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A habitus of instability: youth homelessness and instability

Justin Barker
Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT
This research introduces the concept of a habitus of insecurity to account for the lives of homeless young people. It outlines how conditions of existence are internalised and how homeless young people come to expect and in turn recreate instability in their lives. This research addresses the internalisation and naturalisation of experiences of instability, insecurity and marginalisation and how people can come to subjectively aspire to what they are socialised to see as objectively probable or ‘for the likes of them’. The research draws on ethnographic research and participant observation to examine the complex lives of homeless young people and how they are shaped by instability and insecurity inculcated before, during and after experiences of homelessness. This research highlights that people should not be defined merely by their experiences of homelessness of housing status, but by the complex array of conditions that shape their lives.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to introduce the concept of a habitus of instability. This research draws on the experience and findings of ethnographic research with homeless young people in Canberra, Australia. The example of youth homelessness demonstrates how instability and uncertainty can become an organising theme in people’s lives. It highlights how people can internalise experiences of instability, insecurity and marginalisation and how they can come to predict, anticipate and act out what they are socialised to see as objectively probable or ‘for the likes of them’.

This article has both a theoretical and practical contribution. It presents an account of homelessness that highlights how peoples’ lives are shaped by a wide range of destabilising factors that have been inculcated and shape the habitus and also provides clues for how change occurs in practice. The concept of habitus highlights how homeless young people can incorporate the structures and constraints of external reality, highlighting the link between objective structures and subjective reality. In doing this habitus provides us with a conceptualisation that does not blame the individual nor merely examines structural processes. Furthermore, the conceptual insights present a way to think about change in the lives of homeless young people.

The formation of the habitus of insecurity as a heuristic device was the result of empirical research. However, to convey an understanding of this concept requires a theoretical
grounding. First, the article starts with an introduction to youth homelessness. Second, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is explained. Next the methodology is explicated. This is followed by the findings, outlining the habitus of youth homelessness, a habitus of instability. The unstable living conditions of youth homelessness are illustrated, highlighting the mobility between different accommodation options. Following this, two case studies of the ‘precariously housed’ are examined to illustrate how the move into housing is not always the end of someone’s homelessness or instability. These case studies exemplify the concept of a habitus of insecurity. The discussion outlines my interpretation and the implications of the findings, discussing other examples where we can see the habitus of instability in studies on youth homelessness. It explores the affective and predictive capacity of a habitus of instability and the consequences of this for people who have adjusted to the conditions of homelessness. The discussion also addresses the important question of accounting for change within the theoretical perspective of Bourdieu and how the habitus of instability fits into examples of young people exiting homelessness.

**Youth homelessness**

Research indicates that pathways and trajectories into youth homelessness are varied and complex. However, several overlapping risk factors are consistently highlighted by research: family breakdown (including neglect, conflict and abuse), mental health issues, unemployment, poverty, alcohol and other drug issues, and crime (Homelessness Taskforce 2008; National Youth Commission 2008). In Australia, family breakdown and family conflict are the leading causes of youth homelessness (Homelessness Taskforce 2008, 8; National Youth Commission 2008, 85, 102; AIHW 2011). This is supported by the literature that suggests that many homeless young people come from family histories characterised by neglect, chaos, violence and rejection (Garbarino, Wilson, and Garbarino 1986; McCarthy and Hagan 1992; Yoder and Whitbeck 2001; Mallett, Rosenthal, and Keys 2005; Smith 2008; Mallett et al. 2009). The uncertainty and instability within the family of origin entail that homeless young people cannot rely on their family for support (Barker 2012b). Thus, instability and uncertainty precede the experience of homelessness.

Just as the experiences that lead to homelessness are diverse, so too are the experiences of homelessness. Nonetheless, research suggests that young people who experience homelessness are exposed to a range of adverse conditions that put them at high risk of substance abuse and dependence (Diaz et al. 1997; Baer et al. 2003), mental health issues (Kamieniecki 2001; Slesnick and Prestopnik 2005), medical problems (Ensign and Bell 2004; Kelly and Caputo 2007; Hudson et al. 2010), violence and victimisation (Baron 2003, 2009), and report high rates of sexual, physical and emotional abuse (Kidd and Kral 2002). Homeless young people are consistently linked to disengagement with traditional social institutions and forms of supports, such as family and school, and other pro-social forms of social capital (Heiniz, Jozefowicz, and Toro 2010). The insecurity of homelessness can make it difficult for young people to engage with education, training and employment, leading to further disadvantage and social exclusion (Chamberlain and Mackenzie 1998). Furthermore, the experiences that lead to homelessness and the experiences of homelessness make it difficult for them to trust other people (Barry, Ensign, and Lippek 2002; French, Reardon, and Smith 2003; Kidd 2003; Thompson et al. 2006; Karabano...
The lack of trust and instability often leads to a strong sense of independence or autonomy that is the primary way homeless young people address their uncertain conditions and create a sense of control (Barker 2013). As a result of the range of conditions that proceed and shape the experiences of homeless young people, their lives can appear out of control and unstable to both onlookers and themselves (Barker 2013). The instability of their lives exacerbates the perceived need to find some control or agency, if only symbolically (Barker 2012a). This has been acknowledged by research that notes that interventions in the lives of homeless young people need to respect the significance of choice (agency) and their desire for a sense of control (Kidd 2003; Thompson et al. 2006).

