Mothering During Homelessness: Temporary Accommodation as Heterotopia

REEVE, Kesia <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2877-887X> and TURRELL, Molly <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-5433-5308>

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Kesia Reeve* and Molly Turrell
Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK
k.reeve@shu.ac.uk
ORCHID ID
Kesia Reeve: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2877-887X
Molly Turrell: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5433-5308

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Abstract

There is an extensive literature about the detrimental impacts on families of living in temporary accommodation. There has been less focus on the experience of mothers within these spaces, and the consequences for maternal identities. This paper argues that Foucault's concept of heterotopia - in particular the idea that spaces can be contested and contradictory –is useful for theorising empirical realities revealed by two studies with mothers experiencing homelessness. In these accounts, we see how spaces designed for women to live safely and securely as a family, in fact disrupt maternal identity. In this sense, the 'family home' of the hostel or refuge is an illusion; materially and physically intact, but experientially in contrast. Turning a critical eye onto these experiences advances a new reading of heterotopia that incorporates the affective impact of heterotopic spaces and also reveals points of intervention for creating temporary accommodation that recognises women as mothers.

Keywords: Homelessness; women's homelessness; heterotopia; maternal identity.

Introduction

> In the mirror, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface. (Foucault 1986, 24)

> It's as if all my rooms in one house is in one room. My bathroom's in here, my kitchen's in here, I'm collecting things that you would be used to having in your house…. I love taking [my kids] to the nursery round the corner, I go to the gym round the corner, but I don't live here. (Mariam, interviewed in 2019)

There is an extensive research literature about the experiences of homeless families living in temporary accommodation and the detrimental impacts, particularly on residents' health (England and Henley 2024; Murran and Brady 2022; Croft et al. 2021). However, evidence is scant in relation to the experiences and impacts of temporary accommodation on mothers, specifically; on their maternal identities and practices (but

c.f. England Henley 2024; Carey et al. 2022; van den Dries et al. 2016). This paper theorises these experiences by drawing on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, arguing that temporary accommodation such as homelessness hostels and refuges, as experienced by mothers who are homeless, can be conceived as heterotopic spaces.

This paper does not 'test' the extent to which temporary accommodation 'fits' the six principles of heterotopia (outlined below), as scholars sometimes do when deploying the concept (e.g. Maye-Banbury 2018; Brookfield 2018; Shackley 2002). Rather we draw on the concept of heterotopia to theorise empirical realities revealed by two research studies conducted in England. We argue that the concept of heterotopia is valuable for understanding the experiences of mothers in temporary accommodation because it incorporates notions of disruption and contradiction, and the empirical reality of temporary accommodation is that it can appear (and indeed 'be') a site of a family home but also the opposite: the disruption of family, home, and self. In doing so, the paper adds valuable theoretical insight to a largely empirical field of study (homelessness), through which new understanding about the housing realities of mothers experiencing homelessness is generated. Crucially, this enhances understanding of the distinct ways in which the spaces of homelessness impact differentially on women. Deploying heterotopia in this context also reveals that the concept, as expounded by Foucault and used subsequently by other scholars, neglects the *subjective experiences of a space* as an essential feature of heterotopia. The heterotopic quality of temporary accommodation often lay in the emotional and psychological impact of such places on the mothers participating in our studies; their experience of these spaces undermined and contradicted their very sense of self. This paper also, therefore, enriches international scholarship and conceptual understanding of heterotopia, advancing a new reading that incorporates the affective impact of heterotopic spaces.

Foucault's concept of Heterotopia

Foucault laid out his concept of heterotopia in a lecture in 1967, published in French in 1984, which had been preceded by a short radio broadcast the previous year (see Johnson 2006 for an account of this broadcast). An English translation in 1986 – translated as 'Of Other Spaces' - is the version commonly referred to by English speakers seeking to interpret, critique or utilise Foucault's heterotopia, although two later translations were published in 1998 and 2008, one as 'Different Spaces' (Foucault 1998).

Foucault did not further develop the ideas presented in his lecture, leaving scholars in the decades since offering their own interpretations of a concept that they generally agree is sketchy. Some go further, criticising the work as confusing and conceptually inadequate (Saldanha 2008), "frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent, incoherent" (Soja 1996, 162), and "provisional and at times totally baffling" (Johnson 2013, 792).

This has not prevented scholars from seizing on Foucault's concept, moulding it into a 'laundry list' (Saldanha 2008, 2018) of the "six qualifying requirements of a heterotopia" (van der Merwe 2021, 1) and liberally applying it to spaces as diverse as English cathedrals (Shackley 2002), Irish boarding houses (Maye-Banbury 2018), Olympic villages (Sanchez et al 2022), a Buddhist monastery (Owens 2002), and AirBnB accommodation (Makkar et al 2024). Johnson identifies 36 types of spaces that have been provided as illustrations of heterotopia (Johnson 2013). Even within Foucault's lecture, Johnson (2013, 790) suggests that "The list of heterotopia's becomes almost mischievous in its variety", while Saldanha (2008, 2083) wonders, playfully, whether "there is still space left for mainstream society". More serious criticism has been levied at this body of literature for oversimplifying and applying the concept with

minimal critical attention (Saldanha 2008, 2018). Saldanha (2008) also notes how studies tend to focus on the way in which a particular space brings disparate elements together to determine it as heterotopic. In a similar vein, it can be observed that studies sometimes centre on conflict between two types of users of a space, such as in Brookfield's (2018) study of studentified areas (conflict between established residents and students) and Shackley's (2002) English Cathedral (tourism visitors and worshippers).

