

# Exploring experiences of homelessness and housing precarity through a social capital lens

Qualitative interviews with people experiencing homelessness and  
housing precarity

Nadia Ayed

[n.ayed@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:n.ayed@qmul.ac.uk)

To explore experiences of homelessness and housing precarity through  
a social capital lens

# What is social capital?

- Contentious topic
- PhD focuses on what is **afforded** by certain social relationships and connections
- Conceptual review (Ayed et al., 2020) highlights that social capital in the context of homelessness, has been understood as:
  - Social relationships
  - Services
  - Support

# Why social capital?

- Relational lens
  - Humanises individuals
  - Shines light on 'pathways' of homelessness
    - Temporally important e.g. re-housing and building up connections
    - Home-making rather than shelter
- Provides a framework that facilitates exploration of both individual and structural factors

# Qualitative interviews

- March 2020 - Feb 2021
- Phone/video semi-structured interviews
- 30 individuals experiencing homelessness or housing exclusion
  - ETHOS typology
- Interview sections:
  - Journey of homelessness
  - Social relationships
  - Social support

# Analysis

- Thematic analysis
  - Social capital lens
  - Foucauldian power lens
- Thanks to second coder – Aydan Greatrick

# Participants

Male = 16

Female = 14

Mean age = 44.4 (SD=12)

**Table 1: Housing status at the point of interview (n=30)**

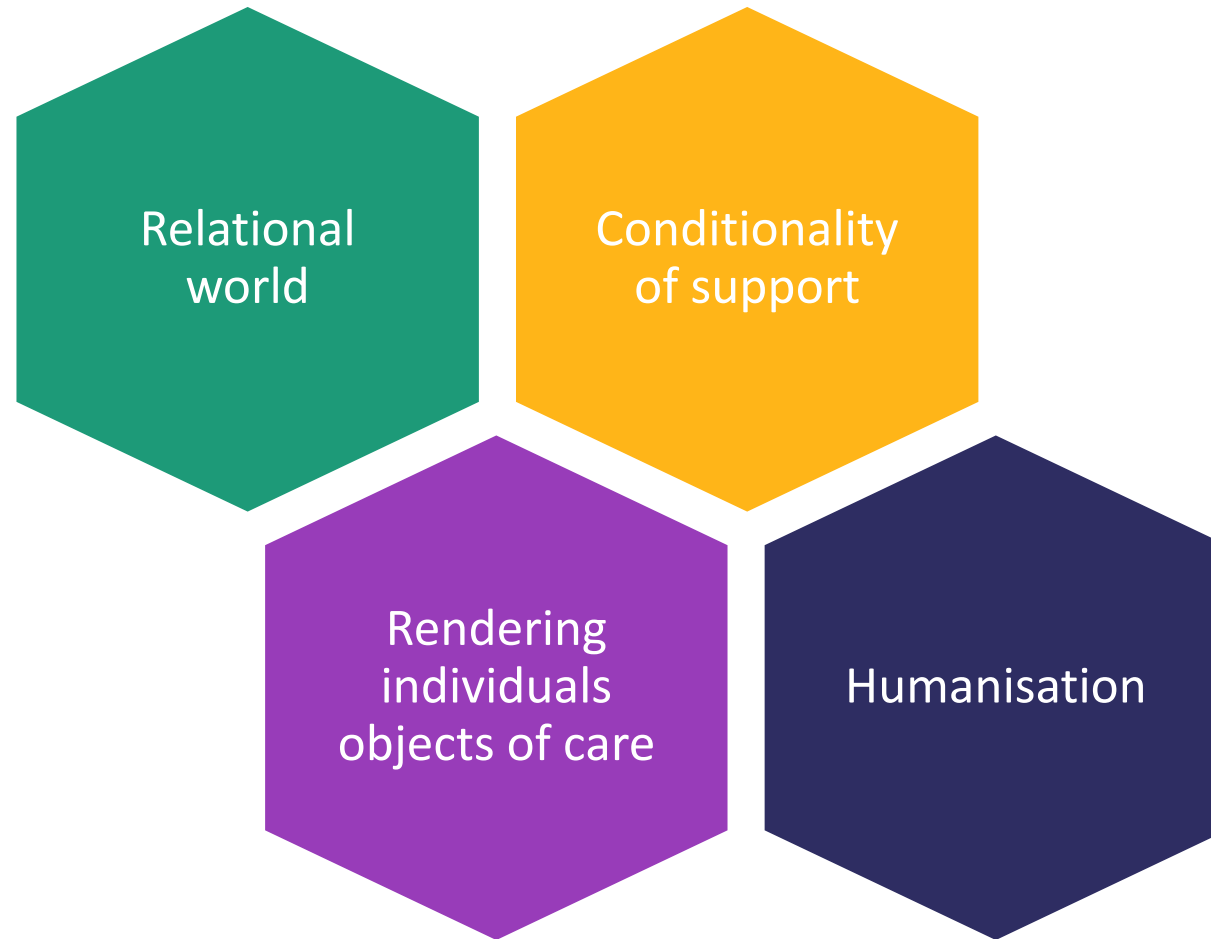
| Housing status                                  | Number of participants |
|---|------------------------|
| Hostel  | 9                      |
| Emergency hotel (Covid-19 response)             | 1                      |
| Private rental                                  | 2                      |
| Inadequate housing                              | 1                      |
| Supported accommodation for formerly homeless   | 1                      |
| Rental with family                              | 1                      |
| Women's refuge                                  | 4                      |
| Sofa surfing                                    | 3                      |
| Temporary accommodation                         | 2                      |
| Rehab (experience of homelessness and drug use) | 2                      |
| Women's supported accommodation                 | 1                      |
| Women's temporary accommodation                 | 2                      |
| Temporary accommodation (Covid-19 response)     | 1                      |



