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Choice within limits. How the institutional context of forced relocation affects tenants' housing searches and choice strategies

Hanneke Posthumus¹ and Reinout Kleinhans²

¹ *Corresponding author* – University of Utrecht, Urban and Regional research centre Utrecht (URU), PO Box 80115, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. Email: h.posthumus@uu.nl

² Delft University of Technology, Department OTB - Research for the Built Environment, PO Box 5030, 2600 GA Delft, The Netherlands. Email: R.J.Kleinhans@tudelft.nl

Abstract

Whether renewal-induced relocations have a positive or a negative impact on displaced tenants is hotly debated on both sides of the Atlantic. In response, scientists have examined the outcomes of forced relocations and shown that they can be both negative and positive. However, the choice processes and strategies underlying these mixed outcomes have received much less attention in academia. We therefore examined how the institutional context of forced relocation affects displaced tenants' choice processes and strategies. The results of a qualitative analysis of interviews with 144 displaced tenants from five Dutch cities show that they can be considered active agents because they adopt different choice strategies. Nevertheless, the choice strategies and experienced freedom of choice differed between tenants who were confronted with different relocation regulations. The limits imposed by and the opportunities of institutional contexts steer the choice processes and strategies of displaced tenants, but are by no means deterministic.

Keywords: choice strategies, forced relocation, relocation process, The Netherlands, urban renewal

1. Introduction

In recent decades, many US and European cities have undergone substantial neighbourhood renewal programmes aimed at improving the prospects of deprived neighbourhoods and their residents (e.g. Andersson & Musterd, 2005; Popkin et al., 2004). Until quite recently, thousands of Dutch social tenants were forcibly relocated every year from housing that was slated for demolition. Irrespective of what they wanted, they had to move. This form of displacement is an essential part of Dutch urban restructuring policy in post-war neighbourhoods (see e.g. Bolt & Van Kempen, 2010; Kleinhans & Van der Laan Bouma-Doff, 2008; Kleinhans & Varady, 2011). As the majority of the replacement housing units are more expensive rental or owner-occupied units, many of the displaced tenants have to find somewhere else to live.

From the beginning of urban restructuring, the sheer number of displaced tenants has raised concerns about the justification of forced relocation. The policy discourse tends to emphasize goals that either benefit restructured neighbourhoods, individual residents that stay in or move to these neighbourhoods, or both. Common goals are increasing the variety of residential environments in early post-war neighbourhoods, improving the attractiveness of the housing stock, strengthen the housing market position, and promoting the upward social mobility of individual residents. These goals reflect wider public interests. However, there are many local variations and additional goals (for an overview, see Bolt et al., 2009; Bolt & Van Kempen, 2010; Kleinhans, 2012). Strikingly, social justice issues have almost exclusively been discussed in terms of the compensation mechanisms for households facing forced relocation (see below). In cases where this justice issue was raised on more fundamental grounds, i.e. whether local authorities and housing associations should restructure at all if forced relocation is necessary, policymakers have been 'cherry-picking' from the widely available relocation research outcomes to support their justifications. The picked findings refer to positive research outcomes regarding the new housing situation. It is important to note that the ability to 'cherry-pick' has been facilitated by a strong ambivalence in research outcomes, which show both negative and positive implications for forced relocatees. The reasons for these phenomena are explained elsewhere (Kleinhans, 2012, p.304-305). We will return to the outcomes of earlier research.

The relocation process of displaced tenants is quite different from that of regular house-seekers in the social-rented sector. While the initial trigger is a top-

down force – a pending eviction notice from the housing association (HA) – legal compensatory mechanisms such as the priority status may strongly favour their position on the housing market above regular, non-urgent house-seekers. In addition, the regulations that apply to the compensation mechanisms also affect displaced tenants' choice processes and decisions.

Whether the specific situation of displaced tenants affects their housing search in a primarily positive or negative way is much debated in both the USA and many European countries. Previous studies on forced relocation mainly focused on the outcomes of the relocation process defined in terms of, for example, housing and neighbourhood quality (compared to the pre-relocation situation), satisfaction, social ties and utility costs. The results of these studies are mixed: both positive and negative relocation outcomes have been found (e.g. Goetz, 2002; Kleinhans, 2003; Oakley & Burchfield, 2009; Varady & Walker, 2000).

However, the choice processes underlying displaced tenants' relocation outcomes as well as their personal experiences of these processes are still under-examined (see Bolt et al., 2009, p. 515; Clampet-Lundquist, 2004, p. 422; Joseph & Chaskin, 2012, p. 380; Kleit & Galvez, 2011, p. 378). To date, most studies have focused on relocation outcomes and used quantitative techniques with panel data. Research that focussed on the relocation process itself is predominantly qualitative, small scale and mostly limited to tenants' experiences with information, counselling and communication from their HA. Hence, both types of studies fail to properly address complex trade-offs made by residents in certain institutional contexts. Finally, some research posits a one-sided image of displaced tenants as victims with little room to manoeuvre within the institutional and housing market context of relocation. Several qualitative American studies, however, provide indications that this perception is obsolete, or at least incomplete. Even in very constraining circumstances, displaced tenants have been found to be active agents who make different decisions in their relocation process (Briggs et al., 2010; Manzo et al., 2008; Smith, 2002). Thus, while the institutional context does shape their trade-offs and decisions, it is not clear from the outset how this unfolds in detail. This also holds for the Dutch institutional context; qualitative studies on forced relocations have so far mostly ignored this issue.