Foucault (1986, 24) begins his thesis by explaining the relationship between utopias and heterotopias, for it is partly through his description of utopia that heterotopia can be understood. He describes both types of spaces as "being in relation with all other sites but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect." Utopias, he suggests, are an *unreal* presentation of society in an ideal form whereas heterotopias, as a 'counter-site', are real spaces that also "represent, contest and invert" (p24) all other real sites but, contrasting with utopias, exist in reality. Foucault then places a mirror between these two types of space to elucidate further, where the "mixed, joint experience" may occur. The mirror is, on the one hand, a type of utopia in the sense that you see yourself in an unreal place from which you are absent. But it is also a heterotopia in the sense that the mirror does exist and, in its existence, it creates a contradictory space:

> It makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass as once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (24).

It is this overarching quality of heterotopia that, we suggest, has the greatest utility for theorising the empirical realities of being a mother in temporary accommodation:

namely that heterotopias are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place, several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986, 25). Implicit in Foucault’s original lecture and in much of the subsequent commentary is that heterotopias reproduce spaces in a way that is discordant and unsettling (Johnson 2006). In the case of mothers living in temporary accommodation, the space of the family home that temporary accommodation reflects (and is) also contains within it a world of spatial and temporal constraint that is contra to, and disrupts, a space in which family life can be enacted. The ‘family home’ of the hostel or refuge is an illusion; materially and physically intact, but experientially in contrast.

Foucault also sets out six inter-related characteristics of heterotopias. We do not intend to assess the extent to which temporary accommodation meets these six criteria and therefore ‘qualifies’ as a heterotopia. Rather, we suggest that the broad conceptualisation of heterotopias as spaces which mirror but also distort is a useful heuristic for understanding the experiences of mothers living in temporary accommodation. Nevertheless, notwithstanding varying interpretations of Foucault’s lecture, and at the risk of reducing heterotopias to the oversimplified laundry list that Saldanha (2008) warns against, it is worth summarising these principles to help further elucidate a somewhat slippery concept.

First, Foucault (1984) suggests that all cultures have heterotopias, but that there is no one universal type. Nevertheless, the two main categories - ‘crisis heterotopias’ and ‘heterotopias of deviance’ - both describe places for people whose behaviours are different from the societal norm. Psychiatric hospitals and prisons are two examples cited. *Second*, the function of heterotopias change as societal cultures and beliefs shift. Thus, Foucault notes changes in how cemeteries are used as beliefs about mortality shift. Foucault’s *third* principle has echoes of his general outline of heterotopic spaces,

foregrounding the way in which heterotopias contain several incompatible sites. Foucault's examples here take a literal form, including the theatre on whose stage is a series of other places. *Fourth*, heterotopias are spaces where a break with traditional time occurs: where normative temporal relations are suspended. Most commonly translated as 'slice of time' this includes spaces where there is an absolute break with time (such as in the cemetery), where time endlessly accumulates (museums) and where time is fleeting (festivals, fairgrounds). Foucault's *fifth* principle is that heterotopic spaces are not accessible to all but require compulsion (for example prisons) or permissions, and so isolate those within. Foucault argues that some such spaces can appear open to all, but accessibility is illusionary and, in fact, entry can demonstrate exclusion. In the *sixth* principle, Foucault discusses the role of heterotopias in relation to all other space, which reminds us that heterotopia is fundamentally relational. They are not, then, just a 'type' of space, identified by meeting a set of criteria or characteristics, but have a relationship to all other space.

Heterotopia and the spaces of homelessness

In Global North countries, emergency or short-term accommodation is available to (some) people who become homeless, although the type and extent of provision, how it is funded, delivered, and by which agencies (e.g. the state, charities, NGOs), and whether statutory duties are placed on state authorities, varies. In England, where the two studies on which this paper is based were conducted, temporary accommodation is available to some homeless people for up to two years while they seek longer-term housing. Local authorities in England have a statutory duty towards certain households, (those with dependent children, those who have become homeless through an emergency such as fire or flood, people escaping domestic abuse and some other vulnerable households) and so are obliged to provide temporary accommodation and

then assist households into more permanent housing. Subject to meeting (variable) eligibility criteria, some temporary accommodation can also be accessed directly by people experiencing homelessness or through referrals from charitable organisations. Temporary accommodation in England, as in other Global North countries, typically comprises emergency provision in night shelters and hotels (typically for a few nights), as well as spaces in hostels and in refuges for people escaping violence, which usually have a private bedroom with shared kitchen and communal living space. Shared provision is usually staffed and often comes with support. When provided by local authorities under their statutory duties, temporary accommodation can also comprise a self-contained property in the private or social rented sector. Temporary accommodation in England is designed with some semblance of 'home' and comfort in mind, although standards and conditions vary widely.