Pathway approaches and longitudinal studies have shown us that many homeless young people have a brief moment of homelessness or episodic homelessness before returning to their family home or alternative independent accommodation (Milburn et al. 2007; Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008; Mallett et al. 2009). These insights have highlighted that not all young people who experience homelessness experience an inevitable downward spiral into a career of homelessness. Nonetheless, it is apparent that some young people are unable to return to the family home due to ongoing presence and impact of the issues that lead them to leave their home initially (Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008). Of the adult homeless population those who have experienced homelessness as a young person have the greatest difficulty in exiting homelessness due to this adaption to these conditions (Chamberlain and Johnson 2013). This is often conceptualised as young people having adopted a culture, subculture or lifestyle of homelessness, adapting to the conditions of homelessness (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008; Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008; Ravenhill 2008; Somerville 2013). This research builds on the broad notion of adaption to the conditions of homelessness to examine how homeless young people can come to internalise the insecurity and instability of the conditions of homelessness to have ongoing impact in their lives.

**Habitus: a theory of practice**

Bourdieu’s theoretical oeuvre is a complex, interweaving and interdependent set of concepts. However, this research centres on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. Habitus is a heuristic device that presents a way to conceptualise human practice and action. It provides a way of thinking about how humans act. Habitus provides an account of how there are observable regularities of social action whilst still accounting for individual actors’ capacity for and experience of agency.

Bourdieu defined habitus as a ‘system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (Bourdieu 1990b, 53, emphasis added). In other words, habitus generates perceptions, reactions and actions, by structuring them in accordance with its own structure. The regularities and constraints of external social reality are instilled with its own structure. The regularities and constraints of external social reality are instilled and incorporated into an individual’s habitus through experience and socialisation.

Structured by the conditions of existence from which it has emerged, habitus mediates between the past and present, addressing new situations in familiar ways. Habitus comes to perceive the present based on past experience. Furthermore, for Bourdieu, it is not just the past that is present but the perceived future is inscribed in the present as agents...
practically and pre-reflexively anticipate the forthcoming (Adkins 2011). Thus, ‘habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with schemes generated by history’ (Bourdieu 1990b, 54).

Habitus is a way of talking about habituated ways of understanding and acting in the world. As the related terms imply (Bourdieu 1993, 86–87), it is a result of the habitat (or place) we live in, our history, and has become a habit or a set of practices and internalised ways of making sense of the world and acting within it. The patterned regularities and constraints of external social reality are durably instilled in individuals, forming the pattern making and sense making tools that constitute a habitus (Bourdieu 1990b, 54).

Habitus represents an informal and practical, rather than a discursive and conscious, form of knowledge and action. Practices produced by habitus are created without conscious calculation, done habitually and pre-reflexively, underlying and outrunning conscious intention, operating at an unconscious or preconscious level (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Jenkins 1992, 79). Through ‘creative reinvention’ the habitus responds to the discrepancies between the demands of new conditions of existence and customary habits (Bourdieu 1993). Habitus can produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable but within the limits of what seems reasonable and consistent with the logic of the conditions from which it has emerged (Bourdieu 1990b, 55–56).

Bourdieu’s notion of group habitus allows us to talk about groups of people who share similar conditions of existence and, in turn, a similar habitus. The homeless habitus can be considered a group habitus, not the description of a habitus of an individual. This helps us to understand a group of people who come from a range of experiences that are unified by a generalised instability and uncertainty that has been internalised and underscores their way of being in the world.

**Group habitus**

Individual agents occupying common relations to conditions of existence share internalised dispositions associated with these conditions (Bourdieu 1990b, 60–61; Swartz 1997, 105). In short they share the same habitus. Bourdieu notes:

Though it is impossible for all (or even two) members of the same class to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with situations most frequent for members of that class. (1990b, 60)

The individual habitus of members of the same class of conditions of existence is united in a relationship of homology; of ‘diversity within homogeneity’ characteristic of their socialisation (Bourdieu 1990b, 60). The observable homogenising of group habitus – that is the product of similar conditions of existence – is what enables practices to be harmonised, patterned and regular amongst groups of people without any conscious reference to a shared norm and without explicit co-ordination (Bourdieu 1990b, 58–59). It is at this collective level that habitus acquires a political significance as it encompasses not only the individual but the collective future of a social category or group. This research, in explicating the habitus of homeless youth, is outlining the group habitus of young people who experience homelessness.
Methodology

The findings presented in this article are based on ethnographic research for a Ph.D. conducted between 2003 and 2010 exploring the lives of homeless young people in Canberra, Australia. The aim of this ethnography was to acquire an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the research participants set against detailed observations of their behaviour and living conditions to produce qualitative insights through systematic and detailed collection of data. The ethnographic research methodology and experience is ideal for seeing the intimate connection and complex dialectical relationship between people and their conditions of existence.

Ethnography refers to both an investigative approach and a written monograph (Seymour-Smith 1986, 98; Glasser and Bridgman 1999, 6). People engaged in ethnography can utilise a range of methodologies, tools or strategies. What unifies the diverse range of practices that are referred to as ethnography is the endeavour to provide an understanding or interpretation of the behaviours, beliefs, norms and practices of a social group. Over an extended period of time a diverse array of research methods are used to acquire detailed and rich data.