Therefore, this paper aims to reveal how the specific context and regulations of forced relocation in Dutch urban restructuring affect displaced tenants' choice processes and strategies. Here, context and regulations refer to the availability of social-rented housing and the formal regulations attached to its allocation to displaced

tenants. Specific attention is paid to the influence of two different institutional contexts with which Dutch displaced tenants are generally confronted: the context in which they are required to look for alternatives themselves, and the context in which they have to choose between different options that are directly offered by their HAs.

While tenants who are required to apply for properties themselves are allowed to choose from all available properties for which they are eligible (see Section 3.1), those who are offered homes by their HAs generally have to pick one of (at most) three consecutive offers. Thus, both the number of potential alternatives and the tenants' responsibility are greater when they are required to conduct their own search. These differences are likely to shape displaced tenants' choice processes and strategies. They may also affect the degree to which tenants feel in control, free to choose, and guided in their choice process. It is of key importance to get insight in these various influences to understand how relocation processes can best be organized.

To conduct this type of analysis, we drew from a Dutch dataset of 144 in-depth interviews with displaced tenants in five cities. The interviews focussed on the respondents' perceived opportunities and constraints, details of their choice processes and decisions.

2. Theoretical background

Many residential moves can be related to events in life course trajectories, such as changes in household composition or socioeconomic situation (education, income, job), or in residents' local environments (e.g. Clark et al., 2006; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). An important trigger is an increase in residential stress due to a mismatch between a household's residential needs and preferences and the characteristics of its current housing and neighbourhood (e.g. Lu, 1998, p. 1474; Speare et al., 1975).

Traditional models of residential mobility often presuppose that a certain adjustment will occur if satisfaction with the housing situation falls below a certain level or threshold value. Popp's theoretical approach (1976) was one of the first to explicitly incorporate various involuntary moving reasons, such as fire, divorce, demolition or a sudden decrease in income. He also rightly acknowledged that households can react in various ways to this external trigger. His approach is furthermore relevant in its recognition that households in buildings slated for

demolition may not always have to find alternative housing themselves, but may be offered a new home by a housing provider. Moreover, Popp also pointed out that people may not actually experience a forced move as such, because they already have a strong desire to move (ibid., pp. 302-304).

Although Popp raised very relevant issues in the context of forced relocation, his approach may be critiqued because the word 'choice' is somewhat misleading in relation to forced relocations (Goetz, 2002, 2003): the initial decision to move is not made by households themselves but by the owner of the building, usually an HA, a social housing landlord or a public housing authority. Thus, the choice of a new home is tied to top-down pressure to relocate. However, Popp's notion that relocation resulting from the impending demolition of one's building may not be experienced as an involuntary matter has been confirmed. Residents who had intended to move before they received an eviction notice ahead of the planned demolition of their homes may react different than residents who had no intention to leave (Kleinhans, 2003).

Like regular movers, forced movers have to deal with certain opportunities and constraints on the housing market, taking into account their own resources, preferences and restrictions (Joseph & Chaskin, 2012; Kleit & Galvez, 2011; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999;). How this influences their choice process is unclear. As mentioned, through the dominance of quantitative research on housing mobility, including forced relocation, "we tend to know quite a bit about outcomes and precious little about process" (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004, p. 422). In the remainder of this section, we review evidence from the few qualitative studies that have looked at displaced tenants' experiences of the choice process.

In their housing search, displaced tenants have been found to strive to satisfy various preferences. According to Joseph and Chaskin (2012, p. 381), "The most consistent findings from existing research on involuntary relocation are that public housing residents' choices from among their relocation options are driven strongly by attachment to place and attachment to neighbors" (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; ; Gibson 2007; Kleit & Galvez 2011; Kleit & Manzo 2004; Manzo et al., 2008; Vale, 1997; Venkatesh, 2002). Other place-based factors also play an important role in the process of choosing a new location. The most important factors are improved neighbourhood quality and safety, and the quality of schools, shopping facilities and transport (Clampet-Lundquist 2004; Comey, 2007; Gibson, 2007; Kleit & Manzo, 2004).

