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To cite this article: Adriana Mihaela Soaita & Kim McKee (2021) Researching Home's Tangible and Intangible Materialities by Photo-Elicitation, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 38:3, 279-299, DOI: [10.1080/14036096.2020.1738543](https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2020.1738543)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2020.1738543>



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Published online: 10 Mar 2020.



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# Researching Home's Tangible and Intangible Materialities by Photo-Elicitation

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on participant-generated photo-elicitation in telephone interviews conducted with private tenants in Britain, we contribute to a new strand of home literature that engages with the vibrant materiality of things. In particular, the paper reflects on how our innovative methodological approach empowered participants to introduce their own points of view through 'thick' descriptions, revealed previously undocumented home practices and enabled researchers' reflexivity and the co-production of knowledge with participants located miles away. The method powerfully captures home's tangible and intangible materialities and their importance to wellbeing in ways that words-alone interviews cannot. We conclude by introducing the metaphor of 'the fold' and the allegory of 'the invisible tether' to reflect on the methodological benefits and substantive findings enabled by our approach. We argue that housing studies can benefit from engaging photo-elicitation in questions spanning from the abstract to the concrete, and from the inside to the outside of the home.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 July 2019  
Accepted 25 February 2020

## KEYWORDS

Home making; private renting sector; photo-elicitation; housing quality; United Kingdom; material culture

## 1. Introduction

Imagine entering a house when nobody is at home; and that you can see but cannot touch, smell or hear; and because this is actually a digital photograph, you can zoom in and notice amazing detail, the wedding pictures on the walls, the titles of the books on the shelves, the flowers outside the door left ajar and the cat about to come in. This photograph creates a "fold" in space, compressing distance, allowing you to step into somebody else's life as expressed in the home's stuff, colours, lights. You get immersed in the photograph, in the fold. But after a time you understand it is a frozen fold because its frame remains stubbornly fixed, you cannot freely explore; you can only look through the frame you were given.

Then you talk over the telephone about the photograph with the research participant who kindly sent it. The participant's words bring to life the things you see in the photograph, they now have history, meaning, context, affect. The frozen fold has become deep, moving water. The ugly is beautiful, the clutter is homeliness or space shortage, minimalism is transiency (or any other way around). Veils are lifted and you start understanding they were not only constituted by the frozen frame of the photograph but also

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by your own subjective frame of reading it. The fold created by photo-elicitation breaks “*the ethnographer’s frame*” (Samuels 2004, 1528) and co-produces a different understanding of home than words-alone interviews (Harper 2002).

The research method described above is called participant-generated (PG) photo-elicitation, however, our technology-empowered, long-distance rather than face-to-face approach is innovating. In this paper we reflect on the ways in which our methodological approach empowered participants to introduce their own points of view through “thick” descriptions, enabled researchers’ reflexivity and co-produced new knowledge with participants located miles away.

The relevance of our paper is three-fold. First, the method of photo-elicitation has rarely touched housing studies despite being progressively popular in anthropological and sociological studies since the late 1950s (Collier 1957). Furthermore, bar our work (McKee, Soaita, and Hoolachan 2019; Soaita and McKee 2019), PG photo-elicitation never seems to have been mobilized in telephone interviewing. Demonstrating its power to traverse the distance between participant and researcher – and the epistemological implications of this – is a key methodological contribution we make. Second, the photo-elicitation element of our enquiry was decisive in observing home’s materialities and revealing undocumented home practices, thereby leading to a new conceptualization of home (Soaita and McKee 2019). It can likewise contribute new knowledge and inspire new conceptualizations to other research questions. More generally, by presenting some substantive insights enabled by the method, the paper adds to a new strand of the home literature that engages with the vibrancy of things (Bennett 2010; DeLanda 2016) and more unsettling practices of constructing a sense of home (Barratt and Green 2017; Brickell 2012; McCarthy 2019; Simone 2016).

As we will argue that photo-elicitation helped move the discussion “*from the abstract to the concrete*” of home (Samuels 2004, 1532), a brief discussion of the nature of the private renting sector (PRS) in the UK is warranted. As in other Anglo-Saxon countries, the UK’s market-based, unregulated PRS commonly offers tenants short and insecure tenancy contracts and reduced control in personalizing the space of their home or requesting repairs (Easthope 2014). Conversely landlords need no grounds for eviction or imposing rent increases while quality standards are minimal and hardly enforced (Martin et al. 2018). Given space constrains, we must assume readers’ familiarity with this context, which frames our findings. Photo-elicitation revealed both the ways in which home’s tangible and intangible materialities are affected by this broader context and the ways in which they affect tenants’ experiences.

The paper proceeds as follow. Section 2 introduces the method of photo-elicitation based on selective contributions in the social sciences. Section 3 details the methodology. The next two empirical sections present insights into what the method can deliver. Section 4 shows how photo-elicitation helped produce “thick” descriptions of “*the tangible and intangible*” (Clark-Ibáñez 2004, 159) aspects of home and thereby enabled researcher reflexivity. Section 5 shows how photo-elicitation uncovered, to our knowledge, previously undocumented practices of home personalization in the UK. Section 6 concludes; we use the metaphor of “the fold” (Deleuze 2006) to frame the benefits of photo-elicitation in telephone interviewing and the allegory of the “invisible tether” to capture the reduced space of tenant agency in home-making.

