Tenuous Guests
Couch surfing through homelessness in the lives of Australian youth

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Thesis submitted for the Degree of the Doctorate of Philosophy in Gender, Work and Social Inquiry
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The University of Adelaide
July 2011
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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically informs current research concerned with youth homelessness in Australia. Drawing upon interview accounts and discussions with young people and youth workers, I examine couch surfing as a prevalent practice in young people’s experiences of dislocation. I conceptualise this practice as both a means and outcome of relying on temporary living arrangements with local households. These living arrangements are distinctive in that young people source them from their own social connections, in the face of having nowhere else to go. Through a grounded, interpretive engagement with the interview accounts, and a social constructionist epistemology, I examine the relational processes that shape and produce couch surfing. In doing so, I map out how couch surfers are drawn into a series of highly tenuous relationships with the households they turn to; relationships that I argue render living arrangements vulnerable to collapse.

Focusing on the production of these tenuous relations, I argue in this thesis that couch surfing practices are both an immediately accessible tactic for young people attempting to (re)negotiate home; and a set of embodied, practical actions for navigating dislocation. By approaching couch surfing in this way, I importantly indicate how young people’s experiences of homelessness are continuous with a broader context of social exclusion, patterned the life chances of Australian youth. Through this perspective, I am interested in how young people who couch surf navigate and contend with a marginalised social space; and, how their experiences shape identities, belonging, and ontological security.

In mapping these dimensions of couch surfing, I contend that many young people in Australia are negotiating dislocation differently. Their experiences invite a crucial re-
thinking of how we presently frame youth homelessness in research, in policy, and in practice. In particular, I propose that couch surfing unsettles the mainstream focus on problems of rooflessness and the purely structural aspects of disadvantage. In arguing this, I indicate the important role of ideological and political processes in young people's struggles for social citizenship. Ultimately, my aim here is to highlight the alternative readings of homelessness that young people's perspectives have offered in this research. The findings of this thesis will add to a critical imagining of the sorts of spaces and communities that young people can more properly 'call home'.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics
HREOC: Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now known as Australian Human Rights Commission)
FaHCSIA: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
NGO: Non-government organisation
NYC: National Youth Commission
NYCH: National Youth Coalition for Housing
SAAP: Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (now known as Specialist Homelessness Services)
SYC: Service to Youth Council
TAP: Trace-A-Place service
DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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PAULINE McLOUGHLIN
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to acknowledge the incredible young people whose stories sit at the centre of this research. Our conversations opened my eyes to the anguish of dislocation, and the struggle for home. I hope that through this research I have done some justice to their experiences and have honoured their strengths.

I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the Service to Youth Council (SYC) and the youth workers whose resources, expertise and support made this research possible. I would like to extend my special thanks to the amazing staff of the SYC Trace-A-Place service, and to Leanne Cornell-March, coordinator of homelessness programs at SYC, for providing me with vital research space and resources for interviews, and for engaging so helpfully with the specific challenges of the research process. I benefited immeasurably from youth workers’ extensive experience, input and advice. Through their efforts, I was able to make connections with young people who had been homeless; many of whom would not otherwise have been able to share their experiences with me.

Finally, I give my thanks to those crucial people in my life who have been my source of resilience and guidance (not to mention, sanity!) throughout this journey:

Many thanks to my supervisors Susan Oakley and Jennifer Bonham. And to Elen Shute, Cecile Cutler and Michael McLoughlin for your invaluable editing assistance.

To my mum, my brother Michael, and to Mike: the three essential “M”s in my life. I could never have walked this path were it not for your enduring love, shelter, support and care. You have made me who I am today.

To my dearest Colleen, Steve, Kaylah and Andy, I send my biggest hugs for all your love and care over the years.

And thanks to all those who have been my mentors, friends, advocates and listening ears. Especially dear to me: Prema, Melisa, Steph, Elen, Karl, and Anne.

Finally, to my dearest grandfather, D.J. McLoughlin, I dedicate this thesis to your memory.
PREFACE

Tracing the path

In a spirit of acknowledgement, I preface this thesis with a story. I speak of this story as a means of indicating those essential themes explored in this thesis: Those of home, belonging and dislocation.

This story begins with a question…

To trace the moment when I first became interested in couch surfing, I must first trace the beginnings of a question:

How long will I have to make a home of the next place?

A few years ago, a young woman named Jane moved house for the thirteenth time in twenty-three years of life. This day marked her first housing move without family (she was leaving home for a share house near the city). It was hardly, however, her first experience of shifting house. Nor would it be her last.

On that day of leaving home, Jane can remember standing out on the front lawn, helping to lift belongings from the ‘old‘ house. To Jane, old was five years. In her lifetime, five years is still the longest time she can count having lived in any one house. Five years in a rented house by the sea, where she had lived with her mother and brother since her first year of university.

Physically, what Jane left behind that day were the bones of a stripped down, empty bedroom. By this point: just four pale blue walls; dancing balls of dust and debris that had...
collected in buried corners; a bare space of polished floorboards, and a blankly gazing window unveiled of its curtains. Her home now was in the old cardboard packing boxes that passed from doorway to truck. Boxes with labels that someone had scribbled on a few too many times. Boxes that were covered in large blue marker capitals, with the words BEDROOM STUFF written on the side. And one box (the very oldest of them all) that still wore its original title: KIDS TOYS, written without the apostrophe after kid. Jane thought to herself, *how amazing that box has survived so long!* It must have been over fifteen years old. She carried it carefully, passing it up to her mother, who — taking charge of the removal truck, as she was wont to do — wedged it between a bed head and a dressing table. To this day, Jane still wonders if her mum had somehow known to keep those boxes in reserve, anticipating the next time.

In the four years since leaving that thirteenth abode, the movements continued. The young woman’s brother shifted through three share houses; moved back temporarily with their mother and on into another share house, before moving into a rented flat by himself, where he could have peace and quiet and get on with his work and his life. Most recently, he has been living in a rented house in the heart of the city, where he has commenced undergraduate studies in architecture. Jane’s mum, meanwhile, has been living a happily retired ‘grey nomad’ life with her partner of four years. Together they have been cruising slowly up and down Australia in their thirty-five foot motorhome aptly named *Second Wind*. Compared to the years she had spent as a single, working mum, her standard of living has dramatically transformed. Jane’s father, on the other hand, sadly died at the age of sixty, having faced life-long struggles with alcoholism and depression. Although he died without having seen Jane and her brother grow up, he did leave to his children the only home he had ever felt at ease within: A vintage 1960s wooden yacht, which had been his
home for the last few years of his life. The thirteenth house itself was sold off by the landlord, purchased by a neighbour, demolished and has subsequently given way to the construction of a set of single storey units.

Not more than six months after leaving that thirteenth house, Jane herself moved again (for the fourteenth time in her life) into a rented flat, where she began a cohabitating relationship with a former housemate. For the next three and a half years, Jane endured what gradually became a destabilising, intensely stressful situation with her partner; a situation that periodically rendered their shared home a disquieting and unsafe place to be. In the wake of an especially distressing experience within this relationship, Jane moved (at first temporarily and almost overnight) into the spare room of her brother's rented house, having nowhere else to go where she felt safe. At the time of being forced to relocate, she had already amassed fifteen housing moves over twenty-seven years. For Jane, almost all of these housing moves had been unbidden and unwanted. Now, in the process of going on to deconstruct and rebuild her life from a difficult situation, her notion of home had once again been called into question.

From childhood to the point of ‘living independently’, Jane had moved house on average every 1.8 years with her single mother and younger brother. The moves first began with the struggles of Jane’s dad with alcohol misuse, the ensuing divorce, and the selling up of the family home. From that point until Jane started high school, the family’s financial mainstay was the variety of cleaning jobs that her mother was able to take on. Making ends meet was a struggle for much of this time, although for the sake of the family, Jane’s mum worked hard to conceal from her children the enormous stresses she laboured under.
Even as a child however, Jane was aware that each of their housing shifts were reluctant, necessary or in some cases simply beyond their control. Ever since her parents' divorce, the call to move was a matter of necessity. In other cases, their housing moves were part of a decision that Jane’s mum had made to seek out better opportunities for them all. This centred especially on her search for financial security and adequate employment; but was also sometimes a way of escaping problematic or failed *de facto* relationships. Decisions to move also came about from Jane’s mother wanting to be geographically closer to the support of a disparate extended family, spread out across three states. And, at many other points, a movement happened because of the tenuous nature of the private rental market. This included times when a landlord sold the house they were living in; or when facing a rent increase the family could not afford. Together, these calls to movement took them across the borders of three states, and into temporary stays in the backyard caravans or spare bedrooms of friends and family, while transitioning into other places. Such movement also ushered the young woman’s passage through the gates of four primary and three public high schools.

Jane often said that her mother placed a great deal of emphasis on resisting the negative labelling attached to the single mum. This had always been evident in how she had furnished and cared for every one of their rented houses throughout the years; always with a great deal of pride and creativity. Not long after they moved into any given house, for example, Jane’s mum had set to work etching out and maintaining an entire landscape around them. In doing so, she would utterly transform a rabble of neglected weeds or a stretch of dead grass and dirt into abundant gardens. Traces of these landscapes and their former beauty remain today in some of their old houses around the country. These, Jane had always felt, were her mother’s indelible and devoted marks upon a shifting stage.
And so it was as they went along: Each move beginning the zealous task of remaking territories and habits. Of creating and nurturing gardens, of choosing and maintaining spaces, arranging and inhabiting bedrooms, working out a new and unfamiliar neighbourhood; and becoming the much dreaded new kid at school. All of this had to be done, of course, without dwelling too much on the thought that maybe, just a year or two from now, they would have to do the same thing all over again in some other place. Because, of course, there never was any way of knowing if or when the next shift might happen, or for what reason (for all this family knew and hoped, their current place was going to last).

So it was that each house, piece by piece, became another sewn in part of an untidy, itinerant patchwork; the traces of their lives time and again dissembled… reassembled…clung to, thrown out and lost in transit.

* * *

Like an existential passenger, this state of tenuous dwelling seems (at times out of choice and at other times, out of necessity) to have followed Jane and her brother into the patterning of their own separate adult lives. At the same time, it is a structuring (or de-structuring) aspect of their life worlds that reaches to the essence of what I examine here. At its heart, the questioning of home is what drives this thesis. Like Jane’s story, my aim here is to speak of the impact of dislocation, and of young people’s practices for navigating a marginal social space. Living under a roof but remaining out of place at the same time, “without secure housing elsewhere” (Uhr 2004: 5), young people who couch surf occupy spaces where the meaning of home, homelessness and belonging is anything but a taken-
for-granted aspect of everyday life. Upon this threshold, where “home is no longer just one place” but rather “locations” (hooks 1984: 148), I argue in this thesis that such meanings are broken, negotiated, contested and made anew. In this sense, the story of couch surfing is also the story of a search for belonging – somewhere, beyond the limits of tenuousness.
INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the term ‘couch surfer’ has become synonymous in popular culture with a growing international practice of offering hospitality to travelling strangers. This is an arrangement in which backpackers and tourists abroad stay rent-free with host households on a temporary basis, usually through organised social networking and websites. However, as will become apparent in the chapters to come, what I am interested in exploring here has little to do with these emerging popular understandings. My focus rests upon an entirely contrasting experience of couch surfing, affecting the lives of young people in Australia who have nowhere else to go.

By contrast to backpackers, young people moving from place to place out of necessity are not on an overseas adventure. Instead, they have encountered significant difficulties and barriers in attaining safe and secure, independent housing in their own neighbourhoods. Owing to these difficulties, these young people move from couch to couch in temporary living arrangements with friends, family and in other informal settings. Rather than immediately turning to a formalised system of emergency homeless shelters, hostels, hotels or dwelling ‘on the streets’, these young people stay in their local areas and seek support there (Uhr 2004: 5). In this sense, young people couch surfing in these situations are dependent, for their welfare, upon the households they turn to.

I am interested in the experience of couch surfing as a response to, and process of, social exclusion. I am also interested in the ways that couch surfing as a practice unsettles our understandings of what it means to be homeless. As I indicate throughout this thesis, the
insecure locus, relational grounding and nature of home is a significant element in young couch surfers’ lives, articulating closely with experiences of homelessness at large (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2002). Not only this, but couch surfing speaks of ongoing and significant struggles for ontological security; making these experiences an important indicator of the state of youth citizenship in Australia (Bessant 2001).

**Research questions**

Mapping these experiences is of fundamental importance. My central aim in this thesis is to establish why, in understanding youth homelessness, it is important to look beyond a focus simply on the issue of (in)adequate shelter, and to take greater account of marginalising social processes and tenuous relations in shaping experiences of dislocation. Moreover, my goal is to demonstrate how couch surfing experiences urge us to re-think existing constructions of the ‘problem’ of youth homelessness in research and policy.

In posing these goals, I have structured this thesis around three essential research questions:

1. What are the social processes that produce couch surfing as a practice among young people, and how might this critically inform our thinking about what it means to ‘be homeless’?
2. What is the connection between the social relationships that structure young people’s experiences of couch surfing, and their social positioning at large?
3. What are the effects of couch surfing (and its relational underpinnings) in terms of how young people (re)negotiate social citizenship, identity and a sense of home?
Through these questions, I join in a push to engage alternative readings of the social processes and experiences bound up in youth homelessness. More generally, I am also concerned with understanding how young people find ways to negotiate barriers to social inclusion. This is a stance taken by a growing number of Australian and U.K. social researchers (including in particular, Judith Bessant, Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, Catherine Robinson and Johanna Wyn). In reflecting on existing research into youth homelessness, Robinson contends:

...there has been a focus on the structural causes of homelessness and the kinds of structural changes which could be made to address these causes, rather than an examination of the embodiment and lived experience of these structures and the interstices that remain for creativity within them (Robinson 2002b: 57).

By bringing our attention to these interstices, authors such as Robinson (2002b) indicate the importance of understanding how young people navigate, make sense of and shape the changing social contexts of their lives. The accounts of young people in this research reaffirm the need to look to the interstices of experience. Couch surfing practices also fundamentally challenge our ideas about youth homelessness. For this reason, it is doubly important that accounts of the lived realities of marginalisation contribute directly to the production of knowledge(s) about homelessness (Bessant 2006).

In taking up this position, I locate this thesis in an interpretivist and grounded perspective. I also begin from a social constructionist epistemology, contending that the ways in which
we understand homelessness ultimately shape young people’s identities and capacities for social citizenship. To these ends, this thesis and its theoretical framework is fundamentally informed by the qualitative research I carried out. This empirical work centres on in-depth interviews with fourteen young people and focus group discussions with youth workers. From my grounded engagement with these interviews, I map out in this thesis how we might think of couch surfing as the enactment of social, embodied practices for navigating dislocation, and as a phenomenon that is deeply embedded in tenuous social relationships. In drawing upon young people’s accounts and the findings of the broader literature, I also map out the precise ways in which couch surfing practices unsettle existing social constructions of the (young) homeless subject.

**Outline of the thesis**

This thesis is structured across eight chapters. I begin in Chapter One by outlining my interpretive, social constructionist epistemology and the key theoretical frameworks which have emerged from a grounded engagement with the interview accounts. Through a reflexive lens, I also discuss the important contentions and political effects of being part of the production of knowledge about marginalised youth.

In Chapter Two, I engage a critical analysis of the research and policy literature, examining how couch surfing is presently positioned and constituted as a social issue. To this end, I analyse the academic and social policy literature that shapes how youth homelessness is defined and responded to in Australia. In tracing the historical and political shape of this ‘homelessness field’, I make sense of why couch surfing practices occupy an anomalous space in the production of knowledge concerning youth homelessness. Through this, I indicate how couch surfing experiences unsettle normative and mainstream
constructions of what it means to be homeless, and highlight the need to think beyond them.

Through Chapter Three I document the methods and challenges of the research process underpinning this thesis. In doing so, I detail how I incorporated a grounded, interpretive approach to working with young people’s accounts, and the ways in which I navigated the geographies and temporalities of dislocation. My discussion of the empirical findings subsequently takes place across chapters Four to Seven. These chapters trace the journey of couch surfing, bringing together a critical engagement with the interview accounts; key theoretical perspectives, and important insights from the literature.

In Chapter Four, the first of the empirical chapters, I draw upon young people’s personal reflections on how couch surfing ‘happened’ for them, and critically compare these accounts with what is known about homelessness at large. Through this chapter, I argue that young people first become engaged in couch surfing as a tactic for (re)negotiating social connection, support and survival in the face of significant structural and personal barriers. In doing so, I examine how young people’s own narratives of couch surfing offer us a further, detailed understanding of homelessness as an intricate and complex social process. I examine how this process occurs within a nexus of ruptured familial relationships, personal grief and barriers to youth citizenship. This is a context in which, I argue, young people are left with nowhere else to go.

Through Chapter Five, I contend that couch surfing involves young people in a process of managing inherently tenuous social relationships which are vulnerable to collapse. Through
the unfolding of young people’s reflections on couch surfing relationships, and a theoretical perspective drawing upon Derrida (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000) and McNulty (2005; 2007), I argue that young people’s movement from place to place occurs primarily through the constraining of relationships of hospitality, producing what I have come to think of as a ‘guest status’.

In Chapter Six I argue that in inhabiting a guest status, young people must navigate both the fragile relationships of couch surfing, and their own needs for space and belonging. Incorporating the theories of *habitus* and practical sense espoused by Bourdieu (1990), I examine how young people live a guest status, and through embodied practices, find ways of negotiating tenure. As I map out, these practices take place in a landscape of embodied burdens and intrusions, which young people feel intensely and contend with on an everyday basis. I also indicate how these practices are ways of managing the burdens and dispossessions of dislocation, and of sequestering spaces for self-preservation.

Taking up this thread of embodied *habitus*, I go on in Chapter Seven to examine the ‘felt’, emotional landscape of couch surfing and its impacts on the self. Drawing upon interviewees’ accounts of being displaced, I trace the implications of living a marginalised tenure for young people’s sense of belonging, barriers to social citizenship, and questions of self-worth.

Finally, through Chapter Eight, I discuss important policy considerations raised by this thesis, and highlight key issues for future research. In particular, I indicate the crucial place of supportive relationships in young people’s accounts of negotiating social inclusion, and
in finding a sense of home. I also explore young people’s personal understandings of the meaning of home. Through this, I discuss the impact of normative constructions of housing tenure in shaping how young people approach, plan for and inhabit home(s) in the longer term.
CHAPTER ONE

On the approach: Interpreting social worlds

State bureaucracies and their representatives are great producers of ‘social problems’ that social science does little more than ratify whenever it takes them over as ‘sociological’ problems. (It would suffice to demonstrate this, to plot the amount of research...devoted to problems of the state, such as poverty, immigration, educational failure, more or less rephrased in scientific language) (Bourdieu, Wacquant & Farage 1994: 2).

As a particular issue, youth homelessness has been the subject of intense political and popular concern in Australia at least since the 1980s. Alongside this, social researchers have produced work that claims to give voice to experiences of youth homelessness as a social issue, or which takes a sociological perspective on dislocation (Bessant 2003; 2005; Fopp 2004; 2007; Mallett 2004b; Melucci 1992; Robinson 2002a; 2004). More broadly, the work of social researchers has constituted young people as a group; a demographic held to embody, as Melucci argues, ‘...the primary subjects of dramatic transformations that affect contemporary society and experience them most directly’ (Melucci 1992: 52).

Over the years, these theories of youth as current social indicator, symptom, yardstick or barometer have helped ‘legitimise’ the study of young people as an important point of focus within sociological research, particularly with reference to social changes and contemporary trends (such as globalisation and the growth of consumer identities) (Melucci 1992; Miles 2000; Wyn & Woodman 2006). However, as the opening words of social
Chapter One: Interpreting social worlds

Theorist Pierre Bourdieu remind us, sociological research also brings with it some highly contested issues. Not least of these are the ways in which knowledge(s) are capable of producing subjectivities and constituting groups as social problems (Bessant 2001; Bourdieu et al. 1994; Collins & Kearns 2001; Robinson 2002b). These carry important political effects that I am mindful to declare and address in my own research, inasmuch as this is possible.

In this chapter, I outline my epistemology and locate myself within the production of knowledge about what it means to be young and homeless. In the first section, I examine the theoretical and political terrain shaping the field of knowledge about youth, identity, and marginalisation. Through this, I establish my imperative to ‘make sense’ of a group of young people’s experiences of dislocation and at the same time engage with a reflexive understanding of the political implications of doing so. In this way, I trace the impacts of constituting young people’s experiences of couch surfing as a social phenomenon; and, importantly, how I contend with these impacts throughout this thesis. In the second section of this chapter, I describe the key theoretical perspectives I have utilised, and indicate how my use of theory is grounded in an interpretive analysis of young people’s accounts.

Contentions in the field: Researching youth and marginalisation

Being a social researcher with an interest in youth homelessness, I am aware of having navigated a contentious field. On the pitfalls of researching youth and social exclusion, Williamson (1997: 16) for instance contends that: ‘Rather too much youth research has served the theoretical positions of its writers than the articulated needs of the young people who have been the subject of that research’. Of course, on the other hand, the reality is that all research (whether theoretically driven or not) will in one way or another serve research
careers. Moreover, all knowledge produced through this process carries political effects regardless of the particular object of inquiry. In the social sciences, whenever one constitutes social phenomena and experience, there are consequences that warrant scrutiny.

One important way social researchers have sought to own these political effects in their work is by reflecting on their role in constituting, and shaping, subjects. This implies a critical reflection on the production of knowledge; an awareness that in claiming to make space for new ways of understanding social phenomena, we are also at the same time objectifying and placing ‘expert’ interpretations on them (Katz 1994; Robinson 2001; 2002a; 2002b). In essence, I am speaking here of a reflexive, social constructionist approach to research. One that is conscious and wary, as Bourdieu contends, that all social institutions and their actors are part of an ongoing ‘struggle for the monopoly of the legitimate representation of the social world’ (Bourdieu 1990: 180). The practice of sociological research is certainly no exception to this.

Thinking seriously about reflexivity in the production of knowledge, Australian youth researchers and sociologists (including Bessant (2003; 2004b); Miles (2000); Nilan, Julian & Germov (2007), and Wyn and Woodman (2006)), have highlighted the political effects of prevailing social theory concerning youth. In particular, they have pointed out the impact of knowledge about youth in producing our ideas of who young people are, and where they ‘fit’ in the social world. This is evident throughout the body of work that presently informs our studies of youth, and is the field in which this thesis is located. As with many theoretical developments in the social sciences, debates about the relative role of structure and agency have taken a central place in generating accounts of youth. These
understandings bear important implications for social researchers and for young people themselves.

Arguably, one of the more recent sets of theories to hold influence in how we think about youth is Beck (1992) and Giddens’ (1991) individualisation thesis. In many respects, the work of these theorists has led to the privileging of notions of agency and a reflexive project of the self in how we understand youth identities and the social forces that are held to shape them. In taking the position that late modernity has ushered in the breakdown of ‘traditional’ institutions and roles, both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) outline what they conceive as an increased reliance on the development of self-identity, as a way of dealing with a heightened sense of personal risk. Moreover, they conceptualise the emergence of self-made individualism as a response to the loss of a clear sense of place in the social world. This perspective on social change has turned the attention of many sociologists towards the role of individual choice and lifestyles in shaping young people’s opportunities. It particular, these theories have influenced how we think of young people as self-inventing consumers.

At the same time, theorists such as Furlong and Cartmel (2007) have criticised this approach for not acknowledging the role of social forces (including dimensions of class and gender) in patterning young people’s identities and life chances in vastly different ways. These theorists have pointed out that, rather than all young people of late modernity being in the same position to manage ontological insecurity through successful self-invention, entrenched patterns of privilege and disadvantage still play a significant role in mediating the capacity to exercise control and make choices about one’s life (Nilan et al. 2007: 27). That being said, structural accounts of young people’s life worlds have also drawn criticism
for construing experiences of disadvantage as a potentially stigmatising subjectivity. This is
evident for example in particular constructions of ‘at risk’ youth, ‘underclass’ or homeless
young people, who are often portrayed as victims of social forces; powerless, dependent on
welfare interventions, or deviant (Bessant 2001; Crinall 1995; Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Harris

Other theoretical contentions similarly shape accounts of youth as a transition towards
adulthood (itself a socially produced life stage). Classic cultural studies of youth (for
example, from the Birmingham School) have been criticised for constituting youth as a
period of dramatic subcultural reactions to social norms, on the way to becoming an adult.
This approach has emphasised a generational conflict paradigm of youth, or
conceptualisations of youth as opposition or problem (Bessant 2001; Wyn & Woodman
2006). It has also contributed to the ‘deviant’ image of the white, rebellious male that has
become an almost typical icon of (masculine) youth (Miles 2000; Nilan et al. 2007: 27). At
the same time, while it no longer holds a central place in youth studies, the classic
sociological metaphor of youth as a normative, stage-like progression towards
independence continues to hold weight in popular understandings. These linear
constructions of youth transitions persist, despite the passage of social changes since the
1950s that have significantly changed young people’s access to, and desire for, traditional
stages and markers of adulthood (Beck 1992; Nilan et al. 2007; White & Wyn 2008; Wyn
2009). This includes, for example, the institution of marriage; enacting or occupying
traditional gender roles; having the financial capacity to become a homeowner; and the
expectation of a single job for life.
These well-worn paths in sociological schools of thought, as Wyn and Woodman (2006) argue, have contributed to particular understandings of youth. They have constituted and produced the very notion of a distinctive subjectivity known as ‘young people’. In this sense, social theories of youth – as much as any other thinking about young people – have generated a particular demographic; an object of social inquiry, which carries political effects (Bessant 2005; Miles 2000; Wyn 2009). The group of people we presently define as youth are, of course, by no means a homogeneous or definable group, identity or characteristic at all (Wyn & Woodman 2006). The life chances of those we define as youth, like anyone else, differ significantly across variables like class, gender, ethnicity and history; ‘variables’ which are themselves socially, culturally and politically produced.

Importantly, the production of knowledge(s) through youth research is not limited to influencing how academics constitute contemporary youth (or young people encountering homelessness). Rather, as Bessant (2003; 2004b) and Wyn (2009; in White & Wyn 2008) point out, this knowledge also carries through, and articulates with, political rhetoric and popular perceptions. Together, this knowledge generates versions of reality that impact on how young people are constructed as an identity (and a group) within everyday social relations. They also shape how, as a subjectivity and social object, young people are regulated or governed through political processes, policy and social institutions (Bessant 2001). In their reflections on the bureaucratic nexus between youth policy and theory, Wyn and Woodman highlight:

While the ideas of social change and flexibility feature strongly in government policy rhetoric, the reality is the invention of inflexible, exclusionary and narrow categories within which young Australians are
governed… The focus on age has obscured the significance of increasing
ingequalities and differences between groups of young people. The focus
on age has also reinforced a view of young people as simply engaged in a
transition to a normative adulthood (Wyn & Woodman 2006: 511).

The same can be said, of course, for how the problems of homelessness and social
exclusion are constructed in research. As Robinson (2002b: 30-32) argues, mainstream
concepts of homelessness today stigmatise and pathologise homelessness as an aberrant
state of lack (issues I return to in Chapter Two). Again, here are the political effects of
theorising and constituting experiences; here is the nature of producing knowledge(s) of
social problems (Bourdieu et al. 1994; Neale 1997). Ultimately, what I highlight is the need
for a critical acknowledgement that bodies of work (such as this thesis) are all part of
constituting what it means to be young and homeless. They create particular understandings
of the social world that need to be scrutinised for their effects.

In identifying my locatedness in this field of research, I must acknowledge my role in
reinforcing and generating these subjectivities of youth, of homelessness and of the couch
surfer. They are constituted precisely through the techniques that, of course, I am using in
writing this thesis. This is not to deny the materiality of a (young) person engaged in
temporary living arrangements with local households. It is, rather, to say that we are all
implicated in objectifying this practice, its relation to other practices and things, and the
person who couch surfs. At the same time, I take up this position of constituting couch
surfing, in order to question what is said about (young) people, and about what we think
homelessness means. I want, in this thesis, to recognise the political shape of the whole
field concerned with the issue, and construction, of youth homelessness. In doing so, I want to indicate that particular statements are being made which young people’s conversations with me have challenged. In this sense, I want to highlight how the experiences of those I interviewed unsettle understandings of homelessness. Moreover, by engaging with young people’s accounts, I give space in this thesis to the myriad relations forming the experiences of the homeless (young) person, and the marginalised social positioning that emerges from these relations. Through this, we can begin to think about the different ways that young people (re)negotiate, and struggle, for home.

**Getting perspective: Theoretical and conceptual frameworks**

As I have mapped out above, it is important that I strive to open dialogue with young people’s accounts – in ways that recognise the political effects of researching youth homelessness as a social phenomenon. In doing so, I take care throughout this thesis to enact an interpretivist epistemology. As Australian sociologist Judith Bessant posits:

> Researchers working from a critical interpretivist frame are interested in the interplay between language, emotions and ethical rules and ideas informing social interaction and making human experience possible. Similarly, there is strong support for conceptual reflexivity. This means, for example, being concerned about how and where the development of the basic research concepts took place. This helps sustain an interest in the social/research processes that constitute the objects of social inquiry (Bessant 2004a: 11).
In pursuing this epistemology, each chapter in this thesis attends to the practice of couch surfing through young people’s accounts, tracing the marginalities within which couch surfing is experienced and socially inscribed. My goal here is twofold. First: to analyse the political and relational processes by which couch surfing takes place (and is positioned as an issue). At the same time, in interacting with the interview accounts, I focus on how young people enact and contend with these processes in everyday experience. As such, theoretical perspectives in this thesis are fundamentally grounded in and adapted from my engagement with the empirical work multifaceted. They are also driven by a critical engagement with the existing literature, and key debates and questions that shape the field of homelessness research and policy more broadly. Together, these knowledge(s) contribute to the understandings I present in this research.

**Theories of citizenship and social inclusion/exclusion**

When I use concepts of ‘dislocation’, ‘social exclusion’, ‘barriers to social citizenship’ and ‘disadvantage’ throughout this thesis, I am in essence referring broadly to the relational processes that affect young people’s life chances. These are complex, routine enactments of social power that shape (and are shaped by) capacities for social mobility. The classic focus of much social citizenship theory has centred on employment as the most fundamental issue affecting social participation and mobility (Buckmaster & Thomas 2009; Marshall 2009). However, as Bessant (2004b) and Somerville (1998) both point out, the roots of social exclusion involve more than the structural (such as access to the labour market and a living wage). In seeking to reconcile the conceptual ambiguities that often attend social exclusion as a concept, housing and homelessness researcher Peter Somerville argues:
…what lies at the heart of all processes of social exclusion, is a sense of social isolation and segregation from the formal structures and institutions of the economy, society, and the state. Social exclusion in general, therefore, is not so very different from poverty, construed in relational terms rather than absolute or relative terms (Somerville 1998: 763).

In this sense, barriers to social mobility are also, more fundamentally, political and ideological processes. Writing in respect to young people, Bessant (2004b: 392-397) contends that contemporary social policy rhetoric, while paying proverbial lip service to notions of youth citizenship, often fails to take account of (and even entrenches) the problematic construction of youth as an irresponsible and immature subjectivity. That is, a group of people lacking the capacity for agency, responsibility or a full engagement with social institutions. Crucially, Bessant (2004b) points out that this view is manifested politically in young people's inability to vote, and hence participate in democratic processes under the age of 18; not to mention the entrenched economic disadvantage of youth wage laws. It is also reinforced through a lack of pathways that might enable young people to exercise choice and control within other important institutions affecting their lives (such as the educational system). As well, Bessant (2004b) indicates the extent to which young people are constituted as a governed population; expressed, for example, through acts of policing, surveillance and regulation concerning their occupation of public space (Bessant 2004b: 398). Understanding the contribution of these processes to social exclusion is crucial in my analysis of how young people contend with a marginalised social position. It also informs my grasp of the relational factors that rest at the basis of couch surfing.
As such, by conceptualising couch surfing as part of broader issues of youth citizenship, I locate young people’s struggles within a political and social context. In doing so, I highlight how couch surfing takes place through barriers to being included in the life of communities. These are processes affecting not only housing tenure, access to education and security of employment. They also shape the availability of rich and essential social supports in young people’s lives, and the enjoyment of fundamental rights and liberties. Importantly, these are processes that shape young people’s ontological security (Somerville 1998), mediating their capacity to establish a grounded sense of ‘at-homeness’ in the world.

**A feel for the game: Bourdieu, social fields and the embodied habitus**

Throughout this thesis, I emphasise how the tactic of turning to informal sources of shelter and support (and the practices which young people engage in as a result), are also specific to the relational and spatial milieu in which couch surfing takes place. That is, couch surfing can be understood as an experience patterned by young people’s distinctly tenuous position in private households. To this end, I engage broadly throughout this thesis with the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1990; in Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), particularly his approach to social class as field; his conceptual work on the *habitus* and practical sense, and theories of embodiment.

Together with his emphasis on a reflexive sociology, Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural or social fields serves as a pertinent analytical frame, helpful in making sense of couch surfing accounts, both as a particular practice in young people’s life worlds, and as a practice produced through social exclusion. Bourdieu (1990: 53-75) conceptualises our navigation of the social world as an embodied immersion in power relations, shaped by
struggles for social distinction. Invoking the metaphor of a sports game, Bourdieu thinks of fields as social spaces in which individuals and groups are in essence embodied ‘players’, embedded in a push to define and acquire symbolic markers of status. These markers (like a medical doctor’s stethoscope or a university degree parchment) constitute what Bourdieu (1984) has described as symbolic capital: that which is held to constitute honour, prestige, reputation, mastery, knowledge and power in any given domain. Fields are, in this sense, the social spaces in which power relations are borne out.

In grasping the prevailing symbolic capital(s) held by actors in a social space, it becomes possible to understand what Bourdieu (1990) broadly conceives as the logic of that space, and the embodied practices that flow from it. An essential element of Bourdieu’s approach is his idea that, in being a part of social fields, we acquire a kind of practical sense or ‘feel for the game’ which belies our position in social space. His concept of *habitus* reflects this; we are *immersed* in our positions in a field. In this, Bourdieu is describing our social way of being, a conceptual tool to make sense of those ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions’ (Bourdieu 1990: 53) that form a ‘sensible’ practice. In Bourdieu’s terms, practices and practical sense represent a set of consistently repeated actions and behaviours that are shaped by, learned within and inform one’s position and power within a field (Bourdieu 1990: 66). The body is a central element here. As Bourdieu writes:

... the practical sense...[is] the practical mastery of the logic or of the immanent necessity of a game... [It is] a mastery acquired by experience of the game, and one which works outside conscious control and
discourse (in the way that, for instance, techniques of the body do) 
(Bourdieu 1990: 61).

Through the idea of *bodily hexis*, Bourdieu describes those dimensions of *habitus* (that is, of social power and position) that are rooted in and expressed through the body in habits and disposition. These are bodily modes of being and interacting that demonstrate our immersion in a field, and indicate social distinctions (Bourdieu 1990). *Habitus* and practical sense are present, for example, in how we unconsciously regulate and habitually hold ourselves. This includes, for instance, how we speak and express ourselves; how we move about (confidently; with restriction) and the thoughts and feelings we hold. *Bodily hexis* also speaks of our occupation of space and time, patterned by social context and status (Bourdieu 1990: 68-75).

I consider Bourdieu’s (1990) theories of practice and *habitus* especially helpful in conceptually mapping young people’s accounts of entering into a distinct kind of social relationship with the households they turned to. I also draw upon the notion of *habitus* in understanding the impact of this couch surfing relationship on young people’s identities, sense of space, emotional wellbeing and capacity for social mobility. In essence, I argue that the process of navigating these tenuous relationships of hospitality speaks of the *habitus* of a marginalised guest. Drawing upon Bourdieu (1990), I thus conceptualise young people’s experiences of couch surfing as emerging from, and producing, a set of practices intimately tied to this *habitus*. At the same time, these practices also emerge from the need to navigate away from relational and ontological insecurity and dislocation.
Through his concepts of field, *habitus* and symbolic capital, Bourdieu additionally offers important insight into the relational and embodied underpinnings of class that I have found evident in young people’s accounts. Importantly, in Bourdieu’s understanding, fields range from the ‘smallest’ of social spaces, groupings and organisations, to the broadest space of overarching social order: the “field of power” (Bourdieu 1996). At the heart of his humanist approach to social class, Bourdieu conceives of these fields of power as the sites where dominant players of the social space *at large* converge (including, for example, prominent members of government, the legal profession, distinguished artists and scientists). Here, there is an ongoing struggle to define the social order (Bourdieu 1984; 1996).

In formulating this understanding of the social world, Bourdieu emphasises the centrality of symbolic capital in reproducing social class and privilege. In his reckoning, the capacity for social mobility is not just mastering the ‘games’ of social spaces, but ultimately defining and controlling the production of symbolic power within them (Bourdieu 1990). This bears important implications for understanding the impact of low symbolic capital, both in producing the marginalised subjectivities, and entrenching the material disadvantages, which young people contend with in their experiences of homelessness.

**Fields of power: Young people, homelessness and the bureaucratic field**

Throughout this thesis, young people’s accounts of encountering formal systems of welfare and accommodation have informed my theoretical engagement with Bourdieu’s understanding of the “bureaucratic field”; that is, of the State (and the welfare field extending from this) (Bourdieu *et al.* 1994; Emirbayer & Williams 2005). These social fields constitute and shape what it means to be homeless. They encompass particular
institutions, individuals, and bodies of knowledge (or knowledge makers) that compete for the identification, management, and regulation of homelessness as a social issue; in effect, we might think of this as the ‘homelessness field’ at large (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008; Emirbayer & Williams 2005; Somerville 1998).

In terms of formal services within this field, young people’s accounts of dislocation in this research traced encounters with emergency accommodation; dealing with welfare and social services, and the social work profession as a whole. An understanding of these fields and their actors is important in making sense of the social power relationships at work in young people’s (re)negotiation of home and social citizenship (Emirbayer & Williams 2005). Significantly for this thesis, what happens within the bureaucratic field impacts especially upon how young people’s experiences of couch surfing are responded to as an issue for policymakers. Moreover, this has implications for how young people are met by formal institutions (where for example, the homeless are constructed as clients or recipients of welfare, competing for access to housing, employment and financial assistance) (Chamberlain & Johnson 2001; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; Emirbayer & Williams 2005; Robinson 2002b; Robinson 2006).

**Theories of hospitality and the guest**

Importantly, the experiences of young couch surfers are not only shaped by this broader, bureaucratic field. In understanding the particular processes at work in young people’s accounts of couch surfing, I also focus through this thesis upon the social relationships and physical spaces of private households. These are the key sites young people seek shelter and support from within experiences of couch surfing. As such, the relational dynamics of
these social spaces are important in understanding how young people contend with marginality.

In conceptualising these household relationships, I extend in later parts of this thesis upon cultural theorist Tracy McNulty’s (2005; 2007) philosophically grounded tracing of Western hospitality during and after Kant. I also draw upon poststructuralist Jacques Derrida’s (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000) analysis of the antinomial nature of hospitality. These theoretical perspectives are important in thinking about the household as a social field. This is a field, which from young people’s reflections in this research, was shaped by the distinctive cultural and historical underpinnings of a contemporary hospitality relationship. In taking account of the hospitality relation, I conceptualise the uncertain and potentially threatening status of the informal 'guest' in couch surfing households, and its role in structuring young people’s social and material position within the home.

**Presentation of self, emotional labour and homeless subjectivities**

In tracing the lived landscape of couch surfing, I also incorporate Erving Goffman’s (1968) dramaturgical accounts of the social negotiation of stigma; and Hochschild’s (1979; 1983; 1998) theories of emotional labour and emotional embodiment. These classic sociological theories offer insight into the felt guest *habitus* of couch surfing which young people related to me. The work of both Goffman (1968) and Hochschild (1979; 1983; 1998) also offers important theoretical tools for tracing young people’s movement through a couch surfing *habitus*, including how they negotiate, make sense of, and in some cases resist, the
particular limits and barriers they face. These perspectives aid my understanding of young people’s accounts of being homeless, and its impacts upon sense of self and sense of home.

As well as these theorists, I also link in with Australian social researcher Catherine Robinson’s phenomenological perspective; in particular, her explorations of young people’s experiences of displacement and grief, as well as her critical account of the mainstream construction of homelessness as a state of abject lack (Robinson 2000; 2001; 2002b; 2005a; 2005b; 2006). I also find Robinson’s work helpful in highlighting the need for safe, meaningful and restorative spaces in young people’s movement away from dislocation and trauma. In Robinson’s accounts, these “therapeutic” modes of inhabitation give room for identity. They are also spaces that enable a sense of belonging and connection (with both self and community) (Robinson 2002b; 2005b).

Throughout this thesis, my incorporation of these key theoretical frames (and a body of important research that draws upon them)\(^1\) is built upon my interpretive understanding of young people’s accounts. In drawing upon this grounded body of social theory, I take account of couch surfing as a lived *process* of navigating a tenuous social position. By examining couch surfing as a practical response to, and outcome of, marginalised social relations, I also indicate how young people’s experiences are continuous with a broader context of dislocation; underscored by social exclusion. In so doing, I approach the “issue” of youth homelessness beyond a particular set of living situations mapped along a scale of disadvantage or risk or (in the manner of dominant understandings of homelessness) a category of homeless subjectivity *per se*.

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\(^1\) Including the social research findings and/or critical commentary of Emirbayer & Williams (2005); Brueckner, Green & Saggers (2010); Farrugia (2010) and Veness (1994).
Conclusion

What I have established through this chapter is the essence of my epistemology, built upon a grounded interpretivism, and a social constructionist lens. I have also importantly outlined my situatedness in the field of research, and the importance of acknowledging the political effects of producing knowledge(s) about what it means to be young and homeless. In many ways, my goal in this thesis is to challenge perspectives that add to the pathologising of youth and of homelessness as a particular identity. In doing so, I critically examine what is normalised as ‘being homeless’ or ‘having a home’. Of course, ultimately all human sciences are normalising in the process of generating categories and claims to knowledge (Foucault & Gordon 1980). The challenge – as I set out in this chapter – is to understand these processes and in doing so, acknowledge the political and material effects of the categories that are used. This means being clear that these categories must be held provisionally, constituting parts of multiple and competing claims on what constitutes the ‘reality’ of homelessness and youth identities.

In examining how young people are displaced and how they negotiate homelessness, my emphasis here is on moving beyond a problematising account of homelessness as a potentially stigmatising identity or type. By connecting my analysis of young people’s accounts with a critical approach to the field of homelessness, I seek in this research to link the “…experiences of participants…in relation to the social and cultural conditions that may have given rise to them” (Brueckner, Green & Saggers 2010: 7). At the same time, I have also acknowledged that I cannot avoid placing certain defining limits around the relationships and practices that I have mapped out in this thesis, and I will to some extent constitute the couch surfer along with them.
In the next chapter, I take up the threads of the critical, interpretive and grounded approach that I have outlined here. Examining the existing literature, I establish how couch surfing is presently characterised and positioned in social research and policy. In doing so, I turn attention to how couch surfing practices unsettle prevailing notions of what it means to be homeless, and anticipate some of the implications this carries for young people experiencing dislocation differently.
As I said to my mate yesterday, “oh, you know, I’m doing this study on couch surfing”. And he said, “what’s that? Is that when you grab a couch and go surfing?” [laughing] “Not quite!” I said: “No, it’s a metaphor my friend, metaphor!” – Mike

In speaking with young people and with youth workers, my use of the term ‘couch surfing’ sometimes raised curiosity. The questions: –How did you come across couch surfing?“ or –what made you use that word?” occasionally came up in conversations. These were fair questions to ask; and from a social research perspective, were an interesting challenge to answer. The simple response is that couch surfing was, quite literally, the first term I had heard used to describe the phenomenon that became the focus of this thesis. Moreover, many of the terms I subsequently came across (terms that I describe in this chapter) deployed particular expert terminologies; or else carried other meanings that I felt were problematic. For the proverbial want of a better term, couch surfing simply ‘stuck’. In the end however, couch surfing represents just one of many possible terms that I could have used to indicate the focus of this research. That is, to talk about a way young people are (re)negotiating home and support, through a context of dislocation. Moreover, as this chapter maps out, it is telling that these particular ways of (re)negotiating home sit across a

A questioning that also led on to interesting discussions in the interviews, for example about how young people identified with the idea of having couch surfed.
multitude of labels in homelessness research and popular understanding, and yet at the same time unsettle them.

As I have indicated, an important focus in this thesis is on how being homeless is framed as a social issue, and what impact this has for young people navigating dislocation. What I establish in this chapter is how couch surfing experiences bring into focus the political and social construction of youth homelessness. Through this, I critically survey the landscape of knowledge shaping what I think of as the field of homelessness at large. I trace how couch surfing experiences are currently positioned in research, policy and the public imagination, examining how this reflects important cultural contentions and normative assumptions. In doing so, I emphasise my interpretive and social constructionist approach to this research. I also anticipate my discussion, in future chapters, about the effects of ideas and practices regarding ‘the homeless’ on the lives of young people who couch surf.

A prevalent practice

In Australia, the practice of moving between temporary living arrangements (with friends, family and friends’ parents) figures prominently in young people’s accounts of dislocation. The prevalence of couch surfing has also been described statistically. In the Australian context, this is borne out especially through the work of quantitative researchers David MacKenzie and Chris Chamberlain. In addition to being the central players in homelessness enumeration in Australia (through, for example, the development of the Australian Bureau
of Statistics national homeless Census counts), Chamberlain and MacKenzie have run three
national censuses of homeless secondary school students (the latest in 2006).3

From the perspective of this thesis, the findings from the second and third censuses of
homeless high school students (taken in 2001 and 2006 respectively) provide an interesting
quantitative picture concerning how young people are negotiating dislocation. These data
also indicate how practices like couch surfing compare to other experiences presently
defined as homelessness (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2002; 2003a; 2008a; 2008b).

Tellingly, in both censuses, the majority of students defined as homeless or recently
homeless nationwide were staying temporarily with friends and relatives (MacKenzie &
Chamberlain 2003b; 2008a). In 2006, 84 per cent of all homeless high school students in
Australia reported staying in temporary housing arrangements with friends, family or in
other informal lodgings, often moving from place to place (MacKenzie & Chamberlain
2008a: 20). This figure was greater among South Australian students, at 87 per cent
(MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a: 20). By comparison, 15 per cent of all homeless
secondary students were in Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)4
accommodation (such as refuges, emergency accommodation, hostels and other transitional
housing) in 2006. This figure was 10 per cent among South Australian students defined as
homeless (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a: 20). The percentage of all homeless students

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3 In the 2006 census, quantitative data and 560 case studies were collected from a total of 2,017 government and Catholic secondary
schools from all states and territories, excluding only non-Catholic private schools from the sample (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2002;
2003b; 2008a; 2008b). Anticipated under-counting of homelessness was adjusted for in the results of the censuses.

4 Now known as Specialist Homelessness Services.
in Australia who were on the streets, squatting, or living in tents or cars was one per cent; with a South Australian figure of three per cent (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2006: 20).

It is important to note that MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2008b) report an overall decrease in the rate of identified homelessness among secondary students from 2001 to 2006. During this same period however, the proportion of students defined as homeless nationally, and who were living in temporary arrangements, increased by four percentage points (that is, a change from 84 per cent of homeless students in these situations in 2006 compared to 80 per cent in 2001) (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2002). Interestingly, the authors also point out that the under-counting of homelessness in up to a third (or 33 per cent) of schools in the 2006 census may partly be explained by the prevalence of “hidden” couch surfing (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a: 19). They were considered hidden because in the process of couch surfing, these students had not been identified (or self-identified) as homeless (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a).

Drawing on interviews with school staff, the researchers note:

It was clear that she [Head Teacher, Welfare at a western Sydney school] knew about other cases…I got her to talk about Pacific Islander kids who couch surf. This was a “big issue” in the school…the more we talked it became clear that there could have been another 15 homeless students (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a: 19).

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5 The number of rough sleepers might, however, be under-counted due to the fact that school attendance may be much more difficult for these young people to maintain.

6 This is an important aspect of current terminology in the homelessness literature which I return to later in this chapter.
The authors similarly quote the comments of staff concerning the possibility that couch surfing was happening among their students: "Of course there could have been others...There’s a lot of couch surfing – there could have been another 10 couch surfers, easily” (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a: 19).

This body of research illustrates, I think, three important issues. First, practices of staying temporarily with friends and family are included in quantitative counts of homelessness, and are being constituted as a ‘form’ of homelessness in Australian research and policy. Secondly, these practices appear to be widespread among young people defined as homeless. Thirdly, however, couch surfing is also being labelled a hidden phenomenon; in some cases held to represent an under-identification of homelessness. More broadly, it is telling that despite accounts of the prevalence of couch surfing in Australia, there have been very few studies, policies or commentaries examining the phenomenon with any considered detail or length.

To the best of my knowledge, only one other body of work within the Australian homelessness literature has focused on the practice of couch surfing under that moniker, and as a specific subject for inquiry (Uhr 2004). This is a qualitative study that was published in 2004 by Brisbane not-for-profit youth work agency, Community Connections (Uhr 2004). Written from a social capital perspective, the research report for this study presented the findings of a set of interviews carried out with a small group of young people,

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7 In the international context, there is as yet one sizeable research report concerning the issue of 'hidden homelessness', published in 2003 by Crisis, a non-government organisation (NGO) in the U.K. (Robinson & Coward 2003).
8 This service incorporates two government-funded programs with an early intervention and community development focus on youth and family outreach. One of these is a Reconnect program (federally funded); and the other is a state government-funded Youth Support Coordinator initiative. For more information see: http://tinyurl.com/5xqalb6
aged 12 to 18 years. The research was service-driven, with an aim of reaching young people that the agency (via the study methodology) identified as couch surfers. Through the report, the researchers defined couch surfers as young people who –[continually move] between temporary accommodation [with friends, friends‘ family, relatives or strangers]…without secure housing elsewhere” (Uhr 2004: 5). These were young people whom the researchers identified as facing barriers to accessing services, and who because of this lack of (formal) options for accommodation, had turned to local connections for shelter and support.

