‘Making a home’: a constructivist grounded theory study of tenancy sustainment following homelessness

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Tenancy sustainment is fundamental to a sustainable exit from homelessness. Although growing attention has been placed on housing outcomes, there is limited research on the maintenance of a settled home following homelessness. The aim of this study was to understand the process for individuals as they transitioned from services to sustained tenancies from an occupational science perspective. A constructivist grounded theory study was conducted with people who had experienced multiple exclusion homelessness. Interviews using reflexive photography were carried out with individuals (N=29) from three cities in the UK and Ireland. ‘Making a home’ was the core process identified in tenancy sustainment. It highlighted the significance of everyday activities and routines in enabling participants to personalise the tenancy, develop their identity as tenants, and maintain daily routines and roles to support it. An occupational perspective can enhance understanding of tenancy sustainment following homelessness.
The ability for a person to sustain a tenancy is crucial to the success of housing-led policies to tackle homelessness (Lancione et al., 2018; Verdoow & Habibis, 2018). A permanent address allows better opportunities to address the complex social needs that can lead to homelessness in the first place (Brown et al., 2015). In the past, sustaining a tenancy has simply been measured in terms of living a certain number of days at an address (Boland et al., 2018) but feeling settled, community integration and personal wellbeing also reflect, and contribute to, maintaining tenancies (Clapham, 2010; Johnstone et al., 2016). There is a call for research on transitions from homelessness to consider both housing and home to ensure successful transitions from homelessness (Parsell, 2012, Grenier et al., 2016).

In this paper, we draw upon perspectives from Occupational Science - the study of humans as occupational beings and the things people do in their everyday lives (WFOT, 2012) - to examine how individuals make a home. Occupational approaches offer an understanding of the ways in which everyday activities contribute towards the transition from homelessness to a permanent home. The paper has four main aims. First, we argue for the importance of occupational perspectives to understand tenancy sustainment. Second, we use these ideas to identify key processes in the transition from homelessness to tenancy. Thirdly, we draw on empirical evidence to examine the significance in occupational practices and routines at these key stages of transition. Finally, we conclude by arguing that there is a need for more personalised support to help sustain tenancies.

**Home and Occupation**

Scholarship has advanced the debate about the concept of ‘home’ beyond the more traditional physical space to consider its diversity and complexity within cultural and political systems (Easthope et al., 2020, Meers, 2021). Homes are made and unmade (Baxter & Brickell, 2014, Blunt 2005). As people move from homelessness services into their own accommodation, they aim to make a home through material objects (Gregson 2006) and patterns of habituation (Rowles & Watkins, 2003), or the rhythms and routines of daily life.

In a study of young people who were homeless transitioning to their own tenancies, Brueckner et al. (2011) observed that the participants position themselves as ‘normal’ home occupiers and hold expectations about how their home should be presented (Smith et al., 2014). Home, for example, offers a place for people to display objects in a meaningful way that reflects their identity (Hurdley, 2006; Tran Smith et al., 2015); possessions helped
women who were homeless cope with their new circumstances and restore their sense of self (McCarthy, 2020). Yet, starting a new home can also include adjusting to living alone, taking responsibility for the tenancy and living in poor conditions (Crane et al., 2011). Increasing debt, acute isolation and a lack of meaningful activities are also a reality for formerly homeless people living in private rented accommodation (Smith et al., 2014; Warnes et al., 2013). Being rehoused may not, in itself, be a panacea to the complex issues that cause homelessness (Busch-Geertsema, 2005). Although a substantial body of evidence has demonstrated the effectiveness of Housing First for housing retention (Aubry et al., 2015), it has been criticised for its poor promotion of social and community integration (Pleace & Bretherton, 2013; Tsai et al., 2012). It is important to develop and nurture positive social support mechanisms to help sustain successful exits from homelessness (Johnstone et al., 2016; Roy et al., 2016). Occupational perspectives provide important insights into these issues.

