THE SUPPORTIVE ROLE OF CONSTRUCTION EMPLOYMENT IN PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: A CAPABILITY EMPOWERMENT APPROACH

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Homelessness is a serious and growing problem in the UK with latest figures estimating that 160,000 households are experiencing the worst forms of homelessness. Employment is widely recognised as critical to reducing homelessness, yet there has been no research into the role that the construction industry, as one of the UK's largest employers, can play in reducing the homelessness problem. Mobilising Sen's (1985) and Nussbaum's (1993) capabilities empowerment framework which provides a multi-dimensional approach on enhancing the capabilities of young people with complex support needs, a case study is presented of an intermediate employment programme aimed at supporting young people aged 16-18, who had experienced homelessness or who were at risk of homelessness. Contributing to the emerging social value debate in construction management, and drawing on interviews with eleven young people at risk of homelessness in an intermediary construction employment programme, findings indicate that as a result of participating in the programme, young people demonstrated decreased substance misuse, improved health; secured employment; gained qualifications and developed new skills and ultimately stabilised their housing preventing homelessness. It is concluded that the capabilities empowerment approach might have some utility in explaining how employment in the construction industry can reduce the risks of homelessness for disadvantaged youth.

Keywords: homelessness, employment, social value, youth, health and well-being

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that societies should make stable, safe and secure housing a fundamental human right (Hoffman, 2019). According to Crisis almost 160,000 households are experiencing homelessness in the UK (Downie, 2018). Tunstall (2018) cites street count estimates that show around 5,711 people sleep rough on any night in the UK. EYHC (2019) notes that young people at risk face particular problems accessing affordable housing that is close to opportunities for continuing education or employment, which can reduce the risk of homelessness. Youth homelessness remains a significant issue in the UK. For example, in Wales, latest figures show that on 7,698 occasions young people (aged 16-25) asked local authorities for help with homelessness in 2018 (Stats Wales, 2019). This figure does not include the hidden homeless such as people who have sofa surfed or slept in a car

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and not presented to their local authority. FEANTSA (2020: 1), the European Homelessness organisation recently defined youth homelessness as "when an individual between the ages of 13 and 26 is experiencing rooflessness or houselessness or is living in insecure or inadequate housing without a parent, family member or other legal guardian".

Driven by principles of New Public Governance, manifest in legislation such as the Social Value (Public Services) Act 2012, the public sector in the UK has placed increasing focus on partnering with industries like construction to create social value in the communities they represent (Raiden *et al.,* 2018). The construction sector has become a focus for these policies because of the large numbers of jobs it can provide for people suffering disadvantage such as young ex-offenders. Recent research from the UK and overseas shows this can be challenging for an industry which sees the people targeted by these policies as a risk especially when the sector has been traditionally concerned with time, cost and quality (Watts *et al.,* 2019, Loosemore, Alkilani and Mathenge *et al.,* 2020).

Care experienced young people and those known to the criminal justice system (CJS) face a particularly high risk of homelessness because of significant barriers to employment. The House of Commons (2016) reported only 26.5% of prison leavers enter employment on release. Welsh Governments Public Accounts Committee (2017) describe care experienced young people as a group who have worse long-term employment outcomes than the general population and are significantly over-represented in the CJS. Indeed, while the construction industry could benefit significantly from the employment of young ex-offenders (see Loosemore, Bridgeman and Keast 2020), they have also been identified as a group which subcontractors in the construction industry see as a significant risk to safety, cost and productivity (Loosemore, Alkilani and Mathenge 2020). Nevertheless, while there has been one anthropological study in Canada of young people vulnerable to homelessness accessing opportunities within the construction industry (Bridgman 2001), research into the potential of the construction industry in reducing the risk of homelessness in this group is scant.

The aim of this study is to address this gap in knowledge by reporting the results of interviews with youth with ex-offending and care experienced backgrounds at risk of homelessness which mobilised Sen's (1985) and Nussbaum's (1993) Capabilities Empowerment Framework. Specifically, by using this theoretical framework, this study addresses the question of whether employment in construction can reduce the risk of homelessness for disadvantaged youth from a care experience and ex-offending background. This study does not present an evaluation of the intermediate employment programme it has already been internally evaluated by homelessness charity Llamau (Tamburello and Morris, 2016) and externally evaluated by ICF Consulting (2014).

