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## The (Re)Building of Social Capital for People Sleeping Rough: Concepts of Home and Community in Byron Bay, Australia

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**The (Re)Building of Social Capital for People Sleeping Rough:  
Concepts of Home and Community in Byron Bay, Australia**

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### Abstract

People experiencing homelessness and/or sleeping rough (sleeping in open air or in inadequate dwellings) are exposed to multiple layers of vulnerability including social isolation and lack of support from others. Without resources that help them transition out of constant survival mode, it can be difficult for people sleeping rough to maintain relationships and build social capital. Social capital broadly refers to the positive impact that community resources have on a subject or group. This case study adds to the existing literature on homelessness by providing a perspective focused on themes of community connection and social capital. To explore how community spaces encourage the (re)building of social capital for people sleeping rough, I conducted a qualitative case study in Byron Bay, Australia, a tourist community with the second highest number of people sleeping rough in New South Wales. Methods for data collection included a three-month internship at the Byron Community Centre (BCC) (fall of 2019), six semi-structured interviews with BCC staff and volunteers, and participant observations of BCC clients. This case study suggests that social capital building involves both community connections and access to community spaces for people sleeping rough. It further finds that programs and projects *directly* addressing basic needs can *indirectly* create opportunities that cultivate a sense of belonging both within a physical space and social community. It concludes that the accrual of social capital can aid people sleeping rough by helping them to avoid or mitigate conflicts and establish social trust and access to resources.

*Keywords:* Homelessness, sleeping rough, social capital, community connection, emotional support, basic needs

**The (Re)Building of Social Capital for People Sleeping Rough:  
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The last time a global survey was conducted by the United Nations, approximately 100 million people were experiencing homelessness worldwide (United Nations, 2005). Since then, it is estimated that the number has increased to more than 150 million people experiencing homelessness (Chamie, 2017). Although no universal definition of homelessness exists, each country has its own characterization used for data collection. In Australia, people are considered homeless when they lack suitable accommodation alternatives and live in an inadequate dwelling or a dwelling that prohibits them from controlling and accessing space for social relations (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2017). According to data from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, Australia's rate of homelessness increased 4.6 percent over the last five years with more than 116,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In 2017, Byron Bay, located in New South Wales, Australia, had the second highest number of people sleeping rough - people sleeping in open air or in inadequate dwellings - in the state (Burke, 2017), with approximately 150 individuals sleeping rough on the streets of the Byron Shire (Bibby, 2018). As of 2020, Byron has the second most people sleeping rough in the state of New South Wales, with Sydney having the most in the state at about 334 people sleeping rough (City of Sydney, 2019). Byron Shire has a total population of about 35,000 people, whereas Sydney's total population is closer to 5 million (IdProfile, 2019; Population Australia, 2019).

People sleeping rough may suffer from multiple layers of vulnerability and, furthermore, may be socially isolated and without support from family or friends. Due to a lack of resources,

access to space, or the need to remain in constant ‘survival mode,’ it can be difficult for people sleeping rough to create relations that aid them in maintaining social capital. Social capital broadly refers to the impact that community resources, social networks, trust, and reciprocity have on a subject or group. It involves the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships that lead to productive benefits of sociability (Johnstone, Jetten, Dingle, et al., 2015). Lack of social capital can result in social disconnect, the impairment of health, and negatively affect risk behavior (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). My research reflects this challenge as I ask, “How do community spaces encourage the building or rebuilding of social capital for people sleeping rough? My secondary questions are, “How does access to service provisions help to create community connections?” and, “How do *instrumental*<sup>1</sup> support systems help facilitate *emotional*<sup>2</sup> support systems for people sleeping rough?”

This case study looks at homelessness through the economic and cultural lenses of social inequality and access to livelihoods. It demonstrates that programs and projects that address basic needs can indirectly encourage the building of social capital through access to community spaces<sup>3</sup>. I argue that such systems can positively affect people sleeping rough in Byron Bay, Australia, by helping to mitigate the worsening of situations. Additionally, I demonstrate that social capital can be built between multiple individuals sleeping rough, as well as between individual people sleeping rough and service providers.

I chose to conduct my study in Byron Bay because of its similarities to my hometown on Whidbey Island, Washington. Both are very small-town, vacation destinations in which all the locals seem to know one another. However, both also have populations experiencing homelessness

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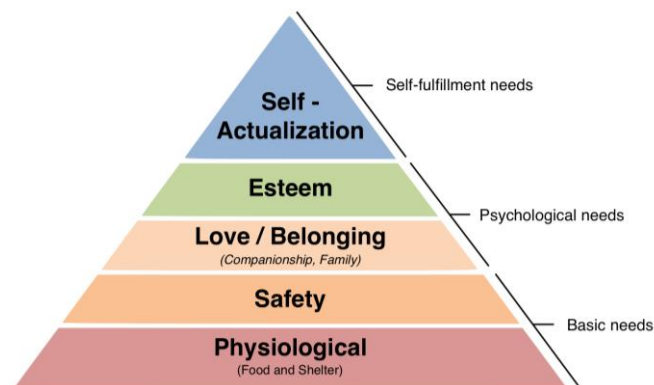
<sup>1</sup> Tangible support such as food and shelter

<sup>2</sup> Interpersonal support that helps to develop social relationships and feelings of love and belonging

<sup>3</sup> Free of charge, non-discriminatory spaces open to all members of the community (e.g., public parks or community centers)

that tend to be overlooked, since tourism is the priority of almost all local businesses. In order to gain a new perspective on the relationships between people experiencing homelessness and local organizations, I wanted to see how Byron was working to help its community by providing free services and spaces to people sleeping rough.

