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## Performing the ‘good tenant’

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### ABSTRACT

Renters in homeowner societies like Australia, the United States and United Kingdom occupy a complex moral landscape, maligned for failure to achieve homeownership but pivotal to the value of investment properties. Identification of ‘good’ and ‘risky’ tenants is an important landlord practice. We investigate how tenants conceptualise and perform the ‘good tenant’ through research with 36 single older women renting in greater Sydney, Australia: a cohort on the margins of secure housing. The good tenant demonstrates responsibility through paying rent on time and property stewardship (reporting repairs, making home). However, these practices are made necessary *and* risky through limited tenure security. The emotional and financial risks attending performances of the good tenant drive paradoxical relations; a good tenant is also acquiescent and silent, not reporting property repairs or lapsed leases to avoid rent increases and/or evictions. Variegated performances of the ‘good tenant’ reflect cultural property norms and valorize the investment function of housing yet could also productively unsettle tenant-landlord relations.

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Renting; housing; home; responsibility; risk; Australia

## Introduction

Renters in the private rental sector of homeowner societies like Australia, the United States and United Kingdom occupy a complex moral landscape. In a context where homeownership is the cultural ‘norm’ and an expectation of responsible citizenship, private renters are often sidelined as ‘failed consumers’ lacking the responsibility or will to achieve home ownership (Bate, 2018; Blomley, 2004; Gurney, 1999b; Power, 2017a; Smith, 2008). These discourses see renters framed in terms of risk. At a household and neighbourhood scale, this is a risk to (investor) property and neighbourhood quality (Bate, 2020; Cheshire *et al.*, 2010; Gurney, 1999b, 1999a; Power, 2017b; Rosenblatt *et al.*, 2009; Rowlands & Gurney, 2000). Comparatively, at a national scale, where ‘the act of becoming a home owner is connected with the governmental objectives of promoting individual responsibility for the economic risks of older age’

(Power, 2017a, p. 234), renters are a fiscal risk. At the same time, renters are an assumed dimension of the economies and cultures of housing investment, constituting a significant component of how gains through housing investment are achieved (Fields, 2017). These paradoxical framings see renters within the private rental market as generators of risk, reward and value.

Some renters, however, are understood to be riskier than others. Interconnected with discourses of responsibility are notions of the 'good' and 'bad' tenant (Bierre *et al.*, 2010; Bate, 2020). These nominals identify renters believed to present a lesser or greater risk to the property owner. For property investors seeking to maximize value through rent, identification of 'good' tenants is key. Renter responsibility is typically evaluated through proxies of income, class, household type, gender, race and age (Bate, 2020; Hulse *et al.*, 2011; Massey & Lundy, 2001; MacDonald *et al.*, 2016; Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Power, 2017b; Wulff *et al.*, 2011). Yet while much is written about renters, responsibility and risk, the majority of research explores the perspectives of property owners, landlords and managers, such as real estate agents, or is read from broader discourses of home and responsibility (e.g. Cheshire, 2019; Cheshire *et al.*, 2009, 2010, Gurney, 1999a, 1999b; Rowlands & Gurney, 2000; Smith, 2008). This paper analyses how renters conceptualize and perform the 'good tenant': examining the ethics, practices, compromises, acts of resistance and paradoxical relations bound up in the good tenant, and the implications of these for the broader property relation, including landlord-tenant relations, property quality and quality of life.

We explore the performance of the 'good tenant' through the accounts of 36 single low-income women aged 55 and over who are living, or have lived, in homes rented from the private rental market in Sydney, Australia and surrounds. Participants occupied a marginal position in the private rental sector, living on very low incomes that included government allowances and pensions, or waged work paid at an equivalent level. Women of this age bracket and socio-economic profile are one of the fastest growing groups of homeless people in Australia, a status produced through gendered histories of care, paid work and housing (Morris, 2009; Petersen & Parsell, 2015). We consider how these renters conceptualize and perform the good tenant, defined as a tenant who is purportedly 'doing the right thing', or who would be viewed in preferential terms by a landlord or property manager. The financially marginal position of this cohort means they often rely on the performance of 'good tenant' to assist security of tenancy in a property market favouring short-term, insecure tenancies. We identify the good tenant within a set of practices and power dynamics imagined and produced inside the property relation, in reference to the landlord, property manager, rental property, rental agreement, and broader national cultures of housing and home. Intriguingly, however, we show that the 'good tenant' does not always service the property owner or rental property. Instead the 'good tenant' is at times a veneer necessitated through an insecure rental market, which engenders risk to investment values.

We first introduce the idea of the 'good tenant' through a brief outline of notions of responsibility as they operate within cultures and practices of housing and home in homeowner nations. We then introduce the research that is the foundation of this

paper. The following sections first, identify and account for core practices of being a good tenant, and second, show how performing the ‘good tenant’ – through making home and taking responsibility for the property as if you own it – is undermined by the limited security of tenure that renting provides. The paper concludes by discussing implications of being a good tenant in light of the increasing prominence of the private rental sector in housing provision, and in longer-term experiences of home.

## Renters and responsibility in home owner societies

In home owner nations like Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, home ownership (including mortgaged ownership) is not only the dominant tenure form, it is also politically and culturally normalized as the ideal tenure and a central citizen responsibility (Gurney, 1999b; Hulse *et al.*, 2019a; Power, 2017a; Smith, 2008). Owned homes are valued as both a place to live, and economic investment for the future (Hulse *et al.*, 2019a; Power, 2017a; Power & Gillon, 2019). The normalising of home ownership has had profound consequences for the social positioning and legislative structuring of renting: supporting cultural perceptions of renters in the public and private sectors as having somehow failed in the responsibility and aspiration to own housing, whilst simultaneously creating private renting as a relatively insecure tenure with limited rights to make home (Bate, 2018; Easthope, 2014). Where ‘homeownership conveys a certain status, symbolising achievement and responsibility in securing a mortgage’ (Cheshire *et al.*, 2010, p. 2599), renting is framed as inferior, a transitional and short-term housing option that acts as a stepping stone toward home ownership. These moral framings of tenure contribute toward a broader set of ‘authoritative “grammars of living” [that] ... seek to shape and prescribe socially sanctioned acts of consumption, including the consumption of housing’ (Flint, 2003, p. 614) in these nations. They are embedded in long running cultures of housing and home that see home ownership as the endpoint of a typical housing pathway. This pathway is supported and encouraged through preferential government policy including tax benefits and first home owner grants (Balchin, 1996; Easthope, 2014; Schwartz, 2015).

The normalising of ownership and problematising of renting manifests as a form of tenure prejudice, shaping social perceptions of renter households. Where home ownership is understood as taking responsibility and making rational choices through capital investment, renting is culturally connected with relative fecklessness, where renters (and especially council renters) are seen as simply not as good as ‘us’ (Gurney, 1999a; Smith, 2008). Blomley (2004, p. 89) points to an ‘enduring suspicion toward, and devaluation of, renters’; a sense that

... those who do not own property (or more importantly, those who are imagined as nonowners) are not only incomplete citizens, but partial or deformed subjects.

