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The experience of precarity: low-paid economic migrants' housing in Manchester

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about increasingly precarious working and living conditions have highlighted the particularly vulnerable nature of low-income economic migrants, who often experience high levels of housing precarity, alongside precarious employment. Economic migrants to the UK often lack housing support, and access housing in the private rented sector (PRS), where they struggle to secure safe, decent and affordable accommodation. This article presents a qualitative exploration of low-income economic migrants' lived experiences of housing precarity, based on research in Manchester. Housing represents a critical element of migrants' experiences, which can have a determining effect on other outcomes. Yet despite the acknowledged higher levels of precarity in the PRS, there have been few in-depth studies of how tenants experience this, particularly at the lower end of the sector. The conceptual lens of precarity offers a deeper understanding of the affective dimension, multidimensionality and structure-agency dynamics of low-income migrants' housing experiences. In this way, the paper contributes to debates on insecurity, perception, and agency in housing studies.

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Introduction

Amid concerns about increasing inequality, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the changing nature of work, it has been argued that the 'normalisation of the precarious' is occurring (Hunter & Meers, 2018, p. 21). The increasingly unstable, uncertain and insecure nature of working and living conditions in many European countries has resulted in precarity becoming a political issue, seen in annual May Day protests about vulnerable workers, alongside growing academic attention to this issue (e.g. Kalleberg, 2018; Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2006). Within this landscape, migrant workers are seen as 'the quintessential incarnation of precarity' (Schierup & Jorgensen, 2016, p. 949). They are often doubly disadvantaged by their (lack of) citizenship status in receiving countries, and their working conditions, which include 'insecure

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contracts, poor conditions at work, eroded rights … and generalised exploitation' (Waite, 2009, p. 423). The interplay of exploitative employment with restrictive immigration regimes has led to the routine experience of precarity in migration in the UK (Lewis *et al.*, 2015), and this is reflected in multiple dimensions, including housing. Since 2014, and in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, this has been compounded by increasingly restrictive conditions for EU nationals accessing benefits and housing, as part of the 'efforts of governments to placate perceived hostility to European migration' (Lukes *et al.*, 2019, p. 3194).

High levels of housing precarity exist among migrant populations, with 40 per cent of recent migrants experiencing housing deprivation, compared to ten per cent of UK-born households (Powell & Robinson, 2019, p. 203). In particular, economic migrants often lack housing support, and access housing in the private rented sector (PRS), where they struggle to secure safe, decent and affordable accommodation. While not all migrants are low-paid, and housing experiences may differ vastly across different groups, often 'migrant strongly suggests the global poor' (Anderson, 2015, p. 71). Here the focus is on low-paid migrants as a group vulnerable to housing precarity. This article presents a qualitative exploration of low-income economic migrants' lived experiences of housing precarity, based on research in Manchester in 2016[1]. Understood as individuals who '[arrive] in the host country with the intention of finding employment' (Hunt *et al.*, 2008, p. 19), and distinguished from refugees and asylum seekers, economic migrants have been perceived as particularly undeserving of rights and support.

Housing represents a critical element of migrants' experiences, which can have a determining effect on other outcomes (Diacon *et al.*, 2008; Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015). In the PRS, it may be precarious in terms of conditions, security and prospects. Yet paradoxically, despite its recent growth, this sector has attracted less attention than owner occupancy in terms of how tenants experience these issues (Hulse & Milligan, 2014). In the rental sector, there has been 'little consideration of the broader … psycho-social dimensions of (in)security' (Hulse & Saugeres, 2008, p. 4). This is particularly curious given that renting is often conceptualised as an inherently precarious form of tenure, due to the power/liability pairing which defines the landlord/tenant relationship, in which 'one party has the power to change a particular set of relations, while the other lacks immunity to such changes' (Blomley, 2020, p. 40). In particular, the voices of those at the lower end of the PRS, who often experience these circumstances most acutely, have been least prominent in academic and policy debates on housing (McKee *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, precarity remains relatively undertheorised in housing debates.

While longer debates on housing insecurity have highlighted issues around tenure, affordability and housing conditions, precarity offers potential to capture the overlapping nature of these multiple dimensions, as well as their emotional consequences. This paper demonstrates how the conceptual lens of precarity facilitates a deeper understanding of the affective dimension, multidimensionality and structure-agency dynamics of low-income migrants' housing experiences, thereby contributing to related housing debates. These debates are explored in more detail in the next section, particularly with regard to how precarity relates to insecurity, and the housing experiences of

economic migrants, with a focus on the private rental sector. The research setting of Cheetham Hill, a 'super-diverse' area in Manchester, is representative of the 'migrant margins' where diversity and deprivation coincide (Hall, 2018). The research was based on qualitative interviews with 18 respondents, low-paid economic migrants accessing services at a community centre in Cheetham Hill. Based on these findings, the analysis discusses the experience of housing precarity for low-income economic migrants in Manchester, focusing on lack of control and emotional responses to this, and multiple dimensions of precarity, particularly relating to bureaucratic structures. In doing so, it also emphasises voices less frequently heard in housing debates.

