws several key conclusions. Firstly, women's support strategies, their use/non-use of

services, depend on their financial, cultural and social capital. Diversity in this study's participants allows this PhD to contribute to understandings of capital relating to women's homelessness.

Secondly, this PhD, like recent existing research, finds women's support strategies to be affected by fear of victimisation, services and negative societal judgement. However, this PhD advances knowledge by exploring in more detail women's support options away from services. It discusses their non-engagement in terms of dignity, an underexplored perspective.

Lastly, informal support provides alternative narratives to degrading societal discourse that people experiencing homelessness are not of value. In doing so, it always respects women's inherent dignity, but at times is found to restrict them from raising their societal status by not acknowledging their capabilities.

## **1.4 Thesis structure**

A review of relevant literature in Chapter 2 shows that little is known about women receiving support away from services and that dignity is scarcely explored in the context of homelessness.

Chapter 3 outlines the study's theoretical framework, constructing a conceptualisation of dignity using theories on embodied capital and societal discourse. A thread on morality in relation to perceptions of homelessness runs throughout the chapter.

Chapter 4 sets out the rationale for the study's methodology and methods. In it, professional care practices on trauma-informed and person-centred approaches are considered and a dignity-centred methodology outlined. Methods embodying this methodology are detailed, foregrounding the adaptation of methods to participants' preferences and circumstances.

Chapters 5-7 present the empirical findings from the research with each answering a distinct research question. Chapter 5 develops a conceptualisation of informal support that is then used throughout the remainder of the thesis. Chapter 6 discusses women's



support choices as the outcome of societal discourse, risk management and the capital they possess. Chapter 7 then directly addresses dignity and identity, how they are affected by, and affect, women's support choices.

Chapter 8, the discussion and conclusions, brings together the key findings presented in the preceding three chapters, highlights contributions to knowledge and concludes the study. Limitations of the study are discussed, along with areas for future research.

## **2. Women's Homelessness Experiences, Dignity and Identity: A Literature Review**

This chapter discusses five themes that were seen as most relevant to the research aims: gendered homelessness; geographies of urban homelessness; informal support; homelessness and identity; and homelessness and dignity. Together they capture the practical, cultural and psychological nature of women's homelessness. These topics intersect, offering a connected perspective of the existing research field.

Some older seminal sources feature in this chapter as they remain both relevant and prevalent, for example, Watson and Austerberry (1986) highlighting homelessness' gendered nature and Snow and Anderson (1987) exploring identity while homeless. The literature featured comes from different subject areas including sociology, psychology and urban geography, as well as local authority reports, government statistics and charity research commissions.

### **2.1 Gendered homelessness**

Gendered homelessness is a cross-cutting theme throughout the literature review. However, first it feels important to address this theme in detail. Gender has significant implications for women's risk of homelessness, their safety and experiences when homeless, and the challenges they face when trying to exit homelessness (Lofstrand & Quilgars, 2016; Huey & Berndt, 2008; McGrath et al., 2023). Therefore, we can say that homelessness is "inherently gendered" (Reeve, 2018, p.165).

Historically homelessness research has been framed through men's experiences (Reeve, 2018; Mayock et al., 2015). It is usually "high and complex needs males who sleep rough and/or live in emergency hostel accommodation" who we envisage when referring to homeless individuals (Mayock et al., 2015, p.878). Women's experiences of homelessness, although still under-researched, has been a growing area of research over the last two decades. This body of research highlights differences in women's

experiences, its more hidden nature, and therefore its unseen scale (Pleace, 2016; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016; Casey et al., 2008; Radley et al., 2006). The literature documents that it is more prevalent than previously considered and therefore in need of further research.

Wardhaugh (1999) argues that women's perceived higher vulnerability to harm results in them needing to 'hide' on the male-dominated streets as a survival strategy. Their higher vulnerability is used to explain why they are more likely to avoid homelessness services and accommodation (May et al., 2007; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021). Instead, it is argued that many women look for different, less visible ways of accommodating themselves, for example staying with friends/family and through survival sex (Lofstrand & Quilgars, 2016; Reeve, 2018). This invisibility is thought to contribute to homelessness policy and responses being based on men's experiences of homelessness (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Lofstrand & Quilgars, 2016).

Gendered differences in experiences of homelessness are influenced by traditional gender roles and expectations, and the dominant structures which created these (Reeve, 2018; Golden, 1992). In the UK, two main structural influences are patriarchal and capitalist ideologies (Watson & Austerberry, 1986). Their effect on perceptions of gender roles and gender inequalities, economically and culturally, is important in understanding women's homelessness (Reeve, 2018) and is discussed later in this section.

Although much progress has been made in terms of gender equality since some of the texts referenced here, the reality is that gender categories are still ingrained in society and affect perceptions, understandings of each other, and social relations (Green, 2004). Gender is now widely recognised as a social construct, however it remains a category used to oppress and limit the life chances of women and minority genders.

### ***2.1.1 The scale of women's homelessness***

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC, 2024a) reports that 15% of rough-sleepers in England were female in their 2023 count. However, their

report acknowledges this statistic as problematic: “We recognise that sleeping patterns of females experiencing rough sleeping is more hidden and therefore may not be fully captured by the snapshot” (3.2 Gender). Mayock and Bretherton (2016) concur, claiming that such statistics are likely to under-represent the scale of women’s homelessness. Rough-sleeping statistics are generated from street counts or data from homelessness services which are less likely to include women, as women tend to rough-sleep in hidden places and less frequently use homelessness services (Pleace, 2016; Reeve, 2018).

The statutory definition of homelessness set out in the Housing Act 1996 is far wider than rough-sleeping, encompassing people who have no home available to them or which is reasonable to expect them to occupy. As previously mentioned, women are more likely to use strategies to avoid sleeping on the street but are still homeless under the statutory definition, for example staying with friends, squatting or exchanging sex for accommodation (Radley et al., 2006; Reeve et al., 2006). These women may remain hidden through these informal arrangements, not approaching local authorities for support and consequently would not be included in homelessness statistics. The often-invisible nature of women’s homelessness can result in it being seen as a less significant social issue, therefore fewer resources are directed towards it (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Radley et al., 2006).

If captured in statistics, many women are obscured under the category of ‘family homelessness’, affecting how gender is recognised in policy (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021). Of those assessed as statutory homeless in England in 2022-2023, 18% were single parent families with dependent children headed by a woman (DLUHC, 2024b). This was in addition to 21% being single women without dependent children and other women approaching councils as a couple or a family with multiple adults, bringing the likely figure of women recorded as statutory homeless to over 70,000 that year.

As well as these figures only documenting those who approach their local authority, there are other reasons why statutory homelessness figures may not capture women’s homelessness. In many European countries women experiencing domestic abuse (a primary cause of women’s homelessness) who use services including refuges, are not recorded in homelessness statistics as domestic abuse and homelessness services are separately funded (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Baptista, 2010; Edgar, 2009).

Over the last few years, there is some evidence that women's homelessness is being taken more seriously in policy and practice. Changing Futures, for example, a government programme supporting adults experiencing multiple disadvantage including homelessness, is paying particular attention to reaching women and producing research highlighting the gendered nature of homelessness and support experiences (DLUHC, 2024c; DLUHC, 2024d; Hess, 2023). In Sheffield, this research had direct implications for homelessness support, with a recent commissioning of new temporary accommodation for women who have had children removed (Aslett, 2024; Adams, 2023).

### ***2.1.2 The impact of traditional gender roles on women's homelessness***

According to Ahmed (2014), women's inhabitation of public spaces is governed by discourses of fear of threats that exist in those spaces. Patriarchal discourses on women's vulnerability position "the 'outside' as inherently dangerous" to them, with the home being a place of safety (Ahmed, 2014, p.70). A 'respectable' woman therefore must position themselves in their home or navigate 'the outside' in ways seen as appropriate (usually accompanied). Wardhaugh (1999) claims that women seen as homeless appear out of place, as if rejected by the conventional family. This challenge to patriarchal family values can appear unfeminine and immoral (Watson, 1999).

Although 25 years have passed since Wardhaugh's and Watson's writing, many statistics support women's greater connection with the home than men and that traditional gender roles persist. The Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2024) recorded that women in the UK conducted on average almost 60% more unpaid domestic work than men over a week period in March 2024. Gender differences in unpaid work are most contrasting with childcare, cooking, laundry and other housework (ONS, 2016). With women commonly the main caregiver in families, they are more likely to have some financial dependence on their partner, so if they leave the relationship they have fewer financial resources available to avoid homelessness (Reeve, 2018).

Lofstrand and Quilgars (2016) support the statistic above on domestic work, although they note feminist movements over recent decades bringing changes with women improving their positions in the labour market and the traditional family setup becoming less common. For some women less traditional family setups have increased their risk of homelessness, for example there are increasing numbers of single mothers who can face discrimination from employers as they have less flexibility with their working hours (Skevik, 2006). This can lead to precarious employment, and therefore poorer access to housing (Doherty, 2001).

Savage (2022, p.34) sees women, unlike men, to be *viewed* as having an innate “gendered moral imperative to care and nurture”, making them more likely to be carers. In the previously mentioned statistics on statutory homelessness in England, 18% of those approaching local authorities as homeless were single mothers in 2022-2023 (DLUHC, 2024b). This contrasted with 2% being single fathers, and 7% being families with two or more adults and dependent children. This demonstrates the striking difference in gender expectations concerning child-rearing and how many women experiencing homelessness have the additional stress of their children’s welfare. Without a home, traditionally the principal site for mothering, a woman’s identity as a mother can be affected, as well as her capacity to mother as she would like, maintaining routines, rules and maternal autonomy (Bimpson et al., 2022). Without the privacy a home affords, and by seeking help, mothers can feel exposed to moral judgement from services, and framed as if they are unable to protect their children, or as a risk to them (Bimpson et al., 2022; Savage, 2022).

The homelessness label can expose mothers to heightened criticism over their abilities to mother, which can result in children being removed from their care (Hess, 2023). Once “stripped... of her motherhood”, the mother can experience a loss of support (no longer eligible for services for mothers) and a loss of priority-need status for housing (Hess, 2023, p.121; McCormack & Fedorowicz, 2022). Subsequent engagement with support that remains available to them could also be affected by the loss of trust in professionals experienced when children are removed (Hess, 2023).

Despite women being traditionally positioned in the home ‘for their safety’, some literature notes how the ‘home’ might not feel like a home. It can instead be a site of abuse and victimization, obscured from others by the privacy afforded to people in

their homes (McCarthy, 2018; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995). Consequently, the inside can be a feared space for women, making them vulnerable to homelessness with domestic abuse seen as a common gendered cause (Reeve, 2018).

Societal discourses binding ideas of home, the family and women (Lofstrand & Quilgars, 2016), Golden (1992, p.5) explains, result in a woman being homeless holding different meanings to a man being homeless as “women are so entirely defined in terms of who they belong to that no category exists for a woman without family or home”. Due to this challenge of gender norms, it is argued that women experiencing homelessness can be perceived more negatively and receive more hostility than men (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Golden, 1992).

According to Golden (1992, p.5), not fitting with defined societal categories, can give women experiencing homelessness an “unsavoury sexuality and secret power”. Golden associates women experiencing homelessness with old narratives of witches. They can become scapegoated and marginalised by society, and have negative qualities projected on them which society cannot accept in itself.

For women to be without family or a restrictive institution like a convent, historically could make their sexuality seem dangerous and unrestrained. In the literature this is seen to lead the public to link women experiencing homelessness with sex work (Golden 1992; Bretherton & Mayock, 2021). Women experiencing homelessness in Radley et al.'s (2006) study talked of men who were not homeless wrongly assuming that they could approach them on the street to request sex. Golden (1992) writes that the image of sex workers brings up contrasting feelings of fear, disgust and desire. These ambivalent feelings can result in the women being treated as inhuman.

The literature posits that if a woman without a home goes against societal gender expectations, women's homelessness could be perceived by the public as a mental health issue (Bretherton, 2020). Patriarchal discourses dictate different expectations for how men and women are supposed to behave which according to Golden (1992), has led to differences in what defines a man or woman to have a mental illness. To not meet social norms based on gender expectations could be considered signs of mental illness and fearsome, for example historically for women to show sexual desire, to be alone or to not have a home (Bretherton, 2020; Golden, 1992).

There is some opposition in the literature, however, as to whether women experiencing homelessness are always perceived as going against societal expectations. Passaro (1996) argues that women's homelessness is less of a challenge to patriarchal discourse about women's vulnerability and dependence, which she felt could result in them receiving more support. Golden (1992) documents an example that supports this argument when women in her study, unlike men, were often given money by passersby in public places without having to ask, perhaps due to their increased perceived vulnerability. Fitzpatrick (2005) also points to evidence of women being treated with more sympathy than men when approaching the local authority as homeless. However, in homelessness policy, women without children (or who are separated from their children) are not prioritised based on gender for support to be housed (Reeve, 2018). 'Single' homeless women's experiences are considered by policy and services to be similar to men's (Mayock et al., 2015).

Passaro (1996) observes that unlike women, men's vulnerability and dependence when homeless can view them as having failed as men. In contrast, Russell (1991) sees men's homelessness as more aligned with their traditional gender roles. By being homeless they are independent and freed from family constraints, which can lead to men's homelessness being romanticised. Bernstein (1998) refers to this romanticised image as an "American folk hero", and Gowan (2010, p.27) as "more flamboyant intentional dropouts of the counterculture". However, it is largely a historic image, currently less applied to homelessness and less relevant to the UK. Whether seen as meeting or opposing traditional gender roles, the romanticisation of women's homelessness is unevidenced in the literature.

### ***2.1.3 Causes of homelessness: a gendered perspective***

Gender is seen to affect everything from the reasons people are homeless to their day-to-day experiences when homeless (Radley et al., 2006; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Sosenko et al., 2020). Radley et al. (2006) suggest the cause of homelessness often to be a complicated sequence of trauma and life circumstances combined with financial vulnerability. Reeve et al. (2006) argue similarly that both the underlying causes and immediate triggers for homelessness can be gendered. Fleeing domestic abuse is



frequently referred to as one of the main triggers of women's homelessness in the literature, which is far more prevalent amongst women than men (Bullock et al., 2020; Reeve et al., 2006; Reeve, 2018; Bretherton, 2020). In England in 2022-2023, 78% of those assessed as homeless or at risk of homelessness due to domestic abuse were women on their own or with children, as opposed to 16% men (DLUHC, 2024e).

On a structural level, patriarchal ideologies and traditional gender roles have a significant effect on women's financial independence (Reeve, 2018). This can include lower education attainment, low pay, workplace discrimination and unpaid caregiving (Bullock et al., 2020; Skevik, 2006). This makes women particularly vulnerable to homelessness as they may not have financial resources available for permanent housing (Radley et al., 2006).

#### ***2.1.4 Gendered differences in experiences of homelessness***

Once homeless, there is general acknowledgement within the field that women's experiences of homelessness differ from those of men, usually taking a less visible form (Mayock & Bretherton, 2016). This can include where they sleep, sleeping-rough in places they are less likely to be found or employing a wider range of strategies than men to avoid sleeping on the streets (O'Sullivan, 2016; Reeve et al., 2006; Bretherton, 2020).

Reeve (2018) identifies survival sex as a gendered strategy when homeless, including exchange of sex for food, clothing or somewhere to sleep, getting into relationships with people who are housed for the purpose of accommodation, and using sex work to fund accommodation. Reeve et al. (2006) find that sex work and "unwanted sexual liaisons" (p.47) are reasonably common amongst women experiencing homelessness. Participants spoke of it as an economic survival strategy, a "last resort" (p.48) to prevent them from sleeping on the streets, which could present larger risks to them. This disempowered, vulnerable image is a contrast to Golden's (1992, p.98) discussion on the traditional perception of the dangerous sex worker with "unbridled sexuality" and "evil powers".

Some literature discusses the gendered practical differences experienced by women, focusing on hygiene and appearance when homeless. Women in Golden (1992) talked of going to the toilet being more difficult to do discreetly than for men, and their difficult experiences when having their period on the streets. Menstruation is expected to be unseen, with visible blood being viewed with disgust (Earle-Brown, 2022; Vora, 2020). When homeless, many women do not have access to products, facilities and spaces which enable them to conceal their period. Consequently, they are unable to maintain social normalcy, reduce their own discomfort and maintain dignity (Vora, 2020; Parrillo & Feller, 2017).

Women are traditionally associated with the inside and men with the outside (Wardhaugh, 1999) so cleanliness is of particular importance to women (Radley et al., 2006; Earle-Brown, 2022). To be feminine is to be clean, and for women to be seen as dirty or unkempt marks them as impure and morally-deviant (Earle-Brown, 2022; Skeggs, 2004; Cresswell, 1994). Studies find that to feel unclean, to smell and have lice, leads to a woman's erosion of her felt-identity and self-esteem (Golden 1992; Mitchell et al., 2018). Both Casey et al. (2008) and Radley et al. (2006) found that keeping a clean and tidy appearance is used as a survival strategy by many homeless women. It allows them to blend in with other members of the public and therefore use public spaces which are not usually accessible to those who are identifiably homeless. Public spaces can provide useful resources such as washing facilities, toilets and warmth.

According to Huey and Berndt (2008), the limited visibility of women experiencing homelessness on the street is in fact a survival strategy to remain safe. Women on the streets are more vulnerable to victimization, physical and sexual assault (Jasinski et al., 2010; Reeve et al., 2006). Huey and Berndt (2008) see women experiencing homelessness adopt complicated approaches to avoid being prey to victimization. These include performances exhibiting masculine traits as protection, feminine traits to attract the protection of a male and trying to exhibit no gendered traits to avoid attention and the accompanying risk. McCormack and Fedorowicz (2022) also find that women's vulnerability may cause them to seek the protection of a man experiencing homelessness. By forming intimate relationships with men, women can vicariously gain physical protection in the male-dominated, often threatening environment of the streets (Watson, 2016). According to Watson (2016) many of these relationships are

however sources of abuse themselves and create barriers to women accessing other forms of support.

### **2.1.5 Summary**

Although societal attitudes towards gender are progressing, gender still has significant impact on women's homelessness, from reasons for becoming homeless, to survival strategies when homeless. Women's experiences are influenced by the historical discourses and power structures which govern traditional gender roles and women's higher vulnerability to victimization when homeless.

Research on women's homelessness has increased in recent years. It identifies women as less visible than men, working to blend in with other members of the public, rough-sleeping in less visible places, avoiding support services and engaging in other types of hidden homelessness. However very little of this research looks in-depth at the experiences of these women existing less visibly, instead largely recruiting participants through support services.

## **2.2 Geographies of urban homelessness**

Women's geographies are key to this PhD, as they show where women go for support and help us understand reasons behind their choices.

By exploring urban geographies of homelessness, we are interested in where and how people experiencing homelessness use the city landscape. Although homeless individuals' journeys vary widely (Cloke et al., 2010), they are greatly influenced by the necessity to fulfil their daily survival needs; to eat, sleep, wash and obtain money (DeVerteuil, 2003; Mitchell & Heynen, 2009). For many, this means that daily movements are cyclic, dependent on and restricted by the locations and opening times of homelessness support services (Langeegger & Koester, 2016; DeVerteuil, 2003; Wardhaugh, 2000).

Consequently, geographies of homelessness are often shaped by the geographies of homelessness services. Cloke et al. (2010) discuss how homelessness services are positioned in marginalised areas to contain and control parts of the city used by the homeless population. This is viewed as a method employed by those with power in society to organise social space, keeping people experiencing homelessness away from areas of the city they value and from 'polluting' the daily routines of the privileged (Sibley, 1995; Cloke et al., 2008). Scholars such as Ley (2012) argue that this separation often disadvantages people experiencing homelessness, distancing them from jobs, public services and the opportunities available in prime city spaces.

Sibley (1995) argues that it is vital to consider power relations in order to understand the meaning of spaces. The removal of those who are marginalised from areas valued by those with power, enforces a segregation which allows the privileged to remain in control (Ley, 2012). The separation between marginalized and privileged promotes the stereotyped image of homeless people as rogue threats, not only towards the safety of housed individuals, but also to the financial wellbeing of prime city spaces (Sibley, 1995; Langeegger & Koester, 2016). The marginalisation of people experiencing homelessness from both physical spaces and the resources and opportunities available in them, is explored in-depth in Chapter 3.

The various ways in which power is exerted to exclude people experiencing homelessness from public space is a theme running throughout literature exploring the geographies of homelessness. The design of urban landscape into marginalised and prime areas is one of these ways. This creates boundaries which can determine what areas people feel they do or do not belong in (Sibley, 1995). Although much of the literature suggests that marginalised and prime city areas are distanced from each other, Wardhaugh (2000) challenges this arguing that this view is dated and boundaries segregating homeless and housed people are now less defined than in pre-industrial times. Both Wardhaugh and Fast and Cunningham (2018) identify cities which situate homelessness services in marginal spots embedded within prime city centre locations, Manchester (UK) and Vancouver (Canada). By doing this, Fast and Cunningham claim that people experiencing homelessness feel like they do not belong in the city and are not "allowed" (p.10) to be outside their accommodation in areas representing desire and opportunities unavailable to them. If outside in prime city space, their use of areas

may be regulated to certain times or purposes. Wardhaugh (2000) uses the example of the city centre public space, Piccadilly Gardens in Manchester. During the daytime homeless people might be asked to leave the area by police, however, in the evening they can access food and clothes distributed by charities there, demonstrating fluidity in the role and meaning of public spaces.

Literature also discusses the presence of hostile architecture and design in public spaces, which limits structures and space to certain uses (Petty, 2016; Rosenberger, 2020). Petty (2016, p.68) provides the example of spikes installed into the ground outside London flats to deter rough-sleepers from bedding down as “the intentional ‘designing out’ of certain identities, behaviours and categories of people from urban and public spaces”. Other examples include public benches with metal divides, fenced off alleyways and automated sprinkler systems to prevent sleeping, and CCTV cameras to deter unwanted behaviours (Rosenberger, 2020; Petty, 2016; Bader, 2020). Justified as safety and crime reduction measures, hostile architecture to some is “the physical embodiment of the watch-dog state” removing personal freedoms, often of those economically and socially disadvantaged (Bader, 2020, p.48).

Johnsen et al. (2018) discuss laws and policies which exercise both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ forms of power against people experiencing homelessness, restricting their use of public space. They note how activities associated with street homelessness such as begging and street drinking are arrestable offences, whilst simultaneously public campaigns are deployed discouraging giving to individuals asking for money. Heap et al. (2022) and Heap and Dickinson (2018) similarly point to Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) that give councils flexible authority to restrict certain anti-social behaviours in public spaces. With PSPOs, the threshold for prohibited behaviour is lowered to that which has a persistent negative effect on quality of life which, they argue, creates the possibility of further spatial exclusion of vulnerable groups. This exercise of power over people experiencing homelessness is seen as a way of organising social order, making them disappear from sight without tackling homelessness (Mitchell & Heynen, 2009).

Cloke et al. (2010) discuss how most research focuses on the homeless population as victims of social control rather than how they creatively negotiate the regulations they are subject to whilst using urban spaces. Many undermine social order and the ‘given’

meaning of city spaces by appropriating public and private spaces for their own private use, for example occupying squats or using public toilets as bathrooms to wash in (Wardhaugh, 2000; Cloke et al., 2008). They can change the meaning of urban landscape, turning steps into seating and doorways into sheltered places to sleep (Cloke et al., 2008). Similarly, people experiencing homelessness in Lenhard (2020) appropriated space next to the hot air vents of the Gard du Nord (Paris), turning them from prime public spaces into heated temporary homes. Periodically they were moved on from their spots by police, station security, or the implementation of architecture blocking them from the air vents, and the process of shelter-making restarted elsewhere. At times people experiencing homelessness negotiate with those holding some power in private or public spaces in order to use them. Cloke et al. (2010) use the example of people cleaning a carpark to gain the carpark staffs' respect so they could sleep there.

As noted earlier, it is the visibility of homelessness, a threat to the meaning and imposed social order of places, which causes unease amongst the privileged (Wardhaugh, 2000). The visible presence of homelessness in busy retail areas, for example, can change the area's meaning on an emotional level for the housed public, bringing up feelings of fear, sympathy and detest (Cloke et al., 2008). Potentially it is for this reason, that the visibly homeless' access to public and private space is restricted (Cloke et al., 2010). By not appearing homeless, you can retain anonymity and invisibility, and access to public spaces (Lengegger & Koester, 2016). Avoiding being noticed as homeless, staying away from homelessness services and associations with others experiencing homelessness, is therefore a survival strategy for some.

### ***2.2.1 Women's geographies of homelessness***

The avoidance of services due to the stigma associated with them, and the effect this stigma has on identity, emotional wellbeing and mobility, is particularly common amongst women experiencing homelessness (Cloke et al., 2010; Casey et al., 2008). Many women employ the survival strategy of invisibility in order to access public spaces which can be used to fulfil their daily needs independently from homelessness

support services (Casey et al., 2008). This includes using gallery toilets for washing and libraries for phone charging. This invisibility results from presenting themselves, in terms of their appearance and behaviour, as not homeless. By doing this they look to be using the public space for its intended purpose, and are unlikely to be denied access (Reeve, 2018).

Women's geographies of homelessness are also influenced by their perceived higher levels of vulnerability to physical and sexual assault (Jasinski et al., 2010). These risks are discussed in more detail throughout this chapter. Their higher vulnerability often results in their use of the city being more hidden than that of homeless men and is an additional reason for their avoidance of services (Wardhaugh, 1999; Casey et al., 2008). Homelessness services are regularly in parts of the city known for drug dealing, sex working and crime (Cloke et al., 2010). The services themselves can be male-dominated, threatening spaces for women (May et al., 2007; Casey et al., 2008). Therefore, public spaces in prime city locations can be preferred (Casey et al., 2008). Women in Menih (2020) spoke of movement as a strategy against victimization when homeless. One woman described spending "hours and hours just walking, everywhere", with this transience providing invisibility and privacy.

Menih's research documents another strategy used by women to increase their invisibility, occupying spaces of transience such as bus stations and shopping centres. Casey et al. (2008) see women to occupy similar retail environments, as well as other transient spaces like airports, art galleries and public toilets. The Female Entrenched Rough Sleepers Project (FERSP) report (Westminster City Council, 2020, p.3), a report on a group of women experiencing homelessness in London identified as entrenched in homelessness and named "wanderers", finds similar with the women frequently moving between places and across London boroughs. They spent time travelling on bus routes, in A&E departments and food establishments. The report goes further to suggest that the women's movements were not only to stay safe but to actively hide from outreach workers who they were unwilling to engage with.

Both Menih (2020) and the FERSP team make efforts to find women experiencing homelessness in spaces unconnected to support services, which makes a valuable contribution to knowledge as it captures the experiences of some who choose to remain hidden. These rare contributions, however, look more at the experiences of

women who are 'hidden' outside in public space, than those who are concealed, unstably accommodated indoors. Despite existing literature on women's homelessness almost always acknowledging its likelihood to take less visible forms than men's homelessness, the majority of research surveyed still recruits participants primarily through services, leaving gaps in our understanding of women's homelessness.

Women experiencing homelessness often find themselves frequently moving between forms of informal temporary 'accommodation' (Reeve et al., 2006; McGrath et al., 2023). Both Reeve (2018) and May et al. (2007) see it as relatively common for women experiencing homelessness to sleep-rough, despite not being reflected in official statistics. A survey by Reeve et al. (2006) finds rough-sleeping to be the most common form of 'accommodation' used by homeless women with 62% of respondents having done it. Reeve (2018) finds women's strategies of invisibility to be reflected in their choice of sites where they sleep. These are often in hidden areas of the city where they feel safer from victimisation. Casey et al. (2008) however speak of circumstances when women choose to sleep more visibly. In these cases, rather than the surveillance mentioned earlier being a deterrent for homeless women using public space, the women were more attracted to regulated space because of the increased safety that being visible to surveillance can bring. In their interviews with homeless women, some discussed picking sleeping spots covered by CCTV cameras. Adversely, the hidden nature of sofa-surfing, although often envisaged as a safer option than the streets, can expose women to violence and harm (McGrath et al., 2023; Watson, 2016; 2011).

This highlights the cyclical nature of harm and perceived risk which affect women's geographies. Many women become homeless on leaving abusive relationships (Reeve et al., 2006; Reeve, 2018; Bretherton, 2020), they may stop using services due to abuse experienced within them from other users or may not approach services in the first place due to fear of abuse (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; McCormack & Fedorowicz, 2022). However, they are then exposed to abuse on the streets, whilst sofa-surfing, or from within intimate partner relationships which they form in part to protect themselves from external risks whilst homeless (Watson, 2016; Hess, 2023; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021).



### **2.2.2 Summary**

The geographies of homelessness are orientated around the fulfilment of people's daily needs, which for many means their movements are dependent on the location of homelessness services. Some literature suggests that homelessness services are tactically located in marginalised areas to 'contain' the homeless population away from city areas used by the privileged population, whereas other academics write of cities where homelessness services are embedded in prime areas. Users of these services can feel more prominently like outsiders, not belonging in the city. Their use of prime city spaces can be governed by surveillance, regulation and hostile architecture.

Less is known about women's geographies than men's. What research does document is that more women are choosing invisibility or movement as survival strategies. These women try not to appear homeless to access public and private spaces which help them fulfil their needs, or use their informal networks for places to sleep. This allows them to avoid homelessness services where many feel vulnerable to assault or stigmatised. Understanding women's geographies can help us learn about their support choices and what influences these choices.

## **2.3 Informal support**

In Chapter 5, a new definition of informal support is proposed based on the research participants' perspectives. Here, the way informal support is conceived in existing literature is discussed. In this literature, formality of support is largely based on the context in which it is given, i.e. whether or not it is provided by a service or professional.

### **2.3.1 Non-use of formal services**

The literature evidences people's negative interactions with homelessness services. Hostels are described as chaotic spaces, with the presence of drugs and alcohol

widespread (Mayock et al., 2015; McCormack & Fedorowicz, 2022). Therefore, they are difficult places for those who want to stop using. Other research finds that homelessness services make people experiencing homelessness feel untrusted, dehumanised and incapable, negatively affecting their dignity (Miller & Keys, 2001). For example, participants in Hoffman and Coffey (2008) and Bimpson et al. (2022) felt infantilised and looked down upon by service staff while Ogden and Avades' (2011) and Langegger and Koesters' (2016) participants found homelessness services to have rigid, restrictive and unaccommodating rules. Where services provided accommodation, they had little control over routines and privacy, for example staff opening their rooms to do checks (Ogden & Avades, 2011; Mayock & Sheridan, 2020).

The above reasons suggest that many choose to avoid services potentially to maintain their dignity. By disengaging with services, participants in these and other studies retained a sense of agency and independence, more control over their movements and could disappear or be anonymous (Hoffman & Coffey, 2008; Langegger & Koester, 2016; Snow & Anderson, 1987).

There has been a move over the last decade towards more trauma-informed ways of working within support services (McCarthy, 2022), which may make accessing them a more dignified, individualised experience. This could potentially reduce service disengagement and reduce evictions or discharge from services for behaviour or low attendance. Trauma-informed approaches are discussed further in section 2.5.

Accessing homelessness services identifies people as homeless which endangers other components of their identity (Casey et al., 2008). This too can deter people from using services. The homeless identity is homogenous, stigmatised and can bring a sense of loss of the self as it can overshadow all other aspects of a person's identity (Bell & Walsh, 2015; McCarthy, 2013). By distancing themselves from others experiencing homelessness and services, people may try to avoid a homeless identity and continue to be part of mainstream society (Reeve, 2013).

Conversely, forgoing formal support can be detrimental. Mayock and Parker (2020), for example, note that engagement with formal homelessness services is of benefit to people experiencing homelessness, helping them to navigate the systems in place to reach stable housing.

### ***2.3.2 Influences on women's support choices***

Studies suggest that women are particularly deterred from using homelessness services (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; McGrath et al., 2023). Reeve et al. (2006) found that 40% of the women experiencing homelessness responding to their survey did not access formal homelessness services on becoming homeless. The literature posits a number of interrelated reasons for this choice.

Hess (2023) argues how perceived stigma and judgement from services (including homelessness services) around sex work, drug-use and in particular around motherhood, could prevent women from approaching them. Mothers fear being judged as inadequate mothers without the opportunity to demonstrate otherwise, resulting in the real possibility of their children being removed.

Women experiencing homelessness may not use services to avoid being identified/identifying as homeless (Casey et al., 2008). The homelessness stereotype is primarily of a man (McCarthy, 2013; Watson, 2000), or alternatively the derogatory 'bag lady' who "rummages through rubbish bins, carries her belongings in used plastic bags and often dresses in 'strange' clothes" (Radley et al., 2006, p.438). In line with this, Reeve et al.'s (2006) research finds that women who avoid the homeless identity have a more positive self-view. They are more likely to present as clean and tidy (a concern seen of importance to their participants) and therefore less subject to others' judgements, which also affects their sense-of-self.

Bretherton and Pleace (2021) and McGrath et al. (2023) both found that many of the women experiencing homelessness in their studies had been victims of abuse or neglect in childhood, with some taken into care. Early life experiences set expectations of violence and poor support from close relationships (McGrath et al., 2023). The experiences can cause poor mental health and distrust, which form barriers to engagement with services (Hess, 2023). Of those participating in Milaney et al.'s (2020) research, women experiencing homelessness were more likely than men to have mental health diagnoses, psychiatric hospital stays and previously reported suicidal

ideation or attempts. They link this to women reporting more adverse childhood experiences than men and highlight the need for trauma-informed support.

For many women, abuse is a fear and/or reality in their adult lives (Menih, 2020; McGrath et al., 2023; Hess, 2023), with implications for service use, as women can be afraid that current or past perpetrators will be present (Hess, 2023; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021). This is exacerbated by government cuts to spending on women's refuges, with the alternative being mixed-gendered services (Hess, 2023). Bretherton and Pleace (2021) found that around 50% of women they surveyed exited accommodation because of abuse or risk of abuse. Reeve et al. (2006) note that homelessness services often have male-dominated atmospheres, which can make women feel vulnerable and intimidated.

Reeve et al. (2006) also find that women who have been homeless for longer have lower service engagement. They suggest this is largely due to previous negative experiences with services, many of these gendered experiences. Hess (2023) writes of women who have experienced trauma when their children were removed by services, which impairs their future engagement due to reduced trust and returning to the services being emotionally triggering.

It is important to note, however, that women's support choices might not always be 'active' choices. For example, the risk of emotional or physical harm in/from services may mean that formal support does not feel like a viable choice. A woman's 'choice' to access services is also found to be influenced by their intimate relationships with men. Women are seen as vulnerable to physical and sexual assault, particularly when street-homeless, as men hold more dominance, physical strength and power on the streets (Jasinski et al., 2010; Watson, 2016). One strategy identified in research studies is to form a relationship for protection (Watson, 2016; Radley et al., 2006). If the relationships are controlling, these partners however can isolate women from their social networks (McGrath et al., 2023). They can reduce women's capacities and abilities to make decisions (Hess, 2023) which complicates their relationships with services. There were cases in McGrath et al.'s (2023) study where women were evicted from temporary accommodations because of their partner's behaviour.

The use of informal support when homeless is not unique to women, however many of their reasons for doing so are gendered which makes the use of many forms of informal support (particularly hidden forms) more prevalent amongst women and sometimes less of an active choice (Hess, 2023; McGrath et al., 2023; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021). Women's experiences whilst using informal support are also gendered, influenced by their higher vulnerability to victimization when homeless and traditional gender roles (Reeve, 2018; Radley et al., 2006; Casey et al., 2008; Watson, 2000). Support choices are largely based on risk-management (Hess, 2023). When discussing the different forms informal support can take below, gendered experiences are highlighted.

### ***2.3.3 Support from family and friends***

Close family and friend relationships are discussed as beneficial to people's psychological needs whilst homeless, their self-worth and positive sense-of-self (Terui & Hsieh, 2016). Mayock and Parker (2020) highlight the benefit that positive family relationships can bring to young people living in homelessness accommodation. Some participants in their study saw improved family relationships as empowering and one participant said that contact with his family worked to stop him using drugs.

The main form of Informal support from family and friends discussed in the literature, however, involved providing temporary accommodation, for example sleeping on their couch. Women in particular are often hidden away, sleeping on the floors and couches of their friends' and families' houses (Radley et al., 2006). McGrath et al., (2023) found that sofa-surfing was the most frequent form of accommodation amongst women in their study.

Radley et al. (2006) see reliance on friends and family for accommodation to potentially lead to individuals overstaying their welcome and being asked to leave. Women in McGrath et al.'s (2023) study would move between different houses, enabling sofa-surfing to be a long-term accommodation option. However, many of the places they would stay were associated with others using drugs or involved an expectation of sex, and therefore could be spaces of harm. Mayock and Parker (2020)

saw this form of hidden homelessness to regularly result in poor living conditions, instability and transient lifestyles for the young people in their study. It also resulted in them not being visible to homelessness services and therefore them not accessing support to gain more stable housing. This raises a key point that much of the research on homeless people's experiences uses gatekeepers at homelessness services. Therefore, those whose reliance on the support of friends and family has resulted in less or no contact with homelessness services are unlikely to participate. The consequence is that we know less about this area.

#### **2.3.4 Public services/places**

For those experiencing homelessness who have no private space, public space can be a "site of necessity" (Pospech, 2020, p.3). Reeve et al. (2006) document how women experiencing homelessness in their study met their day-to-day needs through the use of public services including libraries, shops, galleries and public toilets, places where they often felt safe. Women in Casey et al. (2008) chose to use resources in public spaces, as opposed to homelessness services, for example using public buildings' charging points for their phones, toilets in galleries as bathrooms, and benches in airports for sleeping. In order to access these resources, the women would cover up their illegitimate use of public spaces by making it appear like they were using the space as intended (for example, sleeping in music listening booths in a library whilst pretending to listen to music), or they tried to appear not homeless. Presenting good self-care and blending in with other members of the public allowed them access to spaces where those experiencing homelessness are usually unwelcome (Reeve, 2018).

Lenhard's (2020) previously mentioned study gives evidence of how the use of public spaces is *conditional* on homeless people appearing clean and respectful. If this condition is not met, a person is likely to be moved on or punished. In Lenhard's ethnography, participants used the vents around the Gare du Nord train station to fulfil their need for warmth. By not affecting others' use of the public space, being quiet and clean, they were rarely approached by police or security, moved on or sanctioned. This

research illustrates how people who are noticeably homeless may not always be moved on if they behave in certain ways.

Casey et al. (2008) similarly highlight conditionality in the use of public space when noticeably homeless. They discuss how the women successfully using public spaces in their study had learnt to understand and follow the 'rules' applied to their usage. This involved either learning how to avoid or work with those who staffed the spaces, for example security guards. They gained understanding of when and how they could use the spaces. One example is that of a woman given permission by security guards to sleep on the steps of the museum they were protecting. The unspoken conditionality was that she needed to clean the steps of both her things and general litter and vacate by sunrise.

### ***2.3.5 Reliance on others experiencing homelessness***

Research literature shows that some people experiencing homelessness rely on peer support to fulfil their needs. This support can be practical, for example Lenhard (2020) in his Paris-based ethnography observed street homeless people to form supportive groups, sharing tents, food, money and collectively providing each other protection. Smith (2008) finds similar amongst street-homeless young people in America. The study's participants spoke of how they learnt to survive on the street through their peers. Groups of street homeless youths formed and would often work together; sharing what they were given whilst begging, food and shelter. Bell and Walsh (2015) evidence practical peer support also occurring within formal settings. Their research looks at the informal support provided by male peers within a Canadian hostel. Through friendships formed between residents, they helped each other to obtain food and money, protected others' property and assisted in completing paperwork such as benefits forms.

Studies also note the psychological support and solidarity that peer friendships can bring. For residents in Bell and Walsh (2015), the commonality in residents' experiences offered understanding, care for each other and a sense of belonging. Bell and Walsh saw residents taking positive roles within their peer group, which allowed

them to access parts of their identities which could otherwise be overshadowed by the degrading homeless identity. Similarly, McNaughton and Sanders (2007) find that in networks of people experiencing homelessness, individuals can experience positions of status, familiarity, and therefore some security in their routines.

In Bell and Walsh (2015) there are a number of participant references to their homeless peer group being a family. Smith (2008) similarly refers to the grouping of street-homeless young people in her study as replicating a traditional family setup in order to fulfil individuals' needs. Within these groups different members took on different roles, often in line with traditional gender roles, so women were likely to perform domestic duties and emotional support.

Despite having a family-like quality, Smith (2008) documents conflict and distrust within peer groups, with their membership changing as a result. Likewise, Lenhard (2020) observed times when conflict within peer groups caused victimisation and members to be outcast. Therefore, groups can provide both protection and risk of harm. Participants in Mayock and Parker (2020) saw their friendships with peers as negative influences, for example in relation to drug-use. Disengaging with others who were homeless was found to have positive implications for people exiting homelessness (Mayock & Parker, 2020). Bell and Walsh (2015) also see close peer groups amongst hostel residents to potentially cause a reluctance to leave hostels for stable housing, or to result in some residents returning to live at their former hostels after being housed.

The supportive qualities of homeless peer groups can be more complicated and questionable for women. Women are seen at high risk of physical and sexual assault when street-homeless due to men holding more dominance (Jasinski et al., 2010; Watson, 2016; Mayock et al., 2015). For young women in Smith's (2008) study, this saw them as more reliant on their group for protection. However, they were also more at risk of victimization from members of their own group. The women interviewed reported that men in their groups made them do sexual acts in exchange for shelter or protection from those outside the group. These women often felt it was their responsibility in the group to provide sex and despite being victimised by the group, felt protected by it.



Instead of protection through group membership, Watson (2016) and Radley et al. (2006) discuss women partnering with men experiencing homelessness to gain their physical protection from external harm. Mayock et al. (2015) also saw these intimate relationships to offer companionship, as well as access to drugs and money. Access to these resources, however, only exists whilst the women are in the relationship (Watson, 2016). In addition, there is evidence that these relationships are themselves often causes of physical and emotional harm, and can compromise women's access to accommodation, work and family support (Mayock et al., 2015; Watson, 2016).

### ***2.3.6 Summary***

Despite evidence that people experiencing homelessness are often deterred from using formal homelessness support, research still tends to focus on those using formal services, with less known about the experiences of those who do not.

Service avoidance may result from negative experiences of formal services or resistance to the stigmatisation which service use can bring. Research suggests that service avoidance is especially common amongst women who are seen as more vulnerable in homelessness services, and more deterred by the masculinity of the homelessness stereotype and services. Alternative support sources include friends, family, partners, public services and homeless peers.

There is debate in the literature as to whether reliance on informal support brings risks, hinders a person from exiting homelessness or brings benefits. Insights could be gained from speaking with those who use informal support and those providing it, perspectives rarely featuring in research literature.

## 2.4 Homelessness and identity

Directly related to this study's final research question about the effect of informal support on women's sense-of-self, this theme helps us to understand women's support choices (see above) and felt-dignity (see below).

The problematic concept of a 'homeless identity' refers to two intertwined aspects: social identity and personal identity. Snow and Anderson (1987) refer to social identity as being an identity given by others, as opposed to personal identity which is asserted by themselves. They are not distinct however, as personal identity formation is affected by our reflections on our interactions with others and how we think others perceive us (Erickson, 1995). Identities are created as we go through life, through the amalgamation of different interactions with others, through which we learn how others understand us and internalise this (Goffman, 1963; Hoolachan, 2020). Boydell et al. (2000) suggest that if people experiencing homelessness are treated as being of low-worth and intelligence, this can contribute to low self-worth and low confidence. Despite this, due to our different lived-experiences, the meanings that others attribute to a social identity may differ from how the individual interprets this social identity (Erickson, 1995). This section discusses identity maintenance strategies which work to create more positive personal identities when faced with the often negative social identity associated with homelessness.

### 2.4.1 *The homeless identity*

Our homes are a source of personal identities (Wardhaugh, 1999; McCarthy, 2020). Wardhaugh (1999), for example, draws on the field of psychology to argue that home symbolises the body and so is a vessel connecting us to people, our past, present and future. Similarly, our home can express societal status and so impacts our social identity. To be without a home therefore has negative repercussions for status and social identity.

The social identity label of 'homeless' is "socially constructed through various discourses and consists of an amalgam of stereotypes" (McCarthy, 2013, p.46). How the homeless identity is represented affects public attitudes, support provided to people experiencing homelessness, and public policy (McCarthy, 2013; Pospech, 2020). Using Goffman's (1963) concept of a 'spoiled identity', Lee et al. (2004) suggest the negative identity imposed on those who are homeless, based on homelessness stereotypes, result in them being belittled and discarded by the housed public. Stereotypes are connected to images of drug and alcohol addiction and mental health difficulties. Behaviours like this, which for the housed public would usually be hidden from sight, are more visible amongst those street-homeless who have little privacy, adding to the stigmatised social identity imposed on them (Lee et al., 2004; Parsell, 2011).

Pascale (2005) links the homeless social identity to capitalism. She argues that the negative homeless image can result from the social discourse of "economic meritocracy" (p.12). In capitalist societies, to be homeless is seen as a personal failure as opposed to a systemic economic problem. When homeless, you can make little consumer contribution to society and therefore are alienated. Similarly, many of Boydell et al.'s (2000) participants saw the positive aspects of their identity to be linked to having a purpose and contribution to society, usually in the form of job roles or helping others. This demonstrates the societal discourse of productivity determining your worth.

The social homeless identity can influence personal identity. The homeless identity is described as a "master identity" by Perry (2013, p.3). It can be all-consuming, overshadowing other features of a person's identity so that wellbeing, self-esteem and self-concept dwindle (Bell & Walsh, 2015; McCarthy, 2013; May et al., 2007, Hoolachan, 2020).

Hoolachan's (2020) study, however, found that homelessness is not always the dominant component of people's identities, even when they identify as homeless. The study shows how the interplay of multiple stigmatised identities (homeless, drug-user and youth), and interactions in people's environments, can moderate the impact of the homeless identity. In addition, Hoolachan identifies strategies that reduced the influence of homelessness on participants' identities. She points to a participant in a

hostel for young people experiencing homelessness seeing themselves as 'less homeless' than others, such as those who are street homeless, and so distancing themselves from more derogatory images of homelessness with which they do not identify. This was also true in relation to drug-use where certain types of drug-use were stigmatised by those in the hostel (such as heroin-use), whilst others were celebrated (such as cannabis). Residents could therefore gain positive identities and inclusion through adopting the identity of a cannabis user, whilst distancing themselves from heroin-use. This shows how the stigmatisation and deviance of an identity is influenced by those you interact with. Despite being aware of the societal stigma of both homelessness and drug-use, Hoolachan finds that participants had largely not internalised this stigma into their personal identities.

#### ***2.4.2 Homeless identity and women***

The stereotypical image of a homeless person comprises of characteristics of those most visible (May et al., 2007) and is usually male (McCarthy, 2013; Watson, 2000). Watson (2000) explains the implications for women experiencing homelessness:

Women's own sense of themselves as not fitting the image they carry of homelessness, which is nearly always masculine, serves to undermine defining themselves as such and ultimately reinforces a passivity and inability to do anything about it... dominant masculine discourses are demobilising to those who cannot recognise themselves within them. (p.160)

The masculine nature of the homeless identity therefore presents challenges to women experiencing homelessness, how they manage their identity and potentially how they cope practically when homeless.

In addition, the stereotypical image of a homeless person conflicts with traditional gender roles of women's place in the home, the nurturing mother in the kitchen (Watson, 1999). Wardhaugh (1999) and Kisor and Kendal-Wilson (2002) do however note the stereotype of the 'bag lady' which is often conjured when people think of women experiencing homelessness. This image tends to be of an older woman, so one which many women cannot identify with.

### ***2.4.3 Identity maintenance strategies***

Maintaining a consistently positive view of oneself can be hard for someone experiencing homelessness due to negative homelessness stereotypes (Osborne, 2002). Identity maintenance strategies can help conserve a positive personal identity whilst homeless by exercising agency in negotiating one's identity, and in resisting imposed stigmatised social identities (Gonyea & Melekis, 2016; Preece et al., 2020; Wardhaugh, 1999; Casey et al., 2008). Importantly identity maintenance strategies work to protect individuals from the impact of stigmatisation on their mental health including low self-esteem and suicidal ideation (Kidd, 2007).

Osborne (2002) identifies two dominant identity maintenance strategies amongst people experiencing homelessness; to preserve the identity they held before becoming homeless; and integrating homelessness into their identity. We now explore these in turn.

Strategies to preserve a 'pre-homeless' identity include not disclosing, and actively concealing homelessness (Boydell et al., 2000; Perry, 2013; Casey et al., 2008). In Perry's study (2013, p.10), one person described himself as "displaced", which is often used to describe those who have lost their home in natural disasters. To describe themselves as homeless held the stigma of personal failures. 'Distancing' oneself from the stigmatised homeless identity is another form of Identity preservation highlighted in research literature. Connections to homelessness services, or to other people experiencing homelessness, place you in the same homelessness category (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Farrington & Robinson, 1999) and so not using homelessness services can be an identity preservation strategy which Hess (2023) noted was common amongst women in her study.

In Preece et al. (2020) many homeless but roofed participants, for example those living in hostels and vehicles, contrasted their experiences from those of the stereotypical street-homeless. This is a similar observation to that already mentioned in Hoolachan (2020), where a hostel resident saw his housing situation as only weakly associated with the homeless label by distinguishing himself from the roofless stereotype

embodying the label. With both Preece et al. (2020) and Hoolachan (2020), participants distance themselves from the stereotype's negative associations.

Other forms of distancing include not performing behaviours associated with the homelessness stereotype, for example choosing to go hungry rather than eat food from bins, and by presenting a looked-after appearance (Casey et al. 2008). To appear clean (and non-homeless) can help maintain connections to pre-homeless identities and relationships (Preece et al., 2020). For women specifically, to look after their appearance can also allow some a way to "perform femininity" and maintain their self-image (Earle-Brown, 2022, p.6).

By maintaining personal appearance and 'concealing' their 'spoilt identity', Casey et al.'s (2008) participants were also able to access public spaces such as libraries and galleries from which visibly homeless people may be excluded, allowing them to continue hobbies they engaged with before being homeless. This, in turn, helped them preserve their domiciled identity. By using facilities in public spaces, such as washrooms, they were also allowed more autonomy, privacy and distance from stigma than when using homelessness services with positive implications for dignity (Perry, 2013).

Alternatively, people experiencing homelessness are also found to adopt homeless identities, developing strategies to retain their self-worth through that identity (Osborne 2002). Studies present examples where embracing homelessness roles has positive implications for people's identity. This includes: a person who saw himself as an "expert dumpster diver" and others who saw themselves as street performers using their skills to busk for money (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p.1355); a talented poet writing poems for the public in exchange for money who felt socially-accepted providing a service rather than begging (Perry, 2013); and situations where people adopted 'familial' and positive roles within homeless groups (Farrington & Robinson, 1999).

In Farrington & Robinson's (1999) study there are examples of people experiencing homelessness categorising themselves into subgroups of homeless people and seeing their subgroup as superior to others to retain a positive self-image. A homeless individual could think that they are morally superior to groups of homeless people who are drug-users or who beg (Preece et al., 2020; Boydell et al., 2000; Casey et al., 2008).

Perry (2013) documents people experiencing homelessness critically comparing others who were homeless to themselves. They discussed others' hygiene and behaviours such as eating food from the rubbish as unacceptable and subordinate, seeing themselves in a more positive light. To preserve a more positive identity in a society where the homeless are viewed to be at the bottom, homeless individuals may situate themselves at the top of the homeless category (Boydell et al., 2000).

Snow and Anderson (1987) discuss the strategy of homeless individuals' fictive storytelling in order to show themselves positively. Fictive storytelling refers to embellishing or making up stories about your past, present or future to show a positive identity. Boydell et al.'s (2000) and Preece et al.'s (2020) research does not speak specifically of embellishing stories; however some participants spoke of their former domiciled identities and achievements, which could be a way of reconnecting with more positive self-identities. Much of this conversation was orientated around their previous job roles, presenting their productive identities and showing how our feelings of purpose and societal contribution are important to self-worth (Farrugia & Watson, 2011; Preece et al., 2020). Boydell et al. (2000) also saw looking to the future as a potential identity maintenance strategy. In their study, this future often involved an identity which was viewed positively and not homeless. Their future selves frequently were in desired job roles or positions where they could help others (unlike in the present where they needed help).

Identity can shift based on the spatial and social situation people are in. Perry (2013) conducted an ethnographic study in an American 24-hour donut shop, largely occupied by people experiencing homelessness. For the periods when those experiencing homelessness were in roles as customers in the shop, legitimately using the space alongside the housed population, they were seen to express more dignified identities. The shop was a space which unlike shelters provided privacy and connection with people who were not homeless. Perry's observations demonstrated the multiplicity and changing nature of identity in the context of homelessness, and that identity is something constructed through interaction (Perry, 2013; Goffman, 1963). The contextual nature of identity is discussed further when exploring cultures of dignity in section 2.5.

#### ***2.4.4 Becoming homeless on leaving difficult relationships/environments: Identity implications***

In contrast to much of the discussion in the literature on the negative impact of homelessness on people's identities, there is some discussion of positive implications. Matthews et al.'s (2019) study on LGBTQ+ experiences of homelessness found that whilst homeless and journeying out of homelessness, many of their participants felt they were able to become themselves. Living in difficult conditions prior to becoming homeless, often their family homes largely characterised by poor and abusive relationships and people who would not accept their identity, acted to constrain their identity exploration and expression. Some accommodation situations when homeless, like hostels, were also constraining environments where they felt unable to express their identities. However other situations, like staying with friends, could positively affirm participants' identities if relationships with accommodators were supportive and accepting. Matthews et al. also connect the transition to more secure housing from homelessness with more identity stability.

It could be considered that there might be similarities with women who become homeless on leaving domestic abuse. Abuse in intimate partner relationships can erode women's boundaries and sense-of-self (Neale, 2023). Their perpetrators are often seen to isolate them from their friends and family, relationships which their identities are connected to. Participants in Neale (2023, p.13) spoke of abuse reducing their sense of autonomy and competence, working to "dismantle and remove any trace of individual identity in order to render her docile and submissive". There is little research evidence that by leaving these relationships, a woman will regain her identity like some of Matthews et al.'s (2019) participants did. The constraints of the relationship can have lasting effects beyond the abusive home environment and the duration of that relationship. If women become homeless on leaving these relationships their experiences may be retraumatising, with fear or experience of further abuse and negative service interactions (Hess, 2023). Services being unwelcoming and disempowering can make women feel of low-worth and reaffirm thoughts about their identities. Their ability to rebuild their identities is likely to depend on the positive social support they have when homeless (as seen in Matthews et al.'s study), as this



can build their wellbeing, esteem and safety from harm (Trotter & Allen, 2009; McGrath et al., 2023).

#### **2.4.5 Summary**

A 'homeless identity' can hold negative connotations which impact on an individual's personal identity. Women experiencing homelessness in particular can find the homeless identity conflicting with their self-image, and to identify with homelessness can negatively affect women's dignity. Identity and dignity are interlinked, and it is important to explore identity in order to understand a person's felt-dignity. Research finds that people experiencing homelessness use various identity maintenance strategies to retain dignity and keep more positive sense-of-selves.

