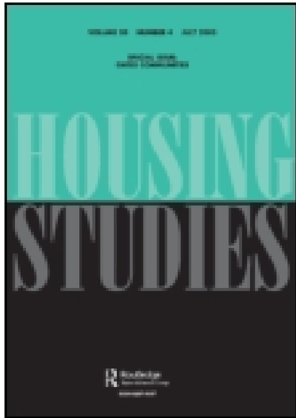
This article was downloaded by: [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley]
On: 06 November 2012, At: 07:19
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Housing Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/chos20

Proud to be a Tenant: The Construction of Common Cause Among Residents in Social Housing

Quintin Bradley [a]
[a] Faculty of Arts, Environment and Technology, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK
Version of record first published: 06 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Quintin Bradley (2012): Proud to be a Tenant: The Construction of Common Cause Among Residents in Social Housing, Housing Studies, 27:8, 1124-1141

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2012.728574

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Housing Studies,
Vol. 27, No. 8, 1124–1141, November 2012

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Proud to be a Tenant: The Construction of Common Cause Among Residents in Social Housing

QUINTIN BRADLEY
Faculty of Arts, Environment and Technology, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK

(Received February 2011; revised November 2011)

ABSTRACT *This paper demonstrates the assemblage of a distinctive body of combative beliefs among social housing tenants in England engaged in formal participation with their landlords. Applying the social movement diagnostic of frame analysis, the paper identifies three 'collective identity frames' that signify the construction of common cause among a diverse and fragmented tenant population. These frames celebrate social housing as a public good, promote grass-roots decision-making and advocate direct democracy to public services. They champion local knowledge and local services and articulate a commitment to collective action and collective provision that opposes itself to the individualising discourse of the market. Although a lack of unity characterises the organisation of social housing tenants, this assemblage of contentious claims may signify the continuation of narratives of a tenants' movement and indicate the cautious mobilisation of a distinctive 'counter-discourse' in housing policy.*

KEY WORDS: Tenant participation, social movements, frame analysis, collective action, social housing

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Introduction

Tenants in social housing are more often presented as individual consumers, or empowered citizens, than autonomously organised collective actors. Where the collective action of disability and mental health service users continues to be analysed through social movement theory (Carr, 2007; Oliver, 1990), contemporary tenants' organisations appear marginalised in housing discourse as the unrepresentative congregation of the 'usual suspects' (Barnes *et al.*, 2003; Millward, 2005). The network of local, regional and national tenants' organisations which is a feature of the English social housing sector is still described as a tenants' movement (Grayson, 1997; National Tenants Voice Project Group, 2008). However, the association of tenant collective action with an urban social

Correspondence Address: Quintin Bradley, Faculty of Arts, Environment and Technology, Leeds Metropolitan University, The Northern Terrace, Queen Square Court, Civic Quarter, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK. Fax: + 44 (0)113 8121958; Tel.: + 44 (0)113 8121964; Email: q.bradley@leedsmet.ac.uk

ISSN 0267-3037 Print/1466-1810 Online/12/081124–18 © 2012 Taylor & Francis
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2012.728574

movement (Castells, 1978), or with a narrative of housing protests, has not survived the rise of public participation in social housing, or the fragmentation and marginalisation of the tenure. Tenant activists now appear enmeshed in the regulatory effects of participation policy or co-opted as surrogate managers in strategies of citizen governance (McKee & Cooper, 2008; Sullivan, 2001), and it is unclear to what extent a tenants' movement can be evidenced in England and what, if anything, it aims to achieve.

This study re-asserts a connection between housing studies and social movement theory to return academic attention to the collective action of tenants within the public policy of participation. Accepting the diversity and divisions that now characterise the social housing sector, the paper investigates the construction of a movement identity among tenants whose only common bond appears to be their involvement in the participation strategies of their housing association or local authority landlords. It applies the diagnostic of frame analysis to chart the construction of shared meanings and beliefs among these social housing tenants and presents three 'collective identity frames' (Melucci, 1995), shared widely among its sample, that appear to indicate the mobilisation of a distinctive and contentious 'counter-discourse' in housing policy (Fraser, 1997). The paper begins by exploring the decline of the concept of a tenants' movement in academic study in the failure of arguments around common material interests and charts the fragmentation of social housing and the rise of participation as the medium for tenant collection action. Drawing on social movement theory to explain the continued role collective action plays in the social housing sector, the next section introduces the diagnostic tool of frame analysis and assembles a research strategy to locate the formulation of shared identities and common cause among tenants involved in participation with social landlords. The paper then presents three collective identity frames that emerge from the research findings, providing a package of contentious claims around concepts of community, local knowledge and direct democracy and representing the formation of a distinctive belief system among the tenant participants. It is argued that the identification of these frames suggests the construction of oppositional policies among the sample and, more tentatively, that it indicates the potential for the emergence of a movement identity among those social housing tenants engaged in forms of collective action.

The Disappearance of a Social Movement

Tenants in England have engaged in collection action over the quality and cost of housing since the late 1880s, and tenants associations were a feature of the council estates built from the 1920s onwards, often organised into federations at city or borough level. A succession of national tenants' organisations have attempted to mobilise a country-wide movement since 1937, and nationally organised campaign groups have taken action around issues such as system-building and damp homes, while nationwide protests against legislation such as the Housing Finance Act in 1972 and the Housing Action Trusts in 1988 pitted tenants against government housing policy. In recent years, tenants campaigns have been associated with opposition to stock transfer and resistance to the marketisation of social housing (Englander, 1983; Grayson, 1997; Oxley, 1986; Schifferes, 1976; Watt, 2008).

