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'Making a home': an occupational perspective on sustaining tenancies following homelessness

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

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26 **Abstract (144 words)**

27 Tenancy sustainment is fundamental to a sustainable exit from homelessness. Although
28 growing attention has been placed on housing outcomes, there is limited research on the
29 maintenance of a settled home following homelessness. The aim of this study was to
30 understand the process for individuals as they transitioned from services to sustained
31 tenancies from an occupational science perspective. A constructivist grounded theory study
32 was conducted with people who had experienced multiple exclusion homelessness.
33 Interviews using reflexive photography were carried out with individuals (N=29) from three
34 cities in the UK and Ireland. 'Making a home' was the core process identified in tenancy
35 sustainment. It highlighted the significance of everyday activities and routines in enabling
36 participants to personalise the tenancy, develop their identity as tenants, and maintain daily
37 routines and roles to support it. An occupational perspective can enhance understanding of
38 tenancy sustainment following homelessness.

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52 **Introduction**

53 The ability for a person to sustain a tenancy is crucial to the success of housing-led policies to
54 tackle homelessness (Lancione et al., 2018; Verdouw & Habibis, 2018). A permanent address
55 allows better opportunities to address the complex social needs that can lead to homelessness
56 in the first place (Brown et al., 2015). In the past, sustaining a tenancy has simply been
57 measured in terms of living a certain number of days at an address (Boland et al., 2018) but
58 feeling settled, community integration and personal wellbeing also reflect, and contribute to,
59 maintaining tenancies (Clapham, 2010; Johnstone et al., 2016). There is a call for research
60 on transitions from homelessness to consider both housing and home to ensure successful
61 transitions from homelessness (Parsell, 2012, Grenier et al., 2016).

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

72 *Home and Occupation*

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

79 In a study of young people who were homeless transitioning to their own tenancies,
80 Brueckner et al. (2011) observed that the participants position themselves as ‘normal’ home
81 occupiers and hold expectations about how their home should be presented (Smith et al.,
82 2014). Home, for example, offers a place for people to display objects in a meaningful way
83 that reflects their identity (Hurdley, 2006; Tran Smith et al., 2015); possessions helped

84 women who were homeless cope with their new circumstances and restore their sense of self
85 (McCarthy, 2020). Yet, starting a new home can also include adjusting to living alone, taking
86 responsibility for the tenancy and living in poor conditions (Crane et al., 2011). Increasing
87 debt, acute isolation and a lack of meaningful activities are also a reality for formerly
88 homeless people living in private rented accommodation (Smith et al., 2014; Warnes et al.,
89 2013). Being rehoused may not, in itself, be a panacea to the complex issues that cause
90 homelessness (Busch-Geertsema, 2005). Although a substantial body of evidence has
91 demonstrated the effectiveness of Housing First for housing retention (Aubry et al., 2015), it
92 has been criticised for its poor promotion of social and community integration (Pleace &
93 Bretherton, 2013; Tsai et al., 2012). It is important to develop and nurture positive social
94 support mechanisms to help sustain successful exits from homelessness (Johnstone et al.,
95 2016; Roy et al., 2016). Occupational perspectives provide important insights into these
96 issues.

97 *An Occupational Science perspective*

98 The everyday routines of day-to-day life are often ‘seen but unnoticed’ (Hasselkus, 2006, p.
99 627). Yet, the ways that people participate in daily occupations have an important influence
100 on health and well-being (Law et al., 1998; Wilcock, 2006). Everyday activities, such as
101 eating a meal, spending time with friends or walking the dog, are central to establishing a
102 meaningful routine. The individual importance of these routines will vary from person-to-
103 person and are influenced by temporal and contextual factors. For example, preparing food
104 may be a joy for one person but a chore for another, depending on personal preferences and
105 the time and context in which it is carried out (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). Occupational
106 science focuses on these activities by considering ‘how people live and seek identity; how
107 people organise their habits, routine and choices; and how systems support (or do not
108 support) the occupations that people want or need to do’ (Whiteford & Townsend, 2011, p.
109 67).