The instability and mobility that shape the lives of homeless young people influenced the approach that I took to fieldwork. Many of the research participants had no particular ‘site’, ‘location’ or ‘place’ that they were tied to – their lives were structured by quite the opposite situation: having no reliable or stable ‘place’ or ‘home’. Tom Hall, in his ethnography on youth homelessness in Britain, highlights the dull repetition, the passing time, hanging out, juxtaposed with explosive, often violent, ruptures in the seemingly mundane existence of this social group (Hall 2003, 10). This resonates with my experience: a great deal of time ‘hanging out’, passing time, contrasted with the often violent conflicts, frustrations and outbursts that underscore the seemingly inevitably upheavals that framed these people’s lives. Thus, the conditions of fieldwork were unstable and uncertain and shaped the methods used.

Initially structured research methods were used to gain access to homeless young people; conducting focus groups and individual interviews. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed after obtaining consent from the research participants. They were conducted at a range of locations familiar to the participants, including at homelessness services (e.g. residential accommodation and youth centres), in public places (such as parks) or at someone’s accommodation.

Recruiting research participants began through contacts with organisations that work with homeless young people. More research participants were met through these initial social networks and meeting people whilst in the field. The interviews and focus groups provided the initial rapport and contact from which networks were developed, establishing pathways into the lives of homeless young people. After initially taking part in individual interviews or focus groups, research participants were invited to be part of the participant observation.

Participant observation was the most influential research method. Participant observation involves a researcher immersing him or herself in the conditions and lives of the research participants as far as is feasible and is ethical. Twelve months was dedicated to participant observation. More than 30 young people began as key participants at the beginning of the participant observation. Throughout the time dedicated to participant
observation only 18 of these young people remained as key research participants as the others either moved out of the region or contact was lost. With the consent of the participants, interviews and conversations were recorded and transcribed. Detailed field notes were taken in situ and upon leaving the field, describing the observations and events that had transpired.

Participant observation provided a means to acquire subjective perspectives and observe behaviours and conditions of living. One of the key factors that contribute to effective participant observation is time. Over a 12-month period I was able to observe the practices of the research participants in the context of their lives. The patterns, strategies, regularities and practices that were not subjectively articulated were nonetheless observable. These observations are set against subjective views of the research participants acquired through recurring interviews and conversations. This allowed me to see the links between the subjective views, the observable regularities and their conditions of existence. Research findings and hypotheses were repeatedly tested in real-life conditions and contexts throughout participant observation, as the research participants interacted with the world they live in.

The 18 key informants became the backbone of the participant observation and in-depth qualitative research. Genealogies, life histories and social network diagrams were collected with these participants. As each genealogy was drawn up with the assistance of the informant we simultaneously developed a rudimentary timeline that marked the interactions they had with their family and other events in their lives. To the genealogies and life histories were added social network diagrams that indicated the young person’s involvement with services and the relationships they developed with peers and other members of the community. The social network diagrams were particularly complex as they endeavoured to note how and when the diverse range of relationships began and finished and what kind of relationship each was: friends, lover, co-offender, acquaintance, etc.

Youth homelessness is a complex phenomenon. Using multiple methods with the research participants helps to reveal the interplay between numerous competing forces and factors that shape the lives of these young people. Creating genealogies and social network diagrams and linking these relationships to a timeline created a sense of the dynamic social relationship. In previous research I have highlighted how friends and family move in and out of the research participants’ lives, often oscillating precariously between friend and enemy (Barker 2013). Mapping life events and movement between accommodation options onto the timeline similarly provided a sense of the instability of accommodation, education and employment. Thus, the range of research methods and sheer quantity of time spent doing fieldwork provided the opportunity to examine numerous factors that intersect and interact in the lives of the research participants.

Analysis
All of the data were converted into text and then coded, including individual interviews, focus groups, field notes, experiences and reflections. Initially open codes were used to capture the diverse topics and issues from the data. Open codes were drawn together into axial or parent codes as the research progressed, highlighting regular themes and motifs. Across the data references to instability, insecurity, chaos, uncertainty, lack of
safety and other variations on these themes were open codes that were later collated under the parent code of ‘instability’. By the end of the data analysis there were a range of recurring practices, strategies and experiences linked to instability that traversed the data collected from all 18 key participants.

Instability and uncertainty pervaded all aspects of the participant’s lives and saturated the research experience. It was explicitly articulated in the subjective felt insecurity of the research participants, who were acutely aware of the chaos that seemed to follow them. It was seen in the observable transitions between and within accommodation types, social networks and family relationships. Thus, the classification of ‘instability’ was both the subjective self-appellation of the research participants and seen in the recorded observations.

**Participants**

The key participants in this study were aged between 16 and 23 years. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘homelessness’ refers to people who do not have secure, stable or safe accommodation. This research draws on the experiences of these young people across varying stages of their lives; however, it focuses on the conditions of their life observed during the 12 months dedicated to fieldwork.

