

**Title: The Occupational Wellbeing of People Experiencing Homelessness**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports findings of a study that utilised an occupational perspective to explore how wellbeing was achieved and sustained by the occupations of people experiencing homelessness in Australia. Thirty three in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with homeless individuals in a regional city in Australia. Data from the interviews were thematically analysed to understand the relationship between wellbeing, as defined by the individual, and the occupations engaged in by people experiencing homelessness. The findings are reported here as three collective narratives that illustrate the experiences of diverse groups within the homelessness population explored in this study. The study demonstrates how occupations go beyond the individual experience and choice; to explore the social and cultural value of occupations as a means to wellbeing. The findings are discussed in relation to three key themes that emerged from the study: survival, self-identity and social connectedness. These three interconnected concepts complement the existing occupational science literature, and offer a preliminary framework for understanding and improving wellbeing for disadvantaged and marginalised people where occupations are restricted by societal forces. The findings support the urgent need to redirect services to support occupational opportunities that are socially and culturally valued and enhance survival, self-identity and connectedness of homeless people.

## Introduction

The relationship between occupational engagement and human wellbeing is central to occupational science research (Hocking, 2009; Wilcock, 2007). Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to report the findings of a study conducted in regional Australia that aimed to explore the relationship between occupational engagement and well-being for people experiencing homelessness.

The term well-being is used with some caution. Although it is a widely used concept, it is defined in different ways in the literature of various disciplines (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2013; McAllistair, 2005). The lack of an agreed definition makes research related to well-being both conflictual and confusing (McAllistair, 2005). A useful and inclusive definition of well-being provided by Hammell and Iwama (2012) can be abbreviated to "a state of contentment - or harmony - with one's: physical/mental health; emotional/spiritual health; personal and economic security; self-worth; sense of belonging; opportunities for self-determination; opportunities to engage in meaningful and purposeful occupations; and sense of hope" (p. 387). As Aldrich (2011) proposed, a Deweyan approach to well-being must also acknowledge and consider individuals' personal situations.

Well-being is a preferred concept amongst occupational scientists, as it provides a broader focus of interest than health and dysfunction (Aldrich, 2011; Hammell, 2008, 2014; Hammell & Iwama, 2012; Persson & Erlandsson, 2014). Consistent with that perspective, the term occupational well-being is used to describe the influence of one's engagement in a variety of occupations, in the context of the social environment and one's sense of identity (Doble & Santha, 2008; Nilsson & Townsend, 2010; Pooremamali, Persson, Östman, & Eklund, 2013). Reinforcing the link between occupation and well-being, Pollard, Kronenberg and Sakellariou (2009) asserted that well-being is achieved through "people's dignified and meaningful participation in daily life" (p. 3). Conversely, lack of occupational opportunity (or occupational deprivation) has been associated with lower subjective experiences of

well-being (Nilsson & Townsend, 2010; Whiteford, 2010). At the extreme, situations where participation in occupations that fulfil basic needs, demonstrate capacities, and express identity is restricted have been characterised as occupational injustice (Wilcock, 2006).

Occupational well-being recognises that individuals compose or orchestrate their occupational lives in patterned ways to meet their occupational needs (Bateson, 1996; Doble & Santha, 2008.) It is through these patterns of everyday occupations that people build meaning and community in their lives, highlighting that even while different people may be doing the same thing, it is the different ways in which they engage in these occupations that expresses their "exquisite individuality" (Hasselkus, 2006, p. 628). The assumption that there is a relationship between occupation and well-being is, however, qualified by acknowledging that well-being is defined differently in different cultures and social groups (Hammell, 2009) and that some risky or health damaging occupations also provide meaning and purpose (Kiepek & Magalhães, 2011).

