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ABSTRACT

Living in temporary accommodation (TA) can impact negatively on social and emotional well-being, particularly where it is poor-quality, large-scale, or congregate in nature. None-the-less, the 'avoidance' of TA, where an individual will sleep rough or squat when a bed space is available for their use, often provokes puzzlement on the part of the public, service providers and policy makers. Homeless people who abandon or avoid TA are often viewed as holding beliefs, characteristics or traits that render them unable or unwilling to make choices which prioritise their own well-being. Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory, and qualitative testimony from those with direct experience of TA in Belfast, this article challenges these perspectives, arguing that the avoidance of TA is better understood as a rational and reasoned response to an environment where intolerable levels of stress often pertain and individual control over stressors is extremely limited.

Introduction

Evidence has consistently demonstrated that living in temporary accommodation (TA) can impact negatively on social and emotional well-being (Boyle and Pleace, 2017; Credland, 2004; Mitchell *et al.*, 2004; Watts *et al.*, 2018). Where TA is of good-quality, self-contained and close to established support networks, these impacts may be lessened; however, the sense of temporal instability associated with TA may continue to have a negative effect on well-being, irrespective of TA quality or type (Boyle and Pleace, 2017; Credland, 2004; Ellison *et al.*, 2012; Mitchell *et al.*, 2004; Watts *et al.*, 2018). That said, it is widely accepted that negative impacts are felt most acutely where the form of TA is poor-quality, large-scale, or congregate in nature (Boyle and Pleace, 2017; Bush-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Credland, 2004; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2010; Mackie *et al.*, 2017; Mitchell *et al.*, 2004; Watts *et al.*, 2018).

Hostel and shelter accommodation, in particular, can exacerbate the impacts of homelessness and may, in fact, function as an organisational barrier to permanent housing, rather than its intended purpose of facilitating exit from homelessness (Bush-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Grunberg and Eagle, 1990; Johnsen and Teixeira, 2010; Mackie *et al.*, 2017). In this context, the development of smaller-scale or self-contained TA is often viewed as an improvement in provision (Bush-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007). However, such accommodation is frequently set within a transitionary continuum where access is determined by 'housing readiness' (Mackie *et al.*, 2017; Sahlin, 2005; Stewart, 2019). The 'treatment first' philosophy which underpins such provision, emphasises stability or recovery as a prerequisite of movement toward independent living (Bush-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Ellison *et al.*, 2012; Johnsen and Teixeira, 2010; Mackie *et al.*, 2017; Stewart, 2019). Available evidence indicates that the staircasing of services around a transitionary pathway can function to divide the homeless population into two distinct groups: those who can evidence change and progression and those with more complex needs who become entrenched within, or excluded from, the transitionary pathway (Benjaminsen, 2016; Johnsen and Teixeira, 2010; JRF, 2016; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Mackie *et al.*, 2017).

In contrast, there is a robust body of evidence which supports the efficacy of Housing First and housing-led approaches to homelessness, where the rapid provision of permanent housing coupled with access to flexible support, bypasses or significantly reduces the need for TA in the first instance (Boyle *et al.*, 2016; Johnsen, 2013; Padgett *et al.*, 2016). Despite this evidence, public opinion (particularly in response to observable increases in homelessness) will often sway toward the expansion of hostel and shelter accommodation, including the opening of vacant buildings for congregate use by those rough sleeping (O'Neil *et al.*, 2017). This phenomenon is especially evident in public responses to street deaths, perhaps unsurprisingly so given the highly visible and urgent need for shelter of those affected (Bush-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007). The phenomenon of *avoidance*, that is, where an individual will sleep rough or squat when a bed space is available for their use, complicates the simplicity of these narratives, particularly in light of a growing consensus that some users view hostel accommodation as a frightening and intimidating environment (Homeless Link, 2013; Johnsen and Teixeira, 2010; Mackie *et al.*, 2017; NIHE *et al.*, 2016).

