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# **Shining a Light on the Experiences of Staff Working with Young Homeless People: A Grounded Theory Study**

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## **Abstract**

Young people experiencing homelessness represent one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Research which has considered staff experience, has highlighted the importance of the interaction between the workers and the homeless young people. Very few studies have considered the emotional impact of the support worker role in young people's homeless services. The aim of this study was to investigate the psychological and practical coping skills staff employ to negotiate the demands of their roles, with a focus on how staff work to develop supportive relationships with young homeless people with complex trauma histories. Eleven staff (5 male, 6 female) participated in this research. All the participants were Support Workers employed by the same organisation, supporting youth experiencing homelessness across two urban areas of Wales. Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences. Data was analysed adopting a Grounded Theory approach. Seven main concepts were identified in the analysis: the need to be "a certain kind of person"; the rewards and challenges of the role; the impact of the organisational context and culture; individual approaches to coping; possible adverse impacts of the role; enjoyment of the role; and personal growth. The interaction between these concepts was considered and conveyed via a proposed model. A theory of balance was developed within which a pivotal process was the fluctuation between feeling supported by the organisation and coping well and feeling unsupported and struggling to cope. It is hoped that the findings from this research will directly inform clinical practice regarding psychologically based interventions for staff in settings for young people experiencing homelessness and be a valuable contribution to the scarce research literature on services for young homeless people.

## Introduction

Young people experiencing homelessness, who are typically defined as people aged 16 to 24, who lack a permanent home (sleeping rough, living in shelters, or the 'hidden homeless' e.g. sofa-surfing (Centrepoin, 2018)), represent one of the most vulnerable groups in society (Hodgson, Shelton & van den Bree, 2015). In 2018, 103,000 young people in the UK contacted their local authority for help with homelessness (Centrepoin, 2018). The latest Welsh Government statistics for 2017 – 2018 indicate that 7,584 young people (16–24 year olds) approached their local authority for help with homelessness; an increase of 23% since 2015 (Llamau, 2019).

Research has shown that young homeless people face multiple challenges alongside the lack of a permanent dwelling (Hammersley & Pearl, 1996). Research has consistently identified a high prevalence of trauma amongst young homeless people; with reported levels of physical abuse ranging from 6-94%, and levels of reported sexual abuse ranging from 4-62% (Sundin & Baguley, 2015). High rates of current and lifetime incidence of mental health issues have been found among young homeless samples (88% and 93%, respectively, Hodgson *et al.*, 2015). Multiple risks and traumas can be said to occur both prior to, and as a result of experiencing homelessness (McCabe & O'Connor, 2016). For example, care leavers have been identified as one of the most at risk groups for homelessness (Shelter, 2005). Homelessness also increases the risk of further victimisation or re-traumatization (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet, 2010) and for many, "it becomes a revolving door" of various accommodation settings, or sleeping on the streets (Cockersell, 2011).

Third sector organisations for young people experiencing homelessness in the UK often provide emergency accommodation, supported housing, tenancy support services and 'floating support' (flexible 24-hour support). Further support with independent living skills,

employment and education, and emotional needs is often provided by support staff. In many settings, each young person will be assigned an individual 'support worker' (sometimes termed 'key worker', 'case worker', 'care-co-ordinator' or 'case-manager'). This role involves adopting a supportive and coordinating role for the young person, helping them to access the support they need, whilst encouraging the young person's independence where possible. In the UK, these roles typically do not require any professional qualifications and staff may receive little training for their work (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007). Although support workers play a central role in providing both emotional and practical support to complex, young people experiencing homelessness, there is very limited research into their experiences (Kidd, Miner, Walker & Davidson, 2007).

Research which has considered staff experience, has highlighted the importance of the interaction between the workers and the homeless young people. Consistent with this, the Homeless Link annual review (2017), stated that many homeless young people reflected on positive relationships and interactions with support staff being the most important part of accessing support and the key to effective services. Describing a model for the provision of health care for young people experiencing homelessness in Seattle, U.S.A., Barry, Ensign and Lippek (2002) detailed the importance of this relationship and the requirement for an adaptable approach which is open and respectful of the young person's needs. After conducting 12 interviews of young people experiencing homelessness, and 10 of their key workers, in UK hostels, McGrath and Pistrang (2007) suggested three core dimensions which described features of the relationship: enforcement versus support, emotional involvement versus distance, and resident-centred versus staff-centred practice (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007). Mutual trust and respect were seen as vital for managing the tension between these roles and the need for appropriate training and reflective practice for staff was highlighted (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007).

Similarly, conclusions from Kidd *et al.* (2007), qualitative research with 15 youth workers, echoed the need for a versatile approach, tailored to the young people experiencing homelessness's individual circumstances. The establishment of a connection based around valuing, respecting and liking a young person, alongside the need for clear boundaries was identified as central for developing an effective, trusting working relationship (Kidd *et al.*, 2007).

Very few studies have considered the emotional impact of the support worker role in young people's homeless services. However, research in adult settings has highlighted factors associated with staff coping. For example, Hagan and Hutchison (1988) found high rates of emotional exhaustion and motivation to leave their jobs, among those working with homeless adults. The emotional impact of the support worker role is very relevant given the very recent development of "Psychologically Informed Environments" (PIEs; Johnson & Haigh, 2010) in settings for young people experiencing homelessness. PIEs have been defined as "specifically informed environments where staff are trained to develop an increased psychological understanding of the work that they do" (Benson & Brennan, 2018, p. 52) and are considered to be very relevant to homeless settings given the associated trauma that often comes with homelessness. Many services for homeless people (adult and young people) across the UK now operate as PIEs, and there is emerging evidence that they might be effective in improving clients' functioning, clients' ability to maintain accommodation (Cockersell, 2011; Maguire, Johnson, Vostanis, Keats & Remington., 2009a, 2009b) as well as increasing staff confidence (Maguire, 2012).