110 As home is created through patterns of habituation, or routines of everyday life (Rowles &
111 Watkins, 2003), an occupational perspective is important to understanding tenancy
112 sustainment following homelessness. The uncertainty of people’s lives while homeless can be
113 constructively transformed through changes in routines, activities, and time use (Raphael-
114 Greenfield & Gutman, 2015). Becoming housed provides opportunities for carrying out

115 occupations, yet personal fears, economic realities, and social structures influence their
116 uptake and participation.

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

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

131 **Research methodology**

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

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

144

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Individual with experience of multiple exclusion homelessness (MEH)	Homelessness experienced as part of a family
In the process* of moving from homelessness into their own tenancy <i>or</i> Had secured and were in their own tenancy <i>or</i> Had experience of their own tenancy but currently re-using homeless services.	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	

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

147 **Table 1.** Inclusion/exclusion criteria

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

155

156

157

158

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.

Characteristic		Number (%)
Gender	Male	24 (83%)
	Female	5 (17%)
Age range (years)	20-24	3 (10%)
	25-34	9 (31%)
	35-44	7 (24%)
	45-64	9 (31%)
	65+	1 (4%)
Household type	Single person	29 (100%)
	Children	10 (35%)
Characteristics	Homelessness	29 (100%)
	Substance misuse	20 (69%)
	Mental health	14 (48%)
	Offending history	13 (45%)
	Physical health	7 (24%)

159 **Table 2.** Demographics of the 29 participants with experience of homelessness

160 Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011) was used to guide interviews and, building on Glaser and
161 Strauss' (1967) work, we used a constructivist approach to emphasise the role of the
162 researcher, the participants, and the social world in co-constructing the data (Charmaz, 2011).
163 All participants had experience of their own tenancy but at the time of interview over half had
164 returned to using homelessness services. Consequently, our work reflects the views of people
165 (currently) sustaining a tenancy as well as, sadly, the

166 experiences of those whose tenancies had finished or had broken down. Both perspectives
167 were valuable in informing the analysis process and supporting the development of the
168 categories discussed in this paper. The lead author brought previous insights and professional
169 experience as an occupational therapist to the project that allowed her to communicate
170 effectively and inclusively with homeless people about their occupational practices. The use
171 of a reflective diary and critical review of data analysis by co-authors ensured that this
172 positionality was acknowledged (Charmaz, 2017). At the same time, the grounded approach
173 allowed themes to emerge from the interviews, empowering homeless people to give voice to
174 their experiences.

175 Participants were given digital cameras and asked to take photographs that represented their
176 use of time and everyday activities. These were used to structure the interview, allowed
177 people to show their accommodation and possessions and facilitated the portrayal of time use,
178 which may have been difficult to capture in words alone. The interview began with the
179 participant choosing one photograph and being asked to introduce it with the words 'tell me

180 about it'. A series of follow-up questions discussed the meaning of the photos to the
181 participants and provided insights into the activities they undertook.

