Power, discursive space and institutional practices in the construction of housing problems.

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ABSTRACT

A constructionist approach to the study of social problems and housing policy provides a theoretically informed means of analysing the ways in which housing policy is formulated and implemented. Yet despite a strong commitment by housing researchers to policy-relevance, constructionist studies of how specific social problems are generated and deployed have so far made only a limited impact on housing research. The paper addresses this lacuna by first discussing important literature and the key conceptual issues in this field of study. This is followed by a discussion of two examples from recent UK housing policy (the shift in the 1980s from defining lone mothers as the victims of housing shortages to a morally questionable group subverting needs based allocation policies and the re-emergence of anti-social behaviour as a problem on housing estates). The paper's conclusion is that the 'construction of problems' provides a rich source of new material as well as offering significant opportunities to develop a more critically informed housing research agenda.

KEY WORDS: social problems, housing, power, discourse, institutional practice

'Whether or not a situation is perceived as a political problem depends on the narrative in which it is discussed' (Hajer, 1993:44)

'Social problems lie in and are produced by a process of collective definition. The process of collective definition is responsible for the emergence of social problems, for the way in which they are seen, for the way in which they are approached and considered, for the kind of remedial plan that is laid out, and for the transformation of the remedial plan in its application' (Blumer: 1971:301).

Introduction

Despite an increase in constructionist studies of housing policy, the process whereby certain issues become accepted defined as "housing problems" and in turn the object of policy measures remains neglected in housing research. Instead, the dominant approach to the study of housing problems and housing policy seems to be that there exist a number of self-evident housing problems that different governments devise policies to address in terms that fit with their own ideological leanings. The housing problems that are identified are those that seemingly command a broad consensus impelling policy-makers and governments to do something about them.

This is limited view of the way housing problems emerge and become the subject of policy-making. It minimises the role of power in bringing housing problems into prominence, the lobbying exercised to first establish housing problems on political agendas, and then influence the policy-making process and finally the decisions to devise specific policies, including justifying the allocation of resources to legitimise interventions.

The rise and fall of housing problems and their relationship to policy-making should therefore be an important focus of housing research (Atkinson, 2001). The neglect is all the more surprising since there is in fact a very large corpus of literature - including much detailed empirical research - on the construction of social problems in general. In this paper we begin the work of addressing this *lacuna* and to open up a rich field of empirical research through a study of the rise and fall of housing problems. We draw our main inspiration from the extensive literature over the last 40 years on the social construction of social problems deriving from the work of Blumer (1971), Spector and Kitsuse (1973) and even earlier work, such as Gusfield's, (1963)

study of the US temperance movement's role in the formation of prohibition and subsequent alcohol policy.

This literature breaks with the traditional unquestioning acceptance of the why and how of the emergence of social problems. Instead, it problematises the historical processes whereby social problems emerge and develop their own life-histories. The emphasis in this literature is on the activities of vested interests, pressure groups and social movements and the role of the media, politics, and institutional interests such as the police, in putting particular social problems onto the policy agenda.

A key concern in this literature is therefore the exercise of power, ranging from the formation of pressure groups and advocacy coalitions through campaigns to mobilise support, agenda-setting, the mobilisation of bias, lobbying, media campaigns and the moral panics they can engender, *etc*. Indeed, it has been argued that social problems can be understood as a process of competitive claims-making and that much may be learned about social problems from the study of social movements (Mauss, 1975; Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993).

The paper argues that three necessary conditions have to be met for a housing problem to be accepted and acted upon. First, a convincing narrative needs to be deployed to tell a plausible story of a social problem. Second, a coalition of support has to be constructed and finally this coalition needs to ensure that institutional measures are implemented. To illustrate our argument the paper draws upon secondary sources to discuss two examples from British social policy; first, the identification of lone mothers as a group representing a social problem through subverting need-based housing allocation policies in the 1980s and second the re-emergence of anti-social behaviour as a problem on housing estates. As we argue, the construction of each problem draws heavily upon negative stereotyping and rhetorical strategies that undermine the status of certain marginalized social groups whilst privileging others. While anti social behaviour has become firmly entrenched as a social problem, the problem of the 'lone mother' has more recently been widened to encompass refugees and asylum seekers as culpable groups who are subverting allocation waiting lists. The paper concludes by arguing that housing researchers need to question far more the construction of 'problems' commonly advanced by

government policy makers if the discipline is to retain critical and independent modes of enquiry.

The rise and fall of housing problems

Housing problems, like many social problems, have a tendency to come and go, becoming prominent and rising higher up the policy agenda, then receding into relative insignificance. Erstwhile housing problems sometimes stay dormant for many years, even decades, only to re-emerge as major issues needing – and sometimes generating - new policies to address them, then sinking back into relative oblivion, to remain dormant until they are later rediscovered.

