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# **‘Putting our mark on things’: the identity work of user participation in public services**

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## **Abstract**

New relationships between service users and the welfare state have emerged as a result of governmental strategies of public service reform in which participation has appeared as the cure for a putative welfare dependency. A new public has been invoked in technologies of governance which have conflated responsible citizenship with participation in the marketplace and have aimed to change the behaviour of welfare service users accordingly. This paper investigates the ability of welfare service users to resist, or amend, the disciplinary intentions of these discourses, to constitute ‘counter-publics’, and to formulate their own visions of public services. Drawing on research with English social housing tenants engaged in participation with their quasi-public landlords, and applying a theoretical framework based on the work of feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler, the paper explores the behavioural effects of participation on tenants and evidences their use of consumerist and communitarian discourses to construct alternative perceptions of a ‘public’, and re-imagine their relationship with public services.

## **Key Words**

Publics, resident involvement, social housing, welfare reform

## Introduction

The ability of welfare service users to resist, or avoid, the disciplinary intentions of governmental programmes that aim to transform their behaviour has been observed and explored in studies of the restructuring of public services in the UK (Clarke *et al* 2007; Barnes & Prior 2009; McKee 2010). The new publics invoked in strategies of 'responsibilisation' are forged not only through technologies of governance, but by the resistance and alternative imaginings of service users (Newman 2007; Newman & Clarke 2009). The intention of this paper is to analyse the processes through which service users influence or amend the regulatory discourses that accompany public service reform and that appear, in their intersectionality, to dominate the direction of debate on the future of the welfare state (Crenshaw 1994).

This paper aims to investigate the 'identity work' (Snow & McAdam 2000) that constitutes the assemblage of new publics in restructured public services through research with English social housing tenants engaged in formal participation with their quasi-public landlords or local authorities. User participation in the management of housing services has been portrayed as a pervasive strategy through which the behavioural and conceptual norms of a restructured welfare state can be transmitted. Participation fosters the identity of the 'responsible tenant' (Flint 2004), a composite entity that is part rational consumer, part active citizen (McKee & Cooper 2008), and promotes a model of empowerment in which tenants regulate their own behaviour, and responsibly contribute to the successful reform of public services (Jayasuriya 2002; Clarke *et al* 2007). Applying a theoretical framework based on the work of feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler, the paper explores the behavioural effects of participation on tenants and evidences their use of these consumerist and communitarian discourses to reclaim excluded notions of social citizenship. Two concepts central to Judith Butler's (1993) theoretical framework are employed to guide this analysis: those of interpellation and performativity. Participation is envisaged as a discourse that interpellates tenants; that is it renders them recognisable as a social category and addresses them as rights-bearing citizens while it enhances their subjection, and solicits their compliance. This is a regulatory process in which specific behavioural norms are cited in everyday practice and are continuously renewed, and here the study is guided by Butler's theory of the performative, in that the iteration of these restrictive identity positions presents the constant possibility of change and re-assemblage; in other words, by performing their

intended identities service users may amend them. This paper, then, evidences how social housing tenants enact the identity of the citizen-consumer (Clarke 2007) to construct alternative perceptions of a 'public', and re-imagine their relationship with public services.

The analysis is framed by the concept of 'identity work', defined by its originators in social movement studies as 'a range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities' (Snow & Anderson 1987: 1348), and later adapted to describe the construction of a collective identity (Snow & McAdam 2000). Identity work has been studied chiefly in the form of the spoken word, and a research strategy focused on 'identity talk' calls attention to dialogue as the attribution of social identity, and to the creative capacity of language to produce new meanings and identifications. The analysis of identity talk in the construction of collective identity, seeks to detect the verbal boundary markers, or widely shared discursive references that demarcate a sense of collective belonging. These can be discerned in the production of familiar stories, interpretations and self-definitions that confirm a shared consciousness or framework of meanings (Taylor & Whittier 1992). The assemblage of collective identity in group discussion and individual narrative may illustrate the discursive construction of new publics and the adoption or rejection of new definitions of public services.

