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Creating livable lives: A qualitative exploration of life after homelessness

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ABSTRACT

The transition from homelessness to a housed life involves complex psychosocial processes that cannot be reduced to the mere fact of securing accommodation. While Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) approaches have shown success in achieving housing stability, less attention has been paid to how people construct meaningful lives after securing permanent housing. Through field observations and in-depth interviews conducted over multiple time points, we developed a relational framework synthesising recognition theory, feminist care ethics, and Indigenous scholarship to analyse participants' experiences. Our findings reveal how neighbourhood disadvantage, trauma histories, and social stigma continue to shape participants' possibilities for living well, even after they achieve housing stability. Participants described profound existential challenges, boredom, isolation, and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement, which often triggered returns to substance use and exacerbated mental health issues. Despite these constraints, participants actively sought to create livable lives by establishing safety, forging knots of connections across human/non-human boundaries, and seeking opportunities to contribute their knowledge and skills to others. These findings challenge service models prioritising personal transformation while overlooking the nuanced ways formerly homeless people engage in collective 'worlding' practices. This research suggests that effective support along pathways out of homelessness must extend beyond mere housing provision and clinical services to facilitate meaningful community participation and reciprocal relationships. Rather than gauging success through housing retention alone, approaches should foster opportunities for contribution that celebrate interdependence and recognise the valuable perspectives that people with lived experience bring to community-building efforts.

1. Introduction

Homelessness represents far more than the absence of housing, it embodies a profound exclusion from society that fundamentally shifts daily existence from living well to the immediate imperatives of survival (Nemiroff et al., 2011). Permanent supportive housing (PSH) has proven successful as an evidence-based intervention, providing the stable foundation necessary for people to move beyond these survival concerns (Rog et al., 2014). However, investigations into what makes life worth living for people with biographies of long-term homelessness remain limited in scholarly literature (Wenzel & La Motte-Kerr, 2023), despite the fundamental premise that opportunities for meaningful existence should not be constrained by housing status or socioeconomic circumstances. Existing research that does examine post-housing outcomes tends to focus on individual measures of housing stability, healthcare utilisation, and behavioural health symptoms (Aubry et al., 2020), failing to measure what people who are formerly homeless themselves identify as essential in rebuilding their lives (Parsell et al., 2020). Further, this individualistic focus obscures the profoundly relational dimensions of human flourishing (Cruikshank, 1999), and overlooks a critical question: how do people with histories of long-term homelessness create livable lives after years of social and structural exclusion?

In the context of this paper, a livable life is understood as a broad concept encompassing various aspects of a fulfilling and healthy life as defined by the participants, including physical, mental, and social wellbeing. We examine these accounts through relational theoretical frameworks to understand how social conditions shape possibilities for post-homelessness flourishing.

1.1. Housing interventions and ongoing social exclusion

Recent sociological inquiry has repositioned post-homelessness as a

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complex transitional process rather than a static endpoint (Parsell, 2018), revealing barriers including persistent stigmatisation, fractured support networks, and challenges in identity reconstruction (Johnson et al., 2018). These challenges are particularly pronounced for people exiting long-term homelessness, which is characterised by extended periods of rough sleeping and complex needs including addiction, chronic illness, disability, mental illness, and/or traumatic brain injury. Approximately 50–60 % of this population requires permanent supportive housing interventions to achieve housing stability (Alves et al., 2021). To address these needs, Housing First is an evidence-based approach that provides immediate access to permanent housing without preconditions, followed by wraparound support services for people experiencing long-term homelessness (Alves et al., 2021). In Australia, this model combines affordable housing with on-site support targeted towards vulnerable people and those experiencing long-term homelessness (Mercy Foundation, 2018). While PSH successfully provides housing stability and reduces emergency service use (Kerman et al., 2021), ongoing challenges persist.

Ethnographic research reveals that formerly homeless people often experience supportive housing as isolating, struggling to rebuild connections after years of marginalisation (Valentine et al., 2020). Australian qualitative studies highlight how formerly homeless people navigate what Batterham (2018) terms 'precarious inclusion', a liminal state where housing security alone fails to resolve marginalisation. Traditional pathways to social integration remain largely foreclosed for people with histories of long-term homelessness, due to scarce employment opportunities, interrupted work histories, persistent health challenges, and ongoing employer discrimination (Marinucci et al., 2023) while institutional barriers continue to position them as service recipients rather than potential contributors (Braun and Clarke, 2019). These findings indicate that people with histories of long-term homelessness continue to experience significant social isolation and exclusion from meaningful participation despite securing accommodation (Duff et al., 2021; Luchenski et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, research illustrates that sustainable exits from homelessness depend on rebuilding social connections and fostering community belonging (Valentine et al., 2020), and that among formerly homeless PSH residents, community integration and sense of belonging are significantly and positively associated with life meaning (Wenzel & La Motte-Kerr, 2023). Social exclusion on the other hand, has been shown to diminish life meaning (Freedman et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021), while ethnographic insights from COVID-19 responses to homelessness revealed the fundamentally relational nature of housing stability, questioning individualised approaches to intervention (Parsell et al., 2020). While valuable scholarship has examined ontological security, homemaking practices, and sense of belonging in supportive housing contexts (Henwood et al., 2018; Milligan et al., 2024), these studies typically focus on specific dimensions of post-housing experience rather than exploring how formerly homeless people themselves define and actively construct meaningful existence.