### **2.5 Homelessness and dignity**

Dignity is at the heart of this research and, like with the previous review of literature about identity, it directly relates to research question 3 on how informal support affects women's dignity.

Dignity is usually conceived as a social construct which is ambiguous in nature yet at the core of what we value as our human rights (Jensen, 2017; Hofmann, 2020). Within most of the literature, dignity is deemed as inherent, a component of being human (Miller & Keys, 2001; Giselsson, 2018). In this way, dignity supports the equal rights and worth of all humans, regardless of role and status in society (Giselsson, 2018).

Miller and Keys (2001) describe dignity as inner-worth determined by both internal and external factors; how we are viewed by society and how we view our own identity. The internal and external are interlinked as how a person is treated by others and their environment can affect their self-worth. Relevant to this study is how people's experiences of homelessness, their interactions and encountered environments, affect their dignity. In this section dignity is explored through the research evidence-base

relevant to women's experiences of homelessness, rather than the theoretical literature which is discussed in the next chapter.

Research studies rarely focus on dignity in relation to homelessness, however dignity is important in our understanding of homelessness. Events leading to a person becoming homeless can produce a loss in someone's felt-dignity as they may be viewed as unable to support themselves (Passaro, 1996). In addition, experiences whilst street homeless, including performing daily activities such as sleeping, washing and using the toilet, can negatively impact people's dignity (Fleary et al., 2019).

Studies describe how negative interactions with housed people make those experiencing homelessness feel ignored, inhuman, unworthy, incapable and inferior, with negative impacts on their dignity (Fleary et al., 2019; Miller & Keys, 2001; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008; Kneck et al., 2021). Women experiencing homelessness' accounts in Perriman (2019) illustrate undignified interactions whilst rough-sleeping, including being urinated on by drunk men, people moving away from them when they try to make conversation, and being judged as dirty, jobless and addicts by members of the housed population who did not know them.

Another theme arising in the limited literature on homelessness and dignity is privacy (Miller & Keys, 2001; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008). Mayock and Sheridan (2020, p.16) talk of "the intense sense of surveillance" experienced by women in homelessness services, leaving them feeling "policed" and infantilised. In services and whilst street-homeless, behaviours usually conducted privately and unseen by most are on show to staff or the public (Parsell, 2011; Passaro, 1996). Casey et al. (2008, p.8) thought that conducting day-to-day activities such as washing in public could be perceived by observers as "disturbing and transgressive", challenging the assigned meaning of spaces and adding to a homeless person's stigmatisation. This stigmatisation can threaten people's dignity (Miller & Keys, 2001).

In reverse, Jensen (2017, p.21) sees "dignity as a counter to social stigma that is grounded in local practices and nuanced relationships". Jensen coins the term "cultures of dignity" (p.35), spaces which do not reinforce the vastly unequal social interactions resulting from an individual's social stigma. His study uses the example of a homelessness shelter. He observed the humour being used by the residents to tease

volunteers and workers in the shelter to diminish social barriers, “attempting to remove the relevance of the stigmatizing attributes” (p.30). It reduced status differences, making the space more dignifying for residents and building stronger relationships between residents, volunteers and workers.

Parsell’s (2011) research discusses cultures of dignity in a different context and form. Parsell’s ethnography with rough-sleepers in Australia observed that where people experiencing homelessness were given charity donations they generally exhibited a meek, passive personality, one which suggested lower self-worth. When they were a paying customer in a cafe, with the treatment and status of a customer, they acted empowered and confident. Participants in Hoffman and Coffey’s (2008) study describe similar experiences of paying or exchanging work for food in a cafe as beneficial to their self-esteem, making them feel like a “real person” (p.13).

By being customers, they were seen to be contributing to the economy. This is discussed in Chapter 3 as a moral claim in capitalist society, which can contribute to people’s felt-dignity. Terui and Hsieh (2016) discuss moral claims in a similar sense. Their research highlights examples of people experiencing homelessness exerting their contributions to society by expressing a desire to work, their previous work ethic and job roles, or using their present employment to differentiate themselves from others.

Studies suggest that having or regaining a sense of dignity can aid people to exit homelessness through building up physical, emotional and “empowerment” resources (Fleary et al. 2019, p.79). Miller and Keys (2001), for example, suggest that dignity brings a sense of self-worth, self-sufficiency and capability that can improve people’s capacity to change their situation. However, obtaining dignifying resources when homeless can be challenging. McNaughton and Sanders’ (2007) study about transitioning out of homelessness and sex work, for example, found that the stigmatised identities of ‘homeless’ and ‘sex worker’ were barriers to escaping these situations because of the impact on their self-worth and dignity. Participants found it difficult to believe they could exist in different roles, with different identities (of greater societal status). In addition, if people feel undignified and shamed, they may be less likely to approach others for support (Jensen, 2017), people who could assist them out of homelessness. These discussions on dignity as a resource for exiting homelessness highlight the importance of understanding dignity in the context of homelessness.

Being treated as a number as opposed to a human with an individual identity regularly comes up in the literature on dignity and homelessness services (Hoffman & Coffey, 2008; Miller & Keys, 2001). Miller and Keys (2001) also highlight other undignified treatment and practices including rigid and excessive rules, waiting in long lines and restricted access to resources. Mayock and Sheridan (2020) give accounts of the power differentiation between staff and service users, resulting from rules and policing, negatively impacting service users' dignity. One account spoke of a bench where staff would request service users sit if returning to the hostel intoxicated. Participants in Hoffman and Coffey (2008) link this type of treatment to feelings of infantilisation, with staff acting as restrictive parents.

Share (2020) explores the food and meal habits of families living in emergency accommodation. Families in Share's study had little control over their daily routines as they were scheduled around their accommodations' meal constraints. This inability to exercise agency led to feelings of infantilisation, dependency and of being different from other families who could adhere to social norms by controlling their own food practices. Rules and regulations around food practices in the accommodations often conflicted with the families' other needs, for example mealtimes conflicting with traveling to and from school. Some families were unable to choose what they ate which could impact on their identities as the food we eat can be reflective of our culture (Almerico, 2014). Suspicion also arose as a theme. Share's study highlights families' feelings of being untrusted by service providers. Some participants experienced CCTV in their accommodation's eating spaces, and kitchens were locked at certain times. This agrees with findings from Mayock and Sheridan (2020) where service users talked of surveillance (including room checks and cameras) removing their privacy and consequently their felt power and respect.

Share's (2020) interviewees spoke of acts of resistance as ways to regain some dignity, for example, going against the accommodation's rules to have a toaster in their room. Challenging services' rules was also a common tactic used to regain agency and a sense of power by service users in Mayock and Sheridan (2020), while opting out of homelessness services is interpreted as an act of resistance in other studies (Hoffman & Coffey, 2008; Ogden & Avades, 2011), and as a dignifying act, using their agency to exit environments perceived as restrictive and undermining (Mayock & Parker, 2020).

However, in doing this they potentially sacrifice the opportunities to exit homelessness for stable accommodation that engagement with these services bring.

As touched upon in section 2.3, trauma-informed approaches within support services are gaining increasing importance with more organisational practices working to understand past traumas experienced by service users in order to avoid retraumatisation (McCarthy, 2022). This could result in undignified experiences when using support services becoming less widespread. Milaney et al. (2020) saw trauma-informed approaches to be particularly important for supporting women experiencing homelessness, who they found to have higher adverse childhood experiences scores, and higher reported mental health issues than men. Professionals working in support services interviewed for McCarthy's (2022) research saw trauma-informed approaches to be about respecting a person's humanity, increasing their control over decisions and working collaboratively, empathetically and compassionately with the person. These factors all relate to the respect of people's dignity. Reid et al. (2021) agreed, finding trauma-informed work to have the potential for increased self-acceptance, self-value and agency. Despite seeing trauma-informed approaches as important, constraints on services can create barriers to its implementation. These barriers include staff retention, large caseloads, the need to prioritise responding to emergency needs in services and short-term measurable targets set by commissioners which lack understanding for trauma-informed approaches (McCarthy, 2022).

The conditions of services can also affect the dignity of its users. Studies show that using or living in homelessness services can be undignified because they are not adequately equipped to meet basic needs, for example they are unclean (Ghosh et al., 2020; Miller & Keys, 2001), do not afford people the privacy of having their own room (Walsh et al., 2009), and do not allow for food experiences which align with social and cultural norms (Share, 2020). As an example, a family living in emergency accommodation in Share (2020) had to eat on their bed due to not having chairs and a table.

### ***2.5.1 Dignity and women experiencing homelessness***

There is general agreement within the literature that there are gender differences in how people experience homelessness in ways that could impact dignity, with discussions giving particular focus to motherhood, sex work and the sexual objectification of women experiencing homelessness.

Hoffman and Coffey (2008) and Passaro (1996) suggest that women may be less subject to rigidity of rules in services, with women generally treated with more kindness and sympathy than men. Passaro (1996) argues this results from women when homeless appearing as dependent and vulnerable, which is reflective of traditional gender beliefs. A homeless man showing the same characteristics may instead be seen as a “failed man” and therefore treated with less favour (p.2).

Perriman (2019) highlights ways in which women are treated differently than men outside the context of homelessness services. A woman in Perriman’s study spoke of how the undignified experiences street-homeless women are exposed to can be gendered:

I got offered money so often to have sex with people, which I’m sure they wouldn’t do to a man, but because I was a woman, they assumed I was a slut and that was offensive. I felt pretty degraded already, being on the street, and to have someone say ‘I’ll give you fifty quid’ makes you feel like you are nothing, you are just a body to be used. (p.44)

Perriman’s study revealed many similar accounts by women of unwanted approaches by unknown men for sexual acts. Here again dignity relates to impersonalisation and objectification, being a body. However, women in particular can be interacted with like they are sexual objects. Patriarchal ideologies sexually objectify women’s bodies and this culture becomes part of women’s identities (Wesely, 2009). Many homeless women have experienced sexual abuse in childhood and as a result learnt that to be a woman is to be abused as a sex object, and in this way to be “degraded and dehumanised” (Wesely, 2009, p.13). Patriarchal culture also affects the geographies of women experiencing homelessness. Women in Casey et al. (2008) avoided certain places so they would not be confused for sex workers, with the associated stigma.

As discussed in the previous sections however, studies find that many women do exchange sex for resources whilst homeless. In Reeve and Batty's (2011) survey of 400 homeless individuals it was found that 28% of women had slept with someone to be accommodated for the night compared with 14% of men, and 19% of women had sex worked because of the possibility of spending the night with a client compared with 3% of men. Women especially can have very few resources available to manage their homelessness, making survival sex or sex work a "subsistence strategy" rather than an active choice (Reeve, 2018, p.171). As reflected in the quote above (Perriman, 2019, p.44), sex work holds a particular stigmatisation, it can be considered to go against gendered ideals, attaching the derogatory label of "slut" to a woman and reducing her worth to something "to be used" by others.

Reeve (2013) however, questions the extent to which women who sex work deviate from patriarchal gender roles. In one sense they meet these values by their role existing for the sexual desire of men, while also contradicting normative roles within the home as a mother and wife. This deviation from social norms is important when considering dignity (discussed further in Chapter 3). It views them as immoral and can have severe consequences for their treatment, being shamed and disrespected by others (Ahmed, 2014; Golden, 1992). For women experiencing homelessness who sex work on the streets, they can be highly visible as deviant as they are working and potentially sleeping outside.

It is argued that the intertwining of 'woman, mother and home' works to label mothers experiencing homelessness under another form of deviance, "'spoilt' motherhood", which does not apply to fathers (Mayock et al., 2015, p.889; Bimpson et al., 2022; Hess, 2023). To be without a home, mothering within a service without the privacy usually afforded to mothers, can greatly increase women's feelings of their parenting abilities being judged (Hess, 2023; Share, 2020). With implications for their dignity, many felt their mothering was negatively judged, whilst staying in temporary accommodation seen as unfit for mothering (Bimpson et al., 2022). In these services, they can feel infantilised with reduced control over how they mother and lowered independence. It can be harder to develop routine for their children and give them safe spaces to play (Bimpson et al., 2022; Share, 2020)

Mayock et al. (2015, p.889) also suggest that: “for a large number, the practical problems associated with parenting in the context of homelessness were deeply connected to the humiliation and guilt of having their children with them in homeless hostels”. Guilt implies that women feel they are not meeting their moral values, the internalised image of what the “‘ideal’ of a competent mother” is (Mayock et al, 2015, p.889). Humiliation, when their guilt is reinforced by the judgements of those around them (Hess, 2023). These same emotions were seen as greatly present for women experiencing homelessness whose children had been removed (Hess, 2023). For some this saw marked deterioration in their mental health. Reeve (2013) found that some women who had suffered the loss of children in their care spoke of moral narratives, of them giving up their children so they could have better lives. These narratives could bring the women feelings of agency and the dignity of respecting their morals.

### ***2.5.2 Summary***

Dignity is a concept which could give crucial understanding to people’s felt experiences and the choices they make when homeless, yet it is underexplored in homelessness literature. The literature which does exist on dignity and homelessness, regularly links dignity with a person’s feelings of powerlessness in relation to the housed public and staff in homelessness services. When homeless, you often have reduced privacy, less control and the absence of facilities to adequately take care of yourself, which can leave you dependent on others. Support services are often seen as environments with undignified cultures, making users feel infantilised, like numbers as opposed to humans with individual identities and needs. For this reason, many choose to disengage from these services. This disengagement is seen as particularly prevalent amongst women. Literature also notes gender differences in the experiences faced by people experiencing homelessness which impact their dignity. Women are more likely to experience sexual objectification than men and judged negatively based on patriarchal gender roles.



## 2.6 Conclusion

The literature review shows that over the previous two decades there has been a notable increase in research on women's homelessness, which predominantly found that women's experiences of homelessness are different to men's and generally take less visible forms. Despite this, much of the research on homelessness still largely features the experiences of men or the accounts of the fewer women who choose to exist more visibly and/or use homelessness services. The experiences of women who are less visible are rarely explored in-depth, potentially as they are harder to find if not using services. Research states that homelessness support services are male-dominated, but there are gaps in knowledge as to where women are fulfilling their day-to-day needs if not using these services and who is supporting them. Existing research, at times, features the perspectives of workers in support services, however the perspectives of those informally supporting, outside of service environments, rarely feature leaving large knowledge gaps on the nature of informal support and its implications for a receiver's dignity.

The existing research on how women fulfil their needs when homeless tends to focus on the practical support given to women (for example accommodation), as opposed to the psychosocial implications of these support interactions on women's identities. Dignity in relation to homelessness is important yet largely unexplored in the surveyed literature, with much of the existing literature looking at stigmatisation. Exploring women's experiences of homelessness through dignity could help us understand their support choices and behaviours.

This study aims to address these gaps by exploring what informal support looks like for women experiencing homelessness, to what extent they rely on it and why, and how the use of informal support affects their feelings of dignity and sense-of-self.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Building on the literature review presented in Chapter 2, this chapter develops a more theoretical understanding of dignity. Literature searches showed that dignity as a theoretical concept is rarely explored in homelessness research, with the field largely focusing instead on 'stigma'. I argue, however, that this represents a gap in understanding due to dignity's relevance to experiences of homelessness. This chapter first explores how dignity is conceptualised in philosophical literature before using theories on non-economic capital and societal discourse to construct an understanding of dignity applicable to women's experiences of homelessness.

This chapter connects the theoretical framework with the literature review's themes, relating it to women's access to space and support, their identity, dignity and gendered experiences when homeless.

#### 3.1 Dignity

Dignity is at the core of this PhD: the lens through which I view the data and the research's contribution to the academic field. My exploration of literature on dignity taught me of the concept's importance yet also its ambiguity, as expressed by Sayer (2011):

Dignity is a curious, elusive thing... It matters to all of us and is yearned for by those to whom it is denied - the oppressed, the dispossessed and the disrespected. Although difficult to define it is something quite ordinary that we sense particularly when it is threatened – when we are treated in a disrespectful, undignified manner. (p.189)

This PhD grapples with the concept of dignity through the insights of those whose experiences of homelessness have undermined their sense of dignity and therefore can give key insight into its meanings for them. Dignity can be difficult to maintain whilst homeless, especially for women, who violate societal norms just by being homeless (Fleary et al., 2019; Radley et al., 2006). Before exploring the knowledge of women with experiences of homelessness (see chapters 5-7), dignity in this chapter is

discussed using philosophical and sociological literature. By establishing what is at the core of its conceptualisation, we can better grasp how an individual experiences dignity.

Simplistically, dignity is conceived as inner worth, determined by both internal and external factors; how we are viewed by society and how we view ourselves (Miller & Keys, 2001). The internal and external are interlinked as how a person is treated by others can affect their self-worth.

When exploring the philosophical literature on dignity however, more complexity and ambiguity is revealed (Giselsson, 2018; Høy et al., 2016; Pols et al., 2018). Dignity is discussed as crucial to determining how we treat others, as humans with value and rights as opposed to tools whose rights can be sacrificed for the greater good of society (Sayer, 2011; Giselsson, 2018). Two different types of dignity are considered in the literature; dignity which is 'inherent' to being human and cannot be lost, and dignity which is 'achieved' through behaviours or status in society (Høy et al., 2016; Sayer, 2011; Formosa & Mackenzie, 2014). Both types are relevant to this research as they affect how people see their worth, how others perceive and treat them and consequently the strategies people use to manage their sense-of-self and worth when homeless.

Inherent dignity is conceived as a "universal ethical principle" (Pols et al., 2018, p.90). It prevents people being viewed and used as pawns and therefore proponents of inherent dignity condemn exploitative practices (Giselsson, 2018). Every individual is considered important and has rights *because* they are a human with dignity, independent of their social status (King, 2003; Toscano, 2011). These rights enforce moral treatment.

Kant, an influential philosopher, saw dignity as inherent. He argued that everything either has a price (a relative value), or dignity (an inner value), "an unconditioned, incomparable worth" (Kant, 2018 [1785], p.48). If something is considered priceless and not interchangeable for something else, then it has dignity. For Kant, what makes something of value is rationality, morality and autonomy, and he argued that only humanity has the capacity for these (raising them above animals) (Giselsson, 2018; Formosa & Mackenzie, 2014; Rosen, 2012). By autonomy, Rosen (2012, p.25) felt that

Kant meant that as humans we are bound by our own “self-given” internal moral laws which guide how we should behave.

The relationship between morality and dignity is key within Kant’s philosophy as dignity is dependent on morality; only those with capacity for morality have dignity, and to have dignity brings the requirement to be treated morally by others (Kant, 2018 [1785]). Morality is an important thread linking dignity to the two other parts of this theoretical framework: capital and societal discourse (discussed further below).

Despite us acknowledging the gap between our actions and beliefs on how we should act as moral beings, Rosen (2012, p.25) interpreting Kant, saw him to believe that it is our *capacity* and *motivation* for morality which should be held in high esteem: “human beings have dignity so long as they have morality, whatever external reality may turn out to be like”. According to Kant, acting according to our moral will was rational behaviour (Kant, 2018 [1785]; Timmermann & Gregor, 2011). We should act as we expect everyone else to and the outcome of this should be a universal respect for ourselves and others.

Kant also believed that self-respect should result from people knowing their moral-worth, that they are priceless and irreplaceable (Kant, 2018 [1785]). Important to this PhD, this means that for women experiencing homelessness to feel dignified, they must view and respect themselves as worthy.

Sayer (2011) questions the implications of Kant’s conceptualisation of dignity as requiring capacity for morality, autonomy and rationality: Does this mean that a person in a coma, experiencing severe mental illness, or who has a disability affecting their ability to follow social norms, is still entitled to dignified treatment when their autonomy and rationality have been impacted? Scholars propose that dignified treatment in these cases may result instead from a respect for the person’s former dignified self, or societal attitudes which see it to be a moral duty to treat all humans well (Sayer, 2011; Johnson & Cureton, 2022). Then again, many people whose capacity for rationality, autonomy and moral reasoning has been affected, are treated disrespectfully by others and discriminated against in society.

Nussbaum’s philosophies greatly oppose utilitarian ideas (Nussbaum, 2000; Gluchman, 2018). She believes in equal dignity regardless of achievements, social or moral

standing, and in relevance to this study, gender and economic wealth (Nussbaum, 1999a; 1999b; Gluchman, 2018). Dignity cannot be taken away due to people's actions, and results in universal entitlement to conditions needed to lead dignified lives (Gluchman, 2018). Consequently, she argues that to honour every individual's human dignity, all humans should have the same capabilities in life, for example being capable of having good health, good relationships and agency. Nussbaum's philosophies, like Kant's, associate dignity with respect (Bendik-Keymer, 2014; Nussbaum, 1998). To have dignity entitles you to respect.

According to Nussbaum, if someone commits a violent crime it is the behaviour which is undignified, not the individual. The individual maintains their dignity and is to be treated respectfully, however their behaviour is condemned (Nussbaum, 1998; Gluchman, 2018). In this way, she could be seen to view people as products of their environment, with responsibility being less on the individual and more on society/government to provide the conditions for their development.

Gluchman (2018) disagrees however, arguing that if someone commits a violent crime, they are responsible for their actions, and they and their dignity should not be shown the same level of respect. Gluchman believes that dignity should not be solely held simply because of being human, it should be held subject to a person's behaviour marking them different from animals (rationality and morality).

Most of Kant's writing indicates a view that all humans are entitled to equal respect based on their inherent dignity. As already discussed, this however is questioned by some academics who suggest his philosophy positioned people without the capacity for morality, autonomy and rationality as undignified. In addition, Rosen (2012), identifies a single reference in Kant's work on dignity also being based on people's adherence to their internal moral law, to *act* with moral respect-worthy behaviour. Sensen (2011, p.2) makes a similar interpretation: "[Kant] says that only a morally good will can have an absolute value, but on the other, that even a morally vicious human being deserves respect". Sensen suggests that Kant saw even those exhibiting morally poor behaviour to deserve unconditional respect due to their *capacity* to act morally (and therefore inherent dignity), however only those who *behave* morally have "absolute value" (Sensen, 2011, p.2). Toscano (2011, p.13) refers to this as "two grades within the same rank", where humans are ranked above other animals by universally

having inherent dignity, but this dignity is unequal amongst them based on their moral behaviour. This overlaps with the concept of achievement dignity, discussed below.

Whether inherent dignity is affected by people's actions and whether people are passive products of their environment is key to discussions around dignity and homelessness. Homelessness discourses vary over time, from seeing homelessness as resulting from individual failure to it being a consequence of wider structural problems which deny people the conditions needed to live dignified lives (Pascale, 2005). How homelessness is framed societally may determine whether someone experiencing homelessness is treated with dignity, which could in turn affect their felt-dignity.

Although inherent dignity cannot be made, it can be dishonoured by treatment (Pols et al., 2018). Nussbaum (1999a, p.227), for example, argues that patriarchal attitudes and structures undermine inherent dignity by violating women's dignity: "human dignity is frequently violated on grounds of sex... many women all over the world find themselves treated unequally with respect to employment, bodily safety and integrity, basic nutrition and health care, education and political voice". Even if a woman has the right to an education, they may be restricted from accessing it due to social norms influencing their economic constraints or expectations on them within the family to fulfil certain roles. Their rights and individual worth may not be respected in favour of other family or community members. Social norms privileging men can violate women's dignity (discussed further below).

Achievement dignity under all definitions in the literature is not universal or stable (Sayer, 2011). It refers to the "respect-worthy status of a person's beings and doings" (Formosa & Mackenzie, 2014, p.877), therefore individualising and externalising dignity. Achievement dignity can be gained or lost based on a person's actions (Sayer, 2011). Of relevance to this PhD is how dignity can be gained and lost through people's experiences when homeless and their different support choices.

Pols et al. (2018, p.91) describe this form of dignity "as a way of describing social differences" when more dignity is given to certain people. This is of particular interest when discussing capital in the next section. It is relational and consequently those with more dignity are given status above those with less (Sayer, 2011; Toscano, 2011). Achievement dignity conflicts with many conceptualisations of inherent dignity as it

can be used to justify unequal treatment of people and differences in opportunities to live a dignified life (Pols et al., 2018; Nussbaum, 1999a).

According to Toscano (2011), when dignity is hierarchical, an individual's higher moral status indicates that they are more valuable, and the more valuable they are the more it matters how you treat them. Similarly, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p.108) argue that dignified status is based on people's contributions to "the common good", how useful they are to society. Someone is seen as low-status because their contributions do not go beyond the domestic sphere.

What is seen as dignified and moral in society is not stable. What gives someone a dignified status is influenced by societal discourses and varies throughout time, cultures and fields (Pascale, 2005; Roccas & Sagiv, 2010; Sayer, 2010). This suggests that moral values, and therefore what is seen as dignified, to some extent is socially constructed. This also has direct implications when discussing inherent dignity. The only thing which Kant believed to be universally good (and makes a person moral) is a person's will to do 'the right thing' (Timmermann & Gregor, 2011). 'The right thing' to do, however, can vary based on context, as can what is respectful treatment of another person based on their inherent dignity (Pols et al., 2018; Sayer, 2010).

The social construction of morality has particular consequences for this study as it suggests a discrepancy between a person's felt-dignity and how dignified different people perceive them to be. This chapter will go on to discuss how what is considered moral and dignified behaviour can be constructed by those with power, focusing on neoliberal capitalist contexts where poverty is considered a moral failure (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013; Skeggs, 2011).

This PhD primarily researched dignity as something which is felt by and located within individuals, as opposed to something which is projected on individuals or groups by society. An individual's feelings of dignity may be affected by others' projections, however the literature also showed felt-dignity to be altered by an individual's choices and identity maintenance strategies (Farrington & Robinson, 1999; Gonyea & Melekis, 2016; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008).

The above discussion on dignity creates a lens through which to view the participants' discussions of their felt-dignity. From a Kantian perspective, by asking a person about

their feelings of dignity, I am asking how they view their own moral-worth. I am also asking them about dignity as an understanding of their personal value systems (Pols et al., 2018). By this I mean what they see to be a violation of their dignity, what they consider to be morally-right behaviour, or behaviours which bring dignity. I explore the effect of judgements made against dominant societal value systems and respect they experience from others on their own self-respect.

## **3.2 Capital**

Theories of capital were only integrated into my theoretical framework towards the end of data collection. Many themes emerging in the empirical data relating to the research questions directly linked with, and could be explored through, theoretical literature on capital.

Capital theory helps us understand how achievement dignity, and inherent dignity violations, affect our felt-dignity. This section explores how dignity can be affected by personal resources and how systems of capital accumulation can be mechanisms for building or reducing dignity. With the ambiguity in defining dignity, I explore how elements of the very nature and internal construction of dignity can be captured within capital theory as a value system.

### ***3.2.1 Capital theory***

Theories on capital originate in the work of Pierre Bourdieu and have been developed by many academics such as Beverley Skeggs (whose work features prominently in this section). Capital theories show how non-economic forms of capital are important in “determining and reproducing social positions”, as well as in accruing economic capital (Bullen & Kenway, 2005, p.52). Capital is relational and therefore the societal positioning and power accrued is hierarchical. Individuals can accrue capital as “they move through social spaces (fields of exchange)” (Skeggs, 2011, p.501). It is also context-specific, so particular types of capital may hold different values in different



fields of exchange (Skeggs, 1997). Different fields may be concerned with different interests, however what is unchangeable between fields is that they are a location of a “struggle of interests” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.111). This struggle for dominance takes place between both individuals and institutions based on how much of the capital of advantage to that field each possesses. Examples of fields according to Bourdieu (1993) are religion and politics. Watson (2016, p.260) argues that the homelessness domain should be considered a field as it is “a self-governing space... carries context-specific capital, and it retains distinct forms of regulation”.

In Capital theory, value systems are based on commodification, where “everything becomes a matter of accrual, of exchange-value” (Skeggs, 2004, p.74). People gain in value, from acquiring assets which become embodied in their person (Skeggs, 2011). The value helps them acquire resources in the field. Skeggs uses the example of getting a job, where “social skills based on cultural and social capital are becoming increasingly necessary” as advantageous resources (Skeggs, 2004, p.73).

Capital strategically works to create boundaries around fields of exchange, excluding some and preserving the power of others. This could be thought of as a violation to inherent dignity as it restricts some individuals’ capacity to a dignified life (Nussbaum, 1999a; 1999b). In addition, it is this value which is ascribed to certain individuals and not others based on their capital accrual which is key when discussing achievement dignity. With capital being a signifier of someone’s societal status and value, there is the potential for the volume of capital a person has, to have great effect on their self-worth and consequently their felt-dignity.

Bourdieu categorised non-economic capital into three groups: cultural, social and symbolic.

### ***3.2.2 Cultural capital***

Culture can be inscribed on bodies to immobilise or give mobility in a field of exchange (Skeggs, 2004). Some cultural characteristics inscribed can label someone as ‘bad’, of low-worth. Other cultural characteristics can bring a body capital. What determines

which cultural characteristics bring capital, and how much, depends on the moral and economic perspectives of the field of exchange. According to Bourdieu (1993), as cultural capital is unequally distributed amongst people, its possession is a way to have beneficial distinction over others. Possessing cultural capital elevates a person over what is considered common behaviours.

Cultural capital can be embodied, objectified or institutionalised (Skeggs, 2004; 2001; 1997). It includes knowledge gained through education, ways of speaking and culturally appropriate behaviours (Bullen & Kenway, 2005). Embodied values can also become objectified for example in consumption practices (Sayer, 2011; Bullen & Kenway, 2005). Cultural capital is largely gained through family upbringing in forms such as ways of thinking, inherent qualities and styles (Reay, 2004). Those with dominance in the field determine the value and status given by different cultural capital. Fields of exchange are therefore sites of social reproduction, “cultural capital attracts more cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.182).

Brooks (2001) notes how dominant modern societal values of productivity and self-improvement have affected what activities are seen to bring cultural capital. Under this value system all worth-while activities must have purpose, rather than just being for enjoyment. Gyms and museums are key features of this value system, useful to health and intellect goals.

Largely Brooks speaks of an individualistic culture where the morals of the elite set the cultural capital required to thrive. Those following the cultural codes of the dominant class are more likely to get employed or promoted, their opinion is more likely to be respected and they will rise in societal hierarchy.

In contrast, people experiencing homelessness are often seen as a drain on society’s productivity and of low individual worth. Societal discourse has them making bad choices (and even choosing to be homeless), having bad health due to substance use and mental illness, and using their time unproductively (Pascale, 2005; Braverman, 2023). Pascale (2005) believes that a link between capitalism and morality results in them being viewed to have a deficit in cultural capital and moral-worth.

### ***3.2.3 Social capital***

Social capital is the power gained from an individual's social networks (Bourdieu, 1993; Bullen & Kenway, 2005). This includes informal networks such as family and friends, and formal networks (Allard, 2005). In the context of this study, formal networks could include homelessness support services. These networks and the social identities built through group associations can give access to resources, for example jobs (Allard, 2005), in turn bringing advancement in social standing (Skeggs, 2004).

The quality of these connections is also important, as some connections and associations can inhibit access to resources (Allard, 2005). As an example, by identifying as homeless, the stigmatised group association this brings can affect a person's access to spaces, distance them from resources and reduce the quality of their social interactions (Pascale, 2005; Casey et al., 2008; Perry, 2013). The association can reduce social status and negatively affect the respect received from others (Perry, 2013; Casey et al., 2008).

Other social connections can give access to resources in one field and inhibit access in another (Watson, 2016). Some women in Watson's (2016) study found that having a male partner when homeless resourced physical protection from harm outside of the relationship, however it also restricted women's access to temporary accommodation and work.

Under the value system of capital, social connections can be seen as commodities. Skeggs (2011) discusses middle-class research participants who expressed anxiety about the necessity to utilise their time in ways which acquired social capital, including pursuing friendships and social connections which were productive to their future aspirations. Brooks (2001), similarly, suggests that spending time with children is seen as a productive activity, helping develop better relationships with them and teaching them new things. The commodification of relationships is explored further later in this chapter.

### ***3.2.4 Symbolic capital***

Symbolic capital is viewed as, “reputation, status and prestige” (Bullen & Kenway, 2005, p.52). It is based on opinion and consequentially can be delicate in nature, “destroyed by suspicion and criticism, and is particularly difficult to transmit and to objectify” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.93).

Symbolic capital is the shape that the previously mentioned capitals take when they are considered and acknowledged as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1990). Once considered legitimate, capital can have symbolic power which can be profited upon by the holder (Skeggs, 2004; 1997). Symbolic capital could be viewed as an externalisation of someone’s moral-worth, which is deserving of others’ respect (Strathern, 1992).

People experiencing homelessness are rarely seen to hold symbolic capital in dominant fields. There were examples in the literature of identity management strategies, where those experiencing homelessness were perceived as trying to build symbolic capital through constructing fictive or embellished narratives on their ‘respect-worthy’ accomplishments (Snow & Anderson, 1987), or linking back to their pre-homeless identities and achievements (Boydell et al., 2000).

### ***3.2.5 Expanding theory on non-economic capital***

Academics have expanded theories of non-economic capitals to areas pertinent to this PhD’s themes, for example emotional capital (Illouz, 1997; Reay, 2004) and vicarious physical capital (Watson, 2016) which is discussed further in this chapter.

Skeggs (2001) describes feminine capital as a limited form of cultural capital. Its legitimisation can be restricted by age, race, sexuality and class and is dependent on time and place. Skeggs believes that femininity displayed by young, middle-class, heterosexual, white women can bring them symbolic power in some areas, however it could be seen to be deficit capital in areas such as the workplace.

Historically the habitus of the powerful classes formed feminine ideals which had a decorative and frail quality. It developed an idealised femininity which when seen as

natural signified purity, and both brought value and worked as a form of embodied regulation (Skeggs; 2001; Watson, 2016). Contrastingly, working-class women were often seen as naturally hardy and masculinised. Femininity displayed by them was characterised as putting excessive interest into their appearance which was considered bad taste, vain and a sign of sexual deviance (Skeggs, 2004). This image of immorality, and opposition to gender norms could be used to justify restrictions to some women's access to resources.

Although respectable femininity has widely evolved from this passivity in modern day UK society, its legacy remains (Bullen & Kenway, 2005). Feminine capital also takes different forms in different fields, for example the domain of homelessness. Watson (2016), for example, saw women experiencing homelessness to be largely ineligible for capital accumulation in mainstream society. With limited resources they can often resort to using the exchange values of their bodies. Watson believes that femininity, when operated in the field of homelessness, can be used by women to form intimate relationships with men to acquire their physical capital, physical protection from external threat in a field which presents large risks to women's safety (however it is important to note that these relationships themselves were possible sources of violence for the women).

In addition, Huey and Berndt's (2008) study saw examples of women experiencing homelessness behaving passively, maternal or flirting with those in authority. This was thought to be greeted with sympathy and respect. It could bring access to resources, for example financial assistance from members of the public (Passaro, 1996).

### ***3.2.6 How capital feeds into dignity***

According to Sayer (2011, p.200), "the search for dignity often takes the concealed form of a distributional struggle for resources, these being valued not only for the use-values they provide but the recognition which they signify". Here he could be likening the building of dignity to the accumulation of capital and its conversion to symbolic capital. Capital theory can bring insight on how dignity is understood and therefore how participants in this research understand their own felt-dignity.

What is considered cultural and social capital in fields of exchange is what is deserving of respect, whether this be the way somebody behaves, the education someone has or being born into a family with status. This respectability is informed by whether someone is seen as competent, exercising autonomy, and can be trusted to be acting morally (Sayer, 2011). Once legitimised, capital becomes symbolic capital and the holder gains status in that field. However, it is important to note that what is deserving of respected status, to be capital, can vary between differently positioned groups and cultures, with “struggles over the meaning of inequalities” influencing claims to moral worth (Farrugia et al., 2016, p. 239). Societal inequalities, which some see as immoral, others justify and legitimise using moral reasoning, as this chapter goes on to discuss in terms of neoliberalism.

This ties in with both achievement dignity and some interpretations of inherent dignity. The holder of legitimised cultural and social capital, symbolic capital, bears dignity in that field as they hold both respect-worthy status and are considered as acting according to their internal moral laws. To have achievement dignity is to be viewed as having societal value. Where we see ourselves and where others see us in the social hierarchy connects with how moral we are seen to be and can alter felt-dignity (Skeggs, 2011; McKenzie, 2015). It affects the level of respect and value others give us, and we give ourselves. This way of envisioning achievement dignity, as symbolic capital, speaks to its fragility. Affected by opinion and context-specific, it is vulnerable to being lost based on changes in society or life circumstances.

Dignity when thought of as equating to symbolic capital, gives a respect-worthy status which encourages positive societal treatment. Alternatively, if a person is considered of low or deficit symbolic capital, undignified, their societal treatment could be characterised by a lack of respect. The literature documents numerous times when those given a homeless identity are infantilised and robbed of privacy and individual rights (Ogden & Avades, 2011; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008).

Capital theory documents violations of the main premise of inherent dignity, that everyone deserves equal respect and opportunities to lead a dignified life on the basis of their humanity. Capital theory is a story of inequality, and immobilisation of some individuals so that their ability to accrue societal resources is removed.

Social capital adds more to the theorisation of dignity as it comes from positive connections with others where interactions are based on respect and recognition of someone's worth. Social connections can help increase social standing and consequently achievement dignity. Breakdowns in relationships, or associations with groups not seen to hold respect-worthy status can reduce a person's social capital and the respect they receive. In extreme cases negative group associations can lead to a person being treated without humanity. This can work to affect a person's felt-dignity.

Reading the literature highlighted ambiguity on the relationship between social capital and a person's dignity. Social capital commodifies social connections as ways to access resources. Perceiving relationships as commodities goes against cultural values of love and the building of more meaningful connections (Minina et al., 2022), which could have negative effects on a person's felt-dignity. When thinking about a person using homelessness services, building positive connections with staff could bring resources. However, I propose that a person knowing that they need to make those connections because they need essential resources to survive (e.g. housing and food), and that the person they are connecting with is there because it is their job, could harm their dignity by creating a status inequality. Self-value and dignity could come from an authentic rather than transactional relationship, knowing that a relationship is based on a mutual understanding, love and care.

Clark and Mills (1979) categorise these two kinds of relationships as exchange relationships and communal relationships. With exchange relationships, the giver of a resource assumes that they will receive one in return. The basis of a communal relationship is a mutual care for each other's welfare, which drives resources to be given in response to the other's need. Communal relationships are commonly seen in family relationships. This categorisation of relationships is useful when exploring the differences between formal and informal support in research question one, however its potential effect on support choices and dignity makes it of great importance to all three research questions.

### **3.3 Societal Discourses**

In this section I explore the premise that what makes a person dignified, of moral-worth and to hold capital in a field, is manufactured by those who already hold large quantities of capital, who have influence in that field because their views are respected and trusted. This could be done through the creation of societal discourses on morality which work to preserve inequality.

Even if we believe that everyone is born equal, the environment into which a person is born, the societal structures which work to create hierarchy, endanger individuals' dignity (Sayer, 2011). Throughout history hierarchy and inequality has been justified using discourse which demeans those at the bottom and claims that those at the top are there because of their greater worth (Jones, 2011).

Capital theory shows that when accrued capital is seen as legitimate, it gives its holder symbolic power, societal status and a position of dignity (Skeggs, 2004). Discourses created by those in power on who and what is of moral value can become thought of as societal truths (Ahmed, 2014). Forms of capital which hold this moral value, can then be legitimised.

Imogen Tyler's (2013) work on social abjection and Sara Ahmed's (2014) theories on emotional discourses as political tools are used as a base to help delve into the construction of discourse. They can provide an explanation for why women experiencing homelessness are marginalised from society, experience treatment from others which impacts their dignity, and consequently make the support choices they do.

#### ***3.3.1 Social Abjection***

Tyler (2013) can be used to explain how those experiencing homelessness are cut off from mainstream society as scapegoats for government failures. Tyler looks at social abjection, a concept which she references as moving Kristeva's (1982) psychoanalytic theory of abjection to the social sciences. Social abjection sees the government to



create “waste” groups which become the object of others’ disgust and excluded as “moral outcasts” (Tyler, 2013, p.19). Social abjection increases inequality and restricts these group’s access to capital. It works to maintain social hierarchy, enforcing the superiority of those with power and reducing the risk for them of being pulled into the lower classes. Groups can become dehumanised (Bataille, 1993 [1934]), and stripped of their dignity (Krauss, 1997) whether conceptualised as inherent or achievement dignity.

Neoliberal discourse boasts, “individualism, choice, freedom, mobility” (Tyler, 2013, p.177), which according to Tyler (2015) amplifies inequalities and justifies the lack of resources available to those at the bottom of social hierarchy whilst celebrating the achievements of the wealthy. Neoliberalism, like capital theory, links an individual’s value to society to their contribution to the economy (Skeggs, 2004). Social position is earned, a product of a person’s choices (Tyler, 2015; Watson, 2016). It displaces societal structural failings, as failings of the individual, a result of individuals’ morally problematic behaviours (Pascale, 2005). This is reflected in the attitudes of participants in Farrugia and Watson’s (2011) study who saw their homelessness as a personal failure and that it was their responsibility to manage structural inequalities themselves.

Tyler (2013) uses ‘the chav’ as an example of the neoliberal societal scapegoat, the disapproved of and abjected part of society. It illustrates how a fictitious character is created to embody immorality. The figure of the chav featured in societal discourse firstly as a political discourse and then widely in mainstream media. It is of a disenfranchised young person of the ‘underclass’ with deficit capital. This fictitious image worked to conjure ridicule and disgust amongst the public with it operating as a vessel for negative characteristics, and then being passed off as a typical member of the working-class (Tyler, 2013; Jones, 2011). This vessel acted as justification for cuts to welfare systems and measures to distance the underclass from mainstream society due to the imagined danger they posed (Tyler, 2015; 2013).

According to Bataille (1993 [1934], p.9-10), those in power create discourse to exclude the oppressed from the “moral community”, whilst maintaining separation and raising themselves “above impure human mass”. The discourses they communicate become societal ‘truths’ and work to form boundaries which exclude ‘immoral’ individuals from

opportunities to accrue value through participation in a dominant value system of capital (Skeggs, 2011; Ahmed, 2014).

Both Bataille (1993 [1934]) and Tyler (2015) show how those with power, through their discourses, leave the exploitation of those abjected to society representatives, for example the police or media. Tyler (2015) explores the media's role in legitimating neoliberal discourse on people claiming welfare, using the British reality TV show 'Benefits Street'. According to Tyler, the programme attributes a broken society in moral crisis to the problematic behaviours of welfare dependents. She felt the media's depiction of draining dependents exploited participants, using them as scapegoats for the crisis caused by capitalism in the 2008 financial crisis.

The stigmatised group of 'the homeless' could be considered as a constructed, fictitious waste group, illustrated by recent political discourse from a social media post by Ex-Home Secretary Suella Braverman (2023):

We cannot allow our streets to be taken over by rows of tents occupied by people, many of them from abroad, living on the streets as a lifestyle choice... What I want to stop, and what the law-abiding majority wants us to stop, is those who cause nuisance and distress to other people by pitching tents in public spaces, aggressively begging, stealing, taking drugs, littering and blighting our communities.

Here Braverman links homelessness with going against moral codes, placing it as an immoral choice characterised by morally wrong behaviours (stealing, littering etc.) which are threatening the moral (law-abiding) citizen. Pascale (2005, p.256) believes, "Homelessness is produced through a particular social discourse that links capitalism and morality". She implies that morality is used to justify a person's societal status, so that if a person is homeless, it is because of their moral failings, their 'weak' character and poor choices against society's moral codes. This discursive view which is often depicted in the media and in political discourse affects how society chooses to address homelessness. There are clear links between Braverman's comments on those experiencing homelessness causing "nuisance" in public spaces and the measures taken by the police to 'control' homelessness. Indeed, until June 2022, rough-sleeping and begging were criminal offences in the UK and warranted arrest (Geraghty, 2022). With relevance to this PhD, this homelessness discourse and the consequential marginalisation of those experiencing homelessness could work to restrict individuals

in society by reducing their access to spaces and sources of support and distancing them from resources. It may also have potential to increase the effect of becoming homeless on a person's dignity and identity.

### ***3.3.2 Emotional Discourse***

Ahmed (2014), like Tyler (2013), theorises how those with power create discourses to maintain their authority and marginalise others but does so with a focus on emotions. Her theory sees emotions to result from circulating discourses as opposed to from within individuals. Emotions are viewed as relational causing people to move towards (e.g. love) or away (e.g. disgust) from each other. They can cause people to form collectives, or boundaries separating themselves from others:

It is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others... emotions create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects. (Ahmed, 2014, p.10)

Ahmed argues that emotions are created as an effect of social norms. Emotions circulate around people or groups that do not meet social norms, which can create boundaries and categorization of groups. A person without a home goes against social norms. Similar to Tyler's (2013) analysis of 'the chav', Ahmed (2004) believes that emotions of fear and hate are not present inside the person. When related to this PhD, discourses of fear and hate are seen "to create the very outline" (Ahmed, 2004, p.26) of the 'homeless person' and bring those identified as homeless together as a fictitious collective to be feared and hated. Societal discourses, such as those exemplified in the Braverman (2023) quote above, create a threatening embodied stereotype of a homeless person and by being identified as homeless, an individual can embody this stereotype and the emotional discourses associated with it.

Pascale's (2005) research on the cultural production of homelessness can be used to illustrate Ahmed's ideas on the effects of circulating discourses. Pascale charts how homelessness discourses have changed over the previous decades in the US, affecting the social and material circumstances of homeless people. In the media, terms used to

describe people experiencing homelessness would change, for example between “drifter... and bum”, and “economic refugees” (Pascale, 2005, p.252-253). This reflected shifting discourses on the causes of homelessness, from pathological/individual to structural explanations. The former promote negative attachments to homeless people; they are seen to embody immoral values, as lazy, threatening a society of hardworking people and this could bring emotions of hate and fear (Ahmed, 2014). It could work to create boundaries between mainstream society and those who are homeless. The marginalisation of those experiencing homelessness works to give further power to media discourses on homelessness as less of our knowledge on it comes from our direct relationships (Pascale, 2005). The discourse of the ‘economic refugee’ contrastingly could bring emotions of compassion and sympathy, and through this a connectivity and feelings that they ‘deserve’ to be helped. They are of moral value and consequently their dignity means they are deserving of support.

### ***3.3.3 Othering: Disgust***

Both Tyler (2013; 2015) and Ahmed (2014) frequently reference the emotion disgust when discussing reactions towards those marginalised from society. According to Ahmed, disgust is experienced from the threat of contact with an unfamiliar body you assume as bad, and a fear of contamination as a result. Ahmed argues that an object of disgust entering a public space can represent danger to other users of the space, a danger of contamination.

She builds on this by exploring how disgust affects power relationships. Feelings of disgust act to form and maintain boundaries between people. Bataille (1993 [1934]) agrees, believing that it is disgust for social groups which causes those in power to abject them. Disgust relates to seeing bodies as strange and inferior and separating them off (Ahmed, 2014). It is one explanation for the efforts some of society go to to distance those who are homeless from certain spaces and places (Sibley, 1995; Cloke et al., 2008). This is of relevance to the embodied stereotype of a homeless person which can be seen as an unfamiliar object marginalised by society, that could be infectious to society through contact.

### ***3.3.4 Discourse and women***

Of importance to this study are Ahmed's discussions on patriarchal control of people's emotions. Patriarchal values can become naturalised when discourses are concealed as "established 'truths'" (Ahmed, 2014, p.169). As an example, Ahmed argues that it is discourses on feminine vulnerability and of "'the outside' as inherently dangerous" whilst the home is safe, which determine women's access to public space (Ahmed, 2014, p.69-70). So, a 'respectable' woman is linked with the home and domesticity. This narrative can act to hold women in the home by fear of threats from the outside world. Women outside, like some of the women experiencing homelessness in this study, are conditioned to fear future injury if they are alone, and these narratives "shape women's bodies as well as how those bodies inhabit space" (Ahmed, 2014, p.70). As discussed in the previous chapter, discourses like this view women without homes as deviant from social norms, as a negative otherness.

Ahmed's theories therefore contribute to discussions on how fear influences gendered geographies of homelessness and survival strategies. As fear is not evenly distributed, access to spaces is restricted for some and further enabled for others, hence the streets being male-dominated spaces where women only appear in a "shadowy way, if at all" (Wardhaugh, 1999, p.14). It could also inhibit women's abilities to accrue capital/resources needed to survive from day-to-day or exit homelessness, as these can be located in spaces where they would be required to present as more visibly homeless, for example homelessness services.

Ahmed (2014) also argues that the ranking of emotions can be used to establish social hierarchy. Emotions are ranked as positive or negative and used to characterise different socially constructed groups. This impacts how people are seen, the status they are given, and consequently their dignity. Marginalised groups are usually associated with emotions relegated to the bottom of the emotional hierarchy.

This is relevant to gender categories, which can be seen to oppress women by subordinating both emotions and characteristics considered feminine. Rationality and

emotional control are both considered intelligent and identified as masculine.

Emotionality is associated with femininity and ascribed to women:

To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body... Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as 'closer' to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement. (Ahmed, 2014, p.3)

Ahmed suggests that emotionality and consequently women are viewed as primitive and beneath men, who in contrast are seen to use reason. Weitz (2003) discusses how Charles Darwin's influential theories on evolution saw women to be less evolved than men as he believed they did not partake in the same natural selection and their development was inhibited by the effort required for reproduction. Hence, they were governed more by emotions than morality and were "child-like" (Weitz, 2003, p.6). This form of patriarchal oppression not only works to exclude them "from the realms of thought and rationality" (Ahmed, 2014, p.170) but restricts their capital accumulation.

Illouz (1997) notes that, historically, emotional composure has been linked with respectability and therefore can bring embodied capital. She looks at research on the desirable characteristics of those in workplace leadership roles in regard to economic productivity. The research saw emotional composure to bring symbolic capital indicating that a person is reliable and predictable. Therefore, to associate women with emotionality could work to exclude them from leadership positions.

Nussbaum (1999a) wrote of how patriarchal attitudes work to violate women's inherent dignity. Rationality and morality according to Kant is what separates humans from animals (Franklin, 2005; Rosen, 2012). To be excluded from rationality and delegitimised as immoral, could be to be excluded from humanity. In evolutionary terms if women are seen as more animal-like than men, this would raise questions on their eligibility as bearers of dignity which could affect how women experiencing homelessness are viewed and treated by society, and consequently their felt-dignity.

### 3.4 The effect of dominant discourse and capital on felt-dignity

The literature discussed so far posits that societal discourse can result in emotions circulating which move groups towards or away from capital. Acquiring capital can raise an individual's value and social standing, with societal discourse setting what is the 'correct' capital to possess (Skeggs, 2011). Societal discourse can therefore distance marginalised groups from accruing capital under dominant value systems whilst simultaneously shaming them for their deficit capital (Tyler, 2013; 2015; Skeggs, 2004). With individuals' moral-worth often linked to their capital accumulation, those marginalised can have their dignity violated with disrespectful, and sometimes dehumanising, treatment.

With relevance to this PhD, literature suggested that if a person is viewed and treated as if they are of low moral-worth in society, this will affect how they feel about their own identity and dignity. According to Sayer (2011, p.215), "to function well and to flourish requires good relationships with others – in which people respect each other's capacities and do not take advantage of their vulnerabilities". This indicates that a person's felt-dignity is influenced by social interaction and how we treat each other. Being disrespected by others can be internalised affecting our self-value (McKenzie, 2015). Sayer's (2011) reference to individuals' capacities and vulnerabilities could also suggest that the concept of capital, seeing social relationships as commodities, may be undignifying.

According to Skeggs (2004), discourses which work to inscribe people with societal positive or negative worth through economic value, also affect self-worth. Farrugia and Watson (2011) agree, arguing that in modern society we relate to societal structures as individuals rather than as a collective. In this way we see ourselves as responsible for our social standing rather than it being a result of social inequality. An individual can feel responsible for being of positive value to society, despite their unequal access to capital. Farrugia and Watson note therefore that this discourse of individual responsibility can lead to self-blame for people who are experiencing homelessness. Their study's participants spoke of the shame of being unable to responsibly support

themselves and consequently being homeless because “you’ve let yourself get like that” (Farrugia & Watson, 2011, p.117).

McKenzie (2015) sees discourses shaping the life chances of their subjects (residents on a Nottingham council estate), but also affecting how the subjects think about themselves. McKenzie relays the nuances expressed to her by the residents, the anger of many towards the societal narratives of their community as the “perpetrators of ‘breaking Britain’” (p.20), but also the low self-worth and the self-blame communicated by residents for making ‘bad choices’ earlier in life which resulted in their current lack of resources.

Despite this, counter-narratives were also expressed by residents, potentially a way to create more positive sense of selves and dignity. McKenzie says that residents “believe they have something special, something that is to be envied, and something that has kept at bay the onslaught of the various political parties, institutions and policies” (McKenzie, 2015, p.198). Residents were seen to have a positive self-value and sense of belonging through their “community networks”, family, friends and neighbours (p.169). This could be thought of as using social capital outside the dominant societal field to preserve dignity. The dignity maintenance strategies of marginalised groups are discussed further in the next section.

According to Kantian philosophy, dignity is a commonality of all humans and brings an entitlement to respect from others and self-honour (Rosen, 2012). This idea that dignity brings self-honour is particularly interesting when discussing felt-dignity and dignity maintenance strategies, as with a Kantian conception of dignity self-honour would result from autonomy in following our moral values (Rosen, 2012). Moral values differ between cultures and this variation can exist as much amongst cultures within the same society as between different societies (Graham et al., 2016). Moral variation therefore could mean that someone could see themselves acting in a dignified manner according to their values, whilst an observer sees their behaviour as undignified.

This connection between moral values and dignity, and how there can be a difference in how moral we feel and how moral we are perceived to be by others, is important when looking at ways that marginalised groups who have had their dignity threatened by discourse have worked to maintain it.



### 3.5 Marginalised groups

This section looks in more detail at dignity maintenance strategies used by marginalised groups. Bourdieu (1993, p.2) defines those who are marginalised as those who sit “outside the social space” but “in the social world”. Of interest then is how those living in this “borderland” (Eubanks, 2018, p.205) are affected by systems of capital. In terms of Bourdieu’s theories, with the hierarchical nature of capital accrual, marginalised groups are “often unable to convert into much more than welfare dependency and/or sporadic work histories, they have little ‘exchange value’ and are likely to be understood as deficit” (Bullen & Kenway, 2005, p.52). They do not have equal access to the fields of exchange (Bourdieu, 1993).

Bourdieu does not explain how those seen to be deficit in capital and narrativized as of negative value to society by those in power develop a ‘personhood’ of value (Skeggs, 2011). The literature already discussed speaks of the stigmatisation, the shaming and the scapegoating of marginalised groups through societal discourse which works to subordinate and immobilise individuals, and at times dehumanise them (Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2013; Ahmed, 2014). This therefore could impact both individuals’ inherent and achievement dignity.

Other research literature however highlights the resilience of marginalised groups against this negative rhetoric, allowing individual members to maintain a positive dignified sense-of-self. This includes the strategies of subcultural capital, alternative local value systems and sub-group comparisons as discussed below.