For people who experience homelessness, participation in occupations is restricted by a lack of housing and resources (Stadnyk et al., 2010), with a number of authors recognising the disadvantage and marginalisation of homeless people in relation to the occupational opportunities available to them (Chapleau, 2010; Chard, Faulkner, & Chugg, 2009; Thomas, Gray, & McGinty, 2010; Van Leit, Starrett, & Crowe, 2006). While acknowledging the individual and structural barriers to occupational participation during homelessness, an occupational perspective allows for a nuanced, culturally and socially appropriate understanding of individual and collective occupations that contribute to a state of contentment fundamental to well-being. For example, the findings of a previous study on well-being in homelessness reported keeping safe, being positive, connecting with others, and being 'human' (as implied in the idea of being a normal or accepted person) were important aspects of subjective well-being for homeless people (Thomas, Gray, & McGinty, 2012). As those findings illustrate, an occupational perspective of homelessness focuses on the nature and meaning of human doing in relation to well-being and is not limited by concepts reflective of dominant culture

and deficit models frequently used in studies involving people who are homeless (Hammell & Iwama, 2012; Njelesani et al., 2014; Petrenchik, 2006).

A better understanding of the way in which well-being is achieved through occupation by people experiencing homelessness is needed to provide an evidence base to inform social care and influence social policy on homelessness. The aim of this study was to discover the occupations that people experiencing homelessness engage in to achieve and sustain well-being. The stance taken was that individuals' unique life situations determine the level and demand of occupations necessary for well-being, in the context of their particular physical and social environment and the resources available to them. That is, occupational well-being for people experiencing homelessness was not viewed as an individual enterprise, experienced in isolation. Rather, it is negotiated within the limitations of the physical, cultural and social factors which influence the form of chosen occupations and the value and worth ascribed to them.

The aim of this study was to discover the occupations that people experiencing homelessness engage in to achieve and sustain their wellbeing.

## **Method**

The research was grounded in a constructivist paradigm and aimed to produce reconstructed understandings of the social world of people experiencing homelessness in this context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A case study methodology was used to describe and interpret the experiences that constitute homelessness with explicit reference to the social, cultural, situational and contextual environment (Stake, 2005). A strengths-based approach was taken to prioritise the voices and meanings ascribed by participants, which connected with constructivist assumptions that individuals construct their own knowledge and reality and, as such, influence their lives and interactions with others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002).

The study was approved by the [REDACTED] Human Ethics committee as part of a doctoral research project. It was conducted by the first author over four years between 2007 and 2011.

## **Research Context**

The geographic context of this study, in a regional city in Northern Queensland, Australia, is relevant for two reasons. Firstly the city enjoys a tropical climate, having an average of 320 days of sunshine per year and a constant warm temperature which may be a cause of the relatively high rate of homelessness (including people who were sleeping rough or living in temporary shelters) in the city. At 93 per 10,000 of the general population, the homelessness rate is almost double the national rate in Australia. Secondly, a relatively high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in the region. For some, the region is their ancestral home, many others were forcibly relocated to the region as colonisation of Northern Australia occurred. For the purposes of this study the term Indigenous refers to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

The high proportion of Indigenous Australians is also evident in the homeless population, which provides an opportunity to explore homelessness through a cultural lens; recognising the historical, social and cultural factors that influence everyday life and wellbeing of this group (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2008). A social lens is also relevant in this region, as access to public space while seemingly unlimited to the general public is limited to people who are homeless through local by-laws and practices. Local by-laws for example permits police and security personnel to stop and search people for alcohol, or move people on without any obvious misdemeanour. Other strategies are employed by local government such as locking toilets at night, or setting watering systems to spray lawns during the early hours of the morning, making sleeping in parks difficult. For people experiencing homelessness the impact of these practices determines their occupational choices and can influence wellbeing.

The researchers were non-indigenous females with prior experience or indigenous research. Cultural mentorship was integral to the research design and a cultural mentor, who was a local respected elder within the Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island population guided the study.

The first author conducted fieldwork in a range of different homeless services for homeless people. This facilitated the development of relationships with people experiencing homelessness prior to individual interviews being undertaken. The services included a drop-in centre (providing breakfast and lunch and a range of other services for anyone who is homeless), an emergency hostel (specifically for people who were homeless and intoxicated), a housing and support service for homeless families, and an Indigenous town camp. The variety of settings for the research aimed to provide a diverse participant group and cross section of the homeless population.

A purposeful sample of participants were recruited from each of the services through the support of service staff and by direct invitation. Posters and information sheets, including a photograph of the researcher, were displayed and the aims of the study were discussed with all participants prior to arranging an interview. Each service assisted the researcher by suggesting individuals who might be interested and allowing the interviews to be conducted within their premises.