In the community action and urban studies literature of the 1970s and early 1980s, Marxist and Weberian theories were applied to the situation of council housing tenants to contend that they possessed common interests rooted in their class relation or in their position as housing consumers, which engendered political conflict (see, for example

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Bolger *et al.*, 1981; Saunders, 1981). The notion of a social base for collective action in council housing was maintained by Lowe (1986) who theorised that as tenants were brought together by the restrictive housing management practices of local authorities, and concentrated in defined and distinctive housing estates, they were bound by their shared experience of stigma and conjoined in an overwhelmingly working class culture. This social base established a set of common cultural and economic interests that enabled council housing tenants to mobilise in collective action.

The fragmentation of public housing signalled by the 1980 Housing Act's Right to Buy and the increasing promotion of home ownership at the expense of social renting destroyed all pretensions to a unifying material interest shared by tenants. In a re-assessment of Lowe's profile of the social base of council housing for the much-changed housing market of the 1990s, Cairncross *et al.* (1993) evidenced the numerous distinctions in material interests between tenants of different council estates and different property types, and as recipients of different management processes. This research put an end to any proposition that social housing tenants shared a set of common material interests that could trigger collective action. The tenants' movement responsible for nationwide rent strikes in the early 1970s was motivated by optimism and aspiration among newly affluent council tenants (Hayes, 1988). In the decades after 1980, the social housing sector was shaped by policy, first into a safety net, then into an ambulance service for the most vulnerable households (Card, 2001) and, leached of its best stock and its most affluent tenants, became characterised as the carrier of deprivation, poverty and worklessness (Dwelly & Cowans, 2006). This process of residualisation was accelerated by policies aimed at reducing the public ownership of housing through transfer to housing associations, and the development of 'mixed communities' with low cost home ownership or intermediate market renting. What were once mono-tenure housing estates, and portrayed by Lowe (1986) as potential social bases for tenant collective action, now appear to provide little ground for the generation of common cause.

Collective action, however, remains a significant feature of the social housing sector. Three per cent of residents in social housing are members of a tenants' group (CLG, 2009a), while 38 per cent of social housing tenants are aware of their local tenants and residents association (TSA, 2009), and according to the 2007–2008 Citizenship Survey (CLG, 2009b) membership of a tenants' association is the second most common form of 'civic activism' in England. This collective action has been channelled into the participation initiatives of housing organisations and the rise of public participation in social housing has been associated by some commentators with the co-option and institutionalisation of the tenants' movement and the disappearance of autonomous contentious action (Goodlad, 2001; Wood, 1994). The contemporary tenants' movement is represented by the national organisation, Tenants & Residents Organisation of England (TAROE), established in 1997, together with national organisations for tenant management and co-operative housing. Whereas TAROE has only 230 individual tenants' groups as members, the tenant participation consultancy, Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS), governed by a management board that includes landlords' representatives, has a national membership of 1195 tenant organisations. There are three regional tenants' federations and a further 37 sub-regional tenants federations, 14 of which describe themselves as Tenant Participation Networks or Involvement Groups and in some cases include landlord representatives on their committees, making clear their function as facilitators of participation with housing companies (IRIS Consulting, 2010). At the last count, there were more than 10 000 local tenants and residents associations on social housing estates and schemes (Aldbourne

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Associates, 2001; Cole *et al.*, 2001), but these neighbourhood groups are often set up and sponsored by social housing organisations to fulfil their requirements for customer involvement. Still more local tenants' organisations exist as constituted or informally assembled panels or forums convened and mediated by landlords, and individual tenants are recruited to serve on scrutiny panels, monitor their landlord as tenant inspectors or become directors of social housing organisations. Although some tenant campaigning continues in organisations like Defend Council Housing, the line between a self-organised social movement and a landlord-led consultation process is now extremely unclear. It has been argued, however, that distinctive and combative shared beliefs can still be discerned among the tenants and leaseholders engaged in formal participation (Millward, 2005; Simmons & Birchall, 2006). The next section sets out a research strategy to investigate the identity constructions that might provide common ground for this disparate tenants' network.

The Construction of Common Cause

Social movement theory argues that collective mobilisation does not emerge from bonds of objective material interest but from the painstaking construction of shared identities through discussion and negotiation. A common understanding of unity has to be composed and re-composed in discussions and argument among participants for a social movement to emerge (Gamson, 1992; Melucci, 1989). In social movement studies, the technique of frame analysis (Snow *et al.*, 1986) has become a key diagnostic tool for interpreting this identity work and for charting the construction of 'collective identity frames' (Melucci, 1995) that establish the distinct identity of a movement. These frames are widely shared discursive devices that serve to establish the verbal 'boundary markers' that demarcate a sense of collective belonging, and package the declarations of antagonisms and attributions of injustice that motivate collective action. They can be discerned in the production of familiar stories, interpretations and self-definitions that confirm a shared consciousness or framework of meanings (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). The analysis of collective identity frames in group discussion and individual narrative provides an indicator of movement construction although effective mobilisation and organisation are required to transform these discursive unifying constructions into practical action.

A sample of 144 residents engaged in formal participation processes with social landlords was assembled to investigate this process of collective identity construction. The sample was drawn from tenants and residents associations, city tenants' federations, constituted tenants' panels and forums, individual tenant directors and tenant inspectors, tenant management organisations, regional and national tenants' organisations and tenant campaign groups. Data collection was carried out through focus groups followed by semi-structured interviews and took place from mid-2008 to mid-2010. The focus group has particular benefits for the study of frame construction in that it allows individual thought processes to be revealed, aligned, challenged and negotiated collectively (Johnston, 2002). Opinions and experiences are shared and conclusions drawn, as the participants define group boundaries and, perhaps, articulate and debate goals and strategies. This process of deliberation in which individual speech acts become collective frames was advocated as a social movement research method by Gamson (1992, p. 192) on the grounds that 'the demands of discourse will push a group towards the adoption of a single frame', so allowing the process of frame construction to be witnessed and recorded. In total, 12 focus groups were held with 133 participants, with the average session lasting one and a

