The Paradox of Tenant Empowerment: regulatory and liberatory possibilities

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Abstract

Tenant empowerment has traditionally been regarded as a means of realising democratic ideals: a quantitative increase in influence and control, which thereby enables 'subjects' to acquire the fundamental properties of 'citizens'. By contrast *governmentality,* as derived from the work of Michel Foucault, offers a more critical appraisal of the concept of empowerment by highlighting how it is itself a mode of subjection and means of regulating human conduct towards particular ends (see for example, Cruikshank 1999).

Drawing on empirical data about how housing governance has changed in Glasgow following its 2003 stock transfer, this paper adopts the insights of governmentality to illustrate how the political ambition of 'community ownership' has been realised through the mobilisation and shaping of active tenant involvement in the local decision making process. In addition, it also traces the tensions and conflict inherent in the reconfiguration of power relations post-transfer for 'subjects' do not necessarily conform to the plans of those that seek to govern them.

Key words: social housing, community ownership, tenant participation, empowerment, governmentality and Foucault.

Introduction

The UK welfare state has undergone a whole host of changes preordained by its socio-economic and political environment: from a safety-net which "countered the polarising effects of capitalism" and cultivated citizens as reserve labour (Hutton, 1995: 49), to a welfare state now enmeshed in the political toil to promote empowerment, responsibility and active citizenship (Clarke, 2005). The incumbent New Labour government has sought to address the nation's deep-rooted social problems by forging a "consensus" around a modernisation agenda that places local governance at its centre (Newman, 2001: 2). This has injected irrevocable change into the public sector where the local governance vernacular is now manifested vis-à-vis empowering discourses, such as user involvement, collective decision-making, local control and so forth.

Nowhere is this shift more visible than within UK social housing where tenant participation is now the norm instead of the exception (see for example Hickman, 2006). Whilst regarded as a universal "good thing" (Riseborough, 1998: 221), tenant participation remains a contested concept with different definitions leading to different approaches to considering its effects (Goodlad, 2001). A catch-all label for a range of different forms and processes, it is often equated with the related concepts of influence and control. Indeed the *National Strategy for Tenant Participation* in Scotland defines it as: "tenants taking part in decision making processes and influencing decisions…It is a two way process which involves the sharing of information, ideas and power" (Scottish Office, 1999b: 33). By questioning whether participation increases tenants' influence this raises the important issue of the relationship between participation and power. As

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research by Cairncross *et al* (1994) concluded over a decade ago there is however no easy answer to the question of whether participation empowers tenants.

Whilst much work has been done evaluating and commenting upon the degree to which this key political objective of empowerment has been, or can be, realised (see for example Somerville, 1998; Cairncross *et al*, 1994; 1997), this paper proposes a slightly different approach. Drawing on a theoretical framework influenced by Foucault's work on *governmentality* this paper seeks to critique popular notions of tenant empowerment as a radical political project by highlighting how it embodies regulatory as well as liberatory possibilities. In particular, attention is focused on how tenants are constituted through discourse and mobilised into action through governmental strategies and techniques. This is complemented by an emphasis on how this 'subject' produced by technologies of power fails to 'turn up' in reality (see for example Clarke, 2005; 2004). The aim here is to draw on the strengths of governmentality whilst also highlighting its limitations: that power's effects, as reflected in particular 'mentalities' of rule, cannot be guaranteed.

It is hoped that the ethnographic study presented here on how housing governance has changed in Glasgow following its 2003 stock transfer will offer a useful contribution and positive addition to the existing literature on tenant participation and empowerment. To achieve this goal this paper begins by discussing the theoretical framework that is central to this paper: that of governmentality. This is followed by a discussion of the contextual background and research methods of the study, before an exploration of the empirical data and summary of the conclusions.

Governmentality, Technologies of Citizenship and the 'Will to Empower'

As a framework for analysing power in contemporary society, Foucault's work on *governmentality* draws attention to the 'how' of governing by considering how we think about the nature and practice of government (Foucault, 2003a; 2003b). This reflects a historical interest in the interconnection between thought and our capacity to govern, as manifest in the emergence of particular 'mentalities' of government (Dean, 1999). Whilst this approach emphasises the interdependence between forms of knowledge and apparatuses of power it does not imply there is always perfect correspondence between the two, for power is more than the simple realisation of will (Lemke, 2001). Indeed Clarke highlights how these subjects constituted through discourses, apparatuses and practices "do not necessarily materialize in the anticipated form" (2005: 456).