### ***3.5.1 Subcultural capital***

Capitals that those marginalised have available to draw upon as currency within their social groups may bring essential resources in their field but be seen as deficit capital in other fields (Watson, 2016; Bullen & Kenway, 2005). Bullen and Kenway (2005) discuss 'subcultural capital' in relation to 'at risk' schoolgirls. They propose that many of the girls in their study deployed an embodied 'tough girl' strategy as a way of accruing subcultural capital, which is of benefit within their localised environment. Although this strategy could be of deficit capital in the field of education, the girls felt it brought respect from peers and symbolic capital in the form of a status which protected them from others taking advantage of them. In addition, toughness could be seen to bring social capital in the form of belonging to the subcultural group through common behaviours. I would argue that the respect and belonging resulting from this subcultural capital can help the girls develop self-value.

### ***3.5.2 Local value systems/alternative narratives***

"Local value systems" (McKenzie, 2015, p.201) create alternative discourse often with a different moral value code (Skeggs, 2011). McKenzie (2015) speaks of local value systems in the context of a poor neighbourhood faced with external stigmatising narratives. She found that externally the community's value was disregarded and disrespected because it did not fit external value systems, but within the community positive meanings and values were given to tastes, life choices and practices. Through this local value system, a different, dignified culture existed.

Skeggs (2011; 2004) also identifies value systems which opposed the dominant system of building value through capital accrual using examples from her research with working-class communities. She speaks of local circuits of value addressing "the daily struggle for value" where people use different ways of attaching value to themselves which did not treat social relationships and units of time as commodities in order to gain resources (Skeggs, 2004, p.2). Instead, value came through gaining the respect of others through positive social relationships, through care, loyalty and moral values.

This could be seen as a value system based on the previously mentioned communal relationships as opposed to exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979). In places there was a reversal of moral values exhibited in dominant culture as way to attach self-value. Skeggs (2011) uses the example of it being seen as morally wrong for mothers to be working full-time, instead of caring 'properly' for their children.

### ***3.5.3 Sub-group comparison***

Local value systems can be a way for marginalised individuals to compare themselves favourably to dominant society, seeing themselves as morally superior (as in the example of childcare above). Within the literature there were also examples of marginalised groups using subgroup value systems.

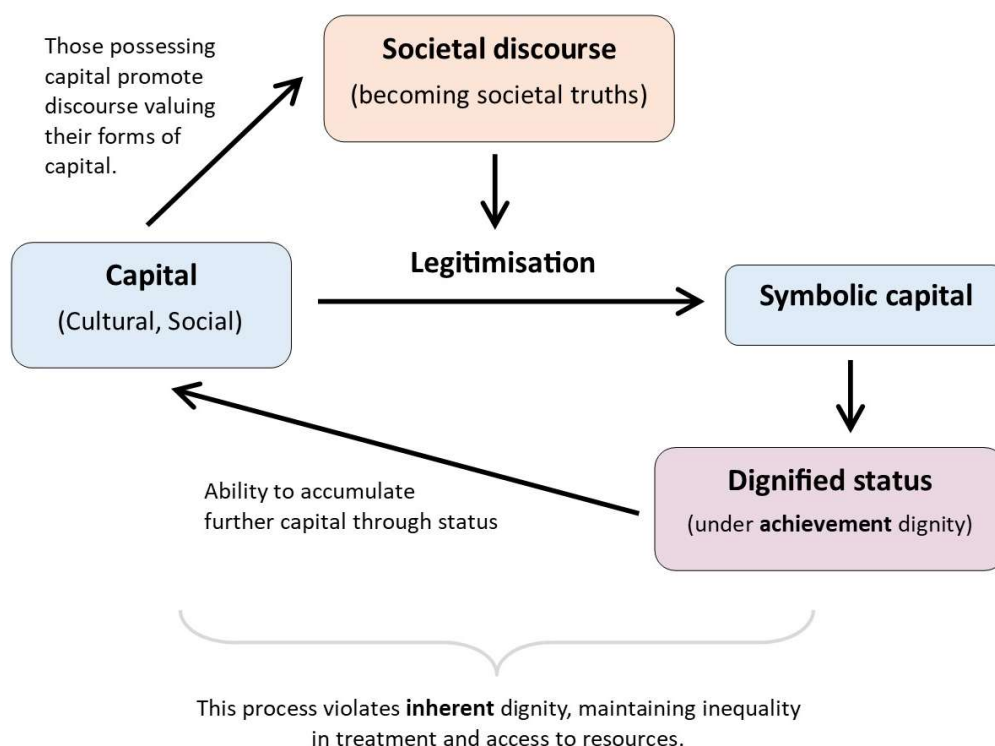
According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), we base our identity on the groups to which we belong. As previously discussed, a sense of group-belonging can have positive and negative impacts on self-image and determine social status. As humans we seek a positive self-identity and so in order to enhance our self-esteem we amplify the similarities between members within groups, and differences that exist with other groups. We make comparisons with other groups in order to see our group, and consequently ourselves, favourably. If we are unable to gain a positive self-identity from our group associations then we might aim to leave that group (for example, attempts to disassociate from a 'homeless identity').

There are examples of people experiencing homelessness categorising themselves into subgroups and seeing their subgroup as morally superior to others to retain a positive self-image (Farrington & Robinson, 1999). People experiencing homelessness could view themselves as superior to groups who are also drug-users (Boydell et al., 2000; Casey et al., 2008). Subgroup comparisons provide one explanation for why the use of informal support, as opposed to homelessness services, can affect an individual's sense-of-self and dignity. Snow and Anderson (1987) find that groups of people experiencing homelessness who distance themselves from homelessness services see themselves as more self-reliant and resourceful than groups using services, demeaning those who depend on services.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn together theories on dignity, capital and societal discourse into a framework to support the interpretation and analysis of the data collected (see Chapters 5-7), data exploring how women experiencing homelessness' dignity and sense-of-self is affected by their support choices. The interplay between capital, societal discourse and dignity in this framework is shown in Figure 1. Capital and dignified status are influenced by societal discourse legitimising what and who is of value. Individuals can obtain resources through their capital, raising their status.

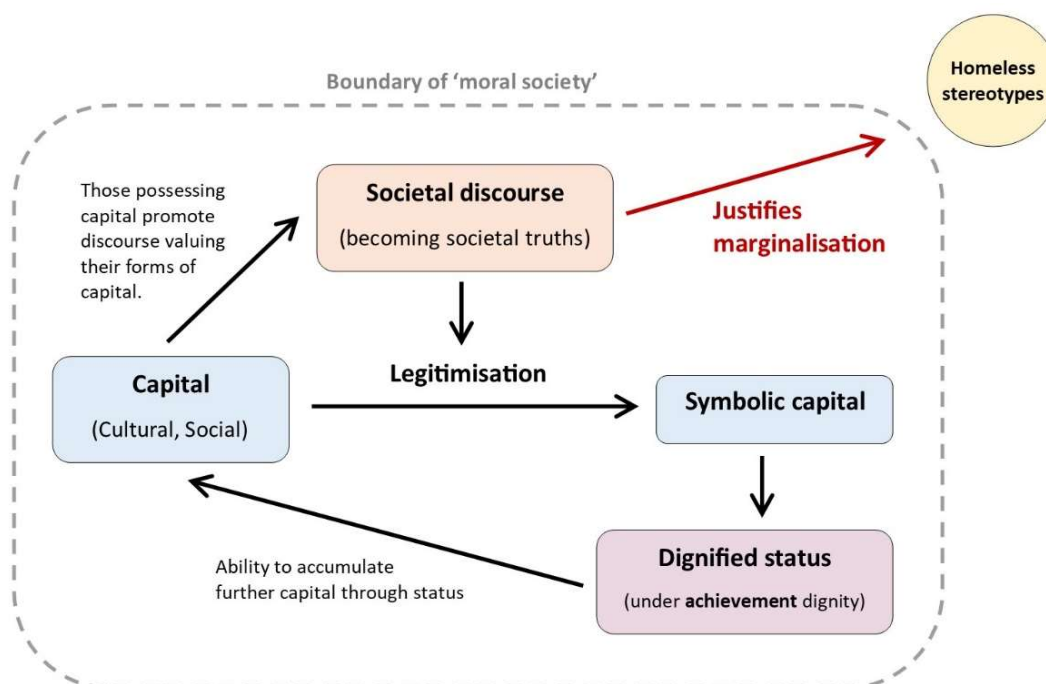
**Figure 1:** *Capital, Societal Discourse and Dignity*



By accruing capital and increasing their perceived value in and to society, a person is seen as more dignified, worthy of respect and of more moral-worth. Morality is a core aspect of dignity discussed in this chapter, and key to the developed framework, as

societal discourse about who ‘deserves’ resources has basis in moral argument. Societal discourse can exclude women experiencing homelessness from capital accumulation and status-raising by portraying them as immoral and low-worth (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Marginalisation**



This theoretical framework sees discourses propagated and disseminated by media, politicians and those who already hold capital, to marginalise women experiencing homelessness from society, often scapegoating them for society’s problems. Discourse can create stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness which embody immorality and become objects of hate, fear, disgust and shame. These stereotypes work to maintain social hierarchy and inequality by creating boundaries between the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’. When judged by these stereotypes, as opposed to as individuals, women experiencing homelessness can be immobilised from accumulating value under the dominant value system of capital, and consequently a dignified status. They can sometimes be dehumanised through societal discourse, violating their inherent dignity. The process illustrated above (figure 2), works instead to *justify* a woman experiencing homelessness’ undignified status, poor treatment in society and their lack of resources.

Women experiencing homelessness therefore often have few resources available to them, influencing their support choices.

The framework developed views the data on both societal (see figures 1 & 2) and individual levels. A woman's felt-dignity and sense-of-self when homeless is likely to be influenced by how able she is to distance herself from homelessness stereotypes, which this PhD aims to explore through her support-related strategies (see Chapter 6).

The framework sees women's dignity and sense-of-self to be affected, but not determined by the treatment they receive based on societal discourse. Dignity and identity maintenance strategies can help women experiencing homelessness maintain more positive self-views. It is a woman's self-view that this research's in-depth, qualitative methodologies work to understand, whilst considering the impact of the wider societal climate on it.

A review of existing literature on homelessness did not find evidence of a dignity framework applied in this way. There are fleeting references to dignity in the literature on discourse and non-economic capital, but the connection between dignity, capital and discourse remains largely unexplored. When looking at non-economic capital and other value systems, the majority of the literature focused on working-class communities, rather than those experiencing homelessness who often have depleted social connections, less stability and less resources for respectability.

## 4. Methodology and Method

The theoretical framework set out in Chapter 3 directly influences this study's methodology and method:

- It provides a framework through which to explore how a person's felt-dignity is affected, but not determined by, how they are treated. Therefore, it is subjective realities that are most important.
- The framework shows how the research questions require in-depth answers to understand women's motivations for their choices, their felt experiences and identities, therefore quantitative methods are unsuitable.
- The framework highlights the importance of including interviews with support workers (in addition to women experiencing homelessness' accounts) to capture the wider climate in which women's homelessness is situated (illustrated in Chapter 3, figure 1).
- The framework sets out how stereotypes are used to marginalise women experiencing homelessness. This methodology opposingly views women experiencing homelessness as individuals with different identities, life circumstances and preferences. Consequently, methods are individualised to each participant and decided through discussions with them.

### 4.1 Research philosophy

The research used a qualitative methodology, exploring the subjective experiences and feelings of women experiencing homelessness. It captured individuals' experiences in-depth, working with them to reflect on personal meanings. Qualitative approaches appreciate the nuanced, knotty and potentially contradictory nature of data, assuming that explanations to research questions will be messy (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Quantitative methods were considered inadequate for capturing the required depth, nuance and search for meanings that would meet the study's aims. They would be unable to provide the flexibility to each participant's needs as outlined in the remainder of this chapter. Despite commonalities existing between participants'

experiences and feelings, the resulting knowledge is seen as contextualised and cannot be generalised to wider populations (Goodley, 2004).

The philosophical perspective underpinning the research saw participants' social worlds to exist separately from independent reality (Ritchie et al., 2014). The resulting data was viewed as participants' interpretations of happenings, their "life-embedded truth" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.44), with the meanings given influenced by their individual life experiences and the unique social, historical and political context they took place in (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). As focused on in this chapter, the meanings given might be influenced by participants' past traumas. As well as affecting how we view their narratives, the unique context of the data also affected the relational and methodological underpinnings of this research, as will be discussed.

Participant accounts were, however, interpreted through my lens as the researcher and analyst (discussed further below). In this study, a reflexive approach was therefore systematically conducted throughout, and researcher subjectivity was seen as an important resource for interpreting meaning as opposed to a threat to rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Gough & Madill, 2012).

This chapter begins by presenting the study's methodology including reflexivity and positionality, before moving on to discuss the research process underpinned by the methodology. The methodology was based on current reflective practices in the care sector. Person-centred care and trauma-informed approaches, practices originally emerging from psychological theory, hold great importance in conducting ethical research on sensitive topics or with vulnerable participants. A dignified methodology, in alignment with this PhD's topic, was then considered using some of the same principles along with philosophy on dignity.

#### ***4.1.1 Trauma-informed methodology***

Trauma-informed approaches are increasingly being used in health and social care practice and referenced in policy, with growing evidence of their benefits (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities [OHID], 2022). In the UK, Psychologically Informed



Environment (PIE) (Johnson & Haigh, 2010) principles have been progressively implemented into homelessness services, aiming to transform them into spaces which feel emotionally safe and adapt to their users' psychological needs through the reflective practice of those working with them (Buckley & Tickle, 2023; Johnson & Haigh, 2010).

Trauma-informed approaches promote greater awareness amongst professionals of how trauma can affect service users and aim to make services more accessible to people who have experienced trauma. OHID (2022) list six principles of trauma-informed approaches: Prioritising service user and staff's physical, psychological and emotional safety, trustworthiness of the organisation, service user choice, staff and service user collaboration (in service decisions and delivery), staff and service user empowerment, and cultural consideration (understanding people as individuals, not stereotypes).

These principles are also relevant to researching sensitive topics with vulnerable groups such as people experiencing homelessness. According to Bimpson et al. (2022, p.278), "Trauma-informed' practice in research presents a significant opportunity for ethical and methodological development". A trauma-informed research methodology understands the impact of participants' trauma-histories, and through this understanding, can respond appropriately, putting measures in place to establish their physical and psychological safety (Karmakar & Duggal, 2024).

Many people who have experienced homelessness have also experienced repeated trauma from an early age, affecting formative bonds with caregivers and consequently the qualities of their future relationships (McGrath et al., 2023). Trauma is seen as a cause of alcohol/drug dependency and poor physical and mental health (Cockersell, 2018). Cockersell (2011) finds that anxiety disorders and depression affect 50-80% of people experiencing homelessness opposed to 11% of the general population, and 42% have attempted suicide opposed to 1.3% of the general population. According to Hutchinson et al. (2015) experiences of trauma are particularly common amongst women experiencing homelessness:

Women's homelessness often occurs after prolonged experiences of trauma, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, frequently within the home. It often follows from and results in a cycle of mental ill health and substance use,

and a myriad of other problems. Many homeless women are left grieving for lost childhoods and lost children, and the impact is felt across generations. (p.3)

Women's trauma histories are found to be "undeniably complex" with their effects "long lasting" (Hutchinson et al., 2015, p.4). Many women experiencing homelessness in Hutchinson et al. (2015) had experienced domestic abuse in childhood and adulthood and 79% of them had had children removed, trauma which Hess (2023) sees to mark significant deterioration in women's mental health and trust for services. It is therefore imperative that a trauma-informed methodology underpins this study's methods.

Research is guided by the principle of doing no harm and so it is important to understand trauma in order to avoid retraumatisation. The impact of people's previous trauma needs to be considered as a creator of potential risks and measures put in place to reduce these risks before it is appropriate for the research to commence (Karmakar & Duggal, 2024). Participating in research can also be therapeutic for participants. According to Stein et al. (2000), the foundation of traditional psychoanalysis views suppressed trauma to play out in masked forms in people's behaviours, but externalising that trauma (for example by speaking or writing about it) can give some resolution to the internal conflict. They emphasize that later psychoanalytic thinking suggests more nuance, as the benefit of expressing trauma is dependent on it being done in a context and at a time appropriate for the individual, and usually requires repeated opportunities to express the experience. In the context of research interviews, Stein et al. also suggest that the therapeutic quality would depend on the rapport with the interviewer and how understood and heard the participant feels by them.

Trauma-informed thinking affects what research methods are considered appropriate. Self-rating scales can feel inaccurate and inappropriate to participants for defining their experiences of trauma, whereas structured interviews are more likely to be experienced as supportive (Stein et al., 2000). Despite this, interviews for some can be experienced as retraumatising and measures should be taken to reduce the impact of this. It is not only the choice of methods that is important, but the way these methods are conducted. Taking a trauma-informed approach to interviewing would "mean recognizing that participants can have a history of adverse/traumatic experiences,

actively recognizing signs of distress in order to adopt preventive strategies to mitigate re-traumatization and providing a safe space for participants to share their experiences.” (Karmakar & Duggal, 2024, p.35).

Karmakar and Duggal’s (2024) discussion of strategies to avoid retraumatisation through participation in research, aligns closely with current university ethics guidelines and procedures. This includes the importance of the participant information sheet, informed consent, research transparency, emphasis on the participants’ abilities to end or pause their participation, confidentiality, periodic checks-ins and debriefs. It is recommended that researchers present as calm, compassionate and empathetic, and can recognise non-verbal signs of retraumatisation, regrounding participants in their present environment if distressed.

This recommendation, as well as Stein et al.’s (2000) emphasis on the importance of the research’s context to its therapeutic quality, suggests that researchers conducting research with individuals who have experienced trauma would benefit from training in trauma-informed approaches to research. Throughout the fieldwork period, I found my previous professional experience in support and therapeutic roles, and my attendance on multiple trainings on trauma-informed approaches, to be essential. Even with this, the research encounters presented challenges and brought self-doubt about how best to navigate perceived signs of distress in retelling trauma. My reflective notes written after a research encounter with one woman with experiences of homelessness, Jess, discusses this:

I felt anxious during the research encounter that Jess was making herself vulnerable by divulging difficult memories and potentially traumatic experiences that had not been asked for in my research’s scope or by the question I asked. On reflection she did answer the question thoroughly with the narrative she described but I hadn’t expected the depth and vulnerability this brought.

Jess had appeared distressed to me when talking about past experiences and consequently I tried to ground her back in her current and preferable life, spending the last 20% of the research encounter discussing this with her without audio-recording. I also acknowledged to Jess how difficult her experiences must be to talk about. Jess (an asylum seeker) responded by telling me she felt fine talking about these experiences, she had only spoken about her experiences in England rather than the more

challenging ones preceding her journey here. Jess' response demonstrated how it can be difficult to translate potential signs of distress in others. Establishing familiar relationships with individuals prior to their participation could assist, however this may not be possible within a study's time constraints.

Bimpson et al. (2022) discuss similar ethical considerations when working to prevent women in their study being retraumatised through their participation:

Our ethical responsibility as researchers in this project was... complex. There was a fine balance between allowing women to recount their experiences while making sure that they were not retraumatised. Researchers made ongoing careful judgements that erred on the side of caution about whether to continue an interview... and how far to probe issues most relevant to the interview questions. (p.278)

Throughout the fieldwork, I chose to take this cautious approach and tried to make sure participants did not feel pressure to continue in the research if they did not feel comfortable to do so. Jess told me she wanted to meet again and on reflection I thought it important to meet once more. I felt she had more to say which could be potentially therapeutic for her. I also wanted to indicate the value of her contribution by listening to what else she wanted to say.

Other elements of trauma-informed approaches as defined by OHID (2022) are collaboration, choice and empowerment. The philosophy of choice was especially important to my way of working, taking a subtle form throughout the fieldwork. Where possible, how a woman would participate in the study was discussed and decided on between the two of us, based on her availability, current life circumstances and preferences (largely how she was most comfortable). Each research encounter was therefore individualised to each participant's needs including location, methods, number of research encounters and how data was recorded. This is discussed further in sections 4.13 and 4.3 below.

Trauma-informed approaches in homelessness services can be compromised due to the difficult climate within which they operate. Limited resources, understaffing, high staff turnover and high caseloads can result in firefighting being prioritised and commissioner targets can lack understanding for the nature of trauma and trauma-informed approaches (McCarthy, 2022; Watson et al., 2019). Researchers, similarly, may experience high workloads with strict time constraints, making it harder to

conduct research in ways which allow the researcher to build trusting relationships with participants before interviewing them about personal and sensitive topics. This is less prevalent amongst PhD research which can give more flexibility and time for using trauma-informed approaches.

Watson et al.'s (2019) research with workers in homelessness services also discusses the worker's emotional capacity as a barrier to connecting with service users. This human connection allows workers to understand the needs of a person, reduce the power imbalance between them and build trust, therefore working with them in trauma-informed ways. The intensity of the job role, often due to the impact of past traumas on the behaviours of those they are working with, can have great effect on the workers' own emotions. In Watson et al.'s study, workers' expressed feelings of being unsupported, with heavy emotional scores on them and implications for their abilities to support others. Those workers receiving reflective practice sessions at their workplace, helping them to dissect and work with the emotional dynamics they encountered, noted positive benefits. As a researcher, you are likely to be less submerged in the emotional dynamics of these settings, however reflective practice and putting measures of support in place could still be of great importance. Karmakar and Duggal (2024) note looking after researcher wellbeing in their list of recommendations for trauma-informed research. This includes establishing formal supervision, which was actioned in this PhD's research alongside post-research encounter check-ins.

#### ***4.1.2 Person-centred methodology***

A person-centred methodology aligns with a trauma-informed methodology and principles of collaboration, choice and empowerment mentioned above but expanded on here due to their importance for the study.

Person-centred care in support work focuses on the needs and preferences of an individual when designing their care. It looks at the whole person, recognising the "broad biological, social, psychological, cultural and spiritual dimensions of each person, their families and communities" (McCormack et al., 2017, p.3). The philosophy

behind person-centred care is respect and understanding for others. It emerged from the work of psychotherapist Carl Rogers who saw the benefits of clients directing their own therapy as equal partners in the therapeutic relationship (Cramer, 1991; Rogers, 1961).

According to Lariviere (2019), person-centred approaches also have great importance to research:

We need not only to think about person-centred care but also person-centred research. The argument for scientific validity is no longer an adequate pretence to disadvantage people from participating in studies. We must develop innovative techniques for robust and rigorous research that also considers the lived experiences of participants as people with full lives. (p.364)

Lariviere provides examples where research does not prioritise participants' needs including extensively long participant information sheets written in scientific language and time-consuming, frequent research encounters involving long distance travel and time off work. This puts "the burden of participation" on the participants rather than the researchers and he argues instead that methods should be co-designed with participants to establish reasonable expectations, value their contribution, and reduce the power imbalance between researcher and participant (Lariviere, 2019, p.364).

In Lariviere (2019) and related literature, person-centred approaches are largely considered in relation to health research and patient trials. I believe person-centred approaches also bring great value to qualitative research with people experiencing homelessness. Menih (2020, p.1141) who conducts research with women experiencing homelessness writes: "The nature of vulnerable populations also requires a methodological approach that is as flexible and unintrusive as possible", whilst Bimpson et al. (2022) state that the method's flexibility to participants' needs is particularly important when researching sensitive topics as it gives individuals control when sharing their stories.

Lariviere (2019) argues that the multiple identities and life circumstances of participants should be considered when designing methods, not just the part of their identity which meets the study's inclusion criteria. In homelessness research, I suggest there could be an increased propensity to overlook people experiencing homelessness' other identities, as the 'homeless identity' is one which can overshadow them (Perry,

2013; McCarthy, 2013). It is also an identity associated with deficit societal capital, lack of purpose and idleness (Pascale, 2005; Boydell et al., 2000), which could cause researchers to assume that people experiencing homelessness who consent to participate should be flexible to participate on the researcher's terms, as they have few other commitments. It neglects them as individuals, their needs and other identities. In this PhD's study, the women experiencing homelessness were mothers, workers and volunteers, identities which affected how they could participate.

Even when participants' circumstances are more aligned with homelessness stereotypes, for example substance addiction or poor mental health, these affect how they engage in the research and need consideration when designing methods of participation. According to Charlie, a street outreach worker interviewed for this study:

Some people's drug-use is a full-time job. You wake up, you're rattling, you've got to go shoplift, then you've got to go sell whatever you've shop-lifted to then get the money to go score, to have a hit, and then you're back to square one... So... sometimes it's actually finding time in your day. (Charlie)

In these and similar circumstances, researcher flexibility is essential. With one woman in this study, she made me aware of her general routines, when in the day she was likely to be present in particular public spaces, and invited me to join her. I tried to meet her during these times with the understanding that her routine may change and that she had other priorities. The length of our research encounters significantly varied based on my assessment of her emotional state, and I always asked whether my being there was appropriate before sitting with her.

One interview with an informal supporter for this PhD, Jack, felt very pertinent when discussing the importance of person-centred approaches alongside the constraints of academic frameworks:

If you're someone coming into a space with a research angle, then there's a certain depth that you can get to... maybe the question... I would have for you is like how is this work more than extractive? How is it feeding the person as well as giving me what I need for my research... That it's not someone coming in, having a conversation and taking that material away, and not coming back... The more time you can spend in projects, the more people are going to trust you... The really important question is, do I deserve their trust?... and it's fine with me but at that point of encounter you're giving someone a form to fill in, then that's like this is an institutional exchange and I think that it's very difficult to get beyond that in an academic framework. (Jack)

Jack spoke of the need for mutual benefit, the importance of time for trust and the responsibilities as a researcher. Jacobs et al. (2017) concur that person-centred research is relational, focusing on the researcher-participant relationship. The approach addresses power imbalances and the needs of each, which Jacobs et al. believe can obstruct research if left unaddressed. As with trauma-informed approaches, connectivity is the key principle of person-centred research, with research being *with* participants rather than *about* them. It involves being attentive to the other's needs, good communication, respect of differences, lack of domination, participant voice and choice, and reflexivity. In this way the research could be considered "more than extractive" (Jack).

In this PhD study, where possible, an open communication would take place with a potential participant at the outset to establish what their commitment could entail, taking account of their circumstances and preferences. This included how much time they could give, when and where they could meet and what research methods they preferred. With one participant, for example, our discussions of her needs led to us speaking on a bench in an empty children's playground in her neighbourhood so her child could play whilst we chatted in private. She was happy to speak with me, but as a single mother with employment she was time-constrained.

This PhD study intended to apply all the principles noted by Jacobs et al. (2017), however there were barriers in doing this. As suggested by Jack, there were some constraints when working within an academic framework, for example the signing of a consent form. However, there was some flexibility in when and how this was done, as long as verbal consent was attained from the outset.

#### ***4.1.3 A dignified methodology***

A methodology which is dignified could be seen as tightly bound to person-centred and trauma-informed approaches, advancing these care sector best practices into a methodology which embodies the very premise of this PhD research. Respect of participants' needs, preferences and identities are threads running through all three methodological components.



As dignity is at the heart of this PhD, it was crucial that my research methods and the manner in which I conducted the research reflected my learning from philosophical perspectives on dignity and my own sense of what constitutes a dignified experience. Philosophical theories of dignity (as discussed in Chapter 3) link a person's dignity with being treated as an individual of value with individual needs, control and autonomy. Applying this to the research methodology, generated the following principles:

- Respecting that the researcher's moral judgements may be different from the participant's due to differences in our cultures, ages and life experiences.
- Accepting that participants' communication of their experiences may be influenced by their need to maintain dignity, and therefore see themselves in positions of moral superiority.
- Respecting participants' privacy by ensuring they control their interview/discussion.
- Avoiding replicating the experiences of some participants when accessing services which they felt had violated their dignity, such as asking for personal information before trust has been built.
- Giving participants' power over how they want to participate based on their preferences, individual needs and circumstances.
- Approaching participants' narratives with compassion and empathy, removing judgement and working to understand their perspectives.

There is overlap with the principles of trauma-informed and person-centred approaches discussed above because those principles largely work to respect people's dignity.

My methods and research approach aimed to encompass the above principles by offering participants as much choice and control as possible. Prior to participation, potential participants were asked about their capacity and preferences for participation. Possible methods were suggested and how to tailor them was discussed with each individual, for example some women could only meet once, some wanted to walk whilst we spoke, and one participant wanted to write her answers instead of speaking. Questions asked during interviews/discussions were intentionally broad, so participants had greater control over the focus and direction of the discussion, rather

than asking more 'closed' set questions. However, I would pick up on and prompt around points of interest.

In addition, the study's subjectivist epistemological position contributed to its dignified methodology. Research evidence shows that people experiencing homelessness suffer the indignity of not being believed and understood by services (Hess, 2023). The methodology helped counter these experiences, accepting participants' accounts without question. The knowledge generated from the research was based on their accounts as 'truth'.

At times the knowledge and perspective that I had built as a homelessness support worker conflicted with the participants' accounts on topics such as formal support systems (discussed further in the reflexivity section). A dignified methodology respects that neither view is right or wrong. What matters is participants' expression of their experience, their beliefs and behaviours.

## **4.2 Reflexivity and positionality**

Subjectivity in qualitative research is unavoidable and as a result a reflexive approach is required: "The qualitative researcher cannot be an objective bystander, collecting data in a personally disinterested fashion; they should become immersed in their work and be aware of the emotions it evokes and the presence and impact of their personal values" (Carpenter, 2018, p.40).

Reflexivity can present a transparent view of the research and in doing so contextualise the findings (Hoolachan, 2016). I adopted a reflexive research approach, recording thoughts and feelings in a research journal. In doing so, reflexivity was a valuable resource for interpreting situated meaning in the emerging data, strengthening the research's rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Hoolachan, 2016). In this section examples of how reflexivity was practiced are discussed.

#### ***4.2.1 Professional background***

I considered the influence of my professional background throughout the research. I have worked and volunteered in different homelessness services in a variety of roles such as a support worker with a caseload in hostels for 16-24-year-olds, an assessment and reconnection worker for adults found rough-sleeping, and an art psychotherapist in homelessness hostels.

I found myself at times seeing experiences reported by participants from the perspective of a worker, and internally questioning some of the accounts expressed. For example, there were times when I could see solutions and opportunities where the participant felt there were none, and my knowledge of service eligibility criteria made me cast doubt over the accuracy of their perspective. In addition, as a worker I had previously implemented the service rules that some women talked about negatively, and so had a different view of why they were in place based on scarcity or safety. I felt that my view as a worker and researcher should not be privileged over that of someone living through homelessness as it often can be in support organisations. Although experiencing something does not mean that you understand it (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001), this PhD explored the effect of experiencing homelessness on women's felt-dignity and therefore they should be considered the expert. It is through this framing that my professional background had less effect on the data's interpretation, because I cannot cast doubt on how services and systems make a person feel and a woman's felt truth.

There were other implications of my professional background. On one occasion I spoke of having previously worked in homelessness services to a potential participant which, on reflection, could have impacted her decision not to take part. I felt that being associated with these services could have a variety of effects for women who had negative experiences of services and staff. This includes negatively influencing their views of me and my motives, making them feel inhibited about expressing negative opinions of services, and making me appear more of an outsider. This reflection influenced my decision in most circumstances to not state my professional background to the women participating.

#### ***4.2.2 Insider/outsider***

During fieldwork I existed as an insider and outsider in different contexts, where an insider is considered a member of the group being researched, with the characteristic or experience being studied in common (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

My professional experience and knowledge made me seem like an insider to some workers participating in the research. In a couple of cases, I volunteered for the organisations they worked for, or with an organisation observation, had been volunteering alongside them for a period and had spent time in their office before asking whether they would participate. My insider position provided opportunities for observation (discussed below) and enabled trust and rapport with the staff participating, which I felt made them comfortable during the observation.

When researching with women experiencing homelessness, I felt I was perceived by them as an outsider. Although I have had periods of unstable housing where, by definition, I would have been homeless, my experiences felt extremely minor in terms of the emotional impact and the fact I had accommodation options to help avoid serious hardship. Therefore, I did not disclose this to participants. To the women who identified as homeless, I was an outsider with relative privilege. Some women talked of the importance of lived-experienced workers in services and how their mutual experiences helped them feel understood. One woman told me that you could never understand homelessness without having been homeless yourself. This opinion suggests that my outsider position could form a barrier in the research relationship, potentially affecting what the participant felt comfortable to talk about. Interestingly, with those who had not identified as homeless when by definition they were, I did not feel as if they saw me as an outsider, which was an important observation when it came to analysing the data.

Throughout the fieldwork I felt my gender affected the insider-outsider dynamic. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.73), “no position of genderless neutrality can be achieved” by the researcher, and this was particularly true in this

study where gender was central to the participant's experiences. My gender felt essential to the research, it physically afforded me access to women-only spaces and meant that I presented as less threatening to many of the women who had previously experienced violence from men which had shaped their responses to gender.

#### ***4.2.3 Cultural capital***

I have always been conscious of my accent in homelessness services, although not particularly 'posh', it marks me as having some cultural capital and as not being local. Interacting with people in the role of a postgraduate researcher at a high level of education exacerbated this discomfort. The cultural capital this gave led to my feelings of "being positioned and classified", heightening my fear of being seen as 'snobbish' and judgemental by "real and imagined others" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 4).

When trying to work in a more collaborative fashion with participants, asking them to state their participation needs and preferences, I felt that differences in our cultural capital caused a power imbalance which could, if not addressed, disempower them in the research process. This felt particularly prominent when working with two women who had come to England as asylum seekers. These women seemed to take more passive positions in the research process when I was trying to encourage choice-making and the adaptation of methods to their needs. Some participants (women and supporters) suggested that the asylum system requires people to perform passivity, like Sara: "if you don't have that 'oh I can do that', you are gone", and Frances: "there's almost like an erosion of the self in it as people have to do whatever it takes to comply with the system". In addition to their experiences of the asylum process potentially meaning that the women expect a lack of power in the research process, as a white British researcher, racial differences were present in our dynamic. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.75) note how race "is, of course, not merely a matter of physical appearance, but is also defined in terms of culture, power and personal style". Racial and power differences increase the importance of a person-centred approach, aiming to privilege their needs. In my anxiety to do this, I found myself emphasizing these women's choices and rights (e.g. the right to withdraw from the research or not answer

any questions asked) to excessive levels, in a way that I did less with other women, particularly the few interviewed with more cultural capital. A participant who worked with ethnic communities, expressed her thoughts that researching with minority ethnic communities could often feel extractive and exploitative. She noted the importance of the voucher given, as respect for community members participating in the research.

### **4.3 The research process**

A person-centred, trauma-informed and dignity-centred approach to the research has been integrated throughout, from topic selection to writing up, although at times there were barriers to implementation. I worked with participants to decide how was best for them to participate based on their circumstances, time constraints and what they felt most comfortable with. The limitations of this study's methods are discussed in Chapter 8. As discussed previously, the methodology chosen was grounded in good ethical practice making ethics central to the research process.

#### ***4.3.1 Ethical considerations***

Prior to participant recruitment and data collection, I submitted an ethics application detailing proposed data collection methods, data management and risk management. I attached copies of participant information sheets, consent forms and interview schedules. This was approved by Sheffield Hallam University ethics board.

During the fieldwork period I submitted 4 ethics amendments, the first based on advisory comments on the initial application and the subsequent 3 based on method changes due to opportunities which arose and efforts to increase the inclusivity of my data collection. All amendments were approved and are detailed below, as well as the ethics-based decisions I was making throughout. Ethical responsibility in conducting the research is discussed throughout this section as it was integral to all aspects and evolved over time.

### **4.3.2 Data collection**

Data collection comprised of three stages:

- 1) Observational methods, informal and semi-structured interviews with women with experiences of homelessness. This included 14 participants over 25 research encounters.
- 2) Semi-structured interviews with 17 workers and informal supporters supporting women experiencing homelessness (referred to collectively as 'supporters') over 14 research encounters. In one circumstance workers were interviewed as a pair, and in another as a three.
- 3) An observation in a women-only support service, featuring five workers over 20 weekly research encounters.

These three stages overlapped. In total fieldwork took place over 12 months between November 2022 and November 2023.

Interviews with workers in support services were originally intended to support recruitment of women experiencing homelessness, but instead proved to be important data. They presented a wider perspective than that of the individual woman and it felt as though some of those interviewed were collating the voices of the many women they worked with and consequently were able to pick up on themes and commonalities in their experiences.

These interviews also prompted important thinking about how to define informal support, a topic central to the research. I had conceived of support in distinct binary categories: formal support from statutory and charitable homelessness services and informal support from individuals/organisations with no professional obligation to support people experiencing homelessness. The interviews highlighted that types of support were difficult to categorise into formal and informal. It was even difficult to locate types of support on a formality scale with statutory support services at one end and an individual member of the public helping in some way at the other. The reasoning for this is discussed in section 4.4.

## **Supporter interviews**

Semi-structured interviews with supporters lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour 10 minutes and were on a single occasion. All but one interview was conducted in person, usually at participants' workplaces, with Fay's interview taking place via Zoom, as was her stated preference. Security and ethical guidelines set out by Sheffield Hallam University on the use of Zoom for interviews were followed. On one occasion two workers were interviewed together, and on another three workers were interviewed together. Again, this was based on their preferences however this proved valuable as participants bounced ideas off each other and added to each other's experiences.

An information sheet was read by participants, and they were given an opportunity to ask questions before signing a consent form. All interviews were recorded onto a university recommended voice recorder, saved onto the university's secure server before being deleted from the voice recorder.

An interview schedule was designed as a guide, informed by the study's research questions and my research on the individual's support offer prior to the interview. In reality, interviews were more participant-led, with me picking up on and prompting around points of interest.

I conducted more interviews with workers than initially planned. As already mentioned, they proved insightful on the topic and each participant gave different perspectives and/or had specialist knowledge in relevant areas, for example domestic abuse.

Interviews with those informally supporting women experiencing homelessness were not originally planned but became important to the direction of the research.

Opportunities arose to meet with informal supporters when they were identified by women with experiences of homelessness and through my observations during the fieldwork. Their interviews represent a contribution to knowledge in the field, bringing their unique perspective on relationships of support.

## **Women with experiences of homelessness methods**

Prior to engaging in the research, participants read the information sheet and were given opportunity to ask questions. If they agreed to participate, we discussed in what



capacity they were able to participate based on their circumstances and preferences. This involved whether they could meet on a single or multiple occasions, what methods we would use, where and when we would meet, and how data would be recorded. I would suggest various methods to choose from. These were observation, interviews, and photograph/art-based methods. The women largely chose interview methods, possibly because this is a familiar and expected format for research participation. The final woman participating in the study told me that she wanted to participate in a method which I had not offered, a written interview. In hindsight, I regretted not inviting earlier participants to suggest alternative methods.

The value of having this preliminary discussion, where possible on a separate occasion prior to the first data collection encounter, was highlighted during my meeting with one participant which had been co-ordinated through a gatekeeper. I expected to have a preliminary discussion about what form of involvement would work best for the participant, but the gatekeeper had arranged the encounter as an interview. I proceeded on that basis but the set up and time limitations meant that it had been difficult to build rapport and trust prior to speaking about topics relevant to the PhD. I felt this affected how comfortable we both felt during the interaction. In hindsight, despite the research encounter already having been set up, I should have initiated a conversation about participation preference as it became apparent towards the end of the interview that the participant would have preferred a walking interview. This interviewee was a 'lived-experience worker' who spoke about her homelessness experiences as part of her role. Although I feared her involvement had not embodied the person-centred, trauma-informed methodology I had wanted, her lived-experience role minimised the risk in her talking to me about her homelessness experiences without having had time to build trust. This experience of feeling like the extractive researcher however informed subsequent fieldwork. It provided learnings on the importance of incorporating time to build rapport (as other participants may be less used to speaking about their homelessness experiences) and adapting the research to the participants' needs to make them feel in control of their research contribution.

All participants signed written consent forms; however this was not always before their participation started. With some participants it felt appropriate to build further trust before asking them to sign the form. Whether or not a consent form had been signed,

verbal consent was given at the beginning and an ongoing informed consent approach taken. This involved the women being reminded that they could pause or end their involvement at any point (both between and during research encounters), which is of particular importance when researching sensitive topics (Bimpson et al., 2022).

Both participant and researcher welfare were taken seriously during fieldwork. As discussed, a trauma-informed, person-centred and dignity-centred methodology was undertaken. There was a safeguarding procedure in place, however no safeguarding concerns arose. A procedure was also implemented where I would check in and out with a supervisor before and after research encounters (and during them if they were prolonged), with the opportunity for a debrief if needed.

The women were given a £20 voucher in recognition of their time and contribution. This voucher was, where possible, given to them at the beginning of their participation and it was explained that it remained theirs independent of their decision to continue with the research.

The methods documented here were used in the research. I had planned additionally to use creative methods and photography with those who felt comfortable to do so, but these methods were either unsuitable or less preferable to participants.

*Observation:* One participant (Kelly) took part in this method over seven research encounters spanning three months, however other participants in smaller ways, spending time with them in environments familiar to them whilst building rapport prior to interviews. I met Kelly primarily at her begging spot but also travelled together to local establishments like cafes. I observed her interactions with people and her environment, as well as asking her about subjects related to the PhD. No audio-recording was done during these research encounters. Instead fieldnotes were written up afterwards.

The longer duration of a person's research participation can enable the development of trusting researcher-participant relationships, which is particularly important when researching with vulnerable groups or on sensitive topics (Cloke et al., 2010; Hoolachan, 2016). I felt that I was better able to understand Kelly's value systems, her daily rhythms and priorities in ways that I would have been unable to if verbally explained to me. The long duration of the fieldwork period allowed for Kelly's mobile

and transient lifestyle. On several occasions, I waited where she said she would likely be at that time, but I would not see her and needed to try again on another occasion.

Observational methods can capture both people's narratives and feelings, alongside how they interact with others and their environment, which provides insight into their relationship with societal structures (Hoolachan, 2016). Observations, especially those between Kelly and the public, proved extremely important especially when analysing the data through the theoretical framework of dignity and societal discourse. This method helped me understand the complexities of her routine and relationships, giving more in-depth understanding of her support choices. In this way the study would have benefited from more women participating in this method.

*Interviews:* Interviews conducted varied greatly as they were adapted for each participants' circumstances and preferences, and participants navigated the interview differently. For example, some participants were able to talk about their experiences with few prompts, and in these circumstances I asked responsive questions to points of interest. This mainly applied to women who talked about their homelessness journey chronologically. An interview schedule was prepared for all participants, but only used on a minority of occasions.

Some women did not give consent to be audio-recorded but were happy for me to make notes of details or specific quotes during the interview and write fuller fieldnotes afterwards. With other women, an initial informal interview was unrecorded and allowed me to understand their situation. With their permission this was written up in fieldnotes, reflected upon, and then in the subsequent research encounter we recorded an interview based on the points of interest from the first meeting (see Appendix G for customised interview schedule example based on reflections from the previous research encounter).

Two women participated in walking interviews round parks. We picked a location convenient to them. Walking is found to help memory retrieval and be therapeutic (Bilsland & Siebert, 2024). It takes interviews outside of spaces that often organise around hierarchy and boundaries, which can pose restrictions on a person's thinking.

*Mapping:* This was a visual tool used in some interviews to aid discussion. It involved mapping out on paper, and considering the quality of, the different forms of support a

woman accessed. It helped me, as the researcher, confirm that I had understood what the participant had said and acted as a reflective tool prompting further discussion. This method was only used when interviews were static and indoors. It was not until late in the fieldwork that it was first employed and its value highlighted, therefore it was only used with three participants.

*Written interview:* This method was added towards the end of fieldwork at the request of a participant who felt more comfortable to participate in a written capacity. An ethics amendment was made to accommodate their needs. After the participant had been sent the participant information sheet, had any queries answered, and had returned a signed consent form, an interview guide in a password-protected document was emailed to them (see Appendix H). Questions in this guide were broad in nature, for example: "Please could you tell me a bit about the period you were without stable accommodation? E.g. where were you staying and what were the main challenges you experienced?". The participant completed it at a time that was convenient for them and sent it back.

#### *How did research methods change as fieldwork progressed?*

I originally intended to spend more time with participants, observing them in their daily lives and interactions. However, I soon realised that this would not be suitable with many participants. The method did not appreciate the nature of women's homelessness, of movement and displacement, of fleeing abusers, of asylum-seeking, of addiction and sex work, and of survival. Many women who were visible as homeless in public space were with men. These factors added risk to the researcher and determined women's routines and available time. Uninformed assumptions can be made that people experiencing homelessness are rich in time, an assumption I wrongly made when starting out on fieldwork.

As fieldwork progressed, opportunities arose to speak with women who were no longer homeless. This provided access to women who had been hidden from services whilst homeless, and who had had time to reflect on their experiences which could bring insightful accounts (McGrath et al., 2023). This allowed me to document a wider range of perspectives and situations, short-term and long-term homelessness. With

those who were no longer homeless however, observation methods were unsuitable. Some of these women no longer lived in the city or town where they had been homeless, so were unable to show me where they spent time and fulfilled their needs.

When recruiting women and arranging research encounters through organisations, the organisations sometimes arranged a traditional interview even if I had requested otherwise. My lack of confidence to re-adjust their expectations formed a barrier to using more observational methods, as did my person-centred approach. Many of the women chose to participate through interviews due to preference or because it best fitted their circumstances. The women with dependent children especially faced time constraints which meant that an interview on a single occasion was preferable.

Although these women's contributions were still insightful, longer durations of participant involvement are found by Parsell and Parsell (2012, p.430) as beneficial to the researcher-participant relationship. They articulate how, over time, as trust builds, their participants' "bravado" reduced, and they started to "more comprehensively articulate" their more problematic experiences.

It was originally planned not to record the voices of women with experiences of homelessness, as it was thought this could be inhibiting, appear formalised and was less appropriate to the intended observational methods. An ethics amendment was made to audio-record as it allowed the women's own words to be used in the research, rather than my interpretation of their accounts. This was of importance as many were from underprivileged backgrounds and I was not. Another ethics amendment was made for written interviews, at the request of a participant. As the researcher, this was a frustrating method. The participant's response documented many interesting points which had not been expanded on, and which I could not respond to as you would in verbal interviews.

There was another opportunistic discussion which was unplanned but became an insightful contribution to the data. A group of women with lived-experience of homelessness, operating as consultation for a charity, took time to speak with me at one of their meetings after I had presented my research study to them. After I had written up key, generalised notes from our discussion, they read them, consented for them to be used in the study and added additional points.

## **Service observation**

Service observation was not part of my originally planned methods and required an ethics amendment. The decision to observe in a service emerged from spending time in an organisation which supported vulnerable women. After interviewing the manager and beginning to volunteer for their outreach service, I arranged to spend one-day a week in their office where they ran a drop-in for the women. The plan was to speak with women who attended, become a familiar face, and see if they wanted to participate in the study. However, it was the workers' interactions with the women using the service that proved particularly insightful in terms of the research's themes, particularly around dignity. Consequently, during an informal conversation with the manager, she invited me to formally use my observations there in my research. Due to ethical restrictions, only worker observations were documented, and all workers present during the research encounters signed consent forms. Observations were written up in fieldnotes at the end of each research encounter and saved to the university's secure server.

### ***4.3.3 Participant recruitment***

In total there were 33 participants. Seventeen were providing or had provided formal or informal support to those experiencing homelessness. Five participants took part in a workplace observation. Fourteen were experiencing or had experienced homelessness. Two participants took part in the workplace observation and were interviewed as support workers. One participant spoke from two clearly defined positions, as a support worker and a woman who experienced homelessness, however many others who experienced homelessness also noted occasions informally supporting others in similar positions. Participants were located in four different cities in England, although most were recruited in one city. At the point of finishing participant recruitment, despite this research intending to make no claims of generalisability, many of the same themes were occurring in the participants' accounts. At the same time, participant numbers were low enough to give time and care to

reflecting on and analysing their accounts (Baker & Edwards, 2012), an important factor for a dignity-centred methodology.

Participant recruitment (workers, informal supporters and women experiencing homelessness) was largely achieved through immersion in the field. Throughout the 12-month fieldwork period, I spent time volunteering for organisations in one city (selected for geographical convenience) including outreach shifts for a charity supporting vulnerable women, a pop-up community kitchen catering for those experiencing social and/or economic poverty, and a social eating project which also functioned as a community centre for all. I met potential participants (both workers and women with experiences of homelessness) through this volunteering, by sharing their space, but it also increased the trust that others working for similar organisations locally had in me.

I went out with the city's rough-sleeper outreach team on their daily wellbeing checks which revealed that women were rough-sleeping and were being informally supported. One of these informal supporters, a carpark attendant, subsequently became a research participant. I searched directories of non-homelessness-specific local projects online and went to speak with some of them. One sent my recruitment flyer and participant information sheet around their networks, another let me attend a women's art group, both which led to participant recruitment.

I talked with the workers and volunteers I met who occupied the city's support projects formally (captured and used as data) and informally. They sometimes introduced me to or suggested other people to speak with. I presented to a group of women with experience of multiple disadvantage (including homelessness) who now came together to use their lived-experience to address issues in support systems. I also spoke informally with women and workers in public spaces such as librarians and council officials who patrolled the city centre, and women who appeared to be experiencing homelessness yet did not want to officially participate in the study. At times these conversations highlighted areas for exploration, identified informal supporters who I subsequently spoke to, or women with experiences of homelessness I could invite to participate. The highlighted areas for exploration, for example support from religious and ethnic communities, led to the purposive recruitment of participants who had more insight on this.

Although I did have some existing knowledge through previous professional roles, immersion in the field allowed me to better understand localised support systems (services and informal community spaces), geographical areas of relevance, public spaces of relevance such as libraries, churches, foodbanks and community initiatives. I also spent time in some of the public spaces identified as potential places where women experiencing homelessness could occupy.

In addition, my supervisory team introduced me to two professional contacts and members of my personal networks, on hearing about my PhD topic, directed me towards people they knew or knew of who they thought could provide knowledge. This extended participant recruitment to different cities, introducing me to different workers, women with experiences of homelessness and informal supporters. Some informal supporters included in this study were also those directly helping the women in this study who had given their permission for me to talk to them.

### **Workers and informal supporters**

Often it was difficult to categorise the formality of support provided by participants, even when provided through support services, and some individuals were both workers and informal supporters. Therefore, they are considered together here. One worker was also interviewed as a woman with experiences of homelessness. She features in both participant tables.



**Table 1: Participants: Interviews with supporters**

<b>Pseudonym(s)</b>	<b>Relevant details</b>
<b>Charlie</b>	Street outreach worker providing generalised support to rough-sleepers.
<b>Jack</b>	Works for organisation providing meals and some signposting for those in food or social poverty.
<b>Jennie</b>	Minister of a church which also houses support with food and Citizens Advice services.
<b>Fay</b>	Worker for an organisation providing a broad range of support including a bridge to more formal services for women who are sex-working.
<b>Sam</b>	Worker for an organisation which provides generalised support for people with multiple disadvantage.
<b>Tim</b>	Carpark attendant in a multi-story carpark. <b>Informally</b> giving access to a place to sleep.
<b>Danny</b>	Café owner. <b>Informally</b> giving hot drinks, food, social support, toilet-use and internet access.
<b>Sophie</b>	Worker at women's homelessness and domestic abuse charity.
<b>Jules, Maggie &amp; Tina</b>	Workers for an organisation providing advocacy, mental health and practical support to their local community.
<b>Will</b>	Worker for a local community charity which connects people with services, advocating for their rights, helping them to make social connections.
<b>Abby</b>	<b>Informally</b> providing a place to stay in her house.
<b>Samira &amp; Sara</b>	Workers giving support with the asylum system and other generalised support. Also <b>Informally</b> providing practical support outside their job roles.
<b>Frances</b>	Minister at Christian church providing whatever support is required, formally and <b>informally</b> .
<b>Tara</b>	Worker providing housing and homelessness support for both the council and a charity.

### **Women with experiences of homelessness**

The participant selection criteria for the study were that they must self-identify as a woman, be over 18-years-old, be homeless (i.e. without safe and secure accommodation), or have previously been homeless, in urban England.

Participants were recruited from a variety of different settings which helped me capture diverse experiences. It meant that participants' backgrounds varied in class, culture and ethnicity. I approached one participant whilst at her begging spot outside a

supermarket. I explained my research and what participation would involve over a cup of tea, before returning a few days later to see if she would still like to be involved. Five participants were recruited through support services/organisations where they were receiving/had recently received support, however only one of these services was specifically for people experiencing homelessness. The other organisations helped sex workers, refugees and asylum seekers, and BAME women from underprivileged communities. One participant was recruited through a community art group for women. I had approached the group leader who invited me to speak to the group about my research.

I was keen not to rely on homelessness support services for participant recruitment, as this risked excluding women who were more hidden when homeless and who actively chose to avoid services. These women's insights were key to answering my research questions. I spoke to several women who were workers or volunteers with lived-experience. Some of these women, although now involved with services in advisory or worker roles, had very limited involvement with formal support at their time of homelessness.

One community organisation I approached circulated details of my study round their professional networks. The information sent contained a definition of homelessness and a worker (from a non-homelessness organisation) contacted me saying that she had not realised she could have been classed as homeless until reading the research documentation and that she was happy to participate.

Two other women were recruited through personal networks, one of which was a purposive recruitment based on a point of interest arising in an earlier interview. Through this recruitment I was trying to capture those who were homeless by statutory definition but did not identify as homeless.

### *Participant demographics*

The women with experiences of homelessness in this study were diverse in their ages, backgrounds and types of homelessness. Although I did not specifically ask for ages, details discussed by participants suggested their ages ranged from early twenties to

sixties. Their homelessness accommodation experiences varied from rough-sleeping to sofa-surfing, refuges, partner's houses, Airbnbs, homelessness hostels and moving between backpackers' hostels. Some transitioned between different forms of homelessness. Nine had grown up in the UK, with one of these women first generation British. Of the remaining five women, three came to England as asylum seekers from South Asia and the Middle East, one woman was African but had been in the UK for some time and another was European. Five had dependent children with them when homeless and another two had contact with their children and hoped to regain custody. One woman was homeless with their long-term male partner, whilst two other women had had some periods homeless accompanied by a male partner. There was diversity in observed cultural capital between women, which is discussed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

Demographic information was purposively not requested from the women, in line with the research's trauma-informed and dignity-centred methodology, however many provided some details throughout the research encounters. As a researcher interviewing women experiencing homelessness, it felt important not to replicate their reported undignified experiences of approaching formal support services:

I see so much of the asylum process, so much of the benefits process as dignity-stripping, where it's so invasive... And you literally see the person like being eroded as they are, like stripped away. Anything that they thought was going to be private or anything that they wanted to keep secret or, or just to hold back is robbed from them. (Frances)

They reported undignified experiences of initial assessments with organisations, where the women were expected to provide very personal details and data to workers who were strangers as a prerequisite to receiving support. This impacted their privacy and feelings of control over their information. When I was on outreach with one service, a worker asked one woman receiving support what her surname was. The question seemed to take this woman aback, and she sounded shocked and distrustful. She questioned the worker on why they needed it, as the requested information could make her traceable. Jack, a supporter in this study, spoke of this type of 'form-filling' marking participation as an "institutional exchange", which can limit the research's depth and feel "extractive" to participants. Ethics procedures required participants to sign consent forms, however, I did not want to replicate the formality and

impersonality that many women had experienced from support services by asking for demographic information. I did not want them to feel like I was seeing them as statistics as opposed to individuals and make them distrustful of me.

