

‘The (unintended) consequences of governance?’: Examining the role of ‘Frames’ in creating Imaginary housing systems and their importance for understanding the practices of senior housing professionals.

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Abstract

This paper examines data from interviews with senior housing professionals working in both the statutory and voluntary homelessness sectors in Scotland. The first section presents findings from both groups highlighting the contradictions and tensions which exist between the two sectors. The second section applies Boltanski and Thevenot’s (1991) theoretical framework to explore the ways in which housing professionals make sense of and justify their role in the provision of housing services to homeless applicants and those threatened with homelessness. The analysis of the data will be used to expand Carlen’s (2008) concept of the ‘imaginary’ in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the objective structures of governance shape and reshape the subjectivities of those working in the field of housing management. The important and often overlooked concept of ‘misrecognition’ will be used to explain why the tensions exist, as well as shedding light on why the apparent power imbalance between statutory and voluntary sectors goes mostly unnoticed.

Keywords: homelessness, frame analysis, imaginary housing systems, justification and criticism, professional practice, housing management

Introduction

Utilising original and unpublished qualitative data from a study commissioned in 2012 by a Scottish homelessness charity (hereafter referred to as the commissioning organisation), this paper will examine the ‘frames’¹ which senior housing managers utilise in order to make sense of, and justify their role in the provision of housing services and how this fits with the wider housing landscape. The first section of this

¹ The concept of ‘frame’ used in the analysis of the data in this study is similar to that used by Goffman in *Frame Analysis* (1976) and represents the ways that agents ‘order their experiences’ in ways that make sense of the world.

paper will present incidental findings from the study while the second section will analyse this data using a form of frame analysis. The final section will apply a critical perspective in order to understand the origins of these 'frames', their significance in creating 'imaginary' housing systems and the importance this has for understanding the practices of senior housing professionals.

The paper draws upon qualitative data from a(n unpublished) study which took place in 2012. The key research objectives of that study were to describe the market place for a third sector homeless service in Scotland seeking the views of key stakeholders, potential customers, and competitors (other organisations who provided homelessness and housing rights advice and advocacy). This paper does not report on the findings of that study which were for internal use by the commissioning organisation (hence no research question features here). However, this paper will examine a number of incidental findings which emerged from the study. In particular, two distinct sets of opinions are explored which highlight some of the key themes which were evident in terms of the relationship between senior housing professionals in the statutory and voluntary housing sectors.

The theoretical approach to this research emerged from an analysis of the qualitative data, much of which focused on criticism and justification. Boltanski and Thevenot's theoretical framework elaborated in both *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (1991) and *Critical Capacity* (1999) seemed well suited to the task of analyzing these incidental findings. The theoretical framework considered in this paper is a synthesis of a number of theoretical approaches which sit together under the broad rubric of 'social constructivism' and includes a form of frame analysis (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991, 1999) which will be combined with a critical approach.

The strength of this synthesis lies in its general ability to account for the distortions which are not only inscribed in any given perspective, but which also allow the researcher to adopt a reflexive approach which challenges the 'common-sense' view of the world, itself a political relation, as are the categories of perception that sustain it (Bourdieu 1991).

Theory and Method

This paper will synthesise a form of frame analysis, specifically Boltanski and Thevenot's (199) economy of worth model with Carlen's (2008) notion of the Imaginary in an attempt to explain the contradictions and tensions that not only exist within the field of housing provision, but also between the voluntary and statutory sectors within the provision of homelessness services. The theoretical method adopted here attempts to construct, as its object of study, objectivity of the second order (Bourdieu 1991), that is, the shared norms and values which constitute the intersubjectivities required when agents within a particular field have to move from personal convenience (subjectivity) to collective conventions (objectivity of the second order) which Bourdieu (1991, 2000) argues tend to be more or less adequately adjusted to objective structures (what Bourdieu calls objectivity of the first order). Objectivity of the second order is represented here by the orders of worth, the frames which professionals use to make sense of their own world and to justify their actions while criticising the actions or inactions of others.

In the original study on which this paper is based, the views of 25 senior housing professionals were sought to obtain their views on the commissioning organisation, potential barriers to joint-working arrangements with the commissioning organisation, and any possible areas for future collaboration². The interviewees (referred to as 'key stake holders' by the commissioning organisation) held senior managerial positions in various housing organisations; from directors of local authorities and housing associations to membership organisations which represented the interests of landlords and housing professionals (such as the Chartered Institute of Housing, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers, etc.). There were also senior representatives from five voluntary organisations, all of whom either worked directly with the commissioning organisation or were seen as providing similar services. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 and 40 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The candidness of many of the interviewees was, it could be argued, down to the fact that respondents were promised complete anonymity. This paper, in presenting and theorizing incidental findings, explores the

² As the study was in-house it is not available for a wider audience, hence it is not referenced here.

interviewees perception of the relationship between statutory and voluntary organisations³.

Perspectives on practice, understanding the tensions

The interviewees represented voluntary (five interviewees) and statutory organisations (17 interviewees), the latter containing senior managers who worked for landlord representative bodies (three interviewees). The first section of this paper presents data from the voluntary sector respondents before considering the two broad themes that resonated across the second group of interviewees, from the statutory housing sector. Boltanski and Thevenot's (1991, 1999) own form of frame analysis, embodied by what they call a sociology of critical capacity, will then be applied to the data in order to gain a deeper understanding of the implications for professional housing practice.

