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The trappings of home: Young homeless people's transitions towards independent living

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the experiences of young homeless people in Western Australia during their transitions to more permanent accommodation and independent living. For these young homeless people, permanent accommodation provided an opportunity for 'feeling at home' and having a sense of control and stability associated with 'home'. Within this space, these young people wanted to be considered 'normal' home occupiers. In this context, we discuss how young homeless people experience and negotiate the social and cultural understandings of home outside socially accepted pathways of leaving the parental home and becoming 'normal' home occupiers themselves. We show how this experience of home, and the potential it offers previously homeless young people, is interrupted by discourses of youth workers, neighbours and society at large, which serve to (re)position them outside the community of 'normal' home occupiers. The findings have implications for both policy and the delivery of services to young homeless people.

Keywords: young homeless people, housing transitions, meanings of home, homelessness, discourse analysis, phenomenological analysis

Introduction

The transition from the parental home to independent living is commonly seen as a natural extension of the 'normal' youth transition into adulthood, which has at its endpoint the setting up of a new home (Jones & Wallace, 1992; Jones, 1995; Skelton, 2002). However, there is a 'right way' to achieve this endpoint in accordance with society's 'rules of the game' (Clegg, 1989). This 'right way' has become more varied over the last 20 years (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), and tends to follow usual and socially acceptable routes out of the family home; for example, leaving to attend university or find employment (Jones, 2000). In contrast, young homeless people often do not leave home for 'traditional, normative reasons' such as these (Jones, 1995). Instead, they frequently leave homes which they have experienced as places of conflict and family disunity (Kurtz *et al.*, 2000; Styron *et al.*, 2000; Wardhaugh, 1999) as opposed to the 'purified environments' traditionally associated with home (Sibley, 1995). Their 'housing careers' (after Ineichen, 1981) are often non-linear,

and their frequently changing pathways are not necessarily accepted by society (Clapham, 2005). However, despite living outside the mainstream experience of home, the homeless young people interviewed for the study reported on here also sought to have a home, feel at home, and be thought of by the wider community as home occupiers. This will be illustrated in the paper along with how particular discourses prevented homeless young people from having these experiences and becoming an accepted part of the home occupying mainstream. In this paper we use the term discursive barriers to refer to those discourses that discourage people from thinking about themselves in certain ways and prevent them from taking particular positions in society (Parker, 1992; Parker *et al.*, 1997).

Background

The young homeless people reported on in this paper were living in Western Australia (WA) and were moving from temporary accommodation to more permanent and independent living arrangements between 2006 and 2007. All young participants lacked security of tenure and were therefore identified as experiencing secondary homelessness (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1992). Prior to their transition into more permanent accommodation they had been living in temporary or emergency accommodation, such as youth hostels or boarding houses, or had temporary living arrangements with extended family or friends. Their living circumstances had arisen because of difficulties in the parental home due to issues such as parents' substance use, the young person becoming pregnant, or loss of parental care; for example, being evicted from the family home or foster care.

For many of these young people, these traumas meant that home was not associated with notions of nostalgia and romance (Mallett, 2004; Sibley, 1995). As has been identified in previous research, 'home as a haven', a nurturing environment

underpinned by stable caring family relationships and a sense of belonging does not necessarily reflect the reality of many people's lived experience (Jackson, 1995; Jones, 2000; Kellett & Moore, 2003; Mallett, 2004; Manzo, 2005; Robinson, 2002; Somerville, 1997; Wardhaugh, 1999).

At the time of being invited to participate in this study, these young people who had been homeless were given the opportunity to move into more permanent living arrangements. This was provided by Australia's national Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), which offers accommodation and support services to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. SAAP's aim is for people to develop the capacity to live independently and to maximise their degree of self-reliance (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Kunnen & Martin, 2004). Thus, it was expected that following their transition into SAAP accommodation the young people in this study would be able to live independently without, or with decreasing levels of, support. For them, transitioning into more permanent accommodation was seen as moving into a place of their own, even when the accommodation might have been semi-permanent or shared with one or two others.