Conversations with staff at the service where I conducted my research observation clearly highlighted their intentional efforts not to ask for personal details until necessary (for example when supporting with council accommodation correspondence) in contrast to many services. They reported that some women they worked with gave false names to protect their identity. They wanted to keep their stigmatised identities private, for example as someone who experienced homelessness or addiction, and not be linked to services meeting these support needs. Staff thought that asking women to do initial assessments to use the service could impact their trust of the service and stop them using it.

I took the perspective that if a woman felt a specific detail such as their age to be relevant to the narrative they were sharing with me, and they were comfortable sharing it, then they would do so on their terms. I did not intend to conduct formal comparisons based on demographics and therefore if they did not share details, these were considered irrelevant to the experiences they were sharing.

The table below details the information the women chose to share. Where women did not directly disclose their age, age ranges are based on indicators discussed during their research encounter.

**Table 2: Participants: Women experiencing homelessness**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Type of homelessness</b>	<b>Type of participation</b>	<b>Details</b>
<b>Kelly</b>	Current: rough-sleeping and couch-surfing	Observation (multiple research encounters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 35-45-years-old</li> <li>- Homeless with partner</li> <li>- Grew up in UK</li> <li>- Repeat homelessness (10+ years).</li> </ul>
<b>Ally</b>	Previous: couch-surfing, backpackers' hostels	Interview (recorded, single occasion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 40-50-years-old</li> <li>- Grew up in UK</li> <li>- Homeless under a year</li> <li>- Child contact but not homeless with dependent child.</li> </ul>
<b>Priscilla</b>	Previous: homelessness hostels	Interview (recorded, single occasion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 60-70-years-old</li> <li>- Grew up in UK</li> <li>- Homeless with serious health condition.</li> </ul>
<b>Reina</b>	Previous: women's refuges, temporary accommodation	Interview (multiple occasions, recorded and unrecorded, walking interview).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 45-55-years-old</li> <li>- Homeless on fleeing domestic abuse</li> <li>- Grew up in UK</li> <li>- Child contact/child custody whilst homeless.</li> </ul>
<b>Sara</b>	Previous: temporary accommodation	Interview (multiple occasions, recorded and unrecorded)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 35-45-years-old</li> <li>- Asylum seeker/refugee</li> <li>- Homeless with child</li> </ul>
<b>Holly</b>	Current: various, mainly couch-surfing and rough-sleeping	Interview (recorded, single occasion) and time spent trust-building at service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 30-40-years-old</li> <li>- Grew up in UK</li> <li>- Repeat homelessness.</li> </ul>
<b>Jess</b>	Current: temporary accommodation. Previous: refuges, Airbnb, family and multiple acquaintances	Interview (multiple occasions, involved mapping and walking, recorded and unrecorded)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 30-40-years-old</li> <li>- Asylum seeker/refugee/homeless due to domestic abuse.</li> </ul>
<b>Katrin</b>	Previous: hostels, Under 25s emergency accommodation with families	Interview (multiple occasions, involved mapping, recorded and unrecorded)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 20-25-years-old</li> <li>- Asylum seeker/refugee</li> <li>- Accessed/eligible for young persons' services (Under 25s).</li> </ul>

<b>Eve</b>	Previous: staying with friend, Inadequate property	Interview (single occasion, recorded)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 45-55-years-old</li> <li>- Grew up in UK (first generation British)</li> <li>- Homeless with children</li> <li>- Homeless on leaving partner</li> <li>- Short-term homeless.</li> </ul>
<b>Susie</b>	Current: under 25s hostel Previous: rough-sleeping	Time spent together in hostel, with informal interview written up in fieldnotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 20-25-years-old</li> <li>- Accessed/eligible for young persons' services (Under 25s).</li> <li>- Grew up in UK.</li> <li>- Homeless for 3 years.</li> </ul>
<b>Esther</b>	Previous: emergency hotels, temporary accommodation, staying with family	Interview (single occasion, written up as fieldnotes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 25-35-years-old</li> <li>- Homeless with child</li> <li>- Grew up in African culture</li> <li>- Homeless for 2 years.</li> </ul>
<b>Jane</b>	Previous: staying with family, refuge	Interview (multiple occasions, involved mapping, written up collaboratively as fieldnotes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 40-50-years-old</li> <li>- Homeless with child</li> <li>- Homeless on fleeing domestic abuse.</li> <li>- Grew up in UK</li> <li>- Homeless for less than 1 year.</li> </ul>
<b>Gemma</b>	Current: temporary accommodation Previous: emergency accommodation	Interview (single occasion, recorded)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 25-35-years-old</li> <li>- Homeless with child</li> <li>- Grew up in UK.</li> </ul>
<b>Lucia</b>	Previous: backpackers' hostels, friends & family, partner's, unsuitable housing	Written interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 25-30-years-old</li> <li>- Grew up in Europe</li> <li>- Homeless on coming to the UK</li> <li>- Homeless for 3 years.</li> </ul>

### Service observation

Staff participation in a workplace observation came after a period of attending an organisation's office drop-in as a researcher to speak with women experiencing homelessness that attended, and volunteering for a different service run by the same organisation. Through this, I built trusting relationships with the staff team and became a familiar face, so when I asked the five staff members whether they would consent to being part of an observation, they all agreed.

It was agreed that the observation fieldnotes would not separate out the contributions of individual staff members, and therefore a participant table is not listed here.

## **4.4 The analytical process**

### ***4.4.1 Transcribing and fieldnotes***

#### **Transcribing**

I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim, which helped me familiarise myself with the data. It acted as a stage of analysis and whilst I transcribed, I wrote notes on points of interest to my research questions and emerging themes.

The transcripts are to some extent a partial view of the interviews. I chose only to include some documentation of body language, for example laughter, where it was required to understand the tone in which something was said. More extensive documentation of linguistics and body language was not required for thematic analysis.

In both transcripts and fieldnotes, identifiable names of people and places were either pseudonymised or removed with the aim of preserving participant confidentiality.

Other subtle details were changed (for example diagnoses and family members' genders) when it was felt that in doing so it would not change the meaning of the data whilst improving participant anonymity. Participant anonymity is of increasing importance as the dissemination of research widens (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). One participant requested a short section of their recorded interview not be included in transcripts, whilst another wanted an aspect of their lifestyle to be redacted from any write-ups. Transcripts were saved on a secure university server and only accessible to my supervisors and me.

#### **Fieldnotes**

Fieldnotes were made for three purposes; documenting observations with women experiencing homelessness; recording interviews where it was chosen not to audio-record; and documenting observations at a support service. Fieldnotes were made as

soon as possible after each research encounter, usually immediately after, in as much detail as could be remembered. Where possible I made some notes during research encounters and on occasions wrote down quotes with the participant's permission.

When writing up observations, I recorded the way women interacted with their environment and others in it, and our informal conversations. I separately recorded my reflections and possible interpretations of the research encounter.

It is accepted that fieldnotes are an interpretation of the women's narrative. Where I had written up fieldnotes rather than audio-recording, and the woman did not have capacity to meet again, I recapped my understanding at the end of our research encounter for them to correct if necessary. For others, we met again and I was able to clarify points with them then, checking I had correctly documented what they had said. One woman was involved in writing up her interview. Much of this participant's story was about not being understood or believed by services so it felt important to offer her the chance to read over my initial write up, help me understand it better, and have control of the story by editing it. She agreed with most of my initial draft but added clarification and further illustrations.

I had been anxious before the meeting that reading my initial write-up could be traumatic for her as seeing it written down could feel emotionally impactful, however I knew that this participant had undergone intensive therapy since her period of homelessness. After the meeting, the participant fed back to me that she had found this process of documenting and reading her story empowering. For other participants, co-producing fieldnotes felt unsuitable due to their time constraints or risk for it to be emotionally triggering to them. I also feared that if I had written up what a participant judged to be a poor reflection of their narrative then this could upset them. This was a concern shared by Murphy and Dingwall (2001) who felt that participants could be upset by both what the researcher chose to put into the writing, and what they leave out, as to them neglected aspects may feel of great importance. In hindsight, I should have given the option of co-producing written narratives to all women rather than imposing my own judgement on its suitability.



### **Written interview**

All identifying information was removed from the written interview before analysis.

### **Reflective fieldwork diary**

I made an entry in my fieldwork diary after each research encounter and on other occasions when important reflections occurred. I recorded my own personal reflections and feelings about the research encounters and my positionality within it. Based on these reflections, the methods were adjusted. The diary also documented my subjective observations from the research encounters, some of which became significant to the research later, for example notes on the embodied capital perceived to be held by participants.

#### ***4.4.2 Reflexive thematic analysis***

Braun and Clarke's (2022) descriptions of reflexive thematic analysis were used to guide data analysis. This form of analysis was seen as suitable for in-depth qualitative data, providing tools "to organise, interrogate and interpret" the data to find "patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.42). Specifically, it does not problematise the subjectivity of the researcher, but instead by working to understand and engage with it, incorporates it into the analysis as a valuable tool (Gough & Madill, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Analysis naturally happened throughout fieldwork through reflections between research encounters. A reflective diary was kept as a written record, organising and giving space to these thoughts. These reflections on potential themes and points of interest informed topics discussed in future research encounters, and decisions about purposeful participant recruitment. This early analysis also evaluated the applicability of the study's theoretical framework (which was later adjusted to fit the emerging themes). If all the analysis had taken place after data collection, the opportunity to follow up on ideas in the data would have disappeared which is important as the

analysis (and theoretical framework) should be emerging from the ideas in the data itself (Green et al., 2007).

The formal analysis stage began with familiarising myself with the data; re-listening to it and transcribing it (if applicable), then reading and rereading notes and transcripts numerous times. As I had conducted the interviews and written reflective notes on them, I had observed how the women spoke about their experiences, their tone and emotionality for example. Therefore, as the interviewer, it was easier for me to accurately interpret the data (Green et al., 2007).

I wanted to place the narratives of women experiencing homelessness at the forefront of my research. I therefore began the thematic analysis by coding their transcripts and fieldnotes. I manually coded the written material. Codes were written in the margins of transcripts, and the data it related to, which could range from a word to a block of paragraphs, colour-coded (Green et al., 2007). Codes represented individual ideas and could be explicit surface-level meanings or implicit conceptual meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This coding considered emerging themes in the data relating to the overarching research questions (Bimpson et al., 2022), therefore reducing the data considered to that relevant to the study. The codes were then revisited, and groups were formed with codes that “share a relationship”. These groups were considered adequately full when they contained enough information “for the experience to be seen as coherent and explicable” (Green et al., 2007, p.548).

I analysed supporter interviews and observation fieldnotes using the same process. I then identified codes which were complementary to the groups of codes emerging in data from women with experiences of homelessness. In this way the supporters’ accounts added to the groups of codes emerging in the women’s data, often giving a broader perspective.

‘Potential’ themes were generated from the groups of codes emerging from the research with both the women and supporters. In contrast with the codes which represented specific meanings, the themes represented wider shared meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). From these themes, the data could be considered in relation to existing knowledge, allowing the study’s findings to be located within the research field and the findings’ significance identified (Green et al., 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2022) description of reflexive thematic analysis, 'potential' themes were reviewed by returning to the data, checking that they told the story of the data and included the most important aspects in terms of the study's research questions. With small adjustments, themes were defined, differentiated from each other and named. They were then written up in relation to the study's three research questions.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter detailed the PhD's methodology and method, with focus on trauma-informed, person-centred and dignity-centred approaches and how they were applied. The thesis now presents the study's empirical findings over three chapters, each chapter addressing a different research question.

## **5. Findings: What does informal support look like for women experiencing homelessness?**

When beginning this research, the term 'informal support' was conceptualised as support women rely on for resources which does not involve accessing homelessness services, for example friends, family, members of the public, workers in public spaces and others experiencing homelessness. Through further reading of academic literature and fieldwork, this definition broadened and became more complex. Questions arose of whether physical and online spaces could be considered informal support, and whether informal support could exist within formally-structured support services. This chapter therefore explores the nature of informal support in the context of women experiencing homelessness. It draws on the accounts of participants to form a definition of informal support.

The data discussed in this chapter came primarily from the accounts of women with experiences of homelessness on the support they use/had used to meet their daily needs. Interviews with those informally supporting are also drawn upon, as they give insight into the motivations behind, and nature of, informal support. The reflections of workers interviewed and my own observations of staff at an organisation supporting women experiencing homelessness are intertwined into discussions.

### **5.1 The nature of informal support**

The support given to women experiencing homelessness to fulfil their practical, physical and psychological needs was uncategorisable into two distinct groups, formal and informal. It was found to be the nature of the support-giving that gave it a feeling of informality for the women, not just the context in which it was given (for example whether it was through a service or not). Formality of support was seen instead to exist on multiple scales rather than in boxes. These scales of formality included the nature of the relationship between supporter and supported (professional and personal boundaries), conditionality of support, and motivations for the support.

One reason for this difficulty in categorising support types was that, practically, it was hard to distinguish between types of support organisations. I interviewed users and workers at services exclusively for people experiencing homelessness, however there were also support services included in the study where homelessness was not a condition for access but specialist homelessness support was available there. There were services that helped with needs associated with, or a consequence of homelessness, for example mental health, physical health and addiction. There were examples of informal support existing within formal services. For example, one woman participating had used an official support service for people experiencing homelessness which temporarily accommodated her in the family homes of the public. Another woman used an official online organisation which allows the public to turn their homes into B&Bs. However, when she could no longer afford to stay, the homeowner let her stay without payment, out of care.

There were other support relationships between workers and women experiencing homelessness where the professional's role had no association with homelessness, but they were providing support whilst at work. There were also professionals working with people experiencing homelessness who went beyond their roles to provide support. There were volunteer-led organisations supporting people experiencing homelessness where an organisation's formal structure existed but the volunteers were not providing support as part of salaried job roles. Similarly, there were formal groups such as religious groups that promoted generosity of spirit and gave support based on this, without any concrete obligations to provide that support.

There was also support given through personal relationships which existed prior to a woman's homelessness circumstance (friends and family), relationships which formed as a result of their homelessness (often with others experiencing homelessness) and compassionate acts of strangers.

Much of the nuance between the different sources of support exists in the motivations for providing that support, whether that be out of care, professional obligations or other reasons. The complex qualities of the support discussed by the women mean that a deeper understanding of the nature of this support is required to capture an understanding of informal support. Empirical accounts of those supported and those

providing support are used to help define informal support for the purpose of this research.

## 5.2 Levels and types of support

The types of support the women received addressed their psychological, physiological and practical needs. Psychological needs included their emotional and mental health, feelings of love, belonging, safety and self-esteem. Physiological needs included food, water, clothes and shelter. Practical needs included money, transport, period products and help attending appointments. Support could be one-off, short-term or long-term.

Frances, a church minister, usefully conceptualised support in a way that illustrates this research's findings and so provides a good starting point for discussing the nature of informal support. He explained the giving of support as a pyramid with the types of support given requiring more trust as you rose up the pyramid's tiers. His discussion is featured here in length as it captured the forms informal support can take, as well as providing a supporter's perspective:

I think the sense was that there was a general baseline of a sort of hospitality and kindness that I would hope we would see across all humans but especially people of faith... So that might be as basic as just making eye contact with someone selling the big issue and saying, "Not today, thank you". Or it might be just saying "Hello". Obviously seeing someone fall over and saying, "Can I help you up again?" ... Just a general kindness, a politeness almost, but only something a little bit more deliberate than just that sort of cultural value. So I'd say that was like a baseline that you don't have to be well or strong or rich or whatever to provide that. That's just about recognizing the value of the other human... and there's very little risk in that...

Then the next level up... it might be just sort of a follow up conversation... where you'd say hello to someone and they might say hello back and then ask something of you... I can remember there was an occasion I was walking through [name of town]. It must have been like two o'clock in the morning, where there's a 24-hour Tesco... there was a guy who was on the floor and I thought that's not a good place to be at two o'clock in the morning... I said, "Sorry, are you okay?". And he was like, "yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm fine". I was like, "Okay. Okay". He said, "Um, actually one thing. I need to get to [name of place]. What are you gonna do about it?". I was just like, "Oh, um, right, okay. I suppose I'm gonna give you a lift to [name of place]". And it really surprised me just to

hear myself saying that because I think like, that's a 10-minute drive. It's two o'clock in the morning, no one knows where I am...

So I think even just having the follow up like is potentially the next level cause you don't know what's going to happen... I think there is a level of fear that comes with the risk of the follow up question, sometimes very legitimately, but sometimes it is just people saying, "actually I'm just in a spot of bother. Like, can you help me out?"...

The next phase could be something as simple as, can I borrow your mobile phone? Have you got a fiver? Can I have a cup of tea?... And then I think there's this escalation that goes from there that maybe is about saying, okay, then let's get ourselves into a one-on-one situation where I'm giving you a lift in the car or letting you come into my house to use the loo or something. And again, I think the frequency of those asks is smaller, but the risk is greater. All the way up through to... someone who's presenting as homeless, inviting them to stay in your home for an indefinite period of time. I think is probably one of the biggest risks, and yet one of the greatest kindnesses that we can offer. (Frances)

Frances' pyramid of support clearly highlights types of informal support as well as the support-giver's considerations on whether to give support. Firstly, Frances identifies the acknowledgement of, and polite interaction with, another as a form of support. Examples of these types of interactions were present during my time spent sitting outside a supermarket with Kelly on her regular begging spot. When Kelly tried to speak with members of the public passing her and they did not acknowledge her, she became clearly frustrated and sometimes shouted after them. Other members of the public and supermarket staff would stop and have conversations with her, some of these she knew by name, and they knew hers. These polite interactions, i.e. others showing interest in how she was, were positive support for her on a 'baseline' level and she said they made her feel respected.

Despite Kelly knowing some of these people (and these existing relationships potentially making the interactions more supportive), this baseline support described by Frances often requires no previous relationship and involves less trust. Gemma illustrated this when she spoke of the kind words of support from strangers in the park outside her temporary accommodation which made her feel more hopeful about her situation.

Moving higher up Frances' pyramid, women in this study gave examples of support which required the giver to have some resources. Esther spoke of a stranger in the street giving her money and Kelly received money and free hot drinks from the public

and two local cafes. This type of giving usually requires kindness from the giver and is low-risk, so is likely to be given by both strangers and those with pre-existing relationships.

Frances raises the issue of how different people have different capacities to support based on the resources they possess (he uses physical strength, wealth and transport as examples) and based on their attitude towards giving. In my study, people's capacities to support could be increased by their social capital (e.g. their professional or community contacts) or their influence in their field. Although Frances speaks of religious duty as a motivation for giving, it is thought of as a personal value of kindness and the recognition of another person's inherent worth, without the necessity for a pre-existing relationship.

Frances goes on to speak of the trust involved with informal support and how support-giving is a judgement call based on "a sense of being shrew and wise". This slightly contradicts his view of giving without moral judgement. However, in explanation, he expansively discussed the vulnerability involved in providing informal support throughout his interview. This vulnerability exists without the formal risk assessments and procedures in place in support services.

Frances, and the examples cited above, mainly refer to support given by strangers or acquaintances. Participants regularly noted examples of support from people with whom they had various types of pre-existing relationships, from family members to residents in the same temporary accommodation. Often the support on these occasions would be placed higher up Frances' pyramid. Many of the women went to stay temporarily in the homes of friends and family, for example.

As suggested by Frances, this could be due to trust. Abby, who accommodated people she already knew when they became homeless, talked of how important it is to trust those staying in your house and how this trust comes from them being your friend: "Someone said to me why don't I take some refugees in, but that's so stressful to me... I would rather... you're helping friends, you're helping people you know... Being able to trust the person that's in your house". She felt hesitant to accommodate people she did not know, even if done through official government schemes.



### 5.3 The formal extreme

Although generally support services were not easily categorisable into informal/formal for reasons outlined above, this was less true of local authority and state organisations. In the women's accounts the council's housing and rough-sleeping departments, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Home Office, and on some occasions the NHS, were considered formal. By exploring characteristics which make this support seem formalised to the women, we can better understand informal support.

When discussing formal support from the perspective of this study's participants, it was hard to separate their descriptions of its characteristics from their often negative responses to these characteristics. This chapter aims to form an understanding of what constitutes formal/informal support rather than how it is *experienced*, so it will not go in-depth into these responses. Participant experiences are instead discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

Participants (both women with experiences of homelessness and supporters) spoke of statutory services as systems where workers helped to facilitate or restrict movement through this system. Ally, for example, interacted with social services whilst homeless and found the system unsupportive:

I know the individual support workers and case workers and social workers are really, really compassionate human beings most of the time. But the system that they work within, it is still a tick box... And that sort of black and white nature of the approach is terrifying. It doesn't feel like a nurturing thing. (Ally)

In agreement, Tara, a former council worker, directly referred to the council's housing support as a system that you needed to go through to access resources and Gemma, who approached the council when homeless, regularly spoke of the council's systems as a game you needed to know how to play. Gemma's expression of this was similar to Ally's: "It's like when you're on the phone they've got a sheet. And I swear it's just like, if you tick all the boxes, then you're fine."

Rigid processes leave little room to consider individual's circumstances. Tara described this as services operating on their terms: "In the council, and I think in other services like it, there's a sense of having to obey their rules and do things on their time". Sara

described how the council moved her to different temporary accommodation without considering her child's circumstances:

They moved me without even considering that my daughter goes to a [name of town] school... It's not a big journey but there's no bus that goes straight to like [name of town] school. So annoying, it was so annoying you can't even... Then I moved from [name of area] to [name of area], near [name of area] and my daughter was still in that school. Then I moved to [name of area], so the other side, and my daughter was still in that school... two hours journey just to go to school. (Sara)

A very similar circumstance was described from the perspective of two support workers, Jules and Maggie:

Jules: I just said if this is about the children why are they being forced to get 3 buses to school. By the times mum's got up, got the kids ready, got to school, got back, she's coming back out again. She was exhausted.

Maggie: They hadn't given any thought to this at all. They just hadn't. This was the system, this is what they did. They looked at the different hotels in the area every fortnight to see which was the cheapest and that's where people were sent. And they'd never question this as well. It was just the way it was done. (Jules & Maggie)

Maggie here describes feeling like the council's systems operate without consideration for women's needs other than the need for shelter. Support was given on the council's terms according to the policies and procedures designed. Here the priority described was financial savings, restricting access to resources potentially influenced by government and local authority spending agendas based on neoliberal attitudes (Tyler, 2015).

There were a few examples cited of flexibility in the council's housing processes. According to workers Sara and Samira, some council workers were more lenient than others in allowing people to refuse unsuitable accommodation offers. This leniency could be interpreted as a degree of informality in the system, however Gemma thought of it as the system user having the knowledge to play the game, ticking boxes, so that procedures allowed you to turn down properties:

[The property listing] told me it had a bath and it was a walk-in shower and I was like, no. So they allowed me to refuse that because I said it's important for [her child]. And I managed to play with the [health condition] of mine, like saying I should be better having a shower bath, rather than having a shower

that I could fall... it was the only way to then not get knocked on the lower band. (Gemma)

Will, a worker, described the council as “big” and “unwieldy”. This could explain women’s descriptions of these services as faceless. Participants rarely referred to any contact with council workers, often face-to-face interactions were limited as most processes had been moved online. Almost all participants referred to ‘the council’ rather than a worker they had been interacting with, in contrast to when they referred to other smaller organisations. They were requesting help from an organisation, a system, rather than an individual. The facelessness of formal services was also identified in Mayock and Parker (2020), where participants found interactions with these services to feel degrading.

Holly, even when meeting face-to-face with NHS workers, described a similar disconnectedness:

But as for like doctors, mental health, a few people like that, I feel like I'm talking to somebody different every time. And there's not the support network there... I understand they've got homes and their lives but you feel like, okay, they're just listening to a story... I feel like they don't really care. (Holly)

Another key characteristic of formality was women being asked for vast amounts of personal data in order to receive resources (often at point of service access), from people about whom they knew nothing. Frances described this as “invasive” and with “an erosion of self in it as people have to do whatever it takes to comply with the system, just to get through to the next phase”. This one-way relationship which crosses personal boundaries can create a large power difference between supporter and supported.

Gemma described the council’s conversation with her mum when she was no longer able to stay with her due to overcrowding and approached the council for accommodation: “Like, they proper get intimate, like, you know, it's like it's nothing to do with you, it's my house, it's what I decide, but no, they are very pushy”. It was often seen, therefore, that workers were not acting from positions of empathy. Susie expressed negative feelings towards the council and asked me whether the council would be held accountable if someone died whilst rough-sleeping. Sara found the council’s treatment could be unfeeling when approaching them as an asylum seeker:

“The officers... some of them are like literally, “Why did you claim asylum?”... And a few people, not all, a few people literally asked you, and they don’t even have a filter, “Why did you come here?”. She found she had no choice but to comply with the organisation’s systems, however they treated you, or you could not access resources:

So that feeling is literally... if you don’t have that ‘oh I can do that’ you are gone gone, literally your self-esteem goes down and your confidence goes completely crack. They try to crack you basically. Literally they try every single thing that they... in the worse way possible they try to provoke you. (Sara)

Tara, the former council worker, provided a more nuanced account. She was working with rough-sleepers where fewer people had phones or frequent internet access, and therefore in her role she did have more direct contact. Tara recounted a conversation she had had with her manager after she felt there had been numerous mistakes made in accommodating and supporting a woman experiencing homelessness. Tara, unlike her manager, had been in regular contact with the woman they were discussing:

This is a vulnerable woman who's in our care and because of failures *by us* [emphasis added]... she's in a worse position than when she came to us. And how can you not care? And I think it is because of that lack of connection and of actually spending time with her. And I remember a few days earlier he'd phoned me about a conversation that they'd had where he basically said, “Oh, guess what? You have to move again”. And she'd been rude to him about it. And he said, “Well, she's not going to get very far in life if she acts like that”. And I was like, “What? How much less far can she get? Like, she’s homeless, she’s addicted to crack, she’s sex-working out of necessity, like she's come to us at her lowest and there just isn't really... when it's just a voice on the phone, I don't think people have a picture of the person on the other end. (Tara)

Tara’s comments are about human connection, or lack of. Formal support, based on participants’ accounts, is often given from a place of emotional and/or physical distance between worker and those supported which creates disconnection. In order to access resources, women have to move through a system based on uniform policies and procedures which do not allow for individualisation.

Other types of support discussed in the remainder of this chapter are less clearly positioned on scales of formality but are discussed for the informal qualities they hold.

## 5.4 Workers motivated by personal care within their role

At the outset, this PhD took a simplistic approach to defining informal support, as support existing outside of services and institutions, but the data quickly rendered this invalid. One key point was how the women differentiated between dignified and undignified interactions with workers. Sometimes those with whom women felt a more genuine connection, who listened and understood them, were workers as opposed to friends and family.

Their descriptions of relationships with workers, and my observation of staff in a service, showed how these relationships had many informal characteristics, yet were still enacted within a professional framework which enforced time restrictions and safety procedures. Workers in these services are usually paid in exchange for fulfilling a role within a system (like in the formal support section above), and in support worker roles there may be expectations that these roles be fulfilled with a compassionate professionalism. Staff during the observation talked of having, “flexible, gentle, firm, loving boundaries”. However, workers operated in a manner which seemed separate from their role expectations, from what could be a personal sense of care, considered here as a form of informal support.

As seen with Tara earlier, some workers within formal services aim to operate with care, but formalities often hinder them, increasing the disconnect between workers and service users. Women with experiences of homelessness and workers in this study spoke about services where workers’ roles and professional boundaries gave space for, and often encouraged, real connections and care.

Jules, a support worker whose office was based in a café, talked about the importance of informal conversation with people needing support: “it’s really important because we’ve got the café space that you can sit and have a brew with somebody and have a full chat and let them get to know you and you get to know them.” Here she talks of a two-way relationship where support begins from a place of informality, where the power difference is less present.

During my observation in an organisation supporting vulnerable women, I witnessed relationships which challenged the formal support dynamic in other ways. I noticed

there were many emotional expressions of care from staff towards the women, for example when one woman was experiencing low mood, a staff member called after them “we love you” as they were leaving. The workers acted personally. They remembered women’s birthdays and on occasions discussed what they might want to do together to celebrate. When one woman was discussing their grievances against other people in their life, the worker reacted in a way which was friend-like. They were sticking up for them, telling them how they had not deserved the treatment, and recalled things that the woman had told them on previous occasions to support their argument. This demonstrated genuine care for the woman and that she had a space in the worker’s mind. There were frequent examples of maternal care. For instance, when one staff member was making toasties for a woman attending the drop-in. She made one for her then and packed up one for her to have for her dinner later.

I saw this informality particularly in longer-term support relationships. Holly, a woman using services where informality existed within relationships with staff, described the relationships as being “like friends... I offload and they know everything. They laugh [with] me. And then they cry with me.” She said this made the service feel like “coming home”.

Susie reported doing recreational activities like going clothes shopping with her hostel support worker. However, typically, it was workers’ exhibitions of emotional care that determined the informality of the relationship. For Priscilla, “they held my hand when I needed it, gave me a hug when I needed it”. Gemma described the emotional care and understanding shown by a staff member in her temporary accommodation:

Literally I just broke down in tears and Tanya was like, “You alright love?” ... She came up to the flat with me, she sat down with me, “Do you want a drink? Have something to eat”, and she just sat there for like 10 minutes, and she was like, “What’s going on?”. I told her and she just went, “No wonder you’re fucking breaking, it’s like a lot to handle”. They’re just really caring, like, because I’m on my own with [her child], like they know that I feel guilty that she hasn’t got her dad and that I do overcompensate... and they try and make me feel like, “Oh she’s come along so much”, and like every time they see her, she’s the only kid that goes into the office because her auntie has a spinny chair and she does the whole kid thing. (Gemma)

Gemma even referred to a staff member as an auntie to her daughter. As with Holly’s account, Tanya’s interactions could be considered friend-like. Gemma contrasted Tanya

with other staff who were “jobsworths”, where residents felt the power had ‘gone to their head’. This again suggests that informal support in professional relationships exists where power differences are perceived to be less.

Of interest in Gemma’s contrasting of Tanya and the ‘jobsworths’ is that Tanya was named, whereas the jobsworths were not, perhaps because their support was seen to be based upon policies and procedures, and Tanya’s was coming from her as an individual. They were representing the systems and not themselves. This seems a key difference between formal and informal support.

There were circumstances during my staff observation where professional boundaries hindered elements of informal support. For example, I was with a staff member locking up the office at the end of the working day and a woman who used the service approached us in a notable state of distress. We reopened the office so she could address her immediate needs, however we then had to ask her to leave as the organisation needed to close. We both felt sad about having to do this, however the service had time boundaries.

Informal support was seen to exist within professional relationships. In this context, the informal element of the support is underpinned by the individual worker’s own emotions and personal sense of care. The supportive relationship is between the worker and woman experiencing homelessness as individuals. The support given is from the worker’s personal resources. Mostly the support provided through this type of informal support was emotional, but the observation revealed some examples of practical support being delivered through these caring relationships. This informal support ran alongside the formal support defined by job roles.

## **5.5 Workers going beyond their role**

The previous section detailed how workers created informal relationships within their professional boundaries to support women experiencing homelessness. This study also found examples of workers going beyond their roles to provide both emotional and practical support. Support workers Sara and Samira, for example, recounted how they

provided a bed for a woman, reflecting behaviour that was common amongst workers I spoke with:

Samira: You kind of have to have that sense of kindness and something personal, that you want to support others. Professional capacity, you can't do anything. But on a personal level, for me driving an hour... like for me working very hard from early morning until 5 o'clock, and then... I phoned her and said, "Are you home now? You know I will drive to you and see if that bed will fit in".

Sara: And sometimes we are spending our own money... like she is spending her own driving around...

Samira: I approached the housing, that lady's housing provider, I left a message, I phone them, I explained to them the case, you should provide this and that, and actually nobody paid attention to it. It's not just that I jumped to support people personally. I tried that professional level but it doesn't work. So then you have to have that very quick alternative option which is lets use your own network...

Sara: I paid [referring to the bed]. It was completely new. (Sara & Samira)

Sara and Samira gave financial and practical support when their professional routes did not work. Sara went on to explain their motivations for shifting from providing formal to informal support:

I think that because we both have lived-experience we can feel that pain. You know what happens when I see someone's child... I always imagine my son over there. So if my son was sleeping on the floor, I would be devastated. Oh my gosh, I will do anything. (Sara)

Sara goes on to explain that because she went through traumatic experiences in her home country, and the UK whilst homeless and seeking asylum, she can empathise and relate with others in similar positions. She acts from her own emotions to help the "struggle" she is aware others are going through.

A similar circumstance was discussed by Esther, from her perspective as a woman receiving the support. Esther was homeless in a city unfamiliar to her. She had made some links with an organisation helping women from BAME backgrounds, but not specifically women experiencing homelessness. She referred to the founder of that organisation as being almost a stranger to her at that time. Despite this, when the council booked Esther into a hotel for a night which she had no way of getting to, the founder came to give her a lift there. The founder continued to support her by arguing her case to the council, delivering her food and answering her phone calls at any time



of the day and night, providing emotional support. Esther saw the support to be coming from a personal and not professional level, as the founder was gifting her own resources (time, financial, transport and emotional) rather than her organisation's.

Similarly, Jess talked of her teacher at college who let her store important documents in their locker and Katrin discussed the support she and her friends received from Henry, the security guard at her hostel. Katrin gave examples of Henry emotionally supporting her and practically supporting her friend with a lift: "my friend was very ill, was very sick. She doesn't have money so Henry picked my friend from hospital to hostel". Giving this support without any formal obligations to, suggests Henry was motivated by care. Katrin also indicated that Henry used his personal resources in terms of his car. In this example, Henry worked at a hostel for women experiencing homelessness, however he was not a support worker and went beyond his role to help.

There were also professionals going beyond their roles who did not work in homelessness or related fields. Tim worked in a multi-story carpark where people experiencing homelessness chose to sleep, many of them women. Tim told me that according to the carpark rules he should "kick them out" and he could get into trouble with his boss for allowing people to sleep there. However, speaking on behalf of himself and some of his colleagues Tim said:

We've got to know one or two of them, we're sort of on first name terms with one or two. They don't cause us any real problems so we sort of said, well if you're out of the way, especially in these temperatures, we say just keep warm, keep it tidy and keep out of the way and we can sort of let you get away with that. (Tim)

Tim advised them where to sleep to avoid having to disturb them due to the fire hazard they posed. He generally talked about those sleeping in the carpark with kindness and empathy which seemed to be his motivation for supporting them: "It's harsh for them so I try not to be cruel". They were individuals who deserved respect.

I also spoke with Danny who ran a café. Initially Danny was offering support to a woman (participating in this study) as part of the café's pay-it-forward scheme where customers donate towards hot drinks for those who could not afford them. However, his support expanded outside of these boundaries. He started providing food, access to toilets and other support. He even bought her a dummy security camera to make her

feel safer. Despite Danny's concerns that he was being taken advantage of, his motives for supporting came from a place of genuine care: "I do care about what must ever be going on for her... I'm just doing what I can to help. You know she came across vulnerable to me... so I helped". Danny also discussed the potential conflict between his personal kindness and the financial harm to his business through giving a lot away for free. His support opposed the needs of his business.

Unlike in the previous section, these were workers who stepped outside the formal constraints of their roles to deliver informal support to women experiencing homelessness. Similar to the previous section, they were motivated by their emotions. Workers were more likely to operate beyond their roles to give practical support, rather than emotional support, using their personal resources (e.g. the example of the bed) when unable to get resources through professional channels. Other circumstances, like with Tim, involved going against their job roles to support those experiencing homelessness.

## 5.6 Communities

This section looks at communities, i.e. groups based on commonalities such as beliefs, locality and experiences. Of interest is how individuals operate through these community networks to give support.

Gemma and Sara spoke about informal support online, a form which had not been found in the literature reviewed. Gemma used Facebook and online gifting pages to secure material goods and gain advice on sources of support:

[Gemma shows a gifting Facebook page on her phone] See, I put this [shows her comment asking for knowledge of how to get furnishings for when she moves out of temporary accommodation]. To be fair, I know that girl, but like this one, 'I have a roll of carpet, you're welcome to. Can be used as a rug'... Like this girl, 'Congratulations'. She's in a private-rented. She was like, 'DM me if you need any stuff. I've also got this, this and this'. And look, she's put, 'You don't have to apply for the white goods scheme'... There's loads of them that have already said about half of these schemes... Like I went to school with her in [name of area]. [Reads her comment] 'Have you done the Credit Union Family Loan? It's £500 that you might be able to get'. She was like, 'You might be able to get a room done with that'. (Gemma)

Social-networking sites gave Gemma access to large numbers of people who could potentially provide support by offering their own resources and knowledge. The support came from people she knew and strangers.

Sara explained that some local ethnic groups communicate using Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups to support people in need. She cited an example where one such group helped a woman experiencing homelessness of the same ethnicity:

Sara: So someone told [her colleague] about that lady. She called her, she put it on Facebook. So they arranged hotel room for her and obviously gave her food. Then someone else arranged, other lady, other neighbour, arranged for next day. So that's how they help... Then someone cooked pizza for her because they didn't have anything else to offer.

Becky: So that was all members of the public rather than services?

Sara: No, public. If you have your own community. Like Ukrainian... so they have their own Facebook page... 'someone need our help', 'What do they need doing?', 'Ok I can provide this', and 'I can help with that'... So they have their own Facebook pages, or WhatsApp groups. (Sara)

This support had an organic quality, where people came forward without obligation with whatever resources they had to give, usually practical as opposed to emotional resources. In Sara's example, it appeared that supporters were working together to make sure the woman's essential needs were fulfilled.

Support given by religious communities was cited by participants in different contexts. Holly and Eve spoke of donations of clothes from religious organisations. Katrin described how having a religious community around her provided support: "And every week that I go to church there was the peace again. I got calm and it was useful to me and I was praying to God, Jesus. Every time, I can swear Jesus help me." The pastor and other members of the congregation supported her both emotionally and practically. They gave her lifts, food, sanitary products and clothes. During the fieldwork I interviewed two church ministers. Frances in particular highlighted how his church's formal charitable obligations to support people in need were very minimal:

We are of benefit to the community because we have faith... I'd say that the legal interpretation, our interpretation of the legal framework is such that we are not obliged to do anything over and above a sort of a minimum standard. But we like to because I think that again, we are driven by the faith side of it rather than trying to fulfil the charitable status side of it. (Frances)

Without many formal obligations to provide support, their support could be considered informal in nature. Their motivation to support is their faith which, according to Frances, promotes kind and hospitable treatment towards strangers. Jennie, the other minister interviewed, referred to the culture in the church building as, “a family place but not like a closed in family. It’s an open arms welcoming family”. This is suggestive of relationships of care, which are not dependent on pre-existing connections. Jennie also characterised the support as coming from a position of equality: “there’s a sense that nobody’s above anybody else, we’re all the same, no matter what walk of life people are from once you come through these doors”.

For Eve and Esther especially, school communities functioned as sources of knowledge, as well as practical and emotional support. Esther’s child’s school exerted pressure on the council to house them whilst Eve’s child’s school donated uniforms, linked her with Surestart and showed her kindness and empathy.

There were discussions by participants on peer support, i.e. support amongst people experiencing homelessness, which I have considered in this section as it is a network of people with a mutual experience. However, community for some may not feel like the right word. For Ally, “community conjures up an image of a kind of niceness... [When homeless] it has to be all about you. You’re in survival-mode... I think it’s very difficult to have a community mind around things”. Despite this, Ally said that she saw people help each other out, but not in a networked way which community can suggest.

Both Priscilla and Holly felt that they sometimes benefitted emotionally from spending time with others experiencing homelessness. According to Holly:

It sounds bad, but it's nice to know I'm not alone. That I'm not on my own with life, not getting that help... Sometimes it gets like, you know, oh God, why me? Why me? And then you realize it's not just you. (Holly)

Holly also spoke of the negatives of peer ‘communities’ saying that when she helps others, she feels used by them. She noted that those who only had support from others on the street could become, “stuck in that position. Nobody to help them, nobody to just say, ‘Right, there's a roof there for a week till you get into a hostel’”. This ambiguity of peer support was also highlighted by worker Fay. Agreeing with Holly, she thought that many of the women who accessed her service only had support from

their peers. Fay observed that with their peers, “they’ve got each other’s backs”, however there were also squabbles.

The nature of peer support is also debated in the literature. Ogden and Avades’ (2011) participants, for example, generally saw peer support to have more positive benefits than the women discussing peers in this study. Peer relationships were seen to have possible beneficial implications for a person’s self-identity and could form family-like groups where they looked after each other. Their participants still however agreed with Holly’s experiences of being used by peers and spoke of how being around those with similar problems could make these problems worse. Susie in this study illustrated the same point when speaking of how in one peer relationship, they helped each other access drugs and influenced each other to use them. Mayock and Parker (2020; 2017) saw cultures, such as drug-use, amongst peers to hinder routes out of homelessness. The negative side to informal ‘support’ is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Sara recounted how her immediate neighbours and local community proved invaluable when she and her daughter were based in temporary accommodation without access to practical support from family and friends. Her neighbours gave her plates of food when they were cooking, helped sort her daughter’s school, and lent her items she needed: “there is no question about it when it comes to food or anything I need to borrow.” Members of her local community provided practical support, for example looking after her daughter, and emotional support, “moral support. That I’m not alone here, I can talk to someone”.

There were examples of strangers in the women’s local geographical community being supportive. Kelly, who had a regular begging pitch outside a supermarket, told me that financial support from the public allowed her to eat. Esther spent days outside, waiting to call the council’s out-of-hours number to arrange emergency accommodation for the nights. She had no money and could not afford to eat. She recounted how some car mechanics working nearby came over and bought her and her son pizza. Eve, similarly, discussed “the kindness of strangers” in her locality when she was homeless and offered an unfurnished flat by a housing association:

The flat was adjacent to sheltered accommodation... and two days later the warden who had given me the key to our flat came over and said that a gentleman had died there and his family were doing a house clearance. And she

said [to his family] that there's a mum who's moved in with nothing and they'd said... to her, "tell her to take whatever she wants". So I went over and cried. Their father had just died and there's some mad woman crying in their living room... So I took sofas, dust pan and brush, an iron and washing up bowl and everything to put in my house, to make something for my children and myself really. (Eve)

In Esther and Eve's situations, these strangers responded to their practical needs with no pre-existing relationships. Like many documentations of informal support from strangers, the support was given on a single occasion. There was no evidence in the women's accounts that there was an expectation of reciprocation.

AirBnB is a platform designed to accommodate holiday goers for short stays, but Jess explained how this platform connected her with an informal supporter. When the temporary accommodation Jess was given was a poor standard and support services were closed for the weekend, Jess found a cheap AirBnB online, a room in a woman's house. She used most of her money to travel to the house and therefore did not have enough for the AirBnB over the weekend. The AirBnB host, however, let her stay. Jess noted this host as a positive support for her: "She received me as she would receive relatives... It was not like we were strangers". The host fed her, allowed her to take any food she wanted, and messaged her several times after she left to see how she was doing.

Community offered structures through which to provide informal support, and ways for women to be connected with support. At times it gave access to knowledge and people with resources who may or may not already be known to the women. There was some debate over the less supportive elements of peer groups, a topic explored in section 5.9.

## **5.7 Family and friends**

The women participating had varying access to support from family and friends due to estrangement, breakdowns in relationships, their family's limited resources (for example, inadequate space in their homes), or they were dislocated from them.

Friends and/or family were mentioned by most women as sources of emotional support. For some, who were new to England, their close relationships had to offer support from afar. Katrin's husband was in frequent contact but still lived in the country Katrin had fled. Esther noted a close family friend living abroad as one of her most important supporters despite their relationship being over the phone. Similarly, Eve described the daily motivational messages she received from a friend. Susie noted that her relationship with her mum and brother helped keep her away from drugs, an opinion shared by a participant in Mayock and Parker's (2020) study.

Concurring with other evidence (Radley et al., 2006; Mayock & Parker, 2020), my research found that many women had also been practically supported by family and friends. Lucia, Holly, Eve, Jane, Jess, Gemma, Esther and Ally all spoke of being accommodated by friends and family. Jane and Katrin's family and friends let them store their belongings with them, even when staying elsewhere.

Abby, an informal supporter, accommodated people already known to her several times on long-term bases. She requested no rent and often cooked for them. Abby said that her motivation for this informal arrangement with one young woman was that she, "just wanted her to be safe... I don't want anybody to feel lonely or fed up like you find yourself". This empathy chimed as similar to Sara's motivations for informally supporting as previously discussed.

Gemma expressed how vital the practical and emotional support of friends and family was to her:

If I didn't have mum's help of being able to come here and me best mate Miranda, I couldn't even tell you where I'd be now. Probably in a ditch lying comatose, because it was like there were days where I thought I can't do this. Or like I've sat there thinking I want to go to the shop, go buy a nice bottle and get absolutely hammered. (Gemma)

For Gemma, family and friends also helped with childcare, food and knowledge. They told her about resources she could access and what to do and say to get them.

Jess' friend helped her with travel and food: "Rachel was the one who was taking me in her car... She took the luggage from the hotel. She took the keys and dropped me off in the house. And brought grocery items with her as well, gave me £20". Jess goes on to say that she was embarrassed by her friends bringing her food and that she had not

asked for it. Often, but definitely not always, informal support is given without it being requested, when the supporter notices a person is in need of care.

Lucia, Kelly and Susie all cited that having a partner whilst homeless had given access to resources. In Lucia's, and to some extent Susie's circumstances, the nature of the relationship makes its supportive quality questionable, which is discussed later in this chapter. Lucia's partner was not homeless and the relationship resulted in accommodation staying at his. Susie's relationship brought her protection whilst on the streets and knowledge of how to get support to exit street homelessness. Kelly's partner seemed to bring protection whilst on the street and they generally worked together as a team, sharing food and money. It could be seen as a collaborative relationship where resources were shared in order to meet a joint aim, to survive (Shaheen & Azadegan, 2020; Ergun et al., 2014). Despite this, she was often expressing anger towards him and told me she thought she supported him more.

Family and friends were frequently mentioned as sources of long-term informal support, largely emotional support, however the trust often present in these relationships also facilitated higher levels of support being given. The support was being offered to that specific individual based on their established relationship.

## **5.8 Space and place**

What is of interest when defining informal support is where access to spaces and places, as well as the resources within them, is facilitated by people. Tim, the carpark attendant, is an example of a gatekeeper to a space. He would allow people to sleep in the carpark, motivated by a desire to help, as long as they respected fire regulations. This was against the rules of his employer. Tim felt the carpark gave people warmth and a place to sleep "where they know they'll not get bothered" and away from the "cruel out there". Some women in Casey et al.'s (2008) study talked of how they would find public spaces overlooked by CCTV or security guards as this made them feel safer. Tim's carpark was covered by CCTV cameras visible to him and his colleagues. The combination of the space and the attendants watching over it, could provide women sleeping there with a feeling of safety.



Casey et al. (2008) highlight similar relationships between women experiencing homelessness and gatekeepers such as Tim. Women in their study negotiated their use of public spaces (and resources within) with gatekeepers in ways other than for their intended use, for example, washing themselves and their clothes in public toilets where this was usually prohibited. As with Tim, the granting of access to spaces could come with conditionality such as clearing up after themselves or accessing at certain times.

Gemma used the free Wi-Fi in public spaces to bid on council homes, specifically in supermarkets and pubs, as she could not afford phone data. When not a paying customer in these spaces, the women would rely on staff choosing not to ask them to leave. Similarly in the literature, Lenhard's (2020) research observed how the decision of the police and security staff over whether or not to interfere could affect a person's access to resources from spaces when homeless. Although train station staff were always visible to those accessing heat from the hot air vents of the Gare du Nord, they rarely disturbed them.

Kelly in this study used toilets in cafes without being a paying customer. Unlike in Lenhard (2020), where there was no mention of relationships between station staff and people making shelters outside the station, I witnessed that Kelly had built relationships with workers in two cafes. This relationship-building may have contributed to her ability to use the toilets whilst known as homeless and not a customer.

When considering what informal support is in the context of this study, I am interested in how those who gatekeep space provide informal support. This could be as subtle as a gatekeeper's decision not to restrict access to a space when a woman's use of it goes against the rules of that space.

## **5.9 Conditionality and Harm**

In the previous examples, care was the primary motivation for informal support. However, there were also examples where there was an expectation of exchange or

some conditionality which negatively impacted the women. Similarly, there were examples where, even though resources were given, elements of the relationship/interaction were not supportive. An instance of this has already been discussed, with Holly feeling that peer relationships could be inhibiting to movement out of homelessness and could be exploitative.

Jess recounted two specific circumstances where she had been treated “worse than [a] servant” in women’s houses in exchange for accommodation. When talking about her experiences with the first woman, Jess said: “She did not even let me speak to refugee forum, to go anywhere, go to college... I am cooking food, washing, doing things and then she was shouting at me”. Jess went to stay with another woman and found the experience and expectations even worse:

This lady left the city... She gave me loads of stuff to do in her absence... Cooking food, cleaning for her, doing everything... And then she’d come home, “Jess, what did you do all day?” ... Even if I am using my mobile phone, MY mobile phone, she was saying, “What are you watching?”, “What are you doing Jess?”, “Whom are you talking?”, “I have 24/7 cameras in my home, you cannot bring anyone”. I said, “I am not bringing anyone. If you have 24/7 cameras, you can see”. (Jess)

In both instances, Jess experienced restrictions on her freedom and privacy, as well as obligations to work in exchange for staying there. These obligations mean that this cannot be defined as informal support and indicate that care was unlikely to have been the motivation to let Jess stay. The treatment detailed could be considered exploitative as Jess described being taken advantage of for the benefit of those accommodating her. This is discussed further in the next section.

Ally talked more generally about the possible dangers of women relying on informal support for accommodation:

You think, well, if you can crash on your parents' floor or your mate's floor, then that's okay, but you know, it's not really, especially if you've got children, it's not okay. And they can be really dangerous places as well right? We're making massive assumptions that these are all safe spaces and I've spoken to women that have done the sofa-surfing thing and have been exposed to absolutely terrible situations. There's that kind of, you know, that survival sex kind of territory that you can get into. (Ally)

McGrath et al. (2023) highlight women’s vulnerability to assault whilst sofa-surfing.

Worker Sophie noted that these dangers are gendered, claiming that women are “more

likely to experience violence and abuse from the people who are supposed to care for them and love them". For informal arrangements to be supportive, they must not threaten women's safety. Ally mentioned survival sex here, a topic also referred to by several support workers. Fay spoke about women experiencing homelessness who are either sex working or exchanging sex for accommodation:

They'll get their heads down in a punter's car for ten minutes at a time and that's just a repeat cycle, they're constantly on the beat working. We've got women who will be staying with violent partners, pimps. We call it survival sex when we're looking at the sex industry, it's not quite sex work because often women might have sex for a bed for the night. So that's what we do see a lot of. (Fay)

Charlie, in agreement with Fay's comments, said that many women stay with "dodgy punters", in crack dens, trap houses or swap sex for accommodation. Charlie referred to this as women "having to use themselves in that kind of way", suggesting they are using their bodily and feminine capital for resources, places to sleep. Reeve et al. (2006, p.53) similarly refer to this exchanging of sex for resources as a form of "currency", which could put women at risk of assault. This cannot be classed as informal support as the arrangements are a risk to women's mental and physical wellbeing and motivations involve expectations of exchange. Exchange relationships are discussed further in the next section.

The workers interviewed and participating in the service observation reported that many women they supported lived with abusive male partners for accommodation. This chimed with Lucia's experience:

When kicked out because of my addict flatmates, I had no choice but to move in with a guy I had just met. I knew I was doing something that was against my instincts and feelings and it made me feel desperate. I had one of the worst years of my life, stuck during pandemic with an abusive person I did not have feelings for. (Lucia)

In Lucia's example, her accommodator's motive could have been to support her with housing, but the resource had not been given with care. In addition, conditionality was imposed; that Lucia remained in the relationship. A participant in Watson (2011), in a similar situation to Lucia, said she was scared of leaving a partner that she had no romantic feelings for as she would be losing both accommodation and other resources.

This speaks of a significant power imbalance in the relationship which increases the woman's vulnerability.

Sophie, similarly, spoke about how many women experiencing homelessness paired up with men and consequently gained their support in terms of day-to-day survival and their protection from external harm. There is a conditionality in obtaining resources here as the physical protection is conditional on them being in that relationship (Watson, 2016). Both Sophie and Watson (2016) also discussed how partners could perpetrate abuse within a relationship and isolate them from other forms of support including friends, family and services.

I suggest that the examples in this section cannot be considered as informal support because of the motivations behind them and/or potential harm, however they are key to discussions in Chapters 6 and 7 on women's support choices and dignity.

## **5.10 Exchange vs. communal relationships**

This chapter discussed different types of relationships and the motivations behind providing informal support. To discuss this further it is useful to refer back to the differences between exchange and communal relationships considered in the theoretical framework using Clark and Mills (1979). Communal relationships are based on care and resources given in response to people's needs. In exchange relationships resources are given with the expectation that the receiver will return resources of equivalent value.

Informal support has largely been characterised in this chapter as emerging from communal relationships. In agreement with Clark and Mills (1979), many of the communal relationships spoken about by the women were with family and friends. However, short-term communal relationships were seen with strangers. Esther gave an example when she spoke of a stranger who saw her looking stressed in the street and gave her a ten-pound note which she hoped would help. There was no expectation that the stranger would receive anything in return or be paid back.

Exchange relationships, where the motivation for giving is to receive something in exchange, are not generally understood here as informal support. In examples detailed in this chapter, I have also shown how these exchanges can be potentially harmful and therefore their supportive qualities are in doubt. Many women experiencing homelessness have few resources available to exchange, which can lead them to using the “exchange-value of their bodies” to obtain essential resources to survive (Watson, 2016, p.260). Exchanges can make them vulnerable to harm from others.

One interesting circumstance from the fieldwork was relayed by Jess who saw an exchange relationship change into a communal relationship. This was the previously mentioned relationship with her AirBnB host. Initially the ‘contract’ of that relationship was that Jess would exchange money for a place to stay. When Jess no longer had money, the host changed the relationship to a communal relationship and one of informal support. To our knowledge she did not expect future payment, yet she cared for Jess with accommodation, food and emotional support in response to her needs.

Communal and exchange relationships help us look at the exploitative relationships reported by participants. Jess entered into two relationships where she thought she had been offered accommodation out of kindness, a communal relationship, or she had expected to cook as an exchange. Instead, the demands on her to give her own resources were both comparably more than those given by the accommodators and/or not what was set out at the beginning of the relationship. This can be defined as an exploitative relationship from the perspective of Jess, and not a relationship of support (Clark & Waddell, 1985)

There were examples where women experiencing homelessness had reciprocated the support given. Eve and Katrin both did housework for friends who were supporting them, however there was no expectation from the friends that this housework be done in exchange. The support seemed to have been given out of care, independent of reciprocation.