Subsequently, renting is connected with metaphorical aphorisms constructing and perpetrating negative perceptions of rental tenure (Gurney, 1999a). In the UK these include ‘renting’s [just] money down the drain’ and ‘renting’s [just] dead money’ (Gurney, 1999a, p. 1711; Smith, 2008), while in Australia there is a widely held sense that ‘money paid in rent to a landlord is wasteful’ (Cheshire *et al.*, 2010, p. 2599).

These perceptions proliferate amongst home owners and renters. Single mother renters in Australia in one study, for instance, connected ownership with responsibility, investment, 'success and stability' (Holdsworth, 2011, p. 60), while young people renting in the United Kingdom saw ownership as part of a socially acceptable 'package', making connections between 'a good job, family life and owner occupation' (Rowlands & Gurney, 2000, p. 126). Other research points to a divide between 'us and them', with owners understood as being more connected to their homes and communities and renters as 'transient' (Reid, 2015), as taking less care of property and being less considerate of neighbours (Lippert, 2012, and see Smith, 2008). Home owners and renters are also connected with different morally framed meanings and practices of 'home'. Home is a place with substantial symbolic value, interconnected with senses of self and identity (Easthope, 2004). Ideal homes are valued as places of comfort, security and control, providing opportunities for privacy and independence (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Easthope, 2004). Such home values are normatively connected with home ownership (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Gurney, 1999b) and made challenging for renters who experience limited tenure and homemaking rights through legislation (Easthope, 2014; Hulse & Milligan, 2014; Power & Gillon, 2019). Concurrently, there is a widely held sense that renters are less committed to home. Participants in Gurney's (1999a, p. 1714) research contrasted the care and responsibility taken for owned possessions with relative carelessness for rented possessions, whether they be books, hire cars, televisions or housing, highlighting 'the common-sense responsibilities of stewardship and husbandry which have accompanied the post-war growth of home-ownership in the UK'. Research in Australian master-planned communities likewise connected renters with poorer maintenance standards and 'lack of moral compunction to consider the impacts of their conduct upon the value of other people's property' (Cheshire *et al.*, 2010, p. 2602). There was an overarching sense from home owners that renters were 'ethically defective [and] lacking a sense of pride in either themselves or their homes' (Cheshire *et al.*, 2010, p. 2607, and see Cheshire, 2019; Cheshire *et al.*, 2009; Walters & Rosenblatt, 2008).

Renters are not always seen as uniformly problematic; instead, gradations of risk and responsibility frame evaluations (Power, 2017b). This is evident in the tenant selection practices of landlords and managing agents, such as real estate agents and which point to an emergent idea of the 'good' and 'bad' (or risky) tenant. Risk classification through ranking tenants according to 'ability to pay' and 'ability to care' for a property are central tasks for real estate agents involved in tenant selection, determined through combinations of income, rental history and references (Bate, 2020; Short *et al.*, 2008). Risk is also assessed through household characteristics. Proxy markers of risk include households with small children, young people, people with disabilities, people in receipt of welfare, pet owners and 'single men, including those working, but on low incomes' (Bate, 2020; Bierre *et al.*, 2010; Hulse *et al.*, 2011, p. 59; Power, 2017b; Wulff *et al.*, 2011). Poorer quality and lower priced rental properties are also associated with riskier tenants and higher probability of rent disputes (Bierre *et al.*, 2010). There is also evidence of racial discrimination, with some groups less likely to be supported through the application process or pushed toward less desirable properties and localities (Massey & Lundy, 2001; MacDonald *et al.*, 2016;

Pager & Shepherd, 2008). These discriminations not only make it more difficult for stigmatized groups to secure quality housing, they also foreground the profoundly classed, aged, gendered and raced practices interconnected with the moralities of tenant responsibility.

Single older women living on low incomes including government pensions and allowances, like those in the present research, occupy an ambiguous position in discourses of tenant risk. Their low incomes and reliance on government welfare (see Methods) place them within the profile of the 'risky' tenant'. They also occupy the very bottom of the housing market, necessarily seeking low-cost accommodation that is often of a poor quality and at times sub-standard (Power 2019; Power 2020). At the same time, this group may benefit from the cultural gendering of home and care (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). While single women face stigma that drives the invisibility of single older women's homelessness (Darab & Hartman, 2013), long-standing cultural associations between women and the domestic may benefit this group (relative to single men, for instance) through suggesting a greater affinity to care for property. Age may also play a mediating role. Younger single mothers and families with small children are often viewed as a risky and problematic population (Holdsworth, 2011; Hulse *et al.*, 2011; Saugeres, 2000). In contrast, older women are frequently identified as a distinct group facing homelessness for the first time in later life through a combination of misfortune and economic disadvantage that is a by-product of a life devoted to familial care; this is captured in the idea that it 'could be you' who is single older and homeless (McFerran, 2010).

Significantly, renter classifications do not simply normalize and stigmatize. Rather, they are also productive, working to discipline behaviour. The 'grammars of living' normalizing home ownership as an expectation and responsibility are interconnected, as outlined, with classed expectations of housing aesthetics and neighbourly behaviour (Cheshire *et al.*, 2010; Flint, 2003, and see Rose, 1999; Smith, 2008; Saugeres, 2000). These valorise certain behaviours and practices, while marking others as problematic, abnormal and irresponsible. Such discourses and their classificatory, productive power reflects broader circuits of power in advanced liberal states, where individuals are governed through their freedom in the context of communities of belonging (Flint, 2003; Rose, 2000). To discipline individuals and households is to act on their personal freedom

... to intensify and redirect the forces that bind individuals into such groupings and relations – shame, guilt, responsibility, obligation, trust, honor and duty. This, it is thought, will intensify the virtuous consequences of such bindings – reciprocity, mutuality, cooperation, belongingness, and identity. In these ways, perhaps, free and autonomous individuals can be governed through community. (Rose, 2000, p. 1399)

Consumption is profoundly interconnected with contemporary governance (Power, 2015). In the case of housing, home ownership and the purported behavioural and aesthetic practices of the middle-class home owner are ascribed as the moral norm against which housing consumers, including renters, are measured.