However, satisfying certain preferences has to be accomplished within overriding constraints that are beyond tenants' sphere of influence. Time constraints and the limited availability of affordable housing can create a situation in which tenants are more concerned about finding an acceptable unit in a neighbourhood that meets their minimum community standards for safety and basic amenities, than about moving to a neighbourhood that might offer improved amenities and economic opportunity (Manzo et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Turner et al., 2000;). Relocatees have to explore their options and choose a unit within a limited period of time (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Smith, 2002; Venkatesh, 2002). It was found stressful to find these options when "in many areas an already inadequate supply of affordable housing lessened availability" (Smith, 2002, p. 21). The 'ticking clock' was also found to be a source of stress: 'the longer a person searched without satisfactory results, the more nervous they became and the more willing they were to settle for any available unit' (ibid., p. 23). Furthermore, the flood of displaced tenants onto the market at the same time increased the competition for units. Some Dutch qualitative studies showed that several displaced tenants had accepted the first real option, fearing competition from other displaced tenants (Kleinhans, 2003; Posthumus et al., 2011; Van der Zwaard & De Wilde, 2008). They had decided to abandon their preferences because they feared losing out to other displaced tenants and ending up homeless.

Cole and Flint (2007) suggested that displaced tenants also limit their own options beyond constraints imposed by institutional factors. They found that "many residents have a strong desire for very local moves, and often confine the locations they will consider being relocated in to very narrowly defined areas adjacent to their existing neighbourhoods which are subject to clearance" (ibid. p. 19). Thus, limited housing availability may sometimes be more a function of search area than of actual availability of vacant units. Yet the simultaneous regeneration of several areas that are close to each other increases the difficulty of offering enough choice to everyone who needs to be relocated. Focus group research in Glasgow revealed:

"... how complicated the issue of choice is within a clearance situation: several participants said they had felt 'forced' to accept the house they were now in, for fear of not getting a better offer, because they felt under pressure to make a decision, and through not having several alternatives to consider simultaneously." (GoWell, 2011, p. 37)

Displaced tenants' relocation choices have also been found to be strongly mediated by the relocation staff of housing authorities. With reference to Comey (2007) and Goetz (2003), Joseph and Chaskin (2012, p. 382) reported "evidence of pressure from relocation staff for residents to select a relocation destination from among readily available options, rather than more fully exploring possibilities throughout the metropolitan area".

3. Specific institutional context of forced relocation in the Netherlands

Since Dutch displaced tenants have a lower average income than other Dutch tenants in the social-rented sector (Bolt et al., 2009), they generally have to move to another social-rented property. To understand their relocation processes and choice strategies, it is therefore crucial to take into account the allocation and availability of social-rented housing.

3.1 Allocation of social-rented housing

Although allocation policies are framed differently across cities in the Netherlands (for a full overview, see Kleinhans & Van der Laan Bouma-Doff, 2008; Van Daalen & Van der Land, 2008), displaced tenants are legally entitled to various forms of compensation: another property comparable in size, type and tenure; a reasonable allowance to cover their relocation expenses; and additional assistance from the HA, such as help with their search for suitable housing. HAs are allowed to relocate tenants only if these requirements are met.

The most common allocation policy in the Netherlands is the choice-based letting system, or the 'Delft model' (Kullberg, 2002). This model, which is implemented in four of our five research cities (The Hague, Ede, Groningen, Rotterdam), requires house-seekers to actively respond to weekly/biweekly listings of vacant social housing units. To give displaced tenants a head start, they are given priority over regular house-seekers in the local social housing sector. In contrast to regular house-seekers, displaced tenants do not need to have been on the waiting list for the longest to obtain a new home, as they have priority status. However, they still have to meet the eligibility criteria, which usually concern household size, age and income. In addition, their priority status is generally valid only for a certain time and for specific types of

housing. If several house-seekers with priority status apply for the same property, it is allocated to the applicant whose priority status certificate has been extended or expires the soonest.

The only city that does not use choice-based letting is Breda, which employs an 'option model'.¹ In this model, households that have to move can indicate to what type of social-rented housing (number of rooms etc.) and to which neighbourhood they want to move. There are no restrictions imposed on their preferences. The HA will then offer a property that matches the options indicated as soon as one becomes available. Whereas tenants displaced from buildings that are due to be demolished are always prioritized over regular house-seekers, if they turn down three properties in a row they lose their priority status.

Although Breda is the only city to use the option model to allocate its social-rented housing, the other four cities sometimes use direct mediation. That is, they allocate housing to tenants who have not been able to find a new home within the allowed search period, and to tenants who are expected to experience difficulties in finding one themselves (e.g. elderly people). Tenants who are subject to direct mediation are offered, like tenants who are subject to the option model, a limited number of consecutive offers (usually three). As such, their institutional search context is comparable to that of tenants who are subject to the option model.

3.2 Availability of social-rented housing

The Netherlands has a relatively large share of social-rented housing. In the five cities under discussion, on average 36.2% (CBS, 2010) of housing units are part of the social-rented stock. As a result, the number of units available to displaced tenants is larger than in many other countries. However, this does not mean that Dutch displaced tenants do not experience any constraints. Social-rented housing units are not evenly distributed over neighbourhoods. The turnover rate of such units also differs considerably between neighbourhoods. Moreover, urban restructuring has already led to a much tighter balance between affordable rental housing and the primary target group in both Breda and The Hague (Dol & Kleinhans, 2012). This means that all vacant properties are in strong demand from both regular house-seekers and tenants who are facing relocation.

¹ Housing associations in Breda have recently switched from the option model to a choice-based letting system. Our data were gathered while the option model was still in use.