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

half hours. One focus group was held with participants from neighbourhood tenants and resident associations, one with individuals involved on a range of tenant panels, two were held with committee members of borough-wide tenants' federations (one of which was closely involved with the campaign group Defend Council Housing), one with board members of a tenant management organisation and two with regional tenants' federations. Five focus groups were held at the annual conference of TPAS and brought together members of landlord forums and customer panels, tenant directors of social housing companies, and board members of tenant management organisations and other tenant-led housing companies with tenants' association committee members and tenants' federation representatives. These focus groups were held as part of the conference in 2008, 2009 and 2010 and were advertised as open events and the attendees were self-selected, but reflected an extremely wide range of those engaged in participatory practices.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 11 participants, including two paired interviews, lasting 1 h on average. The interviews followed up themes that had developed in the focus groups and enabled the researcher to revisit focus group participants who might not have spoken freely in the group setting or who might have been silenced by the pressure of mutual agreement. Interviewees were selected from each organisational level: one interview was held with the chair of the national tenants' organisation, two with committee members of regional federations, two with city federation members, two with neighbourhood association organisers, one with a tenants' panel member and two with tenant directors. The sampling strategy was conceived to attain a broad geographical spread of organisations, and in addition to the focus groups held at the national TPAS conference, data collection was carried out in four cities across England. Tenants and leaseholders from housing associations, stock transfer organisations, arms-length management organisations and retained council housing authorities were sampled, along with a number of owner-occupiers active in residents' organisations, although for simplicity the sample are referred to as 'tenants' throughout. Overall, 55 per cent of the sample were women and around 14 per cent were from ethnic minority communities and the majority of the participants were over the age of 50. The questions that guided the focus groups were phrased to encourage exploration of aims, grievances, mobilisation and deliberation on strategies. The questions for the interviewees focused on their individual motivation and encouraged reflection on their personal achievements, as well as deliberation on some of the frames of meaning that had surfaced in the group setting. Accounts in both interviews and focus groups were evaluated throughout for their consistency, and the findings were reported back to a further group of research participants to provide an additional opportunity for triangulation. Although more than 140 people were involved in this research, inevitably some were more vocal than others and some participants appear often in the pages that follow; however, it should not be assumed that they were alone in articulating these views. The research findings reveal a significant convergence of reflective experience and opinion evidenced across all the focus group discussions and supported in each individual narrative. Three collective identity frames emerged very clearly in coding, suggesting the joint, but uncoordinated construction of a vocabulary of common experience and shared interpretation among the participants that was articulated individually and organised collectively. These frames were constituted by familiar reference points, and storylines with recognisable structures and meanings, indicating a cultural tool-kit shared among tenant participants, regardless of location or landlord,

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

from which the accumulated meaning of individual voices assembled an understanding of common cause (Miethe, 2009). The following sections draw attention to the construction of collective identity in these three areas of agreement among the sample of those engaged in formal resident participation activities.

Framing Social Housing and Community

The most evident identity construction among the research sample was the representation of social rented housing as a public good and the association of the tenure with the benefits of mutual aid and co-operation. This interpretive frame promotes an idealised model of universal social housing, arguing that the provision of mass public housing for general needs (Harloe, 1995) fosters relations of mutual aid. The construction of the frame appears to re-align the arguments against social housing mobilised by Conservative and Labour regimes and redirect them to oppose the processes of privatisation. In dominant housing discourse, the introduction of tenure diversity in former social housing estates has become the means of regenerating community (Manzi, 2010). The entrepreneurial benefits of property ownership and the social capital of middle income households with spending power have been mobilised to rescue the caricature ‘council’ estate, with its concentration of poverty, disadvantage and the area effects of deprivation. Rebelling against this central tenet of housing policy, tenants constructing this frame assert that mixed communities bring disharmony and disorder. The argument can be discerned in this excerpt from a focus group with a regional tenants’ federation:

> Richard: Yeah but it’s the housing now, on estates, such as there was, going back when everybody was a tenant, a council house tenant, *now* there is so much interplay.
> Theresa: Diversity.
> Richard: With homeowners, right, that is, they’re not doing their input into the estate as what the tenants are through their organisations.
> Theresa: Yeah.
> Richard: Right, and there, that is what’s letting it down.

Tenants in this study appeared to attribute the collapse of ‘community’ on social housing estates directly to a trajectory of public policy that has championed home ownership as the only acceptable tenure and has undermined the public services that once insured against risk. As Susan, a regional federation member says:

> We’ve got this kind of situation where, as things kind of deteriorated in terms of the, kind of, funding going into local authority housing and instead of it being seen as a positive thing that it was suddenly we should all own our own home, which came from all parties [...] That has without doubt divided communities.

Far from being the sector of disintegration and neighbourhood breakdown described by the dominant stigmatisation discourse, tenants in the sample assert that social housing is communal and neighbourly and contrast it with what they claim is the essential isolation of homeownership. This linkage between the tenure of social housing and a more co-operative way of life is constructed through two discursive strands. The first is rooted in

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

the services attached to social housing, in the fact that it is a managed tenure where some sort of regular contact with the landlord, repair contractors or in supported accommodation with care staff, is part of the package. The benefits of public housing are catalogued in this TPAS conference focus group from 2009:

> Clare: There are a lot of people in the private sector say "oh wish we could get that, wish we could have someone come and repair our homes within a few hours of a flood burst" and, I mean I think we're very privileged people.
> Sarah: I think we're better off than those in private accommodation to be honest.
> Clare: To get repairs done, to have someone.
> Linda: You just pay your rent and you get it all done.

Barbara, secretary of her tenants association, pointed to the quality of building design in the social housing sector and the benefits of renting from regulated landlords:

> I'm quite proud of the fact that I'm a council tenant. I've got a beautiful home and I live in an area where sheds are let and if you could see the condition of some of the private, its called shed city, in some of the houses that the private landlords let and expect people to live, you'd be, like me, proud to be a council tenant.