Jules worked in a support service based in a café which allowed for elements of informal support to take place. She expressed why women such as Eve and Katrin may have been motivated to reciprocate when she spoke of how people her service supported came back to volunteer:

I think how people end up coming and volunteering... when they're here and they've had help they want to help do something. So it's like what can I do for you. Because there isn't an exchange of anything, it's just friendship and kindness. And it's like 'you've done this for me, what can I do for you?'. So everyone tries to help a little bit, you know in whatever way they can. It's really kind. (Jules)

Jules discussed how reciprocation can take place without it being part of an exchange relationship. As expressed by Clark and Mills (1979), the 'rules' around giving resources (which could include time volunteering) differ in communal relationships. They argue the giving, both the initial support and reciprocation, is done by both parties to benefit the other's welfare when a need exists.

Jules here, in slight conflict with Clark and Mills, suggested that the reciprocation takes place out of individuals' feelings of personal duty to give back (rather than responding to a need), even if there is no expectation from the original giver to do so. However, Jules still named the motivation as kindness. Eve also suggested that she felt a personal duty to reciprocate the support of her host when she said she would do much of the housework because she "felt guilty at being there". This sense of personal duty, or personal guilt, as a motivation to reciprocate could come from a wider societal pressure based on a value system of commodification. This value system links our worth to our productivity (Skeggs, 2011). Giving back could be a way to attach value to ourselves, increasing our self-worth, perceived worth and power in a support relationship.

Clark and Mill's (2011) discussion of hybrid relationships could be used in reference to workers showing genuine care in their roles. Hybrid relationships have both elements of communal and exchange relationships. The workers are acting out of care and not expecting payment (financial or in-kind) from the women accessing their support. Those accessing support largely do not feel like they have to repay the worker, or at least not at a comparable level. However, the workers are paid for their support by their employer. I am suggesting in this study that workers can engage in both formal and informal support simultaneously. They may have formal obligations through their role, but act based on their own emotions as well.

Informal support, in the context of this study, is largely communal relationships or elements of the relationships which operate by the rules of a communal relationship.

Where women engage in exchange relationships to access resources, the giver of those resources is not motivated by care and kindness.

## 5.11 Conclusion

This chapter drew on participants' accounts to explore characteristics of informal support. This analysis was used to form a definition of informal support in the context of women's experiences of homelessness.

I propose a definition that sees the formality of support to exist on multiple scales as opposed to there being distinct categories of formal and informal support. This differs from existing literature which often associates formal/informal support with professional/personal contexts. This chapter showed this association as too simplistic. It found numerous examples where informal support was given in professional contexts whether this be workers going beyond their roles, or using their personal resources to support within their roles.

Despite informal support being envisaged as scales, I suggest there are some distinct exclusions on the basis that 'support' has to have a positive quality. There were examples in the data where receipt of resources involved some form of harm and therefore could not be considered supportive. The definition of informal support therefore excludes receipt of resources which involves a risk of harm or exploitation. The support instead must respect women's inherent dignity, their value as humans, for the interaction to have the positive quality of support. The realisation whilst defining informal support that it must respect inherent dignity produced a circular argument with my final research question, 'How does informal support affect women experiencing homelessness' feelings of dignity and sense-of-self?', which is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Based on the research data, informality of support is defined according to scales showing **to what extent** the following considerations apply:

- Support-giving is motivated by genuine care.

- Support-giving is without *expectation* for exchange, reciprocation or conditionality.
- Support interactions are occurring under the conditions of human connection (as opposed to faceless systems).
- Support is responding to the needs of a specific individual.
- Support is taking place in a personal context/setting (as opposed to professional).
- Support involves the giving of personal resources (or making decisions from personal values to allow access to resources against the intended meaning of a space/organisation's rules).

By using scales, as opposed to a binary classification, a more nuanced understanding of informal support is developed. It views a worker showing genuine care and compassion for a woman (beyond what is required in their job role) as informal support, yet sees it as less informal than a family member providing accommodation based on their personal relationship. It recognises the constraints of professional boundaries whilst seeing informal qualities. This definition is visualised in a model in Chapter 8.

This way of defining informal support considers the motivation for support-giving. This advances understanding in the existing literature, and was made possible by considering the accounts of those providing informal support, a perspective missing from other studies. Two main types of motivation for informal support were identified, genuine care for that specific individual based on an existing relationship, and general kindness towards all people based on a recognition of their human value (more often shown by religious, ethnic and community groups). Defining informal support on scales captures both motivations for informal support but views them to be of different levels of informality.

This chapter drew on the insights of women with experiences of homelessness and supporters to conceptualise informal support in an innovative way which considers nuance and motivation for support. This conceptualisation is used in the following findings chapters to help understand women's support choices and their effect on sense-of-self and dignity.



## **6. Findings: To what extent do women experiencing homelessness come to rely on informal support and why?**

The previous chapter (Chapter 5) explored the nature of informal support and proposed a definition. It concluded that the defining characteristics of informal support are that it is given as an act of care and concerns the feelings and motivations of the supporter. It acknowledges a person's worth and consequently has the potential to make someone feel of worth. Chapter 5 helps in understanding the present chapter as it highlighted the nuanced nature of informal support, suggesting that informal support cannot solely be associated with personal contacts. It is the *characteristics* of a support relationship which affect the feeling of receiving that support, impacting whether women choose that support option.

This chapter focuses on the extent to which women experiencing homelessness rely on informal support and why they do so, looking at women's felt-experience when accessing support. Discussions take a step forward from Chapter 5, exploring wider societal influences on women's support choices, support relationships and services. Societal influences can limit women's choices, or they can enforce engagement with support. In this way, the research found that participants' support 'choices' were often governed by necessity and risk-management.

The theoretical framework influences the structure of this chapter and the following. This chapter begins with discussions on the impact of societal discourses (neoliberal, patriarchal and fear of others) and the risks present (from services and men) on women's support choices, before continuing to the different forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) and ending with some further key issues highlighted by women in this study. Chapter 7 then develops these findings, looking at how the women see dignity reflected in their experiences.

## **6.1 The impact of societal discourse on women's support choices**

Societal discourse was seen in this study to influence women's support choices whilst homeless. It created a societal climate which affected the resources made available institutionally to those experiencing homelessness and the willingness of others in society to provide informal support. It also affected the values participants held which governed their decisions.

A societal culture of individualism instils beliefs that we should "manage structural inequality individually", creating a pressure for many experiencing homelessness to solve their own dispossession (Farrugia & Watson, 2011, p.114). This was especially true for women in this study who in addition to negotiating dominant commodified value systems with few resources, also negotiated gender inequality and for some, racial inequality. Individualism was seen to affect the support strategies they used whilst homeless, who they approached for support, and whether they approached sources of support at all.

### ***6.1.1 Neoliberalism***

#### **Individualism**

Many of the women recounted experiences which demonstrated the influence of a neoliberal culture on their decision-making whilst homeless. Individualism could be seen in their personal values and the external judgements they felt on them. The influence of external judgement was evident in my conversations with Jane who, whilst homeless, felt under scrutiny by social services and the courts during a child custody case. Jane was reluctant to approach other support services as this could make her "look weak" to court and social services. This increased Jane's reliance on family for support, leaving her in overcrowded conditions in her mum's home.

Holly spoke of how her value and preference for self-reliance affected her choice to rough-sleep over staying with friends:

I don't like [staying with friends] because I don't like having to rely on somebody else. I have walked the streets many a night... falling asleep in gardens, you know, and it's pressure on other people anyway if you're staying there. (Holly)

Holly mentions feelings of being burdensome on others if relying on them for accommodation, a view also expressed by Eve. This feeling could be associated with a culture where perceived value is based on our contribution to society (Skeggs, 2004). To feel burdensome on other individuals or society, feels like you are of less value. Potentially it was for this same reason that Jess felt shame that her friends were supporting her with food. She may have felt that her friends perceived her as unable to provide for herself, a reflection of her personal failings (Farrugia & Watson, 2011).

Individualism for Reina was a value built through her personal experiences. Her previous use of support services taught her that only she could help herself:

Before when I came out of the abuse and had all of these support networks, I thought I was being rescued and that people were going to come and help me understand and get on a recovery journey. And my expectations of that were up there high, and then I realised it weren't happening... I realised only one person's going to help and do something about it. It's me. But then, like I just said, if you're in a dark place and you're feeling very low in your mindset... how are you going to get to where you want to be if no-one is coming and giving you the tools for that. If you're lucky enough to have got them from school, or you've got parents or family who support you, then people will get that. But if people haven't got that and no-one else is coming to get that person that, how do they get out of that situation? (Reina)

Reina expresses that you need to have personal resources to solve your situation but acknowledges that not everyone has them during difficult times. She went on to describe how she built up her own emotional resources and resilience through self-help books, journalling and self-compassion exercises. For Reina, this was her taking control of her own situation. Throughout our time together she talked of how she had had a lack of trust for others whilst homeless, largely services:

I was absolutely shocked how the people I went to ask for help, how some of them belittled me... Making me more humiliated and shamed as well, and then feeling there was something wrong with me. And that came across a lot, and this is like mainly police, which I found very hard to accept because for me police were the people who were supposed to be safe and to help. So that then made me not want to trust. (Reina)

This was influenced by coming out of an abusive relationship and feeling like the police and other support services had failed to keep her safe or believe her (paralleling her

experience of abuse in her relationship). The abusive relationship had also impacted Reina's ability to trust her family and friends. She said that she had "open me heart to being in a relationship what I thought were going to be loving and normal", which was instead abusive and made her not want to trust again. She expected to be let down by family and friends. This loss of trust in others impacted her use of services and informal support whilst homeless and influenced her views on managing her own situation. She did not want to rely on others and created a narrative in line with individualism which saw strength in her own resources and capabilities.

In relation to Reina's experience of being let down by police and some support services, Tyler (2013) discussed how policies that restrict resources for those in need (often evident through service failures) force individuals to take responsibility for their circumstances. These circumstances are often shaped by broader structural inequalities. In terms of police failings and measures to keep people safe, Fay, a support worker, spoke of some women she worked with taking control of their own safety: "Carrying weapons is probably the most common [safety precaution] in terms of women who are sleeping-rough". This shows lack of trust for others and self-reliance in the dangerous environments that women can be exposed to when homeless. Workers Jules and Tina spoke of how when women felt unable to rely on services, they could look to support themselves through sex work and begging. Begging was a method used by Kelly. However, time spent with her showed how this was precarious depending on weather, footfall past the shops and whether she was asked to move on.

Homelessness can prevent women from exercising individualistic values. For Eve, autonomy and independence were amongst her most important values, but her past experience of homelessness removed her ability to exercise them: "I'm very independent and I do everything for myself, but I ended up sort of having to rely on the kindness of strangers." Eve later went on to own a house and in contrast spoke about the importance of feeling self-reliant and in control:

That house is mine, there's no mortgage and no rent to pay. And to me that was absolutely paramount that I was in that position with that because no matter what happens Becky, nobody could ever make us homeless, nobody, and that was the most important thing to me. (Eve)

Eve also spoke of the importance of how she was perceived by others. Eve called this 'value' "this awful thing of saving face", which she disliked but nonetheless felt its influence on her thinking and attributed this mindset to her parents. 'Saving face' was self-preservation and presenting to the world an image that you are doing well, independent of your reality. Eve talked of it in terms of her experience of homelessness and beyond:

So not airing your dirty laundry in public and making sure that everybody sees. So to me it was absolutely paramount that... because there was real poverty, there was real poverty in that time. My children, to this day you know, will always be dressed beautifully... everything in my house comes from Ebay and charity shops but you would never know. You would never know because I am always coordinated. (Eve)

This clearly demonstrates the importance to Eve of being seen to be coping by others, but also as having value through capital (cultural capital in terms of appearance and intelligence, and perceived economic capital) embodying many neoliberal qualities of thriving despite the hardship she had undergone.

Workers reported women as more likely to stay away from services for longer, until they were at crisis point (Sophie), and to downplay their needs until they were no longer able to (Sam). Gendered "masking" and neglect of needs until the point of crisis is also discussed in the literature (Hess, 2023, p.120; McGrath et al., 2023; McCormack & Fedorowicz, 2022). Maggie saw women's distancing from services slightly differently saying that in comparison to men, "women don't like to admit their struggles. And they're more resourceful, find it easier to look after themselves and find solutions". Maggie's comment is in line with neoliberal attitudes but contrary to traditional gender stereotypes. This concurs with existing research which suggests women are more likely to find 'solutions' to accommodate themselves, independent of services, using informal networks. However, these are often short-term, unstable arrangements and can bring risk of harm (McGrath et al., 2023; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021).

Women's values of self-reliance and independence are indicative of a culture of individualism. The women spoke of them as values formed in response to experiences of support failings, or as internalised values from the cultures they grew up in. Some of the women not only chose to forgo formal services, but also preferred to remain

independent from informal support networks. However, for others this was not an option.

### **Meritocracy and Homelessness**

According to Farrugia and Watson (2011, p.115), “The nature and meaning of homelessness is an outcome of the political, social and welfare landscapes specific to a particular society”. Pascale’s (2005) research found homelessness discourse to vary over time between being attributed to structural issues and being seen as the result of poor choices and individual failings. As discussed in the previous section, neoliberal attitudes are dominant in British society. Neoliberalism promotes meritocracy, attributing an individual’s successes to their merits (Tyler, 2013). It justifies inequalities as “deserved” (Jones, 2011, p.97). Consequently, neoliberal ideologies attribute individuals’ homelessness to their personal failings rather than structural failings, influencing how people experiencing homelessness are treated and the support available to them (Farrugia et al., 2016; Tyler, 2015). This has implications for women’s support choices.

Despite the dominance of neoliberal discourse, there were some views expressed in the research of structural causes of homelessness. Tim, a carpark attendant, indicated that he saw homelessness as the result of negative experiences when he said, “the majority of them are sound people really. They’ve just had it hard”. Tim spoke of those sleeping in his carpark with sympathy when he made comments like “God bless ‘em, life’s crap for them”, and with positivity saying, “Some of them are good salt of the earth good people”. His opinions were reflected in the way he treated them.

The opinions of workers interviewed regularly challenged neoliberal discourses on homelessness. This was present in the language they used with Sam frequently referring to people “experiencing multiple disadvantage”. There was much discussion by the workers of trauma-informed approaches, acknowledging that someone’s experiences of support interactions were impacted by their past traumas (McCarthy, 2022). Structural causes of homelessness and survival strategies were discussed, for example the cost-of-living and housing crises were identified by Fay as reasons for women’s homelessness and them returning to sex work. The effect of gender

inequality as impactful on women's routes to homelessness, and their experiences when homeless, was widely acknowledged by workers. It is unclear whether this challenging of neoliberal discourse would be present when talking with workers in statutory housing services. This is discussed more in section 6.1.4 on patriarchal discourse.

Danny, a café owner and informal supporter, was seen to be switching between two discourses on homelessness which sat in conflict with each other and affected his decisions on what support to give to a woman experiencing homelessness:

In these individuals' cases we are aware that they are not technically homeless. They have got a property to go to. And her partner sits up there outside [name of café] so the two do what they do and get the money that they get. But through other people I've also found out that they have somewhere to go, they have an I-pad, she's got a phone you know. They're not 'homeless'... if you add up what they must get, and the benefits she's told me she receives, she actually goes home every month with more money than I do. So at that point I think right stop taking the piss. But of course if you put all that aside I still think this person is... I hate the phrase 'less fortunate' cause that's not really the case... but they choose to sit outside in the cold and the wet and the rain and the wind. Whether they need to or they don't, they do do that and that takes a lot of [pause] strength I guess, a lot of willpower to do that because it would be so much easier wouldn't it to just sit inside all day. But they must make a good living off it and again who knows what the situation is. (Danny)

Danny doubts the genuineness of this woman's situation. He mentions reports about her from others that gives her some apparent privilege and to some extent promotes a discourse of the welfare state being too generous, giving those who do not work more economic capital than him, a business owner. When Danny did offer support, other people told him that he "shouldn't have bothered, she's not homeless". Later in the interview, Danny said that he believed the woman was capable of part-time work: "I feel that she could work but she obviously doesn't want to". Tyler (2013, p.161) argues that neoliberal discourse equates "inclusion/exclusion" with "work/worklessness" suggesting a dominant societal view that this woman could 'choose' to be included in mainstream society through 'choosing' to work. On the other hand, Danny recognises that she must have unmet needs, or low non-economic capital, to make the choices that she does. Danny cites his questioning over her privilege as a reason for him choosing to "pull back on giving things away for free".

Homelessness discourse can affect how society treats those experiencing homelessness, including the informal support given by the public (see Danny above) and the services set up to support them. Meritocracy's message that someone is homeless because of their bad life choices works to justify state restrictions of economic and material resources including the deterioration of the welfare state (Tyler, 2013). Many women in this study described difficulty accessing resources through state organisations and facing judgement on whether they 'deserved' support.

The women gave a picture of scarce resources for those experiencing homelessness, as well as punitive experiences when trying to access them, evidence of societal discourse reflected through harsh policies that people must be responsible for their own survival (Tyler, 2013). Esther spoke of strict council procedures, their requests for evidence of her need, being accommodated for single nights and spending all day sat outside in between. Katrin talked about the council repeatedly having no emergency accommodation and Eve mentioned long waiting lists for housing. This scarcity leaves many needing to resort to other forms of support to fulfil their needs.

Gemma discussed how the council prioritise people with various needs for accommodation. She thought that people fleeing domestic abuse, people with disabilities, and refugees and asylum seekers were prioritised:

Other countries, they shut the borders, we don't. We're letting everybody in. And they are having to house them. But that's what annoys some of us, like, when we're there, it's like, she's not even got a kid, how the hell has she moved out into a property before us?... But, then I think to myself, you don't know everyone's circumstances. (Gemma)

Gemma touches upon the "soft touch Britain" discourse, of Britain doing too much to assist asylum seekers, which Tyler (2013, p.88) says works to justify exclusionary policies towards them. One effect discussed by Sara, Katrin and Jess was the size of the Home Office's allowance for asylum seekers. According to Sara, her brother "was supporting [her], because Home Office was not enough".

Gemma, above, expresses a narrative of competition over resources. Others are a threat to the scarce resources she needs. She went on to say that many people knew what to say to appear in higher need. She also talked about criteria determining priority changing over time:



But if you go back... I'd say about five years... if you got pregnant, it was you got a council house straight away. That's why there were so many teenage pregnancies. Now it changed, because you'd get given a place, I'd be a mother and baby unit. So daddy wouldn't be able to go and live there... that's why they've done this and got harder I think. (Gemma)

Gemma suggests here either that discourses on some people 'playing' the system have meant that resources have been taken away for others, or that there is too much competition for resources. According to Gemma, "because so many people know how to get round stuff, it is harder". Discourse of scarce resources can create competition between those who need the resources, motivated by a fear over resources disappearing. This was illustrated by Gemma who frequently mentioned her belief that when everyone finds out about resources, the resources stop, for example: "Like this credit union that everyone's jumped on the bandwagon. I guarantee it's not going to be there for the next couple of years". For Gemma, this competition resulted in her not helping others access resources: "There's a few people I know who could get it, but I don't want to lie, I don't want to help them". This is an interesting point as it suggests discourse on homelessness and scarce resources creates competition which can impact informal peer support amongst people experiencing homelessness.

It is widely accepted in the literature that significant funding cuts to welfare and services have created scarcity of resources available to those experiencing homelessness (Watson et al., 2019; Hess, 2023; McCormack & Fedorowicz, 2022). Watson et al. (2019) also suggest that austerity conditions have intensified competition for resources. Accounts from workers in homelessness services reveal they often felt pressured to determine who was most deserving of the limited resources available.

Another homelessness discourse encountered by participants was that those who are homeless should be grateful with what they are given. This was particularly prevalent in accounts of asylum seekers, as outlined by Sara speaking about her interactions with the council: "a few people literally asked you and they don't even have a filter, 'Why did you come here?'. So that's a caution if you're complaining. So we shouldn't be complaining about the system if you're an asylum seeker". Samira, a worker, said that homeless asylum seekers are often expected to accept whatever accommodation is available even when unsuitable. She said reasons for why the accommodation is unsuitable are not listened to as there is a general attitude that: "You should be

grateful because we saved you from... so you should be grateful". The discourse was enshrined in policies governing housing allocation, as refusing an accommodation option could result in priority status for housing being downgraded. Gemma reported similarly that if she had continued refusing unsuitable accommodation then the council would have said, "Well you can't be that hard done for if you say no to that property".

Samira's observation is illustrated by Jess' experience. For periods of time Jess lived in accommodation for asylum seekers, in very poor conditions:

The lock was broken of the room, and inside on the back of my bed there was a square hole and a t-shirt, a brown t-shirt, was fitted in it to fill the hole. And it was smelly like a cat has done a poo in it. It was so smelly, the room was smelly... And when I came downstairs to take water there was... only one small fridge and it was not even working. (Jess)

In another house there was no heating, the sink and shower were blocked, and the fridge also broken. Jess said that the other women in the accommodation chose to stay with friends instead because of the poor conditions. Jess chose to leave, largely due to these poor conditions. She chose instead to live with women who offered her informal support: "And I was happy, at least I do not need to go back to [asylum seeker accommodation]".

Reina, Gemma and Katrin also talked of poor conditions in their homelessness accommodation. Reina reported "disgusting" conditions which she felt to reflect her perceived worth when she said, "when you get put in a situation like that it makes you feel like, well is this what they're saying I deserve?". She cites this as a reason for returning to her abusive partner. Reina's experience of poor quality material support, as with the other examples described in this section, could be interpreted as resulting from governmental policies limiting financial resources to services based on neoliberal ideologies (Tyler, 2013).

Societal discourse on homelessness affects whether women experiencing homelessness are viewed as deserving of support and of genuine need. This affects the support and resources given by services. Meritocratic discourse was seen to often result in poor standards of accommodation and competition over resources. The result was the women choosing informal support where available or taking risks to obtain

resources (although it was also noted in this section that neoliberal discourse could affect informal support-giving too).

### **6.1.2 Patriarchalism**

Patriarchal gender ideals assign women to roles which subordinate them in both the home and in public (Liu, 2024). They largely assign feminine characteristics to women and judge their moral 'goodness' against their ability to occupy these roles and display these characteristics.

Charlie, a worker, noted how traditional gender roles seemed to influence how women are seen and treated by services and society:

People, and particularly employees in statutory services, sort of expect women to behave a bit better than men and present themselves better than men. So when we look at reasons why women are evicted from temporary accommodation like B&Bs, men get away with much worse behaviour. And I think that goes for appearance as well, so I think people in general are more shocked when a woman looks really unwell, looks really dirty... I think for women to come into [homelessness daycentre]... looking bedraggled and having a shower, I think there's a lot more stigma around that than a man turning up and having a shower, so I think sometimes a woman just wouldn't approach there. (Charlie)

Charlie talks of the stigma that can be attached to women if they do not maintain their appearance and how this affects their geographies when homeless. Conversely, the literature highlights how cleanliness and appearance can be used as a strategy by women experiencing homelessness to avoid stigma and gain access to public space (Casey et al., 2008; Radley et al., 2006). In addition, Charlie notes how behaviour which contradicts gender expectations can result in women being treated less favourably by services. She sees this as a reason why women may not use services or have their access to resources removed.

There was an example during this study's staff observation, which showed how behaviour framed through traditional gender roles can result in women being seen more favourably. Staff spoke of a drugs worker who saw the men he was working with to be more accountable for their lifestyles. He thought men should be able to take hold

of opportunities to get off drugs, whereas women were passive victims and consequently less accountable for their actions. Services seeing women as dependent and vulnerable, aligned with social norms, could give them more access to support resources (Passaro, 1996).

Women at a lived-experience group felt that women were 'trained' to be "shrinking violets". They appear more vulnerable and take up less space. For this reason, they felt that women were less visible when homeless and approached fewer support services. Women's lack of visibility whilst homeless is frequently referenced in the literature (Casey et al., 2008; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016; Menih, 2020). Those who are more visible can be seen as deviant and consequently feared by society (Golden, 1992).

Susie and Kelly were in relationships with male partners whilst street-homeless, and Lucia was being accommodated by a male partner. Gender performativity could be enacted in these relationships with Susie saying that her partner brought her protection, and Lucia's partner being the provider of material and economic resources. Heteronormative relationships could bring validation from society as they follow societal "scripts" (Ahmed, 2014, p.147). They embody ideals of femininity and masculinity with women's femininity being 'used' to form "bodily alliances with men" (Watson, 2016, p.262). Therefore, a woman experiencing homelessness with a male partner could be judged as less deviant. Despite this, a heterosexual couple when visibly homeless, may not reap the same societal privilege and movement through social space which is afforded to those in dominant society (Ahmed, 2014; Watson, 2016). Women experiencing homelessness may have safer access to support services and the streets under the protection of male partners. Simultaneously, male partners can be threats to women's safety and decision-making including their support choices (Ally, Sophie, Jules), which was seen as an enactment of masculine gender role ideologies (Santana et al., 2006). Examples of this were present in literature, in the workers' accounts in this study and true of Lucia's case (discussed further below).

Women were also anxious that they would be judged by services as bad mothers. Tyler (2013) describes how societal discourse can create fictitious characters which embody immorality, and when attached to certain groups work to scapegoat them for society's problems. There was evidence in this study of a fictitious character, the perfect mother, created by patriarchal discourse to embody morality, which some of the women with

children felt judged against. Esther felt that she needed to present as the perfect mother to social services, dressing her child well and cooking dinner for the social worker. Eve spoke about how although she was experiencing “real poverty”, she would make sure that she presented to the outside world a different image with her children dressed beautifully. Moral judgements against the perfect mother are closely linked with dignity and are discussed further in Chapter 7.

Evidence from this study, in agreement with existing literature, suggests that traditional gender roles are influential on women’s homelessness experiences. Women seen as homeless and not accompanied by a man could be judged in society as unfeminine and deviant, or they could be viewed as passive victims based on gender norms. This affects their societal treatment, access to resources and support choices. The women’s own judgements of themselves against societal moral discourses such as the perfect mother at home could also affect their use of support with many of the women avoiding services to manage negative external judgements of them.

### ***6.1.3 Fear of others***

The stereotype of a person experiencing homelessness may be shaped by media and societal discourses which create fear of ‘the other’, of groups who are marginalised due to them going against social norms (Ahmed, 2014; 2004). These discourses are further strengthened by increasingly fractious city landscapes which distance people experiencing homelessness from other areas of society, resulting in the dominance of fictitious stereotypes (Pascale, 2005).

Discourses of fear surrounding marginalised groups are common in society, and according to Frances, a church minister, create suspicion:

In one sense, you've got this community... that has massive longevity and has not moved... then around them is this community that's grown really fast with the migration process over the last 20, 30 years. Where there's all sorts of different people with different languages and different cultural expressions and different values and I think that just the unknown around all of that creates a bit of a climate of suspicion. (Frances)

Frances suggests that distrust and fear can be a consequence of migration and increased diversity. This increased diversity can result in a dissonance in needs amongst residents in an area (Reeve, 2008). The influx of new populations can increase community tensions when they are seen as competition for limited resources and facilities, especially in deprived areas. This was exemplified in the previous section by Gemma's thoughts that refugees were being prioritised for council housing. A debated study by Putnam (2007) which has been labelled as pessimistic (Hewstone, 2015), finds that immigration increases community discord, with less community cooperation. Consequently there are increased perceptions of threat and lower levels of trust even amongst people of the same ethnicity. Distrust and separation can create fear of others (Knox et al., 2017) and a perceived lack of community cooperation is seen by some to erode reciprocal informal support arrangements (Flint & Robinson, 2008).

Although Frances sees the potential for suspicion to flourish *between* different societal groups, there was also evidence of strong ties *within* these groups described by other participants. This conflicts with Putnam's (2007) findings of immigration resulting in low community cooperation within ethnic groups, however Jack saw "older and better-established" communities as more able to provide support networks, and Putnam had referred to the short-term impact of immigration. There were examples in this study of cohesive ethnic and religious community networks working to support those in need with shared commonalities (and sometimes others). Jack, Sara, Samira, Frances and Katrin especially spoke of these groups being dependable sources of informal support both on practical and emotional levels (as detailed in Chapter 5).

Frances, when speaking about the fractious nature of the city he was resident in, explained that he grew up in a small village where everyone knew each other. Consequently, he felt that the culture of suspicion was not present in the village. Lower levels of suspicion could exist for several reasons. There could be less fear of others because people lived in closer proximity, with judgements being based on real interactions rather than discourse and stereotypes. If interactions are positive, then this positively affects attitudes towards each other and reduces perceptions of threat (Hewstone, 2015). Alternatively, more trust could exist where there is less diversity and more *perceived* similarities (Koch et al., 2020), as according to Reeve (2008) distinguishably less ethnic diversity exists in UK rural areas than urban areas. In relation

to this, Jack spoke of diasporic communities looking after new arrivals to his city of the same ethnicity or religion. This could show that the ability to relate to the situation of another is a motivation for support, an opinion expressed by Sara who said her lived-experience stimulated her to support as she could “feel that pain”. However, it could also suggest, like above, that there is less fear in supporting someone with more perceived commonalities.

Frances goes on to talk about how media discourses have the potential to cause him to fear strangers whilst in his role:

I think there is that sense that the media is getting better and better at sensationalizing stories... I mean the story that's caused ripples in the Christian circles is those two priests who were murdered in France, where someone just came in with a knife and just attacked them in the middle of a service. And you're thinking, wow, that could literally be any of us, you know, that are offering a church service that is open. And I remember that was when the penny dropped for me, thinking this is actually quite serious, isn't it? (Frances)

Although a saddening event through any lens, what Frances described here could be an example of “crisis management”, an event ‘sensationalised’ by the media, creating fear in society (Tyler, 2013, p.8). This fear can be used to gain public consent for governmental agenda. These discourses, when sensationalised, can both effect the way we think and behave towards others. For Frances, directly related to the above media story, he talked of his initial feelings of threat when he saw a man standing at the church entrance for some time during a church service: “there’s a part of me that does feel threatened in those moments, knowing there are stories of... faith communities coming under attack”. This same man later asked Frances for a lift home from church and Frances talked about a mental checklist that he made to manage the risk of helping that stranger. This included his wife being with him in the car, and not telling the man where he lived. This illustrated how discourses of fear can affect the informal support that people feel comfortable to give to those they do not know. This was touched upon in Chapter 5 when speaking of larger support asks requiring more trust.

Ahmed (2004) and Tyler (2013) discuss societal discourses of fear and disgust creating fictitious characters which come to embody what is disapproved of by society and work to marginalise groups. This can be applied to people experiencing homelessness. Kelly in this study was visibly identifiable as homeless and it was observed during time spent

together how strangers interacted with her. Kelly sat outside a supermarket, sometimes asking passersby for money and conversing with people who were known to her. Many passersby though did not acknowledge her when she tried to engage with them. On one occasion, Kelly and I went into a local café. Kelly went to speak to the customers in there with dogs and handed them free dog treats from a bowl the café owner had left out. One customer chose to give the treats back to me instead of Kelly to place back in the bowl, despite me being further away from them.

During the research, with Kelly's permission, Danny the owner of this café was interviewed as he provided informal support to Kelly in a number of ways. Danny spoke about occasions like the above where Kelly would speak with café customers: "They don't want that... everyone finds it like really 'errr homeless girl talking to me, errr'". He talked of a similar response from local business owners when he said, "a few of the business owners that I've become friendly with are like 'argh, not them again'".

Danny referred to Kelly as "harmless" and there were a number of people whilst we were outside the supermarket who Kelly knew by name and remembered many details about their lives. Kelly had ongoing friendly conversations with these people. This suggests that Kelly was judged according to homelessness stereotypes shaped by discourses of fear and disgust, where a sense of separation was kept. These discourses worked to maintain Kelly's separation, restricting her access to spaces (for example, the businesses spoken about by Danny) and her interactions with others who were not marginalised. Tausch et al. (2007) saw anxiety of others to build through the anticipation and expectation of negative contact, elevated by negative stereotypes. Discourses of fear can work to maintain separation from people experiencing homelessness, promoting the feared homelessness stereotype as a threat and source of anxiety (Sibley, 1995). However, when positive contact was made, anxiety was seen to reduce (Tausch et al., 2007), as could be the case with Danny and the others who came to frequently speak with Kelly.

Kelly expressed similar fears towards others when she said that she did not use services because they were "full of knobheads" or alcoholics that she did not want to associate with (referring to users of the services). She said that other people experiencing homelessness were not nice people and separated herself from them. Danny suggested that Kelly chose to come into his café for food and drink rather than



homelessness services to “feel slightly more part of society”, potentially as an identity maintenance strategy. Kelly could be working to create a more positive social identity and self-worth through dissociating herself from others who are homeless and associating with unstigmatized people (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Farrington & Robinson, 1999; Snow & Anderson, 1987). This strategy is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Discourses of fear based upon stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness can marginalise them from society. Exacerbated by an increasingly fractious society, physical distance can be created from those visibly homeless through restricting their access to spaces. This reduces the perceived risk of contamination (Ahmed, 2014). Discourses of fear can affect people’s decisions to provide informal support to those they have no pre-existing relationship with due to the perceived risks. This limits women’s support choices, making them more dependent on services or closer personal connections. It was a nuanced debate however as simultaneously discourses of fear could negatively affect women’s use of services, as in services they could come into contact with feared ‘others’ experiencing homelessness.

## **6.2 The impact of risk management on women’s support choices**

This section, exploring how fear of services and victimisation affects women’s support choices, overlaps with section 6.1 on societal discourse. When discussing women’s safety, for example, Ahmed (2014) argues that societal discourse shapes feminine vulnerability and circulates images of those who pose threat to women. Women consequentially experience heightened fear of “the shadowy stranger, just out of reach” (Stanko, 1990, p.3). This fear can restrict women’s movement through public space (and in relevance to this PhD, homelessness services), allowing others to dominate these spaces. According to Ahmed (2014, p.68), “fear is not simply a consequence of the ‘objectivity’ of threats or dangers”. Those more afraid are often those less at risk of victimisation (Ditton & Farrall, 2000; Stanko, 1990).

Whilst acknowledging the above, fear of services and victimisation are presented separately here. Women’s fear is seen as influenced by discourse but is not discourse itself. Many examples discussed in this section were real incidences of harm, and fear

of this harm reoccurring. Existing research evidences real danger to women's safety from interpersonal relationships, as opposed to the 'shadowy stranger' featured in discourse as the object of fear (Stanko, 1990; Ministry of Justice, 2022). Further, women when homeless relate differently to safety, without the same protections as other women (discussed further below). They are more at risk of victimization and likely to have experienced abuse prior to their homelessness (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Jasinski et al., 2010).

### ***6.2.1 Fear of victimisation***

The domain of homelessness has largely been seen as male-dominated, from the streets to the support services designed for the more visible homeless man (May et al., 2007; Wardhaugh, 1999; Lofstrand & Quilgars, 2016). Women whilst homeless are more at risk of physical and sexual assault, affecting their survival strategies (Huey & Berndt, 2008; Jasinski et al., 2010). Susie saw women as "more of a target" when homeless and she had been sexually assaulted whilst living on the streets. She chose to be in a relationship with a man who was also street-homeless, which she told me brought her some protection.

Charlie, a worker, expressed why she thought fewer women visibly rough-slept: "when you ask women, I think for them that it's because sleeping on the streets is really dangerous. Sexual assault is quite high. A lot of them are quite scared of that". Jules agreed speaking of a woman she had worked with who remained in an abusive relationship whilst street-homeless because "he was like her protection as well. And she was so frightened just having to go it alone". Although Tara did not see it as common, she felt that some women chose to rough-sleep with boyfriends for protection as it "enables them to follow the same kind of patterns of rough-sleeping that the males typically follow, so like sleeping where they can be found for example, accessing spaces like [name of daycentre] where single women don't necessarily feel safe to go." Tara was suggesting here that a male partner as informal support allowed women to use more formal support. This chimes with Susie's experience. She made

regular use of a daycentre largely frequented by men to access resources such as food and showers whilst in a relationship with a man who was also street-homeless.

Ally talked of the risks that women are exposed to if they chose, like Susie, to access support services when homeless:

Looking at some of the spaces that women have to reside in, there's so much perpetration and predation and it's horrible to watch. I kind of know, particularly a couple of hostels around [name of city], if a female goes in there, I, you know, I'm keeping my fingers crossed for them because there's a high chance they'll come out in a worse state than they went in. (Ally)

Sam agreed with Ally saying that he found safety to be “the most gendered kind of reason as to why women didn’t engage with services or appear on services’ books”. For Sam this threat to safety existed whilst, “travelling across the city, going into waiting rooms where [you] don’t know who’s going to be there, having to sit around for hours waiting to be seen, getting tickets at like housing solutions for example”. In his city, he found that proximity between services caused issues, for example a drugs service was located near a men’s hostel:

There’s always a group of men outside that hostel on the benches, within the area. And women repeatedly, multiple different women said, they don’t go to get scripts or try to get set up on scripts... because [the men’s hostel] is where ex-partners, ex-punters, current partners, current punters are going to be. (Sam)

Fay also talked of women’s geographies of homelessness being affected by safety risks, with many women she worked with finding daycentres unsafe. Fay takes Sam’s comments further to explain why the presence of men near the drugs service or in the daycentre may feel so intimidating:

I think when you speak to the women, they’re a lot of men within the homeless community who have sexually assaulted them or have been involved in you know some horrific trauma whether it be robbing, sexual assault, that kind of thing. And a lot of these men frequent places like the [name of homelessness service] so it’s really difficult for a woman to walk in there (Fay)

The service where Fay worked was women-only which Fay thought made the women feel safe. Aspects of the service’s design were also more welcoming for women than many other services, for example they applied for funding specifically to get women’s toiletries to “make them feel dignified”.

Katrin explained that the most important thing about her hostel was that it was women-only: “women were there, not any men... men there means I have to lock my door, I have to watch out. You are nervous, like maybe someone use alcohol”. A women-only hostel allowed her to feel safe, not at risk of victimization. Many other women in the study had been accommodated with men. During the observation, staff spoke about how it was common for a woman to be the only woman amongst men in accommodation, a view also expressed in the lived-experience women’s group. The women’s group discussed their experiences of feeling vulnerable in male-dominated temporary accommodation as the accommodation was only staffed nine till five and had no locks on bedroom doors. They spoke of how the risk they felt from other residents made them feel like rough-sleeping was a safer option. McCormack and Fedorowicz (2022) also see mixed-gender hostels as a risk to women’s safety, with negative implications for their ability to make positive life changes.

There was some discussion on the impact of workers’ genders on women’s feelings of safety and comfort when accessing support. Tara saw the fact that many council workers were men as a barrier to women accessing council support. She noted that many women become homeless fleeing domestic abuse from men, and if they approach the council for accommodation they could be asked to discuss this abuse as part of an assessment with a male worker, which they felt uncomfortable about. Fay said that the decision to have male workers in her service was a boundary that “has to be tread really carefully because pretty much all the women that we work with have had really horrific trauma involving men”. She wanted the women to feel safe accessing support. Frances, a male supporter, talked of how he was conscious of gender dynamics when offering support to women:

I recognise there’s a gender balance there as well, where if a woman would say, “I am homeless” to a man, then it’s creating a power inequality. Where if I would say, “well come and stay with me”, I might be inadvertently putting her in a position where she would feel the need to examine my motives and be like, what is going on here? (Frances)

Frances could be suggesting that as a man he would be hesitant to offer some types of informal support to women.

Almost half the women spoke of being in abusive relationships with male partners, with Jane, Reina and Eve citing this as the trigger for their homelessness. Jane

discussed how her experiences of services on exiting domestic abuse affected her subsequent trust in services and her wellbeing. Her homelessness experiences were complicated and affected by a child custody case. When Jane became homeless on leaving a coercively controlling relationship, coercive control was not legally recognised as a form of abuse. Many services and the courts had approached her claims of coercive control as mudslinging. She talked in particular about her lawyer, who would tell her that he thought there was nothing wrong with her ex-partner's behaviour, leaving her feeling judged, unheard and unbelieved. Sophie, a worker specialising in domestic abuse cases, agreed that many workers still did not understand coercive control and so doubted women's accounts and asked why they did not leave their partners.

Reina felt unbelieved and let down by services when reporting domestic abuse prior to exiting the relationship. She felt the police had not taken her seriously, turning up to her emergency phone calls hours later with no prior knowledge of her previous domestic abuse reports. She felt this was a systematic issue and has since designed police training on domestic abuse. Again, as with Jane, experiences like this can cause emotional harm and affect trust in, and future use of, services.

Threats to physical and emotional safety from individuals and services can cause women to 'do' homelessness differently. Their homelessness geographies and support decisions can be determined by risk management and result in them avoiding services where they are able to, or only accessing women-only services where these exist.

### ***6.2.2 Fear of services***

Earlier in the chapter, fear of others was discussed both in relation to a distrust in society which can impede informal support, and a fear of those who inhabit services which may act as a deterrent to women using them. This section focuses on fear of the services themselves, a fear expressed in particular by women with children.

Sam talked of the understandings his organisation had gained from speaking with women who had historically stayed away from support services:

They kind of gave us a couple of really clear themes about why they are more hidden. I think the trust of services was kind of the strongest out of those, the fact they're often downplaying needs, real concern. The majority of the women on our cohort for example have all had at least one child removed, a substantial number have had multiple children removed so there's inherent trauma I would say with statutory agencies being involved in their life and what ends up happening off the back of that. (Sam)

Sam said that many of the women also had social services involved with their families as children, which resulted in distrust of services from an early age. Fear of services was entwined with distrust and the main fear expressed by women in this study was towards statutory organisations like social services. Sam's opinion above was shared by many of the participants, both workers and women with experiences of homelessness. Tara similarly referred to both the women's own experiences of care and their children being taken into care as traumatic and a cause of distrust in state organisations. Ally stated that she chose not to approach any services for fears that it would affect her child custody:

I had a son who was staying with his dad at the time, and we were going... through courts etc... So I was terrified of getting involved with any services because I have seen some of the consequences for mothers, all parents, who do interact with the services. I think certainly for me and many other women I've spoken to, is that when you interact you are going to be split from... which of course no you're not probably going to do that unless you're absolutely desperate... I think women will find alternatives more so than men before they get to that point where it's like, I have no choice now. This is a necessity. Every other option I've tried. Because you're just afraid. (Ally)

For Ally, the most important thing was her child, and all her decisions about support were based upon obtaining future custody. She tried to remain unnoticed, moving between various backpackers' hostels and a friend's floor. Eve's support decisions were based on maintaining custody of her two children, both of whom were with her whilst homeless. She had been told that she could not get housing support until she was seen to have nowhere to stay:

They said to me that they didn't feel that I fit the criteria because I wasn't homeless because I had a bed at my friend's house but if my friend threw me out on the street then I would be homeless. But if my friend had thrown me out on the street, I feared that I would have to go into a refuge with the children and I was absolutely petrified... that my ex-husband would use that legally against me to take the children. So that for me wasn't an option. For me the

most important thing was to keep my children... I couldn't go into a refuge for that reason really. (Eve)

Eve here indicates that legal systems may have lacked understanding of her circumstances. Ally talked about these large state organisations not understanding the complexity of people's lives, instead operating as linear tick-box systems. There is discussion in the research literature of social services misrecognising the need for support, including housing need, as a risk signifier of parental neglect (Reeve & Parr, 2023; Bimpson et al., 2022; Featherstone et al., 2016). As referred to in Chapter 5, services can appear rigid and lacking the human qualities which conjure a level of trust. Without trust, and with services' assumptions that the mother is a risk rather than in need of support, involvement with services can produce fear (Featherstone et al., 2016; Bimpson et al., 2022).

Esther highlighted that while social services' support could also be seen as positive, she still felt an intense fear before their visit, worrying that they might take her child away. Esther made sure her son was well-dressed, and that she cooked for the social worker. In Esther's circumstances, social services helped to speed up her rehousing, provided a fridge and cooker and referred her to a foodbank. Fear of social services prior to contact could come from a knowledge of their powers. The impact of decisions made by social services can have long-standing effects on the women as Sophie outlined in reference to women's support needs increasing: "they've had their kids taken off them... and you can chart their decline from when that happens".

Social services was by far the most commonly mentioned service that the women feared, however Sophie extends this fear to mental health services saying that, "some of them have been in secure units and had awful times, and they just don't want to engage with any local authority statutory services ever again after that".

According to Sam, traumatic experiences with state services and a loss of trust could have implications for the women's engagement with other support services. Fay spoke of how women she worked with were afraid to use other services (of various levels of formality) for fear of them collaborating with the police:

I've had women arrested at [substance misuse service] before when they're accessing support for their script. So you can understand why they're hesitant to go. You know when you're saying "I've made you an appointment", "Well I'm

not going, you know I've got a warrant out", and you're in your head thinking this woman needs support. But I get it, I get why she's not going to, because she knows that 3 years ago she went for support and they arrested her. (Fay)

During my observation of a women-only service, I was told that many women accessing support gave false names and did not want their real details on record, as they did not want other services, families and friends to know about their homelessness or other support needs. Some of those interviewed who provided more informally run services reported that it was not a requirement to give personal details in order to access resources from them, thereby removing this barrier of fear.

Fay saw women's fear and distrust in services as a significant barrier to them accessing support and talked about how they tried to combat this in her service:

What a lot of [the women] say is that we're a constant. They trust us. We try really hard to make sure we're trauma-informed at all times in everything that we do... I guess it's just years and years, and I can't take any credit for this, it's the previous managers and directors and stuff that have put the work in to make it such a service that belongs to the women. They're involved in every decision that we make; we involve them in how the service moves and how the service grows is down to them... I think that plays a big part in why a lot of them want to come and access that support. (Fay)

Fay talks about trust, control and choice as ways to reduce women's fear of accessing the service, things the women indicated had not existed in their experiences of state organisations. In addition, Fay said they had to understand the reasons why women may not want to provide information about themselves, so they reduce the formal elements of their service and do not make this a requirement to access support.

This section highlighted how engagement with services is not always a choice, for example when it is necessary in order to keep child custody. However, negative experiences with compulsory services, or the discourses of fear circulating around them, can affect engagement with non-compulsory support services. Fears that less formal services are reporting into more formal services can create a generalised fear and mistrust. This could increase women's reliance on informal support but was also shown to influence how some services adapted their procedures to try and build trust with the women.



### **6.3 An individual's access to resources: Capital**

As outlined in the theoretical framework (Chapter 3), societal discourse created by those with power is closely associated with capital. It is argued that discourse influences what is moral and immoral in society, marginalising groups by labelling them as immoral and scapegoating them for society's failings (Tyler, 2013; Ahmed, 2014). In this way inequality is preserved. As previously discussed, discourse about homelessness can view people as homeless because of their moral failings (Pascale, 2005). Many who are homeless are therefore viewed by society as undeserving of resources with little or deficit capital.

Amongst the women with experiences of homelessness who participated in this study there was some variation in the economic, cultural and social capital they possessed. A key conclusion to emerge from this study is the way in which the possession of capital affects women's survival strategies and support choices whilst homeless.

#### ***6.3.1 Economic capital***

It may seem obvious that women's experiences of homelessness varied depending on their economic capital. However, discussions on finances also illuminated systemic issues which both caused homelessness and affected the women's choices whilst homeless. Some economic capital gave women the capacity to conform to societal values of individualism as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Lucia had three jobs which enabled her to stay in dorm rooms at backpackers' hostels, moving between hostels fortnightly as this was the maximum stay allowed. By paying for a bed in a dorm, she was unable to save for a rent deposit to move into more stable housing. Lucia's finances prevented her from needing to use homelessness services but were not enough to pay for stable accommodation. However, eventually, due to informal support from friends and family, she was able to save a deposit and exit homelessness. Having enough financial capital to avoid support services, may have contributed to her not identifying as homeless.

Ally similarly stayed in backpackers' hostels, an option available to her due to having "a little bit of money". Like Lucia, Ally moved between hostels regularly. She did this to avoid questions being asked about her situation. Some economic capital according to Ally, "might have separated me slightly from, you know, the absolute necessities of using some of these services" and allowed Ally to exist less visibly.

Ally, like Katrin and Jess, saw finances to bring some choice over their circumstances, even if their economic capital was not enough to resolve their homelessness as in Lucia's case. Katrin talked about accepting resources given to her because she had no alternatives, such as food she disliked in her temporary accommodation. Lack of money also increased her reliance on informal support, for example getting lifts from people because she could not afford public transport. Jess referred to her lack of money making her reliant on others for food, accommodation and to meet other needs. At times having low economic capital caused risks to her safety. For example, on one occasion she was locked out of her hostel room and could not afford to pay the locksmith, who consequently behaved threateningly towards her.

Eve suddenly became homeless with no recourse to benefits after leaving a marriage and a life of high economic capital. This situation, according to Eve, meant that she "was not in a position to say no". She had to accept the accommodation available to her. The DWP raised doubts about her eligibility for welfare benefits, so Eve had to "rely on the kindness of strangers". This kindness came from many places including the local community, her friend's family and her children's school.

Gemma found herself needing to make financial cutbacks whilst homeless, so she downgraded her phone contract and consequently did not have internet access. This digital poverty was detrimental as she needed online access to bid for housing on council systems, resource household items and resolve her homelessness. This made Gemma more dependent on informal support and public spaces, needing to use Wi-Fi at people's houses, in supermarkets or pubs.

Economic capital can bring more choice over use of support when homeless, making women less reliant on both services and informal support. It allows for the exercising of societal values such as individualism and self-reliance and the avoidance of a homeless identity and its related judgements.

### ***6.3.2 Cultural capital and identity***

Women's cultural capital had implications for both their access to resources and whether they identified as homeless. It could distance them from the homelessness stereotype. Women with experiences of homelessness in this study spoke of how their varied cultural capital affected perceptions of themselves and others whilst homeless.

The relationship between cultural capital and self-perception was evident in some of the women's accounts. Eve and Lucia did not identify as homeless. For Lucia this was related to her capacity for choice over her situation: "I wouldn't consider myself to be homeless as normally homeless people don't have a choice. My situation was a consequence of my choice to move to the UK to find a better future." She felt she had the option of returning to a safe home in her home country, but this would be at the expense of her career. In England she had unstable accommodation, moving between backpackers' hostels, couch-surfing and staying with an abusive partner, yet she distanced herself from a homeless identity. Skeggs (2005) suggests that by framing an affective experience as a choice, a risk taken to benefit their personal progress, people with cultural capital like Lucia can use this choice to increase their status. It could demonstrate her hardworking ethic and endurance of adversity to achieve her life goals. Skeggs argues the same experiences further reduce the status of those with low access to capital, and therefore homelessness can 'attach' differently to different bodies.

Lucia's cultural capital, including high education levels, could have also given her access to more opportunities to resolve her homelessness. Skeggs (1997) discusses how cultural capital can give access and advantages in the labour market. Although not well-paid enough to overcome systematic barriers in the rental market, Lucia had three jobs whilst homeless which did pay for hostels, and eventually (with friends and family's assistance), a deposit for accommodation.

Eve had high economic, cultural and symbolic capital, owning a number of properties and being seen as "highly respected" and "very popular" in her community, but became homeless on leaving her marriage. Eve knew that by definition she was

homeless, but did not hold this identity: “No, no, no, I didn’t see myself as homeless... I tell a lie, that’s not true, I have said ‘oh, I was homeless’, but I never really really thought I was homeless”. This had implications for her use of support: “I didn’t see myself as homeless, so I would never have thought to contact those services... also because I was newly into the country as well, so I didn’t know how the system worked”.

This suggests that despite Eve’s high cultural capital in dominant societal value systems, she had low cultural capital in the field of homelessness in terms of her lack of knowledge of systems and support. Although the friend she stayed with put her in contact with a housing association, generally her lifestyle meant that she did not associate with people experiencing homelessness before or whilst she was homeless and consequently did not gain knowledge capital within the homelessness field or identify with this group. Knowledge of support services would not have value in Eve’s social circles (Allard, 2005). As discussed previously in relation to Lucia’s circumstances, Eve’s cultural capital may have resulted in her homelessness being viewed differently to someone with less capital (Skeggs, 2005). Becoming homeless on leaving her abusive partner was a risk taken to improve her and her children’s quality of life, a choice which based on her status could be viewed as moral.

Cultural capital was seen in participants’ accounts to affect how they were treated by others and potentially the resources they could access whilst homeless. The contrasting accounts of Eve and Sara illustrate cultural capital at play. Eve thought that her English name and accent could have played a role in her being offered housing over the phone when there was a year-long waiting list:

My name is Eve Roberts, I don’t sound foreign. So this woman had no idea of the colour of my skin, and I wonder if she did whether she would 1) have offered me somewhere or 2) she would have offered for me to go and live in [name of town] which is extremely white and a very very nice place to live. And the answer to that I will never ever know. But knowing what I know, probably not. It probably wouldn’t have happened. (Eve)

Sara on the other hand had seen how asylum seekers could be negatively judged based on assumptions made because of their lack of English language skills:

If they’re not from UK, obviously they’re not going to be from the UK, English is not their first... just don’t judge people by their English, by their language... that people don’t judge people by how fluent they are. Maybe he is Einstein even

when you go back to his country, but because he is struggling with English, you think, oh he knows nothing. (Sara)

As exemplified by Sara, asylum seeker status can hold little cultural capital which also affects access to other types of capital. As previously discussed in section 6.1.1, those coming to England to claim asylum have limited access to resources whilst homeless, with little knowledge about how systems work and restrictions on what they can do such as not being able to increase their economic capital through work. Most have limited social connections having left family and friends in their home country. For others, ethnicity gives access to a community which offers support (Sara & Samira). Having religious beliefs also functioned as cultural (and social) capital for Katrin, giving access to a community of people and another aspect of her identity. Her religious community operated as informal support, important for both her emotional and practical needs.

Similarly, Priscilla continued some hobbies whilst homeless, a value and identity strategy also used by women in Casey et. al.'s (2008) study. This gave her access to other communities and helped her keep in touch with those aspects of her identity. Priscilla said she "was hardly ever in" her hostel both due to time spent in hospital and doing hobbies, for example being on a pub quiz team and horse riding. Casey et al. (2008) argue that by maintaining these hobbies, women were able to maintain elements of their pre-homeless identity which brought self-worth. These connections may therefore help maintain women's perceived worth in society by seeing them as 'more than homeless'.

Accessing support services can mean 'revealing' yourself as homeless, identifying with a stigmatised identity which brings deficit cultural capital (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Tina referred to this as being "given a label". Homelessness is a label which can overshadow other elements of people's social identity and affect how they assess their own identity and worth (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Erickson, 1995; Perry, 2013; McCarthy, 2013). Some less-formal support services intentionally tried to oppose this stigmatisation. Jack, for example, explained that because no questions are asked of anyone who attends his community kitchen, he does not know who is homeless. Tina talked of how at her support organisation they responded to people "as the person that they are, not the situation that they're in". She said people can thrive when

“there’s a real sense of like I can see you’re a good person, I want to get to know you more”. Informal support here can be seen as a way to avoid being overshadowed by a homeless identity.