*An Occupational Science perspective*

The everyday routines of day-to-day life are often ‘seen but unnoticed’ (Hasselkus, 2006, p. 627). Yet, the ways that people participate in daily occupations have an important influence on health and well-being (Law et al., 1998; Wilcock, 2006). Everyday activities, such as eating a meal, spending time with friends or walking the dog, are central to establishing a meaningful routine. The individual importance of these routines will vary from person-to-person and are influenced by temporal and contextual factors. For example, preparing food may be a joy for one person but a chore for another, depending on personal preferences and the time and context in which it is carried out (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). Occupational science focuses on these activities by considering ‘how people live and seek identity; how people organise their habits, routine and choices; and how systems support (or do not support) the occupations that people want or need to do’ (Whiteford & Townsend, 2011, p. 67).

As home is created through patterns of habituation, or routines of everyday life (Rowles & Watkins, 2003), an occupational perspective is important to understanding tenancy sustainment following homelessness. The uncertainty of people’s lives while homeless can be constructively transformed through changes in routines, activities, and time use (Raphael-Greenfield & Gutman, 2015). Becoming housed provides opportunities for carrying out
occupations, yet personal fears, economic realities, and social structures influence their
uptake and participation.

At the same time, recent work has also recognised how the complex interplay of
sociocultural, economic and political factors influences choices, opportunities and
participation (Hammell & Iwama, 2012, Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016). Some
occupations are also viewed as self-damaging or anti-social, while others are beneficial. This
not only challenges the causal relationship between occupation and wellbeing, but also
questions the social and cultural values that wider society places on certain occupations and
acknowledges that what is regarded as important and meaningful varies between people and
social groups (Twinley, 2017).

This indicates a need to deepen our understanding of the role of everyday activities as people
transition into tenancies within the context of a housing pathway that is, in turn, determined
by wider social and policy contexts. To begin addressing this gap, our qualitative study uses
occupational perspectives to examine how individuals with multiple complex needs
(Fitzpatrick et al., 2011) transition from temporary or no accommodation to a sustained
tenancy. We seek to identify the core occupational process of tenancy sustainment.

**Research methodology**

Semi-structured interviews based on photo elicitation (Lapenta, 2011) took place in one
English and two Irish cities. Respondents were asked to take photographs of their homes and
reflect on their content in an interview (Wang & Burris 1997), offering insights into their
daily lives and changing occupations (Johnsen et al., 2008).

Participants were contacted using purposive and theoretical sampling techniques (Jupp, 2006)
that aimed to recruit individuals who could offer valuable and diverse insights into tenancy
sustainment. We strategically approached organisations that worked with homeless people,
or supported people who were establishing their own tenancies. Working with these
gatekeepers (McAreavey & Das, 2013) we invited people who met the inclusion criteria
(Table 1) to take part. Ethical approval was received for this study from Faculty of Health
and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Plymouth (reference 15/16-
480) and the individual homeless service providers.
Inclusion criteria

Individual with experience of multiple exclusion homelessness (MEH)

In the process* of moving from homelessness into their own tenancy or
Had secured and were in their own tenancy or
Had experience of their own tenancy but currently re-using homeless services.

Exclusion criteria

Homelessness experienced as part of a family

Under the age of 18

Under the influence of substances or experiencing psychosis at the time of recruitment

 Staff member who has supported a person meeting the inclusion criteria above

*For the purpose of this study ‘in the process’ referred to having a goal of getting one’s own accommodation and working, with/without a staff member, to realise this.

Table 1. Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Data collection took place over 15 months (December 2015-February 2017) and interviews were carried out with 29 participants who had experience of homelessness and complex needs (Table 2). Eight persons were recruited in Ireland and 21 in England. At the time of the interview, 12 people were in their own tenancies (6 private rented, 6 social housing), 16 were using hostel accommodation and one person was in a supported housing project. Five interviewees were women, reflecting that those who experience MEH are predominantly single men (McDonagh, 2011)¹.