To conduct the research for this study, I interned at a not-for-profit organization in Byron Bay, Australia, from September to November of 2019. I employed ethnographic and qualitative research methodologies that included participant and non-participant observations; informal, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews; daily field notes recorded in digital and physical formats; and transcribed and coded sound recordings of interviews. Additionally, I drew from bibliographic research and was initially guided by the motivational theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs describes a five-tier model of human needs and is classically depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid.



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According to this theory, needs lower in the hierarchy must be met before individuals can attend to needs higher up. I was also guided by the concept of Psychologically Informed Environments, which argues the significance of maintaining spaces where services understand both clients' and

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<sup>4</sup> Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

staff needs in ways that consider the thinking, emotions, personalities, and past experiences of its participants in order to operate.

In the first section of this case study, I review selected literature on social capital and community connection to consider their relationship to rough sleeping. I then discuss the methodology used and ethical considerations taken throughout my research. In the next section, I present my findings organized by the concepts of home, social capital, community spaces, and programs and projects geared towards addressing basic needs. I argue that programs and projects in Byron Bay focused on basic needs can indirectly foster the building of social capital by providing access to community spaces. I conclude that this building of social capital positively affects people sleeping rough by helping to mitigate the worsening of situations.

### **Literature Review**

The issue of homelessness has a complex history. This selected literature review is selectively focused on five main themes: home, social capital, community and sense of belonging, environmental factors, and programs and projects for people experiencing homelessness.

The idea of ‘home’ is not only related to an external and physical place, but also to internal feelings of comfort, security, belonging, and even identity (Mallet, 2004; Somerville, 1992; Tipple & Speak, 2005). Because of this, losing one’s home can be a highly traumatic experience with detrimental consequences, such as the development of emotional disorders, reduced self esteem, and the loss of ability or will to care for oneself (Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991; Kidd & Shahar, 2008). Lacking a sense of belonging to a community, a sense of security from a social safety net, or social capital, individuals experiencing homelessness may feel alienated and fall into longer-term rough sleeping (Stablein, 2011).

The absence of social capital is one of the most frequent aspects of homelessness (Barker, 2012; Bowen, Barman-Adhikari, Bender, et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2017; Johnstone, Jetten, Dingle, et al., 2016; Marr, 2012; Nicholson, 2013; Oliver & Cheff, 2014; Sherry, 2010; Stevenson & Neale, 2015; Thulien, Gastaldo, McCay, et al., 2018). Social capital can be conceptualized as the characteristics of social life that enable community members to act effectively together in order to pursue shared goals (Sherry, 2010). Social capital, or the lack thereof, can affect an individual's future. For example, high levels of social capital can help prevent individuals from falling into homelessness, whereas those with low levels of social capital may become homeless as they do not have the connections to support them and prevent this from occurring (Johnstone, Jetten, Dingle, et al., 2016; Nicholson, 2013; Stevenson & Neale, 2015). Individuals experiencing homelessness benefit greatly from the support that allows for community connection whether it is derived from street-based peers, home-based peers, family, or professional service providers (Begun, Bender, Brown, et al., 2016; Bowen, Barman-Adhikari, Bender, et al., 2016; Johnstone, Jetten, Dingle, et al., 2016; Oliver & Cheff, 2014; Sherry, 2010).

However, not all people experiencing homelessness seek support from the same types of networks. Some individuals may rely heavily on street-based peers (Bowen, Barman-Adhikari, Bender, et al., 2016; Rowe & Wolch, 1990; Thompson, Kim, McManus, et al., 2003). Others recovering from homelessness may reject such support and distance themselves from the homeless community as a way of avoiding being defined by association (Thulien, Gastaldo, McCay, et al., 2018). The amount of support sought from peers, family, and professionals by people experiencing homelessness varies in different communities. Recovery may also take different forms across countries: recovery from homelessness in the United States, for example, often involves higher use of staff allies and social ties. In contrast, in Japan there is less importance placed on such roles



and more importance placed on instrumental support; instead, such aid may take the form of securing minimum wage employment (Marr, 2012).

Moreover, many instances of losing social capital originate from family dysfunction. The fracturing of trust between individuals and their family members deeply affects how people experiencing homelessness assess and use different social networks (Barker, 2012; Bowen, Barman-Adhikari, Bender, et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2017). Individuals with traumatic childhoods may have a lower sense of connectedness to their community, which can significantly affect successful reintegration into a community and rebuilding of social safety nets to avoid recurrent homelessness<sup>5</sup> (Fitzpatrick, 2017; Hsu, McQuiston, Gorroochurn, et al., 2013; Thulien, Gastaldo, McCay, et al., 2018). When recovering from homelessness, improving an individual's sense of social safety and belonging can have a vital affect on their livelihood (Stablein, 2011; Tischler, 2008; Thompson, Kim, McManus, et al., 2003). Both instrumental support and emotional support are necessary for successfully transitioning from homelessness and are beneficial in various ways (Hsu, McQuiston, Gorroochurn, et al., 2013; Thompson, Kim, McManus, et al., 2003; Thulien, Gastaldo, McCay, et al., 2018). Reintegration into a community can offer a sort of 'social cure' which can aid in protecting well-being and fostering positive methods to deal with life stressors (Johnstone, Jetten, Dingle, et al., 2015).

The environmental factors involved during recovery from homelessness and re-housing play a major role in necessary instrumental support (Tischler, 2008; Woodcock & Gill, 2014; Yanos, Felton, Tsembers, et al., 2007). Being rehoused into a diverse, working-class neighborhood allows for better outcomes and lower rates of recurrent homelessness when compared to either higher income neighborhoods or unsafe areas (Tischler, 2008; Yanos, Felton, Tsembers, et al.,

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<sup>5</sup> "One or more new episodes of homelessness occurring at any time after obtaining housing, for any length of time, subsequent to an index (i.e. first-time) homeless episode" (Hsu, McQuiston, Gorroochurn, et al., 2013).