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

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

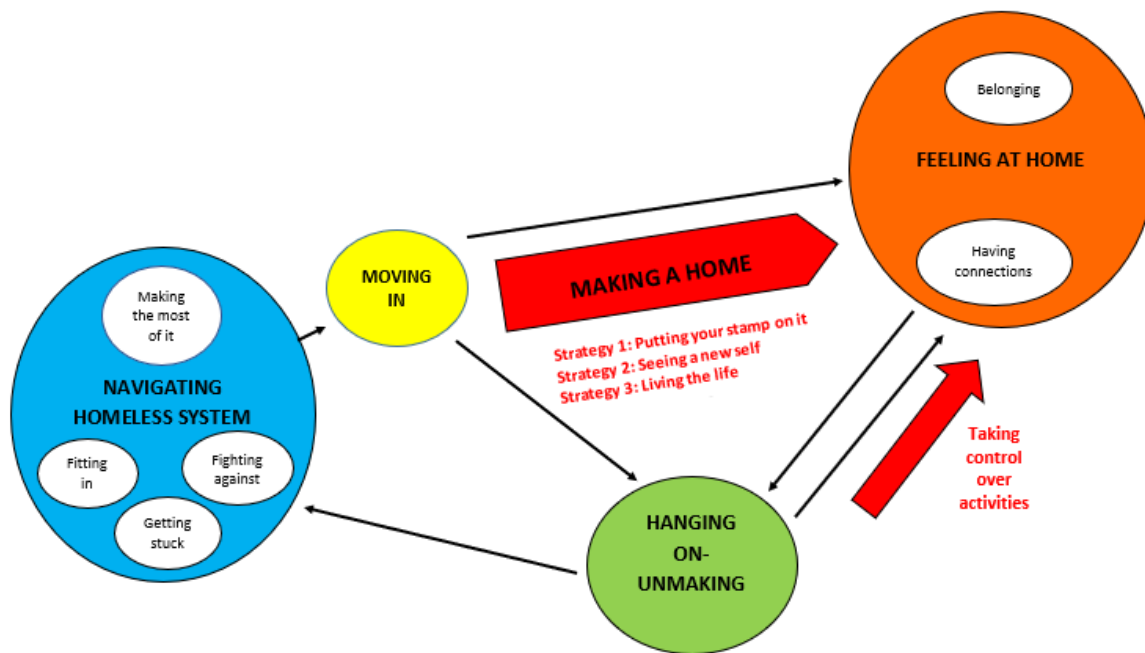
198 **An Occupational Model of Sustained Tenancy**

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

202

- 203 1. *Putting your stamp on it* is an active process of adapting the physical environment to
204 make it feel like home. Participants described making their place feel more homely
205 through buying, borrowing and acquiring material objects.
- 206 2. *Seeing a new self* is the construction of an identity fitting that of a tenant and the
207 expectations attached to it.
- 208 3. *Living the life* refers to having a consistent routine that enables the successful
209 sustainment of a tenancy.

210



211

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

213 When tenants successfully make a home there is a sense of *feeling at home*, equating to
 214 *‘belonging’*, or a sense of connection to place (both to accommodation and neighbourhood),
 215 and *‘having connections’* or positive relationships with other people.

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

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

228

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

231

232 **Making a home**

233

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

242

243 So my first night - my first night was - I should have been happy but [pause] I was
244 more, like worried. I couldn't really sleep properly and I just had so much to do. My
245 head just kept - every time I tried to relax I was like 'ah, don't forget you have to do
246 this'. (Timothy, age 20, 520-522²).

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

² All names are pseudonyms and the numbers refer to the line numbers in the interview transcripts.



250

251

Figure 2. The complexity of home

252 The skills it takes to make a home should not be taken for granted (Povey, 2011). An
 253 occupational perspective allows us to appreciate everyday home making activities and how
 254 participation in these can shape a sense of home. Three key strategies which enabled the process
 255 of *Making a home* process are elaborated upon next.