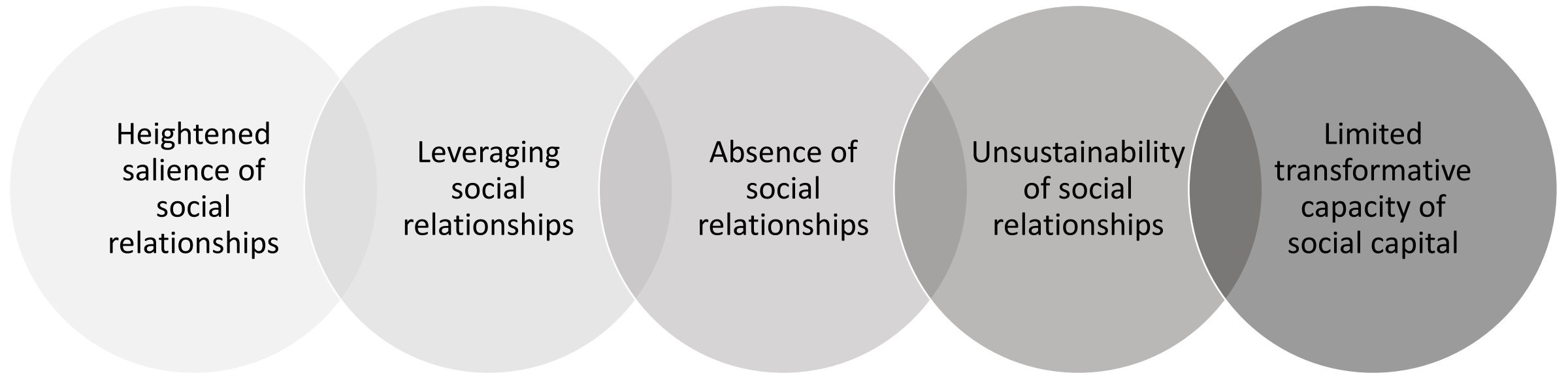
# Sensitive content

- Experiences can be distressing to hear about
- If you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to take a moment/leave the presentation
- I'm happy to discuss the content in further detail
- A heartfelt thank you to all participants who shared their experiences with such strength and courage, and who have consented for them to be disseminated for the research project
  - Pseudonyms – many chosen by participants

# Themes



# Relational world



# Heightened salience of social relationships

*“I’d be dead without my friends. And that’s no word of exaggeration. When they [hospital staff] wheeled me in to the street in [London location], it was cold. When my car was taken away at three o’clock in the morning, it was minus four...Yeah, and they’re [friends] always there, and they’re always supportive...without them I’d, you know, I wouldn’t keep going actually in truth.” (Paul)*

