



# Living through continuous displacement: Resisting homeless identities and remaking precarious lives



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## ABSTRACT

This article considers how individuals who experience continuous displacement from housing manage the 'spoiled identity' of homelessness. The research draws on in-depth, biographical interviews with 39 individuals living in Oxford, a high-cost UK city. All had experienced forms of homelessness in the previous three years. Building on critical debates around experiences of precarity in urban geography, the article explores how individuals construct and maintain a sense of identity whilst living precarious lives. Participants were constantly confronted with their own precarity in pressured housing markets, which fostered their displacement, and then undermined re-entry into stable housing. Yet, participants described their attempts to maintain a 'normal' life, rejecting homeless subjectivities as they anchored their identity to daily practices of self care. These were also a key means of distinction from others experiencing displacement, enabling individuals to dis-identify from those characterised by moral and personal failings, thus highlighting their own responsibility and resourcefulness. Others described the bodily transformation that was associated with assuming the identity of 'homeless'. Participants moved between different subject positions, with distinct narratives through which individuals sought to reclaim precarious identities, foregrounding alternative choices, pride in survival and resourcefulness, and freedom. Whilst this occurred within a context of extreme constraint, individuals were actively engaged in attempts to construct a sense of worth and value that was denied by a 'homeless identity'. The article contributes to contemporary debates foregrounding social processes in understandings of the lived experiences of marginalisation, as well as adding empirical depth to representations of hidden homelessness.

## 1. Introduction

Experiences of homelessness involve deprivation across a number of dimensions, including the territorial, physiological, emotional, and ontological (Somerville, 2013). As Daya and Wilkins (2013, p. 363) argue, "becoming homeless in a society where so much is invested in the idea (and ideal) of home can...severely disrupt one's sense of self and autonomy". Individuals face being subsumed by an all-defining 'homeless identity' (McCarthy, 2013). Drawing on in-depth interviews with individuals living in Oxford who have experienced homelessness, we address the question: what identities are expressed through the narratives of individuals experiencing continuous displacement, and through which process are they constructed? The article contributes to debates on processual experiences of living precarious lives, and the distinctions that are made as individuals construct identities through displacement.

The definition of homelessness was broad, to investigate whether

different dwelling experiences generated feelings of homelessness, and the identifications emerging from narratives. Whilst there are a range of definitions applied to homelessness, including being currently or imminently without accommodation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019), many people experiencing inadequate and precarious housing do not necessarily view themselves as homeless. Accordingly, 'continuous displacement' (Lancione, 2016) is used as an alternative framing for participants' experiences. This responds to calls to move from a bounded taxonomy to an open definition based on the social processes through which subjects are formed (Lancione, 2016, p. 172).

The research considers identity-construction across a range of dwelling experiences. Hidden homelessness is commonly understood as "non-statutory homeless people living outside mainstream housing provision" (Reeve, 2011, p. 3). Given the rapid spread of housing displacement and precarity in the UK and internationally, it is crucial to explore hidden and statutory forms of homelessness. Contemporary forms of urbanisation contain a wide spectrum of precarious

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geographies that have yet to be uncovered empirically (Ferreri et al., 2017, p. 247), and Oxford is an international exemplar of housing crisis, with high levels of homelessness and housing unaffordability (Oxford City Council, 2016). We utilise the concept of precarious identities to understand continuous displacement in a high-cost, pressured urban housing market of the ‘Global North’. The precarious geographies of participants in this study are both visible (rough sleeping, hostels) and hidden (sofa surfing, lodgings, hotels, tents); Reeve’s (2011) dichotomy thus follows an experiential dimension, not the physical visibility of these dwelling types. The article emphasises the ways in which individuals navigate displacement, recognising that whilst action is constrained, people make decisions that influence their daily life and trajectories through housing insecurity (Pleace, 2016).

Precarity is therefore double-faced; it is a product of – and a producer of – urban life, giving rise to specific modes of being (Lancione, 2020, 2019). Recognising that pervasive notions of ‘normal’ urban residence obscure the everyday lives of those who occupy uninhabitable spaces (Simone, 2016), the article makes a number of contributions to the international literature on identity-construction, displacement and homelessness. In focusing on agency and process, which transcend the ‘homeless’ category, the research contributes to contemporary conceptual debates that emphasise giving voice to the perceptions of those experiencing continuous displacement (Pleace, 2016). This entails focusing on the ways in which individuals make and re-make the ‘homeless city’ (Cloke et al., 2008), calling attention to “provisional and unsettling processes of dwelling” (Soaita and McKee, 2019, p. 149). By situating experiences within wider social and cultural dynamics that can otherwise be hidden (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2016, p. 278), we contribute to an inter-disciplinary literature. For example, forms of “permanent temporariness” can be understood as symptomatic of wider dynamics of precarisation in urban areas (Ferreri et al., 2017, p. 246). Resistance against this precarity emerges from “uncanny places [and] uninhabitable ‘homes’” (Lancione, 2020, p. 275), highlighting the need for research to attend to the ways in which people respond, resist and remake their conditions of existence (Sparks, 2016). Drawing on the dialectic of identification and dis-identification, we build on Farrugia and Gerrard (2016, p. 278) who show that the apparent extraordinary aspects of homelessness “are themselves produced by practices of government that enact normative distinctions between ‘the homeless’ and ‘everyone else’”. We demonstrate that such distinctions are also made by those living through displacement.

Empirically, the research contributes to understanding experiences of urban precarity across a spectrum of homelessness. As Pleace (2016, p. 29) highlights, “people living without their own space, without privacy and without security of tenure in Europe are, at best, partially mapped and partially understood”. Horsell (2006, p. 214) similarly notes how the construction of homeless populations “totalise subordinated groups”, thereby serving to overlook their heterogeneity. Indeed, most research into identity has taken place with roofless populations, and “we know remarkably little” about the practices of the ‘hidden homeless’ (Cloke et al., 2008, p. 257). As Parsell (2011, p. 445) argues, “rarely is it explained how individuals who are homeless actively shape and display their identities”. This article draws out the processes through which identities are constructed, resisted, and reshaped. The biographical approach foregrounds participants’ perceptions of continuous displacement across their lives, which for most includes periods of independent housing, hidden homelessness, hostels, and rough sleeping.