1.2. Beyond housing: living well after homelessness

Recovery frameworks guide many mental health and addiction services for homeless and formerly homeless people, particularly in programs designed to address complex needs alongside housing instability (Khan et al., 2020). Despite the research emphasising the social and relational process of post-homelessness recovery, contemporary recovery frameworks applied to post-homelessness contexts foreground largely individual outcomes. The influential CHIME framework, derived from a systematic review of recovery literature, identifies recovery processes—Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment—as individual achievements rather than collectively negotiated experiences (Leamy et al., 2011). Such models can mask neoliberal ideologies that transform structural inequality into personal responsibility (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2016; Parsell and Marston, 2016), where trauma becomes a personal challenge to overcome rather than a response to structural violence (Price-Robertson et al., 2017).

These limitations extend to how wellbeing is conceptualised more broadly. Despite its proliferation across popular discourse and institutions, there remains a lack of agreement regarding the definition, conceptualisation, or operationalisation of wellbeing, nor any clear evidence of its success as an instrument of policy (Jackson et al., 2022). White and Blackmore (2015) note that the ubiquity and diffusion of meanings around wellbeing create confusion across different interests and agendas. Moreover, the concept has mostly been conceptualised from a psychological perspective emphasising personal states and subjective experiences, such as life satisfaction, positive affect, and individual self-actualisation (Jackson et al., 2022). Such critiques highlight how dominant wellbeing discourses may inadvertently serve to individualise what are fundamentally social and structural issues. Critical scholars argue that a more fruitful way to operationalise wellbeing for sociological investigation may be to shift focus from psychology's subjective elements to assessing contextual prerequisites for wellbeing (McLeod and Wright, 2016).

Within the post-homelessness context, particularly in PSH and Housing First programs, research has predominantly concentrated on measurable outcomes such as housing retention (Carnemolla and Skinner, 2021), health service utilisation (Hanson and Gillespie, 2024; Hunter et al., 2022; Lachaud et al., 2021), and reductions in mental health and substance use symptoms (Ferguson et al., 2024). While valuable qualitative studies have explored recovery experiences and transitions out of homelessness (Phipps et al., 2022), and extensive knowledge exists about homelessness itself (Parsell, 2011; Snow and Anderson, 1987), including pathways into homelessness (van Laere et al., 2009; Watson et al., 2016), current experiences of homelessness (Om et al., 2022), and the complex social and structural factors that sustain it (Parsell, 2011, 2018; Plage et al., 2025), research examining how formerly homeless people define and create meaningful lives remains scarce (Wenzel & La Motte-Kerr, 2023). This study seeks to examine this gap by exploring how people with histories of long-term homelessness create livable lives after being housed, as defined and understood by participants themselves.

2. Relational worldmaking: approaches to understanding post-homelessness flourishing

Given the conceptual limitations outlined above, and evidence for the importance of acknowledging social and material embeddedness in post-homelessness recovery, this study draws on relational theoretical approaches to understand how people with histories of long-term homelessness create livable lives through collective practices of recognition and kinship.

Honneth's (1995) recognition theory provides a systematic framework for understanding human flourishing as fundamentally intersubjective. He argues that *the good life* emerges not through isolated self-actualisation but through intersubjective processes across three spheres, those of love (emotional support), rights (legal recognition), and social esteem (community acknowledgment), that enable self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem respectively. Homelessness profoundly disrupts recognition across all spheres. People face systematic denial of rights, fractured relationships, and pervasive social devaluation through daily experiences of bureaucratic and civil misrecognition (Bova, 2022). These experiences manifest somatically: discrimination correlates with depression and threats to fundamental needs of belonging and self-esteem (Marinucci et al., 2023), while social exclusion compromises both psychological and physical health (Watson et al., 2016). Importantly, Honneth's emancipatory approach avoids prescribing specific lifestyles or imposing abstract ideals of the good life, instead identifying recognition structures necessary for people to determine their own paths to flourishing. This framework helps explain why housing alone proves insufficient; healing requires restoring social

bonds, civic participation, and valued roles that enable meaningful recognition.

Feminist care ethics and Indigenous knowledge systems challenge the myth of autonomous selfhood underlying recovery models. Indigenous scholars argue that the good life emerges through community connections, kinship networks and cultural continuity rather than simply via individual achievement (Gardner et al., 2024; Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). These perspectives reveal interdependence as constitutive of human flourishing, not as a failure of self-sufficiency (Barnes and Cotterell, 2012). Haraway's (2016) concept of 'making kin' extends this relational framework by showing how meaningful connections can occur across species and technological boundaries. For Haraway, the good life is fundamentally about 'ongoingness', the possibility of making life together with others beyond just surviving. As she states: *"the task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other"* in a damaged world (p. 2). This involves recognising our situated connections rather than claiming universal abstractions: *"Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something"* (p. 31). Haraway's notion of 'staying with the trouble' emphasises creating meaningful existence within damaged landscapes rather than demanding transformation toward idealised wellness. For people carrying histories of trauma, substance use, mental illness, and poverty, this approach validates their experiences without requiring conformity to normative ideals of recovery.