Through the researchers’ social capital lens, the report provided specific insight into the social connections young people had relied upon in their local area (Uhr 2004). Importantly, the researchers pointed out that in coming up against dislocation, these young people had relied on their local connections for as long as these remained satisfactory options (Uhr 2004: 12). In this process of remaining in their local area, they had also avoided becoming –entrenched in homeless services in the inner city” (Uhr 2004: 12). However, for the same reason these young people did not have access to additional sources of assistance in their own neighbourhoods. The researchers considered the living situations of these couch surfers to be inadequate, or not constituting an –appropriate place to call home” (Uhr 2004: 12). As outlined in the research report:

These young people moved between different houses of friends and families, however, a safe, secure and appropriate place to call home still eluded them (Uhr 2004: 12).
The *Community Connections* research (Uhr 2004) identifies the idea and practice of couch surfing as an object of priority for policymakers and social workers. By pointing out the inadequacies and struggles attached to these young people's living arrangements, the researchers have sought to bring couch surfing within the ambit of the homelessness field, as an issue that constitutes a 'spectrum' of homeless experience. Their call to make couch surfing a more important point of focus is, in many ways, indicative of the general positioning of couch surfing in the homelessness field at present. Indeed, during a time when national attention is very much turned towards youth homelessness as a social issue, it would seem anomalous that the couch surfing phenomenon has not thundered into the public imagination at least as much as the figure of street-dwelling homeless or 'street kids'. However, as I indicate in this chapter, we can better understand why this is so by looking to what presently shapes our thinking about homelessness.

**Constructing couch surfers: The conceptual landscape**

Terminologically, couch surfing has its origins as urban slang in the U.S., U.K. and Australian contexts. First emerging in the vernacular of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *couch surfer* was a label for young people (usually in their early twenties) who stayed on a series of friends’ or acquaintances’ couches or spare beds, where they did not need to pay much (or anything at all) in the way of rent or board (Uhr 2004). This situation usually came about because the young person could either not afford to pay for accommodation at the time, had just left home and had no other housing arranged, or had transitioned to a new

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9 For example, considering the intense media interest and public responses attending the release of the National Youth Commission’s (2008) *Australia’s Homeless Youth Report*, which was the first independent national inquiry into youth homelessness since the Burdekin Report (HREOC 1989) two decades ago. More recently, the Rudd/Gillard Labor government policy focus on homelessness has seen a stakeholder-driven Green Paper inquiry into homelessness, the release of the Homelessness White Paper (FaHCSIA 2008) as well as investment in early intervention, increased public housing stock and affordable housing initiatives (Rudd & Plibersek 2008).
region or city (and had yet to establish themselves somewhere) (Uhr 2004). However, in a recent (and increasingly popular) mutation of the term, couch surfing has also become synonymous with the pursuit of Western backpackers travelling inexpensively in lodging arrangements organised through social networking (Zepeda 2010). These travellers are living from one stranger’s place to another and paying their way by purchasing food, paying a small amount of board and/or doing household chores or labour. This particular turn in the popular etymology of couch surfing has sparked a major, recent shift in its meaning.

On the one hand, the original slang term refers to a tactic engaged in by young people to get by with assistance from their friends. In effect, this earlier understanding placed couch surfing as a practice for seeking support out of necessity. It enables a structural understanding that figures underlying marginality into some of the reasons young people turn to these forms of accommodation. On the other hand, the ‘new’ backpacking couch surfer connotes a rather different set of ideas. It involves an international backpacking lifestyle that is formalised through Internet driven networks of temporary accommodation, offered to suitable strangers. In this sense, it draws on notions of voluntary mobility and choice; a process of affordable, adventurous tourism taking place across a subculture of like-minded travellers and hosts (Zepeda 2010). These changes in meaning have rendered anomalous those elements of marginality, unemployment and local dislocation that were inherent to the original term.

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10 See for example: www.couchsurfing.com
At least since the late 1980s, homelessness researchers and policymakers have also made mention of the practice of staying in temporary living arrangements with friends, family and acquaintances. To date, descriptions of these practices sit across multiple ‘expert’ understandings and definitions. Couch surfing, as such, represents one of many labels used in the homelessness field to describe people living in insecure, shifting and temporary housing arrangements, and who are doing so because they are unable to find more secure or ‘adequate’ housing (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis & Nackerud 2000; Uhr 2004).

As well as the specific term ‘couch surfing’, practices of relying on temporary, local supports for accommodation have also been described (as I indicated earlier) as ‘hidden’ homelessness in this body of literature. This is particularly the case in the Australian, Canadian and U.K. contexts, as well as in the international literature concerned with rural homelessness, and the prevalence of homelessness in developing countries (Bown 1993; Crisis 2004; Fiedler, Schuurman & Hyndman 2006; Robinson & Coward 2003; Tipple & Speak 2009). The concept of ‘concealed homelessness‘ has similarly appeared in the literature, particularly in discussions of Indigenous youth, and of women’s practices of seeking temporary shelter with friends and family (for example, in the context of domestic violence) (Farrin 2005; Streich, Havell & Spafford 2002; Watson & Austerberry 1986). In talking about this phenomenon, Farrin for instance draws upon the work of U.K. authors Streich et al. (2002), defining concealed households as young people living with –parents, friends, or relatives, as they cannot access housing of their own” (Farrin 2005: 12).
In the Australian context, the literature has also constituted couch surfing practices as "secondary homelessness" or a risk factor for homelessness (Beer 2005a; MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a; Uhr 2004). Other terms that have predominated include "informal" housing, and "doubling up" in the U.S. literature (Entner-Wright, Caspi, Moffitt & Silva 1998), and by the concepts of "incipient" and "metaphorical" homelessness in the New Zealand context (Kearns et al. 1992; Kearns & Smith 1994a; 1994b). Australian researchers such as Hulse and Saugeres (2008) have also included couch surfing practices within definitions of insecure housing and their concept of "precarious living".

Within this myriad of labels and concepts, one defining theme emerges that is of significance for this research. That is, wherever these kinds of practices have been identified in the literature, it has been in the context of broader discussions around types, degrees, forms or risk indicators of homelessness (for example, as a subset or "pseudo" form of homelessness). In an editorial article in 2005, Australian housing researcher Andrew Beer commented on a number of major issues that the homelessness research community agreed were in need of attention. Among these issues, he highlighted the need for:

…early identification of the risk of homelessness [and] early action to stop "couch surfing" becoming a more significant form of homelessness… (Beer 2005a: 28)

11 This is an important label reflecting prevailing trends in the construction of homelessness in Australia; a point I return to later in this chapter.
In many ways, Beer’s (2005a) commentary is indicative of the general positioning of couch surfing within policy and research: as something with the potential of becoming a ‘problem’, or of occupying the edges of homelessness. As I have indicated, this is happening despite a policy context in Australia that has seen the inclusion of experiences like couch surfing within national censuses and policy definitions of homelessness. Indeed, according to some commentators, the Australian homelessness field is uniquely ‘inclusive’ in terms of what is counted as homelessness. As Tanya Plibersek, former Rudd Labor Government Federal Housing Minister, commented to media in 2010: ‘Australia is unusual in the world because we count homelessness not just as people sleeping rough...we also include those people who are couch surfing” (Morello 2010). Despite this declared inclusiveness of quantitative counts, couch surfing practices remain largely anomalous within mainstream understandings of homelessness. The concepts by which we understand these practices represent, I argue, the particular landscape of the homelessness field. This is a landscape which significantly defines and influences what youth homelessness means in Australia, and how we respond to it (and produce it) as a material reality.

As I outlined in the previous chapter, young people couch surfing out of dislocation are the subjects of a bureaucratic field concerned with the management of homelessness as a social and economic issue (Bourdieu et al. 1994; Emirbayer & Williams 2005). This includes those institutions, individuals, and bodies of knowledge (and knowledge ‘makers’) bound up in targeting homelessness (Emirbayer & Williams 2005); the domain of social policy; the activities and orientations of governmental bodies, and service providers such as social housing, welfare, and advocacy groups (Emirbayer & Williams 2005). Inherent to the work of these particular experts, professions, policies and institutions, are ongoing struggles for
legitimacy and social power over how the homeless subject is defined, what markers or living conditions are constitutive of homelessness, and what issues and persons are considered of highest priority as subjects of welfare. Many of these contestations are driven by the fiscal and ideological concerns of the State with managing populations.

The multiple relations through which the homeless person has been constructed (objectified and subjectified) also play a role in forming the couch surfer. This process is evident not only in the literature, but also in the wider interests and priorities of the bureaucratic field (for example, issues such as social housing provision, welfare reforms, employment, and education) (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu et al. 1994). It also extends to the influence of popular or colloquial perceptions of homelessness, the fabric of social and cultural norms, as well as the subjectivities of young people navigating dislocation. For the remainder of this chapter, I explore the key literature contributing to our present understandings of youth homelessness, and the political processes underlying the production of this knowledge. I do so with a view of mapping the major ideas and definitional frameworks that have emerged in recent decades, and commenting how these frameworks have shaped the positioning of couch surfing practices within the homelessness field.

**The shape of things to come: Producing the (new) homeless subject**

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mainstream understandings of homelessness in developed countries transitioned beyond the typically male ‘skid row’ boarder, ‘tramp’ or ‘hobo’ figure that had dominated earlier perceptions and realities (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; Cresswell 2001). This is in part due to changes in the demographics of those considered homeless in countries like Australia (especially since the 1960s). In
particular, structural and social changes (affecting housing markets and the labour force, for instance) played a role in increasing the vulnerability of different segments of the population to becoming homeless (for example, through housing stress) (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992).

Moreover, as policy researchers Del Casino Jr. and Jocoy (2008) importantly contend, these changes to the ‘face’ of homelessness also represent a greater recognition of the breadth and depth of experiences of dislocation; generating awareness a ‘new’ kind of homeless subjectivity in the mainstream political and popular imagination. These changes in public perception led to a growing social concern with homelessness as an issue amongst young people and families; greater understanding of the realities of homelessness in women’s experiences, and more awareness of street homelessness as a social issue (especially as a topic of interest for the media) (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008). In the midst of these demographic changes and growing public attention, policymakers and researchers have become central players in producing new kinds of symbolic capital in the homelessness field, intimately shaping how we think about homelessness, and how we respond to it as a social issue.

In Australia, the late 1980s were notable for an opening up of discussion and concern about homelessness, brought about by these changes in public perception (Uhr 2004: 22). During this time, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission12 (HREOC) conducted the first national inquiry into child and youth homelessness, culminating in 1989

12 Now known as the Australian Human Rights Commission.
with the watershed Burdekin Report (HREOC 1989). This report dramatically raised public and media awareness of the experience, and social ‘problem’, of youth homelessness (particularly street homelessness). This inquiry was a watershed; tracing the landscape of a set of experiences which had never previously figured as an object of such concern to the public imagination. In doing so, the Burdekin Report rapidly raised awareness and moral concern about a younger homeless demographic, particularly young people who sleep rough (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992). This became the basis for important reform, policy change and significant bodies of research. That being said however, media coverage of the Report at the time also drew sensationalised focus towards the figure of the street kid. This was despite the fact that street homelessness was only one aspect of a multitude of experiences of dislocation discussed at length within the report (National Youth Commission (NYC) 2008; Uhr 2004:22). In this sense, popular and media portrayals of the Burdekin Report have had quite a different effect on how youth homelessness is perceived in Australia. These representations have fixated attention in particular on rough sleeping as the quintessential site of (youth) dislocation (NYC 2008).

During this important period in Australia, policymakers and legislators were also heavily involved in constructing new definitions and ways of responding to homelessness. Much of the focus was on defining living conditions thought to constitute inadequate housing, with the aim of structuring the delivery of government funding, services and programs focused on ‘housing the homeless’. In this respect, one of the most significant definitions of homelessness produced during this time was developed through the Supported...
Chapter Two: Couch surfing and the homelessness field

Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). Outlined through the SAAP Act (Parliament of Australia 1994), this definition was established with the purpose of assessing eligibility for SAAP services. This legislation outlines a legal understanding of homelessness that takes into account both physical and social context, and which concentrates on a lack of what is defined as housing security, safety, affordability and access to essential amenities (Parliament of Australia 1994; Uhr 2004: 21-23).

The late 1980s also saw an openness to definitions of homelessness that were informed by lived experience and self-identified measures of what it means to be homeless. This is a perspective which some Australian researchers (such as Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992)) have dubbed too “radical” in their subjective orientation. At the time, these kinds of policy broadenings were bound up in the extant concern with youth homelessness, and were expressed in documents such as the landmark 1985 National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH) definition of youth homelessness. This definition informed the Federal Government National Homelessness Strategy 1999, which is the policy forerunner to (most recently) the Rudd Labor Government White Paper on Homelessness (FaHCSIA 2008).

The NYCH policy document is notable in the sense that it marked a brief period in (youth) homelessness policy constructions in Australia when the young person’s own perceptions of their situation were emphasised as a key part of defining homelessness (Chamberlain & Johnson 2001; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992).

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14 The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a joint State/Commonwealth initiative that provides funding for more than 400 services to help people who are homeless” (New South Wales Government 2011). It is now known as the Specialist Homelessness Services.

15 FaHCSIA: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
According to the NYCH definition, youth homelessness is:

The absence of secure, adequate and satisfactory shelter as perceived by the young person, and for homelessness to exist, at least one of the following conditions… (NYCH 1985: 1).

It is important to note that the NYCH definition also includes “very high mobility between places of abode…” (NYCH 1985: 1) as “one of the following living conditions” that homelessness encompasses. Again, this demonstrates that for at least a quarter of a century, couch surfing practices have appeared in the policy frameworks that inform mainstream understandings of youth homelessness in Australia.

At the time of their release, key documents like the NYCH definition and the Burdekin Report also anticipated the rollout of major government emergency accommodation initiatives. As I have indicated, one of the most notable among these was the establishment of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) in 1985, including its provision for specialist (such as youth-focused) emergency, youth shelter and transitional housing components (FaHCSIA 2008). These programs constituted a large-scale (and at the time, unprecedented) government response (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992) to the growing ‘buzz’ surrounding (youth) homelessness – and especially street homelessness – as an issue of social concern.

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16 Since 2009, the SAAP has been subsumed within the National Affordable Housing Agreement (FaHCSIA 2008).
As I have mapped out here, these were some of the crucial beginnings of youth homelessness as a phenomenon of interest in the contemporary Australian imagination, and in policy rhetoric. In many respects, this period gave rise to important, new knowledge(s) and practices concerned with identifying youth homelessness as a social issue. At its heart, this speaks of an ongoing political process; a struggle by various policymakers, legislators, stakeholders, journalists and advocacy groups to define a ‘new’ set of homeless subjectivities. Subsequent decades have seen important reversals and occlusions in how youth homelessness is framed and understood. In particular, the ascendancy of economic rationalism (including fiscal concerns with privatisation and deregulation) sits at the centre of these changes (Bessant 1996; Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008). As I discuss in the next section, this bears important implications for how the practice of couch surfing is presently positioned and understood.

*Narrowing the welfare field: From ‘new’ homeless to ‘hidden’ homeless*

In their analysis of the effects of neoliberalism in the U.S., Del Casino Jr. and Jocoy (2008: 192-193) note that the growing government concern with deregulation has produced a narrowing of the homeless subject in social policy. In arguing this, the authors contend that the changing structure of welfare politics has seen a withdrawal of focus on the ‘new homeless subject’ (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008: 192-193) (such as young people, women and people who are homeless but not sleeping rough). This retreat from broadened understandings has effectively excised, as a subject, those whose experiences of dislocation do not demonstrate the characteristics of a narrowly construed ‘chronic’ state of homelessness (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008). In many respects, this narrowing recalls a
regression to earlier (pre-1960s) notions of the hobo, or homelessness as a bare state of rooflessness (Somerville 1992). As Del Casino Jr. and Jocoy contend:

[T]he long-term construction of a chronically homeless subject—the male, itinerant, mentally ill hobo… has gained new traction and is being deployed to minimize the provision of services to those individuals who do not fit a very narrow definition of what it means to be homeless (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008: 192).

These neoliberal shifts in the bureaucratic field have important effects for young people who negotiate dislocation differently. Indeed, the political narrowing of “what it means to be homeless” (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008: 192) helps to explain why, in much of the literature on homelessness circa the 1990s, researchers have drawn on tropes of the “invisible” or “hidden” homeless – categories I touched upon earlier – in describing experiences that are not figuring into the mainstream. The literature is awash with these metaphors of the hidden or invisible. This, I would argue, critically traces the present positioning of practices like couch surfing in the homelessness field. Descriptions of hidden homelessness include staying temporarily with friends or family; living in situations of domestic violence or family conflict; living in unsafe or unfit habitation, and being at high risk of eviction (Fitzpatrick 1998). In a 2004 report, U.K. non-government organisation Crisis (2004) described hidden homelessness as “Britain’s invisible city”, made up of a predominance of young men whose experiences and numbers were “poorly recognised”, and who remained “excluded and vulnerable” (Crisis 2004: 3).
As Bown writes of this hidden demographic:

A follow-up to the UK's 1991 census returns has revealed a new group of up to half a million people in Britain with no permanent home. Mostly young and male, and found mainly in inner cities, they do not live on the street, but appear to move frequently from place to place (Bown 1993: 1891).

Together with accounts of highly mobile and ‘difficult to reach’ street dwelling youth, there are many descriptions in the literature of hidden young people who ‘move frequently from place to place’ (Crisis 2004: 3). Descriptions of similar invisible experiences have figured prominently in the findings of major qualitative and enumerative research projects focusing specifically on youth homelessness. This includes Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers (2006:281-285) and Robinson (2005a: 51-52) in the Australian (inner Sydney) context; Aubry, Klodawsky, Hay & Birnie (2003: 24-25) in the Canadian context, as well as the results of the most recently published national censuses of homeless school students in Australia (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008a). Similarly, in describing concealed homelessness, Farrin positions these living arrangements as a risk factor for ‘moving into the category’ (Farrin 2005: 12) of a ‘literal homelessness’ or as Somerville (1992) describes it, ‘rooflessness’.

Importantly, the ‘hidden’ dislocation of women is flagged as a particular issue of concern in the literature. This has been borne out, for example, in the findings of a qualitative action
research project in Toronto, Canada (Richter & Chaw-Kant 2008). The aim of this project was to examine the health impact of homelessness among 126 women. Through the research findings, the hidden homeless are identified as:

...women who are temporarily staying with friends or family or are staying with a man only in order to obtain shelter, and those living in households where they are subject to family conflict or violence. Hidden homelessness also includes situations where women are paying so much of their income for housing that they cannot afford the other necessities of life such as food; those who are at risk of eviction; and those living in illegal or physically unsafe buildings, or overcrowded households (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group 2002: executive summary).

In this research, the authors emphasise hidden homelessness as a distinctly gendered phenomenon, in the specific sense that many women encountered situations amounting to homelessness while still living ‘under a roof’. The gendered patterning of dislocation has been the subject of much research, with a strong body of literature employing similar kinds of descriptions of women’s experiences. It has been widely noted, for example, that women of all ages facing dislocation are especially likely to seek ways of avoiding sleeping rough, even at the cost of enduring domestic violence, or other untenable or unsafe experiences in their housing situations. This is often due to concern for the custody of children; worries about safety if forced to sleep rough, or fear of the stigma of being

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17 Jointly commissioned by the NGOs ‘Sistering: A Woman’s Place’ and ‘The Toronto Community Care Access Centre’. According to the authors, the research was underpinned by both feminist and public health perspectives (Richter & Chaw-Kant 2008).

perceived as homeless (AIHW 2005; Hill 1991; May et al. 2007; McDowell 1999: 90-92; Wardhaugh 1997; Whitzman 2006; Young 1997). Because of many of these factors, women and young people’s experiences of dislocation often centre on, within and between the home space (or multiple houses) (Hill 1991; Tually et al. 2007). In the literature, this has also been described as ‘incipient homelessness’ (Kearns et al. 1992; Kearns & Smith 1994a; 1994b) and being homeless within the home (Young 1997).

What is most telling about this body of homelessness literature is precisely the fact that these experiences have been labelled as hidden, concealed or invisible. These practices for contending with dislocation are commonly constituted, for example, as categories of homelessness that have not been ‘counted’ or ‘identified’ sufficiently. This labelling speaks directly of the positioning of homeless subjectivities in the field. Quite simply, the language of invisibility is ascribed to these experiences because they are not politically or culturally recognised as homelessness. As noted in the Toronto research project: ‘few people immediately understand that the word ‘homeless’ can be applied to women who have roofs over their heads’ (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2002: executive summary). Comments such as these highlight the political narrowing of the homeless subject and the preoccupation with chronic rooflessness. This language of invisibility also raises other implications.

In one sense, the ‘hidden’ label represents an important need on behalf of researchers to bring (or return) these experiences to light and make them a priority. That is, to inscribe a

19 The same can be said of the goals (implicit or explicit) of the Community Connections study, this thesis, and many other bodies of homelessness research. This is something which I have contended with throughout the process of ‘doing’ research concerned with youth homelessness as a social phenomenon.
‗legitimate‘ place for these experiences in the field of homelessness. However, describing the homeless conditions of women, children and youth as hidden because they take place in the interstices of the home space (or multiple home spaces) is also problematic. Through this literature, metaphors of invisibility reinscribe the idea that these experiences are not the _usual_ homelessness that takes place in _visible_ (public) spaces (May et al. 2007). In this sense, while this literature challenges the anomalous positioning of these forms of dislocation, the problem is that descriptions of invisibility also draw upon deeply held gendered and age(d) assumptions about what constitutes homeless spaces and experience (Hill 1991; May et al. 2007; McDowell 1999: 90-92; Wardhaugh 1997; Whitzman 2006; Young 1997).

Tropes of invisibility represent, in one respect, the normative gendering of space. That is, they speak of long-standing cultural constructions of men and women’s use of space that dichotomously fixes notions of femininity within domestic households, and ascribes a visible _maleness_ to public space (Hill 1991; May et al. 2007; McDowell 1999: 90-92; Wardhaugh 1997). Within these understandings, homelessness is rendered not only a roofless and chronic subjectivity, but also as occupying a prominent (rough) male space. These gendered constructions have deep roots. Even well-meaning feminist scholars, writing within the homelessness field, have at times unintentionally reinscribed them. As May et al. comments:

Noting that women are less likely than men to sleep rough or to engage in other activities (such as begging) that mark them as _visibly homeless_, feminist scholars have tended to focus their attention on the more extensive but largely hidden population of _single_ homeless
women residing with friends and relatives, in bed and breakfast hotels or ‘upmarket’ hostels rather than in emergency shelters or on the streets...Whilst challenging unhelpfully restrictive understandings of ‘single homelessness’, one effect of such a move has again been to construct a picture of street homelessness as a quintessentially ‘male space . . . [in which] homeless women [appear] only . . . in a shadowy way, if at all’...(Wardhaugh 1999: 104). In light of the growing number of women to be found sleeping rough on the streets...or making use of the emergency shelters, day centres and other services provided for ‘visibly’ homeless people, such a picture is no longer tenable (May et al. 2007: 122).

As well as this, the labelling of invisible homelessness also belies normative and gendered understandings of what the home represents (May et al. 2007; Wardhaugh 1999). As Somerville (1997) notes, popular imaginings idealise the home as spaces of belonging, safety, security, nurturance, pleasure, rootedness and identity to the home space. Home is also essentialised as a feminine space or as a fixed and settled site (May et al. 2007; Wardhaugh 1999). These cultural ideals or qualities of home often stand at odds with the lived experience of actual home(s) (Wise 2003: 112-114). For instance, places essentialised or romanticised as ‘the home’ may in reality be sites of violence, discomfort, fear, insecurity, ennui and repression (Wise 2003: 112-114; McDowell 1999: 72-73). Similarly, places normatively considered ‘not home‘ (such as the streets, or a couch surfing household) might represent the search for a sense of belonging and security that some young people, for example, have never experienced in their caregiver home(s).
Despite the misfit between gendered, idealised meanings of home and many lived realities, the normative home nevertheless hold a powerful place in how the homeless are positioned. In Robinson's (2002b) view, popular understandings of homelessness situate these meanings of home in direct opposition to what she brackets as "home(less)ness"; a (less) which implies an aberrant, or abject, lack of a culturally meaningful belonging. Similar dichotomies are inherent in the literature wherever distinctions are being drawn between "adequate" and "inadequate" housing; or between "shelter and home", as Marcuse (1989: 138-159) frames it.

Constructions of invisible and visible homelessness speak of underlying normative (and political) processes that together shape the symbolic capital of the homelessness field. What I demonstrate here is that contrasting tropes – of the rough sleeper and the invisible homeless – are the shape of the field in which we currently think about couch surfing practices. In essence, the language of invisibility represents a discussion in the literature about experiences of dislocation "beyond" the narrowly construed notion of a chronic homeless subjectivity (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008). In this sense, we might understand how the act of navigating dislocation within multiple domestic households introduces a sense of unease into mainstream understandings of homelessness (May et al. 2007).

Taking up this thread, I focus in the next section of this chapter on the more recent emergence of an enumerative and typological agenda in Australian research and policy, and trace its role in structuring concepts of homelessness at present. In doing so, I argue that the imperative to count and identify homeless types has finely tuned a chronic homeless subjectivity by reference to some of the normative understandings of home and tenure I
have indicated here. These are understandings that are challenged by couch surfing practices.

**Problematic typologies**

As I have demonstrated thus far, the move towards understanding homelessness as a social problem has also given rise to particular subjectivities. These reflect changing ideas about who the homeless *are* (and who they are *not*). More recently, efforts to define homelessness have increasingly centred on the push for standardised definitions. Over the past twenty years especially, there has been a growing emphasis in homelessness research on *counting the homeless* by types of living conditions, and mapping homelessness by pathways. Most notably of late, these approaches have come to fruition through the work of researchers like Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992: 274-297; 2006: 198-212; in Chamberlain & Johnson 2001: 35-50).

The trend towards formulating a *consistent* definition of homelessness in Australia has attracted the praise of some researchers internationally, and invited favourable comment from politicians here at the federal level (Leggatt-Cook 2007; Morello 2010). It has also taken up a central place in structuring government and service provider responses to homelessness. From the perspective of homelessness researchers, the need to enumerate and consistently define homelessness has come about as a response to the very narrowing of the homeless subject that I have discussed in this chapter. For example, a driving intention behind the enumerative work of Chamberlain and MacKenzie has been to map, quantify and highlight the extent of experiences that they feel ought to constitute homelessness at the policy level (Chamberlain 1999; MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2003a).
Importantly however, these approaches create particular versions of reality that have deeply affected how we think about homelessness at present. I would argue that some political imperatives (for example, to prioritise funding allocation in supported accommodation and in social housing) have seen very different outcomes flowing from these approaches, beyond that originally intended by an enumerative approach. Moreover, there are key aspects of these recent approaches to homelessness research that have bearing on how experiences like couch surfing are positioned in the field. In particular, these approaches have produced a standardised definition and structured typologies that problematically map homelessness against housing norms. Joining the critical work of authors such as Robinson (2002b), I argue that these enumerative-driven approaches sustain the focus on a narrow homeless subjectivity, and unhelpfully constitute homelessness as deviance, or as degrees of pathology.

**Normative housing and the cultural definition**

Since the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) first introduced a homeless count in the 1996 census, Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s quantitative work has centred on the “special enumeration strategy” (Chamberlain & Johnson 2001; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; Goldie 2004). Importantly, this strategy led to the adoption of an agreed upon definition of homelessness in Australia for census purposes, in the form of the “cultural definition” of homelessness (Chamberlain & Johnson 2001; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; 2003; Goldie 2004). This definition is crucial to the influential place of these researchers’ ideas.
In developing their cultural definition, Chamberlain and MacKenzie start from a social constructionist perspective; an understanding that homelessness is a concept and set of material circumstances that are culturally, economically and historically contingent (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; 2003; Chamberlain & Johnson 2001). From this understanding, the authors propose that homelessness ought to be defined by reference to a culturally determined, minimum standard of adequate housing (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; 2003; Chamberlain & Johnson 2001). They derive this from the general community standard of living, with the view that this allows for differences in definition across cultures, times and locations (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992; 2003). Incorporating these ideas as a premise, Chamberlain and MacKenzie define homelessness in Australia as the lack of access to the minimum standard of: *a small rental flat to live in – with a room to sleep in, a room to live in, kitchen and bathroom facilities of their own, and an element of security of tenure*” (Chamberlain & Johnson 2001: 15).

In one respect, this is an intelligent perspective that recognises the socially produced nature of homelessness. However, in building a claim to the legitimate (standardised or ‘official’) measure of homelessness, the researchers have also placed normative ideas about housing (and home) at the defining centre of what it means to be homeless. This issue has been commented upon by homelessness researchers like Catherine Robinson (2002b; 2005a) who, in her reflection on the experiences of homeless youth, points out that many researchers in Australia are mapping homelessness by the degree to which individuals lack a normative roof and an engagement with mainstream ‘housed’ society. These constructions have deep political effects. Indeed, the key implication is that they generate a
view of homelessness which, in Robinson’s (2002b: 27) way of speaking, those who are homed are compelled to "brace" themselves against:

In general, the distancing from or bracing against young home(less) people by the community (researchers and policy makers included) seems rooted in rigid conceptualisations of home and subjectivity, or of relations of place more generally. The focus of much research is on young home(less) people as consistently lacking a place in the community, in the city and the suburbs (Robinson 2002b: 27).

Similar social bracing has existed in relation to the vagrant or refugee; to the nomad and the gypsy; groups that have been simultaneously feared, persecuted and romanticised throughout history for their border crossings and their perceived deviation from normative standards of inhabitation (Cresswell 2001; 2006; May 2000). As I discuss in future chapters, these normative ideas carry serious implications for how young people contend with the emotional impacts of being homeless (Bessant 2001; May 2000; Robinson 2002b; Wilson 2007).

Significantly, the cultural definition has acquired canonical status in Australia. It not only underpins the census homeless count (its original purpose), but also strongly informs the homelessness field as a whole. The definition has been used for example in significant policy documents like the Australian Government Homelessness White Paper (FaHCSIA 2008), and in important inquiries into youth homelessness, such as the National Youth Commission report (2008). Moreover, it is through this cultural definition and its
enumerative purpose that Chamberlain and Johnson (2001) and Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992; 2006) developed a homeless typology. This typology raises an additional set of questions about the effects of constituting homelessness through research. Originally intended to expedite the homeless census count and add to the cultural definition, Chamberlain and MacKenzie have delineated “primary”, “secondary” and “tertiary” categories of homelessness (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992). According to the classifications developed by the researchers, the primary end of the homelessness spectrum refers to people lacking “conventional accommodation” (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008: vii). This includes situations such as rough sleeping, living in improvised shelters and street dwelling. Secondary homelessness is defined as “moving frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another” (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008: vii).

In this model, secondary homelessness represents the particular point where couch surfing experiences are located and spoken about. At the tertiary end of this spectrum, the authors refer to people staying in insecure housing, such as medium term boarding and lodging arrangements with no security of tenure (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008: vii). Crucially, this typology maps researchers' and policy makers' thinking about homelessness by "degrees", or by the extent to which someone does not inhabit the cultural standard of housing (the small rental flat or unit). In this sense, we might think about the enumerative approach in general as structuring ideas of homelessness along a spectrum of deviation from a normative home.

Moreover, by positioning rough sleeping and similar living conditions as a primary form of homelessness, these typologies entrench the preoccupation with a visible, roofless and
chronic homeless subjectivity as the essence of dislocation (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008). Indeed, ‘chronic homelessness’ has been characterised by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006; 2008b; Mackenzie & Chamberlain 2003a) as an eventual homeless identity which someone assumes, with various exit and re-entry points along the way. These kinds of understandings have drawn criticism and concern among some Australian social theorists. Robinson (2006: 4) in particular takes issue with the extent to which Australian researchers and policymakers construct experiences of homelessness as "...a process of slow degeneration into chronic homelessness and the development of a homeless identity" (Robinson 2006: 4). This is also echoed by writers in the homelessness advocacy sector. For instance, Wright-Howie – a policy officer with the Council to Homeless Persons – contends that in much of the literature, homeless living conditions are constructed as homeless identities (the primary homeless; the hidden homeless, for example) (Wright-Howie 2009: 21).

Pathologising Homelessness

The chronic homeless identity is deeply inscribed in the homeless career model currently being used in Australia. This career model (originally developed by Randall (1998) and adopted by Chamberlain and MacKenzie) has been particularly influential in the conceptualisation of pathways and risk in relation to youth homelessness as a phenomenon. For example, the career model describes young people’s experiences of homelessness as a movement through short term and long term stages: transitions in and out of home”, a permanent break from home, subsequent exposure to risky homeless subcultures” and eventual acceptance” of homelessness as a living condition and identity (Chamberlain &
MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2003a). Plotted along this model, practices like couch surfing become symptoms; positioned as ‘pre-homelessness’ or indicators of risk.

In this sense, I would contend that in reinscribing a chronic homeless subject these mainstream understandings of homelessness also deploy metaphors and models of chronic disease. That is, they structure ideas of homelessness as a set of symptomatic stages in a pathway towards chronicity. These are stage-like biographic constructions where, as critical geographer John May contends, researchers are “caught within an explanatory framework that seeks to explain homelessness by means of individual pathology” (May 2000: 618). This is made apparent, again, in explanatory frameworks like the homeless career model, that map homelessness as a pathway progression towards a chronic status; and where primary, secondary and tertiary categories of homelessness are arranged in such a way that interventions (in effect, ‘treatments’) fit at particular points; preferably before taking on a chronic homeless identity (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2006).

In many respects, these constructions of homeless pathways and stages call to mind the work of Susan Sontag (2001), who famously wrote about the impact of metaphor on the subjectivities of people experiencing chronic illness. Sontag (2001) critically made the case that certain metaphors commonly used to describe and frame illnesses (for example, cancer as a ‘curse’, ‘affliction’ or ‘death sentence’) are often ascribed in ways that target or blame disease on the identity and personality of the patient. When such metaphors are also deployed authoritatively by ‘experts’ of the day, they become systematically entrenched;
deeply impacting how patients relate to themselves and their illness experience (Sontag 2001).

Metaphors of disease as a disordered (failed or immoral) self are, like many understandings of homelessness, normative social constructions that reflect a stigmatising response to experiences held to be socially transgressive (Douglas 2002; Sontag 2001). The implication, as Sontag's (2001) critique suggests, is that prevailing explanations of homelessness in social research contribute to the idea that being homeless is to be ill. It means that our ideas about homelessness become politically or socially inscribed by certain 'symptoms' (rooflessness, abjection); understandings that risk constituting dislocation as a degenerative or 'hopeless' condition. Crucially, these definitions and accounts presently shape a considerable body of policy, research and thinking about homelessness in Australia (Leggatt-Cook 2007).

Again, this ultimately highlights the significant political and social effects of knowledge produced within the homelessness field (Bourdieu 1990; Mallett 2004b). What I have argued here is that many research imperatives have often begun with the goal of broadening understandings (and responses) to homelessness. At the same time, they have contributed to the production of a chronic and stigmatised homeless subject. Indeed, the problem here is that approaches like the cultural definition directly shape (and are in turn shaped by) government, community and service responses to youth homelessness as a socially constructed issue. How young people are 'fitted' within these typologies has massive bearing on identities and life chances. It intimately affects the extent to which housing and supportive resources are provided; and more broadly, it patterns how communities and
households respond to dislocation. This is especially problematic for young people whose experiences do not sit with existing categories and thinking in the homelessness field.

**Calling into question**

As researchers such as May *et al.* (2007), Robinson (2001; 2002b), Somerville (1992) and Wardhaugh (1999) have suggested, prevailing understandings of homelessness go to the heart of the deeply held social norms driving our ideas of what it means to be homeless. What I have demonstrated thus far in this chapter is the extent to which, in imagining and constructing the „essence‘ of homelessness, prevailing thinking about homelessness is centred on the visible lack of physical shelter; on chronicity, and on deviation from the normative trappings of home. Implicit in these meanings is the central notion that young people who experience homelessness have no agency or connection; that there is no way of possessing identity, social relations, belonging, and meaningful places outside of the accepted ideas of being adequately homed (May 2000: 618; Robinson 2001; 2002b).

Crucially, couch surfing practices sit uneasily within these assumptions about youth homelessness. Practices for seeking temporary accommodation occur under many shifting roofs. They are engaged in relatively equally by women and men (Robinson & Coward 2003: 2), as well as among female-headed families and single parents. Couch surfing is also experienced often by young people of school age or in their early twenties (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2003a; Uhr 2004), and involves a fluid set of circumstances, relationships, spaces and tenures. Couch surfing practices also involve young people’s engagement in their own local social connections and resourcefulness, for as long as this is tenable (Uhr 2004: 6). Moreover, as the accounts in this research also suggest, one important element of
the practice of couch surfing is about the need to avoid being labelled or stigmatised as a "homeless person".

In essence, the narrowing of the homelessness field to exclude an understanding of so-called "new" subjectivities has meant that young people who seek their own temporary accommodation with private households are negotiating dislocation differently. Their experiences unsettle our understandings of homelessness, and ask us to think beyond them. It should be possible to imagine that someone identified as homeless possesses strong social relations and agency despite not having a roof; that young people who couch surf are actively engaged in, as Robinson writes:

… [a] process of configuring relations with place, of developing networks of connections, of somehow weaving the self through…[F]or young home(less) people, these are imperatives and tactics of physical and emotional recovery and survival (Robinson 2002b: 28).

In these ways, we might begin to think of a multiplicity of practices through which young people contend with dislocation, and the struggle for home.

**Conclusion**

Through my analysis of the academic and policy literature in this chapter, I have critically explored the complex origins, development and identification of couch surfing as concept and category. In this way, I have examined how couch surfing as a phenomenon is positioned, both conceptually and politically, within the field of youth homelessness. In
speaking of the normative tropes of home, and the narrow notion of a chronic homeless subjectivity shaping the field, I have also demonstrated the problematic ways in which homelessness is currently framed as a social issue. Positioned against these mainstream understandings of homelessness, it is not surprising that practices like couch surfing are being labelled as hidden homelessness; homelessness risk, pre-homelessness, or secondary homelessness; or constructed somewhere on the borders between shelter and the streets.

A key aspect of the positioning of couch surfing in (and by) the homelessness field is how it raises a sense of doubt around these political and social constructions. In drawing attention to this doubt, I have established how we might think, instead, about a multitude of ways in which young people (re)negotiate home, support and survival. This is a way of thinking about homelessness that also hinges on young people's accounts. It is through the next chapter that I anticipate these accounts, and map out the research process at the heart of this thesis.
CHAPTER THREE

Setting in motion: Research process and methods

To try to capture the interpretative process by remaining aloof as a so-called "objective" observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism (Blumer 2007: 76).

As I have established across the last two chapters, this thesis is built upon an interpretive engagement with couch surfing as a lived process, and one that challenges many of our ideas about what it means to be homeless. My analysis of couch surfing is deeply informed by young people's interview accounts, and the meanings which I have taken from them. In this chapter, I map out the methodology that rests at the heart of my interpretive approach and the empirical chapters to come. I reflect upon how the interview accounts were produced, and the methods by which they were interpreted. As well as this, I reflect on the research journey itself, focusing on the challenges and adaptations that shaped the fieldwork. I also give space to important contextual and ethical considerations that became known through working with young people who have couch surfed. These considerations flag important methodological issues for future research involving young people and experiences of dislocation.

Open to interpretation: Mapping the methodology

The qualitative research underpinning this thesis is in-depth in scope, and nuanced in nature. I have not aimed to produce the generalising claims of enumerative or large-scale qualitative studies (though this thesis does open dialogue with existing research of this kind). Instead, my goal in speaking with young people and youth workers has been to seek
a nuanced perspective on what we know about youth homelessness. I have, in this process, shared in producing and interpreting personal accounts that I think add important, alternative stories and meanings to the homelessness field. Like all empirical work however, these are at the same time partial and specific readings. Situating this research as partial, I reaffirm my reflexive position on knowledge in the human sciences (and one that has been made by many a feminist scholar and critical social scientist),\(^{20}\) that an unmediated, wholly _objective_ and universal claim to knowing is very much a myth. In seeking to _make sense_ of couch surfing, I have met young people’s stories as best as can be done, in the &quot;betweenness of their world and mine&quot; (England 1994:87). This betweenness speaks of important processes of relating and interpretation. That is, a research process co-constructed by researchers and _researched_ alike.

This intersubjectivity is at the heart of doing and producing social research. Relations of betweenness defined the kinds of border crossings and boundaries I navigated throughout the interviews. In arguing such, I link in with the important contributions of postmodern feminist methodology. In particular, I draw upon Gibson and Graham’s (1994) concept of research as constitutive of researcher/researched relations (rather than purely reflective of a pre-existing, unmediated _reality_), and the multitude of feminist researchers (including Heidi Nast (1994) and Linda McDowell (1992)) who have highlighted the impact of audience in shaping what can be said, and challenging authorial intent. In connecting with these critical methodologies, an important part of my reflexive and interpretive approach to this research is, in the words of feminist scholar Gillian Rose, &quot;...keep[ing] the political

\(^{20}\) See for example the work of feminist theorists Patricia Collins (1999); Kim England (1994); Donna Haraway (2004); Sandra Harding (2004) and Gillian Rose (1997)); and the reflexive methodologies of social scientists such as Bourdieu (1992); Susan Chase (1996); Amanda Coffey (1999) and Michael Jackson (1996).
aim of situating academic knowledge in mind: to produce non generalizing knowledges that can learn from other kinds of knowledges” (Rose 1997: 318).

In carrying out the research (a process which I outline in the next part of this chapter), I worked from a grounded theory approach. Importantly, this approach enabled me to build research questions and generate my theoretical perspectives abductively, *through* the themes and meanings that emerged in young people’s accounts. Grounded theory is one way researchers might go about _bracketing off_ assumptions about social phenomena, and generating understandings *in vivo*. According to Corbin and Strauss, grounded theory is a methodological path in which:

…the research process itself guides the researcher toward examining all of the possibly rewarding avenues to understanding. This is why the research method is one of discovery and one which grounds a theory in reality (Corbin & Strauss 1990: 6).

In taking up this methodology, I wanted to establish an interpretive openness to young people’s life worlds; to put aside what is _known_ about youth homelessness and generate an account that begins with the meanings young people have conveyed (Coffey 1999; Jackson 1996). As such, grounded theory served as a way of interactively developing and testing my explanatory framework. It enabled me to place central importance on the ongoing feedback of the interview process, to have space to reflect on themes, and opportunities to expand upon them during interviews.
I qualify my use of this methodology with the word ‘approach’, however. As I detail later in this chapter, most of the young people I interviewed were (for want of a better term) ‘difficult to reach’. Because of some of their circumstances (including factors like tumultuous living arrangements, or not having access to a mobile phone), it was more often than not impossible to get back in touch with many of those I had interviewed. For these reasons, I was unable to run follow-up interviews with each young person, which might have otherwise allowed for additional testing of ideas and an expansion of themes over time. Instead, I took each new interview as an opportunity to explore issues and themes that had been raised by other young people in previous interviews; effectively adding new themes and ideas as the fieldwork progressed. Through this methodology, I developed the key research themes and questions that have become the focus of this thesis.

Setting up the research

The time I spent actively searching for and interviewing young people in this research spanned a period of about six months, from early March through to September 2008. Fourteen young people took part in interviews; ten were young men and four were young women, and the age of participants ranged from 16 to 25 years. Some of the young people I spoke with found out about the study through university or TAFE campuses, but the majority had heard about the study through contact with youth workers at the Trace-A-Place (TAP) service. Situated in the city of Adelaide, Trace-A-Place is part of the South Australian non-profit agency Service to Youth Council (SYC). It operates as a central referral and case management service for young people aged 12 to 25 years, who are facing or have experienced homelessness in metropolitan Adelaide. In particular, the service provides emergency and supported accommodation referrals; links young people to other housing and support services, and has a number of employment, education and advocacy
Through the invaluable assistance and support of youth workers at TAP, I was able to link in with young people who had couch surfed and were interested in sharing their experiences with me. Eleven young people found out about the research through TAP, and three expressed interest after seeing posters placed around the campuses of city based tertiary institutions.

All interviews were in-depth, unstructured and face-to-face. The locations of the interviews varied, depending on whether the young person had links to TAP or had heard about the study from another source (such as posters placed around university and TAFE campuses). I chose to focus on the Adelaide central business district in looking for young people to interview. With a longer window of opportunity to plan for multiple sites, I would also have drawn from regional areas of South Australia. That being said, many of the young people I interviewed had come to Adelaide from either regional areas (both interstate and South Australian), or had originally lived overseas. Many had moved to the city and surrounds to gain access to services (like health or support services) and emergency accommodations that were not available in their local areas.

As well as the young people who took part in the interviews, seven others had initially expressed interest, but did not end up taking part in an interview. Most had arranged to meet me for an interview but did not arrive on the day, or could not be contacted. In many cases, these young people were no longer able to make it because of an unforeseen issue with housing, such as eviction or being relocated to emergency housing outside the metropolitan area. Most of these instances happened in the first couple of months after

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21 For more information on the TAP program and SYC, see: http://www.syc.net.au/
beginning fieldwork in early 2008, when initially there was a one or two week gap between first making a time to meet with young people, and the date of the scheduled interview.\footnote{As I highlight later, this time lag was due to my initial plans to give young people an opportunity to engage in a visual element of the research, before returning for the interview.}

**Youth worker focus groups**

In addition to the interviews, I sought the professional perspectives of youth workers involved in referring young people to emergency and supported accommodation. My aim here was to get some perspective on how couch surfing was being defined and encountered in formal systems, and specifically within specialist services aimed at youth homelessness as a specific issue. To this end, I conducted a focus group with nine youth worker staff from TAP, as well as engaging discussions with a number of other youth workers who were happy to contribute their thoughts. The focus group ran for approximately one hour and involved open, unstructured discussion. Through the focus group and the additional discussions, youth workers shared their understanding and knowledge of couch surfing as a practice and a concept, as well as their encounters with young people as part of their work. Youth workers also shared their impressions of how young people navigate couch surfing and dislocation; barriers that couch surfers might face to accessing accommodation and support, and their assessment of what more could be done to assist young people in couch surfing situations.

**From proposal to practice: A process of adaptation**

Anticipating and adapting to practical challenges was an important part of the research process. Many of these challenges spoke to the material and personal realities of individual
young people’s lives, and the marginalities that many had experienced. One of the crucial challenges in this respect was ensuring that as many young people as possible had the opportunity to share their stories with me. This meant finding out how to ‘reach’ and find young people who had practiced couch surfing, and knowing what approaches would work (and what would not). Another key challenge was identifying and negotiating specific barriers to young people’s participation. These fundamental aspects of enacting the fieldwork called for an adaptable, troubleshooting approach. In some cases, it also meant adjusting the research ‘design’ to better fit the geographies and contexts of young people’s lives (and work with the constraints of time and resources). In the following table, I have mapped out some of the key challenges I encountered, and how I adapted to them throughout the research process.

As the table below indicates, the research journey was anything but a linear progression from original design to enactment. Rather, it was a feedback process that involved learning from young people themselves about how best to make things work. One of the particular adaptations I made in this respect was deciding not to go ahead and run an additional focus group with young people. My intention had been to run this group with ten interviewees I had previously spoken with, as a way of expanding upon important themes from the interviews. However, it was difficult to get in touch with young people for follow-up, and coordinating a time when all ten participants might be available became a prohibitive task.
Table 1. Adapting the research design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original ‘Design’</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Adaptations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Run in-depth interviews with 14 young people and a focus group with 10 young people as follow-up.</td>
<td>Problems coordinating everyone's availability. Many young people are still encountering housing difficulties or highly itinerant.</td>
<td>Scrap focus groups with young people. Only run single session in-depth interviews, to better fit with young people's lives, commitments and living situations. Concentrate on focus group with youth housing agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit participants through referrals of interest from Trace-A-Place (TAP) and poster advertisements.</td>
<td>Difficult to respond to referrals in time. People losing interest, dropping out of contact or moving elsewhere before interview takes place.</td>
<td>Have a physical presence at TAP at least once a week, so interested young people can speak with me directly on the day, and interviews can go ahead on first come, first served basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide cameras for young people prior to interviews, to capture what home and belonging mean for them.</td>
<td>Cameras are not being returned at the interview. Dropouts happening after asking young people to meet a week or so later for their interview. Photo journal is delaying the interview process.</td>
<td>If possible, interview young people on the same day as they make contact with me. Provide cameras at the end of the interview, not days before, and only to those who express particular interest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My decision to eliminate the focus group with young people was also a response to some of the preferences and concerns interviewees had expressed to me. Importantly, after speaking with a number of young people about their interest in a focus group, some had said they were worried about discussing their personal experiences in a group setting. Others were also concerned about speaking to a group that might comprise people they knew personally. Taking these important considerations on board, I decided to limit the focus group to the youth workers, and concentrate on developing themes and theory through the in-depth interviews with young people.

At the beginning of the research process, one of the other significant hurdles I navigated was adjusting appropriately to the timing of interviews, and to contextual aspects of young people's lives that affected their ability to participate. For many of the young people I spoke with, living situations were in a state of flux, as I discuss further on in this chapter. In part because of these circumstances, the task of organising interviews for more than a few days in advance proved to be difficult. Likewise, it was a challenge subsequently getting in touch with young people (for example, to check ahead that they were still okay to make it to the interview). As I have pointed out, making contact was further complicated because some interviewees did not have regular access to home phones or mobile phone credit.

Initially, some of these timing issues were an unintended side effect of my plan to incorporate a visual element in the research. In fact, I had made provisions for young people to have the option of sketching maps or taking photographs with a disposable camera prior to the interview. The idea was that the images produced would capture a kind of photo diary of young people's own meanings of home, as well as evoking places they
might have stayed at in the past as part of couch surfing. My rationale behind this visual method was that it would aid in stimulating discussion during the interviews, particularly around couch surfing experiences and meanings of home and belonging. It was hoped that these images would also become rich sources of description and significance in and of themselves, as a purely visual dimension of memory and representation.