Foucault defines governing as the "conduct of conduct" with this word play on conduct encompassing any calculated attempt to direct human behaviour towards specific ends (Foucault, 2003b: 138; see also Dean, 1999). It is therefore an older and more comprehensive meaning which illustrates how governing ranges along a 'continuum' from addressing the problems of self-control through private acts of self-governance, to regulating the conduct of others (Lemke, 2001). At the heart of this approach is a rejection of power as a prohibitory concept, in favour of a more sophisticated understanding that draws attention to the productive nature of power. Unlike traditional conceptions of power with its emphasis on causal agency that can be derived from Hobbes, this represents a point of subordination and alternative conceptualisation that owes its allegiance to Machiavelli and his realist account of power in situ (Clegg, 1989).

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Unlike the concept of power from which it is derived empowerment has a more practical utility, and indeed is generally characterised as a: "process by which people who are disadvantaged, or excluded acquire something of the character of citizens… (because) control over their lives is increased (Somerville, 1998: 223). By continuing to define the subject and the citizen in opposition such a definition however continues the traditional conceptualisation of power as the "crushing of individual (political) subjectivity" (Miller, 1987:1), and thereby the solution in transcending power relations. This ignores that empowerment is itself a mode of subjection and means of regulating conduct.

Here governmentality can perhaps offer a more critical edge. The work of Cruikshank is especially illuminating for she draws attention to, "technologies of citizenship: discourses, programmes, programs and other tactics aimed at making individuals politically active and capable of self-government" (1999:1). Perhaps more importantly she links their emergence with a more general 'will to empower' which is indicative of a concern about individuals who fail to act in their own interests and thus deemed to lack the fundamental properties of citizens.

> "When we hear that subjects are apathetic or powerless and that citizenship is the cure, we are hearing the echo of the will to empower… I have argued that the will to empower is a strategy of government, one that seeks solutions to political problems in the governmentalization of the everyday lives of citizen-subjects" (Cruikshank, 1999: 122-123).

By defining citizens in terms of what they lack, these technologies embody a productive form of power which aims to put others into action. The citizen here is conceptualised as an "instrument" of political power, not simply a "participant", with authorities trying to solicit, maximise and facilitate their voluntary engagement in the political process as

opposed to procuring their apathy or docility (Cruikshank, 1999: 5). This involves actively promoting individual subjectivities, not the crushing of them. Crucially, unlike traditional conceptions of power Cruikshank stresses that the interests of the 'governed' and the 'governors' need not necessarily be in opposition. Indeed as a mode of power she regards empowerment as "both voluntarily and coercive" (Cruikshank, 1999: 4). Such attempts to act upon the action of others, or what Foucault labelled the 'conduct of conduct', nonetheless represents an extension of government as opposed to its reduction. Whilst strategies of empowerment promote individual agency and their capacity for self-government and may therefore have liberatory potential, Cruikshank's critical insight suggests that it is fundamentally a relationship of power concerned with shaping and directing human conduct towards particular ends. This mode of power is not however a totalising force, rather a forever "uneven and partial" project (Clarke 2004: 7).

Importantly for democratic theory this suggests 'empowerment', and indeed participatory democracy, is not self-evidently a good thing: it is no better or worse than any other form of government for it is still a mode of exercising power. This should not however be interpreted as anti-democratic rather an approach that endeavours to incorporate the insights of post-structuralism, particularly how the subject is constituted through social discourse and practices of power. As Cruikshank herself concludes: "This book holds the will to empower to the fire not to destroy it or discount it but to bring both its promises and its dangers to light" (1999: 125).

Background: the 2003 Glasgow housing stock transfer

Stock transfer involves the transfer of housing from the public (i.e. local authority or Scottish Homes) to the voluntary sector (i.e. a housing association or co-operative).[1] In Scotland it has a unique dimension which emphasises local tenant control and communitarian endeavour as reflected in the notion of 'community ownership' (McKee, forthcoming; Kintrea, 2006; Scottish Office, 1999a; Clapham *et al* 1991); although this idea has a long legacy in Scotland it is presently the label applied to the Scottish Executive's national programme of housing stock transfers (Audit Scotland 2006).