Literature review: precarity, insecurity and migrant housing

Housing precarity and insecurity

The notion of precarity has been extensively debated in the field of labour studies. Research on precarious work in Europe locates its origins in economic deregulation and welfare state reforms from the 1980s onwards (Carr *et al.*, 2018), although it is recognised that it was the norm in industrialising Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Vosko, 2006), and has characterised economies in the global South for much longer (Banki, 2013; Munck, 2013). After the relative stability of the post-war period of collective bargaining and the 'standard employment relationship' (Vosko, 2006, p. 6), in twenty-first century Europe precarious employment is once again becoming central to many economies. In the present era, it relates to work characterised by 'limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high risks of ill-health' (Vosko, 2006, p. 11). In shifting costs from employers to individuals, it has been seen as 'the privatisation of risk' (Clair *et al.*, 2019, p. 15). Standing (2011) argues that globalisation and neoliberalism have intensified labour market flexibilisation and created the precariat, a large group united by conditions of vulnerability and multiple degrees of exclusion. The precariat is characterised by a lack of stability, prospects and control over their own time, their lives 'dominated by insecurity, uncertainty, debt and humiliation' (Standing, 2011, p. x). Instability and insecurity are central to precarious employment (Ferreira, 2016, p. 145), and therefore '[p]recarization means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency' (Lorey, 2015, in Carr *et al.*, 2018, p. 8).

These conceptualisations of precarious work, deriving from economic and organisational sociology, can be distinguished from the more theoretically determined, ontological notion of precarity, relating to the existential effects of neoliberal global capitalism, which results in a generalised lack of security with effects on individual wellbeing, especially for certain vulnerable sectors of society (Kalleberg, 2018). Uniting these diverse conceptualisations of precarity is the central idea of a lack of control over outcomes. However, contextual factors are significant in determining the specific effects of precarity on groups and individuals, particularly relating to state-market relations and 'social welfare protections and labor market institutions' (Kalleberg, 2018, p. 3), suggesting the importance of policy as both a causal factor and responsive mechanism.

While debates around housing precarity are less well developed, it has apparently increased across Europe since the 2008 financial crisis (Clair *et al.*, 2019). The crisis

compounded effects of the ongoing commodification of housing, which since the early 2000s has seen the decline of social housing in terms of quality and quantity, increased reliance on market rents, and reduced protection for tenants (in terms of contracts and rent controls) in a growing private rental sphere (Carr *et al.*, 2018). Such moves reflect global shifts in housing policy agendas, driven by globalisation and neoliberalisation, away from the provision of housing as a social good and towards its increasing financialisation (Rolnik, 2013). In England, the social housing sector has shrunk from providing more than 30 per cent of all dwellings in 1981, to 17.9 per cent in 2006, due to the Right to Buy policy and a decline in housebuilding (Robinson, 2010). Meanwhile the private rental sector, often associated with higher rents and lower quality housing conditions, is growing across the global North (Lombard *et al.*, 2020); in the UK, its share of the overall housing market increased from 10 per cent in 2000 to 20 per cent in 2016 (Powell & Robinson, 2019). European housing scholars have employed the notion of precarisation to explore the deregulation of rental markets (Huisman, 2016) and the conjunction of instability and resilience in vulnerable populations (Pendall *et al.*, 2012). Increasingly, precarity has been applied to explore the housing conditions of specific groups, such as 'generation rent' (McKee *et al.*, 2019) and property guardians (Hunter & Meers, 2018). This highlights the suggestion that '[p]recarisation, both in general, and specifically in relation to the home, is an agent of inequality' (Carr *et al.*, 2018, p. 11), revealing its differentiated effects, with certain groups such as migrants particularly vulnerable.

Although the notion of housing precarity is relatively new, precedents can be found in debates around housing insecurity. Home is associated with 'ontological security', in terms of the meanings attached to it as well as the physical object; being able to control one's living space and personalise it are key elements of secure occupancy (Easthope, 2014, p. 583).[2] Conversely, housing insecurity has been characterised in terms of lack of privacy, lack of belonging, lack of physical comfort, housing mobility, housing instability and feeling unsafe, all underpinned by 'a lack of control over circumstances' (Hulse & Saugeres, 2008, p. 2), which resonates with conceptions of precarity. More recent work by Hulse & Milligan (2014) emphasises the perceptual dimension of insecurity, drawing on conceptions of land tenure from research in the global South to distinguish between *de facto*, *de jure* and perceptual (in)security (Van Gelder, 2010, 2013)[3]. *De jure* security relates to property rights, often expressed in contractual form, while *de facto* relates to the experience of security and diminished risk of eviction, based for example on length of residence. Distinguishable from both dimensions, perceptual security emphasises 'an individual's subjective experience of his/her tenure situation' (Van Gelder, 2010, p. 451), such as fear of eviction, even if this is not directly threatened; this may derive from legal and cultural norms, which determine the (lack of) opportunities for tenants to exercise autonomy over living circumstances. Thus, alongside overlaps between precarity and insecurity relating to the lack of control over (housing) outcomes and the significance of contextual factors, both concepts emphasise the importance of perceptual dimensions.

Despite these overlaps, precarity can be differentiated from insecurity in several ways, as highlighted by Banki (2013), with specific implications for housing studies.

Firstly, precarity 'suggests the potential for exploitation and abuse, *but not its certain presence*' (Banki, 2013, pp. 450–1; my italics). Although echoing the notion of perceptual (in)security, it extends this by highlighting particularly precarity's future dimension, for example relating to the *potential* for eviction, unemployment, deportation and disruption to networks. While the insecurity literature emphasises contextual factors such as legal and cultural norms as the basis from which uncertainty derives, precarity offers a more expansive view of the factors involved and their influence. Moreover, it suggests a focus on the specific affective outcomes of these constant threats and lack of control, particularly in terms of their influence on subjective wellbeing (Kalleberg, 2018), capturing the existential effects of such acute and pervasive uncertainty.