Reviewing the six principles set out by Foucault, it is immediately clear how some are relevant to the general characteristics of temporary accommodation. Heterotopia as spaces of crisis certainly resonates with the function of temporary accommodation as housing for people experiencing homeless. The fact that the accommodation is temporary, and entry is dependent on meeting certain criteria fits the notions of heterotopias as 'slices of time' and as not accessible to all. On the latter point, Foucault's suggestion that entry can indicate exclusion ("we think we enter where we are, by the very fact we enter, excluded" (1984, 26) seems particularly pertinent. Through being 'eligible' for temporary accommodation, one must be positioned outside mainstream normative life (housed, settled). This is particularly true for women experiencing homelessness, who are positioned as 'deviant' for transgressing cultural expectations regarding their role in the home and the family (Reeve 2018).

However, the concept of heterotopia has thus far been minimally applied to homelessness experiences. The 1950's boarding houses of Maye-Banbury's 2018 study are resonant of poorer quality temporary accommodation today, but her participants were not experiencing homelessness. Mendel (2011) uses the idea of heterotopia to rethink the relationship between homelessness and citizenship in Poland, and Ruddick (1990) to explore the geographies of homelessness in Los Angeles, but these studies focus on street-homeless people. By applying the lens of heterotopia, this paper therefore adds new empirical and theoretical insight to international homelessness scholarship.

Following a description of research methods, the paper introduces new empirical evidence from two studies with mothers living in temporary accommodation, showing why this theorisation provides a novel and valuable lens to understand women's experiences of living in these settings.

Methods

This paper is based on interviews with 33 mothers experiencing homelessness who participated in two different research studies. The first was conducted in several cities in the north of England in 2019 and explored the housing situations and maternal identities of mothers experiencing homelessness through qualitative interviews with 26 mothers experiencing homelessness.[1] The second study was conducted for a PhD exploring the reproductive lives of women who experience homelessness. It asked how structural stigma and violence shape decision-making processes regarding sexual and reproductive health. This second study comprised in-depth interviews conducted in 2023-24 with 14

[1] The study also involved interviews with key professionals, and an additional seven interviews with women experiencing homelessness who were not mothers, but these data are not included in this paper.

women experiencing homelessness in Northern England, seven of whom were mothers and whose data is drawn on for this paper.[2]

Both studies were underpinned by feminist research principles that seek to centre women's experiences as valid, and essential, forms of knowledge and recognise emotions, memories, and other abstract experiences as crucial facets of this. (Smart, 2009). All stages of the research were designed according to a feminist ethics of care and with the intention of reducing power dynamics in the research setting. Reflecting this approach, interviews for both studies allowed participants a high degree of control over the direction and content of the interview, and allowed for new themes to emerge and research questions to be adapted.

Interviews in Study 1 were informed by biographical approaches, as a focus on personal history allows participants to centre the experiences they view as most important. Interviews therefore gently guided women through their life story prompted by general questions about their housing pathways ('So where did you go when you left that place?' and such like). However, if women veered from a chronological account (which we expected, and they did), or introduced topics and issues without prompting, the researchers allowed that discussion to develop. Interviews for study two were unstructured and guided by issues identified by the women as most salient to them in relation to sexual and reproductive health. At the start of each interview women were invited to share a bit about their themselves and their current housing situation. This was then followed by the question 'Can you tell me about your experiences of sexual and/or reproductive decision-making whilst you have been homeless? By this, I mean

[2] The study also involved 11 in-depth interviews with women experiencing homelessness in Australia, and collaging sessions with a small sub-sample of women, but these data are not included in this paper.

anything related to your sexual wellbeing and/or reproductive system during any period of your life.' This question was kept deliberately broad to create an environment in which women could lead the discussion. Interviews for both studies were conducted face-to-face by a female researcher, recorded where consent was given, and transcribed verbatim, or written up as notes immediately after the interview

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The eligibility criteria for both studies specified that participants identified as a woman, were 18+, and had experienced homelessness. Both studies used a broad definition of homelessness that encompassed rooflessness, houselessness, and insecure housing in order to capture forms of 'hidden homelessness' that women are more likely to experience (ONS, 2023)

Participants were recruited through organisations that provide refuge and other temporary accommodation for homeless people, as well as women's support services. In some, trusted workers were asked to share information sheets with their clients, providing an overview of the research and inviting participation. In others, a researcher spoke directly to women within a service to invite participation or a poster was advertised in a communal area. Several women in study two were recruited through snowball sampling.

Participants had a diverse range of homelessness pathways, although domestic abuse had been a contributory factor for many of the women. Participants had lived in different types of temporary accommodation including hostels, refuges, bed and breakfast hotels, and supported housing schemes, and had typically experienced more than one temporary housing situation. Some women had also experienced other forms of homelessness including rough sleeping and couch surfing. Nearly all were homeless at the time of their interview, mostly in hostels, refuges or sleeping rough. Neither study

actively collected profile information from participants as we were keen not to replicate women's experiences in formal services where they are routinely asked to provide personal information for no clear purpose. However, in the course of interviews, some demographic information could usually be gleaned and this was noted by the interviewer and drawn subsequently from the transcripts. From this, we know that the 33 women ranged in age from 17–mid 50's, the majority were White British and they were mothers of between one and six children. At the time of interview, 25 were living apart from at least one of their children and 10 were living with at least one of their children.