256 *Putting your stamp on it*

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

260

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

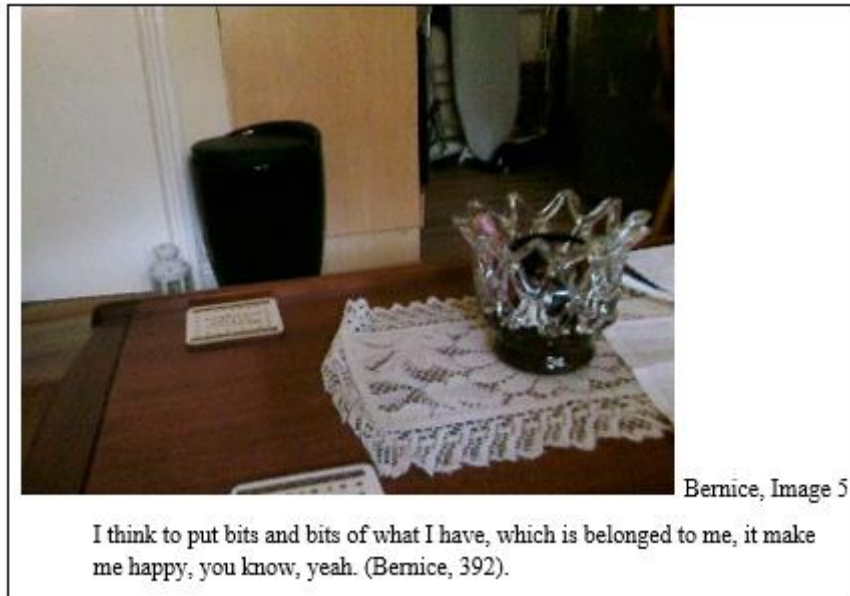
263 Valued activities included dressing the bed, arranging furniture, placing things on shelves and
 264 cleaning (figure 3).

265

266

267

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269

270

Figure 3. Decorating place with personal possessions

271 The realities of homelessness can result in the loss of possessions due to transience, eviction,

272 robbery as well as having to sell or pawn items for cash (Robinson, 2011). When evicted,

273 Garfield lost ‘wedding photographs, all the pictures of my son as a child and my Dad’s pipe’

274 (Garfield, age 50, 444-445). Michael found it difficult to hold onto his possessions:

275

276 From when I first become homeless I am always losing stuff - I am always losing

277 stuff, always. Getting kicked out of places... (Michael, age 40, 775-775).

278 Home therefore became a place where possessions could not only be kept safely but arranged

279 in a way to make spaces feel more homely and meaningful. Thus, place, objects and self were

280 relationally enrolled to create a sense of home. In turn, the stability offered by a sense of

281 home afforded the opportunity to acquire more goods, - including buying, borrowing and

282 acquiring from skips, which strengthened emotional connections with the property. The

283 manner in which people display objects in their home are important occupational activities

284 that are integral to connecting identity with home (Hurdley, 2006). Thus, Xenophon enacted

285 *putting your stamp* on it through occupations such as painting as well as choosing, buying,

286 and hanging pictures. This helped him see a future living there, as illustrated by his

287 conversation with his neighbour:

288

289 Tracy was slagging me about - next door - we were talking about something and I said
290 'ah sure I will be looking at furniture *after* paint'. She said 'you are there for life'. I said
291 'maybe so'. (Xenophon, age 41, 617-618).

292

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

295

296 I don't want to just exist. I want to actually live. I want a place that I can decorate
297 myself, a place where you can hang pictures on the wall. I am scared to put a bloody
298 nail in here in case the landlord says 'you put a hole in the wall'... (Garfield, age 50,
299 642-644).

300

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

303

304 *Seeing a new self*

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

309

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

314 Meaningful occupational activities – 'putting things into place', 'the things I do' – were
315 crucial to this transition and, in time, helped him to adjust to being in his flat. With the help
316 of his support worker, he was then able to set up an occupational routine, including several
317 volunteering roles, that helped him maintain his tenancy. As these occupational activities
318 develop and strengthen, they contribute to a stronger sense of self. Thus, Xenophon
319 considered that his home offered him an identity beyond that of tenant alone:

320

321 I am a member now of what is considered to be society, you know, respectable
322 society because I have, you know, my own house although I am still looked down
323 upon because I am unemployed. I also fit into that group, you know, I have no
324 children, I'm single, overweight. All those sort of things that society deems to be a
325 bad - really bad things that you shouldn't be, you know. So the light side is that I have
326 this thing around me that doesn't really mean anything, the flat doesn't really mean
327 anything in itself, you know. A secure location obviously, fair enough, that's grand.
328 Then the dark is the reality of what it is - it's, you know, you are living on your own
329 and you are struggling to pay your bills... (Xenophon, age 41, 1830-1842).