## 2. Photo-Elicitation

To explore the application of photo-elicitation in academic research, we mapped the field (Soaita, Serin, and Preece 2019) by searching systematically but *not* exhaustively one of the largest bibliographical databases, SCOPUS, and four housing journals for relevant studies. Across the 1,814 SCOPUS returns, we noticed the fast-growing popularity of the method in the last two decades across social sciences and other disciplines while the method's under-representation in housing journals could not be more striking: only 25 articles were found.<sup>1</sup> Surveying another large bibliographical database, Sociological Abstracts, Preto (2015) noted a similar explosion of articles mentioning "photos" in their abstract between 2004 and 2014. Studies combining photo-elicitation with telephone interviewing could not be found.<sup>2</sup>

We focus on a particular strand of this method that is *participant-generated* (PG) photo-elicitation. This method of in-depth interviewing relies on participants talking about photographs they have taken themselves (Guillemin and Drew 2010; Harper 2002; Preto 2015).<sup>3</sup> Other PG visual methods, such as drawing, mapping, box-sanding, video-making, theatre playing are comparatively infrequent (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006; Neumark 2013; Roerig and Evers 2019) whereas elicitation based on photos taken or otherwise sourced by researchers are more common (Guillemin and Drew 2010; Preto 2015).

Photo-elicitation was first mobilized by Collier (1957) in a survey of house conditions. The survey team observed that "*the same house had too often been given different ratings*" because "*the field workers were unconsciously judging houses in respect to their personal backgrounds*" (845). To eschew such personal subjectivities, pictures were used to develop an agreed understanding within the team. Collier (1957) also reported his comparative observations regarding traditional and photo-elicitation interviews, the latter using his own photographs as prompts – we refer to this as researcher-generated (RG) photo-elicitation. He noted that the "*photographic interview got considerably more concrete information*", "*more emphatic expressions*" and "*much more specific information*" (849). Participants were also more relaxed and interested; important to our case, Collier noted that photo-elicitation "*to some extent approximated visiting the plants with them in person*" (849). There seem to be widespread agreement on these direct benefits of photo-elicitation (Coleman, Kearns, and Wiles 2016; Drew, Duncan, and Sawyer 2010; Harper 2002; King, Williams, and Gleeson 2019; Mannay et al. 2018; Roger and Blomgren 2019).

Mapping the field, Harper (2002) argued that photos are not just memory aids but stimulate a different kind of knowing as "*images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words*" (13); and that they are particularly helpful when breaking participants' frame of "*normal view*" (20). The last point was exemplified by his research on farmers when only aerial and historical photos – rather than photos of the current environment – elicited richer data than words-alone interviews. Some scholars (Clark-Ibáñez 2004; Preto 2015) reflected on the *polisemic* nature of photographs that is their multiple, concomitant meanings or their different meanings to different participants/contexts – this being seen as strength if well managed through the research process. The RG photo-elicitation method continues being employed in social sciences in in-depth interviewing (e.g. Buckley 2014; Gill et al. 2015; Nguyen, Horey, and Liamputtong 2019), particularly on sensitive matters (Preto 2015) – but also increasingly in surveys (e.g. Dzidic and Green 2012; Houssemand et al. 2018). Perhaps the most challenging issue in RG

photo-elicitation remains the selection of photos (Rose 2012). PG photo-elicitation not only eschews this problem but turns a possible weakness into strength.

Despite being considered a novel approach (Edmondson, Brennan, and House 2018; Pini et al. 2019), the method of PG photo-elicitation has developed in parallel with its RG counterpart (Dennis et al. 2009), and intensified when cheap, simple point-and-press cameras could be given to participants (Rose 2012). However, researchers should still be aware that some individuals may not be able to produce photographs unassisted for instance because technology is not available (Samuels 2004) or due to physical incapacity (Radley and Taylor 2003).

Scholars highlight several benefits of PG photo-elicitation beside those mentioned in its RG counterpart. First and most importantly, the method gives primacy to participants' own world, providing "*a direct entry into their point of view*", grounding descriptions in their daily experiences (Radley and Taylor 2003, 79; Samuels 2004). Second and relatedly, the method aims at empowering participants to express what is important to them; it aims to co-produce knowledge e.g. by transgressing the limitations of *a priori* designed interview outlines (Mannay et al. 2018). However, Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, 82) argued that the claims of participant empowerment are "*sometimes rather over-ambitious*". Thinking about the process, i.e. picture taking, photo interviewing and analysis/reporting, Preto (2015, 171) observed that the method indeed empowers participants in the first two stages by introducing their *emic* point of view that is participants' views of the world, their "*local/popular notions and concepts shared by his/her culture*". Yet, the interpretation may still reflect the *etic* perspective of the researcher, i.e. "*the constructs, descriptions and analysis formulated according to the conceptual terms established by the scientific community*" (171), raising epistemological questions on knowledge claims.

Third, by taking photos prior to the interview, the method invites participants to contemplate, gives them space to reflect on the topic, which results in deeper data (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006). To give freedom of expression, approaches to instructing participants on the number/theme of photos is generally loose. For instance, Radley and Taylor (2003) required a minimum of 12 photographs, letting the content open to anything related to the "*ward*"; Samuels (2004) suggested 11 and van van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart (2010, 376) five broad themes as "*a modicum of structure while allowing participants to freely choose from a wide range of possibilities*" while Clark-Ibáñez (2004, 1510) simply asked for photographs related to "*the people and the things that are the most important to you*" and Kohon and Carder (2014, 49) to "*the best and most challenges aspects of living in their apartment and neighborhood*".

Following Rose's (2012) call of paying attention to the sites of photo-production, Radley and Taylor (2003, 79) and Guillemin and Drew (2010) argue that "*the act of photographing is a special engagement*" with the world; image production is not neutral, hence researchers should pay attention to what is shown (or hidden) and why, in both the photo and the narrative. This directs us to the rather ambiguous question of what constitutes data in photo-elicitation, the photos or the words. The method undoubtedly privileges the latter (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006). For instance, van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart (2010, 383) noted that "*An ordinary picture of an ordinary-looking trail was able to capture multi-layered meanings attached to a particular place and led to discussion of local politics and community life, both past and present*". However, scholars commonly illustrated their arguments with photos for reasons of validity and impact (Guillemin and

Drew 2010). While the idea of authenticity is critical in RG photo-elicitation, the interpretative and phenomenological perspectives informing PG studies accept it either unconditionally or as one (among others) representation of reality (Crang 1997).