Of interest in this paper are the barriers that young homeless people face when attempting to create a positive experience of 'home'. Establishing a home places young homeless people, like those in this study, between the 'real and the ideal' experiences of home (after Somerville, 1997) – their previous, often negative experiences and perceptions of home and their yearnings for 'feeling at home', which we refer to as having the security, comfort and privacy in the place one is living. However, as will be shown, the young homeless people's experiences are not simply contained in these internal negotiations, but are situated within the discourses around

housing assistance, home ownership, young people and homelessness which serve to limit young people's attainment of 'feeling at home'.

The meanings and dominant discourses of 'home' in Western Australia are discussed in more detail below before we describe our research methods and analytical framework adopted for analysis. We then explore the way in which these young homeless people experience and negotiate the discursive barriers they were facing during their transition into more permanent accommodation.

Meaning(s) of home

The literature across different research traditions provides a rich treatment of the different meanings of home. Behavioural and human interpretations of home, for example, focus on home providing security, control and autonomy as well as personal status and permanence (Després, 1991). In a similar vein, the sociological literature describes home in terms of being the centre of family life, a place of retreat, safety and relaxation as well as a place of freedom, independence, self-expression and privacy (Somerville, 1997).

Research based on Giddens's (1991) notion of ontological security (continuity of self identity, constancy of social and material environments and reliability of persons and things) addresses the psychosocial aspects of home (Kearns *et al.*, 2000). In this context, having a house is viewed as a normative base from which to achieve ontological security and stability (Ronald, 2004) because it is a place where tensions that build up from constant surveillance in other settings can be relieved (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). As such the conditions required for home include the following:

- a site of constancy in the social and material environment;

- the context in which day to day routines of human existence are performed and where daily life is predictable;
- the site of control over one's life and freedom from surveillance in the contemporary world; and
- a secure base around which identities are constructed (Dupuis & Thorn, 1998?).

Based on these different meanings of home we suggest that the opportunities provided through SAAP-funded services can offer young homeless people a sense of home in terms of belonging and normality. More permanent accommodation can enable them to shift from their categorisation as 'other' and 'homeless', make sense of traumatic pasts, begin to make connections, become-at-home, belong and make decisions about the future (Manzo, 2003; Robinson, 2002; Stephen, 2000). Yet, as will also be shown in this paper, permanent rooves alone may not help overcome subjective experiences of homelessness as they relate to feelings of social exclusion, stigmatisation and trauma (McNaughton, 2008).

While the provision of housing can provide a sense of home, research with young homeless people has also found that beyond the desire for shelter and the importance of independence and control they seek social and cultural belonging through having a home (Kellett & Moore, 2003). Similarly, Stephen's (2000) work with young homeless women in hostel accommodation revealed they, too, despite feelings of being at home continued to want a home of their own because society would then perceive them as 'normal' young women with 'normal' needs. Unsurprisingly, as will be shown later, the young people in this study also yearned for the normalcy they perceived home ownership would bestow upon them.

What comes with the house

In 'settler' nations such as Australia, Canada and the USA 'home' and 'home ownership' are closely related and over time have become almost indistinct concepts for they represent a cultural norm (Baum & Wulff, 2001; Dowling & Mee, 2007; Gurney, 1999a). To illustrate, 70 per cent of the Australian population own their homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The normalising discourses of home ownership, predominantly found in Anglo-Saxon countries, find expression through evocative and emotional aphorisms of home (Gurney, 1999a, 1999b); for example, 'an Englishman's home is his castle' and 'it's yours at the end of the day'. Home ownership offers owners a set of values such as having the responsibility to look after one's property, self-respect and worth, and is also positively associated with values related to good citizenship and parenthood. Owning a home is seen as a necessity for family life, explained by the security and control home ownership brings.