Butler's concept of livable lives provides the critical framework for understanding how this relational worldmaking occurs within structural constraints. Butler (2022) contends that not all lives are considered 'a life': before we can consider what constitutes a good life, one must first be recognised as having a life worth sustaining. The concept allows for figuring out ways to endure, persist and 'become possible' (Butler, 2022) when conventional pathways to recognition are foreclosed. Applied to post-homelessness contexts, this framework exposes the systemic conditions that make certain populations, such as people who use drugs or experience mental health issues, systematically invisible, their suffering unacknowledged and their humanity questioned. Butler's framework enables analysis of how institutional arrangements establish the parameters within which formerly homeless people must negotiate the relational worldmaking practices that Indigenous scholarship and Haraway describe. Creating livable lives therefore requires both challenging broader social conditions and cultivating practices of recognition and kinship within structurally constrained environments.

Together, these approaches conceptualise livable lives as emerging through relational worldmaking, recognition across multiple spheres (Honneth, 1995), community-based kinship networks (Indigenous scholarship), and creative connection-making beyond conventional boundaries (Haraway), while acknowledging the structural conditions that shape whose lives are deemed valuable (Butler). This synthesis enables examination of how people actively create meaningful existence through collective practices of recognition and kinship, while navigating institutional arrangements that both enable and constrain these relational possibilities. By synthesising feminist care ethics and Indigenous scholarship, this paper reimagines Bulter's conceptualisation of livable lives to encompass what having a valuable life means to the person living it, and how they actively construct that life.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative, longitudinal research design that incorporated ethnographic methods, to investigate the experiences and evolving support needs of people who had transitioned from long-term homelessness to stable housing. Grounded in interpretivist and constructionist traditions (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), the research sought to understand how formerly homeless people construct livable lives after securing housing and the meanings and understandings they attach to living well. The analysis approaches post-homelessness not as resolved deprivation but as a complex social position where particular forms of knowledge, memory, and relatedness continue to shape identity. The relevant Health District Ethics Committee approved this study.

Following Ethics approval, participants were recruited from a housing-first social housing building in Sydney, Australia. To protect participant confidentiality given the limited number of such facilities in Sydney, we do not provide identifying details about the specific building. Recruitment occurred through advertisements in common areas, presentations at resident meetings, direct referrals from clinicians, and snowball sampling. All participants self-identified for the study, were aged 18 years or older, and had histories of long-term homelessness with complex needs.

Nineteen people participated in an interview; eight women and eleven men. To capture the temporal dimensions of participants' experiences and evolving support and care needs, a longitudinal approach was adopted. Twelve participants completed follow-up interviews approximately 12 months after their initial interview. A further six participated in three focus groups (two men and four women) exploring different aspects of post-housing life, including social relationships, daily routines, and community participation. Some participants attended multiple focus groups. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 58 years and had resided in the building for periods ranging from 6 months to 14 years. All participants experienced multiple forms of social and material disadvantage, including mental health concerns, racism, substance use issues, trauma histories and financial hardship.

To ensure meaningful engagement throughout the research process, a consumer advocacy committee consisting of residents was established. This committee played a critical role in refining research priorities, developing recruitment strategies, reviewing interview guides, and discussing findings and interpretations. Three inquiry groups with this committee were conducted, each lasting 90–120 min.

Data were collected between January 2024 and March 2025. The first author conducted participant observations over six months, taking part in daily activities and attending social events and tenant meetings to learn about the explicit and tacit aspects of the building (Musante and DeWalt, 2010). Field notes were recorded throughout all data collection activities, e.g. interviews, focus groups, and observations, capturing both observable interactions and critical reflections on the researcher's role in co-producing knowledge with participants. This reflexive practice acknowledged the relational nature of qualitative inquiry and the researcher's active role in knowledge construction (Riessman, 2008).

Following informed consent procedures, semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one in either participants' homes or common areas within the building. Initial interviews (45–75 min) explored participants' experiences of health, homelessness, transition to housing, and post-housing support needs. Follow-up interviews focused on social networks, relationships, personal conceptions of wellbeing ("what makes a good life", "can you give me an example of a good day"), and strategies for managing challenges and thriving. The first author, a white woman with extensive experience in qualitative research with disadvantaged populations and social science methods, conducted all interviews, focus groups and inquiry groups. Detailed field notes were recorded after each data collection event, including critical reflections on the researcher's role in co-producing knowledge with participants.

All interviews were professionally transcribed, reviewed for accuracy, and de-identified. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain confidentiality. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach to deeply explore the meanings of home, health and recovery, including underlying, covert or implicit meaning of such social phenomenon. Initial analysis employed an inductive open coding process using NVivo software to systematically code the entire dataset (including interview and focus group transcripts and ethnographic field notes). Observational data were used to triangulate emerging themes and contextualise participant narratives, particularly in relation to relational dynamics and environmental stressors. This generated

preliminary codes related to participants' accounts of health experiences, housing transitions, and significant life events (e.g., substance use, homelessness, interpersonal conflicts). The first author led the initial coding and theme development, which were then discussed and refined collaboratively with the consumer advocacy committee and the broader research team. These discussions enriched the interpretive process and ensured that the analysis was grounded in lived experience and informed by multiple perspectives. The analytical focus then narrowed to explore how participants constructed meanings around well-being and conceptions of "a good life". Transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data before detailed coding. The analysis specifically examined how structural and social embeddedness, and lived experiences of long-term homelessness shaped participants' meaning-making processes (Charmaz, 1990).