All interview participants (total 29) were between 21 years and 65 years, and at the time of the interview considered themselves to be homeless or to have been recently homeless. The interviews were conducted at times when individuals were likely to be more relaxed and less likely to be under the influence of alcohol, i.e. after breakfast or lunch, or for the mothers during school hours.

The interview was guided by a question schedule of open questions and prompts, designed to facilitate the exploration of the positive strengths, sense of agency and ability of participants to maintain and sustain wellbeing while homeless (Saleebey, 2009). The interview questions and prompts was reviewed by the cultural mentor and piloted before the interviews, to ensure that the language used would be easily understood. The interviews were conversational, co-constructed and

aimed to elicit participants' situated accounts of their occupations that influenced their wellbeing (Lysack, Luborsky & Dillaway, 2006; Roulston, 2010; Silverman, 2006). Participants were reminded of the aims of the study and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, prior to being asked to sign a consent form. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes and an hour. Two Indigenous participants offered to be interviewed more than once, over a period of time to add further information related to their historical and cultural situation. This resulted in a total of 33 interviews which were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher prior to analysis.

Analysis and interpretation of the interview transcripts produced new knowledge based on socially relevant and constructed meanings arising from the occupations and agency of the community under study. Data analysis of the transcripts, by the first author, using NVivo version 8, began by analysing the transcripts to generate themes from the data through coding, comparison and categorisation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Line-by-line coding of the transcripts, looking for phrases specifically related to occupation, i.e. the things that participants did, proved to be of limited value as large amounts of the peripheral data, contextual influences and meanings of specific activities were excluded, providing limited insights. Following discussion with the second and third authors', analysis became increasingly inductive as the voice of participants was discovered in the data, highlighting the relationships between wellbeing and their life world (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Gupa & Lincoln, 2005). Through reading each transcript as a whole we were able to identify more clearly how the occupations of people experiencing homelessness create wellbeing in the context of homelessness and social exclusion. Contextual references in the data told a different story and clearly illustrated the barriers and facilitators of wellbeing for each individual. These references from the transcripts were discussed between all authors, and with the cultural mentor, in order to agree on the interpretation of the meaning. The analysis process continued over a number of months, with regular discussions between the authors and exploration of the concepts emerging through the data.

Three different stories of occupational wellbeing emerged from this analysis, demonstrating the heterogeneity of homelessness represented in this study. The stories were significantly different from each other, and expressed common (though not mutually exclusive) experiences of single homeless males; women with children; and Indigenous homelessness. These collective narratives are summarised in the results section and illustrate the range of experiences and occupations that influence wellbeing in homelessness. However further interpretation of the narratives have elicited the three clear themes; occupations of survival, occupations of self-identity and occupations of social connectedness. These overarching themes form the basis of the discussion.

## **Results**

A brief synopsis of the three collective stories of occupational wellbeing in homelessness is provided below, using direct quotes from participants indicated in italics. The use of collective stories (Richardson, 1990) maintains the anonymity of individual participants but allows the researcher to narrate the experiences of a group as a central and recognisable character (Richardson, 1990). The art of writing these stories is in creating a fiction based on true accounts that is recognisable to those it represents whilst ensuring anonymity.

### **Chris**

Chris is a 40 yrs old Indigenous man and has lived on the streets for 6 yrs. He originally came from a remote Queensland Indigenous community. He attended a high school in the city, living with relatives and returning to the community during the holidays. After school he worked for the railways and moved around Queensland. He has a partner and a child, who live with his mother in the community. Chris had a relatively stable life when he was working, he got on well with his work colleagues and at home he was happy in his relationship with his partner and his community. One

weekend there was trouble in the community which resulted in fighting, Chris and some other members of his family were involved and after the event he was charged and received a jail sentence. Going to jail changed everything for Chris. On his release after spending four years in jail things did not work out with his partner or with his relationships in the community. He was unable to find work again and feels unwelcome back home. Since his release back to community he has been living in Townsville with other Indigenous people who are homeless. These people are his family now and it is with them that he feels he belongs.