This process of collective identity construction was investigated with a sample of 144 residents engaged in the wide menu of participation opportunities now offered to social housing tenants and leaseholders. The sample was drawn from tenants and residents associations, tenants' federations, constituted tenants' panels and forums, individual tenant directors and tenant inspectors, tenant management organisations, regional and national tenants' organisations and tenant campaign groups. Data collection was carried out through focus groups followed by semi-structured interviews and took place from mid-2008 to mid-2010. Discourse theorists argue that it is only in social interaction that identity work takes place, so the focus group offers the potential to observe the organisation of speech, how it is sequenced, what vocabulary is used and how words are stressed, what roles are assumed and how individuals are positioned in conversation, and the conventions and narrative genres that are applied, in order to reveal the identity processes that take place among the members (Davies & Harré 1999). In total 12 focus groups were held with 133 participants, with the average session lasting one and a half hours. One focus group was held with participants from neighbourhood tenants and resident associations,

one with individuals involved on a range of tenant panels, two were held with committee members of borough-wide tenants' federations, one with board members of a tenant management organisation, and two with regional tenants' federations. Five focus groups were held at the annual conference of a national tenants' organisation and brought together members of tenant forums and customer panels, tenant directors of social housing companies, and board members of tenant management organisations and other tenant-led housing companies with tenants' association committee members, and tenants' federation representatives. These focus groups were held as part of the conference in 2008, 2009 and 2010 and were advertised as open events and the attendees were self-selected, but reflected an extremely wide range of those engaged in participatory practices. Many of the participants in the focus groups expressed their appreciation of the opportunity to share their experiences and thoughts with other tenants and residents in similar situations.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 11 participants, including two paired interviews, lasting one hour on average. The interviews followed-up themes that had developed in the focus groups and enabled the researcher to revisit focus group participants who might not have spoken freely in the group setting or who might have been silenced by the pressure of mutual agreement. Interviewees were selected from each organisational level: one interview was held with the chair of the national tenants' organisation, two with committee members of regional federations, two with city federation members, two with neighbourhood association organisers, one with a tenants' panel member, and two with tenant directors. The sampling strategy was conceived to attain a broad geographical spread of participants and, in addition to the focus groups held at a national tenant conference, data collection was carried out in four cities across England. Tenants and leaseholders from housing associations, stock transfer organisations, arms-length management organisations and retained council housing authorities were sampled, although for simplicity the sample are referred to as 'tenants' throughout. Overall 55 per cent of the sample were women and around 14 per cent were from ethnic minority communities and the majority of the participants were over the age of 50. Although more than 140 people were involved in this research, inevitably some were more vocal than others, and some participants appear often in the pages that follow, however, it should not be assumed that they were alone in articulating these views. The research findings reveal a significant convergence of reflective experience and opinion evidenced across all the focus group discussions and supported in each individual narrative. To provide

additional checks on authenticity, the findings were reported back to three further meetings of research participants to confirm the outline that emerges of a combative 'counter- public' in social housing (Barnes *et al* 2003).

The paper begins by analysing the practice of tenant participation, or resident involvement in housing services, and examining the role it plays in the pursuit of welfare reform, and in shaping the behaviour of service users. It moves on to discuss the awakening of subjectivity and power engendered by participation discourses and explores too, in the fieldwork, the regulatory limits of that subjectivity, drawing on Judith Butler's work on interpellation. The next section evidences the performative application of those discourses to construct the outlines of a tenant collective identity, and the use of that imagined collective to rearticulate 'the public' in quasi-public housing. This counter-public is seen to engage with issues of social citizenship and the collective provision of welfare services. The paper concludes with an assessment of these findings and their contribution to our understanding of the complex and dynamic relation between service users and welfare reform.