The interview data from both studies were reanalysed for this paper according to a framework based on Foucault's description of heterotopic spaces This was an iterative analytical process that began when the authors encountered the concept and recognised the experiences of their research participants in the description of heterotopia. The qualities and characteristics of heterotopic spaces, as set out by Foucault and critically discussed in related literature, then guided a close reading and (re)analysis of the transcripts. The authors first sought to thoroughly comprehend the characteristics of heterotopia by reading Foucault's lecture, commentary and interpretation of his lecture, and other studies that employ the concept. This generated broad characteristics that served as initial analytical categories (a general 'contradictory space' category and the six principles outlines above). Each of the 33 transcripts were then read closely and ways in which participant experiences were reflective of, or stood in contrast with the analytical categories were recorded using extracts from the interviews and author commentary. This document was then reviewed by both authors, revealing sub-categories and nuances to existing categories. For example, themes of 'absence' and 'regulation' emerged , and we saw how frequently participants referred to their housing

in dispassionate terms and created a new ‘code’ for this. We returned to the transcripts again with newly refined categories and repeated the process several times until we had generated clear and confident results.

Both studies received ethical approval from Sheffield Hallam University’s ethics committee. Our participants had experienced (were experiencing) trauma and were managing extremely difficult situations so our ethical responsibility was front and centre in research design and conduct. In line with our feminist ethics of care, all interviews were characterised by open-listening and empathy, including offering breaks during interviews, checking in with participants who appeared upset, and not probing into any areas that participants expressed not wanting to discuss. The researcher in Study 2 also dedicated moments before, during and after each interview for the participant to reflect on their participation in the research. Participants gave informed consent after being given verbal and written information about the study and invited to discuss any aspect of the project and participation process further. Consent was an ongoing process, however, particularly given the personal subjects raised by the research. It was therefore emphasised during interviews that participants could stop at any time, and did not have to talk about anything they did not want to discuss. Researchers themselves also made careful judgements about whether to continue with an interview or sensitively draw it to a close if there was any concern that the interview was having a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of the participant. Women were given a £20 shopping voucher to thank them for their time and it was made clear that they would receive this regardless of whether the completed the interview. The wellbeing of researchers was also considered, and systems were put in place to debrief for as long as necessary with another member of the study team (Study 1) or the supervisory team (Study 2) following each interview.

Mothers experiencing homelessness in heterotopia: research findings

Drawing on the accounts of mothers living in temporary accommodation (with and without their children) this section builds a picture of the ways in which such spaces are a discordant representation of a family home. In doing so, we offer a novel theoretical perspective for understanding the housing realities of mothers experiencing homelessness. We argue that these accounts reveal the heterotopic quality of temporary accommodation as it is experienced by mothers; the mechanisms through which women's maternal identities and performances are disturbed and inverted in such spaces.

Temporary accommodation: the illusion of home

Women's temporary homes diverged so markedly from that of a family home that they referred to their residences as 'other' places altogether. Charlie,[3] for example, felt so isolated in her temporary accommodation that she described being "in a field" and Maggie described her accommodation as "a one-bedroom **thing"**.[4] Women typically referred to their accommodation as places of entrapment (prison, jail, cell), or in descriptive, impersonal terms ('building' 'thing'):

> It's a horrible place and it doesn't give you hope, this **building.** (Nadine)

> She said when she first came to the refuge, it felt like **a jail**. Because of the, you know, the doors and the rooms and the environment. (Fatima, through a translator)

Alana was explicit that her 'building' was not a house or home:

[3] All names have been changed.
[4] Emphasis added in all quotes where this applied.

> Here you are settled but it's not like it's a house, you still feel like you're in **a building**, the bedrooms are probably smaller than this room, it's appropriate for staying, but it's a bedroom, like oh god, I'm not in a home (Alana)

Alana's reference to her accommodation as being appropriate for *staying*, rather than *living* is interesting. There is a transience and emotional detachment implicit in this term, as if you cannot truly 'live' while in temporary accommodation. This is more explicit in Mariam's account of life in temporary accommodation (see quote at the start of this paper), where she describes having the rooms required for a home, the usual possessions within a home, and going about normal daily life, but emphasises that "but I don't live here".

These accounts move beyond articulation of the temporary nature of the accommodation and associated uncertainty about the future. The language and terminology, rather, evokes a fundamental sense of ontological fragility; a disruption of one's sense of self and of belonging in the world, or, in Giddens' terms, undermined confidence "…in the continuity of their self-identity and in the of the surrounding social and material environment of action" (Giddens 1990, 92). As sites of ontological fragility, we begin to see the fundamentally disturbing and disruptive effects of temporary accommodation.

Analysis of the interview data revealed three specific heterotopic characteristics of life in temporary accommodation as experienced by mothers:

- simultaneous temporal and spatial disruption
- discipline, control and regulation within their temporary homes
- absence (of children)

Referring back to Foucault's description of heterotopic spaces quoted at the start of this

paper, in these characteristics we see the 'mirror' in action, inverting the space in which mothers experiencing homelessness live, such that they can 'see themselves' (as mothers, in their family home) but experientially in an unreal space because these characteristics disturb the 'family home' in which they live. We now explore each of these in more detail.

