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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer experiences of homelessness and identity: insecurity and home(o)normativity

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness among the young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* (LGBT+) population is becoming an increasing societal concern, with alarmist reporting of high rates of homelessness compared to heterosexual people. This paper presents qualitative evidence from research with 20 LGBT+ people who had experienced homelessness in Scotland. Significantly, it moves discussion of LGBT+ homelessness out of a concern with public health and social work, to understand it in terms of homelessness research and housing theory. The analysis also brings in queer theory to our discussions of homelessness and housing. As a result, rather than understanding our participants as passive victims of a homophobic or transphobic society, we focus on their agency in developing a queer identity alongside their experiences of insecure accommodation. In their experiences of homelessness people were carrying out 'edgework' at the margins of heteronormative society. Routes out of homelessness were thus associated with people becoming more comfortable within their identities. We conclude by arguing that experiences of homelessness interacted in complex ways with sexual and gender identity, and that tailored mainstream housing provision is required for LGBT+ homeless people.

KEYWORDS LGBT+; queer; homelessness; housing; policy

Introduction

The experiences of homeless young people with LGBT+ identities are of significant recent public and policy focus (Ecker, 2016; Paradis, 2017). There is a concern that this group are more vulnerable to familial rejection, and may be more vulnerable during their experiences of homelessness. In this

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paper, we present qualitative evidence on the experiences of this marginalised group. The original contribution of this paper is that we bring queer theory into understanding the links between homelessness and ontological security and thus move beyond presuming a direct causal link between sexual or gender identity and homelessness. Rather, and significantly for our understanding of homelessness more generally, we suggest that the vulnerability of homelessness is closely aligned to the discomfort of being queer in a heteronormative society, that is 'the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence' (Jackson, 2006, p. 108).

At the core of this paper we carry out intellectual work with two key issues: firstly, that home/homelessness and sexual and gender identity are both essentialist characteristics – that is they are central to an individual's sense of identity and security – so any discussion of the intersection of the characteristics is complex. Secondly, bringing together the critical realist perspective on experiences of homelessness of McNaughton Nicholls (2009), with insights from queer theory we suggest can develop our understanding of homelessness further. As argued by McNaughton Nicholls (2010, p. 38): 'those who are marginalized ... can rarely have both the security of (social or supported) housing and the freedom to "be" and enjoy it as a private space'; if people feel marginalised by their sexual and gender identity, then they may not feel free in their housing situation. Recounting the experiences of LGBT+ people who have experienced homelessness, we reveal the complexity of the interaction between their sexual and gender identity and their housing situation. We suggest that developing identity as queer/transgressive, and becoming (more) comfortable with this (Ahmed, 2013), often parallels becoming settled in a home or home-like environment, rather than sexual or gender identity being a simplistic cause of homelessness.

LGBT exclusion and homelessness

Great strides have been made in most minority world countries on promoting equality for LGBT+ people. In the UK, the Equality Act (2010) outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual or gender identity, and across the world equal marriage legislation is steadily being approved, removing a final legal barrier (Kollman & Waites, 2011; Richardson & Monroe, 2013). While discriminatory views are still held, these are also falling in wider society (Swales & Taylor, 2017). For example, in Scotland, the proportion of people saying same-sex relationships are 'mostly' or 'always wrong' has fallen from 48 per cent of people in 2000 to a mere 18 per cent of people in 2015 (Scottish Government, 2016). When looking at young people with much

more liberal social attitudes, this has led to the view that homophobia is of declining significance in society (McCormack, 2012). Despite this progress, there is an ongoing concern that LGBT+ young people make up a disproportionate number of people who experience homelessness, with estimates suggesting they make up 25–40 per cent of the youth homeless population, although the evidential basis for this is extremely weak (Abramovich, 2016; Bateman, 2015; Ecker, 2016).

Traditional perspectives on LGBT+ homelessness have focussed on family rejection as a key cause of homelessness (see, for example, the high profile report for the UK charity the Albert Kennedy Trust by Bateman, 2015; Ecker, 2016; Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). Other related causes are young LGBT+ people moving to large urban centres, such as San Francisco (Weston, 1995), to be with other LGBT+ people without a permanent home. Implicit in the link between sexual and gender identity and homelessness in these narratives is the forming of identity. Young people recognise a difference in themselves, develop this sense of difference as an LGBT+ identity, and then through its expression (coming out) leave, or are forced to leave, a home. Research supporting this direct causal pathway into homelessness, where coming out leads to family rejection, tends to be from North America and particularly the USA. This research also focuses on the public health implications and risk associated with homelessness, rather than causes or more general experiences, and thus highlights incredibly negative experiences such as drug use and sexual exploitation (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Corliss, Goodenow, Nichols, & Austin, 2011). Importantly, this research comes from a context where the welfare safety net is very poor; as Somerville (2013, p. 407) suggests '[t]he sheer cruelty and vindictiveness of the US system, indeed, is sometimes difficult for Europeans to fathom'. For example, a recent review of research into LGBT+ youth homelessness that relied on North American research, found their experiences were far worse than the experiences of heterosexuals. The review concluded that:

'Homeless queer youth had poorer outcomes in relation to all other indices, including mental health issues, suicidal behaviours, substance use, sexual victimisation, sexual risk behaviours, physical victimisation, discrimination/stigma, family relationships, and social relationships' (Ecker, 2016, 343)

While, the statistical studies used in this review are not available within the UK or other European countries, we can surmise that some of these negative outcomes may be avoided with the broader welfare entitlements of these countries. For example, in the UK, supported housing, which is portrayed as an innovation in a US context, is a more common form of provision and can reduce harm for vulnerable homeless people (Clapham, Foye, & Christian, 2017).

Greater complexity for the role of sexuality in causing homelessness was explained in one of the few UK-based studies of LGB homelessness (Prendergast, Dunne, & Telford, 2001). In this research, sexual identity was identified as a causal factor in youth homelessness in two, of four, identified narratives of homelessness among their participants. For the majority of their participants, their sexuality was part of their identity, but not a cause of their homelessness, a finding repeated in more recent research (Tunåker, 2017). The researchers also suggested LGBT homelessness was likely to rise as young people explored their sexuality more, but were in a welfare environment where young people have to rely on their family of origin to support their welfare. Thus, there was a greater risk of family rejection leading to homelessness. However, this presumed that social attitudes toward counter-normative sexualities would not change, and the risk of a family being homophobic would remain the same. The massive changes in social attitudes towards same-sex relationships over the past two decades, as well as legislative advances, suggest this might have been an incorrect assumption. As Gorman-Murray (2008, p. 32) suggests, coming out in supportive family environments can help young people become comfortable in their identities, and family homes can become 'queer spaces ... [and] ... sites of resistance to heterosexism'.

Definitions and causes of homelessness

The strong welfare safety net of homelessness, particularly in the UK, has framed how we understand and define homelessness (Jacobs, Kemeny, & Manzi, 1999; Neale, 1997). Indeed, in relation to this research, we need to recognise Scotland's expansive, right-based homelessness system which means that nearly all people who have become unintentionally homeless have a statutory right to housing from their local authority (Watts, 2014). This means all people over 18 who are sleeping rough, in inadequate or overcrowded accommodation, or at risk of abuse, are due a duty to be permanently housed by their local authority. Exclusions apply based on the applicant having a local connection, or people who have made themselves 'intentionally' homeless through not paying rent, or committing anti-social or criminal acts. Individuals who are under 18 would be due a duty of care from social services through parallel social work legislative provision.

An ongoing critique is that such legal definitions come to frame how we understand homelessness (Jacobs et al., 1999). As a reaction, scholarship has sought to understand how homeless people themselves understand their vulnerability, moving towards a more constructivist position. For example, while many researchers and activists are concerned about 'sofa-surfing' being a major part of hidden youth homelessness which would not

be covered by legal definitions of homelessness, or in most statistics. Further, research has suggested that young people themselves do not understand the term, that they were homeless, or the vulnerability of their position (McCoy & Hug, 2016). However, it is still important to understand such experiences, and support young people, which a constructivist approach to homelessness research allows. Two criticisms of such constructivist approaches are, firstly, that it becomes difficult to be precise about an experience of homelessness, against an experience of broader vulnerability which included a period without secure accommodation (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009). Secondly, such approaches often use broad structural explanations for homelessness (poverty, lack of housing) without explicitly outlining *how* they lead to an individual experiencing homelessness (Somerville, 2013).

Housing pathways approaches to understanding homelessness use a social constructionist basis to understand housing and home, but then focus on the affordances that home offers. A 'housing pathway of a household is the continually changing set of relationships and interactions that it experiences over time in its consumption of housing' (Clapham, 2005, p. 27). In terms of understanding homelessness, housing pathways pays attention to the period of transition for young people who: 'are engaged in a process of negotiation with parents or gatekeepers of housing in which their ability to achieve their objectives will vary. Some will encounter severe problems and in a few cases will experience homelessness' (Ibid 201). However, in application to understanding the causes and experience of homelessness, a housing pathways approach still falls back on structuralist explanations, highlighting poverty, welfare changes, and family rejection as key causes of homelessness (Clapham, Mackie, Orford, Thomas, & Buckley, 2014; Somerville, 2013).

