Chapter 13.

Embracing Complexity: A framework for *creating from*, *with* and *as* in homelessness contexts

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Abstract

This chapter discusses how participatory and creative methods are effective in generating more inclusive knowledge systems around home and *Homefullness*. We document the use of service design, immersive digital storytelling and Photovoice to understand the emotional, relational, and

non-linear dimensions of homelessness. These methods address the limitations of traditional qualitative approaches in capturing the fragmented and complex experiences of those affected, particularly in relation to feelings of home and social exclusion. Creative methods offer participants greater freedom for self-expression, moving beyond extractive practices and foregrounding personal narratives rather than focusing solely on individuals in crisis. Service providers engaged in co-creative processes have noted the value of these methods for understanding user journeys and the emotional landscapes of support services. We argue that in order to create more *Homefull* cities which shift away from emergency housing as the default solution and towards plural and situated understandings of home–there needs to be more meaningful collaboration with those holding lived and professional expertise.

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Introduction

In this chapter we discuss how using participatory creative research methods such as service design, Photovoice and immersive digital storytelling contributes to richer knowledge systems on home and homelessness. As researchers we have worked across England, including homeless support services and people experiencing homelessness in Leicestershire, a county in the east of England, and with women experiencing homelessness in London. Informed by our three different areas of research practice, we have developed the *Creating From, With and As in Homelessness Contexts Framework* to demonstrate the spectrum of participatory creative methods used, as well as to unpack the different opportunities these methods present within contemporary research on home and homelessness.

In England, 290,000 eligible households contacted their local authorities about the risk of homelessness in 2021-2022 with a 26% rise in visible rough sleeping (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Snapshot figures in 2022 estimated that 1 in 100 households in England were experiencing acute forms of homelessness on any given night (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). These figures demonstrate that issues associated with homelessness are widely experienced by a significant proportion of

the population, with UK homelessness charity Crisis predicting that these figures may double in the next 25 years (Crisis, 2018). Regardless of this increase in numbers, in 2023 the UK government proposed the Criminal Justice Bill, which had it passed would have allowed local authorities and police to criminalise rough sleepers (Criminal Justice Bill, 2023). This proposed bill suggested that, within policy at least, there is a paradigm shift towards blaming individuals for their homelessness, as opposed to systemic causes. This demonstrates what Marquadt (2016) describes as the individualisation of homelessness, which detracts accountability away from government responsibilities to address structural inequalities.

In the UK, research indicates that identifiable structural factors, as well as combinations of preventable individual and social causes, are what lead to experiences of homelessness (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018). The likelihood of experiencing homelessness is heightened for disadvantaged groups, rather than being arbitrarily experienced within a population. These factors, and the prevalence amongst those who are disadvantaged, emphasise the need to support the autonomy and amplify the voices of those who are experiencing and are at risk of experiencing homelessness. Outside of a policy context, homelessness support organisations in the UK have been working with individuals to dismantle the stigma around homelessness through sharing their stories and creating dedicated roles for people with lived experience within their organisations (Album 2022; De Vally 2019). Co-creating homelessness services with experts by experience (Meriluoto 2018) recognises the necessity and value of including those with lived experience in the design of services and policies that directly affect them. However, in particular contexts, co-creation can place a double demand on experts by experience, requiring them to possess both policy-relevant expertise and authenticity, ultimately isolating individuals from both social welfare organisations and their fellow service users (Meriluoto 2018; Allmark 2020). This double demand highlights the emotional dimension of participatory research, and how methods are needed that alleviate this pressure through providing flexibility and choice in different levels of participation.

