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Valuing Control over One's Immediate Living Environment: How Homelessness Responses Corrode Capabilities

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ABSTRACT

Informed by the capabilities approach, this paper considers the importance of control over one's environment for people experiencing homelessness. Drawing on a study of temporary accommodation in Scotland, we make four arguments. First, control over one's *immediate living environment* has been insufficiently recognized as a foundational component of a minimally decent life within the capabilities literature. Second, such control is compromised, sometimes severely, in *temporary accommodation* provided for homeless households, with these impacts especially acute in congregate accommodation. Third, lacking control over one's immediate environment can be understood as a *corrosive disadvantage* that actively damages people's bodily and mental health and affiliation-related capabilities. Fourth, both *intrinsic* and *contingent* features of different kinds of temporary accommodation are implicated in constraining people's control over their environment. This distinction enables us to identify changes to existing provision that can mitigate their negative impacts, and to clarify where accommodation models are inherently problematic.

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Introduction

Globally, understandings of “what works” in responding to homelessness are at a critical moment. While traditional responses requiring people to navigate transitional and often congregate forms of accommodation, like hostels, still dominate (Mackie, Johnsen, and Wood 2017), there is a growing recognition that preventative and rapid-rehousing approaches are more effective in resolving homelessness and minimizing its ill effects (Culhane, Metraux, and Byrne 2011; Clarke, Watts, and Parsell 2020). Key here has been a fast-growing body of evidence on the Housing First model (Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn 2016), as well as the array of research detailing the negative experiences associated with hostels and other forms of congregate accommodation (Mackie, Johnsen, and Wood 2017). Informed by the capabilities approach, this article considers *what it is* about the kinds of temporary living situation faced by people experiencing homelessness that enables or constrains their ability to live “a dignified and minimally flourishing life” (Nussbaum 2011, 33), focusing in particular on the importance of people's control over their environment.

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The empirical focus is on Scotland, where virtually all households experiencing or at imminent risk of homelessness are entitled to settled rehousing via their local authority. While people's legal entitlements are being assessed, and while those owed the "full rehousing duty" await settled housing, applicants are entitled to temporary accommodation. Over 20,000 households reside in such accommodation each year (Watts et al. 2018). Temporary accommodation thus represents a central pillar of this internationally lauded response to homelessness (Fitzpatrick and Pawson 2016). While self-contained social housing (known as "temporary furnished flats") is the most commonly used form of temporary accommodation according to snap shot data (61% of households in temporary accommodation at March 2020), half of temporary accommodation placements in 2019/20 were in congregate settings, either hostels (27% of placements) or Bed and Breakfast hotels (B&Bs) (22% of placements in 2019/20) (Scottish Government 2020b). While almost all families are accommodated in temporary furnished flats, single people are more likely – especially in higher pressure areas – to be placed in hostels or B&Bs (Watts et al. 2018).

Historically high levels of temporary accommodation use in the last decade (Fitzpatrick et al. 2019) have precipitated a concerted recent effort to improve standards and move towards a rapid rehousing response. Legal reforms have been introduced restricting local authorities' ability to use B&Bs for anything more than a very short period (Scottish Government 2020a). While no such restrictions have been instituted in relation to hostel accommodation, rapid rehousing approaches now being implemented are intended to reduce their use given acute and longstanding concerns about negative experiences within them (Mackie, Johnsen, and Wood 2017). While temporary flats are considered a less problematic form of provision, placements can be for long durations (up to several years) (Watts et al. 2018), and less evidence is available regarding people's experiences within them.

Using these three examples of temporary living situations, we explore the relationship between control over one's environment and people's ability to lead a well lived life. We do so using tools provided by the capabilities approach, arguing that while control over one's environment has been recognized as important by capabilities theorists (most notably, Nussbaum 2011), control over one's *immediate living environment* remains underappreciated as a core facet of such control, something that may reflect the dominant methodologies deployed to construct "central capabilities" lists. In taking the capabilities approach as the primary jumping off point,¹ we contribute to the nascent tradition of normative housing scholarship that grapples explicitly with questions of what housing and home *should* be like given our understandings of human flourishing (Taylor 2018; Foye 2020; Kimhur 2020). In doing so, we seek to both complement – and go beyond – the extensive work of social theorists documenting the complex (and sometimes contradictory) "meanings of home" from a non-normative perspective (Easthope 2004; Mallett 2004). This normative approach is in our view essential for housing scholars wishing to contribute to policy debates given their inherent normativity (Wolff 2011), that is, their concern with what constitutes a good society from a housing perspective, and who should get what and why in relation to housing. Moral and political philosophy, including but not limited to the capabilities approach, are thus a crucial and yet relatively untapped resource for housing scholars (Watts and Fitzpatrick 2020).