*“I think I’ve just been lucky that I did have my parents. Even though it was hell, but at least I had it. There’s people here who have been told you have to lie on the street with all your property around you, and they drive by and pick you up. But I’ve also heard stories of that happening and the person just dies, freezing to death on the road, and they’re never picked up.” (Zoe)*

*“The council never really seemed to care at the time. Doctors didn’t really say much about my situation with drinking and drugs...I was just sort of left to my own devices...And luckily some of the people in AA and NA were looking out for me, and jus-, helped me get into this rehab centre.” (Ollie)*

# Leveraging social relationships

*“I went to them [the council] and told them everything that had happened...she came to the situation with a very kind of sceptical mindset. She was saying essentially that I couldn’t be recognised as homeless because I’m not on the streets ...she was essentially was being quite, not really understanding, she was saying “can’t you like stay with family?” “Don’t you have anyone that can, you know, let you sleep with them for, for a while, on their, on their sofa or whatever?” (Ashley)*

*“...my relationship I’ve got, is with my erm, my mum and my step dad. I mean, they’re really important in my life. I think, (.), when I was living homeless, I got in contact with ‘em. And through them I’ve ended up in a rehab, you know? It wasn’t through them, erm, finding this place for me, it was, just, the support which they gave me.” (Freddy)*

*“... I met some people, so I could live myself sometimes at their home, and then...when they started knowing that, erm, would of kind of helped each other...like I was helping like doing some jobs at home, you know? A little bit cleaning, tidying up you know, a little bit cooking, so...I could stay like few nights there, so, they help me, I help them. So, that’s, how it worked.” (Kyriacou)*

# Absence of social relationships

*“And, it was, denied, because er, the reason was, I’ve only been in the UK for four years and I think they told me that in order for me to qualify for universal credit, I have to be in the UK for five years. So, er, it, it goes back to the understanding, of not having that, network of support. I do believe on the other hand, if I had family in the UK, then, I would not be in this homeless, vulnerable, condition that I’m in right now.” (Torrito).*

*“Yeah I mean, it’s horrible with my sister Meg sometimes...because when we were younger, me and my sister Meg were really close. Don’t get me wrong, we’re still really close, but we’ve both been through such difficult times, losing each other, the family and what happened to our family and stuff like that. It’s not been easy, so, it’s not been easy getting back in touch with my sister. That’s brought up a lot of memories, you know? It’s very deep you know.” (Angela).*

*“And then we get in an argument, and I’ll sort of say well “how important am I to you?” And genuinely she [sister] says “not very”. And the thing is I used to think she was joking. But over the years I got to realise, that’s the truth. That’s genuinely the truth.” (Mike).*

*“Yeah, mmm. You got no friends to go to or nothing. Yeah. That’s true homeless, no family. That’s really sad isn’t it?” (Penny).*

# Unsustainability of social relationships

*Susanna: "I have one friend, who is, well...he's the person that erm, pays my bills still. Because I don't get a lot of money, erm, to live on."*

*Interviewer: "And what's your relationship like with that person? Do you feel supported by them?"*

*Susanna: "Erm, no (laugh). No he's the person that keeps reminding me how useless I am...And I get, you know, psychological abuse from him a lot. Or, he just ignores me when he knows that he's my only friend. Like he's the only person that I have, around me...he'll send me money though, to make sure that I'm alive."*

*"I had to go to a recovery house in (London location 2), near erm, (London location 3), for two-weeks. And once that ended I was forced to live back in my childhood home in (London location 1). And so then, I started having dreams, and flash backs (voice shaky with upset) and everything. I wasn't coping. And that all came to a head (voice shaky with upset) because I was really really (.) depressed and I didn't really know what to do." (participant starts to sob) (Zoe)*

# Limited transformative capacity of social capital

*They-, they could just solve these problems with a click of their fingers, you know. There's a-, things could be, sorted really, really easily. They could build housing, decent housing- I mean-, look at my experience with renting a place, from a massively in powerful property company. Even they, endangered the lives of, our baby, on multiple occasions, you know. And they, how they're getting away with it, is- 'Cause the game is rigged, that-, these awful capitalists, you know? So er, I see the bigger picture, as a structural problem, you know."* (Joe)

*Interviewer: So just to start off with, so erm, we often hear the term homelessness but I was wondering what does that word or term mean to you?*