Finally, photo-elicitation helps, in the words of Samuels (2004), bridge the researcher's and the participant's cultural worlds, drawing together the two horizons (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006). We like to emphasize Samuels's (2004) argument that participants' photos helped break his own frame of reference; new, unexpected knowledge was thereby co-produced. For instance, having asked child monks in Sri Lanka to photograph a religious activity, he was surprised to receive many pictures of monks sweeping floors and the yard; participants' explanations helped him revise his assumptions about monastic life by understanding that even mundane activities create a space of intense religious reflection.

The biggest challenge to PG photo-elicitation is the time demand and effort required from participants, including for technical training. Hence, studies tend to be small. Our reading of the literature shows participants may be fewer than 10 (Barratt and Green 2017; Jones 2017; Madsen 2018; Radley and Taylor 2003; Samuels 2004) and commonly between 10 and 20 (Fozdar and Hartley 2014; Heath et al. 2018; McCarthy 2019; Pini et al. 2019). Samples over 20 are rare (Coleman, Kearns, and Wiles 2016; Kohon and Carder 2014; Mullen et al. 2019; van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart 2010).

Finally, PG photo-elicitation raises additional ethical challenges as anonymity may be more difficult to preserve, particularly in photos of public landmarks or self-image; additional issues of informed consent and anonymity pertain to other people that may appear in the photos; copyright may be sometimes problematic. Ethics matters should be fully considered and carefully addressed throughout the research process (Guillemin and Drew 2010; Rose 2012).

### 3. Methodology

We draw on two related projects that involved PG photo-elicitation. The first concerned "younger" private tenants aged 18–35 (thereafter Y-group; 16 semi-structured telephone interviews conducted in February/March 2018) and the second "older" private tenants aged 35–54 (O-group; 17 semi-structured telephone interviews conducted in February/May 2019). Both studies looked for participants living in England and Scotland and not in full-time education. Taken together, the projects aimed to examine the more neglected experiences of both lower-income young tenants (of household income below the national average of £27,500) and those of older tenants. Both projects therefore aimed to address notable gaps in current PRS research and bring the voices of under-represented groups in the literature to the fore.

Participation was sourced via social media (project Twitter and Facebook;  $n = 8$ ) and online platforms (Shelter, Generation Rent, ACORN, Living Rent Scotland<sup>4</sup>;  $n = 25$ ) which displayed our flyer. Given our study's reliance on online recruitment, digital photography and telephone interviewing, concerns about technological exclusion should not be dismissed lightly. For instance, Matthews (2015) notes that in 2010 only 35 percent of households with below £10,000 annual income in Scotland had internet access compared to 97 percent of those over £40,000; and that smartphone usage does not compensate internet exclusion on grounds of cost, coverage and technological familiarity. The poorer,

older, less educated or disabled people and social tenants are more likely to be excluded from digital access (Bunyan and Collins 2013; Schou and Pors 2019; Watling 2011); rural areas are also unable to catch up with cities (Park, Freeman, and Middleton 2019).

Overall, 104 individuals contacted us, of whom 84 were eligible. Given funding constraints, we tried to “balance” across geography, gender and household type and privilege lower income participants and males (who were particularly difficult to recruit). We enrolled 20 participants from England and 13 from Scotland (Table 1). Ethical approval was obtained; all participants gave informed consent and will be referred to by pseudonyms. Identical interview guides and a sole interviewer (the first author) enhanced studies’ comparability.

For most participants, the PRS was very expensive: only 11 participants declared paying rent below 30 percent of household income (while 11 paid between 50 and 90 percent, even when living in shared housing). Participants’ socioeconomic status has clearly framed the experience of home, particularly in terms of housing quality and capacity to personalize the space. Despite their education levels and employment status (Table 1), only 16 participants declared they were doing alright or lived comfortably, which highlights the phenomenon of in-work poverty (Hick and Lanau 2017). While our recruitment strategy allowed for broad geographical representation, it did not reach rural households, who are more likely to suffer digital exclusion (Matthews 2015; Park, Freeman, and Middleton 2019).

All participants declared their ethnicity as white national (British, English, Irish or Scottish) except two Polish and three Asian. Interestingly the last included the two extremes of the income spectrum (£3,600 and £53,000 EHI pa); excluding these extremes, Y-group’s average

**Table 1.** Participants’ profile.

|   |                              | N  |
|---|------------------------------|----|
| Age   | 20 s                         | 12 |
|   | 30 s                         | 8  |
|   | 40 s                         | 10 |
|   | 50 s                         | 3  |
| Gender  | Female                       | 21 |
|   | Male                         | 12 |
| Employment status   | Employed full-time           | 19 |
|   | Employed part-time           | 7  |
|   | “0-hour” or self-employed    | 6  |
|   | Not employed                 | 1  |
| Equivalentised gross household income (EHI, rounded) <sup>a</sup> | £29,000-£53,000              | 3  |
|   | £20,000-£27,000              | 10 |
|   | £13,000-£19,000              | 12 |
|   | £3,600 to £11,000            | 8  |
| Subjective financial situation                                    | Comfortable or doing alright | 16 |
|   | Just about getting by        | 11 |
|   | Finding it (very) difficult  | 6  |
| Sharing arrangements  | Sharing with friends         | 6  |
|   | Sharing with strangers       | 7  |
|   | Not sharing                  | 20 |
| Education levels  | A/GCSE level                 | 7  |
|   | Degree                       | 13 |
|   | Master                       | 11 |
|   | PhD                          | 2  |

<sup>a</sup>EHI is calculated by dividing the household’s total gross income from all sources by household’s equivalent size. The scale attributes a “weight” to all members of the household (1.0 to the first adult; 0.5 to the second and each subsequent person aged 14 and over; and 0.3 to each child aged under 14).

was only slightly *lower* than the O-group's (£18,000 and £18,600 EHI pa). The Y-group consisted of two couples with children, one couple and 13 singles. The O-group comprised eight households with children (of these, three were single mothers), four couples and five singles (of these, two were divorcees). Our sample therefore conveys the diversity of the UK's PRS, enabling us to observe a range of different experiences of renting.