There is a lack of research however, into the psychological and relational coping skills that enable support workers to work effectively and sustainably with young people experiencing homelessness. Given the potentially abusive and neglectful histories of homeless young people, and the high prevalence of recent non-familial care experiences, it is likely that they might often lack trust in others, creating challenges for staff in terms of developing a

“therapeutic alliance” (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007). One qualitative study has been completed with staff working with a young homeless population in the UK (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007). As this study was completed over a decade ago, likely demographic changes would not have been captured. Also, McGrath and Pistrang (2007) employed a method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Given that psychology-based staff and environmental interventions in settings for young people experiencing homelessness are increasing, there is a need for a psychological theory to inform service development. Therefore, a different approach, such as Grounded Theory methodology, could propose a theory and a model to assist wider understanding of staff emotional and psychological experiences. The aim of this study is to investigate how staff negotiate the challenges of supporting young people experiencing homelessness, with a focus on how staff develop and maintain supportive relationships with service users with complex histories. It is hoped that the findings from this research will directly inform clinical practice regarding psychologically based interventions for staff in settings for young people experiencing homelessness (such as those employed in PIEs) and be a valuable contribution to the scarce research literature on services for young people experiencing homelessness.

## **Methodology**

The research was reviewed and ethically approved by the School Research Ethics Committee (SREC), School of Psychology, at Cardiff University (see Appendix a) for approval email).

### *Design*

The study used a qualitative methodology guided by principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). In depth interviews with support workers were conducted, transcribed and then analysed in accordance with the principles of this theory.

### *Participants*

Eleven staff (5 male, 6 female) from an organisation in Wales providing support to homeless young people were recruited using opportunist sampling. All the participants were Support Workers, with varying levels of responsibility and specific job roles. Some of these roles focused more on daily support within accommodation settings, and some on the longer-term needs and goals of the service user. All participants were employed by the same third sector organisation supporting youth experiencing homelessness, and worked across two urban areas of Wales. Ten participants had worked for the organisation for over 3 years, with several having over 10 years' experience. Identifiable information about the participants and the organisation has been removed. Each participant has been allocated a gender-neutral pseudonym to help protect their anonymity. Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation in the research.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- All participants were &gt;18 years of age</li><li>- All participants were Support Workers</li><li>- All participants had worked as a Support Worker, with young people experiencing homelessness, for this specific organisation, for &gt; 1 year.</li><li>- All participants were able to understand and communicate in English</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The participant had worked as a Support Worker, with young people experiencing homelessness, for this specific organisation, for &lt; 1 year.</li></ul>

### *Procedure*

#### *i) Recruitment and sampling*



Invitations to participate were distributed to Team Leaders within the organisation. The Team Leaders informed their staff within team meetings about the research; they distributed a summary about the study and invited those interested to contact the researcher. A £50 incentive was offered as a prize for one participant selected at random. All interested support workers who met the inclusion criteria were then provided with an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form before being interviewed.

Following the interviews, participants were provided with a debrief sheet to read, which provided details of ongoing sources of support within the organisation; they were offered time to talk through any potential issues with the researcher.

#### *ii) Interviewing*

Consistent with Grounded Theory, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed (Charmaz, 2014). The schedule consisted of open-ended questions designed to function as triggers to encourage the participant to talk about a particular aspect of their experience (Willig, 2001). The research proposal and interview schedule were reviewed by a senior member of staff, within the organisation, who had previously worked in support worker roles. The questions focused on the experiences of the staff working with young people experiencing homelessness: their motivations, the challenges they faced, and how they were affected by them.

The participants were offered a choice as to how the interview would take place. The majority of the interviews were carried out over the telephone, although 3 were conducted face-to-face, at a location chosen by the participant. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The average length of the interview was 42 minutes.

#### *Analysis*

All interviews were transcribed and analysed using the fundamental strategies and practices of coding, memo-writing and theoretical sampling. In accordance with Charmaz (2014), interview questions were then revised to target conceptual theories emerging and evolving from the data. It is from these evolved concepts, grounded in the data, that contextualised theory was developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The number of interviews that were conducted was determined by the point of theoretical sufficiency (Dey, 1999); where no new understanding emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2014). It was also influenced by the number of participants who consented to take part.

i) Coding

Coding constitutes the most fundamental process in Grounded Theory (Willig, 2001). Line by line coding was initially carried out, examining each line of data with an analytic stance and defining actions or events which occurred within it (see Appendix c). Initial ideas about meanings within the data were considered. Line by line analysis ensured that categories and theories emerged directly from the data rather than being superimposed on it (Willig, 2001). Through the processes of constant comparison, line by line codes were subsumed by conceptually higher order focused codes (see Appendix c). Focused coding condensed and synthesised larger segments of the data to aid explanation. The most significant and frequent earlier codes were used to sift through the data. Categories were then created, and theoretical ideas were conceptualised (Charmaz, 2014).

ii) Memo-writing

Throughout the process of data analysis, memos were written to track thoughts and ideas about focused codes and subsequently, the rationale for the subsuming of codes into core categories and emerging theory (Willig, 2001). Memos helped to elaborate on the processes

and actions subsumed by a code and demonstrated connections between categories. Notes were made about assumptions within participants' accounts, and discrepancies and gaps were highlighted within the emerging analysis, which was integral in facilitating theoretical sampling.

iii) Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling was employed, whereby properties within concepts that remained unclear, were further explored through the successive amendments to the questions within the interview schedule (Charmaz, 2014). Concepts identified for further exploration included: staff support, enjoyment of the role, the perception of staff that certain personal qualities are required in the role, and the learning that staff acquired from the young people experiencing homelessness themselves.