Identified themes were compared across transcripts to capture commonalities and differences in participants' experiences. These themes were then examined in relation to theoretical and empirical literature on wellbeing, housing, and living well after homelessness, allowing for conceptually rich interpretations that honour participants' lived experiences while contributing to broader scholarly understandings. The theoretical frameworks, recognition theory, Indigenous scholarship, and feminist kinship theory, were used to guide both coding and interpretation. These frameworks helped identify and interpret themes related to relational agency, misrecognition, and alternative kinship structures, ensuring that analysis remained attentive to the social and structural conditions shaping participants' lives.

4. Findings

The analysis draws out the areas in the participants' narratives where they particularly sought out and struggled in their efforts to create good lives. Three themes emerged highlighting; elements of individual agency and self-determination; relational agency and interdependence; and collective agency and social transformation.

4.1. Individual strategies: agency, adaptation, and ongoing challenges

Participants developed individual strategies for establishing the foundational conditions necessary for livable lives, such as creating security, asserting control over daily routines and bodily autonomy, and cultivating practices that provided meaning and emotional regulation. Yet these efforts remained precarious, constantly threatened by violence, institutional constraints, and material conditions beyond their control.

Systemic precarity during past periods of homelessness manifested in participants' current prioritisation of various forms of security as fundamental to living well. Peter, a man in his late 50s with chronic pain and comorbidities, articulated how spatial and temporal autonomy shaped his capacity for self-care:

> Having my own place. For me, it's a sense of having a roof over my head, not struggling in a boarding house. I lived in boarding houses for a few years and it's so hard to survive... This is one of the things that I love about here. I can relax of a night, eat when I want, cook when I want, shower when I want, however long as I want. I don't have to worry about anyone else. (…) I have a specific way I want to relax and try and de-pain myself. I put special music on and have a few cones [cannabis] and just try to relax. (Peter)

Peter's account reveals a deliberate strategy of creating autonomous routines for pain management and self-care. This insistence on self-determination can be understood as reclaiming rights differentially denied in institutional settings, and illuminates how individual strategies for creating livable lives often emerge as responses to prior experiences of systemic control and constraint. Similarly, Sylvia described her approach to ADHD medication:

> I don't want to take it [ADHD medication] all the time. Because the next day I feel a bit, like, a bit flat. I don't like that. I like to be de-de-de-deh. I like to be me. You know what I mean? I'll do it when I need to, when I need to really focus. Because ADHD, it's like, de-de-de, 50 things at once. That's why my place is so clean, I believe. [Laughs] Because I'm like, oh, yeah, I'll do that, de-d-dee. I don't know. Anyway. Look, my hair's growing, hey? (Sylvia)

Sylvia's selective medication use demonstrates strategic self-management of her ADHD, making decisions based on her lived experience of how medication affects her sense of self. Her approach represents active engagement with medical treatment on her own terms. Katie, a woman in her 50s who had lived in the building for three years, described deliberately seeking out activities that could provide emotional sustenance:

> Garden and nature. Laughing, and things that lift me up. When I go, 'I really need to laugh now,' because I'm getting really low, I'll go to things that make me laugh to bring myself back up again. Like watching documentaries and movies. Things that give me meaning in my life, is what's important to me. Yeah, all of that is really important to me. That's the sort of stuff that fills my soul, whether it's animals, nature, even just going for walks, long walks. (Katie)

For participants like Katie, who had histories of homelessness, depression, addiction and mental health challenges, living well required ongoing labour to generate positive experiences and counter forces that render life unlivable. Katie's resourcefulness and adaptability demonstrate how the good life had to be continuously constructed through deliberate cultivation of meaning rather than simply achieved.

For participants with histories of relational trauma, other-than–human connections provided crucial foundations for living well. Justine, who lived with several mental health issues which made connecting with others and participating in groups difficult, found security through comfort objects:

> I've got a gorilla stuffed toy, I've got Pikachu. He is forever smiling. So, when I wake up, I look at Pikachu and go, man, you're smiling again? When do you stop smiling? But they help. Even though they're just objects, it does help me. (…)I feel safe with them, the fact that they're not going to hurt me. I'm in control. (Justine)

Justine later described using artificial intelligence as emotional support, explaining that *"ChatGPT always helps me. It's like talking to a real person"*. These relationships took on particular significance in the context of Justine's prior experiences of childhood abuse, where security, predictability and care were severely compromised. Justine relayed that despite her efforts to belong, she had repeatedly experienced exclusion from social institutions, including church groups, mental health programs, and educational settings. This pattern suggested misrecognition at the level of social esteem, where Justine was denied opportunities for valued participation and community acknowledgment. In contrast to such experiences, other-than-human-objects and technologies represented a reclamation of security and agency, they were reliable, non-threatening, and most importantly, under her control. Following Butler's framework, these practices show how people work to 'become possible' when conventional pathways to recognition are foreclosed.