The interview explored four areas: (1) the experience of living in the PRS; (2) housing aspirations; (3) the broader impact of housing on participants' lives; and (4) views on the recent tenancy changes in Scotland. The photos supported the first interview section by exploring participants' current living environment. We asked each participant "Could you now take me through the pictures and tell me what they mean to you?" Interviews lasted on average one hour and were professionally transcribed. The photo-elicitation element covered on average 17 percent of total word-length of transcripts (ranging from 9 to 26 percent). Our approach to interviewing and thematic analysis adopted "*an attentiveness to things*" and practices (Bennett 2010, xiv). For this paper, codes/themes attended to the ways in which photo-elicitation empowered participants, challenged researchers' understanding, and captured home's materialities and practices.

### 3.1. The Photos

All participants were invited to provide "pictures of your home" prior to the interview as a base for discussion. We purposefully did not instruct on number or content so that participants could send us photographs of what was important to them. As 11 participants emailed to ask for instructions, we gave them full discretion by answering: "anything you like/dislike about your home; interior/exterior; rooms/objects; it is really up to you". Three felt reticent, suggesting they need to ask landlord's permission but agreed upon our prompt "we invite you to provide pictures of your home not of your landlord's property". Thirty participants emailed digital pictures (min = 3; average = 8; max = 30) to the first author's secure university account. Of the three who did not, one did not own a phone/photo-camera; one felt reluctant given a recent move into an unfurnished bungalow with new furniture yet to be delivered; and one sent a video.

Half of participants sent the pictures the evening before the interview, a few days ahead and some just minutes before. We received 247 photos, mostly interiors (Table 2). Except for two featuring participant's reflection in the mirror and seven showing pets, all photos represented things. Four participants sent the photos with insightful explanatory notes; and five participants did not consent for their pictures to be published or archived (all Y-group), which suggests that photographic data raise additional ethical considerations. Photos were securely stored on password protected-devices and locked cabinets. For online publications, only print-screens of the original photos are used in order to remove potentially embedded metadata.

**Table 2.** Pictures' content.

|         | Total | Exterior | Rooms: |         |      |         |          |        |
|---------|-------|----------|--------|---------|------|---------|----------|--------|
|         |       |          | Living | Kitchen | Hall | Bedroom | Bathroom | Garage |
| All     | 247   | 32       | 53     | 35      | 24   | 67      | 35       | 1      |
| Y-group | 101   | 13       | 21     | 16      | 10   | 26      | 15       | 0      |
| O-group | 146   | 19       | 32     | 19      | 14   | 41      | 20       | 1      |

With Harper (2002), we agree that photo-elicitation requires interest and enjoyment with the visual and the matter of things. The first author – both a chartered architect and a researcher keen in home-tour interviewing (Cook, Smith, and Searle 2013; Goodchild, O’Flaherty, and Ambrose 2014; Soaita 2015) – took pleasure in immersing herself into the details of a photo and in “*like being*” there in person (Collier 1957). Moreover, as opposed to home-tours where houses are commonly staged for the eye of the visitor (Rose 2003), the photos seem to us to convey a feel of authenticity with their cluttered rooms, unmade beds, cracked walls or unwashed dishes. Two participants acknowledged this to be intentional:

I didn’t try to tidy up, I thought I would take the pictures as it actually is, you know, how we live in reality (Bill, 38, couple/two children, Cambridge).

Comparative to other photo-elicitation studies, ours is large and the collected data is likewise rich. During photo-elicitation, some participants conveyed what we coded “the uninhabitable”, “the bad”, “just doing the job”, “the ugly” that is negative experiences of a house that failed to become home. Others described what we coded as “the good”, “the beautiful” and “the self” that is somewhat more positive experiences of living in “a kind of home” (Soaita and McKee 2019 148). Six participants declared their stand was intentional:

I’ve only really included nice pictures of things I like about the flat, whereas I can send you some photos later of the things I hate, things that need repairing, products of landlord negligence (Clara, 25, couple, Sheffield).

I sent five pictures with the bathroom, I wanted you to see how old-fashioned is (Nadia, 35, couple/two children, Holbeach).

We now proceed to the two empirical sections. In [section 4](#) we show the power of photo-elicitation to produce “thick” data grounded in participants’ experiences, and thereby stimulate researchers’ reflexivity. [Section 5](#) illustrates the method’s potential to deliver new knowledge, in this case to disclose what we consider to be previously undocumented home practices.

## 4. Thick Descriptions

Photo-elicitation indeed produced “thick” descriptions of homes’ tangible and intangible materialities. We asked participants to describe their current living arrangements prior to photo-elicitation, hence we were able to observe the difference between the initial short, “objective” description and the following longer, emphatic, “subjective” account during photo-elicitation. From passive research “subjects”, participants felt empowered to introduce their *emic* point of view by talking about what mattered to them. We will give just two examples, the first on the tangible and the second on the intangible home’s materialities.

### 4.1. Tangible Materialities

Fiona (43, single mother, Edinburgh) described her current living arrangements in 36 words:

I’ve lived in this current flat for six years with my son. It’s a private rented flat, one bedroom, one box room, a living room, at ground floor. I don’t know how else to describe it!

