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Living in a small home: expectations, impression management, and compensatory practices

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ABSTRACT

Housing choices are commonly perceived as active and exercised at a fixed point. But individuals continually negotiate these trade-offs through the unfolding of their everyday life, particularly when choices result in forms of living outside normative housing expectations. This article considers trade-offs around house size made by residents of smaller homes in three UK cities—London, Sheffield, and Edinburgh—drawing on in-depth interviews with 27 individuals. The article focuses on the space of expectation adjustment in a period of extended crisis in housing systems, fostering the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, *Cruel optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2011) of persistent and collectively maintained attachments to outcomes which are increasingly unrealisable. First, individuals downgraded their own expectations of living space. Second, in negotiating wider societal expectations, individuals engaged in impression management to prevent stigmatisation. The research thus advances longstanding debates on housing and stigma. Finally, individuals constructed alternative narratives of small home living which centred on forms of adjustment through compensatory practices of minimalism and creativity.

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Introduction

A sense of housing crisis is pervasive across the UK and other international contexts (Gallent, 2019), typified by diminished housing opportunities for younger people, creating a generation whose housing outcomes are demonstrably poorer than those of previous generations, whether through prolonged sharing, delayed life transitions, or unfulfilled housing preferences (McKee et al., 2017). Nevertheless, successful and responsible citizenship continues to be symbolised by housing outcomes (Flint, 2003), increasing the tension between acquired dispositions for housing and the conditions which make their fulfilment difficult (Aramburu, 2015). As individuals negotiate this impasse (Berlant, 2011), downward pressure is exerted on housing expectations, with individuals trading off different dimensions of home (Preece et al., 2020). This

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article considers a key dimension of housing—size—focusing on the way that residents of small homes explain the trade-offs they make. Whilst there are debates about the physical and wellbeing implications of living in smaller homes, this article is concerned with the processes through which individuals adjust and explain their expectations of home. It draws on in-depth interviews with 27 individuals in London, Edinburgh and Sheffield, UK, to explore how shifting expectations may bring a wider range of homes into consideration as viable housing options.

The research contributes to debates around small homes, which coalesce around different drivers: changing preferences, constraint, and policy. Some commentators have argued that smaller homes may better meet contemporary housing preferences; in making the case for micro-living, Kichanova (2019: 12) argues that ‘what one generation dismissed as an outrageous indignity is happily embraced by another’, with smaller homes increasing choice and housing supply. However, consumption is not synonymous with desirability, and occupancy of smaller homes may be driven as much by constraint as by changing preferences (Evans & Unsworth, 2012). Individuals may simply be obtaining what they can afford, not necessarily what they prefer, in a producer-led market (CABE, 2009). A key policy measure oriented towards addressing the housing crisis is to supply more housing, with particular questions about the potential of smaller dwellings, built at scale and density, to meet housing needs. Whilst policies may facilitate the provision of smaller homes, as Tervo and Hirvonen (2020) argue, these homes do not necessarily meet residents’ needs or wants; the provision of small units was more to do with policy drivers that enabled markets to determine the size and price of apartments.

Despite these binary debates, there has been little scrutiny of how individuals living in smaller homes negotiate their housing choices, and then live within a home that exists outside normalised expectations of housing (see Hasu, 2018 for an exception, which extends housing choice processes to post-purchase evaluations). This is in contrast to extensive literatures on tenure and place stigmatisation (Kearns et al., 2013; Rowlands & Gurney, 2000; Wacquant et al., 2014). This research situates individual housing choices within a wider context in which adjusted expectations (in relation to house size) collide with societal expectations, in which certain housing forms are particularly prized and others denigrated (Flint, 2003; Gurney, 1999). This tension can be reduced by actively managing the expectations and impressions of others, countering potential stigma and spoiled identity (Allen et al., 2007). This article focuses on how residents of small homes perceive their space and negotiate wider expectations, constructing new sources of value through adjusted practices of small home living.

The research makes an empirical contribution by exploring who is living in small homes, why they are living there, and the practices they enact in doing so. This is particularly timely as dwelling sizes are decreasing in key urban areas (Tervo & Hirvonen, 2020), at the same time as individuals have been spending more time at home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Preece et al., 2021). Wiles (2020: 27) calls for more research to understand who is living in smaller homes, whilst Boeckermann et al. (2019: 70) argue for research that explores ‘the reasons people are choosing to downsize their living space’ and how these motivations are then represented in everyday practice. We extend this by considering motivations as well

as the ways in which individuals seek to control negative impressions of their home, reducing a source of potential failure. Qualitative engagement with the experiences of those living in smaller homes has focused on the margins of conventional housing, for example the ‘tiny house’ movement, which tends to emphasise environmentalism, housing cost, freedom, and counter-cultural values (Boeckermann et al., 2019; Carras, 2019; Shearer & Burton, 2021). We consider whether these narratives are also relevant across a wider range of small housing—not just new build developments—including existing and older dwellings, which are important contributors to smaller UK housing stock (Morgan & Cruickshank, 2014).

Finally, the article makes conceptual contributions, building on earlier work calling for a more precise understanding of the operation of housing expectations in relation to aspirations and choices (Preece et al., 2020). It addresses a key gap by situating the adjustment of individual expectations within a context of wider societal expectations, taking longstanding debates about housing, stigma, and impression management in new theoretical directions. This is crucial in understanding how individuals negotiate the attrition of a ‘fantasy’ of ‘the good life’ that is collectively and socially maintained (Berlant, 2011). Bridging the individual and collective, the research brings the concepts of cruel optimism and compensatory cultures (Berlant, 2011; Harris, 2019) into housing studies. We propose that the negotiation of individual and collective expectations is *practised*, and through compensatory practices individuals reframe living with constraint.