Chris wakes before sunrise, when he walks through the city to get a coffee at McDonalds, or a drink at a tap if he has no money. He meets up with others who are homeless' and they wait for the drop in centre to open at 8.30 so they can have breakfast. After breakfast Chris goes with his friends to the park where they yarn (Indigenous term for informal conversation). It is with the mob (an indigenous term for a groups of friends) that Chris feels he belongs, sitting, yarning and drinking in the parks. He says *"Being with my brothers and sisters is what counts, they might be lost, being around them just makes you ....., you have your laughs, you have really good laughs."* The relationships between people in the mob are constructed as extended family, kinship relations that provide a sense of identity. The occupation of being with, and belonging to the mob fulfils Chris's wellbeing needs.

Chris also likes to spend time on his own, when he goes for walks and uses the time to reflect. Chris says *"I go to the beach, that's where I have always gone, so I can be with myself, keep my mind occupied"*. Being alone and connecting with specific spaces, such as the beach or the bush provides opportunities for reflection and a sense of peace. For Indigenous Australians, connection to country is recognised to be important for wellbeing as evident in Chris's story. Recently Chris has started painting and he find this to be culturally significant, he told me the painting is good *"to give them something cultural and something they can fight for. Because they had everything taken away at the moment. That's why they are unhappy"*.

For Chris the streets of the city are his home and this is reinforced by being part of the mob.

Avoiding trouble with the law is a major occupation. Police and security guards use council by-laws to move on those who are homeless. Being found with alcohol could mean another fine. For Chris and his mob he experiences these laws as racist and trouble with the police as harassment. Both confirm his sense of being marginalised from society; *"It's like you cant sleep in the parks, well you can until the police come up, then they will move you"*. Chris and his mob have nowhere else to go and yet they are continually told they cannot stay where they are.

## **Julia**

Julia is a 25 year old non-Indigenous woman with 2 children. She is currently living in a 2 bed-roomed unit for emergency family accommodation. The unit is barely furnished, most of Julia's belongings are in storage and she is making do for now, the floors and walls are bare, there are no pictures or ornaments, the kitchen is tidy, a pile of clean washing is folded on the sofa.

Julia's own childhood was disrupted by periods of foster care, although she has contact with her own mother, she talks fondly of the support she still receives from her foster mom and a foster sister, who are also in the city. She became homeless when her rental accommodation was sold. She has found that it is impossible to find another rental she can afford, being a single mom on a benefit makes her a risky tenant and rental agency staff are unsympathetic. She has been in crisis housing for 2 months and will be allowed to stay longer because and she is actively looking for permanent housing.

For Julia her major occupation is keeping going *"just basically keep on with my normal life as it is at the moment, trying to keep my children in a routine as much as possible"*. For the sake of the children she cannot give up so she works hard to maintain the routines of getting up, taking her son to school, looking after the three year old, preparing cheap meals, and keeping the house clean. She says she has to *"just push through and hope for the best"*.

Her role as mother is what is most meaningful, she knows she must protect them from the reality of what is happening, she tries to make sure she is available for them, spends time cuddling them and playing with them *“so that they have got a cushioning [ ] they know I am still there and things are still the same [ ] that gives them the sense of security even though they are not living where they were before”*.

Julia’s life is on hold until she gets her own place but she has a clear vision of a different future. She has a plan to do a course at TAFE (College of Higher Education), so she can *“do something that will improve my ability to get work”* and get off the social benefit she is reliant on now.

Getting a permanent home is an essential first step to make the plan happen; *“To know that my children have a stable home, to have my own home actually, for me and the children”*. A house provides security for herself and her children and she knows from her own experiences how important that is for them all; *“somewhere they can always come and know it’s always going to be there. I believe that’s important for a child to have.”* Julia feels ashamed about being homeless being on a pension and letting her kids down, she wants a better future for herself and her children.

## **Stuart**

Stuart is a middle aged Western man and a regular at the drop in centre where he is usually cheerful, happy to have a chat and a joke with anyone. Stuart says that he is 52 years old and comes from Adelaide (though he looks much older with his beard and weathered skin). He has been on the streets for eight years. Before that he was married with an 18 year old son and living in his own home in Adelaide. He says he just walked out, left them with everything, he didn’t want anything and he has had no contact with them since. He does not want a divorce and is happy for his wife

and son to continue living in the marital home. He expects they are happier without him. He does not say why, just that he could stay there any longer.