The Symud Ymlaen/ Moving Forward (SYMF) programme provided participants with employability support and the potential to progress into a paid work placement. To be eligible for the programme, young people could not be in education, employment or training (NEET) and needed to be either care experienced, meaning they had been or were currently in state care, or working with a youth offending team (YOT). Young people involved in the programme were homeless or at risk of homelessness. The programme provided employment opportunities and support to help participants overcome barriers, gain essential skills and confidence alongside the facilitation of

practical experience and paid work placements. It ran from 2013 until 2016, at a cost of £4.8 million through funding provided by direct grant funding from dormant bank accounts through the Big Lottery Fund. Work placements were provided in a number of sectors, including construction, retail, administration, mechanics, catering and many more. In total 437 young people completed a 26-week work placement as part of the initial SYMF programme. After the first three-year, Big Lottery Funding came to an end the programme received one-year continuation funding from the same fund. After this four-year funding came to an end the programme has continued to receive smaller scale funding from the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA).

Theory

Traditional approaches examining the causes of homelessness have been widely criticised because they can create the impression that homelessness is random and distributed across the population (Bramley and Fitzpatrick 2017). This has made it difficult historically to both predict and prevent homelessness. Gaetz and Dej (2017) use a three-level social-ecological model that suggests homelessness is the outcome of a complicated and intricate interplay between structural factors, system failures and individual circumstances. Structural factors are broad systematic political, economic and societal issues that occur at a societal level that affect opportunities, social environments and outcomes for individuals. This would include the introduction of government policies, which effect opportunities for young people and other factors such as economic downturns. Systems failures that contribute to young people experiencing homelessness include barriers accessing public systems, failed transitions from publicly funded institutions and systems and gaps within and between government funded departments and systems, and within non-profit sectors. Individual and relational factors refer to the personal circumstances that place people at risk of homelessness; they include interpersonal and relational problems, persistent and disabling conditions, interpersonal violence and trauma (Gaetz and Dej, 2017).

Sen's (1985) and Nussbaum's (1993) capabilities empowerment approach is a multi-dimensional approach which has been proven of value in explaining and enhancing the capabilities of homeless people with complex support needs (see Tanekenov 2013). The capability empowerment approach is a rights based evaluative approach which proposes freedoms, or capabilities as the proxies of the freedoms, in order to evaluate well-being, social arrangements and social justice (Kimhur, 2020). The basis of the capability empowerment approach was Sen's (1985) criticism that traditional approaches for assessing well-being were based on opulence (real income, wealth commodities), and utility (satisfaction or desire-fulfilment). Rather than focussing on the acquisition of wealth and material resources in assessing poverty the capability approach focuses on whether people have real opportunity to live lives of human dignity (Batterham, 2019). Subsequently, Nussbaum (1993) proposed a set of ten central capabilities, The Capabilities Empowerment Framework (see Table 1).

Critically, for this research, Tanekenov (2013) and Tanekenov *et al. (*2018) have demonstrated the utility of the capabilities approach in exploring the issue of homelessness. They combined Nussbaum's ten central capabilities with a critical realist epistemology to examine what works for whom in what circumstances to empower homeless people to secure and sustain employment. In support of earlier work such as Fernandez Evangelista (2010), Tanekenov *et al. (*2018) show that preventing homelessness is not just about providing shelter. To prevent youth homelessness an integrated approach is needed to tackle the multiple and interrelated

factors that can lead to a young person experiencing homelessness including mental health conditions, substance misuse, family and relationship breakdowns. These complex needs and barriers can also result in obstacles to seeking and sustaining paid employment (Tanekenov *et al.,* 2018). Tanekenov *et al. (*2018) suggest a person's position can be judged by actual achievements and the freedom to achieve. Kimhur (2020) suggests the issue of different abilities to achieve are particularly important for the welfare of marginalised groups who are less efficient at converting resources into achievements (functions).

Table 1: The Capabilities Empowerment Framework

Empowerment Domain	Capabilities List
Bodily	Life: having a safe life, preserving a physical life, a sense of physical safety.
	Bodily Health: having reasonable physical and mental health, ability to meet basic needs for food, shelter and basic healthcare.
	Bodily Integrity: bodily needs, enhancing safety, feeling safe, living in a safe area, not being in a situation where one feels unsafe.
Economic and political	Practical reason: having one's own version of a good life, ability to conceive one's own conception of a good life.
	Control over one's environment: having the (financial) resources and (political) power to pursue one's own version of a 'good life', to be able to plan one's life and to realise aspirations.
Social and emotional	Affiliation and emotions: being able to interact with, having a meaningful positive social relationship with other people, on the basis of equal dignity and self-respect, how one is viewed by other people, how one perceives oneself to be viewed by other people.
Creative and intellectual	Senses, imagination and thought: a person's capabilities in relation to developing his/her own 'true self' as a human being in terms of creativity, learning and intellectual activity of one's own choice, and spirituality and inner development.

(Source: Tanekenov *et al.,* 2018).