### Welfare reform and user participation in social housing

Social housing in England has witnessed a more radical exposition than most other public services of governmental strategies in which participation appears as the cure for a putative welfare dependency (Fraser & Gordon 1997; Somerville 2005). The concentration of people on very low incomes, often outside the active labour force, in one easily demarcated housing sector has allowed social housing to become a proxy for dependence, while home ownership and private consumption have become synonymous with responsible citizenship under Conservative, Labour & Coalition governments (Bauman 1998). As the wobbly pillar of the welfare state, housing has always been the least commodified of services and its public provision has been increasingly residualised; access to its shrinking stock has been made conditional on extremes of housing need, and the majority of new lettings have gone to those on the lowest incomes. Social housing now appears a marginal and dispensable constituent of the welfare state and has provided successive governments with an almost uncontested territory in which to experiment with the restructuring of public services (Malpass 2008). Alongside the privatisation measures of the Right to Buy, the transfer of council housing to registered social landlords, the development of shared-ownership and intermediate market renting, the incursion of managerial practices,

and the creation of quasi-markets and choice-based schemes in public sector housing (Malpass 2005), a menu of participation opportunities has been provided to 'ensure all social housing tenants have the confidence, skills and power to engage on housing and housing-related neighbourhood issues' (CLG 2009: 22). In making decisions about goods and services and in seeking to wield influence over service providers, the tenant as welfare recipient is expected to learn from participation the rules of commodity exchange and to undertake an education in the responsibilities typically associated with property ownership, seen as the hallmark of the empowered citizen (Hart, Jones & Bains 1997).

Recent reviews of social housing regulation have confirmed tenant participation as a relationship between consumers and producers over service standards, performance scrutiny and complaint (Cave 2007; CLG 2010). Opportunities for participation in social housing management have been founded on the belief that service user involvement has a quasi-market effect that triggers business improvements and efficiencies in welfare services where competition and the influence of consumer choice are limited (Hirschman 1970). Participation appears here as a mechanism 'like the market' (Hirschman & Nelson 1976: 386), expected to bring about 'behaviour modification in providers' (Paul 1994: 3). It is envisaged as a relationship between rational actors in a public sphere imagined as a market place in which 'information is conceived as an objective item of exchange' (Newman 2001: 132). This is an arena in which there are no power relations or social inequalities, and all parties are equal in deliberation; they are able to rise above their selfish interests to make a mutually-beneficial deal (Richardson 1983, Cairncross, Clapham & Goodlad 1994). The belief that participation provides market-like stimuli that can steer the behaviour of providers in lieu of competition deems it with performative power (Finlayson 2003), and, as a performative, participation should be understood as a process that calls into effect the relations it names. The performative does not simply describe a situation or an action, it makes something happen; as Judith Butler (1997: 146) says 'the word becomes the deed'.

In the social housing sector participation exerts its performative force through a menu of nine involvement processes that includes surveys, feedback forms, focus groups and customer panels (TSA 2010). The mere presence of tenants in landlord decision-making processes supposedly carries the transformative impact of consumer pressure (TSA & Audit Commission 2010). The presumptions of market theory that underpin this idealist rhetoric ignore the power of the sponsoring agency to convene

the deliberation, select the participants and orchestrate the outcome. In these processes the agenda is usually set by housing officers, and what is consulted on and what use is made of that consultation are matters controlled by the housing company. The public imagined for these deliberations has been modelled on traditional notions of pluralism, recruited on the basis of essentialist identities to achieve a market-research notion of demographic representation. This model of participation reinforces the power of the landlord or housing provider by recruiting service recipients as data sources so their experience and views can be harvested for the business improvement of housing companies (Beresford 1988). Marian Barnes and colleagues (2003: 396) have criticised 'the power of public officials to constitute the public in particular ways; ways that tend to privilege notions of a general public interest and that marginalise the voices of "counter-publics" in the dialogic process.'