Of the 18 key participants, 10 were male and 8 female. Twelve of these participants had ‘slept rough’ at some time in their lives, in a park, car, under a bridge or in an abandoned building or dilapidated home. Eight of the key participants had lived in out-of-home care before the age of 16. All of these eight young people had run away from care placements into homelessness. Including these 8, 12 of the participants had experienced homelessness prior to the age of 16 years. Five of the key participants had experienced homelessness whilst still living with their parents or parent. Six of these young people, all male, had been in juvenile detention on at least one occasion. Since turning 18 these young men have all been to jail. Throughout the 12 months of fieldwork, only one participant remained in stable accommodation. All of the key participants had used a specialist homelessness service (services specifically designed to cater to the needs of the homeless population) at some time.

**Ethics**

Ethics approval was granted by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork research. Consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the ethics approval. No financial or other incentives were provided to participants. The names and personal details of participants and identifying details have been altered to protect their privacy.

**Findings: a habitus of instability**

Habitus can, in certain instances, be built, if one may say so, upon tension, even upon instability. (Bourdieu 1990a, 116)

This article builds on this passing statement by Bourdieu, providing a site where habitus can be seen to be built on instability. The organising principle of instability can be seen as a dis-organising principle. The habitus of homeless youth is based on experiences of
instability and uncertainty. Subsequent experiences are structured in terms of a logic derived from the past, as homeless young people perceive and reproduce instability in their present conditions. This sense of insecurity is reinforced by the conditions of homelessness.

The findings below highlight the instability seen in the lives of the research participants. Here we see examples of social and material instability, highlighted by the transitions between accommodation options. Two case studies are then provided that exemplify the habitus of instability. These two examples illustrate how the instability of homelessness can become incorporated into the habitus and how these perceptions and expectations are carried into independence accommodation, jeopardising what can appear to be the end of homelessness.

**Instability within homelessness**

The instability of youth homelessness is most evident and visible in the external material instability seen in the transitions between accommodation options. The research participants moved between numerous accommodation options day to day, a week here or a month there. The young people who participated in this research had traversed the spectrum or continuum of accommodation options that are included in definitions of homelessness; from the literally homeless (roofless, living on the streets) to the precariously housed. However, all of their accommodation options were uncertain, unsafe and unpredictable. Even the refuges (shelters) and homelessness services provided only momentary reprieve and often offered an unstable and unsettling environment.

Of the 18 key participants, 12 of them had slept rough at least once, such as in a car, under a bridge, in a park or in an abandoned building. During the 12 months of fieldwork only one person did not change her accommodation, staying all that time in long-term supported accommodation. However, over a 5-year period none of the key participants had stayed in any one accommodation option for more than 15 months.

Even when the research participants were in one of these options for any length of time, they lived with the pervasive sense that it was not going to last, a sense of impending instability and insecurity. Consequently, any moment was framed by the other viable accommodation options that were available, by the memory of past conditions and the anticipation of possible futures and the perceived forthcoming.

Matt, Luke and Jake provide examples of the strategies and practices used by the research participants that illustrate the habitus of instability. In these examples we see how these young people enacted practices that were shaped by past conditions of existence and expectations of instability. However, these examples also highlight how the adaption to conditions of instability can reinforce unstable living conditions.

**Matt**

Matt slept on the streets for ‘a few months’ whilst having his name on waiting lists for accommodation. His previous experiences in refuges led him to choose the street instead of ‘those shit holes’. The rules and restrictions imposed by refuges were incompatible with Matt’s independence, not willing to exchange his sense of independence for a
seemingly stable bed and meal. For Matt ‘roughing it’ had become a viable, but nonetheless far from ideal, option:

I was sleeping on the streets. She [girlfriend] wasn’t. She did for a little while, she was out in the tent with me. Most of the time I was out in the street with just me … Just wherever I ended up. I slept in a car when it was raining. I slept under the stairs at the community centre. There is nice little cove under there, I got quite comfy for a while.

Matt settled into the cove under the stairs, referred to above, for nearly two weeks. This was the longest period of time that he stayed in one place whilst on the street prior to moving into a tent in a caravan park which he could only afford for short period of time. Usually his accommodation would differ every day or two. This mobility was considered important to Matt, inextricably tied to the value he attributed to minimising possessions, giving him less things to be attached to and worry about. Matt not only did not expect each accommodation option to not last, he would consciously move to avoid trouble. Matt valued his capacity for mobility – the ability to leave any given situation to find an alternative. This mobility was used to escape problematic situations or even abandon seemingly stable conditions. However, his ‘choice’ to move frequently is the subjective embodiment of the past conditions of existence – the internalisation of externality.

Matt’s strategy of mobility is a conscious component of the habitus of instability. His mobility can be seen as making a virtue out of necessity, attributing value to what is actually demanded of him. Matt would attribute the mobility and lack of stability in his life to a conscious rational action, evoking a sense of agency and control in his life that was driven and shaped by the pervasive instability of his conditions of existence. It is difficult and perhaps unhelpful to extricate the conscious acts of agency or mobility from the instability of youth homelessness. Here we see how social actors are incorporated in the world and their habitus is the embodied form of those structures. Thus Matt’s mobility was both an adaption to the conditions of homelessness and key factor that reinforced his homelessness.