Following our engagement with the capabilities approach, we provide an account of the study's methods, before deploying qualitative data to show how control over one's

immediate living environment is curtailed, sometimes severely, by both intrinsic and contingent features of temporary accommodation, including in particular the rules and routines in place in congregate forms of accommodation. Influenced by Wolff and De-Shalit's (2007) suggestion that particular capabilities can be "fertile" or "corrosive" of others, we demonstrate that this form of capability-deprivation (a lack of control over one's immediate environment) can corrode a range of other important capabilities. Taking our cue from the most obvious and significant corrosive impacts revealed by our empirical data, we focus on the corrosive impacts of lack of control on people's health- and affiliation-related capabilities. In the concluding section, we distil the implications of these arguments for housing scholarship and responses to homelessness.

Capability Theory and Control over One's Environment

The capabilities approach is increasingly recognized as a valuable lens through which to explore and illuminate the value of home, and the negative impacts of various forms of housing deprivation on people's lives (Kimhur 2020; Foye 2020). It is a theoretical paradigm that focuses on what people are able to do and be – the real opportunities available to them – as the appropriate way of thinking about social justice (Sen 1992; Nussbaum 2011). Its foundations' lie in Amartya Sen's work seeking to answer the dual questions "why might equality be an important social goal?" and – if it is – "equality of what"? Sen argues that the answer is not *resources* (what people have), nor *utility* (how they feel), but rather *capabilities* – what people are able to be and do (Sen 1992). More specifically, "capabilities" refer to people's ability to be and do things that they have reason to value, with this distinction between capabilities – the ability to be or do something – and functionings – the being or doing of it, core to the overall approach.

The value of autonomy, choice and control are thus baked-in to the capabilities approach via this foundational distinction between capabilities and functionings. Their importance is further recognized by their presence in various forms in a range of lists of "central capabilities" (Nussbaum 2011, 32) or key "dimensions of human fulfilment" (Alkire 2002, 59). A more localized form of autonomy – *control over one's environment* – features in the most well-known codified list of central capabilities (Nussbaum 2011) alongside nine others: life, bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play. This philosophically-derived list seeks to capture "areas of freedom so central that their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity" (31). Nussbaum distinguishes between the political and material aspects of the control over one's environment capability. In political terms, it requires:

Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association (34)

Materially, it requires:

Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition within other works (Nussbaum 2011).

Nussbaum's specification of this capability therefore focuses on the societal, political and legal environment, and not on people's control over their *immediate living environment*. The importance of one's immediate living environment is perhaps implicit to some degree in Nussbaum's identification of having "adequate shelter" (Nussbaum 2011) as a component of the bodily health capability, but this is an extraordinarily thin conception of such control that does not capture people's concern with housing and home (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007).

Though Nussbaum describes her list as "open ended and subject to ongoing revision and rethinking" (2011, 108), it has been criticized as procedurally problematic and acontextual (Robeyns 2003; Sen 2005) given its primarily philosophical derivation. Deliberatively- or empirically-informed capabilities lists, however, have also highlighted the importance of various kinds of control over one's environment. Burchardt and Vizard (2011), for example, operationalize the capabilities approach via a dialogue between core international human rights treaties and a deliberative consultation exercise, involving the general public as well as specific groups at risk of discrimination and disadvantage in the UK, including ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. The resulting framework identifies ten substantive capability domains, including "life", "health", "individual, family and social life" and "participation, influence and voice". The capability to enjoy a comfortable standard of living is also included, with specific emphasis given to "choice and control over *where and how you live*" (117, emphasis added). Burchardt and Vizard's phrasing here points to a distinction between different types of control over one's immediate environment that may be important: over *where* one lives and *how* one is able to live within that environment.

The importance of control over one's immediate environment to people's lives might be seen as an implicit assumption of much housing scholarship, including the meaning of home literature (Easthope 2004), and has been recognized explicitly by some scholars (see Nicholls 2010; Parsell 2012; Batterham 2019). Political philosopher Nine (2018) articulates the point especially well in her analysis of displacement, arguing that home can (and should) be:

A trustworthy, reliable space, where inhabitants control objects and their arrangements ... feel that the place is their own ... understand and identify with the rules and norms governing the space, and ... see themselves reflected in the home's material goods and organization (Nine 2018, 6–7).

Crucially, the home can also be modified by those that reside in it "to foster belief formation, memory retention, shared values, and to encourage certain choices and practices" (Nine 2018, 5). Here, Nine argues that control over one's immediate living environment is fundamental to achieving a wide range of other capabilities, not just important *alongside* them (as per Nicholls 2010; Batterham 2019). Inspired by Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) then, we argue that lacking control over one's immediate environment is a "corrosive disadvantage" (133) that inhibits the attainment of other capabilities in various ways. The next section details the methods utilized to test these arguments in relation to the experiences of those facing homelessness.