Table 1 shows the size of the housing stock and the tenure distribution (2011) for each of the five cities. There are strong differences between the cities, with the social housing stock ranging from 23 per cent in Ede to 47 per cent in Rotterdam, i.e. more than double the share of Ede. In terms of owner-occupied housing, the picture is the reverse, with a share of 65 per cent in Ede and 33 per cent in Rotterdam. However, the size of the social housing stock is only a rough indicator for relocation opportunities. Pressure on the local housing market, and, in particular the demand for social housing, is a much more robust indicator, as the overwhelming majority of relocatees have to rely on the social housing sector for their relocation opportunities. Dol and Kleinhans (2012) have shown that the balance of the available social housing and the number of eligible households is much tighter in Breda and The Hague than in Rotterdam, where the stock still exceeds the number of eligible households. The same applies to housing market pressure, which is lower in Rotterdam than in Breda, the Hague (Dol & Kleinhans, 2012) Groningen used to have a relatively relaxed housing market, but is experiencing increasing market pressure since 2008 (City of Groningen et al. 2008).

The economic crisis has an ambivalent impact on the pressure on the social rented housing market. On the one hand, the number of relocatees has significantly decreased as many restructuring projects have been postponed or even cancelled. This means that the share of relocatees as part of the larger pool of active house seekers has decreased. On the other hand, the crisis has increased the demand for social housing in all five cities, because of job redundancies, the associated income losses and general uncertainty. At the same time, households within the social housing sector have postponed moving plans, which has substantially decreased the number of vacancies in the social sector. The overall result is a significantly increased pressure on the social housing market since 2009.

Table 1: Housing stock and tenure distribution in the studied cities, 2011

2011	Breda		Den Haag		Ede		Groningen		Rotterdam	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Owner-occupied housing	41888	54	102497	43	27213	65	34837	41	98673	33
Social housing	23884	31	79796	33	9505	23	35267	41	141179	47
Private rented housing	11005	14	51681	22	4652	11	15495	18	53120	18
Tenure unknown	205	0	5171	2	513	1	185	0	4765	2
Total housing stock	76982	100	239145	100	41883	100	85784	100	297737	100

Source: Statistics Netherlands

4. Data and methods

Our dataset comprised 144 in-depth interviews with displaced tenants in Rotterdam, The Hague, Breda, Groningen and Ede. Rotterdam and The Hague are the second and the third largest city in the Netherlands, respectively. The other three are mid-sized cities. The respondents were recruited through a survey among a much larger group of displaced tenants in these cities (for an overview, see Posthumus et al., forthcoming)². The survey was primarily aimed at collecting data on the previous and current homes and neighbourhoods of displaced tenants.

In the second wave of the research, we contacted respondents who had indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. The interviewers used a semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions covering a range of topics related to perceived opportunities and limitations with regard to the search for a new home, the nature of and satisfaction with relocation counselling, pre-move preferences for housing and neighbourhood characteristics, strategies used in the choice process, length of the choice process and satisfaction with the new situation.

The interviews were conducted by phone and lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. They were recorded digitally and fully transcribed. The background characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 2. Our analysis was based on the questions concerning perceived opportunities and constraints encountered during the housing search, and the strategies used in the relocation process.

The analysis was both deductive and inductive. We initially coded for the general topics and questions represented in the interview schedule. Throughout the coding process, we also identified codes/sub-codes that we had not anticipated. This inductive analysis revealed some of the issues described further on in this paper.

² The data in this paper are part of the data collection in the ‘Spillover effects of urban renewal’ research project implemented by the Nicis Institute, Corpovenista, Utrecht University, TU Delft and the municipalities of Breda, Ede, Groningen, Rotterdam and The Hague.

Table 2: Interviewees' background characteristics

	Number
Allocation system	
Choice-based letting	88
Option model	16
Direct mediation ³	40
City	
Breda	16
The Hague	51
Ede	22
Groningen	29
Rotterdam	26
Ethnicity	
Dutch	103
Non-western minority	29
Western minority	6
Unknown	6
Net monthly household income	
€0–1100	54
€1100–1700	46
Over €1700	21
Unknown	23
Age	
18–39	48
40–64	74
65 or over	17
Unknown	5
Educational level	
Low (none, primary school, secondary/lower secondary vocational training or lower tertiary vocational training)	50
Average (tertiary vocational training or higher secondary training)	52
High (higher professional education, polytechnic or university)	36
Unknown	6

³ 17 of these residents were originally required to conduct their own housing search. Since they had not found new homes within nine months after receiving their priority status, they were offered direct mediation.

5. Results

We first present the relation between contextual factors and the choice process of respondents who were offered housing units by their HAs (i.e. tenants subject to the option model and direct mediation). We then do the same for respondents who were responsible for their own housing search (i.e. tenants subject to choice-based letting).

Apart from the institutional context, we also have information about the local housing market context in which residents had to conduct their search as well as their socioeconomic characteristics (education level, income, ethnic background, age). When differences were observed in the choice processes and strategies of respondents with different backgrounds or from different cities, these will also be discussed.