Unfortunately, in practice this visual approach was difficult to enact. Handing out the cameras and allowing time for developing the film meant that in many cases there was a gap of time between the day the interview times were set, and the date young people came back to speak with me. This was enough of a gap that a number of young people lost interest in or forgot about the interview. As I indicated earlier, some of these people also dropped out of contact after encountering housing difficulties that meant they could no longer take part. Given these considerations, I decided that where it was possible I should try to meet with interested young people and do the interview with them on the same day, setting the visual work aside as an option at the end of the interview.

In taking this approach, it was important to establish a more physical presence at places where young people were seeing the posters or hearing about the research. In this case, it was mostly at the offices of Trace-A-Place. After discussing options with TAP staff, I arranged to ‘hang out’ at the front office about once or twice a week for the day. This was my regular practice for a period of about two months. In doing so, the aim was to be available to meet with young people where they were already seeking services, and to be in a position to run ‘drop-in’ interviews. I had also aimed to lessen some of the pressure on staff who had been helping to communicate and pass on young people’s expressions of
interest. On the days that I was not physically present at TAP, I was also available on-call to meet with young people at mutually convenient spots and times around the metropolitan area.

In terms of the visual element of the research, it became necessary to provide cameras at the end of the interviews, and only to young people who had expressed a particular interest in producing the visual diary. This was primarily because few interviewees brought the cameras or visual work with them to the interviews. Out of all participants for example, just one young person was able to return film for processing. Unfortunately (and ironically), it turned out the film had been exposed and was unusable. This was complicated by the fact that I was subsequently unable to get back in touch with the young man who had returned the camera.

With the proverbial benefit of hindsight, it would have been more worthwhile to create a specific project space for developing this photo diary work. This is something I feel would certainly have benefited from remaining separate from the interview process, where I might have directly worked with young people in producing their work. Logistically and in terms of timing, this would have meant planning a more distinct stage for the visual work to take place. This was not realistic under time constraints at the point of doing my research. Despite the difficulties I encountered however, this visual focus remains something that I am especially interested in exploring in future research.
(Dis)location: Doing research ‘on the move’

The challenges and adaptations that I have mapped here point to an important aspect of *doing* qualitative research, and one that is too often overlooked. The research journey I undertook was a learning process in setting aside assumptions and expectations, an unfolding exercise in anticipating and navigating the unique contexts of young people’s life worlds. In seeking accounts of couch surfing, I entered into a field of experiences that had put young people constantly on the move – experiences that take place diffusely and across shifting times and places. Many of the taken-for-granted sites and temporalities of social research were unavailable here. Making rigidly fixed plans had proved problematic.

Hanging out and living ‘on the fly’ seemed to be the way to go. I could not assume that houses and homes would be an appropriate interview setting. At the same time, finding young people who had couch surfed meant thinking and searching beyond the soup kitchens and shelters of homeless geographies, finding ways to speak to a practice that traverses a wide range of living situations.

In doing this research, it was necessary to dis-locate from assumed sites and structures. It was, moreover, important to recognise and re-think the geographies and temporalities (many of which were stable, mapped, familiar, easily scheduled and accessible) that had previously shaped my expectations and experiences of social research. It was not realistic, for example, to visit someone for their interview if they were couch surfing at someone else’s place, on the move, or in the middle of housing difficulties. Likewise, for people who were moving around frequently, it was a challenge to make contact concerning the research when they may not have had use of mobile phone credit, a computer, or spare change for a payphone. Similarly, I did not expect young people to go out of their way for their
interview, when there was a possibility that some interviewees might not have money to spare, or where the interview site was unfamiliar to them, lacked privacy, or was hard to access via public transport.

Attending to these important dimensions of many young people's lives meant having detailed discussions when arranging interviews. It meant working out safe, accessible and neutral spaces known to young people, where the interviews could take place. This was partly why I concentrated my research in the Adelaide CBD. There was a need to find an urban centre where young people who had couch surfed were likely to seek housing and other services at some point. Likewise, I looked for central, public sites, where young people might see the study advertised on noticeboards. In thinking about these aspects of the research, I also looked to the experience and resources of youth workers, drawing upon the links I had made with organisations like TAP.

**Making connections: Youth service providers as a nexus**

There were distinct advantages and disadvantages in going through the medium of a youth-focused not-for-profit service, and in having TAP as a major gateway for finding young people to share their stories. Trace-A-Place was certainly an excellent choice geographically. With its central city location, the service was close to many other support agencies servicing the general metropolitan area (including, on the same street, a Centrelink office; a range of employment network and job training services and tertiary education institutions). Trace-A-Place was also advantageous in terms of the personalised and supportive drop-in ‘shopfront‘ service it nurtured. Young people’s relationship with the staff at TAP seemed quite positive and at ease, and many youth workers encouraged a strong rapport. The youth workers and management staff were also incredibly supportive of
the research process, and had experience themselves in action research methodologies. In particular, the staff were extremely helpful in aiding me to find young people to interview. As part of the well-established Service to Youth Council, TAP is also quite familiar to young people around Adelaide as a central place to go when facing housing difficulties or looking to connect with employment and advocacy services. The accessibility of the service itself also facilitated young people’s interest in taking part. The offices were a place, for instance, where interviewees could contact me at no cost to themselves over the phone, through the medium of staff they knew and were comfortable with, or speak with me directly with no additional travel or cost. I could ‘embed’ myself at the TAP offices on a regular basis, and make myself available to meet with interested young people who were already there for other reasons. As I have indicated, this meant that I could carry out interviews on a drop-in basis, significantly alleviating any time pressures on staff. Having strong links with TAP also enabled me to access private, purpose-built rooms to carry out interviews.
### Table 2. The agency medium: Experiences of TAP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central city location.</td>
<td>Couch surfers who are not accessing formal assistance may not hear about study (unless they have seen posters elsewhere).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research-supportive and experienced staff.</td>
<td>Single agency site (with some referrals from Mission Australia) may limit diversity or range of young people taking part.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service is central referral agency for young people (15 to 25 years of age) seeking assistance with housing and employment in Adelaide and surrounds.</td>
<td>Younger demographic predominant at TAP (15 to 18 years of age). This age group may be more likely to seek formal services when couch surfing has broken down for them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenient and familiar for young people. Provides site to &quot;hang out&quot;.</td>
<td>Political, ethical considerations of working within a formal, &quot;institutionalised setting&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good drop-in and on the spot interview opportunities. Specialised, private spaces for interviewing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff assistance with seeking suitable participants.</td>
<td>Influence of social workers in selecting which young people are considered suitable to participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As indicated in the table above, there were also some disadvantages to my engagement with this site. One particular downside to my reliance on a single agency is that this could have influenced the diversity and range of experiences of participants. That being said, it was not an aim of this research to pursue a representative sample; but rather to garner a nuanced, grounded set of perspectives. It is also worth noting that in the Adelaide metropolitan area, a great deal of the housing and health services in the city actively refer young clients between different, specialised agencies. In this context, many of the young people who accessed TAP did so in order to be referred on to accommodation, employment and social welfare services spread out across a diverse range of suburban and metropolitan areas. Of course in a more general sense, going through a formal accommodation service meant that some people who were in the process of couch surfing and not accessing services may not have been in a position to find out about the study, unless they saw posters around public, city spaces.

Arguably, one of the most significant disadvantages of seeking and running interviews through a formal, specialist service was that it meant working within the bounds of an institutional setting. There are, of course, power relationships bound up in this. A case in point is that it may have played a role in the decisions of some of the young people who dropped out before their interview. For example, they may not have wanted to see their social worker around the office that day, or speak of their housing and other experiences in the same interview spaces where they saw their social workers. Moreover, some young people were very accustomed to the process and practice of being interviewed within the context of a bureaucratic field. This ranged, for example, from countless interactions with social workers and counsellors, to interrogations from police. In some respects, this
coloured their impressions and attitudes towards the research process. For some who mentioned this, familiarity with interviews had made them feel accustomed and at ease with sharing their experiences. Others expressed a certain sense of weariness and distrust of the process, having gone through a great deal of systems that required them to share their life histories with strangers, time after time. As one of the interviewees related it to me:

> You've got that many people poking and prodding and all that sort of stuff! It's just a pain in the bum. [laughing softly] What you need is one of them [points to my tape recorder] and you tape it and you just go:

> “Here!”

In responding to some of these issues, I sought to situate myself _beyond_ this milieu and to distinguish myself somewhat from the plethora of figures and systems that formed young people’s experiences of the welfare field. This was admittedly a difficult task at times. The TAP interview rooms (while purpose-built, private spaces) were the same sites that marked many young people’s encounters with youth workers, often at times of crisis. Similarly, everyday comforts like being able to chat over a cup of tea or coffee, were not allowed because of in-house health and safety protocols presiding over the interview space (only water was permitted). In these contexts, it was important that I ensured young people were completely satisfied that our conversations were a safe space for them, where they could share their experiences with a neutral party, and in confidence. In some respects, my age at the time made this somewhat easier. I was only at best a few years older than most of the people I interviewed at that point. Some interviewees had commented, for example, that
they “felt comfortable” chatting with someone close to their age group, and who was not a social worker.

**Ethical considerations**

All research carried out was subject to prior assessment, review and approval by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee. Prior to giving consent, all participants were fully informed about the research and the nature of their participation and understood that they were under no obligation to participate in the study. Young people taking part were fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and to have their information and responses excluded from the research findings upon request. Prior to commencing the research, I was also given clearance by TAP through a National Police Certificate criminal record check.

**Reimbursements**

Early into planning the fieldwork, the staff at TAP recommended I provide a small reimbursement to young people who took part, as appreciation for giving their time and their story. This was approved by the ethics committee, and I was able to provide $10 Coles/Myer gift vouchers, offered as part of the agreement to participate in the study. Generally, the vouchers were well received, but it was also a small enough amount that this minimised my concerns about perverse incentives.

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23 See appendix for information letters for interviews and focus groups.
Age considerations

In cases where young people were under the age of eighteen, I had been granted ethics approval to obtain informed written consent directly from the young people themselves (in lieu of parents/caregivers), as long as the young people had been declared independent for Centrelink purposes. Obtaining informed consent from the parents/caregivers of young people under the age of 18 is often prohibitive for those who are experiencing homelessness, particularly as parental and caregiver relationships are frequently problematic (Bessant 2006). I am, of course, certainly not alone in grappling with this. As Bessant contends, the human research ethics process requiring parental consent (and often, not requiring consent from young people themselves) amounts to age-based discrimination, in the sense that:

…[M]any researchers decide against research about or with under-18-year-olds because the ethics requirements create too much work…[This] means researchers are more likely to rely on the perspectives of outsiders. In other words, it encourages the production of knowledge about young people that does not include the accounts from those young people (Bessant 2006: 54).

Indeed, the issue of age limits in social research is a significant and ongoing point of contention in research ethics. On the one hand, as Bessant (2006) points out, the requirement of parental consent highlights the importance of duties of care, as well as anxieties about managing risk (Bessant 2006). On the other hand, age restrictions also reflect normative assumptions about young people’s limited capacities to exercise agency.
and judgement (Bessant 2006). Moreover, there is the case to be made that these limits prevent some young people from participating in the kinds of research that is capable of garnering their views directly (as opposed to statistically or through ‘experts’, for example) (Bessant 2006). This is a point which youth-focused researchers like Bessant (2006) are particularly concerned about. The implication is that requirements like obtaining caregiver consent effectively exclude an important and often disadvantaged group of young people from a right to take part in research that is producing significant knowledge about their experiences and identities (Bessant 2006).

Confidentiality and handling of data

Responses from young people and interview transcripts were anonymous. In this thesis, pseudonyms have been used for all interviewees and youth workers who took part in the research. Due to the open nature of the interviews, those involved were also given the opportunity to receive a transcript of their interview, and the option of electing which interview material they wished to be used in the findings chapters, and used anonymously in discussion with other interviewees. Young people were also able to choose which material they wanted to place limitations on, for example, who it could be discussed with, or in what time frame, or other specifications for how it may be used. None of the young people who took part chose to exercise these options however.

Linking to support services

Young interviewees were provided with relevant contacts from the research ethics committee, and a comprehensive list of available and relevant counselling, health and social
services. There were also provisions in place through TAP for young people to have links with appropriate counselling services, which could be made available on call for anyone who required assistance or support.\textsuperscript{24}

**Interviewing practices**

A majority of the interviews for this research took place retrospectively for the young people involved. In some cases, couch surfing happened years before. Other young people I spoke with (especially those in their late teens) had just gotten new housing or accommodation and were hoping to put experiences of dislocation behind them. There were a few young people who were couch surfing or in emergency accommodation at the time of the interview, however this was not the case for most. Many of the young people I spoke with identified with the interview process as a way of sharing, reflecting and giving space to an experience they had not talked explicitly about before.

I took care to ensure the interviews were unstructured and in-depth, focusing on the young person’s accounts of their pathways through couch surfing, and enabling them to tell their story in their own ways and in their own time. There were some points when I asked questions from a sheet of prompts that I had on hand.\textsuperscript{25} These were prompts about issues that did not always come up in the usual narrative flow. This included, for example, questions the spatial elements of couch surfing or how young women and men negotiated couch surfing places and relationships differently. I also specifically asked young people about their ideals and meanings of home, and of how they defined, couch surfing. My goal here, as I have indicated, was not to make any statements about large statistical patterns or

\textsuperscript{24} See participant information sheet and agency information sheet.

\textsuperscript{25} See appendix.
trends. Rather, the research sought a closer, more detailed perspective on the phenomenon. This perspective is driven by the thick description of young people’s narratives, as well as the insights of staff that provide housing assistance to young people. Throughout the interviews with young people, I focused very much on the impressions and the meanings conveyed, through thick descriptions of events and an exploration of the emotional and embodied landscapes of experience.

**Working with young people’s accounts: Thematic modes of analysis**

In analysing (for want of a better term) young people’s accounts in this research, I audio recorded all interviews and transcribed these recordings verbatim, producing typed electronic transcripts. This was an intensive process of revisiting, reflecting, rethinking and anticipating new themes to expand upon in future interviews. Through the act of listening to and transcribing interviews, and in taking the time to read over each transcript in detail, I was able to immerse myself in the specific flow of discussions with young interviewees, ‘picking up the threads’ of issues and themes that had only begun to emerge in the face-to-face context. In this grounded approach to analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967), I engaged in a gradual layering of inquiry, beginning with a general mapping of themes as they arose. This process often took place on paper and in simple notes and sketches. From these kinds of mappings, I gradually expanded upon the particular ideas and issues that young people’s accounts consistently invoked and indicated, and explored these with increasing detail in each interview.

As well as these basic elements of grounded theory, my use of NVivo 8 software further assisted in my thematic analysis of young people’s accounts, and the transcripts that emerged from them. Utilising a tree structure for coding, highlighting and making reference
to key passages from interview transcripts, this software enabled me to inductively build a picture of recurring themes in young people's accounts, and track the nuances and frequency of these themes across the interviews. From this patterning of interview themes (and the visual, branching representation enabled by this software), I was able to build the interconnected theoretical perspectives that shape the structure and narrative flow of this thesis at large.

**Conclusion**

Through this chapter, I have mapped the methodological and practical journey of doing social research with marginalised young people. I have outlined the ways in which I handled, garnered and sought accounts of couch surfing. What I have also done is to highlight how these accounts fundamentally inform the theoretical perspectives and research questions that shape the thesis. In the chapters to come, I take up the threads of the critical, interpretive groundwork established thus far, examining the body of accounts which emerged from young people and youth workers’ interviews. In doing so, I trace the ‘process through’ couch surfing, establishing how young people’s experiences might be understood as both an immediately accessible tactic for seeking to (re)negotiate survival and connection and once begun, a process involving an embodied set of practices. These practices, I contend, represent young people’s ways of navigating (through, towards, away from) a tenuous social relation which intimately shapes identities and social citizenship.

In taking this perspective, I pursue an understanding of couch surfing beyond a dominant focus on living situations or a particular homeless subjectivity. I look instead to young people’s accounts of couch surfing as a fluid experience, intimately patterned by tenuous relationships, tense emotional geographies, and structural barriers. As I examine in later
chapters, this is a lived and deeply affecting process, where young people’s practices for survival and connection are brought to bear in the intimate dimensions of household space.
CHAPTER FOUR

Nowhere else to go: Couch surfing and the (re)negotiation of home

“There isn’t anywhere else. I don’t know where else to go.” –Rita

In this chapter, I draw upon young people's accounts of the passage towards dislocation. It is through these narratives that I trace the beginnings of couch surfing as a means and outcome of (re)negotiating home, in the face of social marginalisation. I examine the important social processes at the heart of couch surfing, as highlighted through young people’s accounts. In doing so, I bring these accounts into a dialogue with existing knowledge and understandings in the homelessness literature. I also foreground my discussion in later chapters around the experience of tenuous couch surfing relationships, and the everyday practices through which young people navigate (and are affected by) these relations.

Through the first half of this chapter, I unpack the relational underpinnings of young people’s experiences of dislocation, contextualising couch surfing as a process emerging from losses, absences and betrayals of important relationships and sources of support. In the later sections of this chapter, I examine the role of social and institutional barriers in young people’s decisions to rely on their own resources for shelter and survival. In particular, I bring attention to problematic issues in the social construction of ‘need’ in formal services and bureaucratic systems, and map out the impact of stigma – an issue that dominated young people’s accounts.
Underpinnings of dislocation: Fraught caregiver relationships

For all but one of the fourteen young people I spoke with in the course of this research, couch surfing was an experience that emerged from profound situations of dislocation, alienation and barriers to gaining help or assistance. For those who first couch surfed at a young age (eighteen, nineteen years and under), these situations were rooted in complex social and relational processes. In one respect, ruptured familial relationships between the young person and their kin (especially their parent(s)) were central to young people’s accounts. At a broader level, couch surfing also emerged in a context of structural and political barriers to social citizenship.

One of the questions I often asked during my conversations with young interviewees was simply “what things were happening at the time that first led to couch surfing for you?” With the exception of Grant, Rita’s and Mike’s experiences, this question invariably brought young people to the issue of familial relationships as one important aspect of their experiences of dislocation:

Pauline McLoughlin (PM): What were some of the things in your life at the time that kind of first led into couch surfing for you?

Grant identified his couch surfing experience explicitly as a lifestyle choice, in the backpacker vein. I have included Grant’s story in this research, as he represented a telling antithesis of the experiences of the other young people I interviewed. Couch surfing was not about ‘lifestyle’ for the rest of the interviewees. It was part of a fraught practice for survival. Grant’s story in effect made this difference all the more apparent.
Jonathan: *Family problems with my dad and my mum. Since they split up it's pretty much been a big problem. And moving from, back and forth from here to [a small regional centre] and that and stuff...there was just always problems at home which led me on to the streets and to mates' houses, just staying with them for a couple of nights and that...The problems started at about ten [years of age]. And the first time I actually left home would have been about twelve...*

Craig: *My mum kicked me out. And, yeah I was forced to go couch surf, I couldn’t get any accommodation.*

Kyle: *Violence at home and uh, yeah, just bad family home. So one day I just decided “I'm outta here!”... And, you know, took some small items in a bag and left and hit the streets...*

Jake: *Mainly like, relationship breakdowns, then going to drugs and alcohol.*

Adam: *I left home about fifteen, sixteen. Family problems. Drugs and crime.*

Lucas: *Not being able to live at home. I know that sounds very simplified, but that's what did it.*
These descriptions elucidate how, for the young people I interviewed who had first couch surfed at an early age, fraught relationships with family were a prevailing theme. Interviewees reflected on how they had voluntarily left or run away; had been evicted from, or ‘crowded out’ of home – usually in their teens. Some, like Jonathan, Renee and Kyle, first left home as young as twelve years old; others, like Lucas, Yvette, Mark, Jake and Adam were out of the parental home at fifteen to nineteen years of age. In one way or another, these relationships had rendered a family or caregiver home untenable and unbearable, stripped and lost. In many instances, those I spoke with found themselves out of home with no financial or emotional support from their immediate families. Young people’s accounts of how they come to be ‘outside the parental home’ at a young age were, in particular, pervaded by the divorce or separation of parents, and stressful, alienating or unpredictable relationships within parental home(s). For others, family violence and abuse were major factors in their experiences. In some young men’s accounts, vexed relationships with a parent’s de facto partner or ‘stepfather’ figures dominated narratives of eviction. As well as these experiences, young people also spoke of struggles with alcohol, drug use and mental illness (either their own struggles, or members of their households), and overcrowding in their family homes.

In a lot of cases of divorce, young people explained how they found themselves divided between two households that were often very geographically separated (sometimes the parents lived in separate states (such as Mark). In other instances, one parent lived in a rural or regional area while another lived closer to Adelaide (like Jonathan); some lived overseas (such as Yvette’s parents). This distance, or tensions and relational problems between parents and/or the young person themselves, made it difficult to remain living with either
parental household. Young people who had been in these situations spoke of preferring, at the time, to leave altogether; to stay with friends in the area they were most attached to, or to ‘stick it out’ on their own. As I indicated in Chapter Two, these accounts relate very closely to some of the experiences of young people as mapped out in the *Community Connections* qualitative study (Uhr 2004: 6-7). For example, the majority of the 23 young people interviewed in this study had initially used their own ‘informal’ networks (friends, family, family of friends or their community) before they turned to formal homeless services. In this study, friends and friends’ family in particular were foremost among these informal supports, followed by extended family members (Uhr 2004: 7).

Yvette, one of the young women I interviewed, began couch surfing a year before our interview in 2008, after her parents separated and moved back to their hometown overseas. She decided to stay on in Adelaide, as that is where she had grown up (spanning the last ten years of her life at the time). In her interview, Yvette later related having experienced abuse within the family setting. She spoke with an undertone of sorrow, frustration and anger at the difficult emotional terrain of dealing with her parents. This parental relationship alienated her from home in its taken-for-granted, normative sense (the idealised qualities of a family ‘home’ had certainly not been her experience of it). In expressing these experiences to me, Yvette posited that the uncertainties of couch surfing and the risk of dwelling on the streets had seemed preferable situations compared to enduring this vexed family relationship:

*I moved out of home when I was seventeen, officially moved out. But I wasn’t really at home for about two years before that, because it just*
wasn't very 'pleasant'. My parents were in the process of breaking up and stuff...I would have rather been back here on the streets than over there living in a nice bed with my food and my bills paid. It was just crap! ...I'm completely miserable at home...

In a different set of experiences, step-parent conflicts figured strongly in the accounts of Mark and Lucas. These two young men were in their teens when they first turned to other households for support. In reflecting on what ‘led to’ couch surfing, both men described the moments they had been evicted from their caregiver homes after issues involving a parent’s new partner. Both of these young men spoke of these events with a leaden sense of disbelief and grief over what had happened. In his accounts, Mark related a sense of being pushed out of his living space by his mother’s partner, which eventuated in his ultimate displacement from home. He also recalled how this partner regularly supplied drugs to his mum. When Mark reacted aggressively to this situation by stealing the partner’s ‘contraband’, his mum asked him to leave. As he related it to me:

The principle of the matter is she [my mum] ended up hookin’ up with this dude, gettin’ acid, gettin’ gear, gettin’ pills, gettin’ dope, the whole deal off of him...And then next thing I know, he’s fuckin’ livin’ in my bedroom! I was like: “yeah, cheers mum, love you lots”...I spent the last two months busting my mum’s balls, sayin’ “you put up a drug dealer...in my fucking bedroom, in my bed, in my little comfort zone, but you can’t have your own blood son here?” How’s that shit work?
Chapter Four: Couch surfing and the (re)negotiation of home

Lucas was also pushed out of home as an outcome of his mother’s *de facto* relationship. This was a situation that he described as an abuse of power on the part his mother’s partner, who was also her employer:

**PM:** *What were some of the things around that, not being able to be at home?*

**Lucas:** *It was my mum’s boyfriend... I felt like I wasn't welcome... We lived in a Housing Commission home and he convinced my mum to give up her house and live with him, on the understanding my mum had that I would be able to stay with him [as well]. But of course, once mum had given up the house and moved in with him, he says I'm not allowed to stay there... She [my mum] worked for him as well, that's how they met. So all her money for her employment was relied upon for him. And it's not easy to set yourself up, and I don't know how she would have managed to... so she was stuck. Completely stuck.*

This had been an extremely difficult set of events. In describing this situation, Lucas spoke of an overwhelming sense of dismay. Years after this event, he still felt a lingering sense of grief at the loss of the strong sense of home these events had wrought:

*I think the disbelief was really quite horrible at that stage... because well, I'd always had a very strong sense of home growing up... I'd lived in this house for, well, fifteen of my seventeen years. And I was very secure and*
very happy there. Then she got rid of the house. Then I had nothing to go back to.

Unlike Mark, Lucas did not overtly express any feelings of blame or resentment towards his mum regarding his displacement from the family home. Rather, he empathised with the difficult, and in many ways, disempowering position she had found herself within:  

She [my mum] couldn't get another Housing Commission home. This was in Victoria; the waiting list is ridiculous. She'd just given one up; they wouldn't have let her go back...I understand why she didn't [help]; there was nothing she could do because she didn't have a lot of money at the time...I've had people say that I should be madder at my mum than I am for it, but I don't really see what she could have done then.

In Renee’s accounts, being outside the parental home at a young age was a more gradual process than these young men’s narratives of eviction. Through her conversations with me, Renee conveyed her struggles with having grown up in a stressful living situation at home. Since she was a child, her mum had regularly taken on the day care and foster care of predominantly adolescent boys, often up to six boys at a time, and many of whom had demanding, high care needs.

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27 In part, Lucas' understanding of his mother's situation may also have been shaped by the proverbial benefit of hindsight. He had also had the opportunity to subsequently reconcile, and live with, his mum. Moreover, Lucas was five years older than Mark at the time of the interview, and unlike Mark, was no longer in the midst of dislocation.
As Renee related this to me:

We ended up with cousins of mine living with us, ’cause their mum died so we ended up with them living with us, and then one who was just feral, he ended up with us and all that sort of stuff...And she [my mum] took on the ‘too hard basket’ kids, so the ones with disabilities, the ones with emotional problems and all that sort of stuff and I just was sick of it.

Living in this situation for most of her early life meant that Renee had increasingly felt crowded out, and at times unsafe in her own home. Through our conversations, she also highlighted a sense of being overlooked while growing up, and of experiencing constant unpredictability in the household setting. She described her mum as being “unavailable” as she entered her teens, and remembered finding it increasingly difficult to be the only young woman in a household of boys and young children. Compounding these issues were tense situations that sometimes came about through the problematic behaviours of male relatives and the foster care boys. As Renee discussed it with me:

PM: So it kind of made the environment ‘chaotic’ in a lot of ways?  
Renee: Yeah, and tense and you’re not sure what was gonna happen, when it was gonna happen, all that sort of stuff, so I just wanted to get out of there ... and I was the only girl in the family, and not only with day care, with kids in and out of the house, they also did foster care, so we also had kids living at the house...And all the foster kids were boys. So we usually had a minimum of six teenagers in the house... it was your basic
three bedroom house! They ended up having to put a caravan in the
backyard for the two older boys!

In reaction to her situation at home, Renee developed what she called a teenage "attitude" that both reflected and generated tension in her relationship with her mum. As young as twelve years of age, she subsequently attempted running away, at first staying overnight with one of her older brothers:

Renee: I would leave and all that sort of stuff and just, I was already out of home at one stage and had nowhere to go so it was kind of everybody's floor...

PM: How old were you when it sort of first started happening?

Renee: The first time was because I did a runner. And I was about twelve... I just wanted to get away...

By the time she was fifteen years old, Renee’s feelings about her living situation had deteriorated to the point that she rarely returned home. As Renee described it, she began "falling in with some not so good people". This was a relational aspect of her early life that she felt significantly contributed to her later struggles with drug and alcohol use. At about this age, Renee’s mum also evicted her from the family home. She subsequently went into foster care herself, before going on to live with her grandparents, and returning to live with her mum’s household for a while:

PM: ...after you were twelve, what happened then that led on further?
Renee: I got heavily involved with not so good people and by the time I was fifteen I'd been kicked out and ended up in foster care myself for a while, and ended up with grandparents. Did go back home for a little bit but got kicked out again...

Two years later, at the age of 17, Renee moved out from home definitively, staying with a friend for six months in a share house arrangement until the lease expired, and she could not afford to take it over. After experiencing violence from one of her older brothers, Renee was unable to subsequently rely on her family as a source of accommodation and support when things were difficult financially:

I couldn't go back home 'cause [one of my] brother[s] was there and... my brother's extremely violent and I am not allowed to live with him.

Unable to return home, Renee initially sought temporary shelter with a cousin, who was expecting her first child at the time. This living arrangement quickly ended when her cousin's ex-partner moved back in, and the spare room was converted into a nursery. After this living arrangement ended, Renee went on to experience a lengthy period of housing insecurity and homelessness, frequently moving from one temporary living situation to another. Her time spent couch surfing was punctuated, and in many ways perpetuated by, health worries, struggles with drug use, and depression.

For other young people I interviewed, conflicts between the high expectations of parents and the young person's own desires and comfort zones created such intense disagreements
that their relationship with their parents ‘shut down’ and along with this, their place in the family household. This was especially the case for Anna, who was pushed by her parents (particularly her father) to suspend her university studies for a year and test herself in the ‘real world’:

*My parents were sort of thinking that I wasn’t ‘mature’ enough for my age and had to learn to cope with the ‘big, bad world’ and all that. So they said: “right, we’re sending you over to the other side of the world”...My parents have this big thing about you know, making sure that I’m an ‘effective’ person basically, that I’m ‘worthwhile’ so to speak, and that I’m able to take care of myself and pull my weight.*

The theme of difficult family relationships is widely discussed in the literature as an issue that permeates accounts of early home leaving and youth homelessness generally. As such, it is not surprising that many of the specific struggles with familial relationships that dominated young interviewees’ descriptions are also reflected in the findings of existing qualitative studies. In particular, young people’s accounts in this research echo some of the main findings of Project I: a large scale qualitative and cross-national (Australia and the U.S.) longitudinal study, conducted in part by Melbourne-based researchers Shelley Mallett, Deborah Keys and Doreen Rosenthal (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, Myers & Tattam 2006). The Melbourne cohort for the study involved 692 homeless young people aged between 12 and 20 years of age, drawn from metropolitan Melbourne, who had spent at least the last two nights outside the parental or guardian household (Rosenthal, Mallett & Myers 2006: 281-285).
Especially relevant here are Rosenthal, Mallett and Myers’ (2006: 281) findings that for most of the young people involved in Project I there were, on the one hand, problematic circumstances that compelled the young person to leave their parental or guardian home to escape or run away from negative circumstances. In the study, these situations revolved around themes of family violence, abuse or trauma; conflict or disagreements with family members, and struggles with mental health or substance misuse (Rosenthal et al. 2006: 281-283). On the other hand, Rosenthal et al. (2006: 281-283) also identified ‘running to’ factors to do with a desire for life change. These factors motivated the young person to leave home in search of opportunities, lifestyle or greater independence and freedom.

In highlighting this research however, I would hesitate to identify the accounts of young couch surfers along the lines of the binary construction of ‘running away’ and ‘running to’ pathways that these researchers employ (Rosenthal et al. 2006). In my experiences of speaking with young people, the fraught relationships which culminated in being ‘outside’ the parental home at an early age were complex and multidimensional, and could not easily be condensed within what are, in the fashion of present thinking around homelessness, typologies for describing youth homelessness as a set of pathways. As Rosenthal et al. (2006) themselves concede, the desire for independence or life change underlying the experiences of the ‘running to’ cohort may also be prompted in the first place by problems and conflicts in the parental home (to my knowledge, this issue was not examined further by the authors). That notwithstanding, the findings of Project I do broadly reaffirm the stories of loss, betrayal, trauma and interpersonal conflict related to me by the majority of the young people I interviewed.
In her ethnographic work with young homeless people in Sydney, Robinson (2005a: 51-52) identifies similar themes of problematic family relationships and home lives. At the same time, she conceptualises these experiences through a lens of embodiment (particularly, the embodiment of grief over the loss of home or a negative ‘home life’). Robinson (2005a: 51) specifically describes, for instance, the relationships which wove a ‘negative home life’ for the young people she spoke with. These relationships involved step-fathers, extreme cases of abandonment, parents with drug and alcohol issues, intense conflict, violence and abuse, and the death of a parent (Robinson 2005a: 51). Such ruptured relationships overlap largely with some of the major family issues young interviewees related to me. In particular, problematic step-parent relationships are a prevalent theme. As Robinson observes in her doctoral research with street dwelling youth in Sydney: ‘[s]tep parents, particularly step fathers, dominated in young people's narratives of grief over home’ (Robinson 2002b: 106).

Similar themes of violence and conflict within families are also represented in homelessness research that has emerged from comparative OECD countries internationally. For example, the findings of the Canadian Panel Study on Homelessness28 (Aubry, Klodawsky, Hay & Birnie 2003: 24-25) suggest that one of the primary factors initially ‘leading into’ homelessness is the impact of problematic family relationships. The patterning of family issues differed only slightly between young men and women, as Aubry et al. report:

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28 This was a qualitative study on homelessness conducted by the Centre for Research on Community Services. The research involved interviews with a total of 416 participants, with a sub-group of 160 homeless youth (79 men and 81 women). The study focused on ‘housing histories, income histories, employment histories, social networking, personal empowerment, living conditions, social services utilization, health status, health care utilization, childhood stressors, substance use, and demographic characteristics’ (Aubry et al. 2003: 4).
Among male youth, eviction by parents or guardians was cited by 41%, followed by parental conflict or conflict with family (19%), inability to pay the rent (15%), and eviction by the landlord or other (14%). Similarly, for female youth, parental conflict or conflict with family or guardians (28%) was the most commonly identified reason. This was followed by eviction by parents (26%), eviction by landlord or other (16%), and parental abuse (9%) (Aubry et al. 2003: 24).

These recurring themes of fraught familial relations in narratives of youth homelessness are not, of course, the sole factor at play. Such ruptures are important aspects in accounts of homelessness, but so too are the emotional and embodied burdens; the long term impact of sexual and physical abuse, and the psychological distress of dislocation, entrenched through or contributing to these ruptures (Aubry et al. 2003: 25; Robinson 2002b: 103-124). In particular, as Robinson (2005a; 2005b; 2006) emphasises, experiences of grief, trauma and distress are significant but often overlooked factors in young people’s narratives of homelessness, often contributing to many of the mental health, behavioural and substance use struggles that form a major focus of homelessness interventions and research. These emotional impacts are compounded by the fact that many young people forced to leave home early do not have access to vital emotional, financial and practical support from caregivers and other adults (Schneider 2000). This complicates the struggle to anticipate and manage everyday details of living (such as having someone with life experience to turn to for advice and comfort, or someone to provide a reference for job and tenancy applications). The lived impact of marginalisation and traumatic loss in young couch
surfers’ lives is an issue I return to throughout this thesis, and which I discuss in detail in Chapter Seven.

**Structural barriers and interrupted lives: Youth and social change**

In speaking with young people for this research, an abiding theme of early home leaving was finding oneself in a situation of having ‘nowhere else to go’. Most of the interviewees were still of school age while dealing with eviction, early home leaving and fraught relations with caregivers or kin. At the same time, few had access to a living wage, and those who did have jobs were underemployed in casual, low-paid and insecure work. As a result, the majority of those I spoke with found themselves outside the parental home at a point in their lives when socially prescribed transitions into ‘independent’ housing, employment and ultimately, social citizenship, were difficult to attain.

In understanding why young people in their adolescence often find themselves with nowhere to go outside the family home, we can turn to existing knowledge on the adverse impacts of major social changes in Australia over the past thirty years (Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Miles 2000; Nilan *et al.* 2007; Wyn & Woodman 2006). The structural difficulties young people might encounter in entering mainstream job and housing markets has been an ongoing issue at least since the 1970s and 80s. This period was shaped by collapses of the labour market, which has since produced a growing casualisation of the workforce, and a steady decline in affordable housing (including the progressive loss of investment in public and social housing and increasing pressures on the voluntary and not-for-profit housing sector) (Nilan *et al.* 2007: 121-124, 129-130; Miles 2000: 41-42). These social and economic changes have fuelled a subsequent emphasis on
the ‘warehousing’ of adolescents and young adults in education, training and low-paid, insecure jobs for increasing lengths of time (Crane & Brannock 1996: 19; Nilan et al. 2007: 24-26). The effect, of course, has been to delay young people’s financial and social independence from caregivers (Schneider 2000: 3, 1, 5-20).

There is a resulting social expectation in Australia that young people will subsist within the family home, and that families must ‘hold on to’ their young people for longer than in previous generations (increasingly up to the early- to mid- twenties) (Crane & Brannock 1996: 19). However, as Schneider (2000: 6) argues, holding on to young members of the family household assumes adequate financial resources, stability of employment, and supportive relationships between young people, caregivers and any siblings, step-parent figures or other significant kin. It is especially onerous, in a structural sense, for young people to subsist within disadvantaged parental households for prolonged periods of time if affected by significant economic pressure, unemployment, or emerging relational tensions (for example, around step-parent responsibilities and conflicts) (Schneider 2000:6). For families facing marginalisation, and in neighbourhoods that are more generally disadvantaged, these pressures contribute substantially to psychological distress, which impacts on family relationships and may foment interpersonal conflict. The impact of distress and marginalisation, for example, often patterns situations of violence and abuse, mental illness and self-harm, and addiction (Crane & Brannock 1996: 19; Mallett et al. 2006; Schneider 2000: 3, 1, 5-20).

In the case of young people whose parental homes do not hold them for as long as socially or economically expected, structural barriers to establishing independence outside of
caregiver support significant affect their ability to deal with crisis situations such as eviction, or to „find their feet‘ after leaving untenable homes (Mallett & Myers 2006; Robinson 2002b; Rosenthal et al. 2006). These are also significant age-related barriers affecting young people more generally. For example, it is prohibitively difficult for young people to access private rental accommodation without tenant references or previous rental history. For those with „bad history‘ such as criminal records (including for drug-related offences) or recorded „anti-social behaviour‘, these age-related barriers are further entrenched through rental blacklisting (Harrison 2007). Significantly, the financial limitations of the youth wage, and underemployment in unreliable, low-paid casual work prevents many young people (not least those facing dislocation) from finding affordable accommodation of their own (Nilan et al. 2007: 24-26). As Schneider writes:

…if young people do leave [caregiver homes] and are unsupported by their parents, they lack sufficient independent income to afford secure accommodation, which leads to the most common form of homelessness in which young people move from one temporary or insecure place to another (Schneider 2000: 6-7).

Second class citizens: Barriers to social citizenship

It is important to understand that these barriers to autonomy and independence are also bound up in broader issues of civil rights and the proscriptive cultural construction of youth. Through my discussion of social exclusion at the beginning of this thesis, I noted that underlying social and ideological processes are critical in the patterning of disadvantage. These speak of discriminatory political, legal and social processes that have seen Australian youth become a disproportionately governed population, and that continue
to deny young people pathways to financial independence, agency, freedom of movement and association (Bessant 2001; 2003; 2004b; 2005). Such processes intimately shape young people’s life chances in general, and have magnified impacts for young people whose caregiver homes have become untenable.

Indeed, in her critical work on youth citizenship, Bessant (2001; 2003; 2005) points out that despite contemporary rhetoric of giving voice and representation, young people worldwide are routinely subject to a problematic culture of paternalism. This carries through to perceptions of young people as dependent objects without full capacity for autonomy, and on whose behalf authorities, parents and guardians must necessarily intervene or presume to act ‘in their best interests’ (Bessant 2005). As I have indicated, this paternalism is made manifest in limitations to young people’s democratic participation, and processes of discrimination such as youth wage laws that limit young people’s access to a living wage (Bessant 2005; Wyn & Woodman 2006).

In this way, we might think about couch surfing as emerging in a context where young people are finding it difficult to gain access to the basic financial, legal and institutional supports (and privileges) that the general adult working population takes for granted. This constitutes a process of institutional exclusion, in which young people are being denied the benefits of social and economic citizenship. Such exclusion compounds, and reinscribes, disadvantages young people experience in being excluded from the familial home, as Robinson highlights:
As well as being excluded from the richness and ongoing support of home-life, for young homeless people being excluded from home also means institutional exclusion – from education, work and community life – and also exclusion from needed periods of rent-free living (Robinson 2005a: 48).

Barriers to social citizenship had placed most of the young people I interviewed in a situation of little financial freedom, insecure employment or unemployment, and with significant difficulties in remaining at school or tertiary education. This is a context of broad, complex (and often inter-generational) marginalisation, which housing researchers Hulse and Saugeres (2008) have described as being forced into a state of “precarious living”:

Housing insecurity in its various dimensions [is] integrally linked to insecurity in other aspects of life: in particular, with a history of family instability, insecurity of self, insecurities in health status, and financial and employment insecurity. These insecurities, including housing insecurities, [interact] and [reinforce] each other in complex ways. It is this complex of interrelated insecurities that constitutes precarious living. Precarious living entails surviving from day to day (Hulse & Saugeres 2008: 2).

For young people who do not enjoy the benefits of financial, material and emotional support from family, we might understand how these entrenched, age-related barriers to social citizenship can mean having nowhere to go in one’s community. Ultimately, these
kinds of structural and political barriers patterned the emergence of couch surfing in interviewees’ experiences.

**Low priority: Barriers to accessing formal accommodation**

In young people’s accounts, the earliest days and weeks after leaving or being forced out of home were fraught with significant challenges. This included problems negotiating access to emergency financial assistance and, crucially, a lack of support to deal with the practical and emotional effects of dislocation. All of the people I spoke with (other than the couch surfing backpacker, Grant) found it inordinately difficult to know where to go to formally seek help when they first faced issues in their living situations. This not only figured in the experiences of people who had been ‘out of home’ at an early age, but also Rita, who was 25 years old at the time of first couch surfing. Rita had migrated to Australia to study and seek permanent residency, but had since encountered significant problems of access in finding the permanent, affordable, geographically accessible housing she needed. A key issue that she highlighted was not being aware of or having access to adequate information and referrals to accommodation and support. In her impressions, Rita reflected on the problem of not knowing where to go for help as indicative of a lack of ‘community spirit’ in Adelaide generally. This spirit, she felt, was synonymous with the practice of hospitality; a significant aspect of couch surfing relationships that I explore in the next chapter:

> I feel that Adelaide is one of the worst places in Australia for having this element of community spirit. It really doesn’t have it... There’s just not this air of it; there’s nowhere to go. That is the brunt of it. There is nowhere that you can go that says: “look, I can put you up for a few days, or for a
"week or whatever, and as long as you supply your own food or something you'll be fine.”

In many respects, this lack of a "community spirit" is indicative of yet more significant issues in finding support that were highlighted by the younger interviewees (who had first couch surfed in their teens). For most of these participants, it had been impossible to gain access to appropriate accommodation in the earliest days following a crisis in their living situations. In many accounts, this was due to a lack of understanding of their situation from important ‘front line’ figures such as school counsellors and teachers. This was a major issue identified by Lucas, who was seventeen years old and in his final year of high school when he was evicted from his maternal home. In his discussions with me, he spoke of struggling to find any kind of help from his school.

**Lucas:**...[M]y counsellor at school was useless. Didn’t care...He was just not fussed. He’d be like: “yeah, it’ll be ‘right’”...And that’s the way that everyone kind of treated me, and there was no real help.

Often, becoming aware of or gaining entry into places like youth shelters happened at a much later point in these interviewees’ experiences. This only came about, for example, after meeting other young people who had experienced homelessness. Some interviewees only became aware of specialist services (like emergency accommodation) after a period of hospitalisation or admission into institutionalised care systems, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres or domestic violence shelters. This reflects precisely a narrow focus on chronic, street homelessness.
As Jonathan discussed with me:

**Jonathan:** *And even when I went on the streets, I was [there] for about a week before I met up with some people...[who] I found while hanging around on the streets, and they said “well, if you need a place to go, go to [service X] and they'll give you emergency shelter.”*

This early lack of responsiveness from communities, services and schools was also flagged anecdotally in my discussions with youth workers in and around Adelaide. Many commented that they were unable to find places in emergency accommodation for young people who were just out of home and staying informally with other households. Some youth workers, particularly those whose service provision was geared towards an ‘emergency’ accommodation referral context, found themselves having to advise the young person to continue relying on their own supports as proxy forms of shelter. That is, until either their situation ‘broke down’ into what might be considered a housing crisis (a situation of sleeping rough; the very chronic homeless subjectivity I traced in Chapter Two), or the young person was able to access shared housing or private rental. Paul, a youth worker involved in a small project for marginalised students in a regional centre, summarised these issues as a lack of funding and places for supported accommodation, which meant taking a kind of ‘triage’ approach to managing young people’s accommodation needs:

*In regards to case managing I would have to say the most complex issue I am having difficulties with is the lack of supported emergency*
accommodation. I know for a fact that four to five of the kids are currently couch surfing and am certain there are more here that would fit under that category...In regards to seeking help they usually approach me or are bought to me to attempt to find longer term solutions. It is unfortunate, but sometimes having a client couch surf is a good Band-Aid until I can find some more appropriate solutions.

Importantly, these kinds of services barriers are also more pronounced if the young person is facing homelessness within low income areas or regional areas, where the extent of funding and availability of youth-targeted services, affordable and emergency housing are particularly limited (Beer 2005b; Delfabbro 2005; Holst 2005; Oakley 2005). As the everyday observations of service providers in the Queensland Community Connections study demonstrated, “necdotally, suburban homelessness seemed prevalent in areas where there were fewer housing and support services available” (Uhr 2004: 24). As Lucas described the situation in his local area:

...in our area, which covered probably a population of a hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand people – this is a wide area – there was I think two male, short term, up to three month emergency accommodation. And two emergency male one night only accommodation. And the same for females. And that's in the whole thing [area].

More broadly, these gaps in funding (or the nature of particular funding structures) often mean that in their initial days and weeks of facing homelessness, young people are required
to move through many different, specialised services in a "silo" or isolated fashion. This entails, for example, having to go from one service to another for different needs such as accommodation, mental health, employment and the like. As Renee put it:

> Once you're put into the system, they put you here, here and here...When I was first sent to Adelaide I had to see a main case manager or whatever and they sent me here, they sent me to a doctor, they sent me to a counsellor...And, I was like: “What the?” ...And they're not communicating with each other. But then, I guess once you have a go at them and tell them it's just too much and all that sort of stuff, you can then deal with one main worker and they kind of dish out everything to everybody else.

In this sense, there is a risk that in being pushed from one specialised service, worker or system to another, their needs for home, support and inclusion are not being sufficiently understood. Together, this silo effect within specialised services can result in significant barriers to young people gaining help when they need it, particularly in the initial days and weeks after leaving or being evicted from caregiver homes (Ellis & Fopp 1995; Incerti 2004). Fragmentation of (and funding for) systems of accommodation and support can mean that young people seeking help while couch surfing do not "fit". Moreover, it reinscribes the state of destabilising movement and fragmentation that I argue lies at the heart of young people’s experiences of dislocation.

In the broadest sense, many of the systemic gaps and problems highlighted here flow from the bureaucratic contexts in which homelessness is identified and managed as an issue. In
particular, they can be traced to the narrow prioritising of neoliberal homeless policy, and
to welfare restructuring and reform, which I critically discussed in Chapter Two. As Del
Casino Jr. and Jocoy remind us:

Ironically, instead of refocusing attention on this \textit{new homeless subject}, the practices of this neoliberal discourse of the \textit{chronic} constitutes episodic or transitional homeless subjects as self-sufficient and capable of caring for themselves. In effect, the \textit{new homeless} receive less help from the federal government (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008: 194-195).

The narrowing of the homeless subject has had a direct, downscaling effect on the provision of government and social services, where funding has become bound up with targeting groups deemed \textit{able to help themselves} (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008: 194-195). In line with a political prioritising of homelessness as rooflessness, this carries particular impact wherever experiences of homelessness differ from this narrow model of a chronic subjectivity (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008). Placed in a social welfare field increasingly limited to domains of \_\textit{crisis}, \_\textit{emergency}, and \_\textit{chronicity}, this has the effect of limiting the extent to which women, young people, children and families are able to seek help and support or access services which acknowledge their specific struggles with dislocation. As Jonathan put it in his interview:

\textit{...I didn't know there was any services that helped people like me.}
Similarly, some of the youth workers’ comments in the focus group also bore the assumption that because young people had a roof over their head, they were “managing”:

**Jacinta:** Well a lot of people come in [to seek services and assistance] when they’re out of options. When they are couch surfing, they manage it.

What I have indicated here is that, from the interviews, the emergence of couch surfing in young people’s lives took place in the presence of significant barriers to negotiating a narrowly focused welfare field. At the same time however, these barriers are not only about a lack of appropriate services or funding. In facing situations of having nowhere else to go, many young people also spoke of social and institutional factors that outright deterred and excluded them from wanting to engage with formal systems as an immediate option for (re)negotiating home. In young people’s conversations with me, this included negative living conditions that some had encountered in emergency housing settings like youth shelters. In another respect, problematic institutional cultures and practices also figured prominently in young interviewees’ accounts. As I discuss later, this is an important factor shaping issues of stigma in some young people’s accounts of navigating dislocation.

**Not fit for human habitation: Issues in emergency accommodation**

From those I spoke with, experiences of stressful, crowded or unsafe living conditions in emergency and supported accommodation were one of the major deterrents to seeking out or relying on formal systems for support. These negative experiences included violence and theft from other young people sharing rooms and facilities. In interviewees’ accounts, fears
for safety and security were also magnified by the mental health struggles, drug use, and challenging behaviours of other residents. The impression was that many of these places had been poorly managed, or in young people’s accounts had failed to provide a sense of security:

**Yvette:** There is emergency places that will, that you can get help. [But] I didn't want to stay somewhere like that, because I didn't feel safe.

