6th Australasian Housing Researchers' Conference
8-10th February 2012
The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia

The Objectified Person Is Seen, but Does Not See[1]

Low income and disadvantaged housing consumer's perspectives on the SA Housing Strategy

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[1] Adapted from Foucault, 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison.* New York, Vintage Books.

Keywords: *Social policy, housing, agency, governmentality, community.*

Abstract

In September 2011 the South Australian government released a draft Housing Strategy (the Strategy). Shelter SA, the peak body for housing and homelessness, has a responsibility to advocate for low income and disadvantaged people and their housing needs and conducted an independent consultation on behalf of Housing SA. The consultation aimed to explore the perspectives of low income and disadvantaged housing consumers in relation to the vision and directions set out in the Strategy. The two key themes that emerged from analysis of the consultation data were meanings of place and housing affordability. Findings revealed a disjuncture between the State Government's vision of the places in which people live and how participants experience where they live. We argue that the way the term 'community' is used in the Strategy demonstrates this disjuncture. Additionally, some participants were paying up to 50% of their income on rent rather than the 30% of household income, a common measure of housing affordability (Stone et al., 2011). When the cost of utilities and food were added to rent, the majority of participants were left with very little money to meet other basic needs such as transport and health care. These findings are framed in terms of Desjarlais' (1996) understanding of agency to conceptualise how the consultation participants achieved their needs, wants and values in where they lived and within finance constraints. The agency of consultation participants is considered in relation to Foucault's theory of governmentality (1982; 1991) to highlight how people's actions contribute to policy imperatives. We conclude that if social policies are to meet the housing needs of vulnerable people and those living on low incomes it is vital that they are based on people's subjective experiences in conjunction with existing scholarly knowledge.

Introduction

Titmuss has described policy as '…the principles that govern action directed towards given ends' (1974:23). Social policies in particular refer to '…political response[s] to social issues…' that affect the welfare of the population (Clark, 2009:164). Social policies target a diverse array of fields including health, education and housing '…with the intention that [actions in this area] will benefit all citizens' (ibid.). The South Australian Housing Strategy Green Paper (the Strategy) is referred to as a social policy in this paper because affordable housing, support and

equality are defined as key to the welfare of the South Australian population. Actions that address the problems of housing shortage and affordability are outlined in the Strategy as 'directions' aimed at achieving wellbeing for all South Australians (Department for Families and Communities and Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2011).

The Strategy was released in September, 2011 and Shelter SA[2] conducted an independent consultation with consenting members of the public living in a variety of housing tenures on behalf of Housing SA, the state government housing authority. The consultation explored the perspectives of participants in relation to the vision and directions set out in the Strategy. Shelter SA prepared a submission to the Strategy based largely on this consultation and the data in the current paper is drawn from that consultation and submission. The strategy talks at length about the creation of communities as key to helping people realise their potential. However, the needs, desires and aspirations of individuals are not accounted for, which is evidenced in the disjuncture between the rhetoric about place-making in the strategy and the way that participants in the Shelter SA consultation talked about where they lived. In this paper we frame social policies as instruments of government power, the aims of which are realised through people's actions—their agency, which in its most basic form refers to the capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001)—to meet their needs and wants.

Social policies affect people and the way they live in two ways. Policies guide the provision of programs, projects and services that have a material impact on people's lives. Social policies also affect people in a less tangible but no less significant way through discourse, which influences the way that people construct their identities and conduct themselves (Shore and Wright, 1997). For example the welfare reforms of 2006 ('Welfare to Work') that were introduced with the aims of reducing welfare dependence and increasing people's participation in the workforce embraced the concept of 'Mutual Obligation'[3] by incentivising employment through welfare cuts (McClure, 2000). The Work for the Dole program (that began as a pilot project in 1998) similarly aligned with the concept of Mutual Obligation by requiring that people engage in skill building, volunteering and job-seeking activities (Yeend, 2004). Both Welfare to

[2] Shelter SA is the South Australian peak body for housing and homelessness and advocates for the interests of low income and disadvantaged South Australians and their housing needs via policy work, research and education.