The 'good tenant' is produced and measured in relation to expectations of middle-class home ownership. While renters generally are seen to lack responsibility, there is the potential for renters to perform responsibly – to perform the 'good' tenant. One source of these measures are tenant advice blogs which suggest the valuing of tenants

who have a good rental history, certain homemaking abilities or interests such as gardening and ‘handyman’ skills, who dress ‘appropriately’ for rental inspections and hand in a rental application that is ‘clean and tidy’ with ‘no spelling and grammatical errors’. (Bate, 2020, p.18)

These morally inflected practices and skills are promoted in online blogs, which renters can choose to assume in order to secure a rental property (Bate, 2020). In short, ‘... a good or responsible tenant is one whose house is indistinguishable from those that are owner-occupied’ (Cheshire *et al.*, 2010, p. 2608). Consistent with this, some renters ‘expressed a sense of responsibility to “maintain things,” arguing that, despite renting, they were keen to abide by the standards set by owner occupiers on the street’ (Cheshire *et al.*, 2009, p. 664). Similar evaluations operate in social housing contexts; tenants who meet cleanliness norms in their garden or housing are seen as being more respectable, responsible and deserving of help (Saugeres, 2000). The stakes for renters in the private sector are perhaps even higher. Evaluations of the ‘good tenant’ potentially frame access to housing and housing security in a tenure that affords only limited legal, or *de jure*, security (Hulse & Milligan, 2014; van Gelder, 2010).

The power dynamics between landlords and tenants are significant for performing the ‘good tenant’. Landlords (and their agents) are gatekeepers to private rental housing. In this context evaluations of tenant risk by landlords are especially significant as a hurdle to securing housing. During a tenancy tenants experience a degree of legal security contingent on continuing to meet foundational responsibilities: failing to pay rent or maintain a property to expected minimum standards can leave tenants facing eviction.

*De facto* security of tenure, what van Gelder (2010) describes as the ‘(f)actual circumstances of tenure situation’ is also significant. *De facto* security is the ‘degree of security experienced by tenants’, negotiated through the ongoing practices of managing tenancies. These practices, interconnect with the ‘motivations and behaviours of landlords, rental housing management practices and the rules that attach to living in rental housing’, alongside a set of cultural norms about renting and responsibility for home (Hulse & Milligan, 2014, p. 641–644). Tenants who are financially overstretched due to a shortage of affordable housing, or who experience loss or fluctuations of income or employment, can experience limited *de facto* security. Tenants who make requests (such as for property repairs) that do not align with landlord priorities may also experience limited *de facto* security. Similarly, tenants who pay rent late but within an allowable window may retain legal security, but be less likely to gain landlord approval for a tenancy renewal (e.g. in the jurisdiction where the present research is located landlords may only provide a ‘non-payment termination notice’ when rent is late by 14 days or more (Tenants Union NSW, 2020)). Lower income renters are likely to be at particular risk, with fewer options of alternative housing if a tenancy fails or is not renewed. This paper builds on existing understandings of renter ir/responsibility to investigate how one group of renters conceptualizes and performs the ‘good tenant’. We bring particular attention to the experiences and perceptions of a group of tenants who live at the margins of the private rental sector. Our purpose is twofold. First, we build a conceptualisation of the



ethics, practices, compromises and paradoxical relations that are part of the performance of tenant responsibility. Second, we reflect on the ethical and practical implications that unfold around performances of the ‘good tenant’, for the opportunities of marginalized renters, their landlords and homes.

## Methods

This paper investigates tenancy practices and conceptualisations of the good tenant amongst 36 single, low income women, aged 55 and over who have experience living in the private rental sector in the greater Sydney region, Australia. In Australia this demographic is one of the fastest growing groups of homeless people nationally. While some older people have long histories of homelessness, including sleeping rough and living in boarding houses and other marginal accommodation, it is typical for this group to have had ‘conventional’ housing biographies and to be experiencing housing marginality for the first time in later life (Petersen *et al.*, 2014). The marginal status of older women is shaped through gendered differences in pay across the life-course, as well as time out of the workforce due to parenting. The result is low levels of asset accumulation including low levels of superannuation to support living costs, which can be further compounded by relationship breakdown (Darab & Hartman, 2013; Darab *et al.*, 2018; Petersen, 2015; Petersen *et al.*, 2014). None of these women were homeowners, though some had been in the past. All lived on very low incomes such as government income support or low waged work including casual care work (see Table 1 for an overview of participant details by age and income type).

Women’s marginal position in the rental market is exacerbated by the relatively high cost of housing in the greater Sydney region in conjunction with low wages and low remuneration of government pensions (Aged Pension, for people 65+ at the time of the research; Disability Support Pension; and Newstart<sup>1</sup>, for job-seekers). The Aged Pension was the highest remunerated pension received by any participant. In Australia Aged Pension calculations assume homeownership (Power, 2017a) and there is growing evidence of poverty amongst single renters who are reliant on this income source (Morris, 2009, 2016). A 2019 market snapshot points to these affordability challenges. Of 23,921 properties advertised to rent in the region on the snapshot weekend, only seven (7) were affordable (costing 30% or less of income) to a single person receiving the aged pension, and none (0) were affordable to a single person in receipt of the Disability Pension or Newstart Allowance; sixty five (65) were affordable to a single person earning the minimum wage (Bellamy *et al.*, 2019).

Data analysed for this paper are drawn from a larger sample of 46 women (those excluded had not lived in the private rental sector). Of the 36 women with experience of the private rental sector, 14 were currently in the sector. The remainder were living in public, community or similar philanthropic housing (13), transitional housing (4), affordable housing (2), sharing in an established owned home (2) or domestic violence shelter (1), but with experience of the private rental sector that allows them to speak to this experience. Effort was made to recruit more participants currently living in the sector. However, while these women were often willing to discuss their experiences informally, they were frequently reticent to take part in a research interview



**Table 1.** Participant overview.

Pseudonym	Age	Previous tenure/s	Current tenure	Income source
Round 1				
Grace	55–59	Private rental	Private rental	Low wage
Michelle	55–59	Home owner; Private rental	Affordable housing	Disability Support Pension
Robin	65–69	Public housing; home owner; Private rental	Community housing	Aged Pension
Tess	65–69	Private rental	Private rental	Aged Pension
Julia	60–64	Home owner; Private rental	Public rental	Disability Support Pension
Deborah	55–59	Private rental	Transitional	Disability Support Pension
Abigail	85–89	Private rental	Philanthropic	Aged Pension
Gemma	70–74	Home owner; Private rental	Philanthropic	Aged Pension
Simone	65–69	Private rental	Affordable housing	Aged Pension
Lucy	55–59	Public rental; Private rental	Public rental	Disability Support Pension
Katrina	75–79	Home owner; Private rental	Community housing	Aged Pension
Erin	65–69	Home owner; Private rental	Transitional	Low wage
Toni	60–64	Private rental	Private rental	Newstart/ low wage
Tracey	65–69	Home owner; Private rental	Private rental	Aged Pension
Phillipa	65–69	Private rental	Community	Aged Pension
Victoria	55–59	Home owner; Private rental	Public rental	Disability Support Pension
Liz	60–64	Private rental	Community	Disability Support Pension
Sue	60–64	Private rental	Public rental	Disability Support Pension
Round 2				
Harriet	65–69	Home owner; Private rental	Share (family)	Carers pension/ low waged
Alice	60–64	Private rental; Share housing	Share (friend/ employer)	Low wage
Meg	65–69	Home owner; Private rental	Private rental	Aged Pension Pension/ low waged
Georgia	75–79	Home owner; Private rental	Public rental	Aged Pension
Angela	70–74	Private rental; Share housing	Public rental	Aged Pension/ low waged
Sarah	65–69	Home owner; Private rental; shared with family	Private rental	Aged Pension
Nicole	65–69	Private rental; Shelter (domestic violence)	Public rental	Aged Pension
Jenny	65–69	Home owner/ property investor; Private rental	Private rental	Low wage
Lauren	70–74	Private rental	Transitional	Aged Pension
Kylie	70–74	Home owner; Private rental	Private rental	Aged Pension/ low waged
Megan	60–64	Home owner; shared with family; private rental	Shelter (domestic violence)	Disability Support Pension
Eleanor	60–64	Private rental	Transitional	Newstart
Gwen	60–64	Private rental; share housing	Private rental	Newstart
Sophie	65–69	Private rental; homeless (living in vehicle)	Private rental	Disability Support Pension
Lily	65–69	Home owner; caravan rental	Private rental	Aged Pension
Kelly	65–69	Private rental; share housing	Private rental	Low wage
Rose	65–69	Private rental; public rental	Private rental	Carers Pension
Natalie	60–64	Home owner; Private rental	Private rental	Low wage