**Jonathan:** It was very hard. You had to watch your back. Not so much couch surfing, but in the youth services and that kind of stuff, you had to watch your back twenty-four hours a day because there were a lot of violent people in there. And they’d fight for no reason. Plus, you had to watch all your stuff. Most of the youth services, the doors don't lock or the doors are broken, or something like that. So, you have to stay awake...even if you go to sleep; even if you’re in a room [where] the doors lock or something, you have to stay awake...you know, have to know what's going on around you. And all your stuff, you have to carry all your valuables around with you every day in a backpack, or just hide them or something like that. And one of the worst ones [a major youth shelter in Adelaide]...I stayed at [had problems with] fighting. The doors, you know, just people going through them and stuff.
These living situations also exposed some of the young people I interviewed to an increased risk of encountering particularly unsafe ‘cultures’ of drug misuse, crime and violence; even beyond the youth shelter setting. As Lucas highlighted:

_I finished one stint at the youth refuge. And I moved out, and I ended up moving out with a guy from [the refuge]. But then that was horrible because we were messed up, and then we got into drugs...We just rented a place in a caravan park, half a maisonette. But then you’re forced to live with people you don’t get along with and that just compounds everything._

As well as issues of safety and exposure to crime and drugs, young interviewees moreover found it difficult to establish any sense of ontological security within these environments. This was particularly the case when forced to work around the high demand for limited emergency shelter placements. A number of young people I interviewed had found themselves in a kind of merry-go-round in this regard. They had frequently stayed for the maximum two week placement in emergency accommodation, followed by periods of rough sleeping, couch surfing or staying in boarding houses and hostels while waiting to get another placement, often at a different shelter:

**PM:** _So what happens during those five days? Do you have to manage staying at a mate’s, or...?_

**Jonathan:** _Yeah. Or, you just come back here [to the accommodation referral service] and say “ah, I’m going to have to find me somewhere else_
“to stay.” And if the places are full then the only real place is a mate’s house or find a tree to sleep under.

* * *

Lucas: A lot of the time you were out wandering the streets. You weren’t allowed to be there [in the youth shelter] during certain times. You were on weekends and you were allowed to stay up late on weekends.

Accounts such as these highlight that, as well as problems in knowing where to go for help, those young people who did eventually gain access to formal services and accommodation came up against living conditions which, in many respects, perpetuated their dislocation. As I map out in the next section, these negative experiences were not limited to issues of safety and security. They were also linked to problematic institutional cultures and practices, shaping the homelessness field at large.

At arm’s length: Problematic shelter practices

Another significant barrier to engaging formal systems was the stressful and objectifying nature of some emergency accommodation, and interactions with social workers. In their interviews, many of the people I spoke with were concerned that the emergency system of shelter compounded the stresses of dislocation, particularly in settings that produced a sense of alienation between staff and residents. Some of the interviewees also pointed out that settings dominated by rigid routines and rules were difficult to come to terms with when they were in a state of crisis.
As Lucas described—the system”:

**Lucas:** I got into the system, and that's horrible. Because, once again, there's so many rules and there's a queue for everything... Even when the government or whoever does provide facilities to help you, which is very rare, you're still at arm's length...there are certain lines you can't cross and you could never be on an even footing with the people who look after you... But then I started helping around the shelter. I said: “oh, how about I help around [the place]? Why can't I help you? Why can't I work here?” [And they said] “Oh no. No. No. No.” It's like we're in these strict boundaries...And this is something I found. The rules were: in bed by ten, in your room by ten, lights out by ten thirty [pm]. After a certain time, you had to be out; you weren't allowed to be there during weekdays, during I think nine and five, you weren't allowed to be there...

These accounts of being —at arm’s length”— unable to cross certain lines, and having to bend oneself to proscriptive rules demonstrates the kinds of practices that served to generate symbolic distinctions between staff and residents or clients (Cramer 2005; Joniak 2005). Distinctions like these are continuous with the stigmatising and pathologising of youth, and of the homeless subject, as I traced in Chapter Two. As Bessant (2001) contends for example, youth at risk paradigms have seen the increasing justification of intervention programs and social work practices that construct disadvantage as a personal failing; identifying risky youth as —deficient in terms of their ethical, emotional, social, intellectual abilities necessary for self-management” (Bessant 2001: 40). One result of these normative,
expert practices is that under a paternalistic ethos of acting ‘in their best interests’, marginalised youth come up against an alienating formal system of specialist homeless services and emergency accommodation. This not only entrenches patterns of discrimination and stigma, but also profoundly challenges how young people marked off as being disadvantaged, ‘at risk’ or homeless ultimately relate to themselves and negotiate social citizenship (Bessant 2001).

An understanding of the welfare field is pertinent here. Drawing upon Bourdieu, Emirbayer and Williams (2005) highlight that people seeking or receiving assistance from social workers or entering homeless shelters are entering a field where different kinds of symbolic capital shape the ‘game’ of normative behaviour. As the authors point out, in supported or emergency accommodation, the likelihood of being given priority for permanent housing may depend on one’s willingness to play the game of staff-held symbolic capital; a game shaped by norms of housing, and classed tropes of the ‘competent’, self-made individual (Harris 2004: 23-35; Veness 1994). Social workers’ models and idea of the ‘good client’ often value, for example, behaviour that emulates normative aspirations of housing tenure (that is, of middle class homeownership) (Veness 1994), or which draw upon understandings of poverty that infer moral or personal failing (Brueckner et al. 2010; Emirbayer & Williams 2005: 708-709). They may also contribute to popular constructions of homeless subjectivity as the helpless and passive victim, dependent on welfare and intervention ‘for their own good’ (Cramer 2005).
Within institutions such as homeless shelters and youth refuges, the symbolic capital of the good client governs institutional processes of distancing, hierarchy and objectification; enacted through rules, procedures, sanctions and routines. As Mark put it:

...[B]asically it’s like being in jail without being on remand...If I’m at [the youth shelter] I get woken up at nine o’clock. Shovel down some breakfast, fuck off, come back half an hour before curfew... I’ve got stuff to do during the days and they just want me to be there all day being a bum just like everyone else...Aw fuck man, I’d rather be in jail.

It is not surprising that these kinds of institutional practices were profound barriers to seeking formal assistance in for many young people in this research. The shelter environment in particular was an affront to autonomy, and while it is important that the safety of staff and other residents is upheld in these environments, punitive responses also made it that much more difficult for some young people to engage with the formal system and navigate away from dislocation. In some accounts for example, a sense of being unfairly singled out by staff had fuelled acts of resistance (such as being intoxicated, and not following curfews). These behaviours were answered with eviction from the shelter and temporary bars on accessing the emergency accommodation system – situations that also perpetuated young people’s displacement. For some, like Mark, it had also meant the loss of promised housing placements with social housing providers. The key implication of such practices is their potential to re-inscribe a marginal and stigmatised social positioning of young people who are already grappling with the psychological and material impacts of significant social exclusion. As I discuss in the next section, similar issues were also
implicated in other important services, where a narrow focus on crisis or a chronic subjectivity has made it difficult for young people to get the help they need from formal systems.

**Not an emergency: The problem of ‘proving’ need**

Negative experiences in navigating ‘front-line’ services was another problematic issue that figured prominently in some young people’s accounts of turning away from formal systems. This included, in particular, struggles in getting help for drug and alcohol and mental health concerns. Because these front-line services were often one of the key ways young people facing homelessness found an inroad or links to other services, roadblocks in navigating these services complicated their efforts to negotiate support and accommodation formally. These kinds of barriers featured prominently in Renee’s accounts of seeking help from the health system. Through her discussion with me, it was clear that Renee’s significant health concerns had emerged from the long-standing psychological distress of trauma, and the destabilising impact of homelessness:

**Renee:**... *On top of the drugs and alcohol, I ended up getting sick as well, and it kind of all got so much that I had to end it all...I always kept goin’ around in the same circle and I ended up getting so fed up with it...*

**PM:** *And I guess they are sort of a lot of the things that lead to feelings of depression as well; feeling that you have no control over what’s happening.*

**Renee:** *... Yeah, especially at a point where there's no services and they're constantly telling you “there's absolutely nothing wrong with you, it's all*
in your head, it's all attention seeking” …[I] ended up in the emergency ward of a hospital something like twelve times in four months, because I was going psychotic on everybody, but they didn't believe what was going on… You've got to act up to get attention… But the reason I ended up going there is because I needed help. I still didn't get it, until the second time I was detained. I finally got the help I needed...

In getting – the help I needed”, Renee initially encountered a system that in many ways invalidated her mental health concerns; for example by reinforcing negative, popular stereotypes of (female) adolescent depression as attention seeking behaviour. It was only in being detained for mental health reasons a second time, and by navigating the paint-by-numbers Diagnostic and Statistical Manual discourse of psychiatry, that Renee was ‘made’ into a deserving (ill) subject and granted access to the services and supports she needed:

**PM:** And I guess, there's sort of this question: “are doctors the right people to deal with this stuff?” It's really a lot more complex than medicine could be dealing with, with a pill or by holding someone overnight –

**Renee:**...give you a tablet and 'fix it'. Everything is fixed by a pill.

**PM:** Yes, and there's no trying to deal with the, you know, actual circumstances that contribute to this, it's not like it comes out of nowhere.
Renee: Exactly! They are signs that there's something up...Even with some of the specialists, like, psychiatrists and all that, they know nothing because all they know is what's in a textbook.

PM: “This little dot-point, does she have this?” Tick. “Does she have this?”

Tick, tick, tick.

Renee: [wry tone] and if you've got two out of three, you don't have 'it' because you've gotta have the third one as well!

Similar barriers were also evident in Lucas’ earliest months of having nowhere to go. Like Renee, he had encountered roadblocks in his experience of seeking help within “the system”, and made his first inroads into emergency accommodation only after being admitted into a psychiatric hospital. Ironically, he was placed there after collapsing physically from the effects of exposure and a case of pneumonia:

The only way, by the way, that I even found out that there was a youth refuge nearby was I ended up in a psych hospital...[And] why I eventually ended up in the hospital, is because it started to get really cold. I remember one horrible, cold night in sort of autumn... I only had a shirt. I didn't have any jumper or anything. And I was in a windy public toilet down by the beach...Then I ended up in hospital and got out in about ...probably five days later. And I got put into this refuge, and I had a couple of months where I could stay there.
Lucas promptly found himself situated marginally within this system, defined – via a biomedical, psychiatric model of mental illness – as “reactionally depressed” by contrast to suffering an “inherited” or “chemical” psychiatric disorder:

_The only time I really talked about it [being homeless] and the only time anyone ever really took an interest in what was going on was when I was in hospital. And the nurses there talked to me about it but then they said “oh, you’ve just had a bad time. You’re not crazy, you shouldn’t be here.” And I said: “Well, that is very comforting in a way. To be told that I shouldn’t be in a psych ward!” You know, if you’re in a psych ward, the one thing you really want to be told is that you shouldn’t be there! [laughs gently] Yeah, maybe they felt they couldn’t help and they just wanted to wash their hands of it... They wouldn't prescribe me [antidepressant] drugs in the hospital. And when I said “why?” they said: “well, we give these drugs where you’re chemically imbalanced, and we try to correct it. But yours is reactional depression; you’re depressed because you’re reacting to a situation in your life.”_

In this way, nurses responsible for his care made it clear to Lucas that there was “nothing they could do” for him, and that rather than occupying a psychiatric bed-space, his situation could be better addressed by shuffling across compartmentalised services borders into the outreach and emergency housing system.
As the accounts I have shown here demonstrate, some young people found they needed to enact a particular state of disorder in order to demonstrate their eligibility for receiving help from these systems. This included the need to demonstrate signs of ‘chemical imbalance’ in order to receive medication or counselling; or having to reach the point of physical collapse from exposure before being recognised as eligible for emergency accommodation services. As Renee put it:

\[
\text{You’ve gotta let it to get bad enough so that other people are going to see how it's affecting you.}
\]

These kinds of barriers to services not only reflect the silo effect I highlighted earlier. At a more fundamental level, they also indicate the biomedical focus of front-line services, with a privileging of categories of physical or ‘chemical’ disorder over ‘situational’ causes of distress and self-harm (and the inference by service providers that people experiencing ‘situational’ distress are not high priority within an emergency-driven medical system). This emergency paradigm skirts away from a broader focus on prevention, and bears important parallels with my critical discussions in Chapter Two, concerning the emergence of a chronic homeless subjectivity as a problematic rendering of what it means to be homeless; and the tropes of deviance, pathology and helplessness it draws upon.

Indeed, in these young people’s accounts, it was through the physical demonstration of a chronic, sick or helpless subjectivity (and the passage through institutions dealing with the treatment of medical emergencies), that formal accommodation and support services and referral pathways were opened up. Arguably, in the process of defining those who are
homeless and thus a priority for service providers, young people and social workers alike are similarly being drawn into a highly medicalised triage process. For instance, when thinking through young couch surfers’ reasons for accessing Trace-A-Place and the points at which they did, some of the social workers I spoke with reaffirmed the perception of specialist services as an emergency avenue only. In fact, youth workers like Penny mobilised medical analogies, and cast formal services as a place of last resort:

**Penny:** I think it’s like anyone; you go to services when you need to...you know, if you think about health: We’re not really that good at preventive health, not necessarily. A lot of us don’t go to the dentist as much as we should, those kinds of things? So I think, usually, for most young people, when they come to us we’re of, you know, kind of last resort.

Crucially, the experiences I have described here point to the filtering of ideas about homelessness through tropes of rooflessness and rough spaces. Without the act of becoming an identifiable category of homeless person (or psychiatric patient, or a caseworkers’ client), many of the interviewees in this research had found it difficult to get the help they needed from formal systems. However, those who did enter into these systems subsequently found themselves navigating a series of institutional practices that affected profoundly upon identity and autonomy. According to researchers such as Robinson (2004a: 10-11), formal systems struggle to adequately respond to the needs, and take account of the agency of people experiencing homelessness. The effects of problematic institutional practices towards ‘housing the homeless’ are especially felt in contexts of trauma and abuse (Robinson 2004a). Many of the young people I spoke with had faced
some of these concerns. As I commented earlier, the literature widely documents narratives of trauma, violence, mental illness and addiction as predominant themes in experiences of dislocation. There are important implications here, which I map out in the next section. In particular, for young people who may already be struggling with emotional distress, these institutional practices have an especially profound impact on how they relate to themselves, and their willingness to navigate this system in the future (Robinson 2004a).

**Spoiled identities: Stigma and objectification as barriers**

Writing from a community services perspective, Uhr (2004) primarily attributes the emergence of couch surfing amongst young people to a lack of access to, knowledge or awareness of formal systems and services. However, from the accounts I have explored above, it is also apparent that processes of stigma and objectification are equally central issues in young people’s vexed negotiation of formalised help, and their subsequent reliance on local connections. Some of the young people I spoke with pointed out, for example, the problems caused by shelter settings where staff values implied a victim blaming morality. Travis, in particular, insisted that the “pounding holy crap” of moralising discourse in many charitable organisations presented a major barrier for those who were already experiencing significant psychological distress because of their circumstances:

> Some of the people that I know that are walking around the streets right now as we speak won’t access certain organisations, the beds are there but because of their mental state at the time, and their drug issues or whatever they might have, the requirements of moving in to these places, they can’t fit with them. They lose the plot, so that sort of limits their
accommodation and their access quite dramatically... They closed down [a popular homeless shelter] about a year ago and opened up a youth agency that is housing nobody. No one wants to go there. Because it's like a full-on Christian place and you've gotta abide by all these rules and stuff and if you don't, you get kicked out straight away... They don't need to be pounded with "Jesus loves you". They don't need your pounding holy crap.

As accounts like this indicate, the need to avoid being negatively labelled or blamed for homelessness may prevent many young people from wanting to engage formal systems of housing support and social welfare, unless they absolutely have to. I contend that this was a major issue driving the emergence of couch surfing in young people's experiences.

Through his classic sociological work: *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman (1968: 57) conceptualises stigma as a disjuncture between a presented social self (that is, the outward ‘performance’ of the social norms of a particular cultural milieu) and an ‘actual’ identity that might be seen to conflict with those norms. In this way, Goffman (1968: 57) frames stigma as a socially discredited or ‘spoiled identity’ that comes about when the discrepancies between presented and actual identity become publicly visible (or brought to the individual’s awareness). Goffman (1968: 57) also describes the visceral experience of stigma, embodied in unpleasant states of ‘tension’ (a sense of embarrassment, shame or sadness for instance).

For many young people, being officially identified (and therefore treated) as a homeless person carries a heavy personal cost, as recent research based with the Youth Research
Centre in Melbourne attests (Farrugia 2010). Through interviews with young people, Farrugia (2010) observed that popular social constructions of homelessness impose what amounts to a profoundly affecting “symbolic burden”:

The experience of this symbolic burden can be summed up as ‘feeling homeless’ – a fully embodied and affective experience which is mediated by spatial and intersubjective processes, and which is negotiated by drawing on a variety of different symbolic and discursive resources in order to construct selves that do not ‘carry’ the symbolic burden of homelessness…(Farrugia 2010: 4)

This burden of ‘feeling homeless’ (Farrugia 2010: 4) was evident throughout the accounts of the young people I interviewed. In reflecting on her feelings about homelessness, Yvette’s accounts indicated precisely this kind of personal struggle to counter stigma and maintain a positive relation with self. Through her discussions, she indicated the importance of distancing and protecting herself from a stigmatised homeless subjectivity; a process that had often involved consciously marking herself off from “other homeless people” she had seen victimised and derided. This strikingly apparent in her sense of “not feeling like someone who should be homeless”:

I don’t feel like someone who should be homeless. Because I know. I went to school with a friend of mine who got screwed up and stuff, and so I met a lot of homeless people from Adelaide, and me compared to them; I’m a snob compared to them!
Yvette was very conscious of negative stereotypes of homelessness as a personal or moral failure, and indicated her conscious rejection of anything that might "tie me in with that group". In doing so, she drew clear contrasts between how she carried, cared for and presented herself, and the kinds of behaviours, mindsets and objects of consumption that she associated with a spoiled homeless identity:

I like to look nice; I don't like to go out in my frickin 'Adidas' and my 'Nike'.
I don't smoke and I don't drink goon; I will never drink goon in my life!...I just don't see why the fact that you've got no money means that you can't present yourself... But that is just what their identity is. And I don't do that, but I'm the same as them?...It's like: There is a way; I've gotten through! I'm still alive, after a year of doing – not what they do, but being in the same situation as them – and I still look presentable, and I still have a job. I've got my tongue pierced, which is probably the most stupid thing I ever did because it could 'tie me in' with that group! [Chuckling]

By resisting stigmatised behaviours and actively monitoring her presentation of self, Yvette was resisting "feeling homeless". In a sense, Yvette struggled constantly to distance herself from the 'low' symbolic capital of a homeless *habitus*. She was rejecting the symbolic burdens (and potential dangers) manifested in her observations of "other homeless" people. At the same time, this distancing was especially important in Yvette's efforts to keep physically safe and protect herself from harm, after witnessing the assault of a young female friend.
As Yvette reflected on this experience:

*I was hanging out with my mate and she just got beaten up, right in front of me! And I was just [thinking]: "They will go for me, if I am hanging out with them; those kinds of people." You know, they just did it over absolutely stupid things! She got beaten up because someone thought she stole something. They didn't even consider asking her, they just went straight up to her and started laying into her.*

The production of a stigmatised (or victimised) homeless subjectivity takes place within the same political context (that is, shaped by economic rationalism and an ethos of individual responsibility) which I have discussed in earlier chapters (Bessant 2001; Farrugia 2010). This ideological context has seen the entrenchment of popular contemporary stereotypes: of homelessness as a personal failing, the aberrant lack of home, or a state of helpless victimisation (Bessant 2001; 2003; 2004b; 2005). In the case of young people’s experiences of dislocation, the spoiled identity of being homeless is perpetuated by the act of seeking or receiving services which highlight or create a sense of being different from others, in a way that connotes deficiency, and ties in with tropes of the at risk young person. As Lucas and Renee described it:

**Lucas:** *You’re constantly being visited by counsellors. People think: “oh, these people need to have updates from social workers and counsellors”.*

*But that accentuates this feeling that there’s something wrong with*
you...Being made to feel different like that accentuates this feeling of worthlessness and inferiority, basically.

* * *

PM: What's it like, going through the crisis accommodation?

Renee: It's scary. Not so much scary that you're gonna have a lot of thugs and all that sort of stuff. It's more scary that you've gotta share what's happened to a complete stranger...

Through my focus group discussions with youth workers, the force of stigma and problematic institutional processes were topics of major discussion. These staff took a great interest in thinking through and considering how young people who couch surfed were defining their situation and relating to a homeless subjectivity when they did come to a point of approaching services. Most of the staff felt that young people who had couch surfed and were coming to formal services for the first time were, not surprisingly, very reluctant to think of themselves as homeless. As one of the youth workers reflected:

Jane: I think that question about whether young people see couch surfing as homelessness is an interesting one, because I actually think that a lot of people who are couch surfing wouldn't necessarily see themselves as a 'homeless young person'; one of the young people that's sleeping on the streets or is accessing services. I think they'd probably see themselves as one step removed. And I don't know of any young person talking about themselves as 'homeless' who's actually been couch surfing. I think they
still see that there is a bit of hope around their accommodation? So I think there can be some fairly clear distinctions. I've certainly had people who've minimised it... When young people perhaps first come in to the system, they don't necessarily associate or call themselves homeless. They think 'homelessness' is somebody else; it's those 'other' young people out there.

Tellingly, these focus group discussions suggested that young people themselves held a normative understanding of homelessness as a rough space; they did not necessarily self-identify as homeless. Rather, they saw themselves as simply needing help with finding suitable accommodation. In youth workers' experiences, many of these young people had thus minimised their situations and distanced themselves from being perceived as homeless:

**Jacinta:** They've [young people couch surfing] come in here and they've gone: “oh, I just really want to look at some accommodation”, and then you talk with them, and you realise: “gee, you've been couch surfing for quite a long time”, and they say: “no, I'm not homeless. I'm not like some of the other people you get in here, because they're more of a priority!” And it's like, but no, you're just as important as well! All of that time, they don’t recognise that, because they see they have a place to stay, or several places to stay.

**Jane:** Or, they've heard of [this service] as only where you get emergency accommodation so to them it’s where 'actual' homeless people go.
Whereas they see themselves as just not having a proper place and they just want some ideas [for accommodation]...[A]nd I think for me that’s a good way to start engaging with people; [to] say: “No, but there are options for you as well”.

At the same time as these young people are avoiding the label of homelessness, the youth workers indicated that it was in many respects a part of their role to place couch surfers within a continuum of homeless experiences. For example, one aspect of their job often involved assessing the young couch surfer’s level of ‘homeless risk’:

**Kelly:** They might ring and say: "I've got nowhere to go," and then you'll say: "Oh. Well, where have you been staying?" and they'll say: "I've been staying at friends'," [and I'll say]: "how long have you been doing that for?" [and they'll say]: "three to four months". But they still identify that they've got nowhere to go, so.

**Sandra:** And I think that’s when we’d say they’re at risk of homelessness.

Some of the youth workers spoke of re-orienting the young person into defining himself or herself as equally ‘in need’; even if that meant having to officially label them as homeless:

**Megan:** Yeah and some of them, they don't see themselves – well, they know they are homeless but they might not have recognised that, and I'll
say to them: “okay, so, we can say that you’re homeless”. [And they’ll say]
“Oh, aw, yeah I guess I am!” And they, they really have to think about it!

Interestingly, in discussing how young people might feel about the stigma of accessing services, some of the youth workers reflected that they had never really factored this in before:

_Sandra_: I’m glad you raised that, though. I realise it’s something I don’t actually talk to them [young people] about, is how they feel about actually coming to us...And it’s huge, really! When you think of it...That’s something I haven’t really spoken about much, about how hard it must be. But, now you’ve mentioned that, I probably will [ask them] more on that, in terms of reflecting back to their strengths, and actually taking that positive initiative; because it’s a big step to take [coming to see us].

These discussions with youth workers reaffirm my earlier analysis of institutional practices, demonstrating how understandings of homelessness as a spoiled identity or a state of helpless victimisation are reinforced (often inadvertently) within the welfare field. As Goffman (1986: 57) reminds us, stigma is a strong motivation for acts of avoidance and concealment. To counter the symbolic burdens of stigma, individuals manage their identities and may avoid situations that risk conferring a spoiled identity (Goffman 1968: 57). In this sense, thinking about the “symbolic burdens” (Farrugia 2010) of being labelled homeless helps contextualise why many of the young people I spoke with had (at crucial points in their experiences) actively avoided, concealed and even consciously rejected
institutions and systems that ‘deal with’ homelessness. As I discuss in the next section, young people’s accounts in this research also suggest that the barriers to formal help generated by stigma are patterned in particular ways by gender.

**Gendered stigma: Keeping up appearances**

As I touched upon in the gendering of space in Chapter Two, pressures to resist and avoid the stigma of homelessness and disadvantage may be quite significant for young women performing particular gendered identities. As McDowell writes:

> Homelessness for women challenges every assumption about a woman's place and, for that reason, many women themselves often try to disguise or deny their predicament. In Los Angeles, homeless women were found living in cars, changing in department stores and in some cases still holding down a job (McDowell 1999: 90-92).

I would moreover argue that the gendered geographies of homelessness are important considerations in the emergence of couch surfing practices in young women’s experiences of dislocation. As feminist researchers like McDowell (1999) point out, the struggle to ‘fit in’ with normative, feminine geographies and maintain an appearance of home may drive some young women to prefer to seek help and shelter through their own social connections when facing homelessness, or to avoid help altogether (McDowell 1999; Wardhaugh 1999). In Renee’s discussions with me for instance, the drive to avoid stigma defined many of her earliest experiences of dislocation. Fear of being labelled homeless was a major deterrent for seeking formal help and, at certain points, was also a limitation on engaging other
supports through couch surfing. This was a process that she likened to “lying to keep the lie going”. As Renee reflected:

I didn't want people feeling sorry for me. So after my cousin’s I was livin’ in my car until this family from church took me in, and it took me that long to tell them what had happened, so...

In managing feelings of shame and anxieties around attracting attention to her situation of dislocation, Renee described having “lived two or three different lives” in-between share housing and couch surfing. Significantly, these lives coalesced around the symbolic and practical uses of her car, which became a way of negotiating dislocation on her own terms. This car was, for a short time, a temporary improvised home and a practical means of managing her own survival. Through her car for example, she also worked at her part time job as a night-time delivery driver. It was also her means for getting herself to school:

Yeah, I was living two or three different lives. Because I had went back to school by that time as well. And while I was at school I was working part time. Which was kind of weird ‘cause I was at school, working part time whilst living in a car... my car was my work as well. I was a delivery driver so it's pretty much like, I'm living, working, everything in my car.

In these ways, the distinction between Renee’s workspace and her living space had collapsed within the ambit of this vehicle, as she took to the practice of surreptitiously parking her car behind her work and sleeping there at the end of her shift. The spaces of this
car became a nexus through which she managed two public roles that were important to her (an employee, a high school student) and at the same time managing another aspect of self: the potential of a spoiled identity. Interestingly, when Renee‘s employer became aware of her situation, their response was to wash her clothes. This effectively enabled Renee to continue attending school without attracting attention:

*My boss did my washing, ‘cause she knew I was in my car at one stage.*

*Did my school clothes for me, ‘cause you had to go to school in uniform and if you weren't in uniform [you'd get in trouble], so it was kind like lying to keep the lie going.*

While washing Renee‘s school clothes was a gesture of goodwill (and was done out of respect for Renee‘s wishes) in another sense it also had the unintentional effect of implicitly reaffirming a gendered imperative to avoid the presentation of a spoiled (homeless) identity. At the same time as managing stigma helped Renee to avoid and resist an undesired subjectivity, the struggle to negotiate stigma also undermined her efforts at maintaining participation in work and education. Namely, that is, by preventing her from gaining needed support and understanding. In Renee‘s accounts, this was a difficult and ultimately, unsustainable struggle:

**PM: How did you manage it?**

**Renee: It was hard. It was really hard...[I]t’s a matter of where can you stick your car where no one’s gonna find ya? And you're gonna get a knock on the window saying ‘can you move?’ all that sort of stuff. It got a
little bit suss about a few weeks into it. I kept it going for about three, four weeks...

Through these processes of managing a homeless subjectivity, young women such as Renee are responding to (and attempting to protect themselves against) a gendered, symbolic burden. At the same time, these kinds of pressures contribute to social isolation, as well as the risk of dwelling in unsafe and insecure living situations. In these efforts to navigate dislocation differently, young women may be forced to depend heavily upon personal relationships (including with partners or employers) for shelter and survival (McDowell 1999; Wardhaugh 1999). In lieu of other options for support, this reliance on the goodwill of private households is part of what, in the next section, I contend is the primary factor at play in the emergence of couch surfing.

Couch surfing as (re)negotiation

What this chapter has demonstrated thus far is that, for young interviewees who had found themselves outside caregiver homes early in their lives, formal sources of support are (at least initially) inaccessible and undesirable options. As I have indicated, at the initial point of finding themselves out of the caregiver household at an early age, the young people I interviewed did not identify (or actively avoided identifying) themselves as homeless. At the same time, none of the people I interviewed had an easy experience of formal systems of accommodation. In coming up against ruptured familial relationships, social exclusion and a stigmatised subjectivity, interviewees spoke of going to their own social networks and depending upon these for as long as they could, as an alternative way of supporting
themselves, avoiding stigma, and navigating through a difficult situation. This was highlighted in Travis’ and Jonathan’s reflections:

**Travis:** People that are couch surfing, there’s nowhere else to go. Once they’ve been everywhere they could go, it’s on the streets.

***

**Jonathan:** When I was couch surfing, I didn’t know any of the services, so that’s the reason I went on going [from] couch to couch.

As these accounts suggest, I would argue that turning to local households is a ‘common sense’ practice for (re)negotiating survival and connectedness: a way of negotiating dislocation differently. By thinking of couch surfing in this way, I mean to say that drawing upon ‘informal networks (friends, family, family of friends or their community)” as Uhr (2004: 6-7) describes it, is the most readily available and non-threatening option (indeed, often the *only* option initially known) for these young people, upon having nowhere else to go. This is a situation where, as Rita framed it:

*You take what you can take, if somebody offers you a roof over your head.*

Young people’s tactic of drawing in the first instance upon local, known supports (Uhr 2004: 6) is also elucidated in the descriptions of the *Queensland Community Connections* study (Uhr 2004). In discussing the research findings, Uhr indicates that nearly three quarters of the young people interviewed –initially used their own informal networks
(friends, family, family of friends or their community) before they turned to formal homeless services” (Uhr 2004: 6-7). In mapping out these informal networks, the researchers highlight:

The importance of naturally formed supports, within a young person’s community, as a method of meeting their accommodation, income, food, survival, social and emotional needs (Uhr 2004: 6).

It is interesting that Uhr (2004: 6) defines these supports as “naturally formed”. That is, supports consisting of young people’s own network of social relationships, rather than systems of welfare, social workers and housing services. Deploying the ‘hidden homeless’ label, Fitzpatrick (1998) similarly comments that the reasons young people facing homelessness seek temporary shelter in their own areas includes: attachment to their own social networks, familiarity with the region, a lack of options, and a lack of knowledge of, willingness, or fear of seeking assistance. These observations were also echoed by the youth workers I spoke with in my own research. In our discussions, the practice of turning to local supports was framed as a “first port of call” or a stopgap when transitioning or waiting for access to other accommodation. Interestingly, some youth workers (like Paul, below) highlighted couch surfing as taking place in an “emergency situation”:

**Paul:** *I pretty much define couch surfing as when a person is utilising temporary, often familiar accommodation in an emergency situation and/or is in transition with seeking longer term housing or accommodation support or facilities.*
Crucially, some young people like Travis explicitly characterised couch surfing as a 
*relational* process of relying on friends and other local supports to have somewhere to 
sleep; as opposed to an experience that is contingent upon a particular site, space or 
homeless living condition. As Travis put it:

\[
I \text{ wouldn't necessarily see couch surfing -- well, you don't necessarily have to be in a house to be couch surfing. I've slept in people's cars, you know...[Y]ou'd pull up outside a mate's house and just park in his driveway. Sleep in the car there, and do that for a couple of months.}
\]

Accounts like these critically contest mainstream ideas (like the typology approaches) that 
define homelessness by living types or degrees of rooflessness. Travis’ understanding not 
only indicates the fluid geographies of dislocation, but also *challenges* stereotypes of 
homelessness as the lack of agency, resources or connections of one’s own. Implicit here is 
a completely different idea; that couch surfing is one way of negotiating accommodation 
*beyond* formal systems.

Many of the young people I spoke with tended not to think of couch surfing as any kind of 
explicit strategy they thought through from the start. Rather, turning to local connections 
was a common sense response to a difficult set of circumstances. Decisions to engage with 
these households (― I stayed at a mate’s place” or “I found some people to stay with”) just 
*made sense* at the time. Young people viewed their reliance on these households as 
unavoidable, and often the only action they had immediate power to exercise. As Travis 
framed it:
...[B]asically things weren't working out at home so obviously I had to go
find alternative accommodation and, basically didn't know... of crisis care
or these sort of places...so it was up to me and my friends basically and
friends' parents' and stuff like that.

In young people’s accounts, the households they turned to were readily available to them
for the time being, unlike formal housing services. Moreover, they often represented the
only resources young people knew about at a time of dislocation or upheaval. At one level,
young people’s accounts in this research have indicated that turning to local households is a
basic, readymade means of (re)negotiating shelter and material support, and avoiding or
reducing time spent sleeping rough. In the face of multiple barriers to security, connection
and tenure, couch surfing emerges in this sense out a struggle for ‘surviving from day to
day” (Hulse & Saugeres 2008: 2). As these young people’s accounts demonstrated:

**Jake:** When I’m on the streets, [I] just [need] a place over my head while
I'm there.

***

**Adam:** I’m usually out and about during the day, it’s just I mainly need a
place to stay during the night, like a roof over my head so I can sleep...

***

**Kyle:** If you spend a winter on the streets it’s fuckin’ horrible! I must say.

**PM:** How do you get through it...?

**Kyle:** Well, you just try and couch surf...
In another sense, the young people I interviewed had also turned to their own informal networks as a way of attempting to secure (however temporary) affordable or rent-free accommodation, in lieu of formal housing assistance, or access to any other housing or accommodation. As such, couch surfing also emerged as an inexpensive means of gaining a "roof over one's head" for a time:

**PM:** Actually, how do you compare living in a share house now, to couch surfing?

**Yvette:** Well, it's a lot more expensive! [to share house] [laughing] because usually I didn't have to pay for rent or anything while I was couch surfing, it was just paying for food and sometimes bills and stuff, but yeah; so it's more expensive because I'm having to pay rent.

The youth workers I spoke with similarly conceptualised couch surfing as a situation where young people negotiated accommodation through small in-kind payments and exchanges rather than substantive (and unaffordable) sums of rent. As one of the youth workers I spoke with described it:

**Jen:** I also see couch surfing as some way of...when they're [young people] not paying any money; they may pay a small amount of money towards food. I've had a young lady who pays for petrol for the lady she's living with...
Beyond this need for affordable and immediate (though often temporary) shelter, I argue that couch surfing importantly emerges from young people's search for connectedness with others and avoidance of stigmatising processes; often in the face of a significant absence of social support and care in their lives. In some accounts, turning to 'mates', mates' parents or even strangers was necessary in navigating away from situations of rejection, betrayal, displacement, and vexed or fragile home lives. For some young people, especially those who had first couch surfed beyond the school years, an important motivator was moving away from difficult social relationships outside the familial context. These interviewees' accounts spoke of feelings of being 'trapped' in an undesirable living situation with others (for example, in share houses or hostels). As Mike related it to me:

**Mike:** *Most of the time it has been the fact that I've felt like I needed to move, or I felt like I needed to get out, or you know, I'm just feeling trapped too much; I'm not happy with the people that I'm with.*

Whether rooted in vexed familial relationships, or difficult living situations with non-kin cohabitants, the need to get social support, connection and sanctuary elsewhere (however often tenuous this support may have turned out to be) was part of the process which led into couch surfing for all of the people I interviewed. As Craig recalled, couch surfing was one way of avoiding social isolation:

*...'Cause couch surfing, yeah, you've always got someone there to talk to and there's always someone home...*
Crucially, most interview accounts highlighted that the practice of turning to local or known households was, at its heart, a tactic for (re)negotiating a sense of home. For some, the passage towards couch surfing was part of a painful and desperate effort to “hang on” to homes that had been lost (or a sense of home that had never been known). As Lucas reflected:

...For me, it [couch surfing] was a bitter and desperate attempt to hold on to having a home. It was like: I started [life] having a home, having a place, belonging; very comfortable, very stable, to sleeping on park benches and public toilets and bushes and this and that. And I could see myself going...But I just struggled and held on as much as I could. And for me, it [couch surfing] was a struggle just to try and hold on to that.

This “struggle just to try and hold on” captures, in many ways, the meanings of dislocation conveyed by young people’s accounts. Through the interviews, there was a pervasive undercurrent of tenuousness, as young people attempted to wrest a fragile sense of shelter, connection and belonging from situations of having nowhere else to go.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have mapped out the passage towards couch surfing as a vexed (re)negotiation of home. I have examined why young people first seek out accommodation from local households, and have traced the rupture of important caregiver relationships in interviewees’ accounts of early home leaving. In doing so, I have indicated how – in the absence of important financial and psychosocial supports from caregiver relationships –
many of the interviewees were left with nowhere to go (Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Harrison 2007; Kosandiak, Goudie & Cornell-March 2009; Wyn 2009; Wyn & Woodman 2006).

Importantly, through this chapter I have also demonstrated the difficulties young people subsequently faced in gaining the help they needed from formal systems and sources of support. In particular, I have indicated the role these formal barriers played in turning young people towards local households. From the interviews, concerns about safety and security; fear of the stigma of being labelled homeless (Farrugia 2010; Goffman 1968); and a reluctance to leave familiar local connections (Packer 2005; Uhr 2004) were significant factors in avoiding certain places and services, including specialist homelessness services, boarding houses, hotels and hostels. Moreover, stigmatising tropes and objectifying institutional practices figure strongly in limiting these formal systems to an option of ‘last resort’ or emergency. In essence, the predominant focus of the homelessness field upon a chronic homeless welfare subject had complicated and deterred young people’s efforts at seeking help. Without these formal supports as a desirable option, many were ostensibly driven to find assistance elsewhere.

From young couch surfers’ experiences of dislocation, I have mapped out the process of drawing on local connections as a necessary, common sense and immediate tactic for ‘surviving from day to day’ (Hulse & Saugeres 2008: 2). This confirms the observations of existing studies such as that carried out by Community Connections (Uhr, 2004), which conceptualises couch surfing as a process of consulting local networks to gain accommodation and social support, involving small in-kind payments and exchanges in lieu of formal housing assistance, or access to any other housing or accommodation. More
importantly, I have also indicated how couch surfing emerges as a way of (re)negotiating a sense of social connection, and engaging in a struggle for home.

In this way, we might begin to think of couch surfing as both a process and reaction to social exclusion; an experience emerging from ruptures in critical relationships of support in young people’s lives. In the next chapter, I explore how initial practices of turning to local households evolve into a couch surfing situation. That is, a process of moving frequently between different living arrangements. Through this, I unravel the key relational dimensions underscoring young people’s accounts: of a destabilising uncertainty and tenuousness at play within the households they turn to.
CHAPTER FIVE

Someone else’s home: Guest status and the limits of hospitality

*It was theirs. It was theirs. And I was an intruder. That was it, full-stop.* – Lucas

In tracing young people’s accounts thus far, I have examined the journey into couch surfing as emerging from an immediately accessible, relational process of (re)negotiating home and support. Fundamentally, we might think of this as a practice that emerges in response to (and as an outcome of) social marginalisation, situations where young people struggle to find anywhere else to go. In the present chapter, I shift our focus to the passage through couch surfing, as it takes place through young people’s engagement with local households. That is, I focus on young people’s experiences of frequently moving from one living arrangement to another. I am interested here in mapping out the kinds of relationships interviewees had with the households they turned to, and what role these relationships might have in spurring young people’s movement. Engaging with the interview accounts, I contend that people in this research were drawn into a fragile state of hospitality, encountering what I have come to think of as a tenuous guest status. This structuring of the household relationship between hosts and guests renders young people’s living arrangements vulnerable to collapse.

Through the first sections of this chapter, I map out how couch surfing relationships might be understood as imparting a guest status. In doing so, I draw upon both young people’s reflections on couch surfing, and a critical analysis of the contemporary hospitality relation. In describing important aspects of hospitality and its central cultural and economic place in
young people’s experiences, I incorporate the theoretical perspectives of cultural theorist Tracy McNulty (2007) and poststructuralist Jacques Derrida (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000). These perspectives build an understanding of the potential for relationships of hostility to develop between hosts and guests, where a strong symbolic imperative for hospitality is lacking. In drawing attention to these relational aspects of couch surfing, I argue that the experience of a marginal guest status in the household attenuates young people’s efforts to (re)negotiate home. Taking up this thread, in the final part of this chapter I draw important contrasts between the tenuousness that shaped most accounts of couch surfing relationships, and the small number of supportive relationships some young people experienced. These exceptional relationships, I argue, promoted a security of tenure and belonging that had the potential to interrupt and transform the process of couch surfing.

**Tracing the guest status: The changing face of hospitality**

For all of the young people I spoke with, the journey through couch surfing – that is, the call or push to movement from one couch, spare room, spare mattress, shared floor space, friend’s car or corner of a lounge room to another – was driven by the moments of rupture or collapse (either anticipated or actual) in tenuous social relationships. This propensity for rupture was a predominant experience even for Grant, who couch surfed from a position of relative socioeconomic advantage, as part of a chosen, counter-middle class ‘slumming it’ lifestyle of backpacking and squatting. Grant spoke about the uncertainties of the couch surfing experience, which he saw as involving a precarious dependence on the quality of relationships with householders. He considered relational collapse within this process as a kind of inevitability, and highlighted the difficulties in finding anyone to stay with indefinitely:
I found it hard to find anyone. I find you overstay your welcome. Whether it’s a week, a month, whatever. I find inevitably, even if it’s the coolest middle aged couple with no kids and they love having you there, inevitably you wear on each other’s nerves. No matter what, ‘cause you’re not paying rent, or [how] you clean, the conversation; there’s always something.

For young people facing dislocation, these household relationships are central in the movement from one fragile living situation to another. That being said, it was also apparent from interviewees‘ accounts in this research that not all couch surfing relationships are equally tenuous. Some relationships were more supportive and robust than others. Moreover, some young people‘s efforts at (re)negotiating home were less vexed and convoluted. What I argue through my analysis in this chapter, is that the tendency for living arrangements with others to ‘fall through‘ (and thus creating couch surfing situations) depends upon the extent to which young people occupy a constrained guest status within those particular households.

The contemporary hospitality relation plays a central role in interviewees‘ accounts of couch surfing. That is, I would argue that the positioning of young people as tenuous guests has everything to do with how the modern, private household deals with the ethic and practice of inviting a guest to stay. In her cultural and historical tracing of Western hospitality, Tracy McNulty (2007) indicates that the act of offering hospitality is contentious and conflicting; that there is an essential uneasiness in the practice of inviting the guest into one‘s home. The ethic of hospitality, she writes, centres on a difficult question: ‘How can one behave ethically toward the stranger without risking the
dispossession or destruction of one’s own identity?” (McNulty 2007: 48). This difficult question of host-guest relations is also a major theme of Derrida’s *Of Hospitality* (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 25); a work with which McNulty (2007) opens considerable dialogue. Derrida’s analysis is insightful here, in the sense that he draws our attention to the antinomial nature of hospitality. That is, Derrida identifies a conflict between the unconditional acceptance of the guest, which hospitality embodies in its most idealised *ethical* form; and the reality of the specific, conditional state in which householders regularly enact hospitality in practice. For example, most hosts will exercise discretion about who is invited into the home and under what conditions; this is fundamental to the cultural and gendered structuring of the household (and more broadly, of the border politics of sovereignty). As Derrida points out however, the original essence of hospitality is a universal *openness* to all strangers (an ethic of invitation without question or conditions) (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000). This ethic of hospitality is paradoxical, as it draws its essential meaning from an unrealisable *ideal*.

Extending from Derrida, McNulty (2007) crucially points out that hospitality is an untenable practice, without having some way of resolving or compensating for these kinds of contradictions. In her analysis, the act of offering a sustained welcome to the ‘*other*’ requires a ‘potent symbolic structuring’” of the host-guest relation (McNulty 2007: 71-72). That is, a cultural offsetting of the risks (real or imagined) of inviting a guest to stay. By this, McNulty holds that symbolic imperatives (like a sense of duty, religious observance or honour) positively regulate the relationship between host and guest, and ‘account for and valorise the dispossession of the host's ‘*identity*’ through contact with a stranger” (McNulty 2007: 71-72). A valorised hospitality earns prestige; it benefits, in a sense, the
social standing of a household and constitutes hospitality as a normative or moral practice. In suggesting this, McNulty points out those tropes of the sacred stranger and divine guest that have traditionally played a central position in culturally regulating hospitality (McNulty 2007: 47). These traditions endow the household (usually through the paternal head of the house’) with symbolic capital in the act of welcoming the stranger/guest. Indeed, as McNulty (2007) points out, cultures and practices that imbue hospitality with a sacred or morally sanctioned character give honour to the host with the most (or at least expect a certain standard of hospitality as a given). Similarly, many religious practices that encourage a moral duty of hospitality also venerate the stranger as potentially divine (or a member of nobility), and thus owed a right of invitation. To refuse a stranger, for instance, is to risk the possibility of offending a divinity in disguise (McNulty 2007: 47-48).

However, in bringing our attention to this symbolically rich hospitality, McNulty (2007: 47) importantly points out that the contemporary, Western hospitality relation is not nearly as regulated by these kinds of cultural imperatives or traditions. This has been the case at least since the Enlightenment, with the growing commoditisation of social space. In particular, McNulty (2007: 66) contends that Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant played an important role in both anticipating and mapping out the modern hospitality relation, with profound implications for how we think about hosts and guests today.

In the Western Europe of his time, Kant noted the decline in the sacred status of the stranger/guest, and took it as an issue of particular ethical and political interest. Observing the emergence of the modern nation state, the philosopher was concerned that the increased mixing of different cultures and peoples (particularly through trade and imperialism) carried the potential for large-scale hostilities (McNulty 2007: 66). Anticipating a growing
cosmopolitanism, where this threat of hostility between ‘strangers’ seemed inevitable, Kant felt it problematic that there was not a unified or consistent set of ethical practices for ensuring peaceful relations (especially between sovereignties and their citizens) (McNulty 2007: 66).

Out of this concern, Kant advocated a secular ethic of ‘cosmopolitan hospitality”, which he outlined in his 18th Century treatise To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch (Kant 2003). Unlike the multiple (and often conflicting) cultural and religious practices of traditional hospitality, Kant imagined this new ethic as a universalised, ‘rational’ principle or maxim. It was intended by the philosopher that this could apply to any and all people, regardless of religion, culture, territory or politics (McNulty 2007: 66). In doing so, Kant took the view that hospitality should embody a legal and conditional ‘right of visit” (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 67; 71-73; McNulty 2007: 47). That is, a stranger has the right to visit (a country) solely based on a commercial relationship, with the corollary that any extension of hospitality beyond this remains entirely a matter of voluntary civic benevolence (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 67; 71-73; McNulty 2007: 47).

As McNulty (2007: 48; 66) argues, Kant’s right of visit (and the major social and economic changes that the philosopher prevised) commoditised the host-guest relation; introducing a legal status to the guest which is both impersonal and symbolically ‘empty”. In mapping out the effects of these changes through contemporary practices of hospitality, McNulty (2007: 73-74) focuses on the foreigner’s relationship with a sovereign host country. For example, she highlights the creation of the guest worker identity in countries (such as Germany), where commercial relationships are privileged but a right to citizenship is not extended to the foreigner (McNulty 2007: 72-74). That being said, the hospitality relations
which Kant observed at the level of emergent transnational (Western European) borders have their origins within the micro ‘habitat’ of the (patriarchal) household and clan (McNulty 2005: 72-73). In this sense, I would contend that Kant’s hospitality relation carries important implications for young people who are dislocated from the home space, and are seeking temporary accommodation with local households. They are, in all respects, invoking a particular relationship of hospitality. Moreover, I would crucially contend that their relationships with households are intimately shaped by the commoditisation of the right of visit, which Kant’s work delineated.

**Commoditised hospitality and the marginal guest**

As I indicated in the previous chapter, most of the young people I interviewed were rarely able to afford to pay rent or contribute a significant amount of board to any given household. This was affirmed by some of the youth workers I spoke with, who distinguished couch surfing from boarding (or other forms of accommodation) precisely on this basis. As Jacinta, a youth worker, reflected, “...I see couch surfing more as temporarily not paying board, not paying rent.”

Reference to this situation was also made in the findings of the *Community Connections* study, where the researchers demonstrated that one of the major barriers to young couch surfers remaining in particular households was an inability to contribute financially” (Uhr 2004: 42). As such, we might think of young people in these situations as not having access to a legal or commercially sanctioned contract of tenure (such as paying rent or board). This capacity might otherwise secure and protect their accommodation (for example, through obtaining a lease or other right to tenancy and occupation). In the absence of a formalised tenure, young people in these situations have found themselves relying entirely upon the
symbolic grounding of the hospitality relation. In this sense, the social relationship between young people and these households becomes essential in shaping most aspects of tenure and belonging. Within a culture of commoditised hospitality, I would argue that this relationship becomes especially problematic.