However, the precarious nature of these individual strategies became evident when the foundational conditions participants had worked to establish were threatened. Katie's experience with violence demonstrates how quickly individual efforts to create livable lives could be undermined:

> 0*I was attacked by my neighbour. I'm now too scared to go to the bin. I'm now too scared to go into the garden... It impacts my wellbeing. (Katie)*

Without basic security, cultivation practices became impossible. Katie's fear of her neighbour prevented her from accessing the very

spaces where she had cultivated meaning through gardening and nature connection. Similarly, Rosa explained how her neighbour's drug use created ongoing sleep disruption that undermined her ability to function: *"I can't function when my neighbour forces me to not sleep. I wake up with headaches and migraines and I can't function the next day"*. For Rosa, the chronic noise and unpredictability of her living environment meant that even basic self-care became difficult, as sleep deprivation affected her physical health and cognitive capacity. Together, Katie's and Rosa's accounts illustrate how some environmental threats can overwhelm people's strategies for maintaining security, showing the limits of what can be negotiated when social and structural conditions exceed individual capacity to manage.

Participants' accounts illustrate how establishing security, control, and active cultivation practices created necessary conditions for living well after homelessness. Peter's need for autonomous routines, Sylvia's self-determined medication use, and Katie's soul-filling practices all demonstrate how the participants actively constructed foundations for meaningful existence. Even Justine's relationships with comfort objects and AI represent sophisticated strategies for finding recognition and care within safe parameters. Yet these narratives also hint at limitations. While security and self-cultivation provide essential stability, participants' stories suggest these individual strategies emerge partly as responses to barriers in human connection. The foundations they build through security and active practices may enable, but cannot replace, the relational dimensions of living well that many continued to seek despite past betrayals and ongoing exclusion.

4.2. Knots of connection and mutual care – the role of others

Negotiating social connections emerged as the second critical dimension of living well. Within contexts shaped by trauma, addiction, and poverty, relationships represented both vital lifelines and potential dangers. Despite histories of relational trauma, participants articulated the universal human need for belonging, recognition, and meaningful connection with animal companions, friends, romantic partners and family.

Companion animals emerged as vital sources of emotional connection and unconditional acceptance. For many participants, pets provided the consistent care, recognition, and non-judgmental presence that had proven elusive or dangerous in human relationships. Anders's attachment to his cat Lucas revealed the profound significance of these relationships:

> My cat Lucas is very important to me. Like I said to my case manager, if I was going to get a transfer from here, I will only go if I can take him with me. There's no way I would surrender him because I had to surrender my cat once when I became homeless the first time. (…) it was just heartbreaking to have to surrender her. So there's no way I could let him go. He's an important part of my overall wellbeing and happiness. He's a good companion. (Anders)

Anders's fierce protection of this relationship reflects both the depth of their bond and his refusal to repeat the trauma of forced separation he experienced during homelessness. Lucas represents not just companionship, but a relationship Anders can finally choose to keep, a crucial expression of agency after years of having little control over what and whom he could hold onto. Similarly, Peter's grief over his neighbour's dog, Charles, revealed how these bonds created alternative kinship structures:

> It's hard at the moment because I lost someone close to me the other week. Charles passed away. Yeah, so that was really upsetting because I was very close to her. (…) Charles just loved me. She used to love coming into my place, so I always helped look after her, so to lose her, it was just really rough. (Peter)

Through these relationships with animal companions, participants experienced their lives as intertwined and anchored to other beings. We might understand this as a *becoming with* other species who "offer attachment sites for building flourishing, finite ways of living and dying" (Haraway, 2008, p. 24).

The process of building new relationships and kinship networks with other humans was less straightforward, often a slow process of recovering and reimagining connections. Participants discussed their deliberate calculations about who to spend time with, how much time could be spent with particular people, and assessments about the motivations and intentions of others. Nick had lived on the streets for close to a decade before being housed and was still an active 'ice' (crystal methamphetamine) user. Before securing stable housing, his interpersonal relationships were characterised by instrumental, low-trust dynamics marked by patterns of mutual betrayal. For Nick, socialising was central to his efforts to live well, but he also narrated an acute awareness of how the wrong kind of social embeddedness could negatively affect his life:

> I feel good when, a good day is getting out of here and going for a walk or a bike ride. It's something I've been going sitting in the sun, go grab a coffee or go to the mall. I can catch up with mum or my stepbrother, or stepsister. The people that bring me up, not drag me down... I only talk to three people in this building. That's Diana, and Matt and Jo. They're the only three people I talk to in this building now …. Be careful of the company you keep. I don't put up with shit anymore. People talking a lot of shit in this place. And it's just not worth it. It brings me down." (Nick)

Nick's careful cultivation of relationships reflected the complex social navigation required after years of street survival, where trust carried potentially life-threatening consequences. His strategic approach of limiting building connections to just three people while maintaining family ties outside illustrates the ongoing tension between the need for connection and learned self-protection. Beth articulated similar struggles, revealing how the profound loneliness of social exclusion could at times override hard-won caution:

> You've got to be really careful. But sometimes you get close to certain people just to get out of the house. Sometimes you feel lonely and you end up hanging out with people you shouldn't hang out with. And also, you want to make a good friendship. But this is a hard place to make friends. If you're not using drugs, it's hard when other people are – it's a hard friendship. You know? Because people change from one day to the next. For example, Jospeh, he does ice. Yeah, and I think he only talks to me when he wants something. So, those are not friends. (…) So, I learnt to stay away from certain people. It's really hard to trust. You have to have very good boundaries. (Beth)

Beth's narrative illustrates how social relationships were shaped by the material conditions of poverty and housing insecurity, substance use patterns, and the psychological impact of repeated betrayals. Knowing which relationships would "bring them up" versus "drag them down" represented a form of embodied wisdom arising from their particular social positions. For participants like Beth and Nick, these careful strategies reflected not just self-protection, but persistent efforts to create the meaningful relationships they identified as central to living well, even within high-risk environments.

The role of romantic relationships, both the pursuit of love and the labour to maintain it, was central to many participants' conceptualisations of a good life, despite or perhaps because of histories that included intimate partner violence and relationship trauma. Rob's new relationship illustrates how love could reshape destructive patterns. Between the first and second interview, Rob, a man in his late 40s who was housed three years ago after almost a decade living on the streets, had fallen in love with a younger man, Matheus. Rob described how this relationship impacted his life for the better, not simply through emotional connection but by reshaping his relationship with substances through collaborative control:

> I don't go for more than two days without sleeping anymore. Before it was five or six, seven, eight, nine days without sleeping. And that's since I met Matheus. Now I take two days max on drugs and then I have to sleep. I'm in control of the amount of drugs I get. Matheus is controlling the amount I get... I do one and a half grams a week, but I don't do it straight, I will make that last over the week. (…) [meeting his partner] It's improving my life in a way. It's giving me stability. I don't go and slut around outside anymore. To put it that way. (Rob)

For Rob, allowing Matheus to help regulate his drug use represented a form of relational agency, voluntarily sharing control in ways that enhanced rather than diminished his overall sense of being in control of his life. For Owen, an Aboriginal transgender man in his 50s, the good life was culturally anchored in Aboriginal kinship systems. Years of drug use and homelessness had periodically strained his connection with his three sons, yet these relationships remained foundational to his understanding of what made life worth living:

> The word 'wellbeing' to me means... a sense of purpose and solace within myself. And so yes, that's my family and my children – my children directly, my family indirectly. Every day I reflect back on my day, and my sons always come to mind. Would I have done that with my sons? Would I have done that differently with my sons? Would my sons approve of it?" (Owen)

Owen's constant internal dialogue exemplifies Aboriginal understandings where individual decisions are made in relation to collective wellbeing and intergenerational responsibility (Gardner et al., 2024; Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Owen's vision of meaningful days centred on cultural practices of connection. Below, he reflected on a recent trip he had taken with his sons:

> A good day for me is talking to my sons... I got to cook for them all and become the Mr Mum. So yes, it was great cooking three meals a day and sitting down and having good old yarns with them, and going for swims at the river, and taking the dogs for walks. That was great. So, that's what's good in life. (Owen)

Yet maintaining family unity required compartmentalising some of his history and his identity as drag queen Jessica:

> They don't know about my abuse, any of my childhood abuse. But they know that their father dresses in drag. But they've never seen pictures of Jessica, nor will they ever meet her. And anybody who can bring Jessica down – not that I'm saying that my sons would bring me down – but I can't be Jessica and Dad at the same time. (Owen)

This compartmentalisation reflects the complex navigation between personal authenticity and cultural expectations of fatherhood within Aboriginal kinship systems. Owen's understanding of the good life remained firmly anchored in Aboriginal frameworks of collective belonging and kinship obligations (Gardner et al., 2024; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021), even as he negotiated the boundaries of what could be expressed within these relationships. Participants' complex negotiations of the knots of connections in their lives reveal both the necessity and risks of connection for people on the margins. The careful cultivation of selective relationships and vigilance about potentially harmful social ties also reflects traumatised wisdom, strategic approaches to connection developed through experiences where trust was repeatedly violated.

4.3. Communities that lift you out of isolation and boredom

Beyond individual relationships, participants articulated how living well required meaningful participation in collective life. Their narratives revealed a longing for purpose and social contribution, yet this fundamental desire repeatedly encountered multiple barriers, from institutional constraints to the existential challenges that emerged when meaningful engagement was denied. Community in this context represents the collective relationships and meaningful participation that participants actively create and fight for against institutional arrangements that deny recognition, enforce idleness, and prevent meaningful contribution.