'Failing to meet their statutory obligations'

All five senior representatives from the voluntary organisations expressed concerns about the fact that, on a daily basis, local authorities failed to meet their statutory obligations towards those to whom they owed a duty to accommodate under section II of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 as amended (from here on referred to as 'the Act'). The following example is from a voluntary organisation which works directly with refugees.

"[Large local authority] is notoriously bad at meeting their statutory obligations. All the local law centres are stretched and it takes about one week just to be seen by an advisor. Therefore [large local authority] is getting away with not meeting their statutory obligations (...) this is becoming a great concern to us and a great source of frustration for the caseworkers. So basically the biggest issue for our clients is a severe lack of good legal advice and advocacy when councils fail to meet their duties and, oh, and a shortage

³ The distinction between the two groups lies in the extent to which they are required by law to discharge their duties. Those working in a voluntary capacity have no statutory duties to provide homelessness services while statutory organisations have an enforceable legal duty to provide services to those deemed to have a statutory right to housing under the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended. It should also be noted that the voluntary organisations referred to in this paper are exclusively advice and advocacy agents and do not include voluntary sector landlords.

of suitable accommodation. That's the other problem; there are simply not enough units of accommodation to meet demand.” (Voluntary Organisation)

The following excerpt is from another voluntary organisation;

“Local authorities worry about being taken to task over practice issues, they don't like being challenged for not meeting their duties, and this indirectly improves practice. This can only be a good thing for homeless people.”
(Voluntary Organisation)

It is important to highlight the fact that this interviewee believes that legal challenges, although unpopular with housing professionals, are indeed beneficial to homeless people.

The next interviewee highlights the fact that concerns are often ignored.

“Problems in [large local authority] are endemic. People are still being turned away on a daily basis. There is not enough accommodation and [large local authority] pretend to listen to our concerns but at the end of the day they do nothing. The issue is being largely ignored. Things are much worse than they were previously. A statutory service is only as good as its weakest points.” (Voluntary Organisation)

These concerns are strengthened by another organisation with a similar remit.

“If anything, there's a sense that it's getting worse, you're going to council meetings and you're hearing managers openly discussing the fact that they are failing to meet their statutory obligations, quite openly, without any reservations, and that's really worrying because that would never have happened before. That's a worrying new development.” (Voluntary Organisation)

The data strongly suggests that two broad concerns are emerging and that these are shared by all the interviewees from the five voluntary organisations who participated.

“The other problem is this distinction which gets made between old homelessness and new homelessness. It's too easy for councils to just bat

off criticism. Whenever these new managers are criticised, they say ‘oh, that’s the old homelessness world’, and they bat it off, far too easily. When we raise legitimate concerns about failures in meeting duties, we’re criticized as, ‘oh you are just looking to cause trouble’” (Voluntary Organisation).

Criticism is something that this paper will return to focus on shortly, but it is perhaps significant that the above interviewee believes that certain types and forms of criticism can, in certain circumstances and relating to certain groups, be deflected with relative ease.

“It’s far too easy to say, ‘oh but look at our list of successes’. [Former head of statutory service] did that for years. Whenever anyone pointed out that they were failing on a daily basis to meet their statutory obligations, [Former head of statutory service] would say, ‘yes but look at all our successes’. This is happening all the time now; it’s just too easy for managers to shrug off criticism. But that ‘old homelessness, new homelessness’ debate is fascinating to hear, and it’s happening in quite high profile places. Previously it was driven by the changes brought in by Housing Options⁴, ‘are you pro Housing Options or anti Housing Options’, but it has become even more than that and it’s ‘are you wedded to the legislation or are you open to new ways of working’, that’s what it seems to be about.” (Voluntary Organisation)

The concern about legislation is an important one. Local authorities have a statutory obligation (for which there are no discretionary powers to refuse) to provide suitable accommodation for those to whom the prescriptions of the Act deem to have a statutory right to accommodation. What this interviewee seems to be concerned about is the move away from statutory rights and responsibilities to a more ‘flexible’ approach which is much less embedded in statute than housing law itself allows.

⁴ According to the Scottish Government: Housing Options is a process which starts with housing advice when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem. This means looking at an individual’s options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options, including council housing, housing association housing and the private rented sector.
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/homeless/HomelessnessPrevention/hubs/options>

The inter-relationship between ‘Naming and Shaming’ and not seeing the ‘Bigger Picture’

While voluntary organisations expressed deep concerns about what appeared to be the increasing acceptance by local authorities of their inability to meet their statutory duties; almost every landlord organisation, as well as those representing their interests, outlined concerns about how these concerns were addressed by some voluntary organisations. The public ‘naming and shaming’ of local authorities, who were failing in their duties, was considered by statutory respondents to be counterproductive. Relatedly, statutory interviewees agreed that in upholding their client’s rights, some voluntary organisations did not see the ‘bigger picture’.