Some housing problems very obviously have their genesis and demise in specific changing housing conditions. For example, during the 1990s when there was a strong buyers' market and when house prices were falling a new housing problem was identified and given the label of 'negative equity' (Forrest et al, 1999). Much research was carried out on this phenomenon and its consequences in terms of mortgage foreclosures and entrapment. Since the housing market became a sellers' market in 1999 the issue of negative equity has disappeared from both research and policy agendas. Other problems emerge instead, such as 'gazumping' (accepting a higher bid just before sale) and labour shortages that price people out of markets in regions where there is a combination of strong employment expansion and acute housing shortages.

However, many housing problems, such as homelessness, are endemic but remain either unrecognised or given low priority for long periods, only to emerge to provoke concern and to activate politicians to devise policies that 'do something' to address them, and then just as mysteriously to recede in importance (Jacobs *et al*, 1999). Other housing problems are policy-generated, such as affluent council tenants in the late 1960s labelled as 'limpets' to be prised loose from council housing by being charged market rents, only to be redefined a decade later as the downtrodden council tenantry trapped in a lifetime of renting who should be liberated by the Right to Buy (Jacobs *et al*, forthcoming). In the 1980s the Right to Buy was perceived, in some quarters, as a social problem by contributing to social segregation in local authority

estates and reducing the supply of available local authority housing (Forrest and Murie, 1988). However only in recent months, has the UK government signalled its intention to act on this advice to restrict the Right to Buy in areas of acute housing demand. In contrast, the Conservative opposition announced at their 2002 party conference new policies to extend the Right to Buy to housing association tenants.

Conceptual issues

Before going on to discuss the utility of this social constructionist literature it is important to clarify some of the major conceptual issues. In particular, there are two major difficulties that confront the policy analyst in seeking to understand the conduct of housing policy. First, the presentation of housing policy is nearly always stated as a response to addressing housing stress or need. So, for example, government or housing organisations frame their policies in a consensual language that appears rational and akin to common sense. Much work has been done on the study of policy documents as well as on policy statements and pronouncements using discourse analysis to reveal what kind of ideas and thinking lie behind these (see, for example, Hastings, 1998; Jacobs and Manzi, 1996; Richardson, 1994; Urban Studies, 1999). These studies provide details on the types of discourse analysis that are most amenable to housing research and urban studies.

This focus on the written text and the spoken word as expressions of different discourses is illuminating but only takes us so far when developing a construction of social problems perspective applied to housing. In particular, it tells us little about the underlying pressures on governments and the policy interests that have informed the agenda, nor about how these came about. What we are left with is an end statement that is the product of a long and often complex process of political pressure, negotiation and compromise.

As Edelman (1988) has argued much of the policy pronouncements by governments (of all political persuasions) is intended to provide symbolic reassurance; in particular to convey an impression that policy makers are taking seriously the concerns of specific interest groups. In practice, of course housing policy entails making available and then justifying the allocation of resources that will benefit some and impact

detrimentally on others. For example - the willingness by governments to selectively target welfare benefits and subsidies to new homebuyers (as is the case in Australia) will by implication entail fewer resources for other groups in need.

The second difficulty facing housing policy analysis is that some of the most important interventions that impact on housing are not housing policy measures *per se* but arise out of power struggles in other areas of economic and social policy. For example, the use of interest rates as an instrument to control consumer spending has profound repercussions on the housing system, not only for homeowners who have to meet the costs of their mortgage but also public sector institutions such as local authorities who service large debts. A constructionist approach to housing policy formation would therefore often need to look beyond narrow housing concerns to identify the interests that lie behind wider economic and social policy determinants.

Policy Literature

So what determines how concerns become 'problems' and what are the factors that enable certain 'problems' to assume prominence The social constructionist literature highlights the integral connection between the exercise or attempted exercise of power and policy definition. So for example, the work of Schattschneider, (1960) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) on the 'mobilisation of bias' and more recently Sabatier (1988) on 'advocacy coalitions' provide examples of how 'problems' are, to a significant extent, generated through complex negotiations and the forging of alliances. At no point do any of these writers claim that the construction of the policy problems is the result of some free-floating discursive struggle that is independent of structural or material factors. Rather their claim is that it is the *combination* of structural factors and effective augmentation by policy lobbyists and the media that determine the political agenda. This is important and is relevant to our own argument for we are not suggesting that all housing problems are entirely discursively constructed. Rather, it is to suggest that for a housing concern to become a problem demanding a policy response it will often though not always - cf RTB - entail a combination of adverse material circumstances experienced by people alongside a coalition of interest groups who are able to articulate concerns as a policy problem that will be taken seriously by decision-makers.