In 2003 Glasgow City Council transferred its entire stock of council housing to the newly created Glasgow Housing Association - now Britain's largest social landlord (Daly *et al,* 2005; Gibb, 2003). That whole stock transfer was proposed as the solution to Glasgow's housing problems is perhaps not a surprise: firstly, an estimated £3 billion was needed to modernise the city's housing stock over 30 years however the Council were prevented from raising the necessary resources because of public sector borrowing restrictions; and secondly, the Council had an estimated housing debt of £900million, which the UK treasury promised to write-off if transfer went ahead (Glasgow City Council 2001). Stock transfer was therefore a financially attractive alternative to the status quo, which was becoming increasingly untenable.

Despite the mobilisation of an active 'no' campaign, decades of neglect and repeated failures by the City Council made Glasgow's tenants eager for change. In particular the emphasis on community ownership made the GHA's proposals "seductive" and were also fundamental in dismissing claims of "privatisation" (Mooney and Poole, 2005: 32). Yet the Glasgow transfer was not just about a cash injection and physical

improvement of the houses, for transformations in housing governance were also central to the tenant promises made.

Here, two post-transfer commitments are of particular significance: firstly, the establishment of a devolved management structure involving the creation of a citywide network of Local Housing Organisations – small-scale, locally based, tenant controlled organisations; and secondly, the promise of Second Stage Transfer in order these LHOs could eventually own as well as manage the local housing (McKee, forthcoming; Glasgow City Council, 2001; 2002). Given this explicit commitment to involving tenants in the ownership as well as the management of their homes Glasgow represents an ideal case study upon which to explore discourses of citizen empowerment. Although the scale of the problems in Glasgow and the novelty of the proposed solutions make it in many ways a unique case study, the governmental rationalities underpinning community ownership are visible in other policy contexts, both within and beyond housing, and are therefore worthy of further critical scrutiny.

The Research

The research reported focuses on the experiences of two Local Housing Organisations (LHOs), which were established in Glasgow following the housing stock transfer in 2003 from the City Council to the newly established Glasgow Housing Association (GHA). An established housing association based in the city but operating outwith the GHA context was also used as a comparison. Attention was given to select organisations of a broadly similar size, which operated in different areas of the city, and to reflect their different constitutional types (for further discussion of the case studies see, McKee 2006).

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The research reflects the initial findings of ongoing ESRC funded doctoral research of one of the authors.[2] Fieldwork was undertaken between August 2005 – April 2006, and involved two stages: ethnographic case study research complemented by an external phase of key actor interviews, documentary analysis and observation at the citywide/national level. In total 54 semi-structured interviews were conducted with front-line housing staff, committee members, and external housing practitioners/policy-makers; 5 focus groups were held with tenants outwith the local management committees; and a range of both internal/external policy documents analysed, and meetings/events observed. As the research discussed within this paper only reflects a small proportion of the overall project not all research methods are drawn on here. Where direct quotes are used the interviewer's comments appear in italics; efforts have also been made to protect confidentiality by removing identifying names and titles.

Going Local: mobilising 'local knowledge' through stock transfer

The pre-transfer situation

Prior to the stock transfer, the divide that separated tenants from housing professionals was the differing locales of knowledge, which they utilised in their area of work. When the City Council was the landlord, decision-making was centralised, insulated and premised on the professional judgement and expertise of both housing staff and local councillors. This form of organisation acted as a shield for bureaucratic decision-making.

> "The 'take it or leave it' attitude was definitely there and it was much more of an enforcement of this is what we're going to do. We used to have [a department], which would look at its budget, look at an area and say (that's) what we will do there….they spent the money but there was no consultation. They did, they just went in there and you had to be grateful for it that was the way they looked at it:

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'why are you moaning you're getting this, this is a lot'. But there was very little consultation amongst the tenants with regards to that" *(LHO Housing Officer, Glasgow Housing Association).*

"*How were decisions taken about local issues [pre-transfer]?* They were taken from the centre by people who didnae live in the area" (*LHO Committee Member, Office Bearer*).

Where local participation structures did exist, normally in the form of estate action groups or neighbourhood forums, only a limited number of designated staff were directly involved with activists. The majority of front-line staff therefore had little personal contact with tenants other than when individuals raised specific issues with them, either on the phone or at the front desk. For tenants, this lack of familiarity with individual staff at 'the housing' contributed to a deferential attitude where they accepted officers' professional judgement and were expected to be grateful for whatever limited resources could deliver. This served to create a clear divide between housing professionals and tenants, which fostered an adversarial 'them' versus 'us' culture.