Through adapting participatory creative methods and using them in different homelessness contexts, the aim is to include multiple and diverse individuals, as opposed to an issue being the sole responsibility of any one individual. The goal of this inclusion is to develop “a living mutual

responsibility, beyond the possibilities of objectification and conceptual descriptions" (Cipolla & Bartholo 2014, p. 99). By 'creating from', 'creating with' and 'creating as' the emphasis is placed on homelessness being a communal responsibility, and inclusion in this context entails engaging not only those with lived experience but additionally local communities, researchers, support services and policy makers. Through our research, we propose that rather than replicating a hierarchy of participation, what is significant is locating more ways of creatively including multiple and diverse individuals in research – reflecting the ethos of *Homefullness* as a collective condition grounded in shared responsibility. This recognises that homelessness is a breach of human rights and our social contract, and that moving towards *Homefullness* requires the active participation of a wide community of individuals.

Overview of the *Creating From, With and As in Homelessness Contexts Framework*

The Creating From, With and As in Homelessness Contexts Framework responds to the limitations of traditional research methods, which may inadequately capture the layered, non-linear experiences of homelessness. While statistical data can outline the scale of the issue, it rarely reveals the emotional and systemic complexities that shape people's realities. Our Framework integrates creative participatory methods – including service design, Photovoice, and immersive digital storytelling – to explore and amplify the tacit knowledge held by both individuals with lived experience and frontline service providers. These methods are not merely novel additions but essential tools for generating multidimensional, person-led and actionable insights.

Central to the Framework are three modes of creative engagement that we applied in our own research practices: 'creating from' (Eszter Hegymegi's research), 'creating with' (Holly Turpin's research), and 'creating as' (Sara Christou's research). These categories represent multifaceted ways of engaging with the knowledge participants hold and while they can be exclusive in their application, they also have the potential to enhance one another within the scope of larger projects and initiatives (see Figure 13.1). For example, outputs 'creating from' participant's knowledge and experience can be used as a resource when 'creating with' or 'creating as'.

Furthermore, the boundaries between these modes are intentionally blurred, reflecting the fluidity of human experiences and the collaborative nature of the processes. Together, these modes form a flexible approach to building richer knowledge systems that can be adapted in a variety of complex contexts.

- **'creating from'** unpacks participants' knowledge and experience to inform primary researcher-led outputs. For example, in Eszter's study, service providers contributed their insights to developing a tool exploring the emotional dimensions of home via interviews and workshops. This tool was refined iteratively, reflecting professional expertise while surfacing previously invisible aspects of their work. This mode is particularly effective when participants may not have the resources or time to engage in deeper co-creation but still want to contribute insights.

- **'creating with'** emphasises collaboration, bringing participants and researchers together to co-create outcomes. In Holly's project, participants actively shaped the research process through storytelling workshops and visual exercises. This mode values shared ownership, ensuring the outcomes reflect a blend of researcher and participant contributions and perspectives.

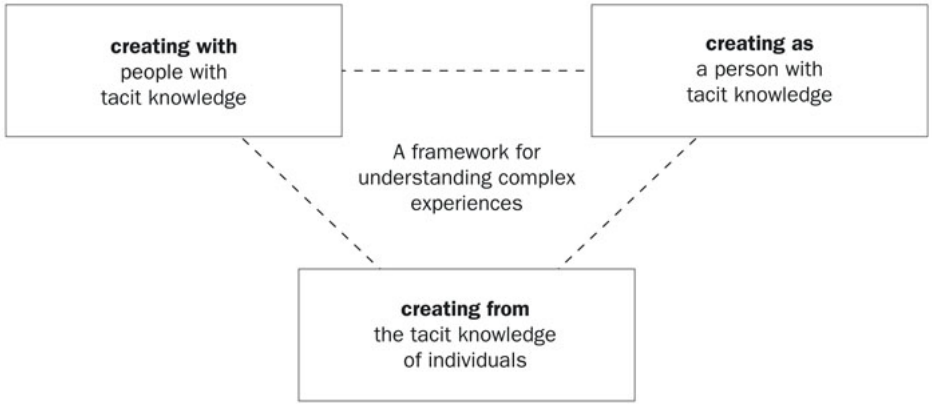
- **'creating as'** places participants in the role of creators, supporting their agency to imaginatively represent their lives. In Sara's research, Photovoice was used to visually interpret the supports and barriers women encountered through photographs they captured of their homelessness experiences . This mode illuminates narratives that might otherwise remain unseen and emphasises participants' choice in how their stories are portrayed.