Simultaneous temporal and spatial disruption

Homelessness accommodation is, by definition, temporary. Normative notions of residency, home and family evoke a sense of permanence, of having set routines, and so a home which is temporary ruptures familiar time. This was certainly the case for all the mothers in our studies, where time in their accommodation represented a "break with their traditional time" (Foucault 1986, 26). They were places to live "for the time being" (Charlie), places where you cannot get "too comfortable" (Mariam).

Often women's time in temporary accommodation was more fleeting even than the festivals and fairgrounds that, for Foucault, represented the "absolutely temporal" (26). Women described staying in emergency shelters for a night or two, or in hotels and hostels for a week or so before moving on, as Helena describes:

> But when we become homeless at first, (local authority) put us in an hotel near (place name)…but because we was too far, we had to go back to (first place name)…. And then from that hotel, they put us in another one. I think that was in (place name) or (place name) or (place name). And then from there we, we went, we stayed in (place name) with one of my other mates. (Helena)

This principle is most commonly reproduced as 'slice of time', although Johnson notes that *decoupages du temp* has latterly been translated as 'temporal discontinuity' which he favours for its implicit emphasis on break and disruption (Johnson 2013). But, whatever the translation nuances, Foucault suggests that difference of time

(heterochrony) is partly what defines a space as different/other (heterotopia). In the accounts of the mothers participating in our studies we find an interesting simultaneous spatial and temporal disruption: the heterochronic (disrupted time) is not (just) what *characterises* the space as heterotopic but is intrinsically related to spatial disturbance. Thus, women were moved, sometimes across several towns and cities (spatial disturbance) in quick succession (temporal disruption). Mariam, for example, moved from another UK nation to the Southeast of England to escape violence and was offered a hotel by the local authority in a northern English city. From there, she was moved to a refuge in a city further north, and then to another refuge in the midlands. The following quote leaves an impression of Mariam and her belongings being scattered across space while she moves fleetingly through time:

> Sunday came, packed everything I had, cos when I left [X city], I think the majority of my stuff is still in storage from the two-bedroom flat, and now I've only got a couple of suitcases with the kid clothes and whatever I use now, like temporary, as and when, just because I have moved and moved and I can't take so much. But when I left the [X city] refuge to here, half of it's at my auntie's house. (Mariam)

Within temporary accommodation, women's sense of time and the way they related to, and managed time was also altered. Emma, for example, explained that she lived one day at a time as she had no idea when she would be allocated settled housing. She described this in terms of unknown or infinite time (the process she cannot start) stretching ahead of her:

> That's a process [reuniting with her children] we can't even start cos I've got **no end to the piece of string** I'm dangling on.

Emma's description of living in temporary accommodation indicates the lack of agency and distress she feels over her living situation. These feelings are particularly evident in

her description of the future time with her children that she has lost. Living in temporary accommodation, for Emma, has therefore curtailed her ability to enact mothering practice in the present, whilst also impacting her ability to plan for the future:

> **It won't ever be back**, by the time they've gone through this system [them in care, her in TA] and they've come home, then teenage years are well set in and they are becoming different people...

At the extreme end of 'temporal disruption' is the sense of time stopping altogether. Nadine, for example described being "basically on pause" while Marianne felt that her life could only "begin again" when she moved on from temporary accommodation.

The notion of a life on pause, where women are unable to engage in normal mothering routines and practices speaks to the absolute break with traditional time that Foucault establishes as characteristic of heterotopia. This points to the disruption that living in temporary accommodation brings to women's lives, and its unsettling nature. While these spaces provide safety for women, they also invert their everyday worlds and deny agency. This in turn has implications for women's experiences of mothering, which is revealed more explicitly in the remaining two themes.

Discipline, control and regulation

As spaces for people in crisis, heterotopias are characterised by Foucault as occupied by 'deviants', where every day behaviour is controlled. This is reflected in the experiences of the mothers participating in our research, who described overt and informal mechanisms of control operating in their accommodation, and where access and continued residency was predicated on conforming to particular gender norms, notions of deservedness and 'good' behaviour. Mariam's account of her request to spend a night away visiting family illustrates some of these points.

> I got ready…to go to the office and pay my full month's rent, a day before, I understand these rules and regulations, I understand it's a safe house…I haven't got a home, but I have family and a mum and a nan that I need to visit because God forbid something happens. Am I only allowed to go if it was an emergency? I said I only want to go for one or two days… I felt like I was on lockdown and things so when I got that 'no' from the office in the refuge I went back in the house, I was so upset…. (Mariam)

Restriction on Mariam's movements and denial of her agency and autonomy to determine her whereabouts and her social and familial contact is clear from her account. The decision was justified as being in her best interests, to keep her safe from her violent ex-partner even though she noted that "I said it's the safest city just now, he is nowhere near there." This further denies her agency and, in doing so, infantilises her. It is also interesting that she pays her rent early before making her request, as if she feels she must demonstrate 'good behaviour' to achieve a positive outcome, as a child might. Marianne similarly talked about "sticking to the rules" and that "a little flat, that would be fine, I'll pay my rent, be quiet, have my kids, that's all I want" where her sense of having to be on best behaviour is palpable.