The article first discusses the conceptual framing underpinning the analysis, foregrounding processes of identity construction and the identifications made under conditions of continuous displacement. After describing the qualitative methods, three key findings are discussed. First, although all participants had experienced insecure, inadequate and unstable living conditions, few identified as homeless, instead describing their attempts to maintain a ‘normal’ non-homeless identity. Second, participants engaged in processes of distinction from

homeless ‘others’ to create symbolic distance. And third, through their narratives some participants embraced a precarious identity, recasting displacement as adventure and freedom, constructing a sense of worth and value that a ‘homeless identity’ denied them. The discussion highlights the way in which continuous displacement has come to be seen as a defining part of the urban condition, impacting on the construction of self-identities.

## 2. Dis/identification and the spoiled identity of homelessness

Identities are widely acknowledged as fluid, multifaceted, and influenced by context (Lawler, 2014). This article elaborates how people experiencing continuous displacement negotiate their identities as multifaceted beings, beyond homeless (see McCarthy, 2013). Identity is a process of becoming; identification refers to the generation and signification of relationships of similarity and difference (Jenkins, 2014, p. 19), occurring at different scales from the individual, to the collective and nation (De Swaan, 1995). Identities are always relational, enacted through different processes (cognitive, material, sensory), in which a sense of self is created in relation to others. Through these processes of identification and dis-identification people come to understand their place in the world, relative to others. Those experiencing homelessness face the imposition of a new identity of ‘homeless person’ (Parsell, 2011), which mediates social interactions (Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). Whilst individuals hold and present multiple identities, homelessness is such a totalising category that it is often the only identity or ‘self’ that others see or recognise (McCarthy, 2013). Therefore, homelessness represents “a unique kind of marginality which may be associated with the ‘symbolic burden’ that the notion of homelessness as a cultural trope and set of subject positions carries” (Farrugia, 2010, p. 72). Indeed, homelessness is often viewed as a personal failing, generating stigmatisation and shame (Farrugia, 2011). Whether or not individuals identify as homeless, they must still confront the negative identities that are conferred on them (Gonyea and Melekis, 2017).

Much research into homelessness and identity has taken place with roofless populations, with stigmatisation taking place in part because individuals are unable to retreat to private homes in which undesirable behaviours largely go unnoticed (Parsell, 2011; Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). This contributes to perceptions of homelessness as ‘other’. In an early attempt to re-orientate the focus of research onto self-perceptions, Snow and Anderson (1987) identified different patterns of ‘identity talk’ among roofless individuals. A substantial component involved individuals distancing themselves from others experiencing homelessness, and the institutions serving them, in order to salvage self-worth (Snow and Anderson, 1987, p. 1353). In contrast, parallel processes of embracement were also identified, in which individuals accepted the role of ‘bum’, ‘tramp’ or ‘hippy’.

Although most literature focuses on strategies for lessening stigma, it is also important to consider processes that may further embed the ‘spoiled identity’ from which individuals seek to retreat (Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). The dialectic of identification and dis-identification, through which individuals come to experience others as different or similar to themselves is useful here (De Swaan, 1995). In dis-identifying from the disgusting ‘other’ (Lawler, 2014; Skeggs, 2004), individuals create distance from those who do not belong (Sibley, 1995). For example, Farrugia (2010) notes that relationships among shelter residents were influenced by the stigmatisation of homelessness, with individuals avoiding other residents in order to maintain distance from the moral failure that they represent. However, denigrating ‘other’ homeless groups can exacerbate the stigmatisation of homelessness, with fine-grained distinctions being subsumed into broader cultural tropes.

The process of constructing a self un-burdened by a ‘homeless identity’ takes place in distinct spatial contexts, and it is crucial to consider homelessness as an embodied and affective experience, mediated by spatial and relational processes (Farrugia, 2010, p. 74). Parsell (2011), for example, notes the enactment of different identities

in distinct settings. Similarly, identities are performative, enacted through physical action in place (Goffman, 1963). Dress, gestures, and demeanour – attuned to different spatial contexts – are all ways of seeing identities in action, which ‘performative moments’ can reveal (Hull and Zacher, 2007).

### 3. Continuous displacement and the production of precarious subjectivities in Oxford

Homelessness is often presented as a one-dimensional identity that people embrace or avoid, failing to consider the way that individuals enact and use different identities (Parsell, 2011). By focusing on the identities constructed under conditions of continuous displacement, the research identifies different experiences and subjectivities (see Farrugia, 2011) that were enacted simultaneously and fluidly across individual biographies (Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). Cities are a key domain in which precarious living conditions are produced and sustained, with a varied geography of insecurity, flexibility and temporariness (Ferreri et al., 2017, p. 249). The research centres on the city of Oxford, which is one of the least affordable cities in the UK (Oxford City Council, 2016), with some of the highest private rents in South East England (Valuation Office Agency, 2018). As a university city, the population is more transient than most, but transience is qualitatively different for those experiencing homelessness. High living costs influence displacement, with participants describing their pathways through insecure housing conditions, rising rents, and reducing welfare support to meet housing costs. Homelessness and rough sleeping are prominent policy concerns in Oxford, which has one of the highest – and fastest growing – homeless rates per head of population (Brimblecombe et al., 2020). The city is therefore a particularly appropriate site in which to understand hidden homelessness, with relevance for other high-cost contexts.

The research also attends to the different ways of being and becoming enacted at the extended margins of urban environments (Lancione, 2020), such as the many individuals in Oxford living in squats, with friends, or sleeping in tents (Brimblecombe et al., 2020; Reeve, 2011). This is the point at which precarity is lived and made livable, through practices like self-care (Rosa, 2019) that challenge normative understandings of dwelling. For example, Simone (2016, p. 136) asks whether spaces deemed uninhabitable actually point to a different – rather than diminished – form of urban life. Similarly, we consider whether individuals may construct different identities as a result of living through conditions of displacement, identifying with precarious subjectivities.