These two issues of ‘naming and shaming’ and ‘not seeing the bigger picture’ appeared in the data in some form or other in almost every interview with representatives of the statutory sector. The extent to which these two notions repeatedly presented themselves in the data, suggests that they are both ‘frames’ through which senior housing managers viewed the relationship between their own inability to meet their statutory obligations towards homeless persons and the role of voluntary organisations in enforcing the rights of homeless people.

“I hear a lot of charities on the radio being critical of local authority practices (...). I’m not always convinced that this type of criticism is productive.” (LA Head of Housing).

In another example, as well as containing a reference to the practice of ‘naming and shaming’, the interviewee indicated that resources were limited, accordingly: *“Making our lives more difficult by publicly naming and shaming us helps no one in the long run.”* (LA Head of Housing)

Another interviewee noted:

“Criticising them (local authorities) in public does nothing but undo all the previous good work. Picking one bad case and highlighting it is not conducive to building good relationships’ (Director of a local authority landlord representative organisation).

Another important finding appears to be firmly embedded in attitudes toward the advocacy function of voluntary sector organisations, with senior housing professionals, whether in housing associations or local authorities, indicating their dislike of challenges to their practice, particularly when this involved court action or judicial review. It is interesting to note that professionals in the statutory sector regarded their priority as being to meet the legally enforceable statutory rights of homeless applicants, while they viewed the role of the voluntary sector as being to uphold the legal rights of homeless applicants; roles which are in fact different:

“We recognise that we have very different roles, (...). Individual cases cause problems as the [voluntary sector] often doesn’t see the bigger picture” (LA Head of Housing).

This view was shared by the majority of local authority heads of housing who viewed the advocacy role of the voluntary sector as ‘not seeing the bigger picture’.

“They need to look at the bigger picture, particularly with regard to evictions for rent arrears...(…) the lengths that landlords go to, to recover rent. The hoops they jump through for their tenants go largely unnoticed (...). We are in the business of housing people, not evicting them and we do so only as a last resort.” (National Housing Membership Organisation).

This statement is interesting as it frames the situation in a way that makes claims of efficient and effective practices which are invisible to an otherwise ‘narrow’ focus (not seeing the bigger picture) and which therefore go unappreciated by voluntary sector organisations.

“(…) we look at the bigger picture, we have to. When [the voluntary sector] defends someone who we are in the process of taking legal action against, then they’re undermining our wider strategic function, which is to make sure that rent comes in and that the tenants who do pay rent can have their nice new kitchens and bathrooms, which is what they are entitled to. It’s not fair on them and [the voluntary sector] needs to see it from their perspective..., they need to stand back and look at the bigger picture (LA Head of Housing).

There is also a hidden, but nonetheless strong, link to notions of performance in the 'bigger picture' discourse. A common thread evident through interviews suggests that housing professionals are doing all they can and that external factors which are imposed upon them through austerity cuts or funding shortages from central government, are the principle barrier to running an efficient and effective housing service.

"Working for a local authority means that you can become vary laid back about not being able to meet your duties (...), we need organisations (...) to put pressure on us when we become too relaxed about all of this. But they also need to see the bigger picture; they also need to be able to see what's important and what's not. (LA Head of Housing)

Blame is shifted from institutional failure to one where a distinct lack of resources, units of housing in particular, is the main cause for the inability to adequately discharge duties owed.

'Good legislation is still difficult to implement. [A particular council] has 160,000 people on waiting lists, which makes the 2012 target of ending homelessness⁵ something of a misnomer. It displaces the problem of homelessness. Rights work fails to acknowledge the good work that is being done by local authorities up and down Scotland. [The voluntary sector] need(s) to see the bigger picture.... They need to acknowledge the difficulties authorities face, both operational and political'. (Director of local authority landlord Representative organisation)

To summarise this section, two distinctive yet interrelated positions are evident in almost all of the examples cited here from housing professionals working in the statutory field of service provision. They almost unanimously held the view that the practice which they referred to as 'naming and shaming' was counterproductive. The housing professionals also shared the widely held view that when local authorities

⁵ The Homelessness Etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 prescribed that all unintentionally homeless persons would have a statutory right to settled accommodation by 2012. It did this by removing the 'priority need' category which limited the statutory obligations of local authorities to those who could prove 'need' in accordance with a set criteria.

were criticised for not meeting their statutory duty, their critics were themselves criticised as ‘not seeing the bigger picture’. The next section attempts to explain these justifications and criticisms by employing a pragmatic approach which temporarily suspends the critical gaze in an attempt to understand why agents choose certain frames of justification and the forms of criticism they employ.

Analysing the role of Frames in the creation of Imaginary housing systems

Boltanski and Thevenot’s theories of Justification and Critical Capacity (1991, 1999) provide a useful starting point for an analysis of this data, as their theory is founded upon the notion that agents have a requirement to continually justify their own actions, particularly when these actions (or inactions) come under critical appraisal. Individuals also criticise the actions of others as part of their own justificatory practices, all the more so, when they themselves are the ‘object’ of the other’s criticism.

The six frames or ‘worlds’ of justification identified by Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) are set out in Table 1.