"… [going to the housing] was like going to the doctors or the dentists or going to a hospital appointment. Because they were the professionals and they knew better you know" (*LHO Committee Member, Office Bearer*).

"We didn't have a relationship with the council…It was just we're the owners and you're the tenant" (*LHO Committee Member*).

For the minority who did try to get involved, they described their experience of local participation structures as frustrating for housing staff simply paid "lip service" to tenants as there were no resources, and perhaps political will, to implement their locally identified priorities. This resulted in activists becoming very disillusioned with the process as they were continually raising the same issues over and over yet they were

never addressed. This negative perception was also echoed by local housing staff, who were only too aware of the limitations of the Council's approach to tenant participation. Indeed they themselves described local participation structures as simply "talking shops" where residents could come and raise their issues but where nothing would really happen because financial constraints prevented them from implementing tenants' priorities.

The limitations of the Council's tenant participation activities were not however restricted to a lack of finances alone. Tenant activists recalled how small issues they raised which required minimal resourcing, such as keeping the local area tidy or the grass neatly cut, were also ignored. They further criticised the Council's lack of communication and consultation with their tenants, which was described as minimal at best. This was a situation that housing staff themselves also recognised.

> "[The Council] had to have tenant participation but it was very much 'we've decided this, can you let the tenants know' (*LHO Policy Officer, Glasgow Housing Association*).

Together these failings suggest a lack of commitment to tenant involvement within the organisation, with a preference instead for top-down decision making premised on professional knowledge. This professional knowledge in turn drew its terms of reference from external professional standards, underpinned by the legislation, regulation and good practice guidance that governs the operations of social housing. Overall this served to create a paternalistic organisational culture in which housing professionals were deemed to know best.

The post-transfer situation

The 2003 stock transfer promised 'community ownership' for Glasgow's tenants. Here

the creation of the LHO network has been fundamental to the city's housing revolution.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to comment on the precise remit and function

of these organisations (see however McKee, forthcoming) it is important to reflect upon

the rationale behind this organisational model, which was to place tenants firmly at the

'centre of change' in delivering new and improved housing services for the city. This

was to be achieved by fragmenting service delivery via the downward devolution of both

autonomy and control to a plethora of community housing organisations: the LHOs.

> "This (transfer) Framework will allow the opportunity to develop new and radical
> forms of local housing management, ownership and community-based
> regeneration. Local people must be at the centre of change in realising better
> housing and better-equipped organisations to deliver improved housing
> management and repair services. These are critical components in encouraging
> demand and stability in socially rented housing and in building stronger
> communities" (*Glasgow Housing Partnership Steering Group. 2000:3).*

Controlled by tenants - these locally based, small-scale, tenant managed housing

organisations allow residents to have a say in shaping local services to suit the needs and

priorities of their respective communities. Consequently, post-transfer tenants have been

constructed as possessing a more implicit, informal and private sphere of knowledge than

that of front-line staff whose expertise is couched in terms of external professional

standards. The tenants, within the confines of their communities, knowingly possess a

field of knowledge that is more specifically local than that possessed by housing

professionals. As residents "live in the area" they are deemed to have a greater insight

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into its particular problems, needs and priorities. Importantly, they are also the people who have to live with the consequences of any decisions made, good or bad.

> "It's their houses so it's really up to them…People who live in big fancy houses in Bearsden don't necessarily know what's good for the punters in [the LHO area]. It's the people that live in the houses they can actually identify the problems, and they can identify the solution (*LHO Housing Officer, Glasgow Housing Association*).

Local tenant involvement has therefore become presented simultaneously as both the rationale (instrument) and the outcome (effect) of stock transfer in Glasgow. Consequently, much financial resources and staff time have been dedicated to mobilising participation - primarily through the LHO network - in order to encourage residents to become more directly and actively engaged in the decision making process. Here front-line staff have been accorded a key role in 'maximising' participation – indeed they themselves described the need to be flexible in terms of the methods of engagement they offer, and to be innovative and think "outside the box" by making participation "fun" for tenants. In addition, participation is no longer to be equated with the 'committee' per se or restricted to traditional housing issues, but extended to encourage involvement from the wider tenant group through new initiatives outwith the traditional focus on bricks and mortar activities. This requires landlords to rethink the very nature of tenant participation itself in order it be made more interesting and appealing to their tenants.