Data and Methods

We draw on data from a 2018 study on the purpose, use and impacts of temporary accommodation provision in Scotland. The study combined analysis of official statistics, national key informant interviews with sector experts ($n = 16$) and in-depth case studies in six local areas² purposively sampled to capture contextual variation in relation to urbanity/rurality, rates of homelessness, and numbers in temporary accommodation. Each case study involved local informant interviews (total $n = 42$) and interviews and focus groups involving people with direct experience of living in temporary accommodation (total $n = 52$).

People with direct experience (the focus in this article) were contacted via accommodation and support providers, and opt-in mailouts sent to a subsample of those in temporary accommodation via the local authority. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure a spread of experience across the three main temporary accommodation types, with efforts also made to ensure reasonable diversity in relation to key demographic criteria (primarily age and gender). Overall, 16 participants were currently or had recently stayed in “temporary furnished flats”, 34 in hostels, and 13 in B&Bs. Participants had often stayed in multiple kinds of temporary accommodation, with especially strong overlap in those who had experienced hostels and B&Bs.

Participants were provided with written and verbal information about the study and the confidential nature of their contribution, and given the opportunity to ask questions, before proceeding. Participants were asked to complete and sign a consent form confirming their willingness to take part and be recorded. All received a £15 high street voucher to thank them for their time. Researchers used a semi-structured topic guide to explore peoples’ experiences consistently yet flexibly. Transcripts were analysed using a mix of deductively and inductively generated codes using the qualitative analysis software package NVivo. The study gained ethical approval from Heriot-Watt University Ethics Committee before the commencement of fieldwork.

We now examine experiences within the three types of temporary accommodation used in Scotland, beginning each section with a description of the intrinsic features of this kind of accommodation and the contingent dimensions on which they vary. We then consider the extent to which people’s control over their immediate environment is limited by these intrinsic and contingent features of these living situations, before assessing the impacts of these constraints on people’s wider capabilities. We focus especially on the impacts that emerged most strongly from the data, namely those on the health- and affiliation-related capabilities.

Hostels: Rule-bound Congregate Living and Support

Hostels are congregate environments in which multiple residents share living space. Access is institutionally controlled (often by a non-profit organization) and occupancy conditional on complying with various rules (e.g. concerning drug/alcohol use or visitor access), with some form of supervision or support provided on site (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin 2007). Hostels are thus intrinsically rule-bound and surveilled, primarily reflecting the need to risk-manage the communal setting for the protection of staff and residents (Homeless Link 2018). This rule-boundedness means that hostels have an inherent

tendency to limit people's control over their immediate environment. Numerous examples of such rules were given by those we spoke to:

we're not allowed anybody in our rooms, we're literally not allowed to have anybody with one foot in my door ... I find that unfair. (East Ayrshire, female)

You have to be home for a certain time, so it affects your life. (Dundee, male)

They shut the kitchen at quarter to eleven at night ... When I wake up, I want to have something to eat and the kitchen's locked. (East Ayrshire, mixed group)

Despite being intrinsically rule-bound, hostels are also inherently unpredictable and stressful environments given their congregate nature and the needs-profile of those residing in them (McMordie 2020). Their congregate nature often meant, for example, that residents could not control the noise they were exposed to, nor encounters with others:

[it] was an absolute nightmare ... Just folk banging into your doors ... strangers ... just the kind of people. (Perth and Kinross, male)

it can be quite difficult when you know you're living with other people, it's loads of other people as well. There's a lot of tension. (East Lothian, female)

These inherent characteristics of being rule-bounded and congregate mean hostels necessarily restrict people's control over their environment. Some hostels did so more than others, however, given contingent features of specific units (see Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin 2007; Homeless Link 2018). The size of people's private bedrooms and facilities within them was an important dimension, with bigger and more self-contained private space increasing people's control:

Out of the three that I've been in, this is the best one so far. It's ... calmer, more stable ... [you get] your own flat ... You can chill in your room ... It's funny, you feel more like you exist [than] in those other places ... in a small room. (Dundee, male)

Bigger units, poorer quality buildings, catered meals, and hostels accommodating residents with more complex needs all intensified the limits on people's control over their immediate environment, magnifying the inherently congregate and institutional nature of the environment.

Reflecting on these experiences in hostels, we can distinguish at least two types of control over one's immediate environment that are important to people – first their ability to *shape what that environment is like* (i.e. quiet, or free of others), and second, their ability to *do what they wish in that environment* (for example, cook when they want, socialize with friends or have quiet time alone). It is clear that restrictions on these forms of control negatively impacts people's subjective wellbeing, but our data also suggests that such restrictions may be corrosive of people's wider capabilities, in particular those relating to affiliation/relationships and health.

