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### Citation for published version:

Tanekenov, A, Fitzpatrick, S & Johnsen, S 2018, 'Empowerment, capabilities and homelessness: the limitations of employment-focused social enterprises in addressing complex needs', *Housing, Theory and Society*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 137–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2017.1290676>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/14036096.2017.1290676](https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2017.1290676)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Housing, Theory and Society

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**Empowerment, capabilities and homelessness: the limitations of employment-focused social enterprises in addressing complex needs**

Author Accepted Version

Published on-line 16/2/17

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14036096.2017.1290676>

*Housing, Theory and Society*

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This research was supported by the JSC "Center for International Programs" of Kazakh Government under Grant N869

## **Abstract**

‘Empowerment’ is often said to be a key objective of policies aiming to improve the lives of homeless people and other vulnerable groups. This paper contends that Sen and Nussbaum’s influential ‘capability’ approach provides an appropriate means of operationalising this arguably nebulous concept. Via a critique of work-focused social enterprises in the homelessness field, as promoted by successive UK governments, it seeks to demonstrate the importance of a multidimensional approach to enhancing the capabilities of homeless people with complex support needs. Specifically, it argues for attention to be given to four (independently important) empowerment ‘domains’: the bodily domain; the political and economic domain; the social and emotional domain; and the creative, intellectual and self-development domain. This broad-based understanding of empowerment implies that a balance must be struck between specialist provision, such as the bespoke social enterprises focussed upon in this paper, and more integrative models which seek to support homeless people in ordinary community and workplace settings.

## **Introduction**

A multitude of definitions of 'social enterprise' (SE) have been proposed in academic and policy literatures (Stevens *et al.*, 2009), but there is a reasonable degree of consensus that SEs share two minimum criteria, these being: a) engagement in trading activities, to at least some extent; and b) an explicit focus on the creation of social benefits in society (Peattie and Morley, 2008). The UK’s promotion of SE as an ‘innovative’ policy tool for transforming disadvantaged people’s lives has been internationally recognised since the late 1990s (Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), 2002; Pearce, 2003; Spear *et al.*, 2009; Teasdale, 2010b; Nicholls, 2010), and can be situated within a broader agenda to “*refram[e] the relationship between state and citizen*” (Flint, 2015, p.41) such that increased emphasis is given to citizen self-reliance, and with interventions to assist disadvantaged groups considered legitimate predominantly where they are designed to offer 'a hand up, not a hand out' (Robinson & Walsh, 2014). Where there is an accepted need for a supportive intervention, the preference is for this to be market or community-based, rather than involving taxpayer-funded state provision, with SEs often viewed as combining the key virtues of both favoured sectors (Kisby, 2010; Pattie & Johnston, 2011; Cabinet Office, 2015). Across much of the developed world there has been a similar 'rolling back' of state

involvement in the provision of citizen welfare (Jacobs, 2015), and in the UK this has played out in post-2010 welfare reforms that have weakened longstanding safety net commitments (Wright, 2012), and have witnessed severe cuts in working age benefits in particular (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016). Alongside this, there have been draconian cuts in the 'in kind' local state services on which many low income households rely, such as social work and housing support (Hastings *et al.*, 2015).

It is within this wider political context that the number of SEs in the UK homelessness sector has expanded (McKenna, 2011, Tracey *et al.*, 2011), with a particular emphasis on encouraging SEs with a focus on employment and vocational activities (SPARK, 2009; Teasdale, 2010a, 2012a). This emphasis has been inspired, at least in part, by recognition of the multiple barriers that homeless people, and especially those with complex needs, face in seeking and retaining paid employment (Johnsen & Watts, 2014). The notion of 'empowering' homeless people has been important in justifying this policy focus on both employment and SE under successive administrations (Dobson and McNeil, 2011; Teasdale *et al.*, 2012). However, empowerment is a complex and nebulous concept, open to a wide range of interpretations and vigorous critique (Baistow, 1994; Starkey, 2003). The paper uses the example of employment-focused SEs in the homelessness field to illustrate the benefits of engaging with the key tenets of the 'capability' approach (Sen, 1992; 2004; Nussbaum, 2000, 2006) in order to impose a greater degree of 'tangibility' and theoretical coherence on the notion of empowerment, in order to allow policy claims of this nature to be tested more systematically.

It begins by providing an overview of the policy context for the establishment of work-focused SEs as an 'innovative' approach to 'empowering' single homeless people in the UK, before setting out its underpinning conceptual framework, which combines classic notions of 'empowerment' with key insights offered by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's highly influential 'capabilities' model of human development and flourishing. After a summary of the research methods used to generate the data presented, we then illustrate the applicability of our capabilities-grounded empowerment framework via an empirical interrogation of employment-focussed SEs from the perspective of both service providers and service users. The paper closes by offering some critical reflections on the contribution made by the SEs studied to the empowerment of homeless people, and more broadly on the limitations of 'specialist' provision which segregates homeless people from ordinary workplaces and other community settings.