Attempts to account for the phenomenon of avoidance tend to lean toward one of two broad categories: namely, individual or environmental explanations. Individual explanations focus on the personal characteristics and behaviour of those who abandon or refuse accommodation, often emphasising the centrality of individual pathology or complexity of need (see, for example, Homeless Link, 2018). Environmentally oriented accounts, on the other hand, locate the causes of abandonment in broader structural factors, placing a particular focus on the unsuitability/ negative impact of available accommodation and barriers to wider health and social care services (see, for example, Mayday Trust, 2018). More recently, the concept of Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) has brought together knowledge of individual factors (such as adverse childhood experiences and complex trauma) and environmental factors, placing considerable emphasis on awareness of how one may interact with the other (Breedvelt, 2016; FEANTSA, 2017; Keats *et al.*, 2012). While

such approaches seek to actively avoid or counter the direct blaming of difficulties on the individual, they often continue to see hostel accommodation (albeit modified) as an appropriate site 'to focus in depth on the emotional needs, and capacities, of homeless people' (Johnson, 2010, p. 48). This has given rise to the (re)development of hostels with the specific purpose of addressing the systemic exclusionary practices of 'other' hostels (Homeless Link, 2018). Access to such services often requires evidence of repeat placement breakdown: that is, service users progress through the process of placement and exclusion before obtaining access to those services that are suited (at least in theory) to their needs (Homeless Link, 2018). In attempts to explain the continued occurrence of abandonment within these specialist services, we see a degree of leaning back toward individual pathologies: in a recent report, for example, Homeless Link (2018) argue that '[abandonment] generally occurred most often in the high support hostels, which can to some extent be attributed to the chaotic lives of some of the residents' (p. 22).

Drawing on understandings of stress developed in psychological research and theory, I aim to demonstrate that homeless people's avoidance and abandonment of hostels and similar accommodation represents a rational and reasoned response to unmanageable stress and threats. It is structured as follows. First, a model of stress is outlined through a consideration of cognitive appraisal theory—with a particular focus on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) seminal study, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*—before the methods used to generate the empirical data in the paper are described. The paper then proceeds to apply the model of stress to experiences of hostel and shelter accommodation use as articulated by participants in this research. In the concluding discussion I argue that abandonment and avoidance is, firstly, informed by a desire to assume control of outcomes and to do so in a way that promotes well-being, albeit in a very immediate sense and, secondly, reflective of the very limited control that homeless people have over the stressors and threats that often pertain in this environment.

The conceptual framework

Participants in the study that informs this paper consistently reported experiences of stress in the hostel environment and the adoption of various coping strategies as a means of mastering, tolerating or reducing its psychological impacts. Stress has significant implications for human wellbeing, in the direct sense of occasioning *physiological* alterations in the body (see, for example, Tawakol *et al.*, 2017) and in the indirect or *psychosocial* sense of influencing cognition and social interaction (see, for example, Paulmann *et al.*, 2016; see also, DeSteno *et al.*, 2013 for an overview of direct and indirect emotion-related effects). This article is largely structured around an exploration of the latter, arguing that cognitive appraisal theory allows for an understanding of the *psychosocial* effects of stress on decision making strategies, coping behaviours and the building of social supports (see Moors, 2014 for an overview of cognitive appraisal theory).

Cognitive appraisal theorists are divided with respect to whether distinct states (such as stress) should be held as the principle phenomena to be explained (see, for example,

DeSteno *et al.*, 2013 and Reisenzein, 2019); or whether (sub)emotional components should be the primary object of study, with the labelling of distinct states being of lesser or secondary concern (see, for example, Scherer, 2009 and Scherer and Moors, 2019). The analysis presented here purposefully seeks to tread a middle course, suggesting that the exploration of stress (as a discrete state) yields important insights into the causal mechanisms of abandonment and avoidance, while also insisting that such exploration demands particular regard for the emergent nature of stress and, thus, its (sub)emotional components and the process of interaction between the same.

This is possible, I would argue, where stress is conceptualised as being 'contextual' meaning that it is determined by the interaction of components at the level of the person *and* the environment (DeSteno *et al.*, 2013; Folkman, 2010, p. 901; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Moors, 2014); and, as 'a process', meaning that it is dynamic and emergent in nature, changing across environments and over time (DeSteno *et al.*, 2013; Folkman, 2010, p. 901; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Moors, 2014; Scherer and Moors, 2019). This conceptualisation allows for an analysis of the process by which multiple components (both internal and external) interact to produce the (emergent) experience of stress and associated phenomenon of avoidance for a given individual, in a given environment, at a particular point in time (Bhaskar, 2008; Fitzpatrick 2005; Sayer 1992).