### **Subcultural capital**

Gemma spoke extensively about how knowledge on how to ‘play the game’ in homelessness and other welfare support systems gave access to resources: “if you know how to play the system... you’re fine, you’re rolling in it”. This included knowing what to say to services and what support was available. This knowledge worked as a form of currency whilst homeless and can be thought of as subcultural capital.

Whereas outside the homelessness field it holds little value, within the field it can be converted into economic capital (Bullen & Kenway, 2005). For Gemma this subcultural knowledge largely came from informal sources, often online forums. However, more informal services were also seen to provide guidance about what to say to formal services. An example was seen during a service observation where staff were talking about filling in Personal Independence Payment application forms. They discussed how applicants needed to know to write about their mental health on the form, even when not asked, and needed to repeat themselves in their answers to different questions.

Mckenzie (2015) found similar when researching women living on a Nottingham council estate. Women in her study passed knowledge between them on how to “get by” (p.48). This knowledge mainly focused on what to say to welfare agencies to avoid benefit sanctions. To some extent this subcultural capital can be seen as deficit capital under dominant societal value systems, for example due to the stigma around claiming welfare benefits.

Some participants in this study touched upon the use of feminine capital. Watson (2016) sees femininity in the homelessness field to be used by women to form intimate relationships with men for their physical protection. Sophie and Tara, workers in this study, made similar observations and Kelly slept-rough visibly in shop doorways with her partner, an activity risky for women on their own (Perriman, 2019; Reeve, 2018). Susie also felt that having a male partner whilst street-homeless had brought her protection both in and out of services, while Lucia’s engagement in an intimate

relationship gave her accommodation for a period. This access to accommodation was precarious however as it depended on her remaining in a relationship which was unsafe for her to be in.

There were examples in this study where cultural capital could be seen to affect whether women identified as homeless and subsequently whether they used homelessness services or instead relied on informal support. A homeless identity could bring a deficit in cultural capital and limit access to resources. Cultural capital through other aspects of a person's identity, for example their religious beliefs, could instead potentially open opportunities for support. Subcultural capital, largely from informal support sources, was also spoken about by participants as something which could help navigate homeless systems and environments.

### ***6.3.3 Social capital***

Social capital can be thought of as “productive interactions” which give access to resources (Allard, 2005, p.72). It can include personal and professional connections, like those mentioned in Chapter 5. Women in this study had varying access to social capital, affected for some by dislocation from their home countries or domestic abuse. Social capital could increase women's choice about how to support themselves, improve their mental health, and give more routes for exiting homelessness.

There was an example in the study of social capital affecting whether women identified as homeless. We saw in the previous section that Eve and Lucia did not identify as homeless for reasons which could be linked with their cultural capital. Jane also did not identify with homelessness, but her reasoning was instead linked to social capital. Jane did not see herself as homeless as she had a mum who cared for her and somewhere to go. Having enough social capital in the form of a network of people reliable for support, means that a person could choose to avoid homelessness support services, a way to distance themselves from a homeless identity (Snow & Anderson, 1987).

When Gemma was asked about instances of receiving support from strangers, she answered “because I've always had my family, I've not had to”. However, it was more

common for women in the study to discuss how they were affected by a deficit of social capital. Eve and Lucia both experienced homelessness on coming to England from different countries, but not under the asylum system. Consequently, they did not have strong social networks for more practical support here. Eve accounted her homelessness to this: "The reason I was homeless was because I... don't have a family... So there wasn't an option of going to my parents, there was nobody who was going to give me any money". Holly said that having no family and friends meant that you were "stuck in that position. Not coming out of it. Nobody to help them, nobody to just say, 'Right, there's a roof there for a week till you get into a hostel'".

Jess was claiming asylum in England and was frequently moved between cities:

In seven years I have suffered relocation and housing problems too much... It was nightmare and recently when I moved, I was sitting in front of my support workers. I was asking them not to move me on. But they did not listen to me.  
(Jess)

Jess was moved by various services or moved out of services to be accommodated informally. In these new locations she did not often have social networks to draw upon. In one accommodation of a very poor standard, Jess said that many of the other residents were choosing to stay with friends instead. Being new to that city, Jess did not have that option. Esther and Katrin, like Jess, were unable to draw on practical support from their families but talked of friends and family abroad who were vital in terms of emotional support over the phone.

When in new cities some women found certain aspects of their identities to bring social capital. It could connect them with communities of people offering support. According to Jack, who worked at community kitchens attended by refugees, asylum seekers and British people:

There's a very strong network of diasporic that is looking out for people who are new arrivals and maybe less so from other countries and maybe that's because... there's an older and better-established community from certain places. And maybe like varying religious countries might be more inclined to look after people who are from those places or religiously connected...

It does seem that with the British people who attend there's actually a really strong culture of support... when someone's not there people are wondering where they are... There's actually quite a strong network of care. I'm not sure there's such a strong network to do anything about it, to act on it. (Jack)



Jack suggested that some people have more access to social capital through communities of informal support than others based on elements of their identity. Church minister Frances relayed being contacted by a woman in a different city, asking whether he and his church would look after a friend of hers who was being relocated to his city and of the same faith. He connected her with a group in his church who spoke the same language and they began to support her socially. Katrin spoke from the perspective of being new to a city and being welcomed into a church community of the same branch of faith that she had followed before coming to England. Katrin talked extensively of how this community took her in and provided her with practical and emotional support.

Chapter 5 discussed online social networking sites which allowed communities to work together to support others, and people to ask others for support. Gemma used online networks to obtain material resources for her new flat and gain knowledge of available economic resources. Social networks, whether personal contacts or workers, were seen by many of the women as sources of knowledge on how to obtain resources. In this way, women accumulated knowledge through their social capital, which built cultural capital in the field of homelessness.

Social capital could include positive relationships with workers in support services which bring resources. At a baseline this could be workers' "professional obligations" to practically provide support (Allard, 2005, p.75), but it could also refer to relationships of genuine care with workers which go beyond these obligations.

Worker relationships bring the skills and knowledge of that particular worker, but they also bring additional resources through their professional networks. Support workers, Sara and Samira, made a professional connection with a DWP worker who said she could help them when they were working with people having issues with 'the system'. They contacted her directly and issues were often solved immediately. Although this connection was useful, Sara expressed that this social capital should be available to everyone, and not just because of the symbolic capital that their role gave them: "My question is always why do we need our posts or our sources to get something? It should be available for everybody but that's not the case".

By avoiding services, many women were forgoing the social capital gained through the workers using their symbolic capital. This type of social capital could be seen as a 'vicarious symbolic capital', only available through positive relationships with workers/organisations during opening hours. This is a similar concept to Watson's (2016) 'vicarious physical capital' referring to a woman's acquisition of a male 'protector' whilst homeless.

According to Allard (2005, p.66), social capital is about the "meaning or the quality of interactions", rather than just having the social connections, or the frequency of contact (Rea, 2022). Family and friend interactions may not bring emotional support, they could in fact be detrimental to people's wellbeing. In the example earlier, if Jane's mother had not been both emotionally and practically supportive then Jane may have viewed herself as homeless. The next section discusses the quality of relationships in more detail, and therefore whether they can be considered social capital.

### **A genuine relationship between people**

As discussed in Chapter 5, genuine relationships of care with workers can see them go beyond their professional obligations to give support. This was highlighted by Jules, a worker, when she said, "it's actually seeing beyond what you're supposed to do and being caring and thinking actually what is it that someone needs, you know, what is it that'll make your life easier". Within their professional boundaries this was largely emotional support, however there was evidence of workers going outside their roles to provide practical resources when professional channels would not provide.

It was the acting from a position of care that often made the interactions positive and high quality, and meant that the connections could be considered social capital for emotional resources. Positive interactions also meant that women would continue to access support from these sources whether they were service-based or through personal contacts.

Genuine relationships which brought positive social capital on an emotional level were seen to be based on understanding and empathy. Reina and Holly saw empathy and understanding as common in relationships based on mutual lived-experience. When a

supporter has lived-experience, Holly said, “they can tell you before you say it how you are feeling. You are like, they’ve got it”. Reina spoke of the value of attending peer support groups with others who had experienced domestic abuse to her feelings of being understood and not alone. Generally though, Reina said that supporters did not necessarily need to have the same lived-experience, but life experiences that helped them understand and gave them life skills. She could not feel understood for example with a worker who was “20 years-old telling me how to look after my children and I’ve had four kids but she hasn’t even had one yet”. This example demonstrates how even if the supporter is motivated by genuine care, it is also how the support is received that affects whether the interaction is positive.

For others this genuine relationship came from the supporters’ expressions of kindness and care. Jess met a woman who accommodated her for a weekend yet the woman, “received me as she would receive relatives”. Likewise, Esther spoke of the kindness and warmth of a stranger who gave her money, whose short-term relationship brought her both practical and emotional resources. This relates to Chapter 5 where there were seen to be two main types of motivation for informal support, a genuine care for that specific individual based on an existing relationship; or a general kindness towards all people based on a recognition of their value as a human. Jess’ and Esther’s examples illustrate how this can come from new relationships if they show genuine care.

Despite this, continuity in relationships was noted by some as important in terms of understanding and trust. Holly explained that when she used to always see the same doctor: “she knew everything, and I didn’t feel like I had to go in and like, ‘so I’m going through this at the moment and this is why’. She knew why.” Jane also had long-standing relationships with health workers who knew her backstory and understood the implications of her experiences on her physical and mental health.

Continuity and genuine care in relationships could help to build trust. Tara, a worker, expressed how this supports the emotional wellbeing of the supported in the context of a service:

It's probably not a very nice feeling to know that lots of professionals and services are discussing you. Whereas if the calls and contact you're receiving are all from an organisation you know and trust, that's probably quite different. And you know that even if you know that information sharing is going on beyond

that, having someone phone you who has intimate knowledge of, you know, abusive experience or whatever. If you've never met them, you can't even put a face to their name, that must be quite a... I think that's a little dehumanising as well. (Tara)

Tara also suggested that positive relationships with workers in more informal organisations have the potential to assist women to access resources through formal services, where care can be less visible in interactions. They could act as a go-between for services like the council's housing departments, a "point of access... where the women feel safe" (Tara). According to Tara, the gradual building of trusting relationships and subsequent perceived safety could allow "women who might not feel able to access or request help otherwise, feel like they can do so in a way that's quite informal". In this sense these relationships are social capital which can bring practical resources.

Tara echoes Holly and Jane's views documented previously on continuity, and chimes with Reina's views on how trust and a genuine care were important in terms of women's choices to use support. Reina talked of how her trust in some workers, who went "above and beyond", brought more social capital on an emotional level than other workers:

I would have probably gone further down in my recovery rather than helping me because the trust with them was lowering, but then the trust with the other people who were doing what I thought was respectful and showing that I was valued and they did really care, that meant more than anything. (Reina)

Positive relationships, like those which Reina trusted here, made the women feel like people of value and are discussed in more detail in terms of dignity in Chapter 7.

Reina said that when workers did not show her genuine care and respect, she questioned why they were in their jobs and it put her off using the services: "people who are disrespectful or people who are not, I feel, treating me with dignity or respect, my boundary is I walk away". Here Reina shows how the quality of relationships (whether service-based or not), can affect support choices. The women were more likely to go towards sources of support where they felt of value, and this value was built through understanding, empathy, continuity and trust. This could be seen as the conversion of social capital through its quality into an emotional capital which acts as a resource to navigate homelessness.

Genuine relationships from personal connections (and to some extent worker relationships) although often seen to be good sources of emotional support, could have practical limitations. Often these were limitations in what resources they had to give. Gemma and Esther had both been living with their mothers but had to move out due to overcrowding. Jane was staying on the floor of her mother's lounge, often falling asleep alongside others who were using the room to watch TV. There was little capacity for long-term practical support in terms of accommodation.

Having social capital gave the women more support choices. Some women used social capital from personal connections to avoid services, or to fill gaps left by services. Social capital brought emotional support resulting in better mental health, and practical support including knowledge. It was the quality of social connections which resulted in them bringing capital. Positive relationships with workers could also bring access to resources through the symbolic capital available to them through their roles.

## **6.4 An individual's access to resources: Services**

The previous section explored the impact of genuine relationships of care with workers in services. Here we explore the service environment and how this affects women's use of services.

Most women who accessed services found these environments difficult places. Priscilla described harsh environments when she said: "There was a lot of misery, of course, and suffering. And there were five suicides in the time I was there". Holly agreed, saying, "I went to a certain hostel and somebody died downstairs and I found him dead... So it were not a nice place for me to be". For Holly this was one of the reasons why she chose not to engage with services. Another reason was the people she was in the accommodation with: "they put me somewhere where I had grief from somebody that had caused me trouble at the previous house". A worker, Tara, described it being a small community of people using the services, which could mean that Holly's experience was not rare. Tara saw an occasion when a woman was placed in accommodation with a man who had previously assaulted her. Reina's experience was not too dissimilar when the police moved the perpetrator from whom she was

escaping from down the road from her. Jules explained that people in recovery from addiction are often housed alongside active users and this can prompt them to choose street-homelessness to avoid the temptation to relapse (also see Mayock & Parker, 2020). These environments make women feel uncomfortable and unsafe in their accommodation.

Staying away from others using services was part of a social comparison and differentiation for some. Kelly explained clearly that she chose not to use support services because they were “full of knobheads” with whom she did not want to associate. This as an identity and dignity maintenance strategy is discussed further in Chapter 7.

The service environment could be loud and unsettling. Gemma talked of her temporary accommodation during unstaffed periods: “the night before, right, half eleven, there were kids screaming, running up and down the corridors. Like you just hear all the doors slam. It’s horrible”. Priscilla spoke about “door-slamming throughout the night” and how it felt like the smoke alarms went off every night. Accommodation conditions could be poor, with “beds that were lifted up on sweet tins, the mattresses soiled” (Reina), it being “very very dirty” (Katrin) and “so smelly” (Jess). For all three women this contributed to their decisions to leave these accommodations and seek alternatives. Again, poor conditions, and the effect on the women, are examined in more detail in Chapter 7.

Some who used and stayed in services could be seen to sacrifice their psychological needs to gain practical resources, whether this was due to the environment in a hostel or the perceived uncaring nature of formal services. For others, services could support them emotionally. Priscilla and Katrin spoke of the safety that hostels gave them. For Priscilla this was safety from dangers outside:

And there's a control entry system where, you know, where every time you go in and out you buzz and you wait to be accepted in. So as soon as you went through those gates, basically I felt secure. It was staffed 24 hours a day. Well at night it's more like the night watch men people. But there's always somebody there. (Priscilla)

Katrin also told me that she felt safe in her hostel but associated this safety with the knowledge that it was a women-only hostel. Feeling safe was associated with the

feeling of being at home for some of the women, like Jess, who said when referring to staying with a friend: “It was like I was in my home when I was with Rachel. It was very peaceful. No stress, no danger”. Some services were also referred to as homely, or associated with a home, which was seen as an attraction to using them. When Holly said, “all the people here are brilliant and I feel like I’m coming home when I come here”, she suggested that, for her, home could be associated with positive relationships with staff in services as much as the space itself. Much of the discussion on the draw to using services was on the effect of positive relationships with staff on emotional wellbeing, as already discussed in the social capital section.

Some women talked about the specialist knowledge that services gave them access to, especially when formal systems felt confusing. For Jess with the asylum system and Susie with the council, charity services were able to explain or help them navigate these systems. Translating the systems of formal services seemed to be a regular role of more informal services. Support workers, Sara and Samira, used their knowledge to assist people in their correspondence with the DWP, the council and the Home Office, even using their roles and contacts to get issues solved quickly. Additionally, there could be emotional benefits of this specialist knowledge. Jane noted that through using services with specialist knowledge, for example domestic abuse charities, she had a “heightened sense of people understanding you”. For those who avoided services, they could be choosing a more uncertain route (Mayock & Parker, 2020) and risk forgoing the knowledge needed to exit homelessness.

Whether women’s experiences of services were positive or negative, the boundaried nature of many services, which often differentiated them from more informal support, was spoken about as a barrier to women fulfilling their needs. Sophie spoke of the IDVA model for supporting victims of domestic abuse and how rigidity in their working practices could affect women experiencing homelessness:

It’s not a very flexible model in that you have very high caseloads and you can basically ring somebody a few times and leave some voicemails but if they don’t get back to you they close the case and you move on. You also can’t... when I was at IDVA I never left the office. I did everything, risk assessments, everything over the phone... So for a woman who’s out on the street, who’s sleeping-rough or who’s lost her phone, perpetrator has her phone, like those connections they’re just... their workers can refer them in but they’re not going to be able to get support. (Sophie)

For others it was less the methods of support, and more the restrictions on when the support could be given. Services were time-restricted and usually closed over the weekend, a problem highlighted by many of the women. Jess recounted going to register at a doctors' surgery with a hostel worker. At 5pm, the worker said it was time for her to clock off her shift, leaving Jess to find her way back to the hostel in an unfamiliar town. Jess also spoke of two occasions where she was left by workers in accommodation that did not meet her needs and consequently had to seek various forms of informal support out of the service's hours. This included relying on other residents in the hostel or finding somewhere else to stay.

The women reported that resources given by formal services were not enough to fulfil their essential needs, which led to them using informal support. Sara talked of the limited Home Office allowance she was expected to live off, how this for her and many meant that they could not afford public transport, and how her brother had to help her financially. Jess spoke of how she was receiving £10 a week to live off, which resulted in friends helping her with food. In Gemma's accommodation there was only one clothes washer between 19 or 20 flats, many of them families with children. She therefore had to rely on elsewhere for her washing.

The shortcomings of formal services were seen as key reasons why many women relied on informal support. Some services made efforts to reduce barriers for women using their services by consciously removing some formalities. Despite this, services could still be challenging environments and their support constrained by professional boundaries.

## **6.5 Further barriers to support**

Some of the women encountered barriers to using all forms of support. Poor mental health could be both a cause and consequence of homelessness and create a support need. It could be a barrier to women accessing services or reaching out for informal support. Ally expressed this when talking about her experiences of homelessness while struggling with her mental health and addiction: "at that point in time, so broken was I, the idea of reaching out to a community space, it wasn't in my cognitive ability to do



that sort of thing. I felt so isolated. I was so insular". Ally's feelings of isolation resulted in her trying to survive on her own.

For Susie, most of her day-to-day life, headspace and activities revolved around her pull towards, and resistance to, drugs. Access to support and opportunities could be compromised when drugs were taking precedence. Staff at the organisation where I conducted an observation told me that many women they worked with were unable to engage with more formal support because of the chaotic nature of their lives. Tara said that there was not enough leniency in the council's systems to accommodate those with addiction or trauma who "need a few chances, you know. And it's not really set up that way". In addition, Tara felt that many women with drug and alcohol addiction were frequently evicted from their temporary accommodation, and therefore never made it to longer-term accommodation. This suggests that it may sometimes be necessity rather than a woman's choice to rely on informal support.

Living from day-to-day was mentioned by other women in contexts other than addiction. Ally discussed this as "a state of limbo" where "you don't really reflect and cognate or any of those things", while Eve saw it as being in survival-mode:

I was just going out of my mind and each day in those days, those three weeks, was about survival and trying to do the best I can do for my children who were three and six. Really as simple as that, to get through the day, and not let my children see me cry was my priority there. (Eve)

Like Eve, Jane described living day-to-day just focusing on getting through. She felt unable to make future plans due to being all-consumed by what was happening in the present, just needing to keep custody of her son. Unable to plan ahead, this could be one reason why some women rely more on Informal support. Informal support can often occur more circumstantially, unplanned and passively than approaching services. Examples included Ally going to stay with a friend who had "reached out" when she was in this headspace, Esther being given money by a stranger in the street without asking, and the family of an old man who had passed away next door to Eve's new accommodation giving her household items from his house clearance.

Women's mental health whilst homeless is a key consideration when looking at their support choices. Their mental health also directly interacts with their feelings of dignity, therefore these discussions are expanded on in Chapter 7.

## 6.6 Conclusion

Using the definition of informal support conceptualised in the previous chapter, this chapter explored the extent to which, and reasons why, women experiencing homelessness rely on informal support, employing the study's theoretical framework to interpret participants' accounts. It showed how women's support choices, their reliance on certain types of support, and experiences of homelessness in general, were strongly influenced by the capital they had: financial, cultural and social (and consequently vicarious symbolic capital). These forms of capital were found to give women access to resources and opportunities including forms of support. The women in this study had very different amounts of capital, which allowed for insightful observations on the impact of capital rarely captured in the field. Some women had more extensive social networks to rely on, whilst others had more cultural capital in dominant fields which could increase their access to resources to resolve their housing situation. The capital possessed by a woman affected whether she identified as homeless, allowed her to avoid homelessness services and associations with others experiencing homelessness, and potentially acted as a way of differentiating herself from the homelessness stereotype characterised as having deficit capital.

It was not just what support opportunities were available to women which determined their choices, but also the experience of using each form of support. This chapter looked at how women's support experiences and choices could be influenced by the discourses and risks present in society. It explored how neoliberalism, patriarchal discourse/structures and fear affect women's use of support. It identified how discourse could affect attitudes towards women experiencing homelessness and consequently their access to resources. This had implications for how it felt to use different types of support. Neoliberalism promotes more negative societal views of poverty and homelessness and consequently greater restrictions to accessing resources through the welfare state (Tyler, 2013). Patriarchal discourse and gendered risk have implications for how women are seen when homeless and their felt-vulnerability (Reeve, 2018; Wardhaugh, 1999). This study's participants spoke of how women's

geographies were based on risk-management strategies with implications for their support choices.

Informal support, as previously conceptualised, was seen to involve genuine care and respect for a woman experiencing homelessness, independent of negative societal discourse. This care could be reflected in how women experience accessing the support and could therefore make them more likely to use it. This will be expanded on in the next chapter.

This chapter also found examples of when a woman's ability to make active choices was deeply impinged. For many of the women with children, compliance with social services was compulsory. There were also examples where addiction and mental health affected decision-making.

## **7. Findings: How does informal support affect women experiencing homelessness' feelings of dignity and sense-of-self?**

This chapter directly follows on from discussions in Chapter 6, working to develop them further into the philosophy of dignity. As argued in the theoretical framework, exploring the influence of societal discourse and capital accumulation can help in understanding dignity.

The definition of informal support, as developed in Chapter 5, provides a basis for framing the research material. Informal support could take many forms and was often seen to be motivated by a genuine relationship of care. It was given without there being an expectation for an exchange of resources, and without the woman experiencing obvious harm.

This chapter explores the various themes emerging on how the women's experiences of homelessness impacted their felt-dignity. As will become apparent, the women understood dignity largely through its violations and honouring. The discussion in this chapter will therefore explore how the formality of support respected or disrespected women's dignity. The chapter will then look at dignity and identity maintenance strategies, the ways the women worked to sustain a positive self-view.

Dignity, as we learn throughout this chapter, cannot be separated from sense-of-self. The women themselves entwine the concepts in their discussions, as illustrated by Ally: "I don't think I, at the time, had the ability to conceptualize dignity. There was no sense-of-self whatsoever." Here she implies that to feel your worth, you need to have a sense of who you are and therefore what is being characterised as worthy. Simultaneous to dignity relying on a sense-of-self, dignity is "part of who we are", and affects how we think of ourselves (Miller & Keys, 2001, p.332).

The findings showed how a woman's felt-dignity was constructed in the interaction between her behaviour's alignment with her own moral values, and how she was externally treated and perceived. They showed how the formality of the support used

by the women had direct impacts on their dignity, and for many was a key consideration in relation to support choices.

The distinction between the two conceptualisations of dignity referred to in the theoretical framework, inherent dignity and achievement dignity, were important when analysing the findings. In this chapter, if conceptualising dignity as inherent, intrinsic to all humans regardless of societal position and commanding of respect (Pols et al., 2018; Sayer, 2011; Rosen, 2012), the positive interactions, environments and opportunities discussed were considered as honouring women's dignity. Whereas negative interactions, conditions and restrictions were violations of women's dignity. If conceptualising dignity as achievement, relational based on people's actions, social status and responsibilities (Sayer, 2011; Pols et al., 2018), the quality of relationships, conditions and resources available have the potential to affect someone's relative status. They can affect the accumulation or reduction of status.

Both conceptualisations suggest that women's treatment is positively related to their felt-dignity (Sayer, 2011). However, dignity is reliant on both internal and external validation (Miller & Keys, 2001). Therefore, people may be treated with disrespect but still feel inner worth. This complexity is discussed later when looking at dignity maintenance strategies.

## **7.1 Dignity and human connection/disconnection**

Chapters 5 and 6 discussed how positive support interactions were related to genuine caring relationships between supporter and supported. This was defined as informal support, regardless of whether the relationship existed in professional or personal contexts. There were both examples of this care being for the specific individual receiving the support based on an existing relationship, and of the care coming from a generalised acknowledgement of everyone's human worth where there was no existing relationship. The latter was often seen in religious or community-based values.

In Chapter 6 the informal support given from these positive relationships was conceptualised as social capital, where these relationships and interactions could give

access to resources. These resources could be both emotional and practical. In this section, I focus on how positive or negative relationships and interactions, social capital or lack of it, can honour or violate women's dignity.

The positive impact of human connection on women's dignity could be seen both as an emotional resource (for example if internalised, it could assist women's resilience to navigate homelessness), or symbolic capital, giving access to resources based on women's raised status. When thought of as symbolic capital, it was context-specific, for example being seen as priority need for council housing meant you were housed quicker but also meant you were more vulnerable through having less capital in other fields than others on the housing list.

Kelly felt her dignity disrespected when people passing her regular begging spot outside a supermarket did not acknowledge her. She would often try and speak with them and if they did not respond she became frustrated. On occasions she was observed to shout insults after them like "rude bitch". Frances, a church minister, saw the acknowledgement of others to be "about recognising the value of the other human", seeing them to possess dignity. There were also members of the public and supermarket staff that Kelly knew by name and had regular conversations with. These relationships were seen to bring her dignity, appearing to recognise her worth. They could be thought of as informal support bringing Kelly emotional resources.

Some women talked of their dignity being disrespected through not feeling understood by others. This was illustrated by Holly talking about how she felt most professionals did not understand her situation:

Oh, you learnt from a book. You don't actually get it. You might understand it, but you don't really get it... You might be able to imagine it, but actually being there is different to imagining it... When I was imagining when I was pregnant, I imagined how it would be to have a baby. You can try and understand it. You think you've got it, but when it's there, it's totally different. (Holly)

Here Holly described how unless you have been through certain experiences, you cannot fully understand them. Without that understanding there can be a disconnect between the supporter and supported, and a reduced "sense of shared humanity" (Watson et al., 2019, p.131). Without shared understanding, Holly felt a lack of care in

relationships and interactions with workers: “They’ve just got a job. They go home”.

Reina shared a similar opinion to Holly:

It needs to be people, like lived-experience... right my mum’s had cancer, and I can only feel for her and have compassion, but I don’t know what she’s going through because I’m not going through that. So I can’t say, ‘yeah mum I understand’, because I don’t. Only she’ll understand that and anybody else who’s had cancer. (Reina)

Reina spoke of how those with lived-experience can help people feel understood, more than being compassionate can. Jennie, a church minister, explained why she thought support from people with lived-experience was dignifying in the context of a foodbank based at her church:

I think because the people who volunteer here have often been people who have used the service first and then come back and volunteer, there’s a sense that nobody’s above anybody else, we’re all the same, no matter what walk of life people are from, once you come through these doors it’s very much there is dignity, acceptance, nobody’s judging anybody. (Jennie)

Jennie highlighted how an understanding of experience can create more equal status between supporter and supported, and make people feel unjudged. This equality, an equal honouring of each other’s dignity, is a key concept of inherent dignity (Rosen, 2012).

Contrastingly, Holly discussed her dignity being disrespected through perceived status differences. Holly felt she was seen differently from others because she was homeless: “You know, like people don’t look at you the same if you’re homeless, they look down on you, you feel looked down on. Even if they don’t, I feel like they do”. Holly referred to looking down, a reflection of status difference in an interaction, which when discussing dignity is indicative of being beneath another person and therefore of less worth (Sayer, 2011). Holly saw the status difference to exist due to her homeless identity, a societal group holding low moral status (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013; Farrugia et al., 2016). Holly also noted what her self-perceived low-worth might bring to interactions. Her low levels of felt-dignity could cause her negative interpretation of interactions and, in a downwards cycle, be further negatively impacted by her interpretation of the interactions.

In the previous quote from church minister Jennie, she mentioned less judgement resulting from more equal status between supporter and supported. Feeling judged as morally wrong by others impacted on Reina's dignity. Her interactions with some services and institutions made her, "more humiliated and shamed as well, and then feeling there was something wrong with me". In addition, in relation to the poor conditions of the accommodation she was placed in when escaping an abusive partner, Reina said: "you know they're saying get away but then it made you feel as though I was the perpetrator and he was the victim and that took a lot for me". Reina feeling judged as if she was the perpetrator also insinuates that she felt services did not understand her situation, which was discussed earlier as a disconnect between supporter and supported.

Not feeling believed by services similarly created this disconnect. According to Hess (2023), feeling judged and unbelieved by services could be triggering for women, bringing up past trauma and making them feel like they do not deserve supporting. This could be seen in Jane and Reina's accounts, who had both become homeless when leaving coercively controlling and abusive relationships. As it is common in abusive relationships for an abuser to make the victim feel as though they are at fault, creating self-doubt (Hess, 2023), to not be believed by services on leaving these relationships could replicate this and be particularly triggering. Jane, similar to the above quote from Reina, felt like some institutions did not believe her accounts of what she had been through in her relationship. Her initial solicitor in a child custody case said he thought there was nothing wrong with her ex-partner's coercive behaviour. Jane cited the "constant comments from the solicitors", which made it seem like they thought she was lying, as a challenge to her dignity.

When talking about her negative experiences using support services Reina said: "That was a big one, feeling as though I wasn't believed". She explained how she came to feel unbelieved by services:

Sly comments or like not being able to have my voice. So even when I did get my voice, not acting on it or taking that further or listening to me. Or me saying something and then changing my words and writing something completely different about me. (Reina)



When described like this, not being believed can be seen as a status difference being given to people's thoughts, with workers privileging their thoughts over Reina's.

To Esther dignity meant "respect" and "to know the value of somebody", to know the value of herself. When she talked about what made her feel undignified, it was her thoughts during days sat outside waiting until she could call the council for emergency accommodation, that, "nobody cared whether she lived or died". She felt like she had failed and that she "was a nobody". Her interactions with the council also negatively impacted her dignity, making her feel as though they did not care about her.

During this same period, a woman who Esther considered a "stranger" until she became roofless offered informal support to her. This stranger was the founder of a community organisation that Esther had started to attend. She responded to her needs with care, answering her phone calls at any time of the day and night, checking in with how she was, arranging food to be delivered to her and providing emotional support and understanding. This care towards her as an individual of value worked as a dignifying counter-narrative to her other experiences at the time.

Other women described similar experiences of depersonalisation to feeling like a nobody in the context of using formal services, as discussed in Chapter 5. However, according to Priscilla, it was different for her "because on a day-to-day basis I was taught how marvellous and wonderful I was and what an inspiration to everybody". Whilst living in a homeless hostel, Priscilla was undergoing treatment for a life-threatening illness and saw this to contribute to her being treated as an individual by staff:

They took very good care of me. I was very fortunate actually. And because I had a restricted diet, one of the cooks would make things just for me... And I had periods where I was quite tired and I couldn't eat in the canteen and they would bring little meals up to my room, which was nice. They even gave me a TV... The director... bless him, he sent somebody up to Argos. Cause my room faced the carpark, which was south facing. It was a very small room. And it became like really hot, very fast. And I was coming back every night to an oven. And of course you can only open the windows a certain amount because there was the risk of suicide... And he got me a fan... to help keep me cooler. (Priscilla)

Priscilla thought herself to have been treated like a person of value with her individual needs met. As a sufferer of a serious health condition, she was viewed as experiencing hardship due to circumstances outside of her control, vulnerable but deserving of

support. Hoolachan (2020) suggests that the positive interactions people's environments expose them to can moderate the impact of a homeless identity. This supports Priscilla's account, who felt that her special treatment and praise was internalised, with positive affect for her identity.

Frances, a church minister, expressed how dignifying he felt it was to receive care like that experienced by Priscilla: "Just to see the way that dignity is so life-affirming to be able to treat someone according to like the highest standard, rather than just the lowest you can get away with them". However, it is important to note how undignifying serious health conditions can be for a person and their identity. Priscilla herself spoke of how she did not want to tell her pub quiz team about her health to avoid their reactions: "I said I'm not telling them because, [uses high-pitched voice] 'It's Priscilla, she's dying. Hello Priscilla, you alright? How are you?'. I didn't want any of that."

Earlier, Holly especially spoke of violations of inherent dignity based on status differences in interactions. This status difference was seen by some women in the form of infantilising treatment and restrictions of their freedom to act on their own moral will. Gemma expressed feeling infantilised in her temporary accommodation based on their rules and policies telling her how she should behave: "But it's just that you feel like you're in school. I feel like I'm a little kid". She went on to link this with restrictions to her privacy:

Like walking out in the corridor... cause there are cameras. At least you know you're safe but it's the fact that I know they're sat there watching [her child], because they made that obvious with her, like "Oh yeah we've seen her in the little park". I'm thinking well how many times do you look, cause I think they monitor how much you stay there as well. (Gemma)

With this last comment, Gemma suggested that through their monitoring, the service was judging her authenticity: "you've proved that you can stay there, that you actually are [homeless]" (Gemma). Sara talked of how the need to prove yourself, sacrificed dignity: "you don't need to prove to anybody. Don't lose that dignity, that I will do everything what you want". Frances saw the compromising of privacy due to lack of trust to disrespect personal boundaries and erode people's sense-of-self.

"Invasive" treatment where "anything that they thought was going to be private... is robbed from them" (Frances), was not only spoken about in regard to support services.

Jess talked of how her interactions with two informal accommodators (women she knew through family connections) compromised her privacy: “She was asking me questions, “Where did you go? Why did you go? And then whenever I was calling other people, I would have to explain every one.” Jess’ post was opened without her permission and hidden from her. She was told by another informal accommodator that she was being watched in their home: “What are you doing Jess? Whom are you talking? I have 24/7 cameras in my home, you cannot bring anyone”. The disrespect of women’s privacy and personal boundaries in interactions could have large implications for their dignity. This is discussed further in terms of access to resources in the following section.

Much of Jess’ experiences with these informal accommodators saw her treated as a resource, as opposed to an individual of value. She experienced exploitative treatment, where instead of being cared for she was expected to work in their houses: “Cooking food, cleaning for her, doing everything, washing her clothes”. In addition to the workload, Jess talked of being dehumanised by her accommodators: “she was shouting at me, like I am some non-living thing”. Jess described incidents of her needs being denied, for example she felt unable to take antidepressants as they would make her sleepy: “if I keep on sleeping... this lady will not allow me to sleep”. In addition, when her accommodator left the city there was “no electricity, no heating in the house”. Jess contrastingly spoke of other women she informally stayed with who provided more dignified, humanising experiences. With one woman she was received “as she would receive relatives”, shown care and kindness.

Throughout this section examples have been provided where informal support presented a dignifying counter-narrative to dominant discourse on homelessness and connected low-status groups. Watson et al. (2019) saw positive relationships with workers as a way of “rehumanising” and repairing trauma. This was also clearly illustrated during research observations of an organisation supporting vulnerable women. The staff talked about how many of the women who sex worked dehumanised themselves, referring to themselves as ‘flesh’. Workers would respond in ways to try to rehumanise them, for example by saying the work was not them, that they were out working to pay their bills. They also responded to the women with connection, with voiced care for them as individuals and with physical proximity in the form of hugs. As

discussed in Chapter 5, this was different to how the women had experienced interactions with formal services which were largely emotionally distant.

There were examples of emotional support within closer family or friend relationships which provided respite from the pressures of dominant societal moral codes. These relationships held more of an unconditionality of care, where women did not need to present as deserving of support or maintain emotional composure. Gemma, for example, spoke of her emotionality with her brother and mum: “there's times when I thought I couldn't do it. Liam has had multiple calls off me melting down on him, so has mum”. Katrin spoke similarly of phone calls with her husband. Although speaking just of intimate partner relationships, Farrugia et al. (2016, p.252) found close relationships to provide “a space in which [people experiencing homelessness] felt valued and recognised without reference to the moral consequences of homelessness”. These supportive relationships allowed them to reflect on their sense-of-self away from neoliberal ideas of worth and consequently could make them feel more dignified.

Dignity was seen to be gained through genuine caring connections which saw someone as an individual of value, made them feel understood, believed and respected their personal boundaries and identity. It was relationships which involved these types of interactions which were defined as informal support in Chapter 5. In this way informal support, as defined in this study, provided counter-narratives to degrading discourse. When simplified, dignity could be seen as related to social capital where positive social connections could bring emotional resources. However, the reality was more nuanced with evidence in this study where mental health and other factors affected this social capital's influence on felt-dignity, and where dignity maintenance strategies were employed by those with less social capital. This is discussed later in this chapter.

## **7.2 Dignity and restricted resources/poor conditions**

The previous chapter explored how societal discourse on homelessness could be used to justify the limited economic and material resources allocated by the state to supporting people experiencing homelessness, reflected in the poor conditions of services. According to Nussbaum (2000), every person has an entitlement to the

conditions needed to lead a dignified life. This would make much of what is discussed in this section and the next dignity violations, as it was very apparent that women in this research did not experience the same conditions or opportunities to lead dignified lives as most in society. Their marginalisation, which distanced them from resources, worked to violate their dignity. There was however some variation in participants' abilities to access resources, largely based on their economic and non-economic capital.

Chapter 6 discussed how several women had been placed in accommodation by formal services, for example the council or Home Office, of inadequate standards. Jess's accommodation was "smelly" with her bedroom lock broken and the communal fridge not working. For Reina, "there was a shower that didn't work, there were beds that were lifted up on sweet tins, the mattresses were soiled, it were disgusting". Poor conditions like these were felt by Reina to reflect what others were "saying I deserve". For Eve, it was a lack of resources available to her in her accommodation which she experienced as undignified:

Our first night in that flat we literally sat on a picnic blanket on the floor because that was all we had... There was a plastic chair in the garden. There was a communal garden, so we brought the plastic chair up, and that's what we had... There wasn't even carpet, there was underlay and sort of those wooden strips with the nails in on the floor. And that was six-months... I didn't have my clothes, my children didn't have their clothes. (Eve)

When Eve became homeless on leaving her partner, she left almost all her material resources. This sudden change in material circumstance was undignifying for her: "Dignity is taken away isn't it, and the life I had". Eve was able to gain resources to make her living conditions more dignified through informal support: household items and furniture from a recently deceased man's family, and clothes from a religious organisation and her child's school.

Sara and Samira talked of how they provided informal support when they saw a woman's family lacking the resources to live in a dignified way, as some were sleeping on the floor. As support workers, they first contacted the woman's accommodation provider: "I left a message, I phone them, I explained to them the case, you should provide this and that, and actually nobody paid attention to it" (Samira). They chose to

provide this dignity themselves, using their personal resources to pay for and transport a bed to the family.

However, informal support was not always able to provide women with resources to lead dignified lives. Jane described undignified conditions when staying on her mum's lounge floor, having no personal space and regularly falling asleep alongside her mum and step-dad watching the television. Esther also described overcrowding when staying at her mum's house following being evicted from a rented property. This overcrowding caused conflict with her family members.

Informal support when giving emotional resources can embody a counter-narrative to dominant discourse, with positive caring interactions being suggestive of a woman's worth. In terms of practical resources, although given from places of care, informal support was not often able to provide counter-narratives to dominant discourse (i.e. provide adequate resources, suggestive of somebody's worth). Frances, a church minister, described how informal support may be offered from places of care but when there are not enough resources to give:

When we see people who have like a one or two-bed flat saying, 'yes, come and stay with me'. And you think, wow, that's really tough... I see it with lots of different layers, to think, okay, so for the kids who are living in that home who now don't have space to sleep on their own bed or don't have access to you know, a surface that they can do their homework on, like because of the generosity of the parents saying, yes, I want the stranger to come and live with us. And you think of the risk that there is in all of that. And so I feel quite conflicted about those sorts of instances where there's someone doing something absolutely wonderful, but it is coming at a cost. (Frances)

Frances' account here corresponded with Jane and Esther's above descriptions of staying at their mums' houses. He also articulated the possible effect that resource-giving can have on informal supporters when they have limited resources to start with. The limited practical resources available through informal support could make it only a short-term solution. For this reason, it could work to delay women finding more long-term dignified solutions. When accommodated informally, they may be less visible to support services, and therefore not accessing support to gain stable housing (Mayock & Parker, 2020).

Lack of resources in terms of sanitary products was spoken about by Susie, Esther and Reina, who all mentioned undignified experiences of having periods whilst homeless.

Here their lack of financial capital and poor access to hygiene facilities directly impacted their dignity. Reina described her experience:

When I got put in the safe house, I didn't have any money and I was on my period. I wasn't given any Tampax or money or anything, I was just chucked in. That were quite shameful and upsetting and again it were like my dignity.  
(Reina)

Susie similarly found having her period whilst rough-sleeping extremely unpleasant, making her feel dirty. The showers at a daycentre proved vital to her at these times. When Esther was being placed on a nightly basis in emergency accommodation, she had to spend her days sat outside. She described being on her period during this time with no money for sanitary products as horrible. It was money given by a stranger that allowed her to buy sanitary products. Menstruation is expected in society to be concealed, a private affair, which when visible can result in the social exclusion of women (Earle-Brown, 2022; Vora, 2020). Yet many women experiencing homelessness lack regular access physically and financially to the resources and spaces needed to meet these normative standards, resulting in discomfort and judgement (Parrillo & Feller, 2017; Vora, 2020).

Fay, a worker in a service with many informal characteristics, spoke of how they provided toiletries to women using the service. Although motivated by their personal sense of care for the women they supported, they were able to go through formal channels to access these resources:

We apply for funding specifically for toiletries so we can go and buy specific toiletries that we know are going to make them feel dignified. We don't give them men's deodorants, or men's shampoo or shower gel. Just because things like that are important to women. (Fay)

By applying for funding, they could buy products of value, which felt important to making the women feel like they were of value. Fay referred to the women being given products designed for women. This could enable women to feel more feminine, whilst occupying spaces and identities which according to existing literature were associated with masculinity (Watson, 2000; Cloke et al., 2010). Offering choice was also a key aspect of Fay's service, which she connected to upholding dignity:

[Dignity], it's a huge part of how we make every decision... Even down to little things like clothing, we try and make it so the women can come in and pick their

own clothes. We won't make those decisions for them and give them a clothes parcel. (Fay)

Choice was recognised as important to the women's dignity in this study, yet something they had little access to while homeless. When Jess spoke about how the poor conditions of her accommodations made her feel, she said: "I have no words to tell you. In our language, I was like helpless, our four hands and legs are tied... I have nowhere to go. I had no other option". Samira, a worker, highlighted how it was not just about the indignity of living in poor conditions, it was how your societal status meant you had little choice other than to accept these conditions:

To be a homeless woman, or a single mother, or whoever, you shouldn't provide me unhospitable accommodation, leak and damp and all those things. And you ask me to move and I must accept it, or they actually change those categories from B to D if you refuse that accommodation... and not only that, you will be kicked out of that temporary accommodation. (Samira)

Here Samira was referring to council accommodation. She spoke of the consequences of women saying their accommodation was inadequate. The low-status of being homeless, created the narrative of "you should be grateful" (Samira) and consequently accept anything offered.

Chapter 6 discussed how under neoliberalism, people experiencing homelessness needed to prove themselves of moral-worth in order to access the resources necessary to lead dignified lives. Austerity cuts to welfare provisions and other societal institutions create a scarcity of resources and competition between those in need of support (Watson et al., 2019; Hess, 2023; McCormack & Fedorowicz, 2022). There was evidence of this in this study. Esther, Katrin and Eve, for example, spoke of the overdemand for accommodation, with Esther in particular speaking of how undignified and uncared for she felt whilst trying to get a roof over her head each night. Gemma spoke expansively about how competition for resources was causing them to disappear: "Like this credit union that everyone's jumped on the bandwagon. I guarantee it's not going to be there for the next couple of years". In addition, Gemma spoke of how in order to be prioritised for resources over others, you needed to evidence that you were in greater need. She used the example of disability: "And obviously I'd use the, 'I'm [health condition]'. And everyone else that's got a disability, that's it straight away, so then I thought you know what, I'm going to do it then if all



yous do it". This climate of competition, scarcity and "you should be grateful" for whatever you are given, resulted in what Frances saw as "dignity-stripping" 'support' systems:

I see so much of the asylum process, so much of the benefits process as dignity-stripping, where it's so invasive... It just comes across as quite cruel a lot of the time. And I think there's almost like an erosion of self in it as people have to do whatever it takes to comply with the system... And you literally see the person like being eroded as they are, like stripped away. (Frances)

Frances articulated how formal services can work to erode people's sense-of-self and dignity through not respecting personal boundaries. This takes place where there are large power imbalances, where people need resources to survive or stay safe, and therefore have little choice but to "comply with the system" (Frances).

The support providers interviewed who distributed resources more informally, spoke of how they intentionally removed barriers to accessing resources to avoid this dignity-stripping. This was particularly prevalent in Jack's account of how his community kitchen ran:

We don't collect any information about anyone. That was a founding concept, that when we work with people particularly who are destitute asylum seekers, that they are in situations where a lot of what they do, they are conditioned that on entering that space they give a lot of information... and for a lot of people that's quite difficult information. And we just made that decision early on that we wouldn't kind of do that, and that was based on that idea of privacy and personal safety... that also makes it less like a service I think, where staff were not seen as staff, we're not seen as gatekeepers... it sort of extenuates hierarchy doesn't it if you're the people to fill the forms in. (Jack)

For Jack, it was important not to replicate formal support systems by increasing people's privacy and reducing the power difference between the supporters and supported. Jack felt that by not requesting information from people, they were not replicating societal discourse which asks for proof of "whether they are 'deserving' of free food".

Fay's service sometimes asked women for information as it helped in supporting them to access resources from more formal support institutions. However, Fay talked of the importance of flexibility and letting women access support from them without giving information:

They don't want to commit to sort of writing anything down and that's fine.  
We're never going to turn anyone away. We have to understand their reasons...  
We recognise how triggering it can be for them so we go at their own pace.  
(Fay)

To go at the woman's own pace allowed for trust building before personal information was given, which according to a worker in Watson et al.'s (2019) study was something that needed to be built up very gradually. Similarly, workers Maggie, Jules and Tina talked of the importance of operating off trust until those receiving support were ready for dialogue. Even when this dialogue took place, it was informally in their organisation's café: "we've got the café space that you can sit and have a brew with someone and have a full chat... and you get a sense of actually what it is that's going on there" (Jules).

During this study's organisation observation there was evidence of fewer restrictions on the resources given than in more formal services. Their default answer to requests at this service was 'yes' if they had the requested resource available. This was seen regularly when women using the service asked for food, clothes and toiletries for example. Some resources were left out in the drop-in room so that women could access them without needing to make a request. In this way, there were fewer barriers to accessing resources, a practice that challenged neoliberal discourse that people experiencing homelessness are undeserving of support.

Despite efforts to improve women's access to the resources necessary to lead dignified lives, the more informal services in this study were still operating in a societal climate of scarcity, as expressed by workers Samira and Sara:

Samira: The accommodation, the housing is in crisis level...

Sara: ...it's all over the place that are struggling with accommodation at the moment. That's what scares me the most, what's exactly going to happen in the future because in few days I have seen so many homeless cases... It's gone up, higher and higher. (Samira & Sara)

The more informal services did not possess resources for long-term dignifying solutions such as stable housing, satisfactory financial income and ongoing health support. Some of the workers in these services however talked of how they could support women to access long-term solutions by corresponding with formal services distributing these

resources. Tara spoke of how her organisation could make the process of accessing resources through formal organisations more on the women's terms:

I think that women who might not feel able to access or request help otherwise, feel like they can do so in a way that's quite informal... I think there's a sense of, because there isn't pressure there, they know that they can do it whenever they feel ready and it's not an opportunity that's going to go away... Whereas in the council, and I think in other services like it, there's a sense of having to obey their rules and do things on their time. (Tara)

At Tara's service, women could complete homelessness and housing assessments at their own pace with workers they were familiar with, as opposed to approaching people they did not know at the council where many have "a massive distrust" (Tara). This process could have a positive effect on women's dignity, with them being given more control over the process.

The women's experiences often documented how restricted and inadequate resources could affect their dignity. This section showed how informal support's care and compassion could not always bring resources to lead a dignified life, especially support from friends and family who often did not have many practical resources to give. Services operating more informally tried to individualise how practical resources were given and offer choice, however they were still operating in a societal climate of scarcity. These services were unable to offer women the homes needed for a dignified life. Some could however support the women through what was often an undignified process corresponding with formal services to obtain housing and other important resources.

### **7.3 Dignity and poor opportunities/capabilities (to raise societal status)**

I think when you're involved with statutory services, you're given a label. You know, addiction, homelessness, whatever it may be. And again when you're in an abusive relationship, you've lost yourself in that. So if they come here we certainly get to know them as people, but when they see other people responding to them as the person that they are, not as the situation that they're in, they thrive. (Tina)

Tina, a worker, spoke of how the labels people are given when using services work to remove their sense-of-self when their identity is associated with their situation. Their inscription with stigmatised labels affects their economic value and their ability to attribute value to themselves, their self-worth (Skeggs, 2004). Societal perceptions and structures can work to further restrict people from being able to “thrive” and accumulate capital (economic and non-economic). In this study, these restrictions on people’s capabilities and their ability to raise their status were shown to affect women’s felt-dignity.

A woman’s homelessness label, or other associated labels, restricted their capacity to exercise their capabilities and build their cultural capital and societal status. This affected how the women were seen by society and how they saw themselves. Sara talked of how structural discrimination worked to restrict her and others from using their skills and capabilities. “Maybe he is Einstein even when you go back to his country”, Sara said when talking of how people seeking asylum are wrongly judged as knowing nothing because of language barriers and stigmatised identity labels. Sara also spoke of her own experiences of homelessness on seeking asylum, how this situation had prevented her from using her skills and experience:

So in my country I did BSc but my subject was family relations and child development. It was kind of doctor. And I was doing voluntary with [name of organisation] in the admin group, but I was not happy because there was very minimal work for me to do and I hate that work because it was quite boring. (Sara)

As an asylum seeker Sara was restricted from working, a structural restriction from capital both economic and non-economic. She was allowed to volunteer but found that this neither used her skills, satisfied her, or allowed her to gain any power in organisations. Sara linked this directly with her felt-dignity:

I think dignity, when you are volunteering, you sometimes feel worthless because you are capable of something, but you are not getting that power or acknowledgement... That’s why I left [name of organisation] because I was just putting in files. What am I doing? I feel worthless... So my agenda is to give all asylum seekers or volunteers that power so they feel dignified... that we just didn’t use them because they’re free. (Sara)

Sara subsequently worked with volunteers who were in the same position she had been. She spoke of how she made efforts to benefit their dignity whilst structurally

they were unable to accumulate power through their contributions. Volunteers on her project were seen to “polish their skills with us while they are waiting for their [asylum claim] decision”, and her intentions were that “they don’t feel less than normal people”. Sara sent messages to the volunteers like, “You guys are amazing, all the help, support”, to communicate that they were of worth and their contribution valuable.

Volunteering whilst homeless, for Esther, had positive implications for her dignity, helping her increase her perceived self-worth. Unlike in Sara’s experience, it made Esther feel like she was making a valuable contribution to help others, provided a supportive community for her, let her use her skills (including her ability to speak five languages), and helped her towards her ambition of teaching adults. Psychology research finds a sense of purpose, positive relationships and personal growth to be three contributing factors towards positive wellbeing, dignity being considered an aspect of wellbeing (Ryff & Keys, 1995; Fischer, 2014).

Katrin contributed informally within her church community and friendship groups. She discussed how helping others was a positive “satisfying” experience for herself and how to contribute was to fulfil a duty to God:

It’s like a duty that God showed me. Don’t forget what I do for you and your duty is now to help other people who are your friends right now, and maybe they need you right now. You have to feed them; you have to help them.  
(Katrin)

Interestingly Katrin suggested in the above quote and elsewhere in her narrative that her internal moral will was influenced by, or was, the will of God. Kant believed that it was our moral will, our internal guide for morally good behaviour, that gave us dignity (Rosen, 2012). For Katrin it may be that she saw having faith to give her dignity. Her faith was a motivation for contributing and gave her a space in which to contribute. In their communities, Katrin and Esther were seen as individuals with capabilities and something of value to contribute.

Some of the supporters spoke of seeing the women as having capacity to contribute. Fay talked about women contributing to looking after her service:

It’s like a team effort I guess and it’s having that ownership. I guess that comes back to dignity again, you know, they don’t come in and we’re all like ‘oh we feel so sorry for this woman. We need to wrap her up in cotton wool and support her’, it’s not like that at all. (Fay)

To not wrap women in cotton wool, was to not just see them as vulnerable and passive victims. Fay spoke of the women having more power than this, like Sara had expressed earlier about the volunteers at her organisation. Maggie, Tina and Jules similarly described an atmosphere of co-design and contribution at their service, where those who had received support were giving peer support and helping in the day-to-day running. Oppositely, Jack talked of there not being the potential to contribute at formal services: “if you’re receiving support around housing or benefits or education, it’s much more one-way”. It was apparent in the research that the capacity to contribute when homeless was important, as by contributing, women were able to accumulate achievement dignity, capital and status. It could move them out of “victim-mode” (Reina) and give more power over their situation.

Reina felt that services had not always helped her move out of victim-mode: “they didn’t give me the tools and they didn’t give me the resources to be able to look within”. She discussed perceived power dynamics with services, how she moved from a position of feeling like others would ‘rescue’ her, to a more powerful position where she felt in control of changing her circumstances. Reina suggested that services should help her develop resources to help herself. These internal resources could be seen to bring dignity.

With supporters who saw those experiencing homelessness as victims of their circumstances, they could view them as having lower capacities to resolve their situation and accrue resources. Charlie demonstrated this when talking of the rough-sleepers she worked with:

A lot of them might have attachment issues, they’ve been abused as children. We’re seeing more now that a lot of them probably have foetal alcohol syndrome which can lead to impulsive behaviour, not understanding cause and effect, even if they’ve got high IQs, and just making really bad decisions even if they know they’re bad decisions. Actually, there’s more evidence to say that they don’t really have capacity. (Charlie)

Charlie felt this vulnerability, which came from viewing those she worked with as victims, made many of them, especially women, more likely to be taken advantage of by others and less likely to retain resources such as housing. This trauma-informed viewpoint could affect support dynamics. On one hand it could enable a person to receive appropriate care, and on the other hand could create a dependence on

support. Workers in Watson et al. (2019, p.134) were afraid of producing a dependence with those they supported as it could be “setting them up to fail”, or as stated by Reina, not giving “the tools and... resources to be able to look within”. This had implications for a person’s independence, their capability to contribute and therefore their dignity. According to Sayer (2011, p.196), a person “who has no autonomy... who appears passively to follow everything that someone else’s will dictates”, who appears in a disempowered position as in victim-mode, can be viewed as lacking dignity.