The following sections discuss this conceptual framework in more depth. Following a discussion of methods, the articles outlines the three core findings. First, the adjustment of expectations that brought individuals to live in a smaller home. Second, the ways in which they sought to control the impressions of others in relation to their housing choices. And finally, the practices of living in a small home that foster narratives which align these trade-offs with wider lifestyle choices.

Housing expectations and cruel optimism

The UK is a homeownership society (Ronald, 2008), in which a set of values about the advantages of ownership over renting have been fostered by government policy, societal expectations, and the ‘immaterial inheritance’ of socialisation (Nethercote, 2019). Alongside other housing attributes, ownership comes to convey a particular status, achievement and responsibility (Cheshire et al., 2010; Flint, 2003). As normalised housing aspirations become increasingly difficult to achieve, expectations may adjust downwards, creating an aspirations gap (Crawford & McKee, 2018; Preece et al., 2020); this article explores this process of expectation adjustment.

The concept of ‘cruel optimism’ provides a framework through which to explore housing expectations, bridging the gap between individuals and the collective systems in which they exist (Crawford & Flint, 2015). Berlant (2011: 24) describes cruel optimism as ‘a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic’. The attachment persists by providing a sense of continuity and offering the prospect that at some future point conditions will improve, enabling individuals to bear difficult conditions in the present. Whilst Berlant (2011: 11) explores the

‘attrition of a fantasy’ through cultural rather than empirical cases, the concept is well-suited to a housing field perceived to be in a moment of extended crisis, within which aspirations appear intractable despite material changes that erode the possibilities for their realisation (Crawford & McKee, 2018). The concept therefore offers to situate housing within a broader crisis across multiple spheres of life, as well as linking individual aspirations and housing choices to longstanding and collectively maintained ideals.

This article empirically investigates what Berlant (2011: 27) describes as ‘people’s struggles to change ... the terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast’, paying attention to the way in which expectations (of self and society) are negotiated, justified and re-cast. For some individuals and groups, this sense of crisis has long marked their conditions of living, as Berlant recognises, but the research presented here focuses on those groups for whom housing outcomes have been newly compromised. We argue that recalibrated housing expectations arise from a process of misrecognition as individuals realign their expectations with the reality that they face. As Berlant (2011: 3) argues, when ordinary life assumes a sense of crisis in relation to the expectation of key markers of normalcy or achievement, adjustment to these conditions ‘seems like an accomplishment’ in itself. Therefore, smaller homes may meet the recalibrated expectations of their residents, for example to achieve homeownership or live in a particular neighbourhood at the expense of space. Individuals come to accept the realities of the system in which they operate because there are perceived to be few alternatives, or the system is seen as unchangeable (Chisholm et al., 2020).

Impression management and ‘compensatory cultures’

The recalibration of individual expectations is a fluid process involving the negotiation of a wider social context in which normalised markers of achievement are relatively stable. This has the potential to confer a sense of failure, shame or stigma when individuals do not meet the expectations of wider society. The concept of stigma, or the possession of undesired differentness that departs from the expectations of others (Goffman, 1963) has a long history of application in housing studies, and is often discussed in relation to tenure prejudice (Rowlands & Gurney, 2000) and those in more marginal housing positions (Allen et al., 2007). However, the processes involved in managing denigration by others are also likely to be relevant to understanding the ways in which individuals manage life in housing that exists outside other normative expectations—such as in relation to its size.

When expectations are not achieved, adaptive techniques (Goffman, 1963) can emerge in order to insulate individuals from potential denigration by others (Cheshire et al., 2010), for example by controlling the information others use to make judgements. The setting in which individuals create an impression—furniture, décor, background items—is an important component, but the setting may also contradict the impression of the self that an individual has projected. For example, being at home can make it difficult to conceal other facts conveyed by the setting (Goffman, 1959), which has particular relevance for the research context in which

large numbers have been required to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Goffman (1959: 207) identifies a range of defensive and protective practices that are employed to safeguard the impression created by an individual in the presence of others. One such practice is the construction of alternative markers of success and value. Berlant (2011: 200) conceptualises the crisis across multiple fields as an ‘impasse’, a moment in which the interruption of conventional norms fosters adaptation. As achievement of the markers of normalcy are delayed, individuals improvise and adapt to the waning of old certainties, for example by developing alternative forms of living. In housing, symbolic meanings may be constructed to place housing choices within an acceptable framework, in an attempt to limit the stigma of being unable to achieve one’s ultimate aspirations (Cheshire et al., 2010; Flint, 2003). However, this may reinforce the crisis conditions that gave rise to the adaptation in the first place. Harris (2019: 66) describes the operation of compensatory cultures, which ‘mediate and make sense of precarity yet do so in ways that normalise and exacerbate it’, shifting expectations of the kind of housing individuals should accept and restoring dominant neoliberal values. Refining this, we propose that compensatory ways of living can be thought of as practices, enacted through daily life to manage living with a deficit in relation to societal norms and expectations. This offers a way to explore how people make sense of diminishing opportunities and outcomes, reworking what constitutes an adequate home and highlighting the positive characteristics of reduced circumstances (Harris, 2019; Harris & Nowicki, 2020).

Defining the ‘small home’

There is no universally agreed definition of a ‘small home’, but varied definitions of a particular form of small home—micro-apartments—do exist. Lau and Wei (2018) refer to micro-flats in Hong Kong as being below 40 square metres, Wiles (2020) starts from the position that micro-homes are below 37 m². In the UK, operationalising the concept of the small home is complicated because property size is commonly expressed by the number of bedrooms, not floor area (Drury, 2008). It also does not account for occupancy, use, or the feeling of space in different parts of the home. Given these contestations, we gave primacy to residents’ perceptions, asking them ‘do you feel like you live in a small home?’, whilst also targeting recruitment at particular house types, such as those marketed as ‘micro-apartments’ or which traditionally have smaller living areas.

