

Beyond behaviour: rethinking integration for people experiencing homelessness

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Abstract

Integration is one of the main goals of homeless services. Despite the growing research on integration and homelessness, few studies start with the perspective of people experiencing homelessness. Integration is often measured as participation in a list of standard behaviours. This process assesses behaviour in accordance with social norms but ignores people's own feelings and understanding of integration. The main aim of this study is to explore the meaning of integration from the perspective of people experiencing homelessness. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving 26 people in homeless service programmes. Five main themes regarding the meanings of integration were generated: work, housing, respectful relationships, family and personal dignity. Moreover, two themes of obstacles and facilitators affecting integration were identified. A new conceptualisation of integration is generated that captures the participants' sense of personal dignity, respect and recognition from others and a sense of utility within their living environments (work, house and family). Implications of the results are discussed with respect to homeless services and research on homelessness.

KEYWORDS

homeless services, homelessness, integration, Italy, public health, qualitative method

1 | INTRODUCTION

The literature demonstrates that homelessness is the result of a complex interaction of structural and individual factors (Lee et al., 2010). Problems at the structural level that are influenced by social policies include lack of affordable housing, income inequality and poverty (Shinn, 2007, 2010). These can exacerbate individual vulnerabilities, such as changes in family composition or relationships, lack of social support, stressful events, alcohol or substance abuse and mental and physical health problems (Anderson & Christian, 2003). Homelessness is also connected to processes of social exclusion based on income, wealth, housing and incarceration (Shinn, 2010). The result of this interaction between structural and individual factors results in the exclusion of the person from society, for example, from homes, income, jobs or relationships. The marginalisation process extends beyond a loss of housing, by negatively affecting

physical, psychological and social well-being (Beijer et al., 2012; Johnstone et al., 2016).

The growing attention to structural factors affecting individual vulnerabilities has resulted in a shift in ways of viewing people who are marginalised and their role in the society. Valorising their social role could be a way to help them exit from their marginalised status (Aubry et al., 2013). Unsurprisingly, social integration has become a main objective of homeless services (Gaboardi et al., 2019). Growing research focuses on the analysis of integration among people experiencing homelessness, variously described as community/social integration (Townley & Terry, 2018).

Generally, the research focuses on integration-related behaviours (e.g., using community services, having social relations, etc.), or more rarely psychological integration (Ecker & Aubry, 2016). Despite the growing research, few studies analyse the people experiencing homelessness's perspective (Coltman et al., 2015; Granerud & Severinsson, 2006). The focus is on constructs (and therefore measures)

reflecting standard behaviours, and less on people's subjective experiences. The main aim of this study is to explore the meaning of integration from the perspective of people experiencing homelessness.

1.1 | Integration and homelessness

Initially, literature studied integration as a one-dimensional construct, focusing on the extent in which people participate in community activities and use community resources (Segal & Aviram, 1978). Recently, Wong and Solomon (2002) have developed a multidimensional construct that encompasses physical, social and psychological dimensions, based on a synthesis of different definitions and frameworks. Physical integration refers to participation in activities of daily living in the community; social integration focuses on social contact with other community members and psychological integration comprises an individual's sense of community and belonging.

The conceptual model they propose (Wong & Solomon, 2002) is based on an ecosystems perspective, assuming the interdependence of various levels of an ecological system. Three main features of the environment affect community integration: housing, behavioural regulation and support. The housing environment relates to its physical and social characteristics, for example, accessibility of community resources, safety of neighbourhood and housing setting. The behavioural environment refers to rules and regulations which stipulate acceptable behaviour among residents; the programme practices that determine the levels of choice, control and privacy for residents, and the availability of services. The support environment relates to the quality of interaction among residents and staff. All these factors are affected by clients' personal factors, for example, socio-demographic attributes, clinical characteristics and psychiatric symptoms.

This conceptual model has revolutionised the way of looking at integration from an ecological perspective. Several studies have tried to examine Wong and Solomon's (2002) theoretical framework empirically to understand the role of these factors in the integration of people experiencing homelessness and psychiatric disabilities (Marshall et al., 2020). Following Wong and Solomon (2002), we review literature on integration at nested ecological levels: housing environment (housing and neighbourhood), behavioural and support environment (social support) and personal factors (psychiatric symptoms).