The association of social housing with social welfare and public good is easily transposed through the second strand of the frame to present the tenure as essentially co-operative and to claim that this mutuality expresses itself in collective action. In a focus group at the 2008 TPAS conference, Robert maintained that social interaction is intrinsic to social renting and alien to the owner-occupied sector:

> Social housing, social as in interacting with other human beings, that's what social means. We are in a great position because we've got a quality of life which is far superior to people stuck in their private bloody little houses.

Yvonne told a story about the estate where she used to live, describing it as a mixed community, with social-rented, shared-ownership and owner-occupied housing clustered along the same access road. She argued that tenure divisions were visible through the number of children playing in the street:

> On the rented part of the estate [social rented] the kids all played together, the parents looked out for each other, the second lot [shared ownership], you would see one or two kids playing on their doorstep and in the third lot [owner occupation] never see any at all.

This assertion that social housing encourages sociability was applied by Jane, at her regional federation, to imbue all social housing tenants with the values of mutual aid and co-operation:

> And, you know, but they also are, in the main, quite *good* about looking after their neighbours, joining in with things and so on, considering the other children on, you know, people's children on the estate and all this sort of thing. So actually

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

> they're probably more socially conscious than a lot of people who live outside the council house environment.

In the 2009 TPAS focus group, a linkage between renting, sociability and membership of tenants' associations was presented as if the mobilisation of collective action was as essential to the nature of social renting as the repair service.

> Clare: I'm sat at home and if anything goes wrong, then someone will come, to help or repair it or whatever.
> Sara: It's security isn't it.
> Wendy: Well when I arrived in this position I could not believe the facilities that were available to me and, uh,
> Clare: The help is there.
> Wendy: And was, I'm still absolutely bowled over by belonging to this, I'm very proud to belong to my residents group, now, and, um,
> Linda: Proud to be a tenant.
> Wendy: And to be a representative of that body.
> Clare: And you're not on your own any more, as well, you know. You may if you had gone into private housing, you'd have been on your own in a little block, you know.

Although the concept of social housing presented here is associated with co-operation and mutual aid, the tenants' association is positioned as a defender of community services, as Jane maintains:

> I think our tenants organisations in our borough, you know, do an *awful* lot of work for the local community because we've been around, we've been involved in the campaign for the local school or what ever it was, over a long period of time.

Lowe (1986) argued that the ability to mobilise support for local tenants associations stemmed from an awareness of shared interests among residents with a common landlord, as well as from a working class social base concentrated in council housing estates. This concept of a class united by housing tenure was quick to disintegrate as the rise of home ownership excavated divisions around housing consumption in the working class (Saunders, 1990). Tenants in this sample, however, appeared able to rekindle ideas of common interest constructed out of shared public space and to articulate them to mobilise a constituency. At a borough tenants' federation, John attempted to reclaim a sense of commonality in opposition to the divisions of housing consumption that now act as permanent barriers:

> It's about making them see if you live on a mixed estate you all own the estate. They are all of equal value when it comes to community values. They own their community and it's about working together, working in partnership. It's difficult for a tenant that's bought his own home. He may think he's made a vast leap forward; he may think he's better than tenants—it's just a mental attitude.

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

The desire to foster bonds of mutuality and care may be one of the strands that enable the concept of community to be recruited to a regulatory agenda, but it can also convey a wish to create social and political change, and carries with it a long history of political dissent (Taylor, 2003). Mutuality can be used as a tool of mobilisation, as the first step in building collective feelings of efficacy, and in developing the relations necessary for more participatory decision-making (Staeheli, 2002). Marcie seems to express this at a TPAS focus group in 2009 when she says:

> Community for me means that we are, we discuss with our neighbours, our friends, the people around us the problems we have within housing.

The chimerical concept of community appears to be harnessed here to a co-operative endeavour constructed around public space. This frame of social housing and community seeks to construct common cause for tenants around the defence of a universal model of public housing, and its purported social relations of co-operation and mutual aid. The next section identifies the construction of more antagonistic claims in which the desire for change is expressed through an imagined reversal of power relations.

Framing Tenants as Housing Experts

Wainwright (1994, p. 2) argued that a distinctive and recurring theme in the history of social movements since the late 1960s has been 'the questioning and overturning of the character and organisation of what counted as valid knowledge'. This has been especially true in the mobilisation of welfare state users who have championed their experiential knowledge against the professional assessments of need in health, social care and housing. In the dominant discourse of participation, the assertion is commonly made that the residents of an area know best about its needs, and the incorporation of local knowledge into professional decision-making is considered a key outcome for participation processes. The extraction of local knowledge, however, takes place within systems and spaces mediated, if not controlled, by professionals, who establish what knowledge is considered legitimate, how it should be communicated and what uses will be made of it (Mosse, 2001). In this study, tenants appeared to apply a process of frame bridging to establish counter-social relations for the production of local knowledge (Snow *et al.*, 1986), characterising housing professionals as poor learners, claiming the experience of residents as superior expertise and presenting the lived spaces of housing estates as the location of the most effective decision-making. The collective identity frame assembled in this manner reflects the construction of 'expert tenants' in the discourses of participation (Millward, 2005), but appears to apply this expertise to imagine a reversal of power relations in housing management and to express a degree of antagonism towards housing professionals.

At another TPAS conference discussion in 2009, Maisie makes the claim to experiential knowledge on behalf of social housing tenants and uses it to position them as best placed to manage their own housing:

> Maisie: The people who know what's happening in social housing are the people who live in it and consequently if they can tell it or show it or deal with it then obviously they're going to be able to fix it.
> Elizabeth: We're experts in the field because we live there.

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Maisie: Well exactly, we have the experience of living in the houses, of living in the community and um, I think there can be no one who can know more about the person's home, than the person living in it.