**Luke and Jake**

Luke and Jake discussed how they had stayed in youth refuges but often chose to leave to be back on the streets. Jake noted:

You get bored in the refuge because there’s nothing to do, and because there’s curfews and all that shit. And when you are on the streets you’ve got all your mates who are also on the streets and there is no authority – that is what it comes down to, authority. No sixteen year old who has left home two years earlier wants to deal with authority, they don’t want nobody telling them what to do. At a refuge you got a curfew … and kids love to hang out at night.

When discussing the rules and restriction of a refuge Luke stated he would rather look after himself:

I would rather rely on myself rather than be told what to do all the time and live under others’ rules. They don’t let you do fucking shit man. I mean I been looking after myself since I was little – I am independent man. Anyone else who doesn’t live in a refuge wouldn’t have to live like that, they could do what they want. Even at home man I could smoke and leave the house and come back pissed and stoned. No cunt’s going to tell me how to look after myself, I do that better than any of those cunts.
Luke and Jake attributed their lack of interest in staying at refuges to boredom, not wanting to deal with authority and rules. Both were proud of their independence that had grown out of the need to look after themselves from a young age. They had both become accustomed to the conditions of homelessness. Their self-professed choice to leave refuges, or not even bother trying to stay at them, was informed by their sense of independence. But it was also shaped by past experiences of these options never lasting long and previously being kicked. So instead they would pursue other viable options. They had previously defied the rules of refuges, asserting their independence and, in turn, been asked to leave, bringing about the instability they expected. They had come to refuse what had actually been denied them. Excluded from refuges, their inability to return to refuges informed their unwillingness to return, making a virtue of their dispositions that made them not fit into the refuge system. Thus their habitus excluded as unthinkable the option of refuges as an accommodation option, refusing what had been previously denied them, predicting that they would again be ‘kicked out’.

The instability of youth homelessness for Luke and Jake entailed that any one accommodation option was always framed by the other viable options. Any moment in the life of Luke and Jake was set within a sense of impermanence and uncertainty, the threat of being uprooted again, which imposed the need to assess the subjectively viable alternatives to deal with what they perceive as the immanent and imminent instability. Weighing up the alternatives or choices and deciding on the best path to take. Luke and Jake preferred to ‘live on the streets’ than go back to a refuge. For others the fear of potentially having to live on the streets motivates them to endure conditions that would previously have seemed intolerable. In an objectivist vision all accommodation options are available to all young people. Yet what is perceived as a viable option is another matter. What is a viable option to one person does not even occur to the next. What is a viable option is shaped by past experiences and the way one has adapted to these conditions. What is not a viable option at one point in time can become viable under other conditions. The subjective viable options frame all of the accommodation options – what else or where else could I go.

The precariously housed

For the research participants, independent living was considered the ideal accommodation option. To obtain housing was considered by these young people as the end of homelessness. However, in debates about definitions of homelessness, this is often the other end of the spectrum of homelessness: the precariously or marginally housed (Chamberlain and McKenzie 2003, 13). The move into independent accommodation was not the panacea to the living conditions of homelessness that the research participants hoped it would be. Whilst some of the participants obtained housing in safe locations they were still faced with mundane yet significant day-to-day challenges to maintaining their housing.

The relative stability of independent living entailed not having to continually look for alternative accommodation options. Unlike couch-surfing and sleeping rough, those young people who had acquired housing were relatively free from the daily chores of finding a place to store belongings or find alternative accommodation. Moreover, to acquire housing in the first place required that one had secured a relatively stable income, if only through social security. However, independent living limited the mobility
that these homeless young people had often relied upon as one of their key survival strategies and manifestations of their independence (Barker 2013). Rather than finding safety in this secure accommodation, many of the research participants found this stability unnerving and ironically felt insecure. The examples of Marty and Steven highlight how the instability of homelessness can pervade the relative stability of independent housing, with the immanent anticipation of instability being felt in their daily lives.

**Marty**

At 16 years of age Marty was asked to leave home due to his drug use and criminal actively. He moved between staying at homeless shelters, couch-surfing, sleeping on the streets and going to drug rehabilitation in Sydney. After a period in jail he moved to Canberra to move away from what he referred to as ‘the drug and crime culture’ he had become part of. In Canberra he met Jess at a youth centre that provided support to homeless young people. They moved between different accommodation options until Jess became pregnant and they acquired public housing.

By 23 years of age Marty had become relatively stable. He had been housed for nearly 15 months, living in a two-bedroom house with Jess and their baby boy. Marty continued to find it difficult to find work and remained unemployed. Their house stayed tidy, they ate regularly and developed a routine. However, this stability became unnerving for Marty. In a conversation he mentioned how the experience of years of homelessness still affects his daily life:

Starting to feel the other fears now. About people breaking into the house and the fears of getting kicked out by the government and getting evicted. Fears of people breaking into my house now. I get like paranoid sometimes at night. Cos, I used to do it, man. I know it can happen. Most people you meet if you ask them ‘would you expect your house to get broken into’ or like, ‘do you expect to get home invaded’ most people would say nup, but it can happen.