Tenants have engaged in collection action as 'counter-publics' since the late 1880s, and the network of local, regional and national tenants' organisations that is a feature of the English social housing sector is still described as 'the tenants' movement' (Grayson 1997; National Tenants Voice Project Group 2008). The contemporary tenants' movement is represented by the National Tenants Organisations (Hilditch 2012), an alliance between the Tenants & Residents Organisation of England (TAROE), established in 1997, together with national organisations for tenant management and co-operative housing, and the tenant participation consultancy, TPAS, with a membership of 1,195 tenant organisations. National tenants' organisations have been in existence since 1937, and nationally organised tenant campaign groups have mobilised around issues such as damp, and system-building, while country-wide mobilisations against legislation such as the Housing Finance Act in 1972, and Tenants Choice and the Housing Action Trusts in 1988 have pitted tenants against government housing policy, and in recent years there have been high-profile tenant campaigns against the stock transfer plans of local authorities (Schifferes 1976, Grayson 1997, Watt 2008).

Participation initially generated growth in the number of tenants' organisations (Cairncross, Clapham & Goodlad 1994) but, more recently it appears to have diminished the influence of tenants as collective actors. Landlords have withdrawn funding from tenants associations and federations and replaced them with the market research techniques of customer forums and consumer panels (Morgan 2006). While some tenant campaigning continues in organisations like Defend Council Housing,



the rise of tenant participation has made the line between a self-organised tenants' movement and a landlord-led consultation process extremely unclear. Participation has had performative effect on the behaviour of tenants in transforming their appearance as a public and in reworking their relationship with public services. The next section explores through field research the contradictory identification that participation bestows on social housing tenants.

### Participation as recognition and subjection

Participation appears to offer tenants the rights of citizenship; to promise them equality and the status of civilised beings or full members of society (Marshall 1950). This is an act of interpellation that confers on tenants the benefits of belonging at the same time as it embeds them in a system of regulation. It is a 'reprimand' that produces an obedient subject yet is also a welcome recognition granting social acceptance that the subject willingly embraces (Butler 1993). In the concept of interpellation, an individual is granted social recognition only by obeying a call to order from the law. Until this reprimand, the individual is not a social subject; not a citizen. Judith Butler (1993: 121) explains this:

*'The subject not only receives recognition, but attains as well a certain order of social existence, in being transferred from an outer region of indifferent, questionable, or impossible being to the discursive or social domain of the subject.'*

The development of participation, and particularly the way in which it has been driven through the social housing sector by government policy and regulation, has brought tenants from Butler's 'outer region' to a position where their views are actively canvassed in the running of social housing, and they can sit as potential equals on their landlord's management board. Gina, a committee member of one of the regional tenants' federations said:

*Tenants are equal, it's equal rights, equal citizens and that's how it should be continued to be looked at. We're just as equal as anybody else, we're still people, we're still humans*

Christine, a member of a tenant management organisation, appreciates that the way tenants are treated has improved, but she is aware that there are limits to this progress.

*I just feel myself personally that you're not at the bottom of their list anymore. You're not an equal – we'll never be an equal – but I think it's for the better that we are able to come over and speak to them and not be belittled.*

With citizenship defined by participation in the market, the involvement of tenants in a welfare service grants them only limited recognition. By participating in housing management they display responsibility, but their tenure as social housing tenants serves as an indelible mark of dependence. The representation of 'council' estates as sites of welfare dependence and of social housing tenants as morally deviant has been catalogued extensively (see Card 2006). The experience of stigma, received through attitudes, behaviours and policies, is common to social housing tenants today; a factor identified by every tenant in this study. A stigmatised identity provides the motive for participation and the enduring enactment in media representation and government policy of this stigma ensures that participation becomes for tenants a repetitive activity, an unending iteration that promises recognition but never fully delivers, as this reflection among the members of a tenants' panel makes clear:

*Yvonne: We haven't changed the popular image*

*Clare: Not of council tenants*

*Yvonne: Not for the politicians and people that think they matter*

*Linda: Those who think they know everything*

*[...]*

*Yvonne: And the connotations of the word social because the first thing you think of social is you're [on the dole]*

*Clare: [You're on the social]*

*Yvonne: You're on income support*

*Wendy: You're a skiver, yes, you're a skiver.*

*Yvonne: Meaning you've never worked in your life*

The identification of tenants as second-class citizens appears at odds with the dynamics of equality and citizenship that power the interpellative call of participation. For Judith Butler (1993: 122) interpellation is to be understood as a disciplining call that 'does not merely repress or control the subject, but forms a crucial part of the

juridical and social formation of the subject.’ Butler theorises that the subject is inaugurated as an effect of the discourse that precedes and enables it. The recognition inherent in the act of participation inducts tenants into the subject status that conditioned their demands for participation. It affirms them as problematic and conditional citizens and cements this identity as the essential quality of being a social housing tenant. In other words, interpellation requires that tenants act in the ways in which they are already described. Their very intelligibility, the social recognition that they seek, depends on their reiteration of the norms of this identification.

This is a message that tenants hear loud and clear as this extract from a discussion among members of local residents’ groups shows:

*Greta: Well we’re all sort of, you’re tarred with the same brush aren’t you? You are, you’re a tenant and that’s it*

*Bob: And we’re all sinking in the same boat.*

*Greta: Yeah*

*Bob: ((Laughs))*

*Jane: And we’ve all got to fight for what =*

*Greta: And you’ve got to fight for what you want*

*Bob: Yep*

*Greta: And we shouldn’t have to fight*

*Edna: Shouldn’t be postcoded either*

*Deirdre: That’s life isn’t it?*

In this dialogue tenants recognise their exclusion from citizenship and, in identifying this as an injustice done to them, proceed to make a claim on the concept of universal rights. In resolving to fight for their rights, they reference the traditional role of citizens and articulate themselves in a history of rights-claiming movements. They have no entitlement to occupy the place of citizens ‘but nevertheless demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them’ (Butler 2000: 39). This claim to the rights of citizenship is articulated as a basic entitlement in the discourse of participation, evidenced by these members of a tenants’ panel.

*John: A tenant is a tenant when all’s said and done. They pay their dues like everybody else*

*Kevin: But I think what it is, is we believe that all tenants deserve the same rights as anybody else.*

Tenants are interpellated as equal citizens, but that equality is negated by the fact that they are tenants. They are confronted by the possibility of equality that denies the subordination they experience in all other identifications. Chantal Mouffe (2000: 302) dubs this a contradictory interpellation: 'A situation in which subjects constructed in subordination by a set of discourses are, at the same time, interpellated as equal by other discourses.' It is a contradiction that means the social recognition inherent in interpellation cannot merely reproduce subjection; it constructs a new social subject. This makes the interpellative call of participation a revelatory and transformative moment for tenants and many in this research cited a particular occasion or circumstance when they glimpsed the possibilities they thought participation could offer. This epiphany may have been an occasion when they felt the full weight of injustice, but it was also an instance in which they felt motivated and powerful. This combination of subjection and subjectivity is integral to the identification of tenants through participation.

'That changed me', Ron said, describing the moment when he first caught a glimpse of the empowerment that participation could offer. It was at a meeting convened by his landlord to discuss housing transfer proposals. It was a moment of realisation:

*It was a Sunday morning, I'll never forget it, it was a Sunday morning, and we all sat round a table. I thought, it's funny, we can have a say here, and change our way of thinking.*

It was to launch Ron as a collective actor in a new public; within weeks he was elected chair of a borough tenants' panel and, a year later, was one of the founders of a regional tenants' federation.

Michael recounts a similar experience of Damascene conversion in his first encounter with a tenants' federation engaged in participation.