This claim is further developed through the assertion that tenants display a concern and commitment for the neighbourhood and its well-being that housing professionals do not share. Housing professionals are characterised by their remoteness and their indifference to estate problems, as Georgia says:

We see what they turn a blind eye to. We see what's wrong with our community and we pass it on to them. They, they, ah, they just say, well they say they listen and it will be done, but its forgotten about and therefore it gets turned a blind, a blind eye to until we will keep reminding them and we have to keep doing this until we get it done.

These contentions echo research with housing officers who expressed feelings of social distance between themselves and their tenants; Clapham *et al.* (2000, p. 73) quoted one professional saying tenants and staff 'were on two different planets'. According to Cheryl, taking part in the TPAS group, housing staff are spatially separate, living parallel lives, unable and unwilling to bridge the experiential gap between them and tenants:

You're dealing with people who have a very good wage coming in; they've never been poor, never been out of work, never had to deal with the benefits system etc.

In these partisan statements the frame expresses a fundamental challenge to the power relations implicit in professional knowledge:

Cheryl: We employ them, we employ them, we pay their wages.
Robert: That's right.
Cheryl: We pay their wages: they're accountable to us.

It is this imagined reversal of power relations that provides one of the motivations behind the establishment of tenant management organisations, where an elected tenant board is allocated a budget for their estate and directly employs its own housing staff to operate a localised service. Maisie's contribution to the focus group exchange noted earlier was rooted in her ardent endorsement of the Community Gateway housing association (CCH, 2003), a model of stock transfer housing company committed to exporting tenant management and purportedly tenant led. The Gateway model was developed in 2003 in response to a growing awareness that tenants were uncomfortable with the loss of accountability inherent in the unrelenting programme of demunicipalisation (Chartered Institute of Housing, 2006). Throughout her focus group discussion, Maisie enthusiastically promoted tenant management as a strategy for challenging the power of the housing profession and putting tenants in charge:

We're the ones who pay that rent, the ones, you know these are, these, these are our homes, you know, and why should the money that we are paying not, we don't have any control over how its being spent?

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Much of the incentive for tenants to take over the management of their estates and challenge the relations of power in their housing companies stems from their desire to institute a localised service, where housing staff have a direct relationship with tenants and are based at an accessible neighbourhood office. The frame asserts a demand for locally delivered service and is critical of the development of a business and performance culture in housing organisations that has triggered a closure of neighbourhood housing offices and has seen staff centralised in specialist teams, while customer services are delivered through contact centres (Walker, 2000). Sara pioneered a tenant-led stock transfer for her estate because she wanted to reinstate a local housing service. She explained:

> We used to say "just spend one night in the flat and you'll see what we're talking about; you'll see the drug addicts, you'll see the drunks and everything else". But they wouldn't do that. But now we've got an office smack bang in the middle of the estate.

Managing your own estate means doing the 'hiring and firing' as Sara makes clear. It means being in control of the staff and directing the housing service to the priorities and standards set by the residents—the people with the local knowledge. Despite having a local housing office and accessible staff, Sara maintains that it is the tenants' organisation that does the lion's share of the work; after all they are there day and night.

> At the end of the day the housing officers can leave the office and go away. The two people we employ in the housing office, which is in the middle of the estate, live nowhere near it. You know, they go off and "we'll see you tomorrow" or "we'll see you Monday" but you're left in the middle, trying to sort it out, you know.

Participation often results, Mosse (2001) argues, not in professionals adopting local knowledge in their decision-making, but in locals acquiring professional knowledge to promote their concerns. An education in professional discourse can enable tenants to claim both the housing insider's knowledge of systems and the residents' privileged understanding of space. They can boast 'not only knowledge of communities but also knowledge about communities' as Larner and Craig (2005, p. 418) observe. Although the professionalisation of tenant activists can be associated with a loss of oppositional voices, the acquisition of elite knowledge by activists can be applied to undermine the power of those elites. Tenant inspectors, Kevin and John have been trained to make qualitative assessments of housing management procedures in their voluntary scrutiny role. When they visit housing offices they observe that the staff appear threatened by this challenge to their power and knowledge.

> Kevin: When I go there they say "why don't you get a job here". I think the fear is, is that we seem to know more.
> John: Know more than the staff.

Jane, a member of a tenants' panel, also claims superior knowledge for residents in their possession of both professional and experiential truths.

> We have more knowledge about what's going on in housing than many of our officers, and certainly most of our councillors.

In demanding an equal role for experiential knowledge in decision-making, tenants appear to advocate a participatory model of management (Barnes, 1999). They argue that their direct experience enables them to constructively contribute to housing management decisions. When a deliberative relationship is denied them, their frustration turns to antagonism and they frame themselves as best able to manage their homes. Their challenge to the dominance of professional knowledge speaks of a power reversal that is expressed cogently by Gina, a regional tenants' federation member:

> We no longer have to tip our forelock, say yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir, because what the government did, they educated us, so now we challenge and we question and that is what the problem is that the government can't accept that we're a bit more educated, a bit more knowledgeable and we have the ability to question and challenge.

Local knowledge appears in this frame as an unproblematic 'common sense' acquired by residency. This experiential knowledge claimed by tenant directors and the members of tenant organisations does not admit of the social structures and power relations of the localities through which it is generated (Kothari, 2001). It imagines the housing estate as a forum for tidy decision-making and housing procedures for dealing with 'the drug addicts' and 'the drunks', for instance, are uncritically accepted as tools to be put into action, rather than as the constructions of elite power and knowledge themselves. How a diversity of local 'knowledges' might be represented by tenants and how power relations might be scrutinised in housing services are the subjects of the third frame.

Framing Real Democracy in Social Housing

Concepts of participatory and direct democracy are embedded in tenant participation and a desire to extend 'democracy into the very nature of welfare provision' has been central to the tradition of a tenants' movement in England (Bolger *et al.*, 1981, p. 26). A commitment to the principles of direct democracy appears widely shared among the research sample, and a belief in collective action and in the ability of tenant organisations to generate their own views and policies provides the substance for a motivational frame that rekindles the traditions of a social movement.