*Reflexivity*

i) Researcher's position

The researcher was undertaking doctoral training in clinical psychology and had prior interests in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 1994), Compassion Focussed Therapy (Gilbert, 2009), and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988). They had also worked with homeless people, which had influenced a specific interest. The author's previous work and interests in attachment theory and working with people with histories of complex trauma may have predisposed them to hold biases in their predictions that staff would have had negative experiences at work. These biases could have had an impact on the interpretation of the data and the developing theory.

ii) Reflection and Reliability

Through supervisory dialogue, reflective bracketing, the use of memos and a reflective diary the author's pre-conceived ideas were bracketed off and these influences mitigated and managed. The two supervisors of the researcher worked both clinically and within research contexts, and were consulted regularly. To enhance the reliability of the codes, concepts and developing theories, five transcripts were reviewed by a supervisor with expertise in Grounded Theory. During supervision, the final conceptual theories were discussed to certify accurate data representation.

## **Results**

Seven main concepts were identified in the analysis: the need to be “a certain kind of person”; the rewards and challenges of the role; the impact of the organisational context and culture; individual approaches to coping; possible adverse impacts of the role; enjoyment of the role; and personal growth. The interaction between these concepts was considered and conveyed via a proposed model – see Figure 1. In the narrative below, direct quotes from interview transcripts have been included to illustrate the use of a category in a particular context. Where quotes were cut, this has been signified with the use of an ellipsis “...”. Any necessary clarification within the quote has been included in [brackets].

### *The need to be “a certain kind of person”*

Reference was consistently made by support workers to the necessity of an instinctive and innate quality or ability. Staff described finding it hard to articulate the specifics of this but highlighted a distinct sense of staff having something in common with one another.

*...Everybody who I work with is...completely different, you couldn't get more different types of people, but everyone is the same in that they've...got to be a certain type of person to do this job...(Robin)*

*...I can't put my finger on it. But it's just...it's just what we do...(Jordan)*

Staff reflected on an uncertainty about whether they arrive into the role with all the necessary pre-requisite qualities required, as if embodying the person specification, or whether skills are acquired and/or developed through carrying out the work day-to-day. Most staff felt there was some degree of habituation to the role induced through the work and the culture of the organisation.

*...I think you need certain qualities...In terms of being...outgoing...articulate in some ways because you have to get a message across...I think there are still qualities that you learn as you go along...(Charlie)*

Further reference was made to the need for certain personal attributes including: a good sense of humour; confidence; patience; being a creative problem solver; being trustworthy, being a 'people person', a good communicator; being laid back and being comfortable with themselves. Day-to-day, staff described utilising many of these qualities to engage in the relationships with the young people (the formation and maintenance of which is integral to the role), tailoring their support flexibly to the individual's needs.

Staff described underling motivations for the role in terms of valuing homeless young people and having an interest in the next generation. Working in line with their values provided a sense of vocation. For some, this sense of purpose extended to feeling compelled to help to unify society and to invest in their local community.

*...you're investing...in the future of society and...a lot of the guys I work with are also from the similar sort of background as me so...we're doing something for our community...worth*

*doing...you've just got to try and...get on...that's just how I was brought up...unity isn't it and just look after each other...(Ash)*

Many of the support workers spoke of having personal lived experiences, such as experiencing trauma or homelessness themselves. These experiences were viewed as useful in the work, facilitating engagement with service users, and for some they were cited as motivators to do the job.

*...I had to seek...tenancy support...myself...it helped me massively growing up...I had a difficult childhood, but I valued the input that everybody gave me for me to be able to manage and cope at such a young [age]...(Brook)*

Staff who did not have personal experience were able to see the benefits in these experiences for building relationships with the homeless young people, but also the possible difficulties if personal traumas become triggered.

*...it's a careful line...if they can automatically relate to the service users and...help them very quickly because they've been through it; but equally I think those can be the very tough cases because it can be a bit like...holding a mirror up to yourself that's really, really...difficult...(Kit)*

### *The rewards and challenges of the role*

Participants discussed the rewards and challenges that are fundamental to the role. These could be described as elements of the job description; the realities of the role.

#### *The rewards*

There was clear divergence in opinion from staff on the topic of financial reward, with some intimating that the pay does not reflect the effort involved.

*...It's hard work, it's very draining...there's no money in it...but it is very rewarding...(Jordan)*

Other staff spoke of feeling well paid considering their level of qualification and skill.

*... it's good pay compared to what a person of my skills can get...(Ash)*

Some staff spoke about the opportunities for promotion within the role being a potential reward.

*...I hadn't had a lot of experience of working with young people...it was...a new thing for me but...People were giving really good feedback and as a result...I was taken on and...I've had that kind of progression...over the years...(Charlie)*

Other areas listed as rewards of the job included the flexibility gained from the working hours and shifts required in some roles. Others appreciated the autonomy of the role and for some it was the opportunity to work outside of an office environment that brought the reward.