A key point in our approach is that rather than positioning methods on a scale of perceived value or effectiveness, we emphasise that each method holds equal substance, engaging with different aspects of defining *Homefullness*, and fostering mutual responsibility – where responsibility is not placed solely on the individual seeking support, but is shared among multiple and diverse individuals, including policymakers, service providers, researchers, and others involved. The

three methods can overlap each other without imposing value on the outcomes, which allows a multiplicity of knowledges to become co-present – thus revealing a complexity that is uncovered through creative methods and beyond using traditional, atomistic methods.

This perspective recognises that diverse methods contribute uniquely to the understanding and application of these concepts, making them complementary rather than hierarchical. Whilst interrogating the level of co-creation and agency of participants has its value (Bell & Pahl, 2017; Winton & Rodgers, 2024), our approach acknowledges that varying levels and forms of engagement are necessary to address the multifaceted nature of homelessness and to include as many stakeholders as possible. For example, 'creating from' captures articulated tacit knowledge in structured ways, while 'creating with' and 'creating as' fosters progressively greater participant-led engagement. Each of these methods addresses distinct dimensions of the research, all of which are essential to understanding the conditions for *Homefullness*. Thus, ensuring that creative methodologies are accessible and adaptable to participants' capacities while maintaining the integrity and richness of the research.

These three modes of creative engagement are not isolated but deeply enmeshed, and the insights generated through these approaches reflect this interconnectedness (see Figure 1.1). This was exemplified in the exhibition *Within and Without Home* (Turpin et al., 2024), which presented our research findings through a range of creative multimedia outputs, including photographs, immersive digital stories, and interactive pieces (see Figure 1.2). The exhibition served as a platform to share insights with the wider public, encouraging a nuanced and holistic understanding of *Homefullness* and homelessness, fostering the adoption of complex narratives surrounding these issues.



<Figure 13.1. here>

Figure 13.1. The interconnected *Creating From, With and As in Homelessness Contexts Framework*. These modes engage with tacit knowledge in distinct but complementary ways. Diagram by the authors, 2024.

Creating From

Eszter's research investigates how homelessness services in the UK addresses – or overlooks – the emotional dimensions of home. Central to this was the application of 'creating from' as a methodological approach, in which the researcher designs tools informed by participant input, capturing tacit knowledge through design-led methods. A key phase of this work involved a series of design workshops with frontline homelessness support workers across Leicestershire, UK, to test and refine an early prototype of a tool designed to explore the concept of the sense of home.

The prototype consisted of a deck of 15 cards, each representing an element of the sense of home, for example; presence of friends and family, habits and routines connected to objects or hometown. These cards were paired with a scale wheel for participants to select their prioritisations of the elements of an emotional home, as shown in Figure 1.2. The tool was presented in an early prototype state to encourage feedback and modification, which is a well-established practice in design thinking (Katsumata Shah et al., 2023). Participants were invited to engage with the tool and share their thoughts, both in verbal and written format. Participants were also encouraged to make changes to the prototype by adding examples to the existing cards or creating new cards if they felt a category was missing.



<Figure 13.2 here>

Figure 13.2. The prototype of the developed tool used during a workshop session, including the deck of 15 cards representing elements of the sense of home paired with a prioritisation scale wheel. Photography by the authors.

This process facilitated rich discussions about the role of the sense of home in homelessness support settings. Participants acknowledged its significance, recognising that understanding a client's personal preferences and needs related to home is crucial for achieving sustainable outcomes. For example, they noted that individuals who struggle in their permanent housing because it fails to serve them as a home are less likely to maintain it and are more likely to end up needing homelessness support again. However, the workshops also revealed systemic challenges, such as the lack of mechanisms to capture or act upon clients' preferences within an overstretched housing system.