5.1 *When housing associations offer units*

When tenants are subject to the option model or direct mediation they are offered housing units by their HAs. They have fewer alternatives than residents who are subject to choice-based letting and who have to conduct their own search: they cannot apply for many properties, but have to pick one from at most three offers from their HAs. Our respondents had also experienced this. Those who had been offered housing by their HAs were much more likely to complain about the limited number of alternatives available to them. One respondent referred as follows to the limited number of alternatives in the option model:

“They only offer you three places, so you have little choice. They offer you a place and if you refuse it, you have one option less. You can only refuse three offers. And when you’ve refused three, you have to sort everything out by yourself.” (Breda, male, 61 years)

When tenants are offered housing units by their HAs, the offers are not only limited in number but also presented one by one. This creates a dilemma: will the next offer be better, or is the current one the most sensible choice? It is very difficult if not impossible to compare different options beforehand. Many of our respondents had struggled with this:

“After three, four months they offered me a place. I was doubtful, but I took a look anyway. Then they told me: ‘If you refuse this and we find another one and you liked the first one better after all, it’ll be too late. You’d better take the first one you like. If you refuse three, you’ll have to accept the fourth one.’ So I figured I should go for it anyway.” (Groningen, female, 23 years)

Research in Glasgow revealed a similar dilemma: several focus group participants said that they “had felt ‘forced’ to accept the house they were now in, for fear of not getting a better offer, because they felt under pressure to make a decision, and through not having several alternatives to consider simultaneously” (GoWell, 2011, p. 37). The above quote also provides evidence of a kind of ‘soft’ pressure roughly in line with reports on pressure from US relocation staff on tenants to select a relocation destination from among readily available options (Comey, 2007; Goetz, 2003). In response to this dilemma, many of our respondents had decided to compromise:

“I got an offer for a completely dilapidated house that I didn’t like. But the housing association told me it was either this place – a single-family house – or a flat. I decided to take the house, but it was hard to get used to it over here. It really wasn’t my first choice, but as I had to move soon, I had to make a quick decision. Everything went way too fast for my liking.” (Ede, Female, 43 years)

However, not all respondents had felt restricted by the limited options and had had to compromise. In fact, several respondents had actually liked one of the offers and had been happy to accept it:

“I accepted the very first place I was offered. It was a lovely small place with a nice view. So I took it.” (Groningen, female, 56 years)

A very small number of respondents had refused all offers they did not like. Many of them had been offered more and better homes than they were entitled to, and were generally rather satisfied with the offer they had accepted. According to these tenants, they had had the right to refuse more offers because they had perceived their forced relocation in itself as a big enough sacrifice. In their eyes, it was unjust to require tenants who were being forced to relocate to make any compromises (see also Kleinhans & Kruythoff, 2002; Van der Zwaard & De Wilde, 2008). Instead, they believed

that the HA should stretch their options to find a satisfactory alternative, without imposing any restrictions.

5.2 When tenants conduct their own search

Tenants who are subject to choice-based letting are responsible for finding alternative housing by reacting to the advertised vacancies. This gives them both greater responsibility and more alternatives than tenants who are offered new homes by their HAs. To give displaced tenants a head start, they receive a special status by which they get priority over regular house-seekers. However, certain restrictions are attached to this status. In addition, the limited availability of social rented housing may restrict displaced tenants' chances of finding a suitable new home. In the following, we examine how these contextual factors affect displaced tenants' choice processes and strategies.

5.2.1 Priority status

To accelerate their relocation process, displaced tenants are given priority status (see Section 3). Because this status puts these tenants at the top of the waiting list, it would seem that housing availability is hardly an issue for them. However, the reality is different, as several respondents had experienced competition, not from regular house-seekers, but from other displaced tenants with priority status.⁴ This had sometimes resulted in a choice strategy that involved making compromises. Respondents had been willing to settle for a suboptimal housing situation because they were afraid that, since so many others also had to relocate, only worse alternatives would become available:

“I didn't really have much choice. There was a housing shortage because several neighbourhoods were being torn down. Blocks with 11, maybe even 13 floors with 14 flats per floor were demolished. So I figured, let's go right away, before everybody else does. I wouldn't have picked this neighbourhood had I been free to choose. But at least I've got something reasonable, while had I waited I might have got something really bad.” (Ede, female, 54 years)

⁴ When multiple priority holders apply for the same property, the holder whose priority status was issued first will be allotted the property. If priority statuses were issued on the same day, the holder with the longest duration of stay in the previous home is allotted the property.

5.2.2 Options profile

Apart from the priority status itself, the restrictions that are attached to this priority status may also influence displaced tenants' choice processes and strategies. One important restriction is that the status applies only to a certain range of housing units. In general, these are units that are in several respects comparable to those that are to be demolished. This comparability criterion mostly applies to the type, the number of rooms (the maximum number depends on the number of household members) and sometimes the rent.