[3] 'Mutual Obligation' as it is interpreted in the McClure report (the basis of the welfare reforms) is underpinned by social obligations and it is written that '…there should be a recognition that government, business, communities and individuals are held together by a web of mutual expectations which, in some cases, should be made requirements' (2000:32).

Work and Work for the Dole are policy approaches that impact on people's lives and reinforce social conceptions about people who rely on income support as people who take advantage of the welfare system (Peel, 2005) because they are framed as not reciprocating the support they receive. Mutual Obligation reinforces stereotypes about welfare recipients as unworthy, dishonest and immoral because they must be forced to work and disciplined when they do not comply. The way that social policies affect people's lives are not mutually exclusive—policies and programs are based on social and cultural ideas, norms and values (which are informed by discourse), and policies and programs can reinforce and rationalise social and cultural ideas, norms and values.

Social policies contain assumptions about target populations and can reflect ideals about the way society 'ought' to be (Ife, 2002; Clark, 2009). The term 'community' is widely used by governments and appears repeatedly in Australian social policies at all levels (Clark, 2008). Debates about meanings of community have a long history across many disciplines and a large body of knowledge exists because of this interest (Clark, 2008). For a geographic community to exist, members must have a sense of identity and belonging to the street or suburb where they live, which is commonly influenced by neighbours and the presence or absence of family and friends residing nearby, and the length of time people have been in one place (Page, 2006). In a study of urban regeneration and social exclusion in the UK, Page demonstrated that subgroups brought together by a common interest, length of residence, family and friend relationships and shared identities formed 'communities within communities' (ibid.). Competition for scarce resources such as housing and employment can also be divisive rather than inclusionary (Page, 2006; Clark, 2008) and communities are not homogeneous entities that occur solely on the basis of geographic location but are formed on the basis of a number of other factors including subjective experiences.

The term 'community' is not defined in the Strategy but it is used in a number of ways as an expression of an ideal society (Shelter SA, 2011). In the Strategy the term 'community' is used to describe 'inclusive', 'sustainable' and 'safe' places where people live that will solve social problems linked to housing (Shelter SA, 2011). The use of the term 'community' in the Strategy reflects conservative and nostalgic views of what a community ought to look like that are at odds with the body of evidence-based information on this topic[4] and do not acknowledge that

[4] See for example, Clark, 2008; Crow and McLean, 2006; Page, 2006; Spinney and Nethery, 2012.

tensions and conflicts can exist within geographic places *between* different communities that are ordered on identity or interest (Page, 2006).

There is no recognition of the divisiveness and multiplicity of communities in the Strategy. Instead, a collective voice is employed to assert that 'we want to live in communities where we feel safe, connected and enriched', and that 'choice is important to us' (Department for Families and Communities and Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2011:7). There is an apparent assumption that governments will construct these communities, but no acknowledgement that communities are constructed by people and relationships, personal identity and feelings of belonging to a particular street, suburb or neighbourhood and having friends and family nearby (Clark, 2008; Page, 2006). The 'we' and 'us' referred to in the Strategy does not represent individuals with their own needs, wants, values and aspirations and is therefore not inclusive of the subjective experiences and aspirations of the people that it is written to govern. This disjuncture represents a point of departure to consider how consultation participants acted to define their own places and meet their needs. The perspectives of the participants involved in the consumer consultation are considered in greater detail later. Here the concept of agency is outlined to understand how consultation participants acted to meet their needs.

Agency

The actions of people do not occur in a vacuum. People act within social and cultural norms and structures, which in turn guide and constrain actions. An analogy that is often used to explain this relationship is that of a sports team. Members of a sports team have some freedom to act, but their actions are constrained by the rules of the sport. What stops them from acting in any way they like, for example dribbling a football down the field or punching the opposition, is counter-action from referees in the form of penalties and bans and pressure from other players and coaches, which effectively control the actions of players (Cline, 2006).