¹ Future work should pay greater attention to listening to women and other minority groups of homeless people. In the results sections we have tried to make women’s voices heard by, for example, ensuring gender balance in our choice of vignettes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 (17%)</td>
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<td>25-34</td>
<td>9 (31%)</td>
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<td>9 (31%)</td>
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<td>1 (4%)</td>
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<td>10 (35%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Substance misuse</td>
<td>20 (69%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>14 (48%)</td>
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<td>Offending history</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>7 (24%)</td>
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**Table 2.** Demographics of the 29 participants with experience of homelessness

Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011) was used to guide interviews and, building on Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) work, we used a constructivist approach to emphasise the role of the researcher, the participants, and the social world in co-constructing the data (Charmaz, 2011). All participants had experience of their own tenancy but at the time of interview over half had returned to using homelessness services. Consequently, our work reflects the views of people (currently) sustaining a tenancy as well as, sadly, the experiences of those whose tenancies had finished or had broken down. Both perspectives were valuable in informing the analysis process and supporting the development of the categories discussed in this paper. The lead author brought previous insights and professional experience as an occupational therapist to the project that allowed her to communicate effectively and inclusively with homeless people about their occupational practices. The use of a reflective diary and critical review of data analysis by co-authors ensured that this positionality was acknowledged (Charmaz, 2017). At the same time, the grounded approach allowed themes to emerge from the interviews, empowering homeless people to give voice to their experiences.

Participants were given digital cameras and asked to take photographs that represented their use of time and everyday activities. These were used to structure the interview, allowed people to show their accommodation and possessions and facilitated the portrayal of time use, which may have been difficult to capture in words alone. The interview began with the participant choosing one photograph and being asked to introduce it with the words ‘tell me
about it’. A series of follow-up questions discussed the meaning of the photos to the
participants and provided insights into the activities they undertook.

The interview data were analysed using grounded theory to guide initial line-by-line coding,
focused coding, memos, mapping and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). As data
collection and data analysis progressed, a category of ‘feeling at home’ emerged. Individuals
who were successfully maintaining a tenancy were theoretically sampled to achieve
saturation in this category. Within this study, an experience of feeling settled by the tenant
was used to define successful tenancy sustainment.

Further consideration of the categories in the context of all the interviews was used to
develop a ‘substantive theory’ (Charmaz, 2014), which provides a theoretical interpretation
of process in a specific context. A constructivist grounded study does not assume that the
theory it constructs has overarching generalisability or applicability (Mills et al., 2006) but
proposes the findings provide a way of describing and explaining social processes
transferable to similar situations. The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the
process for individuals facing multiple exclusion homelessness as they transition to sustained
tenancies. Based on this fieldwork, the following section identifies a ‘substantive theory’
(Figure 1) that uses occupational science to identify the process of tenancy sustainment
following homelessness.

**An Occupational Model of Sustained Tenancy**

When a tenancy is accepted, a core process of *Making a home* becomes important (figure 1),
to enable a sense of ‘feeling at home’. Three strategies underpin the process: ‘*putting your
stamp on it*’, ‘*seeing a new self*’ and ‘*living the life*’.

1. *Putting your stamp on it* is an active process of adapting the physical environment to
make it feel like home. Participants described making their place feel more homely
through buying, borrowing and acquiring material objects.

2. *Seeing a new self* is the construction of an identity fitting that of a tenant and the
expectations attached to it.

3. *Living the life* refers to having a consistent routine that enables the successful
sustainment of a tenancy.
When tenants successfully make a home there is a sense of *feeling at home*, equating to
‘*belonging*’, or a sense of connection to place (both to accommodation and neighbourhood),
and ‘*having connections*’ or positive relationships with other people.

Tenancies at risk are represented in the category ‘*hanging on/unmaking*’, which captures
some of the vulnerabilities associated with transitioning to tenancies and underlines the
importance of occupational practices. *Hanging on* depicts a passive process in which the
participants described things getting worse in the flat but not reporting any sense of control
over this. *Unmaking*, on the other hand, includes an element of agency, in which participants
took some ownership of the tenancy ending. Taking control, where possible, over everyday
activities and responsibilities was identified as an important factor to successful tenancy
sustainment.

*Navigating homeless systems* (figure 1) describes the experiences of using a variety of
accommodation projects including hostels, night shelters, and transitional services. Figure 1
acknowledges that tenancy sustainment is not a fixed state: tenancies can be lost and people
can return to using homelessness services.