Most of our respondents recognized that this had limited their options. They were also aware that it had prevented them from improving their housing situation, particularly with respect to housing type and number of rooms. Most respondents had taken these restrictions for granted. In order to find a home that suited their options, some had compromised, for example with regard to their neighbourhoods:

“I'd have preferred to live in a completely different neighbourhood, but there're no flats over there, so that made the decision easier. There are only two blocks of flats in Ede with a good reputation, and that's this one and the one right across the street.” (Ede, female, 30 years)

In contrast to these tenants, a surprisingly large share of our respondents stated that their HA had not restricted their choices. Almost half of them did so, and many more did so than when tenants had been offered housing by their HAs. Most of these tenants said that they had been able to satisfy their preferences:

“All the things we wanted are here. A garden, a bath, a fireplace, and just before we arrived a new kitchen was fitted. The bathroom looked nice. Another advantage is the neighbourhood: it's exactly where we wanted to live. This place provides us with even more than we wanted. It really does satisfy all our preferences.” (Ede, male, 31 years)

These positive experiences were more often named by three categories of respondents. Respondents from the city of Groningen relatively often indicated that it had been easy to find a satisfactory dwelling within a short period of time. This may well be explained by the relatively large social housing market in this city (see Table 1). In the city with an even bigger share of social housing, i.e. Rotterdam, respondents did

however not indicate that it was easier to find a nice dwelling. This might be related to differences in the quality of the housing stock in the two cities. While it may have been easy to find another dwelling in Rotterdam, it may not yet have been so easy to find a good-quality dwelling in relatively prosperous and popular neighbourhoods. Compared to Rotterdam, Groningen has fewer neighbourhoods with substantial clustering and numbers of social rented housing.

Higher educated respondents also experienced more opportunities. Compared to respondents with lower educational levels they experienced considerably more often sufficient choice. The opposite was true for non-western respondents: compared to native respondents they indicated considerably more often to be severely constrained than to have plenty of opportunities.

The experiences of respondents with different income levels did not differ a lot. This may be explained by the Dutch system of rent allowances. The actual rent (i.e. the rent price minus the rent allowance) that residents have to pay is dependent on their income. Residents with a lower income get a higher allowance than residents with a higher income. Consequently, for low-income households the rent allowance levels out net increases in rent price due to relocation, whereas higher income household benefit far less or not at all from this rent allowance effect (see also Kleinhans, 2003; Kleinhans & Van der Laan Bouma-Doff, 2008).

Some of our respondents did not feel as if they were not constrained, but had tried to overcome the constraints attached to their priority status in order to take full advantage of the situation. They can be considered 'dispositional optimists' who generally, and especially in the face of difficult circumstances (such as relocation contexts), actively seek to exploit their opportunities to achieve outcomes that are as beneficial as possible (see also Ekström, 1994; Kleinhans, 2003; Scheier & Carver 1987). This strategy was much more common among indigenous Dutch and higher educated respondents. The insights and skills that are needed to conduct such calculating behaviour seem to be more readily available among these residents. Another striking difference, is that those who had been subject to choice-based letting were much more likely to behave as dispositional optimists than those who had been offered dwellings. Because choice-based letting forces tenants to take a more active role in their relocation process, they are stimulated to consider different courses of action, which apparently include the possibility to stretch the regulations. This tactic had often been successful: many displaced tenants had been able to find dwellings for which they were not formally eligible. The conscious striving for beneficial outcomes by

certain tenants who had been subject to choice-based letting is illustrated by the following quote:

“I filtered properties on location, the environment, the size of the place. [...] Getting the maximum out of it.” (Groningen, male, 35 years).

Several respondents had seen their forced relocation as a chance to improve their housing situation, because they had already been considering or planning a move. The perception of forced relocation as a springboard for improvement of the housing situation is not necessarily based on push factors (such as a high level of dissatisfaction); it can be based on the awareness that the priority status strongly improves one’s chances of moving to a better property and/or neighbourhood. Tenants who revealed this attitude had already become accustomed to the idea that they wanted to move, with or without the external trigger. Earlier research has also shown that the preparedness for change heavily influence movers’ opinions of the relocation process and changed housing situation (Fried, 1963, 1967; GoWell, 2011; Kleinhans, 2003; Kleinhans & Van der Laan Bouma-Doff, 2008; Kleit & Manzo, 2006).

An interesting final group of respondents had experienced restrictions imposed by their HAs but had refused to abide by the rules. To them, the simple fact that an external actor had required them to leave justified proper compensation without any *a priori* limitations on housing type, size or location (see also Kleinhans & Kruythoff, 2002; Van der Zwaard & De Wilde, 2008). Although we encountered this line of reasoning among respondents who had been subject to the option model, it prevailed among those who had dealt with a choice-based letting system. Hence, choice-based letting had stimulated certain tenants not only to make the most of their available opportunities, but also to refuse to abide by the rules. The following is an exemplary quote:

“The housing association wants to demolish my house, so if they want me out then they’ll have to get me a new house and make sure I’m satisfied with it.” (Rotterdam, female, 61 years).

Although these respondents did not have the law on their side (HAs are legally allowed to relocate their tenants in the case of restructuring), many had been able to stretch the regulations and gain access to housing to which they were not formally entitled.