Foucault suggests that certain rituals may have to be undertaken to gain entry to heterotopic spaces and, indeed, the mothers in our studies had to fulfil certain eligibility criteria to access temporary accommodation (e.g. being homeless, having dependent children, escaping violence). One woman, Ellie, was required to provide proof of her pregnancy to gain access. However, in Mariam's account above we also find rules associated with *exit*, leaving women's 'being' in the space squeezed between controls on both entry and on exit. How women used this time and space 'in-between' was also governed. Women reported, amongst other rules, that that they were not allowed to make cups of tea during the night, that "the TV gets turned off at 1 o'clock…and you've got to go up to your room then" (Emma), that they could only use the microwave at

certain times, and "coz the rules, regulations, sometimes like with food you've got to eat but I might not be hungry at that time...and you're not allowed to take plates in the room and put clingfilm on it or something and nibble later when I'm hungry.*"*(Marianne). For women who had become homeless escaping violence (many of those interviewed), such conditions were disturbingly resonant of the control they had experienced from their ex-partners.

There were other instances of women's exit from temporary accommodation being governed, either for short periods – "you can't go out after 12" (Emma) – or in relation to leaving permanently. Carrie and Alana, for example, were not allowed to move on to settled housing until some months after their babies were born. It is relevant that both these women were pregnant; here we see how exit from temporary accommodation and the 'right' to live in settled housing becomes conditional on conforming to gender norms of good parenting. Both women were expected to 'prove' that they can be 'good mothers' (to unspecified standards) before they could leave. Regulation and surveillance of parenting were common experiences amongst the women and was felt as a direct inversion of their perceptions of themselves as capable mothers with the requisite knowledge and skills to care for their children. A kind of confusion, as well as defiance, arose from these contradictory juxtapositions, whereby women's maternal practices became detached from their maternal identities. This is seen, for example, in the surveillance of Kelly's care of her children, and the denial of Nadine's maternal agency to determine who cared for their children.

> You can't even take her [daughter] to the park, you have to have a person watching over you, you're being supervised with your child, so I thought 'I'm not taking my child out if I'm getting supervised'. Obviously I took her out shopping and clothes shopping, it's just I weren't comfortable being watched with my little girl when I actually know what I'm doing. It's not fair. (Kelly)

> You can't go to the shop and leave them with somebody else in the building...they want me to watch both my children, well, one of them's a teenager and one of them's small…. I have rights for my children for parental care so if I decide somebody is suitable to look after my child that should be enough… (Nadine)

This indicates that women in temporary accommodation have been constructed as abject; unable to make decisions for themselves or their children, and as such denied their maternal identity in favour of surveillance and regulation within the space.

In the accounts of other women, we see the consequences of failing to live up to gendered expectations, and the regulation of their conduct as a result. Alison, for example, talked about how discipline is enacted in her temporary accommodation. She feels singled out and that rules were placed on her that did not apply to other residents because she is a sex worker and does not dress in a way that is deemed 'appropriate' (i.e. doesn't try to hide her work) by the staff. She talks about being treated "like a little kid", echoing the experiences reported above of an infantilising denial of agency. Alison's vocal resistance to these rules is evident but is also limited in that she relies on the housing and has no other options.

> And they were like, you know because... because of how I looked, how I acted, d'you know, when I were going up and down on the beat and that. I had to, I was the only one that couldn't have people stay. I was the only one had to be in it, like, at a certain time, like I'm a little kid. So, they singled me out! [Because of your work?] Because yeah, you know, sort of thing. And I didn't hide it, d'you know what I mean?... Yeah, they did treat me different, they did treat me different. Because... I don't know. I just. Told him basically, go fuck yourself, you know? I'll do what I wanna do. (Alison)

The regulation of space, and control over access and exit enforces the heterotopic character of temporary accommodation as it is experienced by mothers who are homeless. It undermines a sense of normalcy and familiarity, reinforcing the

otherworldly nature of those spaces.

Absence of children

A sense of absence characterised the accounts of many of the women interviewed, in particular the absence of those whose presence is a necessary condition of home, i.e. their children.

Other studies have shown that homelessness can prompt separation of women and their children (Bretherton and Mayock 2021; Bimpson and Reeve 2020; Savage 2016). Homelessness is a factor in formal child removal in the UK (Inside Housing 2024) and women also place children informally into 'kinship care' to protect them from the disruption a move into temporary accommodation entails (e.g. away from children's schools, friendship networks and familiarity), and the living conditions therein (e.g. sharing with strangers, shared facilities) (Bimpson and Reeve 2020). This was true of many of the mothers in our studies, who traced separation from their children explicitly to their homelessness and residency in temporary accommodation:

> Her dad asked her before she started high school, who do you want to live with and she said me, but **I haven't got anywhere to take her**, so it's hard. (Tracy)

> **I've not got a house to take her to** and they think she's more settled up there [with her grandma] at the moment, and it's all cos I lost the house. (Maggie)

The distress caused by living apart from their children is clear in women's accounts, reinforcing the heterotopic quality of their accommodation as an inversion of 'home':

> The night times and the weekends are the longest and the hardest. Because it's the night times, it's like me putting my kids to bed. I've cried, I've cried for fucking weeks, excuse my French. But it broke my heart for weeks because I wasn't the one tucking 'em up in bed. I wasn't the one reading the story. I wasn't the one erm…

> doing the things that I've done for seven and nine years and- (starts to cry). (Abigail)

> I'm not taking them swimming or cheering them on at sports day or even just colouring in with them watching a film, one on each arm, like we used to do on a weekend…out in the garden, colouring, we were outside on the scooters or watching films, going shopping together, all the normal things, and that's all gone. (Emma)

Where some women participating in the studies found their maternal agency denied through control and surveillance of their parenting (see previous section), these women were barely acknowledged as mothers and so denied the opportunity to parent at all. No longer living with their children, they had lost the decision-making powers and rights afforded to parents. Maggie, for example, became homeless escaping domestic violence. Her 11-year-old daughter had been placed in the care of grandparents on the grounds that Maggie was going to be homeless and had 'failed' to protect her daughter from witnessing abuse. Now living apart from her daughter, she explained that:

> I don't get invited to the parents meetings, I don't get invited to anything now cos she's not with me (Maggie).