1.1.1 | Housing environment

With respect to housing, some research has shown that having independent scatter-site housing is related to a greater psychological and social integration (Aubry et al., 2013; Gulcur et al., 2007; Ornelas et al., 2014; Yanos et al., 2004). Living in independent apartments has been significantly associated with greater independence (Yanos et al., 2009) and higher levels of choice (Gulcur et al., 2007). Moreover, some studies have found relationships among housing satisfaction and psychological integration (Nemiroff et al., 2011).

What is known about this topic?

- Literature about homelessness is typically focused on measuring integration as participation in a list of standard behaviours;
- Conceptual, methodological and epistemological issues emerge in the study of integration and homelessness;
- The integration construct lacks the perspective of people experiencing homelessness.

What this paper adds?

- This study explored integration from people experiencing homelessness' perspective;
- A new idea of integration that encompasses the themes discussed by the participants is generated;
- Results were translated into recommendations to research and practice.

Nevertheless, people could have improvements in housing stability but remain socially isolated, with limited improvement in social integration (Tsai et al., 2012). For example, Patterson et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal study examining community integration among people experiencing homelessness with mental illness. They demonstrated an increase in psychological integration for participants with less severe needs living in independent apartments but no significant improvement in physical integration among any of the intervention groups. Somers et al. (2017) found that change in psychological integration mean was significantly greater after 24 months in congregate housing compared to traditional treatment.

Research shows how the neighbourhood plays an important role in integration. Safety, satisfaction and tolerance for mental illness within the neighbourhood were related to sense of community in individuals with mental illness (Townley & Kloos, 2011). Moreover, opportunities for neighbours to meet and interact in positive ways were associated with high levels of psychological integration in women experiencing homelessness (Nemiroff et al., 2011). People who reported higher levels of integration also reported more positive characteristics of their housing and neighbourhoods than people with lower integration (Ecker & Aubry, 2016). In another study, perceived neighbourhood social cohesion was related to psychological integration, but not to physical and social integration (Yanos et al., 2009). Better accessibility of community resources was associated with the ability to use those resources and with feeling part of the community (Chan et al., 2014).

1.1.2 | Behavioural and support environment

A recent review about community integration and social support showed that numerous sources of social support (family, pets, etc.)

play an important role in promoting community integration for people with mental illness (Terry & Townley, 2019). Social isolation has been identified as an obstacle to community integration (Nemiroff et al., 2011) while social support was connected to higher physical and psychological integration (Ecker & Aubry, 2017). In fact, people with mental health problems can experience shame and fear of exclusion and a sense of loneliness in their struggle to be integrated (Granerud & Severinsson, 2006). Remaining homeless predicted poorer well-being, life satisfaction and mood but changes in social support seems to predict well-being over and above housing stability (Johnstone et al., 2016). Support includes both support within and external to service programmes. Nevertheless, few studies have explored the role of staff–client relationship on community integration (Raitakari et al., 2016).

1.1.3 | Personal factors

Some individual factors are also positively related to integration. For example, higher levels of social skills were associated with greater physical integration for homeless adults with problematic substance use (Cherner et al., 2017). Findings about the relationship of psychological symptoms and integration among people experiencing both mental illness and homelessness are mixed. Some studies have found that having lower psychopathology was associated with higher psychological integration (Ecker & Aubry, 2017; Gulcur et al., 2007); others found that social integration was largely independent of clinical symptoms (Tsai & Rosenheck, 2012). Recently, Manning and Greenwood (2019) demonstrated that personal mastery mediates the relationship of perceived choice to physical and psychological integration. Despite the wide range of studies on this subject, we found several challenges related to studying integration and homelessness.