The following sections give greater attention to the occupational strategies employed by
people trying to make a home.

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**Figure 1.** Process of making a home following homelessness
Making a home

The routes that participants took from using homelessness services to their own accommodation varied widely. Some moved between settings, for example transitional accommodation (the staircase model) and others moved directly into their own tenancies, both private rented and social housing (housing-first). Participants’ levels of engagement with support staff varied, as did their use of available advice and information services. What was common was a sense of hope associated with initially moving into their own place (Kidd et al., 2016; McNaughton & Sanders, 2007) mingled with fears and concerns about abilities to manage (Raphael-Greenfield & Gutman, 2015):

So my first night - my first night was - I should have been happy but [pause] I was more, like worried. I couldn't really sleep properly and I just had so much to do. My head just kept - every time I tried to relax I was like 'ah, don't forget you have to do this'. (Timothy, age 20, 520-522).

There is general agreement in the literature that home is a complex and multidimensional concept. Xenophon used the photo in figure 2 to represent the complexity of home to him - the mix of both light and dark.

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2 All names are pseudonyms and the numbers refer to the line numbers in the interview transcripts.
The skills it takes to make a home should not be taken for granted (Povey, 2011). An occupational perspective allows us to appreciate everyday home making activities and how participation in these can shape a sense of home. Three key strategies which enabled the process of *Making a home* process are elaborated upon next.

*Putting your stamp on it*

Many of the participants recognised the importance of making the physical environment feel more like their personal space, in keeping with place making (Rowles, 2008). This was more than aesthetic and provided a sense of security:

> Just having my stuff or whatever, you know [pause]. Just feel comfortable in it, whatever, you know. Safe and things like that. (Brian, age 36, 923).

Valued activities included dressing the bed, arranging furniture, placing things on shelves and cleaning (figure 3).
The realities of homelessness can result in the loss of possessions due to transience, eviction, robbery as well as having to sell or pawn items for cash (Robinson, 2011). When evicted, Garfield lost ‘wedding photographs, all the pictures of my son as a child and my Dad’s pipe’ (Garfield, age 50, 444-445). Michael found it difficult to hold onto his possessions:

From when I first become homeless I am always losing stuff - I am always losing stuff, always. Getting kicked out of places... (Michael, age 40, 775-775).

Home therefore became a place where possessions could not only be kept safely but arranged in a way to make spaces feel more homely and meaningful. Thus, place, objects and self were relationally enrolled to create a sense of home. In turn, the stability offered by a sense of home afforded the opportunity to acquire more goods, - including buying, borrowing and acquiring from skips, which strengthened emotional connections with the property. The manner in which people display objects in their home are important occupational activities that are integral to connecting identity with home (Hurdley, 2006). Thus, Xenophon enacted putting your stamp on it through occupations such as painting as well as choosing, buying, and hanging pictures. This helped him see a future living there, as illustrated by his conversation with his neighbour:
Tracy was slagging me about - next door - we were talking about something and I said 'ah sure I will be looking at furniture after paint'. She said 'you are there for life'. I said 'maybe so'. (Xenophon, age 41, 617-618).

Yet the freedom to make personal choices in home decoration can be restricted in many private rented tenancies, as Garfield identified:

I don't want to just exist. I want to actually live. I want a place that I can decorate myself, a place where you can hang pictures on the wall. I am scared to put a bloody nail in here in case the landlord says 'you put a hole in the wall'... (Garfield, age 50, 642-644).

This comment draws attention to the importance of being able to carry out meaningful activities but also reflects some of the anxieties faced by some people when trying to achieve them.

*Seeing a new self*

Accessing services dedicated for people experiencing homelessness can have a negative impact on an individual’s self-identity (Gonyea & Melekis, 2017) that can affect a person’s transition into their own place. This is explained by Harold, as he commented on the time it took him to settle after many years of homelessness:

It took a while. It was slowly changing when I was working with Joe [support worker]; it did take a while … yeah I was petrified when I moved into my flat the first time … I didn't know if I was going to stay there …I felt that I had to start putting things in place to get - get over that, with the things I do. (Harold, age 64, 1090-1097).

