

“Tell them what they want to hear”: Re-considering assessment practices with people who are homeless

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Understanding 'needs'



Descriptive	Positional	Ideological
a) Horizontal – broad and comprehensive lists (e.g. Phelan et al, 1995)	Positionality impacts one's perspective on need	Strong, tidal discourses frame how need can be understood (Gowan, 1999)
b) Vertical – hierarchies of need or sequences of need (e.g. Maslow, Spicker)	e.g. Bradshaw's (1972) typology of need	Four interlinking discourses are identified
c) Qualitative – thin/thick (e.g. Doyal and Gough)	a) Felt Need – Subjective	a) Moralistic
d) Quantitative – Multiplicity = Complex Needs = Wicked Problem (e.g. Valentine, 2016)	b) Expressed Need – Demand	b) Paternalistic
	c) Normative Need – Cultural	c) Social reformist
	d) Comparative Need – Competition	d) Economistic

Homelessness, Need and Assessment



Fitzpatrick's (2011) conception of "Multiple Exclusion Homelessness" recognises the overlapping areas of exclusion and complex need involved in long-term homelessness.

- Normative socio-legal frameworks do not map easily to subjectively felt needs – particularly for those on the periphery of services (Mason et al, 2017)
- Are we talking about complex needs or complex services? (Balda, 2016; Renedo, 2014)
- Homelessness services have been impacted (like all services) by austerity and this leads to increasing competition for services (Quirolette, 2016; Dobson, 2018; Dwyer et al, 2015)
- Assessment is likely to be more procedural and episodic than relational and phased (Smale et al., 1993)
- Studies refer to people presenting their vulnerability in ways that fit the expectations of such services (Cook and Hole, 2020; Dwyer et al, 2015)

Conceptual Framework: Mis-recognition and Epistemic Injustice



Mis-recognition (Honneth, 1996)

- Self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect are enabled by forms of 'recognition' by others.
- In the absence of recognition, a person experiences hurt, humiliation and shame.
- The adverse childhood experiences associated with homelessness underpin the relevance of
- In homelessness this can include neglect by professional actors (Houston, 2016)
- Nancy Fraser (1996) has argued that this needs to be complemented by a theory of re-distribution to account for structural barriers.

Epistemic Injustice (Fricker, 2007)

- knowledge-related (epistemic) injustice (that particularly affects those with outside statuses) can occur when power dynamics are used to deflate a person's credibility
- Two forms – testimonial (not giving credit to person's own account) or hermeneutic (person is prevented from articulating themselves or understanding themselves in particular ways due to social or cultural barriers)
- This can happen when people who are homeless are thought of as 'unreliable historians' or where their situation is explained away as a 'lifestyle choice'

Methodology – In summary...



Research Question:

How are 'needs' understood, navigated and supported in a homelessness hostel environment

Today: Findings re: Assessment of Need

Case study methodology

Research Site:

'City Hostel' – 50-bed, mixed gender, complex needs hostel in a city centre

Data Collection

23 days on site at hostel over 4 months (Nov 2023-Feb 24)

28 resident interviews with 20 individuals

25 staff/in-reach staff interviews with 22 individuals

42 structured observations (25 handover meetings, 4 team meetings, 13 keywork meetings)

Documentary analysis of 20 policy / induction / online / brochure / noticeboard documents

Homelessness and the Experience of Assessment



“An assessment is basically where **they find out your needs and how they can support you** and you know the right avenues and the right services they could refer you to and also to find out **are you high risk, you know, are you a danger**, you know, you know what high risk is? Well, I know what it is in jail, so **if you’re high risk** you basically can’t share, you have to be on your own, I don’t think they’d put you in a hostel like this where its communal, **they’ll like put you in a place** that’s smaller, you know, you don’t have the social skills, you’re like.. is it psychopathic?” (Leonie – Interview)

“**Services are really preoccupied with women’s physical safety but seem quite disinterested in their emotional safety.** You know, we might ask clients you know how much they're using or what their perpetrator did, but we're not particularly bothered about, you know, how it made them feel necessarily. Lots of women actually said I I've had so much violence in my life, I don't really care about more of that or **I have had so much risk in my life, I don't really care about more of that, but when someone disregards my emotional safety, that really hurts or that really makes the difference**” (Lucy – In-Reach Women’s Service – Interview)

Assessments as Exhausting, Repetitive, A 'Talking Shop'



Rohan: I'm being listened to but I'm not feeling heard. I sort of feel like I've had enough. I am feeling really triggered by it if I'm honest. I mean I get that she's stretched but it feels like I'm being forced to do the assessment in her office at 4pm. **They say beggars can't be choosers – and here it just feels so true.**

(Keyword Meeting – Rohan and Robert)

It takes years, same old story, same old questions, its always the same. **He's got a folder 2 feet tall on me, it's a copy of everything about me, but he is not listening.** Some professionals just get fed up, they make big money but they can be very unprofessional to you, treat you unprofessionally (Ishmael Interview)

Assessments as embarrassing, exposing, an opportunity to feel judged



“It’s a bit **daunting** you know, because you’re taking to a **complete stranger** about things that are personal that you haven’t probably gotten over yourself. And you don’t even know what is happening to you, you don’t know the root of it, you don’t know how to overcome it or nothing and you’re now speaking to a stranger about it and it’s ‘**oh no, what a waste of space, just another druggie from a hostel**’” (Leonie)

“It’s **intrusive**, talking about drug use and mental health, **it’s not happy stuff** like, it’s pretty heavy. And **you end up going over everything with different people**, it gets a bit much. Afterwards, they didn’t think I would be suitable because a dealer lived there 3 years ago, which is weird because I’ve lived here for about a year and its full of dealing (Keyword - Tom and Marcus)” (Tom)

Coping with Assessments – ‘Telling them what they want to hear’ & Performative ‘Going through motions’



“99% of the time you probably don’t tell the truth Yeah that’s normally the way it goes. I think so. I mean you’re not going to say all the dark things, all the personal things, but you say things that sound normal or acceptable”
(Leonie - Interview)

“I’m a social drinker, its not a support need and it doesn’t matter because I’m not an alcoholic and I’m not at risk of becoming an alcoholic so we can put what we want in here. We can put, like beer, **rum and coke, no don’t put rum and coke down cos then they’ll think I drink spirits and that’ll be a mark against me**” (Keyword Meeting – Tom and Marcus)

“I'm indifferent to it, I don't see it as good or bad, as long as it's for my benefit and it's going to help me out in the long run. But **really just go along with it**”
(Stanley – Interview)

Navigating assessments and thinking about alternative strategies



Independent Advocacy – “Going to meetings, I need someone to talk for me and like have an advocate” (Ishmael, Resident)

Whole system working – “we were telling housing the person needs to have accommodation before we are able to complete the assessment. Again, this is something that I would like to deconstruct” (Sabrina, Social Work Liaison)

Assessment over time – “It just feels like a very overwhelming experience and ideally it would be much more spread over time” (Phil – Hostel Staff)

Flexibility / In-reach – “The drugs worker would say I'm not going to give her this appointment unless you can guarantee that she will come. And you kind of say ‘well that's not actually how our clients work’” (Fiona – Housing First in-reach)

Passports rather than assessments – “clients are now going to have so-called passports or something like that, so a little bit like the story of my life” (Julia, Manager)

Housing First – “Housing First is the idea that you give someone like independent housing and with support from a housing first worker and giving them that kind of independence and their own home will support them to sustain a tenancy, but also to get more support and generally within the community” (Tessa – Housing First In-reach).