Home ownership mostly represents an endpoint in people's housing careers and as such does not mark the first step for young people leaving the family home (Clapham, 2005). Typically, the ascending housing career is described as stepping up a ladder - from parental home to rental, from rental to home purchase, from home purchase to outright ownership. In this context, rental accommodation is considered a stepping-stone only between leaving the parent's home and entering into home ownership (Baum & Wulff, 2001). Thus, not aspiring to home ownership falls outside what mainstream society might perceive as a universally shared goal or understand as the proper path (Richards, 1990).

In Australia, in contrast to European countries (Ronald, 2007), there is a social perception of failure towards those not able to own their own property (Atkinson & Jacobs, 2008). Renting continues to be stigmatised, being perceived not only as expensive and insecure but also a sub-standard living option (Baum & Wulff, 2003;

Gurney, 1999b; Kemeny, 1995). Gurney (1999b), for example, discussed how people in rental accommodation become the stigmatised and stereotyped out-group. He also identified how renters play an important and powerful part of normalising discourses of home ownership. People renting are often vilified in the media as outsiders, especially those in public housing, who are negatively associated with profligacy, waste, fecklessness and seen as lazy, lacking in pride and self esteem (Palmer *et al.*, 2005). While not owning a home does not necessarily preclude people from a community of home owners, renters are nonetheless positioned outside the mainstream (Richards, 1990).

The houses we live in are now often read in terms of their market value and are seen as items of conspicuous consumption, communicating the values and identities of the people who live there (Coen *et al.*, 1996; Corrigan, 1997; Gregson & Lowe, 1995; Kellett & Moore, 2003). The focus seems to have shifted onto the 'image' of home with houses becoming signifiers of the occupants' economic success and status (Easthope, 2004) with direct affects on other people's sense of place and social positioning. Kellett and Moore (2003) found that people financially unable to join ranks with the home-owning class still subscribe to modern mass consumption. By following dominant conventions and cultural norms people outside the formal housing sector were seen to be actively constructing their personal, social and cultural understandings of home with the goal of belonging (Kellett & Moore, 2003).

It is within the mainstream discourses and cultural importance of home ownership that young homeless people in this study move into more permanent accommodation. These discourses were amplified at the time of the study (years) as a result of the 'housing boom' occurring in WA, which saw housing prices surge (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Dominant housing discourses in Australia are

also shaped by prevailing views on social housing. In countries like Australia, in contrast to more egalitarian and collectivist countries such as Denmark or Sweden (Ronald, 2007), the growing influence of globalisation and neo-liberalism in recent decades has led to a decline in the provision of public housing (Atkinson & Jacobs, 2008). This is coupled with discourses of personal responsibility within which social housing is viewed as a privilege rather than a human right (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). The expectation is that with this privilege comes responsibility and when these privileges are perceived as being abused they are threatened with consequences such as eviction or increased scrutiny (see the recent announcement by Western Australia's Department of Housing of a pilot program for the creation of an Antisocial Behaviour Taskforce (Government of Western Australia, 2009)). It is dominant social attitudes such as these, which complicate the start of the already difficult housing careers of homeless young people.

Admittedly, social norms are changing in Australia as a result of turbulent dynamics on the housing market and changing housing preferences among the younger generations (Baum & Wulff, 2003). Over the last two decades, the reduction in housing availability and the escalating cost of home ownership in Australia has resulted in a lower percentage of people being able to afford their own home (The Australia's Future Task Force, 2007), affecting young people in particular (Beer *et al.*, 2007). While the rising number of people living in rental accommodation may start to challenge the negative images associated with renting (Baum & Wulff, 2003), the prevailing social stigma attached to rental properties and public housing estates in particular (Atkinson & Jacobs, 2008) still serve to maintain the distinction between 'normal' home occupiers and outsiders.

In summary, home can contribute to one's psychological and social well-being. In countries like Australia, however, home also comes with notions of having a stable family life, domesticity, consumption, progress, belonging, social status and so on. It follows that at the beginning of their housing careers young people need to negotiate many of these facets of home. For young people who follow the 'right way' out of the family home this is already an often daunting and difficult task (Jones, 1995). Young homeless people, however, who follow alternative pathways out of the parental home, face many additional challenges as they relate to personal trauma but also stigma, exclusion and social (mis-)fit (Hagan & McCarthy, 2005). To compound this situation, alternative pathways out of the parental home are often taken at a younger age. The average age of participants in the study reported on here was 17 years, compared to an average home leaving age in Australia of 24 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). When young homeless people are provided a more permanent home what else comes with the house? How do these 'added extras' interrupt homeless young people's establishment of a feeling of being at home in this new accommodation?