Nussbaum's seventh "affiliation" capability concerns people's ability to "live with and towards others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, [and] to engage in various forms of social interaction" (Nussbaum 2011, 33–34). The restrictions on people's control over their immediate environment in hostels, specifically people's ability to receive visitors, appeared to corrode (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007) people's ability

to have the kinds of relationships with others that they wished to and value (see also Neale and Brown 2016). Negative impacts included restraining people's capacity to develop and maintain friendships, but also to engage in romantic and/or sexual relationships:

I've had girlfriends since I've been homeless in the past year, and it's nothing but trouble. Nothing but bother. You just feel that you can't make time for them, and you can't get them to stay over. It's just hassle. (Dundee, male)

They also, and extremely concerningly, restricted people's ability to maintain contact with their children, even where hostel residents had shared custody:

The only thing I don't like is I've got a bairn [child] ... and I can't even get to see her because [you're] not allowed bairns in the hostel. (Dundee, male)

My wee 14-year-old – well, she was 12 at that time – she wasn't allowed to come in the place. I told the council that I had a daughter who I had 50 per cent access to (Perth and Kinross, male)

The second set of corrosive impacts indicated by our data concern Nussbaum's "bodily health" and "integrity" capabilities, as well as those that highlight the importance of mental health, implicit in Nussbaum's "senses, imagination and thought" and "emotions" capabilities but more explicitly highlighted by Burchardt and Vizard (2011). The physical health risks of congregate accommodation have been highlighted starkly by the COVID-19 pandemic, with difficulties self-isolating (a form of control over one's immediate environment) in hostel accommodation a key risk factor for contracting and spreading the virus (Wall 2020). Here, we highlight a number of further corrosive impacts of lacking such control on health. Most striking are the impacts on people's ability to secure themselves against the risk of harm from others (see also Homeless Link 2018; McMordie 2020; Bramley et al. 2019), something hinted at in the reference to a tense social environment above, but articulated in extreme terms by one man in Dundee, who feared for his safety given high levels of intravenous drug use in a conflict-ridden hostel environment:

Cunts wanted to put needles in my neck, man. (Dundee, male)

Note that our argument here is consistent with hostels offering some protection from the violence faced by those sleeping rough (Sanders and Albanese 2016). Indeed, for a small number of participants, the presence of staff and rules restricting visitor access was *reassuring* against a backdrop of past exposure to violence (see also Parsell 2016). Nevertheless, the congregate nature of the accommodation limited people's capacity to protect themselves from threats levelled by other residents.

Where meals were catered within the facility, people's lack of control over when, how much and what kind of food they could eat seemed to corrode bodily health in a different way, limiting their ability to be adequately nourished, or at the very least forcing them to choose between eating things they did not wish to or going hungry:

I used to eat it [the meals provided] and then think, I'm still starving. (Dundee, male)

I'm allergic to nuts, so I was paying rent there, paying for the food, but I wasn't getting any food because they don't know if it had nuts in it or not. (Dundee, male)

He [the chef] made steak pie and I told him I don't eat steak, so he went, 'Well here's tuna.' 'I don't eat tuna' He says, 'Well you'll have to starve then.' (Dundee, male)

One participant managed these difficulties by relying on nearby family for meals, but in the absence of financial or social resources to supplement the food provided, the health impacts of such restricted control are obvious, especially where hostels stays are for extended periods.

Our data also suggest that the lack of control hostel residents have over their immediate environment might corrode people's mental health:

My depression and anxiety got a lot worse whenever I first came in here (Glasgow, male)

Everybody in here's depressed, because we're all ... You feel trapped. There's a lot of people that don't make it. They turn to drugs, they end up killing themselves. The long process is what drains people. (Dundee, male)

While a range of factors are likely to be relevant to these participants' mental ill-health, including current poverty and past trauma (Pleace et al. 2008; Bramley et al. 2019), we would contend that that the lack of control people have over their immediate environment might play an additional independent role.

In this section, we have argued that hostels residents' lack of control over their immediate environment negatively impacts on health- and affiliation-related capabilities. Our data also indicate, however, some respects in which hostels may *enhance* people's capabilities, in particular, via the provision of support. Such support clearly enabled some to attain important capabilities they had previously struggled to. For those with complex needs, support played an important role facilitating engagement with health services, for example, with positive impacts on physical and mental health-related capabilities. Note, however, that such support can be provided outwith the hostel context via floating support to those in self-contained accommodation, thus avoiding the problematic restrictions on people's control over their environment intrinsic to the hostel setting. Indeed, such an approach has proved highly effective in the context of the well-evidenced Housing First model (Tsemberis 2010).