In her work, McNaughton Nicholls (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009; McNaughton, 2008) places agency at the core of describing experiences of homelessness, while moving beyond historic pathological explanations for homelessness. By avoiding the agency of homeless people in favour of focussing on structural causes. It is argued, means: 'an aspect of explaining some homelessness has been missed. Agency needs to be explicitly explored rather than conveniently "written out" of academic accounts' (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009, p. 75). From this, analysis subsequently focuses on the 'edgework' homeless people actively do when they negotiate the risks of 'transgressive acts' – drug taking or alcohol abuse, or behaviours associated with mental illness for example. Recognising the vulnerable context in which homeless people act, with limited capabilities to act in the world (McNaughton Nicholls, 2010), it is suggested that people act within a 'thin rationality' of limited choices (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009,

p. 71). Thus, becoming homeless because you are a victim of domestic violence becomes an active choice, albeit an unenviable one, between continuing to suffer violence, or escaping into a situation that might be better; taking drugs when one knows it will lead to eviction from a hostel again becomes a choice, between the pleasure of using illicit substances against the unpleasant experiences of staying in the chaotic environment of a hostel. Foregrounding the thin rationality retains a focus on structural constraints within individuals' lives, but can write-back in agency.

In the rest of this paper, we will suggest that this focus on the agency of homeless people and their 'edgework' can better help us understand LGBT+ homelessness. However, we would argue that research on the causes and experience of homelessness has lacked the insights of lesbian and gay studies, and queer theory. Lesbian and gay studies reveal empirical insights into the lives of non-heterosexuals where exclusion within, and outwith, the family is negotiated (Valentine et al., 2003).

Queer(y)-ing home

Queer theory has become an incredibly broad, and fruitful avenue for enquiry across a range of disciplines and as a result, and inherently because of the nature of the term, it has become a slippery and ill-defined term (Browne, 2006; Green, 2002). A particular issue is the elision of 'queer' with, firstly all research concerned with the lives of people who identify as LGBT+ (Green, 2002), and secondly the conflation of all non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered identities under the umbrella 'queer' and that 'geographies of sexualities should not be simplistically conflated with queer geographies' (or any other academic study) (Browne, 2006, p. 885). Rather, queer is a theoretical and critical standpoint to question the suppositions and binaries made normal by a heteronormative society (Browne, 2006; Green, 2002; Jackson, 2007). Even so, as argued by Green (2002, p. 524) 'queer theory is less a formal theory with falsifiable propositions than a somewhat loosely bound, critical standpoint'.

As such a critical standpoint, queer perspectives can inform our understanding of homelessness for LGBT+ people, and for homelessness more generally. In this paper we are using this critical standpoint in two specific ways. Firstly, the central tenet of queer theory is to explain and disrupt heteronormative society (Browne, 2006; Jackson, 2007; Lee, Learmonth, & Harding, 2008). This is an important consideration when considering housing and homelessness because domesticity, and the heterosexual married couple with children living in a house, is one of the key norms of heteronormative society and '[t]he family is idealisable through "compulsory heterosexuality"' (Ahmed, 2013, p. 423). Thus, queer theory allows us to challenge statements such as 'there is no practicable alternative but to use

the concept of household as the basic unit of analysis in housing' (Clapham, 2005, p. 26) by pointing out there are – these are heteronormative constructs, so queer alternatives *do and have* existed (Barrett, 2015; Gorman-Murray, 2006; Pilkey, 2014).

Secondly, queer theory is useful because it focuses our attention on the agency of *being queer* in a heteronormative society. Here, we part company with the arguments that queer is not an identity (Browne, 2006; Green, 2002). Partly this is because some of our participants openly identified as being queer, or feeling at home among queer people. It is also because using the term in this way focuses us on the impacts of heteronormative society on individuals. Same-sex love, or not being cisgendered, in a heteronormative society, is an act of transgression in and of itself (Butler, 2013). It is an embodied transgression, where queer bodies are made to feel uncomfortable in the heteronormative world (Ahmed, 2013). Subsequently, any person who is queer, is going through a process of understanding their being in a heteronormative world. As we will explore below, this insight is useful in revealing more around the feelings of discomfort/comfort and exclusion/inclusion associated with being homeless and home (Pilkey, 2014).

Specifically, queer theory, or queer approaches, can better help us make the link between heteronormative approaches to understanding homelessness (that is, approaches that do not explicitly consider LGBT+ identities) that focus on other identities, such as housing pathways, or the realist approach of McNaughton Nicholls (McNaughton Nicholls, 2010); approaches that focus on individual agency of homeless people (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009); and structural explanations that focus on issues such as discrimination, low income, and lack of housing, including those that do unpack the role of explicit homophobia and transphobia in causing homelessness (Tunåker, 2017; Valentine et al., 2003). While not blaming LGBT+ people for their homelessness, we develop an analysis that explores how homelessness, and finding a home, was intimately tied to our participants becoming themselves and understanding their sexual or gender identity. While for many LGBT+ people this journey of self-discovery will not involve a period of homelessness, for our participants the two events were closely interconnected, but not necessarily in a causal way. In terms of McNaughton Nicholls' framework (2009) a heteronormative society, and explicit homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, frames the 'thin rationality' of the agency of our participants in becoming homeless and eventually being housed.