Meaningful occupational activities – ‘putting things into place’, ‘the things I do’ – were crucial to this transition and, in time, helped him to adjust to being in his flat. With the help of his support worker, he was then able to set up an occupational routine, including several volunteering roles, that helped him maintain his tenancy. As these occupational activities develop and strengthen, they contribute to a stronger sense of self. Thus, Xenophon considered that his home offered him an identity beyond that of tenant alone:
I am a member now of what is considered to be society, you know, respectable society because I have, you know, my own house although I am still looked down upon because I am unemployed. I also fit into that group, you know, I have no children, I'm single, overweight. All those sort of things that society deems to be a bad - really bad things that you shouldn't be, you know. So the light side is that I have this thing around me that doesn't really mean anything, the flat doesn't really mean anything in itself, you know. A secure location obviously, fair enough, that’s grand. Then the dark is the reality of what it is - it’s, you know, you are living on your own and you are struggling to pay your bills... (Xenophon, age 41, 1830-1842).

This passage also confirms that occupational choices are influenced by socio-economic and socio-cultural opportunities. Despite having a flat, a complex interplay of social, economic and cultural factors are influencing Xenophon’s expectations and possibilities for occupation (Laliberte Rudman, 2013). This can crucially affect the third strategy of making a home - living the life.

Living the life

The strategy living the life captures the everyday and somewhat taken for granted occupations that home enables, such as preparing food of choice or simply watching television. While these activities may also occur within hostel settings, the context of a private home is important because it allows tenants the agency to undertake them when, and how, they want (figure 4). This is important because, over time, activities develop into routines with established sequences that ‘provide an orderly structure for daily living’ (Erlandsson & Christiansen, 2015, p. 123) or, as William (age 38, 581-582) says: ‘for me, I like to have a bit of routine because it keeps me - it keeps me straight.’
Figure 4. Being able to lie down in own sitting room and watch the television

When transitioning from hostel to home, individuals establish day to day routines that are both mundane and purposeful but, crucially, different from those of the hostel. When she moved into her new place, Lily got a dog (figure 5) and she recognised how it helped her develop routines (see also Power 2017).

Figure 5. Having a dog to help daily routine
While routines are important in making a home, they do not exclusively occur in the home. Brian, aged 36, was the only participant in full time employment at the time of the interview. He had a fifteen-year history of homelessness as well as drug and alcohol misuse. He had continued in the same job, as a kitchen porter, during his transition from a hostel to his own flat and the time he spent working gave structure to his life because, as he put it, forty hours free time ‘can lead you down the wrong path’ if it is not structured meaningfully. Others found that voluntary work or communal activities provided similar structure.

Taking control of time, and having a routine to structure this, was an important element in tenancy sustainment but could be challenging:

[sighs] I am going to have to start setting my alarm I think and just being more disciplined really. Yeah, it’s something I struggle with. (Sandra, age 33, 1776).

Regular occupations that are meaningful to tenants help to establish this rhythm and establish routines that allow people to maintain tenancies. As this section has demonstrated, support is often needed to establish these, underlining the need for occupational therapy approaches to help people make a home. Those who are able to do this will, in time, feel at home (see figure 1) and be more likely to achieve housing stability.

**Feeling at home**

**Belonging** (the sense of connection to place) and *having connections* (to other people) are the interrelated dimensions of *feeling at home*.

**Belonging**

Home provides a place for the doing of occupations which can enable a sense of belonging (Wilcock, 2006) and, in turn, wider interaction with neighbourhoods. Participants commented on moving into unfamiliar neighbourhoods but getting to know them through what they did every day, for example, using shops, going for walks and taking public transport. Bernice and Stephen chose to live in familiar city centre locations as these were convenient for college, work, and voluntary work to but, in doing so, had to sacrifice on the standard of their private rented accommodation:
This is city centre, I can walk to a charity shop without paying a bus. I can walk to my college without paying a bus so I came here. (Bernice, age 42, 378-379).