The research extends consideration of smaller dwelling beyond niche forms of living, such as the ‘tiny house’ movement or van dwelling, and encompasses existing stock, not just the newly built homes around which much of debate on smaller homes focuses. Whilst new dwellings in the UK are slightly more likely to fall below a standard space threshold, housing built between 1919 and 1974 was most likely of all to be below standard, and of all housing flats and small terraced houses are most commonly undersized (Morgan & Cruickshank, 2014). This suggests significant scope for exploring the experiences of residents of a broader range of housing types. The UK is a particularly appropriate area on which to focus the research given that it has some of the smallest homes in western Europe by floor area per person

(Evans & Unsworth, 2012; Morgan & Cruickshank, 2014), and it is estimated that around 34% of households have a problem in relation to lack of space (Morgan & Cruickshank, 2014).

Methods

The research aimed to understand how individuals traded off different dimensions of home, with a focus on house size, and how these choices related to individual and collective expectations of home. This was operationalised through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with 27 individuals living in different types of small homes. All conversations took place remotely using telephone interviews, which have been used successfully in previous research (Soaita & McKee, 2019), and in this instance enabled conversations to fit into participants' other commitments. As the research was conducted during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic (in June 2020) there were also limits on movement and social contact in the UK. Individuals were required to remain at home—except for limited reasons such as to shop for food, to exercise, or support a vulnerable individual—and to work at home wherever possible.

A typology of small homes was developed to underpin a purposive sampling strategy focusing on: new-build micro-apartments; new-build 'family' homes; house/flat shares; older terraced housing (in which one house is attached in a row to two or more other houses) and tenements (Victorian and Edwardian-era walk-up flats with multiple flats arranged around a central stairway, common in Scottish cities). Research was targeted on the cities of London, Sheffield and Edinburgh, reflecting the clustering of these housing forms in different market contexts. For example in Sheffield, new-build family homes and terraced housing was more prevalent, but in the higher-cost cities of London and Edinburgh micro-apartments are an important component of the housing stock. There were several strands to participant recruitment. The research organisation's social media, newsletters, and website invited potential participants to make contact, whilst certain housing types were also sent a targeted letter inviting households to take part. This latter approach was particularly focused on new micro-apartments and smaller new-build family homes (near or below English space standards). To inform these mail-outs, planning applications and rental information were consulted, and the Royal Mail address finder used to send letters. To ensure representation of a range of households, for smaller 'family-sized' new-builds letters were sent to three-bedroom properties and those with children were particularly encouraged to contact us, since these households were less likely to be represented among micro-apartments and house shares. Participants received a £20 shopping voucher.

When individuals first made contact, data were collected to support sampling, including household composition, a description of the dwelling, and perceptions of house size. Floor area was recorded from planning documents where possible (for new-build properties), or if known by the resident, otherwise bedroom numbers and a description of shared space was taken. The sample was diverse in relation to tenure, house-type, and household composition (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Age	
18–24	1
25–34	14
35–44	6
45–54	4
55–64	1
64+	1
Gender	
Male	8
Female	19
Ethnicity	
White British	17
White—other	4
Mixed—white and black Caribbean	1
Pakistani British	1
Bangladeshi British	1
Other Asian background	3
Area of employment (self-described)	
Policy, research & charity sector	7
Design, marketing & recruitment	4
Education & health	4
Local or national government	3
Project management & consultancy	3
Facilities and building maintenance	2
Student	2
Looking for work	2
Working at home during lockdown	
Yes (completely or partly)	23
No	2
Loss of employment within lockdown period	2
Household composition	
Lives alone	9
Lives with partner/spouse	5
Lives with friends/others	5
Single person with child(ren)	3
Couple with child(ren)	3
Multi-generational household	2
City	
London	13
Sheffield	5
Edinburgh	9
Dwelling type	
House/flat share (friends/strangers)	4
Old flats	3
Old terraces or tenements	5
New build micro-apartments	11
New build family homes	4
Size of dwelling	
1-bedroom new build micro-apartment (32–38 sqm)	11
Studio flat or bedsit	2
1-bedroom tenement flat	2
2-bedroom flat	3
Shared house (4–5 bedrooms)	2
3-bedroom new build family home (73–96 sqm)	4
1/2-bedroom terrace	2
3-bedroom terrace	1
Tenure	
Private rent (PRS)	11
Social rent (SRS)	2
Owner-occupied (OO)	14

A topic guide structured the interviews, but there was also flexibility to explore issues that were of importance to each individual, as they arose through the course of the interview. The key topics covered arrival stories, housing choice, expectations and aspirations, as well as everyday life in a small home and experiences of home during COVID-19 (the latter two themes are discussed in a separate publication, Preece et al., 2021). The initial part of the interviews focused on understanding the trade-offs that individuals made in living in a smaller home, how their own expectations related to wider societal expectations, and the ways that they experienced and explained living in a smaller space. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, were recorded, and transcribed. Analysis was carried out in line with constructivist grounded theory approaches (in line with Hoolachan & McKee, 2019), comprising line-by-line coding, theory construction, and re-coding in a bottom-up, iterative process. The theoretical framework enabled individual expectations to be related to a wider social context in which housing expectations and aspirations are also collectively maintained, leading to potential tension when housing choices exist outside more normative expectations of living space. In bringing together cruel optimism and compensatory cultures within a focused consideration of housing expectations, analysis sought to uncover the ways in which adaptation to 'crisis' conditions generated practices of small home living.