Tracy, who asked her mother to care for her daughter temporarily when she became homeless to escape violence, similarly returned over and again in her interview to her experience of being allowed no input into decisions about which high school her daughter was to attend. Emma also lamented that "I don't get to choose where they go to school or what after-school clubs they got to". Decision-making about, and responsibility for, children is a crucial aspect of parenting. Having this removed left women feeling stripped of their maternal identities.

For some women, then, moving into temporary accommodation created the greatest rupture; that of living apart from their children. This left Foucault's mirror

failing to reflect the people who should be within the space of a family home. Here, then, the mirror barely reflects, inverting to the point of separating mother and child. Concurring with other evidence (McCarthy 2019), 'home' for the women in our studies was often associated with people more than with physical space/buildings. The absence of those who make home *home,* reinforced the heterotopic character of temporary accommodation.

Discussion: foregrounding the affective impact of heterotopia

In the preceding accounts of mothers' experiences of temporary accommodation, we have seen different ways in which this accommodation inverts and disturbs the family home. Women are both mothers and not-[allowed-to-be]-mothers in these spaces; they have the physical semblance of home in spaces that feel only like 'buildings'; they have a place to live but one which is only fleeting; they are subject to surveillance and controls in the very place where one expects privacy and autonomy; they look in the mirror and see a mother at home, but a mother and a home in a "virtual point which is over there" (Foucault 1986, 24). The conflict and contradictions within such spaces are clear and pronounced in these accounts. As such, we argue that the concept of heterotopia, as set out at the start of this paper, provides a useful heuristic for understanding and theorising mothers' experiences of temporary accommodation precisely because it captures such juxtaposing contradictory realities.

What is also clear, however, is that the heterotopic quality of temporary accommodation – the disruptive, contradictory quality – often lay in the emotional and psychological impact of such places on the women who inhabited and navigated them. Yet, Foucault's description of heterotopia, and much of the subsequent scholarship that follows his six principles, foregrounds the characteristics of the *place,* and gives very little sense of the *people* within the spaces. We argue that this is a problematic oversight

because the essential unsettling and disturbing quality of heterotopia is not an objective characteristic. Rather, it is dependent on the relationship between the subject and the place; on their feelings about and reactions to that space. In other words, a subjective (or subject) experience of *feeling* disturbed is a necessary condition of a space *being* disturbing. In the accounts of the women participating in our studies we do see that the spaces of temporary accommodation were contradictory and discordant representations of reality because of their inherent characteristics (e.g. a family home but one where behaviour, entry and exit are controlled, or from which children are absent, and so does not have the core qualities of a family home), but the experience of living in such places, in turn, undermined and contradicted women's own real identities. They were psychologically and emotionally changed.

To return to the ontological fragility that we found was fundamentally present in participants' accounts, it was the impact on these mother's sense of self and identity that made their temporary accommodation heterotopic, that represented the ultimate disruptive force: the way in which their possibilities for being in the world were altered, affecting not only their present lives, but their futures too. For example, the women interviewed who lived apart from their children described the anguish of *being* a mother, but not being able parent their children. This was experienced as a severe loss of, or detachment, from self, exemplifying where "heterotopias draw us out of ourselves in peculiar ways" (Johnson 2006, 84). Indeed, Emma explained that "living without them, I don't know how **to be"** while Corey, whose two children were removed because of her homelessness, expresses a clear loss of self:

> It's hard finding yourself again when **you've lost so much of myself**. I've been on my own for a year now, it's hard to believe I've got a three year old and a two year old… (Corey)

Marianne, similarly, said she feels like "nothing" now her children are absent while Kelly talked about being relegated to "second mum", almost like a shadow of her former and felt maternal identity, because she will have missed a long period of mothering by the time her children are old enough for Kelly to be in their lives again:

> I'm a mum, I can feel myself as a mum but it's just hard not having your child around to be a mum, you're just being a second mum, when that child's old enough to actually come back to you. (Kelly)

We can refer here to Saldanha's (2008, 2083) reading of Foucault which conceives of heterotopia as spaces of "absolute otherness", with women experiencing a loss of autonomy regarding the day-to-day activities they would usually do with their children, and enduring emotional consequences of loss and shame. This was also abundantly evident in the experiences of women living with their children, who experienced an inversion of 'normal life' through the regulation of their parenting, and a disturbing dissonance between the way they were being governed and their self-identity. The mothers in our studies were often being othered in their temporary accommodation as incapable and ill-equipped, failing to fulfil normative ideals of 'good' or 'ideal' motherhood, and constructed as abject.