## **Employment-Centred Social Enterprises in the UK**

Employment-centred SEs have been promoted by UK governments as a means of facilitating homeless people's access to the labour market for more than a decade (ODPM, 2003; Teasdale, 2010a). The promotion of SEs was closely associated with various 'Third Way' policy initiatives launched by New Labour administrations in power between 1997-2010 (Giddens, 1998), and this period also witnessed the emergence of non-profit organisations which rejected grant dependency in favour of pursuing financial independence through trading (Haugh and Kitson, 2007). Landmark changes included the establishment of a SE Unit at the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (DTI, 2002; Pearce, 2003; Teasdale, 2012a), and the introduction of an official definition of SE, this being "A business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose" (DTI, 2002, p. 8). Labour also established a new legal form, the Community Interest Company (CIC), with a view to ideologically differentiating SEs from traditional charities, on the one hand, and commercial companies, on the other (albeit that there are a number of other legal forms that SEs can continue to take) (Social Enterprise Coalition, 2009; Teasdale, 2012b). Labour's ambition to integrate homeless people into employment using the SE approach was articulated in specific initiatives, including the 'Places of Change' programme which sought, amongst other things, to encourage the development of entrepreneurial activities amongst homeless hostel residents; also the 'SPARK' programme which invested in SEs that prioritised training, work experience and employment for homeless people (SPARK, 2009; Teasdale, 2012a).

Enthusiasm for employment-focussed SE as a policy response to homelessness was sustained under the Coalition Government, which supported SPARK 2011 and continued wider investment in work integration via the Work Programme (Teasdale, 2012a). This was allied with the Conservatives' high profile commitment to the notion of the 'Big Society', with the then party leader David Cameron arguing that 'the great ignored' should take on the powers of 'Big Government' through charitable and entrepreneurial initiatives, including via the development of SEs (Kisby, 2010; Pattie and Johnston, 2011; Teasdale *et al.*, 2012). The notion of Big Society has been derided in many quarters given considerable confusion over its meaning and purpose, but it has been noted that "...hostility to the state and advocacy of community-based strategies [seems to be] an enduring legacy of the Big Society programme" (Manzi, 2015, p.17). Certainly its concrete manifestations in the 'localism' and 'welfare reform' agendas were pursued energetically under the Coalition administration (McKee,

2015), delivering a radical reduction in the nation state's role in the protection of citizen welfare, and driving increased reliance on voluntary, faith-based and market-led provision (Jacobs, 2015).

In the 2015 Conservative Party manifesto, The Big Society re-emerged as a “vision of a more engaged nation, one in which we take more responsibility for ourselves and our neighbours” (Conservative Party, 2015, p.45), with the expansion of employment-focussed SEs given explicit mention as evidence of “real progress” on this agenda during the Coalition period in office. Notwithstanding the passing of the premiership from David Cameron to Theresa May in July 2016, the new Prime Minister has stated her intention to continue with the programme set out in the 2015 Manifesto, hence we might anticipate that the Big Society agenda and its associated focus on social enterprises will continue.

### **The Conceptual Framework: Capabilities-grounded Empowerment**

Under both Labour and Conservative administrations, a key justification for the encouragement of both SEs (rather than traditional charitable approaches) and on employment-focused interventions (rather than those targeted simply on accommodation and support) was that these would help to ‘empower’ people (Wright, 2008 cited in Teasdale, 2012a, p. 516; Dobson and McNeil, 2011). Whilst the notion of empowerment that this encompassed was seldom spelled out in any detail, New Labour's use of the term was interpreted to mean steering people “towards ‘active’ citizenship” (Dobson and McNeil, 2011, p.581). Within the Big Society rhetoric there was a more explicit signal that people should be self-reliant rather than dependent on the state (see above), with empowerment therefore conceptualised predominantly as ‘self help’, and disadvantaged people encouraged to take more individual responsibility for their own well-being (Kisby, 2010; Settle, 2010, Pattie and Johnston, 2011; Teasdale *et al.*, 2012).

Social policy scholars have contrasted this self-help conceptualisation of empowerment, with ‘consumer’-orientated approaches (Croft and Beresford, 1992). While an emphasis on individual self-help and self-reliance may be utilised to limit the role and responsibilities of service providers (Kahn and Bender, 1985), the objective of the consumer model of empowerment is, at least in theory, to enhance choice for consumers and prioritise their preferences (Croft and Beresford, 1992). However, this consumer model presupposes the possibility of ‘exit’ whereby an organisation is incentivized to act in order to forestall customers ‘voting with their feet’ to go to another provider (Hirschman, 1970); an option that

is not always open to users of social care services. Moreover, a consumer-orientated delivery model can imply a shift in the balance of responsibility between service providers and service users such that the latter are expected to achieve *'their own normalisation'* (Edgar *et al.*, 1999, p.23). One could interpret such a stance as more in keeping with the empowerment of service delivery organisations than their users (Gilliatt *et al.*, 2000, p.347).