The theory of agency emerged as a way to think and talk about the relationship between people's actions and structure (Elvin et al., 2010; Ortner, 2006). Agency and structure exist in a dialectical relationship—social structures constrain and direct the actions of individuals, and the actions of individuals can produce and reproduce social structures (ibid.). Because of this relationship between agency and structure, the actions of individuals can transform structures and reinforce domination by those structures (Giddens, 1984; Holland et al., 1998). Thinking

about the relationship between agency and structure helps us think about how, and why, people act as they do and the potential consequences of these actions.

One of the most common understandings of agency is of positive action as in Desjarlais' understanding of agency as a capacity 'to do otherwise', rather than simply 'doing something' (1996:897). Desjarlais' understanding of agency emphasises the element of choice in action—that one can choose a course of action to achieve a desired end rather than merely acting with no clear goal. In this paper we use Desjarlais' understanding of agency to conceptualise people's capacity to act outside of institutions like public housing departments. Social policies institutionalise power structures between governments and citizens and guide the provision of resources that ultimately inform, direct and constrain people's actions. Social policies are thus a means of governing populations by acting on people's agency.

Governmentality

The concept of governmentality is derived from Foucault's work on the government of populations and power (Rose et al., 2006, McKee 2009). Governmentality refers to the '…techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour [that includes the] Government of children, government of souls and consciences, government of a household, of a state, or of oneself' (Foucault, 1997:82 quoted in Rose et al., 2006:83). In his explanation of governmentality Foucault highlights that power is diffuse and operates at many levels. Social policy is an example of the diffuse exercise of power that is predicated on people's agency (McKee, 2009). The theory of governmentality is a useful conceptual tool for understanding how people's agency, despite appearing as independent actions that are undertaken to achieve self-defined goals, can in fact contribute to policy imperatives.

Social policies outline social ideals and means of achieving outcomes for the welfare of the population (Clark, 2009; Titmuss, 1974) that are realised through the provision of programs, projects and services (resources). Social policy and associated resources can be seen as techniques inherent in the government of people because it is '…an instrument…for shaping individuals' and using individuals for particular purposes (Shore and Wright, 1997:4). Foucault has discussed the government of people as a form of power that acts on the '…action[s] of other people' (1982:790). 'To govern, in this sense…' Foucault says, '…is to structure the possible field of action of others' (ibid.). Social policies constrain people's actions because they direct

the provision of resources and by doing so shape possibilities for action (ibid.). The capacity for agency is an essential precondition in Foucault's understanding of power because, as he explains, '…freedom must exist for power to be exerted…without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination…' (ibid.). The exercise of power therefore is based on people's capacity for agency (McKee, 2009). However, people's agency is directed toward certain ends through policy (Dean, 2009, Rose, 1999, Foucault, 1991).

This paper looks at the results of the Shelter SA consumer consultation using the concepts of agency and governmentality to demonstrate that the agency of the participants is crucial to the realisation of policy imperatives. We argue that an approach that embraces free market ideology disadvantages vulnerable people whose capacity for agency is severely constrained by their situations.

Aims

The aims of this study were to bring people together who were on low incomes and living with disadvantage to elicit their experiences and opinions about the housing issues that were important to them and to look at the goodness of fit between them and the explicit and implicit content of the Strategy.

