

Discussion

Interpretation

The affordability of housing is a structural driver for van dwelling, especially in Bristol where a housing shortage has led to an increased demand for PRS accommodation that has pushed up rental prices. If spending more than 30% of income on mortgage repayments creates a new housing precariat unable to sustain their homeownership (Koppe, 2017), then renters who spend 34% of income on rent (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018) could reasonably be included in that housing precariat as people struggling to be 'successful renters'. Add to the mix poor quality PRS accommodation, unresponsive landlords, dysfunctional house-share relationships, insecure short-term leases and a market that favours landlords over tenants, it is not surprising that a small number of people want to self-provide their own housing by living in a van.

The UK's flexible labour market also contributes to vehicle dwelling. The low cost of van dwelling cushions an irregular and insecure income, and makes relocation easier. But the skills an individual has to employ to successfully navigate the flexible labour market, such as resilience and resourcefulness, create a confidence that reaches beyond the sphere of work and into housing. Much like self-employment, a van dweller is able to self-provide their own housing too. This self-efficacy adds considerably to self-fulfilment and self-esteem, leading to greater feelings of control, well-being and happiness (Clapham, 2010).

Regardless of whether they have been created by today's 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2005 and 2007, cited by Colic-Peisker and Johnson, 2012), van dwellers have abandoned normative tenures and normative housing to fully exercise their individual agency (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Jones, 2017). They have adopted a 'self-provision' strategy (Mizrahi, 2011) where looking to the state for housing simply does not figure in their thinking, partly as a pragmatic reaction to understanding that they are not the most vulnerable people on the waiting list (McKee *et al.*, 2017) and because they are taking

responsibility for their own life outcomes through the market in response to neoliberal welfare state restructuring (Forrest and Hirayama, 2009; Kemp, 2015; McKee, 2012, cited by Hoolachan *et al.*, 2017). Van dwellers have realised their own autonomy, finding a level of control over their living situation and their finances not achievable in the PRS. A vehicle dweller may not be housed in the traditional sense, but they are certainly not homeless.

Much like any person living in normative housing, a van dweller's self-identity is inextricably linked to, and shaped by, home (Mallett, 2004) and tenure (Clarke and Kearns, 2012; Evans, Wells, Chan and Saltzman, 2000; Holdsworth, 2011, cited by Bate, 2018), plus social and place-specific interrelationships (Winstanley, Thorns and Perkins, 2002). The conversion of a vehicle into a habitable space is a crucial project for a vehicle dweller. It creates opportunities for homemaking practices that reflect their desired self-identity (Easthope, 2014; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Hoolachan *et al.*, 2016; Mallett, 2004; Reimer and Leslie, 2004, cited by Bate, 2018). Their vehicle is their home. Furthermore, it is their possession and provides protection of their personal property, regardless of how few possessions a vehicle dweller may have. The lifestyle created by living in a van contributes to their identity, but does not define them. Overseas travel and geographical mobility figure highly for most van dwellers, yet in the main they do not see themselves as part of the GRT population, as NATs or nomads because they are aware of the complexities associated with identifying with those population groups.

Van dwelling occupies 'improper places' such as residential streets and highways. It also occupies an 'improper place' outside government, normative tenures, the finance industry and the housing market (Bate, 2018). Despite living in improper places in something other than normative housing, and fielding the subsequent negative moral judgments made against them (Flint, 2003, cited by McKee *et al.*, 2017), van dwellers want to be regarded as responsible and good citizens. They are perceptive to a sense of acceptance created through Bristol's links with festivals and its 'alternative vibe'. To preserve that acceptance they are keen to avoid disturbing their house-dwelling neighbours and to minimise their impact on the places they park up. They keep their vehicles legal and are committed to work. The participants in this research were eager to demonstrate their 'good citizenship'

to help facilitate acceptance within Bristol's neighbourhoods, in part to secure the sustainability of their housing choice.

Though vehicle dwellers have opted for unconventional housing, vehicle dwelling can be regarded as a type of homeownership that provides respite from the many detrimental deficiencies of PRS accommodation (Bate, 2018; McKee *et al.*, 2017). Similar to homeownership, vehicle dwelling creates autonomy, security and identity that also generates ontological security and promotes well-being (Giddens 1990; Newton, 2008; Clapham, 2011, cited by Hoolachan *et al.*, 2017). It is a safe place, somewhere to call their own and have control over (Galčanová and Vacková, 2016). Despite this, vehicle dwelling is much like the 'transitional tenure' of renting. For many, living in a van meets their needs until they are in a position to move, or at least make steps towards, their ideal living situation. And, much like renters wanting to purchase their own property at some point despite the difficulties in accessing homeownership, many van dwellers want to advance their security by building a self-built house or parking up on their own land. Those ideal dreams are likely not to come to fruition when faced with the highly restrictive planning laws in England, leaving van dwellers to also experience the 'fallacy of choice' (McKee *et al.*, 2017).

Depending on the individual's access to social, economic and cultural capital (Hochstenbach and Boterman, 2015) and the structural drivers they have negotiated, van dwellers have moved away from the sedentarist norm, normative tenures and normative housing for varying reasons, including gaining control of their housing situation, active pursuit of the van dwelling lifestyle as a goal in itself or to facilitate transition to their ideal living situation, or a combination of those factors.

Urban vehicle dwelling is a relatively new phenomenon that is growing. No other researcher has carried out a study of such depth with vehicle dwellers in Bristol, interviewing participants about their housing pathways and exploring feelings of security, identity and autonomy. Bristol City Council proposes that lived-in vehicles parked on highways (each called a highway encampment regardless of whether they are parked up

singly or in a group) will be assessed individually and proportionately and that a number of factors will be considered, including welfare needs (Bristol City Council, 2018b). This research provides an insight into vehicle dwelling that can be used by local authorities to help shape their approach to those assessments and, as more local authorities seek to unify and formalise their response to vehicle dwelling, this unique research could be used to inform van dwelling policies.

Strengths and limitations of this research

This research is limited by the small sample that is prone to self-selection bias. The data analysis is limited in its use of identity, autonomy and security as themes and the application of the housing pathways framework. Despite this, the focus on housing pathways created an essential opportunity to explore personal agency and structural drivers in vehicle dwelling. Crucially, its qualitative approach and focus on people's stories compelled van dwellers to participate.

Suggestions for future research

Future research could examine the contribution social capital has in affecting an individual's decision-making process to live in a van. Future research could also investigate whether ontological security is more achievable for van dwellers than for people in PRS accommodation.