As McNulty (2007: 66) points out, the contemporary hospitality relation between host and guest in *a private home* has been emptied of much of its moral (or sacred) imperative. At the same time, the impersonal and commercial right of visit has become the norm, and primarily in public space. In this sense, it is the tourist or businessman who has become the new “avatar” (McNulty 2007:67) of the stranger or guest, and *monetary transactions* the privileged mode in which relationships between hosts and guests are conducted, managed and regulated (McNulty 2007: 67). Within this notion of ‘cosmopolitan’ hospitality, the guest or stranger remains precisely that. There is little possibility for a culturally valorised position in the host-space, beyond a limited stay or visit based on commercial relationships of trade, tourism, guest work; or (in the context of the household) paying guests such as boarders and sub-tenants (McNulty 2007: 67-68; 73). As McNulty, writes [own additions bracketed]:

[T]his new [secular] avatar of the guest is defined in opposition to other potential modalities of the stranger/guest, including the supplicant, the nomad, and the alien seeking asylum…the corollary of Kant's “right of visit” as a right of tourism or visitation is the rejection of the stranger's right to asylum or permanent residence. The hospitality imperative specifies that the integration of the foreigner [or guest] into the
community [or household] remains the province of religious or civic benevolence and has nothing to do with the moral imperative. The foreigner's [or guest's] ability to pass through or do commerce within the country [or private household] is therefore obtained only at the cost of losing his ability to settle there or be integrated into the nation [or private household] as an equal citizen [or member] (McNulty 2007: 67-68, 73).

In a commoditised right of visit, trust of the stranger is commercially regulated; a ‘user pays’ ethic of belonging. In many ways then, a crucial question for this thesis is: what about the guest who cannot pay? What is it that structures relationships of trust in these cases? As Travis reflected on his experiences of couch surfing relationships: ‘You don’t have much of that [trust] in couch surfing.’ Within the modern hospitality relation, I would argue that the young person seeking shelter with local households represents an excluded and displaced figure. They are neither fully able to secure a right of visit through commercial transaction (as in the payment of rent or board), nor can they occupy the status of the tourist (or backpacker). This is someone who today represents the accepted and sanctioned stranger, and is entitled to a conditional (market-based) tenure (McNulty 2007: 71-73).

In this sense, we might think of couch surfing relationships as attenuated by the modern ethic of hospitality. In a commoditised rendering of guests, the young person seeking accommodation with a private household will find it difficult to remain for very long in situations where they cannot commercially reciprocate or compensate the host for their hospitality. That is, unless there is a stronger symbolic structuring to the relationship (the
Chapter Five: Guest status and the limits of hospitality

charity, benevolence, oaths of loyalty or bonds of kinship that Kant renders extraneous to hospitality). Without being either an ‘accepted‘ stranger or someone who is in the first place familiar, well-known and close to the household, I contend that young people find themselves occupying an uncertain, unsanctioned guest status; their living arrangements prone to rupture and collapse. It is through this attenuated relation that I argue young people come to occupy a tenuous guest status. As Renee framed it in her discussions with me: —You don't know how long it's gonna last.”

This is akin in many ways to McNulty’s (2007: 73) example of the legally proscribed guest worker, who only possesses a ‘right of visit’ on commercial grounds and cannot expect to become a citizen, beyond whatever ‘civic benevolence‘ might be (optionally) extended to them. The imposition of a guest status is, in this sense, built into the act of a young person entering a private household without financial means, and with no clear symbolic relation that might valorise the act of offering hospitality. As Lucas related it to me, this was a situation where:

... People would have me over for a night or two, think that they were saints. And then they were just like: “well, what [are you still doing here]?...It just got to the point where everyone was fed up with me.

In the next section, I map out young people’s experiences of this tenuous guest status, linking their accounts of key couch surfing relationships to the critical unease at the heart of a thinned-out hospitality.
Fragile relations: Hostility and the guest status

As I have suggested, the breakdown of the hospitality relationship is, in essence, the key factor pushing frequent movement from one household to another. This is the relational process through which couch surfing emerges. In speaking with interviewees about their relationships with these households, it was telling that each of their accounts repeated the same theme: they had all felt very conscious of not ‘belonging’. Ultimately, their discussions emphasised a sense of being outsiders or intruders; a feeling which – as I return to in the next chapter – weighed heavily upon young people’s sense of place and self, and caused them to constantly question how long they could stay in any one place. These experiences of intrusion were an important point of discussion in my interview with Lucas:

*See, when I went to a friend’s place and I stayed, it was alright once you’d stayed a night or two, but once you were there and you – not only did you feel like you were intruding, you just felt like you just didn’t belong. And that was horrible. You know, it’s like: “what am I doing here?”.*

Accounts like these also speak of young people’s liminal, uncertain place within these households. In her anthropological work, Douglas (2002) argues that things or people who cross social boundaries and categories (the proverbial ‘betwixt and between’) are seen as anomalous, or ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 2002). Certainly, in occupying a space half-way between what is constructed as home and homeless, dependent and independent, young people living within a guest status are potentially anomalous subjects, situated somewhat uncannily beyond the pre-existing at-homeness of a couch surfing household. In this respect, Douglas’ (2002) ‘matter out
of place” lends a conceptual voice to young participants’ impressions that their presence “put people out” or made them feel “out of place”.

What is also clear from the interviews is that these feelings of being unwelcome and out of place were particularly strong for young people who had stayed with friends’ parents. In this research, all of the young people who first began couch surfing during their school years (ranging, in their accounts, from 12 to 18 years of age) initially stayed at their friends’ family homes. The predominance of these relationships in their earliest experiences of couch surfing is not surprising. After all, the majority of their friends and peers were still living with caregivers at that age. As well, most of those I interviewed had stayed in their own local areas in the weeks and months after they had found themselves out of home. Because of this, they naturally sought out support with those who were geographically closest and familiar to them. This is also affirmed by the Community Connections study (Uhr 2004: 6), which found (as I commented in the previous chapter) that young people were most likely to be couch surfing with family and friends, and initially remain in close proximity to their own communities.

For those seeking support from friends’ parents, strong bonds of hospitality were absent in the longer term. This was reflected in the tenuousness of the arrangements. Length of stay with these households only ranged from a couple of days to a couple of weeks at most. Moreover, what was especially striking about young people’s experiences of these households was the undertone of unease pervading them. In some young people’s accounts for example, there was a sense of occupying a personal space which was the reserve of pre-existing members of the household; spaces and relationships which were cordoned off, even
if unintentionally, unconsciously or out of habit. These are important, deeply affecting embodied experiences of the guest status, which I explore in more detail in the next chapter. Through interviewees’ accounts, it was apparent that the everyday tensions within friends’ families (for instance, witnessing family arguments or disagreements) had marked the young person’s status as an outsider to those relationships, distinguishing them as tenuous and uncertain guests.

This was a significant element in Yvette’s experiences. At the time of couch surfing, all of Yvette’s friends were still living with caregivers. These parental homes were consequently some of the places where she first sought accommodation. In her conversations with me, she recalled having felt uncomfortable in these living arrangements, and had found arguments between her friends and their parent(s) especially unsettling. These events had marked the household as an inherently private space; somewhere that could never be fully known or open to her. Through Yvette’s reflections, it was clear this ‘impenetrability’ had drawn distinct boundaries around the family that made her feel awkward and out of place. This sense of intrusion was a palpable expression of a guest status, a marginal position of ‘being on the outer’. As Yvette put it:

But the thing is, you might know someone but their family, what happens in the home is private to them, and that’s something that, no matter how close you are to them, you’ll never know exactly what that is. You know, fights that they have with their parents and stuff, it’s really uncomfortable

29 Yvette was seventeen years old and in her final year of high school.
if you’re sitting on the couch watching TV with your best friend and her father behind you going at each other!

In speaking of these experiences, Yvette pointed out that staying in the family household had alienated her from the pre-existing friendship. This was a common thread running through many young people’s accounts, where friendships shifted and deteriorated under the pressure of occupying a thinned-out hospitality relation. This was especially the case when young people had no choice but to reside on a daily basis within their friend’s family home (and often within the same room or space).

Lucas felt this shift in relationships with his friends quite acutely. In particular, he linked this to the fact that he had gone from staying with friends on a voluntary basis (_hanging out_, sleeping over), to being in a situation where he was _forced_ to stay at this household indefinitely. Not only this, but he also had to share his friends’ living spaces (usually sleeping on a mattress on their bedroom floors). This was a difficult situation for both Lucas _and_ his friends to reconcile. In occupying his friends’ homes as an uncertain (indefinite) guest, their friendship had transformed from one grounded in mutual connection and fun, to an arrangement based on a sense of necessity, obligation, dependency and constant physical proximity. This _threatened_ the friends’ sense of bounded identity in _the home_, and fundamentally altered the nature of their relationship. As Lucas described it:

_[Originally] I was there because I wanted to be there; and that's easy, and that's why it was great early on, couch surfing. No one minded. But then,_
when it starts to get to the point where I don't have somewhere to go

back to, well I have to be here. And that’s when the problem comes...

I would argue that these are all instances where the hospitality relation has been rendered vulnerable. Indeed, these accounts reach to the core of McNulty’s (2007) (2007: 71-72) case regarding the limits of contemporary hospitality: that the commoditised right of visit especially fails at buffering guest-host relations in the private household. In her critique, McNulty importantly counters the Kantian assumption that hostility between hosts and guests can be avoided by formalised, universal and rational principles founded on the assumed ‘neutrality’ of commerce (McNulty 2007: 71-72). In contesting this understanding, she draws upon Freudian conceptualisations of the ego, characterising the hospitality conflict as a struggle over self-other boundaries. This is especially so concerning questions of ownership, belonging and borders; questions that are ameliorated through (symbolically valorised) relationships of trust. In McNulty’s (2007: 46-86) view then, the cosmopolitan hospitality fundamentally fails to compensate for the “uncanny threat” of offering hospitality in one’s home. As McNulty writes:

This characterization goes to the heart of what is at stake in hospitality:...the undecidability concerning the ”property” of the host that is so fundamental to the hospitality relationship becomes particularly precarious and menacing… In the face of this uncanny threat, Kant’s ”empty” legislation of the host/guest relationship provides no strong safeguards, since it does not constitute a symbolic order in any real sense...(McNulty 2007: 71-72).
This potential for hostility in the household (that is, in the absence of a more potent symbolic structuring) helps us to understand the pervasive sense that most young people related to me, of eventually feeling like an intruder, an invader or outsider in a majority of the households they stayed at. In his discussions with me, Lucas tellingly linked the potential for hostility to a sense that friends’ parents were being ‘put out’ by helping him; that it impinged upon their freedom. In particular, he wondered if his presence in these households had threatened the sense of home that the hosts had previously taken for granted. This, I feel, goes to the heart of the fundamental unease that both McNulty (2007) and Derrida (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000) highlight in their work. In articulating this hostility, Lucas reflected:

This idea of home means so much to people that to help me, they were
(well, some of them) putting out their own ideas of freedom and space,
and so that’s why they couldn’t be bothered.

In a sense, Lucas had encountered firsthand how the normative investment in home – as an extension of identity and site of belonging – conflicted with the act of hospitality, which required a kind of opening up of the home, its spaces and the identities inscribed within it. Extending hospitality to Lucas represented in this way a kind of border crossing. It raised the uneasy question bound to the process of extending hospitality: ‘How can one behave ethically toward the stranger without risking the dispossession or destruction of one’s own identity?’ (McNulty 2007: 48). In lieu of a strong moral imperative for such hospitality relations, Lucas’ presence in the household became a source of increasing unease,
confusion and hostility. His peers and peers’ parents simply did not quite know what to ‘do’ with him; hence Lucas’ emphasis that ‘having someone over there invaded their space.’”

A similar sense of imposition and worn welcomes figured into young people’s experiences of staying with friends (including close friends) who lived out of home. In their accounts, the degree to which friends remained accommodating diminished as young people occupied more of the household time and space than their hosts were accustomed to. This was evident in Jonathan’s accounts of staying with friends. Even within some of his closest friendships, for example, Jonathan noted that inevitably most of them reached the limits of their hospitality within a couple of weeks at best:

> So even if I stayed there for like a week, you know, I thought about it, “this is pretty good”, you know, I could get used to this! And you know, maybe I could stay here for a bit longer, and you know, get a job and that kind of stuff. Then a time would come and my mate would be like “what are you doing with yourself? You can’t stay here forever you know; find a place and go”.

These tenuous relations were also a part of Kyle’s experience of staying with friends. Significantly, tensions developed despite the fact that he made many of these friends while dwelling on the streets, and all of these friends helped each other get through homelessness (for example, by having friends stay at their houses rent-free). Kyle described these tense times as points when he felt he had ‘pushed his luck’, usually after occupying too much of his friends’ time or by taking up too much space (for example, by sleeping in an
overcrowded lounge room). This issue of occupying space and time is an important dimension of young people’s embodied navigation of the guest status, which I expand upon in the next chapter.

As well as friends, staying with certain family members carried potential pitfalls that made these relationships vulnerable to tenuousness. Often, these relationships reinscribed the struggles and losses of familial support that had resulted in many interviewees’ initial dislocation. This was especially the case if a family member was also struggling with issues such as drug and alcohol misuse, mental illness, or the impact of difficult and abusive relationships. It is not surprising that many of these family relationships were affected by these issues, as I examined in Chapter Four. In these relationships, issues of anxiety, uncertainty, instability, and safety concerns predominated for the young people I interviewed. Renee, for example, spoke about staying with her cousin as a particularly difficult living arrangement. Her cousin was in a vulnerable living situation herself, vis-à-vis a problematic relationship with her de facto partner.

As Renee related it to me:

*Some of the situations I didn’t like was the conflict and confrontations that would happen. With my cousin, her boyfriend (the baby's dad), he actually threw them out of his house so that's why they were in the house they were in, and they got back together while I was staying there and I didn't really know what to do...*
In some ways, we might trace the passage towards a guest status as a process where young people become ‘unsanctioned’ guests. That is, in occupying a tenuous hospitality, they cross over from what Derrida (2000: 27) distinguishes as the welcomed, legitimate guest carrying a right of reception, towards the illegitimate and transgressive (or in the Kantian ethic, non-commercial) intruder. According to Derrida, the guest without a right of visit or right of hospitality can only be introduced ‘in my home’, in the host’s ‘at home’, as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 61). In lieu of being able to pay rent or board and so engage in a commercial right of visit, young people staying with households where strong symbolic structuring of the relationship is lacking, will tend to find themselves becoming precisely the ‘illegitimate…[guests], liable to expulsion’ which Derrida speaks of (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 61). This parasitic reversal of hosts’ perceptions figured strongly in young people’s accounts of staying with friends’ parents. As Anna recalled:

...[I] stayed with my boyfriend for two or three days [laughs softly] then his dad was being a bit of a bitch and was like: “Right. Out!” Even though he’d actually quite liked me beforehand but apparently he’d changed his mind when I got kicked out of home...I’m not sure what it was...I think sort of during my relationship with my boyfriend he got sort of sick of me. In any case he just suddenly was like: [commanding, authoritarian voice]

“Ew, moocher. Out!”.

From the interview accounts, experiences of staying with friends’ family were especially vulnerable to this ‘moocher factor’. In many ways, this was because young people’s
situations were commonly unclear to these households (and to friends’ parents in particular). Problems would come about if the parent(s) were not sufficiently aware of the young person’s life situation from the outset; the fact that they had nowhere else to go, or even the exact reasons why they could not simply return home or move out on their own. In this sense, there was no apparent “right of visit” (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 67; 71-73; McNulty 2007: 47) in these households. Initially, the young person had simply come to stay in these households as a place to crash (thinking it temporary), only to subsequently find themselves with nowhere else to go. Tellingly, few of the young people I interviewed recalled having had much of a role in conveying their situation to friends’ parents. Jonathan, for example, commented that when it came to staying in these households, his friends did all of the talking, negotiating and explaining:

\[ I \text{ really didn’t do the negotiating, my mate did you know? But my mate just said “can he stay for like a week or something?”} \]

In this sense, the likelihood of being able to stay with friends’ parent(s) depended very much on how friend(s) mediated between parents and the couch surfer; and, whether friends (and the young person themselves) understood that they were dealing with a situation of homelessness. Indeed, the capacity for understanding and openness about the young person’s circumstances was crucial in these living arrangements. It meant that parents (and other members of the household) were in an informed position to work out what they could realistically offer the young person, and what additional help they could provide them (for example, helping them in a practical sense to find longer-term solutions to their living situation). On the other hand, failures to grasp the realities of dislocation
were frequent points of tension that undermined young people’s ability to occupy households as legitimate guests (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 61). Importantly, this was often as a direct result of the barriers and stigmatising processes that I discussed in the previous chapter. As Lucas’ accounts highlighted:

...[T]hey’d [people I stayed with] never really had to deal with anyone who had problems. They’d never had to deal with anyone in a bad situation. Friends who, especially one in particular, who I was very close with, even he didn’t understand; he’s the one who actually said: “If it was me, I’d have sorted this out by now”...And he said to me, “My dad said ‘what are you doing here?’” Again, that was the problem. And even if he [my friend’s dad] didn’t mind [me being there], you’d know that other people in the house did.

Again, as McNulty (2007: 67-68) suggests, the host-guest relationship requires a strong element of trust, a symbolic grounding that might otherwise justify the risks – to identity and ‘ownership’ – of a host accepting the stranger or guest. In many cases, the lack of a clear understanding of young people’s predicament meant that parents and other members of the household (including friends) had no compelling reason (or care) for having the young person stay in their homes. There was nothing to structure a hospitality relation. Indeed, in these cases the young person’s presence in the household was anomalous and unbidden. It raised parent(s)’ and friend(s)’ anxieties, and often resulted in a hostile end to the living arrangement. This is borne out, for instance, in my discussion with Lucas, about how his friends’ parents understood his situation at the time:
Lucas: Oh, [the parents thought it was a case of] just a friend staying over. Until I didn’t go home, and then they started to get pissed off.

PM: So really, they didn’t know the full situation? Did the friend sort of say “He’s got nowhere else to live?” or?

Lucas: I don’t know what they told them. I got no idea what was going on.

PM: Okay, because I kind of get that sense, I guess, that parents don’t always completely ‘know’.

Lucas: Well [my friend] did ask his dad could I stay for a little while.

This lack of a deeper structuring to household relationships made it difficult for young people to allay hostility, or engage in supportive bonds with the household for sustained periods. As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, some interviewees recalled having been too young at the time, and too overwhelmed by their situations, to know how to behave in the households or contribute back to them. Where some interviewees did not have outlets or capacities to cope with their situations, they also engaged in behaviours that were additionally problematic. Within some accounts, these behaviours (such as drug and alcohol misuse, or ‘acting out’) had caused significant problems – an aspect of the emotional burdens of dislocation that I also bring focus to in the next few chapters. In this sense, young people’s faux pas within the couch surfing household added pressure to an already fragile hospitality relation, serving as an additional trigger for being asked to leave.
These *faux pas* were major reasons, in both Travis’ and Lucas’ accounts, for being forced to move on during their earlier days of couch surfing:

**Travis:** *Mainly when I was younger, when I was still doing the school thing and that, it was more like imposing on families and stuff like that, or parents and stuff. I was really young and I didn’t really understand and really care much you know? So I became just an issue.*

* * *

**Lucas:** *I didn’t pay them [friends’ parents] rent when they wanted rent, which was just completely unlike me. I didn’t, because I was so messed up. I couldn’t even think ... And then when I hit eighteen I started drinking a lot. A lot of money went on drinking and nights out, but I was just so messed up and I had no one to talk to about it...And by the end of that year, they didn’t really want me there...*

Aside from problems of misunderstanding, the reality is that many of the households (including friends’ parents, but also friends living out of home, and other family members) did not have the resources to accommodate another young person beyond a very tenuous arrangement. In order for a young person’s stay to be sustainable, the household had to be prepared, willing and capable of *taking on* the young person – not only in a purely financial sense, but also in an emotional capacity; and in terms of having adequate space, time and energy. There had to be some kind of balance between the young person’s needs for shelter, social support, space and recovery; and the needs and boundaries of existing
members of the household. This was a major challenge for many of the households where young people sought help, as demonstrated below:

**Yvette:** People are used to having their family and that, and maybe having someone else over once a week or something; not all the time?

***

**Lucas:** You know that people aren’t gonna put up with it; having someone there all the time... So I mean, this is what it all comes down to.

The capacity of households to accommodate young people in these situations may be limited where families or other hosts are themselves grappling with socioeconomic disadvantage. In these situations, a young person entering an already (financially, interpersonally) strained household represents an overwhelming additional responsibility. In interviewees’ accounts, this meant that staying with local households was inherently destabilising; particularly if they were living in areas affected by neighbourhood disadvantage.

As Yvette and Jonathan commented:

**Yvette:** It's expensive to have another teenager living in a house, when I'm not paying a hell of a lot of money towards it.

***

**Jonathan:** Looking at their point of view as well, it would have been pretty hard for them, you know, it's like looking after somebody else...
More often than not, young people who approached these households could not plan to stay beyond a very limited period of welcome (often only an overnight stay or a couple of days at most). As Jonathan reflected on his earliest months of couch surfing:

   And it's hard as well, because most of my mates lived with their parents still...and their parents don't really want you to stay, so they'd say, oh, “you can stay for a week”, make a bed or something out for you...And even when I was staying at the places, they would say: "well, think now where you want to go after, ‘cause you can’t stay here. Don’t think you’ll be staying for months on end, so think now where you can go next”.

In these situations, a young person’s position as a tenuous guest was especially obvious, bringing to bear the fragile nature of a thinned-out hospitality. In this way, we might think of the guest status as a kind of ‘borrowed time’, where young people are excluded not only from claims to tenure, but more fundamentally, find it impossible to attain a sense of belonging. In the next section, I take up the thread of this vexed, attenuated belonging. In doing so, I anticipate my discussion in future chapters about the limiting impact of a guest status on young people’s efforts to (re)negotiate home.

**The guest status as exclusion from home**

In their accounts of couch surfing, young people tellingly spoke of being in houses but not ‘at home‘. Moreover, they rejected words like ‘comfortable‘, ‘belonging‘; ‘permanence‘ or ‘privacy‘ in describing the couch surfing household. As Rita framed it:
One of the ladies from here came with me to look at a place yesterday. And she said to me today how she got home, and she said, and her initial feeling of getting in to her house was realising how lucky she was. And I said: “That's because the word 'home' is in your vocabulary, and it's not in mine.” And she was like pretty much: “Yeah”.

While certain living spaces of a household were made available, a more fundamental sense of inclusion, ownership of space and tenure was rarely felt or given. Home was the reserve of hosts and not of guests. It was this sense of occupying an illegitimate, impermanent space in households that prompted some young people to reflect – what home?" As Jake and Andrew put it:

**PM:** Were there any times or places while you were couch surfing that you felt that you were really 'at home', or was it more just somewhere to stay?

**Jake:** Mm, somewhere to stay, really.

**Andrew:** Yeah. You know, you don’t feel at home.

[I laughs softly]

**Andrew:** You know, **what** home?

**Jake:** Yeah! [laughs softly in affirmation]

[Both and Andrew and Jake laugh in mutual understanding]

**Jake:** [quoting Andrew] “**What** home?” [laughs at Andrew] You're a tripper!
For those I interviewed, the guest status manifested itself in particular spatial and temporal exclusions from a sense of home. In their reflections, many young people expressed a strong awareness of the spatial contingencies of couch surfing relationships, highlighting marked differences in the quality and ‘choice’ of household space between a supportive living arrangement and a thinned-out hospitality. In the most tenuous guest situations, spaces were highly proscribed and the freedom to occupy a household was limited. While couch surfing, the ‘usual’ living spaces that young people had occupied was a couch in a lounge room or other communal space; or a spare mattress or sleeping bag, often on the floor of a friend’s bedroom:

PM: Was it literally like being ‘on a couch’, or in a corner somewhere?

Jonathan: Most of the time, 90 per cent, it was a couch. Maybe one-off I could, you know, sleep in a bed for a couple of nights but, you know, most of it was a couch, so yeah.

* * *

Yvette: Most places it was just on the floor of a mate’s bedroom or in the lounge room or something.

* * *

Kyle: Just couch, yeah. Lounge room.

* * *

Craig: Well, I was on their couch in the lounge, so mornings and afternoons were a bit sketchy if I wanted to sleep, because [the household
had] five kids, all going to school! So, seven o'clock in the morning, everyone yeah, woke up and watched fuckin' cartoons [laughs].

***

Andrew: Yeah, I was sleeping on the floor!

***

Lucas: Well, funnily enough it was never actually a couch. Normally it was a mattress on the floor. Usually in their bedroom, which is again you know, you don't want to sleep there...friend's bedroom; mattress on the floor...

PM: Were there ever spare rooms?

Lucas: Nope... Always mattresses, actually. Always on the floor.

PM: And you never got to choose?

Lucas: Never got to choose.

In young people‘s accounts, these spaces were purely for the purposes of sleeping, and as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, offered very little privacy, space for unpacking belongings or settling in. On the other hand, some of the participants I spoke with had been provided with a bed or spaces with a greater degree of privacy, shelter and comfort; but even within these spaces few felt entirely at home:

PM: Do you get much of a space 'of your own' there? Like a room?

Rita: I get a room, and the room is very much used by the other person still. Obviously not when I'm in there and I'm asleep. I find it extremely
cold and there isn't enough blankets, but at the same time I have a roof over my head, and I have, you know, I have an air bed. What can I say? ...[B]ut no, I've never been at the point where I have to stay on someone's couch because there isn't any other space.

* * *

**PM:** I'm interested in knowing a little bit more about the living conditions of a lot of the places where you couch surfed. Did it feel like you had much of a space of your own, or privacy?

**Jonathan:** No. Nup.

**PM:** Not really?

**Jonathan:** Not much, no! [laughing softly]

These kinds of exclusions from privacy and a sense of ownership over space were defining issues in the interviews, highlighting a sense in which young people felt powerless to shut out the intrusions or comings and goings of the existing householders. This lack of control over space and inhabitation was ubiquitous within participants' accounts. In this sense, as much as young people occupying a guest status feel as though they are intruders, the household in many respects equally intrudes upon them. This strained social space fundamentally structures young people's experiences of couch surfing. The more young people occupied a guest status, the less personal control and choice they had in terms of the living arrangements available to them. For young people, the challenges of navigating this are considerable, and an issue I discuss further in Chapter Six.
At its most extreme, the lack of a bounded, private, autonomous space in couch surfing households carries the potential for situations of abuse, and threats to personal wellbeing. Indeed, in young people’s accounts, concerns about safety and security were foremost factors in many of the more tenuous relationships with householders:

**Renee:** Some of the other places I’ve ended up in for a bit were just plain scary...there’s been a couple where I’ve been to drug dealers’ houses and stuff and that’s just...a den of dark, dingy smoke and it stinks and it’s kind of not fit for human habitation!

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**Yvette:** I found a couple [I could have stayed with] but I personally didn’t want to live with a man, and let alone an older, someone in their mid to late twenties or above. Just, because I personally didn't feel safe with that...

***

**Mike:** In some parts, it [the decision to leave] was a matter of un-safety [lack of safety] where I was staying...[O]n most occasions, it was uncomfortable where I was staying, or it was unsafe, or I just needed to get away...If it’s a safe place; if it's safe and happy and you're fine, then yeah it's fine.

In the context of couch surfing situations, safety issues have also been borne out anecdotally in some of Robinson’s (2002: 106) research. In examining the issues which
compound dislocation and exclusion, Robinson for example reflects on the harrowing experience of a young woman—who accepted a stranger's offer of cheap accommodation, only to be locked in the house for over a week until she managed to escape” (Robinson 2002b: 106). The potential dangers of abuse (particularly by strangers) highlight an extreme instance of a fundamental aspect of the guest status. That is, young people's reliance, for their tenure and wellbeing, on the fragile and tenuous goodwill offered by households.

Ultimately, the tendency of the guest status to exclude young people from a sense of at-homeness is precisely what renders these experiences of couch surfing continuous with a broader context of social exclusion. The nature of the hospitality relationship affected young participants’ inclusion in household spaces and activities; the freedom they had to make use of household amenities and entertainments, and their entitlements to privacy and 'time out' within the home. Without a strong symbolic structuring that might bolster an ethic of care, young people seeking hospitality out of situations of displacement lack the protected tenure that paying rent or board might give them access to. This marginality is the key dynamic at work in the process and perpetuation of couch surfing. It is rooted in relational tenuousness; excluding young people from a legitimate space in the home, and reinscribing barriers to social citizenship. As Grant defined it:

If I could have a life that was safe and easy and it was couch surfing, I would do it. But couch surfing doesn't facilitate, it doesn't work within the system that we have right now. You can't. When someone asks you – the easiest thing in the world – someone asks you on your résumé: “where are you living?” You can’t answer. You've got like four different houses!
These aspects of marginality led many young people, upon reflection, to label their experiences of couch surfing as homelessness. This was despite many interviewees’ pre-existing understandings of homelessness as rooflessness:

**PM:** When you were couch surfing, did you think of yourself as ‘homeless’ or would you define yourself as something else?

**Kyle:** No, no, it’s homeless.

**PM:** Yeah?

**Kyle:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**PM:** What kind of makes you think that way about it?

**Kyle:** The fact that you have no home. You might have a house but you don’t have somewhere to call your own.

***

**Rita:** It’s (couch surfing) kind of ‘homeless’. It’s not ‘homeless’ because you’re not on the streets, but it’s homeless in the fact that it’s not yours; you haven’t got any rights on it, and at any point, somebody can tell you to go. You don’t know how long you’re there for; it could be a day, it could be a week.

Jonathan similarly identified couch surfing as homelessness, highlighting the frequent and destabilising movement of being forced to negotiate a string of temporary arrangements, with nowhere else to go. He also importantly indicated the impact of couch surfing on his capacity to establish himself (for example, in looking for work):
PM: Do you think that you would have considered yourself “homeless”, technically, when you were couch surfing?

Jonathan: Yep. Definitely. I was definitely homeless; I had nowhere to go, so... Yeah, you do have a roof over your head but it’s only for a night or two for a maximum, so then after that then you've got nowhere to go, so you're pretty much homeless... When you’re couch surfing, you could be in [one place] one day [and a completely distant place] the next day, so if you've got a job and then you're couch surfing, it's pretty hard. And it was pretty hard to find a job. So I was relying on Centrelink, and even trying to find your own accommodation when you’ve sort of gotta move from place to place and that sort of stuff.

Yvette also spoke of couch surfing as homelessness, and as occupying a 'house' but not a 'home'. Through this, she contested and reworked the popular notion that homelessness is simply about rooflessness:

PM: Did you actually think of yourself as 'homeless' when you were couch surfing, or?

Yvette: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. When you think about it now that I have somewhere to live, I was homeless. For a year... You've got a house; you don’t have a home. Home is somewhere that you can say that you’ve stayed, you know. That there's sort of security and stuff... Like, if you were
just staying somewhere for a couple of days or a couple of weeks at a
time, you're still homeless ... 'cause homelessness, they just sort of narrow
it in to people that are on the streets. And yeah, but technically I was on
the streets! Every night I had to call a different person or every week I had
to call a different person to ask them if I could stay. So really, if they had
said 'no', then I would have been on the streets. I had my car and I would
have probably just slept in my car. I had a car, but it's not a home!...I was
still homeless, I just wasn't on the streets...I guess it's, you could say it's
homelessness but with a bed.

Significantly, in some young people’s accounts, experiences of a guest status were more
pronounced. They had encountered far more tenuousness in their relationships with
households, and their movement between living arrangements was more frequent and
destabilising than other interviewees. In many accounts, these experiences of a highly
attenuated hospitality set a precedent for rapid movement from one extremely tenuous
relationship to another. In these experiences, the very brief nature of living arrangements
became exhausting and intensely disadvantaging; an aspect of the felt guest *habitus* that I
explore in further detail in the next two chapters. For young people such as Jonathan, such
tenuousness meant ‘burning through’ his connections with households very quickly. This
situation prompted him to find other ways to seek shelter and support:

*I've stayed with a lot of temporary accommodation as well [as couch
surfing]. Been through all the services that there is...even all the youth
shelters, basically all the services like that. Even detox [drug and alcohol
rehabilitation centres] as well, stayed there overnight, just ‘cause it was a place to stay. So, yeah I've extended all of my options... after I'd already stayed at, you know, everyone's house that I could stay at, there was nowhere else after that. I couldn't go to the other places I'd been because of the parents and all that kind of stuff, so that's when I came [to a specialist service] and got accommodation through there.

This is reaffirmed by my discussion with youth workers, who (as I briefly discussed in Chapter Four) noted that young people tended to access their service when they had “burnt all their bridges”:

**Penny:** And I think we tend to see [young people] at the end of the couch surfing cycle, where it's starting to really break down.

**Linda:** Burnt all their bridges.

**Penny:** They don't have enough friends to maintain the constant couch surf; they have to sort of enter services and then they might sort of exit to a friend's house for another couple of weeks and then back into a service.

Through the next section, I expand upon these highly tenuous encounters with a guest status. In particular, I indicate the possible gendered dimensions that may pattern some of the more vexed experiences of couch surfing, where collapses in living arrangements are especially frequent.
Burning bridges: The gendered dimensions of reception

Through my engagement with young people’s accounts, I began to speculate about whether the gendering of relationships between hosts and guests might shape the nature of young people’s position within some households. The gendering of care and perceptions of need might affect the extent to which young women and men can depend on relationships of hospitality. Of course, the small number of participants\textsuperscript{30} and the nuanced focus of my research make it difficult to draw specific conclusions on this issue, beyond speculating on some of the themes raised by this research.

Through the focus group, gender was raised as a possible factor shaping the tenuousness of household arrangements, and the experiences of some men who rapidly exhausted avenues for support with households. In particular, the youth workers speculated about the impact of gendered behaviour and expectations in shaping young men’s capacity to engage and sustain support locally. Although it is impossible to establish without a more rigorous assessment than this research can offer, some youth workers commented that “more young men keep coming and going back to the service than young women”, and sought formal housing and welfare services as a last resort. Of course, it is apparent, from the passage below, that some of these speculations involved normative and essentialising assumptions about the gendering of social skills and help-seeking behaviour.

\textsuperscript{30} It is worth noting that more men than women approached the study or were referred to it through the youth housing service TAP. The gendered patterning of client service-seeking would also be a worthy issue for further research.
**Penny:** I want to say, and I've no proof of this at all, but young women maybe have more social ability and capabilities to couch surf, like young women, because they have more school friends or outside friend supports than young males. But –

**Jacinta:** And potentially less ‘pride’ as well. Well, not necessarily less ‘pride’, but more of the ability to ask for help when they need it. Not stuck on their pride.

**Jane:** Maybe people are more willing to give it [support, shelter] to a young woman than a young man?

[Wide agreement]: Yeah.

**Penny:** Seen as more vulnerable?

In addition to these gendered dimensions of ‘vulnerability’ and need, youth workers also reflected anecdotally on the extent to which young women might have particular intimate relationships that they can rely upon in securing accommodation. They speculated that these relationships might not be similarly available to young men:

**Linda:** In my experience, there definitely seems to be more young men that keep coming and going back to the service than young women, who don’t seem to repeat it quite so much.

**Jane:** I think that’s certainly the case, but I wonder if we would more often have young women exit the system to go and stay with their boyfriend? Particularly an older male, who would have a property. We’d very rarely
have a young guy who would say “I'm going to stay with my girlfriend”. It
doesn't really happen, so in that sense I think there's a very clear gender
difference between the two, yeah.

Contrary to some of these comments, there were a number of young men in the interviews
(namely Craig, Mark and Mike) who did in fact mention staying with their partners, ex-
partners, entering into a romantic relationship with a host, or staying at a partner’s parent’s
house at some stage of couch surfing:

Craig: Well, at the time I was living with my ex-girlfriend for three months,
but I sort of counted that as couch surfing.

Mike: By the end of two weeks, we'd fallen in love with each other. But, it
started out just as being somewhere for me to crash. A safe place for me
to crash. This guy's not going to, not going to do anything that's gonna be
untoward.

These relationships ranged from extremely tenuous (to the point that the relationships
ended), to very supportive. In this sense, being able to seek accommodation from romantic
and/or sexual partners (and their parents) was not the exclusive reserve of young women in
this research. Moreover, some young women who were couch surfing (notably Renee and
Yvette) conversely had partners or a fiancé with whom they did not cohabit and had in fact
actively made decisions to avoid moving in with their partners at that particular point in
their lives. In Renee’s accounts for example, this was out of a need for autonomy, and of not wanting at her young age to “jump in too fast”.

This notwithstanding, as the youth workers discussed in the focus group, it is possible that young men encounter a particularly guarded, tenuous or more spatially proscribed guest status within their couch surfing experiences; perhaps as they fit less easily within highly gendered notions of need and vulnerability. This was also a theme in some of my interviews with young people. For instance, when I spoke with Anna about how young men might experience couch surfing relationships differently to young women, she commented:

*I suppose my relationships would have been different... More likely I would have actually been on the couch! [Instead of having a bed]... as it was, I pretty much always had a bed rather than a couch.*

This suggests, in some ways, the sense that young men might encounter less welcome, or less accommodating living spaces when seeking support from private households. To some extent, some young men I interviewed indeed spoke of highly proscribed and less private spaces within households. In our discussions, Mark, Mike, Adam and Jake all highlighted experiences that might suggest a gendered patterning in the tenuousness of young men’s reception as guests. For these young men, crime, substance use, violence and frustration were major sources of instability and ruptured relations with households and other places of temporary tenure, often propelling periods of complex, iterative movement between one form of dislocation to another which Robinson (2004a) also describes in her research. As these young men’s accounts indicate below:
Andrew: I’m bettin’ on Housing Trust and that. I’m on my last chance there ’cause I stuffed up the last two houses... Yeah, it's sort of like – just smashed it up.

Jake: [You] smashed the mirrors and shit.

Andrew: I remember it...[A community housing program] helped me get my house [once], but I lost it when I went to prison so I had to, yeah, sort of start over again...I was doing alright; I had it for a few months. And yeah, things just started going wrong. Getting in trouble. Yeah.

PM: What were some of the main things do you reckon contributed to getting into those situations? Just bad situations at the time, or?

Andrew: Yeah, just doin' graffiti. Yeah. And fighting.

* * *

Mark: ...Some people in today’s world opt out the easy way. They go into prostitution, stripping, drug dealing, this shit. I’ve been there, I’ve done that...Basically what we [guys] do is rort, steal, smash, fuckin’ whatever...

It is important, however, to contextualise our understanding of these young men’s experiences. There is a risk here of engaging with gendered, stigmatising stereotypes; of the young ‘at risk’ male who has ‘failed’ at the neoliberal project of successful self-management (Bessant 2001; Harris 2004: 23-35). Indeed, as Robinson (2002b: 102-105) reminds us, the lived experience of dislocation can burden young people with considerable, and too often unacknowledged, grief and anxiety. As I return to in Chapter Seven, this is a context of embodied distress, in which we might better understand problematic or so-called
‗challenging‘ behaviours like those highlighted above, as aspects of young people‘s vexed negotiation of grief, trauma and loss. In this sense, the issue is not whether men are more likely to engage in problem behaviours. Rather, the issue is more to do with the gendered construction of such behaviours, and the kinds of responses this elicits in relation to offering help and inviting the stranger into the home.

In some respects, the hegemonic model of masculinity may pattern the ways in which marginalised young men are received by host households, in ways that echo my discussion in Chapter Four (that is, about women‘s negotiation of stigma and its implications for gaining help or assistance) (McDowell 1999: 90-92). I would hazard to argue, for example, that pressures to perform a ‗tough‘ hegemonic masculinity may situate young men as potentially less deserving figures (or perhaps even more ‗threatening‘ figures) in a hospitality relationship; especially if a strong symbolic structuring or ethic of care is lacking. Gendered assumptions around the toughness of masculinity may also obfuscate the realities of disadvantage, or impose barriers to expressing need within the ambit of couch surfing relationships.

It may be helpful to illustrate this at the broader geopolitical level (of nations and reception of the foreigner) where McNulty (2007: 48) focuses her discussion of Kantian hospitality. The gendering of the ‗deserving stranger‘ is certainly an issue that shapes the ways in which refugees are socially constructed and received in Australia (through the media, popular imagination and party political platforms). As gender studies theorist Anna Szorenyi (2004) notes, discourses shaping popular notions of the ‗genuine‘ or ‗deserving‘ refugee are fundamentally grounded in images and metaphors of the helpless victim of
persecution. Within the popular imagination, a deserving helplessness is gendered. That is, the essentialised refugee is synonymous in the public eye with ideas of ‘softness’, ‘frailty’, ‘innocence’ and abject victimhood, with a particular focus on the figures of children, women and ‘impoverished masses’ (Szorenyi 2004). By contrast, male refugees (as well as the educated, those with professional careers, and those who are ‘rich enough’ to pay ‘people smugglers’ to grant them passage) are potential targets of distrust and hostile rejection by way of their inconsistency; their anomalous position within gendered, Western notions of the prototypical helpless (and thus ‘genuine’) image of the refugee (Szorenyi 2004).

Much like the potential hostility encountered by many refugee men at this level of national border crossings, it is plausible that young men who couch surf have come up against a less ‘accommodating’ reception from the households they turn to. In the focus group, youth workers spoke about the potentially ‘untrustworthy’ or ‘dangerous’ symbolic positioning of men in terms of gendered perceptions of male violence, and of criminal behaviour:

Jen: I think young men’s offending behaviour’s a bit more extreme than female offending. Perhaps they’re a bit more risk-taking, so therefore there’s more consequences to their actions? There are more offenders that are males than females. At least those that get caught!

In this sense, if young men do tend to encounter a more hostile hospitality relation, they may be more likely to need to seek formal services and assistance for homelessness where couch surfing more rapidly ‘breaks down’. Alternatively, they may move into other tenuous
living arrangements more often than some young women, who (perhaps by contrast) may rely for longer on the hospitality of households (Tually et al. 2007; Whitzman 2006: 384). The gendered patterning of these processes would, I think, be a worthy issue for further research.

As I have demonstrated thus far, we might understand couch surfing as a process intimately woven out of a tenuous, and potentially hostile, hospitality. I have indicated that some young people experienced more tenuousness in their household relationships than did others. In the absence of a strong symbolic imperative (like an ethic of trust, care and duty) that might sustain these young people’s presence in the household, they came to occupy a precarious and marginalised guest status; excluded from a sense of home. Even for young people whose living arrangements were less punctuated by frequent movement, this relational tenuousness was still at the centre of their experiences of couch surfing.

That being said however, there were some instances in interview accounts where struggles to navigate away from dislocation were met with a more accommodating hospitality. These household relationships, while relatively rare in young people’s recollections, were distinctive in being structured by close bonds that sustained an ethic of care, and a strong investment of time and energy. Crucially, these relationships gave young people invaluable social and physical space that helped them gain a sense of home. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to these exceptional households, mapping out the transformative potential of strong relationships of hospitality amidst young people’s narratives of displacement.
Second homes: Transformative relationships of hospitality

In the interviews, there were times where some young people spoke of establishing strong connections with a household. These were places that represented ‘second homes’, and in some accounts, an entirely new sense of belonging. Contrary to the tenuousness of a thinned-out hospitality, these strong relationships enabled a sense of being invited, welcomed and comfortable in the household. In Mark’s accounts for example, staying with his girlfriend and her mum had marked a period of rich supports in his life. He thought of his girlfriend’s mother as his ‘second mum’, and described having felt overwhelmed by how included and loved she had made him feel. In this household, Mark felt comfortable and at ease, in ways that he had never known before:

[K]ick-arse comfortable when I was staying with my girlfriend and her mum... I was invited and I was comfortable. Basically, [her] mum is like my second mum. She just made me feel so welcome, so loved, so trusted it was unbelievable, and I've never felt that comfortable, you know, it was just surreal.

What is striking about these relationships is that they were based on a strong sense of mutual companionship and care; the investment of a great deal of time, energy and space in the young person; and a familial or kin-like bond (whether with actual kin or not). These dimensions of care are indicative of what has been described in the literature as ‘helper’ relationships. In a small qualitative study31 Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis and Nackerud (2000), explored the role of formal and informal relationships of help in young people’s

31 Involving interviews with 12 young people who had been homeless (Kurtz et al. 2000)
experiences of homelessness. Through the interviews, the researchers found that personalised, close relationships with these helpers (whether family, friends or caring professionals) were crucial in building trust and helping young people who had been homeless to navigate their way through difficult circumstances. As Kurtz et al. write of the positive qualities of helpers:

For young people in this study, helpers served as counselors, mentors, confidants, advocates, friends, and substitute parents. Helpers invested a great deal of time, patience, nurturance, and acceptance into cultivating trusting relationships with skeptical youth. It was this kind of relationship that seemed most supportive and consequential for participants (Kurtz et al. 2000: 399).

Like the observations of Kurtz et al. (2000), the kinds of supportive household relationships young people discussed with me included close and understanding friends (especially those who had shared similar life experiences); other family members they had reunited with; relationships where sexual and romantic intimacy had developed; and relationships with significant adults, who represented “second parents”. For some, these living arrangements represented a temporary but valuable reprieve, before pressures or events affecting the household – or circumstances in young people’s lives – interceded. For others, positive couch surfing relationships enabled a definitive movement away from the tenuous relations of couch surfing and dislocation.
In different ways, and to different extents, these helping relationships offered a few of the young people I interviewed important emotional support; privacy; belonging and comfort. Moreover, these relationships gave young people a space where they had felt included; where they had someone to talk to (and importantly, someone who listened and understood). Jonathan for example, in reflecting upon the couch surfing relationships he might have ‘preferred’ over others, nominated staying with understanding friends who were living by themselves:

*Probably my mates. I do have a couple of mates that don't live with their parents, that live by themselves, in units and that. That was probably the best because I didn't have to worry about the parents, and it was their place and I could stay there. And plus I had friends there, so you could talk to someone, get support, so I had them there as well. So I'd have to say, probably my mates that lived by themselves. They were probably the best people to stay with.*

Kyle also spoke positively of staying with his tight network of friends. Unlike Jonathan, these friends had also experienced homelessness, and he had mostly met them while sleeping rough. In this sense, he belonged to a relatively close social circle comprising people who shared similar life situations. Through this network of communal, mutual support, friends of Kyle’s who were currently renting or living in a house often chose to open their places for other friends to stay rent-free, whenever someone was in need.
Chapter Five: Guest status and the limits of hospitality

**PM:** Were there places where you felt more 'at home' than others when you were couch surfing?

**Kyle:** Ah yes, very, very good friends.

**PM:** Okay. So had they shared some similar experiences as you?

**Kyle:** Yeah. Yeah. Pretty much all my friends have.

**PM:** So it's sort of 'mates helping mates' in a way?

**Kyle:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Exactly! That's how it works. So, when they're in a hard spot you help them out and vice versa.

For Travis, it was staying with family that had brought some reprieve from the uncertainties and tenuousness of couch surfing. In particular, he spoke affectionately of staying with his sister. Although this had only been a short stay (she did not have the resources to accommodate him for longer), Travis reflected favourably on the sense of ease and trust which defined this relationship. He highlighted how living arrangements with his sister were based on clear 'rules' and boundaries; there were no hidden dangers, and it was easy to negotiate expectations around tenure and house rules. All of these important elements of the relationship limited the potential for stress and rupture:

**PM:** Was there anyone that you preferred to stay with while couch surfing, that really stood out to you?

**Travis:** Probably just, probably stayin’ with my sister, you know? Which was a very, very short amount of time but basically I knew that she didn’t have any unforeseen circumstances that’d arise and you know she was
very straightforward...it’s some things that you could trust with her, you know. You could say “look, I’m going to be here for two weeks, or two months”, or whatever and, “is that cool?” and she’d be like: “yeah that’s cool”, you know just do this, do that and don’t do this, and then it’d be sweet.

Lucas’ experience of a supportive hospitality relationship was similarly grounded in a family link, after unexpectedly reuniting with his father through a local church connection. This fortuitous event led to Lucas securing an affordable share house arrangement with his dad; a new situation that saw him paying rent for the first time, regaining employment and establishing new ties with family members from whom he had been isolated. For a time, this granted Lucas a ‘foothold’. It gave him a sense of privacy, familial connection and financial and social autonomy. Tellingly, he reflected upon this time of his life as having “made space”:

**Lucas:** I ended up meeting my other side of my family, and my dad was living with a woman who he didn't want to, in a caravan park and he wanted to move out somewhere, and I wanted to move out somewhere. It was a very cheap area to live, and we ended up moving in together! And that was an interesting time because that was the first place where I actually had a place to live... The rent was ridiculously cheap, so I had money. I could buy things and I could do things –

**PM:** So you could live outside of –
Lucas: *Paying the rent and having nothing, yes. So, I had some extra money. My dad, we got to know each other. We had a drink together now and then but you know, we gave each other space. We had our own rooms, which was something I didn’t have [before]... I had my own little space. I had my own room. My dad kept out of my business. I kept out of his.*

These accounts cast a thinned-out hospitality into stark relief. While occupying a guest status constrains autonomy, compounds exclusion and embodies tenuousness, these supportive relationships enabled young people to establish a welcoming and stable connection with —someone else’s at home” (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000). Importantly, interviewees indicated the emotional and practical support they had access to in these places, and the room (both physical and emotional) it gave them. In this sense, these relationships had the potential to buffer against some of the marginalising social processes that had perpetuated dislocation. This was expressed not only in the ways young people were made to feel socially included within these households. As Lucas’ account above suggests, it was also reflected in the kinds of household spaces made available to them. Within these relationships, interviewees spoke of having access to a private, secure spare bedroom; or at the very least, places to store their belongings, lighten their load and have time to themselves. In many ways, this was because young people occupied a deeper sense of at-homeness in these relationships. As these narratives highlight:

Craig: *I had my own space and I even had a little cupboard out in the lounge room which I used to put all my clothes and stuff in, yeah... the*
living conditions are fine because people usually cleared out at night and usually after about ten o’clock at night I would have my own space, I’d be able to put the TV on and watch DVDs ‘til I fell asleep, so yeah.

PM: Okay. So it’s kind of communal? People would come in and out but –

Craig: During the daytime, but when I needed to sleep, they left. It wasn’t something where [the friend I stayed with was saying] oh: "you’re in my lounge room". I could stay there ‘til however long I want, sort of thing.