Returning to consider definitions of homelessness, a broader definition of homeless states that it:

'is not just a matter of lack of shelter or lack of abode, a lack of a roof over one's head. It involves deprivation across a number of different dimensions

– physiological (lack of bodily comfort or warmth), emotional (lack of love or joy), territorial (lack of privacy), ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope, lack of purpose). It is important to recognise this multidimensional character, not least because homelessness cannot be remedied simply through the provision of bricks and mortar – all the other dimensions must be addressed, such as creature comforts, satisfying relationships, space of one's own, ontological security and sense of worth.'

(Somerville, 2013, p. 384)

In presenting our evidence below, we suggest that for LGBT + ontological security, comfort and a sense of worth is deeply entwined with being at ease in a heteronormative world. As a result, we agree with Prendergast et al that when we are 'Putting their [LGBT + homeless people's] sexuality back into the picture ... although over time it has played a significant role in their homelessness crisis, it may also enable new forms of inclusion' (Prendergast et al., 2001, p. 65).

Methodology

As this research is taking a queer perspective, it is important to explain the positionality of the authors. Matthews is an openly gay, cisgender man and Poyner and Kjellgren are straight cisgendered men. We note this because it led to the research and the interpretation of the data as presented here. Firstly, it led to Matthews wishing to carry out the research, building on previous research on LGB housing (Matthews & Besemer, 2015). Secondly, the sexual diversity in the research team meant the data was interpreted from gay and straight perspectives leading to key insights. In reading many of the incidents in the participants' narratives, Matthews was not entirely surprised – these were just part of being queer in a heteronormative society, whereas Poyner could see these for the shocking incidents of exclusion they were. Conversely, Poyner overlooked some themes that were just normal for all people that were highlighted by Matthews.

Research with homeless people is challenging, as participants are vulnerable and difficult to reach. For this research, a broad opportunistic approach to participant recruitment was used. Homelessness and LGBT + organisations were contacted initially. This recruited some participants, but gatekeepers suggested that many people accessing the services of LGBT + organisations did not perceive of their experiences as homelessness; and *vice versa* homelessness services did not routinely collect data on the sexual and gender identity of service users, or were reticent to breach confidentiality. Some participants were recruited through a flyer posted on Twitter and Facebook. Finally, Matthews created a profile on the gay male

dating app Grindr stating that he was looking for young LGBT+ people who had recently been homeless (Burrell et al., 2012; Matthews, 2017). Under the agreed ethics protocol the researcher was not allowed to initiate conversations with users of the service, and was explicitly not using the service for dating. In these methods, the research team used terminology such as 'been homeless, or had to stay with a friend because you had no choice', to ensure inclusion.

The original intention had been to access young people (18-25) with recent experiences of homelessness; due to challenges in participant recruitment, we broadened the scope to all people who identified as LGBT+ and had experience of homelessness. In total, 20 people with varying experiences of housing insecurity were interviewed, 10 of whom directly replied to requests for participants who had experienced homelessness. While an opportunistic approach to recruitment did not allow us to structure our sample, it may have allowed us to access a hidden homeless population that may have been missed in previous studies that mainly relied on homeless support organisations as gatekeepers (Ecker, 2016). An example of this would be the transgender participants who had experienced familial rejection and subsequent homelessness, but had been in their homes for an extended period, and did not identify themselves as homeless. However, the approach still required people to self-identify as LGBT+ and/or as homeless.

Following previous methodologies for interviewing people who had experienced homelessness, the opening questions in the interviews invited participants to narrate the story of how they came to be living where they live now. This allowed their 'homelessness to be explored as a "life process" within which people actively re-tell and evaluate their history' (Kunnen and Martin, 2008, p. 70). Through this, some participants with other housing insecurities who had agreed to participate in the research for this reason were also found to have had experiences of homelessness.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were read by all members of the research team, and coded *in vivo* by Poyner for key themes. When the data is quoted below, we use pseudonyms chosen by the participants, except when they asked the research team to choose a pseudonym for them. Where relevant, we mention their gender and/or sexual identity, but otherwise identifying characteristics are not mentioned to protect confidentiality.

Finding spaces to become self and homelessness

As discussed, our data suggests that the experience of leaving a home and finding a new home was a key part of our participants' experience and the process of understanding their LGBT+ identity in a heteronormative world.

Prior to their experiences of homelessness, their identity was broadly constrained by where they lived: they were victims of domestic abuse; relationship breakdown; their family did not accept their identity; or they were experiencing other forms of housing insecurity.