Particularly influential within the social constructionist literature has been the work of Spector and Kitsuse (1977) and Schneider and Kitsuse (1984). Common to much of the work within the field is the recognition that there is a need to interrogate 'the relationship between social conditions that are asserted to exist and definitions of those conditions as problematic and in need of some sort of collective action' (Kitsuse, Murase and Yamamura, 1984:162). The emphasis on problem definition and the requirement to distinguish, for analytical purposes, subsequent policy action has been of immense value in understanding the policy process.

Similarly, the work of Rochefort and Cobb (1993) is useful in the identification of a number of different 'mechanisms' that in combination result in the construction of a policy agenda. These include social conflict which they argue 'becomes a process of successive, competitive problem definitions by opposing sides angling for advantage and issue expansion' (1993:57). Rochefort and Cobb also identify what they term 'collective definition' by which they mean that the definition of a problem is used as a way of organising meaning and understanding reality. In other words defining 'a problem' is one of the devices we deploy to make sense of a myriad of data and information.

These insights can be illustrated by studies undertaken by De Neufville and Barton (1987) examining home ownership and public/private partnerships in the context of US housing policy. They show how myth-making is an essential component of the policy process. Very often it is needed to generate inspiration and conceal contradictions in policy making. Their work is important, showing how 'problems' are not discovered as such but arise out of a complex process of bargaining between interest groups possessing varying degrees of power. Other writers who have been particularly influential within this strand of research include Stone (1989) who contends that competing actors advance different rival narratives in an attempt to impose a policy definition that becomes accepted orthodoxy. She argues that 'problem definition is a process of image making, where the images have to do fundamentally with attributing cause, blame and responsibility' (Stone, 1989:282). In both the examples used in this paper, particular groups of people (lone mothers and young men living on social housing estates) are identified as the problem that require policy intervention.

Also relevant to the approach presented in this paper are Loseke (1992), Nichols (1997) and Hajer (1993). Loseke uses a discourse analysis to show how philanthropic institutions have managed to utilise different moral discourses in their strategy to income generate. Her work shows how, at different times, certain discourses are more effective in relation to marketing a charity than in other periods. Nichols (1997) discusses what he terms 'landmark narratives' claiming these are fundamental to the generation of problem identification and construction. In his study of banking scandals in Boston he observed how media and policy makers actively combined to establish the new category of crime now known as 'money laundering.'

Of course, at any one time, there are a number of competing narratives that seek to impose a version of events. What are the conditions by which certain narratives endure? Hajer's (1993:48) test is helpful in this regard. She suggests that there are two conditions that have to be fulfilled. First, the narrative has to dominate the discursive space and second the narrative has to be reflected in institutional practices. As we argue in the conclusion in both the case of lone mothers and anti-social behaviour, these conditions are met.

While the writings on the social construction of problems are useful in revealing how actors mobilise support for policies through the mass media, it is important not to overlook how much of the policy agenda creates an internal momentum. The work of Wildavsky (1979) is particularly interesting in this respect. He has argued that what becomes a problem is very often determined by whether or not there are practical courses of action that can be undertaken. Wildavsky' s assertion is important because it can help explain how problems remain entrenched. Policy problems are determined by pragmatic reasoning as much by rational decision-making based on supposedly objective criteria. There is consequently an internal relationship between the definition of a problem and its practical solution. Policies that ostensibly seek to address 'a problem' very often precipitate further activity in new but related issues. There are numerous examples within housing that conform to this explanation by Wildavsky. A cursory look at the problem of housing poverty in many inner city locations indicates it has been reconstituted into other forms which are have an

autonomous existence (for example crime and disorder, community fragmentation, educational attainment, unemployment, poor health).

UK Housing Policy

So far our paper has discussed at a general level the construction of policy problems. However it is necessary to anchor the arguments in the context of specific examples to demonstrate how problems are manufactured. In the following section we chart some of the most powerful narratives that have influenced the formation of the UK housing policy agenda. The work of Levitas (1998) and Goodchild and Cole (2001) are especially useful for this purpose as both establish a linkage between wider policy discourse and government activity. In her analysis of the ideas shaping Labour government welfare policy in the late 1990s, Levitas argued that at any one time there exist three parallel discourses all of which offer a narrative or view which policy makers have used to justify legislation. These are 'redistributionist', 'moral underclass' and 'social integrationist' discourses. In short, these discourses relate to poverty, morality and employment respectively. Levitas' claim is that policy makers deploy different strategies and rhetorical devices to reinforce policy programmes. Whilst her analysis focuses on social exclusion, these three different discourses have been evident within British policy making for sustained periods. Levitas' analysis has resonance for our purposes. The moral underclass discourse in particular, has a more regressive strain of argument that has sought to understand the poverty experienced by the urban poor in the context of fecklessness. Here the emphasis has been on disincentives and punitive action to address 'the problem' of social exclusion.