This draws on the position that precarity – a “condition of vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict” (Ettlinger, 2007, p. 320) – is an ontological experience rather than purely a socio-economic condition (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). This gives rise to different versions and experiences of flexibility (Ross, 2008). Whilst some may feel ‘on-edge’ living amidst an atmosphere of uncertainty (Harris et al., 2019), others may become acclimatised to a persistent sense of insecurity, with implications for identity-construction (Ferreri et al., 2017). For example, forms of contemporary nomadism – largely explored in the US (Stablein and Schad, 2019) – offer a route to a travelling identity that may avoid the stigmatisation of a ‘homeless’ identity. Whilst travelling may be an overly romanticised label – particularly considering the stigmatisation and marginalisation experienced by groups such as Irish Travellers and Roma (Powell, 2016) – for some it may be a more favourable marker that aligns with contemporary notions of mobility (Stablein and Schad, 2019). Indeed, whilst the research centres on Oxford, across individual biographies there was movement around the country and beyond. Ten participants had grown up and remained in the area, nine had grown up there and returned, and 12 had moved in adulthood for work or family reasons and became homeless whilst in the area.

**Table 1**  
Participant demographic information.

		Number
Gender	Male	25
	Female	14
Age	20–29	5
	30–39	11
	40–49	8
	50 and over	15
Country of origin	UK	29
	EU	3
	Non-EU	7
Total		39

### 4. Methods

Data are drawn from in-depth, biographical interviews with 39 individuals who self-reported as experiencing homelessness in the previous three years. Participants were purposively recruited through a combination of third sector organisations, advice centres, housing departments, online adverts and through snowballing. Staff working in services oriented towards provision for individuals experiencing homelessness or low-incomes, such as food services and day centres, signposted potential participants to the research, and posters were also displayed. Most interviews lasted around an hour and a half, but some lasted over two hours. In order to protect privacy, participants have been given pseudonyms and where necessary other identifying information has been changed.

Reflecting the purposive sampling strategy, Table 1 shows that around two-thirds of the sample were male, replicating existing evidence on the gender balance of those utilising services (Homeless Link, 2016). There was an even spread of age, with a reasonably high number of participants aged 50 and over. Most participants were from the UK, with small numbers from other countries; all EU participants were Polish men who moved to Oxford for work. Some of this group formed a diffuse tent-dwelling community with other homeless Eastern Europeans, although this living situation did not distinguish their self-identities from other participants. Other research suggests that Eastern European A8 nationals disproportionately experience forms of homelessness (Reeve, 2011), and that non-UK nationals face marginalisation as a result of changes to immigration law (Mckee et al., 2020).

At the time of the research participants were living in a range of housing situations including supported accommodation, social or private rented housing, temporary housing, sofa surfing, emergency accommodation for rough sleepers, or rough sleeping. As fieldwork was carried out primarily across winter (December 2018 to April 2019), some emergency accommodation was open that was not available all year round. In taking a biographical approach we were able to understand individuals’ dynamic journeys through housing displacement (see: Garratt and Flaherty, 2020). Whilst two participants were sofa surfing during the research, the vast majority (33) had done so at some point, and sofa surfing was the first experience of homelessness for half the sample. Similarly, three participants were currently rough sleeping, but 28 had done previously, and it was the entry point into homelessness for ten participants. The majority (31) had links to Oxfordshire, having grown up or lived there previously. One-third of participants had first been homeless as teenagers, demonstrating early housing displacement. Familial displacement was also widespread: due to parental death (four participants) or separation (15 participants). Many reported complex family arrangements throughout childhood including living with non-parental family members. Nine had lived outside typical family structures during childhood: four had been kicked out of home, two attended boarding school, one had spent time in a children’s home, another in a young offenders institution, and one was an unaccompanied child migrant.

We used a biographical, life history approach, giving primacy to participants' own narratives and interpretations of their lives, from childhood to the present. Somerville (2013) argues that to understand homelessness it is necessary to focus on the biographies of people experiencing homelessness, yet relatively few studies have taken this approach. Participants reflected on significant points in their histories, foregrounding the way that human memory "endows certain fundamental episodes with symbolic meaning" (Hankiss, 1981, p. 203). Prevailing discourses about 'possible lives' can also structure how people talk about their own lives (Brunner, 1987), as in constructing our own life stories we are influenced by broader societal narratives (Somers, 1994). For example, participants were keenly aware of their deviation from normalised pathways, retelling their lives in light of dominant expectations and markers of normalcy. To structure the interview, a life mapping technique was used, with participants drawing and labelling housing/dwelling transitions across their life. This is discussed in detail elsewhere (Flaherty and Garratt, unpublished results); for the purposes of this article we do not explicitly draw on the visual maps produced, but they guided the interview discussion. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in Nvivo, a software program for qualitative data. Drawing on the conceptual framework of identification and dis-identification, precarious subjectivities, and continuous displacement, participants' interviews were analysed individually to draw out the narratives that they told about their lives and the social processes involved in identity-construction (McNaughton, 2008, p. 46). The way that individuals report their own lives is significant, as homelessness is interpreted in different ways (Somerville, 2013).

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Resisting 'homeless' identities: holding onto 'normality'

This section discusses participants' experiences of displacement across their housing histories, and their attempts to maintain a 'normal' (housed) identity whilst moving within insecure, inadequate, and unstable living conditions. These forms of dwelling are part of a spectrum of homelessness, including sofa surfing, overcrowding, housing tied to work, camping, car/van/boat dwelling, hotels, hostels, and literal rooflessness. Housing pathways were characterised by precarity with participants constantly confronted with leaving housing. Inzali (F, 50+) described feelings of "insecurity, you know, 'oh God, what will happen next?'" Pressured housing markets had a dual impact, fostering displacement – as landlords increased rents or sold properties – whilst the same processes of commodification reduced access to new housing. Inzali recalled: "they [the landlord] said to me...you have to move out because we are going to sell...he would get lots of profit now because [the area is]...very posh". Participants described a cycle of intensifying precariousness from which there was little potential to escape, particularly for those living in informal housing such as lodgings and house shares. Though a valuable option for low-income groups, such housing was also characterised by a high risk of displacement.

Others reflected on rising rents and their inability to make ends meet, constantly juggling debts. Despite working, many could not keep up with the pressured housing market, highlighting the interdependencies between work and housing in contemporary experiences of precarity (Ferreri et al., 2017).