Secondly, and related to this, a precarity lens highlights the diverse yet overlapping dimensions of an individual's experience, and the fact that 'precarity of one kind may aggravate other precarities' (Banki, 2013, p. 451). For example, precarious immigration status may affect employment opportunities, which in turn affects housing options, suggesting its multidimensionality as well as 'the profoundly destabilizing effects of precarious work on broader lifeworlds' (Lewis *et al.*, 2015, p. 585). While the literature on housing insecurity recognises its multiple and interacting dimensions, precarity debates go further in explicitly acknowledging these overlapping and entangled elements, particularly in terms of the relationship between employment, benefits, immigration status and housing, and the disruptive effects that precarity in one area may have on others. This suggests that while housing is a key element of precarity, it cannot be fully understood without considering these other dimensions to a greater or lesser degree.

Finally, precarity is conceptualised in both labour and housing studies as an outcome of global systems of capitalism, and this focus on structures gives it a political (and potentially mobilising) dimension, alongside its capacity to account for political and institutional context. By contrast, the literature on insecurity arguably overlooks this, in part due to its embeddedness in more individualised conceptualisations, such as risk and vulnerability (Waite, 2009). Yet alongside this focus on structures, it has been suggested that an account of agency should be equally important to understandings of precarity (Waite, 2009). This relates to its contingent nature, and the fact that 'it affects individuals but is not intrinsic to them' (Clair *et al.*, 2019, p. 15). In other words, while precarity's recognition of structures is advantageous, the notion of individual agency must be retained, in order to understand the subjective choices and strategies that vulnerable individuals and groups employ to address or even take advantage of precarious housing.

Together, precarity's ability to capture these aspects – lack of control and its affective dimension, multidimensionality and structure-agency dynamics – facilitate a deeper understanding of low-income migrant workers' experiences of housing, through an explicit focus on their own narratives of these. The next section briefly contextualises this within wider housing debates, in order to position the research and its contribution.

Housing experiences of economic migrants

In the UK, '[a]ccess to housing and benefits for migrants has become increasingly limited since the mid-1990s' (Diaz, 2008), although this depends on diverse factors including individuals' immigration status. The different legal and political rights

afforded to different categories of migrants result in a wide variety of housing experiences (Vargas-Silva, 2013). At the time of the research and writing (up to the end of the Brexit transition period in December 2020), migrant workers were grouped into two categories, determining work and benefit status. People from EU countries (EEA nationals) could come to the UK to work without applying for permission, and had the right to reside and access benefits under certain conditions. Citizens of non-EEA countries (generally non-EU nationals) require a visa to work in the UK, and either have indefinite leave to remain (in which case they are entitled to the same benefits and support as UK nationals) or limited leave to remain (in which case they are more likely to be excluded or have 'no recourse to public funds'). Recent migrants (i.e. those arriving less than five years ago) from outside the EU cannot generally access social housing benefits; while EU migrants could only claim benefits a year after they had arrived and been working continuously as a registered migrant worker under the Worker Registration Scheme[4]. Additionally, these categories and the rights attached to them have been subject to constant changes, particularly since 2010, which have entrenched existing patterns of discrimination in housing (Powell & Robinson, 2019).

Many new immigrants move into temporary accommodation upon arrival – often staying with friends, relatives or members of their community – and seek thereafter to improve their situation, particularly if they are looking to stay for longer (Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, (new) migrant workers often access housing through local networks rather than formal channels, meaning that 'lettings are often informal, possibly without legal agreements, and sometimes involve unconventional arrangements', such as staying in outbuildings or sharing with strangers (Perry, 2012, p. 2; see also Lombard, 2019). In the most precarious circumstances they may experience homelessness: in 2016, over a fifth of rough sleepers were non-UK nationals (Powell & Robinson, 2019). In the longer term, due to their restricted access to social housing (and home ownership), around 80 per cent of recent migrants to the UK live in the private rented sector (Vargas-Silva, 2013). In general, the foreign-born population is almost three times as likely to access housing via the private rented sector (PRS): 41 per cent in the first quarter of 2016, compared with 15 per cent of UK-born residents (Vargas-Silva, 2013). This tenure's flexible and affordable nature also makes it attractive to those who are not planning a long stay in the UK, and who wish to maximise their income, often for the purpose of sending remittances (Robinson *et al.*, 2007).

However, the weakly regulated PRS is also subject to insecure tenure, unpredictable rental costs and potentially poor conditions in areas where demand exceeds supply (Finney & Harries, 2013). The insecurity associated with private rented housing may be determined by (lack of) rental contracts and rent controls (Hulse & Haffner, 2014). In the UK, this is associated with the Housing Act 1988, which ended the regulated 'fair rents system' and brought in assured shorthold tenancies, thus removing protection for PRS tenants (Powell & Robinson, 2019, p. 198). Additionally, in the context of the sector's growth, recent years have seen an 'increasing proportion of lower income and vulnerable households renting in the private sector' (Easthope, 2014, p. 593). Alongside declining access to social housing and home ownership within the wider population, this has been attributed to local authorities using the PRS to discharge their

homelessness duties, and changes to Local Housing Allowance calculations, which have made it harder for housing benefit tenants to afford rents (Perry, 2012).

Evidence suggests that housing problems encountered by new immigrants and migrants in the PRS include poor conditions, insecurity, overcrowding, homelessness, and exploitation (Diacon *et al.*, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Increased competition for housing at the lower end of the sector may result in particularly vulnerable tenants, including migrants, putting up with worse conditions, sometimes while paying more. Such informal arrangements may mean that tenants are unaware of their rights and responsibilities, leading to poor relations with other local residents; or they may feel unable to pursue complaints due their lack of a formal tenancy agreement (Perry, 2012). Living in these conditions may have socially disruptive effects: '[o]vercrowded and physically insecure rented accommodation, where individuals and families are sharing with others they may not know, makes theft easier and increases tensions between individuals, which in turn can lead to violence' (Diacon *et al.*, 2008, p. 11). Yet despite the rich body of research in this field, the perspective of those experiencing these housing conditions is still often missing from academic accounts (Parutis, 2011).