Findings

Choosing a small home: downgrading expectations and trading-off space

Housing choices are dynamic and influenced by a range of attributes associated with the home, wider neighbourhood, and household (Coulter & Scott, 2015). Reflecting on housing trade-offs, and aligning with other research (Hasu, 2018), many participants noted that location was a key consideration. Choice of neighbourhood was influenced by factors such as lifestyle (AErØ, 2006), access to cultural life and consumption-oriented and place-making events (Kern, 2016), as well as amenities such as schools for households with children (Lilius, 2017). Bound by high housing costs, individuals compensated by accepting smaller living spaces to access particular neighbourhoods with certain amenities, which in many cases also felt comfortable and knowable to participants (Benson & Jackson, 2017). For owners of smaller homes in London, another driver was to obtain ownership, even if the property was small.

Whilst participants were generally working in more professional jobs and recognised that their housing circumstances were better than many, expectations were adjusted to what could be achieved within the contemporary housing system, just as did lower income and less secure residents in other research (Chisholm et al., 2020):

Before I moved to London I would expect every home to have some kind of living area... When you come to London ... you accept it really because it's ... about landlords wanting to make as much money as possible on their property... Obviously, I'd rather have a living room and I'd rather have more living space

but ... what ... happens in London you've just to accept (Harry, 24, 5-bed house share, PRS, London)

This reflects both a differential geography of housing expectations, and the relational position of space within a hierarchy of calculations. Expectation adjustment was a process, as explained by Helen (31, 2-bed flat share, PRS, London): 'up to probably ten years ago I would have thought that by now I would be able to buy somewhere... It's not quite what we had planned for being this age'. This temporal dimension is key, enabling acknowledgement of adjusted expectations, yet (patiently) maintaining the aspiration of ownership in the future (Berlant, 2011). This aligns with other research suggesting that homes may be perceived as an interim stage on the way to other places (AERØ, 2006).

Whilst expectations around living space were adjusted, for some living somewhere small offered an important route to achieving other aspirations, particularly relating to homeownership. As well as making financial sense and providing control and autonomy, ownership enabled individuals to meet key social expectations around tenure, reinforcing previous research (Gurney, 1999; McKee, 2011). Laura (31, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London) explained that although her home was 'not what I envisaged when I was younger' and she had a preference for 'a bigger place', she was also happy to buy it:

I'd never really been to London... I didn't really know what I was letting myself in for... My friends ... in their mid-20s like they went to uni then they went somewhere and they bought a house and they started a family. And buying a house was like this rite of passage... You kind of forget ... that it's not normal to like share with like five people when you're 30... My expectations probably have changed since living here, and now I think that I'm really lucky to have this... Anyone who comes to visit me who's not from London thinks that I'm insane for like living in such a small place... But ... I'm kind of all right with it and my expectations have changed. And I do still hope to buy a house (Laura, 31, 1-bed micro-apartment, OO, 38 m², London)

For Laura, along with other owners of smaller homes, the ability to trade off space in order to own, and escape a private rented sector characterised by high rents, insecurity, and shared housing (McKee et al., 2020), resulted in the fulfilment of some of expectations at the expense of others. Whilst sharing housing has become a more common experience, this was still differentiated as 'not normal', highlighting the durability of normative expectations of housing outcomes.

Housing expectations are structured by societal norms, but also geography, differentiated across housing and labour markets. Beth (36, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London) explained the unspoken expectation of ownership, in which 'there is a bit of pressure ... to be sort of buying somewhere' based on the pathways of her peers elsewhere. Housing outcomes—both in terms of tenure, and size—were also often linked to normative ideals of what should be achieved at a particular life stage. This constitutes a kind of 'immaterial inheritance', in which preferences for particular housing forms are transferred through generations (Nethercote, 2019). Therefore, family experiences also contribute to the shaping of housing aspirations, as Isla demonstrates: 'My mum's worked really hard to where the business is now

... her house is really nice and ... it is big ... If she's done it then I'm ... confident that I'll be able to do ... just as well' (Isla, 31, 3-bed new-build family house, 73 m², OO, Sheffield).

For renters, ownership was a key part of their housing aspirations for the future, in addition to a larger living space.

I feel like having a house ... you've kind of got some kind of status about you? Like you're successful, you've managed to meet a milestone... There's just something about a house ... that's just ... embedded in us... When you think of a property you think of ... a house with a garden ... and all the bits and pieces that go with it (Heather, 26, 2-bed family flat, SRS, London)

Heather explained her preference to own a house—as distinct from a flat—as partly conditioned by societal expectations of success. Those milestones were 'put in place for you ... you're sort of expected to have a property ... in your thirties, expected to have children... If you're still living at home in your thirties, like what are you doing?' (Heather, 26, 2-bed family flat, SRS, London). The size of home in terms of the physical dimensions, is therefore seldom the sole lens through which homes are viewed, but sits alongside complex framings around age and life stage, parental independence, geography, parenthood, and a signifier of—and reward for—hard work. As Bilal (30, bedsit HMO, PRS, Sheffield) explained, ownership was associated with a 'sense of achievement... You've worked hard'. This reveals the way in which renting had been internalised as a failure, transmitting a negative message in relation to success and social status (McKee et al., 2020; Vassenden & Lie, 2013). The next section extends this to consider how these social processes also relate to the space of the home.