Table 1 Different orders / regimes of worth

Order of Worth	Principle concerns
Market World	The logic of exchange and enterprise.
Inspired World	Creativity, spirituality
Domestic World	Good human relations – hierarchy and tradition
World of Renown	Fame. Marketing. Good public relations
Civic World	Logic of social contracts and citizenship rights
Managerial World	Logic of productivity, efficiency

First of all, it is important to note that Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) cite the compromise between the Civic order and the Managerial⁶ order as not only being the most prevalent compromise evident in society as a whole, but one which underpins the modern state. The compromise between two different (yet very compatible) orders of worth actually provides, according to Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) quite a strong justificatory regime, insofar as it seems to have become accepted, if not wholly 'legitimated' within the welfare sector itself, the field of social housing provision being no exception. In normal circumstances, any compromise agreement tends to weaken the justificatory power of that position, since according to Boltanski and Thevenot (1991, 1999) an order is vulnerable to criticism if the critic can show that the 'Reality Test' (the means by which legitimate agreement is ultimately reached) has 'borrowed' or 'imported' aspects of another order of worth. If the housing professional employed a general compromise between Domestic, Market, and Renown polities then their justifications would be vulnerable to criticism as it would be relatively easy to prove that they contain the central tenets of a number of different forms of worth, none of which are applicable to the situation at hand. In other words, the purer the justificatory regime, the more difficult it is to discredit (See Boltanski and Thevenot 1991: 285 – 292). This, however, is not always the case. State institutions, Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) argue, particularly those which provide public services, are crucibles for the formation of compromises between different orders. It seems reasonable to argue that the post-war welfare period embodied by the Fordist-Keynesian model of industrial organisation saw the Civic model dominate 'official discourse' which emanated from state institutions including those situated within what Bourdieu (1994) calls the bureaucratic field. The shift in power from industrial capital to finance capital in the 1980s arguably resulted in the transformation of Industrial polity into an order of worth which emphasised efficiency and effectiveness, as well as spawning an entire regime of managerial mechanisms, overseen by experts and specialists (subjects) putting to work (relationship) tools for

⁶ In the original French text Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) use the term 'Industrial' order, which I have changed to Managerial in order to make the term more relevant to the contemporary period in which it is here applied. The original research which Boltanski and Thevenot undertook in formulating this model looked at a series of management guides many of which were written when Europe's economic base was still largely industrial in nature. A close examination of the details of this 'order' suggests that the Industrial polity, in contemporary terms, is entirely 'Managerial' in nature.

measuring performance (objects). Collective conventions, such as orders of worth, have the ability to outlive the social conditions within which they were formed (Bourdieu 1994), which is why the Civic order still plays an important part, but has arguably been overshadowed by the dominance of the Managerial order in almost all aspects of public life.

Boltanski and Thevenot's (1991) model would suggest that in the voluntary sector, although less obvious from the data, agents tend to construct their reality through the framework of the Inspired order of worth as this corresponds most to the daily 'situations' in which agents in this field find themselves most often. This is not to suggest that the voluntary sector, is itself a homogenous field, but rather that the collective conventions, the shared norms and values which underpin objectivity of the second order (Bourdieu 1991) constitute the categories of perception which voluntary agents tend to apply to both the 'objects' and 'subjects' of their particular world.

The significance of frames is that, unlike classical sociological accounts, the ways in which a person justifies their own actions and criticises the actions of others is determined not by social group but by the situation at hand (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991, 199). This type of pragmatic sociology is useful as it allows the researcher to take seriously the claims of individual agents by temporarily suspending the critical stance in order to allow persons to speak (taking seriously what they say). The data presented above suggests that there is a clear homology between this theoretical position and what happens in practice, namely that the internal logics of each field (see Bourdieu 1977, 1985, 1991, 1992, 2000) are driven by different aims and objectives by dint of the fact that statutory and voluntary sectors have to deal with different subjects and objects.

The agent working in the statutory housing sector has two main concerns. Firstly, the principle concern is to meet the accommodation needs of the community of tenants, a task which includes managing not only properties but also the tenants themselves, with rent arrears management and the management of anti-social behaviour being key features of the contemporary role of a social housing provider (Flint and Rowlands 2003, Flint 2004, 2006a, 2006b). This aspect of the role of the

housing professional lends itself well to being apprehended through the Civic frame which has the general welfare of communities and collective groups at its core. The *higher common principle* of the Civic order is the 'collective will', the *state of worthiness* is any situation which is 'rule governed and representative', the *state of unworthiness* is the 'irresponsible individual', the *subjects* of this order are 'collective persons and their representatives' and the *objects* are 'legal forms', 'courts', 'procedures', 'districts', 'programmes', 'policies' and 'local offices'. The 'renunciation of the particular' is the form of *investment* in this regime.