Method

A total of 19 young people were involved in this study. A profile of participants at the time of first interview is provided in Table 1. Inevitably, details of education and employment changed over the the course of the research.

- Insert Table 1 here -

All of the young people involved in this study were understood to be homeless because they lacked security of tenure. Prior to their transition into more permanent accommodation, they were either housed in transitional youth accommodation, such as hostels or were staying with friends or with extended family. All participants were connected to youth support organisations and were waiting for a more permanent housing option to become available. During this waiting period, the young people received agency support in terms of temporary accommodation, counselling and coaching as well as training and in-kind financial support. Their transition into more independent living meant that their level of support would gradually be reduced. The security of tenure varied between accommodation options, as some were made available for a period of one year only, while some of the public housing options came with the possibility of long-term tenure.

Youth workers from the collaborating organisations were asked to inform young homeless people who were about to make a transition into less supported, permanent accommodation about the project. Those interested were then contacted by either Green or Brueckner, depending on their preference for a male or female researcher. Young people were paid for each interview to encourage them to remain involved in the study, recognising also that the young people involved in the research may require financial assistance so as to be able to participate (Cotter *et al.*, 2002; Sullivan *et al.*, 1996).

Initially participants were asked to participate in three interviews at three monthly intervals from around the time they moved into independent accommodation. However, as the research progressed it became clear that further interviews would

enrich our knowledge of the young people's housing journeys, and some completed up to five interviews.

- Insert Table 2 here -

Participants were able to stop participating in the research at any time without explanation and no follow up was conducted. The in-depth, face-to-face interviews were between 45 minutes and 90 minutes and were designed to allow young people to openly explore their experiences of home and homelessness. The first interview focused on the youth housing program in which they were involved, the place they were moving to and their thoughts and feelings about the move. Subsequent interviews explored current and previous accommodation: what was being enjoyed and going well; what was causing difficulties and worries; support being provided and needed to cope with the transition; as well as future plans. At the time of subsequent interviews, ten young people had moved to other accommodation, either because of the short-termed nature of their semi-permanent accommodation or because they had been evicted, chose to move out or had been placed in institutions such as mental health facilities and remand centres. In addition, questions similar to those above were asked of these young people focusing on the reasons for leaving their previous accommodation. As predicted by Gurney's (1997) description of home as an emotional sphere in which personal biographies are framed, our interviews with young people extended into very rich descriptions of their lives.

Analytical framework

The aim of the analysis was twofold. Firstly, it was to depict the young people's lived experiences and perceptions of their transition towards independence, including moving out and being independent and receiving support. The second aim

was to identify the discursive constructions and structures that shaped the world young people experience through this transition.

To achieve this, our framework combined interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) with Foucauldian discourse analysis. This allowed us to highlight but also move beyond the subjective experiences of participants to understanding these experiences in relation to the social and cultural conditions that may have given rise to them (Willig, 2001). Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to capture people's meaning of their personal and social worlds in terms of their relatedness to, and engagement with, particular phenomena (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Larkin *et al.*, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2003; van Manen, 1990). However, IPA elaborates on the rich descriptions of people's lived experiences of an event provided in a phenomenological analysis by attempting to position the description in relation to wider social, cultural and historical contexts (Larkin *et al.*, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In other words, a phenomenological analysis would not seek to understand a person's lived experience in relation to their social, cultural and historical contexts.