For others, the geographical location of affordable housing resulted in a sense that a tenant did not belong to a neighbourhood. Garfield, who was in a bedsit converted from a shop unit, commented:

There are no neighbours. That’s the thing, there are no neighbours. I mean I have a sex shop one side and a garage across the road, that’s it. (Garfield, age 50, 661-661).

Garfield felt more connected in his previous tenancy, prior to using homeless services, where he had positive relationships with his neighbours. By contrast, these opportunities were missing in his new tenancy with the consequence that Garfield found it hard to develop connections. Based on his experience, we suggest that occupational engagement with neighbours can be an important way of connecting tenants to new places and establishing a sense of belonging.

Having connections

A home can provide opportunities to rebuild connections with social networks outside the neighbourhood (Kirkpatrick & Byrne, 2009; Tran Smith et al., 2015). Being settled in his own home, changed the relationship dynamic Timothy had with his family:

Yeah, they treat me like real different, just like an adult like. Even my Mam asks me to do her favours and stuff now, do you know what I mean. She would never ask me to do her favours. She would never ask me for anything. All she ever asked me is like 'did you get in trouble? Are you ok?' (Timothy, age 20, 346-348)

Occupations, for example attending classes or going to the pub, were a means to maintain and develop social networks. Xenophon explained how he felt connected to his next-door neighbours and was actively reaching out to them by giving a gift at Christmas. Joe also described his connections with his neighbours:

I see them now and again. I put out their rubbish - I takes the rubbish and put it out and I put back in the bin. (Joe, age 54, 334-335).

Similar to belonging, the expectations for, and the experience of connection were perceived differently by individuals. Some participants valued meeting friends; others felt connected
through social media or engaging in activities outside of the home. Sean used his shopping as a strategy to ensure he connected with others:

There are days you just want to do nothing and then you have to force yourself to get up and go down and go out. Put it this way, if I needed three things in the shop, I would leave one go because that way then I know I have to go tomorrow, you know. Then you meet people in the street, you know so - you be talking away. (Sean, age 67, 530-533).

Figure 6. Meeting people through chatting about the flowers in the garden

Joe extolled the value of his garden to meet people (figure 6). For others, shared occupations found in social groups, work, education and volunteering provided opportunities to build and maintain connections. A secure home can also provide opportunities to build connections with social networks beyond the neighbourhood (Kirkpatrick and Byrne 2009). Thus, Bernice started adult education classes during the transition to her flat:

First time [college] it was not easy. Three weeks were not easy but then after that I started to enjoy it like. When I went to the class everybody was just easy people to communicate with, so I start to make friends like and we are friends even now. (Bernice, age 42, 294-295).
At the same time, some participants continued to use services such as food centres and soup runs to help make ends meet. Food centres are a place of refuge and resource (Cloke et al., 2010) and as Sandra indicated in her comment, an opportunity to be with others with similar experiences:

> It started about being about food and that was also helpful but what really draws me now is that lots of people I know are there. We all go there so... I mean the people I know tend to be also struggling with money [laughs] so we are all in it together, in that sense. (Sandra, age 33, 1687-1688).

In contrast, Xenophon spoke about wanting to break ties with people he knew from the homeless setting he had stayed in for years:

> There was the after shadow of that from the hostel, constantly knocking on the door 'have you got this?', 'have you got that?' Then you say no and you are public enemy number one, you know. (Xenophon, age 41, 246-247).

These issues stress that what constitutes meaningful activity is subjective. For some, independent living offered a chance to develop occupations that broke what were seen as damaging social relationships. For others, they offered opportunities to maintain formal and informal support networks they had developed in hostels. All occupational activities and opportunities, within or outside of homelessness services, are set in the context of wider socio-economic conditions that can influence and act against tenancy sustainment. As the following section examines, these external factors could mitigate against tenancy sustainment.

### Hanging on – unmaking

The stage *hanging on - unmaking* refers to when a tenancy is breaking down. *Hanging on* captures a passive process in which the tenancy is at risk, for example due to rent arrears, without feeling any sense of control over it. This includes being evicted by bailiffs or being put out of more informal situations when staying with friends or family. *Unmaking* includes an element of agency, in which participants took a more active role as the tenancy ended. Rico asked probation services to move him from his flat as he felt unable to cope with the
situation in the tenancy. Other participants described flats they chose to leave, returning to using homelessness services as a preferred option to the situations they were living in.