Whilst stock transfer has resulted in positive gains in terms of local tenant control in the decision making process (see McKee, forthcoming), mobilising tenants' local knowledge in this way is nonetheless a relationship of power that works by and through citizens' political subjectivities, not against them: it is a technique that encourages and

motivates tenants to engage effectively and yet still remain autonomous. This is then, not so much a reduction in government but a refashioning that is premised on the voluntary engagement of local people to act in their own interests. Indeed, local residents explained their motivations to actively participate in precisely these terms. They described themselves as the "tenants' voice" and saw their role as representing "tenants' interests" in order to deliver positive change in the area for the enjoyment of the wider community.

Significantly, this government ambition to mobilise tenants into action has triggered a greater divide between the participants and non-participants within local governance structures (i.e. active and 'inactive' tenants). For example, tenants who participated in formal mechanisms and who allocated time and effort towards meetings and training programmes consequently constructed an individualistic and blasé attitude towards those tenants who chose not to become actively involved.

> "*Is it difficult to get people involved in things?* It is really. They're no interested. Some of them just want to moan…I said to [my father] the other day are you going to the AGM? ….'That lot would do nothing' he says 'especially the bloody committee, that bloody committee do nothing anyway'. …He's just typical of some of them they just want to moan and groan" (*LHO Committee Member*).

Without local residents' discursively engaging, exchanging and participating with their LHO a major problem emerges: apathy. This silence or unwillingness to get involved has become problematised by housing professionals and active tenants alike. However such an analysis may not only preclude a greater understanding as to why tenants opt out of participation processes, but also encourages the uncritical acceptance of discourses of local knowledge, thereby masking the power relations at the heart of such processes.

Tenant Training: shaping the active subject

Promoting self-development or regulating conduct?

Community ownership not only seeks to mobilise active tenant involvement in the decision making process, but also to shape the very nature of their engagement. Post-transfer the funding and provision of tenant training has increased dramatically, both within the GHA and also the wider tenant and housing association support organisations. Important here, is the delivery of basic training about the function of a committee and the nature of effective decision making. Many of the six hundred LHO committee members brought into being by the stock transfer were new to housing, and therefore needed to be trained in core policy areas and become familiar with the specialist nature of housing jargon in order they could partake in informed decision making.

Subsequently training has emerged as a key technique for realising governmental ambitions of 'empowerment', as it instils local residents with the skills and competences they need to become involved in the governance of their communities. Given the fragmentation of service delivery that has occurred in Glasgow post-transfer, governance was always an area in which potential difficulties might emerge: within the LHO context working with a committee is a new experience for many front-line staff, whilst for local tenant activists they are now being encouraged to work in 'partnership' with housing staff whom they may previously have enjoyed a very adversarial relationship with. Training therefore represents a key strategy to smooth over these local tensions and facilitate effective partnership working within individual LHOs. Paradoxically however, it occupies a dual function, building self-belief and encouraging self-development within the tenant group, whilst also regulating conduct by conditioning tenants to apply their

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local knowledge within the existing institutional architecture of housing – that is the laws, regulations and good practice guidance which governs its operations.

Firstly, training is a strategy of empowerment that aims to shape the individual in order they can be instilled with the necessary confidence to effectively carry out their role, and therefore improve their ability to diligently manage certain requests placed on them from the wider community and to demonstrate assertion in their relations with front-line staff. Such techniques, which are rooted in the foundation of self-belief rather than imparting of factual knowledge, were described by one committee member as the realisation that "nobody is better than you".

Post-transfer, building tenants' self-confidence and supporting their personal development is vital to the success of community ownership, for although they bring their local knowledge to the organisation they lack the professional experience of staff. Training therefore offers a mechanism to reconcile these two legitimate bodies of knowledge in order that adversarial and deferential relationships can be transcended, and tenants and housing practitioners can therefore work together. Instilling confidence in tenants that their issues and questions are both valid and appropriate, and that there is "no such thing as a stupid question" is important: if tenants do not feel they can make an effective contribution they are unlikely to be encouraged to get involved.

> "There is an issue about equality: and it's about me saying to them the minute you step into that room it doesn't matter what your role is outside that room, you are all equal…We need to build up their confidence and remind them that they are there and they have equal status around that room" (*Senior Representative, Tenant/Housing Association Support Organisation*).

The emphasis is therefore on liberating tenant to realise their full potential, by reconciling their personal projects with overarching political ambitions for community ownership.