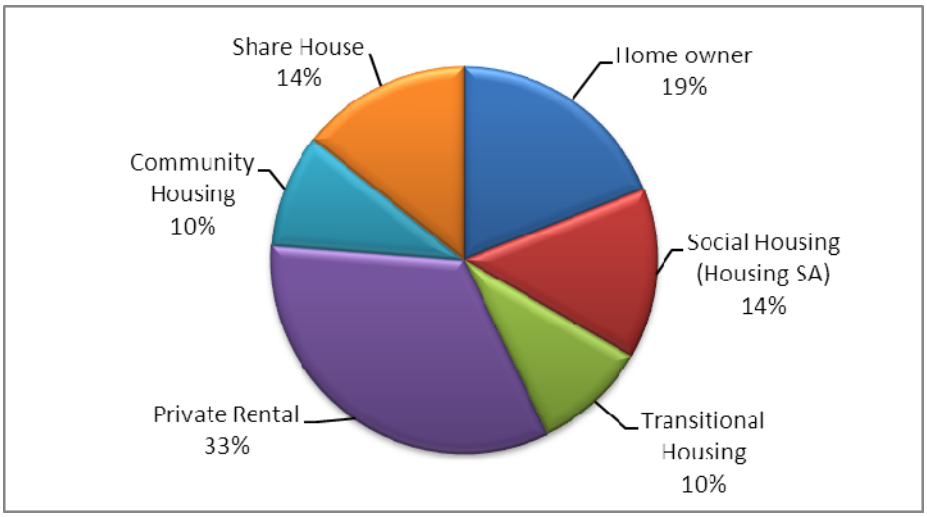
Methods

This section is predominantly reproduced from Shelter SA's submission to the Strategy (Shelter SA, 2011). Twenty-one participants were recruited by Shelter SA to participate in the consultation activities and five focus groups were conducted between October and November, 2011. Four focus groups were conducted in metropolitan Adelaide, and one was conducted in a regional centre. Participants were recruited purposefully because of their experience and knowledge of receiving a low income and living with disadvantage in a variety of housing tenures. Attention was paid to gender balance and inclusion of disadvantage including age, mental and physical health issues and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Participants were recruited using Shelter SA member networks.

Participants ranged in age from 15-19 years to 70-74 years. Of the 21 participants 14 were male and 7 were female. 5 people indicated that they were employed, 7 unemployed, 2 retired

while 6 were either studying, receiving income support payments or stay-at-home parents. Participants were predominantly single (10 people), 2 people were married, 4 divorced, 4 were in de-facto relationships and one person indicated their marital status as 'widower.' Of the 21 participants, 3 people lived with a disability, 3 people supported children with a disability, 1 person identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 4 people were from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The majority of participants lived in private rental (10 people), of this number 3 people lived in share housing, 4 people were home owners, 3 people lived in public housing (Housing SA), 2 people lived in community housing (not-for-profit landlord) and 2 people lived in transitional housing (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tenure Type of Consultation Participants



Results

This section is predominantly reproduced from Shelter SA's submission to the Strategy (Shelter SA, 2011). The two key themes that emerged from analysis of the consumer consultation data were place and affordability. These themes related to how participants experienced where they lived, how they made these places a 'home' and how they negotiated within financially constrictive circumstances to attempt to realise their needs, wants and values. These themes emerged in response to the initial question: "What's happening at your place?" This open, general question was deliberately asked with the aim of encouraging participants to consider what was important to them about where they lived. One young male participant drew parallels between his current and previous tenure, highlighting that his contentment with his current

tenure is linked to his freedom to do what he wants around the house and in the garden, freedoms that he did not have in his previous tenure. A number of other participants spoke about liking where they lived because of the security of their tenancy, liking the area and getting along with their neighbours. Not everybody spoke positively about where they lived. A young female participant spoke about her desire to move out of a Housing SA property because there had been an incident in which someone had "smashed my neighbour's door down…I was scared…he was carrying a huge knife…in private rental I could get away from all of that" . Other participants spoke about negative experiences with neighbours, housemates and the quality and appropriateness of housing.

The stories of two participants that evolved in response to this question and in subsequent discussion illustrate their housing experiences and overcoming unmet need:

> Donna has moved numerous times searching for appropriate and affordable accommodation. She had moved herself and her family from private rental and Housing SA properties where "druggies" were "doing deals in the front yard" where she had been anxious for the safety of her family and the security of their personal possessions. In one instance she had packed up her family only to discover that the landlady of her new rental had changed her mind about renting her property. Donna and her family were consequently compelled to stay in a friend's bedroom until she could find alternative accommodation. Her children have had to change schools numerous times and have disabilities and struggle with frequent change, "they don't like strange people and can't be looked after by others", she said. Donna had recently secured community housing for herself and her young family in what she described as "a nice area". She said of her new tenure that "it feels good to have security" in a place where "the kids aren't scared".