*I found it infectious. Um, that these, this small band of people were on this like mini-crusade to change the way the council were working and they were being restricted on every corner.*

Neither Ron nor Michael believed that the participation process was likely to lead to any immediate improvements or that it would benefit them personally. Michael

immediately concluded that his landlord had little interest in tenants' views and was unlikely to take any suggestions on board. What attracted him, what possessed him at that moment, was the suggestion that he could have effect; that change was elusive but attainable.

*We found it hard to walk away, you know, once you were in. It was, and it still is, its infectious, you know, and I think every little, sort of piece, every small victory still means something even now, you know, it can be just changing a line on a policy or a strategy but it still means something, to sort of, still putting our mark on things.*

John saw a television documentary in which councillors 'with clipped accents' were talking about what was best for tenants. Looking back he identifies this as the moment that he became a housing campaigner who went on to become a director of the national tenants' organisation.

*It's silly. Something simple like that,*

Simple, but life changing; it was an interpellative call that constructed a collective identity for him as a tenant and initiated him into political action. He says:

*There is the class system, stigma, there is the majority of the ruling classes, the Oxford and Cambridge who govern and dictate the rules. So there will always be a ceiling where tenants are allowed to aspire to and they will. Once we reach that ceiling it's up to the next generation of tenants to strive for even greater achievements.*

The recognition that is inherent to participation addresses tenants as equals and references a language of universal rights and citizenship. The awakening of subjectivity invoked by the contradictory interpellation of participation enables tenants to contest their status and inspires moments of epiphany in which they are able to glimpse the possibility of new identifications. Participation is power exerted on the tenant as subjection that is nevertheless a power assumed by tenants as subjects. The next section investigates the vocabulary of rights and citizenship that conveys this subjectivity and assesses its potential to constitute a new public for social housing.

## The performative enactment of a new 'public'

In T.H. Marshall's (1950) renowned definition, citizenship entails the possession of three sets of rights: civil rights that provide for property ownership and grant equality before the law, political rights to vote and take part in decision-making, and contested social rights that allow for an equitable distribution of goods. In the discourse of public service reform, rights to property have assumed a privileged position so that the right to participate politically has been elided with the civil rights of the citizen to participate in the market. While the concept of social rights has been whittled away, and the idea of entitlement guaranteed by the State has been all-but erased, the exercise of consumer influence and the expectation of service quality have been enshrined as new constitutional rights for the users of public services (Barron & Scott 1992). This confinement of political and social rights within a commodity transaction leaves behind a marker that enables claims to be made on notions of social justice and equality that have been marginalised but not fully excluded (Nicholls & Beaumont 2004).

Judith Butler's theory of performativity denotes this failure of discourse to impose a permanent injunction on the subject. The interpellation of the subject awards an identity but Butler argues that identity must be constantly renewed and performed in daily life through 'a regularised and constrained repetition of norms' (Butler 1993: 95). Identity is something that subjects do and re-do, and the iteration of this identity may not produce an exact copy each time. In reproducing the constrained identities of participation, tenants inevitably access a discourse of rights and empowerment that reflects more political and social aspects of citizenship. The failure of discourse to permanently exclude these meanings from the regulatory norms of participation enables tenants to performatively enact a collective public through the rights of the consumer and recover excluded notions of social citizenship in quasi-public services.

In this excerpt from an interview with a tenants' federation member, Brian's description of a dispute with a housing officer conveys both the civil rights of the consumer to choice and the political rights of citizens to equality:

*I said it's a tenants choice, I said and that's what we've been fighting for with all this and the tenant has a right and a choice to what they want, not what you*

*want. If it's no good for a tenant, then explain to the tenant, don't just say to the tenant you can't have it. And this is what it's all about with tenants, you know, they've got a right to say what they want and to have their speak.*

In this narrative, Brian acknowledges that participation has performative effects in transforming tenants into consumers with 'a choice to what they want' but also endows them with political attributes: tenants are 'fighting' for a right 'to have their speak', Brian argues, irrespective of whether that voice is heard or acted upon.