Marty always felt his housing was potentially under threat from old ‘associates’, his unstable income or being evicted for some unknown reason. The anticipated, impending instability generated fear and anxiety. However, none of the things he feared undermined his stability. Rather, Marty’s pervasive sense that his current living conditions were not going to last and what seemed like boredom and frustration with his new life led him back to the streets. Marty began using methamphetamines and staying out late with old associates. He would not come home for days. Both Jess and Marty knew that he was finding his new stable living conditions difficult after years of living from moment to moment, a life precariously balanced between survival, jail, rehabilitation and the extreme highs he got from both drugs and crime.

In discussion with Marty towards the end of my research he explicitly recognised that he would undermine his own stability. He noted that sometimes he would pre-emptively bring about the end of support from a service, a friendship or an accommodation option to take control of what he felt was inevitable. However, at other times he could not see the role he played in contributing to his own life circumstances.

For Marty and other young people who have adapted to the conditions of homelessness, the stability of independent living can be ironically unsettling. This adds insight to
the seemingly self-destructive sabotaging of one’s life when things seem to be going on track. For some of the young people who participated in this research, there was a safety and familiarity in instability or mobility.

**Steven**

Steven lived in foster homes on and off since he was very young – he is unsure of when it started. He first became homeless at the age of 13 and considers his mother’s alcohol abuse as the main reason for becoming homeless, despite his father being ‘a junkie’ and absent from Steven’s life since he was little, often in jail.

When Steven turned 16 he was referred to a supported accommodation service. Prior to this he had been oscillating between foster homes, juvenile detention, living on the street, refuges and couch-surfing. Steven moved into independent accommodation supported by an outreach service that leased the flat to him. Many of his friends, associates and ‘co-offenders’ would spend days and some nights at Steven’s place. Even when he was accommodated he told me: ‘I still don’t feel like it is gonna last, I don’t think of myself as homeless now but I am always under threat of losing my accommodation’ and noted that ‘It seems too good to last.’

The service that accommodated Steven was keen to keep him away from the more notorious housing complexes fearing that he would become embroiled in the criminal and drug culture. However, Steven brought these people with him into his accommodation, offering them a couch-surfing option when they had nowhere to go. With constant guests Steven’s flat started to become ‘trashed’. Steven and his friends kept on making too much noise, leaving broken down cars in the driveway and the more urbane neighbours made complaints. When things got too difficult and the debts mounted, Steven left the accommodation to move to other options. He stated that he knew it would not last so he abandoned his accommodation before he was kicked out. The pervasive sense of ‘it’s too good to last’ and the insecurity felt in stable accommodation are two clear manifestations of the habitus of instability as it brings about a subjective sense and expectation of what has been in the past. A felt sense of an inevitable but uncertain future felt in the present moment.

Both Steven and Marty are emblematic of the precariously housed. The instability and uncertainty characteristic of their homelessness continued into their attempts to live in independent accommodation. Yet, despite the difficulties of living independently it is important to stress that all the homeless young people involved in this research unanimously considered independent living the best option and invariably the most significant step towards moving out of homelessness.

Having a reliable place to reside has many benefits, such as having a place to sleep, store belongings, cook, wash and having an address for mail. However, the accommodation that was available to these young people attempting to transition out of homelessness presented an array of challenges that more often than not reinforced insecurity and uncertainty in a new setting. Even stable and secure accommodation was undercut by the internalised instability that has been naturalised and perceived as inevitable. Hence the notion of the precariously housed which highlights how what could simplistically be seen as the end of homelessness by having a roof over one’s head obscures the embodied, inculcated affects of homelessness.
Discussion: subjective aspirations and objective probabilities

The findings presented above illustrate the pervasive instability in the lives of the young people who experienced homelessness who participated in this research. The instability of youth homelessness was most evidently seen in their transitions and mobility between types of accommodation and within these types of accommodation. The instability during periods of homelessness and the circumstances that lead to homelessness have been well documented across the youth homelessness literature (Hall 2003; Kidd 2003; Smith 2008; Mallett et al. 2009; Heinze, Jozefowicz, and Toro 2010; Blais et al. 2012; Barker 2012b, 2013; McLoughlin 2013). This article also provides examples that illustrate the findings at the core of this research, how instability still impacts the precariously housed. Here we see how instability can continue to have an impact on the lives of people who have moved into what can appear to be relative stability.

Numerous strategies or approaches used by young people who experience homelessness can be seen as adaptions to the instability in their lives and living conditions. Previous research has highlighted how the families of homeless young people do not function as a form of social capital, unable or unwilling to reliably provide support (Barker 2012b). The formation of street families (Smith 2008) and the practice of couch-surfing (McLoughlin 2013) are responses to unstable family relationships and accommodation options and the need to find alternative support and accommodation. The strategies of autonomy and relatedness are two divergent responses to instability that are displayed by homeless young people (Barker 2013). Research has also examined how some homeless young women can use sex and intimate partner relationships as a means to access emotional security and stability, material support and physical protection (Watson 2011). However, intimate relationships face considerable challenges and are precarious due to the conditions of homelessness (Rayburn and Corzine 2010; Blais et al. 2012). Lacking access to other valued resources and capital, some homeless young people rely on attributes and skills that can help them to survive the conditions of homelessness but are viewed negatively by the broader society, theorised as incarnations of ‘negative cultural capital’ (Barker 2012a). Each of these strategies can be conceptualised as dispositions and schemata of perception and action that constitute a habitus. These strategies are shaped by the conditions that lead to homelessness and the experiences of homelessness. However, these responses to instability can also reinforce instability.