The analysis that follows is guided by the question, how is housing precarity experienced by low-income economic migrants? The focus on precarity's affective dimension, underpinned by a lack of control over future outcomes, contributes to debates on the importance of perceptions in housing research, as well as on migrants' housing. Exploring its overlapping nature, relating not only to housing tenure and condition, but also indirectly to employment instability, lack of social protection, and immigration status, enhances and expands debates on insecurity. Finally, the focus on structural/contextual factors, but also the possibility of agency within this, responds to the need for 'a more sophisticated understanding of the agency of renters themselves and the strategies they adopt in the face of external factors' (Hulse *et al.*, 2019, p. 184). The analysis is preceded by a brief explanation of the research setting and methodology.

Research setting and methodology

Cheetham Hill, Manchester

Manchester has a long history of immigration, linked initially to the Industrial Revolution and the prospect of work in the mills in the nineteenth century. The early twenty-first century saw migrants arriving again for employment opportunities, particularly after the expansion of the European Union in 2004 (Bullen, 2015). Additionally, Manchester is one of 12 designated 'cities of sanctuary' to which asylum seekers and refugees have been dispersed from south-east England since the programme's introduction in the Asylum and Immigration Act of 1999 (Hall, 2018). Yet Manchester's 'post-industrial cityscape' is also characterised by 'historic state underinvestment and intensive competition over limited resources' (Hall, 2018, p. 971), in which high levels of ethnic diversity and inequality come together to shape specific neighbourhoods.

Cheetham Hill has been characterised as a 'super-diverse'[5] area on the north-western edge of Manchester's city centre (Hall *et al.*, 2015). Once at the heart of Manchester's textile industry, it has been a historic 'migrant gateway' for Jewish and Irish workers in the eighteenth century, German and Dutch traders in the nineteenth,

and after the Second World War, diverse groups including Sikh and Pakistani commonwealth immigrants, and Eastern European ex-combatants (Harries *et al.*, 2019; Mason, 1977). According to the 2011 UK Census, 44 per cent of Cheetham Ward's population of 22,562 were born outside of the UK, compared with 25 per cent for Manchester, and 14 per cent for England and Wales (Harries *et al.*, 2019). Among Cheetham Hill's foreign-born population, the highest ethnic proportion is of Pakistani origin (14 per cent), followed by people from European (9 per cent), African (9 per cent) and 'other Asian' (8 per cent) countries (Hall *et al.*, 2015). While the local population's growth over the last two decades is in keeping with other areas of Manchester (Harries *et al.*, 2019, p. 3231), Cheetham was the ward with the greatest number of new immigrants arriving between 2001 and 2011 (Bullen, 2015, p. 11). In 2015, Cheetham Hill Road, the area's main high street, was ranked amongst the 10 and 20 per cent most deprived areas in England based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (Hall *et al.*, 2015). Cheetham Hill's intersection of diversity and marginalisation therefore has the potential to reveal the spatialised effects of local and national policy and social dynamics, and resistance to these, at the 'migrant margins' (Hall, 2018).

The presence of established diasporas in Cheetham Hill may constitute an attraction factor for different migrant worker groups (Hall, 2018). However, it is also recognised that new migrants often access the least desirable housing, in 'disadvantaged and deprived neighbourhoods' characterised by limited access to services, local amenities, employment and good quality housing, where demand is low (Phillips & Robinson, 2015, p. 414). This situation, described as the 'new migrant penalty' (Jayaweera and Choudhury, 2008 in Perry, 2008), may have potentially negative effects on migrants' emotional and physical health (Phillips & Robinson, 2015), as well as fostering perceptions among settled residents of incomers 'adding to the burden of deprivation and contributing nothing' (Robinson, 2010, p. 2457). In such contexts, housing may be a particularly contentious issue, although other factors including the area's history of migration also influence this (Robinson, 2010). Housing in Cheetham Hill is varied: initially characterised by Victorian terraced housing, much of which still remains in the core residential areas, in the 1960s and 1970s urban renewal programmes saw the construction of several council estates, offering mainly small maisonettes (Harries *et al.*, 2019; Mason, 1977). While Cheetham Hill has not undergone a process of gentrification (unlike many other areas in Manchester), property price increases in the area have led to competition for reasonably priced housing.

Methodology

Findings are based on qualitative interviews with service users at the Welcome Centre in Cheetham Hill, as part of a project exploring low-income migrants' housing experiences. This drop-in facility offers welfare and education support to migrants and local communities, providing English and other skills- and employment-related classes, as well as family, health and mental health advice, cooked meals and food parcels. Interviews took place from February to April 2016 with an initial group of 31 respondents who were accessing services, and in some cases volunteering, at the Centre. This was narrowed down to a core set of 18 interviews,[6] based on the following criteria

Table 1. Summary of respondents' characteristics and housing conditions (n = 18).

Gender	Age range	Immigration status	Country of origin	Type of tenure	Paying monthly rent?	Sharing bedroom?*	Housing benefit
M (9) F (9)	18-24 (2) 25-34 (6) 35-44 (6) 45-54 (2) 55-64 (1) 65+ (1)	EU (16) Other (2) [spousal/ student]	Poland (6) Italy (3) China (2) Pakistan (2) Slovakia (1) Cz Republic (1) Lithuania (1) Hungary (1) Nigeria (1)	Tenant (11) Sharing (6) Homeless (1)	Yes (11) [£206-850 per mth] No (7)	No (11) Yes (6)	Receiving (3) Applied for (2) No (13)

*With someone other than partner.

which aimed to identify low-paid migrant workers who were: born outside the UK; in the UK for at least one year; working or looking for work; and working in jobs which were likely to be low-waged (see below). Contact with prospective participants was initially facilitated by Welcome Centre staff, and subsequently via snowballing.[7] Respondents participated in a semi-structured interview of around 30–60 minutes, and were asked about their immigration status and access to employment and/or benefits; past and current housing conditions; and aspirations for future housing. Most interviews were recorded, and based on this and/or notes taken at the interview, a 'housing profile' was written up for each participant, covering basic data, a brief history of the respondent's migration trajectory, sources of income, their housing situation, and obstacles and aspirations for improving this.[8] Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manchester.