People can feel out of place well before they lose their tenancies as they battle poor housing conditions, social isolation, interpersonal conflict and violence (Burns, 2016). A change in time use or the lack of engagement in occupations indicated that the tenancy was at risk:

I could tell by the state of my room, my hygiene, my clothes. I just could spot the signs, like you know. I had been there that many times before, you know. (Roxy, age 42, 638-639).

Awareness of these early signs is central to early intervention for tenancy sustainment (Distasio & McCullough, 2016; Schout et al., 2015).

Tenancies that ended by eviction were usually due to rent arrears (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Stenberg et al., 2011) but, until then, the process of hanging on continued:

I didn't realise that the rent arrears had got as far as they did. (Ivor, age 61, 286).

As noted by Van Laere et al. (2009) inability to pay rent is often the result of a complex combination of financial, social, relational and health factors - not financial problems alone - as illuminated by participants in this study. The experience of an eviction is a traumatic experience for those involved (Holl et al., 2016) and so it is understandable why, for some of the participants, having responsibility removed and accessing the support offered by homelessness services was a release:

Like the way he evicted us - telling us in the middle of the street 'you're gone' and that’s it, you know yeah. Now that was probably a good thing… I ended up back in here [hostel] but never mind. (Roxy, age 42, 658-662).

For some, returning to homelessness was a more agreeable option than remaining in the living situation they were in. Xenophon described how he was the victim of antisocial behaviour in a previous flat and as a result gave up that tenancy:

The lock on the door was broken, the windows had been smashed, the graffiti was just [pause]. It was - I had given up. (Xenophon, age 41, 1125-1126).

Tenants in situations of housing instability are unlikely to seek help until late in the process (Acacia Consulting & Research, 2006) and may not know where to source help (Pleace & Culhane, 2016). When reflecting their experiences, a shared opinion among the participants
in this study was the need to take more timely action and not to allow potential risk situations to continue:

Accept any help that's given. Don't be proud - that's it - don't be proud. (Garfield, age 50, 1317-1318).

All I can say is I - the reasons I have got myself into such a mess in the past because I haven't faced up to the fact - faced up to the fact and gone and done something about it. That's basically what it is. (Ivor, age 61, 875-877).

By contrast, tenancy sustainment was positively influenced and enacted by participants taking control of activities including paying rent and bills, managing addictions as well as having roles and routines that they found meaningful. Asking for help, and supporting tenants in need of help, can help to establish occupational routines that help maintain tenancies.

Taking control over activities

‘Taking control over activities’ has both internal and external directed processes. Internally, the person must initiate action and, externally, the context influences the doing process (Reed, 2015). This interaction between the agency of individuals and structural constraints is crucial for the empowerment of persons to leave homelessness (Gosme & Anderson, 2015). All participants shared the view that seeking out support or help when necessary was important to keeping tenancies. Resources participants used in this study were support workers, homeless services including soup runs, accommodation and social support services, housing advice and citizen advice services.

Reflecting on why past tenancies had broken down, both Roxy and Ivor observed how they had concealed difficulties from people who supported them:

Every time they asked me, I said 'Ah, I am fine yeah' when things aren't, so it's down to me, it's my fault. (Ivor, age 61, 546-547).

When Roxy was asked if there were others who could have noticed signs that things were not good for him, he replied:

Not really because I tend to play my cards very close to my chest, like you know. (Roxy, age 42, 642-644).

Asking for help, or being open about difficulties, were found to support taking control of a tenancy. As Nguyen et al. (2012) advised in their study, factors that enhance help-seeking behaviour among homeless men would be beneficial toward a successful transition out of homelessness. Interestingly, Michael felt that being a user of a service removed the personal
responsibility for help seeking. Although he recalled that things ‘just gradually kept going downhill and downhill’ (Michael, 362), he had not approached staff for help because he felt:

No, I thought that was - that should be down to them. (Michael, age 40, 369-370).