To strengthen the link between, the lived experience of people and the social, cultural and historical contexts in which these experiences take place we drew upon Foucauldian discourse analysis, which reveals that the way people think and feel are influenced by the social and historical contexts in which they live, and the power relations permeating their experience (Mama, 1995)(Parker, 1992; Willig, 2003). Taking up various subject positions has consequences for people's subjective experience, in that it determines what can be felt, thought and experienced (Willig, 2003); for example, who is and who is not allowed to be considered a home occupier. The focus of discourse analysis is identifying what can be felt, thought or experienced from various subject positions. In contrast, the descriptive account of people's lived

experience provided by IPA makes explicit what individuals actually report feeling, thinking or experiencing.

To guide our discourse analysis we used Parker's (1992) ten criteria which translate Foucault's concepts of construction, function and variation (see Foucault, 1969, 1980) into methodological steps. Six of the criteria focus on uncovering the discourse, including identifying the objects and subjects in the analysis; the metaphors, analogies and pictures used to describe an event or phenomenon; and the reinforcing or contradictory relationships the discourse has with other discourses. The other four criteria instruct the investigation of the historical foundations of the discourses; how discourses exist within and reproduce institutions and their practices and ideologies; and who gains and who loses from different discourses.

Findings

The findings are presented in two sections. The first section focuses on how homeless young people (re)produced the discourse of the 'normal' home occupier and how they endeavoured to position themselves within this discourse. The second part of the findings focuses on the discursive barriers young people faced from neighbours and youth workers, which interrupted their construction of themselves as 'normal' home occupiers.

Getting settled into being a home occupier

Initial interviews with participants explored their feelings about moving into SAAP accommodation and their views on 'normal' home occupiers.

Mel: ... it was about the permanency. I did not have that since I was out of home so I'm not gonna deny myself that for anything.

Nat: Probably just being my own boss. Not being told what to do, cleaning up and stuff and being told that my house is a mess.

Imogen: Like you have somewhere to always live, you know you're not thinking about where you're going to live in a couple of months ... or if you get kicked out of here.

In the quotes above we see examples of young people experiencing their new accommodation as places where they can feel assured of permanence and security and in control of their lives.

The young people we interviewed also spoke about the stability that came with their accommodation, enabling them to start making changes and decisions about how they wanted to live their lives.

Mel: I hope it gives me some stability and some stability in my own life... that's my expectation anyway ... I hope I mature, I guess, stop running amok start settling down and being confident. I am glad this house is not a drug house ... this house started on a good footing.

For many of the young people, their new accommodation was seen as a vehicle for gaining independence and an escape from negative pasts. Overall it was a step towards a 'normal' adult life, which they defined as having control, "being their own boss", and living in a predictable environment that was "not a drug house" and subject to being "kicked out".

These homeless young people further positioned themselves within the 'normal' home occupier discourse by taking on the expectation that their homes be presented in particular ways. Many participants expressed pride in how they had maintained their houses and spoke seriously of the responsibilities they had in keeping their tenancy.

Jemma: *They (youth workers from housing program) could rock up any day early in the morning with my hair sticking out and I wouldn't be worried because everything always looks organised. I would welcome them in with pride because we (referring to when she lived with her Mum) always had to pack boxes, cover them up and make them look like tables and put stuff into cupboards when we had rent inspections. ...*

Rod: *I can cook ...I am usually the one that does the cooking. The flat at the moment gets a bit messy but only because I am living with someone else. If I was to live by myself, the place would always be clean. My friend used to have mates over messing up the place. I would expect visitors to be tidy 'cause I know the place needs to be clean for rent inspections and stuff.*

We argue that along with the experiences of permanency, control and stability in having permanent accommodation, the participants also started to see themselves as responsible and as competent as those in mainstream society in keeping a home. This argument is supported by quotes like Rod's and Jemma's above, in which participants delineate between themselves, as 'normal' home occupiers who are responsible and others they view as not having those responsibilities. No longer did they need to hide boxes for rent inspections, instead they managed to maintain their house and began to question how and why other people did not get their lives together as was exemplified in the quote by Jemma.