5.2.3 Time restrictions

The priority status of a displaced tenant is also subject to a time restriction: it is usually valid for only one year. However, this is not always regarded as a hard restriction. To start with, a small group of respondents had not perceived any time pressure because they believed that their forced move justified a longer search period. In addition, a much larger group of respondents had not perceived time pressure because they had quickly found a new home that satisfied their preferences.

Other respondents had felt the time pressure much more strongly. Especially those who had not found a new home within a short period had often adjusted their demands as the expiration date of their priority status approached. They had started to compromise as they did not dare to gamble on an extension of their priority status:

“First you look for very specific properties; there’s no need to expand your search area. As long as places are available in certain neighbourhoods, you don’t have to opt for less desirable neighbourhoods. However, if the opportunities because of finances or the availability of properties are exhausted, you have to expand your search area. So, you also start to consider neighbourhoods that you don’t really like.” (The Hague, female, 39 years)

A smaller group of respondents had not only abandoned one or two of their preferences as time ran out, but had also started panicking. This reaction was much less common among tenants who had been offered homes by their HAs. This seems to indicate that tenants who had been responsible for their own housing search had more often experienced great pressure to accept a property at any cost. For example:

“I reacted to so many properties, even in bad neighbourhoods. I really didn’t care where my new home was situated, as long as I’d get one. In the end, I found this place, out of necessity. I got it because it’s too expensive for many people. But, actually, it’s too expensive for me, too.” (The Hague, male, 54 years)

For these respondents, their relocation decision was not about satisfying their preferences, but about avoiding the risk of becoming homeless (Kleit & Manzo, 2006). American research provides several examples of tenants choosing a property and neighbourhood without holding onto their preferences because of time pressures (e.g.

Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Smith, 2002; Venkatesh, 2002). These respondents can be characterized as ‘panickers’ (Posthumus et al., 2011) who are willing to accept any type of housing in any condition in any neighbourhood out of fear of becoming homeless. Unfortunately, this fear is often based on a misconception with regard to the legal powers and options of landlords. Dutch HAs cannot simply evict tenants after the expiration of their search time. The usual practice in this situation is that the HA makes several offers of properties that suit the tenants’ preferences. If the tenants continue to refuse, the HA can ask for a formal court order to start an eviction procedure. However, this virtually never happens in the Netherlands.

Panicking behaviour as well as the tendency to adjust some demands because of the time-pressure were more common respondents with a non-western background and with a lower education. These respondents may lack the skills to find a satisfactory dwelling within a limited period of time. For these respondents, guidance from their HA may be particularly valuable. However, many of the lower educated and non-western residents that were interviewed for this study did not feel supported by their HA. They frequently argued to be misguided by their HA. Respondents’ other socioeconomic characteristics (age and income), as well as the city in which they had to conduct their search, were not found to be related to panicking behaviour and the tendency to adjust preferences because of time-constraints.

Some respondents had adapted their choice strategy early on because of the time pressure they were experiencing. They had wanted to avoid getting stuck in a deserted building and had therefore made substantial compromises. However, their sacrifices had usually been much less substantial than those of the panickers:

“Just after I heard we had to move, I noticed this place. Lots of people had already refused it because of its bad condition. But it’s very close to my children’s school. So I thought: ‘I’ll be happy enough if I get that.’ I didn’t know where else I could move to or how long I’d have to wait to find something else.” (Groningen, female, 39 years)

5.2.4 Availability of housing

Apart from the regulations attached to the allocation of social-rented housing, the availability of such housing can also be expected to affect displaced tenants’ choices. Our analysis shows that the limited availability of housing had affected displaced tenants’ choice strategies in several ways. To start with, as we have seen, a small

group had had severe problems finding a new home within a certain time span. Because they had perceived availability as a problem, they had panicked and abandoned their preferences in order to increase their choices.

In response to the limited availability of housing, many more respondents had changed their choice strategies rather than abandon their preferences; for example, some widened their neighbourhood options. Many respondents had not moved to their neighbourhood of choice, or had failed to fulfil their wish to remain in their previous neighbourhood. Respondents often related this to the implementation of social mixing policies:

“I planned to return to a new-build in my old neighbourhood, but it was too expensive. I mainly wanted to go back there because it’s quite a nice neighbourhood. I didn’t do so, because the places are too small for their rent.”
(The Hague, male, 49 years)

In contrast, a considerable number of respondents had not abandoned their preferences, because their initial fears of a limited availability of housing units had not been realized. A number of respondents even explicitly indicated that their *a priori* expectations with regard to availability had led them to believe that they would be limited to housing in ‘bad’ neighbourhoods:

“I had to move out of a disadvantaged neighbourhood and I was afraid that I’d have to look for a place in another disadvantaged neighbourhood. I thought I’d have to live in a bad neighbourhood, and I really didn’t want that. But that wasn’t the case.” (The Hague, male, 48 years)

6. Conclusion and discussion

While numerous studies have focused on displaced tenants’ relocation outcomes, only a few have examined the processes underlying these outcomes. These processes are important to understand why forced relocation has been found to result in positive and negative outcomes and therewith gain insight in the institutional contexts that are most beneficial for displaced residents. To fill this gap, this paper has shown how the specific context of forced relocation affects displaced tenants’ choice strategies.