Negotiating societal expectations: impression-management and the judgement of small homes

Whilst participants generally reported being satisfied with the housing trade-offs they had made, there were times when these choices were exposed to the expectations of others—increasingly due to changing daily lives under COVID-19—highlighting the gap between realised housing outcomes and wider expectations, for example related to house size. Negotiating this 'lasting fantasy' (Berlant, 2011: 180), amid a transformed social and economic context, reveals the way in which expectations are enacted and sustained at the collective as well as individual level.

Beth (36, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London) recalled feeling 'absolutely fine' about her flat, but then visiting her brother's flat and realising "oh wow, this is actually really big, this is a normal ... sized flat"... But then for me that would be unnecessary'. Whilst downgrading her own expectations of what she could achieve in the London housing market, housing outcomes became linked to the minimum space that was needed, rather than necessarily what would be desirable and were also influenced by patterns of daily life which unfolded in the wider neighbourhood, not just in the dwelling (Preece et al., 2021). As these trade-offs intersect with societal expectations, living in a home that does not meet key markers of 'normalcy' means that individuals are continually negotiating the judgements of others. Where

wider expectations had been internalised, this created a sense of dissonance relating to perceived shortcomings of their housing, particularly because housing choices are perceived to be a statement of identity and lifestyle, not just housing (AERØ, 2006; Benson & Jackson, 2017). Sophie (41, 1-bed tenement, OO, Edinburgh) explained that ‘I don’t see myself as doing the marriage and having the kids ... and any of the things that are supposed to be what you do in life... Buying on your own is a statement of, ‘I’m going to be on my own’. Which ... feels quite a big thing to do’. Remaining in her one-bedroom tenement flat was questioned by others, which was felt as judgement:

Quite a lot of people have said, ‘why don’t you move somewhere ... you don’t want to live there all your life ... it’s tenement ... that’s a starter home, isn’t it?’... I feel like people should mind their own business ... it was very hard sometimes to separate society and friends’ ... views about where people should live and what achievement looks like (Sophie, 41, 1-bed tenement, OO, Edinburgh)

Housing outcomes are therefore still a symbolic marker, distinguishing successful and responsible conduct from that which is flawed (Rowlands & Gurney, 2000), persisting even when the material context of the housing system is transformed. Whilst existing research usually conceptualises this in relation to tenure or neighbourhood (Gurney, 1999; Kearns et al., 2013), this process is also associated with other dimensions of housing, such as size. Yet, this has been largely neglected in the housing literature on stigma. Sophie saw her life choices as existing outside the norm, which meant that her choices were scrutinised and ‘sometimes ... that affects how I judge whether that’s successful in ... other people’s eyes and ... how you feel about yourself’ (Sophie, 41, 1-bed tenement, OO, Edinburgh).

Feeling that they were not meeting markers of success meant that a number of participants were keenly aware of how others would view the space of their home, and this affected their practices of small home living. Jo (34, 3-bed new-build family house, 73 m², OO, Sheffield) recalled her Dad visiting her new home and ‘as soon as he came to my house he was like ‘oh, that’s ... not as spacious’ and ‘oh, this is not even the size of my store room’. Having lived in the home for a few years, ‘the difference in size from where I’ve been brought up is apparent’ (Jo, 34, 3-bed new-build family house, 73 m², OO, Sheffield). Growing up in another country with a different sense of space, Amy (46, 1/2-bed old terrace, PRS, Edinburgh) was ‘very aware that I live in a small space’:

My son is now old enough to be aware that it’s small ... I think his friends ... don’t understand how small our flat is. When they go into my son’s room, he has the lounge, so he has a bunk bed ... sofa, he has all his gaming setup... So, they go in and go ‘wow, your room is really cool’ ... I can be very conscious of people ... school parents, ... coming. It is a small home ... I’m always sort of very conscious of that when somebody new, who I don’t know very well, would come in. Obviously coming into our kitchen, they would realise that this is the main room because it has everything in it and that is it (Amy, 46, 1/2-bed old terrace, PRS, Edinburgh)

Participants described managing the process of others coming into their homes, to bridge the gap between external expectations of home and the lived reality. Lee (36, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London) also described attempts to ‘set an

expectation ... they are called [micro-apartments] for a reason... But when people come over ... they often are quite surprised that it's not all that different to what they would normally expect a flat to be'.

In 'normal' times, participants were able to manage the process of others entering the home, to reduce the potential for judgement, but the COVID-19 pandemic changed the use of the home for many. The research was a unique opportunity to explore the negotiations and adaptations that individuals were living through, particularly because the boundaries associated with the private and public had shifted. Small homes became spaces of social and family life, work, and schooling. The proliferation of video conferencing during this period meant that participants no longer had the same control over managing entry into the home, and there was access and scrutiny from those who otherwise would not have been permitted access:

When you're having video calls ... your home is suddenly on display to your colleagues or to people externally... You do suddenly get very self-conscious about it. There's one colleague I know who is well off, and good for him, that sort of made a comment around... 'Can't you just use your spare bedroom'... It really stung, and it really made me sort of think, 'wow, our living space is not like a lot of our colleagues'... For me, as someone who is quite privileged and quite well off in a lot of respects ... on this one particular bit I'm on this side of the line ... I can feel what that feels like, just temporarily (Tom, 29, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38m², OO, London)

Another participant described a sense of intrusion associated with enforced home working, which meant completing risk assessments:

I'm having to tell my line manager ... that I actually don't have a sofa. And she's obviously thinking, 'you are an absolute nutter, fancy not having a sofa, how awful'. And I'm like, 'no, I've got a folding chair'... Because it's really small, and you can't just go out and buy a sofa because it ... would actually go over half my floor space. (Sophie, 41, 1-bed tenement, OO, Edinburgh)

Both participants describe an 'inopportune intrusion' (Goffman, 1959: 204) that disrupts the impression they have constructed, exposing their living environments to unwanted scrutiny. This highlights the challenge under COVID-19 of controlling access to the 'backstage' of their lives (Goffman, 1959). The interior of the home—rather than the exterior—becomes the site of judgement.