In light of these limitations of individual-orientated forms of empowerment, some writers view collective action as the key to genuine empowerment (Croft and Beresford, 1993, Rhodes, 1987). Rhodes (1987), for example, advocates a shift from consumerist modes of empowerment to a 'citizenship' model which foregrounds the 'political' dimension. According to Rhodes, and Croft and Beresford (1993), collective empowerment requires involvement in a participatory environment, providing a greater voice for disadvantaged people through decision-making to challenge structural power and resource imbalances. Here, empowerment is defined as the unification of people sharing similar circumstances to challenge and overcome the external barriers and constraints that they face (Gutierrez, 1990; Staples, 1990). These collectivist models of empowerment are not without their critics, however, with Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2001) for example pointing out that the immediate physical and social needs of very disadvantaged groups such as homeless people may limit their ability to prioritise their acute issues on a political platform, and may limit the attractiveness (or desirability) of their identifying with people who face similar issues on a long-term basis.

So far we have established that the term empowerment is used as shorthand to serve a variety of different (and sometimes contradictory) agendas – the promotion of self-reliance and reduction of 'welfare dependency', the promotion of participatory approaches and service user involvement, and the provision of more generous welfare benefits and support services. Attempts to root the concept of empowerment in the political science literature on 'power' have been made (e.g. Watts, 2014), but here we turn to the capabilities literature, as expounded by Amartya Sen (1992), and subsequently refined by Martha Nussbaum (2000) (see also McNaughton, 2010), for assistance in the search for some much needed clarity.

Sen's central aim is to show us the centrality of freedom in human development, and his starting point is that an individual's exercise of free will is a significant part of being human:

...a person's position in a social arrangement can be judged in two different perspectives... (1) the actual achievement, and (2) the freedom to achieve.

Achievement is concerned with what we manage to accomplish, and freedom with the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another (Sen 1992, p.40).

While Sen has refused to endorse a 'canonical list' of core capabilities, Nussbaum (1992, 2000) has built on his work to develop a list of ten philosophically-derived *central capabilities* that, she argues, all humans value and require to live a good life. Table 1 presents a version of Nussbaum's capability components, adapted slightly in order to facilitate comparison with traditional empowerment themes. It seeks to demonstrate that Nussbaum's list can accommodate all of the classic themes present in the extant empowerment literature, including: 'economic', 'socio-psychological', 'educational' and 'political' empowerment. We briefly describe each of these classic empowerment domains below before presenting our case for their enhancement via engagement with the capabilities framework.

*Economic* empowerment stresses the acquisition of skills, experience and competence through employment which may enable not only financial betterment but also confidence raising (Gist, 1987; Breton, 1994; Parpart, 2002; Larson *et al.*, 2005; Rosenheck *et al.*, 2006). *Social-psychological* empowerment focuses on the development of positive self-esteem, self-efficacy and dignity through affiliation with family, peers and other social networks (Gutierrez, 1992; Kieffer, 1984; Zimmermann, 1995; Dickerson, 1998; Peterson *et al.*, 2005). This includes an element of identifying oneself with similar others and an opportunity for social cohesion and affiliation, mutual learning and a sense of belonging to a group or community. The *educational* domain of empowerment highlights the importance of education, skills and competence enhancement as a source of self-determination, critical consciousness and sense of individuality (Freire, 1973; Lee, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008; Becker *et al.*, 2004). Finally, *political* empowerment stresses vulnerable individuals' collective participation in the decision-making process which may provide a greater voice for disadvantaged people through decision-making and challenge structural power imbalances (Rhodes, 1987; Croft and Beresford, 1992).

Insert Table 1 here

We would contend that Nussbaum's perspective enriches this traditional empowerment agenda in a number of respects which are of particular relevance to the very most disadvantaged groups, including homeless people. First, she provides for two key domains



missing from the classic empowerment literature. One is the ‘bodily’ domain which encompasses having reasonable physical and mental health, safe and secure living circumstances, and the ability to meet other fundamental physical needs, such as for food and basic healthcare. In addition, she makes provision for the ‘creative, intellectual and self-development’ domain by considering activities aimed at developing a person’s capabilities in relation to developing his/her own ‘true self’, such as learning, play, spirituality and inner development.

Second, a key insight offered by Nussbaum is that each of these core human capabilities is a separate component which is *independently important* – so that a deficit in one cannot be compensated for by a surfeit in another. This means that her framework is ‘irreducibly plural’ (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2014) and “...we cannot satisfy the need for one of them (these domains) by giving a larger amount of another one” (Nussbaum, 2000, p.221). Following this logic, this means that the empowerment process should be pursued through enhancing individuals’ capabilities in *all* relevant dimensions as “...all are of central importance, and all are distinct in quality” (Nussbaum 1992, p. 222).

Third, and crucially for our purposes, a focus on this ‘space’ of capabilities foregrounds recognition of human heterogeneity (Sen, 1992, 2004; Nussbaum, 2000), and the likelihood that certain vulnerable or disadvantaged people will require access to have a higher level of resources (‘primary goods’ in Rawlsian terms) in order to achieve the same level of ‘functioning’ as those who do not suffer from these disadvantages. In other words, one should take into account variable ‘conversion’ factors which determine an individual’s capability to achieve a given range of functions with a given range of resources. As Sen (1992, p.29) emphasises:

...the relationship between primary goods (including incomes), on the one hand, and well-being, on the other, may vary because of personal diversities in the possibility of converting primary goods (including incomes) into achievements of well-being...the variety of physical and social characteristics that affect our lives and make us what we are.