I'm continuously getting a loan to consolidate, to pay off, existing debts...I do pay my rent but it means I can't then pay the loan... [I've] just never had enough coming in. And as much as I work, as many good jobs as I've had, you just can't keep up with the rent in Oxford (Nicola, F, 30–39)

Although living in precarious conditions, few participants identified with the term 'homeless' when describing displacement. Quantitative studies have similarly found that many people experiencing homeless

do not self-identify as homeless (O'Grady et al., 2019), perhaps due to the symbolic burden of the homeless identity (Roche, 2015) in which a person's housing position is used to signify their physical and social status (Sparks, 2016, p. 90). Participants instead emphasised attachments to a non-homeless identity through reference to belongings and social connections. When sofa surfing after a divorce, Chris (M, 50+) "wasn't homeless because I had a sofa to...sit on. We still had all our stuff in a storage". Belongings were a link to, and possible route back to, a stable home, and part of rejecting homelessness: "I knew where my stuff was. My stuff was in storage" (Victoria, F, 40–49). Remaining linked to friendship networks also enabled individuals to be seen as more than the sum of their housing struggles:

I only consider myself homeless once when I slept outside...I mean...I didn't have a place of my own where I could call home, but...when I'm among my friends, I'm not feeling bad...Your friends are not going to be talking about your homeless situation all the time...we talk something else (Angavu, F, 30–39)

I don't think I felt homeless...I was living with my family, I had a home, I just didn't have...a place of my own. I didn't have space for myself...It was more rough sleeping on the floor, in a...family room. I had nothing to basically call my own...no way of escaping anything. So emotionally it felt like I didn't really have anywhere. But I knew I had a roof over my head...cos I mean you've got a lot of homeless in Oxford and I knew I wasn't as bad off as they are (Amber, F, 24–29)

Consistent with popular stereotypes (Dean, 2015), participants therefore associated homelessness with rooflessness, distinguishing their own experiences from those with no other options: "obviously I've been homeless before but it's like I've always had somewhere else to stay" (Matt, M, 24–29). One participant recalled staying with a friend and being labelled as homeless: "They [support worker] wrote in his care notes I was a homeless woman living with him...It was quite degrading" (Caroline, F, 40–49). This highlights the stigmatisation and symbolic burden of being assigned a 'homeless identity' (Farrugia, 2010, p. 72), which can also be magnified by seeking assistance through statutory channels. When participants did identify as homeless, they sought to hide this because they "didn't want to be seen as a homeless person" (Chris, M, 50+). For example, Phoebe (F, 50+) was living at a hostel, but her children "think I work here, so does my Dad...I don't want them to know". Others avoided seeing family: "it would be great to see [my sister] again...I want to...look a bit more presentable... get my hair cut...so, when I meet her at least I can...say, 'well, I've got somewhere'" (Adrian, M, 50+).

At various points, self-surveillance of the homeless body (Watson, 2000) was evident as individuals sought to 'pass' as non-homeless in order to maintain affinity with their social world (Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). Daily practices of cleanliness were significant in these attempts to 'pass', making life livable and enabling relationships and sociability to be maintained (Rosa, 2019):

I kind of made a point of keeping clean and stuff...It was probably more than most people would bother...Shower every day, shave... make sure my washing was done...And it was like something to hang onto...It's pretty shallow, wanting to have a clean shirt...when you should be concentrating on...getting maybe somewhere or something (Chris, M, 50+)

Whilst Chris questions the value he ascribed to these daily practices, they were something within his control and maintained a connection to a non-homeless identity: "keeping tidy, it was one thing I could do, was keep my clothes washed, keep shaved...It was one thing I latched onto". Being clean enabled participants to engage with others without bringing their living circumstances into view: "I'll only go to...the showers and to wash my clothes...just so I could go and live an almost ordinary life, see a few friends...So my clothes are clean, they don't have to smell me...and worry about me...That is why I keep clean"

(Callum, M, 40–49). Others noted that maintaining personal appearance could help them to access work or housing: “I went round all the estate agents in Oxford...and said, ‘look, I’m desperate for a room...I’m homeless’. And he said, ‘you can’t be on the streets, you’re too clean’” (Phil, M, 50+). Cleanliness also offered a bounded opportunity to exercise normative standards and distinction from those who were seen as less successful in maintaining self-care, as will be discussed in the next section. At the micro-level these mundane, intimate, daily practices are important in managing stigma (Rayburn and Guittar, 2013; Terui and Hsieh, 2016), feeling at home, and maintaining connections to a ‘normal’ identity (Daya and Wilkins, 2013). At a broader level such ‘ordinary’ practices also serve to challenge normative distinctions between ‘the homeless’ and ‘everyone else’ (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2016, p. 278).

## 5.2. Processes of dis/identification and ‘becoming’ homeless

Whilst struggling to resist a homeless identity, many participants engaged in processes of distinction, dis-identifying from perceived others. This mirrors early work by Snow and Anderson (1987), in which individuals disassociated from general and specific forms of homelessness. These processes are therefore enduring, apparent in different country contexts and across a spectrum of hidden and visible housing displacement. Participants were critical of those who begged, were seen as unclean, or engaged in drug or alcohol use. This implicitly endorsed individualistic discourses, constituted a claim for difference, and created symbolic distance from those characterised by moral and personal failings, even when these failings were shared. Subtle distinctions highlighted participants’ own responsibility, active self-management, and resourcefulness (Farrugia, 2011). However, this could also contribute to reproduction of the ‘spoiled identity’ homelessness and its stigmatisation.

Begging was perceived as unnecessary because of the volume of services in the city: “there is no need...it’s just they either can’t be bothered to go to these places or they’re collecting money for...their habit...it’s not that I’m uncaring about those people...it’s the ones that...are taking advantage” (Chris, M, 50+). Begging was often linked to addiction, with some participants highlighting their own responsibility or moral superiority: “all the homeless, or most of them, they have the drugs problems, drinking problem...Only 1% clean like me...I work all of my life” (Inzali, F, 50+). Even where individuals had experienced addiction, moral distinctions were made: “I wasn’t getting people hooked on heroin, I was just selling to people that was already hooked...I wasn’t getting people involved in it who didn’t know...like somebody got me involved with it when I didn’t know anything” (Sam, M, 50+). Sam draws a ‘boundary’ (Frederick, 2019) around the provision of drugs to existing users, compared with his own experience of being drawn into drugs, thus justifying his narrative of not selling to unknowing individuals.