1.2 | Challenges in studying integration and homelessness

We identified three interconnected issues in the analysis of literature on integration and homelessness. First, a *conceptual issue* is that the field lacks consensus on the meaning of integration. Most of the studies were based on Wong and Solomon's conceptual model (2002); others found additional dimensions connected to integration, for example, 'independence/self-actualization' (Gulcur et al., 2007) or 'locus of meaningful activity' (Yanos et al., 2009) and psychological integration is often connected to a 'sense of belonging' (Cherner et al., 2017). Tsai et al. (2012) studied social integration as a construct with six domains: housing, work, social support, community participation, civic activity and religious faith. In their review, Quilgars and Pleace (2016) described four categories of integration: participation in community activities, being accepted in society, working, voting or political participation. Another study considered social integration as equitable access to economic, political, cultural and social domains (Thulien et al., 2019). Moreover, Ware et al. (2007) proposed the concept of social integration

as a process through which people increasingly develop their capacities for connectedness (the construction and successful maintenance of reciprocal interpersonal relationships) and citizenship (the rights and responsibilities enjoyed by members of a democratic society). The concept of integration still needs a clear and shared conceptual framework (Gulcur et al., 2007).

Second, a *methodological issue* is that different measures hinder a comparison of the results. As illustrated above, integration is measured with different constructs and then measures, referring to quantity of activities carried out in a neighbourhood, sense of belonging to a community and type of social support (e.g., CIS, Community Integration Scale; Aubry & Myner, 1996). Most of the measures account for behaviour of participants, but others account for subjective feelings, that is, psychological integration that usually is confined to a sense of community and belonging (Marshall et al., 2020).

The third issue, related to the previous, is *epistemological*. Measuring integration as participation in standard behaviours risks 'correcting' people to a social norm that excludes their freedom of choice (Quilgars & Pleace, 2016). For example, the use of specific resources in the community could be related to what people enjoy (e.g., going to the cinema) as well as their resources (e.g., having money to go to the cinema). Only few studies analysed the point of view of people with mental illness who experience homelessness (Coltman et al., 2015; Granerud & Severinsson, 2006). Townley et al. (2009) used participatory methods that reflect the participants' unique experiences to represent activity spaces and measure accessibility of places. As they declared: "*rather than testing what we think community integration should be, the participant is allowed to tell us what community integration and community is for them*" (Townley et al., 2009, p. 528). Nevertheless, they expanded the research about using new methods to explore individual's experience of integration but they limited their study to physical aspect of community integration.

1.3 | Overview

Analysing the literature we found the tendency to measure integration as a set of behaviours, except for the sense of community and belonging (e.g., Ecker & Aubry, 2016). It would be appropriate to capture subjective aspects rather than focusing on the frequency of standard behaviours. For this reason, the present research used a qualitative approach to explore the meanings of integration from the perspective of people experiencing homelessness in order to compare their point of view with the ongoing dimensions of integration.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Procedure

We defined homelessness as encompassing all forms in the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (Amore et al., 2011).

The data were collected by two master students and one doctoral student through semi-structured interviews during December 2017 and March 2018 in three Italian homeless services (a day centre with employment, education and training services, a shelter with a bed, food and access to low-level support and a group-home programme with shared rooms and access to high-level support). These represent the three most common forms of homeless services in Italy (Pleace et al., 2018).

Before conducting the research, the researchers explained the study's aims, methods and analysis plan to the organisations' leaders to obtain their consent to participate. A convenience sample of people who were currently homeless was recruited on a voluntary basis.

Interviews lasted an average of one and a half hours and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. After talking about the places most important to them and where they spend the most time, we asked them about their meaning of integration. Probes included the following: "What do you mean by integration?"; "In your opinion, what help you to be integrated? and "What are the obstacles you have met or are you facing?".

Interviewers did not start with a theoretical definition of integration but sought to explore participants' ideas of integration. Sometimes researchers asked the participants to give them examples in order to better understand their answers. The Ethics Committee of University of Padua approved the research. Participants provided written informed consent for participation in the research without financial compensation.

2.2 | Participants

Overall, 26 people were involved: 6 in the day centre, 13 in the shelter and 9 in the housing programme (group home). Table 1 shows the main socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

2.3 | Data analysis

We used an inductive approach to analyse participants' understanding of integration from a constructionist epistemological position, exploring people's social constructions of integration and the significance it has in their lives.