The variety of nationalities included in our sample highlights its diversity (see Table 1). However, most respondents were EU citizens, with a handful of non-Europeans obtaining citizenship in another European country prior to moving to the UK. This complicates assumptions equating nationality with immigration status and by extension housing trajectory, suggesting the need to look beyond and interrogate such conjectures (discussed further below). All respondents had arrived in the UK between 1996 and 2016. All were working or seeking work in legal employment which was low-paid and often difficult, seasonal or irregular, including agricultural (e.g. picking leeks, chicken farm work), factory (e.g. fish processing), and construction work (e.g. building labour). This is in keeping with Hunt *et al.*'s (2008, p. 9) association of migrant work with '3-D jobs' which are dirty, dangerous and degrading. Nearly all respondents were living in the private rented sector, either as a tenant or with friends, although a few were staying with friends in other types of accommodation (social housing/owner-occupied), and one respondent was homeless. Both private renting and sharing are included here as they have qualitative similarities, particularly if sharing is seen as a form of informal sub-letting (Parutis, 2011); along with homelessness, these forms of tenure often represent a continuum of housing experiences for low-paid migrant workers.

Analysis was undertaken through thematic coding of housing profiles compiled for each respondent, referring to recordings where necessary. The research team undertook an iterative process of revising the profiles and identifying emerging themes which were then discussed and developed further, within the research team and in conjunction with the partner organisation and some participants. Themes are largely derived from

respondents' own accounts. Using the conceptual framing of precarity, they have been distilled into the analysis that follows, illustrated by qualitative vignettes which draw on the semi-ethnographic approach underpinning the research (Lang, 2019). The objective of this analysis is not to be representative, but to deepen understanding of the lived experience of housing precarity from the perspectives of low-income migrant workers.

Analysis: experiences of housing precarity

Lack of control and emotional outcomes

The lack of control suggested by housing precarity can be seen clearly in experiences of personal security and privacy, particularly common in shared housing (Diacon *et al.*, 2008). The experience of Carla, who had arrived in the UK in 2009 from Poland, is suggestive of the multiple dimensions of insecurity that migrants living in shared housing may undergo. Carla had been working on short-term contracts for several months at a time (e.g. frozen fish packing), but was unemployed at the time of the research, and was not entitled to any benefits as she had spent more time out of work than in work during the last year. She had been evicted from the private rented property she shared with a friend after they had complained to the landlord about poor housing conditions, suggestive of 'revenge eviction' (McKee *et al.*, 2019). Their neighbours, a British couple living next door in a two-bedroom property owned by the same landlord, had invited them to stay, and they were sharing a bedroom between three (Carla, her boyfriend and her friend Maria). Although they appreciated having a roof over their head, and felt personally safe living there, the conditions were also poor in this new accommodation: the gas had been turned off due to non-payment of bills, and there was damp on the walls. Additionally, Carla was aware that the formal tenants in the property had been in their room when they were not there, as some of their possessions had gone missing: '*We know they have been in our bedroom and taken things, but we haven't said anything*'. This is indicative of the delicate balance between interpersonal relationships and diverse forms of insecurity that underpin informal sharing, which characterise housing precarity in this setting.

Because shared housing is often entangled with interpersonal relationships, it may also have a significant emotional dimension accompanying the lack of control and instability that it entails. For example, Jan, who had arrived from Poland in 2004 and worked as a self-employed builder for five years before a four-year period of ill health, was staying with his girlfriend in a three-bedroom council flat, which they shared with two other people. He had been there for a year, while looking for formal employment and doing occasional day labouring on building sites, which was '*not legal work*', meaning he had no regular income. While he was appreciative of his girlfriend offering him somewhere to live, and contributed with rent when he could, Jan feared that if there was any problem in the relationship, he would be made homeless. The future dimension and potential for disruption in this arrangement had particular affective consequences, suggesting that housing which is dependent on personal relationships may entail a double burden of precarity, particularly in the context of uncertain employment and income.

However, the attitude of low-income migrants to housing is influenced by factors including their expectations and previous experiences of housing, as well as their economic possibilities, social networks and legal constraints (Perry, 2008, p. 2). Among respondents there were experiences of very variable housing conditions, including homelessness and sleeping rough. Jan, Carla and Maria had all experienced homelessness prior to accessing shared housing. Carla and Maria had lived for a few days in a container with no facilities except for a mattress on the floor; Maria recounted the dire conditions, which were cold and insecure, as they could not lock the container from the inside and were afraid that someone would set fire to it. In this context, informal sharing was preferable despite its insecurities; as Maria put it, '*I don't complain about housing conditions, as long as I don't have to live in the streets*'.

As well as offering new arrivals an initial foothold in housing markets (Robinson *et al.*, 2007), this suggests that sharing is a strategy which allows longer-term migrants to pool resources, which may be critical to mitigate other forms of precarity, such as very low or irregular incomes. The living arrangement with the landlord or tenant may involve an element of reciprocity instead of rental payments: several respondents in shared housing reported making payments when they could (i.e. when they had work), and otherwise helping with cleaning or providing food. For some, the church or mosque was the basis for networks which allowed them to access shared housing. Such practices are indicative of an ethics of care enmeshed in the 'transaction economies' that may characterise migrant strategies (Hall, 2018, p. 972).