while their housing was so precarious. Participants experiences of the private rental sector and their understanding of the good tenant are likely to be impacted by the length of time they have lived in private rental, their income and age. The connection between length of the in the sector and understandings of the good tenant are especially significant and we return to this in the conclusion .

Women were identified through social services agencies, local charities and snow balling amongst the target group. Interviews took place in two phases. In Phase 1, 23 women recounted their housing biography (since leaving the family home) and reflected on their experiences of housing, meanings and practices of home across

tenure and landlord – tenant relations. Thematic coding in NVivo identified key themes that informed interview schedules in Phase 2. In Phase 2 women first over-viewed their housing biography. They then participated in a semi-structured interview that explored key themes emerging from Phase 1, including: making and moving home, housing security and quality, and searching for housing. Comparisons across tenure and landlord – tenant relationships were further themes. Interviews from both phases were recorded and transcribed. Following Phase 2 data from both phases was combined and coded in NVivo.

The ‘good tenant’ was an idea that emerged organically within interviews in both phases as women reflected their experiences living and maintaining tenancies in the rental sector. All data were coded according to this theme, with further coding undertaken to identify the practices that constituted performances of the ‘good tenant’. Categories identified in the paper – paying rent on time, property stewardship and risks – emerged from women’s own descriptions of their practices but were also iteratively interpreted through analysis of the broader literature on the ‘good tenant’ which focuses on landlord and homeowner perspectives in the private rental sector, and landlord – tenant perspectives in the social sector. Quotes included in this paper are emblematic of a broader theme unless otherwise stated. Participants are given a pseudonym and numerical identifier that specifies the research phase (1/2) and interview number (1–23). While we aim to provide quotes from a range of participants, we have also chosen to feature a number of quotes from a few participants to allow a fuller telling of the practices and contradictions embodied in performances of the good tenant. We now turn to the results of this analysis.

## Results

The remainder of the paper examines participants accounts of renting within the private rental sector. The first section identifies how participants conceptualised and performed the ‘good tenant’. The second section draws out emotional and financial risks embodied in performances of the ‘good tenant’.

### *The ‘good tenant’*

#### *Moral transactions: ability to pay*

For women in this research the ability and willingness to pay rent was foundational to the performance of the ‘good tenant’. Lily (2.20), reliant on the Aged Pension as her sole income source, talks about paying rent every fortnight as her ‘security’:

The rent has to come out first. Yes. Where a lot of people don’t have paying their rent as their first priority. But to me, that’s my security. If I’ve paid my rent, well I know that for the next fortnight, I’m fine. Yeah. But I don’t know what’s going to happen when I get older.

Similarly, many emphasized the necessity for forward budgeting and saving to cover bond for the next property in the event an eviction notice was received. Simone (1.10, Aged Pension) discussed the need to retain a ‘store of money’ in her bank account to navigate the private rental sector (planning ahead for the initial

outlay of bond, moving costs). Nicole (2.11, Aged Pension) and Gwen (2.18, Newstart) described this as a constant process of preparation and planning for moving. For tenants, 'ability to pay' is the basis of a favourable rental history, crucial to securing and sustaining a rental property (Bate, 2020). This overtly references the transactional and legal dimensions of the tenant–landlord relationship, where a good (housing) can only be secured with a fee (rent). The good tenant was fair to the landlord through paying rent on time. This is consistent with research with landlords in the social and private rental sectors, which indicates tenants who pay rent on time are 'good' tenants and responsible individuals (Bate, 2020; Saugeres, 2000).

For the women interviewed for this research, however, putting rent first was not always straightforward. Many women lived below the poverty line and struggled to pay energy bills and afford food once rent had been paid. Sacrifices made to achieve rent included reducing energy use through going to bed early (drawing on the thermal affordances of warm bedding), keeping fit (warming the body so that heating was not required), eating cheaper foods and provisioning food in alternative ways, including use of charities. Tracey (1.17, Aged Pension) for instance relied on a local charity that opened a weekly food pantry, while Toni (1.16, Newstart) supplemented marked-down fresh foods nearing their 'best before' date with food from a local church pantry. Meeting basic needs when rent accounted for a substantial proportion of weekly costs required practice and knowledge of local resources. Kelly (2.21, low wage) described the portfolio of skills and resources and 'years of practice' that enabled her to 'live on the smell of an oily rag'. She eschewed eating out and didn't drink coffee or smoke, she borrowed books and DVDs from her local library, and bought clothes from op-shops. She was able to travel cheaply with her Senior's Card and belonged to a film society 'which means that I can go and see a film once a week for 30 weeks of the year, and it costs very little. I think it's \$90, so basically \$3 a film'. Kelly attributed her 'wealth of knowledge' and 'wealth of skills' to her ability to meet essential needs and live well on a low income. Such skills and knowledges allow this cohort to meet the transactional costs and legal responsibilities of renting.

Women worked hard to service the landlord through rent, making personal sacrifice where necessary to make this possible. In turn this performance of the 'good tenant' secured their rental property. Paying rent on time is a legal requirement, with failure bringing disciplinary consequences including eviction. Here there was an additional sense that being up to date with rent was also an important moral transaction, indicative of care and responsibility. This was especially evident in women's discussions of their budgeting strategies, and the emphasis placed on their modest ways of living and consuming.