However, others argued that this was an opportunity to mask certain aspects of home, actively curating the space to create a particular impression: 'I often think about where would I do that in my property... There's not a lot of space, clear space... There'd also have to be a sort of a decent amount of ... decluttering to make it look how I was happy for it to be presented. There's a difference sort of living in it and then showing it' (Amy, 46, 1/2-bed old terrace, PRS, Edinburgh). Others, who had been using video conferencing for some time had already considered how they would present their home to others: 'I'm good on the backgrounds and ... what I actually show and, you know, all those sorts of things ... I've already made a lot of choices about how I present myself' (Jackie, 62, 1-bed tenement, OO, Edinburgh).

Compensatory practices: the creative and minimal small home

The narratives used by individuals to explain ways of living in a smaller home highlighted compensatory practices related to minimalism or lack of possessions, and creativity in everyday living arrangements, which created an acceptable and relatable story for wider society. The construction of these narratives can be seen as an ‘adaptive technique’ that seeks to control the potential for deviation from normative expectations to lead to stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963: 125). This process helped individuals to negotiate wider expectations around living space, drawing on counter-narratives that emphasised the positive features of living in a small home.

It was possible to create an atmosphere of cosiness, with Julie (43, 3-bed older terrace, OO, Edinburgh) describing her living room as ‘a snug’, and Heather (26, 2-bed family flat, SRS, London) explaining ‘you’ve also got that sort of cosy aspect ... you don’t feel like you have to buy things just to fill out a room ... everything kind of fits in it’. This linked to the idea that living in a small space ‘helps not to accumulate too much rubbish... If I have more space I would accumulate more things ... I have to stop myself every now and again. I have to get rid of things here’ (Valentina, 49, studio, PRS, London). As noted by Nethercote (2019), compromising on the size of the home could demonstrate a pragmatic orientation to housing, and this is reflected in these participants’ narratives by the practices they enacted in relation to objects.

Hannah (30, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London) explained that having a small home ‘makes me be a bit more minimalistic. Before I kind of used to go shopping, but now I always think “do I need this? Do I have space for it?”’. Jackie (62, 1-bed tenement, OO, Edinburgh) also noted that ‘neither of us are particularly big on buying things ... I’ve now used up all my bookcase space, so I can’t buy a book without getting rid of a book ... be ruthless ... you absolutely have to be... That just limits what you have and what you keep’. Others highlighted the pragmatism in relation to functionality, such as having enough room to ‘move stuff around, have space on the floor where ... you could put an airbed down’ for friends to stay (Harry, 24, 5-bed house share, PRS, London). In some cases, this minimalism also related to wider narratives of sustainability: ‘living in a small space ... revises your needs... You don’t really need as many clothes or shoes ... because of the space... I think I would keep that sort of mind set ... it’s ... more environmentally friendly’ (Agata, 26, 1-bed micro-apartment, 32 m², PRS, Edinburgh). An apparent negative—lack of space—therefore becomes reframed as a positive lifestyle attribute, contributing to sustainable practices (Harris & Nowicki, 2020). Whilst minimalism and sustainability can be an intentional lifestyle for those pursuing more niche forms of small housing, such as ‘tiny houses’ (Boeckermann et al., 2019), the research suggests that practices of (non)accumulation were also a pragmatic adaptation to the necessities of available space.

Participants also highlighted the creative solutions they found to living in a small home, from space-saving furniture to tricks to make the space seem bigger. Well-designed spaces, with good light or the ability to enhance this through

mirrors helped to create an appealing atmosphere in smaller spaces (Kuoppa et al., 2020). As Lee (36, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London) noted, ‘you just work to make the illusion a little bit bigger ... mirrors help’. Although he had no dining table and his kitchen lacked worktop space, Lee noted that he learned ‘to be more efficient with how you cook’, emphasising creativity and adaptation in the use of space. This was also apparent in revisiting traditional living compartments, functions, and furnishing of the home, for example: ‘you just ... learn to get space saving furniture’ (Hannah, 30, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London).

Many did not have a dedicated table to eat at, or a sofa, instead using ‘bean-bags and a folding table and chairs’ (Sophie, 41, 1-bed tenement, OO, Edinburgh) or ‘a nice Nordic type recliner and another chair’ (Robert, 69, 1-bed micro-apartment, 32 m², OO, Edinburgh). Others maximised space in small bedrooms by removing any freestanding furniture and putting ‘cupboards ... fitted ... into the eaves... You maximise the room space rather than having big furniture’ (Julie, 43, 3-bed older terrace, OO, Edinburgh). Similarly, Beth (36, 1-bed micro-apartment, 38 m², OO, London) installed a ‘built-in cupboard’ to store items such as her bulky winter duvet, whilst Agata (26, 1-bed micro-apartment, 32 m², PRS, Edinburgh) noted that she could ‘hide stuff’ in dead spaces, putting the vacuum cleaner ‘under one table ... behind the bed you can just hide your washing [and] ironing board’. Individuals adapted to the space, for example Olivia (23, 3-bed new build family house, 96 m², PRS, Sheffield) had no space for a dining table so ‘we mostly eat in the lounge’, but with three people ‘it’s a bit squished ... we’ve just got a two seater couch because it’s not big enough to have much more than that’. Another participant explained that that ‘we had a cabin bed built into her [daughter’s] little bedroom’ (Emma, 47, 2-bed old terrace, PRS, Edinburgh), demonstrating the way in which parents sought to use space optimally as their children grew, reusing spaces in different ways to suit changing needs (Kuoppa et al., 2020; Lilius, 2017). These responses were present in a range of small homes, from new to old.