Often the formal tenant was in a similarly precarious position. For example, Aleksandra, a Polish woman in her thirties, had been in the UK for two years, working for 18 months as a picker in a meat factory, and was on maternity leave at the time of the research. She lived with her husband, who was from Pakistan, and their new baby in a three-bedroom house in the PRS, for which they paid £450 per month plus bills. Her husband was waiting for a decision from the Home Office on his spousal visa application; their plans to open a mobile phone business were contingent on this decision, as Aleksandra explained: '*My husband is between [jobs], he has work permission but he wants to start his own business, and we wait for the decision because they are moving like snail [regarding] the decision, and he is not working*'. This highlights the knock-on effect of the uncertainty relating to migrants' 'inability to define their legal status' (Hunter & Meers, 2018, p. 8). Meanwhile, they had turned their dining-room into a bedroom which they were subletting to a friend, a taxi-driver who helped them out with lifts when needed. This suggests that from the formal tenant's perspective, sharing is a strategy to achieve housing objectives as well as potentially meeting other needs, albeit in constrained conditions (Parutis, 2011).

Other respondents with formal tenancy agreements had found alternative ways to deal with the trade-offs between affordability, conditions and aspirations, balancing the immediate experience of housing precarity with longer-term objectives. Meng, a Chinese woman in her forties who had arrived in the UK in 2010, was working as a cleaner and living with her husband, a chef in a central Manchester restaurant, and two children (aged four and 11) in a shared house. The family were sleeping in one room with two double beds, and shared the rest of the house with four students, for which they paid £240 per month (with a formal tenancy agreement), including access to the large garden

and almost exclusive use of the kitchen. Although the household's living conditions were clearly overcrowded, Meng balanced this against their future aspirations: '*[In the short term] we have no choice … [but] in the future we've got a plan, we want to buy our own house … we've got to wait, [but] it's not forever*'. Living in such conditions for the last two years had allowed the household to save enough for a mortgage deposit, and they were starting to look for a house to buy. In this way, precarity can be tolerated as part of a strategy towards potentially improving conditions, suggestive of resilience as a mitigating factor in the effects of precarity (Clair *et al.*, 2019).

However, the negative emotional effects of precarious housing conditions were strongly expressed by other respondents. For example, Justina, a woman in her fifties who had migrated from Lithuania in 2010, was self-employed, running a deliveries, repairs and decorating service with her husband. They were living in one-bedroom flat in the PRS with their disabled grandson, for whom they were the main carers, and who shared their bedroom. She told us that the flat was small, dark and in a state of disrepair: '*Everything is broken: the ceiling is broken, the shower is broken. We asked the landlord many times. He comes and repairs only the tiles. The floor is rotten and I'm scared it will fall*'. The household had been waiting for a house with a garden on the council list for a year, and the uncertainty of when this situation might improve was having a significant effect on their mental and physical health. This also affected their willingness to invest time and effort in improving the accommodation; as Justina put it, '*I am looking for a house [to live in] for very very long time … I can do decoration jobs, repairing jobs, everything [in the house], but I must be sure that I live there a long long long time*'. In contrast to the stability sought by Justina, the uncertainty inherent in the PRS can have a somewhat paralysing effect, undermining the resilience displayed by tenants.

These aspects of housing precarity, including multiple insecurities, poor conditions and affordability, characterise the context in which low-income economic migrants make decisions about their housing options, often intimately linked to personal and social relationships, as well as other considerations such as employment opportunities and immigration status, which are explored further below. A precarity lens highlights respondents' lack of control and affective responses to these situations, as well as the interlinked and overlapping nature of these dimensions. Yet while housing precarity is evident, it does not preclude individual or household agency, seen in longer-term strategic actions to improve housing situations, however uncertain these may be. This suggests a need to engage with the lived reality of housing precarity, in order to understand the 'complex interplay' of factors that shape migrants' housing experiences (Powell & Robinson, 2019, p. 188), explored further below.

Overlapping dimensions and bureaucratic regimes

While researchers have explored '[t]he 'intersectionality of housing and labour markets' (Hoolachan *et al.*, 2017, p. 64), there has been less research on how *precarious* housing and employment interact (Hunter & Meers, 2018, p. 2). For low-paid economic migrants, housing precarity often reflects employment precarity: both are characterised by high levels of mobility, insecurity and flexibility. Many of our respondents were looking for employment, and explicitly mentioned the unstable

nature of their work opportunities, which even if legal were often temporary, irregular and sporadic. For example, Filip, a Polish man in his forties, was living alone in a three-bedroom house. He had previously shared this accommodation with fellow migrant workers, but they had left to go back to Poland due to lack of work, resulting in higher rental costs which he had to meet alone. He had worked in various jobs including as a kitchen porter, and for Tesco for 18 months; but that job ended after his agency didn't renew the contract with the supermarket, and despite looking for kitchen portering work, at the time of the research he was on a zero-hour contract as a warehouse operative. This affected his housing options, as Filip told us, '*There's no stability, I can't plan what I will do tomorrow*'. In this way, the interaction between employment and housing precarity affects migrants' ability to improve or consolidate their housing situation.