Secondly, training is more than a tool for building self-confidence for it is also a form of governmental intervention directed at regulating individual conduct by locating tenants' local knowledge within the already established institutional architecture of housing. The emphasis here is firmly on 'effective' governance, and the importance of volunteer committee members being aware of their roles and responsibilities, and also understanding the wider context in which they are working in. Indeed, committee members themselves described training as helping them become "good committee members" and the "best" committee they could be.

This was to be achieved through an emphasis on the code of conduct, performance standards and schedule seven legislation[3] - the aim of which is to make clear to volunteer committee members just what is expected of them and the standards they should be aspiring to. The focus here, is on regulating tenants' behaviour to conform to existing housing practice - this is more akin to a process of incorporation than liberation, and it requires tenants' recognise the complexity of, and constraints upon, their local autonomy in the decision making process.

> "*What is the purpose of training?* To give [the committee] an understanding of their position. (I) mean the first training for committee members should always be, and it doesn't matter what organisation housing anything, is your roles and responsibilities and what's expected of you" (*Member of Comparator RSL Management Team*).

This is particularly important in the stock transfer context where tenants have to make the difficult transition from being activists representing tenants' interests, to members of a

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management committee that is primarily concerned with the functioning and well being of the organisation. For example, with regards to allocations all the local committees' expressed a desire to prioritise local people in allocating houses in order to sustain the community nexus. However, staff had to "educate" them that this was not possible because of statutory requirement to prioritise homeless applicants. Whilst tenants accepted the legality of this constraint on their local decision making, it was nonetheless an external imposition that was resented because it thwarted their local preference. Significantly, despite the political will for community ownership post-stock transfer decision making still remains firmly centralised with the policy context being shaped by the housing regulator: Communities Scotland.

Tensions, conflict and programme failure

Despite the regulatory ambitions of tenant training to shape the conduct of active tenants, this constituted subject has failed to 'turn up' in reality. For example, despite the aim of training to foster positive relations between tenants and housing professionals at the local level, in some cases the relationship between these parties was irreconcilable. Indeed the majority of active tenants within the LHOs argued the transfer had failed to deliver the increased levels of 'empowerment'. Here they expressed frustration about the limitations on their formal control and that they were in effect like "nodding donkeys", because their committees largely accepted and "rubber stamped" proposals put forward by local housing staff in an unquestioning fashion. Importantly, tenants did not identify themselves as being 'empowered' through the stock transfer - this suggests they may not necessarily be willing to passively live out their self-governing subjection.

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Individual views on tenant participation however came highly contested, and were loaded with complexities and contradictions. Although critical of the changes in participation post-transfer, tenants would often speak in the same breath about the positive gains they had made through their involvement and the issues they had won. They seemed compelled to redeem their ambivalence with more certainty that tenant participation can accomplish positive outcomes for the wider community.

> "*Do you feel you have more of an input now?* A bit, but it's still no as much as I thought we were gonna have. I think we've been misled a bit, you know. I thought that, I mean we were under the impression that more or less you were gonna decide everything and I feel like quite a lot of the things are decided… they (just) want your approval. But we don't always do it mind you; we've fought for different things and got them changed. You know you can do that" (*LHO Committee Member*).

This wavering between the positive and negative opinions of tenant participation derives from the reconfigured roles of both tenants and housing professionals post-transfer. For front-line staff, working with a committee is a new dynamic and they are being asked to work side by side with activists who may previously have been a "thorn in the staff's side". Prior to the transfer, housing officers had little contact with tenants other than when they had an issue to raise and their accountability was limited to that of local councillors and senior management. However with the formation of the LHO network the local committee is now a strategic body with an active input into setting local investment priorities, proposing local variations to GHA model policies, and line managing senior housing staff locally (for further discussion see McKee, forthcoming). Consequently housing practitioners are now downwardly accountable to their local

committee, which has enabled local residents to scrutinise their performance with some

committees adopting very critical views indeed, and exerting real pressure for change.