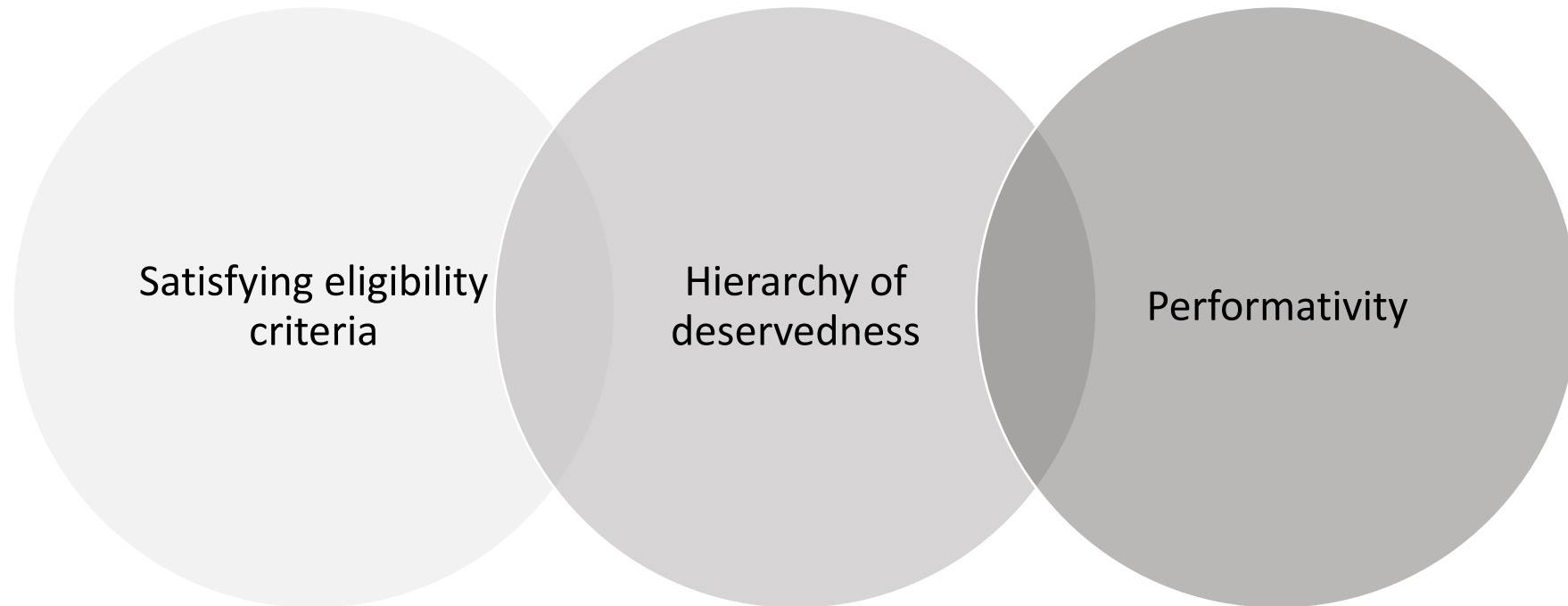
*Wayne: Ooft, that's quite a question. Erm, (.), poverty, er, I mean I'm just gonna spit out words that come to mind, erm, er, I guess the biggest one is poverty.*

*"Well housing is a huge issue. Erm, I guess inequality, you know. Capitalism, let's go there (light laugh). (Roisin).*

*"But I think what would be, erm, appreciated is erm, some more support, direct support from the government in helping young people fund private rent. Because at the moment it just there is absolutely no way I could afford it."* (Amy)



# Conditionality of support



# Satisfying eligibility criteria

*“But the problem is, the services, will only help you, if you fit their criteria. And if you do not fit their criteria, they, erm, you have no chance.” (Susanna).*

*“...I made an application to Westminster Council, because obviously Westminster Council are what I consider to be my local borough. And they refused to assist...There’s a local connection...I’m like going so I can vote...My Freedom Pass, my Disabled Freedom Pass, is issued by their offices. I’ve been on their electoral register voting in every election, both general and bi-elections for six years. And they still don’t consider me to be a local resident.” (Paul)*

*“Cause you think, you can’t really go to the council because you’re single, if you’re a single male and homeless, then they’re not interested. If you’re a single male, you’ve got drugs issues, or alcohol, mental health issues, might get some sort of help from the council. Some sort of priority, go on the list or something. But, anyone else, nah (laugh).” (Joshua)*