Alongside employment, bureaucratic structures featured in our respondents' accounts, particularly relating to immigration and benefits frameworks. From April 2014, Housing Benefit was withdrawn from new EEA job seekers claiming Jobseekers Allowance (DWP, 2014). Additionally, EEA job seekers were no longer eligible for out-of-work benefits within the first three months of being in the UK. Meanwhile, other reforms have indirectly affected migrant workers, including the 'benefit cap', which limited the amount of income that a household can receive within the benefits system (UK Government, n.d.), and the Right to the Rent. The latter provision, brought in by the 2014 Immigration Act and strengthened by the 2016 Immigration Act, required private landlords to check new tenants' immigration status, and criminalised landlords letting to tenants with no 'right to rent', in other words without regular immigration status. In housing terms, these measures have led to increasingly restricted options, particularly for those accessing the lower end of the PRS (Lombard, 2019; Lukes *et al.*, 2019). As part of '[t]he rightward tilting of the bureaucratic field [entailing] the encroachment of disciplinary forms of governance into areas previously dominated by the state's welfare function' (Crawford *et al.*, 2019, pp. 418–9), they have also increased fears about discrimination and reinforced negative immigration discourses.

At the time of the research there was evident anxiety among respondents regarding further potential changes for both 'in-work' and 'out-of-work' benefit claimants, which accompanied apprehension about the approaching referendum. The barrage of reforms since 2010 means that migrants not only had to learn how the system works, but also to constantly update themselves, paying attention to different categories such as migrants and citizens, EEA nationals and non-EEA nationals, and other variables such as marital and work status, disability and children that are taken into account when their claim is assessed (Lang, 2019). For example, Housing Benefit can be received by both 'in-work' and 'out-of-work' claimants, with the amount depending on the claimant's income and the value of their rent. For an in-work EEA citizen to be able to claim Housing Benefit on a par with a British citizen, he or she had to have a 'genuine and effective' job[9], a condition which under UK law is satisfied by earning at least £155 per week, or around 23 hours of work per week at the level of the minimum wage in 2015–16, for three months (Sumption & Altoraj, 2016, p. 5). However, our findings suggested that migrant workers often struggled to meet this threshold, due to factors including low levels of English and lack of knowledge or

support in the job market, meaning they were often doing jobs considered undesirable for low levels of pay, such as delivering 'charity' leaflets for £20 a week (Justina). Those earning less than the specified amount are not considered workers, and were therefore not eligible for the rights extended to EU national workers, suggesting that under these regulations, '[s]ome workers are more equal than others' (Anderson, 2015, p. 80).

Some of our respondents were entitled to certain benefits, most commonly Housing Benefit and Jobseekers Allowance, and several had been affected by the reforms. Those working irregularly found that their benefits stopped as their eligibility to claim depended on the number of months they had been working in the previous year, as mentioned above in Carla's case. This is in keeping with research showing that between 2013 and 2015, the number of EU nationals receiving out-of-work benefits dropped 15 per cent, to 113,960 (Sumption & Altoraj, 2016). The case of Hamza shows how these conditions have had direct effects on the housing precarity of migrant workers. Originally from Pakistan, Hamza moved to Italy 22 years ago and worked there for 18 years, including 14 years in a factory supplying baked goods to supermarkets. With an EU passport and stable work, he travelled back to see his wife and children (who had stayed in Pakistan) every year, and regularly sent them money. He had come to the UK in 2012, looking for work after the factory in Italy closed, and had initially lived in Keighley with a relative, working in a sandwich factory for eight months, but after that job finished he had been unable to find further work. At the time of the research he had been in Manchester for two months, looking for employment. He was in temporary accommodation, sharing a bedroom with another man in a shared house belonging to a friend from the mosque who was letting him stay there for free. His only source of income was his monthly Personal Independence Payment of £87, which he received due to his physical and mental health problems, which included '*depression, blood pressure, heart problem, kidney problem*'. He saw his lack of employment and subsequently a stable address as the primary obstacles to claiming benefits (including JSA which he had previously claimed); this in turn limited his access to health services, as he was still registered with a doctor and other specialists in Keighley. He was struggling to overcome this situation: '*I can't understand what to do, I can't find a home or a flat … if I find then I [will] apply for housing benefit after … But I have not found a home. When I find a home I [will] change address to Manchester, and after access other services, [but] to start here, it's problem*'. Moreover, in his precarious situation, he had been unable to travel to back to Pakistan, and had not seen his family for two years.

Housing precarity is often connected to the high degree of mobility that is found among the migrant worker population. The term 'economic migrant' obscures the complex migration routes that many have undertaken[10]: Hall (2018) recognises the 'double migration' involved in moving from outside Europe to a European country, with language, skills and citizenship often acquired elsewhere before arrival in the UK, as in Hamza's case. As suggested above, respondents' migration trajectories were often multi-stage, involving passing through and sometimes staying in often multiple other countries before arriving in the UK. As well as international moves, the transient nature of migrant worker trajectories includes movement inside the UK (Hunt *et al.*, 2008), often in pursuit of better opportunities. After arriving in the UK, many

respondents had moved between locations, following job opportunities or in some cases, in more exploitative working conditions, for example moved around by gangs. This often resulted in itinerant, flexible living arrangements, which reflected and compounded the instability of low-income migrants' lives, even within the same city. For example, Jakub, an unemployed electrician in his fifties, had arrived in Manchester in 2010, and had lived in seven different places in the six years since then, before moving to his current accommodation, sub-letting in the PRS from the tenant of a three-bedroom house and his daughter.

A deeper understanding of how migrant workers experience housing precarity and how it overlaps with other forms of instability, for example relating to employment, shows how wider structural changes such as bureaucratic reforms to benefits and immigration systems may compound these conditions. As Crawford *et al.* (2019) suggest, the increasingly punitive nature of these bureaucratic systems leads to the double regulation of the poor (Wacquant, 2008). Moreover, the tightening of benefit regimes means that migrants already experiencing multiple forms of precarity, in terms of health and employment, are less able to access housing as a base from which to improve other conditions. In this way, as bureaucratic structures contribute to the production of precarity in its multiple dimensions, agency becomes more difficult to exercise.