2007). In addition, people recovering from homelessness with greater access to social interactions and sense of choice often have higher functioning than those in areas that do not or are unsafe to interact with others; thus less interaction leads to the inhibition of reintegration into a community (Chen, 2013; Tischler, 2008; Woodcock & Gill, 2014; Yanos, Felton, Tsembers, et al., 2007).

In transitioning out of homelessness, programs and projects specifically geared towards aiding people in recovering from sleeping rough can be extremely beneficial (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Kertesz, Horton, Friedmann, et al., 2003; Seager, 2011; Ritchie, 2015; Martin, Grosek, Boisvert, et al., 2008; Miller, Pavlakis, Samartino, et al., 2005; Noh, 2008; Schwan, Fallonbar, & Milne, 2018; Sherry, 2010; Slesnick, Glassman, Garren, et al., 2008). Such programs have been able to help with better management of mental health challenges, stress and coping, and trauma recovery (Schwan, Fallonbar, & Milne, 2018; Slesnick, Glassman, Garren, et al., 2008; Taylor, Stuttaford, Broad, et al., 2009). They are also useful in aiding in the creation of ‘safe-spaces’ and the development of positive self-esteem (Phipps, Seager, Murphy, et al., 2017; Schwan, Fallonbar, & Milne, 2018; Sherry, 2010) – all vitally important to the recovery from living in social isolation on the streets. Being included in art-based programs or sports teams can help to elevate an individual’s sense of pride within themselves; moreover, these can lead to the establishment of social networks and feelings of positive obligations towards others (Langlard, Bouteyre, & Rezrazi, 2018; Schwan, Fallonbar, & Milne, 2018; Sherry, 2010). Additionally, programs for detoxification have been shown to help reduce relapse rates among people recovering from homelessness (Kertez, Horton, Friedmann, et al., 2003). Broader reaching programs or facilities such as drop-in centers and psychologically informed environments can help people experiencing homelessness engage in intensive services that can lead to reintegration (Phipps, Seager, Murphy, et al., 2017; Ritchie, 2015; Seager, 2011; Slesnick, Glassman, Garren, et al., 2008).

This literature review examined the themes of home, social capital, family and sense of belonging, environmental factors, and programs/projects for people experiencing homelessness and people recovering from homelessness. Yet throughout this review, social capital is the predominant factor in all of the topics examined in playing an important role for transitioning out of homelessness. Nonetheless, this literature review lacks significant data on the long-term effects of building or rebuilding of social capital through current programs and projects. My case study, however, adds to the existing literature by providing a perspective that touches on all five themes addressed in this literature review. It takes a different critical approach from many key sources by examining how instrumental support can indirectly cultivate emotional support and foster a sense of belonging for people experiencing homelessness in a unique social and natural environment.

### **Methodology**

I completed a three-month long internship in 2019 at the Byron Community Centre (BCC) in Byron Bay, Australia. The center hosts various functions, projects, and services for the local community and runs multiple programs to help people sleeping rough by providing food, showers, dignity bags<sup>6</sup>, temporary shelter during extreme weather events, and more. My internship enabled new research on the work of the BCC and other local organizations with a primary aim of analyzing the potential benefits of their aid to people sleeping rough by providing support beyond basic needs.

I used an ethnographic design and qualitative approach. I conducted field research with participatory observations and the daily taking of field notes that were recorded through digital and physical formats and were transcribed, analyzed, and coded. I also recorded and transcribed six semi-structured fifteen plus minute informal, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews. The

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<sup>6</sup> Dignity bags made by BCC volunteers contain menstrual products, personal hygiene products, sunglasses, and everyday necessities and are provided to vulnerable women.

interviews provided the perspectives of BCC staff, BCC volunteers, and Byron council members who had substantial experience working with and for people sleeping rough in Byron. I chose these methods to ensure that my interviewees would feel as comfortable as possible during our interviews. As my research focused around the concepts of community and social capital, I prioritized maintaining a safe space for my interviewees during interviews in order to foster a mutual feeling of respect and trust.

My unstructured, informal interviews involved asking questions that arose spontaneously through free-flowing conversation. This personalized and casual approach allowed for interviewees to relax during the process. My semi-structured interviews were flexible and frequently involved new, unplanned questions based directly on the responses of the interviewee. The pre-planned questions were specifically designed to gain open-ended responses and the invitation of new topics, ideas, and questions. Using open-ended research questions helped to both generate data and understanding and to reduce preconceived assumptions. Semi-structured interviews not only secured objective comparisons between interviewees but also provided a personalized approach, inviting the exploration of various points that may not have arisen in other interviews. Using both unstructured and semi-structured interviews helped mitigate the ‘tunnel vision’ inherent in only using one type of interview style (Maxwell, 2013, p. 80).

I also drew on bibliographic research, examining academic literature from both the social sciences and experts on my topic and from BCC reports and past projects such as the book *No Fixed Abode: Stories from the streets around Byron Bay* (Byron Bay Community Association, 2017). Using a transdisciplinary approach focusing on community psychology and organizational theory helped to create an overlapping union of intellectual frameworks and build a more holistic perspective on the issue of homelessness, social capital, and community connectedness. I

developed my research methodologies and practices around a ‘People-First’ mindset by prioritizing both research and personal ethics, the relationships I created with the people I worked with, and the decolonization of the language I used throughout my research and moving forward.