> "[The committee] were saying 'how many voids do you get in, in a month?' – Five? That's just like taking five people to see five houses' - and it's not like that…I mean you've got difficult to let, you've got problems with repairs, you've got to choose kind of the right people and you've got to justify why you are by passing somebody. There's a lot more to it…. they think [the housing officer] has only got five empty houses in a whole month. How hard is that?" (*LHO Housing Officer, Glasgow Housing Association).*

Yet stock transfer has not resulted in the linear shift in power from housing

professionals to local communities, for committee members have also been faced with

growing expectations and a scrutiny of their performance. It is therefore not only

autonomy which is being devolved to the local level but also responsibility. In the post-

transfer environment LHO committees are accountable for the success of the local

organisation: they are answerable both above to the housing regulator, and below to the

local community, for the decisions they make. This pressure to make the right decisions

for the local area was clearly an activity some active tenants found very stressful indeed.

> "It's a firing line out there, and if I'm on it I've got to bring the repercussions back to [the staff]. They might no like it but that's the way it is. The biggest culture shock is the tenant is now the employer. Before the council, the faceless council was the employer; this faceless body that just had this big massive pit of money was the employer but now, no. We are the employer now and there isn't a big massive pit of money" (*LHO Committee Member, Office Bearer*).

Importantly, these local tensions highlight the multi-dimensional modality of power post-

transfer for tenants are not simply subjected to the power of higher authorities, but are

themselves responsible for managing the conduct of others (such as local housing staff).

Given the changing roles and responsibilities of both tenants and housing professionals alike, local tensions and conflict are perhaps inevitable in the immediate post-transfer period. .

Conclusion

Through the case study of community ownership in Glasgow, the aim of this paper was to address the complexity of governance and the overarching emphasis on empowerment in contemporary housing policy. Here Foucault's work on governmentality is insightful for as a theoretical framework for analysing governance it eschews Hobbesian concepts of sovereign power, and instead focuses on power in situ as it operates through particular strategies and techniques at the micro-level (Clegg 1999). Importantly this illuminates the productive modality of governance, whereby governmental objectives are realised not through acts of direct intervention but by reconciling the personal projects of the 'governed' with the political ambitions of the 'governors' (Cruikshank 1999).

This theoretical approach centres on the discursive field in which the exercise of power is rationalised. Whilst this accords an important emphasis to how particular ways of acting upon and shaping human conduct are justified through discourse, it does not necessitate a neglect of empirical reality. Indeed Clarke cautions against conceptualising this political project to govern as top-down, homogenous and totalising for subjections are "likely to be less than comprehensive and only temporarily settled" (2004: 7). The empirical data on the Glasgow transfer reverberates this position for it highlights that just because governmental ambitions to empower Glasgow's tenants exist does not entail that they will necessarily realise their effects. This disjuncture between 'thought' and 'reality'

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is not however a failure of this theoretical framework. In contrast, it is a key strength for it highlights that power is anything but self-evident.

Using this theoretical perspective, then, we argue that this paper takes a fundamentally different approach to conceptualising tenant empowerment. Where previously, studies have tended to focus on evaluating the extent to which tenants have been, or may be 'empowered', by exploring their degree of influence and control in the decision making process or their ability to mobilise their skills and resources in pursuit of their goals (see for example Somerville, 1998; Cairncross *et al,* 1994; 1997), we argue that empowerment itself is a relationship of power and mode of subjection that endeavours to direct human conduct towards particular ends. Paradoxically therefore it may embody regulatory as well as liberatory possibilities.

Crucially this critical interrogation of 'empowerment' is not to denounce or reject endeavours to enhance local tenant control and influence in the decision making process. Rather, following Cruikshank (1999) it is to illuminate the subtle and somewhat hidden forces of power that are present whenever we here the echo of 'the will to empower'. As the Glasgow context illustrates active tenant involvement has been both mobilised and shaped through community ownership. Here the elevation of tenants' local knowledge and the regulation of their conduct through tenant training have been key strategies and techniques in constituting both the 'empowered tenant' and 'good committee member'. This perspective of power that we have developed therefore not only emphasises the dispersal of governance in society, as well as the instrumental role that individuals play in regulating their own self-conduct, but ultimately, that less direct government in society does not necessarily entail less governing.

Notes

[1] For a further discussion of the origins and evolution of stock transfer policy in the UK, see Taylor (2004) for a good summary.

[2] Kim McKee, working title 'Reconfiguring Housing Governance in Glasgow Post-Stock Transfer', estimated submission September 2007.

[3] Schedule 7 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 focuses on the regulation of RSLs particularly the inquiries that can be held, and the sanctions imposed, when performance becomes an issue. It also outlines appropriate conduct of individual officers and committee members with respect to the receipt of gifts and benefits.

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