The profound impact of purposelessness on daily life emerged as a central theme across participants' accounts. Boredom, loneliness, and lack of meaning were not merely inconveniences but existential threats that eroded attempts to create livable lives. Dave, who had resided in the building for six years, drew explicit connections between the absence of meaningful activity and his struggles with addiction:

> Not working can make you irritable and restless because you've got so much time on your hands... I was filling it up with the drinking and the gambling... You need a purpose and a meaning in life... I've always grown up feeling that I don't have a meaning or purpose... I used to say to myself, 'Well, what's my purpose or meaning in life?' I don't really feel like I had one. (Dave)

Dave's narrative revealed how substance use often functions as a pragmatic response to the boredom produced by structural exclusion from meaningful engagement opportunities. His lifelong struggle with questions of meaning suggests that the roots of purposelessness extend far beyond immediate housing circumstances, yet the isolation of supportive housing intensified these existential challenges. As Dave later explained: *"I've had a few relapses... Look, a lot of its loneliness, boredom."* Similarly, Justine described how enforced idleness affected the entire community:

> There's nothing to do here... that's why people are fighting and drinking and taking drugs – because they're bored. At the moment, I'm just trying to keep my mind busy. But I don't know how. I don't know with what. (Justine)

Yet despite these challenges, participants consistently expressed strong desires to contribute meaningfully to their communities. Sylvia's attempts to volunteer exemplified both this drive and the systematic misrecognition that followed:

> I want to do work. I want to help people. So, I've applied for things online, and they've rang me back thinking that I'm the one that's applying for it, for me to get help. I'm like, no, I want to help people... But I can't - I'm not allowed to volunteer, because I asked. (Sylvia)

The automatic assumption that Sylvia must be seeking help rather than offering it reveals deeply embedded institutional biases. Her prohibition from formal volunteering, despite her capacity and desire, was echoed by several participants, highlighting how institutional arrangements prevented them from contributing. Bobby's experience attempting to share his artistic expertise, developed over years of practice, revealed another dimension of these constraints: the challenge of recognising and valuing participants' knowledge and skills.

> I tried to start an art community here, but I wasn't going to do it for free... They take advantage of the clients in this regard, 'Can you do this? We'll give you a $10 voucher.' Why?... pay us cash. (Bobby)

Bobby's insistence on fair compensation highlighted how institutions can perpetuate economic marginalisation despite efforts to support recovery. A similar tension was seen in Rob's exclusion from the shared kitchen while external volunteers were cooking up a communal lunch. While volunteer-prepared meals were designed to support residents and build community, this arrangement positioned residents as passive recipients rather than active participants in community-building activities.

> They baby us. Like I can cook. We're not even allowed to cook in the main kitchen down here. They ban us from helping out, like when they have the cook up once a month, we are not allowed to help. Oh no, they've got their own volunteers. That's bullshit. (Rob)

When asked why kitchen volunteering mattered to him, Rob responded simply: *"Give me something to do. Occupy my time."*

Despite these pervasive barriers, participants demonstrated persistence in creating their own opportunities for meaningful contribution. Their self-initiated activities revealed community care and deep desires to belong and improve their environments. Claude, who had enjoyed gardening since childhood, embodied this drive through his rooftop garden efforts:

> I started to clean between the two flats as well now, pick up the rubbish. I've got to keep myself busy. I've always worked and I like working. I've always done plants and gardening all my life, ever since I was a little kid for some reason. All my plants and that I started doing up on the roof. They all got knocked off. These people here stole them. It's sad. (Claude)

Other participants similarly sought out alternative pathways to contribution, often centred around animal care and informal support networks. Coco's statement: *"I'd love to help other people more. I look after lots of animals here in the building. I always offer, like walk people's dogs and stuff"*, revealed both the desire for expanded contribution and the reality of limited opportunities. Her care for animals created informal networks of mutual support. Likewise, Saul's extensive volunteer network illustrated how some participants successfully created rich webs of informal support and contribution:

> I do a lot of volunteering. I train their dogs and walk their dogs for them… Some of the old people, they struggle at walking their dog… I end up doing that for them. I get a lot of joy when I help them… I like to help. I am a man of my word, if I say something, I'll do it. They all trust me. (Saul)

Saul's emphasis on trust and keeping his word revealed how volunteer activities such as mutual support and building maintenance enabled participants to build the social credibility often denied to people experiencing homelessness. Mark's self-initiated maintenance work demonstrated similar resourcefulness. Mark, reflecting on the broader service system that had supported his transition from rough sleeping and substance abuse, explained:

> I do volunteering in the shop out the front there and other things. I do odd jobs from around here. Clean up in between the two buildings. I pick up the syringes and all that and just do little things around the place for them. It's all right. Gives me something to do. It's the least I can do to repay them for all they've done for me. (Mark)

Mark's framing of contribution as reciprocity challenges narratives of dependency while addressing real community needs. His voluntary, unpaid work, despite having no obligation as a rent-paying tenant, demonstrates genuine community contribution rather than debt repayment. Along similar lines, Jasper's reflection on community potential offers a vision of what becomes possible when people feel genuinely valued:

> I'm very passionate about the individual's ability to thrive within a community. If the individual feels valued on a holistic level, they are going to do something beautiful. They're going to thrive… It might absolutely change the direction of their lives. (Jasper)

What emerges most powerfully from these accounts is participants' understanding that a good life is fundamentally relational, rooted in opportunities to belong, contribute, and build social connections through meaningful participation. Participants articulated visions of lives centred on social embeddedness rather than individual needs fulfilment. While some participants found ways to create networks of reciprocal care that anchored their sense of community belonging, others encountered institutional arrangements that systematically compromised these attempts. Their resilience in pursuing contribution despite barriers reveals how social participation constitutes the heart of human flourishing, challenging dominant approaches that prioritise clinical intervention over opportunities for meaningful community engagement.