The self-care practices described in the preceding section enabled participants to mask their own homeless identity, whilst also dis-identifying from those who were a visible marker of their own precariousness.

When I was on the street, I never really come across as a homeless person, ‘cos I’d always keep myself clean, have clean clothes on... You see people on the street now that’s black as anything. You could walk down there and get a shower any time you want. You can wash your clothes at any time you want...there’s no need to be like that (Matt, M, 24–29)

I go to my mum’s house quite often now and she does all my washing...I try and stay as clean as possible...I’m not like them... around town, and the beggars and that, they try and look as dirty as possible...Other people have got that [drug problems] and not like that...try and live a normal life (Callum, M, 40–49)

These subtle distinctions between individuals with common experiences maintained a hierarchy of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, with cleanliness and passing as non-homeless a key marker. This served as a distancing behaviour (Snow and Anderson, 1987) that provided individuals with a ‘more than homeless’ identity (Cloke et al., 2008). One participant described failing to maintain a clean living environment as “sinking to another level” (Adrian, M, 50+), but others explained the challenges of some environments, with Ryan (M, 30–39) noting how “hygiene starts to slip a little bit” after a period camping in a local park.

Practices of home-making offered a further means of distancing from homeless identities. Phoebe described her hostel:

I used to have them sterile gloves, I wouldn’t take them off...even now, I use my own plate, my own knife, my own fork. I’ve got my own kitchenette, and my room is really nice, I painted it all white, I’ve got white voile at my windows...I scrub my landing near enough every day...We’re a bit blocked off from every-some people (Phoebe, F, 50+)

Phoebe dis-identifies from “every-some people” and highlights her own respectability. However, dis-identification is a dialectical process, and identification – through which individuals come to see themselves as similar to others (De Swaan, 1995) – was also present in narratives. One participant described a period when he was living in a YMCA hostel: “You’re living with...people that have fallen...It’s literally living in the asylum” (Thomas, M, 50+). At the same time, Thomas also identified with another resident: “[He] was a trained architect...I remember feeling quite motivated...I remember thinking ‘if this can happen to you it’s no surprises it happened to me’...And that’s strangely kind of reassuring”. Thomas was reassured by the presence of someone like him, identifying with commonalities in their social position, in contrast to other hostel residents.

Processes of identification were also apparent across individuals’ own biographies, as they identified with previous versions of their self. For example, narratives repeatedly returned to periods of relative normalcy, offering a route for identification and demonstrating the importance of understanding experiences biographically. Sam (M, 50+) explained: “I had a brand new three-bedroomed semi-detached house...I had a nice car, I was earning sixty thousand a year”. He continued to identify with this past productive self (Terui and Hsieh, 2016): “A sixty thousand pound a year job, I had a brand new three-bedroomed house...If I hadn’t have gone [to that job]...none of this would have happened and...I’d be up here now<sup>1</sup>...somewhere” (Sam). Similarly, another participant reflected that at his age, “I would have expected to still be living what I call a good, normal life, living somewhere, working” (Barry, M, 50+). Inzali (F, 50+) repeatedly referred to her previous occupational status as a healthcare professional, potentially to ‘salvage the self’ (Snow and Anderson, 1987, p. 1364) from her homeless status. Phoebe (F, 50+) identified herself as “like a surrogate mum” within the homeless hostel, an identity that was perhaps particularly important to regaining her self-esteem as a woman whose motherhood status was disrupted by long-term privation of domestic space and separation from her children (Neale, 1997). Returning to pivotal points in their biographies grounded identifications in their contributions to society and more morally virtuous self-identities (Meanwell, 2013). This nuances existing evidence that people experiencing homelessness present a temporally divided identity that contrasts their morally problematic past self with a more morally virtuous present self (Hoolachan, 2020; Meanwell, 2013), suggesting that identifications are characterised by greater fluidity than has previously been recognised.

A transition to ‘becoming’ homeless was not just related to cognitive

<sup>1</sup> Sam drew his life map as a graph with peaks and troughs, pointing to them when describing high and low points in his life.

processes, but marked by bodily transformation:

My next step will be...Street homelessness, the real deal, the thing that I haven't accepted, but slowly I am, 'cos I can see I'm down-sizing what I own, I'm wearing more coats...I'm changing externally as well as changing internally...Society is saying, 'you haven't established yourself, you haven't made your life more secure...what we would like you to do is evaporate'...Going onto the street is a more organic process for that to happen because you will start to decay (Emma, F, 40–49)

For Emma, becoming homeless was embodied – shedding possessions, increasing layers of clothing, and “coming to terms with the fact that this is what I'm changing into”. This bodily adaptation was signalled by more clothing or “one carrier bag too many” (Chris, M, 50+). As [Daya and Wilkins \(2013, p. 360\)](#) note, possessions and physical appearance are corporeal factors through which homelessness is marked on the body. This process of embracement ([Snow and Anderson, 1987](#)) was associated with a sense that one could not avoid this becoming: “My mindset has been changing into that of being destitute...absolutely feeling that that was my fate and...there's nothing I can do to stop it” (Emma, F, 40–49). Similarly, Thomas described “the inward battle I'm constantly having...this feeling of inevitability” (M, 50+). Faced with the threat of eviction, he began to adapt: “I literally started buying camping equipment...I'm thinking 'okay, I've got my car, I can put my camping equipment in the car, so I can camp” (Thomas).

Experiences of hidden displacement were also embodied and affective, and highlight the inadequacy of a conceptualisation of housing as home ([McCarthy, 2018](#)). Following her parents' divorce during her teenage years, Emma (F, 40–49) went to live with her mother, but “she wanted to start a new life and I wasn't really part of that...And she let me know that...I was a lodger in her home”. This generated changes in how Emma moved through domestic space:

Now I know that's homelessness...I'd never considered that until maybe a few weeks ago that...this...non-permanent sense of being housed really started as soon as the [parental] divorce, for me, that sense of you're on very rocky ground, you don't know whether you belong here, you must creep around and be very careful, clean up after yourself, don't rock the boat (Emma)

Emma's sense of displacement began with her experience of living with her mother as a teenager. Displacement was therefore not always experienced as spatially distinct from mainstream housing. Though ostensibly adequately housed (in legal terms), her lived experience was one of extreme precariousness, marked by uncertainty and non-belonging. Emma repeatedly came back to this time, demonstrating the way in which some events are endowed with such symbolic meaning that they are located “at a focal point of the explanatory system of the self” ([Hankiss, 1981, p. 203](#)). Emma's narrative underscores the performative nature of displacement. Although more commonly explored among roofless individuals as they seek to placate the regulators of public space ([Cloke et al., 2008](#)), this notion extends to those who feel homeless at home, adapting routines and movement to the constraints of the contexts in which precarious lives unfold. For example, “to accommodate the people you're living with... I creep, tiptoe around during the night” (Thomas, M, 50+); this highlights a sense of being ‘on edge’ in lodgings, mirroring descriptions from hostels and temporary housing ([Harris et al., 2019](#)).