Bed and Breakfast Hotels: Congregate Living and Abandonment

Like hostels, B&Bs are intrinsically congregate and rule-constrained environments: residents have limited private space (a bedroom), and other facilities are shared with those who may have support needs and behavioural problems, requiring rule-based risk-management. Also like hostels, B&Bs vary on a range of contingent dimensions, including their size, resident profile, facilities available, and (importantly) support provision. Unlike hostels, B&Bs are privately owned, and therefore lack the "social purpose" often associated with non-profit hostels. While it is perfectly possible for high levels of support to be provided within B&Bs, there has tended to be much less support and staffing than in hostels. Consequently, we see considerable similarities, but also some differences, in how B&B accommodation limits residents' control over their immediate environment compared to hostels.

As in hostels, rules in place within B&Bs constrain residents' control over their environment. Visitors tended not to be allowed, for example, and this man describes his frustration regarding the curfew in place:

I'm nearly a 40-year-old man and I'm being told what time to fucking [be back at night] ... I should be allowed to decide when I come back, no fucking somebody else (Edinburgh, male)

B&Bs did not appear to be as rule-bound as hostels, however. More important than rules in restricting control was their congregate nature, with the behaviour of other residents a crucial control-limiting feature:

It was just the drug use, and the alcohol use. It wasn't controlled at all. People were just totally out on drugs. (Edinburgh, male)

There is drug use, drinking, you come in ... you're very, very tired, someone else loud, too much loud and if you tell something you fight and for why the fight? (Edinburgh, male)

The lesser prominence of rules and greater prominence of congregate living as factors constraining resident control in B&Bs compared to hostels likely reflects the (contingently) lower levels of staffing, support and thereby rule enforcement in the former. Those we spoke to described feeling "forgotten about" (Edinburgh, male) in the profit-driven B&B environment:

A bed and breakfast is a business ... All they're looking for is the money ... the bad B&Bs that homeless people have to go into, they're not looked after, these places, they're just sweat boxes. (Edinburgh, male)

Other contingent features of B&Bs were also relevant in restricting people's control over their environment, including the frequent lack of laundry and cooking facilities (including fridges), people's inability to control the temperature in their room, and the cleanliness of the environment:

It done my nut in that there wasn't any facilities ... washing machine, nothing like that, you couldn't cook if you wanted to (Edinburgh, male)

It's very difficult ... because if you buy something [to] eat, you no have [any]where to put and the stink will ... You buy food put in the bin ... The B&B is no life. (Edinburgh, male)

Combined, these intrinsic and contingent features of B&Bs constrained people's ability to shape their immediate environment (i.e. have it be free from conflict or noise) and do what they wished in that environment (cook or do laundry) in very similar – though not identical – ways to hostels. It is not surprising then that our data also suggest that this restricted control has corrosive impacts on residents' health- and affiliation-related capabilities.

Risks to bodily integrity, exposure to violence and conflict, difficulties feeling safe, and compromised mental wellbeing appeared more acute in B&Bs than in hostels:

It was quite rough. I was surrounded by a lot of people who I wasn't used to being around. I did feel quite frightened at times (Edinburgh, male)

I've had some scary experiences in some of these places ... Quite shocking ... Violent behaviour, self-harming. I've seen someone who self-harmed themselves really badly. In the middle of the night I was woken up to the ambulance service (Edinburgh, male)

The lower levels of staffing and support described above help explain this difference, as illustrated in this comparison of hostel and B&B accommodation offered by one participant with recent experience of both:

We get people coming and checking on you here [hostel] ... In these B&Bs you could be lying in your room for days before anybody even knows something's happened to you, and I think that does happen a lot. (Edinburgh, male)

The lack of cooking facilities and thus control over what people could eat appeared corrosive to people's ability to attain nourishment and bodily health, and forced people to buy expensive "ready to eat" food like packaged sandwiches. While breakfast is provided in B&Bs, residents had little choice over what they were given and what was provided was described by some as "really not adequate" (Edinburgh, male).

B&B residents' lack of control over their immediate environment also seemed to corrode affiliation-related capabilities. The most striking example concerned a woman allocated B&B accommodation with her young child. Her lack of control over the cleanliness of the room led her to temporarily give up care of her daughter:

It was absolutely disgusting ... I couldn't let the wean [participant's daughter] crawl about the floor, because it was just too dirty. She had to sit on the bed constantly ... I ended up giving the wean to my mum ... moved in on the Monday ... gave her to my mum on the Tuesday (Glasgow, female)

As in hostels, not being allowed visitors weakened B&B residents' ability to forge and maintain friendships and romantic relationships. Very important for one man were restrictions on having his dog in B&B accommodation (see also Nicholls 2010; Simon Community Scotland 2019). He was forced to leave the pet with friends, something he found distressing:

It drove me nuts not having my dog because I'm constantly with my dog, I prefer my animals to ... people ... Dogs are more loyal than what human beings are. (Edinburgh, male).