The principle of direct democracy runs through the organisational structure of tenants' organisations, Brian explains. His federation is an umbrella body of tenants and residents associations, known by the acronym TARAs, and is held accountable by its membership through election and regular general meetings. As Brian makes clear, this local network is connected to a national organisation and onto the international tenants' body, the International Union of Tenants at the European Union:

> If you're a TARA [tenants and residents association] you've got a bigger voice; instead of one tenant shouting you've got the whole TARA, and not only that with the TARAs being affiliated to the association, because this office here isn't our office we only manage it on behalf of the TARAs, it's their office really. And we pay a donation to what you call TAROE, that's Tenants & Residents of all England. They pay a fee to the European one which covers the *whole* of the world, so the tenant's voice will be heard all over the world, you see.

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Tenants in the sample contrast a democratic model of participation with the selection processes by which individual tenants are recruited to the governing boards of housing organisations, or to the focus groups and informal tenant panels of their landlord. The rise of housing associations as the main providers of social housing has been dogged by concerns over democratic accountability. Opposition to the stock transfer of council housing has focused on the loss of local democratic representation in housing governance. Even arms-length management companies, although owned by the local authority, are run by appointed boards, or the new magistracy as these unelected directors have been called (Clarke & Stewart, 1994). Following complaints by the Audit Commission that tenant directors were raising 'estate-level issues' at the board table, the housing inspectorate recommended that tenant board members should be selected by interview, rather than election, to ensure they did not act as representatives of a constituency (Audit Commission, 2004, p. 43).

The mutual Community Gateway model was introduced to renew democratic lines of accountability in stock transfer housing associations, and Maisie, a Community Gateway director, flaunts both company law and the injunctions of the Audit Commission to maintain that the democratic election of tenant board members empowers them as representatives rather than company directors:

> I had to campaign to be elected and consequently it went borough-wide you know, all the candidates who wanted to be elected as tenant candidates had to give a reason why they want that and how they felt, what they brought to that, what they were bringing to the committee would be beneficial to the whole borough and then, everyone in that borough was ah, you know, cast a vote for or against or not for that person and I was elected onto there which I feel very proud of because I have spoken to residents to represent them, to represent their views and it is absolutely important that they know that when you speak to them you are going to go to the committee and put their views to that committee.

In a TPAS focus group in which she describes the board elections in her tenant-led housing association, Sara argues that democratic election gives tenants choice and voice, in contrast to restrictive landlord practices of co-option or selection.

> I think it is very important and I was very proud to be elected by, by the tenants of my community and it meant that they could see that they had choice rather than somebody co-opting somebody else on.

In Sara's account of her tenant-led housing organisation, a democratic ethos appears to generate a culture of inclusion in which decision-making is devolved and participative techniques are applied to ensure that everyone is heard.

> We have a community board of 12 people but everything we do we go out to the tenants first and say well these, we call them 'You Decides' where we put all our questions round the board room and the people come in, if they live in a high rise block, if they live in a low rise, they all get different coloured stickers and, um, this is how we, we run it. So it does work, it does work if you give power to the people.

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

In adhering to democratic principles in housing governance, tenant framing activity revives debate around accountability in public services and confronts the withdrawal of democratic practices in housing organisations. Although the earliest participation schemes involved elected tenants' organisations in housing management decision-making (Richardson & Wiles, 1977), the contemporary make-up of participation appears to have by-passed the notion of collective representation. Landlords have turned to market research techniques in which the selection of individuals by housing officers has become the preferred method of recruitment. This approach is sanctioned by the regulatory authority and accords with the identification of tenants as consumers and of tenant participation as integral to the business improvement of housing companies (Audit Commission, 2004). In this interpretation, autonomous tenants' organisations lend themselves to caricature as selfish interest groups disrupting the free exchange of goods and information. The individual tenant consumer is seen as legitimate, while the collective voice of tenants is excluded for allegedly pursuing a specific self-interested goal that is unrepresentative of the general interest of tenants (Barnes, 1999). It is the housing professional who defines what is legitimate and what is representative and a model of participation in which service recipients are recruited as data sources to be harvested by the experts, reinforces the power of the landlord or housing provider (Beresford, 1988; Millward, 2005). Traditional tenants' organisations now contrast their formally democratic model of participation with the focus group and informal tenant panels of their landlord. Jane, at a regional federation, comments:

> I think that there actually has to be a democratic structure. So the people who are speaking know they're accountable to the people they're speaking for [. . .] I mean, for example, we, nobody in our borough can get to the tenants council without having been elected first from their tenants association, then from there to their area forum, from their area forum they go to, so there's a democratic structure and every year you have an AGM.

Michael, a member of a tenants' association, criticises the selection of individuals who contribute only their own experience to focus groups:

> It's just going to be individuals, individuals, individuals all the time. Speaking on behalf of who? Themselves. In the old days, you know, groups would speak on behalf of the 2-300 members of the community they represent. And I think that's a very simple ethos. You know, you're not there to represent yourself. We want, not I want.

Although housing providers have configured the question of representation as one of demographics (Barnes *et al.*, 2003), tenants in this sample argue that being representative is a matter of maintaining day-to-day contact with local residents and, responding to the accusation, commonly levelled by housing professionals, that the members of traditional, elected tenants organisations are the 'usual suspects', Jane maintains:

> We want to widen it out, but they widen it out to get the kind of people they want, and the thing about a tenants association is that everybody on the estate potentially can come to the tenants association, so potentially you are consulting with all of them and you're their voice and you're answerable to them.