Two Italian analysts, one a doctoral student and the other a full professor, analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We started by transcribing the interviews and reading and re-reading them to familiarise ourselves with the data. Then, each analyst separately developed codes at the sentence level for all the interviews. We used Microsoft Excel (2011) to manage the codes. Sentences could have more than one code (e.g., "Work and health are two essential things to feel like a human being" was coded as "work", "health" and "feeling a human being"). Together we collected codes into themes, discussing until we reached consensus. Finally, we reviewed the codes to determine that the themes captured the

TABLE 1 Socio-demographic characteristic of participants ($n = 26$)

Characteristics	n/M (%/SD)
Age	
M (SD)	49.96 (9.5)
Min - Max	27-64
Gender	
Female	5 (19.2%)
Nationality	
Italians	13 (50%)
Homelessness time (years)	
M (SD)	2.97 (4.06)
Min-Max	3 months-20 years
Employed part-time	3 (11.5%)

key ideas expressed by participants. After that, we generated a thematic map of the dataset with the most salient themes.

2.3.1 | Reflexivity

Researchers' background may have influenced the data analysis. Since the researchers are all community psychologists with experience in homelessness, this may have influenced the data analysis through an ecological approach focusing on both the individual and the context (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

2.3.2 | Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretation, during the data analysis two independent coders were appointed and group discussions took place among the researchers (Padgett, 2011).

3 | RESULTS

We generated five themes related to the meaning of integration, as shown in Figure 1. Regarding the factors affecting integration, we generated two themes for obstacles and three themes for facilitators, as shown in Figure 2.

Participants understood integration as: work, housing, respectful relationships, family and personal dignity.

3.1 | Work

Participants talked about having a job, as related to having an identity and to feeling free. For example, a participant said: "Work and health are two essential things to feel like a human being in this kind of