*...just generally it's a great job. It does have its difficulties, but...it's brilliant. I couldn't work in an office now; it would kill me...(Robin)*

### *The challenges*

Managing the risk and the sometimes challenging nature of service users' behaviour, was consistently referred to as one of the major difficulties of the staff roles. Staff highlighted

various forms of challenging behaviour, including substance and alcohol misuse, self-harm, mental health issues, property destruction and verbal and physical abuse. At times, some staff found themselves in situations where they felt at serious risk and feared for their lives.

*...my colleagues have been spat in the face and have been pushed through a window and then...you've got to work with these people the next day as if nothing has happened...(Robin)*

Staff also described witnessing high levels of service user distress which sometimes involved high levels of risk.

*...she used to cut quite badly. I remember going up in her room and said to her... I'm not going to stand here and watch you, I can't...it was quite shocking to see that...to be there...I found myself in an...alien situation...I...didn't know what to say for the best...what to actually do. And...there's no amount of training can actually teach you...it's a thinking on your feet thing...(Lee)*

It was evident in the accounts from staff, that being able to understand the reasons for the challenging behaviour of the young people helped to mitigate the potentially distressing impact of such behaviours. With a high degree of insight, staff referred to behaviours as resulting from adverse childhood experiences and reflecting a communication of needs.

*...the way I see it is whatever that young person has been not able to communicate...it's a way of communicating...(Brook)*

The staff highlighted ways in which they had learnt to manage challenging behaviour, sharing strategies and advice. A common theme that related to understanding the reason for service user's behaviour was the idea of "not taking things personally"; for example, knowing that a young person's comments were not a personal attack, but an indication of an historic struggle for that person. Staff also spoke about recognising the importance of their own behaviour in



optimising the relationships with young people, such as ensuring they were reliable (i.e. following through on what they said they would do); they highlighted how crucial it was to not let down young people, given that they may have had multiple past experiences of relational disappointment and inconsistency.

*...you say you're going to do something and then you do it. And it's not giving up either...you say to them; I'm going to be here tomorrow at 10 o'clock and if they're not there that's fine. I don't give them a hard time, but just text, leave a note, I'm coming back this day...this day, this day and you just keep doing it...and then they'll meet and then you can start from there...(Jo)*

Alongside the importance of consistency, staff highlighted the importance of enforcing boundaries around the professional relationship.

*...keep everything professional...no, I'm not a taxi service and no, I'm not your mother. And no, I can't lend you a fiver for a packet of fags...(Jordan)*

In terms of specific emotional challenges, some staff spoke of distress associated with experiencing the death of a young homeless person.

*...cases that are really sad...there's been deaths. We went to one of our service user's funerals the other day; a lovely guy...(Jo)*

Practical challenges of the role were also identified such as the working hours and shift patterns.

*...I don't like, because the rota changes so you haven't got the same days off every time...that's awkward, especially if you've got a social life to have...you don't sleep so good there because obviously you're at work...You're never fully relaxed and you will get disturbed during the night...your day off will always follow a night shift, so it won't really feel like a day off...(Ash)*

Others however appreciated the working patterns or did not identify concerns with this aspect of the role. Similarly, there were divergent views re administrative demands. Some staff shared their struggles with paperwork, in terms of questioning its necessity and struggling to balance the volume of paperwork with the demands of the homeless young people.

*...I find the paperwork...was too much, I really couldn't do it...the pressures...staff are under is ridiculous...and because you're dealing with vulnerable and chaotic young people...you've got a diary, but they don't care what your diary is and crises don't book in...They don't make an appointment do they?...I'll come and work with people not papers...(Ash)*

However, others stated that they had no difficulty with the documentation at all.

*...whereas their biggest challenge would probably be the paperwork. To me the paperwork is nothing and I feel like I can focus more on that person...(Robin)*

### *The impact of the organisational context and culture*

Some staff asserted a need to re-consider how work is evidenced within the service and expressed a sense of frustration at the system hindering their ability to do their job well. Some staff also expressed anger at the perceived inflexibility of the service which they felt delayed support for homeless young people. Some spoke of being left feeling dubious about the motives and priorities of management.

*...Why don't you involve yourself? You're telling us to...but you don't do none of those things. Once a year just take time out...the project I work in...you just don't even come over now, never. I don't want them there all the time, don't get me wrong but...just come and meet up, say hi, this is me...(Sam)*

Varied experiences of managerial support and supervision were evident. Some staff described support as above and beyond what is necessary, having had excellent experiences. Staff outlined how finding team leaders approachable and knowing they would be listened to if they shared difficult experiences, helped them feel supported and buffered the impact of challenging interactions.

*...if I've got an issue or if something's happened...that's bothered me...with a service user...then the first person I talk to really is (removed name)...my team leader...really supportive...(Chris).*

*...[the organisation] are so flexible...the flexibility and the assistance you get if you are having a hard time I find is great and I've been supported...(Brook)*

Several staff referred to a sense that managers understood the challenges of their roles due to their own past experiences of working in the role. This helped staff to feel validated and reassured that managers would be able to offer valuable and pertinent advice.

*...They've been there themselves and they've worked their way up probably from a project worker...so generally your manager would have been in your position and will have come across things that you've come across...(Robin)*

Others were less positive about management, with views on supervision being particularly divergent, with some staff feeling supported by the approachability of supervisors and a sense they would be heard.

*...There is supervision...so anything that you feel needs to be addressed. And...you can pick up the phone, you can go in, and there's always somebody that you can talk to. So yes...it's always been really supportive...and I've always felt that I can say my piece...(Ray)*

Others described not feeling able to confidently share information with supervisors, fearing that confidentiality would not be upheld.