He moved up to Queensland because he likes the warmth and after a few months living in his car he has been on the streets for most of the last 8 years. He had an emergency housing unit for a while but did not like the neighbours and found it hard to pay rent and decided to go back to the streets. He likes living on the streets and he feels he manages pretty well.

If he gets the chance he will do some cleaning at the drop in centre and earn an extra \$15.00. The money helps to buy cigarettes and alcohol. He occasionally goes to a hostel but generally sleeps in town. There are a few different spots where he sleeps but he moves around to stay safe. He tells me it is pretty dangerous being homeless in Townsville. He is well known to the services and the police.

In terms of wellbeing for Stuart the first thing is survival – getting food, a safe place to stay, keeping clean. For Stuart food is the priority and so the drop in centre provides a starting point *“then when I am here, work out where I am going to go for the rest of the day. Most times I decide to stay here.”*

Some occupations are basically filling time. He does a lot of walking not just as a means to get somewhere but to fill time and to keep fit, he reads, does ‘work’ for cash when available, and finds other places to go: *“I would probably go to the library, it’s air conditioned so you can loiter around there”*.

Friendships are important, having a mate or two to catch up with, have some company, but basically Stuart does not really trust people and so prefers to spend time alone, *“it’s simpler that way”*.

One of the problems with being on the streets is maintain a positive outlook, so Stuart uses simple strategies to keep him feeling happy and content. He says *“if you wake up and say ‘oh this is going to be a bummer’, well this is going to be a bummer - If you wake up and say I am alive – I didn’t die during the night you know, well that’s a good day”*.

Stuart also drinks and it give him something to look forward to and plan, “*you have to buy the alcohol and find somewhere to sit and drink, or get your pay and go to the pub, it makes you feel better, numbs you and helps with sleep.*” Stuart’s wellbeing is about being content with little, finding pleasure in simple things and not expecting much from life.

## **Discussion**

Building on the findings of previous research, this study expands on the concepts of keeping safe; being positive and feeling good; connecting with others; and staying human and normal; demonstrating how wellbeing is achieved and sustained through engagement in a range of occupations. Reflecting on the three perspectives of homelessness represented in the collective narratives, three clear occupational groupings were uncovered.

1. Occupations of *survival* incorporates the concept of staying safe,
2. Occupations of *self-identity* facilitate being positive and feeling good, as well as staying human and normal.
3. Occupations of *social connectedness* give opportunities to stay connected.

Together occupation enable people who are homeless to experience wellbeing in the face of their restricted opportunities and disadvantage.

## **Occupations of Survival**

The wellbeing of people who are homeless depends on their capacity and opportunities to ensure their own survival. In the absence of a physical home and deprived of the resources to meet their physical needs, people who are homeless organise their lives and manifest their sense of agency to ensure their own and, in the case of mothers, their children’s survival. It is at this level that routines are important and engender a sense of control over otherwise unpredictable or possibly

uncontrollable circumstances (Schultz-Kron, 2004). Survival means doing similar things each day, keeping going, not giving up, and focusing on those things that are necessary and achievable rather than looking towards their uncertain future or investing in long-term goals (Chard et al, 2009; Nelson and Wilson, 2012). Occupations of survival are concerned with the immediate and planning is deliberately short-term and focused on those aspects of life that can be controlled.

The need to find safety, whether in a place to sleep at night, or a permanent home for a family is the motivation for many occupations outlined in the collective stories. It is clear from the study that a range of alternative accommodation options are needed to meet the need for safety. Homeless shelters frequently do not provide a safer alternative to living on the streets; many homeless people prefer to camp out either alone or in groups. However for families, where emergency accommodation provides a temporary solution to being homeless, the search for permanent housing takes precedence over, and places a hold on other occupations such as study or employment. Readily available and accessible social housing of homeless families therefore supports the whole family's wellbeing.

While survival occupations include getting meals, and looking after ones bodily needs, for some, buying and drinking alcohol is another occupation of survival. Alcohol purchase and consumption can contribute to wellbeing in different ways; as an organiser of time and as a therapeutic occupation to add sleep and relaxation (Kiepek & Magalhães, 2011). In other studies of homeless populations, addictions contribute to identity, motivation and routines which, however problematic, serve to maintain some degree of mental stability (Wasmuth, Crabtree, & Scott, 2014, p.612).