She’s heaps nice.

* * *

Anna: Yeah, I did actually [have personal space where I was staying]. And that friend was very nice about it, he gave me his room and he slept on the couch himself!

Many identified a sense of gratitude for having been given spaces with more privacy or comfort within these supportive living arrangements. Interestingly, those who had consistently been provided with a private and comfortable sleeping space identified themselves as having been in a more privileged position. They sympathised with others who had been limited to couches or spare floor space:

Anna: I pretty much always had a bed rather than a couch, so I was pretty lucky like that.

* * *
Mike: In my experience, I’ve always had at least a room to myself. A room.

***

Rita: I’ve never been at the point where I have to stay on someone’s couch because there isn’t any other space. I think I would rather go somewhere where I had to travel an hour and a half to get in, just to be able to have that something...Most people need that. Need that little bit.

If a couch surfing relationship was particularly relaxed and the young person was very familiar with the person they were staying with, the issue of personal boundaries between young people and their hosts were also less important. In these cases, the participants I spoke with had a close enough relationship (usually a kin-like connection or a strong friendship) that they often shared beds and intimate spaces comfortably, and preferred this to spaces like couches and spare rooms:

Anna: The friend at the place before that (the one with the two week limit), I just shared the bed with her...[S]he had a big queen sized bed, so that was cool.

***

Craig: I’d really call it [couch surfing] bed hopping ’cause I’d always be sleeping in someone else’s bed. Usually I’d never sleep on the couch, I’d be sleeping with either my mate who’s thirty-six, or her daughter, who’s sixteen.
Through the interviews, it was also clear that some of these caring relationships had fostered an especially accommodating and inclusive hospitality. In these households, there was no sense at all of imposing or being an outsider. To the contrary, the relational ties of care between the young person and the host(s) fostered a kind of communal, ‘open house’ ethos at the heart of the living arrangement. In young people’s accounts, these were namely household relationships with people who treated them like a ‘part of the family’, or who represented parent-like or sibling-like figures; the ‘substitute parents’ that Kurtz et al. (2000: 399) highlight in their discussion of helpers. Importantly, all of these relationships depended on strong links and bonds with important women of the household, often involving maternal-like bonds. Indeed, many of these significant women were mothers themselves. Craig, Renee and Mark all spoke about the care-providing role of these relationships; affectionately characterising these women as their ‘second mums’, ‘big sisters’, or ‘more of a mum to me than my own mum’.

In his discussions with me, Craig talked at length about a supportive, open-ended living arrangement he had had with his friend Nicole, whom he described as being like a ‘surrogate mum’. Nicole was in her thirties and had children of her own. She maintained a communal, open house policy with her close friends; playing host to up to eight people who regularly came to stay. As such, the household included:

*Eight people!... Five kids and a couple of parents and a couple of kids that lived in the shed out back and friends who stayed with them every night...*
In this sense, Craig’s host Nicole was ‘no stranger’ to the act of hospitality. This relationship was inherently accommodating, situated in a communal household where Craig was another welcomed addition. Indeed, while there was sometimes the potential for overcrowding, Craig spoke about having enjoyed the social connectedness that this ‘full house’ offered him. At the same time, Nicole ensured he had his own space and privacy, with clear boundaries about other guests’ occupation of his space. Importantly, Craig described having had a close, supportive connection with his host, in a place that made him feel like home:

Like, she [Nicole] said “this place is your home, if you want to use the Internet, fine, you go do it. You don’t have to ask me.” It was like that.

Craig left this arrangement, however, when a relationship between two ‘regulars’ in the house became stressful, causing significant frictions:

Yeah I felt at home but I knew it wasn’t a permanent place of residence and I’d have to move and by the end of it, it was getting a bit stressful and there were two people who lived there, their relationship was breaking up and it was getting pretty harsh around there, that’s why I had to leave...because I was there all the time and I’d get talked to by the partner and I’d get talked to by her.

His experiences of couch surfing came to an end at this point, when he secured a six month lease in a unit owned by a community housing provider. In the interview, Craig reflected on
having benefited emotionally from the three months he had spent living with Nicole. This household had given him social supports that buffered much of the earlier alienation and destabilising mobility he had experienced. He felt he was in good company most of the time, and ‘there was always someone to talk to’ when he was feeling down. This ‘buffering’ quality put Craig in a favourable position to take up community housing.

In her discussions with me, Renee likewise spoke at length about the close bonds and crucial social support she had experienced in staying with a young family. She had met this couple and their two young children through her local church, and lived with them for a period of six to seven weeks before accepting an offer to take up residence in a public housing property. Through her recollections, Renee contrasted the communicative openness of this family with the strained relationship she had with her own mother before leaving home:

**Renee: But the thing is, I felt more at home there [with the church family] than what I did at my actual home.**

**PM: The people themselves, they were a lot more sort of open to you?**

**Renee: Well, that and the way they showed their emotions and that... and with my mum, I couldn’t talk to her about anything... and she’s always up for the ‘quick fix’. With my family it’s all through violence and it’s all through drugs and it’s all through alcohol, but with them [the church family] it’s through sincere acts.**
Like my discussions with Craig, Renee indicated how the young couple openly accepted her; offered a sense of belonging and helped her to feel at home. She was, in a sense, given sufficient room within this relationship to feel that her presence in the household was unimposing. The couple were simultaneously respectful of her privacy, and deeply inclusive:

PM: Did you feel that that was a place that you felt more at home when you were staying with them in some ways?

Renee: Well, I did. ‘Cause I got involved with the stuff they were doing.
They intentionally involved me in stuff but they still sort of had their own family time and all that sort of stuff... And when we went to church on Sundays and that, they’d drag me into crèche with them and all that sort of stuff so I kind of had a connection with the kids as well as the adults.

Most significantly, Renee spoke of the mutually rewarding connections she had with the mother of the household, who related to her as a daughter despite a relatively small age gap between them. From Renee’s perspective, both she and the young woman mutually benefited from each other’s company. They had an opportunity to ‘be girls’, both coming from households where they had felt ‘outnumbered’ by boys and men. Having space to ‘be girly’ and to be heard by another young woman was a new experience for Renee, and one she spoke of very positively:

*But the thing is, she [the young mother of the household] was only like [a few] years older than me... She kind of adopted me as her daughter, the*
daughter she never had, ‘cause she had two boys... and it gave her a chance to have girl talks and watch girly movies and all that sort of stuff, whereas with the two boys and her husband...she was the only girl...So yeah, to be able to sit down and laugh and kind of have ‘girl time’ that I’d never had before. It was fun sharing new experiences and that.

The supportiveness of Renee’s relationship with the church family was underscored by a strong sense of hospitality that was also grounded in the family’s religious beliefs. In a spirit of hospitality, the couple had in fact taken in boarders in the past, and had established clear expectations around the ethic of having guests to stay:

They’d had boarders at their house before and all that sort of stuff so they knew what they were getting themselves into when they offered me a place to live and all that.

Renee’s relationship with the church family never collapsed per se, in the sense that at the time of the interview, she was still in contact with and very close to the family. However, the opportunity to live with them on a more permanent basis did not eventuate. This was due to a couple of factors: first, after living with the family for a period of six weeks as mentioned, Renee took up an opportunity to move by herself into a public housing property. Additionally, eight months after she moved out, the church family relocated back to their home town, which was a substantial distance away. Renee framed this sequence of events in a frustrated light, wondering at the unpredictability of her living situation, even within a very positive, supportive and well-equipped household:
And I was actually willing to end up living there but yeah... well I ended up getting the house [with the public housing authority]. But in the end they [church family] ended up leaving the town...and they moved back to their home town... Yeah, so I would’ve kind of been in the same sort of situation when they left ...They ended up leaving eight months after and it’s like: “well, I didn’t see this coming!” So if I was livin’ here what would I be doing?...[E]ven, would I have this much notice? Or all that sort of stuff. Or would I be able to go with ‘em? Or would I be able to stay in the house, ‘cause they didn’t sell it for ages?

Another supportive hospitality relation that some interviewees highlighted was staying in households where romantic or sexual rapport and even intimate partnerships developed. This was particularly the case for Mike, who developed an unexpected romantic relationship with a man who had initially offered to ‘take him in’ temporarily as an offer of refuge and assistance. As Mike put it, this relationship was a ‘sanctuary’. It involved a deep sense of safety and mutual understanding as well as enabling inclusive, ‘fluid and comfy’ spaces in which Mike could establish his privacy; his autonomy, and begin to re-connect with himself and others:

I think I was at Simon’s for about a month, possibly a month and a half...It was a great, it was a great little place. I had my little space. I could sit there reading a book, listening to my music; go to sleep, get up when I wanted to...All very fluid and comfy and everything...[And] eventually we
began to know each other inside out and back to front. Especially [chuckles] sharing a bed with the guy, it comes a bit easier! But that was probably the easiest time that I’ve had couch surfing, because he knew that I was in trouble; because I knew that he would be able to help me no matter what...And by the end of, it was by the end of two weeks, we’d fallen in love with each other.

Importantly, some of the interviewees conceptualised the difference between guest situations and strong, supportive hospitality relationships as a matter of circumstance. That is, whether they had ‘chosen’ a living arrangement, or whether – as I discussed earlier – they had been forced there out of necessity. A thinned-out hospitality limits such elements of choice, and perpetuates young people’s dislocation. As both Grant and Lucas reflected:

**Grant:** I like the situations where people chose to be there. ‘Cause I found when I lived with other people that I had to live with, there was always this ‘responsibility’ to, to fulfil a role or you were expected to do something, but when you chose to live there, it was really, really nice...[And] the thing that made it really nice was that it wasn’t like I had nowhere else to sleep, it was that everyone wanted to be there...It wasn’t like this was my last place to go. That was my best [couch surfing space] I think.
**Lucas:** I don't have a problem with staying at friends' places and the whole problem with personal space. I mean [before my mum kicked me out], I'd stayed at friend's houses...and well, I did not give a rat's arse!...I had a great time. But the thing is I didn't **have to** be there...

The existence of 'second homes' in some interviewees' accounts speaks, I think, of the transformative potential of supportive, “helper” relationships (Kurtz et al. 2000) in young people's (re)negotiation of home. These households engaged a lasting openness to the young person and a deeper understanding of their situation. They demonstrated a willingness to extend time, space and emotional investment; and an active, rewarding reciprocity. Of course, this combination of support, help and care was all too difficult to come by. It was more often the case that relationships had **some** positive elements of support, but households lacked resources to accommodate young people in the longer term. In want of greater resources or a more explicit arrangement for tenure, these relationships eventually succumbed to a narrowing of hospitality. This is also indicative of the relational precariousness patterning young people’s struggles for tenure and belonging.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how we might think of couch surfing as an outcome of a fragile and tenuous guest status. Through young people's accounts, I have suggested that the couch surfing household is a particular social, temporal and physical space limited by a
highly commoditised hospitality relation, in which key social elements of trust and symbolic investment are thinned-out or vulnerable to rupture. In doing this, I have traced the relational processes that drive young people to move from one temporary living arrangement to another. Mapping this tenuousness in young people’s accounts, I have argued that the lack of financial (or other commercial) means to ‘pay one’s way’ into the tenure of a household means relying almost entirely on the goodwill of hosts. In these situations, young people occupy a precarious position in the household; positions where, in essence, the security and supportiveness of living arrangements is confined to the boundaries of a thinned-out hospitality. It is, in essence, the relational tenuousness of couch surfing which spurs the material dimensions of social exclusion, making it harder to realistically access employment, return to education, afford housing or earn a living wage.

Through the theoretical contributions of McNulty (2007) and Derrida (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000), I have outlined how – in the modern privileging commercial transactions as the normative ‘seal’ of tenure – the contemporary hospitality relation lacks the old, culturally valorising tropes of the divine stranger/guest. That is, a symbolic structuring which serves to offset the undertones of unease that puncture the heart of hospitality. This is an unease which McNulty defines as an ‘uncanny threat’” (McNulty 2007: 71-72), the fear of losing one’s sense of home by inviting someone into the household.

In drawing upon these historical accounts of the hospitality relation, I have argued that the marginal social position of the young people I interviewed (in particular, their lack of capacity to engage a commercial rendering of hospitality) brings to bear this uncanny
threat. From young people’s accounts, their presence within the household unsettled hosts’ sense of home, and raised the potential for hostile relations. These are precisely the kinds of situations that render young people’s living arrangements vulnerable to rupture and collapse. In drawing attention to these hostilities, I have demonstrated the role of a thinned-out hospitality relation in producing young people’s journeys into couch surfing. That is, in occupying a marginal guest status, young people are driven from one temporary living arrangement to another.

Importantly, the guest status stands in contrast to those few instances where interviewees had encountered a strong, sustained hospitality relation. For young people, these ‘second homes’ demonstrated the transformative potential of having access to supportive relationships in their lives, especially with significant adults. In highlighting these exceptional households, young people’s accounts cast the experience of couch surfing into stark relief. While ‘second homes’ enabled spaces of belonging and a foothold to navigate home, marginal (couch surfing) homes constrained and complicated young people’s search for social inclusion. Living the guest status is, by contrast to these supportive relationships, inherently destabilising and alienating.

Ultimately, what I have indicated here is that young people’s efforts to (re)negotiate home are attenuated within these marginal household spaces. The production of a guest status places young people in a precarious position with households; a set of relationships they nevertheless depend heavily upon for essential shelter and support. While the risks of living a guest status are readily apparent in terms of safety and security of tenure, this research further demonstrates that couch surfing relationships exclude young people from the ability
to feel at home. Most of the interviewees I spoke with had struggled to maintain a ‘knife’s edge’ of shelter and social support, their claims to tenure, privacy, belonging and security ever on the verge of compromise and collapse. In this sense, we might think of couch surfing as an outcome of social exclusion at the ‘micro’ level of the household, producing a marginalised tenure that reinscribes dislocation more generally. Couch surfing, as I examine in the next chapter, speaks of a deeply burdensome and precarious practice for survival.
The practiced guest: Navigating tenuousness

The fine art of hospitality avoids the destabilization of a fragile equilibrium, it certifies esteem and consideration which is exceptional but not challenging or insulting, as does the clear rule to depart at the right time, so as not to interrupt the daily routine and rhythm of the house and become a burden or a nuisance (Friese 2004: 70).

Thus far, I have examined the practice of turning to local households as one way marginalised youth are having to (re)negotiate home, connectedness and survival. In tracing the journey towards couch surfing, I have shown how – in this search for ontological security and shelter – the young people in this research found themselves caught up in a series of tenuous social relationships, with nowhere else to go. Grounded in a thinned-out hospitality, I have established how these relationships reinscribe broader processes of dislocation. Within these households, young people are positioned in a marginalised social space: the *habitus* of precarious guests. In this chapter, I continue to explore the journey through couch surfing, focusing here on interviewees’ embodied navigation of the guest status. I am interested in how young people in this research contended with, and were affected by, the fragile boundaries and rules of couch surfing relationships, and the spaces they produced.

In the first sections of this chapter, I establish how the guest status becomes a deeply embodied part of young people’s everyday experiences. I ground my analysis in the
theories of practice, *habitus* and field developed through the work of Bourdieu (1990), bringing our focus to the body as the lived site of dislocation, and of tenuous relations. I also incorporate the concept of *emotion work* (Frith & Kitzinger 1998; Hochschild 1983) and Goffman's (1968) dramaturgical perspective on social interaction, examining how young people attended to, and laboured over, their own thoughts and feelings in the process of couch surfing. Linking these theoretical perspectives to young people’s accounts, I go on to examine how young people who couch surf are immersed in a set of deeply affecting bodily and emotional practices, emerging from their occupation of a marginal *habitus*. These practices concern bodily movement, disposition and the management of personal space and feeling. I give space to these practices, detailing young people’s accounts of a constrained and anxious physical presence, the intensity with which interviewees had managed belongings, and the struggle to sequester vital spaces – where memory and identity might be inscribed.

**Walking on eggshells: Mapping the guest *habitus***

In describing their inhabitation of couch surfing relationships, interviewees crucially indicated their embodied immersion in the guest status. Indeed, we might think about the private households young people occupied as social fields in and of themselves, in which the couch surfer occupies a marginal *habitus*. In conceptualising this marginalised way of being, I am especially indebted to the work of Bourdieu (1990; and in Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), in the sense that I consider young people’s negotiation of the guest status to be a set of impromptu responses, motions, anticipations and orientations of choice produced by social power relations (Bourdieu 1990: 66). The body is of central importance here. Bourdieu (1990: 66-67) employs the notions of “practical sense”, praxis and the
bodily hexis it produces as key ways of describing, from a sociological perspective, the everyday – quasi-bodily involvement in the world” (Bourdieu 1990: 66). That is to say:

Practical sense is an immanence in the world through which the world imposes its imminence, things to be done or said, which directly govern speech and action. It orients ‘choices’ which, though not deliberate, are no less systematic, and which, without being ordered and organised in relation to an end, are none the less charged with a kind of retrospective finality...analogous to the rhythm of a line of verse whose words have been forgotten, or the thread of a discourse that is being improvised, transposable procedures, tricks, rules of thumb which generate through transference countless practical metaphors...Practical sense, social necessity turned into nature, converted into motor schemes and body automatisms, is what causes practices (Bourdieu 1990: 66; 68-69).

It is important to understand that practical sense, as Bourdieu (1984) insists, is not an entirely conscious process. When occupying a household, young people in this research did not necessarily develop a strategic or explicit ‘plan’ regarding their behaviour. Rather, their language and descriptions invoked an experience where they had become immersed in everyday, acquired practices; an embodied ‘feel for” (Bourdieu 1990) the hospitality arrangement. Such practices develop and accrue in temporal-social as well as ‘physical’ space, as one is ‘invested in the game” of a social field (Bourdieu 1990: 66-67).
In drawing our focus to practical sense in this chapter, I highlight the embodied ways in which the young people I spoke with navigated a marginalised *habitus*. Living as tenuous guests meant being caught up in a constant struggle to navigate the specific expectations, rules and highly contingent spaces of a thinned-out hospitality. Within these struggles, and the dynamics of the guest status, young people are caught up in the *habitus* of a tenuous relationship with households, and the bodily *hexis* this produces (Bourdieu 1990). In this sense, we can think of young people’s practices within couch surfing as a habitual patterning of “speech and action” emerging from this hospitality relation (Bourdieu 1990: 66). Moreover, I contend that young people’s bodily dispositions (their ways of physically moving about, occupying space, attending to their possessions, interacting and expressing feeling) are intimate expressions of their precarious social positioning. The couch surfing practical sense constitutes, in essence, those ways of being, reacting, feeling and moving that young people have acquired over time, through the process of *living* a guest status. We might think of this as a practically-driven process of negotiating ‘rules’, both explicit and implicit, obvious and unforeseen; rules for behaving and rules for feeling one’s way through a narrow hospitality.

As I explored in the previous chapter, most of those I interviewed reflected on having a constant awareness that the goodwill of a household would inevitably have its limits within the typical guest situation. What I map out here is how, from young people’s accounts, navigating couch surfing households meant anticipating and/or managing the point at which these limits might be reached. Indeed, the quintessential issue faced by most of the young people I interviewed was ‘attending to’ themselves and their relationship with a household, in such a way that they could minimise the potential for hostility, conflict or sudden
eviction. At the same time, it was in interviewees’ interests to find ways of mitigating the impact of a guest status upon their own space, autonomy and sense of ontological security. Dealing with the guest status meant engaging in particular practices for anticipating expected rules of behaviour; not only balancing these against personal needs but also struggling at the same time to manage the flow-on effects of dislocation, marginalisation and in many cases, unresolved trauma and loss, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Seven (Robinson 2002b). The more tenuous the guest status, the more likely it was that young people would come up against uncertain household rules or ways of ‘speaking and acting’ (Bourdieu 1990), which they would need to carefully navigate and acclimatise to. The precariousness of these rules influenced how young people interacted, thought, felt, moved, consumed and occupied space and time. Renee captured this situation in her discussions with me:

Yeah and kinda, when you’re staying at someone else’s house, you kind of feel a little uncomfortable because you don’t know what you can and can’t do, and you don’t know what their – I don’t know if it’s their ‘rules’ but, whether you’re gonna break ‘em or not; intentionally, unintentionally.

In the _holding together_ of their half of tenuous guest relationships, young people were engaged in far more intensive practices of negotiation than were needed within supportive, open and comfortable living arrangements. Across the remainder of this chapter, I trace those important everyday actions, habits and feelings through which young people regulated and navigated space, and managed identity and boundaries. These practices, I
contend, speak of the limitations, possibilities and dynamics bound up in couch surfing relationships, and their spaces of hospitality.

**Space invaders: Embodied intrusion and palpable unease**

As I indicated in the previous chapter, occupying a guest status places young people in a situation where they feel like outsiders. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of young participants' accounts was the extent to which their marginal positioning as guests involved a visceral, uneasy sense of being out of place in a household. In occupying the precarious "in my home” dynamic (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 61) of a narrow hospitality relationship, I would argue that couch surfers experience first-hand a kind of ‘looking in’ on others’ taken-for-granted tenure and belonging. This acute sense of separation from an essential way of being is something social anthropologist Megan Warin (2002) talks about in her doctoral ethnography, focusing on the experiences of a group of people living with anorexia nervosa. Importantly, Warin reminds us that it is only when the taken-for-granted skills and practices of everyday lived experience fail” (Warin 2002: 83-89) that we become aware of the importance and pervasiveness of basic and habitual ways of being. In this same way, young people entering a couch surfing household are made painfully aware of those everyday ways of being-at-home that dislocation has divided them from. This was made poignantly evident in Lucas’ reflections:

*I walked a lot, just walking around hours and hours...just looking at people’s houses and thinking: you people don’t know how lucky you are. You know? Just this most basic thing, which I didn’t even have. Which had always meant so much to me.*
Within a household space that is not fully theirs in terms of tenure or social belonging, young people find it difficult to fit in their own routines and habits of dwelling. They feel out of place even in their own bodies, never quite able to feel ‘settled’. Their occupation of space and their bodily *hexis* is constituted by the fundamental unease of an exclusionary social space. This state of alienated, anxious experience has also been described in ethnographies of undocumented or ‘illegal’ migrants, who occupy a precarious and socially abject position in the host nation space (Willen 2007).

Young people in this research felt the guest status acutely, particularly within the most tenuous relationships where there was a great deal of unease about the obliging and limited nature of the living arrangement. Their sense of occupying ‘someone else’s home’ was fundamentally rooted in a language of bodily boundaries and mass. For most of the young people I spoke with, there was a sense of inhabiting a socially and physically invasive position, of weighing or bearing down upon a household. Most of those I interviewed recalled having felt like a ‘space invader’, their bodies and possessions – as extensions of themselves – always potentially *crashing in, weighing down, getting in the way* and *imposing*. Participants captured this most poignantly in their accounts of physical and social *discomfort*; their awareness of occupying and crossing household thresholds and being restricted in what they could do or have. The guest status, in this sense, is embodied in sensations of *heaviness, obstruction* and of *being burdensome*. As these narratives show [own emphasis added]:

*Kyle:* *You'd get in other people's way and you'd lose friends because of it and stuff like that, you know?*
Chapter Six: Navigating tenuousness

* * *

**Travis:** ...[I]t was more like **imposing**, you know, on like families and stuff like that, or parents...

* * *

**Lucas:** It [couch surfing] made me feel like a burden on everyone.

* * *

**Rita:** I'm starting to feel that I know I'm in somebody else's space again.

This was often a two-way process, where interviewees felt both **imposing** and **imposed upon**. As Yvette put it:

*I felt like we were just invading on each other's privacy? Because you don't have your own space and stuff.*

What also came across from the interviews was a strong undercurrent of self-consciousness and discomfort, of guilt and anxiety. Again, these feelings emerged primarily from young people’s concern with taking up an **imposing** or **invasive** presence. They had felt that simply by being in someone else’s home, they were transgressing another’s sovereign space, time and intimacy. As these interviewees related it to me [own emphasis added]:

**Mark:** ...[A]s far as I'm concerned I'm imposing on people, because it's their personal household, it's not mine.

* * *
Yvette: I didn’t feel **comfortable**. Because it’s someone else’s house, someone else’s life, and you’re just **crashing in** on their lounge room, or their spare room!...It’s **really uncomfortable**.

* * *

Renee:...[Y]ou feel like **you’re intruding in their personal lives**. Because you’re there. Even if you don’t mean it...

* * *

Anna: Well, I ’spose I **did sort of get comfortable** in places but at the same time you know, there was that whole thing of “okay, I **don’t want to weigh these people down** too much”.

Together, these accounts illustrate the intensity of young people’s concerns and struggles concerning the narrow boundaries of the guest status; of the risk of ‘over-occupying’ the limited space of someone else’s at-homeness. They reaffirm, through embodied experience, the potential for hostility, alienation and restriction of social and physical freedoms that I traced in the previous chapter. As Lucas put it:

> *I was just an intruder everywhere I went...I had nothing. I had nothing. I wasn't allowed to live my own life at all. I wasn’t allowed to do anything.*

This disquieting, restrictive **habitus** intimately shaped young people‘s bodily dispositions within the guest household. Many of those interviewed spoke of quickly needing to get a feel for unspoken ‘house rules’. This informed how interviewees inhabited, moved about
and used the spaces in which they dwelt, ate, interacted and slept. In this sense, we might again think of embodied practices as the pursuit of best practice for getting along with, occupying and contributing to the life of a household with a minimum of friction. This was a matter of anticipating and understanding the nature of a given hospitality relationship (including developing a good sense for what you could and could not do in a household).

The most successful practices for ‘getting along’ were those where young people felt there were clear foundations of trust and reciprocity, countering an otherwise tenuous situation. As Travis highlighted, this meant learning to abide by particular standards or rules of courtesy and honesty. It also meant becoming a ‘good judge of character’:

PM: Their space, your space, how does that work?

Travis: Depends how well I know the person, like if it's a stranger, I consider myself a pretty good judge of character so that's just what I go on. I just judge a person's character. And just see how they react to things, not like I test them as such but yeah I just take it easy, be myself, just be polite...[I]f they want to help you out, they will. But yes, with friends and stuff that you've known for a while, you still have to say: “if you're getting pissed off with me, you just let me know” sort of thing.

That's how it is...But if it's more stranger type people there, the approach that I take [is] I'd get permission first obviously and then, yeah just crash there and see how things go from there...
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Getting a feel for household rules included navigating the use of household space and resources, as well as expectations about socialising with host(s). Through these practices, young people were involved in a constant task of ‘figuring out’ their place and boundaries, including where they might build spaces of privacy, identity and settlement or other personal claims on household space, without damaging a tenuous relationship. As I map out in the next section, one salient way interviewees navigated a precarious ‘intruder factor‘ was self-regulating their occupation of household space and time.

*Leave no footprints: Practicing restraint*

As I have discussed in previous chapters, some interviewees reflected that in their earliest experiences of couch surfing (particularly if couch surfing while in their adolescence) they had often ‘overstepped’ a guest relationship by not knowing about or attending at the time to social expectations surrounding their occupation of a household. Through their accounts, many of those I interviewed indicated that the longer they had experienced a guest status, the more they learned how to attend to their presence within a household, as part of the process of navigating living arrangements. In particular, the interviewees spoke of having limited their physical occupation and bodily impact upon households, and of constraining their ‘home bodies‘ in efforts to avoid transgressing boundaries (physical, relational). We might think of this as an important, embodied practice produced by the guest status. It is one way young people manage the potential for hostility, and ameliorate their discomfort and anxiety about occupying someone else’s at-homeness.

For some, this involved following a kind of ‘least space‘ rule of thumb, which governed their everyday habitation of a guest household. Practices for managing a heavy sense of imposition centred on limiting movements in, around and out of the household. It also
meant minimising *traces* of one’s presence. Many engaged in this least space practice even when they did not feel the household host(s) necessarily expected this of them. Mark was particularly reflective upon this *least space* practice, emphasising his need to relieve “strain” on households by curtailing not only his own personal use of space, but also any lingering *footprints, evidence, or impact* upon a household after he was gone:

> ...basically I try not to outstay my welcome and tread on people’s toes, you know, try to keep things pretty civil, pretty relaxed, no stress, no strain...It’s kind of like you know, a bushwalker walkin’ through a bush trail up in the middle of the Tanami Desert or something, you know? You leave no footprints, you’re never there...You’ve got the experiences but there’s no evidence...I want to take up as minimal space as possible. I’ll have my own little, like, dude I’ve lived in rooms about this size [gestures at the interview room, which is not much bigger than a laundry space] and I’ve had this corner [points out a corner of the room, no more than a couple of metres long] as my personal space, that’s where my bed is, that’s where my clothes are, and it’s all I’m gonna take up because it imposes on people less.

In Mark’s experience, this imperative to “leave no trace” was partly fuelled by the pressures that he felt he brought to households, for example, through his own self-identified lifestyle that included coming into contact with crime and drugs.
From the interviews, navigating a sense of imposition also meant managing the amount of time spent within a given household. This was reflected in Yvette’s account of limiting her stay and her presence in any given household, as a way of avoiding a worn welcome:

**PM:** Did you have to keep to yourself, or did you – how much time were you able to spend at the places that you were at?

**Yvette:** I tried to not be there too much; just because I was invading. Just personally, I just felt really uncomfortable to be there all the time, because, you know, people are used to having their family and that, and maybe having someone else over once a week or something; not all the time.

For some participants, managing time spent in the household meant taking extreme care to know when it was appropriate to leave or re-enter the house during the day. In Lucas’ experiences, this included feeling bound socially to interact and enter household space under very specific conditions, for example, not being able to leave the house during the day and return later without being accompanied by the particular friend who had invited him to stay. Through Lucas’ account, it was apparent that being in the house without his friend, or not spending time in the house while his friend was there, transgressed the unspoken rules of guest-occupation within his friend’s parental household:

**PM:** How much out of the average day do you reckon you spent in a lot of the houses you were staying at, while you were couch surfing?
**Lucas:** See, with me the issue was [in the first place I couch surfed]: there was this 'friend' relationship there, so it was very weird for me to sort of go to someone's house, go out during the day and come back. That was a very unusual relationship; there was kind of this obligation there to spend the time with them... Because we were friends, and I knew them as friends or acquaintances beforehand... So you can’t just rock up to a friend's house, without your friend. You had to be there with them. Otherwise, it was just too weird. Their parents would be like: “why are you here without [him]?”

The more tenuous the guest relationship, the less young people felt they could or should occupy a household. At its most tenuous, this meant limiting one’s physical occupation to the barest of shelter, only entering a household for the narrowest conditions of sleeping and bathing. In these situations, some of the young people I interviewed said they often left the house entirely during the day, even if they did not necessarily have somewhere to go. As Jake and Mike both related it to me:

**Jake:** Yeah well some of the places I just went in there to sleep, have a shower and that.

**Mike:** I was staying there [at a stranger’s house] for a couple of days a week, going to work; ironically going out partying and sleeping at the back of work, just because I didn’t want to wake this guy up. Because he was, he was a real prick! But you know, I was staying there for a couple
of days and [would] then go to work, party, go out the back of work, sleep there, get up, go to this place.

Accounts such as these embody the precarious, thinned-out hospitality relations at the heart of couch surfing experiences. This is a marginalising and constraining *habitus* where young people learn to limit their bodily and temporal inhabitation of the home space. As I map out in the next section, another crucial dimension of young people’s embodied navigation of the guest status is the practice of reciprocity. That is, of finding ways to ‘compensate’ and show appreciation to hosts, and in the process buffer the hospitality relation.

**Practices of reciprocity: Be polite, be yourself and help out**

Within living arrangements that lasted at least a week or more, a number of participants found they had time and space to begin finding ways of maintaining an unimposing, or more comfortable and welcomed presence in a household. These practices centred on elements and gestures of reciprocity and of informal compensation, where there was an emphasis on minimising the potential for hostility and relational rupture. One of the major ways young people engaged in such practices was through contributions and in-kind gestures that helped support their presence in the household, materially and symbolically.
Depending on the level of rapport within a given couch surfing arrangement, acts of social reciprocity included ‘hanging out’ and spending quality time with host(s), doing household chores, or even helping out at the host’s place of work, as Craig highlighted:

And then sometimes, I’d go to work with them (my good friend), because she manages a video store, and if she needed my hand she’d take me to work with her. And that would pretty much pay my rent there.

I’d go to her work one, two days a week and just give her a hand...

Inherent in these gestures were the interviewees’ efforts to demonstrate a level of appreciation for the hospitality being offered, whether through financial compensation that was within their means, or by cementing important relational links with the households. As the accounts below suggest, doing so involved getting a feel for how and when to invest time connecting with the household, with the implication that this helped prevent couch surfers from potentially becoming the kind of illegitimate or “parasitic” guest that Derrida (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000) speaks of:

PM: Did you tend to spend much time there, in the places that you’re staying at? Or is it just basically a place that you go back to so you can sleep or shower or eat, even?

Grant: I usually spend time with the people. Because I'd feel shitty if I'm just using their place as like a drop-off point just to shower, brush my teeth and go back out. So most of the time I usually end up drinking or smoking or whatever with them and then you know, the rest of your life
functions around it. And then you pop off to another one and that becomes like your hub of operations. Yeah.

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**Travis:** I don’t like to just drop in and kind of treat your house like a drop-in centre you know? I don’t really just say “hey”, you know, “I’m going to sleep here tonight” and then just piss off!

A corollary of these (expected) gestures of reciprocity is that, in facing dislocation, young people engaging with local connections may be exposed to certain relationships of hospitality that impose exploitative demands (including, for example, the trading of sexual favours and drug dealing). None of the young people I spoke with explicitly expressed experiences of abuse, or of engaging in trafficking or sexual acts in return for hospitality. That being said, participants like Mark had taken part in drug dealing in the past, as a way of informally earning money so he could contribute to or “appease” household host(s). He also spoke of working indirectly with people who made their living through crime (in particular, drug dealing), in part because of the connections to housing, support and income that these associations offered:

*People like me and people like my mates, we're all in shit creek without a paddle, we gotta resort to the higher ups; the higher ups to us aren't corporate, they're criminal. Because you know, Centrelink [unemployment benefits] doesn't pay for fuck all. That pays my phone bill and that pays*
for my food, that's it... So I'm back to dealing with them [criminal associations] again, not as direct but as a middle man [because] that’s generally the only way I can fund my own lifestyle now...[the only way] I can manage to pull in something for the household, which keeps me in good stead...I normally manage to budget my fortnightly Youth Allowance [government youth pension] pretty well, but you know, sometimes, when I owe people money or I've got a phone bill to pay or this and that, I'm on my arse.

Though jokingly, Anna also implied that appealing to sexual or romantic interest and acts of affection – came in handy”; at least in a couple of the households where she had sought support:

I just shared the bed with [my friend]...[laughs] I had to pay with head rubs though!...And then the next lot, that was an interesting one because there was a lot of ‘debauchery’, shall I say, in that house and they'd only very recently all moved into there...There was a guy who as it happened [chuckling softly], got a bit of a crush on me. Which I 'spose came in handy! [laughter]

More commonly, young people’s practices of reciprocity involved small in-kind favours, financial contributions and purchases for the households where they stayed. These favours included buying or putting money towards the groceries; cooking dinner or cleaning for the
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household; paying for petrol or essentials, and leaving gifts or money. Not surprisingly, the more open-ended or generous an arrangement, the more young people felt they needed to contribute:

**Mark:** The place where I'm staying at now, I've been there for probably six, eight weeks, and as much as I can I bring home food vouchers, you know, toiletries, whatever man, anything to suffice the house, keep us all fed, all bathed or whatever.

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**Anna:** With the last place I'd sort of bring home the groceries that I could get just from the food vouchers and cooked and stuff like that...[And] with my aunt it was [for] five weeks so I started to feel kind of bad about it and she actually didn't want to accept any money from me, but just before leaving, I ended up sneakily placing a couple of notes on the kitchen bench where she couldn't see it as I left.

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**Travis:** You offer them rent or whatever, offer to buy them something, give 'em food or whatever you know, just help out and, yeah just take it like that.

As each of these accounts affirms, these practices were a significant social and financial investment in the guest relationship, especially considering young people’s limited means. Through physical labours, investment of time and gestures of contribution, interviewees
had engaged with the hospitality relationship; commercially and symbolically compensating for household tensions in ways that challenged the tenuousness of a guest status. At the same time however, the constant concern with navigating and compensating for these delicate aspects of couch surfing relationships gave young people less room to attend to their own needs and feelings.

Faced with a marginal social position, young people spoke of their anxieties about appearing ‘fussy’. All of the interviewees had been concerned that raising complaints of any kind might risk overstepping a fragile hospitality, thus ending their stay. Not surprisingly, many of the interviewees took the position of ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ when it came to accepting the spaces, living conditions, people or tenure involved in their living arrangements. The more important factor for them, as I have indicated throughout this thesis, was having somewhere to stay. As I discuss in the next section however, this process of ‘putting up and shutting up’ involved a great deal of emotional effort on young people’s part. It meant actively attempting to change, ignore or ‘accept’ their negative feelings about less than ideal living conditions, often on a daily basis.

**Beggars can’t be choosers: Emotional labours of a guest identity**

In want of other housing options, one of the most significant concerns raised in young people’s accounts of the guest *habitus* was the unpleasant feeling of being obligated to ‘take whatever was offered’ by a household. In many cases, participants spoke to me about approaching a living arrangement with a forced attitude of humility and gratitude. Rita for example highlighted this as a particular issue in her experience of couch surfing, speaking of a constant dissonance between the kind of living conditions she wanted, needed and
expected of herself, and the sense that in order to survive under her present circumstances, she had to ‘settle’ and be grateful for something much less than ideal:

And it's about when you start looking [for rental accommodation], you've got all these criteria that you want it to meet, and now I'm three months down the line [without being able to find affordable housing], that criteria is slowly dwindling away. So whereas before I might have wanted to live in a certain area and I might have wanted a certain type of person to live with and I wanted maybe a modern house, etcetera; you suddenly get to the point where you don't care, as long as it's not got rats running through it, you don't care if it takes you an hour to get in to college...as long as it's got some basic things, you don't care if you're sharing with people that don't talk to you.

Like many of the practices young people developed in order to ‘get through’ a marginalised social position in the household, the job of taking whatever was offered and ‘putting up with’ arrangements involved attending closely to the management of feeling. Theoretical work within the sociology of emotions, particularly the work of Hochschild (1979; 1983) around emotion management, offers some insight into what is at play in such a practice. The task of managing how one feels, in Hochschild’s (1979: 551-52; 1998: 6-7) view, involves a kind of intensive labour, which she defines primarily through the analytical concept of ‘emotion work”. Hochschild (1979: 558, 561) distinguishes the process of emotion work from Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of social interaction, which she argues focuses exclusively on the ‘surface acting” of impression management and a
concern with managing outward appearances. According to Hochschild, an understanding of emotion management:

…fosters attention to how people try to feel, not, as for Goffman, how people try to appear to feel…By emotion work” I refer to the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling. To work on” an emotion or feeling is…the same as to manage” an emotion or to do deep acting”. Note that emotion work” refers to the effort – the act of trying – and not to the outcome, which may or may not be successful (Hochschild 1979: 552-53).

In this way, we can conceptualise the process by which young people, finding themselves in a constraining guest status, might attempt to work on” producing a desired feeling which is not already present. This is a practice which Hochschild (1979: 516) describes as evocation” or working feeling up”. Conversely, there may be practices where young people replace an undesirable or socially incommensurate feeling with feelings they sense would better fit with the social and material circumstances of couch surfing. We might think of such practices, from Hochschild’s (1979: 516) perspective, as suppression” or working feeling down”. In both respects, emotion work involves a process of working on feeling’ in accord with what Hochschild (1979: 551-552; 568; 1998: 6-7) defines as feeling rules”. Such feeling rules constitute socially produced guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation” (Hochschild 1979: 566).
Hochschild’s (1979) theories of emotional labour help us understand the power of social expectations in shaping how we "ought to feel". That is, the greater the "misfit" we perceive between the socially expected feeling in a given situation, and one's own (actual) feelings, the greater the effort we will tend to invest in changing our feelings and ameliorating the misfit. In particular, Hochschild (1979: 551) identifies class, gender and ethnicity as important social factors shaping the extent of emotional labour that people engage in (or are expected to) in addressing emotional misfit. This is reflected in the interviews, where participants varied in terms of the expressed intensity of emotion work that they indicated around the practice of "gift horsing" (that is, of not "looking a gift horse in the mouth"). The degrees of emotional labour young people engaged in depended upon how they perceived themselves and their social position. It was also shaped by how long they had experienced dislocation; their expectations around what was owed to a household, and the degree to which young people were hopeful about the future (and viewed couch surfing arrangements as ultimately temporary).

For interviewees such as Rita, emotion work was a major part of dealing with couch surfing relationships and living conditions. Living a guest status was especially difficult for her, in the sense that she perceived a mismatch between her present circumstances and her identity. In her discussions with me, she indicated a great sense of disappointment; of a fundamental disconnection between what she had come to expect for herself in terms of housing, living conditions and lifestyle, and her present reality. In particular, experiences of dislocation stood at odds with her self-identified middle class background. She also felt that her more "mature" age group status made her experiences of couch surfing all the more
anomalous, relative to many of the younger age groups she observed facing the same circumstances as herself:

*It can be very hard if you've come from not having that lifestyle, which I didn't...I've come from a good background; good job, good home, etcetera etcetera. Great social life...And so, it's very much like, you know, you lower your standards or you change your standards, to be able to 'fit in' to what's being offered. A bit like “don't look a gift horse in the mouth”. But at the same time, I'm not in my early twenties [anymore]...So, the idea of coming from having a secure home that was my own, and having a professional job, and then going on to be a mature student and going back to live with eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds, it's really, really hard! And I guess, for the age that I am, I'm having to go backwards instead of forwards...you know, I did years of house shares in this mannerism.*

From her reflections, it was clear that Rita was very unhappy about being in an undesirable living arrangement, with very little personal ownership of space and tenure at that particular point in her life. One of the ways she worked on this was by attempting to change her thinking and acclimatise (temporarily) to what was offered; just as she had – out of necessity – emotionally accommodated to the tactic of turning to local households as a means of surviving. This included actively changing her standards or expectations around acceptable living conditions, and drawing her focus towards feeling grateful for those
advantages or ‘positives’ she did possess relative to others in similar circumstances (for example, having an air mattress rather than sleeping on couches):

…it’s not making me happy being there...But, I have a very good roof over my head in terms of the people I’m staying with. It's a great house. Beautiful house, etcetera etcetera. But I feel destitute at times. At the same time it's not quite as bad as, I guess, really being on somebody's couch. At least I have; well, I have an air bed...it's just something that I've known that I've had to adapt to.

Importantly, we might also understand the unhappy feeling states of interviewees like Rita as rooted in a crucial disconnection between one’s own feelings and the broader ‘feeling rules’ expected of a tenuous guest who has nowhere else to go. This was a major source of anguish for Rita, who felt confronted by the conflict between her own personal feelings of unhappiness and the contrary social expectation that she should ‘feel grateful’ for the hospitality she had been offered (no matter how badly she felt about being in a couch surfing situation). In this way, her emotional labours were not just an attempt to relieve her unhappiness (for example, by gradually reducing her own standards and expectations of acceptable living conditions). Working on feeling was also an embodied aspect of inhabiting a marginal social position in the household.
Writing on the role of feeling rules in shaping social gestures, Hochschild (1979: 568) contends that social exchange involves acts of display based on a prior, shared understanding of patterned entitlement. Any gesture…is measured against a prior sense of what is reasonably owed another, given the sort of bond involved.” In Hochschild’s (1979: 568) analysis, we might think of Rita as having taken seriously” the feeling rules shaping the hospitality relationship. That is, in navigating a guest habitus, Rita took on a certain degree of guilt over the idea that she owed a fundamental feeling of gratitude to her hosts, and that contrary feelings of unhappiness indicated that she was transgressing these rules of feeling. In working to feel grateful instead of unhappy, Rita was engaged in a profoundly burdensome effort of “deep acting” (Hochschild 1979: 558) rather than simply keeping up appearances in a Goffman-esque surface display of gratitude.

One way in which Rita attempted to practice gratitude (that is, to move herself through guilt and talk herself into‘ being grateful) was by focusing on the favours that were nevertheless being done for her, in a want of being able to access other housing options. She spoke of feeling as though the people offering their shelter were going out of their way; that she could be on the streets” if not for their kind gestures. Her sense of owing something significant to these households became sufficient cause for Rita to work up” feelings of gratitude and work down” feelings of unhappiness. This process of deep, emotional labour was evident throughout her conversations with me:

There's always this feeling of gratitude. So you kind of can't be really too picky. And so at times, then, it's like you might not get on or it might not
be what you want but you know that somebody's doing you a favour, so it's really, really difficult. You've got to put up with a lot of stuff.

For others, "taking what's offered" involved an emotional distancing; an acceptance of things "as they came", or approaching couch surfing relationships with as little personal investment as possible (for example by viewing living conditions, however difficult, as temporary and necessary at the time). As Travis highlighted:

...yeah basically it's anywhere where you can find a bed you know? I found myself on tables outside, you know. Absolutely just so, so tired that I'd just sleep anywhere and just crash out in your mate's ah, what do you call those? Patios, out back, you know? Just make up a bed there and just go to sleep. But when you're couch surfing you don't really care where you are; if you're comfortable, if you're warm, you're pretty cool you know?

For some young people I spoke with, the emotional labours of "taking what was offered" were less of an expressed issue. When asked about the process, these participants voiced much less open concern about what they were offered while couch surfing, as long as they had somewhere to sleep and at least an opportunity to work out tenure or find another place to stay in the near future. This did not mean that taking what was offered was not a difficult practice for these interviewees. However, it did not involve a high degree of mismatch
between their situations and their feelings, or between their own feelings and the feeling rules of a guest *habitus*. As Mark stated:

...as long as I've got a place to stay, some food in my stomach and a bed to sleep in...I could have no money for weeks but I will still find a way to eat, sleep and bathe.

As I have indicated thus far, we might think of young people in guest relationships as navigating a *burdensome* and *marginal* social position, where they have little space to negotiate their living circumstances, their freedoms and their capacity to feel at home. In the next section, I highlight how this marginality was made especially apparent in young people’s concern with the embodied burdens of possessions. This state of living was something that Mark likened to being a turtle:

**PM**: So I guess in a way the possessions that you carry, they’re –

**Mark**: Well, I'm like a turtle. Carry it all on my back.

*Carrying your life: The burdens of guests*

Not surprisingly, the process of managing, honouring and attending to possessions was an important theme that emerged from young people’s accounts of a guest *habitus*. In the limited spaces offered by a hospitality arrangement, interviewees were constantly engaged with households in a tentative and cautious manner, effectively –living out of a suitcase” on an indefinite basis. This was an intimate expression of the guest *habitus*, constituting both
an embodied avoidance of imposition, and at the same time representing young people’s concern with being able to ‘up and go’ at short notice. In this section, I discuss how these embodied aspects of the guest status prevented young people from ever fully unpacking, settling in or unburdening themselves.

For interviewees, the weight of personal belongings was ever apparent; intensified by the tenuousness and sparseness of being a guest, and made more complicated by the push of constant movement. This was a context where, at the time of experiencing couch surfing, many young people had been dispossessed beyond those few items they could carry with them from place to place. As Yvette put it:

**Yvette:** Yeah, so I was living out of a suitcase [chuckling softly] for nearly

* a year!

In the literature, there are pockets of social research that also speak to the crucial place of possessions in embodied experiences of dislocation. A particularly interesting example is an anthropological case study that took place in a homeless shelter for women in the U.S. (Hill 1991). Through this research, Hill (1991: 306) crucially points out that recurring experiences of dispossession had been a significant aspect of these women’s encounters with homelessness. These experiences of dispossession deeply impacted how the women related to belongings and items, manifested for example in a marked lack of engagement with possessions that could easily be lost, stolen or difficult to carry (such as expensive items, everyday household items, or new clothes provided to them by shelter staff).
Young people’s discussions with me indicated similar themes. In their experiences of dislocation, attending to the bulk and security of practical possessions was a source of particular anxiety, risk and burden. Like their own bodies, their possessions took up space and mass in a guest household. They also became especially burdensome when staying in emergency accommodation or sleeping rough. In contexts of persistent insecurity, forced movement and uncertainty, possessions were both precious and a dangerous liability:

**PM**: So at the moment, you kind of feel you don’t want to unpack your bags too much?

**Renee**: Yeah, just put it over there. Just shove it all in a cupboard, close the door...

**PM**: ...I was going to ask about the photos...you said that you sort of took a few photos [of places with meaning for you] —

**Renee**: Yeah well, because I was in the process of moving I took a photo of all my stuff packed up, ‘cause that’s what my life was! I was living in a bag, [that] kinda thing...It was kind of: you came with a bag; you left with a bag.

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**PM**: On the opposite side of the coin, was there anything difficult —

**Jonathan**: The stuff that you have to carry around, I had a lot of stuff with me as well. Just carrying all that stuff around on buses, trains, you know, just real overbearing, and especially if you’ve got suitcases and big bags, then it’s very hard.
PM: How much stuff did you tend to be able to bring with you from place to place?

Jonathan: Well, when I left my parents I really had to take everything. So that was quite a lot. And then even when I found somewhere to put my stuff, I still had so much to carry, you know my clothes and all the stuff that I needed every day, instead of going back to the place that I had it, you know? So even that, you know, that was about say four, five bags, so it was pretty hard.

As these reflections suggest, young people constantly struggled with their possessions; worried about how they might safeguard them, maintain them and limit them. In tenuous living circumstances, their belongings had to be essential to living; to be portable or easily ‘held close‘; to be placed and carried in suitable and practical baggage; to be folded and tucked away from sight; to be protected against theft or breach, and limited to the most important, meaningful items. As such, their possessions were also reminders of their exclusion from a sense of at-homeness. Possessions (like home) could not be taken for granted within the guest household (or within situations of displacement more generally). As Rita and Anna highlighted:

Rita: Even to this day, all my things are still in boxes. I’ve not been able to unpack anything, because I’ve got nowhere to unpack anything. So, it’s a constant feeling of living in somebody else’s house; living under someone else’s rules; not being able to have anywhere to put anything...my stuff's
still all in bags on the side. And that for me doesn't always make a happy home; doesn't always make a happy feeling.