Secondly, the statutory housing provider must also meet a number of managerial requirements (see Jacobs and Manzi 1996, 2000, Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi 2003, 2004, Manzi 2010) overseen by the Scottish Housing Regulator (not to mention the managerial checks and balances within the organisation itself) and accountable to the Scottish Government. The statutory social housing sector is responsible for the maintenance of properties, including repairs and upgrades, the close management of rental income and expenditure as well as a number of procedural demands such as those prescribed by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 which places a requirement on landlords to prove that they have taken every reasonable step to ensure that eviction actions are always and in every case, measures of last resort. This aspect lends itself to being apprehended through the Managerial order which has as its *higher common principle* the 'efficiency and effectiveness of performance'. The *state of worthiness* in this regime is achieved when things are 'functional', 'reliable' and 'operational'. The *state of unworthiness* is simply when things are 'unreliable', 'inefficient and ineffective'. Its *subjects* are 'experts', 'professionals' and 'specialists', its *objects* are 'tools and resources' which take the form of 'graphs', 'charts', 'plans' and 'accounts'.

For the agent working in the voluntary sector (in a rights-based homelessness charity for example) their concerns are mostly those of their clients. Most voluntary organisations of this type also have a campaigning function, but the principle concern of their front-line workers is the welfare of their client, usually a vulnerable individual or single household. Boltanski and Thevenot's model would suggest that this world is most easily apprehended through the Inspired frame. According to Boltanski and Thevenot's schema, the Inspired world which has its origins in the

disseminated ideas from St Simon's *City of God*, represents an evangelical approach to a life which sits in opposition to 'the rigid and restrictive world of logic and reason'. 'Dreamers' and 'activists' populate this world and their *subjects* are those whom society has shunned (the archetypes of the 'madman' and the 'artist' take a central place in this imaginary), their *objects* have a strong mind/body connection and their purpose (*investment*) is to 'call into question' taken for granted notions, particularly those which are regarded as being responsible for the production and reproduction of inequality, oppression and exploitation.

Why these frames and not others? They are, to a large extent, determined by external factors and are embedded within certain situations. Regimes cannot be applied to situations where they have no relevance. The voluntary sector worker, advocating for homeless people cannot take a position of helping only those who are well known or having, as a requirement for assistance, some qualifying feature (other than 'housing need') as the world of Renown has no relevance in this context. The charity worker cannot be seen to take money from clients for the provision of services as the Market order has no place here. They cannot justify assisting family members to gain an advantage in the social housing sector as the Domestic order is of no relevance in the world of rights-based legal advice.

Equally, the statutory housing professional could not justify buying and selling former council housing stock for personal profit, as the Market order would be difficult to use as an adequate form of justification in the field of social housing. The housing officer cannot allocate the best houses to people on the basis of credentials (fame, standing, status) other than 'housing need' as the world of Renown is not relevant here and would thus be difficult to adequately justify. They cannot put family members at the front of a housing queue as it would be impossible to justify, given that the Domestic order of worth has little relevance in this context.

Therefore the regimes of worth which are employed can be said to issue from the relationship between external or 'objective' factors, the 'structuring structures' of the first level of objectivity, in this case housing law, policy, regulation and inspection regimes, resource restrictions, and the internalised 'structured structures' of the second level of objectivity (see Bourdieu 1991: 163 – 170).

The following excerpts from the interview data show the extent to which an accommodation between the Managerial and Civic orders are used in varying contexts to justify and criticise depending upon the situation at hand.

“[The voluntary sector] has to understand that the resources just aren’t there for authorities to resolve everyone’s accommodation issues; that’s a fact we all have to accept. There is so much more to homelessness than just accommodation issues ...” (LA Head of Housing)

The criticism of having too narrow a focus is an inversion of the ‘bigger picture’ argument. The justification for not meeting statutory obligations towards homeless persons is framed around the lack of resources available to do so. This indicates a Managerial frame where the problem is not viewed (as it often is) as a lack of ‘efficiency or effectiveness’ but one of resource restrictions, imposed externally and beyond the organisation’s immediate control.

The next example is one whereby the interviewee is not actually denying the fact that they do not meet their statutory obligations, but instead shifts the focus onto their critics, framed here as ‘condemnation’.

“...there needs to be a bit more balance to their approach, especially when condemning authorities for not meeting their obligations. Local authorities should be warned in advance when [a voluntary organisation] is about to attack them, or their performance levels, in public.” (LA Head of Housing).

By invoking the notion of ‘balance’, counter-criticism is not only levied at the critic but it is suggested, at the same time, that much is being done by the local authority which goes unnoticed and largely unappreciated by both tenants and the rights–workers who act on their behalf. This suggests something of an accommodation between both Civic and Managerial regimes of worth contained within a single statement.

Once again, both Civic and Managerial forms of justification are evident in this next example:

“There is an issue whereby [some voluntary organisations] are seen as having, perhaps, too much of an embattled or combative attitude. Some of [their] staff do not understand the ‘grubby end’ of housing provision and adopt a position of defending ‘just causes’, which often end in the realisation that there is nothing ‘just’ about the cause and that what we are dealing with are problems which have much deeper roots. They (...) should be quicker to step in and accept there is a problem when the tenant’s actions are clearly questionable.” (LA Head of Housing).