Whatever the variations in the design and delivery of temporary accommodation in Global North countries, it is a means through which people can remain housed during a period of homelessness and, for families, is a means through which parents can access housing to live in with their children. As such, it holds the possibility for women to maintain, preserve and assert their identity as mothers, and enact mothering practices. Instead, evidence from our studies suggest that, as heterotopias, "These emplacements exist out of step and meddle with our sense of interiority" (Johnson 2006, 84). The impact of being denied agency is clear; women did not only experience a loss of control

over their mothering practices, but a fundamental shaking of their (maternal) self. The affective consequences of inhabiting heterotopic spaces are not generally articulated or revealed in heterotopia scholarship, yet is a crucial aspect of mothers' experience of temporary accommodation.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on Foucault's concept of heterotopia to understand mothers' experiences of living in temporary accommodation. Our research shows that the empirical reality for many mothers experiencing homelessness (living with and without their children) is that their temporary homes represent a contradictory space: a home on the one hand, but also a place where they have little control over their movement through time and space, where they cannot exercise autonomy, enact usual mothering practices, have control over maternal decision-making; where they are regulated and controlled, and their maternal identity is undermined. In every way, normal family life is disrupted as they move uncertainly through time and space. We therefore argue that Foucault's characterisation of heterotopias as spaces "which somehow mirror and at the same time distort, unsettle or invert other spaces" (Johnson 2013, 791) is a useful heuristic for understanding these experiences. This conceptualisation makes two key contributions to homelessness scholarship.

First, it adds to the burgeoning but still limited empirical knowledge about the experiences of mothers who are homeless (c.f. England and Henley 2024; Parr 2024; Zufferey 2020; Bimpson, Parr and Reeve 2022). This is a significant and problematic gap in homelessness scholarship, not least because motherhood gives rise to distinct experiences and needs and so is an essential focus if we are to effectively respond to women's homelessness.

Second, the paper has offered a way of conceptualising the empirical reality of life in temporary accommodation for mothers, bringing a novel theoretical perspective to accounts of homelessness experiences. In doing so, it adds to the work of a small number of scholars offering varying conceptualisations of the unsettling nature of 'home', and the affective experiences of women experiencing homelessness. McCarthy (2017), for example, uses the concept of the 'unheimlich', which similarly draws out the unfamiliar and unsettling within the familiar, to explore and explain the contradictions within women's homelessness experiences and identity. And Parr (2024)[5], in her discussion of the connection between women's affective responses to individual trauma and the effects of social policies, introduces the concept of liminality to describe the 'in-betweenness', the being 'neither fully here nor there' (p3) that mothers experience in temporary accommodation. Building on this work, we argue that heterotopia is a concept capable of placing women's motherhood front and centre, and so is particularly apposite: mothers experience temporary accommodation as heterotopic *because* they are mothers, i.e. because their maternal identities are undermined and disrupted in myriad ways through their relationship with these spaces.

In addition to these contributions to homelessness scholarship, the paper also helps refine and clarify thinking about the nature of heterotopia, a concept that commentators agree is sketchy and confusing, but which we persist with nevertheless (present authors included) for the enriched conceptual understanding of place that it offers. Our focus on mothers has exposed the centrality of the subject to heterotopia, of the emotional and ontological impacts on those on those who inhabit the space: those who are changed and whose reality and identities are distorted, unsettled and inverted.

[5] Parr 2004 draws on data from one of the studies on which this paper is based, to explore the ways in which past social policies continue to wield power and 'haunt' women's presents and futures.

We hope that bringing critical attention to this aspect of heterotopia will enhance its capability for interrogating and understanding experiences of place.

In relation to mothers who are homelessness, the empirical and conceptual developments advanced in this paper underscore the importance of addressing not only material security, but the affective impacts of being a mother without a home. It stands alongside evidence from Savage (2022), Parr (2024), and Theobald et al (2024) of the affective inequalities and injustice faced by women who are homelessness, and the importance of focusing on the affective sphere to fully understand and respond to their experiences. This is particularly important when considering the denial of choice and autonomy that is evident throughout the accounts of mothers presented in this paper, and the consequences for their identities and mothering practice.

Finally, then, by turning a critical eye onto these experiences, this paper has revealed points of intervention for creating temporary accommodation that recognises women as mothers, and which offers dignity, agency, and safety. To do so, however, would require further research to explore the qualities and characteristics that would make mothers feel at home in temporary accommodation, eradicating the heterotopic effects of these homelessness spaces. More research on the affective sphere might encourage service commissioners and policy-makers to take seriously the emotional impacts on women and mothers of being denied autonomy in temporary accommodation. We suggest that further research in this area would, however, need to address a key limitation to our studies; namely that as relatively small-scale studies venturing into fairly unchartered territory we were unable to prioritise securing samples of sufficient diversity to explore intersectionality. Yet, women who already feel 'out of place' or marginalised because of aspects of their identity and intersecting disadvantage, might experience temporary accommodation as 'super-heterotopic'. There is, therefore,

an urgent need to understand how temporary accommodation can be developed that is safe and dignified for *all* women, and we acknowledge that this paper has taken but a small step in that direction. We also hope that this paper encourages further research to surface the distinct experiences of women who are unaccompanied by their children, and who receive so little research or policy attention.

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