* * *

**PM:** What about things in terms of furniture and sort of personal belongings, did you get to accrue much while you were couch surfing or?

**Anna:** Not a whole lot. I still travelled fairly light. I basically had these two big cargo bags that I could fit everything in. It wasn’t until I moved into my current house [share house] that I started gathering things, like furniture.

Some participants’ accounts demonstrated very practical strategies for managing the physical boundaries and movement of their possessions, in intimate accord with the tenuous *habitus* of couch surfing. For Mark, managing tenuousness meant putting a great deal of effort and thought into purchasing particular bags, which he had learnt would most effectively enable him to carry his life with him and plan for emergencies:

**PM:** So you’ve had to reduce everything down to a couple of bags?

**Mark:** Yep, on average I don’t buy a bag that’s anything underneath 35 litreage because I know that at least with a 35 litre bag (and I think this one is a 38 litre bag), I can fit at least two and a half days’ worth of clothes in that, if it’s empty...I have to have my life close to me. So I’ve got a toothbrush, I’ve got toothpaste, I’ve got a shaver, I’ve got deodorant,
I've got hair gel, I've got the lot in there. My bag leaves me, people leave the world.

In managing their belongings, the young people I spoke with frequently expressed anxiety, sadness and frustration over the limitations they needed to impose upon themselves. Many faced the prevalent issue of theft. Statistics on reported crime in Australia indicate this is a particular issue for young people and for those experiencing homelessness (Ballintyne 1999; Gaetz 2004; National Youth Commission 2008: 290; White 1995). Indeed, rates of criminal victimisation through robbery are especially high among young people generally, as indicated by Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded crime data. In 2007 for instance, nearly 45 per cent of victims of a reported robbery in 2007 were young people aged 15 to 24 years (ABS 2007: 5).

Through interviewees’ accounts, it was clear that experiences of theft were especially difficult to cope with, considering many had been living in situations where they often had little else but their belongings. These few possessions were crucial to their everyday physical, economic, social and emotional subsistence. Young people highlighted how, with few financial resources, it was inordinately difficult to quickly regain or compensate for the loss of possessions of any kind. As well, fear of inviting would-be thieves often made it too risky to accrue more expensive or durable items that many people take for granted (including mobile phones). At the same time, many of the young people I spoke with expressed a strong desire to have these items for the crucial benefits they held (like being able to stay in contact; having a vital source of entertainment and escape from daily stresses).
In Mike‘s accounts, the desire to purchase a portable DVD player resulted in the incidental theft of his toiletries and important paperwork while couch surfing. This situation cast his living circumstance into a state of disarray at the time. For example, losing his toiletries meant turning to shop lifting in order to be able to shave. In having lost his paperwork, it was also much more difficult for him to provide proof of identity and engage with vital housing and employment services. This situation ultimately destabilised his living arrangements, as Mike discussed with me:

**PM:** What happens – what leads into going onto the streets for you, generally?

**Mike:** It’s usually stupid mistakes. Well, this time it was that I spent close to $300 on electronics...The consequences happened to be that I had all my gear laid out in front of me; I had a gigantic suitcase filled with comics, clothes. And I lost them...Now, what really pissed me off was I lost all my paperwork...[and] I’d lost all my toiletries too. [Sarcastic] Which is just so good for me right now. I shaved today using grooming scissors that I stole...I don’t like to steal but when you need to survive, you need to survive.

Often, young people expressed a sense of frustration at being unable to regain important, longed-for possessions, which had been lost or forced into storage because of dislocation and the tenuousness of couch surfing households. This had important material impacts, affecting many interviewees’ capacity to engage with school and work:
Yvette: ...all my stuff was packed up in the garage of one of my friend's places...I had my TV and my stuff was all packed up. I had a laptop that's worth twenty bucks [chuckling], it's a piece of crap! But, I use it to just...do like Microsoft Word, whatever, whatever. But, yeah, all of that. So that really meant that my schooling was suffering because I didn't have that.

The spatial limitations and dislocation of a guest *habitus* also meant that many of the young people I interviewed were compelled to forego accruing (or re-establishing) furnishings and other important trappings of home*. This created barriers in terms of establishing themselves in a house or shared living space. As indicated by these accounts:

Rita: I also don't have all my things with me. I've got half my things in one place...Every time I move, I can't carry everything with me...I did just come over with a back pack...I've had stuff sent over, and I just can't move it every time I do...If you are in a situation in the house when you're couch surfing, that it's no longer what you want or it's no longer what you require, to be able to move quickly to the next place just becomes that much more difficult...And it's already like that overwhelming feeling of despair of thinking: “I've gotta get a bed! I've gotta get a desk.” You can't even fully move in [anywhere]

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**PM:** Another thing that is a big issue is people's possessions. How were you able to maintain them?

**Lucas:** Well, you're not. You're not. You leave a bit here, a bit there, a bit there. Some places you end up going back later and getting some. Some places you never can go back again. You've just gotta lose them. The caravan park was one place I lost a lot of possessions because I couldn't go back and get them. Well, the little possessions I had at the park.

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**Mark:** I've got over 20 grand worth of assets sitting in [mum's] carport...The principle of the fact is, is my bed, my shit, my posters, my lifestyle is [there], but I can't be there. I'm stuck with stayin’ with armed robbers and junkies. It's fucked...You know, that's about my personal space under that carport.

While the process of managing possessions was often dominated by burdens and risks (in particular, the risk of further dispossession), there were some belongings that young people persistently spoke of as honouring and attending to with exquisite care, as I map out in the next section.

**More than sentimental: Connections through meaningful possessions**

Within marginal spaces and fragile tenure, young people spoke of small items of ‘sentimental value’ that were powerfully inscribed with connections to memory and identity. Attending to these kinds of significant objects was a practice through which young people carried their lives and affirmed their own personal space, security and at-homeness
in an otherwise confining and limiting social space. Through their accounts, participants indicated that these ‘special’ belongings were an important source of security, survival and identity.

The important relationship between possessions, dispossession and homelessness is reaffirmed by some of the key ethnographic observations which Hill (1991) highlighted, in their research with women who had experienced homelessness. While noting that, much to the chagrin of managing staff, the majority of women residents in the homeless shelter shunned everyday belongings and activities of self-care (like cleaning their living spaces or washing their clothes), what was less obvious to these staff was the significance of those ‘special possessions’ that the women did value and honour. As Hill writes:

One outcome of this situation [of persistent dispossession] is that the women in the shelter are usually apathetic regarding the care and maintenance of new possessions, except those that have symbolic value…(Hill 1991: 306).

Through spending time with the women residing in the shelter, Hill (1991: 305-306) observed three forms of special possessions that were important in relations with self, the future, and in connections with significant people in the women’s lives. The first of these possessions were those that the women could hold on to throughout periods of homelessness (Hill 1991: 305-306). In Hill’s (1991) observations this included not only objects (like mementos) but also highly personal aspects of the self; certain inviolable dimensions of their being that individual women treasured and maintained (such as
memories, moral values and principles the women held dear). Similar kinds of special possessions were apparent in young people’s reflections on couch surfing. As Renee highlighted:

**PM:** Was there anything that you sort of kept close to you, while?

**Renee:** My teddy bear. [affectionate tones] Yeah, my teddy bear [smiling].

Yeah, my brother gave me a Christmas present one year, off his own back.

He went and bought it himself, [wryly] without expecting someone else to get it and write his name on it! He bought it himself and gave it to me, and it’s kind of a really big deal. So yeah, that’s gone everywhere.

In Hill’s (1991) research, another important type of possession that women valued were those belongings they had been able to secure or gain in the face of homelessness, including –items that symbolised a better future”, such as a set of rosary beads that in one resident’s accounts, represented her determination to overcome drug addiction (Hill 1991: 305). This was, again, a common theme in young people’s conversations with me. As Mike discussed:

**Mike:** That’s why I love my camera so much, you know, I’m always charging it. I’m always taking it out with me. [Addressing himself] “Look at these photos, they look so good, that’s my puppy, that’s my big sister, etcetera”. When I’m on the streets, if the camera is charged I’ll go show it off. If it’s not I’ll hold onto it for the sheer fact of sentimental value, that it is within me; that it’s got for me.
The other significant possessions that women valued in Hill's research were things that had been lost or left behind (Hill 1991: 305-306). As I indicated earlier, the constant displacement of a guest *habitus* meant that the same kinds of erosion and loss of belongings were common in young people's experiences of couch surfing. The memory of such possessions (and experiencing their loss) was, as I have pointed out, often a significant source of lament, frustration and longing. At the same time, for some young people I spoke with, the hope to reclaim these possessions was also a motivation, structuring dreams and plans for the future. As Mark’s reflections demonstrate:

**Mark** I've got my Ford Cortina sitting up there [in my mum’s garage]. It's a mint, one-owner car. I ended up stacking it into something, maybe about two grand worth of damage but I can repair that...if I spy all the parts and the paint.

**PM:** Have you been wanting to? As a project?

**Mark:** Driving force...I've always wanted a late model Cortina, just through passion, like my old man has been a Ford Chrysler lad his whole life and I've got absolutely huge aspirations for this car. That's why I'm aiming real hard for hospitality work behind the bar because that's a minimum twenty bucks an hour, and if I do split shifts or you know, 40 hour weeks, I can just pump all that into my fines straight away and then I can just get my license...
In drawing our attention to these kinds of special belongings, Hill (1991) theorises that experiencing persistent or profound dislocation crucially alters how people relate to the trappings of their lives, with a privileging of symbolically laden possessions over the more impermanent, or cumbersome, objects of inhabitation. As the author notes:

…[S]ome of the volunteers [at the shelter] believe this lack of care [for things the women are given by shelter staff] is the result of “laziness”. An alternative explanation is that their lack of control [over possessions] may cause them to avoid strong attachments to things that can easily be withdrawn (Hill 1991: 306).

Young people’s discussions with me indicated a similar kind of relationship with possessions. Immersed in histories and spaces of dispossession, many had acquired a practical sense for avoiding those possessions that would be burdensome (or easily lost) and holding on to those that could be maintained. These were the kinds of belongings (like holding on to official documentation from Centrelink, for example) which also inscribed a sense of citizenship, carved out of circumstances where the lack of a ‘fixed address’ had persistently erased their access to a formally recognised identity. Some belongings also figured strongly in young people’s means of coping and resisting their status as guests, through the sequestering of private space and identity. In this way, particular belongings gave some young participants ways of maintaining meaningful sources of personal space, privacy and connection – both to self and significant others. As I discuss in the next section, another important means of navigating the burdens and restrictions of tenuousness was finding moments to spend alone, unregulated, unseen and uninterrupted.
Sequestering space: Practices of inhabitation

While young people navigated and attended closely to the rules and ‘territories’ of the guest households they inhabited, their own needs for personal space and privacy could not be ignored. In their experiences of dislocation, it was all the more important for most of those I spoke with that they were able to find certain ways, however fragile, to build personal space, preserve a sense of identity and seek belonging and connection. It was through this that they found ways of establishing connections to their lives, autonomy, memories and identities. This is a deeply embodied process in which, as Robinson (2002c: 134) describes, young people are engaged in ‘marking out a specific place of inhabitation’.

In Robinson’s view, these kinds of socio-spatial practices are significant elements, for young people, in managing the ‘spatiality of grief’ (Robinson 2005a: 47) pervading experiences of dislocation. The key to working through much of this grief, Robinson argues, is in young people’s access to ‘therapeutic places’ which give them the space, security and safety needed to have ‘time out’ from the vicissitudes of marginalisation; time and space to begin to attend to and care for themselves (Robinson 2005a: 47; 55-57). Examples of therapeutic places which Robinson (2005a: 55-57) explores in her research include staying with a trusted family member, and seeking out safe, fun, or supportive communal spaces (including drop-in centres and secret, hidden spaces around the city).

For some of the young people I spoke with, seeking out therapeutic place was the primary means through which they resisted a confining guest habitus, and marked off personal space. Lucas in particular engaged in this kind of spatial retreat and escape, putting himself beyond the restrictive spatiality inherent in sharing the bedroom floors of his friends’
parents' homes. Through his accounts, he indicated how he had sequestered particular places and activities. These were embodied ways of gaining a temporary respite from the confinement and surveillance of his use of household space and time:

PM: *Did you feel the need to be able to make some kind of private space for yourself; were you able to?*

Lucas: *Showers were good, because I'd have my own, well I'd lock the door... [Also] on the toilet... [And] going for walks. As I said, I walked a lot. That was one way I felt I had some freedom, was I used to walk.*

For some, the marking off of personal space was less bounded in the physical spaces of the guest households, and more about seeking sanctuary and support in *social* spaces altogether ‘outside’ of the particular living arrangements they were in. This included seeking the company of good friends who could offer support or understanding of the young person’s situation, and acts of distancing from other marginalised and homeless youth. Yvette was very much engaged in these social practices, and attributed a great deal of her ability to cope with and manage tenuousness to both her close, ongoing network of friend supports she kept separate from the spaces and territories of dislocation:

Yvette: *I don’t have to be friends with other people that are in the same situation as me. Both my best friends are at uni[versity]... and here's me; I haven’t even finished school yet... I'm friends with these people, and you know, they help me out by putting their spare change in my car for petrol and stuff like that, and it's not always money either –*
PM: *It's support?*

Yvette: Yeah, it's just emotional support... Even while I was at strangers' houses, my support network was still really strong for me, even though I couldn't stay there, they would call me and I could call them whenever I wanted and if I'm really desperate for money they would help me out, even though they were struggling as well... But my support network was always really tight. Me, and my best friends and my boyfriend were like, the four of us were always together...

PM: So I guess in a way, they're kind of like 'family'?

Yvette: Well they've been more family than my own has.

PM:...Do you reckon that's made a difference, in terms of 'getting through' couch surfing?

Yvette: Yeah. As much as I hadn't been happy, it definitely helps you from being 'down here' [gestures down to the ground] to being a little bit 'up here' [gestures a bit higher]. You know, you're not really happy, but you're [also] just not right down in the dumps. You do still feel like there is a way through.

As I have previously highlighted, an important practice in Yvette's navigation of couch surfing was an active avoidance of people whom she identified as homeless. This was her way of securing therapeutic place (Robinson 2001c), maintaining safety, autonomy and wellbeing through acts of conscious distancing. Generally, the other young people I spoke with expressed widely differing attitudes about the practice and merits of hanging out
with’ or living with other homeless youth. This depended on how each person related to being homeless and the context in which they encountered others in similar circumstances. In some ways, this was gendered (especially around issues of violence or sexual assault). That being said, a couple of young men had similar concerns and experiences with violence and theft when staying in emergency accommodation. As such, security was not just a problem that young women were encountering. Some young people (namely Kyle but also Mark and to some extent Mike, Jake and Andrew) positively identified with other homeless youth and had a substantial base of friends who were homeless. For participants such as Kyle, links with other young people in similar situations was an important source of connection, support and wellbeing. A number of his friends would share whatever housing they might have been living in at different points with friends who were living on the streets at the time.

As I have highlighted thus far, young people’s accounts indicate the high degree of emotional and embodied labour involved in the process of navigating their status as guests. The more tenuous and unsupportive a couch surfing relationship or series of relationships, the more young people managed these situations through burdensome practices. As I explore further in the next chapter, the guest habitus is also a profoundly burdensome emotional landscape, both in terms of managing the expression of emotion and of what is being felt. Given this context, it is not surprising that time and again, participants highlighted how living a guest status had compelled them (at one point or another, and at times repeatedly) to ‘jump’, ‘cut their losses’ and seek new ways of (re)negotiating home. As I discuss in the next section, this was another process by which, in contending with a
marginalised hospitality, young people found themselves reluctantly moving from one tenuous and unsupportive situation to another.

**It’s just a case of jumping! Moving on as embodied relief**

In many of the experiences I heard through the interviews, working out whether it was best to stay and endure, or cut one’s losses, was a defining practice driving their navigation of a guest status. Yvette, for example, chose to avoid staying with close friends for anything more than very brief periods whilst she was couch surfing, out of the fear that staying with them in a situation of disadvantage would create a great deal of tension that could possibly damage their friendship:

> I've got two best friends and I sort of stayed with them. But it’s just hard, because they are so close to me; it will ruin the friendship that you have if you stay with them for too long, so it was only a couple of days at a time here and there...

Tellingly, young people's descriptions of how it felt moving away from particularly tenuous guest relationships suggested a lifting of the physical and social burden upon others and upon the self; an experience of relief, freedom and ownership (of self and space), even if this meant entering into situations of further displacement and dispossession, such as sleeping rough. As Lucas and Rita similarly framed this:

> Lucas: I was actually happier to be on the streets than couch surfing.

> Because I had nothing, but at least that nothing was mine...As I said, it
was a big relief when I just did leave that [couch surfing], because
suddenly I was free; I wasn't a burden to anyone.

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Rita: And even though I have four or five people that all say [I can stay
with them], I'm going somewhere else tomorrow!...The person that I'm
with isn't making me move, I just feel it's time to move on.

If conditions or relationships did reach a certain point of intolerability, or the young person
anticipated the rupture of a couch surfing arrangement, the practice of moving on was in
many ways the best option available to them. For some of the interviewees, this was a
particularly important way of minimising the potential for pressures and conflicts in staying
with people they had a good pre-existing relationship with, such as close friends.
Participants in these situations talked about their worries that staying for too long or
-pushing your luck‖ would have threatened valued friendships. As Yvette reflected:

I've got two best friends, and I sort of stayed with them. But that – it's just
hard, because they are so close to me, you don't – it will ruin the
friendship that you have if you stay with them for too long, so it was only
a couple of days at a time here and there.

Kyle spoke of how an otherwise relatively supportive couch surfing relationship with
friends was punctuated at times by stressful interpersonal conflicts and the effects of
overstaying. In his experience, these were situations that could be managed, avoided or
subverted by physically leaving and “lying low” for a while; withdrawing from their social sphere:

Well just, as soon as you start to push your luck you just piss off... Your friend that you’re stayin’ with, or friends, are starting to get sort of pissed off with you, so you cruise and don’t talk with them for a while and then when they see you, they’re glad to see you again, you know what I mean?

For some of the interviewees, staying too long in any one place was an inherently uncomfortable and undesirable situation generally for them. In these situations, frequently moving on was not only a tactic within couch surfing itself; it was part of a complex state of itinerancy resulting from issues such as mental illness, problem gambling, interpersonal conflicts and struggles with debt or criminal prosecution. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter Three, these situations risk inscribing persistent, or “iterative”, periods of dislocation (Robinson 2005b). This is an experience of dislocation that Robinson (2005b: 1) describes as “unstable, and often unsafe, housing characterised by constant movement through many different forms of accommodation”.

Of the young participants I spoke with, the practice of frequently moving on was especially apparent in young men’s accounts. In particular, it figured prominently in the experiences of Mike, Mark, Jason and Andrew. Mike, for example, spoke of living constantly “on the move” within backpacker accommodation in addition to couch surfing. This was a particular mode of habitation, which Mike identified as his own personal preference. Mike also highlighted brief periods of staying in emergency shelters and sleeping rough. He had
often moved from place to place because of a complex interplay of struggles with debt, conflict and mental illness. In this sense, Mark had acquired an itinerant way of negotiating self and belonging. He was constantly moving away from situations as a means of coping:

*I'm living on the street [at the moment], looking for emergency accommodation that'll last me until next week and then I can get paid. And then I can go look for another backpackers’ and stay there for another three months until I piss somebody off and have to leave again. Which is effectively my system. It's how it goes...and it's a lot easier to be able to deal with [that way]...I'm so used to fitting in to niches; I'm so used to meeting people for very short terms, very short times, because, especially in places like backpackers', if you meet somebody for a couple of days and they're only there for a week, you can't really get them to get pissed off at you in the space of a week. It's usually over a month by the time that they realise that you've done something horrendously stupid...It's just living with those people that's been difficult.

In similar ways, Mark also spoke of moving on in regular –six month stints”, especially whenever conflicts arose:

* I just went into sort of semi-stable accommodation for six months at a time, sort of went in cycles, so every six months shit hit the fan and I can’t
catch very well so I ended up on my arse, managed to find someone else who'd put me up for an interim stint.

For others, the practice of moving on was a more direct response to the conditions and relationships inherent to the guest status itself. This included being in households where the hospitality relationship was extremely tenuous, or where a situation was becoming unsafe, uncomfortable or full of conflict. In these circumstances, young people spoke of going back to their social networks or seeking formal assistance in order to find ways to get out and find a new living arrangement. The ability to know or anticipate the moments when it would be best to move on, get out or even opt out of couch surfing altogether was perhaps the most important process within interviewees' experiences of dislocation. In this respect, we might think of the movement of couch surfing as another aspect of young people's struggle to negotiate home and belonging.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced how young people become immersed within a *habitus* of marginalised tenure. Critically, this is a *habitus* that reflects the particular social field of the individual household; a field shaped by thinned-out hospitality relationships, in which both host(s) and guest(s) are engaged in constant struggles around identity and ontological security. Engaging with the interview accounts, I have argued that experiences of tenuousness are deeply embodied. I have explored how, in the accounts of the young people I interviewed, couch surfing is a process bound up in the fraught task of navigating through or away from a potentially hostile and precarious relation with households. In a sense, to couch surf is to become a „practiced guest‘.
In detailing interviewees’ embodied practices, I have in particular demonstrated young people’s concern with anticipating the rules of a tenuous hospitality. Navigating a marginal status, young people were bound up in a struggle to extend their tenure, to build the hospitality relation, and to avoid or minimise hostilities within a fragile and limited social space. At the same time, many were also attempting to preserve a sense of self, and of personal boundaries. In particular, experiences of the guest status as a state of ‘space invasion’ made the tenuousness of couch surfing relationships painfully apparent for most of the young people I interviewed. In managing this visceral sense of imposition, young people found themselves limiting and regulating their bodily and social occupation of household space and taking what was offered, in an ongoing and intensive process of minimising interpersonal friction or the potential for conflict.

The practices I trace here speak, ultimately, of the burdens and sense of intrusion that the guest habitus embodies. In young people’s reflections, being a tenuous guest takes considerable emotional labour. In those rare households where strong relationships of hospitality, trust and reciprocity prevailed, the labour of maintaining the relationship and household tenure was generally less intensive, as might be expected. By contrast, living within a highly proscribed guest status was profoundly burdensome. In this context, the practice of moving on was a quintessential part of the process through couch surfing, intimately bound up in the guest status – with its attendant potential for hostility, socio-spatial exclusion and relational rupture. In the next chapter, I take up the thread of embodied burdens I have set out here, tracing the emotional landscape of dislocation in young people’s accounts. In doing so, I indicate the ways in which interviewees were
affected (or not) by a marginal *habitus*; and how they (re)negotiated home and identity because of – or in spite of – *being homeless*. 
CHAPTER SEVEN

Emotional landscapes: Feeling the guest status

All living is dwelling, the shape of a dwelling. To dwell means to live the traces that past living has left. The traces of dwellings survive, as do the bones of people (Illich 1982: 119).

As researchers such as Robinson (2002c) have emphasised, the deep emotional impacts of dislocation and of loss are important, but too often overlooked, factors in understanding young people’s trajectories through homelessness. Returning to theories of emotional labour (Hochschild 1978) and the stigmatised identity, I explore in this chapter how young people described the emotional landscape of couch surfing, and how contending with a guest status had affected them. I also examine young people's capacity for coping and making sense of dislocation: both in managing the embodied burdens of the guest habitus and, more broadly, how young people (re)negotiated their identity in relation to the symbolic burdens of homelessness (Farrugia 2010).

Drawing upon a number of researchers who have focused on the embodied subjectivities and habitus of youth homelessness, I argue that spaces for coping with distress (both from past homes and present circumstances) and garnering support, belonging and inclusion, are limited and vulnerable to rupture within guest relationships. In doing so, I point out that the practices that form young people’s guest habitus are also ways (whether generative or destructive, or both) in which they attempt to deal with ontological insecurity, within a marginal social space. These are practices that bear important links with what Robinson
(2002b) describes, from an anthropological perspective on embodied grief, as —...the continued haunting of young people by past ‘homes’”.

**Couch despair: The felt habitus of marginal guests**

Through the interviews, I often asked young people how they would describe the process of couch surfing, if they could use their own words to ‘capture’ that experience. Invariably, their accounts evoked the profound emotional landscape of marginalisation. Their words emphasised the many ways in which the process of couch surfing, and of dislocation, is bound up in feelings of heaviness; of disorientation and shock; isolation, exhaustion and tiredness; of insecurity and depression; of worry, annoyance and a pervasive unpleasantness [own emphasis added]:

**Jonathan:** *Words that could describe it:* probably ‘*depressing*’! Yeah, it’s *depressing when you’re doing that*... *You feel very tired* as well, *it just wears you out*... *because you know half the time you won’t get any sleep* because you’re *worrying about this, worrying about that, pretty much.*

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**Craig:** I reckon I’d call it ‘*couch despair*’... it was *depressing*, the fact that I knew it wasn’t a permanent place of residence and I’d have to move...

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**Jake:** Because it’s *not your place*; *it’s not permanent*. Sometimes could only be for a few days then you go to your next mate’s house. Yeah, it’s *just annoying*. 

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Referring to her experiences of couch surfing as 'all the un'-words', Yvette capitulated the negative emotional spaces (and embodied burdens) that she had experienced in occupying someone else's home:

**Yvette:** *It was not pleasant! Not at all. It was horrible, and I'm really glad for now that I'm out of that...But it's really 'couch trudging'!* [laughs]...Couch, I don't know, 'slumping'...Stressful. Unstable. Ah, sometimes unsafe. Uncomfortable. All the 'un' words! [laughing] Just put 'un' in front of a big word and that's pretty much what it is!*

The more tenuous couch surfing relationships were felt to be, the more profound the impact. This was summarised powerfully in Rita's account:

**Rita:** *It's a major, major shock. Because it's a very isolating feeling. To have everything that's your security taken away...there's too many factors that just make you feel depressed over it...And, I think a lot of people just don't realise. I felt so isolated, and lonely and didn't know who to turn to and what to do, and [what to do] with that feeling... It never occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to find something else; that this would spiral into something as big as what it spiralled into. I would never have thought of 'couch surfing'. It wouldn't have been something that I would have thought of doing. I don't like going from place to place; I don't like staying in anyone else's space...And, when you're so far away from home, you've*
got nowhere to go. And you don’t have family, or friends, or anything to
base anything on.

Many also spoke of the physical and spatial dimensions of couch surfing, as a state of
staying and going, to-ing and fro-ing; tenuousness, disorientation and instability:

Renee: [It’s] going from pillar to post! It’s kind of like not knowing where
you are.

* * *

Mark: Unstable! Simple as that. Unstable and volatile.

* * *

Mike: ...Short term’s definitely a good word for it.

For some, experiences of dislocation were overwhelming; contributing to physical and
mental exhaustion, illness and thoughts of suicide:

Renee...I ended up getting sick as well – physically and mentally. And it
kind of all got so much that I had to end it all, and it’s just, I don’t know
whether that would’ve happened if I wasn’t couch surfing and all that sort
of stuff... it's kind of like you don't know what caused what.

* * *

Lucas: And I got people to buy me alcohol, I started to drink. I got
depressed, I started smoking a lot of cigarettes...When I hit eighteen I
started drinking a lot. A lot of money went on drinking and nights out. I
had no one to talk to about it [being homeless]... I became incredibly messed up. For the last few years I guess I've joked about the whole thing, but I have to probably take seriously what it actually did to me, because I'm not the same person I was. And I still struggle with things. The whole thing. And so how do you deal with that?

Each of these accounts traces the emotionally embodied landscape of the guest status; a state of being that, as I have mapped out over the past three chapters, emerges through profoundly affecting processes of exclusion and marginality. Throughout their occupation of a thinned-out hospitality, young people’s inability to ‘make themselves at home’ had prevented them from having sufficient freedom and space for their own needs. It excluded them from opportunities to relax and begin to contend with their own emotional needs, worries and burdens. As I discuss in the next section, this a situation in which – as Robinson contends – young people are denied access to ‘places in which they can freely engage in the process of moving through grief’—‘everyday’ places which might often be taken for granted by those who are homed’ (Robinson 2005a: 57). This was highlighted powerfully in Lucas and Yvette’s reflections:

**Lucas:** You’re not free. It's not free. It's like: “oh, I can't sleep. I might go and watch TV now.” No, you can’t... It’s these little things. Little things that people say: “that doesn't matter”, until they've lost them and then they realise how much those little things are.

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Yvette: I wasn't able to have any relaxing time watching TV and, you know, just doing something to chill out, or anything like that.

You’re not free: Constraining attachment

In young people’s accounts, exclusions from at-homeness made it inordinately more difficult to move beyond the tenuous habitus of couch surfing. This was personified, for instance, by Kyle’s worries about the fate of a kitten he had befriended while living in a rented house, and whom he worried about being able to take with him now that he had to leave his current housing:

Moving out of the place [rental property] has been heaps more stressful lately because I now have a cat. When I was living in a house I found an animal on the side of the road and it was just a tiny little kitten [gestures to show its tiny size], took it home and brought it up and stuff and it’s a big cat now but as much as I love her I kind of wish I didn’t because I can’t just take my cat on the road with me, you know?

Reflections such as these highlight the ways in which the tenuous guest habitus of couch surfing is often incommensurate with gaining attachments to place and (re)negotiating a sense of home. Similar to the street dwelling youth focused upon by Robinson (2001; 2002b; 2005a) in much of her research, spaces for managing and processing grief – and garnering support, belonging and inclusion – are limited and vulnerable to rupture within guest relationships. For instance, it is significant that in Lucas’ accounts of dislocation, he
felt that it was much easier for his friends to gain social support and a listening ear, because they were buffered by a physical and symbolic sense of home:

**Lucas:** And so, our friends (our friend group) actually paid more attention to him and his problems than mine. Even though his [problems] were just, you know, “grow a pair”.

**PM:** And no one could understand that [your] situation.

**Lucas:** Well, he had a home. You could just talk to him, offer him some advice, think you've done a great thing and you wouldn’t have to actually put yourself out. With me, you actually had to put yourself out, because I didn’t have a home...

Possessing a sense of home, Lucas felt, grounded his peers’ identity. It gave them not only a stable sense of self from which to seek support but also normalised them; giving them as Lucas framed it, more –social power‖. Their situations were easier to ‘relate to’ or understand. Because Lucas was facing complex disadvantages which were not fully understood or grasped by his peers (or, for that matter, by his broader school and social milieu), caring meant –putting yourself out‖. Helping meant going beyond talking or simple relating; it also meant giving space and belonging and identity. In a sense, it meant opening up one’s home to Lucas.

It is in this sense that the embodied, emotionally laborious practices involved in couch surfing tend to echo or compound what Robinson (2005a: 53) describes as –the continued haunting of young people by past ‘homes’‖. Indeed, for some of those I interviewed, the
impact of living within a prolonged guest status continued to be felt months or even years after they had experienced homelessness. Lucas, for example, talked at length about his present sense of insecurity about belonging and housing tenure. He recalled that through the relative security of later living with his father, he had begun emerging from the ‘survival mode’ of his homelessness experiences, where for years the present moment had been his primary and limited concern. However, even though at the time of the interview it had been years since he had been homeless, painful recollections of the past continued to colour Lucas’ sense of self into the present moment:

...for the last few years I guess I've joked about the whole thing, but I have to probably take seriously, you know, seriously think about what it actually did to me, because I always – I'm not the same person I was.... Everything's gone very well for me over here [having moved to Adelaide], and I'm in a position now that not many people who were in my position ever get anywhere near...I've been here for six years? Six years, and about three months. And everything's gone pretty well, but I still struggle with a lot... Sometimes I seek too much to try now and sort of recapture things that I can't? I've gotta sort of accept that I've lost those years [when homeless] and that I can't go back there...which is hard to do.

As Robinson (2005a) points out, the traumatic precariousness of being displaced often means that young people have no space (whether physically, socially or emotionally) to deal with the burdens of grief in ways that might be helpful for them. In the next section, I highlight how interviewees’ struggles with drug and alcohol misuse, dropping out of
school, violence and ‘acting up’, or simply ‘pushing things’ with the parent(s) were often an indication of a significant state of anxiety and ontological insecurity they faced, with few immediately available outlets for resolution.

**No space to deal: Distress and dislocation**

For many, the emotional weight of living the guest *habitus* compounded what Robinson (2002c: 103-122; 2005a) describes as a deeply embodied grief and anxiety. This grief stems from life histories of displacement and loss, producing a persistent sense of exclusion from a sense of home:

> Young homeless people have consistently spoken to me about the breakdown or refraction of home and the experience of a kind of living without flow, in which nothing could be forgotten and in which the intimacies of dwelling were treacherous (Robinson 2002c: 101).

These emotional struggles and their behavioural repercussions have significant bearing on young people’s capacity to deal with everyday aspects of life, and often put them at a further disadvantage. As both Lucas and Renee reflected:

> **Lucas:** But at that stage, I was so messed up and that's the thing, I couldn't make rational decisions. I wasn't old enough! I wasn't mature enough. So, I spent a lot of money; I couldn't end up buying a car, so I couldn't travel anywhere; I couldn’t get a job – yeah, I couldn’t keep my
job. There was nowhere around that I could work that was nearby. I couldn't finish school.

* * *

PM: Did you sort of feel like, for you...when you did go into drugs and alcohol, was that a way of 'coping' with things, at the time?

Renee: Yep. Yeah, it was a way of me kind of 'forgetting'. But yeah, it was worth a shot at the time! [laughs]

At the same time, in many young people’s accounts, the distressing *habitus* of couch surfing was magnified by a lack of understanding, support and practical assistance from peers, couch surfing households and the wider community. As I highlighted Chapter Five, some spoke of constantly facing a lack of understanding that left no acknowledgement of the barriers they faced. This included being expected by adults, authorities and peers alike to “make all the right choices” and to “get yourself together”, without any regard for practical challenges (like not having a car to get to work; not having a permanent home base, or being too young to access financial assistance independent of seeking paper work from estranged caregivers). Faced with the difficulties of alienation, and a fundamental lack of experience or understanding of Lucas’ situation, he felt that many of his peers blamed him for his circumstances at the time:

*Everyone blamed me. I had people saying: “If I was in your position, I'd get out of it”...People just had enough of me...And you see, the only way for me to get out of that situation was to be given a life back. But no one could really offer me that.*
For Lucas, this lack of understanding from friends made him feel he was a ‘burdensome’ subject. He had become not only a stranger among his peers, but ostracised. His uncanny status compelled the kinds of acts of bracing against home(less)ness that I have elsewhere highlighted from Robinson’s (2002b) work. At the same time as bearing the emotional burdens of these tropes of individual responsibility, few of the young people I spoke with had access, at the time of couch surfing, to the kinds of practical help and supportive guidance from significant adults that their peers did. For example, they could not benefit from rent-free living with parents; a fundamental advantage that their peers took for granted.

For some, such as Lucas, the pressure from others to get it together meant not being able to go out and ‘be a teenager’, ‘make mistakes’ and ‘take risks’ without his behaviour being linked in some way to his state of homelessness. These were, again, experiences of stigma and victim blaming which not only entrenched a poor sense of ontological worth and exacerbated anxieties, but also ultimately restricted spaces and avenues for coping with distress in helpful ways. In some accounts, reactions to these pressures propelled young people into further disadvantage (such as getting into debt). As Lucas highlighted:

…and I spent too much, because a lot of that money was spent trying to just have a very good time right now and forget about my situation. Trying to be like the teenager I was! I struggled to try and just have a ‘normal life’, but you’re not allowed to have a normal life. You’re not allowed to do the things that other teenagers do, because then people
Accounts such as these highlight my discussion in earlier chapters about the impact of a stigmatised homeless subjectivity in the lives of marginalised youth; the symbolic burdens of “feeling homeless” (Farrugia 2010). Drawing on Bourdieu, Farrugia (2010) emphasises how the marginal social status of young people experiencing homelessness can contribute both to victim blaming, and to feelings of poor self-worth (which in turn may lead some young people to blame themselves for their circumstances). Indeed, the very idea of ‘youth homelessness’ as Farrugia posits:

…[is] a cultural trope which positions young people experiencing homelessness as irresponsible and inferior to others …[and] due to their position in structural and symbolic space…[young people] have very little symbolic capital…this lack of symbolic capital is likely to be mis-recognized as a lack of ontological worth… (Farrugia 2010: 5).

These processes of marginalisation and stigma, Bessant (2001; 2003; 2004b) reminds us, are produced within a political context where young people are increasingly subject to the pressures of a de-contextualising neoliberal ideology. At its extreme, this ethos obscures an acknowledgement of processes of institutional and social discrimination, and their role in reproducing patterns of privilege and disadvantage. Ultimately, as Bessant (2003) points out, when individual responsibility is deployed as though life chances are simply a matter of exercising choice, the impact of underlying social inequalities easily becomes a kind of
invisible cage. The impact of this is magnified in the case of young people who have experienced homelessness.

As I have indicated, the marginalised social position of a guest status gives young people less space to defend against a negative or unhelpful social environment, where issues of stigma and victim blaming erode resilience. This was brought to bear in Lucas’ accounts of homelessness, where the weight of victim blaming and negative judgements from those around him became extremely difficult to bear. Over time, these processes had a profoundly deleterious impact on his sense of self:

\[
\text{But the thing is at the time, when you've got all these people saying the same [negative] thing [about you] it's very hard – reality becomes very skewed. And you do start to believe it. And you do start to think “well, it obviously is me, I'm obviously shit”. And that's when you start thinking that you are shit.}
\]

It cannot be overemphasised that the tenuous and marginal *habitus* of couch surfing intimately shapes life chances, opportunities and social citizenship. Within the fraught context of marginalisation, distress profoundly affects young people’s ability to cope with everyday challenges; maintain their autonomy and control over their lives; manage their health; and connect to supportive social relationships. As Lucas reflected:

\[
\text{See, this is the thing. This is why a lot of people who are homeless just kill themselves, or just drink or smoke themselves to death. Because [of] the}
\]
emotional shit. As I said, ten years later I'm still dealing with it. So I don't
know how you deal with it at that age... It [homelessness] destroyed any
self-confidence I had. It made me feel inadequate and inferior to everyone
else. It made me feel useless and worthless.

Because of these experiences, Lucas still (years afterwards) struggled with a persistent
sense of –feeling homeless” (Farrugia 2010); a burden that took ongoing emotional labour
to manage. As Robinson (2005a) reminds us, accounts such as these are indicative of the
vexed and convoluted process of moving through dislocation. Reflecting on young people’s
biographies of grief, Robinson writes:

This movement towards a sense of security was not a linear process
for...any...young person I interviewed...The ghosts of trauma and
abuse—_I'd hear all the screams_— remain embodied—_I’d feel all the
feelings I used to feel_— and often again consumed young people, forcing
a return or _escape_ to the street, to high drug use, and so on. Interspersed
in this...were important periods of stability, in which young people
might have the support and the relative safety of accommodation in
which to begin to actually address the reasons for their grief, and begin
the process of moving through grief (Robinson 2005a: 56).
**Managing the burdens: On resilience**

While the constraining *habitus* of couch surfing carries a great deal of emotional burden, it should be remembered that young people living in situations of dislocation are not passive ‘victims’. Indeed, all of the practices I mapped throughout the previous chapter demonstrate young people’s reactions to the constraining spaces, difficult emotional territories and tenuous relationships they contend with in their everyday experiences of homelessness. In young people’s accounts, these embodied practices of resistance and (re)negotiation were also at times generative and transformative – not only ‘destructive’. As Robinson (2002c: 103-104) urges us to consider, while grief and loss in the lives of displaced youth bears significant (and often poorly recognised) psychic impact, constructions of psychological distress as a helpless state of emotional victimhood are equally unhelpful. In young people’s (re)negotiation of self and home, the suffering of grief also indicates complex spaces of resilience:

...[G]rief is simultaneously a key barrier to young homeless people's maintenance of stable housing and an important part of the continuing negotiation of home and a place to belong (Robinson 2002c: 102).

As Robinson (2002c; 2005a) argues, when young people are in a position (that is, when they have sufficient space) to attend to and care for the self, the process of dealing with grief and loss can become an important part of finding new ways to ‘be’. This is by no means a linear process, but rather what – as I indicated earlier – Robinson (2005a: 56) describes as *moving through* grief and dislocation, in different ways. Indeed, every young person I spoke with had their own ways of navigating, resisting or ‘dealing with’ the
emotional landscape of couch surfing. Importantly, the presentation of self (Goffman 1968) and doing emotional labour represented important aspects of young people’s tactics for coping, and for protecting themselves against the impact of a marginalised *habitus*. This included acts like “putting on a mask” of confidence to shield from victimisation, and attending to care of the self (an aspect of resilience that Robinson 2005a highlights in her research with homeless youth). As Yvette reflected:

**Yvette:** And it's just security and safety that you have within yourself. I don't know who I am; I'm insecure, but there's a certain amount of 'false confidence' that you need to have, almost. Like, you need to appear confident for [victimisation] not to happen, I guess? Because, that is another thing, where people judge you if you're not confident. But, nobody else has to know whether you're really crying inside.

**PM:** It's a 'bravado', I suppose, on the outside?

**Yvette:** Yeah, a mask. And that's all that really needs to get you through...

*Poker face. They [other homeless youth] can live like that, but they don’t. And that's what I sort of try and do. You go to work and you don't yell at people, you just shut up, work; finish your work, you're getting paid for it. My boyfriend's mum was saying to me it's, “a means to an end”; you've gotta keep looking at your 'ends' and then your means won't seem so bad. Even if it is paying rent the next week, that's good enough.*
Most interviewees had engaged in some degree of emotional labour in changing their thoughts and feelings about adversities or setbacks. This included working up a sense of "stoicism", good humour or acceptance, particularly regarding circumstances or events that young people perceived as beyond their immediate control. As Mike and Mark's accounts indicate below, this was both a way of conserving emotional energy, and of consolidating focus and direction towards those things that "really matter":

**Mike:** The easiest way for me to deal with couch surfing, is that: Okay, I've just lost a bag of goodies [personal belongings]. [Tone of acceptance]
Okay. That's fine. You've got to be able to get past the annoyance, the aggravation and just realise it's just material possessions. I've still got my health. (In part! [laughs]). Still got my life. I've still got me. So, if I've got the things that I care about, that's what's important.

***

**Mark:** I might be broke as fuck, I might be on the streets but I'm still happy and I'm proud of who I am.

Overwhelmingly, practices for coping involved an active ethic of persistence, hope and a willingness to make plans for the future:

**PM:** What factors kind of contributed to you being able to get your own place, and sort of 'establish' yourself from, you know, where you were at before?
Jonathan: Just hard work. You know, getting off my arse and going into jobs, giving résumés and that kind of stuff. Going around to house inspections, you know, filling out the forms...Keep trying. Just yeah, just keep at it until you finally get a break... Just don't give up. Don't give up...Keep trying. Keep putting your résumé out there and try and get a job...Even with the house as well; it's the same with the house. You can go to the house inspections, fill out the forms and you probably won't get it, but then if you keep trying...and you present yourself well, then you'll get one sooner or later.

* * *

Yvette: But you know, I still had things to do and I still have my life. It still kept on going? I didn't just, you know, like there's lots of people that I know that couch surf or are homeless and they just don't do jack. They just spend all their benefit on drugs and alcohol and cigarettes, and I don't smoke, I don't do drugs, I don't do anything – and so, you know, it's just...The only addiction I have to feed is my stomach! [Laughs] I'm addicted to food!

* * *

Lucas: Deep down I always had a belief that I'd get out of it. And that I'd do good things, great things.
Chapter Seven: Feeling the guest status

For some, moving through dislocation involved positively identifying with couch surfing as part of a process of seeking a better life; freedom or escape from bad situations. This was particularly the case for Kyle:

Kyle: It's [couch surfing] the sense of freedom, when you leave [a bad situation]. Yeah, absolute freedom... When you get stressed it's like a shit-load of stress but then, you don't get that very often and most of it's just complete freedom. You can do whatever you want, whatever time of day it was.

For other interviewees I spoke with, the process of moving through couch surfing and dislocation had transformed, to some extent, the ways in which they related to themselves, spaces and social relationships. As Anna discussed with me:

I think often if you haven't been that low you're sort of scared of it happening? I've been there now, and I'm in a much better position now than I was then but – and hell, I don't want to be couch surfing again – but at the same time though, I can look at it and go “well, if it does happen I know I can handle it, even though it would suck for it to happen again!”... Mostly I feel like it's given me a sort of courage just to deal with adversity more. I mean, it sort of has me going: “okay, there's a bit of a leap here and I'm kind of scared but I know that I'll probably survive” so [takes a deep breath] “right! Let's go!”
In many of the interviews, making sense of how homelessness _happens_ had been an important part of managing the burdens of tenuousness. Young people demonstrated a complex and varied understanding of the factors that had led to couch surfing for them. This influenced how they coped with, reflected upon and processed their experiences. As I have highlighted, many accounts indicated an adherence to an individualistic value system (that is, the primacy of personal choice and responsibility in biographies of homelessness) and involved feelings of self-blame. This was demonstrated in Renee's reflections for instance:

_Well, if I hadn't...done the runner [run away from home] in the first place when I was so young, I wouldn't have got involved with the 'not so nice people' and I wouldn't have fucked up YEARS!...It was my choice to begin with, to go. But then when I hit fifteen, it wasn't. So, if I didn't start it in the first place, would I have ended up like I am now?_

On the other hand, many of the reflections young people gave also pointed to alternative understandings. Some of the young people I interviewed deeply protested popular assumptions about choice in explanations of homelessness and disadvantage. This included, for example, coming up against the notion that couch surfing was a matter of choice, or that homelessness, unemployment and dropping out could be _fixed_ simply by _trying harder_. Their experiences had shown them that this was simply not the case. As Yvette put it:
Yvette: And I'm sure that's the case with everyone; I'm sure people don't just wake up in the morning and go, oh: "I've just decided I'm gonna live on the streets!" There's always something to contribute.

For some, dealing with their own experiences of intense marginalisation had given them a different, "wider view" and understanding of structural disadvantage more generally. By merit of having personally encountered significant barriers and losses in their lives, many expressed how their experiences of couch surfing and homelessness had "opened their eyes" to the role of social forces (in contributing for example to unemployment; not being able to afford housing or having to drop out of school). In particular, participants gave space to these kinds of reflections when the interviews turned to a more general, "philosophical" questioning of homelessness and "how it happens". This was reflected in Lucas' comments on how homelessness produces disadvantage by placing people "at the bottom":

Lucas: It [becoming homeless] was just, you end up in the bottom of society. You end up having to live in the poorest places...You just end up at the bottom. And, there are problems at the bottom.

Some interviewees reflected that in emerging from dislocation, their life experiences had led them to question uninformed judgements; not only about what caused young people to be in similar situations to themselves, but also assumptions and community attitudes about poverty and disadvantage more generally. This was apparent, for instance, in both Travis and Mike’s reflections on how couch surfing had changed their perspective on people:
**Travis:** I've seen a lot of different type of people, of very different backgrounds and with couch surfing, I've asked them why they've been there, you know... It's made me a lot more open-minded to people who are, you know, what gets them into this situation, like why [young people on the streets] aren’t at home with their parents. And why they aren’t going to school. Why they aren’t working, you know. Why are they doing what they’re doing... There’s a lot of young people that run away from home and abusive families and that sort of thing and you can see ‘em around the street and you don’t know their background, you know what I mean? People can say “get a job!” or “go to school!” or something like that but you don’t know them. You don’t know where they’ve come from until you’ve spoken to ‘em.

***

**Mike:** The lifestyle of couch surfing has definitely changed – I wouldn’t call it my 'personality' – but it's made me more easy to accept every walk of life...couch surfing’s definitely made an impact on my life, but it's also more than anything made an impact on how I treat other people, and how I try to connect with other people? I always try to go for the common ground. Always try to go for, you know, what’s going on in their life; listen to what they’ve got to say, ask the right questions, don't ask the wrong questions, you know, don’t go into too much...
These narratives highlight the complex cognitive and emotional processes through which interviewees had made personal sense of a marginalised *habitus*. This is part of what Farrugia (2010) suggests is a need to place oneself outside the burdens of “feeling homeless”. For some then, (re)negotiating the emotional landscape of dislocation was also a process of actively distinguishing and protecting one’s identity from the *experience* or *living situations* of dislocation. That is, of not participating in the popular attribution of homelessness as a stigmatised subjectivity with little symbolic capital (Emirbayer & Williams 2005; Farrugia 2010). For some, this involved cultivating a *devil-may-care* attitude (an attitude which may, or may not, have been a process of deep acting) (Hochschild 1998). As Mark and Jonathan put it:

**PM:** You were saying that you do feel happy, in spite of whatever else happens in your life; what are your perspectives on how couch surfing, if at all, has had an effect on your life or your sense of who you are?

**Mark:** It’s never really had an effect on, in regards to who I am, it’s more had an effect on the people around me, ‘cause they realise how driven I am, how shit my circumstances can be, and how little I give a fuck about what goes on around me...

* * *

**Jonathan:** Myself, I think that it [couch surfing] just happened and it’s something that I went through. It’s an experience? But I think it’s just something that I’ve been through and I’ve gotten over it you know? I don’t do that [couch surfing] anymore, so it’s helped me a lot when I was on the streets. When I was, you know, going through it, but yeah.
In some accounts, young people’s (re)negotiation of identity involved working up a positive reversal of what it means to be homeless or to couch surf. On the one hand, this reinscribed a homeless subjectivity but at the same time, these young people actively defined and reclaimed this identity ‘on their own terms’. Rather than conflating homelessness with personal failure, these interviewees emphasised virtues. In doing so for example, these young people highlighted the character strengths they felt they had developed out of situations of adversity. This was particularly important in retrospective accounts, as Travis’ reflections demonstrate:

Basically it's [couch surfing] made me who I am today, doing this sort of stuff. It’s made me a lot stronger, a lot more streetwise and my judge of character wouldn't be as good either, you know what I mean?