*“So I could not go to the council and ask for help. Just because I wasn’t really local anywhere in London, you know? They made the decision, they prefer to help...prioritise locals... So they only, my only option was to take help from charities.” (István)*

# Hierarchy of deservedness

*“You can have certain types of disabilities and you’re still not vulnerable. You can handle being homeless, you know?... My GP rang them up and said “look, he’s vulnerable, he’s done suicide attempts, this that and the other”. But they still really battled it...it’s just like Kafka-esque nightmare times a billion.” (Joe)*

*“I’m aware of, what pressure, erm, our services are under...I’m not high enough priority...so, I understand the lack of support but also do feel that I would be, I would find some advice useful.” (Amy)*

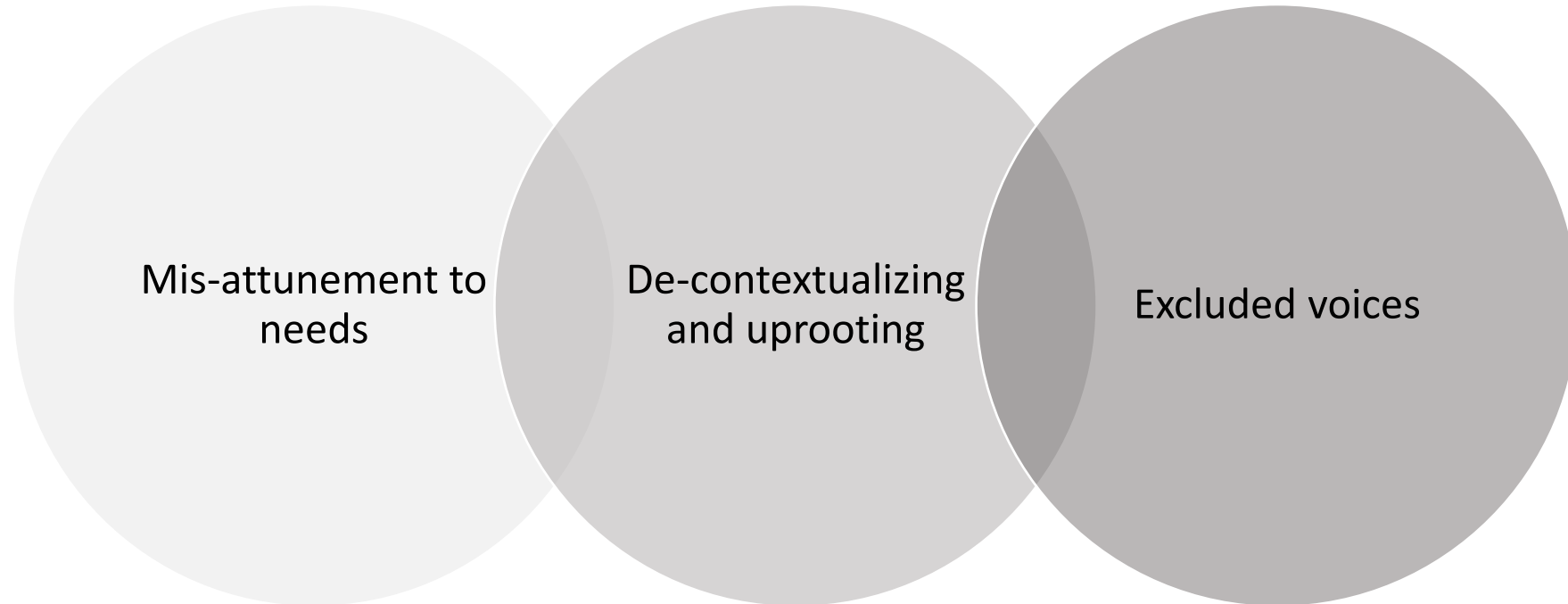
*“She was saying essentially that I couldn’t be recognised as homeless because I’m not on the streets or because you know, there’s not like immediate erm, immediate, er, like, danger to my current circumstances.” (Ashley)*