This emphasis on grass-roots democracy and accountable representation may appear somewhat ironic, given the studies of tenants' associations that have analysed the splits, feuds and lack of support enjoyed by local committees (Ravetz, 2001). Far from defending closed organisations that make little effort to encourage diversity or reflect a wide range of views, tenants in this study appeared committed to the principles of direct democracy, as these Federation committee members illustrate:

> Brian: It's the tenants out there what voted for each and every member on this Federation for them where they are today so it's up to them to represent the tenants out there of the whole of [. . .] borough for putting them where they are today.
> Eileen: It's not what we want.
> Brian: It's what they want.

The ethos of direct democracy is one in which elected delegates are mandated by their electorate and are subject to recall if they lose the trust of their voters. In this model of participation, the tenants who engage with their landlords represent a defined constituency; they have been elected and entrusted by that community to advocate on their behalf. Sanjit likens the process of decision-making at his federation to the negotiations of a trade union.

> Everybody here is an elected representative of a residents association, or a tenants association somewhere. And we come together and we agree things by consensus. I like to use my old, I used to be a shop steward in the film technicians union and I always used to say in meetings: "I'm sorry; I can't take that back to my members" (laughs). So whenever I'm in meetings I always try and think like that, okay, can I get, would I, can I get anybody else on my estate to agree to this, no? Well I can't agree to it, even if I think it's a good idea (laughs). That, that's real democracy.

In expressing a commitment to a model of direct democracy and belief in the value of collective action, tenants constructing this frame appear to present a strong critique of the 'democratic deficit' in housing organisations, and this critique gains an antagonistic edge when combined with arguments around the primacy of experiential knowledge and localised decision-making. The three main areas of agreement evidenced across the research sample appear to articulate a value system based around co-operation and mutual aid, and advocate the principles of direct democracy, grass-roots decision-making and collective local provision. If shared more widely, this identity work could indicate a cautious process of deliberation taking place among tenants engaged in participation about the organisational principles of their housing service. It would suggest that even in the fragmented social housing sector and in the absence of an autonomous social movement, tenants can assemble 'subaltern counter-publics', as Nancy Fraser called them, and formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs (Fraser, 1997, p. 81).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the construction of contentious collective identities may be observed among social housing tenants in England who are engaged in formal participation with their landlords. It is suggested that the assemblage of common cause and

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

shared beliefs among tenants in the marginalised social housing sector may signify the continuation of narratives of a tenants' movement against the fragmentation of the 'social base' of social housing estates.

Applying the social movement diagnostic of frame analysis, the paper has identified three areas of negotiated agreement that appear to provide social housing tenants with a shared repertoire of contentions and beliefs. The production of these 'collective identity frames' was widely evidenced across the research sample, and signified the construction of common interests among a fragmented network of tenant participants. These frames championed the benefits of social rented housing in opposition to government strategies of home ownership, imagined a reversal of power relations in housing governance and articulated an inclusive model of direct democracy for the running of housing services. Tenants in this sample associated social rented housing with the values of mutual aid and co-operation and positioned the local neighbourhood as a forum for consensus decision-making. In citing a democratic deficit in housing organisations, they championed a model of service provision founded on local delivery, local knowledge and a tradition of collective action.

These collective identity frames provide a resonant package of grievances, principles and motivating values that suggests a shared desire for change in the organisation of housing services and may provide a sketchy outline of an alternative model of delivery. The mobilisation of these shared identities appears to indicate opposition to discourses of the market, characterised in this sample as a selfish dynamic of individualism, alongside antagonistic contentions that oppose the direction of travel in housing policy. This framing activity provides an intriguing example of the formulation of 'counter-discourses' among the recipients of public services, and the tentative expression of opposition to the direction of welfare reform in England. Although a lack of unity characterises the organisation of social housing tenants today, these findings appear to indicate the successful construction of agreement and may signal the potential, however distant, for the formation of a collective tenant voice in housing policy.

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

References

Aldbourne Associates (2001) *A Study of Tenant Participation in Registered Social Landlords* (London: The Housing Corporation).

Audit Commission (2004) *Housing—Improving Services Through Resident Involvement* (London: Audit Commission).

Barnes, M. (1999) Users as citizens: Collective action and the local governance of welfare, *Social Policy and Administration*, 33(1), pp. 73–79.

Barnes, M., Newman, J., Knops, A. & Sullivan, H. (2003) Constituting 'the public' in public participation, *Public Administration*, 81(2), pp. 379–399.

Beresford, P. (1988) Consumer views: Data collection or democracy? in: I. White, D. Mike, B. Reba, B. Jack, B. Peter & J. Adrianne (Eds) *Hearing the Voice of the Consumer* (London: Policy Studies Institute).

Bolger, S., Corrigan, P., Docking, J. & Frost, N. (1981) *Towards Socialist Welfare Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).

Cairncross, L., Clapham, D. & Goodlad, R. (1993) The social bases of tenant organisation, *Housing Studies*, 8(3), pp. 179–193.

Card, P. (2001) Managing anti-social behaviour—Inclusion or exclusion, in: D. Cowan & A. Marsh (Eds) *Two Steps Forward* (Bristol: The Policy Press).

Carr, S. (2007) Participation, power, conflict and change: Theorising dynamics of service user participation in the social care system of England and Wales, *Critical Social Policy*, 27(2), pp. 266–276.

Castells, M. (1978) *City, Class and Power* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).