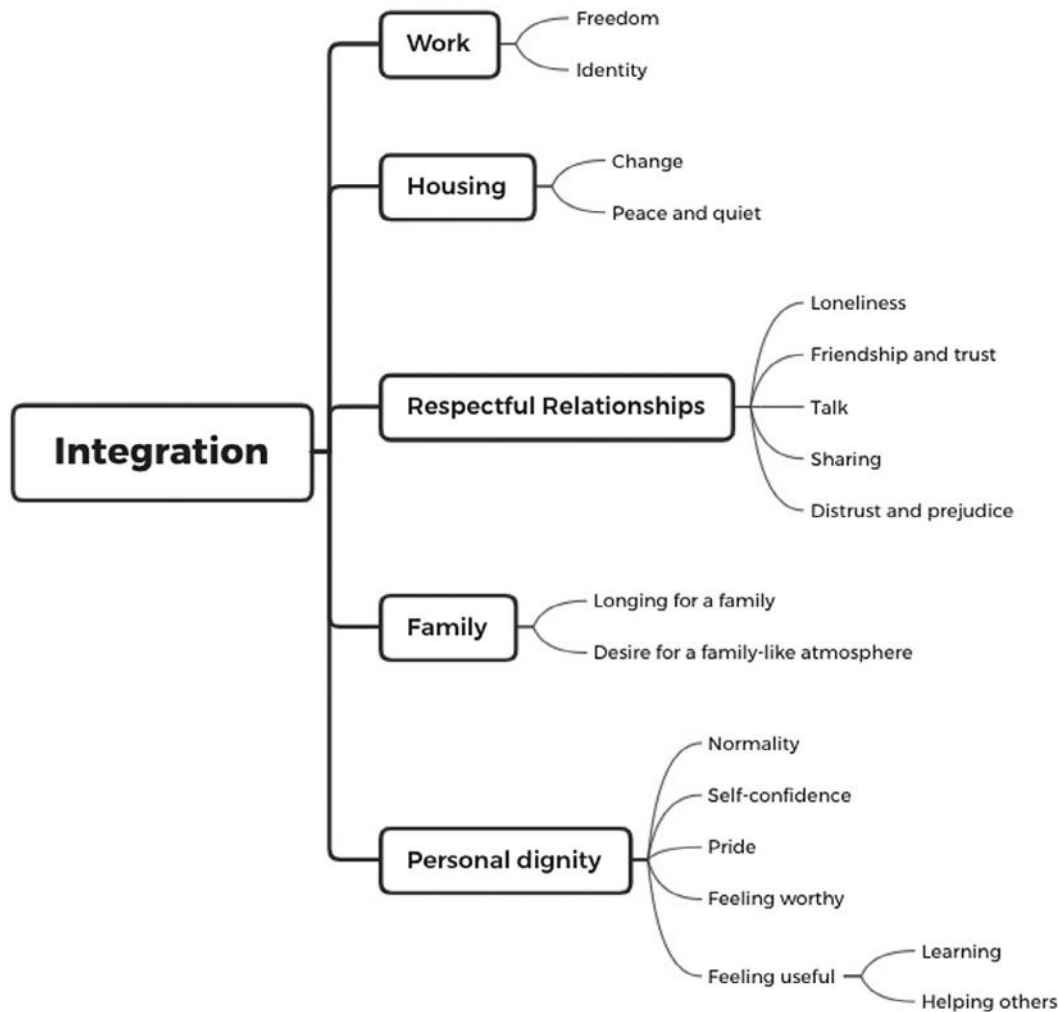


FIGURE 1 Thematic map of integration from the people experiencing homelessness' perspective

society" (#1, female); or: "Until I find a job, I am not me. If I find a job, I can work, come home, eat something, watch the television, work tomorrow, you are quiet, you are free, you are a person, you are someone" (#16, male).

Work was related to freedom (to do what they want), as a participant declared: "When I see something that I like, for example a pair of shoes, I think that I can't buy them because I don't have a job, I can't afford to spend that amount. So, I feel bad about it. I feel excluded from the freedom to choose what I want to do" (#18, female). Participants also discussed the need for work and difficulty in finding jobs.

3.2 | Housing

The theme of housing was discussed by participants as a need to change and to be quiet and at peace, for example: "If you are in a house you can get dressed, you can change every day, you always have clean clothes, you are always clean, you can take a shower and this integrates you in the normal society" (#6, male); or: "the usefulness of

having a foothold that's mine, if I have a home and you have the key, you go out, and you come back when you're done" (#9, male).

Housing creates the possibility to accomplish other goals: "I have to find a house so slowly I have to look for a girl, get married and bring my wife. That'll make me feel comfortable" (#14, male).

3.3 | Respectful relationships

This theme refers to what is exchanged in the relationship with others, on different levels: having someone to talk to, having friends and trusted relationships, and sharing something with others. Participants noted: "Share with other people, know the thoughts of others, know what another can do, what another says [...], integration is learning experiences as well" (#13, male); or: "I also need someone to talk to, but I am looking for people who understand me. People with dignity, with respect, not people to pass the time, transitory people. You are not integrated with people like that" (#8, male).

People need to feel accepted: "To feel accepted. That is what I would like—for others to accept me with all my faults" (#24, male) or:

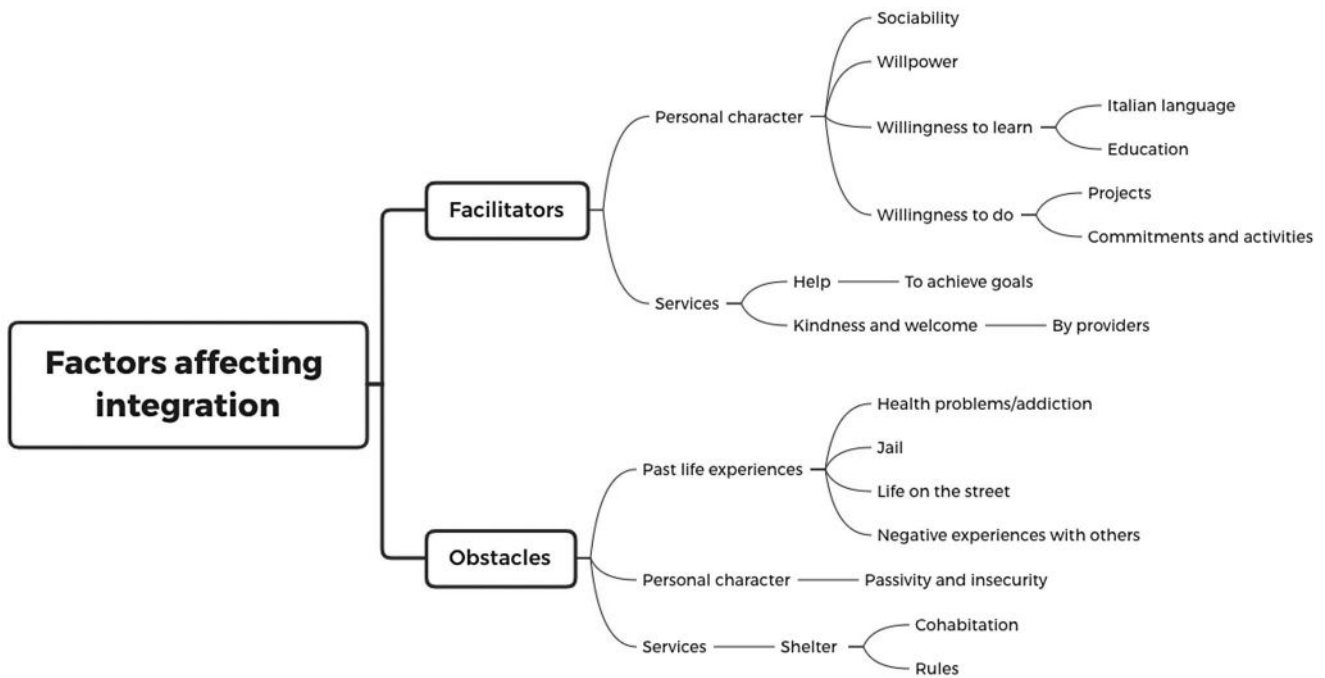


FIGURE 2 Thematic map of factors affecting integration from participants' perspective

"Because feeling integrated means that you care about people, you know new people, you can build something, many things" (#19, male). Conversely, participants talked about their sense of loneliness, and about distrust and prejudices by other people: "Distrust must not be predominant in relationships with others. So when I see excessive indifference, excessive ignorance in the simplest things, this then holds me back, it hinders me from being myself" (#15, male).

3.4 | Family

The family theme includes both being part of a family and living in a family-like atmosphere in which others care about you. Talking about integration a participant said: "I'd like to be with my family, have my own house, have a fair job all day. See the kids, take them to the park, to a restaurant, to an ice cream shop" (#21, male).

Talking about a place important for him, a participant noted: "I feel at home [...], people call you, they want to know about you, how you are ... you feel like you are in a family because they think of you and that is important" (#2, male).

3.5 | Personal dignity

Integration is linked to feelings about personal dignity, in particular: normality, self-confidence, pride, feeling worthy and feeling useful. Integration starts from feelings of dignity of the person, as described by a participant: "Dignity holds people, respect. If you do not have this, for me you are not a person" (#8, male). Another participant talked about integration as contributing to self-esteem:

"Feeling integrated is important, because it gives you confidence in yourself" (#22, male).

Talking about integration a participant declared: "I want so much to be a normal person, to be a person like everyone normally lives. Having the money, a job, the family living with you, to go around, not to worry" (#21, male). Another participant declared: "It is important for me to feel integrated because it helps me in what I have always wanted for my life, to be me with myself as a useful person for society" (#5, trans).

Participants expressed a need for a sense of usefulness, doing activities and learning: "I come here (at the daily center) to be busy also because we do activities, we do theater, learning English, using the computer, so in addition to not being around and maybe feeling like nothing ... it is nice to come here to feel useful, and then you can also learn [...]; the thing that stimulates me the most is knowing that I have a commitment and taking it forward, having responsibilities, having goals" (#3, female); or: "Do something, also a hobby [...], leave a mark as well, if you do not leave a mark it is not community, it is nothing, it is not life" (#13, male). They emphasise participating in the activities because they make sense of themselves and their day.

3.6 | Obstacles and facilitators

In addition to talking about what integration meant to them, and their desires for it, participants talked about factors that facilitated or hindered integration (see Figure 2).

Some individual factors can facilitate integration, for example, having a friendly and sociable character, as participants noted: "Be openness to others helped me to integrate myself" (#8, male).