*...to be honest the confidentiality aspect of it for me is...I would never in a million years think that I could say something to...either my team leaders or my manager 100%...confidentiality doesn't come into it...somebody would find out. I wouldn't feel comfortable in sharing stuff at all... It's not nice...if you hear that...your line manager or team leader is sharing stuff about other people...(Lee)*

Some longer serving staff experienced supervision as a tick box exercise which lacked formality and was often unreliable or unavailable.

*...is part of the team leader's job to do that once a month...but sometimes they will come up for supervision and I'm like, what are you doing here? {laughs}...mate I'm looking to say to you to just sign the bottom of the book and crack on...(Sam)*

In considering the causes of these differing experiences, staff spoke of members of the team promoting a 'stiff upper lip' approach of 'putting up with' and 'getting on with things'.

*...[with] my manager. It's just shrugged off...well there you are then. Oh well, that's the sort of attitude we get. You're going to get issues, stiff upper lip thing, you've got to get on with it. I don't think that's productive...people do need to have support and supervision. We don't have that. We just don't have time for that...(Lee)*

These attitudes, and the issues with supervision confidentiality, were experienced by some as leading to a wider team culture of not being able to share how they feel. Staff described preferring instead to debrief with select, trusted colleagues, or to reflect alone.

*...where I'm working... there's no confidentiality at all...everyone knows that... (Lee)*

*...I don't really have much of a conversation about that sort of thing [getting upset] with other members of staff...(Chris)*

*...I'll get upset but I won't sort of stay upset...mainly...just on my own really... (Kit)*

Questions around possible pressures to become more resilient with increasing levels of experience were raised; with staff suggesting that public displays of vulnerability might lead to them being seen as incompetent by colleagues.

*...It could be that they feel they could be looked at that they don't know their job.*

*That...they're not building the relationships with the young people...(Ray)*

In addition to the role of management, staff referred to the role of other colleagues in helping them to feel supported through camaraderie and humour, along with a sense of feeling unburdened by sharing experiences.

*...but there's always one of us that will just... pick it back up again... You've got to lighten that load. Dark humour I suppose. Brilliant...it's great, really supportive people.... Yeah, we all have a good moan... then...we have a...bit of fun...share it, and it just goes...(Jo)*

**\*\*\*\* TO HERE**

Other staff highlighted the potential for feelings of isolation and loneliness within roles involving lone working. They mentioned that they do not always feel like part of a team; having little contact with other staff and experiencing handovers as brief and lacking in opportunities for sharing and reflection.

*...It is quite isolating...if you're not having regular crossovers and meeting other workers; if you work in projects that can be quite lonely...it's really important to have those crossovers...even if it's a quick...at least they've seen other people...(Brook)*

### *Individual approaches to coping*

Staff described a number of different strategies for caring for themselves and coping with the challenges and difficulties within the roles. Many spoke of using mindfulness to help them remain grounded in the present moment. Others spoke about the use of self-talk strategies, visualisation and separation techniques to help maintain perspective.

*...you've got to think of ways to stop the mind going...to clear the mind...to like breathe or I might just put on a certain piece of music and just close my eyes and just... breathe...how your breathing is really important...(Ash)*

*...there's that physical closing of the door and...you take your mental eye just goes elsewhere and it doesn't look back in work...(Kit)*

Self-care strategies such as prioritising hobbies, interests and relationships outside of work were discussed, as were the benefits of physical exercise and healthy lifestyles. Staff described the importance of asking others for help and knowing when to take a break. Staff also emphasised the importance of not taking things personally and taking time to process emotions.

*...Don't take nothing personally...(Ash)*

*...I...regularly go running...so I'm able to just get out and not think about work and not...dwell on anything...(Charlie)*

### *Possible adverse impacts of the role*

Staff outlined how at times difficulties in coping with the challenges, combined with the working conditions and organisational context and culture, caused them to struggle to cope with the impact of the role. Many staff described how work demands were perpetuated by an increase in the complexity of young people experiencing homelessness accessing the services, which was attributed to funding cuts and systemic issues in wider society. The support workers referred to a number of adverse impacts of the role: worrying and ruminating about work; difficulty sleeping; nightmares; stress and sickness. Those with personal adverse lived experiences explained how previous trauma had sometimes been triggered by work situations. Feelings of responsibility and pressure were common, particularly in having to make quick decisions on risk and safety. Most described having experienced physical, adrenalin induced fight/flight responses.

*...it can make you ill...people do go off on sick because...if they've already got their own issues and then you're dealing with somebody that's got issues, it can compound itself and you can become ill. People do become ill...(Jordan)*

*...sometimes when you've got people shouting at you...or being aggressive towards you, your natural reaction is like fight or flight, so...it does make...your heart rate goes and stuff like that...(Chris)*

In addition, to feelings of stress and arousal, mental and physical exhaustion from the work were also mentioned with staff describing feeling physically exhausted at times, in particular when working in projects over night and covering long shifts when working on call.

*...it can be extremely emotional draining...and it is physically draining when you've got to constantly keep on at somebody to say provide a bank statement...and if they don't provide it they lose their home...and that's actually quite frustrating...because you are just harping on all the time...(Jordan)*

### *Enjoyment of the role*

Despite the challenges, all participants spoke of how much they enjoyed the variety of experiences that the roles provided. The opportunity to work across different settings, and with differing levels of complexity, held their interest. The variation was cited as leading to long careers within the organisation.

*...No two days are the same...every day is different because obviously people are different aren't they...it's like you're never bored and...I think it's a role that's worth doing...(Jo)*

Connecting with the homeless young people was seen as a skill, and staff found it enjoyable to be a positive influence. Staff referred to a sense of achievement in seeing the homeless young people progress, reach goals, gain skills and achieve independence.