Through the concept of habitus Bourdieu links objective structures to subjective experience (Skeggs 2004) where the structures and tendencies of the world are incorporated into social actors (Bourdieu 2000, 143). The ontological complicity between habitus and the regularities of the world make it possible for actors to practically anticipate the immediate tendencies of any situation (Adkins 2011). Because actors are incorporated in the world and their habitus is the embodied form of those structures, this enables anticipation of the future (Adkins 2011). Adkins notes that for Bourdieu possible futures are already in the present, the presence of the forthcoming (Bourdieu 2000; Adkins 2011). The habitus of instability provides an illustration of the practical anticipation of the forthcoming, the immanent and imminent state of anticipating what is perceived as inevitable, recognised in the immediate.

For the research participants, the anticipation of the forthcoming was evident in the case of emotions, most notably fear and worry, where the body sees and feels the
impending as something that is already there. Bourdieu described how ‘the body is snatched by the forthcoming of the world’ (2000, 208). The habitus of these homeless youth had come to expect instability, often generating the instability that it conceived as inevitable. The habitus of instability – the fear, anxiety and insecurity it generates – and the perception of what can be done creates practices that are sensible, pragmatic and effective from within the conditions of youth homelessness and are framed by how things have turned out in the past.

Bourdieu noted that there is an adjustment between an individual’s hopes, aspirations and expectations for the future, on the one hand, and the objective situation in which they find themselves. Chances of success and failure are internalised and then transformed into aspirations and expectations (Bourdieu 1977, 79; Bourdieu 1990b, 54; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 130). The anticipation of objective limits is inculcated through experience providing a ‘sense of one’s place’ (Bourdieu 1984, 471). Thus, Bourdieu posits that agents come to subjectively aspire to those things that are objectively probable – refusing what is in actual fact denied, making a virtue out of necessity (Bourdieu 1990b, 54).

There is much to support the fit between subjective aspirations and objective probabilities for homeless youth. The concept of habitus reminds us of how the demands of conditions of existence are internalised and naturalised and people come to expect and pre-empt what they have come to see as their lot in life. Bourdieu notes that people can come to ‘live their suffering as habitual and even natural, as an inevitable ingredient of their existence’ (Bourdieu 1979, 61). Whilst this conceptualisation can seem overly deterministic, the habitus of instability also provides insights for change.

**Accounting for change**

The concept of habitus can appear deterministic as people are generally bound to encounter circumstances that tend to agree with those that originally fashioned the habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 133). However, habitus is in a perpetual state of transformation either in a direction that reinforces its structure or in a direction that challenges and transforms it (Bourdieu 1990a, 116). Changed conditions, external determinations, are the primary factor behind change in Bourdieu’s framework. A source of change and adaptation of habitus can be derived from a structural dislocation between habitus and the conditions of existence. When the discrepancy between new situations and those in which the habitus was formed is slight, only a gradual modification, if any, occurs. Change is most likely to occur when there is a disjuncture between opportunities presented by external determinations and the expectations of habitus (Swartz 1997, 213–214). This would suggest that the habitus of homeless young people, a habitus of instability, can change through exposure to external conditions that are reliable and stable. This fits with what we know about interventions with homeless young people, especially the need for ongoing support rather than brief interventions (Crimmens et al. 2004; Barker et al. 2012). Ongoing exposure to consistent and reliable support, both social and material support, could lead to people subjectively aspiring to an alternative future. A key feature of interventions used to affect change for people who have a habitus of instability would have to be providing stability, certainty and reliability in access to resources, support and opportunities.
This research did not use a representative sample of homeless young people. Rather, the research participants were at the more chronic end of the youth homelessness spectrum, having experienced recurring and protracted periods of homelessness and instability prior to homelessness. As noted previously, many homeless young people have only a brief experience of homelessness before returning home or finding a more stable alternative. However, examples of brief homelessness can still be explained within the theoretical framework articulated in this article.

For young people who have a brief experience of homelessness, it is hypothesised that there is a lack of fit between their habitus and the conditions of homelessness. As highlighted previously, homeless youth come from a diverse range of backgrounds, not all of whom have extensive and prolonged experiences of instability. Rather, for some, homelessness is an abrupt and unexpected event. Whilst this discontinuity and change can lead to adjustment in a habitus to fit these new conditions, it can also present the opportunity for conscious reflection (Adams 2006). Bourdieu leaves room for reflexivity when there is a disjunction or discrepancy between habitus and the conditions of existence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 130–131). This disjunction can create a crisis and, when presented with resources and opportunities to enact change – such as support from a service or the offer to return home – can lead to an exit from homelessness. However, this change and exit from instability is contingent on a habitus that does not fit the conditions of instability and access to resources (capital) and viable alternatives (not all young people can return home) that make it possible to act on these inclinations. Thus, Bourdieu’s framework does allow for the transformation of habitus via conscious deliberation and action (Bourdieu 1990a, 131; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 116; Adams 2006). However, the likelihood and efficacy of conscious manipulation is itself determined by the structures of the habitus in question: only certain social agents are inclined and capable of ‘getting a handle on their dispositions’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 133n.86). To rephrase Adams’ discussion of Townsville’s work (2006): ‘considering degrees of reflexivity in the context of habitus may be misplaced if what matters for individual experience and opportunity is the capacity to convert “reflexions” into meaningful realities, which requires material resources that’ some homeless young people do not have access to. Thus, the capacity for some homeless young people to move out of homelessness is contingent not only on their habitus, endowed with the advantages or disadvantages of their history, but the presence and availability of resources to enact this desired change. The habitus of instability provides a way for us to think about the way past experiences and external structures shape the opportunities of homeless young people and their attempts to move out of homelessness.