Goodchild and Cole (2001) explicitly focus on housing management practices. Their article (*op.cit*: 106) is especially interesting as they contend that the outcome of policy is contingent on conflicts within the policy community. They draw upon the work of Deleuze (1992 and 1997) in their observations of the tensions within housing management discourse. On the one hand, there are powerful arguments promoting community empowerment and structural changes within the housing policy profession, yet on the other hand, the very notion of social housing 'contributes to the process of social discipline mainly in the passive sense of denying any excuse that

immoral or bad behaviour is the product of poor environmental conditions'
(Goodchild and Cole, 2001:106).

Goodchild and Cole also draw attention to the pathological explanation for social
housing management problems advanced in the work of Charles Murray (1994) who,
drawing upon Conservative think tanks such as the Institute for Economic Affairs
(Green, 1990), viewed council estates as synonymous with the notion of an
underclass, a pejorative term that Murray uses to describe 'a new rabble' (Murray,
1994:18) who have not taken up educational and employment opportunities available
and instead have chosen to rely on state benefits. Though such arguments are of
course not new and as Stedman Jones (1971) has argued the notion of an urban
residuum and the fear of contamination has been an enduring feature of 19th century
discourse that has provided incentives for governments to act through legislation.
These ideas continue to influence contemporary practice in both explicit and implicit
ways. In particular welfare policy in the UK has come to be strongly associated with
'Atlanticist' policies that stigmatise welfare provision as dependency and endorse
punitive solutions such as 'workfare' programmes or 'welfare to work' strategies
(Peck and Theodore, 2001). Two contemporary examples help to illustrate how these
narratives are deployed, the coalitions of support that sustain differing explanations
and the institutional practices that generate a consensus surrounding the definition of a
housing problem.

The Demonisation of Lone Parents

The issue of lone parents provides a clear example of how a particular account can
occupy a discursive space dependent on the power of pressure groups, and vested
interests to determine their own narrative explanations of events. From the first
broadcasting of the film *Cathy come home* in 1966 to the late 1980s the dominant
representation of lone parents was their portrayal as groups at considerable risk of
experiencing poverty and social deprivation. They were seen as victims of the
structural barriers of the welfare state and consequently accorded sympathy and
understanding (Lewis, 1995; Duncan *et. al.,* 1999). Historically, the broadly
sympathetic treatment of lone parents reflected the success of campaigning groups
such as the Child Poverty Action Group and the National Council for One Parent

Families to advocate prescriptions designed to offer generous state assistance in order to lift single parents out of poverty.

As Millar (1996) argues the social problem in the 1970s was defined as one ~~a problem~~ of poverty rather than moral behaviour or the restrictions on social security budgets. The establishment of a government committee in the mid 1970s was designed to investigate the specific problems faced by lone parents (Finer, 1974) and illustrated a rising concern with the social conditions facing single mothers. The report contained a 'comprehensive account of the problems faced by single-parent families, with recommendations for an improvement in their relatively disadvantaged position in society' (Brown and Payne, 1994:42). Furthermore, single parents were at this juncture seen as representing a positive feature of women's emancipation. The committee's view embraced lone parenthood as part of the 'liberalisation of the institution of marriage' (Millar, 1996: 97; Smith, 1999: 315). The report led to the establishment of an unconditional specific benefit (One Parent Benefit) abolished by the Labour government in 1998 (Gray, 2001). Although commentators criticised the unwillingness of governments to implement the recommendations of the Finer committee (National Council for One Parent Families, 1977), the report was influential in constructing the notion of a 'feminisation' of poverty (Ungerson, 1990; Glendinning and Miller, 1992). This concept illustrated the way in which women were disproportionately at risk of falling below agreed poverty lines and criticised the tendency for patriarchal institutions to reinforce women's dependency on men in domestic and organisational spheres. These views were reinforced by empirical evidence supporting the notion that lone mothers were a group vulnerable to high levels of social deprivation (National Council for One Parent Families, 1977; Townsend, 1979).