In the context of this paper, then, the ‘capabilities-grounded empowerment’ framework presented in Table 1 is valuable because it provides a holistic, multi-dimensional conception of empowerment which allows for analytical traction in a practical (qualitatively) testable way. We contend that it offers a more nuanced and comprehensive approach than traditional

conceptualisations of empowerment – casting light on vulnerable individuals’ diversity, differences in personal ‘conversion’ factors, and the impact of context on ‘what they are able to be or do’. The four, independently important, domains that emerge from this exercise – the bodily, the economic and political, the social and emotional, and the creative, intellectual and self-development – form the prism through which we consider the contribution of employment-focussed SEs in the homelessness field in the UK.

## **Methods**

A qualitative case-study based research strategy was employed to answer our core research question: *how effective are employment-focussed SE models in empowering homeless people, as viewed from the perspective of both service providers and service users?* To date, the 'effectiveness' of SE activities has tended to be measured in largely quantitative terms (see, for example, Social Investment Scotland, 2015). In contrast, this paper seeks to offer a deeper, more qualitative account of effectiveness as perceived by both service users and providers, conceptualising effectiveness as pertaining to the extent to which these projects can help vulnerable individuals to overcome obstacles to the full exercise of their capabilities.

The fieldwork was conducted in two main stages between February 2011 and November 2012. Stage 1 involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with a senior representative from each of 16 UK-based SEs in the homelessness sector to explore their understandings of the terms empowerment and social enterprise, and their perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of the SE model in the empowerment of homeless people. All of these SEs were employment-based, training-focused or provided work placements for homeless people with the aim of facilitating their integration into the workplace. The 16 organisations were located in seven cities across the UK, in both England and Scotland.

The second stage of fieldwork involved detailed case studies of four of these 16 projects. There was therefore a direct link between the first and second stage of fieldwork, as one objective of the initial key informant interviews was to scope out the suitability of each organisation visited for the in-depth case study phase. The key characteristics of the four organisations selected as case studies are summarised in Table 2. They were purposively sampled so as to be illustrative of a range of geographical contexts, historical origins, income-generating activities, and legal status. One was located in London, two in the North of England, and one in Scotland. One SE was established in the early 1970s, but the others were rather younger: with two being set up in the mid-1990s and the newest in the early

2000s. The nature of their activities also differed: Organisation A redistributed unused food from supermarkets to homelessness services; Organisation B ran training and offered work opportunities in outside catering, a café business, warehousing and delivery; Organisation C provided a bicycle repair service and bicycle maintenance training courses; while Organisation D trained homeless people to work in the painting and decorating industry.

A key theme that emerged in the course of fieldwork was a major distinction between two groups of SEs: those with a '*business emphasis*', which operated with an ethos closer to that of a commercial company, and those with a '*social emphasis*', which had an identity more akin to traditional voluntary organisations. This orientation in turn related to the SEs' organisational origins, with all of the 'social' SEs contacted at either Stage 1 or Stage 2 of the study evolving from charitable organisations, whereas those with a business emphasis tended to have been established using the private capital of the founder. As Table 2 indicates, amongst the case study organisations, one had a business emphasis and the other three had a social orientation, reflecting the broad balance of SEs in the homelessness field in the UK.

Insert Table 2 here

Across the case study SEs a total of 15 staff ('service providers') were interviewed. These comprised the project managers/directors of all four SEs, and at least one frontline worker in each, such that almost all of the staff in these small agencies were interviewed. In addition, 23 homeless or ex-homeless people ('service users') participating in the programmes offered by the SEs were interviewed, with between four and eight such individuals interviewed in each. All 23 homeless or ex-homeless service users were male and aged between 25-43 years; key informants reported that this reflects the profile of homeless people involved with SEs more generally. All of these service users had been engaged with the relevant SEs for a period of between three and 12 months, with most having been involved with the SE for around 6 months.

None of these participants were being paid by the SEs as 'workers': 16 were 'volunteering' and seven were in 'training'(again this is typical of employment-focussed SEs in the UK). The main difference between volunteers and trainees was that the former tended not to have fixed working hours per week, whilst the latter were expected to participate two or three days a week. With respect to the nature of the activities undertaken by both trainees and volunteers, these differed according to the nature of the business. So, for example, in Organisation A they assisted with the redistribution of fresh food donated by supermarkets to

homelessness projects, whereas in Organisation B they supported warehousing and catering activities, in Organisation C they repaired bikes, and in Organisation D they undertook painting and cleaning services. With regard to their accommodation status, 12 of the service users interviewed were living in hostels, three were staying in friends' houses, and eight were living in council flats.