As opposed to the above short statement, Fiona described in 380 words the disgraceful state of the bathroom with its “flaking off” wall paint and bath enamel, nailed window and untreated bare wood floor (the first photo she talked about). The second photo elicited 370 words to describe the small, windowless box-room she uses as a bedroom so that her 11-year-old son can have his own bedroom. A third photo generated 270 words to describe the high-ceiling living-room where changing a light bulb requires borrowing a friend’s ladder because the landlord refuses to provide one; and the room’s resistance to heating which disallows use over the winter. Fiona’s eloquence and the length of her account indicate her keen interest in the matters discussed (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) at her own will, which positions PG photo-elicitation as a form of participant empowerment.

Fiona’s 10 photos and her emphatic narrative gave a “thick” description of what she felt like inhabiting an uninhabitable space (Simone 2016); five more participants felt similarly about their living conditions (three ‘younger, three “older”). Figure 1 illustrates this point. Of the eight participants describing their current rooms or flats as being in extreme disrepair, only two contacted the local authorities to enforce quality standards on landlords, which indicates fundamental power asymmetries disadvantaging the tenants (Chisholm, Howden-Chapman, and Fougere 2018).

However, our academic lenses would classify eight more participants as suffering extremely poor housing conditions (four in each group). This constitutes 42 percent of our sample, which may be less surprising given that only six participants had a household income above the UK average of £27,500. But to our surprise, four of these eight participants thought their homes were far from uninhabitable but indeed comfortable – and relatively *cheap*. While we noted participants’ transient collections of basic “furniture”, hung curtains used to separate indoor spaces or extreme clutter, photo-elicitation revealed that such self-assembled sofas and shelves personalized the space and gave a sense of agency and pride (Figure 2, left panel). Curtains created a sense of privacy and warmth. Cluttered books, boxes and memorabilia constituted the home, carried from

Fiona’s box-bedroom (43, single mother, Edinburgh)



Nadia’s daughters’ bedroom (35, couple/two children, Holbeach)



Mohan’s HMO room (35, single, Reading)



Figure 1. The uninhabitable.

Clara's 'self-furnished' livingroom  
(25, couple, Sheffield)



Clarissa's 'life-container' lodging room  
(47, single, Manchester)



**Figure 2.** Breaking the researcher's frame of reference.

tenancy to tenancy like a snail's shell (Figure 2, right panel; although Clarissa resented the fact that she was not allowed to store some of her things in what should have been the shared space of a house inhabited by the landlady and three lodgers).

As a private tenant, migrant and a researcher on a fixed-term contract – each shaping conditions of precarity in the UK (Standing 2011) – the first author's self-image of housing precarity was questioned by seeing participants' conditions. My two-bed "IKEA home" of brand-new IKEA beds and mattresses, curtains and carpets, wardrobes and lights, pots and cutlery proved to be an image of privilege rather than precarity. Myra, our participant of highest household income (38, family of two academics, Newcastle) had a similarly well-furnished home. Samuels (2004, 1528) referred to such questioning of our assumptions as "*breaking the ethnographer's frames.*"

This "*breaking of the frame*" has turned our attention to longstanding questions related to the (un)intended consequences of regulating for decent standards of housing quality in the PRS. Participants were clearly forced into "uninhabitable" (and others into poor) conditions because these units carry lower rents. It is not market-regulation but not-for-profit housing that can break the link between low-income and poor housing quality in the long term; while more generous rent support can ameliorate it in the short term.

#### **4.2. Intangible Materialities**

Our second example of "thick" description refers to one home's quality that is rarely substantiated in the home literature: warmth (for exception see Ellsworth-Krebs, Reid, and Hunter 2015; Petrova 2018). Gareth (51, single, Edinburgh) described this aspect prior to photo-elicitation in 49 words:

This flat is cold, I found out that the insulation for the property is very, very poor. I'm on the bottom flat, and so I don't think I get any heat coming from any of the other flats. It has central heating, the flat, but it's very, very poor.

Warmth is an intangible materiality that can nonetheless be pictured through halogen heaters, gas-burners, heavy curtains or warming lights (Figure 3). It can also be narrated. As opposed to the short statement quoted above, photo-elicitation empowered Gareth to



**Figure 3.** Gareth's cold "home".

introduce his "own point of view" (Radley and Taylor 2003, 79) by emphatically describing his battle against cold – in over 600 words. Gareth told us he had to buy two halogen heaters and keep them plugged at the "high cost" of £20 a week. Given the flat's expensive pay-as-you-go metre, every three days "my phone alerts me to top up" (suffering from depression, he does not work, receiving housing benefit lower than his rent). He had to block draughts by installing at his own cost heavy curtains in places where doors were removed for an open-plan modernization. Gareth also connected a gas-burner, whose running cost is £40 for 100 hours of full power while the deficient central heating "had to be switched off to stop spending money for no heat". He told us he sleeps in a cold bedroom, the coldest room in the flat, because heaters are a hazard if not supervised. Overall, Gareth hopes that these heat practices enable him to stay put through the winter as he dreads the hassle of relocation.

Cold is the failure of many home's materialities (e.g. poor insulation in floors, walls and windows; inefficient heating system) that landlords are unwilling to address (Ambrose 2015). Twenty-one more participants complained of the poor thermal-performance of their homes in terms of cold ( $n = 10$ ), or mould and damp ( $n = 12$ ). Cold caused Gareth extreme illbeing as it can cause or aggravate illness (Howden-Chapman et al. 2012). Gareth's tale of battling the cold directs the attention to crucial links between the home and many assemblages of power within housing (landlord able to eschew regulation), economics (market rents reflecting housing quality) and energy providers' practices, resulting in renters paying higher energy prices (Petrova 2018).