CCH (Confederation of Co-operative Housing), Chartered Institute of Housing and Co-operative Union (2003) *Empowering Communities—The Community Gateway Model* (Coventry: Chartered Institute of Housing).
Chartered Institute of Housing (2006) Empowering communities: The community gateway model. Available at http://www.cih.org (accessed 20 August 2010).
Clapham, D., Franklin, B. & Saugeres, L. (2000) Housing management: The social construction of an occupational role, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 17, pp. 68–92.
Clarke, M. & Stewart, J. (1994) The local authority and the new community governance, *Local Government Studies*, 20(2), pp. 163–176.
CLG (Communities and Local Government) (2009a) *Place Survey 2008, England: Further Results,* Local Government Statistical Release (London: Communities and Local Government Publications).
CLG (Communities and Local Government) (2009b) *2007–08 Citizenship Survey Empowered Communities Topic Report* (London: Communities and Local Government Publications).
Cole, I., Hickman, P., Millward, L., Reid, B. & Whittle, S. (2001) *Tenant Participation in Transition: Issues and Trends in the Development of Tenant Participation in the Local Authority Sector in England* (London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions).
Dwelly, T. & Cowans, J. (2006) *Rethinking Social Housing* (London: The Smith Institute).
Englander, D. (1983) *Landlord and Tenant in Urban Britain, 1838–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Fraser, N. (1997) *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Post Socialist' Condition* (London: Routledge).
Gamson, W. (1992) *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Goodlad, R. (2001) Developments in tenant participation—Accounting for growth, in: D. Cowan & A. Marsh (Eds) *Two Steps Forward*, pp. 179–197 (Bristol: The Policy Press).
Grayson, J. (1997) Campaigning tenants: A pre-history of tenant involvement to 1979, in: C. Cooper & M. Hawtin (Eds) *Housing, Community and Conflict: Understanding Resident Involvement* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing).
Harloe, M. (1995) *The People's Home?* (Oxford: Blackwell).
Hayes, J. (1988) The development of the association of London housing estates 1957–1977, *The London Journal*, 13(2), pp. 156–161.
IRIS Consulting (2010) *Regional and National Tenants' Organisations* (London: Communities and Local Government).
Johnston, H. (2002) Verification and proof in frame analysis, in: B. Klandermans & S. Staggenborg (Eds) *Methods of Social Movement Research* (London: University of Minneapolis).
Kothari, U. (2001) Power, knowledge and social control in participatory development, in: B. Cooke & K. Uma (Eds) *Participation: The New Tyranny* (London: Zed Books).
Larner, W. & Craig, D. (2005) After neo-liberalism? Community activism and local partnerships in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Antipode*, 37(3), pp. 402–424.
Lowe, S. (1986) *Urban Social Movements: The City After Castells* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).
Manzi, T. (2010) Promoting responsibility, shaping behaviour: Housing management, mixed communities and the construction of citizenship, *Housing Studies*, 25(1), pp. 5–19.
McKee, K. & Cooper, V. (2008) The paradox of tenant empowerment: Regulatory and liberatory possibilities, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 25(2), pp. 132–146.
Melucci, A. (1989) *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society* (London: Century Hutchinson).
Melucci, A. (1995) The process of collective identity, in: H. Johnston & K. Bert (Eds) *Social Movements & Culture* (London: UCL Press).
Miethe, I. (2009) Frames, framing & keying: Biographical perspectives on social movement participation, in: H. Johnston (Ed.) *Culture, Social Movements & Protest* (Farnham: Ashgate).
Millward, L. (2005) Just because we are amateurs doesn't mean we aren't professional: The importance of expert activists in tenant participation, *Public Administration*, 83(3), pp. 735–751.
Mosse, D. (2001) 'People's knowledge', participation and patronage: Operations and representations in rural development, in: B. Cooke & K. Uma (Eds) *Participation: The New Tyranny* (London: Zed Books).
National Tenants Voice Project Group (2008) *Citizens of Equal Worth* (London: CLG).
Oliver, M. (1990) *The Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).
Oxley, M. (1986) Housing policy and tenants' organisations in Great Britain, *Property Management*, 4(3), pp. 217–229.
Ravetz, A. (2001) *Council Housing and Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge).
Richardson, A. & Wiles, A. (1977) *Getting Tenants Involved* (London: Department of the Environment).

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012

Saunders, P. (1981) *Social Theory and the Urban Question* (London: Hutchinson).
Saunders, P. (1990) *A Nation of Home Owners* (London: Unwin-Hyman).
Schifferes, S. (1976) Council tenants and housing policy in the 1930s: The contradictions of state intervention, in: M. Edwards, F. Gray, S. Merrett & J. Swann (Eds) *Housing and Class in Britain*, pp. 64–71 (London), Papers presented at the Political Economy of Housing Workshop of the Conference of Socialist Economists.
Simmons, R. & Birchall, J. (2006) Tenant participation and social housing in the UK: Applying a theoretical model, *Housing Studies*, 22(4), pp. 573–595.
Snow, D., Burke, R. E. Jr., Steven, W. & Robert, R. (1986) Frame alignment processes, micromobilisation and movement participation, *American Sociological Review*, 51(4), pp. 464–481.
Staeheli, L. (2002) Women and the work of community, *Environment and Planning A*, 35(5), pp. 815–831.
Sullivan, H. (2001) Maximising the contribution of neighbourhoods—The role of community governance, *Public Policy and Administration*, 16(2), pp. 30–48.
Taylor, M. (2003) *Public Policy in the Community* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).
Taylor, V. & Whittier, N. (1992) Collective identity in social movement communities, in: A. Morris & M. M. Carol (Eds) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (London: Yale University Press).
TSA (Tenant Services Authority) (2009) *Existing Tenants Survey 2008* (London: Tenant Services Authority).
Wainwright, H. (1994) *Arguments for a New Left: Answering the Free Market Right* (Oxford: Blackwell).
Walker, R. (2000) The changing management of social housing: The impact of externalisation and managerialisation, *Housing Studies*, 15(2), pp. 281–299.
Watt, P. (2008) 'Underclass' and 'ordinary people' discourses: Representing/re-presenting council tenants in a housing campaign, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4(4), pp. 345–357.
Wood, M. (1994) Should tenants take over? Radical community work, tenants organisations and the future of public housing, in: S. Jacobs & P. Keith (Eds) *Community Work in the 1990s* (Nottingham: Spokesman).

Downloaded by [Leeds Metropolitan University], [Quintin Bradley] at 07:19 06 November 2012