While the sample size for this research was relatively small, it should be noted that a high level of 'saturation' was achieved in that virtually all 'in scope' organisations in England and Scotland (i.e. employment-focused SEs operating in the homelessness field) were visited during Stage 1 of the study. Careful purposive sampling of the Stage 2 case study organisations also ensured good coverage of the range of organisational characteristics identified as most pertinent via the Stage 1 interviews. Care was taken to interview (ex-) homeless people in private settings, and to emphasise the confidentiality of all of the data collected and the strict anonymity policy, so that they could speak openly without fear of any feedback to the SE. Where used, interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

### **Exploring the Effectiveness of Employment-focussed SEs in Empowering Homeless People**

The capabilities-grounded conceptual framework established above is now used to explore the extent to which both providers and users of the case study SEs considered them an effective vehicle for empowerment across the four domains depicted in Table 1.

#### *Bodily Empowerment*

Service providers expressed the belief that their employment-focused SEs promoted a range of goods relevant to bodily empowerment, and in particular could help to enhance the health of their service users:

*"I promote employment and I promote the benefits of employment and I'm strongly convinced that for many people who are unemployed, employment will probably [lead them to] experience better mental health, better physical health, more contentment and more secure, sort of, 'I feel part of society'."(Manager, Organisation D)*

This chimed with some service users who noted positive changes in their health after they became involved in a SE, with a number commenting that the work they were now engaged with provided them with the motivation to move forward with their lives, helping them combat substance misuse in particular:

*“I’m doing something with me time during the day so it’s stopping me from going out drinking and smoking drugs ...I’m keeping out of trouble comin’ ‘ere, doing this, and keepin’ off the drugs and the alcohol, which is a good thing. My life’s getting a bit more healthier”*(Bill, Organisation D)

Health-related aspirations on the part of service users were at least as often about improvements in mental as in physical health:

*“So I was really low, sort of depressed basically. And this has built me up. Although physically I’m quite healthy, fit and healthy, my mental health was really bad because I was just coming off the back of a serious addiction – heroin and drink – and that had taken its toll on me... my mental health massively improved.”*(Tony, Organisation C)

In the main, however, service users who reported improvements in their health since becoming involved with the SE did not attribute this to the work that it provided them with, but rather to the supportive environment within the project, particularly the staff’s positive attitude towards them and the problems they faced. This was especially the case in those SEs with a social orientation:

*“You know, some days you think a bit negative whereas ‘ere they get you to look on the brighter side of it and turn it around, try and make you think positive all the time, you know. They always encourage you, “You can do it. We know you can do it...” And if you tell them, like, what problems you’ve got, like your physical health, they’ll adapt around you... They help you. They don’t say, like, “Just get on with this, get on with that.” They say, like, “How’re you doing today? How’re you feeling?”*(John, Organisation A)

In some instances, another element of this supportive work environment was informal, collective self-help from peers, which in the socially-orientated SE projects was sometimes facilitated by the project staff. For example, service users were encouraged to stay in close

contact with other trainees, volunteers or workers, and if they did not turn up these fellow service users phoned to find out how they were:

*“...after I ‘aven’t been in for like three days, four days a week, somebody will ‘phone me up a bit, “Are you alright, mate? How’s it going? I ‘aven’t seen you for like a couple of days and was worried about ya”. So soon as I miss a couple of days they start worrying about it, thinking summat’s ‘appened to me. So ....they ‘phone up just to check, to make sure I’m still alive and kicking”*(Sam, Organisation D)

A number of service providers also expressed the hope that participation in their SE may facilitate homeless people’s access to a better and more stable living environment, thus enhancing their ‘bodily integrity’ as well as ‘bodily health’ in terms of the conceptual framework set out above:

*“...it’s a step towards having somewhere safe, somewhere nice, to live. Not a hostel, not where you’re competing with lots of other people. Not a sort of mediocre flat that’s been given you, but a nice place.”* (Manager, Organisation B)

*“...full-time work and the next step may be a better home of your own. But you can support people to take that first step so they have the ability to take the next step. So I think that’s really why we focus on employment”* (Manager, Organisation A)

However, none of the service users interviewed had experienced a positive change in their living circumstances since they became involved with SE, with 12 of the participants still living in a hostel and three others still sleeping on friends’ floors (those with council flats already had these flats when they commenced their engagement with the SE). Tony (Organisation C) for example, explained that when he first became involved with a SE project, almost two years before interview, he had hoped it would help him to avoid sleeping on people’s sofas, yet he was still struggling to access independent accommodation:

*“The fear factor about being homeless... I’ve got no security. I’ve not got my own space”.*

### Economic and Political Empowerment

Perhaps unsurprisingly given their employment focus, service providers from both social and business-orientated SEs tended to emphasise the economic aspects of empowerment that their projects could potentially offer, especially via the enhancement of skills, qualifications and practical job competencies. For example, the manager of a SE with a social emphasis noted that *“Empowerment is about giving people the space and the skills through training, work experience to strengthen their capacity so that an individual would be able to have a positive choice”* (Organisation A). Managers of SEs with a business emphasis argued that the potential to achieve this aim is enhanced when the project operates in a commercial manner, asserting that *“...the more successful we are at the catering side the more opportunity we can do for the training and job”* (Organisation B).