Within the sample, participants who exercised control of roles that were personally meaningful felt most at home in their tenancies. If opportunities to establish a place and purpose in society are not created, the risk of cycling back into homelessness is increased (Bell & Walsh, 2015). Some people, especially those with more complex needs, may benefit from occupational therapy to help establish, and perhaps retain, meaningful occupational routines.

The stage of hanging on - unmaking in the substantive theory deepens our understanding of the experience for individuals when their tenancy is at risk of breaking down. It revealed the impact on their daily lives, for example, not getting out of bed, avoiding meetings, feeling isolated, ignoring bills.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the value of everyday activities as people transition from homelessness and settle into tenancies. Using this approach, it can be asserted that tenancy sustainment was not thought of by participants as a duration of time but, rather, a sense of ‘feeling at home’ or ‘belonging to a place’ in which they could relax, make choices, have privacy and feel connected to others. It supports the critique that housing stability should measure more than time alone (Frederick et al., 2014; Johnstone et al., 2016) and, instead, proposes the need to include subjective factors of stability, belonging, satisfaction as well as participation in everyday occupations, to identify meaningful tenancy sustainment.

This study has given an insight into the activities people do every day and how these impact on the process of tenancy sustainment. Each of the identified strategies to support the making of a home - putting your stamp on it, seeing a new self and living the life - were achieved by, and reflected in, the performance of everyday activities. In particular, we draw attention to the importance of personalising the tenancy through activities such as decorating, displaying personal possessions and carrying out everyday occupations, including the preparation of food, watching television and having people to visit. Participation in activities that are part of
day-to-day life – the often ‘seen but unnoticed’ everyday occupations - have potential to support individuals to feel at home and gain a sense of belonging to their communities.

Yet these activities are dependent on three things. First, the relative importance attached to these occupations varies between people and is informed by their values and experiences (Hasselkus, 2011). For example, cooking may reinforce the identity and provide social connections for one person, but may be viewed as a chore by another. It is important, therefore to consider the relative merit of these activities according to the person undertaking them.

Second, in addition to the structural factors that influence housing availability and tenancy sustainment, occupations are contextualised and dependent on resources and opportunities. Certainly, the quality of accommodation as well as access to work, friends and social networks all impacted on the occupational opportunities available to tenants and, in turn, their ability to make a home. The choices and opportunities available to people to participate in everyday activities are influenced by numerous structural and institutional factors, for example housing quality, poverty, community resources. Individuals who experience multiple exclusion homelessness live with a range of physical and mental health difficulties which impact on their functional ability to carry out occupations and daily routines when transitioning from homelessness. Occupational therapists, experts in assessing functional performance, as well as enabling individuals to engage in meaningful activities of everyday life, may provide a unique perspective to support people in tenancy sustainment. Accessible health and addiction services, co-ordinated with homelessness and housing services, are required to best support people transition from homelessness.

Finally, we also noted that some tenants were able to recognise the value of occupational routines and, if these broke down, would ask for help. Others were reluctant to seek support when they were unable to establish or maintain routines.

Drawing these ideas together, we argue that individualised support is needed to help establish occupations that will maintain tenancies. This should not prescribe what occupations are deemed beneficial or harmful but, rather, work with individuals to recognise what works for them. The importance of empowering tenants to develop a sense of control over their doing of activities is an often neglected component of tenancy sustainment. Therefore as people transition through homelessness, it is important for services to critically reflect on the practical opportunities and choices available for individuals to engage in personally
meaningful activities, which would enable people develop a sense of mastery through doing. Consideration should also be given to the social and structural circumstances of an individual as well as recognising when, and how, to intervene.

An occupational perspective, largely overlooked in homelessness and housing studies, brings a focus to how routines, time use and engagement in ‘doing’ can support individuals to transition from homelessness. More research is needed in this area to gain a deeper understanding of humans as occupational beings and how meaningful activity has the potential to support people to fully participate in tenancies, and local communities. This can contribute to programme development and inform practice in the homelessness and housing sector.

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Declaration of interest

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