Although certain components—such as expectancy, goal relevance and control— are proposed with notable frequency (see Moors, 2014 and Reizenstein, 2019), the precise form of the individual components involved in the generation of stress, and the nature of the construal process by which they are appraised as stressful by the given individual, are in essence 'working hypotheses … open to empirical correction' (Moors 2014, p. 304). It is in this spirit, that I utilise the work of psychologists Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman (see Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) conception of stress, Lazarus' (1999) synthesis of stress and emotion, and Folkman's (2010) account of stress and coping) as an *under-labouring* framework for the exploration and analysis of experiences of stress as articulated by participants in this research.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describe the process of cognitive appraisal as occurring in two interrelated, non-linear stages: namely, primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal is concerned with the individual's evaluation of the given situation in terms of whether or not they have anything at stake in the transaction: that is, what (if anything) they stand to gain or lose. Lazarus and Folkman propose three forms of primary appraisal: irrelevant, where the individual holds no vested interest in either the transaction or the results of the transaction; benign positive, where the individual perceives the transaction as positive with no potential for negative outcomes; and, stressful, where the individual perceives a transaction as having a potentially negative result or an outcome detrimental to well-being.

Secondary appraisal refers to the further evaluation of demands considered stressful, with three forms again being proposed, namely: a challenge appraisal, where a transaction is evaluated as holding potential for mastery or gain; a threat appraisal, where a transaction prompts anticipation of future loss or harm; and a harm/loss appraisal, where material, physical or emotional harm or loss has already been

endured in the transaction (for a summary of evidence on the differing influence of threat versus challenge appraisals, see Scherer and Moors, 2019).

Both primary and secondary appraisals are influenced by the extent to which the individual perceives their inner and outer resources as enabling effective coping: with coping being defined as behavioural efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the stressful demand (see DeSteno *et al.*, 2013 for an account of emotion regulation and coping). Lazarus and Folkman categorise the components influencing appraisal (and by extension the adoption of coping strategies) under two broad headings: namely, situation-level components and person-level components. Situation components may be understood as the 'properties of situations that make them potentially harmful, dangerous, threatening, or for that matter challenging' (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 82). Person-level components refer to the individual's understanding of the given event and the characteristics that determine what holds importance for them in a given encounter. I especially draw on Lazarus and Folkman's exploration of predictability and uncertainty (as situation-level components), and commitments and general beliefs about control (as person-level components).

Methods

In applying Lazarus and Folkman's framework to the phenomenon of avoidance, this article draws upon qualitative data from a research study on temporary accommodation and chronic homelessness in Belfast, Northern Ireland (McMordie, 2018). The study sought to explore the experience of a sub-group within the Belfast homeless population—often with more complex needs—whose housing history is marked by cyclical temporary accommodation placements, episodes of rough sleeping and various forms of institutional stay. The existence of this group is well evidenced in the Northern Ireland homelessness literature (Boyle and Pleace, 2017; Boyle *et al.*, 2016; Ellison *et al.*, 2012; NIHE, 2005, 2017; NIHE *et al.*, 2016), across the United Kingdom (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012), Europe (Benjaminsen, 2016) and the United States (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). As such, the findings of this study, although explicated through the lived experience of people in Belfast, are intended to have wider applicability.

Participants in the study were selected purposively from among those with a history of repeat homelessness, serial temporary accommodation placement and episodes of rough sleeping. Recruitment was facilitated by an organisation which provides support to individuals who are resident in temporary accommodation, sleeping rough, or living in settled accommodation after a prolonged period of homelessness. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to identify participants.

The study purposefully sampled a small, homogenous group, with eight participants in total, all of whom were adult males. The intended purpose of the study was not to establish the frequency of avoidance or patterns of occurrence across segmented groups, but instead to uncover and understand the components at play in hostel accommodation at the level of the environment *and* the level of the individual. Of particular interest was how these components interact to produce the phenomenon of avoidance for a given individual, in a given environment. Such exploration

requires research that has particular regard for *intra*individual comparison, that is, research that seeks not to evaluate individual actions against a normative standard but, rather, to contextualise and compare *intra*individual action across time, events, environments, and actions (DeSteno *et al.*, 2013; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Wynn and Williams, 2012). This approach necessitated an in-depth focus on each participant's housing and homelessness history and, as such, the sampling strategy prioritised *depth* of exploration over the *breadth* of the sample. Given that the sample focused exclusively on the experience of male participants, the study cannot be taken to reflect the specific experience of women in temporary accommodation.