While considered here under the broad ambit of affiliation-related capabilities (after all, this man's relationship with his dog was clearly extremely important to him), in Nussbaum's framework this would indicate a corrosive impact on the "other species" capability (to be able to live with concern for and in relation to other animals).

Temporary Flats: Contingent Constraints

"Temporary furnished flats"³ are regular social housing units used to temporarily accommodate homeless households. The key intrinsic feature of this form of accommodation is that it is self-contained i.e. residents do not share facilities or spaces (bathrooms, kitchens and living spaces) with others. While residents can be subject to rules not applicable in mainstream social housing, such rules are not intrinsic to such accommodation given the absence of the need to risk-manage a congregate living environment. Beyond these features, temporary flats vary in all the ways that mainstream social housing units do: in relation to their location, size, internal layout, building quality and management, etc. While we see people's control over their immediate environment constrained in important ways in this kind of temporary accommodation, it is primarily these *contingent*

features of particular allocations of temporary flats or their management that limit people's control, rather than *intrinsic* features of this accommodation type.

The intrinsically self-contained nature of temporary flats offered clear liberation from the constraints on control over one's immediate environment seen in congregate accommodation. This feature of temporary flats was explicitly and especially valued by those with prior experience in congregate settings:

It is better living here [than the hostel], because I've got my own space. This is practically like your own house. I'm in my flat, I get all my support, and stuff like that. Aye, it is easier that way (Glasgow, female)

Interestingly, the intrinsically *temporary* nature of such accommodation emerged as a constraint on residents' control over their environment. Some participants felt "in limbo" (Edinburgh, female with children) given uncertainty about when they would move on to settled housing (see also Edwards 1995). While this liminality didn't *materially* constrain people's control over their environment, it could impact people's willingness to shape the environment in the ways that would help them feel settled:

If they said to me, 'We cannot give you anything for a year,' I would let my daughter unpack ... put some posters up ... get her personal knick-knacks and things out, but I could get a letter any day saying [we have to move] ... So is there any point feeling settled? ... you just want to make it homely ... [but] the more you unpack the more you're going to have to repack. (Dundee, female with children)

We would argue that this issue did not arise in hostels and B&Bs because "settling" in these congregate and rule-bound institutional environments was by and large not feasible, whereas in the more "normal" context of self-contained accommodation, it was.

Various contingent features of temporary flats acted to restrict some people's control over their immediate environment. Rules played a much less prominent role than in hostels. Indeed, the only rule limiting control we identified concerned the exclusion of pets by some occupancy agreements, though this was important to those it effected. More prominent in limiting people's control were a range of non-rule based contingent features of particular temporary flats. Having to live with sometimes quite serious repair issues (for example broken boilers, or plug sockets hanging off the wall) because repairs services were non-responsive left some lacking important kinds of control over their immediate environment. One woman in Glasgow, for example, was concerned that she may get locked in her bedroom given a fault with the lock on the door.

Being allocated temporary accommodation that was not big enough for the household was another important contingent factor limiting people's control over their immediate environment. One family of three (mother, daughter and adult son), for example, were staying in a two bedroomed flat, forcing mother and daughter to share a bed. This profoundly limited the mother's control over what she could do in the accommodation, in relation to choices as basic as when and how long to sleep:

I can't go to bed until she's in bed ... You can't have a long lie at the weekend because she's up (Dundee, female with children).

The location or setting of accommodation was another important factor that, we would argue, limited people's control over their immediate environment. Living in an upstairs apartment with no lift, and being unable to leave the house when pre-existing mobility

issues flared up, was one example, so too being allocated accommodation far from friends and family and thus being unable to see them easily. For one family, being on the sixth floor meant the two young children in the household had very restricted freedom in their immediate environment:

It's just like kind of stuck in the house all the time. They feel like they're not allowed to do anything ... It's not as if they've got anywhere to go out and play. Like, we're six floors up ... it's really, really difficult. (Edinburgh, female with children)

Here we see the importance of control over the *location and situation* of one's immediate environment (see also Burchardt and Vizard 2011), as well as control over the *shape* of that environment and *what one is able to do* within it (see above).

