Inverting normative ideas of 'home': Multiple Exclusion Homelessness (MEH) women, in the UK, choosing the visibility of the street as their safe spaces

September 2024
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Presentation Outline

Context – Women experiencing Multiple Exclusion Homelessness

Methods – 'Deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998)

Theoretical Framing – An adaptation of the critical values of home – Iris Marion Young (1997, 2005)

Findings –

1) Intersecting/overlapping adverse childhood experiences > a toxic trio of harm, (in)visibility and gendered stigmatisation in childhood homes

2) An absence of a positive discourse around housing/homes

3) The street as MEH women's safe and visible space

Homelessness – A gendered phenomenon

- Representation of homelessness in global North– highly visible, single, lone men (UK, Office of National Statistics, 2019)

- Homeless women – evidence suggests - survival strategies involving unseen, ambiguous and precarious spaces and to conceal homeless identities
(Bretherton and Pleace, 2023; Pattison and McCarthy, 2020)

- Causes/risks/consequences of homelessness - correspondingly gendered and influence how homeless women perceive themselves and behave
(Reeve et al., 2006; Bowpitt et al., 2014, Bretherton, 2020)

Women Experiencing Multiple Exclusion Homelessness (MEH)

(Bowpitt et. al, 2011; Fitzpatrick et. al, 2011;Sosenko et. al, 2020)

Repeated incidences of homelessness	**Multiple and complex needs**	**Misuse of substances**
Persistent mental or physical ill-health challenges	**Histories with care and criminal justice institutions (police, probation, courts and/or prison)**	**Street culture activities - begging, street drinking, 'survival shoplifting' and sex work**

'A *house* represents a conceptual space, it is abstract, relational, geometric. *Home* is an expression of lived space, of human meaning and being-in-the world' (1999 : 94—95)

(Wardaugh 1999 : 94-95)

> *I was happiest when I was living in a tent* (Amilie, in emergency accommodation).

> *I would find my freedom by living a normal life. Wake up in a bed, go to work, come home and* [have] *tea on the table. That's me being happy. People take that for granted – I haven't experienced that* (Sugar, whilst rough sleeping in a tent)

Research Question:

How do embodied histories, identities and discourses around the concept of home influence the safety and visibility of women experiencing MEH?

Selected Methodological Tools

Recruitment and informed consent: On the street, at a physical distance from services. **Regularly checking continued informed consent** (Verhallen, 2016).

Participant-observation via 'Deep Hanging Out' (Geertz,1998) : At outdoor MEH focal points, accommodation/sleep sites and when accompanying participants to appointments: GP, hospital, court appearances in magistrates and crown court, probation appointments, legal offices and the police station.

Life- history interviews/ conversations: flexible and trauma informed (Edelman 2023).

Mapping activity: Average week of travel and occupation of space in relation to concepts of (in)visibility/safety/risk.

Theoretical framing

Minimal critical values of home:

'Safety', 'individuation', 'privacy' and 'preservation' (Iris Marion Young 1997, 2005)

Interpreted as:

Safety

Security

Privacy

the shaping of Identity

Categories of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
(Felitti et. al., 1998)

Victim of abuse

Victim of neglect

Witness of domestic violence

Experienced parental abandonment

A parent with mental health condition

A family member in prison

Household of problematic alcohol/drug use

MEH participants' reflections on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and preoccupations with consequential harms

All participants experienced a minimum of 3 ACEs

2 participants experienced as many as 6 ACEs

Teenage pregnancies, child sexual abuse and challenges with schooling; learning disabilities, bullying and absence

Sugar's Vignette – secrets, (in)visibilities, and escapes

– Poverty – 'where the naughty families lived'

– Parental substance misuser

– Parental abandonment – after father left mother began inviting men into the home to have sex with Sugar (age 12/13) who was being plied with amphetamines

– School absence – unable to raise alarm

– Youth pathway into rough sleeping as a teenage 'escapers'

– **"for many young people, home effectively leaves them"** (Johnson et al., 2008 : 54)

'Dad married another woman on the [same] estate. He never spoke to me. Didn't bother with me and another little girl called him Dad. I used to get really nasty to that girl. I used to see him pick her up and cuddle her, but he wouldn't do it to me'

Critical values of home: 'safety'/ 'security'/'privacy'/ 'identity' > replaced by a toxic trio in childhood homes:

'Harm'
unsafe and insecure spaces

'(In)visibility'
hidden and silenced

'Gendered stigmatization'
dysfunctional families and child sexual abuse

Mode of homelessness/housing during the fieldwork year

Participant	Mode of homelessness/housing September 2021 – September 2022
Sugar	Rough sleeping across 3 different cities & 2 emergency accommodation addresses
TFlaver	High support hostel
Amilie	Three emergency accommodation addresses in different town/city
Caz	High support hostel
Cinders	Council allocated bed-sit
Teabag	Rough sleeping in fieldwork city & 4 emergency accommodation addresses in different town/city
Leila	High support hostel
GG	High support hostel, 1 emergency accommodation address & council allocated flat
Kiki	High support hostel
Jazz	Survival-sex sofa-surfing

Rough Sleeping – contradictions – 'safety' and 'gendered stigma'

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It is a really, easy life-style to fall into, but a really hard one to get out of. *People say it's easy being on the street, but you constantly get sore feet. You can't take your shoes and socks off.* *I'm tired and rundown all the time, that makes my anxiety worse*. *I haven't taken my anxiety medication in years. I'm most anxious when I'm withdrawing* [crack-cocaine and heroin]. *I rock back and forth to comfort myself. My breathing gets worse than normal* (Sugar)

In 2008-2009. I went on the run from breaching bail ...it took 9 months to find me. *I chose to be homeless...[after] leaving prison.* *We* [Kiki and her romantic partner at the time] *were homeless together for 8 or 9 years.* *They were the best years of my life* *apart from the clucking* [withdrawal symptoms from heroin addiction]. *I felt free and unthreatened and safe* *because he never lifted a finger to me and would do anything to protect me* (Kiki)

Emergency accommodation (EA) – infantilized 'identities' with implications for 'safety'/ 'security' and 'privacy'

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*They've moved me into the last chance saloon...it's so lonely out there. In a hostel, at least you've got staff to help you. In EA nothing. I engaged with certain staff, but they're never there to engage. Staff are unreliable and they let you down. **They only want to sit down and talk to you when you're doing something wrong**. If they talk to you at all, it is **as if you are a child**. The rooms make you feel depressed. **You don't even want to tidy up the mess**. That's how I got into mad thoughts. I did those* [pointing at bandaged wrists] *with scissors. I couldn't take it anymore – **I leave at 7.00 am and come back at 10.00 pm*** (GG)

Emergency accommodation just feels like a children's home; it's exactly the same thing (Teabag)

Hostels – 'safety' outside of hostel rooms

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I shouldn't still be in the hostel system. *I've been in it for 15 years.* ***The hostel system just keeps you where you are at***. *****ing shit, isn't it? It's horrible* (Leila)

I feel safe **[on the street**] *at the Clocktower…****it's not safe in the hostel****…there have been 2 deaths in the last week.* ***I don't want to die here****!…I'm trying to see light at the end of the tunnel, but I can see myself dying in this hostel…****Sometimes I lay in bed and think I just want to go home.*** *I wake up and I just don't know where I am* (GG)

Local authority allocated self-contained units – absence of 'autonomy'/ 'agency'/ '(in)visibility'

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*Where I live is very depressing. **I hate where I live**. There is no sound proofing and there is a young man who lives upstairs who invites a lot of people to his flat above me. It is too much. It's a studio flat. **The Council put me there**, but it is managed by a horrible company that don't do the things that need to be done, and they are on you for money if you do anything. **I'm a person who is always on the move in the day,** and I have been, for so long, **I just can't stay in the house*** (Cinders)

***When I go home to my flat, at the moment, it's not home**. The window is broken. I don't have a bed except a blow-up and none of the kitchen appliances I need. **I don't want to stay indoors on my own. I'd rather be down here** [on the street] **and go home at a reasonable time**. I have already had a letter off the Council about noise* (GG)

Survival-sex sofa-surfing – balancing 'gendered stigmas' with implications for 'safety' and '(in)visibility'

'Yes, I was in the YMCA hotel…it was alright. I am waiting for housing to get back to me with an offer currently. I have an application…not priority…no underlying health conditions. [I] had a council flat for 4 years about 5 years ago. Had a couple of kids and lost them. **Services deal with you as if you never had kids** and that is really unfair' (Jazz)

'I can't do this anymore. I can't keep living like this' (Jazz)

Findings for discussion

MEH women experience intersecting and co-occurring adverse childhood experiences that compromise their 'safety', 'security', and 'privacy' > replaced with a toxic trio of 'harm'/ '(in)visibility'/ 'gendered stigmatisation' which impact understandings of homes, identities and safe and visible spaces.

Absence in positive discourses around housing/homes > inadequacy of provision in social homeless/housing sectors but also infantilization by services > MEH women feel invisible/forgotten > agency and autonomy undermined to make homes of the accommodation available to them.

As 'escapers' in childhood from 'harm' '(in)visibility' and 'gendered stigmatisation' MEH women are seen to again chose the street as a space that they deem safe and where they are visible.

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Thank you for listening and I am happy to answer any questions

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