In terms of family rejection as a cause of homelessness (Donovan, Heaphy, & Weeks, 2004; Valentine et al., 2003), among our LGB participants, this had not explicitly occurred recently, however for one transwoman and one gender non-binary person this was their experience:

'I was not allowed to be myself and I just felt that I had been doing big steps and so was feeling more comfortable and confident about myself and I just felt really caught up in everything. I did not really feel that safe around my parents, as well... I kind of realised that a lot of the behaviour my parents had towards me was quite abusive.' – Kelly

'I have always been in an abusive situation in the family home from a young age, but when I came out, it got worse. It was not so much that I came out as queer; it was when I came out as trans. There was no targeting towards queer... It was the transness that was very much a target, it was, "you are just a tranny" all this stuff that you should not be hearing let alone from your own mother. It was just horrific.' – Kai

In both cases, it was not as simple as familial rejection on the occasion of them coming out. Both participants recounted experiences of longer term psychological abuse within the family environment and in legal definitions, they could have been categorised as homeless before they actively left the family home (under existing legislation they might have been categorised as being at risk of domestic abuse, one of the criteria for being owed a duty to be housed). Coming out as transgender/non-binary for these individuals was the trigger for the abuse to escalate and Kelly and Kai had to rationally act to get out of their situation (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009) and to be themselves, as explained by Kelly.

Two other transwomen, Daphne and Ange, became homeless after coming out in relationships because of their gender change, as Daphne explained prior to her transition: 'me being male and the other person being female and that did not work and that made me homeless'. Ange's marriage had ended when she came out to her then wife, who did not want a relationship with a woman. Again, in both cases, the person could not be themselves as a woman within the housing situation they found themselves in, and becoming homeless was a stage in their developing identity.

Among the participants who had more historic experiences of homelessness, familial rejection of sexual identity was noted, as reported by more historic research in this area (Prendergast et al., 2001; Valentine et al., 2003). For example, Daniel explained how as a younger man 'I said to my mother

one night would you have a homosexual person living here and she said absolutely not, and I said I had better leave then.' Again though, we can give agency to Daniel – within the context of a socially conservative, arguably abusive family situation, he acted within a thin rationality to get out of a situation where he could not be himself.

Veronica's story was more complex. She was now living in a hostel and was in a long-term relationship with a woman. However, previously she had been closeted and married to a man. As she explained, this was due to familial acceptance, and she 'had to wait on my dad dying. My dad would never have allowed it – never'. After her father had died, she got divorced and started a same-sex relationship, living her identity as a gay woman. Although Veronica had experienced familial rejection, this was not the direct cause of her homelessness, rather it led her to maintain a relationship she did not want to be in. The ending of this relationship and the forming of a new relationship precipitated drug abuse, leading to a second abusive same-sex relationship which led to her homelessness.

Other participants had experienced domestic abuse in relationships that were interwoven with complex lives that included periods of homelessness. Kai, described how they had:

'an online relationship with a partner and I went to live with them, but they were very abusive and so I was in a very difficult situation then as well where I was trying to escape from that abuse. I was essentially kept housebound for a month and a half, two months, which was terrifying, obviously. They lived in a town far away from a city – public transport was difficult – so that took me a while. I got out of that in June.' – Kai

This was on top of experiences of abuse within their family of origin. Another participant, Anna, who was bisexual had experienced domestic abuse in a relationship with a man: 'I had been living there for three years and my ex was not a good person sometimes – very violent and occasionally angry'. As well as this, the family of her former partner openly criticised her sexual identity. This led to her homelessness, but again she found herself in an abusive relationship, this time with a woman, who was very controlling, for example tracking the calories she ate. This meant she experienced a continued period of housing insecurity.

The situations outlined above are all horrible, and in this analysis we do not wish to minimise the distress and harm that these experiences caused our participants. But following McNaughton Nicholls (2009), and looking at how these people described their move to homelessness, in difficult situations it was a choice which allowed another part of their identity – their sexuality or gender – to flourish in a much better way. The 'thin rationality' and agency that these people expressed can be contrasted with the appalling situation Kat, a recent in-migrant, found themselves in:

'Just my previous boss is gay and his boyfriend (my friend) is gay. My friend (my second boss) is interested sexually about me and he tried a few times, last May, to have something with me. I said no and the big problem started after this because I said no.' – Kat

Kat's sexual identity is involved in this story of becoming homeless, but ultimately their homelessness was caused by an exploitative employer, who also happened to be gay, who took away their tied accommodation. This extreme vulnerability contrasts sharply with the other participants' experiences, where homelessness was intertwined in a complex way with the people's emerging identities and broader experiences of exclusion and abuse. For many of our participants to become comfortable with their identity required a home, for as suggested by Noble (2002, p. 57) 'the home provides for most people a grounded space for identity work.'

Lack of security and identity

Sommerville (2013, p. 408) suggests that '[b]eing at home in the world (or 'home', for short) is a multidimensional phenomenon, comprising a complex assemblage of relationships of a number of different kinds'. In particular home offers comfort in a sense that 'refers not just to our immediate sensory satisfaction but to a less explicit and more general sense of familiarity with space—the feeling of being 'at home'—and in relation to the larger world' (Noble, 2002, p. 56). This becomes apparent when we consider the experiences of homelessness and transitions out of homelessness of our participants. Here, a link between comfort within one's own queer identity in a heteronormative society, and comfortable experiences of being at home becomes apparent during and then out of experiences of homelessness.