Phil, an older male participant, also spoke about what he valued in his housing:

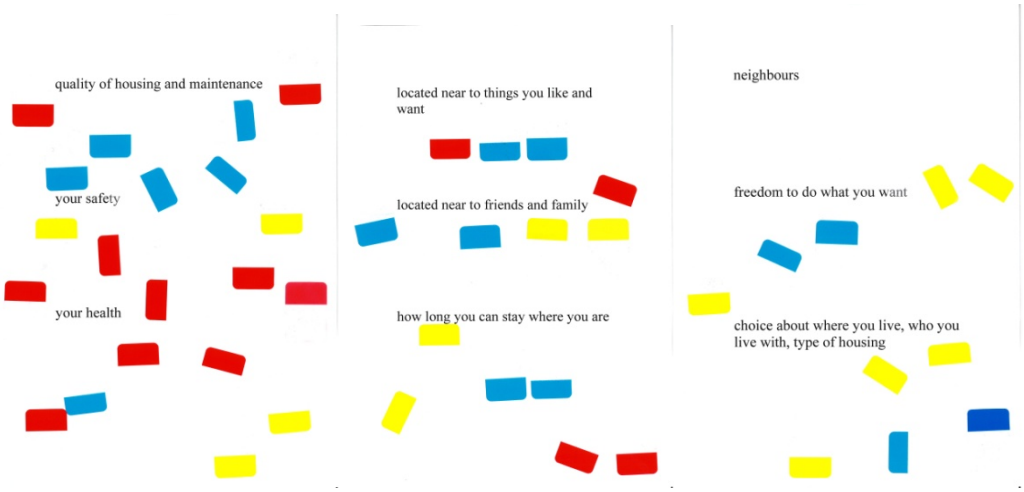
> After suffering from a serious health issue, Phil was no longer able to work. His inability to work had an impact on his income and consequently his housing options as he did not own his own home. He put in an application with Housing SA, but after not hearing from them for some time suspected that "they're shoving me under a rug". After securing a private rental "Housing Trust started ringing, offering me flats when I put down that I wanted a house. How can you upset a guy with the problems I've got already?! It's really unfair". Phil said that the reason he kept his private rental was because it offered him the space and facilities he needed to engage in his hobbies. "I won't move, because it has a 20 x 20 concrete shed out the back – won't get that with Housing Trust."

Amongst participants there was a perception that alternative rental markets, and particularly the private rental market, are different from public housing properties. It was implied that the private rental market is safer and is a space in which one has a greater degree of choice.

Activity 1: Participatory Voting

This section is predominantly reproduced from Shelter SA's submission to the Strategy (Shelter SA, 2011). Responses to the question "What's happening at your place?" were grouped together by the researchers and nine aspects were developed.[5] The nine aspects were subsequently discussed with participants and they agreed that these were an accurate representation of the most important ideas they had previously expressed. Participants were then asked to prioritise and vote for three aspects in order of importance to them. A ranking system using differently coloured tabs was employed – red symbolised the most important, yellow the second most important, and blue the third most important. The raw results of that activity can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Participatory Voting Activity Raw Results



[5] The nine aspects were: Neighbours, freedom to do what you want, choice about where you live, who you live with, type of housing, near things you like and want, near to friends and family, how long you can stay where you are, quality of housing and maintenance, your safety, your health.

In terms of single votes, participants highlighted that the most important aspect to them about where they live is health. The second most important aspect about where they live is choice about where they live, who they live with and the type of housing they live in. The third most important aspect about where participants live is the quality and maintenance of their housing. Tallying the total number of votes given to each theme (of highest, secondary and tertiary importance), health and length of tenure are the most important considerations given to where participants live. This was closely followed by choice in where they live, who with, in what type of housing, and the quality and maintenance of that housing. When participants voted they were implicitly ordering their needs, wants and values. It is not claimed that these findings are representative of the entire population of South Australia but they provide important insights and raise the question of how governments intend to make communities when participants placed such a high value on being able to define their own places.