Also the willingness to do or learn, for example, education or knowing the local language, especially for non-Italians, for example, *"Integration is integrating with Italian culture [...], to be integrated at 100% into the Italian world you need to learn its language and writing"* (#20, male).

Services can also play a facilitating role. Participants discussed about the need to be supported and helped by services, for example: *"I can't do this alone. I need someone to give me some input for a change"* (#15, male); or *"Being integrated into society also means being helped if you need it, it is not possible that we are in 2018 and people have to live on the street"* (#7, male).

They talked about the services referring to the attitude of the providers. Starting from simple behaviours, participants can feel recognised and connected to providers, as a participant declared: *"The first thing that gives me energy is when you enter (in the service) and you see a smile in the morning"* (#2, male).

On the other hand, participants experienced obstacles to the integration, for example, due to past life events (incarceration, bad health, family break-ups): *"Living on the street creates difficulties for you because you can't look for a job, you can't do many things and you can't go to work [...] I've done some time in prison and when you get out of prison it takes some time to integrate"* (#6, male); or: *"My experience has had a great impact. So I am a very distrustful, very lonely person"* (#19, male).

Participants talked about shelter as an obstacle to integration because of the inability to cohabit with partners and rules that limit freedom: *"There (shelter) we go to rest, to pass the time when it is cold, when you do not have nothing to do, when you are tired. We have to stay from 8a.m. to 8p.m. on the street"* (#8, male).

4 | DISCUSSION

The research aimed to explore the meaning of integration from the perspective of people experiencing homelessness. The results suggest a new idea of integration that focuses on feelings connected to this construct, more than particular behaviours.

Some themes are related to Wong and Solomon's (2002) multi-dimensional construct of community integration but with some different nuances. The transcripts contained nothing explicitly related to physical integration. Personal dignity is related to psychological integration but participants discussed feeling of dignity more than sense of belonging to community. Respectful relationships could be associated with the dimension of social integration but they are not limited to the number of contacts respondents had with other people in the community. This theme involves more the sense of recognition, the feeling of being considered, accepted and understood, such as the idea of connectedness developed by Ware et al. (2007).

Our participants talked about the importance of feeling useful to society through working or involvement in activities. They did not discuss simply using community resources but thought about doing something during the day as a way to feel engaged in something meaningful. They sought social roles, much as Yanos et al. (2009) described in their 'locus of meaningful activity'. This finding is similar to

that by Coltman et al. (2015) who showed that taking part in activities and things of interest did not always create positive experiences of integration. When accessing public spaces in the community, some people could feel bored, unfulfilled and lonely.

Thus, different studies showed the impact of being involved in meaningful activities on people's well-being. For example, in Collins et al. (2016), participants discussed engagement in meaningful activities as a way to reduce alcohol use, improve quality of life and achieve recovery goals. Activities engaged participants by taking time away from drinking and gave them pleasure and a sense of responsibility. Similarly, Padgett et al. (2016) found that engagement in meaningful activities contributed to change in recovery from mental illness over 18 months and was intertwined with variation in relationships with significant others. Activities help participants define social roles and offer a sense of usefulness and identity. For example, a study showed how the engagement in an art programme (to learn art skills) provided participants with a starting point for community participation, the construction of new identities, routines and roles, and an alternative from their problems (Thomas et al., 2011).

In our study, participants also identified work and housing as related to integration. Price (1985) points out that participating in the valued social role of a worker might contribute to a sense of belonging in the community and, conversely, people who experience a sense of belonging and acceptance might feel more able to take on positive social roles, such as that of a worker. In another study, participants reported that lack of employment made them feel neglected (Granerud & Severinsson, 2006). As in that study, participants in the current research placed great importance on finding a job, especially in order to have a salary, companionship, daily routines, to meet people and to grow their self-esteem and sense of usefulness: *"employment is an affirmation that one is an active member of society"* (Granerud & Severinsson, 2006, p. 292). Similarly, Marie Jahoda (1982) explored the psychological meaning (not only the economic value) of employment. She explained how unemployment negatively influences psychological well-being. People primarily engage in work to attain manifest benefits (income), but they also profit from five latent benefits associated with meeting psychological needs: time structure, social contact, common goals, status and activity. Unemployment leads to deprivation in both types of benefits, but it is the loss of the latent benefits impinges most on psychological well-being (Jahoda, 1982).