Participant interviews used a life history methodology to enable the development of a physical timeline of each participant's housing and homelessness history (for discussion of life history timelines see Freedman *et al.*, 1988; Gramling and Carr, 2004; and, Harris and Rhodes, 2018: and for discussion of biographical approaches to housing histories see May, 2000). The timeline was constructed using visual prompt-cards that listed the various temporary accommodation services in Belfast, other forms of homelessness (such as rough sleeping and sofa surfing), types of institutional stay (such as prison and hospital), and other forms of accommodation (such as private and social lets). The interview then made use of a second set of prompt-cards listing a range of experiences arising from, or contributing to, the experience of social exclusion (such as being the victim of a violent crime or having used hard drugs). The categories used in developing the experience framework were derived from the UK Multiple Exclusion Homelessness study (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012). The first occurrence of each relevant experience was then located in the homelessness timeline. This approach facilitated the development of a clear understanding of complex housing histories and allowed for in-depth representation of service user experience and perception (Bryman, 2016; Freedman *et al.*, 1988; Harris and Rhodes, 2018; May, 2000). In the process of construction, service users spoke at length about their experience of homelessness, providing an account of their housing history and its impact on their physical, social and emotional well-being. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and subsequently coded using an inductive approach.

Primary and secondary appraisal

I now move on to apply Lazarus and Folkman's concept of primary appraisal (that is, the process by which the individual evaluates what, if anything, is at stake in a given transaction) to experiences of temporary accommodation use as articulated by participants in this study. The three outcomes of primary appraisal identified by Lazarus and Folkman are: irrelevant; benign positive; and stressful.

In this study participants described access to temporary accommodation as holding relevance: they articulated a strong sense of having a vested interest (a stake) in obtaining access to shelter and support. The consequences of not attaining access were described as highly impactful in an immediate sense: often leading to episodes of rough sleeping or squatting, with an associated deterioration in physical and

mental health, increased contact with the criminal justice system, and significant experiences of victimisation and self-harm:

> I got a … bad, bad, kicking just for no reason, bottles broke on my head. (Sam)

The stake held in avoidance of rough sleeping was such that it functioned to incentivise engagement with TA services, over-and-above other disincentivising components:

> I don't like being around other people. I'd rather be on my own. But sure, if you need a bed, you need a bed, don't you? (Mark)

Yet, hostel accommodation was also (indeed simultaneously) described as occasioning harm and loss. People spoke of instances where they were exploited, victimised, or threatened by others, and articulated a more generalised experience of anxiety/unease within the hostel setting—one arising from the congregate nature of such services.

> Most of the hostels I was in … you've always been wanting to get wasted off your head because you don't like it. You don't feel settled, so you try and blank things out. (Kyle)

Indeed, participants described the experience of using hostel and shelter accommodation as one marked by stress and spoke colloquially about their head being 'done in,' about feeling 'fucked' or 'melted.' Use of hostel accommodation, then, was evaluated as neither 'irrelevant' nor 'benignly positive' but instead as 'stressful': a transaction that was necessary to obtain access to shelter yet fraught with potential for outcomes detrimental to well-being.

Lazarus and Folkman suggest that a 'stressful' appraisal may be further evaluated—through the process of secondary appraisal—as a challenge, a threat, or as having already occasioned harm or loss. Challenge appraisal (that is, where a transaction is evaluated as holding potential for mastery or gain) holds particular relevance to 'housing ready' models of temporary accommodation, where the prospect of promotion (i.e., gain) is expected to act as a motivating factor for compliance, engagement, stability and personal growth (i.e., mastery of environment and self).

Participants articulated an understanding of hostel accommodation as being premised on this very basis: that is, they sought to master the demands of hostel accommodation in the hope of gaining access to shelter in the first instance and, thereafter, of obtaining access to better forms of accommodation or an exit from homelessness entirely. That said, they often described available gains as being markedly fragile and uncertain:

> I've done that [detox] to go into [a hostel] and then [a move-on apartment] … It was all—I don't know … everything was good and all, that's why I went to … a place of my own, but it didn't work out … what happened was I ended up drinking … That was me … straight to rough sleeping. (Kyle)

Here, Kyle describes his movement toward 'gain' in terms of access to increasing levels of privacy and security ('a place of my own') as being staged, incremental and dependent upon his capacity to demonstrate stability and sobriety. In contrast, his movement toward 'loss' ('it didn't work out') was presented as sudden and complete,

with the associated impact ('straight to rough sleeping') being immediate and highly detrimental to well-being.