To begin by focussing on insecurity, most of our participants described periods when they were precariously housed – living with friends, or in hostel accommodation that was unsuitable for them. This lack of security was felt by our participants who had 'sofa surfed' – that is, slept at friends' houses without their own bedroom or secure tenancy – as a feeling of being in the way. As explained by Michael:

'There were four of us mucking around in this flat that was really small and, obviously, everyone trying to get ready in the morning and I felt uncomfortable being there as well because I was a hindrance'

This was just one of the periods of insecurity for Michael. He explained how during another period of homelessness he slept in his boyfriend's single bed at his boyfriend's parents' house. Too scared to leave the room, he hid away. When hearing his boyfriend was unfaithful he left and on leaving his former boyfriend's mother explained they had always known he was

there because they saw his shoes in the hall, and that he would have been welcome to join them. Other periods of sofa-surfing were less distressing for our participants, but they were marked by similar feelings of being in the way. Importantly for our analysis, this discomfort was not tied to their sexual or gender identity, but to the insecurity of their housing situation. Some of the same feelings were expressed in people's experiences of hostels and shared supported accommodation – having to share kitchen space and having food stolen; sharing social spaces; not having access to the internet and a computer. Again, it is likely these would be similar for all residents.

Another way in which insecurity was manifest in our participants was in the feelings expressed over the loss of possessions during periods of homelessness. After his first experience of homelessness, Michael lost all of his possessions as they were taken by his landlord. He explained how:

'When you only have one change of clothes at that age it was really embarrassing - people are seeing me wearing the same thing all the time and they are going to think I am dirty.'

For Anna, who was bisexual, when her first period of homelessness began after her relationship with a man ended, this loss of possessions, and impact on her identity was keenly felt as the perpetrator was her former boyfriend's mother:

'Even stuff like, his mum would buy a book and read it once, so there was a copy of *Oryx and Crake*, which is my favourite book in the universe, and it was her copy, but I had read it so many times that the spine broke. I tried to take it with me when I moved out and she went through and said, that belongs to me, that belongs and that belongs to me.'

She went on to explain that this symbolised the loss of something deeply meaningful, and the loss of a friendship. As suggested by Noble (Noble, 2002, p. 57) 'home ... is understood as a kind of project of ontological security, an ongoing accomplishment' and belongings associated with identity are key to this project; when that identity is non-heterosexual belonging in the home can become more important (Pilkey, 2014).

We see closer links between feelings of insecurity and sexual identity in people's experience of hostels and other supported accommodation. In the next section, we discuss positive experiences in such accommodation. However, some of our participants had more negative experiences. Daphne had left a hostel, in effect become homeless again, because she was uncomfortable with the way staff treated her. Veronica experienced explicitly transphobic behaviour from staff in a hostel:

'I was in a couple of homeless hostels for a bit and I actually had to leave one of them. The reason being I was not comfortable there ... They kept on trying to treat me as a man'

Thomas decided not to be open about his sexuality as a gay man within hostels:

‘when I was in the hostels I certainly did not disclose it then because I just would not. Some of the people in there I do not know if they would be sound with it [accepting].’

In these cases we see how sexual and gender identity was associated with discomfort and a sense of homelessness even in hostel accommodation. In all the cases, the experience meant the participants were made to feel uncomfortable in their queer selves, or could not express this openly for fear of the reaction from other residents. In these cases, sexual or gender identity did explicitly interact with a housing situation. Contrasting Veronica’s act to leave the hostel to express her sexuality, and Thomas’s choice to stay, but remain closeted, we can clearly see the thin rationality that exists for LGBT + homeless individuals (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009). As they negotiate the transgressive act of their queerness, and particularly for transgender people their queer bodies, in a heteronormative environment, and their need for accommodation security in the short-term, they have to make an assessment of the risk to themselves and their bodies in coming out, or being themselves, in different environments.

Home, family, and routes out of homelessness

The data presented so far highlights how experiences of homelessness for these LGBT + people was associated with a broader sense of discomfort about their identity. When we look at the experiences of our participants leaving homelessness the opposite is apparent. The comfort of home – wherever that happened to be – was a broader comfort of the self (Noble, 2002; Pilkey, 2014).

Key to the development of this more secure sense of identity were the social relationships formed by people, either with staff or with friends in a family of choice. This parallels the experiences of young people coming out in supportive households described by Gorman-Murray (2008). For Veronica, it was the alignment of sexual identities that made interactions with staff productive: ‘All the staff who are gay are brilliant’. With her experiences of homelessness linked in complex ways to domestic violence, drug addiction, and her sexuality, being able to discuss her problems with staff who were also gay women helped Veronica. The alignment of gender was also important, and she believed she would not have the same relationship with a gay man.