Those service users who were particularly positive about their SE experiences tended likewise to emphasise the accumulation of work experience, and enhanced skills and qualifications:

*“So, you know, you pass your Painting & Decorating Course here or you can pass your Woodworking ... you get a certificate at the end of it and that goes towards your CV”* (Paul, Organisation C).

However, across all of the SEs there was a degree of dissatisfaction amongst users with aspects of the training and work experience provided. A number felt that the training provided was not advanced enough to enable them to gain skills that would enable them to move on from volunteering to a full-time job:

*“...its a few weeks’ course but you want that professional, the upper level where, you know, you learn more and, you know, you want to become a chef and then you can ... you get that qualification from a higher level”*. (John, Organisation B)

Others expressed concern that projects failed to provide a sufficient choice of skills development and work experience. Steve (Organisation B) wondered if it would be better if:

*“...maybe if they belonged to a bigger company like Morrison’s, Asda, places like that where they have different skills to learn.”*

In other cases, the total volume of work was simply viewed as insufficient:

*“There’s not enough work to set volunteers on, to learn that. ‘Cos you’re stood around quite a lot not doing anything.”* (Gilbert, Organisation A)

Most service users were also unhappy with their unpaid volunteer status. It is worth noting at this point that all of the SEs used a ‘cost-transfer’ strategy from state resources, organising volunteering and training hours per week in such a way that their service users remained eligible for state benefits (see also Teasdale, 2012a). This meant that, in contrast to the hopes expressed by service providers, and indeed policy makers (ODPM, 2003; Pattie and Johnston, 2011; Teasdale, 2012), all service users remained reliant on state benefits. Some participants stressed the insecurity they faced as a result of their lack of earnings:

*“If I had an income of some sort I’d be quite happy doing this, you know. ‘Cos I do forty, fifty, hours a week here and I’m quite happy...doing that but because I don’t earn any wages that’s a dilemma. So it’s a sort of a Catch 22 predicament. It’s a no win situation. You need to be earning money just to have quality of life. My £60 a week is not enough to live”* (Organisation A).

No evidence emerged during the course of this study of these projects acted as a ‘stepping stone’ to mainstream employment for homeless people, though one should take into account the relatively limited period of time that some service users had been engaged with these projects.

Notably, the political aspect of this domain of empowerment, as opposed to the economic one, was articulated by neither service users nor service providers interviewed in this study (see also Kennedy and Fitzpatrick, 2001).

### *Social and Emotional Empowerment*

Service providers consistently argued that employment-led SEs helped to strengthen project beneficiaries’ social and emotional well-being by promoting their self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence, and also by helping them to develop “*new social groups*” and “*connect up in the communities*” (Manager, Organisation D).

The points made about enhanced self-esteem and confidence were strongly echoed by service users. For instance, Steve, who had recently joined a SE project, explained that it “*...keeps my self-respect up because I was, obviously, unemployed and I wasn’t working and I wasn’t*



*doing anything*". Alan, likewise, commented that working in the SE project *"gave me my self-confidence back. Self-esteem and my focus back. Gave me summat to focus on..."*. Others noted that engaging with a project where they were treated with dignity helped them to change their self-perception positively, which in turn improved their sense of self-worth:

*"I always thought people thought the worst of me or people would see me as being a drug addict or homeless or this or that, instead of seeing me as a person...Now, a bit more self-worth, I think I've got a better idea of what people do see in me; and they see me as a person now, they don't just see me as a drug addict or a homeless person...Twelve months ago I wouldn't have been able to sit here and talk to a stranger. I would have been really anxious, quite nervous...it's given me more confidence in my own abilities."*(Tony, Organisation C)

One key theme to emerge was the extraordinary psychological boost that service users experienced from feeling that they were 'trusted' (see also Ward & Maruna, 2007; McNeil *et al*, 2012). This was particularly the case for those with criminal records, and was linked to the sensitivity that they felt about how they might be viewed by mainstream employers:

*"I got a 'phone call off the manager one day, when I walked along...a bit something else to do. So she 'phoned me up and asked me if I wanted to do some training. Train some lads on painting and decorating. I was over the moon. It was like I was dead chuffed because somebody's actually put trust into me..."*(Tony, Organisation D)

As with other empowerment domains, most (ex-)homeless people believed that it was the supportive working environment and positive attitudes of the staff and other service users, rather than the work itself, that played the key role in enhancing their emotional well-being. These positive attributes appeared to be more typical of SEs with a social than a business emphasis. Significantly, service users often commented that they had been helped to overcome their fear of working due to support from SE staff, and had more confidence in what they could manage. Marcel (Organisation C) for example, noted:

*"In the last few weeks I started to [do]...three days a week here and that's the first time in a number of years now that I've... been able to maintain without feeling that I'm over-burdening myself and I can cope with it and, yes, there have*

*been problems but... um... I managed to speak to them to increase my days. Sometimes I come twice a week, sometimes three times a week."*