Alongside the fragility of potential gain, participants also described significant difficulty in attaining any sense of mastery over stressful demands. Indeed, research on the impact of hostel accommodation on well-being (such as Bush-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Ellison *et al*., 2012; Mackie *et al*., 2017; McNaughton Nicholls, 2009; Sahlin, 2005; Watts *et al*., 2018) has demonstrated that, far from enabling a sense of mastery, the rules and routines of hostel and shelter accommodation often function to curtail individual autonomy and capacity for self-determination. Here, Darren describes the difficulty he experienced in adhering to the rules of a particular hostel placement:

> You can't hand your drink in. That's a problem as well because then what are you going to do with your drink? You stash it, some other cunt finds it, they take it, then you're left with no drink. Then you're rattling [i.e. withdrawing from alcohol] the next day. (Darren)

For Darren, part of the challenge of sustaining a hostel placement rested in the intersection between alcohol dependency and rules that prohibit the storage of alcohol on premises ('you can't hand your drink in'). The available alternatives ('you stash it') present a significant risk of loss ('some cunt finds it') and associated harm ('you're rattling').

Yet, even where environmental components act to constrain control, as they do for Darren, some sense of mastery may still be attained where the individual perceives the demand as one that is tolerable, particularly where access to social supports act to mitigate against stress and enable effective coping. However, the support available to participants in this study was most often attached to accommodation services, rendering access to support conditional on successful retention of placement or precarious based on continual transfer between services. Here, James explained why he had not 'even got on the list yet' for substitute prescribing, despite having actively 'put his hands up' and requested support.

> I overdosed, and they threw me out of here … That's what I don't understand. You would think they would want to help me in here … but they asked me to leave … I was out for three weeks … Trying to keep up with [support referrals] … is hard as well, you know? Cause you move from place to place, like, you don't know where you're going to be the next day. (James)

Participant's capacity to sustain a challenge appraisal was radically diminished, first, by the ambiguous nature of what was available for gain and, then, by environmental components that enfeebled the individual's capacity for mastery over demands while simultaneously disrupting access to social supports. In response, participants described adopting a range of coping strategies. These included *covert behaviours* whereby people would hide or disguise substance use as a means of avoiding negative outcomes, particularly those associated with exclusion or eviction; or, *muting behaviours* whereby they increased substance use to sublimate symptoms of psychological distress, particularly where hostel accommodation was perceived as requiring a constant state of hypervigilance.

In describing covert and muting coping strategies, participants continued to evaluate hostel and shelter accommodation use as retaining *aspects* of a challenge appraisal, albeit one that co-existed alongside appraisals of threat, harm or loss and, as such, necessitated sublimation or circumvention of stressful demands. In contrast, where participants described the use of *avoidance strategies*—that is, where they refused or abandoned placements entirely—they appeared (at least ostensibly) to move away from an appraisal of challenge, rejecting their interest ('stake') in obtaining access to shelter and support. I will now go on to explore the role of situation-level components and person-level components in this movement away from a challenge appraisal toward avoidance of temporary accommodation.

Situation-level components: Predictability and uncertainty

Lazarus and Folkman suggest that predictable stressors may be preferable to unpredictable stressors, in that predictability allows the individual time to prepare (the preparatory response hypothesis) or relax during periods of safety (the safety signal hypothesis) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; see also, Matthieu and Ivanoff, 2006). Both concepts hold relevance to hostel and shelter accommodation where services are often premised on the provision of shelter and support: i.e., a safe space where people may engage, at some level, in preparatory activities for move-on. Yet, there was a consensus among participants in this study, that accessing and retaining temporary accommodation was marked by an *absence* of the kind of predictability that might allow for such preparatory undertakings. Here, Joe provides an overview of the accommodation he accessed over approximately one and a half years:

> This [hostel 1] was like a year or so … sometimes they would throw me out for a bit and then I'd have to go to the night shelter. But then, the night shelter doesn't let me in … So, I sleep out … [Then] the police brought me in there [hostel 2]. They didn't want me to freeze to death … They asked me to stay but then they said to me, with my mental health … they can't. So, they asked me to leave … [Then] I was in [hostel 3]. I was only there for about three days … [Then] they put me there [hostel 4] for one night. But they said to me, I'm drinking too much and … 'you're not allowed to stay.' (Joe)

Joe describes access to shelter (and security of tenure where access is gained) as being fraught with instability. Even in his most consistent placement (hostel 1), access was sporadic and interspersed with periods of precarious night shelter use and rough sleeping. Recalling a single instance where access was gained and (for a period) sustained, the experience was described as inextricably linked to loss of positive predictability, with established expectancies regarding personal safety and care suddenly no longer met:

> I loved it. They didn't care [about my ethnicity] and they looked after me. They checked on me every hour … I got a lot more help. I went into town to pick up my money. I came back a few hours later and [they] wouldn't let me in. [They] said, 'you don't live here anymore.' And I said, 'what do you mean, I don't live here anymore.' [They responded], 'A van came and picked all your stuff up out of the room.' The whole place cleared out. (Joe)

Whether viewed from the perspective of a preparatory response or a safety signal hypothesis, the absence of predictability within the hostel and shelter setting, was perceived as severely inhibiting capacity to either institute preparatory coping strategies or to relax during periods of purported safety. On the contrary, hostel accommodation was most often described as giving rise to a profound and continuous sense of unpredictability:

> [It's] the atmosphere in them for a start … you're always waiting on somebody calling you, or somebody moving in who you've argued with … You're always on edge, you're always, constantly, on guard. (Kyle)

Yet, where participants provide an *overview* of their experience of chronic homelessness, there was a consistency in outcomes that allowed for some form of predictability. That is, the experience of chronic homelessness was one of consistent transition between various services and forms of acute homelessness, and as such subjective or lived experience was described as negatively and unbearably predictable.

> I'm exhausted. I'm fucked. I'm burnt out. I am. Still sleeping rough. It always stays the same. It does. (Mark)

> Rough sleeping. That's all I've ever known. That's all I've ever had. I've never had a year that I haven't slept rough. (Kyle)

Although participants often expressed confidence in predicting the outcome of a given placement (namely, harm or loss) they articulated deep reservations about their capacity or ability to exercise control over predicted outcomes.

> They put me in a hostel. A hostel I don't want to be in … I hate it. I'd rather stay on the streets but I can't with my [health condition]. I'm paying [money] for a bed I can't sleep on, a mattress that's broken … There's another three people [in my room]. There's stuff going missing all the time, and they [hostel staff] do fuck all about it, they don't care … Here, I've no privacy. I've nothing. (Joe)

Here, Joe perceives his current placement as one that he has been 'put in' contrary to his wishes ('I don't want to be here'). In this context, his preferred coping strategy would ordinarily be avoidance ('I'd rather stay on the streets'), but he feels compelled toward engagement on account of a health condition. His endeavours to tolerate the stressful demands of hostel living are premised on a challenge appraisal: the prospect of gain in the form of sustaining shelter and avoiding further deterioration in physical health. Crucially, his appraisal of challenge must be sustained alongside concurrent and pressing threat and harm: 'no privacy,' 'a bed I can't sleep on,' and 'stuff going missing'. The mastery or reduction of threat, harm or loss through the mobilisation of coping strategies aimed at altering the environment are perceived as being of very limited utility ('they do fuck all about it, they don't care'). Even where repeat use of temporary accommodation produces negative outcomes with a degree of consistency that allows for predictability, Joe lacks access to the forms of control that might allow for effective coping: sustaining a challenge appraisal is based entirely on his capacity to endure threat, harm, and loss.

In the context of such enduring threat, Lazarus and Folkman's concept of event uncertainty holds particular relevance. They use event uncertainty to refer to

probabilistic evaluations regarding the *likelihood* that a harmful event will occur. Conditions of 'maximum uncertainty' are proposed as 'maximumly stressful' in that the individual must engage in preparatory coping for two different outcomes: that is, both the occurrence *and* non-occurrence of the harmful event (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 92). In temporary accommodation, where provision is often marked by insecurity of tenure (i.e., residents may be subject to temporary exclusion or eviction without court action), probabilistic evaluations emerge as both important and necessary.

Institutional control of access (i.e., where staff control resident and visitor entry to premises) was described as weaving insecurity of tenure into the comings and goings of everyday life. Here, Darren explains:

> [Access] depends on who's on … and how much [alcohol] you've had. If you're kind of compos mentis and you get an all right one that's on … they'll go 'away you on in.' You have other [staff] that'll be, 'no, have you been drinking?' 'Aye, and what, you know I'm a fucking alcoholic.' And then: 'you're not getting in, come back later.' (Darren)

The act of seeking entry to accommodation was perceived as demanding significant preparatory coping, including the capacity to understand and negotiate access criteria that were subjectively applied and thus continuously shifting. Where access to emergency night shelter accommodation was sought, this uncertainty was compounded by the arduous nature of having to endure exposure to adverse weather conditions:

> [Access is granted] depending on who's on, or what's said, or how many people there are … You're standing outside in the pishing rain, you know, hail, fucking everything. (Darren)