Through a Managerial frame, the idea that the ‘grubby end’ of housing provision (they do not see the ‘bigger picture’) is not fully appreciated is a criticism of the voluntary sector’s inability to understand housing management as *an effective system*; that they do not appreciate all that is being done in the wider interests of tenants. In the above example, the head of housing also uses the Civic justificatory regime to criticise the notion of ‘just causes’ which, it is implied, are nothing more than the elevation of the interests of a few ‘unrepresentative’ individuals. Boltanski and Thevenot (1991, 1999) are particularly clear that the Civic worth will always, and in every case, prioritise the collective interests of the ‘community’ (in this case the neighbourhood of tenants) over the interests of individuals; particularly individuals who are not only seen as being ‘unrepresentative’ of the wider group but who are perceived to cause harm to the wider interest through their own ‘irresponsible’ and ‘selfish’ actions.

Also evident was the view that while statutory duties are often not met, there may be resource reasons for this failure, thus legal challenges do not provide a solution:

“The fact that on a daily basis, I don’t meet my statutory duties is something I’m quite used to, but it would not be appropriate for [the voluntary sector] to become used to that. There is a difficult balance to be struck here. I might not be able to do something about it, I prioritise x over y and they need to respect that. I sometimes have a problem with how they challenge, especially when they escalate the judicial review process.” (LA Head of Housing).

Guaranteed anonymity in this study allowed the respondents to be very candid and the excerpt above uncovers a number of issues which are of interest here. Firstly, this senior manager acknowledges the Civic idea that the rights of 'individuals', many of whom threaten the wider interests of the neighbourhood through their own 'irresponsible' behaviour, may need to be upheld. This is used in a justificatory way, with senior managers of local authority housing services often perceiving their role and that of their organisations as having responsibility to a much larger group; thus embodying the very polity of Civic worth.

From the data presented here, it appears that housing managers acknowledge the fact that they cannot meet their statutory obligations, that they resent being publicly named and shamed for such and also that they are doing their best under the circumstances. What is clear is that a stark contradiction exists between the voluntary agencies who highlight their concerns about the volume of unmet statutory obligations, and the housing managers who criticise these agencies for publicly highlighting such failures. Statutory housing managers also, in turn, levy a criticism which suggests that the voluntary sector somehow fails to see the 'bigger picture'; a concept which interestingly, is never fully elaborated.

This theoretical approach adds to, and indeed develops, Pat Carlen's approach to the imaginary in welfare practice.

Expanding Carlen's concept of the Imaginary

In an attempt to explore this oppositional relationship between those who see their role as upholding the rights of homeless applicants and those who have a statutory duty to accommodate this group, Boltanski and Thevenot's 'justification' and 'criticism' is combined with the theoretical framework of Carlen (2008). Carlen's work utilises the concept of the 'imaginary'⁷ adding an extra dimension to help explain why practitioners and professionals often appear to simultaneously perform various levels

⁷ Carlen (2008: 21) describes the Lacanian notion of the 'Imaginary' as 'the existential capacity for recognising the specifics of lived experience as constitutive of reproducible self-identities. Recognition of these identities creates and perpetuates and perpetuates the imaginary order in which the subject lives'. This results in the 'misrecognition' of the symbolic, which in the case of this paper materialises in the sets of rational fictions (Van Weil 1992) which housing professionals construct in order to make sense of the contradictions which embody statutory housing provision.

of conflictual action. Firstly, in Carlen's research which focuses on the criminal justice system (and corresponding to the data presented above), professionals make strong claims that the stated goals of the project they are required to undertake are impossible to achieve given the severe resource restrictions. Secondly they complain about the enormous efforts they have to go to in order to prove the effectiveness of the project while, thirdly, constantly being aware of having to address the 'Other' oppositional but nonetheless operational project with a 'material reality' that is at all times counter to the objectives of the 'official' project (Carlen 2008). As Carlen says, in relation to crime reduction;

'For while 'everyone knows' that the chief inspector was only 'doing his job', 'everyone else knows' that in-prison programmes and decent regimes are almost certainly not in themselves going to reduce offending...So why lose credibility (or your promotion, or even your job if you are a prison officer or a prison governor) by continuing to say what everyone else always and already knows? If you are an academic why risk offending a major source of UK criminological funding by refusing to pretend that an imaginary penalty works' (Carlen et al 2008: 20).

As the data presented above suggests, the internal conditions and constraints of the field of housing provision place the housing professional under enormous pressure, which arises from having to deal with the external problem of what Hogget (2010) calls *the highly contested purpose of public organisations*. In practice this situates the statutory housing professional in between two dichotomous forces. On the one side there is the internal ethos of the organisation which gives rise to a sense of duty to one's tenants (Civic Polity) which exists without necessarily acknowledging the limited resources which make the realisation of certain internal goals or objectives difficult, if not impossible. On the other side there is the recognition that a large number of policy interventions are imposed (from outside the field) and which, Hogget shows (2010: 183) are largely 'symbolic' (so that the government can sustain the appearance of doing something) and which professionals in the field have to implement despite their reservations. This results in the housing professional having

to revert to a Managerial polity in order to justify their role in meeting the demands imposed by policy makers and enforced by bodies such as the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Integrating the two strands of economic and political reality, this Imaginary can be said to emerge from what Carlen calls the 'unintended ideological products of governance: economic insecurity; governance through auditing and actuarialist techniques to produce a mountain of hard copy testifying to responsible and effective government' (2008: 9). These phenomena are in no way alien to the housing profession and are strongly represented in the socially constructed tropes of 'managerialism' in social housing (Jacobs and Manzi 1996, 2000, Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi 2003, 2004, Manzi 2010). Indeed, it would seem plausible to suggest that the contradictions and tensions which exist within and between voluntary and statutory agencies are a direct result of the 'unintended consequences' of a governance regime that is itself contradictory in that the Scottish Housing Regulator and the Scottish Government emphasise different priorities.