Like the majority of existing studies on homelessness, my case study was constrained by a lack of current data and initiatives on and for the local population sleeping rough in Byron Bay and lack of longitudinal data on effects of implemented programs. I also found that my data often contained redundancies given that my interviewees collaborated on some or all projects. Because my interviewees were volunteers for a vulnerable population, it is most likely the case that my dataset lacks reports by individuals who may have been able to provide more insightful information on the topic of homelessness due to their lived experiences. I also chose to keep the identities of my interviewees completely confidential by altering their names and avoiding any descriptive information used in my report that could be used to personally identify them. This allowed my interviewees to feel more at ease and be able to speak their minds without concern that their opinions would be judged by their peers, colleagues, or community. In doing so, I excluded the professions of my interviewees in my report, although this may have provided a more detailed picture of who was involved in the effort to address homelessness. Lastly, while Byron Bay has the second highest number of rough sleepers in New South Wales (Burke, 2017), the city represents a specific community and group of organizations addressing homelessness. While this research adds critical data to the literature on efforts to address homelessness, it also recognizes that those efforts are broad and ongoing beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, I contend that this preliminary research suggests other avenues for further research and data collection. Examining how people sleeping rough in Byron Bay may build social ties and support each other through trauma, how specific resources for building social capital can be implemented

into community services, and how environmental factors and climate may affect how people sleeping rough build community has critically illustrated the importance of allowing and encouraging people sleeping rough to dominate the conversation on how to address homelessness so that they can provide the most accurate insight and meaningful suggestions.

### **Research Ethics**

As an ethnographic researcher, and given my topic and field of inquiry, undertaking my research in an ethical manner was especially important for the process of my case study. In order to pose minimal risk to my research subjects, I avoided undertaking any direct research with vulnerable populations such as conducting interviews with individuals sleeping rough or even people recovering from experiencing homelessness. Instead, I interviewed staff, volunteers, and council members and maintained a field note journal of my participant observations. Before commencing any onsite research, I sought and received approval from my internship organization, established clearly stated ground rules with my supervisor, and informed my coworkers and the people sleeping rough I interacted with of my research.

Obtaining written, informed consent was a major component in conducting an ethical case study. Prior to involving any research participants in my study, I informed them of my research purposes, described any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts they may have faced from my interviews, ensured them that their identity would remain confidential, and made it clear that their participation in my study was completely voluntary. In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for my research participants, this case study avoids the description of anyone in detailed terms to prevent personal identification through my research, and I have maintained the safe, password-protected storage of confidential data. All names in this case study have also been changed in order to protect the privacy of my research participants.

I sought my participants' continuous and ongoing consent throughout the process of my interviews and also offered them a copy of my report to review and request edits before I submitted it as a final document. Additionally, I gave my participants authority over what was recorded during interviews by surrendering control over my recording device to them and allowing them to voluntarily stop the recording at any point on their own accord.

Although English is the official language of Australia, Byron Bay is a hub for travelers. I anticipated that there would be various languages being spoken in the community. Consequently, to be sure that my interviewees were fully informed of the consent process and possible risks involved with partaking in my research, I only conducted interviews with people who had basic to higher level knowledge of and proficiency with English.

An important ethical concern that I aimed to avoid was imposing my own biases from interpretations of research previously gained largely from scholarly articles and theories. Because of the extent of research on homelessness that has been conducted prior to my case study, I tried to conduct observations and interviews without the imposition of my interpretations of research previously obtained largely from scholarly articles and authors. I instead integrated this information into the knowledge provided from my interviewees and mentors. By doing so, I was provided with a more holistic understanding of my topic pertaining specifically to my location and work with the BCC.

I acknowledged that some questions may have been problematic or triggering to participants due to their past experiences or connections with people who are vulnerable. As such, after getting to know my interviewees more personally through my internship, I avoided certain questions with specific interviewees and conducted my interviews with humanistic sensitivity through communication, compassion, empathy, and understanding. I also cancelled interviews

when I felt that my planned interviewee's emotional or physical state had become unstable due to unforeseen, outside factors.

Finally, in an effort to decolonize the language of my research, I chose to practice bias-free and people-first language (PFL) or person-first language (PFL) by using the term 'people sleeping rough' rather than 'rough sleepers' and 'people experiencing homelessness' instead of 'the homeless' or 'homeless people.' PFL puts emphasis on the person before their condition or situation and helps to avoid conscious or subconscious dehumanization (Johnson, 2018). Using PFL was an extremely important aspect of the ethical considerations taken in my research.

### **Findings**

During the time that I interned at the BCC, I found the themes of home, social capital, and space recurring throughout my research. In this section, I will discuss these themes and make use of quotes and excerpts from field notes and interview transcripts to explore, explain, and highlight my findings associated with each area of focus. Each theme is interconnected and related to one another through sub-themes of community and senses of belonging, social support networks, and physical and social spaces.

#### **Home**

The concept of home is multidimensional and involves much more than just a place or location. Many people define home in various ways, and many are unsure themselves as to what home truly means to them ("Peter," personal interview, October 9, 2019; "Lucy," personal interview, October 23, 2019; "Lily," personal interview, November 14, 2019). The most common themes that arose when interviewees were asked about 'home' were issues and ideas regarding safety and material possession (Peter, personal interview, October 9, 2019; "Elle," personal interview, November 7, 2019). The majority of interviewees noted that they felt the concept of



home involved feeling safe, secure, comfortable, a place to go back to, and a place to store one's things and have access to everything needed for survival (Peter, personal interview, October 9, 2019; "Penelope," personal interview, October 16, 2019; Elle, personal interview, November 7, 2019).