However, the value of the capabilities empowerment approach in exploring how employment in industries like construction can reduce the risk of homelessness, which is the aim of this research, is new both within and outside the field of construction research. For example, Hodgson (2014) indicates factors in the Capabilities Empowerment Framework such as a young person's mental health can make it more difficult to find appropriate housing and sustain a tenancy. However, we do not know the extent to which employment in the construction industry can affect these capabilities and address these potential problems in young disadvantaged people and thereby reduce their risk of homelessness. This is the aim of this research.

Method

Mobilising Sen's (1985) and Nussbaum's (1993) capabilities empowerment approach and employing an interpretivist epistemology which recognised the socially constructed nature of homelessness risk, eleven interviews were conducted with young people with care experience and ex-offending backgrounds. Interviews typically lasted one hour and were undertaken in different parts of the country to reflect urban, rural, town and city areas taking place in north, south west, south east and mid Wales and facilitated by researchers employed by a youth homelessness charity for the internal evaluation of the programme. Respondents were purposefully sampled based on their involvement with the SYMF programme. Interview respondents had completed placements within the construction industry, (See Table 2 for sample structure). Overall, 72% of programme participants were male and 28% were female. Only two female participants wanted to pursue a construction placement, neither are represented in the sample. Nussbaum's (1993) and Sen's (1985) capability empowerment approach is used to examine how a programme to support young people into employment helped them overcome barriers and prevented or moved them out of homelessness. Collecting data in the context of the SYMF initiative was important in providing a common context for participants to articulate and discuss their experiences of working in construction and how this impacted their risk of homelessness. We recognise the limitations of single case study research (Yin, 2017).

However, as Flyvbjerg (2006) notes, single case studies are of enormous in-depth value as highly valid narratives in their own right, especially in exploratory research like this, providing in-depth insights which other methods cannot do and the basis for the application and refinement of theories, which can be empirically tested in subsequent research. Employing the Capabilities Empowerment Framework, interview questions covered bodily, economic and political, social and emotional and creative and intellectual issues as described in Table 1. This included offending behaviour/attitudes, drugs and alcohol knowledge/attitudes, mental health awareness, housing issues/benefits and barriers to employment. The interviews were transcribed and analysed based on Guest's (2012: 11) approach to inductive thematic analysis which involved: 'immersion' in the data; using the Capability Empowerment Framework to organise and generating an initial list of items/codes from the data-set; developing and refining themes which link these codes. In line with the traditions of thematic research, we present our analysis below in narrative form supported by selected quotes based on the exact words used by respondents within the interviews.

Results and Discussion

Bodily domain
The bodily domain covers life, bodily health and bodily integrity (Tanekenov *et al.,* 2018). The human body gives us certain needs, but it also gives us certain possibilities for excellence (Nussbaum, 1993). Two participants in the SYMF programme reported improved physical health including increased physical activity and healthier sleep patterns. Three participants described improved mental health, particularly a decrease in depression and anxiety. Five participants reported a decrease in substance misuse; they explained they knew substance misuse was not acceptable on a construction site. Participants seemed to become more aware of the implications drinking could have on their employment and made positive changes to

reduce their behaviour. The evidence suggests that taking part in the project helped six of the eleven interview participants; re-evaluate their substance misuse.

> At the start of (the programme) I was quite lazy, I'd quit college and I thought the world was against me …I go to the gym and I go for runs, it's just made me a better person especially my health.

Table 2: Table of Respondents

Respondent	Gender	Age at referral	Eligibility Requirement	Employed By	Outcome
1	Male	18	Care Experienced	Maintenance contractors	Retained by placement provider
2	Male	17	Care Experienced	Construction of domestic buildings	Project completer working towards opportunities in rail
3	Male	18	Care Experienced	Development of building projects	Secured employment in care
4	Male	18	Known to the CJS	Development of building projects	Project completer
5	Male	18	Known to the CJS	Construction social enterprise	Completed project and secured external apprenticeship
6	Male	17	Known to the CJS	Roofing contractors	Secured apprenticeship with placement provider
7	Male	17	Known to the CJS	Development of building projects	Became street homeless during placement and was unable to continue
8	Male	16	Care Experienced and known to the CJS	Other building completion and finishing	Early exit - chaotic life
9	Male	17	Known to the CJS	Building and plastering contractors	Retained by placement provider
10	Male	18	Known to the CJS	Development of building projects	Retained by placement provider
11	Male	17	Known to the CJS	Plumbing and heating contractors	Offered an apprenticeship with placement provider

Economic and political

Practical reason is a form of political empowerment, which involves people participating in the planning of their own lives by evaluating and enacting what they value for their own futures (Nussbaum, 1993). Previous research regarding helping homeless people find employment found that no participants interviewed in the study described an improvement in the political aspect of empowerment (Tankenov *et al.,*

2018). Similarly, SYMF participants did not report greater political power. McNaughton Nicholls, (2010) explains this capability is connected to a material sense of control over one's environment, people's rights to own property and possessions and to seek and gain employment (McNaughton Nicholls, 2010). Economic empowerment stresses the acquisition of skills, experience and competence through employment, which may enable not only financial betterment (Tanekenov *et al.,* 2018). Four participants commented they were now earning money and knew how to manage money better and this had affected their living situation.