To paraphrase Samuels (2004), photo-elicitation moved the discussion from the abstract to the concrete, i.e. from an abstract, normative view of home to concrete practices, materialities and emotions, producing a different kind of knowledge. But these "thick" descriptions also enabled a second reading from the concrete to abstract structures of power within which the home is enmeshed:

*It's homely, and we're comfortable and we're happy here, but when you're renting accommodation you lack a lot of things, and you lack permanence. You never know what's going to happen. Will your landlord sell your property? Will your landlord put your rent up? Will this happen, will that happen? You can't make amendments to your home, we can't decorate ... (Robert, 40, couple, Manchester, for the first time renting a 'quite a nice sort of period house').*

Therefore, discussing photographs representing home's stuff elicited reflection on the abstract structures of power that diluted tenants' sense of home. Bar five participants (two "younger", three "older"), all stated they had no choice but to rent privately, which endorses McKee et al.'s (2017) argument of the fallacy of choice with regards to home-ownership. Not surprisingly, financial betterment (e.g. receiving an inheritance, a permanent contract or partnering) meant that three "older" and one "younger" participants were looking to exit the PRS by buying. However, we wish to focus next on the practices of personalization of those with no immediate prospect of tenure change; photo-elicitation has been particularly powerful in disclosing what we consider to be previously undocumented practices.

## 5. New Knowledge

The photo-elicitation element of our research delivered new knowledge related to practices of space personalization, which are crucial to develop and sustain a sense of home and self (Marcus 2006). With Neumark (2013, 244), we observed that "*even small acts of beautification can be very satisfying*", while "ugly" things generate dissatisfaction. Photo-elicitation also revealed dedicated practices of home-personalization in the UK's PRS that have never been, to our knowledge, documented before – although overall only one participant felt that the property they rented was fully a home. We will reflect on these aspects in turn.

### 5.1. Small Acts of Beautification

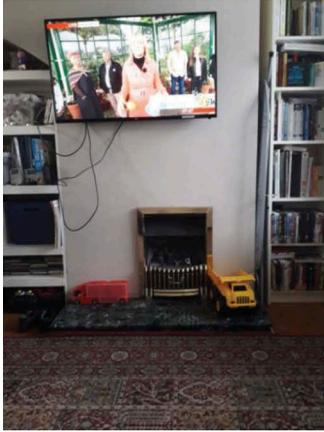
Fourteen participants (10 "younger"; four "older") could only afford, financially or emotionally, changing the furniture layout, bringing a pot flower or putting a photo on the desk in their "*small and unpleasant to be in*" HMO room (Andrew, 37, single, Manchester); for some the bed linen was a precious sign of personal possession and expression of self. Except for one participant, such practices were far from enough to compensate the state of disrepair and their landlords' disinterest in the home décor:

And the silly chimney breast and the fire is off centre and the TV bracket is off centre. Those are things that you would correct in your own home (Samantha, 43, couple/one child, Edinburgh; Figure 4, left panel).

For Samantha, the ugly wall of her living-room that she unavoidably noted every day localized her deep dissatisfaction with her "*so-called-home*" while reminding the socio-political context that stopped her beautifying it: the laws, rules and norms governing a market-based, unregulated PRS. Samantha repeatedly compared her experience of the ugly with that of her home-owning friends landscaping their gardens into beauty.

Through social networks or paying the full market price, four participants (two in each group) could rent stylish properties that matched their aesthetic preferences; additional small acts of beautifying made them very homely (Figure 4, middle panel). Photo-elicitation helped reveal that 12 participants (four "younger", eight "older") undertook significant DIY to beautify their home, showing creativity in assembling stuff from the throw-away/second-hand economy, decorating walls with meaningful self-made arrangements (of posters, paintings, photos or colourful flags) or displaying books. Nine participants (one "younger", eight "older") had their own furniture. However, photo-elicitation

Samantha's ugly wall  
(43, couple/one child,  
Edinburgh)



Robert's nice period house  
(40, couple, Manchester)



Donna's DIY redecoration  
(30, single, Edinburgh)



**Figure 4.** The ugly, the beautiful and the self.

exposed the tension between meaningfully assembling materialities of self and the transiency of these assemblages in response to the PRS's institutional tenure insecurity.

## 5.2. Dedicated Practices of Home Personalization

Through photo-elicitation we observed that five participants engaged in more dedicated space personalization, although despite their commitment, none felt their place was fully a home given their tenure insecurity. Donna (30, single, Edinburgh; [Figure 4](#), right panel) imprinted her personal mark in celebration of staying one-year put in the same job and flat:

I decorated my bathroom and bedroom and I'm pleased that it feels a bit more personalised. My flat mate has her own en-suite, so other than visitors this is 'my' bathroom, which is really nice. And it's nice that I'm able to decorate and put a wee bit more personality in it as well.

Clara (25, couple, Sheffield) and Clarissa (47, single, Manchester) – see [Figure 2](#) – enmeshed their identities in their possessions as the latter explains:

I am 47. I have a lot of boxes, correspondence from my life. This is my life, basically. And there is a tall bookshelf that has my book collection, my kind of personal library. The other end of the room is painted yellow, and that's my sleeping area. My partner helped me paint it. About a year ago I was really, really sick, it was terrible and I really wanted to feel I had a nest that I could be kind of safe in and warm, and so my partner came and painted this end of the room yellow for me. And I have an altar, I'm a Buddhist.