For Darren, preparing for one outcome (access) while simultaneously preparing for another outcome (refusal of access), created feelings of confusion and helplessness that he sought to resolve through the abandonment of attempted access:

> That's why I changed it. I was just like, look; I'll tell you what it is … I'll not be in … (Darren)

Others described attempts to reconcile themselves to the probability of failure:

> I come [to the night shelter] quite late. But if I don't get in, I don't get in. I just sleep rough. I'm used to it … but it's taking its toll on me … My head's done in … I haven't got sleeping for three days. (Mark)

In splitting individual resources between preparation for competing and often incompatible outcomes, the mechanisms of day-to-day access were described as shifting the balance of appraisal from one of challenge, to one of threat, harm or loss. Crucially, where participants attempted to occupy a position outside the arena of competing outcomes, they were exposed to equal or greater harm in the form of rough sleeping.

Person-level components: commitments and beliefs

Lazarus and Folkman's framework also steers attention to person-level components as important determinants of appraisal. This section first explores the role of individual commitments: that is, what holds meaning or importance for the individual.

Sam described an extended period of rough sleeping and night-shelter accommodation use; an experience he defined as being characterised by feelings of 'hopelessness.' He spoke of his initial feelings of appreciation and contentment upon gaining access to a hostel. Securing accommodation represented the achievement of a long-held and important goal. He continued:

> Then when I found out where I was and what's around me, I was in for a week, had to get out of there … The people are there for things they've done, sexual abuses, and what happened in my family, around me, affected me big time … I couldn't have stayed there, rather the streets … in case there was one of them people next to me … there was always a lot of aggression in me but it was also, I was in control of myself, I wasn't going to attack one of them or anything like that. (Sam)

Here, Sam gave primacy to his commitment to avoiding circumstances that replicated or evoked earlier childhood trauma and did so without equivocation. He described how the interplay between environmental components ('what's around me') and person components ('what happened in my family') gave rise to intolerable levels of psychological distress. Sam's description made clear that the level of threat posed could not be managed or tolerated through emotion-focused coping: the person factor (the trauma of adverse childhood experiences) could not be reframed or altered within the given environment (proximity to people who have sexually abused others). His means of coping was emphatically problem focused: he altered his relationship with the environment by abandoning his placement ('had to get out of there').

Mark also described giving primacy to avoiding replication of circumstances that evoked earlier experiences of trauma. Describing his experience of victimisation as a result of a paramilitary attack, he explained:

> They beat me when I was [an adolescent], so they did … Blood squirting up the walls and all. I thought I was dead and all. Scary isn't it? … They [hostels] work for some people, I would say. For me? No. Because people go into the hostels and they want to get stability or whatever. Then they see I'm not coping and that there. I don't like being around too many other people. That cracks me up. I can't do it … If I squat, nobody knows. Nobody sees me. I feel safer squatting. (Mark)

Here, Mark described the impact of a highly significant person factor (the trauma of physical assault) in light of an environment factor (being around other people in a hostel or shelter setting). He evaluated the risk posed by the interplay of these components as intolerable ('I can't do it'). Like Sam, he concluded that problem-focused coping—where action taken in the form of avoidance altered the relationship he had with the environment ('I feel safer squatting')—was the most salient and appropriate coping strategy. Taken in conjunction with additional environment components—the need to evidence progress ('they want to get stability') and feelings of exposure to judgement ('they see I'm not coping')—Sam evaluated hostel and shelter accommodation as being fundamentally incompatible with his commitment to the avoidance of further trauma.

Mark's appraisal that squatting was his safest option was an appraisal that occurred in the context of a specific environment (the hostel or shelter) and bore little resemblance to his stated or overall preference. Here, he explained:

> All I know is, I just want a quiet life. That's all I want. I just want to be settled down and relax. Go out and do what you have to do, come back … that's all I ever want. I'm exhausted. I'm fucked. I'm burnt out. I am. Still sleeping rough. It always stays the same. It does. (Mark)

What Mark aspired to was settled housing. His evaluation of risk and his use of avoidance was not presented as fixed or immutable, but instead as a situational response generated by the interplay of person and environment components. Likewise, Sam's utilisation of problem focused-coping in the hostel environment differed markedly from his evaluation of what would assist him to achieve a greater sense of well-being: 'counselling is the big thing,' he explained, 'definitely, counselling is one [of the] main things.' What Sam aspired to was emotion-focused coping, a means of altering or understanding the inner meaning of the trauma he had experienced. He was prevented from doing so, not as a result of a belief that the impact of trauma was fixed but, rather, by the urgency lent to key person components within the given environment.