Others noted their agency in strategic identity performances. Caroline (F, 40–49) described her interaction with the JobCentre: “you have to be really grovelling with them...you just have to...do what they say and not be arrogant” (Caroline). Similarly, Tinsel (F, 30–39) explained different ways of being in a hostel: “I believe I got a good reference [from the hostel]...because I know how to keep my mouth shut and I know when I need to suck up to people to get what I need”. These ‘performative moments’ ([Hull and Zacher, 2007](#)) highlight the deployment of particular identities in specific settings, the multifaceted and

fluid nature of identities, and the agency of individuals, tactics also observed by [Parsell \(2011\)](#).

### 5.3. Reclaiming continuous displacement: embracing precarious identities

A number of participants recast their experiences of continuous displacement as the pursuit of alternative lifestyles, adventure, and freedom. For some, this rejection of mainstream society may have been a response to, or protest at, perceived rejection from mainstream society. Their narratives reclaimed precarious identities, foregrounding their agency and generating a sense of value, albeit in a context of extreme constraint. For some, transience was part of a broader lifestyle associated with travelling between sites of protest, squatting, and activism. This mode of dwelling expressed other identifications: “It was around the nineties...there was a huge movement going on...[an] alternative scene...I was living in a squat...I ended up living on protest sites” (Dan, M, 40–49). As another participant explained: “I saw myself as a sort of like techno tramp...I was being called space cadet and activist...it was a lot of demos and stuff” (Jason, M, 50+).

Although insecurely housed, this was not necessarily synonymous with a feeling of homelessness, consistent with [Simone's \(2016\)](#) reframing of apparently uninhabitable spaces as a different form of urban life, rather than a diminished form of habitation. As Jason described: “If you're homeless...you must feel deprived of a home...Over the years, the last few years...I've felt deprived of a home...So, I've considered myself homeless, as I got older, yeah...definitely...But...this was all fun, this was all by choice” (Jason). These changes in participants' descriptions of their circumstances reveal that life stage was significant in perceptions of homelessness. In their youth, living in a highly mobile way provided a sense of identity and belonging: “I felt like I'd really achieved something in life to be on that front line where it was all happening...I felt I really fitted in” (Jason). These individuals were part of a cultural resistance, rejecting the normative expectations of home ([Finkelstein et al., 2008](#)). It is perhaps significant that these experiences occurred in a period when there was more scope for ‘alternative’ lifestyles, which has since narrowed (for example through the criminalisation of squatting in England).

For others, dwelling outside – often using tents or vehicles for shelter – was positioned as an adventure and exercise in survival. As Thomas explained: “I kind of remember feeling quite invigorated that I was being forced into survival mode, it [eviction] kind of snapped me out of the dark place” (M, 50+). Thomas compared his own life path and resourcefulness with his peers: “most of the people I was in school with are still in the same place...having not done much with their lives at all and I've had quite an adventure really”. Visiting friends as a way of remaining housed fitted with his life narrative of being “a bit of an adventurer...completely interested in people and society and culture...discovering other places” (Thomas). Travelling was re-cast as a source of adventure and evidence of a more cosmopolitan identity, juxtaposed with the inactivity of his contemporaries. This is similar to the narratives of young American ‘nomads’, who set themselves apart from sedentary forms of homelessness and ‘traditional’ routines of work and life ([Finkelstein et al., 2008; Stablein and Schad, 2019](#)).

For another participant, who had experienced displacement from a young age: “Life is about surviving...If you can survive from the age of 13 to age 16, that is a good way of saying...carry on and you might get somewhere in life...I was quite proud of myself, because I looked after myself” (Helen, F, 30–39). This sense of pride in surviving was shared by Thomas (M, 50+), who reflected that “you certainly forget very quickly about...the intricacies of...normal living...The little bit of energy my mind is giving me goes into food and shelter...You get a strange sense of pride when you achieve that”. Strength and resourcefulness formed a self that was set aside from those who would not cope: “if I said to you, ‘that's it you're on the street, no money’, you've only got to do it for a week...I promise you within two days, you would not be able to think straight” (Thomas). Through daily practices of

survival, within these alternative identities some participants constructed a greater sense of intrinsic worth (Farrugia, 2010) and ‘success’ than they had experienced in their previous mainstream lives, in which they were constrained by limited housing and job prospects, challenging neoliberal notions of a ‘good life’ (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2016, p. 280).

Embracing a life on the move, other participants framed periods of displacement as travelling. Dan (M, 40–49) described himself as “a traveller...Sort of homeless as well, really, but...a gentleman traveller”, aligning himself with a nomadic lifestyle. Paul (M, 30–29) reflected that “I was travelling to avoid the homelessness”, resonating with other participants:

It’s like an adventure really isn’t it? I didn’t want to think about what...I had to do in England. Being abroad...it was just so much easier. It’s like a holiday innit? I was just bored of everything...The bus ticket’s only £20 to get from London to Berlin, so why not...I was seeing the sights (Matt, M, 24–29)

Although their lack of home was common across the countries they travelled to, participants were able to adopt a different – and more advantaged – identity of being “a bit more of a traveller” (Matt) rather than someone who was homeless. Similar to the nomadic youths in Finkelstein et al’s (2008) research, travel offered adventure, action, and the opportunity to escape the boredom and alienation of ‘home’.