Finally, [Figure 5](#) illustrates two cases of families with children. Both Bill and Linda preferred, for the sake of their children, unfurnished flats that allowed more dedicated practices of home personalization. Bill (left panel) described his family of four as the home's core. Their lifestyle of a bonded family – parents working part-time in order to enjoy domesticity – was described with pride and mapped into their home's materialities:

Bill's 'bonded family' home  
(38, couple/two children, Cambridge)



Linda's 'Harry Potter' home  
(38, single mother, Glasgow)



**Figure 5.** Bill's and Linda's homes.

We, me and my partner, are quite, er, home people, it's important to us, especially with children, that we try and make wherever we live as much, you know, our home as possible even if we know we can't stay where we are for very long.

This was his 8th privately-rented home over 11 years. Bill's photos of the garden, kitchen, living-room exuded homeliness and domesticity, displaying children's drawings and personal furniture. We can only show one of the 22 pictures sent and reproduce some excerpts below:

The room that has the picture of giraffes in, which is our front bedroom, is where we all sleep with the children. We've got mattresses on the floor and we all sleep in there together. We've managed to make it livable, the curtains and the lampshade and the pictures and the furniture, that's all ours. We took their curtains down and put our curtains up. The back bedroom is kind of the grown-up bedroom really, but we sort of sleep with the kids mostly, we love being together.

After having rented 12 flats over 18 years, for the first time in her life Linda (Figure 5, right panel) dedicated herself to creating a loving home for her daughter (a big self-painted "heart" decorated their entrance hall):

My daughter had been asking for years to have a really fully decorated bedroom because we have always lived in private rented flats and it has always been bland rooms that she has had. Finally, I gave in last year to it and decorated her room and she absolutely loves it.

She did her home with nothing but her creative imagination and crafting – but at her low income, home-making *"almost led to bankruptcy"*. She rented a *"not in movable condition"* two-bedroom flat negotiating a lower rent in exchange for DIY redecoration (the landlord provided new carpet). Assembling from friends and a Facebook community *"things and stuff"*, *"any decorating supplies or any bits of furniture they weren't using"*, *"spare paint and brushes"*, *"lamps and all sorts"*, home-making gratified Linda's wellbeing (though the hard work was admittedly exhausting). It was indeed difficult to select one of the 13 photos she shared in order to illustrate her achievement:

It was quite exciting because it took a while to plan out what I was doing in each room so that everything matched and what colours I wanted to do. So in that way I enjoyed it because it

was like this is going to be your home. It took me from September to February to finally complete all the bedrooms and I do actually have a photo on my social media of just me sitting in my armchair with a glass of wine watching TV with my feet up just saying to myself finally it's done and I love it.

However, tenure insecurity and uncertainty in finding unfurnished lets at short notice meant that some other participants with children lived in very basic flats: Amy (29, Nottingham) expressed her annoyance by sending us 11 pictures, well over the average of eight; conversely Carol (40, Lincoln) felt unattached to her living environment and sent us just three pictures, the minimum received in our research.

## 6. Conclusions

We have attempted to show how the method of PG photo-elicitation in telephone interviewing empowered participants to introduce their own points of view through “thick” descriptions and enabled researchers’ reflexivity by “breaking” our frame of reference in the judgement of homeliness and housing quality. We showed that the method helped capture the capabilities of home’s tangible and intangible materialities and their importance to wellbeing. While PG photo-elicitation helped move the discussion from the abstract, normative notion of home to its concrete practices, materialities and emotions, we have also indicated throughout the paper that it concomitantly helped capture the broader structures of power in which the UK’s privately rented house is enmeshed.

We will first reflect at the methodological power of our approach to co-produce a deep and different kind of knowledge with participants located miles away; we do this by introducing the metaphor of “the fold” (lightly drawing on Deleuze 2006). Second, we will consider the method’s ability to chart the abstract space of tenants’ agency; we do this by proposing the allegory of the “invisible tether”.

### 6.1. The Fold

Building on Samuels (2004) image of “the bridge”, the intuitive idea of “the fold” most suitably articulates the key benefits of PG photo-elicitation in telephone interviewing. We caution that our use of the fold remains metaphoric rather than conceptual (for the latter see Deleuze 2006; Harris 2005). We draw on the double constitution of the fold as ontology and epistemology. Simply put, the former understands the world as a twisting and weaving variation of infinite folds, surfaces and textures that are continually folding, unfolding and refolding through time and space. The latter is a consequence of the former: the movement of the fold compresses time and space bringing together distant bodies, events and understandings. In this sense, a TV documentary creates a fold that temporarily links a faraway world, the production team and the viewer within a compressed time-space. A Skype video-chat likewise brings together two bodies across distant places. While the bridge conveys solidity and nearness, the fold suggests fluidity and temporary co-location.

Indeed, PG photo-elicitation not only “bridged” the researcher’s and participants’ horizons but for a time, transported the researcher into the participants’ homes – at a lower research cost for a larger geographical reach than any other method. United in the

fold of photo-elicitation, our probing on *this toy, this card, this Buddha statue* resembled a home-tour interviewing, i.e. researcher and participant walking and conversing through the rooms. We felt there were similarities between the two: in person or by photos, the researcher may not be invited into each room; the home can be staged (more so in real home-tours as social norms differ between person-to-person and digital encounters); while it may feel awkward to examine details in person-to-person encounters, zooming in a picture is unproblematic (resolution permitting).

With others who provided just a loose “*modicum of structure*” (Radley and Taylor 2003; Samuels 2004; van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart 2010, 376), we felt that our open approach to the number and content of photographs related to the theme of “your home” has empowered participants because they were able to talk about what mattered to them. It helped them to convey in-depth their dissatisfaction or achievements through many photos or conversely, to just leave the door into their home ajar with the odd picture. While we do not recommend imposing an upper limit to the number of photographs, suggesting a minimum is desirable to fully unlock the method’s potential.