In adopting avoidance strategies, Sam and Mark's decisions were influenced by their beliefs about control in the hostel and shelter environment. If we return to Sam and his decision to abandon a much sought-after placement, we can see how proximity to particular others produced emotion (aggression), with the coping strategy deployed (abandonment) enabling a sense of control (over himself). Control in this sense was primarily related to the avoidance of a specific outcome ('I wasn't going to attack one of them'). So too for Mark, where proximity to general others produced emotion (fear), with the coping strategy deployed (avoidance) enabling a sense of control ('no one knows, no one sees me') and the prevention of a specific outcome ('that cracks me up' i.e. causes severe mental distress). Both were unequivocal in their assertion that they were unable to assert control over outcomes within the hostel environment: Sam 'had to get out of there' and Mark 'can't do it.'

Abandonment and avoidance are often interpreted as markers of disengagement with services that might facilitate stability, progress, personal growth or other similarly positive outcomes. In this figuring of the phenomenon, people who abandon or avoid hostel placements are often perceived as holding fixed beliefs, characteristics or traits that render them unable or unwilling to make choices which would improve their own well-being. Yet, what we see in Sam and Mark's account, is the figuring of abandonment and avoidance as, firstly, an active and considered choice and, secondly, as a choice which is informed by a desire to assume control of outcomes, and to do so in a way that promotes well-being, albeit in a very immediate sense. Avoidance and abandonment, then, are a reflection of the extent to which Sam and Mark perceived the environment (the hostel) as one that precluded control over outcomes and not, as might be assumed, a general dispensation toward disengagement

Discussion: implications of a transactional understanding of avoidance strategies

When we conclude that avoidance and abandonment of shelter are indicative of ineffective coping, we often do so on the basis of an interindividual comparison: that is, the act of avoidance is evaluated against a normative or ideal standard of functioning (DeSteno *et al.*, 2013; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Parsell, 2018). However, where the environment in which the individual functions is one that poses extraordinary or unusual challenges, interindividual comparison is of limited (if any) utility: the person who abandons hostel accommodation may be assumed to be coping chaotically or ineffectively when in fact their actions are rational in the context of demands arising in the hostel environment (DeSteno *et al.*, 2013; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; McNaughton Nicholls, 2009; Somerville and Bengtsson, 2002). This is particularly relevant in the context of temporary accommodation in Belfast where participants often had limited access to, and control over, the external resources which might allow for the mobilisation of effective coping strategies. Many of the stressors they described stem from practices that are deeply embedded in traditional responses to homelessness. These practices exert a profound influence on their lives and, yet, are often unresponsive to their individual coping efforts: poor outcomes (such as avoidance and abandonment) are interpreted as evidence of individual failure or inability to cope, without considering the onerous demands of the environment in which the individual is enmeshed. In this way, the failings of homelessness service systems are actively displaced onto the individuals those systems purport to serve (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Parsell, 2018).

Cognitive appraisal theory offers housing studies a framework for nuanced exploration of what *exactly* it is about hostel accommodation that causes people to act and react as they do. In turn, increased knowledge of the nature and form of the components (and associated interactions) that actualise particular outcomes, for particular people, allows for clearer identification of the challenges that impede the delivery of effective solutions to homelessness. I would contend that addressing these challenges demands purposeful intervention by service providers and policy makers; not further adaptive coping on the part of the individual. Existing evidence would suggest that solutions to chronic homelessness are achievable, particularly where provision is offered in the form of Housing First and housing-led accommodation models (Boyle *et al.*, 2016; Johnsen, 2013; Padgett *et al.*, 2016). The experience of the participants in this research suggests that an approach to homelessness service provision that fully recognises the role of environmental stressors in abandonment and avoidance of hostel accommodation, demands a radical reconsideration of the physical and service environment within which services are offered.

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Notes on contributor

Lynne McMordie has worked in the homeless sector in Northern Ireland for over ten years and has managed a range of homelessness services, including: temporary accommodation, drop-in centre and street outreach services. She has worked extensively with marginalised adults, particularly in the areas of destitution, complex needs and multiple exclusion. More recently, Lynne has commenced a PhD with I-SPHERE at Heriot-Watt University, on the design, use, and impacts of temporary and supported accommodation models for homeless households in the United Kingdom.

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