As I have highlighted throughout this chapter, the capacity for negotiating a burdensome emotional landscape (especially in ways that are helpful) is not equally available to every young person occupying a marginalised habitus. It is especially attenuated by the processes of dislocation at work in experiences like couch surfing. For young people like Travis for example, ‘coming to terms’ with marginalisation in the ways his account above suggests, was something that happened gradually, and only as he had gone on to place himself beyond experiences of couch surfing and homelessness.
Conclusion

Managing the everyday relational aspects of couch surfing is a major part of young people’s experiences, involving deeply embodied and often emotionally burdensome practices. These burdens, I argue, played a significant role in perpetuating young people’s dislocation, both within and beyond the guest household. In participants’ narratives, it became apparent that negotiating the expectations, geographies, rules and pitfalls of couch surfing households involved intensive and, all too often, prohibitive emotional effort. The process of living this constraining guest habitus was profoundly burdensome for most of the young people I spoke with, as they contended with their own needs for autonomy, space and belonging.

As accounts demonstrate, the burdens of occupying a guest status carry significant implications for how young people (re)negotiate social citizenship, and navigate a sense of home. The nature of couch surfing relationships ultimately has direct bearing on the kind of tenure young people are entitled to in any place; the kinds of living spaces they are given; and the degree of freedom they have to occupy space in the household; participate, and have a sense of belonging and personal ownership of space. Because young people who couch surf do not tend to hold a stake in the membership and living of the households, they lack the claims to tenure that paying rent or board might entitle them to. The constant and unpredictable movement this generates (the lack of a fixed address to receive Centrelink assistance for example, and to realistically search for jobs and return to education) tends to entrench barriers to housing and job security that young people who couch surf have already been attempting to deal with in their lives (Urquhart 2002). The more tenuous a
guest relationship within couch surfing, the more young people need to find ways, often restrictive and burdensome, to manage these relationships.

In another sense, the impact of having to constantly navigate a tenuous hospitality exacerbates experiences of disadvantage, by making it more difficult to deal with the broader structural barriers which marginalised young people contend with both within and beyond couch surfing. As Robinson (2002c: 102-105) reminds us, the complex stories of displacement underlying youth homelessness can have the effect of burdening young people with poorly addressed and unacknowledged grief and anxiety, which makes it more difficult to cope with everyday life and find ways of navigating away from precariousness. That being said however, young people are also active agents, involved in ongoing practices for building resilience and autonomy. In the process of navigating through their difficult status as household guests, young people’s resistant practices also indicate important capacities for inscribing identity and belonging in spite of constraints. These personal capacities for resilience, independence and empowerment demand to be given more space and attention in social policy and service provision. This extends most importantly to young people’s capacity for developing transformative ways of being and relating; because of, and in spite of, experiences of marginalisation and dislocation.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Being at home: Implications for the homelessness field

There is always a danger, with research and analysis that focuses on the homeless or other disadvantaged groups, that our work can be seen to contribute to a right wing agenda where the vulnerable are held responsible for their circumstances. We can't hold young people 'responsible' for their homelessness, nor can we attempt to wash our hands of the problems of youth homelessness by assigning guilt to their parents – many of whom are confronted by multiple other dimensions of disadvantage. Homelessness remains a problem of, and for, society as a whole and all of us should accept responsibility for finding solutions (Beer 2005a: 28).

Through this thesis, I have sought to uncover the complex social processes and personal resources through which young people contend with homelessness and dislocation. In doing so, I have also highlighted why it is important to understand young people's social and embodied navigation of marginality, and its effects. I have taken such an approach bearing in mind that, like all research, this body of work is positioned within a contentious field, with important political effects. In the process of needing or preferring to turn to whatever limited 'informal' supports are open to them in their own familiar local territories, the insights of those interviewed in this research have, in many respects, clearly mapped out some key issues for policy change and future research. These accounts signal where gaps are occurring in young people's experiences of seeking assistance, and what barriers these young people have encountered in the process of (re)negotiating belonging, autonomy and at-homeness. It is to these points that I turn now, to map out some important implications.
flowing from this research. In discussing these implications however, I must also reiterate my methodological position on ‘generalisability’ and the small scale, nuanced nature of the empirical findings of this research. In this sense, the implications of young people’s accounts in this research must be taken in context: as both an indicative case study of a poorly understood phenomenon, and the basis for critical commentary that raises, I argue, important questions for future research and policy.

**Couch surfing is not a stopgap: Re-thinking the bureaucratic field**

As young people’s accounts in this thesis have suggested, the practice of seeking informal shelter is an arduous and risky one; a way of negotiating home that challenges our understanding of homelessness. Couch surfing involves having to navigate an uncertain relationship of hospitality, with households that may be ill equipped to provide adequate housing and support in anything other than short-term stays. Young people in these situations often seek shelter with friends’ families in local areas, in households where limited resources and understanding of young people’s situations makes for precarious and uncertain living arrangements (Uhr 2004). These are circumstances where there is often little or no access to safe, secure and appropriate tenure beyond the limits of hospitality and goodwill offered by any given household. In these situations, duties of care and rights to tenure are constantly under pressure (and unsupported by formal agreements such as the payment of board or rent or caregiver responsibilities). The lack of financial means by which young people can ‘pay their way’, as well as the important emotional impacts of dislocation, further entrenches the precariousness of these arrangements.

While the perilous nature of living a guest status is readily apparent in terms of safety and security of tenure, this research has also indicated that young people who couch surf are
equally marginalised from a sense of personal, ontological security. This includes a lack of privacy, belonging, freedom of movement and the ability to feel at home. All of the young people I interviewed spoke of constantly feeling as though they were imposing upon households or at-risk of “ever-staying their welcome”, and could as a result be asked to leave at any time unless they minimised their impact and presence. Because of factors such as these, those who find themselves unwittingly couch surfing are effectively locked in a struggle to maintain a knife’s edge minimum of shelter and social support. Living in place but out of place at the same time, “without secure housing elsewhere” (Uhr 2004: 5), young people who couch surf out of necessity are rendered homeless and marginalised guests. Given this context, it is inappropriate for couch surfing to be relegated to a stopgap housing arrangement, or an acceptable proxy for emergency accommodation until or unless a young person’s situation “worsens”. As one of the youth workers defined it:

**Paul (youth worker): In my experience most places treat [street] homelessness with more of a priority as it is required right now as opposed to couch surfing where again sometimes having a client couch surf is a good Band-Aid...Assuming the environment is safe and not inappropriate for the individual, I respond to couch surfing essentially the same as I do with homelessness; just with a little less priority, depending on what other situations I need to prioritise at the same time...**

In this sense, one of the most important issues raised by this research is the question of what can be done to better provide support at the community level to young people, outside the so-called “family home” or in the absence of other significant relationships that might...
secure tenure. Coupled with structural barriers to gaining housing, employment and social inclusion, young people who end up couch surfing have found it prohibitively difficult to access safe, comfortable and appropriate formal avenues for help or assistance (and particularly in the first months of being evicted from or leaving a caregiver home or secure housing). In addition to a lack of funding or resources to respond to the particular concerns of young people experiencing couch surfing, there are also significant pressures on existing services and resources in specialist homelessness services generally. This is particularly the case in Adelaide, where the pressures of managing emergency accommodation and other housing referral systems are concentrated in a small number of non-profit community services groups, in a context of limited funding and resources (Malaycha 2005).

Organisations such as the Service to Youth Council (SYC) which operates as one of the primary youth housing referral agencies in South Australia (and particularly Adelaide) (Malaycha 2005), are limited by the overall number of ‘beds’ and funding provided under Federal and State government schemes. This includes, in particular, the limits of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) and its current incarnation as Specialist Homelessness Services. Again, these issues were also raised by youth workers. In his discussion with me, Paul for example highlighted how many of the funding and access barriers are endemic to the system in South Australia:

[I] recently attended a planning day to essentially focus on what we are doing, what we can do, how we do it, and how would we like to do it in the future...The biggest issue we discussed (not surprisingly) is Supported Emergency Accommodation...I believe [services such as] SYC are under-
resourced like many outreach and community services. [A lot of small
services in Adelaide]... also do a good job, but I believe they and ninety per
cent of all youth related services rely on SYC for emergency
accommodation referrals.

Moreover, the kinds of ‘shuttling’ between disconnected service providers that I
highlighted in Chapter Four (and the weariness and confusion it creates for young people
already dealing with significant life stresses) attenuates the capacities of services to
appropriately address the complexities of young people’s situations (Doidge 1997). Indeed,
as I have established in this thesis, despite there being a broadening of the ‘types’ of living
situations considered to ‘be’ homelessness in Australian policy and research (MacKenzie &
Chamberlain 2003a), there remains a prioritisation of services and funding towards the
literal lack of a roof (Chamberlain & Johnson 2001; Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008;
Robinson 2002b). The implications of this are especially apparent for young people and
women. These are people whose experiences of homelessness do not easily fit with a
narrow model of a chronic or sudden lack of physical shelter, but rather take place across
many forms of unsafe, insecure and inadequate housing which constitute homelessness
―under a roof” (Crinall 1995; Del Casino Jr. and Jocoy 2008; Watson & Austerberry 1986).
These formal systems are either not immediately accessible or, through negative experiences, are even less desirable as an option for many young people negotiating dislocation differently. As youth workers in the focus group highlighted:

**Penny:**...*in terms of the number of young people that are homeless in South Australia, and the number that we see, there's a huge difference, I think.*

**Linda:** Yeah, there's lots more that don't come, compared to what we see.

In young people's accounts in this research, these kinds of barriers to accessing mainstream and specialist services were central reasons for turning to alternative sources of support in the first instance. Being able to access appropriate services early on, particularly before situations worsened or the process of (re)negotiating home became more onerous, was highlighted frequently in the interviews as a major issue. As Travis reflected:

**Well, if I was to do it now; if I did it all over again, I'd probably do it a lot different. Like, by trying to find the services while I'm in that position to, rather than after[wards] – when you've got nothing left and you're on the streets, and then you've gotta try and find those services.**

Among young people who have experienced the trauma of dislocation, these systemic barriers may also play a role in perpetuating, over the longer term, what Robinson (2004a) describes as “iterative homelessness”, which fragmented policy and service frameworks are failing to appropriately address (Robinson 2004a: 1). As Robinson (2004a) contends,
people who have experienced dislocation not only deserve services that are more responsive to addressing the complexities underlying their situations, but also call for a more unified 'whole-of-government' policy front which:

...is needed to develop a linked system of accommodation, support, and mental health care with the capacity to form ongoing, case-based relationships with clients, and to respond to the destructive experiences layered under presenting disadvantage and distress (Robinson 2004a: 3).

Research into rural youth homelessness bears instructive parallels with couch surfing, as young people in rural and regional locales often do not have access to services and formal systems of assistance in their local areas (Beer & Randolph 2006; Oakley 2005; Uhr 2004). Similar to young people who couch surf, in rural and regional settings it is strong, local social networks of friends and extended family, as well as schools and community-based organisations that can potentially serve as vital sources of information, guidance and referral to appropriate services. Given the impact of social and institutional barriers to gaining help, these local networks may also play a role in drawing attention to gaps in existing services and programs (Beer, Delfabbro, Oakley, Verity, Natalier, Packer & Bass 2005; Packer 2005).
In thinking, for example, about the service barriers she had faced in her regional hometown, Renee importantly reflected in her discussions with me:

**PM:** It'd be good to get your opinion on how you think it could be sort of changed in a way, to help people earlier.

**Renee:** A lot more services for younger people I reckon, to be able to see the ones that are gonna be at risk to go into that [couch surfing]. I know there's a lot of youth services in Adelaide, but [we need] a lot more services that are wider-spread...[at the moment] you come here [to services] because you've got nowhere to go...you need something in the middle...At the beginning you've got school counsellors and all that; teachers that kind of pick up on some stuff, but you need something in the middle.

Much of this dovetails with the prevention and early intervention issues identified in the Rudd Labor Government’s Homelessness White Paper (FaHCSIA 2008). Amongst a number of key policy areas, the Homelessness White Paper sets out an agenda for better coordination between specialist homelessness programs (such as SAAP), and mainstream human services (including Centrelink, education and employment services and systems, health services, and state/territory housing authorities). This policy document also calls for an expansion of the capacity of formal systems to achieve favourable housing, social inclusion and employment outcomes for people who are experiencing or are ‘at risk’ of homelessness (FaHCSIA 2008). Specific strategies proposed to achieve this centre on improvements to funding models to better anticipate the complexities of homelessness;
legislative reform to services, and an agreed national accreditation and service standard or charter, for a more responsive and skilled human services workforce nationally and at the local level (FaHCSIA 2008). Presumably, this would go some way towards addressing the tendency of current service and funding frameworks – with their emphasis on homelessness as rooflessness – to leave young people with little choice but to (re)negotiate shelter and support through a tenuous hospitality relation.

_A place to be: Social citizenship and home_

To date, policy approaches to addressing homelessness have tended to coalesce around the concern of a bureaucratic field with the structural capacities and interventions of the State. In particular, this includes the role of governments as social landlords, providing or managing affordable and accessible housing; attending to successful housing transitions and sustaining tenancies. Prevailing policy approaches also centre on a concern with improving the responsiveness of services to the needs of people experiencing homelessness, and structural issues such as minimising barriers to accessing a living wage, employment, quality healthcare and education. The Homelessness White Paper (FaHCSIA 2008) clearly sets out a policy framework geared towards each of these aspects of policy and legislative reform.

Certainly, these broad strokes of housing policy are important in governing young people’s access to housing, employment and appropriate assistance in a formal sense. However, it is equally important that homelessness be understood as one expression of a broad ranging process of social exclusion. This is a process rooted in the routine enactment of power relations. In recognising these power relations, it is important to focus on more than the issue of shelter, degrees of deprivation or deviation from normative standards defining
safety and security of housing. As I have highlighted throughout this thesis, the risk of a narrow focus within homelessness research is that it may contribute to a segmented approach, pathologising young people’s experiences as symptoms of an acquired homeless subjectivity. Without addressing the fundamental issue of young people’s social citizenship, access to formal systems of support is at best a kind of ‘Band-Aid‘ solution.

Given that symbolically burdensome (Farrugia 2010) understandings of marginalised young people (as dependent, irresponsible, deviant or ‘at risk’) continue to hold sway in the public and political imagination, the issue of youth citizenship remains a crucial one (Bessant 2001; 2005). As Bessant contends:

…we still have a long way to go in treating young people as citizens and people with the capability to exercise human agency...Dominant social and legal practices exclude many young people from a range of places and practices that most others enjoy. Young people continue to be actively discriminated against on the basis of age in a full range of areas including access to income, and the ability to exercise basic citizenship rights like freedom of movement, speech, etc. (Bessant 2005: 105).

As my discussions with interviewees have highlighted, the capacity to feel at home is a crucial aspect of young people’s social citizenship, and one that is too often overlooked. In a social and economic context where young people generally face barriers to exercising agency and independence, the struggle to attain a sense of home is an aspect young people’s experiences of homelessness that is especially vexed. Aside from having a roof or
a tenancy, many of those I spoke with identified strongly with the need to have home spaces where they could have their own privacy, control, freedom and belonging. As Lucas put it:

> People need the freedom to live, but the problem is that a lot of homeless people, they're not gonna pay the rent...and they're not gonna meet their obligations, because of the problems [affecting them]...What you need is to just have a little place that's yours. There's no places these people can go except sharing or being forced in with other people.

Accounts such as these reaffirm the work of key researchers who have focused upon belonging and the meaning of home in experiences of homelessness, including in particular Robinson (2001; 2002b) in the Australian literature, and April Veness (1993) in the North American context. As both authors suggest through their respective work, belonging is in many ways the (re)negotiation of a meaningful sense of dwelling. This is not only about physical shelter or housing tenure outcomes. It is about social connectedness and positive connections with place and self (Robinson 2001; 2002b; 2005a) that enable a foundation for social citizenship. Having a place to be, as Robinson suggests, is “...about the micro-tactics of belonging – the ways in which we make space meaningful…” (Robinson 2002b: 37).

As I highlighted in earlier chapters, the need to be at home also bears important links with emotional recovery, resilience and therapeutic place (Robinson 2005a). The burdens of a dislocated *habitus* carry long-term implications for social citizenship and ontological security. At present, much of the focus of homelessness research and social policy centres on narratives of family breakdown, and of the structural causes of homelessness. However,
social researchers such as Robinson (2002c: 103-104) remind us that we cannot ignore the significant role of loss and grief in shaping displaced young people’s life chances. This is, in a fundamental sense, a struggle for social inclusion. It is not only about the bricks and mortar of housing provision.

An important point that I have signalled throughout this thesis is a need for further research into the social contexts and spaces that shape young people’s (re)negotiation of survival, and their struggle for belonging and connectedness. One important area of concern in this regard is the political effect of mainstream understandings of home and homelessness, especially in generating practices for housing and managing ‘the homeless’ as a social problem. This includes the impact of surveillance, stigma, safety issues and the lack of choice; issues that cut across young people’s struggles for home and participation in the wider community (Beer & Randolph 2006; Bessant 2003; 2004b; 2005; Brueckner et al. 2010).

The inadequacies and alienating processes shaping many contemporary practices for ‘housing the homeless’ are increasingly coming to the attention of researchers. In the U.S. context, this has been a particular focus in the literature since the early 1990s. Authors such as Veness (1994: 150) have for example critically traced the emergence of newer models of homeless shelters in North America as ‘intentionally designed to be a model of a middle class home for the people they serve…[in which] poor and homeless people are being told how to live’ as model or exemplary home occupiers. The important implication of these norms of the middle class homeowner is that they shape, in one way or another, how young people (re)negotiate home and housing systems, in relation to the symbolic capital it
confers. Adopting favoured, normative styles and aspirations in home occupancy may, for some people living in emergency accommodation for example, confer social and material advantage, in demonstrating one‘s _deservedness_ for priority housing. For others, it is by _bucking the system_ and resisting the symbolic power held by shelter rules that social honour may be afforded (for example, by gaining solidarity among fellow residents or friends) (Emirbayer & Williams 2005).

More recently, Brueckner _et al._ (2010) have critically examined the role of normative housing models and meanings of home in the experiences of young people living in supported accommodation. In their research carried out in Western Australia, Brueckner _et al._ (2010) found that many young people attaining supported accommodation for the first time constructed their transition into longer-term housing in accordance with cultural norms of the autonomous, middle class homeowner. The symbolic capital of _home_, in these young people’s accounts, conferred qualities of independence, control, protection from tenuousness, and entering into a _normal life_. These meanings of home signalled a desired move away from the ontological insecurity of previous negative experiences (Brueckner _et al._ 2010: 8-9). According to the authors, the process of becoming a _normal_ home-occupier also represented a way of establishing identity in a personal space. It meant having a safe and stable place to build and extend upon important relationships, and the opportunity to create a _homely_ environment that positively expressed a new sense of belonging and security (Breuckner _et al._ 2011: 9). In this way, the ideal of home-occupation is held to confer social citizenship, representing young people’s aspiration for social mobility (Somerville 1997; 1998).
In my interviews, I found many similar themes indicating the symbolic capital of owner-occupancy, including the aspects of ontological security this form of tenure was held to embody. When I asked young people to describe their ‘ideal home’ and what such a home would mean for them, the overwhelming impression was the need for a permanence of belonging, safety, freedom, security and ownership. As Travis and Rita similarly capitulated, to be at home was to be a homeowner. In particular, home ownership was seen to safeguard against dispossession or a vulnerability to being ‘pushed out’ financially or socially:

**Travis:** Basically a home, in my eyes, it'd probably be a place that, you know, is yours until you die and even after that, you know what I mean? It's something that you can hand on to kids or whatever, and have kids, but until then it's yours...and no one can take it away from you, sort of thing. You’re not owing anything on it. You can go in there whenever you want and it's yours and no one's going to kick you out sort of thing, at any time, you know, you don’t have to pay rent or whatever you know?

* * *

**Rita:** You just need to be able to have something that you're paying for, that you call your own...My ideal home would be one that was my own. Or at least one like what I had back [at home abroad] which is where I'm – I guess it's I'm the tenant and people come share with me, not the other way 'round.
For some, at-homeness included having a sense of safety, and a space to ‘establish’ not only possessions, but also the intimate expression of identity that this settling of possessions represented. As Renee and Rita reflected, the ideal home is something that is:

**Renee:** Safe...something that I can kind of make my own, with my own little things. ...It's kind of, at the moment it's just [trying to find something] that is a little bit more permanent, other than 'two weeks and you're out!' kind of thing! Yeah, cause once – I'm temporarily in one of the units. Once they move me into the one they want me in to, I've got my own – I went and got a bit of furniture and all that sort of stuff, and I'll be able to make it 'mine'.

* * *

**Rita:** I can get my things out of boxes and when I come home, I don't have to answer to anybody; I can close that door and that's all mine. That is something now that I want so much, that I don't care where I am.

At the heart of these ideas of home as ownership, there was also a sense that being at home would enable autonomy, independence and freedom. For some, the concern was freedom from the intrusions, restrictions and incursions that had defined the vexed process of occupying a guest status, entering formal systems of accommodation, or sharing subsequently with chaotic and overcrowded households. Given the burdensome *habitus* of couch surfing, young people’s emphasis on space was not surprising, including a sense of relief in the idea of ‘spreading out’ into that space (and claiming it).
This was made apparent in Yvette’s account below:

[Home is] just somewhere that I've got only my space and it's all my decisions and it's all up to me. Whereas, in a share house, it's all: who cleans and washes? Your life is just on a roster. And it's just, I want it to be about ‘me’? It sounds really selfish, but it is my life...

For others, the notion of home was linked more closely with a freedom to establish new connections. For example, being at home meant the freedom to establish stronger and supportive relationships, in contrast to previous experiences of isolation or living with people where conflict and tension were endemic. The socially reproductive potential of the home was also identified by some of those I spoke with, as a space for having children and a family of one’s own. At the same time there were other, less normative expectations raised regarding the social potential of the ideal home. This included the opportunity for living harmoniously with a chosen group of friends, as a different kind of ‘family’:

Craig: It'd be a house with friends that I don't fight with. And it'd - it would have my own private, preferably large, room that I could just have some little quiet get-togethers at and stuff like that. And, it would be drug-friendly. So, yeah that's pretty much it. A nice little three bedroom house and a nice area, close to the city, or something.

In highlighting the central role of normative notions of home in how young people negotiate housing beyond homelessness, Brueckner et al. (2010) flag some important
tensions. According to Brueckner et al. (2010), young people in supported and social housing were navigating a semi-institutional context governed in particular by the presence of social workers and structured by bureaucratic practices. In drawing our attention to these issues, Brueckner et al. (2010: 10-12) discuss how being ‘monitored’ and having one’s situation inspected on a regular basis by social workers as part of supported accommodation programs, had the effect of interrupting young interviewees’ sense of being a ‘normal’ home-occupier. To a different degree, similar practices happen with other groups of people whose tenure deviates from the housing norm of owner-occupation. For example, in the practice of regular house inspections for people who rent (Harrison 2007; Kosandiak et al. 2009). In this sense, Brueckner et al. (2010) indicate how cultural and institutional practices toward the ‘formerly’ homeless have the effect of impinging upon young people’s current sense of competence, autonomy and participation in their own communities. These are potentially stigmatising processes that, according to Brueckner et al. (2010), young people struggled to negotiate in the process of finding a home. In many respects, such practices institutionally saddled young people with the burdens of a negative homeless subjectivity (Farrugia 2010).

In much the same way that young people who are couch surfing feel like intruders upon someone else’s at-homeness, the presence of social workers (and social landlords’ imperatives to manage tenancies), might be seen to intrude upon young people’s sense of becoming a ‘normal’ home occupier. This was a point raised in my interview with Lucas below.
Reflecting on the time he spent living in supported and transitional accommodation, he described a state of *difference* and aberrance brought about by conditions of surveillance from social workers:

*And you were never allowed to cross groups. And as I said, the whole homeless system is very hierarchical. And it's like a society; you've got different classes. And it's 'fantastic' if a lower class person...if we went out and got a shitty job... but at the end of the day, there's still these big barriers that you're not allowed to cross. And that's why I 'shouldn't be' where I am now...This is what I mean when I think about homelessness and the way you're treated by people who 'helped' you...Do you know when [for example], you're not allowed to be smarter than your lecturer? You know what I mean? You can be good, but you can never be as good as your lecturer. Same thing. That's the way they treat you. Well that's the thing I found. I could only succeed within very narrow guidelines...*

Certainly, in my own research, young people's interviews have demonstrated a need for greater community support and awareness of the depth and breadth of marginalisation and its impacts upon personal coping capacities, particularly regarding stigma and victim blaming. Accounts such as these indicate that good social policy should be responsive and resistant to the relational and institutional processes that re-inscribe social segregation and self-blame. As Lucas related this to me:

**Lucas:** *And I started thinking that I'm never going to do anything.*
PM: Because of people's attitudes?

Lucas: People's attitudes, plus my own feeling of not belonging. My own feeling of I don't deserve what everyone else has.

PM: What made you feel that?

Lucas: It's just pragmatism. Everyone else had a home, I don't. I must deserve it. There must be something wrong with me.

Tackling these kinds of issues certainly begins with an acknowledgement of the role of social constructions of homelessness in contributing to a negative, stigmatised identity. This includes turning a critical eye upon the contributory role of formal, bureaucratic responses to homelessness that focus on emergency shelter and support, and programs of intervention (in education, jobs training, access to Centrelink income support; housing assistance or family mediation for example). More importantly, as authors such as Brueckner et al. (2011), Robinson (2002b) and Veness (1993; 1994) remind us, it also means questioning what has been normalised as the home, and the finely grained social mechanisms by which the (young) homeless subject is being produced, and rendered marginalised.

This, again, calls upon Robinson’s (2002b: 27) concern that “the distancing from or bracing against young home(less) people by the community (researchers and policy makers included) seems rooted in rigid conceptualisations of home and subjectivity”. Given the tenuous (and potentially alienating) social relationships and practices that pattern the experience of couch surfing, a significant issue to take from young people’s interviews is the need for consistent, caring relationships. This is especially important in terms of the
sources of help that young people draw upon, cutting across experiences of both formal systems and the intimacies of personal and local connections.

**Take a chance on me: The critical role of social relationships**

As existing knowledge in the literature highlights, the ‘job’ of surviving and thriving as a young person calls upon a wide array of resources, and a strong element of social interdependence founded on relationships of trust and care (Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Kurtz *et al.* 2000; Schneider 2000; Wyn & Woodman 2006). This interdependence underpins not only young people’s material and economic capacity, but also extensive emotional and social resources for creating and maintaining places to live and call home, primarily and traditionally gained from familial and close friendship networks (Kurtz *et al.* 2000; Robinson 2005a; Schneider 2000). The central role of caring, trustworthy relationships in the provision of help has been echoed in the findings of other work with marginalised youth. For instance, in exploring the role of formal and informal helpers in the accounts of twelve young people who had been homeless, Kurtz *et al.* emphasise that:

….participants gave much less credit to the benefit of specific treatment programs and services. Caring, stable relationships seemed to be what they were seeking and found most beneficial (Kurtz *et al.* 2000: 399).

Findings such as these reaffirm my relational analysis of couch surfing in this thesis, demonstrating the central place of constancy and strength of supports in the (re)negotiation of home and social citizenship. These relational supports build and strengthen young people’s identities, their capacity for resilience, and skills for living and thriving. These
social resources’ enable young people to have choices, options and opportunities that strengthen their economic capacity in the labour market, formal economy and assist in gaining security of housing tenure, as well as spaces of social and cultural belonging (Bessant 2003; 2005; Uhr 2004; Wyn 2008). This was demonstrated in the narratives of many of the young people I interviewed. As Lucas reflected upon his experiences of dislocation and seeking support:

You need unconditional support and love, and the only people who are going to give you that really are family, and only a few – good family...And you see, the only way for me to get out of that situation was to be given a life back. But no one could really offer me that. And so where do you go from that?

Crucially, a dearth of such supports in young people’s lives represents a significant barrier to gaining an economic and social foothold. All of these barriers ultimately undermine the capacity of young people to participate in and feel included in the broader community. In this way, the processes of marginalisation underlying the emergence of couch surfing also carry wide-ranging and potentially long-term impacts upon young people’s identity and sense of autonomy; safety and belonging; health and wellbeing.

For many of the young people in this research, a crucial factor in (re)negotiating housing, home and social citizenship was connecting with key people who invested time, interest and care over the longer term, whether as friends, ‘second parents’, caring professionals or advocates. For some young interviewees like Jonathan and Craig, overcoming barriers to
the rental market was a matter of finding a community housing group or real estate agent willing to work with them to establish an affordable tenancy; one that they could not only maintain but also begin to feel secure enough to ‘make a home’. For others, (re)negotiating inclusion and material resources involved finding that one youth worker, counsellor, friend, nurse, hairdresser or person on the street who pointed them to a vital service, or a community housing program they had never even known existed; programs that gave them an inroad to tenure by recognising their core needs. As Travis put it:

*People... tell 'em [people experiencing homelessness] to get a job; tell them to do this, tell them to do that...A lot of these people don't need that. They need a place to crash. They need somewhere and someone who can slowly work with them, you know.*

Significantly, the interviews with young people in this research also indicated the powerfully inclusive potential of a cultural capacity for strong household relationships of care and support. As I highlighted in Chapter Five, these households recognised the complexities of young people's situations, possessed the resources to help them feel included and safe on a longer-term basis, and actively supported young people while they re-established themselves or connected with housing programs and financial assistance. These instances of hospitality gave young people access to a degree of tenure security, and more importantly included them within a space of at-homeness that was intimately guided by an ethic of care. This gave value to young people's social and physical place in the household and, more broadly, in the community. These examples of supportive relationships were also distinctive in that they enabled some young people the spatial and
social freedom in which to ‘come to terms’ with or begin to mediate the burdens of dislocation. In this process, some were able to connect positively with a key set of people in their lives, or begin to connect with what they valued for their futures. As I discussed earlier, this was especially important for some young people in helping to overcome formal barriers and discrimination marring their efforts to access housing and employment.

These accounts of supportive hospitality relations are important in another sense. They indicated the possibility of particular households that are open to, and equipped for, young people in situations that have left them with nowhere else to go. In some ways, these household relationships were resistant to the kinds of formal, institutional practices for housing the homeless that many young people actively avoid, or bear the burdens of contending with (Breuckner et al. 2011; Farrugia 2010). In this sense, these kinds of supports are distinctive social spaces that, at least in this research, spoke of the potential for establishing belonging, and bridging issues of social citizenship. In one sense then, the relationships that structure couch surfing experiences lay bare the problematic role of a thinned-out hospitality relation. That is, in generating a precarious and marginalised tenure. At the same time however, these few instances of helping relationships indicated the possibility for spaces of at-homeness to evolve within hospitality practices – spaces that do not embody a marginalised habitus.

That being said, it is telling that from young people’s accounts, these important supports were extremely difficult to find. As I discussed in Chapter Five, those few ‘exceptional’ couch surfing households interviewees described had largely been incapable of sustaining strong hospitality relations in the longer term. In some cases, as I have pointed out, this was
mostly due to practical concerns or other factors, such as a declining financial capacity within the household, or because of the intercession of formal services and support that subsequently became available. In other instances however, these relationships collapsed due to shifting expectations about young people’s place in the household. Ultimately, the existence of these supportive household relationships – including their apparent rarity, their fragility and their possibilities – flags an important aspect of young people’s negotiation of homelessness that merits further research. As I highlighted in Chapter Five, it would also be interesting to explore whether there are significant differences in young men and women’s engagement with relationships of hospitality, and how this shapes the tenuousness bound up in couch surfing.

**Conclusion**

Couch surfing out of necessity is an important indicator of the kinds of barriers dislocated young people face in negotiating home, and struggling for social citizenship. Their experiences also, importantly, unsettle understandings of what it _means_ to be homeless. Ultimately, one of the major implications raised by this research is the need for better responsiveness to the needs of those young people who have found themselves outside the family or caregiver home at a crucial point in their lives, and thus find it difficult to access adequate housing, maintain employment or continue at school.

In the accounts of all of the young people I spoke with, the tenuous nature of social relationships took up a central place in struggles to get a foothold. Bearing these issues in mind, future research would be well placed to explore the specific ways in which social relationships and networks of support mediate young people’s wellbeing, their sense of ontological security, and their negotiation of social citizenship. Moreover, the themes that
have emerged from the interviews certainly highlight a need for more research that explores capacities for alternative spaces (social, physical, cultural, economic) and households. That is, spaces of inclusion and support that can (or do) have a transformative potential in young people’s lives.
CONCLUSION

At times home is nowhere…Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations…[A] place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference (hooks 1991: 148).

Since beginning my research with young people in 2008, I have examined the practice of drawing upon “informal networks (friends, family, family of friends or their community)” for accommodation and support (Uhr 2004:6-7), as a process of contending with social exclusion and displacement. These practices fundamentally unsettle understandings of what it “means” to be homeless. For those who took part in this research, couch surfing emerged from an embodied and relational practice of (re)negotiation. This was not only about seeking shelter. More importantly, young people’s accounts indicated a search for fundamental social relationships that had been lost, and a grasping for ontological, as much as housing, security. In tracing this struggle, I have also mapped how, through the interviews, couch surfing accounts pointed to the central place of a thinned-out and fragile hospitality relation. This is an inherently tenuous patterning of social relationships, which in young people’s accounts compelled their movement from one temporary living arrangement to another, and produced an ongoing process of dislocation. Through this, I have indicated the social processes by which young people who couch surf are rendered marginal household guests.

An important part of this thesis has been to make sense of how young people navigate these tenuous relationships, the guest status they generate, and the impact of living a marginalised habitus. As the accounts in this research have indicated, barriers to appropriate housing and
formal systems of assistance are only part of the broader process that leaves young people having nowhere else to go. Struggling to maintain a precarious foothold within living arrangements that are constantly on the verge of collapse, young people’s accounts have demonstrated the complex embodiment of a marginal social positioning. This is, as I have argued, a perilous guest status that intimately shapes identities, opportunities and relationships. By bringing our attention to the impacts of a marginalised guest status, I have also established how young people who couch surf navigate ‘through’ multiple processes of social exclusion. Not only do they face barriers to engaging with formal institutions and systems, but they are also marginalised from a sense of at-homeness within the households they turn to, and must contend with the socially constructed burdens of a potentially ‘spoiled’ homeless subjectivity. These are processes that produce and pattern experiences of homelessness more generally, as well as processes that shape the specific relational context of the couch surfing household.

In focusing on the social and embodied processes at play in young people’s accounts, I have suggested that experiences of couch surfing unsettle entrenched ideas of who and what constitutes the (young) homeless subject. As I established in Chapter One, this thesis maps the practice of couch surfing and the accounts of young people through a grounded, interpretivist framework. By tracing how the phenomenon of couch surfing calls into question certain prevailing understandings of homelessness, I have also sought in this research to add to a social constructionist perspective on the social processes and embodied effects of dislocation in the lives of young Australians. I have taken this perspective with the aim of critically challenging what is being said about youth homelessness in social research and policy.
Through my analysis of the literature in Chapter Two, I traced the conceptual, political and social positioning of young people’s experiences of couch surfing through the homelessness field, and the impact of a narrowed chronic homeless subjectivity shaping contemporary social policy. These are political and social constructions of the phenomenon that I have argued obfuscate an understanding of how young people themselves encounter and struggle with dislocation. As I indicated in this chapter, youth homelessness has only gradually become an issue of political import in the Australian context since the late 1980s, with the watershed Burdekin Report (HREOC 1989) bringing the pre-existing realities of youth homelessness to the policy forefront.

In this sense, it is not at all surprising that the driving agenda of much research concerning homelessness has centred on identifying its extent, causes and trajectory (or ‘career’). This of course, has been driven by an eye for generating the kinds of categorisations that might bring homelessness within the ambit of the bureaucratic field (Bourdieu et al. 1994), as a social and economic issue for policymakers and, perhaps cynically, government funding bodies that steer certain research priorities. In order to better map out appropriate policy responses and set targets, researchers have thus often remained pre-occupied with the task of categorising risk factors and gaining a statistical and ‘macro’ picture of the patterning and pathways involved in experiences of homelessness. They have done so with the aim of identifying the different living situations that homelessness might constitute, and the degree of need and chronicity these situations imply.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, the kinds of typologies that are produced through such research carry important implications for how young people experiencing
dislocation are socially constructed, and placed within the bureaucratic and welfare fields (Del Casino Jr. & Jocoy 2008; Emirbayer & Williams 2005; Robinson 2002b). In this sense, the research imperative to generate categories and defined pathways – whether inadvertently or strategically – can, within the policy context of the bureaucratic field, lend itself to the construction of rigid boundaries around who is and is not considered a typically „deserving“ subject of social welfare, and at which points particular interventions should be targeted. The concern here is that, in the push to produce research in which homelessness is categorised as a kind of identity („the homeless person“), a stage-like progression, or a set of living conditions, there remains somewhat less capacity for understanding the social, embodied ways in which young people manage, contend with, and are affected by marginalisation. In making this claim, I have sought to demonstrate how couch surfing as a phenomenon interrupts some of the distinct understandings of youth, and categories of homelessness, that presently shape how youth homelessness is constructed as a social and policy issue. Moreover, by focusing upon the social processes at work in couch surfing, my central aim has been to establish the importance of going beyond issues of rooflessness and rootlessness (Somerville 1992) in making sense of how young people experience homelessness.

As I outlined in Chapter Three, I have analysed the empirical findings of this research from a grounded perspective, taking as my „starting point“ the meanings that young people have made of their own experiences. As such, this thesis has centred on the findings presented from fourteen unstructured and semi-structured interviews that I carried out with young people, and a focus group I conducted with youth workers. Of course, this number accounts for a very small „sample“ of those who couch surf in situations of disadvantage in Australia,
which limits to some extent the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, what young people’s and social workers’ accounts in this research do provide is a nuanced qualitative insight, which opens a crucial dialogue with social theory and the existing body of knowledge. In conceptually mapping the ‘journey’ through couch surfing, I have also drawn upon a multifaceted theoretical lens, generated from and grounded in the empirical process. This has enabled me to inductively incorporate and extend social theory from the experiences and insights that young interviewees shared with me.

To this end, I have drawn throughout this thesis upon the concepts of ‘practical sense’, *habitus* and field as developed through the work of Bourdieu (1990), as a way of conceptualising the social power relationships and embodied impacts that attended young people’s accounts of couch surfing, and the experience of a marginalised social status. Through this thesis, I have also engaged theoretically with the works of Jacques Derrida (in Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000) and Tracy McNulty (2007) (by way of a critical analysis of Immanuel Kant and Derrida) on the vexed, ‘thinned-out’ nature of the contemporary hospitality relation. By doing so, I have mapped out how commoditised relationships of hospitality contribute to the development of a tenuous, precarious guest status in the households with whom young people informally seek shelter and support. In examining how young people make sense of and manage the social and personal impacts of marginalisation, I have also drawn upon Erving Goffman’s (1968) work on impression management, stigma and the dramaturgical underpinnings of social interaction. Tracing the emotional labours of the guest status, I have incorporated Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (1979; 1983; 1998) theories of emotion work, emotional embodiment and the management of feeling rules. In understanding the emotional landscape of marginalisation, I have also
engaged Catherine Robinson’s work on the embodied and spatial dimensions of grief shaping young people’s experiences of homelessness.

Across each of the empirical chapters of this thesis, I have examined distinct aspects of my central ideas about couch surfing, as a process of contending with tenuous social relationships. In Chapter Four, the first of the empirical chapters, I established the contextual underpinnings shaping the journey ‘into’ couch surfing, mapping out how couch surfing might be understood as a common-sense, immediately accessible tactic of survival and (re)connection. In seeking the assistance of people known to them in their own local areas, and in not identifying themselves as homeless, this process of help-seeking was also a way of avoiding exposure to institutions and processes that young people perceived as stigmatising, dangerous or disempowering. Through this, I examined how couch surfing was fundamentally brought about through the loss or absence of key relationships of support at a crucial period in young interviewees’ lives.

I continued on in Chapter Five to map out the role of tenuous relationships of hospitality in propelling young people’s destabilising movement from place to place, producing what I have described as a guest status. In so doing, I conceptually linked young people’s narratives on couch surfing relationships with a socio-historical context, drawing upon an understanding of the contemporary hospitality relation (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000; McNulty 2007). Through Chapter Six, I focused on how young people navigate the constraints of marginalised tenure. Drawing on the interviews, I argued that young people are engaged in a burdensome set of practices produced by and through their negotiation of the guest status. These practices, I argued, entail a set of consistently repeated actions and
behaviours that embody the *habitus* of a marginal guest. Taking up this thread of embodied *habitus* and practical sense, I traced in Chapter Seven the emotional landscape of a burdensome and marginalising guest status. In doing so, I demonstrated how practices for navigating tenuousness are also bound up in young people’s struggles to (re)negotiate their own sense of self, belonging, safety and security. These are vexed and complex struggles, with real and long-lasting implications for young people’s social citizenship and wellbeing.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, young people’s experiences indicate a tenuous position in the household; one that is reinscribed through broader processes of social exclusion. The failure of hospitality is, in this way, a continuation of young (homeless) people’s marginalisation generally. Living under a roof but remaining out of place at the same time, “without secure housing elsewhere” (Uhr 2004: 5), young people who couch surf are cut off from a sense of home. In this way, the guest status also traces an experience that crosses the threshold of popular (and political) understandings of what it means to be homeless.

Through this thesis, I have wanted to highlight the crucial role of social relationships, and social practices towards youth, in shaping young people’s sense of at-homeness in the world. Ultimately, occupying a guest status is a form of suffering that deeply affects the life chances of Australian youth. As a phenomenon, it not only unsettles our understandings of youth homelessness. It also raises questions about the state of youth citizenship. These questions deserve not just to be heard, but more importantly, to be met with new ways of thinking about youth, and about the lived impact of dislocation.
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APPENDIX

Information Sheet (Interviews)

My name is Pauline McLoughlin. For my PhD study on couch surfing, I am running a set of one-on-one interviews. The idea behind the interviews is to share your experiences of couch surfing in open, free discussion.

Couch surfing is a very common experience for young people who have faced housing hassles. Still, not much is known about what couch surfing is like for those who have experienced it.

I am interested in hearing your accounts of how you came to couch surf, and what couch surfing was like for you. I will also be inviting you to express your thoughts on what your ideal home would be and what ‘home’ means to you. The interview session will take about one hour. You will be chatting one-on-one with me.

The interview session will be audiotaped. If you request, you can read the transcript of the taped session. The transcript will only be used for the study. All identifying information will be kept in a locked cupboard and later shredded into small pieces so no one can read or use it in any way. Only myself (the researcher) will have access to the transcripts and tapes. Information gained during the study may be published. You can choose either to remain anonymous (your name will be changed), or to use your first name in the study.
You are **free to contribute as much or as little as you want** to the interview session.

You can withdraw from the study at any stage.

You will be reimbursed for your involvement in the interview with a $10 gift voucher from Coles/Myer.

The University of Adelaide **Ethics Committee has approved this research**.

If you have **any questions** or wish to raise a **concern or complaint** about the study, please have a look at the attached **Contacts and Complaints Form**. I can provide a detailed fact sheet if you need more information on the study.
**Information Sheet (Service Providers)**

For my PhD research at the University of Adelaide, I am looking to find out about young people's experiences of 'couch surfing', home, belonging and identity.

**What is ‘couch surfing’?**

The hallmark of couch surfing is relying on informal social networks for shelter and support, and the frequent movement from one person's place to another (for example, with friends, the family of friends, or with their own family). Young people who couch surf out of necessity do so because they have come across difficulties in accessing safe, secure and more permanent housing. There are many things which contribute to young people having to rely on their friends, extended family or even strangers for temporary housing. This is one of the reasons I am interested in hearing young people’s own accounts of couch surfing.

**Why is this study important?**

Couch surfing is one of the most common ways young people manage their accommodation if they experience housing difficulties. It can also be an early sign that a young person is at risk of becoming homeless, especially if there are constant barriers to finding more secure housing. Despite this, young people’s experiences of couch surfing tend not to be seen or listened to as much. Couch surfing is very _hidden_, so not a lot is recognised about the role it might play in young people’s lives: for example, in young people's sense of physical and emotional security, identity, and ideas of what _home_ means. That’s why I think this study is important, because it will listen to and communicate young people’s own voices and
perspectives on pathways into and through couch surfing; spaces, relationships and living conditions associated with couch surfing, and what this experience has meant for them.

Who is participating in the study?
All up, I am keen to speak with 15 men and 15 women between the ages of 15 and 25 who have lived from ‘couch to couch’ in insecure living arrangements with friends, family and/or the family of friends, due to difficulties in accessing safe and secure, independent housing. Couch surfers will be recruited on the basis that they are currently experiencing, or have previously experienced, at least one substantive period of couch surfing: that is, a period of housing difficulties in which couch surfing was experienced for a total of at least six weeks.

What will the study involve?
Participating young people will come along for an in-depth, one-on-one interview. These interviews will go for about one hour. They will be a forum for young people to share their perspectives and accounts of how they journeyed into couch surfing, what couch surfing was like for them, and the role (if any) couch surfing has played in their sense of belonging, home and identity. If participants are interested, they will also be given the option of bringing along to the interview session some sketches, photographs and/or maps of places where they feel they belong, and places which capture their ideal ‘home’. Participants will be encouraged to talk about what these images mean to them. At the end of their interview session, I will ask participants if they would be interested in coming along to a small focus group with four other young people in the near future. The focus group sessions will last about one hour and will encourage young people to discuss their shared experiences of
couch surfing in an open, interactive setting. No identifying information will be used in the report for this study, and participants will be given a $10.00 gift voucher for their involvement in the one-on-one interviews.

**How can participants get involved in the study?**

If you have connections with young couch surfers who meet the study’s criteria, you may wish to arrange to discuss the study with them, and/or contact me at the details below with possible expressions of interest. Interested young people will be sent out a more detailed information pack and consent form.

I look forward to working with you.
Information Sheet (Youth Workers’ Focus Group)

For my PhD research at the University of Adelaide, I am looking to find out about young men and women’s experiences of couch surfing.

As well as conducting interviews and focus groups with young couch surfers aged 15 to 25, I am also seeking the professional perspectives of service providers who work with young people encountering housing difficulties. For this purpose, I will be running a short focus group to service providers who would like to take part.

What will the focus group involve?

The focus group will be held at Trace-A-Place on a day that suits. It will be a forum for sharing with colleagues in open, interactive discussion, professional perspectives and knowledge on:

- the concept of ‘couch surfing’;
- young peoples’ pathways into and through couch surfing;
- the current status of policies, services and housing provisions that address couch surfing, and;
- ideas on how communities, services and governments might provide new spaces, services and forms of housing which are good options for young people who have couch surfed.

The focus group should not take more than forty minutes of your time. The focus group will be audiotaped. You can request to view the transcript. If you choose to participate, you are free to contribute as much or as little as you want to the focus group. You can opt out at any time.
The University of Adelaide Ethics Committee has approved this research.

If you have any questions or wish to raise a concern or complaint about the study, please have a look at the attached Contacts and Complaints Form.
**Interview prompts**

We’re talking about couch surfing, which is where people have had housing difficulties and instead of going straight to crisis accommodation or the ‘streets’, they’ve been relying on their own social networks – like friends, relatives, acquaintances – staying temporarily at their places, often moving from one person’s place to another for a period of time…

**Photo prompts**

What were some of the things in your life that led to couch surfing, do you think?

Do you think you would’ve considered yourself ‘homeless‘ when you were couch surfing? Why/why not?

What was the longest time you reckon you might have couch surfed for?

How long did you tend to stay at any one place?

When you moved on to another place while couch surfing, what were some of the reasons for moving on, do you think?

What peoples‘ places did you tend to stay at when you couch surfed? Friends? Family, others?
Was there anyone you preferred to stay with/anyone that was really hard to stay with? What was it about them and your relationship with them that you liked/found difficult?

I’m interested in knowing what the living conditions were like at a lot of the places where you couch surfed and what being in those places felt like for you:

Did it feel like you had much of a space of your own in the places you stayed at? Like, a bit of freedom or privacy?

What spots in peoples’ houses did you mostly sleep in?

Did you get to choose the places where you slept or kept your things, or were they mostly chosen for you by the people you stayed with?

Did you feel like you needed to make a private spot of your own, or make yourself feel more at home after a while – especially if you were staying at a place for a month or more?

What were some of the ways you reckon you’d make spaces that felt more like your own while couch surfing?

How much out of the average day do you reckon you spent in a lot of the houses you were crashing at? – like, was it coming and going just to sleep there and you’d spend the rest of
the day elsewhere, or were the places you stayed at more open to you being there during the
day for example, just hanging out or doing some of your own things?

Were there some houses, sleeping spots and living spaces you liked more than others?
Spaces and houses that you didn't like? What was it about them that you liked/didn't?

How did people tend to interact with you, talk with you and make you feel while you were
staying with them? Did it tend to vary depending on how long you stayed, and how close
they were in the beginning?

Were there any times or places while couch surfing that you felt really ‘at home‘ or
‘belonged‘? What was it about those places that helped you feel that way?

If you could live in your ideal home, what would it be? What would it look like, or feel
like? (could you sketch a map of it?) What would it mean to you?

I’d really love to hear your own perspectives of how couch surfing might have had an effect
on your sense of who you are, and how you see life – positively, negatively, maybe not at
all. What do you feel couch surfing has meant for you, personally? e.g. Has couch surfing
had any effect, do you think, on your sense of belonging or being a part of things?

I’ve used the words ‘couch surfing‘ to try to capture a little bit of what this experience
could be about, but I’d love to know how you’d describe it. What sort of other words or
sayings do you reckon you’d use to express what couch surfing felt like for you?