In a focus group discussion, two tenants conduct a tortuous but illuminating linguistic journey around this troublesome concept of the citizen-consumer. Nick, a housing association tenant, begins from the civil rights of the landlord-tenant contract to reclaim the political rights of collective action:

*If you're a tenant you're in a relationship with a landlord, you know you're having this, and, um, that's a sort of contractual relationship even if you've got other rights, what the tenants movement has attached to those rights, I think ultimately, originally there was, it was just a you and them relationship, I think the tenants movement for me is about making links with other tenants who are in similar situations so that sort of one to one contractual relationship is, is seen in the context of your, your neighbours and your community because there's usually one landlord for a lot of tenants*

In the first stage in this journey Nick breaches the isolation of the individual in the contractual consumer-producer relationship to establish a collective tenant imaginary, the 'tenants' movement', while implicitly misdirecting the relationship from the housing service to encompass a concept of neighbourhood and community. In the development of this argument below, Nick indicates the adaptability of participation's performative power. By accessing a vocabulary of rights, Nick is able to exit the market definition of housing entirely and construct the outline of a decommodified service: housing as security, housing as a social right.

*But its about, it's the struggle to try to win rights that go beyond that original deal, offer from the landlord which is on the landlord's terms, I mean what you're given. I mean the ten- tenants' movement is a kind of self-parodying term, because it's about your home. Tenant is what the landlord calls you, ((laughs)) you know, that's their term for you, you know, you know. It's your*

*home and it's giving, it's working with your neighbours to give yourself rights to stay in that home and to make sure that home becomes a community.*

The language of the market appears readily adaptable to the identity talk of new publics and it can proceed from a lack of choice to an appeal for equality and then on to the vocabulary of struggle and collective organisation, as Steven, a tenant inspector, illustrates in the same discussion.

*Where there's an inequality between the person providing the, whatever you want to call it, the service, the object, and the person receiving it, and often the person receiving these services, or whatever it is, may be static in that place, so the only way to change what you have and what you're stuck in, and where you've got no choice, is to coalesce and form with your fellow people and try and band together and share in a movement, in a, actually act against whoever's providing you with a service, and housing very much fits into that, social housing fits into that, because there virtually is no market, there virtually is no choice*

This invocation of a tenant collective through the language of the market is founded on the depiction of social housing as a public good; a home and a community, as well as a commodity. At a national tenants' conference Robert, a council tenant and member of his tenants' association argues that social housing encourages social interaction and that it is essentially a co-operative tenure, in contrast to the individualism of the private market:

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

Clare, a stock transfer tenant, expresses social housing as a collective belonging, a feeling of solidarity, unavailable in the private sector:

*You're not on your own any more, as well, you know. You may if you had gone into private housing, you'd have been on your own in a little block, you know*

Yvonne, a tenant director, tells a story about the estate where she used to live. She describes it as a mixed community, with social rented, shared ownership, and owner-



occupied housing clustered along the same access road; each occupying its own section. Yvonne recounts how tenure divisions were visible through the number of children playing in the street.

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

The assertion that social housing encourages sociability is advanced by Jane, in discussion with her regional federation, to imbue all social housing tenants with the values of mutual aid and co-operation:

*And, you know, but they also are, in the main, quite good about looking after their neighbours, joining in with things and so on, considering the other children on, you know, people's children on the estate and all this sort of thing. So actually they're probably more socially conscious than a lot of people who live outside the council house environment.*

The notion that social housing constructs a 'public' through the values of solidarity and co-operation provides a critical narrative on the trajectory of public policy that has championed home ownership as the only acceptable tenure and has undermined the public services that once insured against risk. As Susan says, at the same federation meeting:

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

In the nostalgic dialogue below, indicative of 'lost community', tenants in a regional focus group argue that the incursion of market forces into public housing has destroyed the communion of mono-tenure housing estates.