For a small number of women, the transactional dimensions of performing the 'good tenant' were also inflected through a concern with fairness. Although limited in their ability to pay market rents, these women expressed concern for their landlord securing a reasonable return on their investment. For Grace (1.1, low wage) this meant being assertive about negotiating 'fair' rent increases:

I have had the rent increased since I've been here and whilst I went, oh my God, I wrote to them and said – and I was only working part time then and also studying part time and I said, 'this is my situation, I cannot afford that'. It was up by \$20 a week. So I

negotiated and said, 'would you make it half?', so I didn't say, 'I can't, please don't do it'. I was like, alright, they want to increase it, I want to decrease it, so I met them half way and they accepted it, thank goodness ... I think they were going to increase it, so why not make it something that you would have been happy with, but kick it off with what you would have been happy with, rather than wait for them to counter, come back with a counter offer.

So sort of being realistic where the market's at.

Yeah and if I want them to be fair, then I have to be fair too, so I had to try and see it from both sides and go, alright, they want an increase, so – but then I go, mm, when will the next one be? Will I be in a position to hold that?

For Grace, 'fairness' was a two-way street; both the landlord and tenant compromising to ensure a mutually fair outcome. The 'good tenant' was aware and responsive to the landlords needs. In turn participants perceived that this increased their *de facto* security through supporting the likelihood that rental contracts would be extended. Sophie (2.19, DSP) was in a different position. She had lived in her rental property for 15 years and paid a relatively meagre rent compared to her landlord's other tenants. She described the landlord as 'fantastic' and 'wonderful', explaining 'he's been really, really understanding'. Sophie explained she helped 'look after the place', knowing she would be homeless if her landlord increased her rent. There appeared to be an element of care inflecting this transactional relationship: the landlord seemingly aware of Sophie's financial position, and Sophie conscious of this understanding and responding by being a 'good tenant', including taking extra care of the property. These types of stewardship practices are considered further in the next section.

### **Stewardship of home**

The second dimension of how research participants conceptualized and performed the 'good tenant' we term the *stewardship of home*: caring for the rental property as if it were their own, and notifying the landlord or real estate agent of any emerging property issues or required repairs. Reporting on property condition and repairs was perceived by most women as a core responsibility of a good tenant. Jenny's (2.13, low wage) indicative account captures the transactional dimensions of this relationship:

So I don't believe I'm hung up about paying rent. I just want a place I can go home and call my home. Somebody else can fix and repair. And if they don't fix what I report and it's something I can't fix, I can't do anything about it. They haven't come and fixed it. I've reported it. I've put it in writing that something's wrong. I can't do any more than that. So that goes back to them then. That's bad management if they don't fix it. You know, when I've reported it straight away and told them what the problem is.

Jenny's attitude to property repairs is very transactional; it is the responsibility of the landlord to fix and repair the property, so reporting them is *her* responsibility. Reporting to the landlord is, for her, part of visibly looking after a property and performing responsibility. Jenny was proud to be a wage earner who did not 'live off the government'. While her low-income status left her vulnerable in the event of eviction, she reported property repairs as part of her ethical responsibility as a renter. Jenny had owned multiple properties with her husband prior to their marriage breakdown

in the early 2000s; they may have also influenced her perspective on tenant responsibility.

Vigilance reporting property repairs was widely understood as mutually beneficial for both landlord and tenant (though later we discuss reluctant landlords). When her report of a black ant infestation led to the discovery of active white ants, Grace's (1.1, low wage) property was fumigated. She no longer needed to live with ants throughout her kitchen and 'it looks like I seemed to save the landlord their property by not having white ants eat their way up through all the floorboards'. Tess (1.4, Aged Pension) similarly explained:

If something really needed to be done, I will ask and say I think it's for the benefit of the owner in the long run. As well as my benefit now... A stitch in time saves nine. [...] I thought if that is loosening – I don't know what you call things – but the eave or whatever [unclear], and it falls down, [the landlord is] going to have to pay more to have it replaced than have it repaired [if I notify them now].

Good tenants observe and report required repairs in a timely way. This form of property stewardship was conceptualized as mutually beneficial. The tenant would have a home in good repair, and the landlord could maintain property quality and therefore investment values.

Stewardship of home was also practiced through individual homemaking practices, of treating this house as though it were one's home. Toni (1.16, Newstart and low wage) expressed her desire to make prospective properties her 'home' during her initial application, describing how she dressed in 'professional attire' and asked permission to hang her 'precious oil paintings'. She explained these were really just cheap prints and political posters, but '... I just found a middle-class way of saying, this is what I want to do, I'm going to put some holes in the wall. Would you want to do it for me?' Through this performance Toni sought to align herself with middle-class norms of home stewardship and recounted positive feedback from rental agents, including an offer for a property not currently listed to the market and which she knew she could not afford.

After being granted permission by the owner, some renters also undertook property improvements and modifications. Natalie (2.23, low wage) spoke about repairing and improving rentals as key both to her sense of home, and her feeling appreciated as a tenant. While improvements were at her expense, for Natalie it was also about 'feel[ing] like you're living in your own place'. She described painting walls, changing window dressings, polishing floorboards, and making 'a really beautiful garden'. At times in previous properties she had been behind on her rent, which landlords 'didn't like' but 'they sort of understood'. There was a sense that late rent was broadly excused when accompanied by a tenant who was otherwise an excellent property steward. This resonates with Saugeres' (2000) findings that tenants perceived as taking care of their home were given greater support by public housing staff.

Stewardship practices are performed within a broader regime of insecure property rights, where renters have limited *de jure* security and experience restricted rights and freedoms to make home (Easthope, 2014; Hulse & Milligan, 2014; Soaita & McKee, 2019). Referencing these limits, Tracey (1.17, Aged Pension) likened private rental to a 'base camp', whilst an owned home is 'Everest'. Renting fulfils all her basic needs, but lacks the permanence to make a house-as-home:

It's a bit like you've got base camp and then you've got Everest, because you're never quite sure if it's going to be permanent and things change all the time. So it's home because I've got a bed, I get sleep, I can cook, I can clean myself up, I can do my washing, and I know people in the neighbourhood.

Limited security and rights over home diminish the ontological security of renters through precluding a sense of housing security and belonging into the future (Morris *et al.*, 2017). In this context stewardship of home was attributed enhanced significance. Home making practices aided the generation of feelings of belonging and, through doing 'the right thing', women perceived they were more likely to achieve tenure security.

Jenny (2.13, low wage) captures the perceived connection between property stewardship and tenure security.

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean, it sounds to me like you're incredibly meticulous.

Jenny: Well, I just do a property as if it was my own. And I like to think that if I put in that bit of extra effort, people will let me stay there. Because it's not fun moving. I've moved something like five times in the 14 years that I've been in the [region]. And every time you move, it becomes harder. I'm not getting any younger. I can't lift the weights I could lift before. And so you're relying on other people and you're paying somebody else to do that work for you ... people who have their own home don't realize that. Because they're just used to being in their own home. And they move when they want to move. I move when I have to move. When I've got no choice. And that's the difference. So I always say, this home – this place where I'm living is my house and my home, whenever I'm living here and paying the rent. And that's how I treat it.