Dwelling informally represented freedom in many narratives, enabling a sense of control over their mode of living that had not been possible when housed. Some had travelled with seasonal work: “I really liked that lifestyle...living in the caravan, having no responsibilities and doing whatever I wanted...It was freedom in my eyes” (Tom, M, 30–39). Sleeping in his car, Barry (M, 50+) reflected that “it was quite nice in some ways. In others it wasn’t but...not having any worries with work or relationships...I felt a bit of freedom to be honest”. Similarly Dan was living in a tent, having left a flat:

I wanted to leave everything behind from that life...Personal items, banking details...I just left it...I could have taken some things that might have been useful to me...but I didn’t...I bought it all again...Leaving it [was]...like shedding a skin ...shedding that life...I am actually happier; I don’t have that...pressure...that flat...People just became disenfranchised with staring at the same walls and living in a flat and having a bleak existence and...a dreary job...they made a better life for themselves...[living outside represents] freedom (Dan, M, 40–49)

Although living with rooflessness was a precarious existence, it was not necessarily seen as more precarious than being inadequately housed, and could provide a sense of agency and control: “I sort of like it because in a way it’s my choice...In a way there is freedom” (Rafal, M, 24–29). In contrast, access to homeless hostels or supported accommodation increased surveillance and conditionality:

It’s normal now...I did like it on the streets as well...because you had your freedom there...it’s not ideal, no, but when you’re homeless you haven’t got to go by no rules, you can get up and go when you want to, you can move about when you want to, and...there’s no cost involved (Paul, M, 30–39)

As Cloke et al (2008) note, life in hostels is characterised by acute emotions, and rather than a home many participants described Oxford hostels as like a prison<sup>2</sup>. Other forms of dwelling could generate a sense of belonging and freedom. For example, Gary (M, 24–29) camped somewhere that was familiar but avoided the stigmatising gaze of others.

I always camped near the estate...I knew it like the back of my hand...I know where I can go where I won’t be seen...The first few months of actually roughing it and living in a tent...it was actually alright. There was a small sense of freedom there, ‘cos you’re not tied down to anything. You don’t have to pay rent, gas, electric...It was a sense of independence that you’re not going to get if you live in a house...I was out of the way and I was doing my own thing. I was cooking on campfires most nights. There was a sense of increased morale. If you’re just sleeping in doorways and stuff you’re always under the public eye...You’re going to feel like everyone’s looking at you. And everyone is, in that situation. Even if it’s just a sideways glance, everyone is looking at you (Gary)

Gary articulated the judgement of passers by, and the way that these ‘looks’ created an embodied subjectivity that was inferior, casting him as the ‘homeless person’ that he did not want to be (see Farrugia, 2010, p. 79). Individuals therefore experienced alternative modes of dwelling in contradictory ways, finding some benefits to daily life performed away from the gaze of others, whilst also living with extreme precarity and marginalisation.

Whilst being roofless was not their ideal living environment, housing was not necessarily synonymous with home. Ryan (M, 30–39) argued that living in a tent was “almost like going on a camping holiday for the first month...no responsibilities...But...after a while, reality kicks in”. Similarly, Thomas recalled camping holidays:

I enjoyed the camping at first. We used to camp as a family as kids...There’s this underlying stress and this overlying kind of, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing, this is exciting’...I think it’s what I know...I’m somebody [who has been on stage]. Most people would be terrified of that prospect, I’m invigorated by it...Because it’s not normal, it’s invigorating. I think that’s how I make sense of it...You’re living this nomad lifestyle (Thomas, M, 50+)

Having spent time on stage in his life, a nomadic existence was almost habitual to Thomas. He was “very comfortable” living out of a suitcase, and even though he had been living in the same house for a year, he was “still taking clothes out of a bag” and “almost ready to move...go onto the next place” (Thomas). However, there was also “a constant stream of stress...Not knowing what’s going to happen next” (Thomas). Therefore, embracing precarity coexisted alongside other subjectivities, and many wanted to live a ‘normal’ life: “just being normal like all my mates” (Callum, M, 40–49). Whilst valuing the independence of tent dwelling, Matt (M, 24–29) also argued “obviously I do want to get myself sorted and stuff like that...Just get somewhere to live and get back working”. When describing his experiences of travelling around the UK, Paul similarly commented that “obviously you’d have preferred not to be [homeless]”. Therefore, accounts of travelling should not romanticised, as these choices are made against a background of severely constrained options. Whilst many sought a self-contained home of their own, this was not a realistic option, and other modes of dwelling could be preferable to living in a hostel, which is often perceived as more dangerous and less desirable than literal rooflessness (Parsell, 2012).

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Cities are key incubators of forms of precarious living and “precarity in place” is widespread, but many modes are hidden (Ferreri et al., 2017, p. 256). This article illuminates some of these “partially understood” (Pleace, 2016, p. 29) experiences as individuals negotiate the displacement effects of living in a high-cost urban area. In this research, participants had little choice but to make a life through continuous displacement, generating routes to meaningful identities. The research highlights the processes through which individuals align themselves with multiple identities, sometimes concurrently. The socio-spatial context is crucial to understanding the enactment of different identities

<sup>2</sup> The notion of hostels as prison-like is reinforced by architecture of Oxford’s main homeless hostel, with three floors surrounding a central atrium, described in one fieldwork visit as “prison without a safety net”.

(Parsell, 2011). For example, participants described performing a particular homeless identity within a hostel, and compared the stigmatising gazes that conferred homeless identities with the freedom of tent dwelling.

Many participants rejected the term ‘homeless’ during periods in which they were inadequately housed, reflecting the way in which one’s housing position also signifies position in social space (Sparks, 2016, p. 90). Just as roofless individuals are stigmatised by being unable to retreat to private spaces (Parsell, 2011; Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004), so too are those experiencing hidden displacement within semi-private domains, such as sofa surfing. Participants held onto a ‘normal’ life and resisted a ‘homeless identity’ even when living through adversity. In contrast to Snow and Anderson (1987), whose research focused on rough sleepers and a context of low service provision, many participants here engaged in attempts to ‘pass’ (Goffman, 1963), suggesting that the provision of services such as showers, clothing and meals, enables resistance of the spoiled identity of homelessness. As Rosa (2019) argues, the performance of hygienist norms acquires a practical and social dimension in enabling individuals to maintain a liveable life.