Six participants highlighted that health and housing are multi-dimensional problems that intersect with safety, length of tenure and quality and maintenance of housing. The link between housing and health is accepted, but needs to underpin program development and service delivery in a more integrated way. Participants indicated that they value choice, and in fact rate the exercise of choice as an aspect of where they live that's as important as the quality of the housing they live in. The high value that participants placed on choice throws into sharp relief claims made in the Strategy about making communities when participants themselves indicated that they valued making their own choices about where they live.

Rhetoric about the creation of 'safe,' 'sustainable' and 'inclusive' communities and neighbourhoods appears repeatedly in the Strategy. The participants' did not use the term community at all and spoke about the places in which they lived in terms of their immediate environment (neighbourhoods, streets and suburbs), health, security, stability and safety of themselves and their families. Implicitly, participants themselves directly challenged the government's assertions that they would create communities. When researchers showed participants how the word 'communities' was used in the Strategy, specifically around government creating communities, one participant exclaimed "how are they going to do that?!" Another participant said "who cares about the rhetoric in the Green Paper – people just want to live their lives." Participants also noted how community centres and local shops can bring people together, but that despite this "you can go back to your street and feel alone again."

Activity 2: Affordability

This section is predominantly reproduced from Shelter SA's submission to the Strategy (Shelter SA, 2011). Achieving needs, wants and values were constrained by participants' financial situations. Consequently subsequent activities focused on affordability. One young participant explained that when he is short of money for a bill or food he goes busking to make-up the shortfall. However this is not a capacity shared by all participants and many made compromises to pay their bills. An older male participant with a disability described the sorts of compromises he has to make to pay his bills and afford an operation:

> "I've seen the cost of living go up drastically; it's really hard to live". Brian says that the increased cost of utilities leaves him with $160 a fortnight to buy food and anything else he might need, "I don't have luxury stuff - alcohol or cool drink. You can go three days without anything but a tub of butter and a slice of bread". Brian needs a $2,000 operation, but said "how the hell am I going to get that?! No medical cover, can't afford it, so I'll have to borrow it, but then I can't eat". Brian's financial situation has meant that in the past he has been compelled to live in a place where he doesn't feel safe. Brian has experienced problems with violence and organised crime that has affected his freedom to come and go from his home and his relationships with neighbours. "No-one talks to anyone" he said, "I was like a prisoner in my own home—I kept the windows closed and blinds down and I would only go outside at certain times when cars had left".

The Strategy talks about addressing affordable housing, the definition of which rests on a measure of 30% of income paid on rent or mortgage. This is referred to as the ratio method of affordability and has been in used in many nations around the world for a number of years and has been commented on by a number of scholars including Stone et. Al. (2011), but was cemented as the dominant measure of housing affordability when it was adopted in the 1991 National Housing Strategy . Using the 30% measure of affordability as a benchmark, we asked participants to calculate the percentage of their income that they spend on rent. Overall participants were paying between 30% (only one Housing SA tenant) to 50% (remaining participants) of their income on rent or mortgage, but when asked to include utility and food expenses this measure increased to 50% to 60%, with one person reporting that they were paying 86% of their income on the combined expenses of rent, utilities and food.

Stone (2011:20) has described the basis of the 30% measure of affordability and questioned the rationale for its use:

> How can one account for the existence and persistence of the fixed ratio or percentage of income affordability concept? Apart from its mathematical simplicity, the rationale for the conventional standard, and the rationalisation for raising the acceptable level in the US from 25 per cent to 30 per cent in the 1980s, and in Australia and other countries since then, has been built upon interpretations of empirical studies of what households actually spend for housing. Because ratios are pure numbers, they can be compared across time and space and thus are susceptible to being reified as universal and lawful. Such 'laws' then become legitimated as appropriate indicators and the basis for normative standards.

A number of participants support dependents and larger families, three participants had a disability and another three participants support children with disabilities. These participants likely experience added costs that are not accounted for in the 30% affordability measure. This confirms the need to rethink current affordability measures.