There was also some support for the notion that involvement in the SEs had strengthened service users' ability to engage in meaningful and supportive social relationships. Tony (Organisation D) for example, explained that: "...other people's perception of me, has changed and especially my family...They tell me that I've come on sort of..... I don't know to put it. Come on massive amounts or a huge amount within the last sort of few years..." Both the social and emotional well-being of several service users had been enhanced by a heightened sense of 'relatedness' to their local community, specifically because they were contributing their volunteer labour to the project (again see also Ward & Maruna, 2007; McNeil *et al*, 2012):

*"Well the self-respect thing is basically when you get laid off from a job you're down low and you're can't get another job; and you're moody and you get, och, you just don't feel ... like you're part of the community...Now I'm working in here voluntarily I'm putting something back into the community so it's like me paying something back for what I took out."* (Sam, Organisation A)

Similarly, Jimmy perceived an emotional purpose in volunteering within the SE project: "...there's a 'feel good' factor, you know, there's making a contribution, knowing I'm helping out. I just prefer to be doing something rather than doing nothing at all" Another service user, this time from a SE with a business focus, noted: "I were comin' on a voluntary basis ... it just me thinking I ain't as bad off as what I thought I were..." (Brad, Organisation A)

However, other service users found that being a volunteer in a specialist SE project working alongside other (ex-)homeless people posed a formidable challenge to fulfilling their social and emotional goals, which were to build relationships or friendships with people who were not homeless. In part, this was because they felt that remaining dependent on state benefits created barriers to 'inserting' themselves into new circles and networking with new people on an equal basis. Karl (Organisation A) explained:

*"If they offered me a job now I'd take it. I'd sign off the dole today. I don't want to be on the dole no more. If I 'ad another source of income coming I'd given them the dole book back and tell 'em to stick it, because it's not worth being on*

*the dole, know what I mean? I want to be a normal person, whatever normal is, to meet new people out there.”*

### *Creative, Intellectual and Self-development Empowerment*

Service providers did not articulate creative, intellectual or ‘play’ dimensions of empowerment as a significant aspect of the contribution that their SE could make to the well-being of the homeless people they worked with. In contrast, however, (ex-)homeless service users often prioritised finding meaningful and constructive ways to spend their free time, including engaging in a range of hobbies and various aspects of ‘self-development’ (see also Smith, 2008). For example, Sam explained:

*“I’d like to go to the gym more ... or take up the guitar... you know, do guitar lessons or just take up some form of course. Other than that I just tend to go home and watch telly.”*

A few interviewees, such as Kenneth (Organisation A) were already engaged in social activities in their spare time: *“...in my spare time, like at weekends, I play football”*. However, in the main, service users expressed dissatisfaction with this aspect of their lives. Tony (Organisation C) for example, noted that he was attempting to engage again with a ‘normal’ social life and wanted to take up hobbies as one means to become a member of mainstream society: *“I’m trying to sort something out at the minute ‘cos I do need to do summat in me spare time...”*. He stressed that he would love to go *“...swimming, reading... meeting friends for coffees, things like that. Just building back a social life again”*.

### **Concluding Discussion**

Empowerment is often said to be a key objective of policies aiming to improve the lives of homeless people and other vulnerable groups, and it is the central contention of this paper that Sen and Nussbaum’s influential ‘capability’ approach provides an appropriate means of operationalising this rather nebulous concept. Via a critique of work-focused social enterprises, as promoted by successive UK governments, most recently the Conservatives under the ‘Big Society’ banner, and also elsewhere in Europe and beyond (FEANTSA, 2010), it has sought to demonstrate the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to enhancing homeless people’s capabilities. Specifically, it has called for attention to be given to four

(independently important) ‘domains’: the bodily domain; the political and economic domain; the social and emotional domain; and the creative, intellectual and self-development domain.

As viewed through the prism of this ‘capabilities-grounded empowerment framework’, our findings indicate that the empowerment utility of these employment-focused social SEs was mixed. With respect to bodily empowerment, for example, there was evidence of improvements in participants’ health, particularly their mental health. Yet, participation in these SE programmes seemed to afford little opportunity to improve homeless peoples’ accommodation and living circumstances, and in so doing enhance the safety and security aspects of their ‘bodily integrity’. As regards the economic domain, there was evidence of enhancement in participants’ work skills through the provision of training, and in their life skills with respect to functioning in the workplace, but also considerable dissatisfaction amongst users with the basic level of the training and limited range of training opportunities afforded. Moreover, participants’ unpaid (volunteer or trainee) status meant that no progress had been made towards financial independence, and no evidence emerged of these projects acting as a ‘stepping stone’ to mainstream employment in practice (see also Sahlin, 2005; Busch-Geertsema & Sahlin, 2007).