The tool, and the process of refining the tool, encouraged support workers to reflect on their own sense of home, a dimension rarely explored in research. The cards acted as catalysts for personal storytelling, with participants recounting experiences like adapting to new environments or maintaining or distancing themselves from social networks. These reflections highlighted how, when support workers considered and shared their own sense of at-homeness with the individuals they support, it fostered deeper connections between them. This reinforces research on tacit knowledge, which emphasises that meaningful relationships between care providers and recipients can enhance the quality of care (Reinders, 2010).

'Creating from' offered participants the flexibility to engage with the research process at their own pace. In this study, some organisations participated in multiple stages, while others only attended the workshops. This adaptability acknowledges that participation is not always feasible and not everyone can fully dedicate time and effort to the process. By accommodating varying levels of involvement, the approach ensured meaningful contributions while respecting participants' constraints.

The method worked particularly well where tacit knowledge was well structured, but not formalised. For example, support workers frequently shared techniques and strategies informally, yet these insights were rarely documented. 'Creating from' captured this articulated but implicit knowledge, enabling it to be integrated into broader organisational practices, bridging the gap between implicit expertise and standardised systems.

While outcomes in a ‘creating from’ approach are inherently researcher-led, this can be balanced through structured feedback loops. By embedding participants’ insights at each stage of the process, sharing the development and the outcome with all participants involved, these loops ensured that the resulting tools reflected participants’ expertise and addressed their practical needs. In Eszter’s study, participants reviewed and refined the prototype, fostering a sense of shared ownership despite the facilitator-led nature of the process.

Creating With

Holly’s research aims to develop new ways to understand experiences of homelessness and how these are shaped by place, local community and personal heritage. This work used an immersive digital storytelling methodology to co-create digital stories in 360-degree film with participants who have experiences of homelessness in Loughborough, UK. A digital story is a short multimedia narrative around 2-3 minutes in length. The storyteller uses their voice to tell their own story linked to other people, a place, an interest or any personal aspect , combining voice, image, and sound to create meaning (Benmayor 2008; Normann 2011). In this research, 360-degree film was used as the visual element in the stories, with finished stories shown by viewing 360-degree film through a virtual reality headset. The research’s approach of utilising ‘Empathy’ and ‘Narratology’ was motivated by a desire to challenge meta-narratives of homelessness that measure social obligation towards individuals based on whether they are perceived to be intentionally homeless or not (Bowpitt et al. 2014). Instead, prioritising ‘Empathy’ and ‘Narratology’ allowed the research to move towards engendering communal responsibility through immersion in another’s view of themselves and of their doings, reflections, thoughts and place in the world (Bruner 1991, p. 67).

As well as shaping an individual’s experience, place and locality also impact an individual’s access to homelessness support in the UK. In UK homelessness policy, local connection refers to whether an individual seeking support from a particular council has links within that local area. These links include whether they live or have lived in the area recently, work in the area, have close family living there, get care leavers support in the area, or have lived in asylum support

housing in the area (Rich, 2023). Through co-creating four immersive digital stories, this research explored the ways in which local connections are more nuanced. Immersion in these stories, and the places they are situated in, emphasised the hidden nature of these perspectives and that relationships with place are not linear, existing beyond present day associations.

'Creating with' was enacted in several different ways in Holly's research. The narratives were created through an immersive digital storytelling workshop in which participants took part in several creative exercises. First, they shared their experiences of place through co-creating a map of Loughborough with other workshop participants and facilitators. This exercise helped participants ideate for the 'story circle' activity in which they took it in turns to share and record a short narrative about their memories of Loughborough. Following this, participants individually created storyboards, where they planned the places in Loughborough to be filmed in 360-degrees that would accompany their stories. Participants reported that working creatively increased their confidence in sharing their stories and allowed them to engage with memories and experiences they had not considered in a long time.