*...you will get a young person coming in potentially with no living skills and then within a year or six months they can leave and then they can live independently. You can really see that then...(Robin)*

Most staff described learning from service users, gaining insight and perspective. Several staff described an accompanying sense of responsibility to advocate for services users, recounting a desire to inform others about the importance of investing in youth and reminding others how privileged they may be in comparison.

*...it's that educating people about the way it really is...I find myself getting quite passionate about it and...I have to keep a lid on it and keep it professional... It's an education for people outside...All these misconceived...I have to educate them...(Jo)*

### *Personal growth*



Many staff spoke of how the role had helped them to re-evaluate their own concerns and helped them to view their life more positively. Some staff discussed being changed by the work, for example, becoming more aware, reflective, non-judgemental and patient. Staff found skills that they did not know they had, and experienced this as enlightening. For some, a shift in values was described, impacting how they interacted with their own children; wanting to protect them and show them more physical affection. A sense of personal gratitude in 'feeling lucky' in comparison was highlighted.

*...I think that when you've done this job for any period of time you become very aware of how lucky you are as a person and how much a little bit of help goes a long way with other people...it makes your life seem wonderful sometimes...(Robin)*

The core conceptual dilemma identified within the data was the challenge of enabling and maintaining engaging and safe relationships with homeless young people, many of whom have a history of trauma, resulting in staff frequently encountering high levels of distress and risk. At a conceptual level, this was influenced by the pressures of coping with multiple complex challenges, within a constrained organisation that is seeking to address a wider societal and political problem.

A theory of balance was developed within which a pivotal process was the fluctuation between feeling supported by the organisation and coping well and feeling unsupported and struggling to cope (see Figure 1.). When organisational support was high, and the individual has a strong repertoire of coping strategies, and feels skilled and efficacious in building supportive, but bounded relationships with service users, the role can feel rewarding and enjoyable which can progress to personal growth. Central to individual coping strategies was the way challenging behaviour was interpreted; conceptualising such behaviour as reflective of adverse childhood experiences, and viewing it as a communication of needs, depersonalised

such experiences and helped to lessen its distressing impact. Recognising the importance of their own actions, also helped staff to develop positive relationships with young people, and appeared to create a sense of control, agency and purpose, alongside a feeling of acting in accordance with one's values. Staff also described a number of self-care strategies for coping with the difficulties of the inherent stresses of the role, such as mindfulness, prioritising personal hobbies and valuing supportive relationships outside of work. At an organisational level, feeling that managers understood and recognised the challenges of their role helped staff to feel acknowledged and validated. Perceived organisational support was enhanced further when staff felt that team leaders were available and approachable and when they experienced a sense of camaraderie and peer support from colleagues. Gaining a sense of purpose and enjoyment from the role also helped to buffer the challenges inherent within it, leading to a sense of achievement, growth and personal development.

Conversely, when staff felt unsupported by the organisation, the work was traumatic or excessively demanding, coping may be overwhelmed with the potential to result in adverse impacts, such as stress and sickness. At an individual level, when staff ruminated and worried about work and felt high levels of pressure and responsibility, staff were vulnerable to emotional and physical symptoms of stress. The negative impact of these individual experiences was closely interwoven with the adverse impact of organisational factors, such as not feeling that support was available, authentic or safe (confidential) as well as feeling isolated due to lone working and exhausted due to shift working.

A fluctuation between all the involved factors renders this dilemma of achieving balance vulnerable to tipping/being tipped.