In (re)positioning themselves within the discourse of a 'normal' home occupier many participants would invest considerable effort and desire to make their accommodation homely, putting up pictures and buying ornaments as shown in Kelly's desire to make changes to her home:

Kelly: Well I do want to invest in this place and buy it, still want to do that. I want to do some renovations to it; make it, just like painting it up or something, yeah adding to it. ... I want to get proper curtains and paint a feature wall or something and make this place look a lot better.

The young people's desire to be 'normal' home occupiers became visible also in references to home ownership and renovations, despite them lacking the financial resources or employment status to achieve these aspirations.

Gertrude: ... I'm moving to my own house soon, cause I reckon I'm getting to be ready to move into my own place, and I'll move out with my boyfriend and that. Then next year we are going to get our own place, like buy one, cause now he's working he can get a loan so he's going to buy a house

From the findings presented so far one can assume that these young, previously homeless, people were seeing SAAP accommodation as an opportunity to experience aspects of home either for the first time or for a long time. We have also argued that these young people started to see themselves as being 'normal' home occupiers and different to people with whom they had had negative experiences of home. While not currently home owners these young people were positioning themselves within a discourse about what it is to be a 'normal' home occupier (Baum & Wulff, 2001; Gurney, 1999a, 1999b), as discussed earlier. For them, being homed extended beyond permanency and stability to being independent, mature and knowing the responsibilities of having a home and how a home should be presented. In some instances, this did develop further into desires for home ownership. In the next section we discuss how the position of 'normal' home occupier was interrupted for homeless young people.

Interrupting the experience of home

Despite being willing to take on all home has to offer, the young people's transitions into a domestic idyll were not straightforward. In the findings presented

below we suggest that the positive potential of these experiences was interrupted for some participants because of the discursive barriers that (re)positioned them as outsiders rather than the responsible home occupiers they viewed themselves to be.

One group seen as interrupting these experiences of young people were their youth workers who had the role of assisting them through their transition from homelessness to permanent accommodation and independent living. Some young people's spoke of the way in which their feelings of being at home were constrained by the power imbalance between themselves and their support workers.

***Kat:** [Youth workers ask you questions] ... like how often should you change your bedding or how often you should vacuum the floors or ...should clean the tiles and all that kind of stuff. Just the basic stuff that most people generally know. Most adult kind of people...*

***Kat:** ... it's just like "I gotta go home" and people go "why do you have to go home" and I go "my 'parent's' coming to check my unit and talk to me. Cause it actually feels like that, it feels like you've got somebody every week coming into your home. And if you want friends to stay you've got to ring and ask. ...*

***Imogen:** (Talking about getting a Homeswest house) ... you get the keys and it's all yours, like you're own person, you don't have to go through no youth people or deal with them. It's just normal, how everyone else works. ... Homeless people are not disabled, you just need a house. You're not like dumb or slow, you've just got nowhere to live. But I think people think homeless people are dumb and stupid...*

These quotes suggest young people felt a loss of control and security, aspects of home which the young people's new accommodation was expected to provide.

Arguably, young people would have their independent living arrangements scrutinised by their parents or other care givers. However, firstly this scrutiny is viewed as more intense and far reaching than would be applied to others. For example, Imogen yearned to be like normal Homeswest tenants, who she perceived as not surveilled as often or as extensively as those involved in the SAAP and treated ‘normally’, not as if they are “dumb and stupid”. Secondly, youth workers who ask questions about changing bedding or require young people to ask about having friends stay over interrupt young people’s construction of themselves as ‘normal’ home occupiers. They are aware that they are not seen as young normal independent adults by these youth workers or agencies, despite seeing themselves that way.

While wanting to be ‘normal’, the participants in this study were often simultaneously viewed as a threat to those who already ‘are homed’ and ‘have homes’. The feelings of not being included in the community of ‘normal’ home occupiers by neighbours and others visiting the house is described in Elle’s story below. She moved into public housing, which for a number of years had been the short-term accommodation for other young homeless people receiving agency support through SAAP.