None of the young people who participated in this research wished to remain homeless. Furthermore, as articulated by Farrugia (2011), some of the participants were acutely aware of the symbolic burden of youth homelessness and resisted or reacted against this categorisation. Some homeless people try to avoid the stigma of homelessness using a range of strategies (Rayburn and Guittar 2013). The strategies outlined by Rayburn and Guittar (2013) of dealing with the stigma of homelessness – distancing, embracement and fictive storytelling – demonstrate not only conscious attempts to disrupt their identification as homeless but also the resignation or investment in the label of homeless and its implications. In line with the logic of this article, just as the degree of success of a conscious endeavour to become more stable and exit homelessness
can be outrun by habitus, so too can the pursuit of disrupting being identified or identifying as homeless. The degree of fit between ones habitus and the conditions of homelessness may inform the resignation to, or attempt to break free of, the symbolic burden of homelessness. Thus, whilst some young people work to not be seen as a homeless young person (distancing), others are resigned to this status (embracing) and others are negotiating their place (displayed through fictive storytelling).

### Conclusion

The terms ‘instability’ and ‘uncertainty’ can capture many facets and factors that shape conditions of existence. It may appear to simplify diverse experiences under a broad term. However, the generalisability and breadth of the experiences and conditions captured under the notion of a habitus of instability allows for us to see similarities across experiences, of diversity within similarity. It provides a way to make sense of a diverse range of experiences and practices by what emerged in this research as the pervasive theme of instability.

In trying to provide an account of youth homelessness that reflects the ethnographic experience with the young people in this research, this study became both an empirical and theoretical one, aiming to convey and explain the factors that shape the lives of homelessness young people. At the broadest level, this article is introducing the concept or heuristic device of a habitus of instability – a habitus that is shaped by precarious and unstable conditions of existence and can recreate these conditions in different contexts. This concept was forged out of empirical research of a particular group of young people. This article presents a way to make sense of the lives of homeless young people who are so often seen to collude in the instability of their own lives. The conceptualisation aims to show how there is an intimate interaction between the conditions of people’s lives and the ways they perceive and act in the world. This conceptualisation helped me to understand the lives of these young people and also provides clues for ways to address the chaos and instability that appears to seep into their lives.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus provides a way for us to see the relationship between social actors and the world they live in that problematises any simplistic demarcation between structure/agency and determinism/freewill. This conceptual point resonates with the ethnographic experience which left me realising that blaming either individuals or structures is a preposterous intellectual fallacy – that they are intimately intertwined. Rather, the habitus of instability reminds us that human action is the culmination of personal histories, external environment and living conditions. Interventions that require individual change without structural change and awareness of the expectations that have been inculcated from past experiences can set people up for failure, reinforcing a sense of naturalised or inevitable inadequacy that this article aims to articulate in the example of the habitus of instability.

The seemingly conceptual or theoretical point has very real implications for practice and policy. We are presented with an account of homelessness that highlights how these peoples’ lives are not only shaped by a lack of stable and safe accommodation, but by a wide range of destabilising factors that have been incorporated and shaped the habitus of these participants. The concept of a habitus of instability draws our attention to the destabilising forces in the lives of homeless young people, both past and
present. Homelessness, narrowly conceived as unstable or unsafe accommodation, is not the only factor or experience that needs to be addressed. Instead, the conceptualisation of the habitus of instability draws attention to the instability prior to and after the experience of unstable and insecure accommodation. The notion that instability shapes the habitus of these young people also implies that to shift their expectations and practices requires durable exposure to reliable and stable support, both material and social. This will allow for these young people to see realistic opportunities to change their lives with the support of external enablers.

Habitus reminds us that what can appear to be the choices or practices of individuals can obscure what is actually the structural conditions and limitations from which they have emerged and exist. It reminds us that structural and institutional settings have an impact on decisions and practices. In fact, habitus goes beyond suggesting that there is a rational assessment of likelihood of success or failure based on a conscious calculation of structural limitations. Rather, habitus highlights the embodied and pre-reflexive engrained sense of place, where the structures of the world have been incorporated and internalised. People can come to see their circumstances as natural and inescapable, habitual, rather than blame the objective order for their disadvantage, unable to conceive the change in the social order which could abolish the cause of their suffering (Bourdieu 1979, 61). Thus, it is imperative that there is an ongoing endeavour to unearth and untangle the structural and contextual factors that shape the habitus and practices of homeless young people, to highlight the structural factors that influence the instability of homeless young people.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