# Performativity

*“... they said if you do certain things, we’ll give you a flat...when you first move in they tell you, alright you’ll be here for two years, then we’ll move you on to your own accommodation...we’re a high support unit, if you show us that you can cook, clean, look after yourself, then we’ll move you onto... somewhere else. And you show us you’re using your time well. So I stopped drinking, I went, I went to a college, they told me to go to, this is (Homeless Charity 1)...Went from that course, they said if you do this, you do this, this and this, then we’ll move you on.”  
(Marsha)*

*“...I’m just waiting for a phone call to move in, which probably will happen on this week or next week and by the contract or agreement, er, (Homeless Charity 3) will help me until they really can surely say, I’m capable to...they want be sure, one hundred percent, that I’m really capable to live independently and move on to the private rented sector.” (István)*

# Rendering individuals objects of care



# Mis-attunement to needs

*“I didn’t feel ready, to be off of the psych ward. Erm, it was, it was just all too much too quickly... was just coming from you know, a psychotic episode, you’re trying to kill yourself... So it was just all a bit too much too fast... And then told “you have to leave, get out, we need the bed”...They pulled the rug out from underneath me and said “you have to go now.” (participant cries) (Zoe)*

*“And erm, they tried to put me into housing I didn’t require....Throughout all the charities, and I noticed it even the good ones, er, you end up being treated like a child, and generally a naughty child...And I don’t think it’s a conscious thing at first, but it just happens that, you’re just helpless little children and you’re treated as such...That’s, erm, and that’s not particularly supportive. It’s er, there needs to be more genuine support to maintain independence.” (Christian)*

# De-contextualising and uprooting

*“...mental health support, everywhere I was supported, in (London Borough 1), was either in (London Location 4) or (London Location 5). And it was everywhere around places where, that, I don’t even want to call it an ex-, because he’s a piece of shit, erm, (laugh), where it was all, kinda evolving... I never felt safe going on my own...One time, I went to the place in (London Location 5), erm, for a therapy session, and his aunty was walking past me, I just thought “oh I can’t go back there now”.  
(Sophie)*

*“I have two children, and, erm, I can’t have them stay with me or anything. They live with their dad. And I never ever thought that would happen, like you know? Then there’s me in this predicament, I won’t get a look in. And I’ve got two children. But ‘cause they don’t live with me (.) I said “well they would live with me, if I had somewhere to live, wouldn’t they?”  
(Lisa)*

*“...‘cause especially if, when you’ve been through domestic violence and that...When I first moved into (accommodation), I really hated the fact that I had to use a set bathroom and stuff. I used to like hold my er-, wait for a wee, like wait ‘til I was bursting, not want to go toilet and all that...I didn’t wanna use the shared facilities. Didn’t want to use the bathroom. Didn’t wanna use the kitchen. Didn’t wanna use the washing machine room.” (Marsha)*