However, by the late 1980s this perception had been replaced by an attitude of moral condemnation. The social problem had shifted to a focus on the behaviour of an urban 'underclass', influenced by the writings of authors such as Charles Murray (1984; 1990; 1994). The new definition of the social problem shifted attention on the conscious decisions made by individuals to claim state benefits and to embrace a 'dependency culture' (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992: 23). A culture that viewed work as anathema was argued to have become a pathological feature of one-parent

families. The central thesis of the underclass theorists was that social deprivation was in large part intentional. Rather than arguing benefit levels were set at too low levels, resulting in poverty as in the 1970s, writers such as Murray argued from the opposite premise, namely that state assistance had been too generous, resulting in dependency. Thus:

> as long as the benefit level is well above the threshold, the dynamics of social incentives will continue to work in favour of illegitimacy as over time the advantages of legal marriage become less clear and the disadvantages more obvious (Murray, 1990: 31).

The acceptance of this assumption by policy-makers reflected the success of neo-liberal thinkers in gaining influence within government circles (Cahill, 1994: Cochrane: 1994). This latter view has dominated policy prescriptions in the 1990s witnessed in a range of media representations and political debates. For example the Conservative government 'back to basics' initiative of 1993 was partly designed to address the moral problem of welfare dependency amongst single parent families (Phoenix, 1996; Cowan 1997). Consider, for example the Housing Minister's (Sir George Young) speech to the 1993 Conservative Party Conference. He argued that existing homelessness legislation did not

> Sit comfortably with the values we share; with the self-reliant society we want to promote; and whether it represents the fairest way of allocating housing…. How do we explain to the young couple…who want to wait for a home before they start a family…that they cannot be rehoused ahead of the unmarried teenager expecting her first, probably unplanned child (Young, 1993 quoted in Cowan, 1997:166).

Of central importance in establishing a new convincing narrative was the role of supposedly impartial commentators in the media. Consequently the current affairs programme *Panorama* entitled 'Babies on Benefit' broadcast in 1993 lent substantial support to the notion that single parenthood constituted a new and significant social problem. The programme investigated claims by John Redwood, Secretary of State

for Wales, that the welfare system encouraged significant numbers of women to have children outside marriage (Duncan *et. al.,* 1999:241).

The success of the neo-liberal agenda was buttressed by data that highlighted the increase in one-parent households over the last 30 years. Central Statistical Office data (Social Trends: 1994) for example produced evidence to show that the proportion of children living in a single parent household rose from 6% in 1972 to 20% in 1994/5 (Rowlingson and McKay: 1998). However, this data by itself does not help to explain why the issues of lone parenthood occupied disproportionate narrative space nor the manner in which it did so. Instead, we have to look for other explanations that help to explain the cultural impact of the lone parent debate.

Publications by the Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare Unit proved influential in shaping new interpretations of social policy (see for example Green, 1990; 1993; 1996). The thesis of the 'moral hazard' of state welfare (Taylor-Gooby, 1991: 198), that the receipt of welfare provision provides incentives to unwelcome behaviour was seen to apply in large part to single parents. For example, Harris saw permissiveness as a casual factor in the undermining of traditional institutions:

> The dramatic increase in unmarried mothers owes a good deal to the special payments and subsidised housing priority won by the pressure group for the biological curiosity of "single-parent" families' (Harris, 1988: 26, cited in Taylor-Gooby, 1991: 101).

The narrative consequence was a redefinition of the social problem from one of poverty to the concept of lone parenthood *per se*, resulting in what have been described as 'pernicious and draconian' policy measures (Smith, 1999: 316). The establishment of the Child Support Agency in 1993, designed to force absent fathers to make financial contributions towards their children was the central policy response to these concerns (Phoenix, 1996).

What were the central features of this change in representation? The explanations can be found in the particular combination of fiscal, cultural and institutional pressures. First, the concern about rising levels of state expenditure, particularly at the rising

level of social security benefits and more specifically at the cost of the Housing Benefit bill (Hills, 1991). These financial pressures led to a second explanation centred around a marked normative strain within policy discourse, focusing on 'desert' and individual intentionality. Although the distinction between deserving and undeserving groups had been implicit in much British social policy, for example in the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, this dichotomy became increasingly pronounced in the 1980s. An individualistic culture of blame and responsibility was apparent, typified by media debate around welfare 'scrounging' (Golding and Middleton, 1982) represented in media campaigns of the time and demotic political pronouncements for example by government Ministers such as Peter Lilley (*The Guardian*, 3/7/93) and John Redwood (*The Guardian*, 13/9/94). Crucially, political interventions once consigned to the far Right were now viewed as part of mainstream consensus thinking (see for example the work of Frank Field (1989), who was later to become social security minister in the 1997 Labour government). Although the rhetoric is less strident, the resonance of lone parents constituting a social problem persists in the welfare policy of the Blair government, comprising a central element of the Labour government 'welfare-to-work' reform strategy of 1997, through the establishment of a 'New Deal for Lone Parents' (Lister, 1998). Such policies have drawn strongly on individualistic approaches to welfare policy influenced by North American initiatives whilst choosing to ignore more solidaristic models of other European countries (Dolowitz, 1999; Hutton, 2002).