Like employment, independent housing seems a base for having feelings of integration, echoing findings of other studies (Gulcur et al., 2007; Ornelas et al., 2014). In contrast, living in a shelter hinders feelings of integration due to restricted hours and lack of privacy.

To define integration is not simply to specify a particular set of behaviours that measure how much a person is integrated: we need to acknowledge the emotional components of integration. The personal dignity theme includes a series of feelings addressed to the self that capture the need for normality, pride and self-esteem. In planning research and practice to foster integration, some service providers might think that people should 'correct' their behaviour to fit into a 'social norm' (Quilgars & Pleace, 2016). However, feelings

of integration arise from a combination of individual personality and opportunities in the environment.

The capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2011) provides a possible theoretical framework for the interpretation of the results. Capabilities are what people can actually do and be in everyday life that is in turn contingent on having both competencies and opportunities. This perspective involves studying both the capacities of individuals and the opportunities in their environments. The capabilities framework has been used to conceptualise homelessness (Shinn, 2015) and social integration (Ware et al., 2007).

Nussbaum (2001) enumerates 10 capabilities essential for a life worth living, a truly human life. Yet there are two that she says “suffuse all the others” (p. 82). One of these is affiliation, being able to live in relationship to others and having the social base of self-respect and non-humiliation. The other is practical reason, or the ability to plan one's life and occupy meaningful social roles. The parallels to the themes of integration generated in our study are clear.

The central contribution of this study is generating a new idea of integration that encompasses the themes discussed by the participants: feeling a sense of personal dignity, respect and recognition from others and a sense of utility within their living environments (work, house, family).

4.1 | Limitations

Although this study yielded important insights into the conceptualisation of integration for people experiencing homelessness, some caution should be taken in drawing conclusions from these findings. This study was carried out in a specific context (Italy). Nevertheless, the similarity to theories by Ware et al. (2007), Nussbaum (2001) and Jahoda (1982) in very different social contexts suggests that the findings may be more general.

Furthermore, the socio-demographic features of the sample deserve consideration. The average age of the current sample was around 50 years. The voice of younger homeless individuals was not well-represented. Half of the participants were immigrants and language difficulties may have influenced the understanding of the questions. To reduce this limitation, during the interview, we asked for constant feedback to be sure that they understood the meaning of the questions.

Despite these limitations, this study led us to a conceptualisation that encompasses not only people's behaviours but also the feelings associated with them. This conclusion leads, both in research and in practice, to new possibilities for fostering the feelings connected to integration.

4.2 | Implication for research and professional practice

In light of these results, we suggest some recommendations for research and practice. First, future research should investigate the

feelings connected to integration. For example, researchers should ask people whether they feel recognised or valued and where or with whom they have these feelings. If they are involved in particular activities, researchers might ask whether they feel useful doing them. The research could develop new measurement tools able to capture subjective feelings and the contexts/opportunities that favour their emergence. For example, questionnaire items could be: when you talk to providers, do you feel respected? Do you have a role with responsibility in the service?

In relation to practice, our findings emphasise the importance of creating environments (and services) that facilitate the development of feelings of integration, especially fostering a set of opportunities for people where they can have active roles and responsibility. Variability in opportunities available in different settings may also reflect how well a setting cultivates the ‘capacity to’ be able to feel integrated (Shinn, 2015). Trying not to ‘force’ people to behave in a socially integrated way could be the first step to reflect on what really makes the person feel integrated. Adopting the participants’ perspective in research and practice about integration involves a change that starts from considering integration as an idiographic process of feelings, not a nomothetic set of activities that all should engage in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the participants for sharing their experiences and giving their time to participate in this research. We wish to thank Irene Geraci, Francesco Papa and Laura Bruna Ruggieri for their assistance in interviewing and coding of transcripts. Thank you to Deborah K. Padgett for the helpful suggestions in the early phase of the research.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Gaboardi M, Santinello M, Shinn M. Beyond behaviour: rethinking integration for people experiencing homelessness. *Health Soc Care Community*. 2021;29:846–855. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13314>