As in the heterosexual families discussed by Gorman-Murray (2008), the alignment of sexual or gender identity was less important for other participants; what was important was that staff were respecting and helpful. For

example, Kai described how residents in their supported accommodation referred to one member of staff as 'grandma' because of the maternal care she gave the young people. For Amber, one homelessness officer in the local council was particularly helpful, making sure that she was engaged in the letting system and did not lose her priority on the housing list.

Some participants had experiences of sofa-surfing which were the result of friendships within the LGBT + community which allowed our participants to escape their conditions. For Daniel, his homelessness was a result of inadequate accommodation – his flat in the private rented sector was of such poor quality that a friend found him crying in his garden, and:

'I was very thankful when my neighbour found me... She drove me over to this other flat and said this is appalling you cannot possibly live here and I said to her I do not have anywhere else to go, and she said sleep in my spare room'

Kelly, who was rejected by her family after a life of psychological abuse because of her gender identity, was allowed to stay with friends in other cities before her housing situation was resolved. For Anna, a collective identity of homelessness risk allowed her to form a friendship that temporarily resolved her housing situation:

'At that point, a friend of a friend offered me a room, so we signed a lease together because they already lived there and their brother was moving out. We were not friends. We did not really know each other, we got on well enough so it was just like, fuck, yes, we will live together because I do not want to be homeless.'

For Kat, who was in an extremely vulnerable situation as described above, gay friends provided temporary accommodation:

'They are a gay couple, my friends from my first time here. They helped before with other things. I stayed with them for almost three weeks'

For these participants, these friends were queering their domestic space by 'bringing the public—the non-domestic and non-nuclear familial—into the ostensibly private in order to create queer, identity-affirming homes' (Gorman-Murray, 2006, p. 57) and these homes became supportive 'families of choice' (Valentine et al., 2003) even if acts such as sofa-surfing might be recognised as insecure and making these young people vulnerable (McCoy & Hug, 2016).

For our participants, getting to a point of having secure housing and feeling secure and settled in their identity often required support and an active choice for people. This is particularly the case in a context where welfare provision for young people, and for housing, is reducing (Prendergast et al., 2001). Two of our participants were in full-time higher education when they were homeless, and were thus not eligible for any welfare

benefits. Their universities were supportive in providing them with accommodation in their halls of residence outwith term-time, however this came at significant cost as rents were higher than elsewhere in the private rented sector. Given the increase in the undergraduate student population in the UK over the past 20 years, with now around 50 per cent of all young people going on to study full-time at university or college (Department for Education, 2016), it is likely that universities and their accommodation providers are becoming an unexamined part of youth homelessness provision (Evans, 2016).

Two good examples of the active agency of our participants in attaining their own home are Kai and Veronica. In Veronica's case, being in a hostel meant respite from an abusive partner and their drug abuse. The hostel operated a 'staircase' model of support (Clapham, 2015) where clients' lives had to be stable within the hostel environment to gain a secure tenancy in their own home. Veronica was committed to staying dry and clean, even though the hostel allowed residents to use drink and drugs on the premises. She had started playing football and was hoping to take part in the homeless world cup. This clearly required action and agency on Veronica's part to overcome her individual problems and engage with support. For Kai, the action was deciding that they could not wait for a social tenancy to become available and aspired to live in the private rented sector. This meant they had to save their meagre benefits for many months to secure enough money for a deposit on a very small flat an extremely positive step for Kai in developing their identity as a queer person.

Conclusion: home-onormativity?

At the outset of this paper, it was argued that bringing queer theory into an understanding of homelessness helps us both understand homelessness more, and the particular experiences of LGBT+ people's experiences of homelessness. Theoretically, it was argued that queer theory can open up critiques of heteronormative society that would not otherwise be recognised, and highlight the act of being queer in a society which is not queer, including the discomfort of being the 'wrong' body in such a society (Ahmed, 2013). Bringing this together with McNaughton-Nicholls' work on the agency of people who are experiencing homelessness and their actions with a thin rationality, helps us to unpack a complex relationship between the experience of homelessness and sexual and gender identity.

As such, the *act* of becoming homeless, for some LGBT+ people might be essentially linked to their growing identity, and the move out of homelessness closely connected with stabilising identity and becoming more comfortable in a world of discomfort. This was most strikingly summarised

by Kai who described that 'My independent life since running away, I think has been such a relief from my childhood that, actually ... overall it has been really amazing and really positive.' As with the participants in McNaughton-Nicholls' (2009) study, Kai, and our other participants, were acting within a 'thin rationality' – becoming homeless was an act by these participants, but in a context of personal abuse, exclusion or other problems, and in the broader context of a society in which being queer itself is a transgressive act. As a result, for many, outcomes were broadly positive.