*Richard: Yeah but it's the housing now, on estates, such as there was, going back when everybody was a tenant, a council house tenant, now there is so much interplay*

*Theresa: Diversity*

*Richard: With homeowners, right, that is, they're not doing their input into the estate as what the tenants are through their organisations*

In addition to asserting the values of collective provision, the iteration of a discourse of rights in participation allows tenants to reconfigure their relationship with public services. Social housing becomes a service that has been achieved through the collective action of its residents. In an interview at his tenants' federation Bernard says:

*If it wasn't for the tenants' movement I'm afraid we'd all be in terraced houses with the lavvy at the end of the road.*

The sense of legacy and historical progress is developed by John, a member of a tenants' federation, who maintains in an interview:

*People have fought long and hard to raise the profile of tenants and to ensure they get a fair crack of the whip from landlords whatever persuasion. And it's about continuing the work done by previous members of our communities and honouring their achievements and developing on what bricks they put in place and growing the opportunities.*

This contention is amplified in a focus group at a national tenants' conference where Carmen, a tenant director and chair of her tenants' federation, depicts user involvement as a process of struggle:

*I always say it's fighting for the rights of tenants, I don't mean physically in fisticuffs, but it's about fighting. A lot of young tenants come on board and they think this has always been here. It has been a fight and it has been a struggle to achieve what we have achieved.*

The invocation of a popular movement for social housing and tenants' rights is confirmed in the focus group by Wendy, a tenant director:

*Any movement's got to get to the top as they did in Chartism in the Victorian days [...] Because tenants' cries have to be recognised at governmental level in order that action can be taken.*

In the face of a range of discursive identity practices targeted on social housing and acting on the subjectivity of tenants, the construction of this political imaginary is evidence of concerted dis-identification by tenants engaged in formal participation (Butler 2000). A discourse that seeks to enact the identity positions of the rational consumer and responsible citizen is resignified to depict a collective public and to convey public services as expressions of solidarity and co-operation and the outcome of social struggle. Participation provides a vocabulary of identity talk intended to remodel the behaviour of welfare subjects; by adopting this vocabulary tenants appear able to reclaim notions of social citizenship that contradict the direction of welfare reform and provide alternative visions of public services.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the ability of service users to amend or resist the behavioural discourse of public service reform through a study of user involvement among social housing tenants in England. Applying the theoretical framework of Judith Butler, it has evidenced the discursive work done by tenants to negotiate identity positions and articulate a distinctive collective identity, or 'counter-public'. This identity work is conducted through the iteration of the behavioural norms of user participation and the implementation and amendment of regulatory discourses acting on the subjectivity of social housing tenants. The strategies of user participation in public services operate within the context of a programme of welfare restructuring modelled on market theory and serve to encourage service users to acquire the autonomy and self-governance necessary to take part in the marketplace as responsible subjects. Institutional changes made to the supply and management of social rented housing, alongside other public services, have embodied market practices and made familiar these disciplinary discourses. Participation has had performative effect on the behaviour of tenants and their relationship with public services; it has infused the social housing sector and enthralled tenants who seek user involvement as directors, inspectors, or members of tenant groups. The iteration of participation as a performative practice, however, references a discourse of rights and empowerment that contradicts the assumptions underpinning public service

reform. Enabled by the subjectivity awarded in participation, and motivated by the contradictions in its promised equality, the tenants in this study were able to misdirect the behavioural discourses of governance to re-imagine their reciprocal relationship with their housing service. The public called into being by this identity work appears to manifest tenacious support for marginalised ideas of social citizenship and the collectivising effects of public services. It is a combative public that envisages itself as engaged in a collective and long-term campaign for social change. By engaging in user participation, and by 'putting their mark' on the hybrid, and sometimes contradictory meanings of a behavioural discourse, these service users construct a discordant counterpoint to the institutional restructuring of public services. If shared more widely, this identity work would suggest that the relationship between the public and the welfare state has yet to be conclusively redrawn.

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