After this workshop Holly filmed the participants' locations and edited the stories in virtual reality, using the recorded voiceovers from the workshop. The finished outputs of the immersive digital stories therefore include both the voiceover narration created by the participant, and the 360-degree filmed visuals created by Holly. Through co-creation and creating alongside one another the final stories demonstrated a sense of 'co-presence' – that the viewer is simultaneously experiencing the perspective of the storyteller and that of the researcher inhabiting the different story locations. This suggests that the method of immersive digital storytelling has the potential to demonstrate what is shared in the experience of homelessness, and that 'creating with' has the power to create links between differing perspectives and experiences.

Creating As

Sara's research critiques the layers of hiddenness in women's experiences of homelessness in London, UK. Her work seeks to illuminate the significance of hope in transitioning out of homelessness, as the women interpreted their survival as a reason to be hopeful and looked to the future as living towards *Homefullness*.

Women's homelessness is hidden. Hidden in the sense of them concealing themselves in order to avoid the risks of rough sleeping, as well as hidden by the systems' lack of acknowledgment of their homelessness (Bretherton, 2020). This informed Sara's choice of methods, as Photovoice could bring visibility to women's experiences. In addition, Sara found that the women prefer to participate in activities that produce something physical that belongs to them. Through homelessness, they lost many of their possessions, including photographs, and likely had to leave home suddenly or moved from place to place. Hence, the women appreciated opportunities to create photographs as keepsakes. For these reasons, a visual, creative, participatory research method, with a tangible output was selected. 'Creating as' methods also require identifying and dismantling barriers to participation . Sara situated this in a feminist participatory research (FPR) methodology, adopting an ongoing awareness of the participant-researcher co-creation of knowledge which emphasises care (Burgess-Proctor, 2015).

Developed by Wang & Burris in the early 1990s, Photovoice is a method that can be particularly helpful when the issue of concern is one that is traditionally difficult to discuss (Gervais et al., 2018). Photovoice typically engages marginalised people to deepen both their own and the researcher's understanding of an issue using *photos as a voice*. Fostering core FPR principles, it is autonomous, participant-led, acknowledges a diversity of experiences, and understands that the data collected is contextual (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). In this research, a first set of interviews was conducted with seventeen women, of which seven chose to participate in the Photovoice project, who then captured over 150 photographs. Participants were encouraged to 'create as' collaborators. Through the Photovoice study, a rich set of visual data unfurled layers of the women's hidden experiences.

Photovoice also involves a reflexive process with participants to discuss the meanings in their images. This is the 'voice' part of the method. 'Creating as' supports participants to choose how

to present their tacit knowledge and the meanings they ascribe to their creations. On this point, it is important to note that Photovoice is not about producing what is conventionally viewed as 'good' photography, the images can be blurry, dark, or out-of-focus. The researcher needs to mitigate creative anxiety through assurances to participants that any number of photographs, capturing any image they want, remains a valuable contribution. It is what the participants say about their images that is significant, underlining that they are the creators and emphasising their voices.

In Sara's project, as well as exploring the narratives of each participant, themes emerged that connected across all the women's collective photos. One such recurring theme was nature. For some participants, these images represented growth in difficult environments. They photographed flora pushing through boundaries and connected this to their own survival, which was simultaneously interpreted as depicting hope. For others, green expanses or bodies of water provided places to breathe, reflect, and feel human. These were spaces where the women did not have to hide. Nature as representing hopeful survival and recovery was not mentioned in the first set of interviews but instead was surfaced through their photographs. Hence, methods that 'create as' can uncover experiences beyond the confines of an interview and prompt further insights.

Images can encourage viewers to see an experience from the standpoint of another person, which is why it was important to present the women's photographs at our *Within and Without Home Exhibition* (see Figure 13.3). Nonetheless, no matter how committed a researcher is to dismantling power imbalances, these cannot be entirely eliminated in creative participatory methods, instead, 'creating as' attempts to reduce the extractive nature of the researcher-participant relationship, by shifting power to participants who 'create as' holders of tacit knowledge.