The choice strategies of Dutch displaced tenants facing two different search systems were examined: one in which tenants are offered a maximum of three consecutive properties by their housing association, and one in which they have to conduct their own search and apply for vacant properties in their municipality on a weekly/biweekly basis for a maximum period of one year. We thus examined the experiences of tenants who had few potential alternatives and little responsibility, and those who had many potential alternatives and a lot of responsibility.

Tenants who participated in the different search systems adopted choice strategies with different attitudes towards compromising. Tenants who were offered housing by their HAs predominantly adopted a choice strategy that entailed some compromises. They accepted housing that did not fit all of their preferences, because they did not want to take the risk that future offers would be worse than the current offer, and they knew that they could not simply go on rejecting housing units. However, some tenants were offered a unit that satisfied their preferences. To them this dilemma was irrelevant, as they did not feel that they had to make any compromises.

Tenants who had had to conduct their own housing searches were much more likely to have felt unconstrained in those searches. All these tenants had had a larger number of opportunities to satisfy their preferences, and almost half of them had not had to make any compromises. This experience was particularly common among higher-educated respondents and those living in Groningen, a city with a relatively relaxed social housing market, compared to the other cities under study. Nevertheless, several tenants still felt constrained in some way by the restrictions attached to their priority status and the limited availability of housing. These tenants were the most likely to have made some compromises. Some tenants, however, had opted for more extreme and harmful choice strategies. We observed both forms of behaviour to be relatively often present among lower educated respondents and those with a non-western background.

The combination of being responsible for finding a new home, a limited availability of housing and the limited validity of their priority status, made some tenants panic. They had no longer tried to satisfy their preferences, but had simply done their best to avoid the risk of becoming homeless. Tragically, the fear of homelessness is based upon a misconception with regard to the legal powers and eviction options of landlords: Dutch HAs cannot evict tenants after the expiration of their priority status; extensions of this status are more a rule than an exception and

courts virtually never issue orders to evict resisting tenants. In order to prevent panicking behaviour, HAs should aim to eliminate this misconception about time constraints, without reducing the pressure on relocatees to move out before the expiration of their priority status. Providing these tenants with direct mediation, at either the beginning or the end of the relocation process, is an alternative. Another option is to provide more counselling during the relocation process, by actively helping relocatees to track and weigh various options. Regardless of the option chosen, housing associations should show much more awareness of both the positive and negative outcomes of forced relocations for specific groups (e.g. the elderly) and this requires them taking better stock of the disseminated knowledge on these matters.

Some tenants who had had to conduct their own searches had been aware of the institutional constraints imposed on them, but had believed that they could ignore (and often had ignored) these constraints. In some cases, especially higher educated and indigenous Dutch respondents, had hoped to get the most out of their relocation. In other cases, they had perceived their forced relocation as such a big sacrifice that any restriction on their relocation options would be unjust. This shows that relocation regulations are flexible, and that assertive and calculating behaviour pays off. HAs try to keep this practice quiet as they fear it may function as a precedent. Nevertheless, they should be wary of giving displaced tenants unequal treatment by allowing some to deviate from the regulations. However, in some instances, there might be good reasons to deviate from the regulations. For instance, in the case of an impending family expansion it may be fair to allow a household to relocate to a large property than they are entitled to at the moment of relocation.

Although it is problematic that tenants who are subject to choice-based letting sometimes panic and behave calculating, it should be considered as the more beneficial allocation model. While tenants who are offered a limited number of dwellings because they are subject to the option model or direct mediation tend to feel constrained and forced to accept certain disadvantages, many of the tenants that have to conduct their own search because they are subject to choice-based letting are able to realize their preferences. Therewith, this paper is a plea to favour allocation models that offer displaced residents responsibility and a wide variety of alternatives over 'paternalistic' models that offer little choice. However, some residents need more guidance to make this choice. Their HA's can play a role in this. However, as there is always the risk HA's will put their own interest ahead of the tenants', the rights of tenants may also be strengthened through independent support or advocacy services.

Above all, the different strategies that displaced tenants adopt (e.g. panicking behaviour, compromising on preferences, maximizing benefits and resistance) are clear proof of their agency, albeit not always in positive forms. Our conclusion is therefore in line with the findings of Manzo and colleagues (2008), namely that “tenants are not passive victims” and that data from their relocation research “reflect the human agency of tenants as they actively work to make sense of the redevelopment, plan for relocation and weigh their relocation options” (ibid., p. 1872). However, we also found that displaced tenants’ behaviour is strongly steered by their institutional context: specific choice strategies were much more prevalent in certain institutional contexts. We therefore believe that the institutional context should be perceived not as determining but as shaping displaced tenants’ choices. Hence, the institutional context displaced tenants are in does not eliminate choice, but induces choice within certain limits that are not always as hard as they appear at first sight.

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