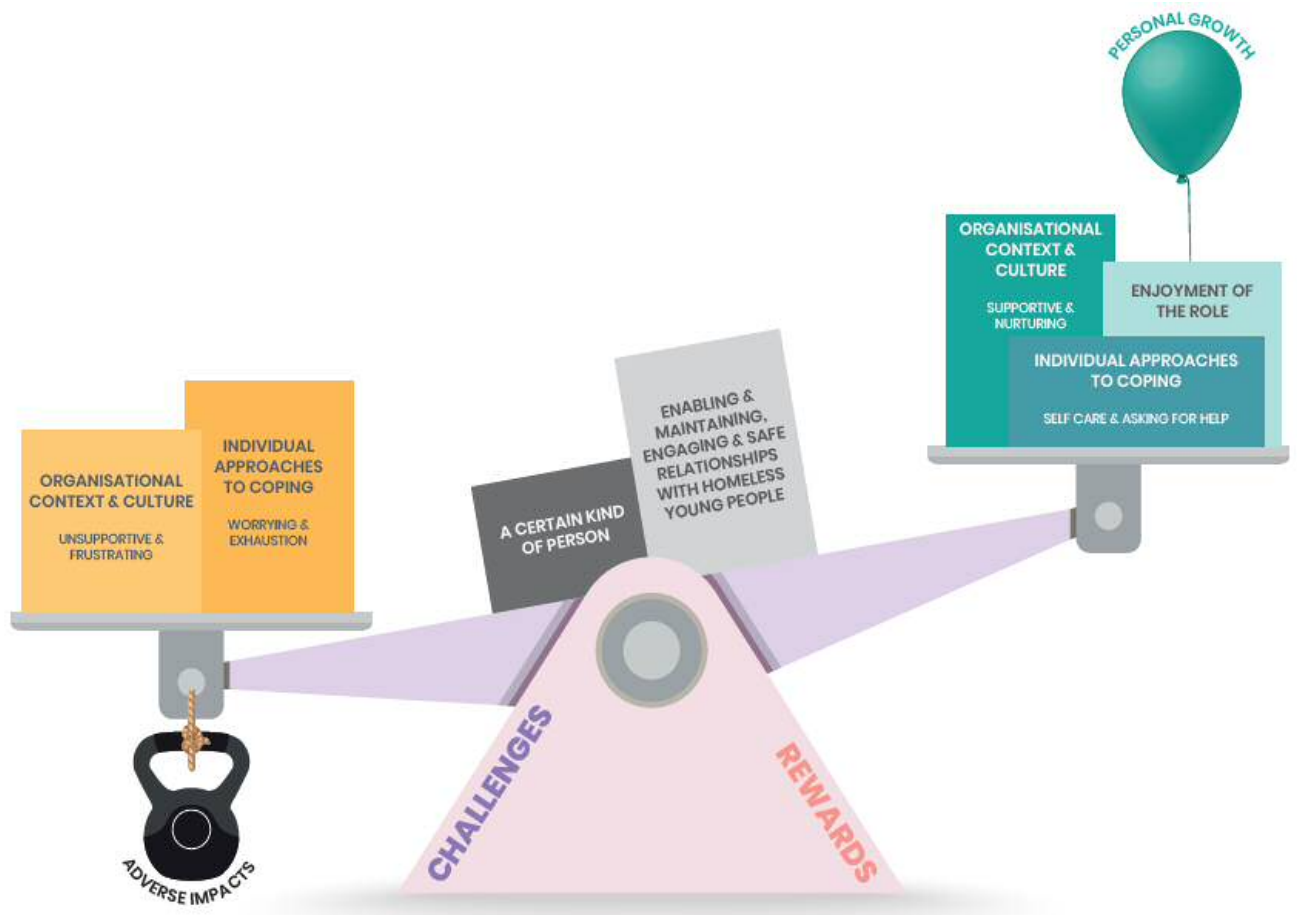


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the complex balance for support workers in helping homeless young people

## Discussion

The current study adds significant insights to the literature on staff experiences and perceptions of working with young people experiencing homelessness in the UK. The findings from the themes and subthemes generated through the interviews, and the resultant model, shed light on factors relevant to supporting staff working in settings for young people experiencing homelessness.

The central dilemma within the model described above highlights the complexity of the relationships between the young people experiencing homelessness and the support workers. Building these relationships has been described as the “bread and butter” of work with homeless people (Cockersell, 2012, p.179, as cited in, Phipps, Seager, Murphy & Barker, 2017), with staff requiring skills that allow them to adapt and respond to the individual with flexibility and versatility (Kidd *et al.*, 2007).

The individual themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews are consistent with some relevant past research, but also add depth and insight into the specific challenges of the staff role in settings for young people experiencing homelessness. The importance of the therapeutic alliance has previously been shown to be key in supporting young people experiencing homelessness (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007). Given that a high proportion of homeless young people have experience of the care system and/or past trauma (Hopper *et al.*, 2010; Shelter, 2005) developing a therapeutic alliance is likely to be challenging due to the inherent trust issues they might face (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007). The current study found that staff highlighted certain skills that have been helpful in developing positive relationships with their clients, for example citing the requirement for consistency in implementing boundaries and reliability in support offered. It is noted that many of the skills referred to (e.g., a need for a consistent approach, having empathy for the clients in terms of their past histories) are common in attachment-focused therapies for those in the care system (e.g., Hughes, 2011).

The two key concepts that emerged from participants' experiences were organisational context and culture, and individual approaches to coping. These were both fundamental to how support workers attempted to manage the tricky balance involved in building relationships with young people experiencing homelessness.

### *Organisational context and culture*

In the current study, support workers discussed the need for safe and confidential sources of support from within the organisation. Kidd *et al.*, (2007) also found that the support worker role was supported within several layers of organisational and cultural context. Participants highlighted a variability in their experiences of supervision and reflective practice, with some finding the support offered to be excellent, and others stating the opposite. Team handovers were also experienced with divergence, with some staff sharing that they felt that they were too brief and unstructured and others finding them a useful space for reflective practice with the team. The inconsistency between participants' experiences might be partly due to individual differences in perceptions of what support they need, or the challenge of embedding support structures throughout organisations.

In reference to the wider system, increased awareness of the impact of austerity, and the faults within the welfare system were reflected upon. Staff highlighted their new levels of insight into the lack of investment in youth; an inequality in opportunities, and the need for a community approach. Participants expressed that the contextual landscape had worsened over time. The significant influence of external and organisational context on the experience of staff is consistent with the model for supportive organisations developed by the National Workforce Skills Development Unit (Health Education England, 2019) which highlights how external contextual factors, such as public health agendas, funding priorities, resources, and societal expectations can have a powerful impact on staff well-being within an organisation.

Staff also asserted that young people experiencing homelessness had lost connection with the system around them, and that much of their work had become about teaching young people different ways to make the current system work for them. This challenges staff outlined in relation to this are consistent with the concept of 'moral distress'; a state of psychological disequilibrium experienced due to not acting in accordance with moral decisions, because of institutional constrictions (Corley, 2002).