Jenny's attention to detail and frequent communication with the rental agent is 'extra effort' she attributes to being able to stay in a place longer. Robin (1.3, Aged Pension) similarly believed that her willingness to agree to contact the landlord about necessary repairs secured her rental, despite the landlord's initial misgivings about her, her pets and the 'party risk' afforded by her younger daughters. While these women could not afford higher rents, they could trade another commodity: care of a landlord's investment property.

Of course, tenant stewardship of home through home making and reporting required repairs operates in relation to the landlord's willingness to maintain the property, through approving and undertaking necessary repairs. The stewardship of home by tenants and landlords through, respectively, reporting and approving repairs was for many women the measure of a desirable landlord-tenant relationship. Toni (1.16, Newstart and low wage) described this as 'mutual respect', explaining that she prefers to get to know the landlord before deciding to rent a property long-term:

Toni: Because if – for me – if the owner is not interested in – and I think you can tell from looking at a place to some extent. If the owner has no interest in keeping their investment up [...] then I'm not interested in staying potentially long-term renting a place.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Toni: I think it's just mutual respect – it's my home, and it's their investment. I'll take care of their – I'll let them know if there's something which looks like – which isn't affecting my lifestyle – but it might affect their investment. So I've got a leaking

bathroom at the moment – which is not affecting my lifestyle – but it's certainly going to affect her investment.

Interviewer: How is it leaking?

Toni: The whole bathroom floor is leaking is what's going on we think – downstairs – and it's only occasionally, but – and the carpets smell... the carpets across this flat should have been cleaned three years ago and she never did, but anyway. So I go – so yes, for me that's the principle – my ethic – I guess, or one of my ways that I want a decent home. Yes, I'm renting it, but if I'm renting I need – if I'm giving them some money I want something – mutual respect basically.

If the tenant-landlord relationship is built upon 'mutual respect' then it can have significant benefit for older people, lessening their direct responsibility to maintain property condition. Gemma (1.9, Aged Pension) for instance prefers renting as she doesn't want responsibility for property maintenance and upkeep as she ages

Gemma: I don't mind at this stage in my life I would rather be renting.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Gemma: Because if I can get a good rental and a place that's handy to everything I need like transport, with good neighbours and that and have the peace and quiet to enjoy it, that's all I want. I don't want the responsibility for a house. If there's a plumbing problem I want to be able to ring up the agent and say blah, blah, blah or ring up the plumber and not have to deal with it.

Interviewer: So, you see a security for you as you get older particularly in being able to rent?

Gemma: Definitely, yeah.

Emerging from these accounts is a connection between performance of the 'good tenant' and senses of housing security. Property stewardship through reporting repairs was perceived to enhance tenure security through aligning the interests of tenant and landlord. There is a sense that this alignment might contribute to a form of *de facto* security. For some women there was strong evidence of this. Robin, for instance, secured a rental property, while negative evaluations of Sophie's late rent were offset through evidence of stewardship. However, it is important to note that this paired responsibility was only occasionally experienced. More often women reported a failure of landlords to maintain property. The economic vulnerability of women in this research consolidated this risk. While Toni spoke strongly about only wishing to rent properties long-term if the landlord continued to maintain the property, she was unable to afford any other properties in the region and so continued to live in this home with its leaking bathroom. She persisted in seeking repairs, part of what she deemed was her responsibility as a good tenant, but was not rewarded for this action.

### **Discussion – the good tenant**

In these first two sections we have identified two dimensions of the 'good tenant' from the perspective of a group of tenants who occupy a marginal position in the private rental market. First, the moral transactions involved in paying rent on time, and second, the stewardship of home. These performances have real and implied connections with tenure security. Paying rent on time is a pre-requisite for secure tenancy



in a market system, while stewardship of home was understood to intervene in *de facto* security – pre-disposing the landlord to support tenancy extensions, whilst also potentially mediating against rent increases. Paying rent on time was also connected with an assumed morality including ideas of fairness and self-responsibility. Living on low incomes these women had limited ability to service market rents, but emphasized the creative and frugal living practices that underpinned the performance of ‘good tenant’. Quotes like Lily’s, which started this section, witness the emergence of a discourse of personal responsibility, differentiating one’s consistent ability to pay from the relative carelessness of others for whom rent is not a first concern. The moralities of paying rent on time are further enhanced by the legal requirement in this jurisdiction that non-payment termination notices cannot be provided until rent is 14 days overdue. Tenants who pay rent ten days late, for instance, cannot be serviced a non-payment termination notice; however, continued late payment is likely to shape *de facto* security through framing the tenant as a ‘risky’ investment proposition.

These performances of the ‘good tenant’ parallel with those identified in previous research with landlords in the private and social housing sectors (Bate, 2018, 2020; Saugeres, 2000) and homeowners in mixed-tenure neighbourhoods (Cheshire *et al.*, 2010; Rosenblatt *et al.*, 2009). They demonstrate the powerful normalisation of middle-class homeowner ideals of home maintenance and care as well as the valuing of investment values. Women in this research expressed a belief that landlords wished for the rental property to be treated as ‘home’, a paradoxical expectation given the profound limitations on homemaking legislated in tenancy policy, including insecure tenure that diminishes the capacity of tenants to assume any long-term investment in home. Negotiating such paradoxes is the focus of our final section.

### ***Negotiating associated risks within tenant-landlord relations***

Lastly, we consider the emotional and financial risks embodied in performances of the ‘good tenant’. First, making home in a property regime that both limits material alterations, and is most likely short term, means renters bear the emotional risks of property stewardship and home making. Kylie’s (2.15, aged pension, low waged) long term rental history is emblematic of the experiences of many women in the study – regular mobility shaped by landlords’ needs and interests. Once the landlord decides the house is better served as a saleable asset, ‘you’ve just gotta suck it up and move on’:

Didn’t work out that way and stayed there for a few years, then by this time my finances were starting to dwindle a bit, and I didn’t need a place as big as that and I moved to another rental place. That one I did move out of voluntarily. But I moved to another one in [Sydney suburb] and I was there for a couple of years. The owner wanted it for his brother, then I moved to another one in [the same suburb] and the owner decided he wanted to sell it, and then I moved from there to [nearby Sydney suburb], I was there for six years, and then the owner decided he wanted to sell that. So, I mean you’ve got no choice. It’s - by this time I had finally retired from work and both my sons had moved to [region] for different reasons, and had their families down here, so I had grandchildren as well. So I left Sydney and came down here. And went into the place at [region]. Lo and behold, the same thing happened. It fell over after a couple of

years. The fellow wanted it for his mother. You've just gotta suck it up and move on. There's nothing you can do about it.