Throughout my internship with the BCC, I noted how and when people sleeping rough would use the term 'home'. One community member said to me in conversation, "I am lucky enough to have a small shelter that I have built down at the beach, and I don't consider myself homeless, but technically I am homeless" ("Jay," personal communication, September 17, 2019). Others would refer to their shelters or camps as home, saying, "I've just been home" ("Mike," personal communication, October 31, 2019) or, "Let's go home" ("Celina," personal communication, November 4, 2019). These findings strongly imply that home is more of a fluid and ever-changing state of mind rather than simply a location, material condition, or geographic place of being.

#### **a) Community / Sense of Belonging**

Throughout my interviews, I asked my participants how they viewed the relationship between the concept of home and community. Similar responses were given from multiple interviewees, the majority stating that community has a large and positive effect on their lives and that it involves a sense of belonging to a place and group of people (Peter, personal interview, October 9, 2019; Penelope, personal interview, October 16, 2019; Elle, personal interview, November 7, 2019; Lily, personal interview, November 14, 2019). In being a part of a community, people are able to offer safety, trust, and support to one another, both contributing to the group and taking advantage of it by accessing the resources that others in the group provide (Peter, personal interview, October 9, 2019). The following interview quote highlights the benefits of community:

Well, community is important, you know, no man is an island unto himself when he cannot live on bread alone, which basically means that we need interaction with other people... if you're in a community, and you feel accepted by it, you have friends there, you have people who support you, who know you, who you see often... this all leads to who you feel comfortable with and who bring you joy and [who] you do celebrations with. This is all about community, and this is about belonging in that community. Because if you don't feel as though you belong, then you're not in that community. (Penelope, personal interview, October 16, 2019)

As part of my internship, I volunteered at the Homeless Showers, a BCC project that is run twice a week to provide people sleeping rough with hot showers, toiletries, and clean clothing. The following passage from my field notes illustrates an example of community within the people sleeping rough in Byron Bay:

*Two men walk up to the cabins. Everyone greets the men and their dogs too. Everyone appears to already know one of the men and his dogs, and he introduces them to his friend. They take a seat in the grass with three other clients and start to chat. A woman wanders outside and then laughs and calls me over to show me that the man with the dreads had wrapped up his puppy in his jumper to keep her warm. The woman says, "He f\*\*\*king loves that dog, he treats her like she's his granddaughter!" (Field note, September 16, 2019)*

The volunteers and clients all knew each other by name and greeted one another with kisses on the cheek, hugs, nods, or handshakes (Field note, September 16, 2019; Field note, October 21, 2019; Field note, November 4, 2019; Field note, November 11, 2019). There was a strong level of familiarity between the clients, and they interacted through jokes, conversations about activities in

town, and gossiped about other clients or people sleeping rough in Byron Bay (Field note, September 6, 2019; Field note, September 16, 2019; Field note, October 8, 2019). Their comfort within the space and with one another allowed for community strengthening, an important aspect for addressing the emotional health of the clients.

### **Social Capital**

Being a part of a supportive community and having a sense of belonging to such a community helps to develop and enhance levels of trust and social resources, thus, building upon social capital. This is an important factor in helping people sleeping rough mitigate their situations by helping them access support from others. During a morning at the Homeless Showers, I witnessed an interaction between two clients. One client mentioned that she wanted to shave the back of her head for the summer. Another client told her that the volunteer hairdresser would be coming to the showers in two weeks and that she should just wait until then (Field note, October 21, 2019). During the first week of every month, a volunteer hairdresser, pediatrician, and nurse would come to the showers to administer free services to the clients, helping them to gain a sense of self-esteem and comfort. Their roles as instrumental or basic support providers were appreciated by the clients, and many of the clients looked forward to their arrival the entire month (September 30, 2019).

#### a) **Social Support Networks**

Social capital involves having a community that supports individuals to function with more stability within their society. Without support from others, people sleeping rough can be left to deal with unsafe situations on their own. I observed events in which clients of the BCC were able

to support each other as well as events where they were unable, or possibly unwilling, to offer support to one another.

In one example of an individual having social capital, a client had become a victim of domestic violence by her partner who was also a BCC client (Field note, November 11, 2019). Almost immediately after the first event of abuse, a group of other people sleeping rough came together to support the vulnerable client and provide protection to her. The group also notified BCC volunteers who were then able to anonymously involve the police and monitor the situation during the running of the showers (Field note, November 14, 2019).

In another example given by an interviewee, a young woman with unstable mental health had come into the showers one day. She was a heavy drug user and was sleeping rough.

It was her birthday as well, apparently... She managed to get herself in and have a shower, but then all the other women took her under their wing. She was not really appropriately dressed, and they were asking us, "Do you have this for her? Do you have that for her? Hey [name redacted], try these shoes on. What size are your shoes?" Really, when walking back with her from town... they really noticed that she was vulnerable because of her state. I've seen that with people protecting her before, like men doing that to her as well because I think they can see she can get - yeah, in a state... I think there's a lot of empathy that they have towards her... Even though you can imagine that some say like, "Oh, can you just stop doing this? Can you stop getting yourself in such a state that we have to look after you?" But I haven't seen anybody reprimand her. I think they understand she has lots of trauma. ("Lina," personal interview, November 4, 2019)

This quote shows the high level of support and empathy that certain clients had for one another. The young women in these previous examples were taken under the wings of other clients and

protected by them, showcasing that they had strong levels of social capital within their community and suggesting that social capital is both earned and expressed by others.