### *Individual approaches to coping*

Support workers spoke about restrictions on their time due to the required administration, and perceived inflexibility of organisational systems, which was consistent with some previous research findings. For example, Baker, O'Brien and Salahuddin (2007) identified predictors of emotional exhaustion including high levels of time pressure and low levels of self-efficacy for being productive at work, amongst female shelter workers. Maslach and Schaufeli (1993) described experiences of emotional exhaustion and psychological distress as a consequence of chronic interpersonal and occupational stressors, as burnout. In the current study, support staff described the potential for worrying, and difficulties in coping, to lead to burnout within their work. Possible adverse impacts of the role were highlighted; staff spoke of sickness absences, stress, and effects from listening to the stories of the young people experiencing homelessness. Previous research has noted that the heightened awareness of the impact of trauma was linked to staff's own current mental health (Phipps *et al.*, 2017). These emotional reactions have been linked to compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma in homelessness staff (Arslan, 2013; Seager, 2013). In addition to compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation, which result from secondary exposure to highly stressful events, this study suggests that support workers in settings for young people experiencing homelessness are also likely to experience primary traumatisation as a result of directly witnessing traumatic incidents as well as hearing about them (Stamm, 2015). Witnessing such events and behaviours that challenge staff, whilst having to stay connected

with service users and their distress, whilst staying professional and caring, is likely to take an emotional toll on staff in these settings.

Effective coping strategies were also apparent in participants' responses and were testament to their skill and insight. Staff who felt skilled appeared to gain intrinsic reward for this, perhaps further evidencing the benefits of skills training. Some staff showed an interest in, and awareness of the role of trauma in the behavioural presentations of the young people experiencing homelessness. Indeed, past research has suggested that psychologically informed environments (PIEs) gave staff a greater understanding of psychological trauma and its effects. With this greater understanding there is the potential to increase effective support and coping strategies (Benson & Brennan; 2018). Perhaps through these initiatives staff may also gain increased job satisfaction.

### *Implications for practice*

This complex theory of balance between identified concepts highlights that the often low-paid "support worker" roles in settings for young people experiencing homelessness are extremely challenging. The theory can assist the development of specific support and training opportunities for support workers working with young people experiencing homelessness. Although this study focused on staff working with young people experiencing homeless, it is likely that many of the core themes to emerge would be relevant for those working with clients experiencing homelessness more generally. Thus, it is hoped that this research may inform both young homeless services and other similar services across the UK, and potentially further afield, of the need for individual, team and organisational service improvements.

The employment of psychologists within services may enhance the opportunity for spaces for individual and team reflective practice. Phipps *et al.*, (2017) found that staff working within an

adult PIE setting, described reflective practice as an opportunity to step back, gain greater awareness and hypothesise about the reasons behind service user behaviour. Opportunities for team formulation approaches could also be facilitated, meeting the requests of some staff to have more open spaces for team discussions, and potentially increasing staff self-efficacy (Maguire, 2006). Staff intimated that they valued advocating for the young people experiencing homelessness; with increased insight this may also advance their ability in this regard.

Although staff explained that they had received a lot of useful training from the organisation, some highlighted that they still felt unequipped to manage some challenging behaviour and lacked confidence in their own abilities. Benson and Brennan (2018) found that training staff was effective in helping keyworkers in adult settings to understand client's behaviour and address underlying issues. Cognitive behavioural therapy skills training has been shown to increase staff confidence and understanding of the effects of trauma, and decrease negative beliefs (Cockersell, 2011; Maguire, 2012; Maguire *et al.*, 2009a, 2009b). Staff also discussed how their work aligned with their own personal values; value-based interventions (e.g. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)), which increase the salience of personal values and how these can be embodied within the work, could also be implemented to increase staff satisfaction.

Many organisations working with young homeless individuals are in the process of becoming more psychologically informed in their practice. Support workers spoke of the benefits in being supervised and managed by staff who had personal experience of working within support worker roles themselves. They explained that with this experience it felt that managers understood their concerns, which allowed them to share issues with confidence. This finding highlights that although some "psychologically informed" organisations operate through direct training, reflective practice and supervision from qualified psychologists, having a tiered system might also be beneficial whereby specially trained managers (who have past experience of support worker roles) offer support to staff. Research indicates, however, that



integration of psychologists with PIE services is still crucial as their input has been found to lead to better outcomes for staff and clients, compared with PIEs without such staff members (Cockersell, 2016).

### *Implications for future research*

Future research could test the developed theory, on larger staff populations and broader homelessness services, by operationalisation of the concepts in the theory through relevant validated quantitative methods. To inform staff psychological interventions, it would be important to examine the interaction between individual levels of self-efficacy and coping strategies with objective measures of the organisational context (e.g., perceptions of staff support) and how these predict the quality of the therapeutic alliance. Furthermore, the findings presented here could act as a baseline to be tested against in organisations where PIE has been fully adopted. Information could also be gathered on whether organisational knowledge of the model could lead to reduced levels of burnout within support staff working with young people experiencing homelessness.

### *Limitations*

Given that this research was carried out across one organisation, the findings represent an initial stage in the process of seeking to clarify issues within services for young people experiencing homelessness. The self-selection of participants might have led to particular support workers, who were either adept at coping or not, agreeing to take part. This method may have also allowed for staff who either had very positive or negative experiences of the organisation to be sampled. The experiences outlined may have also been affected by perceived social desirability to respond in a particular way. Staff may have had concerns

around the anonymity of their experiences, fearing colleagues and senior staff may be able to identify them.

Some of the interviews were carried out in person, face-to-face, but most were carried out over the phone. This may have impacted how the participants responded and interacted with the researcher. The participants had all received varying levels of training from within the organisation and this may have influenced the experiences of the staff sampled, but was not specifically considered. The organisation intended to become a PIE in the future, but this had not yet been formalised.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides a unique insight into the complex balance involved for support workers to engage with young people experiencing homelessness, to cope and to feel supported by their organisation. This research serves to highlight the challenges faced by this under researched group of professionals who are supporting some of the most marginalised people in society.

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