Our analysis of people's experiences in temporary flats provides further evidence that having limited control over one's immediate environment may corrode health and affiliation-related capabilities. In relation to health, the lack of control felt as a result of being "in limbo" was experienced as "quite depressing" by one Dundee participant. Another explained:

There's actually [only] so long that people can live in limbo without it really damaging their mental health ... because you don't know ... what's happening ... you're on edge ... even just a simple thing like packing: do I pack now? (Edinburgh, female with children)

The limits on control imposed by being severely overcrowded, or in accommodation in an unsuitable location or situation, also had serious implications for mental health and wellbeing. The mother having to share a bed with her daughter and who struggled to leave the third-floor flat given mobility issues, for instance, described feeling "like a prisoner stuck up here" (Dundee, female with children). While pre-existing physical health issues drove her inability to leave the accommodation, this inability had feedback effects on both her physical and mental health. An inability to secure repairs via non-responsive housing management services also had clear negative impacts on physical and mental health. Living in damp conditions – something reported by several participants – has well-documented health impacts (Liddell and Morris 2010) and some of the repair issues highlighted appeared to pose a clear fire risk. Even less serious repair issues had significant impacts on mental wellbeing, echoing the findings of Soaita and McKee (2019), who, in their consideration of the experiences of private rental tenants argue that "the loud irritating call of broken things" describes "a world out of order" (155) and acts as a potent material manifestation of people's lack of agency as tenants.

Examples of corrosive impacts on affiliation-related capabilities were also present in our data, in particular where households had not had control over the location of their temporary flat. One woman explained that she and her grandson (for whom she cared) had both "lost touch" with their friends, something she explicitly linked to knock on corrosive impacts on their mental wellbeing: "I was getting awfully depressed ... The grandson, I think he was getting depressed" (Dundee, female with children). Another family reported especially consequential corrosion of their 13-year-old daughter's social networks:

My daughter won't go out because across the road from us ... is where all the youngsters congregate ... She's not from this scheme [estate] ... so she's frightened to go past them as

they hurl abuse at her. So that's had an impact on her, not being in the scheme she grew up in (Dundee, female with children)

By contrast, allocations of temporary flats near households' social networks appeared to support the realization of affiliation-related capabilities. One woman explained that staying near a close friend meant she's "always got company" (East Lothian, female). It is also worth highlighting that the self-contained nature of temporary flats emerged as supportive of affiliation-related capabilities, especially as compared to congregate accommodation, as described by this former hostel resident:

It's definitely improved things ... the social aspect with my family and that being able to visit ... In the hostel, basically, all you can do is go and sit in the car somewhere to have a bag of crisps ... when they moved me into my first temporary accommodation [flat], that opened the doors because they could come up and sit with me, watch TV, have their dinner with me ... things like that. (East Ayrshire, male)

Concluding Discussion

This paper set out to consider *what it is* about the temporary living situations faced by those experiencing homelessness that enables or constrains people's central capabilities, with a focus on people's control over their environment. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 52 individuals staying in temporary accommodation in Scotland, we draw out four key arguments in this final section.

First, while the importance of autonomy is baked in to the capabilities approach (Sen 1992), and recognized in other accounts of human flourishing (see Alkire 2002), the specific importance of control over one's *immediate living environment* has been insufficiently recognized. Nussbaum's tenth central capability – control over one's environment – highlights the importance of opportunities for political participation, property ownership, and workplace conditions (Nussbaum 2011), but neglects the importance of more banal and taken-for-granted aspects of control – when people can come and go from where they live; whether, when and for how long they can have friends, family or romantic partners visit; when and how much they can eat; when and how they can do their laundry, etc.

This gap in the capabilities literature might reflect the methodologies used to construct capabilities lists⁴ (see Alkire 2002). We concur with many critics of Nussbaum that such lists ought to be empirically-informed. Crucially, specific efforts should be made to involve people in a diversity of living situations, not just those representative of the general population in relation to socio-economic and demographic variables, or membership of marginalized groups (see for example Burchardt and Vizard 2011). Relevant here are tenure differences, shared accommodation arrangements and various kinds of institutional living environments (hospitals, care homes, prisons etc.). Indeed, research on older people's living environments has reached complementary conclusions, highlighting that control over one's immediate environment in hospital or care settings is an important influence on quality of life and feelings of dignity for this group (Barnes 2002; Parker et al. 2004; Webster and Bryan 2009). Understanding how differing immediate living environments influence people's capabilities – and how or whether these causal links vary across

contexts – thus offers rich point of dialogue between housing studies and capability theory.

Second, our data demonstrates that control over one's immediate environment is severely compromised in forms of temporary accommodation used to respond to homelessness. These constraints are most acute in congregate living environments like hostels and B&Bs. The harms associated with such congregate living environments are well established by existing research (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin 2007; Mackie, Johnsen, and Wood 2017; Sanders and Reid 2018). What framing these harms in relation to the *control over one's immediate environment* capability adds to existing scholarship is the illumination of a set of *components* of these environments and *mechanisms* via which such harms will predictably arise.