The following excerpt from a field note highlights an example of someone with *less* social capital within their community of people sleeping rough:

*I notice someone laying down in the middle of the sidewalk and recognize him as the client who was bitten by one of the other client's dogs last week. He lies on his side in an unnatural position, and his face looks directly into the sun. A paintbrush rests in his hand, and he appears to be passed out with two bottles of wine by his feet. There is nothing else around him. I look around and see that nobody is paying any attention to him - not even the group of people sleeping rough across the street at the park. (October, 23, 2019)*

In previous conversations with other clients, I had been told that the main group of people sleeping rough did not get along with this particular man and that they generally did not like him (Field note, October 14, 2019). In comparison to the young women at the showers, this man appeared to have had a much lower level of social capital.

## **Space**

### **a) Physical and Social**

The way in which a physical space is arranged can either encourage or limit interaction between people. Spaces that are open, large, and leave room for multiple people to be facing one another tend to invite more conversation in comparison to spaces that are divided by walls, are compact, or inhibit a direct view of others (Field note, September 9, 2019; Field note, September 10, 2019; Field note, September 16, 2019). The space where fresh meals were provided to vulnerable people was set up in a courtyard at the back of the BCC with a variety of tables and chairs. Against one wall were small, two-person tables with stools on either side. On the other side

of the space were larger four-person tables and benches where up to six people could sit comfortably on either side (Field note, September 9, 2019). Oftentimes, those who utilized the small tables sat alone and ate their meals quietly, whereas those sitting at the large tables talked together as they ate (Field note, September 17, 2019).



Outside of the community cabin where the showers were held for people sleeping rough was an open, grassy, sports field. On some days, the volunteers and I would set up chairs in a semi-circle in the grass with the opening of the semi-circle facing a large, open, roll-up door to the community cabin. This space allowed the clients to sit facing each other as a group and talk amongst one another (Field note, November 18, 2019). When the chairs were not set up, the clients would still sit outside on the grass, however, they would break off into smaller groups (Field note, September 16, 2019). I observed this similar arrangement in the grassy area of the park across the street from the BCC (Field note, November 10, 2019). The warm environmental climate also allowed for more interaction outside in open spaces rather than inside where the space would be divided by rooms, tables, or immobile chairs (Field note, September 10, 2019).

I observed that people sleeping rough were typically found in groups rather than isolated on their own. I asked one of my interviewees about this, and their response was, “Because they

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<sup>7</sup> Images: Courtyard at the back of the BCC where fresh meals were provided (Field note, September 16, 2019)

want to socialize, they want to be around other people, and it's also safe" (Peter, personal interview, October 9, 2019).

### **Programs and Projects**

The programs and projects geared towards helping people sleeping rough in Byron Bay were generally aimed at addressing their basic needs: meals, showers, clean clothing, temporary shelter during extreme weather events. "If you don't have a basic level of human needs satisfied, then you get all sorts of problems" (Peter, personal interview, October 9, 2019). When people are able to escape survival mode because they have food in their bodies, a way to maintain personal hygiene, and have access to basic amenities, they generally begin to behave in a more positive manner due to the lowering of adrenaline and cortisol levels (Peter, personal interview, October 9, 2019; Field note, September 26, 2019). The following interview quote elaborates on this:

I can see that people get edgy. A lot of the homeless people get a little bit more narky with each other and a bit more edgy. I can see they'll come to the showers or when I've seen the videos of the hub that we had here, how that relaxes people. It's like, especially people who have experienced trauma, which most of them have, it allows people to just... their cells can relax. It's like, "Oh I'm in a safe place. I can just breathe out, I can relax." And then all of a sudden they can communicate better. You know, it's like they're a bit more warm and open to each other, they're not on the defense. And I've seen at the showers people sitting there on the couch working out arguments that they had over the weekend. You know, things like that. I've been really quite impressed. And then if something negative goes down, like, you see everyone looking out for someone, "Okay, we've got to protect this person." It is quite a strong community. (Lily, personal interview, November 14, 2019)

Not only did the local services provided to people sleeping rough allow for people's physical needs to be met, but they furthermore allowed for them to have a sense of dignity (Penelope, personal interview, October 16, 2019). Clients were furthermore able to create friendships and connections in these spaces by coming to regular, communal gatherings like meals and showers that were held at specific times and locations with which they could familiarize themselves (Elle, personal interview, November 7, 2019). They are also given the opportunity to bond over food (Elle, personal interview, November 7, 2019) and treat one another respectfully (Lina, personal interview, November 4, 2019; Lily personal interview, November 14, 2019).

### **Discussion**

During the initial stages of my research, I based my concepts of support on the motivational theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Many services addressing homelessness tend to focus on meeting basic needs, such as food, shelter, and safety. However, even if basic needs have been met, when people are unable to access support for their psychological needs, they may still be struggling to survive emotionally. This case study supports the importance of Psychologically Informed Environments and indicates that the building or rebuilding of social capital involves both community connections as well as accessibility to public community spaces for people sleeping rough in Byron Bay. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a starting point and base theory but critiquing the necessity for a focus on a pyramid-like structure, I suggest that psychological and physiological needs can be simultaneously supported through programs and projects *directly* geared toward addressing basic needs. While the theory is useful in identifying different human needs, its linear approach does not accurately reflect the importance of conditions and connections that are every bit as fundamental to human survival as physical well-being. Simultaneously addressing both psychological and physiological needs can be done through the *indirect* creation



of space for service users to feel a sense of belonging within a physical area as well as with other community members, therefore, building upon already existing social capital or helping to foster connections that will create new social capital. This can aid people sleeping rough in avoiding events or conflicts that could potentially worsen their situations by establishing social trust and providing access or knowledge of resources by others.