The discursive space was occupied by a reliance on negative stereotyping and a rhetorical strategy that demonised a specific social group. The social concerns shifted to debates about the unfairness of housing allocation policies that privileged lone parents as priority need groups. The Housing Act 1996 was an attempt to reverse this trend to allow two-parent families to be given priority in housing allocations. The third explanation was a change in institutional practices, in this respect a wealth of legislation, benefit entitlements and organisational procedures was mobilised to address the social problems of lone parents through offering incentives to work and formulating new housing allocation policies. The extent to which normative discourses can reinforce misconceptions about actual practices is made explicit in an ESRC funded study conducted by Allen and Bourke (1998). In an extensive study of teenage mothers, they concluded that, contrary to popular perception, there is no hard

evidence to suggest that single women became pregnant to secure a social housing property.

Whilst most of the discussion has focused around policies formulated by Conservative administrations, the success of the rhetorical strategy can be seen in the acceptance of the premise by the Labour governments from 1997. Whilst the more pejorative aspects of the discourse have been rejected, the reliance on paid work and tax credits (such as the Working Families Tax Credit) under Labour administrations illustrated the way in which the construction of the problem of welfare dependency (and thus a reluctance to pay generous social security benefits) underpins current strategies. The New Deal for Lone Parents although based on voluntary contributions involved mandatory 'work-focused' interviews for lone parents (Gray, 2001). Thus the example of single parents encapsulates the way in which policy discourse can be changed in a relatively short period of time from a rhetoric of sympathy to one of blame. (Duncan and Edwards: 1999). The social problem of the 'lone parent' combines a conjunction of interrelated strands that together helped to construct a powerful narrative theme.

Anti-social behaviour

The implementation of policies to tackle anti-social behaviour provides a particularly interesting example because there has always been an interventionist discourse within housing management practice that has emphasised the importance of social control and tenant responsibility (see Cole and Furbey 1994). The origins of this interventionist discourse can be traced back to the work of Octavia Hill (Darley, 1990). However in the 1960s and 1970s other discourses became more influential, in particular those that emphasised action by the State including physical renewal and slum clearance as a vehicle for social transformation. In the early 1980s, no doubt linked to the cutbacks in resources set aside for social housing, more interventionist and managerial approaches again resurfaced with an emphasis that policy solutions were intricately linked to issues relating to empowerment rather physical renewal or refurbishment. Since the mid 1990s housing management practice has embraced this interventionist discourse culminating in a series of policies aimed at addressing individual forms of behaviour.

From an historical perspective, it is clear that the problem of anti-social behaviour appears to be most influential at a time when neo-liberal politics are prevalent (Hall, Critcher, et al 1978). Implicit within the anti-social behaviour discourse is the view that those who are socially excluded are culturally different from the rest of society and therefore in need of specific forms of intervention that would be inappropriate in other settings. The problem of anti social behaviour is a clear example of how certain discourses become influential and are then 'problematised'. It is a useful example, showing how certain ideologies, economic circumstances and political expediency combine.

A similar perspective to the one adopted by Goodchild and Cole (2001) can be found in the work of writers who have focused on issues of governmentality and 'advanced liberalism' (See Rose, 1996; Raco and Imrie 2000). Both Rose and Raco and Imrie highlight the significance of communitarian values as illustrated by the fact that in that in recent years governments have sought to attribute responsibility for community problems back onto individuals. Moreover, communitarian ideas often incorporate a contradictory blend of moral authoritarianism and libertarianism (Etzioni, 1995). Whilst in the past, governments were willing to take responsibility for poverty, it is now commonplace to contend that it is individual and community failure that are the cause of poverty and not governments. This strain of argument has led to a resurgence of pathological explanations that emphasise 'responsibilities'. For example Haworth and Manzi (1999) claim that policy towards the social rental sector is particularly susceptible to the influence by a moral agenda perpetuated by politicians and the mass media. In a more recent study, Flint (2002) examines social housing agencies in Edinburgh and Glasgow to address anti-social behaviour. Flint adopts an explicitly Foucauldian framework in his argument that though housing management practices may meet with some success in containing the symptoms associated with anti-social behaviour they are insufficient in scope to address the complex set of causation factors.