In the previous sections we explored Jenny's investment in the stewardship of home. She believed that these practices were a central part of being a 'good tenant' and connected them with security of tenancy. Here, however, we learn the limits of this practice. Despite assiduously practicing stewardship of her rental homes, Jenny like other participants was faced with numerous unexpected and undesired relocations when the landlord decided to repurpose or sell the property. Here she explains the significant physical and emotional labours that accompany remaking home every 6 to 12 months, at the end of a lease:

And once you know you're moving, all of a sudden that house is no longer your home. You get to the point of saying, okay, this house isn't mine – it's only a house where I'm living at the moment. It's not home anymore because you've pulled it apart, things are coming out of the cupboard. And straight away I've always got in the habit of disconnecting – I don't know what other word to say – disconnecting with that house. Because as I say, whenever you're there it's your home. So you get all the – like, in that instance where I was only there for 12 months in that other house, well by the time I finished unpacking after – say it took me – by the time you totally unpack and go to work, it probably takes you nearly two months. Because you're putting that in the cupboard, that in that cupboard, you're going to work. And you don't always feel like unpacking when you come home from work. So two months, and then in eight months' time you find out you've got to move. So you start up repacking again. So how long was I actually settled in that house? Really only six months I was settled that that was my home. And it's harder when it's a place you absolutely love. So you've got to just get stuck into it. And just forget about any of the emotional stuff. Put the emotional stuff away.

Short-term leases constantly undermine a feeling of being settled, a feeling exacerbated when an eviction notice is served. Jenny protects herself from the disruption of this process through emotionally 'disconnecting' with houses.

While performances of the 'good tenant' were often practiced in conjunction with recognition of the investment values embodied in a rental property, it was these investment values that often led to the loss of home. Despite her immaculate record as a tenant, Kelly (2.21, Aged Pension, low waged) was handed a no grounds eviction from her landlord, as the landlord had decided to let out the property on Airbnb: 'They took my place and they were charging, I think, \$260 a night or something stupid, for it, and all they did was put a lick of paint on it'. For Natalie (2.23, low waged), feelings of insecurity, driven through rental insecurity, were immediate in the interview. The day before, her landlord had started a discussion about selling one of their investment properties – and her rental is one of their most immediately saleable assets: a block with waterfront views. This put her back into the 'questionable zone':

Interviewer: Do you feel safe and secure in this place at the moment?

Natalie: I did until yesterday. She's moved back to her other property. She's looking at selling one of her properties and the agents have come and said, 'We can sell this one straightaway. You don't get a property like this very often.'

Interviewer: Definitely not, no.

Natalie: A wide, wide front, looking at the ocean where nothing ever can be built. So, she's gone away to think. And I'm quite aware that they may have to make the hard decision about moving. So, it's funny, as soon as I knew she was moving away from here, I went, 'Okay'. They will do everything to make it easy for us and they will give us an extended period of time to move. It won't be based on the amount that's mandated. But they'll say, 'When you find a new place is fine by us'. But, suddenly, my security – when I knew she was moving, I went, 'Okay. Now we're in the questionable zone again'.

In these examples, the landlords' investment values were prioritized over the right of tenants to make home. Here Kelly and Natalie expose the limits of making home in someone else's investment, where the exchange value of a housing asset immediately and profoundly disrupts the ability of tenants to feel at home. Renters, as 'unwilling subjects' in asset accumulation through property investment (Fields, 2017), bear the fraught emotional energies of home making with limited tenure security. Further, their resigned acceptance of the inevitable end of a relationship with a rental property, regardless of if they are good tenants, further valorises the investment value of rental properties over their status as home (Hulse & Milligan, 2014).

Second, although reporting repairs was core to performing the 'good tenant', many women perceived that maintenance and repairs ran the financial risk of a rent increase. Some had direct experience of this. For example, Tracey (1.17, Aged Pension) explained how she had requested substantial repairs for water damage – so extensive that she estimates she lost use of 40 percent of the property. The repair process was very slow, but once repairs were complete her rent increased substantially: from \$245 to \$300 per week, effectively pricing her out of the property. Similarly, Tess (1.4, Aged Pension) could no longer afford the apartment she had lived in for 21 years after the owners renovated the 'kitchen and the bathroom [which] were in a bit of a messy old state'. Participants responded to the risks embodied in property stewardship by attempting to 'fly under the radar', by intentionally not reporting repairs. Sophie (2.19, DSP), who has lived in the same rental for 15 years, explained how although her apartment was in dire need of repair, she was too afraid to tell her landlord in case he put the rent up. Reliant on the Disability Support Pension and with no way of increasing her income, Sophie would be forced to move if this occurred:

Sophie: Like, all these flats have been done up, but mine hasn't. If you saw my bathroom, mate, you'd die. I've got a little old sink sitting there and a big shower, that's it. And I had boxes in there. I've had 'em for 15 years. I haven't got a vanity, you know, like a nice unit or anything. I painted this place, you know? Like, I've done all the painting in here for the last 15 years. My landlord's had to do nothing. Not even change – change two washers, tap washers. All my taps are stuffed in here. I can hardly turn 'em off because all the – it's not just the washers now, it's the actual – they're old, they all need replacing. But I won't ask my landlord to do it. I won't even ask him to put a new screen on my door because I'm scared he's gonna put my rent up. That's bullshit.

Interviewer: It is, absolutely.

Sophie: You know? It's bullshit. You're too scared to ask your landlord to fix your house up because you're scared he's gonna say oh well, if I do that I'm gonna have to put your rent up. So, I don't. Unless like when the hot water heater blew up, he had to replace that. That's about the only thing he's had to replace. I'm one of his cheaper tenants, you know? [...] But, you know, he's a business man, too, and I'm very aware

of that. He's not a charity. And I'm aware that he wants to put the rent up, but he won't because of my situation. But that won't last very long. As I keep saying, that will not last forever. And what am I gonna do then?

Lily (2.20) similarly avoided asking for a new oven, despite the old one being broken. Reliant on the Aged Pension and with no other income source, she could not afford a rent increase: 'The oven doesn't work. But I can live without that. Because if he puts in a new oven, he'll put the rent up. So I'll make do without the oven [laugh]'. There was a sense that in not requesting repairs tenants avoided producing extra costs for the landlord and would therefore be *viewed* as a 'good tenant', thereby securing their tenancy. This is a paradoxical veneer that obscures the potential for longer term risks to tenant and landlord as we identify further below.

A second strategy for 'flying under the radar' was not contacting the real estate agent or landlord at the end of a lease. At the end of fixed terms, leases become 'periodic' or 'ongoing' leases. They have no fixed term and tenants can give 21 days' notice before vacating and landlords 90 days' notice of eviction. Staying silent meant that women were in a comparatively precarious position. However, women felt that it also avoided the risk of drawing the lease conditions and rent level to the attention of agents and landlords. Jenny's lease had recently lapsed and she described the anxiety of her new periodic lease: 'I don't want to open the email at night-time [in case of an eviction notice]. Because I don't want to know what's in it'. And 'Uncertainty is horrific'. She was also concerned about the risk of a rent increase, which many participants identified as a risk at the start of a new signed fixed-term agreement. Staying silent has become one strategy to manage the fear and uncertainty of this time, and her powerlessness in this situation. There is an erosion of the performance of the 'good tenant', as these practices seem to be futile.