More positively, there was extensive evidence from the service user interviews that participation in the SEs had strengthened their self-confidence and self-respect, and in some cases helped them to establish meaningful and/or improved social relationships with family, peers in the workplace, and the broader community. Yet, even here, the capabilities-grounded framework draws attention to the restricted social, emotional and self-development empowerment potential of a model that does not, by and large, facilitate the building of new relationships with people who have not experienced homelessness. While for some participants there were very large welfare gains to be had in these domains from their participation in these specialist SE programmes, many aspired to a more ‘normal’ work, social and home life and there was limited evidence of their being empowered to achieve this. These findings therefore provide additional ballast for the, already well-evidenced, benefits of integrative models, such as Housing First (to address homelessness) and Individual Placement and Support (to address unemployment), which seek to provide personalised support to people with complex needs in ‘ordinary’ housing and workplace settings rather than segregate them into specialist provision (Tsemberis *et al.*, 2004; Rinaldi *et al.*, 2010; Busch-Geertsema, 2013).

Interestingly, almost all of the positive empowerment benefits of SEs for homeless people, particularly the strong benefits noted in the social and emotional realm, were found most readily in SEs with a social emphasis, in other words, those that operated in practice very like ‘traditional’ grant-funded charitable projects. In fact, in most instances it became clear that service users were unaware that the project they were engaged with was a SE, rather than a charity, and without exception maintained that this was irrelevant from their perspective. Thus, contrary to political expectations and the assertions of some proponents of the SE model (SPARK, 2009, Wright, 2008 cited in Teasdale, 2012a), the (ex-)homeless people in these particular programmes appeared to derive no additional ‘empowerment’ or other benefit from the employment projects in which they participated being SEs rather than traditional charities.

The findings also reveal the limitations of too strong a focus on employment-related activity in the promotion of ‘human functioning’ or flourishing amongst severely disadvantaged groups such as homeless people with complex needs (see also Teasdale, 2010a; Johnsen and Watts, 2014). The homeless people interviewed consistently identified the principal source of any empowerment gains that they experienced as being positive staff attitudes, and also in some cases mutual self-help amongst homeless service users, rather than the acquisition of a job or training in and of itself. While appropriately supported employment, training and voluntary work certainly has an important role to play in the reintegration of homeless people– not least in helping them to move out of poverty and structuring their time in a constructive manner – we should be mindful of the crucial insight from Nussbaum that each core human capability is independently important, such that the need for one cannot be satisfied by giving a larger amount of another. If this premise is accepted, then the empowerment process becomes an irreducibly plural and holistic one which has to be pursued through enhancing individuals’ capabilities in all of the life domains that they value, with no one component prioritised over all others. This study thus also echoes calls made by other scholars to be realistic about the ability of SEs and other employment-focused projects to provide ‘the answer’ to empowering homeless people, particularly given the enduring labour market barriers they face (see Johnsen and Watts, 2014).

Given the relatively small scale of the fieldwork upon which this paper is based, there is clearly scope for more empirical investigation of the merits of employment-focused SEs targeting homeless people and other disadvantaged groups. The evidence presented above does however caution against any automatic presumption regarding the ‘empowering’

benefits of SEs for disadvantaged groups, and gives pause to the enthusiasm with which specialist SEs are often embraced across the political spectrum.

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**Table 1 Capabilities-grounded empowerment framework**

Capability-grounded empowerment domains	Capability components developed by Nussbaum	Equivalent themes in traditional empowerment literature
<b>Bodily</b>	<p><b>Life:</b> preserving a physical life.</p> <p><b>Bodily health:</b> having reasonable physical and mental health; ability to meet basic needs for food, shelter and basic healthcare.</p> <p><b>Bodily integrity:</b> safety and security, living in a safe area, not being in a situation where one feels unsafe.</p>	Not captured by classic empowerment conceptualisations
<b>Economic and political</b>	<p><b>Practical reason:</b> ability to conceive one's own conception of a good life.</p> <p><b>Control over one's environment:</b> having the (material) resources and (political) power to pursue one's own version of the 'good life'.</p>	<p><b>Economic</b> - employment, wealth and income.</p> <p><b>Educational-</b> education, skills and competence enhancement, as a source of self-determination and critical consciousness.</p> <p><b>Political</b> - collective participation in decision-making processes.</p>
<b>Social and emotional</b>	<p><b>Affiliation and emotions:</b> having meaningful social relationships with other people, on the basis of equal dignity and self-respect; self-confidence, self-esteem and positive self-perception.</p>	<p><b>'Social-psychological'</b> - positive self-esteem, self-efficacy and dignity through affiliation with family, peers and other social networks.</p>
<b>Creative, intellectual and self-development</b>	<p><b>Senses, imagination and thought:</b> developing his/her own 'true self' in terms of creativity, learning, spirituality and inner development.</p> <p><b>Play:</b> one's capacity to flourish in terms of play and enjoying recreational activities.</p>	Not captured by classic empowerment conceptualisations.

**Table 2 Case study SE characteristics**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Activity/focus</b>	<b>'Business' or 'social' orientation</b>	<b>Number of Staff</b>
A	Food share scheme	'Social' emphasis	5 full-time salaried staff 4 homeless volunteers
B	Catering and food share	'Business' emphasis	6 full-time salaried staff 3 homeless volunteers 5 homeless people in training programme
C	Bicycle repair and maintenance	'Social' emphasis	2 full-time salaried staff 5 homeless/ex-homeless volunteers
D	Painting and decorating	'Social' emphasis	4 full-time salaried staff 6 homeless volunteers