Niche furniture solutions were not necessarily embraced by all participants, with Hassan (41, 3-bed new-build family home, 73 m², OO, Sheffield) arguing that the size of their third bedroom was ‘quite deceitful’ because it would not fit a standard single bed, ‘you ... have to get it tailored’. As a result, his children shared the second bedroom, but lack of space meant that he had to move their wardrobes ‘in that box room ... so that they can walk into my office to get their clothes’. Similarly, Jo (34, 3-bed new-build family house, 73 m² OO, Sheffield)—who lived in the same type of house—noted that the show home had a smaller table in the kitchen, which was ‘very strategic in terms of ... what they had in there’, as their own small table was ‘pushed up into the corner’ and did not really function. This highlights the way in which households are required to adapt to living spaces that lack functionality, even if those houses may not be considered ‘small’ in terms of bedroom number (CABE, 2009). It is also, as Gallent et al. (2010) notes, a function of a planning system which focuses on the number of habitable rooms, which can lead developers to create ‘nominal’ bedrooms that are unable to accommodate full-sized furniture.

However, the compensatory practices and ways of living described by participants were often not presented as a diminishment of housing outcomes but as creative adaptations:

It's the kind of space that I'm really comfortable with and I actually find it easier, and I like the smaller spaces, and I like that each room ... in terms of the furniture you put in ... can feel a bit different to the others. Whereas I find a massive room ... it would be ... amazing, but how do you make it work? (Julie, 43, 3-bed older terrace, OO, Edinburgh)

There is a sense here of the benefits of living in a smaller home, and the ease of making a comfortable home, that would not necessarily be achievable elsewhere. A sense of achievement in making the home function was evident in some narratives, mirroring the practices those with limited financial resources engage in to make ends meet (Batty & Flint, 2013). Amy (46, 1/2-bed old terrace, PRS, Edinburgh) described being 'really adept to using the space as well as we possibly can', reconfiguring the house to provide bedrooms for her and her son: 'It's listed as a one bedroom place and it is small, but I've managed to turn ... the layout into two bedrooms'. Their living area was in an L-shaped kitchen, with a sideboard, two side tables, a dining table and large sofa. Trading space and adapting the home in this way ensured that Amy could keep her son at the nearby school, and remain in a neighbourhood that she valued, after her divorce and the sale of the family home (see, for example, Lilius, 2017). Amy noted that:

I'm a huge advocate of small space and just using it as well as possible. There are so many wonderful tips and tricks that I've picked up about just using every piece of space as well as you can... A lot of the time it's definitely not about the size of a space that you have, it's what you do with it, and that's one thing I love about a small property. There's a real challenge there and if you get it right ... small spaces can just be amazing (Amy, 46, 1/2-bed old terrace, PRS, Edinburgh)

Amy went on to describe finding the perfect piece of furniture to fit in an awkward hallway, demonstrating the value that could be found in secondary or 'in-between' spaces (Kuoppa et al., 2020). The constraints of living in a smaller home could therefore be an opportunity to demonstrate individual creativity, flexibility and the ability to find solutions to lack of space.

Discussion

The research has explored the space of expectation adjustment in housing. This process is mediated by ideals of normalised housing consumption and aspirations that are individually and collectively sustained. Under conditions of constraint, participants traded-off different dimensions of home, downgrading their expectations of space to achieve other things (Lau & Wei, 2018). This aligns with the notion that housing decisions are complex and are sensitive to the formation of expectations (Marsh & Gibb, 2011). Many residents prioritised ownership, autonomy and control over their living space (for example by exiting sharing arrangements), and location

in a particular urban neighbourhood, with access to amenities and a particular cultural life (Benson & Jackson, 2017). For those renting privately or through a social landlord and sharing with friends, strangers, or family, living in a smaller home enabled them to move to or remain in a higher-cost neighbourhood. Whilst ownership aspirations persisted, given the trade-offs that had already been made around space, expectations of being able to own in the same neighbourhood were recalibrated and formulated over extended time horizons.

This temporal dimension is important; many participants perceived a future in which they would achieve other housing aspirations. This suggests that whilst expectations may be adjusted in the short term, for example to ‘make do’ with smaller homes, longer term aspirations remain (Preece et al., 2020). The findings do not support the argument that these—mainly younger—residents of smaller homes ‘interpret their quality of life differently to the previous generation’ (Kichanova, 2019: 7), or that consumption of small homes equates to contentment. Rather, the ‘cruel optimism’ of entrenched housing aspirations illustrates Berlant’s (2011: 28) notion that ‘technologies of patience’ enable individuals to focus on ‘the *later*’ in order to suspend questions about current conditions of living. Aligning with other research (Evans & Unsworth, 2012), the adjustments seen here were not synonymous with a significant shift in wider attitudes and aspirations for space, quality, control and security. ‘Cruel optimism’ persists within a housing field that is in a moment of extended crisis in which the realisation of previously ‘normal’ housing attributes has become increasingly unrealistic (Crawford & McKee, 2018).

Living in a small home could expose residents to friction in relation to the expectations of peers, families, and wider society. As Berlant (2011: 196) argues, for relatively privileged groups—who may have been less likely to face the fragility of their aspirations when compared to more marginalised groups—negotiation of the rapidly transforming housing system can generate ‘confusion ... about what kinds of adjustment to prefer’. Residents drew on a range of issues and calculations that drove their choice of a small home, demonstrating the way housing decision-making processes can result in recalibrated outcomes (Hasu, 2018). For example, owners of micro-apartments consciously sacrificed space for ownership and location. But as Harris and Nowicki (2020) argue, reframing ever smaller housing as a solution to the problem of spiralling house prices and exclusion from urban areas fails to address the underlying root of these issues.