Whilst it may be useful to distinguish between 'advanced liberalism' and more social democratic forms of government activity, an historical perspective can show just how entrenched this strain of policy making has been. Damer (2000) in a historical study

of social housing practices in pre-war Glasgow argues that housing management was deployed as a policy instrument to secure 'the social reproduction of its [the working class] labour power in ways compatible with both local and nationalist capitalist labour relations' (Damer, 2000:2010). The rise of housing management as a profession 'lies in the efforts of the mid- and late-Victorian state to infiltrate, gain intelligence upon, moralise and discipline the emergent working class' (ibid: 210). Damer charts the authoritarian and patrician attitudes of housing managers – 'their blatant function was to control the working class (Damer, 2000:2023). He observed too that these intrusive practices in which households were regularly inspected and reports written up on their general standards of behaviour and cleanliness only 'fell into desuetude throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and was a thing of the past in the 1970s' (*ibid*).

The utility of Damer's article, for the purposes of this section of the paper, is threefold. First, it shows that housing management practices have long identified tenant behaviour as a social problem for long periods. Second, it illustrates how housing management practices and policies are receptive to the dominant discourses of the period. Third, it shows the linkages between contemporary discussions of anti social behaviour and earlier discourses. The continuity is important, illustrating how housing problems rely on evoking a particular narrative that accords with popular conceptions of social housing tenants. What is striking about current policies is their reliance on a stereotype of a specific social group. The promulgation of this stereotype is an essential component in justifying policy intervention in this area. Recent research on anti-social behaviour has highlighted the connections between popular stereotypes and government policy. For example Hunter and Nixon (2001) make a connection between the treatment of 'lone mothers' by politicians in the 1980s and early 1990s and current discourses on anti-social behaviour.

Contemporary policies on anti-social behaviour.

Current policies to tackle anti-social behaviour have reflected a more punitive approach to housing management. Legislation and policy guidance introduced in the 1990s attempted to stress the duties inherent in the acceptance of a tenancy rather than the rights offered by social landlords. Thus, the 1996 Housing Act for England and

Wales enabled local authorities to introduce introductory or 'probationary' tenancies, which only convert to a secure tenancy after 12 months. This policy permits the landlord to evict tenants for any breach without having to prove grounds for eviction or illustrate they are acting unreasonably. In addition the grounds for eviction on a secure tenancy were widened to include nuisance caused by visitors (Scott and Parkey, 1998: 326). Cowan, Pantazis and Gilroy (2001) have also charted the extent to which the issue of anti-social behaviour permeates contemporary discourse within housing policy. In their words, there 'has been the 'increasingly hysterical' appeal about an undefined notion of anti social behaviour which is said to have increased. Anti-social behaviour is treated as something which is new, we know exists in abundance, and occurs mostly on social housing estates' (Cowan et al 2001:442). Over the last few years anti-social behaviour has been become a *cause célèbre* for government and housing organisations. Legislation has been passed that enables landlords to introduce a swathe of measures to address this 'problem' Alongside the 1996 Housing Act there has been the 1996 Noise Act, Protection from Harassment Act and 1998 Crime and Disorder Act bringing into effect injunctions, youth curfews and anti-social behaviour orders to criminalise behaviour which had previously constituted civil offences (See Cowan *et al* 2001:443).

The discourse that has permeated housing policy helps us to understand the rhetorical devices deployed in recent attempts to set policy agendas undertaken by the current Labour government. Consider the following extract contained in the Prime Minister's forward to the launch of the social exclusion unit where Tony Blair sets out his view of poor neighbourhoods:

> We all know the problems of our poorest neighbourhoods – decaying housing, unemployment, street crime and drugs. People who can, move out. Nightmare neighbours move in. Shops, banks and other vital services close (SEU, 1998:7)

The term 'nightmare neighbours' is symptomatic of a discourse that has powerful resonance in the media. For example, the UK television programme *'Neighbours from Hell'* provided regular examples of disputes between households on British council estates, usually over issues such as noise disturbance, disputes over boundaries or the dumping of rubbish. The message from this television programme was clear; social

housing estates were an inferior form of tenure occupied in the main by dysfunctional families who were unable to coexist peacefully with other residents. The re-emergence of this construction has found expression in policy legislation (see Papps, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 2000) as is made clear in the following extract from a report by the Social Exclusion Unit:

> There is no one accepted definition of anti-social behaviour. It can range from dropping litter to serious harassment including racial harassment. Serious hard-core perpetrators are small in number but their behaviour has a disproportionate impact on large numbers of ordinary people…. Anti-social behaviour is a widespread problem. It is a problem that is more prevalent in deprived neighbourhoods (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000:5 and 7).

The quotation is interesting primarily because while anti social behaviour is defined as 'a widespread problem', it is also conceded that it is an amorphous term that encompasses a divergent set of activities. Moreover, it is the linkage between deprived neighbourhoods and anti social behaviour that provides the rationale for intervention by housing agencies in the form of probationary tenancies and enhanced eviction policies.