To some extent, participants’ overfamiliarity with snapping pictures by smart-phones has challenged classic photo-elicitation as some participants took the photos just before the interview, which may have reduced the potential for prior reflection. A few participants could not manage concomitant phone-speaking and picture watching but the majority did<sup>5</sup>; we cannot speculate whether this has enabled the reflective distance (Harper 2002) created by watching a photo rather than the real thing. However, with one exception, participants were in the home when interviewed, conceivably seeing what the pictures showed.

The fold of photo-elicitation has further unfolded observed materialities into “thick” descriptions of personal events or reflections on the socioeconomic and institutional context of home, moving back and forth from the personal to the institutional, from the concrete to the abstract, co-producing new knowledge. For instance, it questioned our frame of reference, grounding the question of housing quality or homeliness in the participants’ emic point of view. The “thick” descriptions of house disrepair and its toll on wellbeing raises important policy questions of how to break or ameliorate the link between low income and poor housing. Likewise, “thick” descriptions of home personalization showed that even the provision of such inexpensive items as picture rails, hooks and shelves would be hugely beneficial to tenants’ wellbeing while increasing tenure security in furnished and *unfurnished* units remains crucial for home-making. However, given our methodological focus, we refrain from policy recommendations.

## **6.2. The Invisible Tether**

The purpose of any qualitative method is understanding the world. PG photo-elicitation helped understand the affordances and the broader determinations of home’s tangible and intangible materialities – a welcome addition to the housing studies since much housing research has disregarded the material home (Clapham 2011). It is at this level that we wish to reflect on the space of agency afforded by tenants to assemble and sustain a sense of home. The allegory of the invisible tether allows the suggestion of a smaller or larger, a more constraining or empowering space of agency. This space is determined by the tether’s anchor point and length.

The anchor point was identified by participants during photo-elicitation as being *lack of choice* (or the only choice) but to rent. Once renting in a market-based, unregulated PRS, such as in the UK, tenants are tethered within a space of high tenure insecurity and drastically reduced agency in terms of amending, altering or crafting home's materialities in practices of home-making. However, one could argue that the tether's anchor point is not lack of choice *per se* but the institutional specifics of a market-based PRS whose laws, rules and norms constrain home-making.

While the anchor point was a shared experience, we found high variation in the length of the tether even in our small sample, which photo-elicitation all too clearly helped illustrate. Obviously socioeconomic status was the key determinant of tenants' space of agency. Commonly, higher-income earners rented better quality homes and could afford spending more on personalizing the space. But social capital also allowed for longer tethers, for instance by renting cheaply high quality lets owned by (family) friends. The space of agency could be as little as just rearranging existing landlord's furniture in small acts of beautification. Or it could be as large as renting unfurnished lets to fully personalize them (risking stressful, difficult logistics of relocation) or houses of preferred aesthetics and lifestyle. We observed that "younger" and single participants tended to refrain from personalization or did so exclusively through creative improvisation of cheap, recycled stuff. Conversely, some "older" participants and in particular households with children tried to stretch the length of their tether, as one expressed it, to the limit of bankruptcy, showing their greater necessity and "*readiness to feel at home*" (Neumark 2013, 237).

In our sample, breaking the tether by entering homeownership was soon to become possible for four participants by partnering, receiving an inheritance or obtaining a permanent job. Many more aspired either to homeownership or social housing, but both were seen as highly unlikely; one participant was about to return to the parental home. Obviously, other possibilities of increasing private tenants' space of agency could be crafted through policy by changing the institution of the PRS to give more power and stability to tenants and by setting more generous welfare support to help low-income households to rent better quality housing.

Hoping that our paper has stimulated readers' imagination, we recommend engaging PG photo-elicitation in a range of research questions spanning from the abstract of housing aspirations to the concrete of the neighbourhood as understood by private tenants; and from the inner to the multi-scalar outer of the home, whether in an open or a more structured approach. Given that our sample was small and of young to middle-aged, urban participants, we also welcome future photo-elicitation research on the affordances of home materialities for older, disabled or rural private tenants; as these groups may be more difficult to reach via digital technologies, a traditional approach to photo-elicitation may be better suited. While we agree that the method, like any other, is neither infallible nor an all-purpose tool, we showed here and elsewhere (Soaita and McKee 2019) its power to co-produce new and a different type of knowledge than words-alone interviews would.

## Notes

1. On 15 May 2019. Our general search for "photo-elicitation" or "photovoice" in articles', books' and book chapters' titles, abstracts and keywords returned 1,814 hits published in English. Annually, numbers were increasing from 1–3 until 1992 to tens between 1993 and 2001

(10–73) and hundreds after that (112–295). The same search but with the additional keywords “housing”, “home”, “house” or “flat” returned only 210 hits. Finally, a search in four key housing journals for “photo-elicitation” or “photovoice” returned only 25 articles (10 in *Housing Studies*; 9 in *Housing, Theory and Society*; 5 in *International Journal for Housing and the Built Environment*; and 1 in the *International Journal of Housing Policy*).

2. A systematic search in both SCOPUS and Web of Science conducted on 28 May 2019 for “photo elicitation” or “photovoice” and “telephone interview” in titles, abstracts and keywords returned null results (the searching string allowing for various different spelling).
3. The method is also referred to as autodiving interviews, reflexive photography, photovoice, participatory photo interview, photofeedback, photoessay or visual narratives.
4. See <https://www.shelter.org.uk/>; <http://www.generationrent.org/>; <https://acorntheunion.org.uk/>; <https://www.livingrent.org/>.
5. At three participants request, landlines were used for speaking and mobiles for watching.

## Acknowledgments

We thank the three anonymous reviewers for their valued comments and to Stewart Cowe for his ongoing patience in proof reading. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (grant number: ES/P008852/1). According to our funders’ requirements and participants’ informed consents, some data are archived and can be used for further studies; please ask the authors for more information regarding access.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [ES/P008852/1].

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