Among the most important mechanisms limiting such control are the formal rules and wider routines governing life in congregate settings. We are not arguing that such constraints are *never* justified (far from it, see Watts, Fitzpatrick, and Johnsen 2018), but the rules and restrictions imposed in congregate settings described here fall wildly short of delivering the kinds of benefits to capabilities that could justify them. Also important are the constraints on people's autonomy resulting from living at close quarters and sharing limited facilities with other people navigating challenges including mental ill-health and addiction (McMordie 2020). This (and a plethora of other evidence, Mackie, Johnsen, and Wood 2017) supports a presumption in favour of self-contained rather than congregate accommodation, but we also acknowledge the detrimental impacts of social isolation and loneliness among those rehoused following homelessness, including in terms of housing retention (Patterson et al. 2014). Our paper makes crystal clear that congregate housing environments like hostels are not the answer to these issues, and would direct attention to community-based supports and opportunities for meaningful activity instead (Littlewood et al. 2017).

Third, lack of control over one's immediate environment can be understood in Wolff and De-Shalit's (2007) terms as a "corrosive disadvantage", i.e. a form of deprivation that has negative impacts on other capabilities and functionings. Our data has suggested multiple examples of such capability corrosion. We have seen exposure to or fear of violence in congregate accommodation, neglected repair issues, and severe overcrowding in self-contained accommodation compromise people's ability to secure bodily health and integrity and maintain mental health and wellbeing. We have seen opportunities to develop and sustain positive relationships corroded by lack of opportunity, space and permission to spend time with friends, family (including children), and romantic partners in congregate living environments, and by temporary accommodation placements far from existing social networks. We have seen people's ability to live in concern for and relation to their pets made impossible by rules governing residence in temporary accommodation of all kinds. In self-contained accommodation, we have seen a sense of limbo and lack of control over when people will move on corrode people's ability to shape their immediate living environment in a way that makes them feel at home and benefit from the gains of home-making (see also Nine 2018). While these constraints may have been normalized in these contexts, they strike us as profound and disturbing limits on people's ability to live lives they have reason to value. Bringing these capability corruptions into clear view highlights that those residing in temporary accommodation are a group

subject to a “cluster of disadvantages” (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007), and a cluster amenable to specific public policy interventions.

Fourth, and finally, our analysis points to both *intrinsic* and *contingent* features of different kinds of temporary accommodation that are implicated in constraining people’s control over their immediate living environment. In the case of self-contained temporary accommodation, contingent features of particular properties (most often their size or location) or property management practices (non-responsive repairs services) limited people’s control, with damaging effects. Alternative allocations of temporary flats or better maintenance services would have resolved these issues, as is clear from the accounts of those we spoke to who had been allocated appropriate units. In hostels and B&Bs, however, it is less clear that the limited control people had within these environments could be addressed by changes to how they are run, maintained or designed. While our analysis certainly recommends critically reviewing the rules and routines governing such accommodation with a view to maximizing residents’ control over their immediate environment, these restrictions might be defended as necessary – indeed intrinsic – features of such provision, required to risk-manage a facility in which vulnerable strangers live cheek by jowl. Continuing to rely on such congregate models while removing or weakening these rules and routines might lead to other, potentially even more severe, negative impacts.

In the broadest terms, our analysis provides one theorization of *why* preventative and housing-led responses to homelessness offer a far better route to addressing homelessness than crisis-management and congregate accommodation-based alternatives. If control over one’s immediate environment is recognized as a fundamental component of a minimally well lived life (Nussbaum 2011), policy and practice responses that systematically limit and constrain such control must be recognized as falling short, *even if* they reflect well-intentioned efforts to protect people from the worst effects of street homelessness on life, bodily health, and bodily integrity. Even if congregate accommodation options did guarantee the protection of these capabilities, which we have seen they don’t, this would be an achievement reflecting profound “poverty of ambition” (Parsell 2018, 115) for those experiencing homelessness. One of the advantages of codified lists of central capabilities such as Nussbaum’s, is that they offer a means to “hold the line” and guard against poverty of ambition concerning the social outcomes tolerated for groups that might be conceived of as “other” (Watts and Fitzpatrick 2020). Our analysis offers a reminder, if one were needed, that people experiencing homelessness want and need the same capabilities that many take for granted, including the ability to control their immediate living environment.

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particular those with direct experience of homelessness who were willing to share their experiences.

Notes

1. Rather than, for example, the meaning of home literature (Mallett 2004).
2. Dundee, East Ayrshire, East Lothian, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth and Kinross.
3. The terminology of “temporary furnished flats” reflects the predominance of tenement apartment blocks in Scotland. Some temporary accommodation of this sort, however, will be terraced, semi-detached or detached houses.
4. We leave aside the debate on the efficacy, or not, of capabilities lists in general, on which see Sen (2005) and Robeyns (2003).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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