Despite the restraints it put on dignity, the women themselves spoke of not always having the capacity to take control of their situation and to contribute towards society. Many experienced poor mental health and high levels of stress. This resulted in them living day-to-day, focusing on survival over dignity (Holly). Ally illustrated how her inability to think outside the here and now affected her capabilities:

I don’t remember having that kind of mindset to do very much thinking apart from, right, this is what I’m doing right now, do that thing, this is what’s happening later, go back to that place... there wasn’t really any space for any thought I think. (Ally)

In this way, dignity was less of a conscious part of Ally’s decision-making processes, inclusive of raising her societal status. Holly spoke of her past job and her future aspirations to contribute by helping others to avoid drugs. She said however: “I definitely can’t get there at the minute because of my situation”, highlighting how her homelessness and its associated lifestyle removed her capacity to contribute in forms acknowledged by dominant society. Like in the examples throughout this section, in a society where people’s value is based on their contribution to society, their inability to contribute can result in low self-worth.

The women spoke of how their circumstances impacted their independence and control, like Eve: “you’re incredibly vulnerable you know and I’m very independent and I do everything for myself, but there I ended up sort of having to rely on the kindness of strangers”. For Eve, one element of how she defined dignity was independence. With few resources, she felt dependent on others and without opportunities for choice. For example, when offered a flat, Eve said: “that flat could have been absolutely anywhere... I was not in a position to say no”.

Gemma spoke of how her homelessness made her less capable of looking after her and her child's nutrition. She did not have access to a cooker or working fridge in her temporary accommodation: "I could get my little [microwave] set up but it's not the same as having a cooker". When moving to her own flat, Gemma looked forward to being "able to buy proper food" which was better for her health and easier financially. Gemma's example demonstrates how homelessness can lead to poorer opportunities for a healthy lifestyle. "Being able to have good health; to be adequately nourished" was seen by Nussbaum (1995, p.83) as needed to lead a dignified life. Eating some meals at her mum's and friend's houses helped to improve Gemma's situation whilst in temporary accommodation, however her own home with resources to store and cook food were necessary for a healthy life.

Dominant societal structures and discourses, as well as the constraints of women's day-to-day lives whilst homeless (which were likely influenced by these structures and discourses) were shown to affect women's capacities to contribute and consequently raise their societal status. Their homelessness restricted their opportunities to lead dignified lives, have healthy lifestyles, feel financially independent and have their capabilities acknowledged. However, some women spoke of being able to contribute and use their skills within their informal networks, and workers in more informal services spoke of women experiencing homelessness contributing within their services and receiving acknowledgement for it.

## **7.4 Dignity and going against your own moral values**

Kant believed that all humans hold within them 'the moral law', which acts as a guide to how we should behave (Rosen, 2012). It is this moral law which deserves respect from others and should "inspire us with self-respect" (p.26), despite us acknowledging the gap between how we have acted and how we believe we should act as moral beings. It is the *capacity* for morality within us which should be held in high esteem and consequently we have dignity.

It is this self-respect, and consequential felt-dignity, which is important to this section. Within the women's accounts there were examples of their feelings of shame and



disrespect for themselves resulting from their behaviour not meeting their own moral standards.

Eve acknowledged the impact of her parents' culture on what she had internalised as dignified behaviour saying, "I think some of my thinking comes from that culture". Katrin indicated that her moral values, and sense of duty to act in accordance with them, came through her religion. When talking of helping people, Katrin said: "this is my duty... I think this is gifted by god to help other people". In this way, what is seen as moral behaviour, what moral standards we hold inside us, are to some extent influenced by our culture (dominant and subculture) (Sayer, 2011; Sayer, 2010).

The theoretical framework showed how what is considered moral in society can be crafted by those in power to maintain inequalities and their hold on power (Tyler, 2013). It also discussed alternative value systems and moral codes existing within marginalised groups (Skeggs, 2011). These conflicting moral value systems (dominant or otherwise) circulating around women experiencing homelessness influence their own moral values. This section looks at women's judgements of themselves against their internal moral values, and as a result, their dignity and sense-of-self.

Interestingly when Lucia was asked what dignity meant to her, she responded: "Being able to live respecting your values and beliefs. Not being forced by circumstances to go against them", a view reflecting Kant's conceptualisation. For Lucia her dignity was affected by acting against her "instincts and feelings" to move in with someone she had just met because she had nowhere to stay. This made her feel "desperate" and undignified. Sara spoke of the need to respect your internal value system, independent of the demands around you: "You are rare... in your own skin, you don't need to prove to anybody. Don't lose that dignity, that I will do everything what you want". When access to resources depends on compliance with institutions, it could however be difficult to follow personal values if they conflicted with the institutions' demands.

Respecting your moral values, is indicative of honouring personal boundaries. Susie talked of her dignity being 'lost' when she did not honour her personal boundaries: "Dignity is about feeling positive about yourself. It is also about boundaries, for example if someone asks you for business and you say yes, then that is losing your dignity." When explored further, dignity to Susie was about respecting herself and her

boundaries in a physical, bodily sense, in terms of sex work. We also spoke of what made her feel more dignified about herself, when she was able to prevent herself from using drugs. For Susie this self-control gave her dignity, aligning her behaviour with her moral will.

Ally talked about how, when homeless, she had very low self-respect seeing herself “in dire straits as a human being”:

I don't think I, at the time, had the ability to conceptualize dignity. There was no sense-of-self whatsoever... the nature of where I was at and what was happening, you don't believe you deserve anything. So the idea of having any dignity for me would've meant that I would've had to have had some sort of sense-of-self, and a deserving self, and I didn't, so I don't believe anything like that would've crossed my mind. I was in such a punished state that everything was my fault and I'm a terrible person. I don't really deserve anything. (Ally)

Ally linked sense-of-self with dignity. Although she talked of having no sense-of-self, her narrative suggested an awareness of her moral values, as she must know them to know that she was violating them with her behaviour. She had knowledge of what she stood for, however felt that there was such conflict between this and her behaviour that she had lost self-respect, seeing herself as undeserving, potentially of support from others.

For Kelly, keeping emotional composure brought self-respect. To not react aggressively towards people who confronted her was being dignified. Kelly referenced this in terms of her reactions towards passersby and staff that she interacted with whilst begging outside a supermarket. Supermarket staff regularly asked her to leave that spot, however Kelly believed that if she kept her emotional composure, was not violent or aggressive, she had not done anything morally wrong and therefore had the right to be there. This suggested Kelly saw asking people for money as morally acceptable as long as she was polite, a different moral code to the supermarket staff.

The fictitious character of the perfect mother, embodying morality and patriarchal gender ideals, was discussed in the previous chapter. These ideals see a mother's place in the home, therefore homelessness can have significant implications for women's identities as mothers (Bimpson et al., 2022). In the previous chapter, judgements against this figure of the perfect mother were seen as reasons why some women did not approach support services. They were afraid of how they would be morally perceived as mothers by services and society, being given the identity of a “bad

mother” (Hess, 2023). Simultaneously, and to some extent consequently, the perfect mother figure could influence the women’s felt-dignity as they felt shameful they were unable to provide a home for their children in accordance with their internal moral values.

Sara talked of the financial struggles she experienced whilst homeless and the effect this had on her: “you can imagine when you are a mum and then you can’t give what your child needs”. Sara had not been made aware of the support that she was eligible for, such as free school meals, so instead felt like she was failing. Existing literature discussed how dominant ideology and social policy saw mothers as fully responsible for their children’s welfare, inclusive of accountability for the impact of poverty (Bimpson et al., 2022; Featherstone et al., 2019; Savage, 2022).

When homeless, Esther made negative moral judgements on her own abilities to mother not meeting her and society’s expectations of mothers. Esther expressed that being unable to provide her son with a home made her feel bad about herself and a failure as a mother. Consequently, she asked the council if they could fly her son to America to be looked after by his father, however this did not happen. Esther was now stably housed, but when reminded of the time when she and her child were emergency accommodated in hotels during the night and sat outside them on picnic benches during the day, she still experienced these same moral judgements of herself.

When Esther lived in temporary accommodation between emergency hotels and stable housing, she could be viewed as managing societal judgements of her as a mother, and potentially her felt-dignity, by presenting herself in alignment with the image of the perfect mother. For a social services visit, she cooked the social worker dinner and made sure her child was well-dressed. Eve expressed a similar way of managing dignity in relation to her mothering. Despite being in financial hardship, Eve made sure that this was not the image she presented of her and her children to the outside world. It was important for her that her children “always be dressed beautifully... their hair will always be lovely” to control perceived external judgements.

This control of external judgement did not stop Eve’s own self-criticism. She referred to her dignity whilst homeless with her children:

I don't think I thought too heavily about dignity because that period in my life was just... I use the words, 'I felt like a mad woman' and I beat myself up thinking, oh god, my children, my tiny children who needed their mother to support them, had this mad woman of a mother at that time because of the circumstances that I was in and the circumstances that [her ex-partner] put me in... all of this extra stuff that was put on me really was awful. (Eve)

By describing herself as a 'mad woman', Eve was suggesting she was not of rational thought. Irrationality and lack of self-control would position her as undignified and less moral under dominant moral standards (Farrugia et al., 2016; Sayer, 2011). Eve, at times, indicated self-blame for being unable to support her children as she had wanted, which would negatively impact her felt-dignity as a mother. However, she also referred to being a victim of her ex-partner and external circumstances with things 'put on' her, an acknowledgement which could help her preserve her dignity.

Gemma more explicitly referred to systemic blame. She expressed moral judgements towards the council and other services for not providing adequate conditions and resources to keep her child safe and facilitate her ability to mother. She discussed Universal Credit being unsatisfactory in covering the rising price of nappies and necessities. In temporary and emergency accommodation, Gemma described the lack of resources which made it harder to care for her child. She did not have access to a fridge for milk, or a table to eat at:

[Her child's] eating isn't brilliant. But mine isn't, cause we've not got a table to eat at... And when we go to Miranda's, she'll sit at her table. But at ours it's just like, there's not much rules because I can't... It's like how can I say, 'No don't wipe your finger on there'. It's like, well you are gonna because if you were sat at a table and there was a cushion there, you'd wipe it on that. (Gemma)

The instability of homelessness made it hard for her to maintain the rituals she felt her daughter needed. This concurs with Share (2020), who found the constraints of homelessness accommodation, like the lack of a dining table, prevented families from having food experiences which met social norms.

Gemma also talked of the council's failings to provide safe conditions for her child in emergency hotel accommodation:

They gave me a room that had an emergency door in it that wasn't alarmed... she was running around, middle of the night, on the roof, having a little party... I then had to move everything on my own with her. I got told that no-one else was allowed to come into this hotel, which was wrong... They just watched me

move it up... she legged it off on me because she managed to open the door, got herself up three flights of stairs and got stuck. And they were like, 'We don't know where she is'. (Gemma)

This contrasted with Esther who internalised the difficult circumstances she was mothering in as personal failings. Gemma expressed that formal institutions and services had failed her and her child. Being a mother in adverse conditions may have impacted Gemma's dignity less than it did Esther's, as she did not see herself as a "failed" mother for not being able to provide a home for her child (Bimpson et al., 2022, p.274).

Mothers in this study also raised their felt-dignity in their discussions of self-sacrifices for their children, and their prioritisation of contact with their children above their other needs. Jane's priority was keeping her child's life as normal as possible whilst homeless, potentially to the detriment of her own wellbeing. In having children whilst homeless, Jane expressed that you did not "have time to focus on yourself". Eve explained that leaving her partner, which led to her homelessness, was mainly for the benefit of her children. Once homeless, her days were about "trying to do the best I can do for my children... not let my children see me cry". These narratives demonstrated moral codes of putting children's needs first with both Eve and Jane trying to protect their children from emotional harm. Eve's desire not to cry in front of her children spoke to moral codes of "self-control" and "self-governance" (Farrugia et al., 2016, p.244). Eve's conceptualisation of dignity included 'saving face', looking respectable to others regardless of her circumstances or internal state. She may have been demonstrating this value by trying to appear strong and respect-worthy in front of her children.

Many of the women referred to how their dignity and self-respect was impacted by a perceived dissonance between their moral values and behaviours. Their ability to follow their values could be impeded by homelessness and associated hardship. Discussions also touched on how women's self-judgements could increase due to perceived external judgements on a dissonance in their identities, especially regarding motherhood.

## 7.5 Effect on self of dignity violations

A woman's felt-dignity and sense-of-self was affected by the dignity violations they experienced. Their circumstances and interactions were influenced by how they and society framed their homelessness, whether as personal failings or issues beyond their control. There were also examples of women's capital affecting how their experiences of homelessness interacted with their felt-dignity.

Despite discussing the emotional impact of her situation, Eve saw herself as someone "highly respected in society", with high cultural and economic capital before becoming homeless. Pascale (2005) found that shorter periods of poverty were more likely seen as structurally caused rather than due to personal failings. Eve's homelessness was short-lived; she saw her situation as structurally caused or caused by the shortcomings of her ex-husband: "well I certainly hadn't done anything wrong". This viewpoint suggested that her homelessness had less impact on her identity and dignity. By seeing herself as a victim of her circumstances, Eve may have felt more deserving of support. Her identification with her pre-homeless self, with high cultural capital and easier movement through dominant fields of capital, might have led her to believe she had the status to change her situation.

Those who remained homeless for longer and did not have the same capital, could have felt less worthy of support and become 'trapped' in homelessness. In this way, dignity could be seen as aiding someone in exiting homelessness. Holly described feeling "stuck in a rut". She was homeless at her point of participation and had no planned route to housing. When asked about her dignity, she said:

I haven't got any anymore, to be honest with you. I'm trying to find myself a little more now, but my pride's gone out of the window... you get tired of the brush, do you know? So my dignity's gone. (Holly)

Holly talked of 'the brush', meaning to be unpleasant or not talk to someone (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Holly indicated that repeated negative social interactions, shaped by societal views of the homeless as "objects of disgust" (Tyler, 2013, p.19), had eroded her dignity. Her inherent value was unacknowledged by others. Those experiencing homelessness are often seen as having deficit cultural

capital when treated based on the homelessness label, rather than as individuals. As a result, they are more likely to be poorly treated by others, making it difficult to maintain their felt-dignity (Sayer, 2011).

Holly described no longer having dignity, similar to Gemma who said, “I’ve not had any [dignity]. It has been horrible”, and to some extent Ally: “I don’t think I, at the time, had the ability to conceptualize dignity. There was no sense-of-self whatsoever”. As indicated in section 7.4, Ally saw herself as immoral and undeserving of respect, leading to her lack of recognition and respect of her moral will, her dignity. She saw herself at fault for her situation, including her homelessness. This raised the question: if a woman felt like she had no dignity, or could not conceptualise it, could she experience further dignity violations in others’ treatment of her? If they saw themselves as unworthy of respect, then how are they affected when someone shows disrespect towards them?

Reina described how continual poor treatment from an abusive ex-partner, institutions such as the police, and ‘support’ services made her question herself:

You can imagine you’re trying to come to terms with why this has happened to you and why all these things, you know, getting away from that perpetrator. But then when you get put in a situation like that it makes you feel like well, is this what they’re saying I deserve... it made you feel as though I was the perpetrator. (Reina)

Reina was referring to the poor conditions of the accommodation she was placed in while fleeing an ex-partner. As a victim of an abusive relationship, she was already full of doubt about her own deservingness of respect (impacting her emotional resources), reinforced by the accommodation and lack of care she received there. By feeling like she was seen as the perpetrator, Reina indicated she felt others viewed her as having low morality and therefore an undignified status.

Low self-esteem was seen to result from dignity violations. Sara spoke of how the process of trying to access free bus passes from formal services made her feel:

I had to tell them I’m on free... then they will give you that pass. So that feeling is literally... if you don’t have that ‘oh I can do that’ you are gone gone, literally your self-esteem goes down and your confidence goes completely crack. (Sara)

Sara's indignity stemmed from the disrespect she received as an asylum seeker, including being questioned by staff in formal services about why she came. Asking for resources in a climate where asylum seekers are seen as having deficit cultural capital, "'swamping' schools, hospitals and communities" and using up the country's resources (Tyler, 2013, p.83), made her feel judged as low-worth and powerless. The result was a reduction in self-esteem, which could affect confidence and disable her capabilities.

Jess expressed how continual poor treatment from others made her question whether it was due to something inherent within her, rather than external circumstances: "I think sometimes there's something in me, that people treat me like this. I ask myself, is it something in me, not everyone is treated the way I am being treated". Additionally, Jess described experiencing shame when receiving support from others motivated by care (as opposed to the poor treatment mentioned above). She spoke of friends supporting her with food:

They were bringing food, and I was feeling very embarrassed and shameful that I am begging for... and even I was not begging, they were bringing. I did not ask them. I am not a person who begs for things. I do not like it. (Jess)

Jess discussed how support from others impacted her self-respect, as potentially this framed her as a victim of her circumstances or saw her as morally-wrong (judged to be begging). She indicated a discomfort with the dependence on others, which subsequently could impact dignity (Sayer, 2011). The indignity in dependence was also spoken about by Eve. When asked what dignity meant to her, independence was named as one factor. She mentioned her guilt for depending on her friend for accommodation and strangers for resources. This suggested that support of any formality can negatively affect dignity if the woman was positioned in a place of dependence.

Both Jess and Eve grew up in families where cultural values varied from those dominant in England: "I suppose because my parents were from a [nationality] culture... as much as it pains me to admit, I think some of my thinking comes from that culture still" (Eve). Jack, who worked at community kitchens attended by people from various cultural backgrounds, observed how support could be received differently:

The desire to give something back and to be un-used to a gift culture very much plays out in how people respond to us and want to get involved. In some ways



it's why our volunteer-base is almost exclusively people seeking sanctuary.  
(Jack)

That said, it could be argued that the neoliberal culture in England, which promotes independence, individualism and agency, also creates shame in being dependent on others for support. Jack saw gender differences in receiving support: "women are probably much more likely [than men] to want to have a response to being in that environment that is to give something back and to try to get involved in some way". This proposes that culture and gender roles influence how the receipt of any kind of support (whatever formality) affects dignity.

For different reasons to Jess and Eve, Reina spoke of how treatment in services, even when it was treatment which saw her as deserving of support, could have implications for her sense-of-self, situating her as a dependent victim:

It's cause we're sick of being retraumatised, not only we're trying to live with our illness, every time we need to repeat it, what's up with us, it's triggering trauma again. But then it's bringing that victim-mode, because it's not Reina anymore 'survivor-thriver', if I keep repeating what's happened to me, I'm this domestic violence victim. That's what I don't like about it. Repeating and repeating. Yeah I know what's happened to me and it weren't my fault and I'm not to blame. But if it weren't my fault and I'm not to blame then why do I keep needing to repeat it. (Reina)

As discussed earlier, Reina felt that she was seen as morally-wrong by services. Her narrative later showed how her route away from that thinking was transitioning to see her situation as not her fault and, in this way, building self-respect. However, Reina showed in this quote how being seen as a victim can still be an undignified position. She voiced her resistance to treatment which placed her in this victim position and spent much of our research encounters speaking of her "survivor-thriver" identity which represented a position of more power and agency.

It was being respected as someone with capabilities and power over their lives which honoured the women's dignity (discussed in detail in 7.3). Esther, for example, spoke of how whilst homeless an old friend would remind her how strong she was, recalling what she had been through and survived growing up. This helped Esther to know the value of herself.

The discussions in this section had implications for women's support choices. Where services and supporters honoured women's dignity, they were more likely to accept that support. The women were working to protect their moral-worth. Services that violated their dignity could cause women to "walk away" (Reina) from them as a defence. Fear that moral-worth would be violated could also be a deterrent from approaching support, as expressed by Ally who was worried of being framed by services as a bad mother.

Repeatedly poor treatment was internalised and affected women's felt-dignity. They could begin to think, "there's something in me, that people treat me like this" (Jess), with dignity increasingly affected as homelessness persists. Felt-dignity was affected both when women's homelessness was seen through dominant discourse to result from their personal failings, and when treated as victims of their circumstances. When seen as victims, women's inherent dignity was respected. However, their achievement dignity could be restricted as their perceived vulnerability portrayed them as having less power over their situation and consequently less ability to build status.

## **7.6 Identity and dignity management**

It has already been discussed how societal discourse can frame women experiencing homelessness as "moral outcasts" (Tyler, 2013, p.19) or vulnerable victims of powerful structures. This can have negative implications for women's sense-of-self and dignity. Psychologically as humans, we seek to create positive identities for ourselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and in doing so we work to see ourselves of moral-worth. This chapter has already touched upon the women's dignity and identity management strategies. This section will go into more depth, looking at how the women work to raise their dignity and view themselves more positively, as individuals of value. It shows the women's agency in managing their sense-of-self, which is particularly important when discussing dignity in a neoliberal society.

The research showed that the women sought to increase both their perceived and self-value through embodying dominant societal moral values, the same values which could be seen to hinder them from accruing capital. According to Snow and Anderson

(1987, p.1339), people experiencing homelessness “are seldom incumbents of social roles that are consensually defined in terms of positive social utility and moral-worth”. This study saw examples of women working to fulfil positive social roles, potentially as ways of deriving self-worth.

Kelly could be viewed as managing her self-worth, her dignity, through taking a societal role which she felt to be of purpose to her local community. During the entirety of one research encounter, while standing at her usual spot outside a supermarket, Kelly held a poster of a missing young man from the local area and asked passersby whether they had seen him. When supermarket staff asked her to vacate her spot, Kelly told them she was undertaking an important job and that they should leave her alone to do it. Kelly also spoke of times when she would help passersby, retrieving and returning items they had dropped. On occasions she was seen to warn people leaving the supermarket holding cash that they should put their money away so not to be robbed.

A local café owner, Danny, who knew Kelly, told of occasions when she would inform him of local community news. He felt that this, and Kelly’s assistance to find the missing man, made Kelly “feel like she’s useful again”. He did not seem to view her actions as beneficial to him or others when he said, “it just gave her something to do that afternoon I suppose. That’s how I took it anyway”.

When talking about her own behaviour, Kelly said it was important to be useful and that it made her feel positive about herself. By raising awareness of the missing man, Kelly felt she had a right to be where she was and could not be accused by the supermarket of morally-wrong behaviour. What she felt was morally-right and helpful behaviour could be seen as a way to ‘earn’ the respect and acknowledgement of passersby, making positive connections with them. She was contributing to society and therefore of value to it. Kelly’s contributions could be an attempt to attach value to herself, to raise both her perceived and felt-dignity.

Despite this, Danny’s opinion highlighted how people cannot control how dignified others perceive them to be. It is possible Kelly’s ‘homeless identity’ overshadowed any dignity she worked to attach to herself. However, Tim, a carpark attendant and informal supporter, gave an example which contradicted this. He spoke about a woman experiencing homelessness who slept in his carpark:

Bless her and she's a nice lass... she helps us out. She found somebody's keys and she not only brought them up to us, she wrote a note... she figured out what car they were from and put a note on the windscreen... genuine act of kindness, she didn't want nought from it. (Tim)

How an action by an individual experiencing homelessness is perceived, may depend on the existing narrative that the perceiver holds towards the societal group, as well as the level of contact existing with that specific individual. Tim expressed sympathetic views towards people experiencing homelessness: "They've just had it hard" and said the woman in the above quote was "well-known to the guys who worked here". Those viewed as low-status did not have power and control over their perceived image and how their actions were interpreted, especially by people who did not know them. This was of importance as how dignified a person was perceived could affect their felt-dignity if aware of these perceptions (McKenzie, 2015).

Katrin, Eve, Esther, Sara and Reina all spoke of reciprocal relationships, helping those who had supported them or helping others who were going through similar hardship. Their reciprocation in these circumstances was not an expected requirement to the initial support being given as in exchange relationships (see Chapter 5). Katrin cleaned the house of a friend, Amira, who was informally supporting her. She referred to it as "like a duty that God showed me... to help other people" and said, "when I help Amira or anyone else... it was satisfying for myself". Eve would do the cooking and housework for her friend accommodating her, a response to feeling guilty about relying on her. In neoliberal society, our self-worth can be based on us feeling of positive value to society, contributing to formal and informal economies (Skeggs, 2004; Farrugia & Watson, 2011; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008). Reciprocating support in relationships could be a dignity maintenance strategy. It was the women taking action to rebalance support relationships which they felt were one-way or did not feel of value within.

There were many illustrations from the women and workers of beneficiaries of support volunteering with the organisations who supported them. This could be formal volunteering as previously discussed by Sara or occur informally as outlined by worker, Fay:

They all muck in... If we're putting food parcels together, they'll help us do that... they'll make cups of tea for everyone... just an example from today, someone came in in a bit of a crisis and she's like 'right, come on, let's get these

clothes put away', and she'll just sit folding the clothes for us and putting them away. (Fay)

Fay described the women operating in roles of "ownership" suggesting there was a reduced power inequality between staff and those supported. They were less viewed as victims and more as individuals with capacity to make positive impact (see 7.3), as 'survivor-thrivers'.

Holly also spoke of attaching value to herself through helping others:

I like to help. And in the right constructive way. And I have a goal. I'm struggling to reach it... I have a brilliant idea but I don't know how to get there and I definitely can't get there at the minute because of my situation. But I have a goal and I want to help. (Holly)

Holly wanted to go into schools and share her experiences of drugs and homelessness to "prepare them a little bit, but in a good way". She talked about her previous role as a drugs counsellor where "people wanted me to be their worker 'cause I was speaking from experience". Holly compared the benefits of workers with lived-experience over those who "learnt from a book". This suggested she acknowledges her potential value to others, a value greater than that many others could offer. Boydell et al. (2000) observed similar strategies in their study, where people experiencing homelessness referenced past jobs and future aspirations to build a more dignified self-identity. It was debateable in Holly's example whether this could be considered a dignity maintenance strategy. As expressed in the above quote, Holly felt that due to her current circumstances, she was unable to contribute in that role and attach that value to herself. Her memory of being a drugs counsellor and her future aspirations could work as a reminder of her current distance from those positions.

Reina was no longer homeless and appeared to gain dignity from her roles working to improve the systems she once struggled in. Through these roles, Reina felt she was fighting the structural and institutional injustices she experienced:

I'm going to spend another nine years where I'm on this earth changing systems, being passionate to get people the human rights, the acknowledgement, the education, really from my heart, to change so that people aren't shamed and humiliated. (Reina)

Reina spoke of herself as having positive value to others and power to make system changes, which could indicate perceived symbolic capital. Earlier during this research

encounter, Reina spoke of how during past interactions with the police she had been made to feel “belittled... humiliated and shamed”, undignified experiences. Her current roles, which included helping design police training to prevent others from experiencing the same indignities she had faced, may have elevated her dignity through a perceived reversal of power dynamics. Reina saw her lived-experience and hardship to give her value and status.

Reina, reflecting on her homelessness, found that being in “victim-mode” left her passive within systems, a position she found undignified because it stripped her of power. She contrasted this with the “survivor-thriver” position that she strived for, where she possessed power over her situation. This fits with the moral neoliberal narrative of overcoming hardship due to personal strength, and self-responsibility to attain material resources and status (Farrugia et al., 2016).

Reina expressed how she maintained dignity through psychological capital, through imposing personal boundaries and controlling her emotions:

Now I have my boundaries like I said to you. I learnt to do emotional regulation from going to IAPT and doing CBT therapy... So for me now I am emotionally regulated, and I work on it everyday and I do a lot of self-love. (Reina)

To have control over yourself and the impact of others on you links to dignity. Reina gave an example of these boundaries: “my boundary now is people who are disrespectful or people who are not, I feel, treating me with dignity or respect, my boundary is I walk away”. Here Reina reduces her exposure to dignity-violating experiences. This also chimed with Susie’s experience discussed in 7.4, where she saw her dignity to be lost when she did not honour her personal boundaries.

Reina’s strategies for maintaining dignity involved a perceived power and control against dominant systems, partly through her narrative of changing the unjust practices of services and institutions. Many of the women could be seen as taking control of their dignity through presenting an alternative narrative to neoliberal discourses implying that low-status groups, such as those experiencing homelessness, are a “drain and threat to scarce national resources” (Tyler, 2013, p.9). Some women envisioned formal support systems as acting unjustly and sometimes immorally (as opposed to themselves as in Tyler’s quote). According to Sara, formal services “try to crack you... in the worse possible way they try to provoke you, go to blast I think”. Similarly, Gemma

spoke of how the council treated her mum: “mum was in tears. [A council worker] made mum feel like she was an awful mum. Like it was horrible how they were to her”. The formal systems were characterised as making uncaring decisions (emotionally disconnected and inhuman) over who has access to resources, leaving others in great hardship. As demonstrated in Sara and Gemma’s quotes above, the women would often speak of seeing themselves and others as victims to these systems.

Victim positions can however embody lack of agency (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021). Gemma spoke of reclaiming power and control over formal systems by possessing knowledge on how to gain resources from them. Knowing how to ‘play the game’ with systems took Gemma out of the discussed ‘victim-mode’ and made her feel like an operator of the system: “If you know how to play it, you’re fine, you’re rolling in it”. As discussed in Chapter 6, this knowledge could be seen as subcultural capital. However, this was not always the case, for example when Gemma talked about how the council can “force you to bid on properties” or they bid for you: “I got annoyed with them. I was like ‘stop bidding’. I said, ‘I bid for anywhere’”. Gemma expressed that the council could “do whatever they bloody want”, a statement demonstrating the power imbalance and her lack of control over them.

Control was an ongoing theme relating to dignity management. Lucia’s narrative on her homelessness portrayed her having control over her situation. She saw her homelessness to result from acting on her own beliefs and that she was in that position out of choice to geographically locate herself in a place of benefit to future career prospects. The homeless identity did not influence Lucia’s sense-of-self and dignity. By seeing her homelessness as a choice, Lucia was able to gain a sense of control over her situation and identity (Parsell & Parsell, 2012). Eve maintained dignity through control of external perceptions of her. She referred to this as ‘saving face’, presenting to others as well-groomed and “not airing your dirty laundry in public”, despite experiencing financial and emotional hardship.

For others, dignity management strategies were internal, directly working to change their self-perceptions. According to Sara, “You are rare... in your own skin, you don’t need to prove to anybody. Don’t lose that dignity”. This thinking opposed Eve’s ‘saving face’ as it talked of giving less attention to external perceptions. Sara’s quote on rarity echoes part of Kant’s philosophy on dignity which sees someone to possess dignity due

to them not being interchangeable, being of “incomparable worth” (Kant, 2018 [1785], p.48). It also chimed with Reina’s strategies of self-compassion and personal boundaries to build up her self-respect.

Eve, Lucia, Jane and Ally largely did not see themselves as homeless. Ally, in particular, felt this way because her experience did not match “obvious forms of homelessness” in that at night she had a bed or floor available. She also spoke of having some financial capital. Eve and Lucia’s cultural capital, and Jane’s social capital, contributed to their lack of identification with homelessness. They did not identify with the stigmatised group, instead potentially identifying with the housed population, which could be seen as a dignity and identity maintenance strategy. Their felt-identity distanced them from others experiencing homelessness and most homelessness services and institutions. According to Snow and Anderson (1987), this could be dissociating with the social category of homelessness as a whole.

Some women who did not distance themselves from homelessness services, actively pursued other aspects of their identities whilst homeless, helping them stay connected to their pre-homeless selves and the housed population. Katrin talked about her involvement in a religious community, in which she felt of value. Her faith was a dominant aspect of her identity. Priscilla continued hobbies such as being on a pub quiz team with people who were not homeless and spent much of her time receiving medical support which she explained to have positive implications for her identity: “on a day-to-day basis I was taught how marvellous and wonderful I was and what an inspiration to everybody”. These other parts of their identities, which felt unshaded by the homeless identity, worked to reduce the impact of homelessness on their dignity.

Some women made positive comparisons of themselves with, or distanced themselves from, particular subgroups of homelessness or other low-status societal groups. During the organisation observation, staff conversations revealed how women compared themselves to others. They saw women making clear distinctions between being crack smokers and crack injectors, with crack smokers looking down on the behaviour of crack injectors. Staff observed there being hierarchies in methods of making money. At the top of this hierarchy was shoplifters, then robbers, beggars (sitting down), beggars (asking for money), with sex workers at the bottom. This could preserve a more positive sense-of-self for those at the top, and negatively impact those at the bottom.



This hierarchy was illustrated by Kelly who made money through begging. She spoke of how someone she owed money to wanted her to sleep with him, which she thought was disgusting, degrading and as if they thought she was a sex worker. Kelly's comment positioned her as more dignified and morally superior to sex workers, possibly a way to maintain a positive self-image (Farrington & Robinson, 1999).

Much of the literature on the identity maintenance strategies of marginalised groups focuses on working-class communities, looking at different currencies of exchange and different variations of moral codes from those dominant in society. This study found a few similar strategies, like hierarchies related to making money, but they were rare. This highlighted the isolating nature of homelessness for the women, as Ally expressed: "I felt so isolated. I was so insular". Many did not feel connected or identify with a social group experiencing homelessness, which is potentially why this did not come up frequently. Holly spoke of spending time with others experiencing homelessness but did not see them as her tribe, saying that she would not have chosen to spend time with them otherwise and felt used by them. Most women felt all-consumed by the negativity of their situation and were concentrating on survival. Without them feeling part of a group, these value systems and forms of currency were unlikely to develop in the same way.

Neoliberal discourses can portray those experiencing homelessness as threats to society's wellbeing. Dignity maintenance strategies reversed this narrative, seeing women experiencing homelessness as victims of unjust discourse and institutions, as people of value and deserving of support. By seeing the women as victims, undignified power dynamics can still be created and women seen as passive in support systems. Women taking alternative roles to the victim role through contributing to society and gaining control over systems and their trajectory, functioned to raise their felt-dignity. Other women distanced themselves from homeless identities altogether, through forms of capital or other identity characteristics.

## 7.7 Conclusion

Chapter 6 outlined how women's support choices are influenced by their experiences of support or their perceptions of what receiving that support will be like. This chapter explored this in greater depth through concepts of dignity and identity. Using this study's theoretical framework and in alignment with the previous chapter, the data showed women's dignity varies based on their access to capital and a positive identity. Dignity is constructed in the interaction between whether women see themselves to be following their internal moral values, and how they are externally treated and perceived. These internal morals are largely based on culture and to have capital is associated with having moral value in society.

Informal support, in this chapter, was seen to provide a counter-narrative to dominant societal discourses that people experiencing homelessness are not of value. In this way, it always respects inherent dignity (intrinsic and universal based on someone's humanity), however some informal support was shown to restrict achievement dignity (affected by behaviour and status) by not acknowledging women's capabilities. In doing so, women's autonomy can be limited.

In relation to this, the research documented three positions the women were placed in by society, support-givers or themselves, which influenced their dignity and sense-of-self:

**The perpetrator:** The image was largely built by dominant societal discourse of the women being a drain on society's resources, of them being feared in society and unwoman-like (unable to child-rear, keep home, present as passively feminine). This role holds the least dignity as it is seen as embodying immorality, and incapable of positive societal contributions.

**The victim:** They are seen as homeless as a result of structural disadvantage and having bad luck in terms of poor life experiences. They are deserving of support because they hold moral-worth, however their capacity to contribute to society has been impeded by their circumstances.

**The “survivor-thriver”:** A term used by Reina. They have overcome structural disadvantage, bad luck and often poor treatment, to be in positions in society where they are contributing. Through this they have raised their societal status and accumulated both capital and achievement dignity.

The difference between the victim and survivor-thriver position also demonstrates the difference between inherent dignity and achievement dignity. Achievement dignity and status can be gained through contribution to society which is considered moral.

Informal support, defined as respecting women’s inherent dignity, can frame women as either victims or survivor-thrivers.

The position women are put in by society and support-givers, and to some extent how they see themselves, determines their access to capital. The victim, for example, has access to certain amounts of resources as they are seen as deserving of support, however they are unable to accumulate capital and resources above this to increase their societal status. Their perceived vulnerability and lack of power restricts them. They can be kept in this position by the treatment of informal supporters, support services and institutions creating a dependency on their support.

These three positions are combined into a model using the theoretical framework in the following chapter, Discussion and Conclusions.

## 8. General Discussion and Conclusions

This research aimed to understand how women's dignity and sense-of-self was affected by their experiences of support, and consequently how this influenced their support choices. It focused on women's use of informal support by exploring the nature of informal support, the extent to which they relied on it to meet their needs and how their use of it affected their dignity and sense-of-self.

A review of literature in the homelessness field (Chapter 3) showed that the experiences of women who exist less visibly have rarely been explored in-depth in research. Existing literature shows homelessness support services to be male-dominated and has limited examples of women choosing to use alternative forms of support away from services. These accounts tend to focus on the practical, rather than the psychosocial implications of these support interactions on women and lack depth. This highlighted a gap in knowledge about where women fulfil their day-to-day needs if not using services.

Using the core concept of dignity, this PhD addressed this gap. Dignity in relation to homelessness is crucial yet remains largely unexplored in the literature, which tends to focus on stigmatisation. A theoretical framework was developed drawing together perspectives on capital and societal discourse to construct an understanding of dignity in relation to women's experiences of homelessness. This framework argues that the circulation of hate, fear, disgust and shame in society works to marginalise women experiencing homelessness. They become scapegoats for society's problems. This marginalisation can separate women experiencing homelessness from capital accumulation in dominant fields. The framework proposes that with less capital and consequently restricted access to resources, society can see them as less worthy of respect and of low moral-worth. Respect and morality are key to dignity, with having dignity seen as being of moral-worth and respect-worthy. Inherent dignity is to have dignity due to your value as a human-being, whereas capital accumulation can raise people's achievement dignity. Women viewed as homeless can be seen to have deficit capital and dehumanised in society, violating their inherent dignity. This theoretical

framework worked to examine how dignity, capital and discourse on women experiencing homelessness influences women's support choices.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on women's experiences of homelessness. It adds to discussions on the hidden nature of women's homelessness, capturing the experiences of women who do not use, or have limited use of, support services and the perspectives of those supporting them. It constructs a trauma-informed, person-centred and dignity-centred methodology suitable for researching sensitive topics. The study's contributions are documented in more detail later in the chapter.

This chapter sets out the key findings from the study. It revisits the theoretical framework to show how empirical and theoretical understanding has been advanced. It highlights key points of discussion which have arisen over the research process, looks at the research's limitations and clarifies potential discrepancies. In particular, issues around using the term 'choice' in this research, the changing landscape of gender and methodological limitations are explored. This chapter ends by suggesting further areas for research identified as being of interest during this study.

## 8.1 Key findings

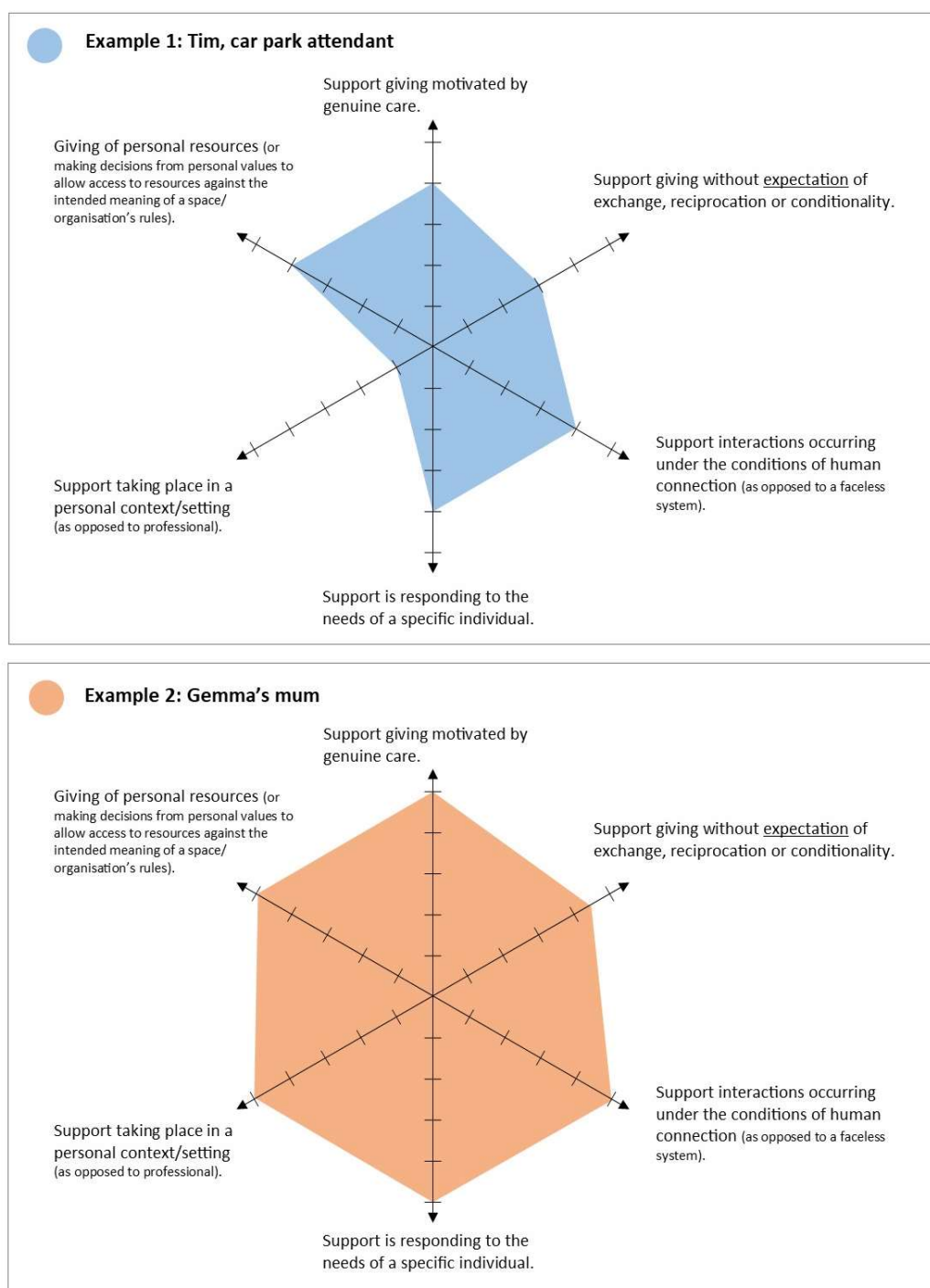
**Key finding 1: Informal support is defined by the motivation for providing support, as opposed to the context or setting in which it is given.**

This research constructed a unique understanding of informal support, developed through the accounts of women with experiences of homelessness and informal supporters. The accounts of informal supporters have rarely featured in the research literature. Importantly, by featuring these, the motivation behind their support could be incorporated into the understanding, a key distinguishing factor of informal support.

When starting the fieldwork, my assumption that service-based/personal sources of support were dichotomous with formal/informal support was quickly challenged. Formality of support instead was found to exist on numerous scales. From the research findings, a definition of informal support was formed which was used to explore

support choices and how dignity related to women's experiences of support. Informal support was therefore defined by its qualities, primarily the motivations for support. In a simplified form it can be visualised as below:

**Figure 3: Informality Scales of Support** (Based on the Outcomes Star™ [Burns et al., 2023])



#### Exclusions

To be considered informal support the receipt of support must:

- Respect a person's inherent dignity.
- Not involve obvious harm or exploitation.

The visualisation shows six scales of qualities of informal support as had emerged in the data. Two examples from this study are charted on the visualisation, Tim, a carpark attendant, allowing people to sleep in his carpark and Gemma's mum who had previously provided her with accommodation. Both examples are positioned on each of the six scales based on the researcher's perceptions of the example in the data. Lines are drawn to connect the scores and the size of the resulting shape gives an impression of the support's informality (the larger, the more informal). It is of importance to note that the visualisation is to *illustrate* the scaled and nuanced nature of informal support emerging from the data and *not* to provide any statistical data or concrete comparison.

The research documented informal support from religious and ethnic communities, friends, family and strangers. Existing literature offered similar examples of women sleeping on the floors and couches of friends, family and acquaintances (Reeve et al., 2006; Radley et al. 2006; McGrath et al., 2023). There is some literature on informal support within minority ethnic communities with differing conclusions. Netto (2006), for example, found people experiencing homelessness often felt isolated from, and sometimes rejected by, their communities rather than supported by them. DeVerteuil's (2011) findings were more in agreement with my own, seeing certain ethnic community networks helping people experiencing homelessness to avoid street-homelessness. This was largely in the form of overcrowding strategies. Interestingly, no evidence was found in the homelessness literature of ethnic communities coming together using online social networking platforms to create joined up support, as was reported in this study.

Some informal support discussed in the literature was that of peer support. Farrington and Robinson (1999) and Smith (2008) talked of groups of people experiencing homelessness functioning as families. Evidence of this was rarely found in this research. Instead, it largely found that women's experiences of homelessness were characterised by isolation, they remained close to non-homeless friends and family, or had negative experiences with others who were also experiencing homelessness. There were examples, however, which concurred with the literature on women pairing up with male 'protectors' whilst homeless. Other studies discussed how these relationships could be abusive, which means they could not be considered support.

However, Susie and Kelly in this study did not report significant harm in their relationships, rather emotional and practical support.

One key observation about informal support in this study was that it could exist in relationships with workers in services when the worker was giving their own emotional or practical resources or making decisions from their personal values. There was some discussion in the literature of support workers' genuine care in ways that provided support above their job role, however it was not categorised as informal support as done here and was generally an unexplored area. Watson et al. (2019) write of workers making real human connections with those they supported. These connections were at times seen to conflict with their employers' demands and targets. Workers talked of being "contractually obliged" to take some actions which went against the wishes of those they supported (p.134).

Informal support from workers was important in this study, especially when experienced during the organisation observation. However, it can be difficult to distinguish between whether care expressed by a worker in a support relationship comes from their own personal resources outside of their job role, or whether it is care they are expected and paid to carry out (i.e. there has been an exchange, even if this is not a direct exchange with the woman). Each encounter with a service can involve both formal and informal interactions, even with the same staff member. The difference in motivations can be hard to distinguish, both by the supporter themselves and the woman being supported, and therefore remains an area of ambiguity.

By defining informal support by motivation, it does not simply equate to support which is of value to the women. There were drawbacks to informal support identified in this research. Often, informal supporters had very limited personal resources to give. This research and existing literature similarly found limitations to informal support, for example being informally accommodated regularly resulted in instability, poor living conditions and overstaying their welcome (Radley et al., 2006; Mayock & Parker, 2020).

When defining informal support, it became apparent that the respect of someone's inherent dignity is a qualifying requirement. This was because any interactions which did not do so, could not be considered supportive in quality. It also highlighted how in respecting inherent dignity, informality operated with a reduced power difference. It



facilitated “connection on a “human” level” (Watson et al., 2019, p.132) so that a person’s equal human worth can be seen.

Respecting inherent dignity as a requirement of informal support was however problematic. It produced a circular argument in terms of the study’s research questions as the final question asked how informal support affected women’s dignity. To some extent, this question had already been answered by the initial research question. When designing the study, this circular argument had not been predicted due to, as already discussed, informal support being conceptualised as support received external to support services. As the study progressed, a new data-led understanding of informal support was developed which defined informal support by its qualities and saw the giving of resources to need to be positive in quality and free from intentional harm to be considered supportive. It was this empirical development which produced the circular argument. The final findings chapter illustrated how informal support respected inherent dignity through examples of the women’s experiences. It then provided a nuanced discussion on how this respect may or may not affect their felt-dignity, before exploring the more complex relationship between informal support and achievement dignity.

Another discussion point that arose was whether respecting inherent dignity, as a requirement for informal support to be considered supportive, also applied to formal services. Could formal services be called support if many of the women spoke of experiencing emotional harm when accessing them? The literature documents examples where formal services made people feel dehumanised, infantilised and incapable, a disrespect to their inherent dignity (Miller & Keys, 2001; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008). However, resources could be gained from engagement with these services which could greatly improve emotional wellbeing in the long-term, for example stable housing. It could be seen that formal services, as described in this study, have the potential to be supportive in quality even if evidence of this was not well-documented by women. Some women may experience them as supportive because of the resources they gain from them, and may find their interactions with them neutral or positive in quality. Others may not and their interactions with them not classed as support. For some, their engagement with formal services may comprise of both positive supportive and negative interactions. Tara, a former council worker

interviewed for this study, presented a nuanced account of the council's resource provision which involved both supportive care for people on a human level at times and harmful disconnected decisions at others.

Based on accounts of women with experiences of homelessness and their supporters, a unique conceptualisation of informal support was developed, offering a nuanced understanding based on motivations, rather than context/setting as in existing literature.

**Key finding 2: A woman's support strategies depend on their financial, cultural and social capital and whether they identify as homeless.**

The literature does not look in-depth at how women's capital in dominant fields affects their experiences of homelessness. Literature largely assumes that women have little capital available to them (Watson, 2016; McCormack & Fedorowicz, 2022). The diversity in this study's participants allowed for an exploration of capital theory in relation to women's homelessness. Some participants did not use or had limited use of services. By examining their experiences alongside those of women who interacted more frequently with services, I proposed that differences in capital (both economic and non-economic) could explain variations in their experiences and impacts on their dignity. In doing so, this PhD contributes to understandings of capital in relation to the field of homelessness.

It was often difficult to see my findings reflected in existing literature on homeless identities, which may have resulted from differences in participant recruitment. There is an obvious point that men's experiences have been of greater focus, but even in research where women's experiences were considered, participant recruitment was usually through homelessness services. In this study, only one woman was recruited through a homelessness-specific service. This meant that some participants had had very limited contact, if any, with services, which had implications on their felt-identity. It also meant they had varying economic and non-economic capitals, which helped demonstrate how their support choices were influenced by the resources available to them as individuals.

These resources could be financial as some women had enough money to remain off the street but not enough to gain stable housing. Some had cultural capital or social capital which affected how they saw themselves in relation to homelessness and their opportunities to resolve their situation. Women with more capital in dominant fields referred to their homelessness as a traumatic or difficult event rather than a distressing way of being which reflected who they were. When asked whether they saw/had seen themselves as homeless, some had not labelled themselves as such, even if they recognised that they met the definition of homelessness. This had implications for their support choices. For example, they were unlikely to use homelessness-specific services.

Women with more cultural capital, who had not identified as homeless, had bypassed state housing and accommodation provision systems to exit homelessness by relying on informal support, having some money come through, potentially skipping a waiting list to be housed by a housing association, and through saving up through work. Skeggs (2004) describes how cultural capital, and associated social skills, are greatly advantageous in gaining employment. Work was not a readily available option for participants with less cultural capital, especially those visibly homeless.

By not relying on state provisions, women with cultural capital avoided the indignity of this dependence, an indignity largely created through societal discourses on welfare recipients as a “parasitical drain” on societal resources (Tyler, 2013, p.9). There was some suggestion in the women’s accounts that cultural capital gave them confidence in their abilities to resolve their situations, or that they would be resolved through opportunities presenting (as someone with more privilege may be more used to), which was less available to those with less capital who were societally labelled of low-worth. This is an area of interest which would benefit from being explored with larger numbers of women to make firmer conclusions.

Also, by not identifying as homeless and not being identifiable as homeless by others, a person avoided the loss of cultural capital associated with that identity. The perceived homeless identity can control women’s movements, restricting them from entering some urban areas used by the housed public (Clope et al., 2010; 2008; Sibley, 1995). This was illustrated by Kelly who was regularly asked by supermarket staff to vacate her begging pitch outside the supermarket, and it was proposed by an informal supporter that she was also restricted from entering some local cafes. Being prevented from

accessing spaces, distances women from sources of informal support in those spaces. Holly identified as homeless and spoke of the weight of this identity in her interactions with others, feeling “the brush” from them. Kelly and Holly’s experiences echoed much of the literature on how people experiencing homelessness can be seen through the homelessness stereotype, resulting in poor treatment (Lee et al., 2004). The deficit cultural capital that comes with identifying with homelessness also seemed to result in their entrenchment in homelessness with neither speaking of a route out.

Social capital was seen as relevant to informal support choices. McGrath et al. (2023) and Allard (2005) critique the literature on social capital for focusing on the connectedness of an individual to social networks rather than the quality of the social relationships. Assumptions can be made that all social networks are support networks which this study called into question in Chapters 5-7, adding to Allard and McGrath et al.’s conclusions. Relationships may be productive in bringing resources, yet also bring harm and “inhibit well-being” (Allard, 2005, p.66). McGrath et al. (2023) discuss how negative social capital impacts women's health, the duration of their homelessness, and the expected obligations in ‘support’ relationships. They address how women might be more vulnerable to control and shaming from their networks while homeless. This study expanded on those ideas, framing such experiences as dignity violations.

Using the context of informal support, this research added to this more nuanced discussion of social capital by giving greater focus to those with less service contact. Many participants remained connected to social circles from prior to their homelessness, or were in social groups with the housed population when homeless, whether through hobbies, faith or family. These connections were described as social capital that, by offering alternative ways to fulfil their needs, allowed them to avoid homelessness services and the associated risks to their identity (Casey et al., 2008). Where support was given from these sources from positions of genuine care, this was a large factor in women’s choices to seek help from them. The women spoke of the relationships bringing benefits to their emotional wellbeing and having positive implications for dignity and sense-of-self.

By relying on informal support and not being visible to homelessness services however, women were sacrificing other forms of social capital; relationships and interactions which help to gain stable housing (Mayock & Parker, 2020). Positive worker

relationships were considered social capital, and there was evidence of this social capital becoming a vicarious symbolic capital when workers used their professional status to resolve issues with formal systems (such as the Jobcentre) and help resources to be more easily accessed. Vicarious capital is an interesting concept, discussed by Watson (2016) in relation to women experiencing homelessness acquiring the physical protection of male partners to increase their safety from external harm. The capital is vicarious because it is “context-specific and only available for the duration of the... relationship” (Watson, 2016, p.257). A similar concept has been applied here to symbolic capital to illustrate the nature of this professional social capital, and consequent symbolic capital, and the potential detriment in disengaging from this type of support.

Interactions with more formal sources of support brought essential resources, which meant that many women engaged with them. Some had no choice as to whether they engaged with formal services, for example those seeking asylum with the Home Office, or those with children in their care with social services.

Women’s ethnicity was found to affect their access to informal support. It was seen in some situations to be deficit cultural capital, for example Eve questioned whether she would have had the same access to resources if a housing association had known she was not white British when she contacted them, and Sara spoke of the stigma she experienced when trying to access state resources as an asylum seeker. In other contexts, a woman’s ethnicity could bring social capital by increasing the support avenues open to them. The research noted how some minority ethnic communities would come together to support members of their community in need. There were also support services available specifically for asylum seekers.

A woman’s capital was seen as greatly influential on her experience of homelessness, the opportunities available to her when homeless, and whether she identified as homeless. This finding resulted from this PhD’s participants having diverse levels of capital in dominant fields, a diversity not apparent in existing research.

**Key finding 3: A woman’s support strategies are affected by fear of victimisation, services and societal judgement.**

A body of literature has been emerging over recent years exploring why women experiencing disadvantage (including homelessness) are not using services (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Hess, 2023; McGrath et al., 2023). Some studies find that women's non-engagement is related to fear of services, including being judged and the consequential shame. This PhD adds to this current area and takes it further to explore in more detail women's support options away from services. It discusses their non-engagement in terms of dignity, an innovative and underexplored perspective.