Many participants were unable to engage in normalised acts of housing consumption, for example in terms of living in a more mainstream home by standards of size or living arrangements. As housing market conditions shift and become more polarised, lines of distinction are altered (Flint, 2003), exposing individuals to negative perceptions, being viewed as flawed or failing due to their inability to achieve key markers of ‘success’. In order to manage the expectations of others, participants drew on a number of strategies, such as controlling access to their home or warning visitors of the size before they arrived. In the latter case, this cued visitors to respond tactfully, co-creating a positive atmosphere by supporting the impression conveyed by the resident (Goffman, 1959).

However, the research was carried out during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, and the routines and conduct of participants’ everyday lives

had been transformed by new restrictions on movement, work, and social life. The requirement of working at home wherever possible created practical challenges (Preece et al., 2021), but also weakened the distinction between ‘backstage’—where individuals can step out of the impression they have sought to maintain—and the ‘front’ or performative space (Goffman, 1959). As Tom noted, his colleague’s surprise that he did not have a spare room in which to work created embarrassment at the perceived failure to achieve expected standards in his housing outcomes, something to which he had previously not been exposed. Participants relied on others to tactfully deploy ‘protective measures’ to assist them in saving face and maintaining an impression, for example through reassurance that their home was not as small as they were expecting.

Berlant conceptualises the present as a moment of loss in which individuals are striving to maintain normality until they can adjust to the new conditions they face. This links to Goffman’s (1963) notion of adaptive techniques, which individuals use to manage the impression of others. This ‘adaptive imperative’ generates and extends precarity and insecurity, but also gives rise to an emerging aesthetic (Berlant, 2011: 195). Our research suggests that adaptations were not just aesthetic, but took the form of practices that developed in response to living in a small home. ‘Compensatory cultures’ (Harris, 2019) can therefore be thought of as practices. The counter-narratives described by participants focus on creative solutions to making a well-functioning home, and a more minimalistic approach to living due to space constraints. Future research may seek to explore these practices through photo elicitation, to analyse furniture arrangements and the creative adaptations that individuals make in their daily lives.

Whilst adaptations to small home living were often presented in a positive light, for example taking pleasure in creative use of space, finding niche storage solutions, or in preventing the accumulation of clutter, Berlant (2011: 196) describes the emergence of a ‘new mask’ as individuals work through periods of major social and economic change. This mask provides a space of delay that allows backstage adjustments to the loss of ‘the fantasy of the good life’. Whilst we can view the narratives deployed by residents of these small homes as partly stemming from attempts to off-set or reorientate the expectations of others, this does not mean that these beliefs were not real or invested in by their narrators. As Goffman (1959: 28) argues, the performance and impression created by individuals can be completely convincing—the ‘real’ reality—for to create a durable impression, conduct, appearance and ways of living become routinised to the performer. Thus, individuals may indeed ‘truly’ live in a minimal or creative manner, but these practices of living also arise from the need to negotiate reconfigured housing systems and durable attachments to collectively maintained notions of ‘the good life’ (Berlant, 2011), as manifested through particular housing outcomes.

These narratives are not spontaneously constructed by individuals but also draw on and are shaped by wider emerging narratives about small home living. The proliferation of images reifying small homes as sustainable, minimal, and creative (such as the television series’ *Tiny House Nation* and *Amazing Spaces*, and the popular blog *Life in a Tiny Apartment*) and the marketing of spaces fosters a climate in which individuals can construct a less stigmatised version of small. The involvement of developers in fostering such narratives is noted by Lau and Wei (2018) in

the Hong Kong context, in which city authorities have highlighted the creative prospects of small home, smart design, and sustainability. But small homes can also rely on diminished expectations amid a state of crisis (Preece et al., 2020), constructing a new set of imaginaries around housing that normalise and naturalise crisis conditions (Harris & Nowicki, 2020). These imaginaries become practised, as individuals' lives unfold in the home.

Conclusion

The research has considered the space of expectation adjustment in housing choices, using one dimension of home—its size—to explore how residents in three UK cities trade-off other dimensions whilst negotiating a housing system that is perceived to be in a moment of extended crisis. In doing so, we complicate binary debates around the contribution of smaller homes to urban areas, whilst challenging the notion that consumption is reflective of demand or preferences. The research makes an empirical contribution in investigating a wide range of smaller homes, and giving primacy to residents' experiences and perceptions of their lived housing choices. Conceptually, the research addresses a gap in understanding how individual housing expectations operate in relation to wider societal expectations. In doing so, it extends existing work on stigma and spoiled identity beyond the existing focus on tenure and neighbourhood, noting how these concepts are relevant to other dimensions of home. The concept of 'cruel optimism' is of value for the housing studies field because it helps to situate the perceived crisis in housing within a broader period of transition or 'impasse', and links individual perceptions with collectively and socially maintained norms. Rather than compensatory cultures, we have argued that the way in which individuals negotiate intractable aspirations despite a materially changed housing system is through compensatory practices of daily life in small homes. These adjustments seek to reframe reduced housing outcomes as a positive adaptation, highlighting minimalism and creativity that are a result of recalibrated expectations around living space. This highlights that expectation adjustment is a process that involves negotiation of individual and collective spheres, and which can generate a sense of achievement in constructing a 'successful' housing narrative from diminished opportunities.

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