Elle’s Story

The neighbour: *The next door neighbour on my right hand side is a psychotic prick. Sorry for my language but he really is. ... Everybody who moves into that house has a problem with him. I understand his side of the story ‘cause there’re a lot of idiots who are moving into that house. The last chick that was living there broke into his house for a start ... he does have to put up with some crap. But it was my first day. I hadn’t even unpacked my stuff, I was still bringing stuff in from the car and I got a complaint.*

The maintenance man: *Last week there was meant to be a repairman in to repair the washing machine 'cause it was unbalanced. ... I think it's the fact that it is a [agency] house, that it's not a proper house where people live in all the time; repair and maintenance people just don't give a shit. He didn't fix the washing machine properly.*

These quotes illustrate Elle's view that she is not seen as a 'normal' home occupier by neighbours, before she is given any opportunity to establish her credentials. The maintenance story highlights her belief that tenants like her are treated differently from others; the inference being, that under different circumstances a handyman would have fixed her washing machine within a matter of days. These experiences show the discursive barriers to young people positioning themselves as 'normal' home occupiers. While they may acquire permanency and stability when moving into these places, they see themselves as outside the discourse they wish to accompany it.

Discussion

Despite the alleviation of 'houselessness' through SAAP-funded housing programs, the young people participating in this study continued to find themselves positioned outside the sphere of 'normal' home occupiers. We found that dominant discourses about 'normal' home occupancy not only served to position the young people as 'outsiders' but also limited their ability to join and own the discourse of 'normal' home occupiers despite their desire to do so.. We discuss the discursive barriers preventing this sense of being 'normal' in more detail below.

Dupois and Thorns (1998) identify how the feeling of being at home requires a sense of control over one's life and freedom from surveillance, conditions not

experienced by the participants in our study. Nonetheless, having received some stability and permanency in their accommodation, many participants began to think of themselves as 'normal' home occupiers. They were proud of how they had maintained their houses and were interested in making their accommodation feel like home. However, their attempts to be part of a 'normal' home occupying community were seemingly interrupted by the discourses surrounding them, in which they were seen as young people who have not left home the 'right way' and who required social housing support. They were (re)positioned outside the community of 'normal' home occupiers by housing providers, neighbours and others.

While references to practical competencies can be seen as a signal of becoming an adult (Thomson *et al.*, 2004), the young people's references to competence in the domestic sphere have an added significance within the discourse of 'normal' home occupancy and can also be seen as expressions of their goal to belong (Kellett & Moore, 2003). For them being a responsible tenant and knowing how to present a house places them within the discourse of 'normal' home occupancy . However, 'normal' home occupiers can deny the domestic competence of perceived outsiders who are often seen as incapable tenants (Palmer *et al.*, 2005). Thus, proving competence can be seen as a way of attaining access to, and partial ownership of, the 'normal' home occupying discourse. This is also tied to other statements made by the young people about adult and 'normal' home occupier practices such as home ownership and renovations (see also Kellett & Moore, 2003), which represented engrained notions in Australian housing discourses (e.g., Baum & Wulff, 2001; Dowling & Mee, 2007).

For young people, becoming part of the community of 'normal' home occupiers appeared to be complicated not because of them having to practice the

social construction of home (that is,, maintaining a house , and showing an interest in home improvement), but by being positioned outside the discourses of home by those from within the privileged position of normalised home occupancy. Young people in Australia face growing social exclusion (Maunder, 2001; Savelsberg & Martin-Giles, 2008) and are frequently stigmatised by those critical of their behaviour, tastes and attitudes (Kelly, 2002). As such, young people are rarely referred to in public discourse as ‘dream neighbours’ in contrast to insiders, the ‘normal’ home occupiers who do not threaten the image of the area (Richards, 1990). Instead young people are often seen as a danger to common values surrounding property maintenance, noise and privacy (Bostrom, 2001). This is even more pronounced for young people in public housing (Arthurson, 2004; Palmer *et al.*, 2005).