330

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

336

337 *Living the life*

338

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

347

348

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354

355

Figure 4. Being able to lie down in own sitting room and watch the television

356

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



360

361

Figure 5. Having a dog to help daily routine

362

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

370

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

373

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

376

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

382 *Feeling at home*

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

385 *Belonging*

386 Home provides a place for the doing of occupations which can enable a sense of belonging
387 (Wilcock, 2006) and, in turn, wider interaction with neighbourhoods. Participants commented
388 on moving into unfamiliar neighbourhoods but getting to know them through what they did
389 every day, for example, using shops, going for walks and taking public transport. Bernice and
390 Stephen chose to live in familiar city centre locations as these were convenient for college,
391 work, and voluntary work to but, in doing so, had to sacrifice on the standard of their private
392 rented accommodation:

393

394 This is city centre, I can walk to a charity shop without paying a bus. I can walk to my
395 college without paying a bus so I came here. (Bernice, age 42, 378-379).

396

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

400

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

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

409 *Having connections*

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

413

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

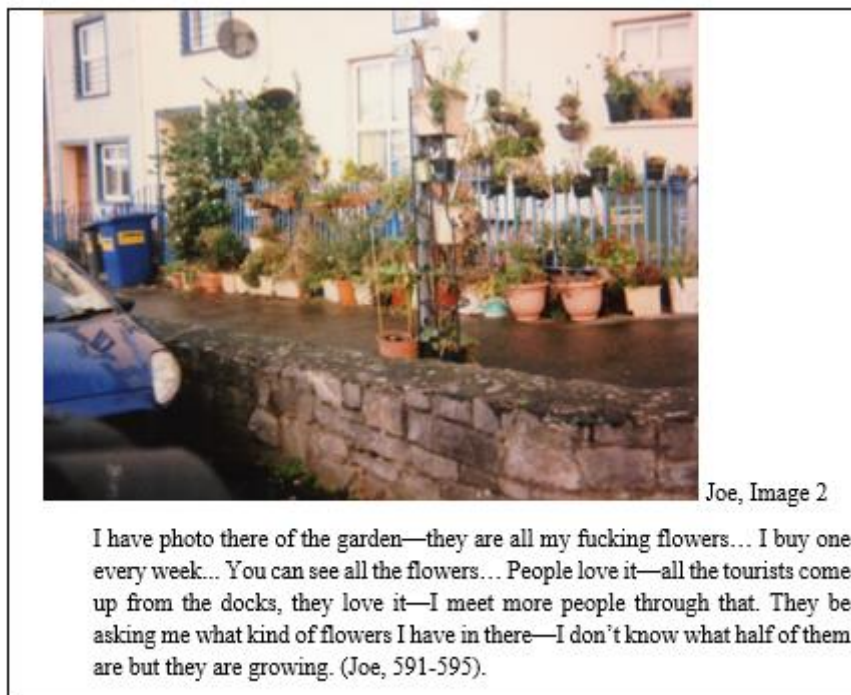
418 Occupations, for example attending classes or going to the pub, were a means to maintain and
419 develop social networks. Xenophon explained how he felt connected to his next-door
420 neighbours and was actively reaching out to them by giving a gift at Christmas. Joe also
421 described his connections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

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

424 Similar to belonging, the expectations for, and the experience of connection were perceived
425 differently by individuals. Some participants valued meeting friends; others felt connected

426 through social media or engaging in activities outside of the home. Sean used his shopping as
427 a strategy to ensure he connected with others:

428 There are days you just want to do nothing and then you have to force yourself to get
429 up and go down and go out. Put it this way, if I needed three things in the shop, I
430 would leave one go because that way then I know I have to go tomorrow, you know.
431 Then you meet people in the street, you know so - you be talking away. (Sean, age 67,
432 530-533).