Many of my findings point to the importance of community connection and social capital for people experiencing homelessness or sleeping rough, as also expressed by other researchers (Barker, 2012; Bowen, Barman-Adhikai, Bender, et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2017; Marr, 2012; Sherry, 2010; Thulien, Gastaldo, McCay, et al., 2018; Nicholson, 2013). I found examples of this when clients were faced with difficult situations such as domestic violence or health issues, and they had a strong social support system of both other people sleeping rough and BCC volunteers. Without this community to support them, these clients may have been put into even more dangerous situations such as the example from my field notes of the man passed out on the sidewalk. In contrast to the other examples of women being supported by their social group, this man's lower level of social capital prevented him from accessing support from his community when his health was in a potentially dangerous situation.

Spaces that allowed for more communication and close interaction like the showers, community meals, and park spaces also facilitated the building of social capital through personal relationships between people that amplified social trust, empathy, and community membership. Small acts of clients or volunteers looking out for one another, such as providing information on when the hairdresser would be coming or helping a client find clothing when they noticed that they were inadequately dressed can evolve into providing larger scale support such as resources to help achieve health goals or protecting them from physical violence.

## Conclusions

Throughout my time working with the BCC and familiarizing myself with the volunteers and clients, my researching process evolved drastically. I began my case study with the perception that services for vulnerable people focused on addressing their basic needs were lacking in supporting emotional needs. However, through my research, I found that the services in Byron Bay do indeed help clients to find emotional support and gain protective qualities on health and well-being by providing safe spaces where they are given the opportunity to look after one another and be looked after as well.

The building or rebuilding of social capital is significant to the health and well-being for people sleeping rough in Byron Bay, Australia, as factors involved with community connection and social support, such as social trust, information, and resources, can aid in mitigating the worsening of events directly affecting them. This case study highlights the importance of providing access to safe spaces in which these connections can be developed, and finds that it is possible for emotional needs to be simultaneously supported through programs created to address basic needs. In order to more fully understand how social capital can assist people sleeping rough, I suggest that further research be conducted to look at how different environmental factors such as climate, weather, cultural contexts, and societal norms can affect social integration or isolation in various locations around the world. Furthermore, I suggest that research be conducted on how social capital can aid people at risk of falling into rough sleeping through preventative support. I also suggest that the voices of people sleeping rough and people who have experienced rough sleeping must always be recognized and heard within all discussions regarding how to address homelessness. It cannot be overstated how valuable the sharing of their lived experiences can be

for both the people sleeping rough and for those who develop programs and services intended to address particular local and specific homelessness issues.

From both my bibliographic and field research, I discovered the importance of specific terminology for experiences and people experiencing them. Intriguingly, searching for information by using categories, such as ‘homeless’ and ‘rough sleepers’ highlighted that these categories often did not describe the unique, personal experiences of the people about which I sought information. This realization became a vital aspect of my commitment to decolonize my research language and use people-first language like ‘people sleeping rough’ rather than ‘homeless people.’ Per contra, as someone who lives in the socially accepted definition of ‘home’, I would like to recognize the privilege that I have as a researcher in using the term sleeping rough.’ To be sleeping rough is defined as sleeping in open air or in inadequate shelter (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2017). However, my people-first approach determines that descriptions of what is, or might ultimately be considered, ‘adequate’ or ‘inadequate’ must be defined by those who are living in those shelters. In the future, I seek to provide more accurately self-described accounts from the people experiencing it to further prevent categorizing individuals solely by their living situations. I hope that my research will both inspire other scholars and service providers to consider how they can alter or amplify multiple types of support to be more inclusive of various needs and thoughtfully assess how the terminology used in their research may label others and, in turn, affect how others may respond to their situations.

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### **Appendix A.**

Interview questions for personal interview with Peter on October 9, 2019:

- 1) To start off, I would love to know how you define homelessness.
- 2) How do you define home itself?

- 3) Do you think “community” has any part in how home is defined for you?
- 4) How long were you working at the BCC?
- 5) How do you think working with the BCC and [content redacted] has affected the way you see and interact with the Byron community?
- 6) How have you noticed that people who are experiencing homelessness interact both with other people experiencing homelessness or people not experiencing homelessness?
- 7) How do you find that local services specifically geared towards people experiencing homelessness allow for socialization between them and others?
- 8) Where do you think would be a good spot for a drop-in center?
- 9) Could you speak a little bit more about why you think people experiencing homelessness are drawn to where other people are?
- 10) Why do you think perceptions of backpackers are different from people experiencing homelessness, even though both are semi-transient and many are living out of a backpack?

### **Appendix B.**

Interview questions for personal interview with Penelope on October 16, 2019:

- 1) How long have you worked at the BCC?
- 2) How do you define homelessness itself?
- 3) How would you define home for yourself?
- 4) Would you say that people would still be considered homeless if they [had security and comfort but] are still living without a fixed abode?
- 5) Do you think maybe “houselessness” could be a term that should be used?

- 6) What kind of role does community play in your life and how do you think it benefits you?
- 7) How has working with the BCC affected the way you view the Byron community?
- 8) Who would you say is a part of Byron Bay's community?
- 9) How have you noticed that people experiencing homelessness interact with each other?
- 10) How do you think that the services provided in Byron Bay, at least such as [content removed for confidentiality] and the hot showers can help allow and facilitate socialization?
- 11) How do you think these services can help people experiencing homelessness to move out of it?
- 12) Have you seen any instances, and if you have, can you give examples of people experiencing homelessness supporting other people also experiencing that?
- 13) How do you think perceptions of people experiencing homelessness are different than other transient people?
- 14) Going beyond instrumental support such as food, a roof over your head, showers, how do you think then that emotional support and community connection can help with that feeling?