This evidence gives agency back to our LGBT + participants – they were not solely the victims of homophobic or transphobic familial abuse, or a challenge for public health, as represented in much of the literature to date (Abramovich, 2016; Ecker, 2016). Also, unlike the participants in earlier research (Prendergast et al., 2001), these were LGBT + people mainly acting in a world that was accepting, at least on the surface, of their identity. Their experiences of homelessness were subsequently complex negotiations in taking risks in managing their identities, their wider personal problems and their insecure accommodation. As with 'edgework', being carried out by the participants in McNaughton-Nicholls' study (2009), our participants were taking risks in a heteronormative society which recreates and reinforces compulsory heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2013; Jackson, 2007).

The importance of home as part of their sense of identity for our participants may leave us in a theoretical quandary. As discussed, the home and the household is commonly seen as a heteronormative institution, with the heterosexual family as a key structure in replicating compulsory heterosexuality (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Pilkey, 2014). The legal changes that have resulted in greater equality for LGBT + people, and inclusion into social institutions such as marriage, has led queer scholars and activists to focus on the growth of 'homonormativity' (Bech, 2007). By this we mean gay and lesbian people and couples being accepted into heterosexual society because of the characteristics of typified heterosexuality they share, such as stable long-term relationship (Fowlkes, 1999) or suburban life with children (Ghaziani, 2014). Our findings might suggest that such homonormativity and assimilation is a vital part of LGBT + people who have experienced homelessness becoming housed or feeling at home. This would be a thin, somewhat facile use of queer theory as critique though, merely creating a new boundary between heteronormative/homonormative and queer (Browne, 2006).

The evidence we have presented above, suggests that using queer as an identity term can open up greater complexities around our understanding of home in the lives of people who have experienced homelessness. The experiences of our participants after their homelessness reveal that a strong feeling of home is part of being more comfortable in a heterosexist world.

This might mean attaining 'homonormative' goals, like a nice family home with a long-term partner, as described by Anna: 'I have wanted to go home to someone who treated me like an actual human being'. For Kat, this was being in a home that was their style: 'I was very sorry when I leave my flat because when I see the pictures around the flat - I really liked it. It was nearer to my style - the furniture and everything.' In this way, our data adds the nuance of the work on queer domesticities (Barrett, 2015; Gorman-Murray, 2006; Pilkey, 2014) to our understanding of LGBT + homelessness, moving the latter away from a focus on 'tragic gay' narratives of exclusion (Bateman, 2015) or a focus on health risks and harm (Cochran et al., 2002; Corliss et al., 2011).

In terms of improving support for homeless people, this queer perspective and our findings would support a 'housing first' approach to tackling homelessness among LGBT + people and other people experiencing homelessness. Removing the basic problem of a lack of shelter and security from people's lives may enable them to understand identity, including their sexual and gender identity, and work with support organisations to gain a wider sense of ontological security (McNaughton Nicholls, 2010). This centrality of home in developing sexual and gender identity also has important implications for how LGBT + people experiencing homelessness are supported. In the North American context, LGBT + specific provision is becoming the norm, with hostels in major LGBT + centres like Chicago (Ghaziani, 2014) and broader LGBT + specific homelessness and human services developing elsewhere (Abramovich, 2016; Ecker, 2016). Our evidence, in the context of central Scotland with relatively small urban areas, with small concentrations of LGBT + people, suggests such an approach is not necessary. A Housing First approach with peripatetic support may be most suitable for people who rightly fear exclusion or abuse in hostel settings. Some of our participants did have positive experiences in mixed hostel accommodation. This suggests a tailored approach is required.

The need for tailored support suggests another key issue is to open up conversations with LGBT + homeless people about their gender and sexual identity. Among the homelessness providers we spoke to, this was not routinely done, for fear of giving young people yet further paperwork to complete (in this case an equalities characteristics monitoring form); and out of a concern for beginning a conversation where the homeless person may feel uncomfortable and withdraw from the service. Our evidence suggests a greater risk is that a need for support goes unrecognised because people are not invited to begin a discussion about the complex ways their sexual or gender identity interact with their experience of homelessness. Staff training on issues like gender identity would also be required to ensure people were accepted and included as they are.

In conclusion, it must be noted that these findings come from a country which has made immense strides in LGBT + inclusion – with growing social acceptance of LGBT + people, and the removal of nearly all legal barriers. Further, it is a society which has an expansive statutory homelessness support system, where young, single people who are unintentionally homeless have a right to housing, and this will be supported by the welfare benefits system. In a more socially conservative society with poorer homelessness support and welfare provision, then the experience of homelessness for LGBT + people would be far more chaotic and difficult. However, our evidence suggests that improved welfare and homelessness services, including providing housing for all, with tailored support for LGBT + people within such a system, would be preferable to LGBT + specific provision. Further, we would suggest that using queer theory, and queering binaries such as homeless/housed, is a fruitful avenue for research on homelessness to explore in future to better understand the experiences of all homeless people.

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