5. Discussion

This paper examined how people with histories of long-term homelessness negotiate livable lives. Using a relational framework that synthesises insights from recognition theory, feminist theory, and Indigenous scholarship, we analysed how participants' practices of meaning-making, connection, and contribution were shaped by, and responded to, the broader social, material and service systems they encountered. The findings make three primary contributions to scholarship on post-homelessness living.

Firstly, our findings illustrate how institutional arrangements determined the parameters within which formerly homeless people must negotiate meaning, relationships, and community participation. PSH created contradictory conditions for livability. Whilst providing essential housing security, PSH simultaneously reproduces arrangements that constrain possibilities for flourishing. Participants' narratives revealed how congregate housing environments could reintroduce insecurity through interpersonal violence, drug-related disruptions, and exclusion from communal spaces. These experiences reflected what Butler (2022) described as the structural conditions that render certain lives precarious and unrecognised. Participants actively laboured to transform these conditions, cultivating routines, asserting control, and creating therapeutic practices to reclaim autonomy and safety. Yet these efforts were often undermined by environmental threats beyond their control. The contradiction lay in PSH offering shelter while failing to support the broader relational and existential dimensions of livability. This contribution highlights the need to reimagine PSH not just as housing provision, but as a relational infrastructure that supports healing, recognition, and agency.

Secondly, the findings highlighted that the good life was conceptualised as fundamentally relational, deeply entangled in the world of others and co-constructed through connection and social practices. Participants articulated a powerful longing for belonging, recognition, and meaningful relationships, alongside acute awareness of relational risks. These efforts to connect were shaped by low-trust environments, poverty and histories of trauma, addiction and relational harm, where connection was both desperately needed and inherently risky. Participants navigated these tensions through careful cultivation of selective relationships and the creation of oddkin and kinship networks, including bonds with companion animals, comfort objects, and technologies that provided emotional safety and recognition when human relationships felt inaccessible or dangerous. This reflects what Haraway (2016) terms practices of worlding; the possibility of making life together with others through connection, creativity, and mutual support. Rather than achieving 'pure' or uncomplicated bonds, participants created meaningful relationships within their 'messy' circumstances and constrained environments, where past betrayals, ongoing challenges, and social stigma shaped connection attempts. This resonates with Indigenous understandings of the good life as emerging through community connections and kinship networks (Gardner et al., 2024; Kirmayer et al., 2011), while incorporating feminist critiques that position interdependence as constitutive of human flourishing (Haraway, 2008).

Thirdly, existential misrecognition, the institutional denial of opportunities for social recognition, emerged as a pervasive inhibitor of attempts at flourishing. Participants consistently identified enforced idleness and purposelessness as major threats to living well, with explicit connections between boredom and substance use relapse, worsening mental health, and undermining recovery efforts. These barriers were not incidental but reflect the design and logic of service systems that prioritise risk management and containment over empowerment and contribution. This pattern align with what Honneth (1995) describes as social pathologies, systems that systematically undermine human development through misrecognition at the level of social esteem. The

absence of opportunities for purposeful engagement generated profound existential challenges. Without valued social roles or chances to contribute skills and knowledge, daily life became an exercise in occupying time rather than building purpose. Participants articulated a powerful desire to contribute their knowledge, skills, and experiences in ways that benefited others as central to living well and persistently created informal opportunities for contribution through animal care, maintenance work, and mutual support networks. These self-initiated activities demonstrated both the depth of institutional barriers and how existential misrecognition could be partially resisted through alternative pathways to meaning and purpose.

These findings suggest opportunities for reimagining PSH within broader service ecosystems to better support livable lives. Drawing on these insights, services could focus on scaffolding that enables relationship-building and community integration through genuine opportunities for meaningful participation such as paid peer roles, volunteer positions and community leadership, which acknowledge formerly homeless people as knowledge holders rather than passive recipients. Programs might support animal care networks, maintenance projects, and spaces where lived expertise is valued and compensated, pointing toward participatory approaches that celebrate interdependence rather than measuring success through individual outcomes alone.

6. Conclusion

This research illuminates that creating livable lives after long-term homelessness involves sophisticated practices of building security, forging connections, and contributing to community undertaken within and against systemic constraints. These practices represent efforts to navigate, contest, and reshape the social conditions that render their lives precarious, rather than demonstrating individual achievements of livable lives. Although participants' visions of the good life differed, they shared the belief that people develop and live within relationships and societal contexts, rather than as isolated individuals.

These insights challenge individualistic recovery models by revealing how livable lives emerge through relational processes rather than personal transformation. Rather than viewing social exclusion and purposelessness as individual deficits, this research suggests they reflect institutional arrangements that deny recognition and meaningful participation. Supporting people to construct livable lives requires shifts toward collective approaches that honour interdependence, celebrate diverse forms of relationship and contribution, and recognise the valuable expertise gained through surviving marginalisation. Ultimately, this study calls for service systems that move beyond housing provision to actively support relational worldmaking, creating conditions where people can build lives that are not only secure, but socially recognised, connected, and meaningful.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Maja Lindegaard Moensted: Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Carolyn Day:** Writing – review & editing.

Ethics statement

This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee (RPAH Zone) of the Sydney Local Health District (Ethics approval number: X22-0117). All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. The study was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, updated 2018).

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Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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