The determination of central government strategies to tackle the issue of anti-social behaviour can also be illustrated by the concept of 'anti-social behaviour orders' (ASBOs) introduced in the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act. These orders whilst covering civil offences, can result in criminal prosecutions if breached. Despite the fact that just over 500 of these orders were issued between 1999 and 2001 and evidence of widespread variation in their application (Campbell, 2002) the initiative is being extended in the Police Reform Act 2002 to registered social landlords. Thus, in spite of a lack of evidence about their efficacy, ASBOs have been used as a crucial symbolic weapon to demonstrate a commitment to tackling this problem.

So why has anti-social behaviour become such a central focus of policy makers? There are a number of explanations. First, it is politically convenient to project problems of anti social behaviour and crime as an issue that is primarily located on council estates. The labelling and identification of the 'problem tenant' is politically

convenient providing symbolic reassurance to the population elsewhere that the problems of crime are spatially contained and can be largely avoided by living in areas away from social housing. As Cowan *et. al.* (2001) argue 'social housing offers space and places of poverty and control'. The stigma attached to social housing is a direct consequence of government policies in the 1980s and 1990s, based on a narrative portraying council estates as wholly undesirable locations and justifying the privatisation strategies of the Housing Act 1988. Second, targeting anti social behaviour conveys an impression to the wider community that action is being undertaken to address their concerns and that perpetrators of criminal activity are being held responsible for their misdemeanours. Third, it conforms to current thinking within government that selective targeting and area based approaches are the most appropriate forms of intervention to address poverty. Fourth, the 'targeting of anti social behaviour' fits into a narrative that the wider public are sympathetic to i.e. culprits are deserving of retribution and punishment. Finally, it is worth reiterating the argument advanced by Murie (1997) that there is nothing inevitable about the decline of council housing *vis à vis* other forms of tenure. The process of residualisation has been propelled by a series of successive policies and abetted by a sustained negative stereotyping of council housing within the popular media.

Conclusions

What are the theoretical issues that arise from this paper? Our main argument is that housing policy is a site of contestation in which competing interest groups seek to impose their definitions of what the main 'housing problems' are and how they should be addressed. Although the examples presented demonstrate the success of 'top down' policy implementation determined largely by central government agenda, this is not to suggest that official definitions will inevitably prevail. In order for definitions to succeed three specific conditions must be met. First, the acceptance of particular definitions is determined by the relative power of interest groups to draw attention to a set of material circumstances that adversely affect groups of people. Within our examples central government and a populist media have been very powerful advocates to define social problems. Second, a dominant narrative has to occupy the discursive space, which as we show in the case of single parents and anti-social behaviour was successfully achieved by interest groups lobbying for more restrictive

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welfare strategies. In contrast the lack of power of 'vulnerable' groups, such as lone parents and young single adults (including those suffering mental health difficulties) undermines attempts to influence decision-makers and to affect the policy agenda. Third, the narrative needs to be reflected within institutional practices. Again the two examples show how the policy responses have clearly been led by populist concerns, resulting in a profusion of legislation, guidance and organisational procedures.

The construction of housing problems is an area of empirical and policy-oriented research that can fill a major *lacuna* in our field by beginning to elaborate the ways in which policy concerns that tend otherwise to be taken for granted have in fact been worked at over a period of time and forged in the heat of power struggles. Sometimes policies can be seen to be compromises between conflicting interests. At other times policy swings from one extreme to another as one vested interest gains dominance over the discursive space, only to be replaced by another interest, with consequent changes in institutional practices. The lone parents example illustrates this particularly clearly, as does the case of homelessness from the 1960s to the 1970s and 1980s. As for other areas that are amenable to the form of enquiry undertaken in this paper there are obvious possibilities. For example, across Western Europe and Australia the media have articulated concerns about the repercussions of 'immigration' and 'asylum'. As events unfold it is still too early to judge the institutional responses that are now beginning to take shape, but it seems likely that these concerns will occupy policy makers in housing and related areas for the immediate future.

Our paper draws primarily from secondary sources but clearly, to draw upon social constructionist methodologies for the study of social problems in more detail requires an extension of the evidence base and more systematic use of historical archives. As important is the task of updating the analysis of problem framing especially now that governments deploy extremely sophisticated methods to disseminate information and at a time when researchers are preoccupied increasingly with responding to government policy agendas. Whilst it needs to be acknowledged that the precise form in which lobbying and interest group politics varies within each nation state, the dynamic in which 'problems' are constructed are often very similar. The development and application of a constructionist approach to the study of housing problems will do

much to illuminate the interest and power dynamics that underlie housing problem formulation and give voice to alternative solutions.

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