Drawing a direct comparison with Carlen's (2008) analogy of imaginary penalty, that is, penal systems which, although aware of the distance between the reality (of not being able to meet their objectives) and the ideological mask (having to make it look as if they are), what happens in housing policy is no different. 'Imaginary housing systems' it seems, consist of the frames which professionals apply to each situation when a contradiction opens up between the personal ethos which gives their role meaning and the external pressures from political organisations (such as government bodies with conflicting aims and objectives)⁸. Statutory housing professionals are 'drawn' towards justificatory regimes which oscillate between Civic (in the interests of the collective group of tenants) and also Managerial (in the interests of the organisation itself which is responsible for the effective and efficient management of social housing stock).

⁸ In evictions practice there seems to be a tension between what the Scottish Government demands of landlords, that is, fewer evictions in the social housing sector, and what the Scottish Housing regulator demands, with its focus on the management of rent arrears. Recent research by the author has shown that these two conflicting demands cause great tension and confusion within social housing landlord organisations.

Carlen's notion of the economic and political impetus for imaginary practice emerges in the day-to-day pressures of working within managerialist structures of governance which have, as their main objectives, the 'appearance' of efficiency and competence. Carlen makes the claim that although in the past, critical thinkers could expose the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of policy interventions, by contrast, the contemporary world of welfare service provision has become a closed arena where 'rhetoric has become the reality' (Carlen 2008: 5), thus creating an imaginary which leads to professionals having to 'act as if'. This is developed further through an elaboration of the factors which combine to create what Carlen calls 'acquiescence in the absurd' (p10): with actuarial constructs, circular evaluations and audits of nonexistent or ineffective programmes and with staff who, in order to keep their jobs, are required to 'act as if' the imaginary is both attainable and measurable while at the same time having to save face by insisting that the job simply cannot be done with such limited resources. Carlen explains this situation thus:

"Professionals in blame driven cultures ... tend to acquiesce in the pursuit of institutional goals set by the various political and management agendas, at the same time as knowing that they are acquiescing in (and thereby promoting) an Imaginary order, the perpetuation of which renders these goals more and more desirable as they become less and less likely of achievement" (Carlen 2008: 9).

This quote has a clear resonance with the research data presented above, in so far as housing managers are subject to a rigorous regime of regulation and inspection (the results of which are published by the Scottish Housing Regulator) and are under pressure to meet a variety of predetermined performance targets, yet housing managers simultaneously claim that they are both relaxed about not being able to meet their obligations as well as being protective and defensive of the 'good work' that their organisations do otherwise. The homology which appears between Carlen's study and the one examined here shows the ways in which imaginary systems are constructed by welfare professionals (particularly senior managers) who are subject to the rigours and pressures of governance.

Carlen is right to conclude that welfare professionals simultaneously perform various contradictory actions, but what the frame model suggests is that they are never perceived as such by those very professionals themselves. Indeed, Boltanski and Thevenot's (1991) model suggests that agents will employ the regimes of justification which are best suited to the situation at hand. When justifying why they do not meet their statutory obligations, housing professionals can utilise both Civic and Managerial frames. Civic frames are employed when renouncing the 'irresponsible individual' who the voluntary sector worker has taken on as a client while at the same time prioritising the needs and interests of the 'collective of tenants'. The Managerial frame is employed when 'performance' considerations require the statutory housing professional to 'prove', to both themselves and others (particularly sheriffs when seeking decree for eviction) that all appropriate interventions have been exhausted and that the organisations procedures are 'efficient and effective' (decree would not be granted otherwise). The voluntary sector worker will adopt a critical capacity that deems as immoral, the housing officer's refusal to discharge their duty.

What the frame model suggests is that there is not one 'imaginary', but many 'imaginaries' which are constructed in agreement with the situation at hand. The *subjects* and *objects* of any planned action play an important part in determining the aims and objectives of any given operation which in turn has a profound impact on the frames used to justify that action. This is the very essence of a pragmatic sociology which redefines the 'social' to account for the agent's interactions not only with other agent's (*subjects*) but with their environment (*objects*) (Latour 2005, Lahire 2011, Boltanski and Thevenot 1991, 1999 and Thevenot 2001, 2002).