Discussion

There is a disjuncture between the way that participants in Shelter SA's consumer consultation spoke about affordability and defined place and the way that the Strategy defines these things. It is argued that the needs and aspirations of South Australian citizens are not included in the Strategy. In the examples given, Donna and Phil moved outside of the provision of public housing. Disillusionment with the 'Housing Trust,' as most people still referred to it, seemed to be caused by being placed in houses, or in locations where they felt they could not realise their needs, wants and values and rather than living in these circumstances they acted to access housing that did fulfil their needs. By challenging government visions and moving outside of public housing, Donna and Phil were practising agency. Their actions highlight the importance of choice as a key feature of their agency that is exercised to achieve needs and defined goals.

The aspirations of citizens are not recognised in government visions of how society should look and function as articulated in policies, including the Strategy. Foucault asserts that the objectified person (as in the case of the prisoner) 'is seen but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication' (1977:200). The people referred to in the Strategy, like Foucault's prisoner, are similarly present, but not given a voice. Rather than being asked what is important to them, citizens are told what is important to them, which gives rise to the disjuncture. Shore and Wright's (1997) discussion of governance through policy draws on

Foucault and the subsequent work of Burchell (1993) and Gordon (1991) to highlight how policy affects people's 'indigenous norms of conduct' (Shore and Wright, 1997:6), because it is a type of power that is realised through people's capacity to act (see Gordon, 1991; Foucault, 1982). Foucault's notion of governmentality, while premised on people's capacity for agency (McKee, 2009) works by acting on, and directing, people's actions toward desirable ends (Dean, 2009; Rose, 1999; Foucault, 1991). Policy can be seen as a tool toward that end (Shore and Wright, 1997). Free market ideology that 'the market will provide' is implicit to government visions for housing and people's capacity to act within the free market, to exercise a measure of agency, is key to its realisation.

Anecdotally, private rental is often put forward as the answer to the lack of public housing by government bureaucrats. The public housing policy of reducing public housing stock and moving people into the free market through private rental are neo-liberal policies that are partially being realised through the agency of people like Donna and Phil to move into private rental to achieve better lives for themselves, rather than through the purposeful and transparent implementation of policy. In this environment however, the most vulnerable are left behind with no resources or capacity to fulfill even their basic needs. Donna and Phil's capacity for agency actually contributes to government taking less responsibility for social housing and a push for the rental market to account for housing more people. The inadequacy of public housing properties to meet the needs, wants and values of participants drove them to actions that ultimately contribute to government policy pursuits.

Conclusion

Policies guide regulatory frameworks and welfare systems and have a very real impact on people's lives through actions that are confined and directed by government policies and programs. If policies are not inclusive of the aspirations and values of the people they are designed to govern, a situation is created where people who are able, must seek alternatives to fulfill their needs. We have used Desjarlais' (1996) understanding of agency as the capacity to 'act otherwise' as a way to understand this.

The agency of vulnerable people is significantly more constrained and they may not have the same capacity to act as Donna, Phil and to an extent, Brian. We have stated that the capacity

to act varies widely amongst members of society and those living with multiple disadvantage are less likely to be able to overcome constraints. Thus it is important to pay particular attention to vulnerable people and those living with disadvantage in the development of social policy. This concern is reflected in the public submissions to the Strategy. A Shelter SA summary report (Shelter SA, 2012) has highlighted that all of the submissions to the Strategy had a focus on vulnerable groups of people. This reveals a trend in the exclusion of the needs of vulnerable people, which can be linked to neo-liberal market policies that assume the market will provide. The market does not always provide and it is not necessarily a space in which vulnerable people can act. Housing policy must place emphasis on vulnerable citizens and their special needs because the current approach further disadvantages them. It is vital that social policies include the aspirations, needs and wants of those they are meant to govern incorporating theoretical definitions of community and the subjective views of citizens themselves if they are to be effective. It is acknowledged however, that even the best policies will still leave behind the most vulnerable people if there is an overall shortage of adequate and affordable housing in South Australia.

Acknowledgements

Housing SA provided funding to Shelter SA to conduct an independent consumer consultation around the SA Housing Strategy Green Paper.

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