### **Appendix C.**

Interview questions for personal interview with Lucy on October 23, 2019:

- 1) How do you define homelessness?
- 2) How would you yourself define what home is?

- 3) Would you say that people would be considered homeless even if they have a... like they're not in a fixed abode, but they still feel community connectedness? Would you say they still have a home there?
- 4) Do you think maybe "houselessness" could be a better term rather than "homelessness" if you don't personally feel like you're without a home, however, lacking a fixed abode?
- 5) What kind of role does community have in your personal life? And how do you think it benefits you?
- 6) Has working here affected how you view the Byron Bay community?
- 7) So what have been your initial perspectives or just observations so far of the community?
- 8) How have you seen, just on the street or in the community center, people experiencing homelessness interacting with each other?
- 9) Do you think that the services that have been provided here in Byron to people experiencing homelessness, such as either the Hot showers or Liberation Larder, do you think they allow for a kind of socialization?
- 10) How do you think that these kinds of services can help people experiencing homelessness start to move out of homelessness?
- 11) Do you think Byron is lacking any really important services?
- 12) So since we don't have a lot of services in Byron, have you noticed any people experiencing homelessness supporting each other?
- 13) What do you think would be the best location for a service such as the Drop-In center? Should it be in town, right in the center, or maybe off to the side?

#### **Appendix D.**

Interview questions for personal interview with Lina on November 4, 2019:

- 1) To start out my first question is how do you define homelessness?
- 2) Do you believe that people can still be considered homeless even if they're living in a fixed abode?
- 3) What role does community have in your life and how do you think it benefits you?
- 4) How has working at the showers and just here in general affected how you view the Byron community?
- 5) How have you noticed people experiencing homelessness interacting with each other here?
- 6) Do you think that the services that Byron has, that are provided to people experiencing homelessness, do you think that they create a space for good socialization?
- 7) What other than a drop-in center can you think of any other local services that we might need there?
- 8) What are some examples that you can give of people experiencing homelessness supporting each other?

### **Appendix E.**

Interview questions for personal interview with Elle on November 7, 2019:

- 1) My first question is how do you define homelessness?
- 2) How do you define home?
- 3) What role does community have in your life and how do you think it benefits you?
- 4) Do you think that community has to do with how you define home?
- 5) How has working here at the BBC affected the way you view the Byron community?
- 6) How have you noticed that people experiencing homelessness interact with each other?
- 7) Can you give an example of them supporting each other?
- 8) Can you think of any other services in the local area that we might be lacking in Byron?

- 9) I've been thinking about terms... like "homeless". In recent years, I know a lot of advocates have been switching over to the term "houselessness". What are your thoughts on that?

### **Appendix F.**

Interview questions for personal interview with Lily on November 14, 2019:

- 1) My first question is how do you define homelessness?
- 2) What is your definition of home?
- 3) What role does community have in your life and how do you think it benefits you?
- 4) Would you say that your idea of community has anything to do with also your idea of home?
- 5) Who would you say is part of the Byron community?
- 6) How has working here at the BCC affected the way you view the Byron community?
- 7) Going back to homelessness, how have you noticed that people experiencing homelessness interact with each other?
- 8) Can you give some examples of how you've seen them supporting each other?
- 9) Do you think that the services provided to people experiencing homelessness such as the showers or Liberation Larder provide for or kind of encourage that kind of support and socialization?
- 10) Do you think that the services provide a way to help them transition out of homelessness?

### **Appendix G.**

**LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY GLOBAL Informed Consent Form for Human Research**  
**Subjects**

You are being asked to volunteer in a research study called Case Study Report conducted by Terra Huey, student of Long Island University Global. This project will be supervised by Professor Jocelyn Lieu, Senior Thesis Coordinator, and Nigel Hayes, Senior Thesis Advisor. The purpose of the research is to gain knowledge on how the building or rebuilding of social capital can aid those experiencing houselessness for a case study under the global lenses of economic inequality, poverty, and access to livelihoods.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in a structured or semi-structured interview on \_\_\_\_\_ . There are minimum to no possible risks, but possible discomfort may derive from answering honestly during the interview. While there is no direct benefit for your participation in the study, it is reasonable to expect that the results may provide information of value for the fields of homelessness, poverty, and social issues. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time.

This study involves the audio or video recording of your interview with the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recording or transcript. Only the research team will be able to listen (view) to the recordings. The tapes will be transcribed by the researcher and erased once the transcripts are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice or picture) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study.

Unless you otherwise agree, your identity as a participant will remain confidential. Your name will not be included in any forms, questionnaires, etc. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant in this study; it will be stored securely on the investigator's Blackboard Journal, available only to the investigator and the above-listed faculty overseeing the project. Data collected will be stored for further research. Results will be reported only in the aggregate. If you are interested in seeing these results, you may contact the principal investigator or faculty sponsors.



If you have questions about the research you may contact the student investigator, Terra Huey at +61 473 188 770 or [terra.huey@my.liu.edu](mailto:terra.huey@my.liu.edu) or the faculty sponsors, Jocelyn Lieu (+1 646 279 6678; [jocelyn.lieu@liu.edu](mailto:jocelyn.lieu@liu.edu)) and Nigel Hayes ([nigel.hayes@liu.edu](mailto:nigel.hayes@liu.edu)). If you have questions concerning your rights as a subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Administrator and Assistant Director of Sponsored Programs, Professor Lacey Sischo (+1 516 229 3591; [lacey.sischo@liu.edu](mailto:lacey.sischo@liu.edu)).

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature indicates that you have fully read the above text and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures of this study. Your signature also acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate.

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Typed/Printed Name of Participant

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Typed/Printed Name of Investigator

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Signature of Investigator

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Date