Wilcock (2007) identified survival as the primary drive of all animals, arguing that humans are neurologically programmed to use their capacities to engage in occupations that sustain life and health. Without safety, survival can become a fulltime occupation, with shelter and subsistence occupations considered essential pre-determinants of life and human wellbeing (Maslow, 1943;

Max-Neef, 1991). This research found that people who have nowhere safe to live are engaged in occupational lives of purpose in order to achieve their own survival.

### **Occupations of Self-identity**

Self-identity is the sense of who we are and who we may become. People construct, reshape and enact their identity through their occupations in ways that meet their social and cultural values: simultaneously people's identities are constructed and reshaped by their social interactions and experiences (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). Parsell (2010) found that homelessness does not define an individual's identity. Rather it is founded on families, life experiences including being marginalised, and opportunities to engage in occupations that affirm a sense of normalcy or mainstreamness.

This study demonstrates how self-identity in homelessness is affirmed through occupations that are socially and culturally valued. Highlighted in different ways the connection between self-identity and wellbeing is clear. For Indigenous people being connected to kinship groups and country is integral to cultural identity, and separation leads to identity confusion to spiritual homelessness (Memmott et al., 2003).

Similarly mothering occupations are critical to the wellbeing and self-identity of homeless mothers, requiring self-sacrifice, careful management of limited resources and nurturing of the children (Fingeld-Connett, 2010; Hognikii & Horner, 1993). Of significance in this study being a good mother is in conflict with being homeless, and so engaging in mothering occupations compensate for and alleviates feelings of guilt and shame associated with becoming homeless. The wellbeing of homeless mothers and their children is sustained through occupations that give hope for future financial security and a stronger sense of self-identity.

In contrast to homeless stereotypes, some individual engage in occupations that create a positive self-identity as a homeless person; keeping clean, reading, going to the library, doing work when

available and keeping fit. Such occupations deny the stigma of homelessness, and create a sense of wellbeing. While strictly not classed as an occupation, the active use of positive thoughts serves to strengthen positive self-image and to challenge societal images and perceptions of homeless men.

An occupational perspective of identity proposes that through engagement in day-to-day occupations individuals gain a sense of who they are and who they may become (Kelhofner, 2008).

In the context of homelessness, limited engagement in socially valued occupation inhibits opportunities for developing and sustaining positive self-identity. Occupational identity is also influenced sociocultural factors, from relationships with others and from the values and opportunities society gives to the occupations in which individuals engage (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009)

This study demonstrates that, for people experiencing homelessness, a positive self-identity contributes to wellbeing, and is achieved through opportunities to engage in occupations that simultaneously meet individual needs and reflect sociocultural values (Asaba & Jackson, 2011).

### **Occupations of Social Connectedness**

Hammell (2014) suggested that social connectedness is concerned with interpersonal relationships and interconnectedness as communities. Fundamental to the concept of social connectedness is the notion of reciprocity within relationships, such that through their social connections people contribute to their own and others wellbeing. While occupations of social connectedness are evident at different levels in the three narratives, the need for social connections both within and outside the homeless community is clear.

Chris prioritised his occupations of social connectedness to his mob, in relation to maintaining his wellbeing. The mob, functions as a kinship group or extended family, creating a sense of belonging which is actualised through the sharing of resources. The social connection established through kinship groups contributes to a sense of shared identity and esteem and mitigates the danger of loneliness. Being connected with others through social relationships and obligations provides a sense of belonging and community for those unable to belong in mainstream society.

Julia prioritised occupations that reinforced connection with her children through intimate enactments of cuddling, staying close, spending time, and playing with her children she experienced a sense of belonging. These occupations simultaneously contributed to her own and her children's wellbeing. For Julia, maintaining and nurturing her relationship with children establishes the family as a small but resilient community that will not be separated by their homeless situation.