Failure to report repairs risks a demise in property condition. There are risks to the tenant inhabiting the property as well as future tenants. However, there are also likely investment risks that impact landlords. In Australia and other homeowner societies where multiple ownership is politically and legislatively supported, small-scale landlordism plays an increasingly core role in housing provision (Hulse *et al.*, 2019b). At the same time, the financial benefits of multiple home ownership are positioned as an essential financial strategy to age well (Power, 2017a), and an important means of filial care as the welfare state shrinks (Nethercote, 2019, and see also Power & Gillon, 2019). Demising property quality therefore brings potential risks to broader investment strategies, especially for small-scale landlords. These risks raise questions about the needs and interests of landlords, and whether they intersect or diverge from the interests that tenants assume they have (and see Fields, 2017; Soaita *et al.*, 2017, on the divergent interests of different landlord groups).

## Discussion and conclusions

In this paper we have examined how renters in the private rental sector conceptualize and perform the 'good tenant'. We have focused on the experiences and practices of a group who are at the economic margins of the private rental sector: a focus enabling insight into the interconnections between performances of the 'good tenant',

tenure security, and risk. In this final discussion and conclusion, we first overview what it means to perform the ‘good tenant’, before reflecting on the broader contributions that emerge from these insights.

First, ability to pay rent was identified as core to the performance of the ‘good tenant’. For the older women in this research that was not always straightforward. Paying rent often involved personal sacrifice: strict budgeting, living modestly, and forgoing perceived luxuries like eating out. It therefore involved more than financial and legal transactions; paying rent on time had moral dimensions, indicating a tenant who was both careful and responsible. Property stewardship was the second dimension of the ‘good tenant’. Participants directly and indirectly referenced the moral norms of middle-class ownership, including making ‘home’ and reporting on property condition and repairs. Participant discussions of paying rent and property stewardship draw upon discourses of self-responsibility and care. They demonstrate, as we noted in our earlier discussion, the powerful normalisation of middle-class ideals of home maintenance and care as well as the valuing of investment values. Indeed, despite frustrations about limited tenure security and property quality, on the whole renters expressed respect for the investment value of their (temporary) home. For instance, acknowledgements that rent should be ‘fair’ to both parties reinforces investor landlordism, as does the willingness to report repairs in order to maintain investor value (Hulse *et al.*, 2019b; Nethercote, 2019). As Cheshire *et al.* (2010, p. 2608) identify in their study of homeowners, a good renter ‘*lived up to*, or even exceeded, [the] standards [of middle class homeownership] in spite of their housing tenure status’.

A second contribution of this paper is identifying intersections between performances of the ‘good tenant’ and tenure security. Through performing the good tenant women perceived support from their landlord, thereby securing their tenancy. Some women appeared to be rewarded for these practices (such as Sophie, whose property stewardship was seemingly recompensed with stable rent). This underscores the important role of landlord discretion and ‘care’ in achieving tenure security. However, the necessarily individualised and insecure nature of these relations produces a paradoxical set of risks within the landlord-tenant relation. The first dimension of these risks impacts renters. First are a set of emotional risks. The ‘good tenant’ identifies with and cares for a home as if it were their own, but with no guarantee of tenure security. The second set of risks are financial. Over time, as property markets grow, well maintained properties are more likely to attract rising rents. This is a particular risk for this group of low-income renters who have limited ability to service escalating rents.

This interplay between the ‘good tenant’ and tenure security also drives paradoxical risks to the landlord. While the ‘good tenant’ was someone who notified the landlord of repairs, many held concerns that the cost of repairs would lead to rent increases. This is not just a concern held by low income renters. A recent survey found that 68% of Australian renters across all demographics were concerned that repair requests would drive rent up and 44% were concerned about the risk of eviction (Choice *et al.*, 2018). Tenants in this study thus paradoxically framed staying silent on repairs as being ‘good’ through being acquiescent and easy to manage – a

sense that in *this* property everything is under control. By modifying household practices and ignoring the overall deterioration of housing stock, rather than asking for replacements and repairs, renters widely believed they could better achieve tenure security. This not only drives unsuitable living conditions, it also has the potential to diminish the investment value of rental properties. These investment risks suggest another way of conceptualising the practice of ‘flying under the radar’, opening the possibility of identifying these paradoxical performances of the ‘good tenant’ as moments of resistance to a property regime organised around investor values: a means of securing tenancies through practices that engender landlord risk.

The paradoxical intersections between the ‘good tenant’ and tenure security bring a new perspective to public discourses framing renters as individually less committed to home. Instead we show that limited *de jure* property rights through the practice of short term (6–12 month) leases drives paradoxical practices: the stewardship of home *and* the decision to not report repairs, as a way of managing legal insecurity. Through this we draw connections between the limited security and homemaking rights of tenants (Easthope, 2014; Hulse & Milligan, 2014) and the performance of the good tenant, showing that security of tenure is connected with a confusing set of divergent motivations: the fear of not doing the right thing (failing to report repairs), and the fear of doing the wrong thing (reporting repairs). For long-term renters these practices are especially fraught. The performance of the good tenant is core for maintaining a favourable tenant record. Home making on your terms, rather than the terms of the lease, risks a poor rental reference – and consequently long-term market-based housing insecurity through a tarnished rental history (Power, 2017b). Conversely, through doing the ‘right’ thing renters risk rent increases but can leverage their rental history to help secure their next property (Bate, 2020). As such, these moral practices are acutely significant – especially for renters at the economic margins of the private market and who have limited financial capacity to change their living conditions.

Renters are a core dimension of the economies and cultures of housing investment and valued as a node of financial exchange (Fields, 2017; Hulse *et al.*, 2019b). However, framing the landlord-tenant relationship on purely financial terms risks renters being forgotten as *people*, and houses being forgotten as *homes* (Power & Gillon, 2019; Power & Mee, 2020). The paradoxical risks brought through performances of the ‘good tenant’, detailed in this paper, are evidence of this and indicative of the need for a new set of ethics and policies to frame landlord-tenant relations. Indeed, they can be a small foundation for initiating this change. Public discourses frame tenants as a risk to landlord and property investment values. The research in this paper identifies how perceptions of landlord values (e.g. for low maintenance costs and which are evidenced in reticence to undertake repairs and rents that increase following repairs) can drive a perverse set of practices suggestive of gradual property degradation over time. These practices evidence the landlord as risk to both tenant and property. In this space there is opportunity to revisit private rental relations through attending to the common sets of interests and concerns that might more productively rework tenant – landlord relations. As many of our participants discussed, mutual respect between tenant and landlord would make the emotional

labour of home worthwhile, and support the performance of the ‘good tenant’ through increased *de jure* and *de facto* security. There are also benefits to landlords who gain stable rent and a property steward.

## Note

1. Newstart was renamed ‘JobSeeker Payment’ on March 20 2020.

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