The data above shows that voluntary organisations roundly criticise the statutory sector for its failure to meet its statutory obligations. Statutory housing providers criticise the voluntary sector for not seeing the 'bigger picture' when legal challenges are made against them and when they are publicly 'named and shamed' for failing to meet their duties. The frame analysis above suggests that this tension arises from two very different ways of seeing the world, Civic/Managerial on one side and Inspired on the other. The person working for the voluntary organisation has as their '*subject*' the marginalised individual who is in need. The statutory housing provider

has as its *subject* the welfare of the wider community of tenants, two very different priorities which are often seen as the same thing, when in reality they are not. However, in accounting for these differences it is imperative to understand the crucial role that misrecognition plays in this process (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Bourdieu 1990, 1991, 2000). The rights-based legal advocate or charity advice worker, it can therefore be argued, is much more likely to see (misrecognise) as wholly *prejudicial practice*, the concerns the landlord has over the risks that individual homeless applicants might pose to the interests of the entire community. From the limited data available, it certainly becomes apparent that the voluntary sector worker's client (homeless person or person with housing problems) tends not to be the central priority, in the same way, for statutory housing professionals who place the wider community as central. Indeed, the voluntary sector 'client' is at a distinct disadvantage simply because, 'the worthiest persons in terms of inspiration are often despised by the world at large, they may be poor, dependent and useless' (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991: 160). Exploring the different *subjects*, which each order of worth either prioritises or relegates, it becomes apparent that there contradictions and sources of tension exist. To put more simply, the requirement of the statutory housing provider to prioritise the needs of the wider community of tenants over the narrow interests of some ('irresponsible') individual is misrecognised (by the voluntary sector agent) as an entirely 'immoral' act.

Shifting to the statutory sector, it can be argued, adapting a Bourdieusian assertion, that the individual housing officer sees a political bias in the refusal of the voluntary sector worker to grant the wholly political submission implied in the unconscious acceptance of the 'common-sense' notions which inform housing practice. These notions (themselves political relations) which, emanating from state institutions, shape the categories of thought that agents spontaneously apply to all things of the social world, thereby create a sense of legitimacy in a system which appears 'natural' and 'self-evident' (see Bourdieu 1991, 1995, 2000). In other words the statutory housing professional sees (misrecognises) a political bias in the challenge to the efficacy of the state, which the voluntary sector agent sees as a key responsibility in the fight to uphold the rights of the vulnerable individual. The voluntary sector's general disregard for the managerial concerns of the statutory

sector, along with their duty to act at their client's behest, is misrecognised (by the statutory sector agent) as being aggressive and obstructive.

This highlights something of a power imbalance. As a tentative proposition it might be suggested that at the heart of the problem lies the matter of 'legitimacy'. Unlike the voluntary sector, the statutory housing sector is part and parcel of the state (Bourdieu 2005). It is subject to regular inspection by the Scottish Housing Regulator, a body which publishes its findings and reports on local authority and housing association performance. This suggests that perhaps statutory sector housing professionals simply do not see the voluntary sector as having the legitimate authority to challenge state institutions. This extends to the legal challenges which the commissioning organisation lodges on behalf of their clients, including judicial review at the Court of Session in Edinburgh⁹. From the perspective of the voluntary sector, this is a strange complaint given that these mechanisms are the only measures that are likely to have any effect. If local authorities are regularly failing in their duties, as the interviewees from the voluntary sector suggested, then someone has to take measures to address this failing. This could be constructed differently; the statutory housing officer criticises the voluntary sector agent for doing their job (the more effectively they do their job, the heavier the criticism), the voluntary sector agent criticises the statutory sector of failing to do its job. How else are legal rights enforced other than through the legal challenges in the courts?) Legitimacy and power, it would seem, clearly rest on the side of the state.

Conclusion

Carlen's research is a valuable resource. What this paper suggests is that researchers should not talk about 'the imaginary', but of 'imaginaries' in the plural. Professional practice is full of contradictions and conflicts. As highlighted above, the reasons for this tension between sectors are many and complex. Being able to shift between orders of worth, while seemingly being able to 'forget' the tenets of the frame used only moments before (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991), persons can segue from one regime of justification and critical capacity to another, without 'the

⁹ The English equivalent is the Court of Appeal.

contradiction' getting in the way. Third party observers (such as academic researchers) can see the contradictions, and as highlighted above, the two sectors can see the contradictions in the other, but by shifting between regimes of justification, the agent can successfully navigate difficult terrain without being all that aware of the contradictions in their own actions. Such is the power of framing.

Why is this important? It has, arguably, a number of policy implications. Firstly it raises questions about 'partnership working', suggesting that in order to understand its limits and possibilities, it is useful to have an understanding of how professionals frame their reality, how they justify what they do and how they criticise what others do. Secondly, the use of frames helps understand outcomes, or more specifically why organisations (both voluntary and statutory) may not accept accusations of 'failure' or 'bad practice', and why they might robustly defend what appears to some as the indefensible. Thirdly, it perhaps highlights a power imbalance between the statutory and voluntary sectors which generally tends to go unnoticed. Issues of legitimacy require much more research and analysis but there appears to be something of an issue regarding what forms of criticism are seen by statutory bodies as being acceptable and what forms of criticism are dismissed as 'troublemaking'. The collective convention of not seeing the 'bigger picture' appears, in this study, to be a 'euphemisation' of a phenomenon which seeks to mask the fact that a lack of 'material resources' prevents statutory housing providers from effectively discharging their duty by invoking the Civic frame which places the 'collective interests' of all tenants before those of the 'individual' for whom the voluntary sector agent is advocating.

For the researcher, the need to remain ruthlessly reflexive and to maintain a 'radical doubt' at all times, is essential to account for the distortions which forms of misrecognition inscribe across the entire social universe.

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