Both narratives highlight different levels of collective occupations and their relationship to wellbeing in homelessness (Elelwami & Kronenberg, 2015; Fogelberg & Frauwirth, 2010); for Chris, an Indigenous Australian 'being with the mob' enables collective community occupations, as "a vehicle for building and sustaining relationships that work" (Elelwani, 2015, p.12) and provides for a meaningful existence. Julia's engagement with and commitment to her family occupations demonstrate occupations at a group level (Fogelberg & Frauwirth, 2010). Participation in family routines provides meaning and wellbeing for Julia and her family.

In contrast Stuart placed less priority on occupations of social connectedness, whilst acknowledging the importance of having a mate or two with whom he could have a laugh and a joke. Though well-liked and respected in the homeless community, he keeps these relationships at a superficial level, deliberately avoiding any emotional involvement. In his experience, relationships are problematic, and he feels any obligation to others makes him more vulnerable. Maintaining wellbeing is linked to individual occupations that maintain a sense of control, independence and avoiding relationships.

Marginalisation experienced through homelessness creates a barrier to participation in occupations of social connectedness and to wellbeing. In this context people engage in occupations that sustain connectedness to others in similar circumstances, and tend to withdraw from relationships with people who do not share their marginalised experience.

The study demonstrate that wellbeing in homelessness is complex and achieved through occupations that meet individually, socially, and culturally defined needs. These occupations do not have a consistent hierarchy, each narrative prioritises occupations differently, according to their personal and social context.

### **Limitations**

The small participant numbers means that the findings are not representative of the homeless population in this regional centre. Specifically the small number of women on which Julia's narrative was based compromises the trustworthiness of the findings. Additionally, the context for the study had a number of unique features, including the tropical climate, high proportion of Indigenous Australians, and being outside the metropolitan locations where most homeless services are located. These features may result in the findings being unrepresentative on other locations.

The criteria for inclusion included self-identification of participants as being or having recently been homeless, which raises the issue of definitions of homelessness, as determined by government policy. In this study no distinction was made between participants who were living on the street and those that had access to temporary hostels or boarding houses. One invited participant identified himself as housed because he considered his hostel to be home, while others in similar situations felt themselves to be homeless, because their right to remain in the hostel was tenuous. There was similarity of experiences expressed by participants regardless of their current living situations.

### **Conclusion**

The study findings highlight an understanding of the diversity of occupations that people experiencing homelessness engage in to achieve and sustain their wellbeing, as represented by three collective stories of homelessness. It is important to reiterate that these stories are not individual case studies but a snapshot of perspectives, expressed by participants in the study. Nonetheless this research contributes to the evidence related to occupational perspectives of wellbeing, by focussing

on the experience of people who experience social disadvantage and limited opportunities for occupational engagement.

The findings suggests that there is a need for a wider appreciation of the benefits of occupation as a vehicle to achieve and sustain wellbeing in homelessness policy. The current policy direction for reducing homelessness pays little attention to wellbeing needs above those of basic survival such as food and shelter. The results of this study demonstrates the importance of engagement in occupations that are socially and culturally valued to subjective feelings of wellbeing. Policy that restricts and limits the occupational choices available to people experiencing homelessness is therefore detrimental to wellbeing. There is an urgent need to redirect services to support and encourage a range of socially valued occupational opportunities for people which enhance survival, self-identity and social connectedness of those who live on the margins of communities.

An occupational justice perspective, for minority groups within or on the outskirts of the population, fits with the concepts discussed by Dickie, Crutchin and Humphry (2006); that occupations are transactions of the person and the situation they are experiencing. As such the nature of occupations available may be restricted or supported by the environment and each co-construct the other. An occupational justice approach to homelessness should therefore work to improve opportunities afforded for those who are marginalised.

The experience of wellbeing described here fulfils part of the definition proposed by Hammell and Iwama's (2012) as a 'state of contentment – or harmony'. People experiencing homelessness seek to attain a level of simple contentment through occupation, to experience harmony with themselves and/or their immediate social connections. However striving for more than that is at best unrealistic, and potentially a threat to wellbeing. Beyond the most basic of human needs i.e. survival, identity and social connectedness, people who are homeless experience a lack of opportunity to engage in occupations that are meaningful, or have hope for a better future. Lack of support at community and

societal levels effectively restricts many homeless people from making plans, or hoping for a different life and wellbeing is considered as a moment by moment, or at least day by day goal.

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