The effect of fear on women's support choices was largely documented in the findings as fear of victimization from men. Women's use of support was often based on their risk-management strategies, for example, they were more likely to engage in women-only services, or access homelessness services with a male partner. This echoes the extant literature which finds women experiencing homelessness' movements to be governed by their higher perceived vulnerability (Wardhaugh, 1999; May et al., 2007; Menih, 2020). The workers' accounts in this study, as in others (e.g. May et al., 2007), were of homelessness services as feared spaces where women were vulnerable to victimisation from men using the service. There were examples from both the women and workers in this study of women regularly being put in mixed-sex accommodation, sometimes with men linked to previous perpetration, which could cause them to judge the streets or informal accommodation as safer. My findings concur with existing literature that women are more likely to seek less visible ways of supporting themselves due to this fear (Casey et al., 2008; Reeve, 2018). This fear was most relevant to the experiences of women who identified as homeless but did not have children in their care.

Fear of services was also prevalent amongst the women. Services most feared were those that could have the largest impact on their lives, primarily social services amongst those with children, and the Home Office amongst asylum seekers. With these services, engagement was often compulsory. Ally, a mother, spoke of how she felt she needed to avoid all support services as she feared they could feed into social services' judgements of her ability to mother. These fears increased self-reliance and reliance on informal support.

Hess (2023) widens this fear of judgement beyond mothering, using examples of sex work, mental health and addiction. These examples were cited by workers and women

with experiences of homelessness in this study and were seen as potential reasons for disengagement and avoidance. By avoiding services, women could avoid retraumatisation (Hess, 2023). As expressed by Reina: “we’re sick of being retraumatised”.

Judgements from services were linked to dignity and shame. Neoliberal meritocratic discourse holds women responsible for their homelessness without acknowledgement of the lack of capital available to them, their poor life circumstances and the structural disadvantage they face (Farrugia et al., 2016; Hess, 2023). As a result, they could be considered a morally-worse person for being in their position, which if internalised, negatively affects their dignity. Discourses on homelessness were seen in both my findings and existing literature to result in feelings of shame for some women. They felt looked down upon and incapable of supporting themselves (Fleary et al., 2019; Perriman, 2019; Miller & Keys, 2001).

Neoliberal discourse is viewed in the literature to result in scarcity of resources and the categorisation of people experiencing homelessness into those who are deserving or undeserving (Tyler, 2013; 2015; Farrugia et al., 2016; Jones, 2011; Reeve, 2017; Edmiston, 2017). The ways in which some formal services function, their policies and procedures, reflected this discourse which contributes to the shame felt by women using them, making them feel judged and judging themselves. It is also reflected in the services’ poor conditions and treatment. This was extensively documented by this study’s participants, from not being believed/trusted, to being infantilised and dehumanised.

As mentioned earlier when talking of fear of services, judgements on the women’s abilities to mother based on their homelessness arose both in my study and recent literature. These judgements were seen as impactful on dignity, with discourse often framing the women as failed mothers unable to meet idealised images of mothers in the home (Hess, 2023; Bimpson et al., 2022). Discourse affected what was seen as moral or immoral behaviour and women could feel shamed when their circumstances meant they could not meet these moral codes.

In agreement with existing literature, judgements like those discussed and dignity-management strategies were seen as reasons for disengagement (Hess, 2023; Hoffman

& Coffey, 2008; Langeegger & Koesters, 2016), consequently impacting women's use of alternative support.

Women's support choices were based on the risk-management of real and perceived threats from services and those who occupied them, as well as the avoidance of judgement that they can experience when using services. This PhD contributed knowledge, discussing women's support choices away from services in more depth using the concept of dignity.

**Key finding 4: Informal support provides an alternative narrative to degrading societal discourse that people experiencing homelessness are not of value. In doing so, it always respects women's inherent dignity, however some informal support can restrict achievement dignity by not acknowledging their capabilities.**

Much of the existing literature presenting alternative narratives that oppose the degrading societal discourses on marginalised groups focuses on working-class communities who have developed localised value systems (McKenzie, 2015; Skeggs, 2011; 2004). These communities are found to have different variations of dominant moral codes which help them gain a more positive sense-of-self. This is less present in homelessness research, including this study, which I suggest is due to most women participating experiencing homelessness as isolating, without feeling connected to a community of joint experience. Potentially this is common yet under-researched in the field, as these women are more difficult to locate as participants. This research saw examples of how informal support created an alternative narrative which countered degrading discourses on people experiencing homelessness' low-worth.

In this study, dignity is constructed in the interaction between whether women see themselves to be following their internal moral values (largely influenced by societal discourse), the conditions they have access to, and how they are treated and perceived by others. Chapter 7 discussed how women's dignity can be violated or honoured through their treatment from others, their access to resources and the opportunities they have to lead a dignified life. These findings agreed with existing literature which sees someone's poor treatment to contribute to low self-worth (Boydell et al., 2000; Miller & Keys, 2001), as well as academics whose work is drawn upon in my theoretical



framework who linked societal discourse on groups given low-status to these dignity and identity violations (Tyler, 2013; 2015; Ahmed, 2014; Pascale, 2005). By framing those with low-status as of low economic worth and immoral, lack of resources and restricted opportunities are seen as justified within society (Tyler, 2013).

Informal support was found to provide a dignifying alternative to degrading societal discourses that people experiencing homelessness are not of value. It did this through interactions which honoured their dignity, seeing them as people who deserved care. Informal support could provide practical resources, those needed to lead a dignified life, making women feel of value. These interactions and resource-giving were reflective of the supporters' rejection of the degrading discourse often exhibited in the media and by those in power. Supporters, in their conversations with the women experiencing homelessness and in interviews for this research, also verbally expressed a counter-narrative of women not being at fault for their homelessness. Services where informal support was provided would stand up for the rights of women they were supporting against more formal services such as the council. They felt those they were supporting were deserving of having their needs met, and therefore the ability to lead a dignified life. By seeing the women as people of value, informal supporters' motivations were respecting of their inherent dignity. An observation is made in Watson et al.'s (2019) study where staff were seen to project an alternative rehumanising narrative by working to remove the more formalised parts of their relationships with individuals. This involved finding common interests and trying to level the power imbalance to connect on a human level.

Nevertheless, there were limitations on informal supporters' abilities to create an alternative narrative and its impact, especially support from individuals. Informal supporters often had few resources of their own and services where informal support was provided were poorly funded, operating in landscapes of scarce resources. The result was that on a practical level they were unable to provide the resources needed to help the women lead dignified lives, reflective of informal supporters' narratives often not holding the same power as dominant discourse.

Formal services created distance and power imbalance in interactions, and accessing resources through these services was often seen in this study as a dehumanising experience. Mayock et al. (2015) found similarly that services limit women's autonomy

through the inferiority they experience in them, consequentially impacting their dignity and sense-of-self. Informal support was more attractive to the women as the interactions were more dignifying. However as already discussed it was less likely to be able to provide practical resources which could have long-term impacts (Mayock & Parker, 2020). A stable housing tenancy could greatly raise women's dignity in the long run, but to get this tenancy might negatively affect their dignity through interacting with the council's systems in the short-term.

Political and media discourse often portrays people experiencing homelessness as threats to society's wellbeing, homeless due to their own failures (Pascale, 2005; Braverman, 2023; Farrugia et al., 2016). The counter-narrative from informal supporters in this study saw homelessness to result from systemic failures and poor life circumstances. Although more dignifying, as women are not framed as immoral, it sees women as victims of their circumstances. This could disempower them, affecting their ability to exercise their agency. By seeing women as disempowered victims, informal support could restrict their achievement dignity by not acknowledging their capabilities to contribute and build their societal status. There were examples in the research where the women were seen as both victims to their circumstances but with the capacity to build status. This is discussed next.

Using the under-researched concept of dignity and the conceptualisation of informal support derived in this study, the PhD showed how informal support can present more positive narratives about women's worth than is often represented in societal discourse and reflected in the often undignified experience of using formal services relayed by women in this study.

**Key finding 5: The women are largely placed in the positions of perpetrators, victims or survivor-thrivers by society, supporters or themselves. Their position influences their dignity.**

This study's theoretical framework brought together three areas of study (capital theory, societal discourse and dignity philosophy) in a unique way to explore women's experiences of homelessness. This framework helped to understand how support choices can affect women's dignity and therefore their position in society. Dignity is an

under-researched area in relation to homelessness, yet the fields of capital and societal discourse provided a widely researched base for its exploration.

This research documented three positions which the women were placed in by society, supporters, or themselves. They were largely influenced by societal discourse and their access to capital, which affected their dignity, both inherent and achievement. In a simplified form this can be summarised in the table below.

**Table 3:** *Perpetrator, Victim and Survivor-thriver*

<b>Position</b>	<b>Discourse</b>	<b>Capital</b>	<b>Dignity</b>
<i>Perpetrator</i>	A drain on society's resources and cause of societal problems. Homeless because of poor life choices.	Deficit capital in dominant fields. Undeserving of resources.	Inherent dignity, dependent on whether philosophy sees dignity to be dependent on behaviour. Deficit achievement dignity (i.e. undignified).
<i>Victim</i>	Their homelessness is structurally caused or resulting from poor life circumstances out of their control.	Some capital and access to resources, however restricted. Seen as deserving of resources.	Inherent dignity, but restrictions to gaining achievement dignity.
<i>Survivor-thriver</i>	<i>Dominant discourse:</i> due to something inherent in them and/or hard work they have exited homelessness and gained status. <i>Alternative discourse:</i> they have been given the conditions to use their capabilities to raise their status.	Ability to accumulate capital based on neoliberal stories of success. Have gained own tools and resources to participate in dominant fields.	Inherent and achievement dignity.

Informal support was found to provide emotional support and sometimes practical support to move a person away from the perpetrator position. It largely frames women experiencing homelessness as victims which in some circumstances sees them lacking capacity to raise their status. Bretherton and Pleace (2021) argue that the victim position removes women's agency, seeing them as support needs without

acknowledging their strengths and abilities. Parsell (2011) sees the receipt of charity donations to promote meek, passive responses from people experiencing homelessness, whereas when they are paying customers in a café, with the associated status, they appear confident and empowered. Hoffman and Coffey (2008) find paying for, or exchanging work for, food in a café to benefit people experiencing homelessness' dignity. This highlights how informal support, which is defined as having no expectation for an exchange, can limit achievement dignity.

Some supporters talked of the women as having the capacity to move towards the survivor-thriver position and encouraged this (without there being an expectation of reciprocation or exchange). If informal support can give women a more dignified narrative to their homelessness, the women's increased sense of dignity can improve capacity to change their circumstances and exit homelessness (Fleary et al., 2019; Miller & Keys, 2001). Other women talked of their own capacities to raise their status, independent of support. This was particularly true of Reina who spoke of having the power to make changes to the institutions she felt wronged by: "I aint going away until I get change in systems" (Reina).

These three positions all align with neoliberal capitalist principles. The survivor-thriver position is gained through societal contribution, a finding which agrees with existing literature seeing positive contribution and purpose to increase people's societal worth and self-worth (Boydell et al., 2000). Whereas the perpetrator position sees people to make little consumer contribution to society, making them a threat to society's wellbeing (Pascale, 2005).

Contributing through reciprocation for support was a way of moving towards the more empowered survivor-thriver position frequently used by women in this study. Findings support existing literature which document strategies often employed by people experiencing homelessness to maintain positive views of themselves (Farrington & Robinson, 1999; Osborne 2002). They are seen as exercising agency to negotiate their identity and position (Casey et al., 2008). Perry (2013) presents examples of people experiencing homelessness providing services for money on the streets instead of begging, for example writing poems. The same kind of strategy was seen in Kelly's actions, raising public awareness of a missing man whilst begging. She was able to develop a more positive identity around this role (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Perry,

2013). Holly spoke about her past job and her future aspirations to help others in society. Similar examples are presented by Boydell et al. (2000) who argue that this allowed people to connect with a more dignified sense-of-self where they are supporting rather than being supported.

Women's capital affected their likelihood of falling into each position. There was evidence that women with more cultural capital were less likely to attribute their homelessness to poor decisions. They saw themselves as having more agency and autonomy to change their circumstances, which may have aided their dignity and helped them to exit homelessness quicker.

The literature on gender and homelessness discusses societal discourses which place women in both perpetrator and victim positions. Many emphasise women's greater vulnerability to harm from others whilst homeless (Huey & Berndt, 2008; Jasinski et al., 2010). Passaro (1996) argues that if a woman's homelessness means she is vulnerable and dependent on society for resources, then this does not challenge social norms. By meeting social norms, women will be framed as vulnerable victims rather than perpetrators on society's resources. Huey and Berndt (2008) write on women experiencing homelessness using feminine behaviour to attract sympathy and lenience, and avoid being put in perpetrator positions by others including the police. This study found evidence that if women performed unfeminine behaviour, they would be more likely than men to be framed as perpetrators. Anger and aggression can be seen as more troublesome when performed by women (Ussher, 2011).

Alternatively, Golden (1992) argues that the rare visibility of women experiencing homelessness makes them harder to define and consequently she sees them as feared by society, comparing their projected image to that of a witch. There is an array of literature discussing how fear towards those experiencing homelessness results in them becoming spatially and structurally marginalised from dominant society and therefore distanced from resources and opportunities (Ley, 2012; Sibley, 1995; Cloke et al., 2008). This in the above table is discussed as capital. Kelly in this study was visibly homeless. It was observed how many chose to avoid her in public, even when she directly addressed them. Sometimes when Kelly and I were together, members of the public would interact with me but not Kelly. This could have been based on a fear of

Kelly, potentially a fear of contamination (Ahmed, 2014), putting Kelly into the perpetrator position.

Theory on capital, societal discourse and dignity were innovatively combined to illustrate the impact of women's support choices on their felt-dignity. This brought a unique understanding to dignity, a crucial but under-researched concept in relation to homelessness.

## **8.2 Understanding dignity in this study's context**

Dignity from the start of this research has been seen as an ambiguous, undefinable, yet a commonly used and important concept. What gives someone dignity is contextual, subjective to the moral codes of a culture. It is both felt within us and projected onto us by others.

This thesis' theoretical framework discussed how dignity, when simplified, evolved into two connected but quite different concepts, inherent and achievement dignity. Inherent dignity is an internalised quality, universal to all humans. Achievement dignity conversely is gained and lost based on someone's behaviour, affecting their societal status. These two concepts were also represented in existing sociological/psychological research literature on homelessness and dignity (see Section 2.5), and in this study's research findings (see Chapter 7).

In existing homelessness literature, dignity was seen to be both a self and externally perceived sense of a person's worth, affected by power hierarchies in society and homelessness services, by a person's privacy, control over their life, and the resources made available or restricted from them. Dignity could be gained from independence and being treated as an individual with value.

Similar themes emerged in the accounts of women with experiences of homelessness participating in this study. They often related having dignity with a positive sense-of-self. Viewed through the lens of the theoretical framework, the women's narratives showed feelings of dignity to align with whether they saw themselves to be following their internal moral values, which suggests that they saw dignity to be affected by their

actions. Their narratives also connected their dignity with how they were treated by others/society. Findings showed that negative disconnected interactions, poor quality service conditions, restricted resources, and poor opportunities to raise societal status could impact how a woman saw her own worth. These could be seen as violations to women's inherent dignity (and were often expressed as injustices in the women's narratives), and a reflection of their restricted achievement dignity.

Dignity was shown to be affected by, but not determined by, how a woman was treated. Dignity was discussed by the women as an internal felt state which they managed through the interactions that they chose/chose not to have (for example whether they approached support services), their associations, how they externally presented themselves, and how they governed their identity.

In summary, for a woman to feel like they had dignity was to positively identify themselves as an individual of value, of moral worth, through their inherent status as a human and/or through their societal contribution.

### **8.3 Summary of contribution to knowledge**

The gendered nature of women's homelessness and their non-engagement in services has been of recent interest in the literature. This PhD contributes to the growing (but still disproportionately small) body of literature on women's homelessness. Many of the findings concur with the evidence-base as to why women may be less likely to use services. This research both added to this understanding and took it further to explore how they were fulfilling their daily needs using innovative theoretical perspectives and methodologies. The contribution to knowledge this research makes has been implicit in the discussion of key findings already presented, however it is summarised below, alongside contributions to methodological development:

**The research constructed a unique understanding of informal support in the context of women's experiences of homelessness. This included:**

- **Developing a conceptualisation of informal support using the accounts of women with experiences of homelessness and informal supporters.** The PhD

developed a definition for informal support in relation to homelessness. This definition gave a more nuanced account of the term than how it had been used in existing literature. It saw informality of support to exist on multiple scales which considered the quality, context, individualisation and motivations behind the support, as opposed to categorising support solely based on the context it was coming from, for example friends or professionals. This conceptualisation has the potential to inform future research on women's support choices.

- **Understanding the motivations of the support giver is key to the nature of the support, and consequently its impact on dignity.** This PhD advanced existing research on women's homelessness to research with those informally supporting them. These perspectives to my knowledge have not previously been documented in research in this context but were of great value. The accounts captured their motivations for offering support and by understanding their motivations, contribute a better understanding of the qualities of the support given. For example, a support motivation of genuine care and respect can make the support receiver feel of worth. In addition, the PhD observed staff at an organisation which gave unique insight into the informal elements of their support-giving, highlighting how informal support can exist in organisational settings.

**The research made theoretical contributions to the field of dignity. These included:**

- **Developing a new theoretical framework, bringing together three areas of theory in an innovative way to view women's experiences.** Theory on non-economic capital and societal discourse was used to construct an understanding of dignity relevant to gendered homelessness. This brought a new perspective to the field but with the well-researched base of literature which exists on capital and discourse.
- **It used dignity as a theoretical lens which was underexplored in homelessness research yet insightful.** It considered women's support decisions in terms of



dignity, when existing literature largely uses stigma as a theoretical framework. Using the concept of dignity encompassed both the impact of external judgements as well as women's self-judgements against their internal moral codes. To have dignity could be viewed as a motivator to counter stigma and improve their situation. Dignity could be gained or lost based on the quality of support interactions, affecting women's choice whether to use that support, and their agency over their situation.

**The theoretical framework provided unique insight into factors affecting women's support choices whilst homeless. This included:**

- **Giving an understanding of how women's access to capital in dominant fields affected their support choices, experiences and consequently their dignity and sense-of-self.** The literature had not looked in-depth at how women's capital in dominant fields affected their experiences of homelessness. The diversity in this study's participants allowed for an exploration of capital theory in relation to women's homelessness. The study proposed why capital (economic and non-economic) could account for differences in their experiences, including the impact on their dignity. It was able to contribute to understanding of capital in relation to the field of homelessness.
- **Demonstrating the impact of societal discourse on women's support choices in a way which went beyond that of existing literature.** Recent literature found that women are not using services based on fear of the consequences and shame produced by societal discourse. This PhD made further advances, looking at the lesser addressed area of how women are supporting themselves away from services.
- **Insights on women's support choices often being a result of dignity maintenance strategies.** Existing literature on how alternative moral codes and value systems to those in dominant fields could work to form a more dignified self-view, mainly looked at working-class communities developing localised value systems (McKenzie, 2015; Skeggs, 2011; 2004). This PhD saw this as less

relevant to homelessness which it suggested was due to its more isolating nature. New insight contributed from this study proposed that women's dignity can in part be maintained through positive support interactions. This provides an explanation for their support choices and consequently their geographies when homeless.

- **Developing a new model which innovatively combined societal discourse and capital theory to show how women experiencing homelessness can be positioned in society with impactful consequences for their dignity.** This model drew together the study's findings to show how women experiencing homelessness can be constructed as perpetrators, victims or survivor-thrivers. How they are positioned is of importance to their experiences of homelessness as it effects the support options available to them, their access to capital, and their felt-dignity.

**The study made methodological contributions, designing methods which learnt from professional ethical and best practice and including participants whose homelessness experiences were less likely to be captured in existing research:**

- **It used diverse and responsive avenues of participant recruitment to capture a wide range of women's homelessness experiences.** Much existing research recruits participants through homelessness services, despite it being regularly noted in the literature that women's homelessness is often hidden from services. This PhD used multiple routes to reach participants, some of whom had had little or no interactions with homelessness services and would not usually participate in research on homelessness. This participant recruitment led to interesting observations on identity with some of the women having not adopted a homeless identity or associated themselves with homelessness. It highlighted how capital effects women's experiences of homelessness. Researching with women who were considered to have capital on becoming homeless was under-researched, particularly when looking at cultural capital. This led to important insight about how identity influences support choices,

and how embodied capital in dominant fields affects women's opportunities to resolve their homelessness.

Participant recruitment was also responsive, following insights gained from the data. For example, when it became apparent in conversations with workers that ethnic communities local to them networked themselves as informal supporters, avenues to document this were explored. As a result, less visible geographies and experiences of women's homelessness were captured, which had rarely been documented in existing research. This gave important insight into how some women experiencing homelessness fulfil their daily needs if not using services.

- **The study combined recent professional support approaches and therapeutic knowledge to create methods which advanced qualitative research practices in the academic field.** The method and methodology in this study was informed by recent advances in support and therapeutic practice based on my own professional background as a support worker and therapist, as well as the culture of the service where the research observation took place. This included trauma-informed and person-centred approaches. Knowledge from these, alongside research on dignity philosophy, came together to create a dignity-centred methodology. This type of methodology was of importance when researching dignity as a central concept but can be applied to all qualitative studies on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations.

## 8.4 Implications for policy and practice

This PhD's findings give support for a number of practices which make accessing support whilst homeless more dignified. These largely apply to the way support services operate. However, it is acknowledged that a societal climate of scarce resources and poor charity/welfare state funding can affect the ability of support services to implement practices discussed below (Tyler, 2013; Watson et al., 2019). For

greater changes to be made to women's experiences when homeless, and their susceptibility to homelessness in the first place, we need to see a move away from neoliberal and patriarchal ideologies, changing how some dominant parts of society view women and homelessness with consequences for funding and resource allocation.

Some implications of the findings discussed below challenge the ways of working that I had initially been trained in when beginning employment in homelessness services over a decade ago, most prominently around strict professional boundaries. Strict professional boundaries were/are seen understandably as a way to protect the safety of workers and service users. However, this PhD highlighted examples of where increased flexibility in professional boundaries and service delivery created more dignified service cultures. These have informed the recommendations for practice below.

#### ***8.4.1 Services: ways of working which encourage dignity***

The findings of this PhD highlight the following practices as ways to increase women's dignity whilst using services:

**The importance of viewing women using the service as capable agents** (with the acknowledgement that there are times where severe poor mental health removes some capacity).

Examples of how this could be implemented:

- Giving access to resources in service spaces for women to manage themselves, for example hot drink making facilities.
- Encouraging/facilitating a culture where the women who wish to, take contributing roles within the service, such as in service running and decision-making. In doing so, this may provide opportunities for women to use and develop their skills.

- Using a trauma-informed approach where women are seen as survivors, rather than victims of their trauma, with the aim of reducing their passivity in support systems.
- Facilitating women to have as much control over their case as possible and to make their own decisions if they wish to (unless mental health or substance misuse removes their capacity to do so). Support women to use/develop their knowledge and internal resources to navigate support systems and independence.

### **The importance of human connection between workers and women experiencing homelessness**

“For people to really move forward with their lives, they need to feel valued, they need to feel human, loved... someone needs to hug them at some point” (Sam, worker).

Positive, connected relationships with workers were seen to make women participating in this study feel like people of value, provide emotional resources and make them more likely to use the service. In addition, through these connected relationships, a woman experiencing homelessness is likely to be viewed as a person of value by workers (rather than a number or stereotype), and consequently the women’s personal boundaries and privacy respected when using the service.

The study’s findings suggest the following ways of developing more connected cultures in services:

- Allowing for human connection in professional relationships. There were examples in the research where workers’ professional boundaries allowed for a personal sense of care and some form of two-way relationship between the worker and service user, which proved beneficial to the women. This worked to reduce power differentials and increase trust and understanding. In these examples, workers were not freely disclosing their personal details and the support relationship still focused on the women being supported. However, the workers were showing aspects of their personalities and speaking about elements of their lives where appropriate. Workers seemed to be showing a real

personal sense of care towards the women being supported. In this way, the support relationships were considered human-to-human, rather than organisation-to-human.

- Encouraging workers' high attunement (awareness and response) to the emotions and needs of the women they are supporting. Attunement is a human rather than system response to a woman in need of support, important for connection and individualised, dignified care in human relationships. Worker training in this way of working could be beneficial.
- "Respond[ing] to the person that they are, not the situation they are in" (Tina, worker), with their specific identities and needs. Advocate for person-centred support, flexible to the individual.
- Reduce generic service-level targets and instead focus on an individual's unique indicators of progress.
- For drop-in services, for example daycentres, challenging organisation policy which enforces the taking of personal details (doing an assessment) as a pre-requisite to accessing the service. This practice was seen to violate privacy and personal boundaries. Instead, these services could take personal details only when necessary (e.g. to assist in accessing statutory services or where there is high risk) and when trust has been built.

### **The importance of bridging services**

Tara, a worker in this study, talked of how when there are face-to-face interactions between supporter and supported, it can be harder to restrict resources from those in need. Formality, rigidity and facelessness in some services, for example the council's housing department, may be a response to the scarcity of resources they have to allocate. For those women experiencing homelessness who disengage from these formal services because of negative experiences using them, bridging services could provide essential support.

This PhD's findings support the continued funding of bridging services, which are generally less formal charity/community run support organisations. They help service

users navigate formal services. Bridging services can provide more dignified cultures where trusting relationships with workers are built in the women's own time. Women can apply for the formal services' resources through and with the support of workers in the bridging services.

Bridging services were seen in this study to bring social capital and vicarious symbolic capital, where workers' skills, knowledge and professional networks bring resources and additional help. These workers help 'translate' formal support systems and can work more flexibility than in formal services. For women experiencing homelessness, there was a high distrust of statutory services based on past experiences and fears. Trust may be able to be built with workers in less formal services to help access statutory support.

### **The importance of gender-informed support**

Examples of how this could be implemented are outlined below:

- Some participants spoke of the importance of women-only services in terms of safety, especially accommodation services. Conflict with other women in services was spoken about, but less frequently than risks from men. A number of participants also considered a services' close proximity to men's hostels as a deterrent to accessing that service. Outreach work, meeting the women where they are, away from services and the risks they pose, was seen by workers to result in increased engagement with support.
- Gender-informed support in mixed-sex services was highlighted as an area for development. This includes worker training on domestic abuse/coercive control, which participants still felt was misunderstood by some services, and women having the option to speak with female workers when they request it. It had been noted that women did not always feel comfortable talking to male workers about domestic abuse.
- The importance of hygiene to the women was discussed in the study. In services offering free period products, spaces to wash and hygiene

products made for women (rather than men's products), were all seen as beneficial to women's dignity.

**Additional ways to create a dignified service culture** (some factors below cannot always be easily controlled by services).

This PhD's findings also highlight the following:

- The importance of having a choice of resources given in services, for example hygiene products, clothes and food.
- The importance of consistency in workers that the women speak to. Continuity in relationships was seen to bring understanding and trust.
- The importance of lived experience workers. Lived experience was seen to give value to a worker's role and help the supported feel understood.
- The importance of having informal, less clinical spaces within services. In this study there was an example where workers' 'desks' were located in a café setting. This can reduce barriers to support and create more equality in support relationships.
- The importance of a service starting from the position of a mother experiencing homelessness being in need of support to provide for her children, rather than a source of risk to her children (whilst following safeguarding procedures when necessary).

#### ***8.4.2 Public spaces and beyond services: ways to encourage dignity***

This PhD's findings also provide evidence in support of the following:

- Free period products available in public spaces.
- The increase of accessible public toilets.
- Training workers in public spaces on signposting people experiencing homelessness to support, including the location of public services with available hygiene resources, and women's services.



- Improving access to public Wi-Fi/computers for people experiencing homelessness. The internet was seen as a source of less stigmatising support including gifting webpages, community Facebook pages, as well as being required for statutory services' processes.
- Providing platforms for women's voices in the media about their experiences of homelessness, showing their varied stories and broader identities rather than the negative stereotypes usually portrayed. In addition, promoting alternative discourse on women experiencing homelessness, asylum seekers, and other groups, which does not frame them as drains to society's resources, rather people who are contributing or want to contribute to society. An existing example of this is Shelter and HSBC UK's 'Vicious Circle' campaign video (Wunderman Thompson, 2021), advertising 'No Fixed Address' bank accounts whilst raising awareness of the structural barriers to exiting homelessness. Broadcast on television, the video depicts a woman experiencing homelessness trying to gain employment (a form of societal contribution) in order to resolve her homelessness, but without an address she cannot get a bank account needed for employment.

## 8.5 Limitations/points of discussion

### 8.5.1 Women's 'choices'

During this thesis, I have used the term women's support 'choices'. This is potentially problematic when also discussing how neoliberal discourse in society works to marginalise those experiencing homelessness by framing their homelessness as the result of their bad choices. By using the term support 'choices', it could also be seen to suggest that the women have a large degree of agency over their trajectory, which both this study's findings and the existing body of literature challenge.

Of relevance to this study's focus, to have dignity in a neoliberal society involves having agency, autonomy and to act according to your own moral will. To be seen as passive to your circumstances was undignifying (Sayer, 2011). For this reason, and to align with the dominant value of self-responsibility, Parsell and Parsell (2012) find homelessness could also be framed by some experiencing it as a personal choice. The individuals' narratives of choice are seen to have purpose in highlighting their "normality" as autonomous beings rather than their deficiencies in being "made homeless by others" (p. 429). Williamson and Brunjes (2024, p.1) alternatively write "for the many people experiencing homelessness and the professionals who work with them, a choice narrative is unrecognisable". It does not acknowledge the systemic discrimination and poor life circumstances which shape the opportunities available to choose from (Hess, 2023). Government policy and funding cuts, service failings, poverty and complex trauma all affect and limit choice (Williamson & Brunjes, 2024). Women are further constrained by "a disadvantageous patriarchal system" (Hess, 2023, p.117). Wider society can view women experiencing homelessness as having agency, however their 'choices' and their ability to exercise agency are seen in this PhD to be affected by their access to capital and the implications of dominant societal discourse on its structures and institutions. The women were making reasoned 'choices' based on the constraints they were subject to (Mayock et al., 2015).

The women's perceived opportunities may be influenced by addiction or limited to between undesirable options (Parsell & Parsell, 2012). Reina, for example, viewed her choices to be between being in an abusive relationship or staying in temporary accommodation which made her feel undeserving, disrespected and morally-wrong. Ally felt she had to choose between approaching support services or maintaining custody of her child.

Despite this awareness, the term 'choice' has still been used in this thesis, as a better suited word could not be found. However, it has been used with recognition of its shortcomings. The heavy constraints on women's choices and restrictions to their autonomy have been extensively discussed throughout.

### ***8.5.2 The changing landscape of gender***

When this PhD research was awarded funding, I thought that by its completion over four years later, I might be viewing both sex and gender differently. I felt that using the term ‘woman’ and talking of experiences based on this categorisation might be regressive. Although this might seem naive, this was based on rapid cultural change in how many conceptualised gender and their own gender identity. In academic literature it is widely accepted that gender categories are socially constructed, that gendered characteristics exist on scales, are not pinned to sex and vary between cultures (Green, 2004; Connell & Pearse, 2015; Butler, 1990). There has been a move away from gender binary. Simultaneously the number of gender categorisations were expanding, as well as people’s gender being seen as individually defined and uncategorisable. An example of this reflected in mainstream society is seen in the most recent census, where respondents were asked for the first time whether their sex registered at birth matched their gender identity and if not, what term best described their gender identity (ONS, 2023). Before undertaking fieldwork, I chose for my participant inclusion criteria to be self-identifying women (regardless of sex at birth) and began research aiming to be open to making further changes if appropriate.

In addition to this, women were seen by many to have made advances towards equality in the UK, which suggests gender impacts women’s experiences of homelessness less than documented in older research literature. Throughout the fieldwork, as in other recent research (Johnsen & Blenkinsopp, 2024; Hess, 2023; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021), it was clear that gender was still greatly influential on women’s experiences of homelessness. It almost felt that when marginalised from society, the protections that many women have gained in mainstream society disappeared, as well as their voice to call out their treatment. Physical strength and traditional gender role differences became more prominent, seeing women as more vulnerable.

Whilst spending time in organisations and with participants, it was apparent that for many, to be defined as women was important to them. It was an important part of how they understood themselves in their situation, their identity, and they felt their femininity as part of their womanhood made them desirable. In one organisation, a

worker pointed out that to put on weight was seen as something desired by the women, as a curvy figure was a positive reflection of someone's femininity. To be recognised as a woman also acknowledged their experiences, hardships and vulnerabilities which came with this categorisation. It therefore still feels appropriate at the point of writing to distinguish homelessness experience based on the gender category of woman.

None of the women who chose to participate in this study were transgender. However some workers participating supported transgender women as well as cis women and suggested that in some respects, transgender women had additional vulnerabilities when homeless. The literature similarly reported transgender people experiencing increased discrimination and victimisation when homeless (Yu, 2010; McCarthy & Parr, 2022). This further marginalisation could be based on a dissonance between their perceived sex and gender (Green, 2004; Green et al., 2001). Due to no women with these experiences participating, despite being an important issue, it is not discussed further in this study. The experiences of transgender women when homeless would be a valuable area of future study.

### ***8.5.3 Methodological limitations***

This study makes limited claims to generalisability of the data due to its small number of participants. Instead, the study looked in-depth at women's experiences, exploring their individual realities. At the beginning of this research it was thought that the participants would be more homogeneous in terms of their demographics. As the research progressed the participants' variation in capital and cultural background increased, which brought great strengths due to a greater range of experience being captured. The greater heterogeneity in experience could also give an argument for increasing the sample size (Baker & Edwards, 2012), however awareness of this heterogeneity happened later in the fieldwork and so practically a drastic increase in sample size was not possible.

The methodology of this research study was that women participating would decide what their participation would involve from a number of options (observation,

interviews and creative methods), whether they were able to meet multiple times and whether any research encounters would be audio-recorded. Although the aim was to make women's participation more comfortable and on their terms, there were drawbacks. It meant there were large variations in the quantity of material contributed by each woman, as some had taken part on multiple occasions. For those who consented to be audio-recorded, their direct voices and detailed examples were likely to be given more space in the findings chapters. It was probable that many women chose to be interviewed as this was the most known and 'safe' method to them. One woman's participation however was through observational methods, spending time with her in public spaces over a number of research encounters. This method proved very insightful when exploring dignity as it observed the woman's interactions with others, and it could have been beneficial to have used this method with more women.

A number of participants were no longer homeless, speaking of their previous experiences. To include women in this situation allowed the study to capture the experiences of more women who had no or limited engagement with services. Being distanced from their homelessness, there had been time to reflect on and analyse their experiences. Contrastingly some of the women participating who were currently homeless seemed all-consumed by their day-to-day that reflection on their situation seemed difficult. However, where there had been some distance from homelessness, there could be issues with recall in the women's accounts (McGrath et al., 2023).

## **8.6 Suggestions for future research**

As suggested above, future research could further expand on the study's finding that women's capital greatly influences their experiences of homelessness. In particular, an area of interest was how cultural capital affects women's confidence in their abilities to negotiate homelessness and resolve their situation. Women may feel they have less autonomy over their pathway if others view them not to due to their low capital and consequential status. This was suggested in this study's findings, however by speaking with more women with experiences of homelessness with varying cultural capital, this could be further explored with firmer conclusions made.

There were other areas of interest arising during the fieldwork where there was not the scope to address them in detail or they were not within the PhD's remit. One area was that of informal supporters. As already mentioned, the accounts of informal supporters collected for this study provided an original contribution to knowledge, however most of this PhD centred the accounts of women with experiences of homelessness based on the research's intention of exploring their dignity. The interviews with informal supporters contained such rich and interesting content which could benefit from further exploration, in addition to collecting a larger sample to observe reoccurring themes. One element of this would be to look at their motivations for supporting further, and how these motivations have been formed. This could bring further understanding to cultural motivations and discourses towards giving, which affect women's choices when homeless. Issues such as community cohesion and lower levels of trust towards strangers have already been highlighted in this study's data by informal supporters.

Recently, there has been increased research interest in the impact of Acquired Brain Injuries (ABI) on people experiencing homelessness (Westminster Homeless Health Coordination Project [WHHCP], 2024). ABIs are thought to be particularly prevalent amongst women experiencing homelessness as it has large associations with domestic violence. One of its affects is on people's cognitive functioning, including planning, problem-solving and communication (WHHCP, 2024), and consequently it could be impactful when considering women's decision-making whilst homeless. It has not already been considered as part of this PhD as little is currently known about it, but as this field develops this is an important area for further exploration in relation to this PhD's topic.

## **8.7 Final reflections**

By researching the experiences of women, some invisible to homelessness services, this PhD shows that homelessness does not discriminate and can be traumatic for all. However, how women are viewed and treated when experiencing homelessness is discriminatory and bias to their gender, societal status and identity. Dignity has been a

powerful tool in understanding their experiences and support 'choices' when homeless, encompassing women's external treatment and internal psychological state. Experiences of homelessness can bring an "erosion of self" and be "dignity-stripping" (Frances), where you "don't believe you deserve anything" (Ally). Whilst recognising structural constraints, approaches to homelessness support focused on honouring women's dignity have the potential to support women to use their sense of dignity as a resource for moving towards their preferred identity and living circumstances.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant information sheet for women with experiences of homelessness

Note: variations existed, for example for written interviews.

### Exploring the role of informal support in homeless women's sense of dignity

#### Participant Information Sheet

##### Invitation and Purpose

We are inviting you to take part in a research study about how women experiencing homelessness are supporting themselves when they are not accessing, or have limited contact with, homeless support services. The study is being conducted as part of a PhD with The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

You have been approached about this study because you are not living in stable accommodation and you self-identify as a woman. You do not need to be living on the street to take part. You may be staying somewhere where you do not have the right to occupy, which is unsuitable housing, or which is not permanent accommodation for example a hostel or night shelter.

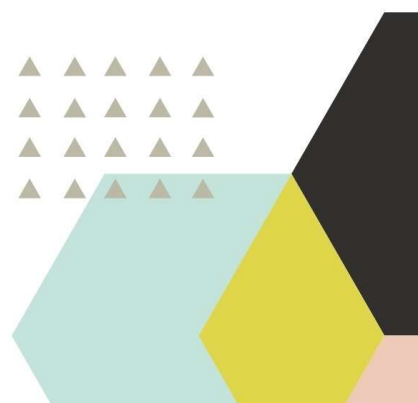
Please read the following information carefully before you decide whether to take part.

##### What would taking part involve?

- By taking part you would be allowing the researcher to accompany you in your day-to-day life to see how and where you fulfil your daily needs, for example eating, washing, resting and socialising. This could be for a single day or span over a longer period depending on your preferences. At times, the researcher would like to ask you questions about your support choices and how these affect and are influenced by your feelings of dignity. With your consent your answers may be recorded on an audio device as this allows us to accurately reflect what you said.
- If more appropriate to your circumstances however, your involvement in the research could be participation in one-to-one informal interviews with the researcher. These would take place face-to-face with parts audio recorded with your permission.
- There will be opportunities to use photography and draw maps as part of the research, if this was something you would like to do.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. If you would prefer not to take part, you do not have to give any reason.
- During the research you will not be under any pressure to go anywhere you do not want to go or answer any questions that you prefer not to discuss. You will be able to pause your involvement with or withdraw from the research at any point.
- You will receive a £20 high-street shopping voucher to thank you for your time. You will still receive the voucher even if you choose to withdraw from the research.

##### Your confidentiality and data in the research

- Your name, and the names of others or identifiable places will be changed in any transcribed (written out) audio recordings, research notes or other written materials.
- If you take any photographs as part of the research study, identifiable features such as faces will be blurred.
- Confidentiality will only be broken in circumstances where the researcher is concerned that there is a risk of harm to you or someone else. In this instance the researcher will seek guidance from the University Research Ethics Committee.



- Sheffield Hallam University will be responsible for all the data during the study and when it is over. Personal data will be kept securely in a password protected folder on Sheffield Hallam University's secure servers. Any paper copies will be kept in a locked drawer.
- If you withdraw from the study, your data will be used up until the point your participation ends unless you request for the data to be removed. You can request for your data to be removed by contacting Becky Greenwood using the contact details below within 14 days of your last research meeting.
- Data from this study may be archived by Sheffield Hallam University and the UK Data Service for up to 10 years after the study has finished and may be available to the public but only if it can be sufficiently anonymised to protect your identity. The only personal data we keep will be your signed consent form. We have to keep this for 10 years from the end of the project so we will keep it separately in a secure file for this length of time.

#### **How will your data be used?**

The data from your participation would be reported in a written thesis as part of a PhD. Following this, the research findings could be presented at various conferences, developed into a published paper or used in the researcher's future research. Once the study has been completed, the researcher would be happy to discuss the findings with you if requested.

#### **Legal Basis for Research Studies**

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data (the information you have provided) for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at:

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notice/privacy-notice-for-research>

All University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Further information can be found at: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice>

#### **Who can I contact if I have any questions or concerns about the study?**

Becky Greenwood, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University.

[Redacted contact information]

Lindsey McCarthy, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University.

[Redacted contact information]

#### **You should contact the Data Protection Officer if:**

- you have a query about how your data is used by the University
- you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately)
- you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data

[DPO@shu.ac.uk](mailto:DPO@shu.ac.uk)

#### **You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Dr Mayur Ranchordas) if:**

- you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated

[ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk](mailto:ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk)

Postal address: Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WB.

Telephone: [Redacted]

## Appendix B: Participant information sheet for supporter

Note: variations existed, for example for the organisation observation

### Exploring the role of informal support in homeless women's sense of dignity

#### Participant Information Sheet

##### Invitation and Purpose

We are inviting you to take part in a research study about how women experiencing homelessness are supporting themselves when they are not accessing, or have limited contact with, homeless support services. The study is being conducted as part of a PhD with The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

You have been approached about this study because you are working in a service which could provide support to a woman experiencing homelessness.

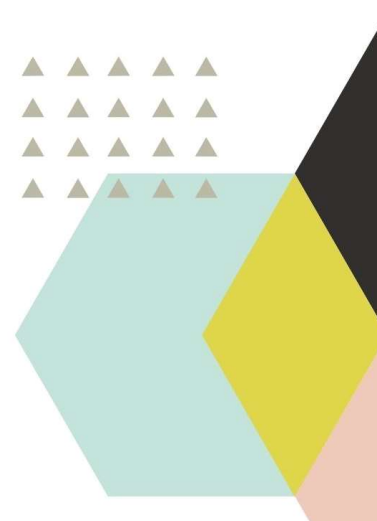
Please read the following information carefully before you decide whether to take part.

##### What would taking part involve?

- Your involvement in the research would be participation in a one-to-one interview. This would take place on a single occasion face-to-face, online or by phone, lasting approximately an hour. You would be asked about your experiences and thoughts on the use/non-use of your service by women experiencing homelessness. It would take the form of a discussion with the researcher asking you questions as a guide. With your consent your interview would be recorded on an audio device as this allows us to accurately reflect what you said.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. If you would prefer not to take part, you do not need to give any reason.
- During the research you will not be under any pressure to answer any questions that you prefer not to discuss. You will be able to pause your interview or withdraw from the research at any point.

##### Your confidentiality and data in the research

- The interview recording will be transcribed (written out), with any names or identifying information removed. Again identifying information and names will be pseudonymised in any research notes or other written materials.
- Confidentiality will only be broken in circumstances where the researcher is concerned that there is a risk of harm to you or someone else. In this instance the researcher will seek guidance from the University Research Ethics Committee.
- Sheffield Hallam University will be responsible for all the data during the study and when it is over. Personal data will be kept securely in a password protected folder on Sheffield Hallam University's secure servers. Any paper copies will be kept in a locked drawer.





- If after the interview you wish to withdraw your data, you will need to contact the researcher within 14 days of your interview.
- Data from this study may be archived by Sheffield Hallam University and the UK Data Service for up to 10 years after the study has finished and may be available to the public but only if it can be sufficiently anonymised to protect your identity. The only personal data we keep will be your signed consent form. We have to keep this for 10 years from the end of the project so we will keep it separately in a secure file for this length of time.

#### **How will your data be used?**

The data from your participation would be reported in a written thesis as part of a PhD. Following this, the research findings could be presented at various conferences, developed into a published paper or used in the researcher's future research. Once the study has been completed, the researcher would be happy to discuss the findings with you if requested.

#### **Legal Basis for Research Studies**

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data (the information you have provided) for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at:

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notice/privacy-notice-for-research>

All University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Further information can be found at: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice>

#### **Who can I contact if I have any questions or concerns about the study?**

Becky Greenwood, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University.

[Redacted contact information]

Lindsey McCarthy, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University.

[Redacted contact information]

#### **You should contact the Data Protection Officer if:**

- you have a query about how your data is used by the University
- you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately)
- you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data

[DPO@shu.ac.uk](mailto:DPO@shu.ac.uk)

#### **You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Dr Mayur Ranchordas) if:**

- you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated

[ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk](mailto:ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk)

Postal address: Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WB.

Telephone: [Redacted]

## Appendix C: Participant consent form for women with experiences of homelessness

Note: variations existed, for example for written interviews.

### Exploring the role of informal support in homeless women's sense of dignity: Consent Form

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies:

	Yes	No
1. I have read the information sheet for this study and/or had details of the study explained to me and understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason. If I change my mind about participating, I should contact Becky Greenwood [REDACTED]	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand that I will not be under any pressure to go to any places or institutions where I do not want to go or answer any questions that I prefer not to discuss.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that any photos taken with a film camera may be printed externally to Sheffield Hallam University.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I consent for interviews I do as part of this study to be audio recorded	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet. <i>Although descriptions of your day-to-day life, your comments/interview quotes, photos you take and maps you draw as part of this research may be included in reports, your name will not be used. We will make every attempt to ensure your anonymity. However, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed as it is possible that somebody may identify you through the specifics of your routines. We will ensure that any sensitive information or comments are fully anonymised.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised, to be used for any other outputs to emerge from this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I understand that the data from this study may be retained by Sheffield Hallam University and the UK data service for up to 10 years after the study has finished and may be available to the public (but only if it can be sufficiently anonymised to protect your identity).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I agree to take part in the research for the above study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant

Signature

Date

Name of researcher

Signature

Date

**If the researcher is taking verbal consent:** "I confirm that verbal consent has been recorded and that the consent form, information sheet and privacy notice have been read/explained verbally to the participant" (researcher signs below).

Name of researcher

Signature

Date

Researcher's contact details: Becky Greenwood, [REDACTED]

## Appendix D: Participant consent form for supporter

Note: variations existed, for example for the organisation observation



### Exploring the role of informal support in homeless women's sense of dignity: Interview Consent Form

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that apply:

- |   | YES                      | NO                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and/or have had details of the study explained to me.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet without giving a reason, or to decline to answer any particular questions without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet. Although comments and quotes from this interview may be included in reports, your name will not be used. We will make every attempt to ensure your anonymity. However, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed as it is possible that somebody may identify you through the specificities of your role. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I understand that the data from this study may be retained by Sheffield Hallam University and the UK data service for up to 10 years after the study has finished and may be available to the public (but only if it can be sufficiently anonymised to protect your identity).   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I consent for my interview to be audio recorded.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised, to be used for any other outputs to emerge from this research.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. I agree to take part in the research for the above study   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Name of participant

Signature

Date

.....

.....

.....

Name of researcher

Signature

Date

.....

.....

.....

**If the researcher is taking verbal consent:** "I confirm that verbal consent has been recorded and that the consent form, information sheet and privacy notice have been read/explained verbally to the participant" (researcher signs below).

Name of researcher

Signature

Date

.....

.....

.....

Researcher's contact details: Becky Greenwood, [REDACTED]

## **Appendix E: Example informal interview schedule for women experiencing homelessness**

### **Informal interview possible questions: women experiencing homelessness**

- Do you consider yourself to be homeless?
- What does the term dignity mean to you?
- What to you classes someone as homeless? Do you think of yourself as homeless?
- Do you use homeless support services? Why do you choose/not choose to use them? If you have used them, tell me about how you have found them? How have you felt when using them?
- What do you think of when I talk about informal ways of supporting yourself, away from homeless services?
- Do you see yourself as the same or different person to when you did have stable accommodation? Do you think other people (friends, family, workers, public) see you as the same or different?
- How do you see others seeing you in homeless services, in public spaces?
- What makes you feel good/bad about yourself from day-to-day at the moment?
- Why do you choose to use this space/facility over other options?
- What is important to you about going here?
- Who do you speak to from day-to-day?
- Do you spend time with others experiencing homelessness? Why/why not? Does this affect the places where you go in the city?
- Who do you choose to spend time with? Why?



## Appendix F: Example interview schedule for women with previous experiences of homelessness

Note: Interview schedules were there as a guide. Interviews took a responsive form.

**Overview-** Please can you explain a little bit about your homelessness journey? What type of homelessness, reasons for homelessness, how long, main challenges etc.

### Individual experience:

- Did you consider yourself to be homeless at the time? What do you think classes someone as homeless?
- What sort of contact did you have with services? Did you use homelessness specific support services? Why did you choose/not choose to use them? If you did use them, tell me about how you found them? How did you feel when using them?
- What do you think of when I talk about informal ways of supporting yourself, away from homeless services?
- What forms of formal/informal support did you use when homeless? Why?
- What does the term dignity mean to you?
- Did you see yourself as the same or different person when you were homeless and when you are in stable accommodation? Do you think other people (friends, family, workers, public, services) saw you as the same or different?
- What made you feel good/bad about yourself from day-to-day when you were experiencing homelessness?

### Generalised Qs:

- Have you heard any other accounts of how else woman experiencing homelessness might support themselves?

*Prompt: Who helps them/ where do they go for their **practical** needs (food, sleep, washing, physical protection etc.)*

*Prompt: Who helps them/ where do they go for **psychological** needs? (socialising, mental health, feeling safe etc.)*

*Probe: **Why** do you think this is?*

- Why do you think many women choose not to use formal homelessness support services?
- This research is looking at how dignity can be affected by experiences of support. How do you perceive how a person's dignity can be affected by using a homelessness specific service, other types of support, by choosing to not use services?

### Draw support using mapping- Informal/formal support

- Experience of each support type? How did using each type of support make you feel?

## **Appendix G: Example of customised interview schedule, second research encounter with woman with previous experiences of homelessness.**

Note: Interview schedule based on reflections from initial research encounter.

### **Interview schedule**

- What does the term dignity mean to you?
- Do you see yourself as the same or different person when you were homeless and when you are in stable accommodation? Do you think other people (friends, family, workers, public) saw you as the same or different?
- What made you feel good/bad about yourself from day-to-day when you were experiencing homelessness?
- Did you spend time with others experiencing homelessness? Why/why not? Did this affect the places you went in the city?
- Who did you choose to spend time with? Why?
- Did you consider yourself to be homeless at the time? What do you think classes someone as homeless?

### **Specifics**

- Women at Foodbank/church. You said she made you feel dignified. Can you explain more?
- Went back to volunteer at the Foodbank and many other organisations. What was it that made you do this?
- When I reflected on our conversation, what it seemed to me that you were talking about was connection with others as what gave dignity? Would you say that I've interpreted this correctly? E.g. a smile with a stranger makes someone feel important.
- You also mentioned that you have more recently reflected that a lot of your past actions (and other people's choices) to not use services were driven by fear. Could you explain this more? DA related? Fear of not being believed? Fear of losing custody?
- You spoke about age, this 35+/40+ age group of women experiencing some form of homelessness who often do not engage with services. Why do you think this is?
- Learning self-compassion bringing self-respect. Can work on self to bring feelings of individual worth/dignity?
- Trust of services/ feeling trusted by others
- Being understood by services, e.g. council not understanding DA
- Condition of accommodation. Not providing for basic needs

### **Draw support using mapping- Informal/formal support**

- Experience of each support type? How did using each type of support make you feel?

## Appendix H: Written interview for women with experiences of homelessness

Note: These questions were emailed to the participant password-protected.

### Written interview questions

The research study is looking at women's experiences of not living in safe and secure accommodation. This could include staying with friends, at hostels, B&Bs, other forms of temporary accommodation etc. It looks at the different forms of support women have whilst not living in stable accommodation (or their non-use of support), and the effect of this on their feelings of dignity.

- Please could you tell me a bit about your period of being without stable accommodation? For example, where were you staying and what were the main challenges that you experienced?
- Did you receive any support from others during this period? If so, how were they supportive? *This could be support from organisations, friends and family, other people or places. It could be practical support (e.g. advice, washing, a place to store possessions) or emotional support.*
- Did you consider yourself to be homeless during this period? Why do you think you did/did not?
- What does the word 'dignity' mean to you?  
*There's no right answer here. Dignity can be quite an ambiguous term, so I'm looking for your personal meaning, what you think about when you hear that word.*
- How were your feelings of dignity affected by your experiences during this period?

## Appendix I: Example interview schedule for supporters

### Semi-structured interview schedule: workers in support services

- 1) What type of support does your work organisation offer to people experiencing homelessness?

*Prompt: For example housing, mental/physical health, training/employment, food?*

*Probe: Who would use the support service? Is it specifically for people experiencing homelessness or more general.*

- 2) Tell me about your specific role working in the service?

*Prompt: What contact and relationship do you have with service users?*

*Probe: What would a typical day at work involve?*

- 3) Are you aware of many women experiencing homelessness using this service?

*Probe 1: Why do you think they are/are not using the service?*

*Probe 2: What do you think attracts them/ deters them from using the service?*

- 4) Have you heard any other accounts of how else they might support themselves?

*Prompt: Who helps them/ where do they go for their **practical** needs (food, sleep, washing, physical protection etc.)*

*Prompt: Who helps them/ where do they go for **psychological** needs? (socialising, mental health, feeling safe etc.)*

*Probe: **Why** do you think this is?*

- 5) This research is looking at how dignity can be affected by experiences of support. How do you perceive a person's dignity to be affected by using your service/ by using other services/ by choosing to not use services?

## Appendix J: Research flyer for participant recruitment

### Participants needed for a research study on how women without stable accommodation support themselves

#### Does this describe your situation?:

- You are **not** living in stable accommodation (for example, you are staying in a hostel, B&B, night shelter, supported accommodation, with friends/family/acquaintances, squatting or rough sleeping)
- You are 18 years or older
- You self-identify as a woman.

**If so, would you like to take part in a research study about how you are supporting yourself on a daily basis?**

#### Participation involves:

- The researcher accompanying you in your day-to-day life to see how and where you fulfil your daily needs, for example eating, washing, resting and socialising. This could be for a single day or span over a longer period depending on your preferences.
- However if you prefer, your involvement in the research could be an informal interview where you will be asked questions about your previous use of support, feelings of dignity and how these are affected by the places and people you encounter.

The study is being conducted as part of a PhD with The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

**If you would like to take part or have any questions about the study, please contact Becky Greenwood,**

**[REDACTED]**  
**[REDACTED]**

**Sheffield Hallam University** | Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