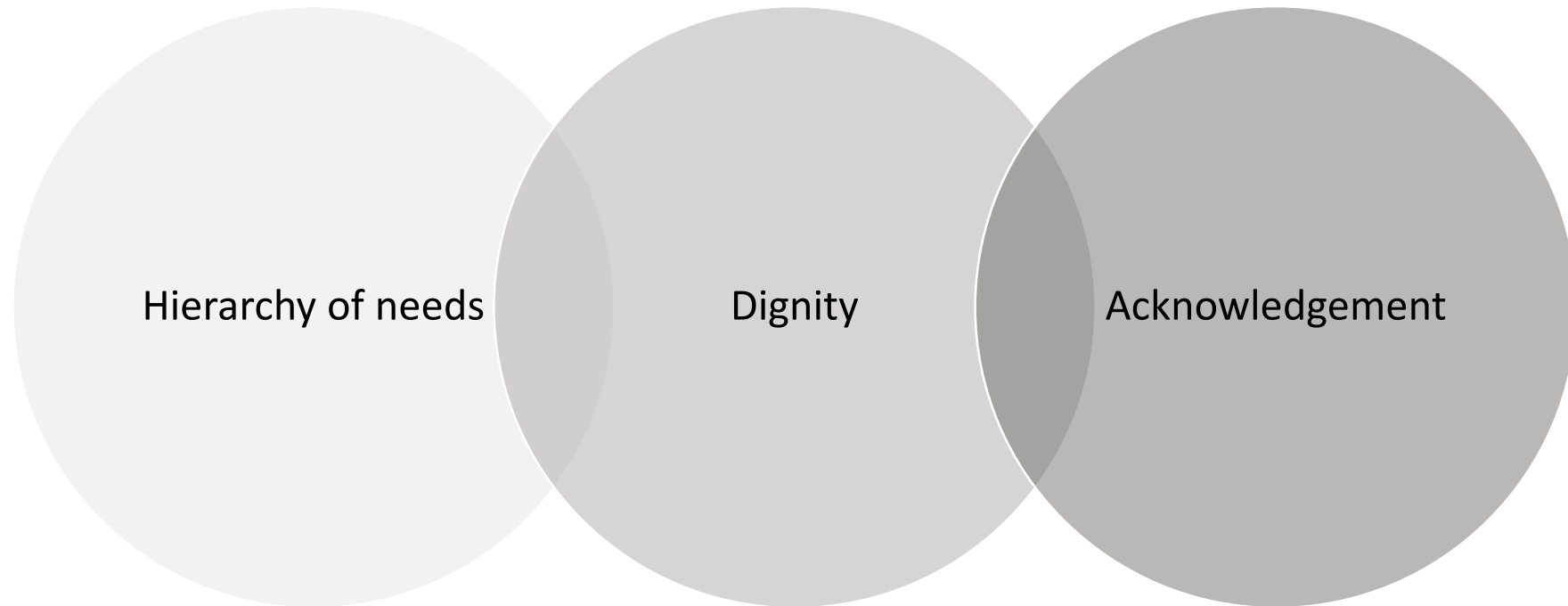
# Excluded voices

*“...they [staff] have, I think the view of us that we’re sort of subhuman. I mean for example, I like to recycle things and I wrote to them, ‘cause they’ve got a suggestion box, “can we get like recycling on site?” you know a recycling bin outside. No reply. Then I said in person “could we you know-?” they said “no”. They’re like “people here won’t, wouldn’t want to recycle”. And I said “well I am a person here, and I do recycle. And I have to use local people’s bins”. And they’re like “no, no, not these kind of people. These kind of people wouldn’t recycle.” And I’m like (laugh), great you know you could at least try it, you know?” (Joe)*

*“Whereas before, I’ve never been asked where I want, you know? I was just stuck in the house and, I, I knew from the moment I walked in there, this wasn’t gonna last long. Not for the reasons I thought but erm, I just feel that, when they place homeless people, there’s not enough interaction between the organisation and the person who they are, they’re placing because I’m sure a lot of people have plans, thoughts or ideas of where they’d like to live...And I just don’t want whatever it is decided for me.” (Wayne)*



# Humanisation



# Hierarchy of needs

*“I wish it was, like a proper flat, and that I could have like a friend over... because I have the space, Erm, but I can’t, because it’s not-, this kind of, this kind of accommodation. So that, makes me sad.” (Josephine).*

*“It feels like you constantly, it’s like a battle to survive but, I think, I’m hoping like after (current accommodation) it won’t just be, survival, it will be, I don’t know, something better.” (Zoe)*

*“...just having to go to like, a soup kitchen, or something, with every other homeless people (voice shakes), it’s like feeling, feeling degrading you know?...And I think, that’s why I drunk so much you know? It’s to obviously mask them feelings that I was going through...like Dutch Courage to go and have a shower in a place like that. Fuck it I’ll be pissed, it’ll be alright. [I’ll have a laugh while I’m doing it]” (light laugh) (Freddy)*

# Dignity

*“Every morning when I wake up...I try to groom myself and I shower every day, I tried to keep that semblance of normality going, because if I don’t have that, what do I have? I just become another statistic. I refuse to be a statistic. I’m a human. I have a conscience. And as long as I can hold on to that, that keeps me human, I think is the right word. If I don’t hold on to that... It’s such... homelessness, I think it’s a word that’s also, hangs on to, making you feel worthless really.” (Wayne).*

*“...why we humans, can’t have somewhere to protect us? To protect our dignity. To protect our integrity. So having a home is so important because it does all these things. It provides us with the dignity and integrity that we need to survive in this society. And it is a basic need of every human, it’s like, every human rights, basic need. And yeah, it’s just, when it’s taken away from someone the person is ripped, it’s almost like they rip out the half of the person. (Caroline)*

*“...something that either prevents you from falling into a hole in terms of drinking or taking drugs or whatever, or, something that makes you, lifts you up, and makes you feel like, you’re, you’re valued. Like a job.” (Naomi)*