<Figure 13.3 here>

Figure 13.3. Display of a selection of photographs by the women participants from Sara's research. Part of the *Within and Without Home* exhibition at Charnwood Arts Centre in February 2024. Photography by the authors, 2024.

Insights and process of creative methodologies

Creative approaches within this Framework offer distinct contributions, both in the type of insights they generate and in their impact on the research process. By addressing some common limitations in traditional methodologies, these methods can enrich understanding and contribute to the creation of pathways for more inclusive, imaginative, and impactful research.

Insights from creative approaches

One of the strengths of these methods is their ability to reveal aspects of homelessness that traditional research can overlook. While previous studies have frequently relied on questionable or incomplete statistics and focused on individual triggers or causes of homelessness (Anderson & Christian, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Zhao, 2023), they have paid less attention to the lived experience and the social factors that can mitigate its impact. Creative approaches uncover new dimensions of knowledge, allowing us to view homelessness not as a singular crisis of loss but as an experience deeply interconnected with multiple facets of life–past, present, and future. By engaging with these facets, creative methods illuminate the fluctuating nature of homelessness. Individuals often share their experiences in ways that intertwine emotions connected to their past, their current realities as needing empathetic understanding, and cultivating hopeful aspirations for the future. Through this Framework, Eszter's research *creates from emotions*, Holly's *creates with empathy,* and Sara's *creates as hope*. This rich perspective challenges linear narratives and advocates for more inclusive, equitable, and long-term approaches.

Additionally, by viewing homelessness through a multidimensional lens–considering an individual's past, present, and future – we could shift the narrative from homelessness as an individual's responsibility to a shared, mutual responsibility. As previously mentioned, moving away from the individualisation of homelessness and narratives of personal blame can help highlight government accountability for failing to address structural inequalities (Marquardt, 2016). By refocusing homelessness as a systemic issue, our framework fosters a collective understanding and responsibility to make the phenomenon rare, brief and non-recurring.

Impact on the research process

The creative and participatory nature of the Framework can impact the research process itself. It provides opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and service providers to shape the research, which in turn can support them to contribute to the knowledge systems surrounding homelessness. Ultimately, the hope is to influence how homelessness is understood and addressed within local policies and communities.

Participants have highlighted several benefits of engaging with these methods. Seeing their creative work represented and having a tangible output can validate their lived experiences and provide immediate evidence of the impact of their contributions. Additionally, the autonomy and agency these methods offer support participants to choose what and how they share, fostering confidence and a sense of ownership. All three presented methods utilise visual methods, which in particular have proven effective in accessing experiential ideas that are difficult to capture through traditional interviews (McCarthy, 2020). The flexibility of the Framework ensures that diverse perspectives are included without demanding uniform levels of engagement, making the process more inclusive and adaptable. Our Framework moves towards bridging gaps between traditional knowledge systems and lived experience, providing participants with meaningful and autonomous experiences, and fosters a holistic and collective understanding of homelessness.

Conclusion

Dominant frameworks of research on homelessness may lack empathy and inclusivity. Participatory methods that 'create from, with and as' provide opportunities to disrupt the inherent power imbalance of traditional research and its role in either reproducing or reinforcing inequalities. Research can fall into a position of epistemological superiority, with co-creation as the self-appointed problem solver. We propose that hierarchies of knowledge are reductive, and instead of aiming for simplification, creative participatory methods can embrace complexity. Confronting inequity is part of the process of our Framework, driving towards emotion, empathy and hope. In parallel, the outputs are not about the aesthetics of what is created, rather, what matters are the meanings ascribed by the creators.

We believe that moving from the siloed solution of emergency housing towards more *Homefull* cities can only happen when we explore multiple experiences of home and homelessness through collaborating with expertise outside of the academy and the use of creative participatory methods. By combining creativity and collaboration, our Framework not only generates richer insights but also enhances the research process itself. In this sense, it is the unfurling of

experiences through different mediums – 'creating from, with' and as' – that understands the multifaceted approach needed to reveal layers of tacit knowledge on home and homelessness.

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