Previous research has found that social housing providers actively make use of housing narratives to develop rules and policies for housing programs for residents living in social housing – everyday policies relating to guests, eviction, drug use and pets as well as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (Gurstein & Small, 2005). Through these means housing providers can assert power because of their ability to scrutinise tenants and evict if they are found wanting. The control and regulation of young people’s behaviours also prevent them from occupying their home in a way they want and how they perceive other ‘normal’ home occupiers as doing. Housing providers’ rules and policies also affect the yearning for a home as a place where you can be accepted for who you are (Gurstein & Small, 2005).

Being young, homeless and reliant on social housing resulted in young people needing to negotiate the discursive barriers associated with their position in ‘normal’ society. These were the added extras that came with their new accommodation, which was meant to enable them to ‘get back on their feet’. In this regard, young

people's management of their tenancy was not only an issue of mastering their domestic affairs but also, if not mostly, a negotiation of the discourses about what it is to be a 'normal' home occupier.

The provision of rooves for, and the transfer of independent living skills to, young homeless people is the key focus of SAAP-funded services in Australia. While all young people are likely to face a degree of difficulty with their integration into mainstream society when starting their housing careers on the outside, homeless young people, as illustrated above, are faced with additional challenges, with implications for service providers.

In this sense, we may speak of what Beer et al. (2005) describe as a potential gap between perceptions of young people and service providers on what is needed in terms of housing. We do not question that the SAAP approach of 'housing first', which mirrors the homelessness strategies found in countries like the USA and UK (Shelter, 2008), is an essential component in service provision for young homeless people. Stable housing and the transfer of independent living skills which facilitate young homeless people's security of tenure are vital. As the same time, however, our research indicates that young homeless people's subjective experiences of home are seemingly affected by the normalised discourses around them and echoed and reinforced unwittingly by housing providers and support agencies.

These housing discourses appear to be largely hidden from 'normal' home occupiers, including housing providers and service agencies. Workers in these agencies may not be aware of the way in which their young clients feel constrained by these discourses of home. Despite being provided with stable accommodation and support, they believed these discursive barriers positioned them as the 'other' and inhibited a sense of social belonging (Manzo, 2003; Robinson, 2002; Stephen, 2000).

While we cannot judge the extent to which these barriers affected young people's housing transitions on the basis of this research, further work on the existence of these barriers and their effects is warranted.

In addition, housing support programs may require attention to the discursive barriers to young people's experiences of home, alongside the practical assistance received to maintain occupancy; to enable young people to challenge the pervasive, discursive barriers they encounter and to work against their social replication.

Conclusion

In this paper we reported on the experiences of young homeless people during their transition from supported accommodation to more independent living arrangements. The data presented showed that the young people were eager to join ranks with 'normal' occupiers, sharing in the practices of home maintenance and home improvements and harbouring hopes for home ownership. Despite their ability to participate in 'normal' home occupying practices, the young people found themselves positioned outside the dominant discourse of home occupancy, which in turn affected their experiences of home and social belonging.

The findings presented in this paper provide insights into the experiences of only a small cohort of research participants, which limits the representativeness and generalisability of this study's findings. Many of the issues raised in this paper are specific to the Australian housing context and country-specific discourses of 'home'. Owing to space constraints, we were also unable to provide comparisons between participants on the basis of gender, personal background or security of tenure, which contextualise further the findings presented below. Nevertheless, the findings point to the presence of discursive barriers to young homeless people's housing transitions. Further exploration of these barriers may be warranted to more accurately gauge their

impact on young homeless people's subjective experiences of home and long-term 'housing success'.

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Table 1: Participant demographics

Demographics	Sex	Age	Employment	Parents⁴	Indigenous⁵	CALD⁶
Number of participants	15 females 4 males	4 were 16 6 were 17 8 were 18 1 was 22	3 employed^ 6 unemployed 9 students^	4	5*	1*

^ One participant was studying and working part-time.

* One participant identified as CALD and Indigenous.

Table 2: Number of participants by number of interviews

Number of interviews	1	2	3	4	5
Number of participants	4	1	4	3	7

⁴ All parents had custody of, and were living with, their children.

⁵ Indigenous Australians refers to Aboriginal Australians and people from the Torres Strait Islands.

⁶ CALD refers to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.