Conclusion

This paper has explored aspects of housing precarity through the experiences of economic migrants in Manchester, with a focus on those living in the PRS and shared housing. These findings offer new insights into how precarity manifests in terms of low-paid migrants' housing, and suggest that theoretically, a precarity lens has much to offer the field of housing studies, where it remains relatively incipient. In particular, it contributes to and expands well-established debates in this area on insecurity, perception and agency. Going beyond insecurity, which risks a narrow, binary and individualised perspective (Clair *et al.*, 2019; Waite, 2009), precarity captures the emotional, multidimensional and dynamic nature of low-income migrants' housing experiences, summarised briefly below.

Firstly, a precarity lens suggests closer attention to the future dimension of housing experiences, and particularly, the affective consequences of this. Housing precarity is characterised by lack of control and potential instability, with consequent emotional effects, which are often negative. Findings showed how insecurity and lack of privacy (often associated with shared housing) were key elements, but that social and interpersonal relationships also influenced and compounded this aspect of precarity, particularly where individuals had unstable incomes and were therefore dependent on others' support. While many tolerated poor conditions, their ability and motivation to address these were also partly contingent on their projected housing future, and the likelihood of stability versus the probability of disruption.

Secondly, understanding housing precarity requires a view of the overlapping nature of other dimensions of precarious living, including employment but also, crucially for low-income migrant workers, immigration status and benefits, which are structurally determined and associated with bureaucratic regimes. Instability in these

dimensions compounds housing precarity for low-income migrants. The low quality of economic migrants' jobs often means that they are inherently unstable, as part-time, temporary and zero-hour contracts are common. Moreover, constant changes to benefit (and immigration) frameworks have resulted in systems which are punitive, confusing and hostile. The ever-increasing difficulty of navigating such systems affects low-income workers practically as well as psychologically, further destabilising incomes alongside a more generalised existential instability (for example, waiting for a decision from the Home Office to define legal status) which affects their capacity to improve or consolidate housing conditions.

Thirdly, however, a view of precarity as enmeshed in structure-agency dynamics allows an understanding of both the structural influences/constraints on low-income migrants' housing experiences, but also their agency within this, including their strategies to respond to these. While structural changes such as benefits reform have compounded the already precarious position of many low-income migrant workers, this does not preclude the exercise of agency around housing options in some circumstances. Strategies for achieving longer-term housing objectives included sub-letting and overcrowding, which were endured in the short-term with a view to saving for a deposit or opening a business. However, such circumstances are both context-dependent and individually determined, influenced by factors such as level of English, social networks and health. This also emphasises the importance of considering contextual factors in understanding housing precarity. As suggested by Kalleberg (2018) and others, the salience of reforms to benefit and immigration systems suggests the need for further research into how housing precarity is influenced by these intersecting dimensions.

Finally, underpinning this theoretical contribution is the methodological imperative to more closely attend to the voices of those living this reality, whose experiences remain all too often overlooked in research and policy debates. Therefore, this paper insists on the need for housing studies to include the voices of those experiencing specific housing conditions, through in-depth qualitative and potentially ethnographically informed research. Indeed, the frequent exclusion of such voices from relevant debates may contribute to the undertheorised nature of precarity in housing studies. Conversely, paying closer attention to migrants' own representations is essential for understanding its tangible and emotional effects, as well as the tradeoffs made by those with direct experience of these issues.

Notes

1. The research took place a few months prior to the referendum on exiting the European Union, and although it does not directly address Brexit, it captures elements of migrants' housing experiences at a time when immigration was high on the political and media agenda.
2. Secure occupancy is defined as 'the extent to which households can make a home and stay there for reasonable periods of time' (Hulse et al., 2011 in Easthope, 2014, pp.579-80).
3. Indeed, discussions of precarity resonate with similar notions such as vulnerability, insecurity and marginality, deriving from well-established development debates (Waite, 2009). More recently, observers have noted overlaps with discussions on informality (Ferreira, 2016), which are not discussed here for reasons of space.

4. Operational from 2004 to 2011, the Worker Registration Scheme aimed to regulate access to the labour market and benefits for Eastern European migrant workers. Although a total of 965,000 applicants registered with the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) between May 1, 2004 and December 31, 2008, its coverage of workers in this category was only partial due to the registration fee and lack of requirement for the self-employed to register (Parutis, 2011). It is not covered in more detail here as it did not feature in interviews. For further information on this scheme see http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/about/data-sources-limitations/worker-registration-scheme/.
5. Critics note that 'diversity' may be 'code for expressing concerns about the problems that might be associated with ethnic difference, migration and poverty, such as pressures on local services' (Vertovec, 2007 in Harries et al., 2019).
6. The other 11 participants were excluded as they were refugees, asylum seekers, or British (with indirect experience of immigration via household members). These interviews, while outside the scope of this analysis, offered broader context for housing and immigration issues.
7. This was especially facilitated by the longer-term involvement of the research assistant, Luciana Lang, in Welcome Centre activities as a volunteer and ethnographic researcher. For more information see Lang (2019).
8. Most respondents' English was sufficient to participate without translation/interpretation, although a handful received assistance from Centre staff. A small number of participants requested for the interview not to be recorded.
9. This term derives from a European Court of Justice ruling in 1982, which found that on the basis of the free movement of workers, the term 'worker' should be consistent across the European community (Anderson, 2015).
10. Such categories also hide the multiple motivations for migrating which respondents expressed, including education, culture, marriage or escaping violence alongside employment (cf. Parutis, 2011).

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