# Acknowledgement of people as whole individuals

*“I mean the thing is with me, like I’m sitting in here having this conversation with you, I feel I’ve got so much life, and I’ve got so much to give... years ago, when I was more together, I used to do welfare rights and I used to enjoy it.” (Mike)*

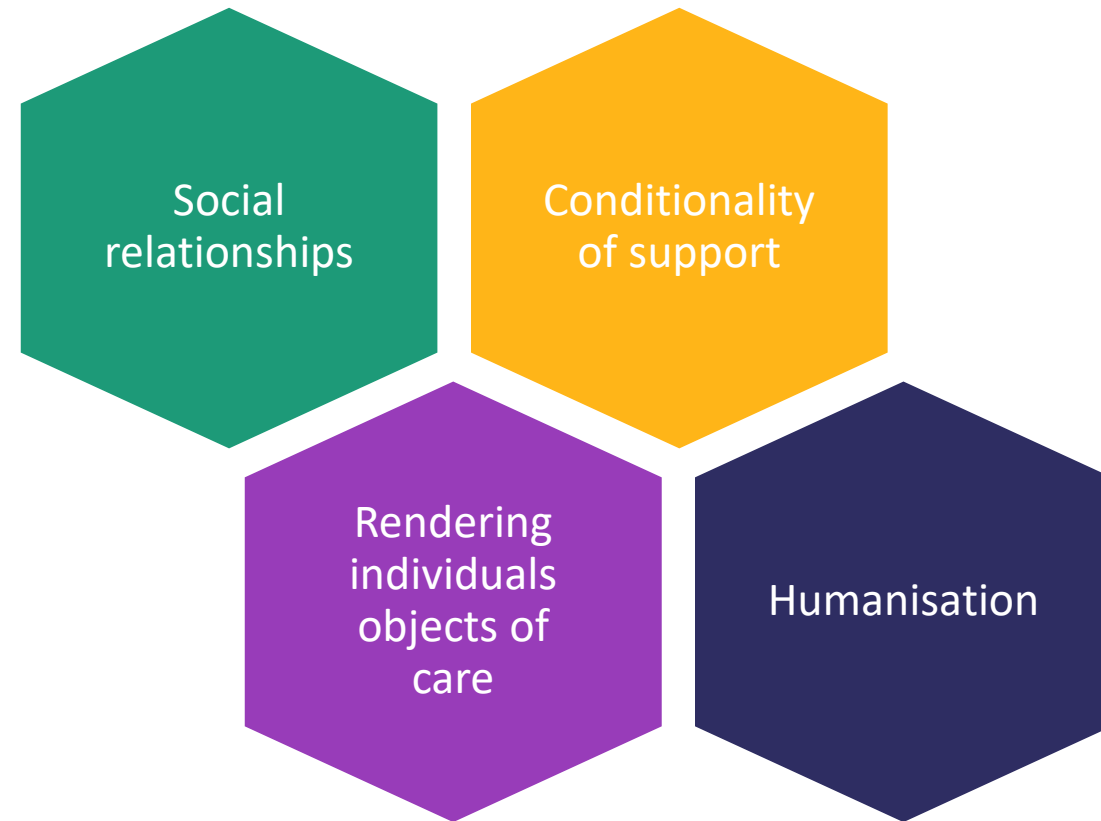
*“I needed piano to practice because, erm, you have to practice all the time...Church bought me a piano, electric piano ... that would be ideally piano, or teaching, of piano teaching. I taught at music school before I had...Erm, so yeah, piano would be the ideal job (Kyriacou)*

*“Well I mean, I create, so I’m a filmmaker, I’m a, I can now call myself a play write, an artist, you know, to have those cultural things.” (Paul)*

*“I’m actually downloading programmes, downloading sounds, downloading a lot of music, that can encourage, what I wanna do when I leave there, which is my art and my media. So I’m getting as much tutorials as I can. I’m doing the best that I can.” (Daryl)*

# Conclusion

- The four themes reinforce the notion that people are embedded in social worlds and have many needs that are socially rooted
  - Not being attuned to this can have damaging consequences
  - Experience of support provisions can be highly challenging and distressing
- Services operate also within this social context
  - Utilising/redirecting to social resources





Thank you for listening  
[n.ayed@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:n.ayed@qmul.ac.uk)