433

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

435

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

441 First time [college] it was not easy. Three weeks were not easy but then after that I
442 started to enjoy it like. When I went to the class everybody was just easy people to
443 communicate with, so I start to make friends like and we are friends even now.
444 (Bernice, age 42, 294-295).

445

446 At the same time, some participants continued to use services such as food centres and soup
447 runs to help makes ends meet. Food centres are a place of refuge and resource (Cloke et al.,
448 2010) and as Sandra indicated in her comment, an opportunity to be with others with similar
449 experiences:

450

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

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

457

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

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

469

470 *Hanging on – unmaking*

471 The stage *hanging on - unmaking* refers to when a tenancy is breaking down. *Hanging on*
472 captures a passive process in which the tenancy is at risk, for example due to rent arrears,
473 without feeling any sense of control over it. This includes being evicted by bailiffs or being
474 put out of more informal situations when staying with friends or family. *Unmaking* includes
475 an element of agency, in which participants took a more active role as the tenancy ended.
476 Rico asked probation services to move him from his flat as he felt unable to cope with the

477 situation in the tenancy. Other participants described flats they chose to leave, returning to
478 using homelessness services as a preferred option to the situations they were living in.

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

482 I could tell by the state of my room, my hygiene, my clothes. I just could spot the
483 signs, like you know. I had been there that many times before, you know. (Roxy, age
484 42, 638-639).

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

487

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

490

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

492

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

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

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

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

507 Tenants in situations of housing instability are unlikely to seek help until late in the process
508 (Acacia Consulting & Research, 2006) and may not know where to source help (Pleace &
509 Culhane, 2016). When reflecting their experiences, a shared opinion among the participants

510 in this study was the need to take more timely action and not to allow potential risk situations
511 to continue:

512 Accept any help that's given. Don't be proud - that's it - don't be proud. (Garfield, age
513 50, 1317-1318).

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

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

521 *Taking control over activities*

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

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

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

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

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

538 Asking for help, or being open about difficulties, were found to support taking control of a
539 tenancy. As Nguyen et al. (2012) advised in their study, factors that enhance help-seeking
540 behaviour among homeless men would be beneficial toward a successful transition out of
541 homelessness. Interestingly, Michael felt that being a user of a service removed the personal

542 responsibility for help seeking. Although he recalled that things ‘just gradually kept going
543 downhill and downhill’ (Michael, 362), he had not approached staff for help because he felt:

544

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

546

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

553

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

558 **Conclusion**

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

567 This study has given an insight into the activities people do every day and how these impact
568 on the process of tenancy sustainment. Each of the identified strategies to support the making
569 of a home - *putting your stamp on it, seeing a new self* and *living the life* - were achieved by,
570 and reflected in, the performance of everyday activities. In particular, we draw attention to
571 the importance of personalising the tenancy through activities such as decorating, displaying
572 personal possessions and carrying out everyday occupations, including the preparation of
573 food, watching television and having people to visit. Participation in activities that are part of

574 day-to-day life – the often ‘seen but unnoticed’ everyday occupations - have potential to
575 support individuals to feel at home and gain a sense of belonging to their communities.

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

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

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

599 Drawing these ideas together, we argue that individualised support is needed to help establish
600 occupations that will maintain tenancies. This should not prescribe what occupations are
601 deemed beneficial or harmful but, rather, work with individuals to recognise what works for
602 them. The importance of empowering tenants to develop a sense of control over their doing
603 of activities is an often neglected component of tenancy sustainment. Therefore as people
604 transition through homelessness, it is important for services to critically reflect on the
605 practical opportunities and choices available for individuals to engage in personally

606 meaningful activities, which would enable people develop a sense of mastery through doing.
607 Consideration should also be given to the social and structural circumstances of an individual
608 as well as recognising when, and how, to intervene.

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

616

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620

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623

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