> My life has changed since the project quite a bit really, I've got more money to manage and I manage it better now. I got my own flat so I moved out.

Social and emotional
The social and emotional domain covers affiliation and emotions including having meaningful social relationships, self-respect, self-dignity and positive self-perception (Tanekenov *et al.,* 2018). Nussbaum (1993) explains all human beings recognise and feel a sense of affiliation and concern for other humans and value these recognitions and affiliations. Four participants reported a growth in confidence at interview. Participants reported improvements in confidence including a growth or 'build-up' of confidence and increased confidence when speaking to and meeting new people. Four participants noted an improvement in relationships since participating in the programme. The reasons participants gave for improved relationships where they had moved into employment, they were out of the home more, they were not offending, there had been a reduction in substance misuse and their behaviour had improved. Improved relationships could lead to the stabilising of housing and prevent homelessness. One participant commented:

> Yeah, I am way more confident now…Well I wouldn't even apply for jobs at first but now I would speak to a stranger on the street.

Creative and intellectual
Senses, imagination and thought cover the cognitive capability to perceive, imagine and think Nussbaum (1993). The play function involves being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities (Nussbaum, 2000: 105). Tanekenov *et al. (*2018) study on homelessness and employment found employees did not find that employment contributed significantly to beneficiaries creative or play functions. Similarly, only two of the eleven SYMF participants reported an increase in recreational activities. With one joining a martial arts group and another joining a football team. The feedback from SYMF participants indicates that only two increased their recreational activities as a result of participating in the programme. McNaughton Nicholls (2010) suggests senses, imagination and thought are particularly important because typically what brings relief for homeless people in the short term such as substance misuse can lead to the shutting off of other senses.

> I started playing for my supported housings football team, so I met quite a few people on there and it has been quite good coz like it's got me out of that what's the point of doing anything anymore…I want to get my life on track.

Initial analysis of eleven interviews using the Capabilities Empowerment Framework suggests construction employment may help young people overcome barriers, which leave them susceptible to homelessness. In the bodily domain, young people reported improved health and a decrease in substance misuse because it 'wasn't acceptable on a construction site'. In the economic and political domain, young people reported earning more money and greater financial control. As Batterham (2019) indicates, having financial resources can give a young person stability and control over their

housing situation. In the social and emotional domain, young people reported improved confidence and better relationships with friends and family. Feedback from young people revealed they wanted to be educated and develop within the construction industry with one young person commenting he wanted an apprenticeship in carpentry so he would be 'set for life'. This finding is significant because research shows that a person's self-confidence and sense of identity are important and can help empower homeless people to sustain employment and secure housing (Iveson and Cornish, 2016). This study presents the findings of eleven interviews the evidence suggests the empowerment capability approach may be useful to increase our understanding of how young people can overcome complex barriers and access construction employment and prevent homelessness.

Employment is key to both prevent youth homelessness and move young people out of homelessness. The Resolution Foundation has expressed concern of the likely negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employment opportunities of young people facing barriers suggesting 640,000 18-24-year olds, in the UK, could find themselves unemployed this year alone (Henehan, 2020). The Resolution Foundation recommends the implementation of a jobs-guarantee scheme (Henehan, 2020). This would be similar to the SYMF programme with short-term work placements, provided by the state with the intended outcome of sustainable employment. Programmes like SYMF are going to be essential if we are going to help young people build a better future for themselves in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

Contributing to the emerging debate in social value in the construction industry, the aim of this paper was to mobilise Sen's (1985) and Nussbaum's (1993) capabilities empowerment framework to explore how employment in the construction industry can reduce the risks of homelessness for disadvantaged youth. The use of the Capabilities Empowerment Framework across disciplines and applied to an employment programme for young people vulnerable to homelessness is a new contribution to knowledge. The reported results of interviews with eleven young people at risk of homelessness in an intermediate construction employment programme indicate employment in the construction industry can develop important capabilities in young disadvantaged people, which can reduce the risks of homelessness.

There are implications for future academic and practitioner research based on the analysis of this employment programme using the capability approach. The approach may be valuable when discussing policy and a move away from economic concerns to social justice and potentially a right to housing close to opportunities for education or employment. The Capability Empowerment Framework has value as an evaluation tool of human wellbeing based on a person's freedom to achieve a life they value and is useful for further research on social value in construction management.

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