Narratives of self-care also revealed processes of dis-identification. Farrugia (2011, p. 773) notes that individuals narrated their transition from homelessness to home in terms of pride and capability, thus rearticulating “the meaning of homelessness as a stigmatised difference associated with personal failing”. Similarly, in this research participants magnified subtle distinctions, dis-identifying from spoiled ‘others’. Thus, lack of cleanliness, passivity, begging and street sleeping marked homelessness on the bodies of ‘the homeless’. Such distinctions do not just occur between homeless and housed positions, but also within groups experiencing common conditions, yet these claims to difference can reinforce the wider social construction of a stigmatised homeless identity that is applied to all those experiencing displacement. This suggests that the success of alternative identifications is in part dependent on recognition and validation by others (Lawler, 2014). Parallel processes of identification were also evident, with individuals not only identifying with others ‘like them’, but also with previous – more positive – versions of themselves. This highlights the need to situate processes of identification and dis-identification temporally and biographically. It also reinforces Lancione’s (2016) call for open engagement with experiences, over more bounded categories of homelessness, bringing into view the “fine hierarchical gradation of disrepute” employed by individuals (Wacquant, 2007, p. 173).

Although many participants spoke of choice and agency, this was within a context of overwhelming constraint. Thus, the choices and identifications made by individuals are spatially and temporally contingent, such as Paul’s recognition that “I was travelling to avoid the homelessness” (M, 30–39). Nevertheless, the purposeful resistance and recasting of different identities provided a form of control, and could be deployed strategically (Parsell, 2011). For example, in accessing services for homeless groups, participants did not necessarily become overtaken by a homeless self-identity (Gonyea and Melekis, 2017), but this identity could be utilised and then discarded. As Angavu (F, 30–39) explained, social interactions with friends were an opportunity to embrace other identities, rather than being seen only in terms of her housing status. This highlights the fluid and overlapping nature of individual subjectivities, which could occur simultaneously, or in different spaces. As Roschelle and Kaufman (2004, p. 42) note, this suggests the need for research “to more fully examine the fluidity and simultaneity of strategies social agents use to manage their stigma”.

Lancione (2020) proposes to examine everyday practices of dwelling at the margins to understand forms of ‘dwelling as difference’ that challenge our habitual view of home. Indeed, in reclaiming continuous displacement, through their daily practices a number of participants made claims to alternative sources of worth, value, and leading a meaningful life (Gonyea and Melekis, 2017). For example, adopting a travelling identity reframed the disadvantage of homelessness as an adventure and freedom (Stablein and Schad, 2019). The narratives that

individuals constructed, such as drawing value from surviving and making camps, provided participants with a sense of control over their situation, which can make life seem more manageable (Frederick, 2019). Travelling also offered an escape from the boredom and alienation of their current life (Stablein and Schad, 2019). For others, squatting may have been driven by housing need, but over time could take on added cultural significance as the gateway to a wider collective identity (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2016, p. 279). However, the ability to create these alternative forms of value is differentiated. For example, those who are sofa surfing do not have access to the romantic travelling image.

Precarity is an embodied, ongoing process through which dis-possession and displacement are assembled, and power relations are enacted, on the body (Lancione, 2019, p. 183). This requires attention to bodily transformations, such as when Emma (F, 40–49) describes a process of ‘becoming’ homeless by wearing more coats. Part of resisting a ‘homeless identity’ was also a resistance against the bodily control imposed through aspects of service provision. Rather than the ‘careful impression management’ (Cloke et al., 2008) involved in accessing hostels, or sofa surfers’ concerns about ‘being in the way’ of their hosts, living informally could provide a sense of freedom that avoided the bodily control of other environments (Lancione, 2019). Whilst insecurity commonly destabilises or forestalls the assemblage of a home (Soaita and McKee, 2019), for some home making could be performed in unconventional and temporary domestic spaces (McCarthy, 2018). Phoebe (F, 50 + ) hung white voile nets at her windows and painted her hostel room, an act which is at once an attempt at home-making and potentially a means of symbolically distancing her from other residents who were not engaged in such acts of self-care. Further research can add to understandings of how individuals make home and a sense of belonging amidst a sense of permanent impermanence.

Whilst embracing a life on the move may not be viewed as an ‘ordinary’ response to growing precariousness, it is a point on a spectrum along which other expressions of precarity are becoming normalised. For example, the acceptance of eviction as a part of everyday life in the private rented sector, or gatekeeping and the complexity of eligibility diverting individuals away from statutory housing assistance, are examples of the way in which insecurity has become seen as a defining and inevitable urban condition. Ferreri et al. (2017) relate such conditions of vulnerability to the emergence of new precarious urban subjectivities. As such, the association of flexibility and adaptability with a sense of freedom, and resourcefulness in times of adversity, can be viewed as expressions of the embracing of such subjectivities. Although alternative identities can be enacted by individuals living through continuous displacement, as McCarthy (2013) notes, the success of such identities are still partly dependent on their recognition and acceptance by wider communities. For example, dwelling in tents and distancing from perceived ‘problem’ groups – constructing a self-identity of freedom, resourcefulness, and independence – may be perceived as maladaptive or threatening to dominant cultures, resulting in further disparagement (Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). Such narratives also point to the internalisation of a more precarious way of being, in which continuous displacement is a normalised condition of urban living.

To conclude, the research makes a key contribution in recognising the spectrum of homeless experiences, and resisting the temptation to valorise a binary distinction between ‘the homeless’ and ‘everyone else’. Most participants had experienced hidden homelessness, and displacement was not always experienced as experientially or spatially distinct from mainstream housing experiences, suggesting a need to work across categories of housing and focus on experience and processes. This brings into view a broader range of fluid and overlapping identities, across greater temporal horizons than has necessarily been recognised, contributing to debates across a range of urban contexts which advocate for a focus on the unfolding of everyday life in diverse modes of dwelling. For example, for some, the freedom, independence, and sense of intrinsic worth and control afforded by success within daily survival



practices in spaces of separation contrasted with the poor housing and job prospects available within the bounds of previous housed living. Although such expressions of agency were exercised within the context of highly constrained opportunities, rooflessness was not necessarily experienced as ontologically different to inadequate or precarious housing. This suggests that understanding experiences of displacement may have important implications for people's self-identification as 'homeless' and related help-seeking behaviours.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Jenny Preece:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Elisabeth Garratt:** Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

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