



Interpretation and Representation in Housing Policy Discourse as Exemplified by Council Tenants' Participation in the Jazdów Estate (Warsaw)

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***Abstract:** The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the usefulness of the What's the Problem Represented to Be approach (WPR), a tool of policy analysis developed by the Australian political scientist Carol Bacchi to examine the discursive representations of council tenants' participation in connection with the inclusion of council housing tenants from the Jazdów Estate in the decision-making process relating to local housing policy in Warsaw. The article identifies two discursive representations of council tenants' participation: (1) council tenants as an expected passive audience in top-down policymaking and (2) the limited acceptance of the agency of council tenants in policymaking. It was found that in Warsaw - or at least in the case of Jazdów - the political and discursive interpretation of tenants' participation is primarily associated with the act of informing and less often with public consultation or the co-production of housing policy.*

Keywords: housing policymaking; Poland; tenant participation; What's the Problem Represented to Be (WPR).



Introduction

In the urban and housing studies literature, the issue of interpreting and representing council tenants' involvement in decision-making on housing policy remains understudied. The idea that public policy is not a response to actual problems but to discursively created ones was developed by Deborah Stone (1988). This notion can also be studied with a focus on housing. How social problems such as homelessness or housing evictions are interpreted affects where the solutions are sought and ultimately how the problems are solved. Discourse-shaped depictions of council tenants often attribute anti-social behaviour to them (Flint 2004). In response, a disciplinary approach is often adopted in the design of measures directed at them in the field of housing policy (McKee 2011). This may also affect how tenants participate in the decision-making process. My investigation offers new insight into the discursive representations of council tenants' participation in policymaking relating to Jazdów Estate in the centre of Warsaw.

Council tenants in Warsaw are generally low-income people. However, only 9% of council housing units (usually flats) are rented to people who have serious housing problems, have very low income, and are at risk of eviction. A small number of council tenants are in a good financial situation (these are people who obtained a flat from the council for a reason other than low income; their financial situation improved; or they inherited a council flat from their family). Periodic checks on the financial situation of new council tenants (whose rent may be increased) have only been carried out since 21 April 2019.

The research examines how tenant participation is described and discussed in housing policy discourse. This issue is rarely captured by the approaches that are commonly used to study council tenant participation, including Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, Ward's levels of tenant participation (1992), the concept of civil society (Suszyńska and Rataj 2017), or Clegg's concept of 'circuits of power' (Cairncross et al. 1994). These approaches depict different levels of tenant involvement and formal structures of participation. They show the division of power between key actors (e.g. tenants and landlords). They provide information about the agency of key actors and the social practice of involving tenants in the decision-making process. They help to analyse the issue of the legitimacy of decision-making, but they ignore the impact of discourse (and discursive representations) on the process of participation. They cannot be used to examine the issue of the social construction of meanings linked to tenant participation.

For this reason, I use an approach called What's the Problem Represented to Be (WPR) to examine representations of council tenants' involvement in decision-making in local housing policy in Warsaw. WPR was developed by Carol Bacchi as a discursive policy-analysis lens for research that seeks to: (1) identify the representation of the problem that a given policy proposal is meant to address; (2) examine the presuppositions and assumptions that underpin these representations and are often left unanalysed; (3) examine how these representations shape an issue in ways that limit the possibilities for change; and (4) identify the gaps and silences in the policy debate by asking what remains unproblematised in certain representations. Bacchi divided the approach into six questions (2009: xii). My study addresses only three of them: (1) What is the 'problem' (...) represented as being in a specific policy? (2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'? (3) How has this representation



of the ‘problem’ come about? The subject of research is the public policy discourse concerning the Jazdów Estate in Warsaw.

The Jazdów Estate and council tenants’ participation - background

The Jazdów Estate is the most famous example of council tenant participation in Warsaw. It attracted the wider attention of the public. It constituted the first time in Warsaw that consultations with council tenants were conducted on a large scale. Many non-governmental organisations that support tenants participated in them. The case concerned an unusual type of real estate and council housing residents.

The Jazdów Estate is made up of a group of wooden council houses located in Warsaw’s Śródmieście district (the City Centre). It was established in 1945 for employees of the Capital Reconstruction Office (architects, engineers). The single-family houses, transferred to the Soviet Union by Finland as reparations, were a gift from Stalin to Warsaw in the wake of its nearly total destruction. In 2017, the Jazdów Estate was included in the municipal register of monuments.

Because of its unique location in the centre of Warsaw, not far from the Polish Parliament and where many embassies are, the estate has been threatened with demolition numerous times. Somehow, it has survived. In 2010, the board of the Śródmieście district adopted a resolution on the reorganisation of the Jazdów Estate. It sought to evict residents and tear down the houses, replacing them with an administrative and service area. In December 2010, the district authorities organised a meeting for the residents of the houses, informing them that they should apply for council housing flats, as the houses were going to be demolished. In 2013-2014, the gradually abandoned houses were temporarily made available to non-governmental organisations. The district authorities did not expect the work the NGOs carried out on the council houses to be as popular as it turned out to be. In 2013, the council houses’ most tenacious residents and the NGOs supporting them collected signatures for the first civic application for public consultations in Warsaw. The aim of those consultations was ultimately to give residents the right to continue to live in the Jazdów Estate. Initially, the district authorities persisted in their policy, while at the same time preparing to conduct public consultations, terminate lease agreements, and evict the residents who remained in their houses. However, in 2014, public consultations, in the form of two series of workshops with the inhabitants of Warsaw, were conducted on the future of the Jazdów Estate. As a result of those consultations, council tenants were allowed to stay in their council houses.

Research strategy

This article has two aims. First, it introduces a method that can be used to interpret specific social problems that influence housing policy design (WPR approach) and applies it to the study of housing. Second, it more closely examines several aspects of how council tenants’ participation was represented in the policy discourse on local housing policymaking in the Jazdów Estate (Warsaw).



Following Bacchi I assume in this research that housing policy in Warsaw was based on specific interpretations of how to include council tenants in decision-making processes. These interpretations are expressed in the policy discourse on housing. Investigating them makes it possible to understand a number of political conditions, particularly as concerns defining and interpreting social phenomena, and how these apply to the inclusion of council tenants in Warsaw's housing policy. These observations reveal that housing policy on tenant participation is not neutral. They also provide new insights into the governing processes in housing. This is of particular importance in the context of ensuring the democratic quality of housing policy.

In the course of the analysis I examined legal acts, strategies, and programmes on the subject of involving tenants in decision-making processes relating to Warsaw's housing policy. These data were useful for understanding the historical and administrative-legal context. I then collected 63 press articles on the subject, published between 2004 and 2016 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a daily newspaper that has been published in Poland since 1989. It covers political, international, and general news from a liberal perspective. The articles were selected by conducting a search of databases using the keywords 'council housing', 'tenants', 'involvement', and 'Warsaw'. The number of articles published varied by year, but the majority were printed between 2005 and 2009.

The data were classified into two categories: (1) supporting data on the given context - legal acts, programmes, and strategies; and (2) data as the object of in-depth analysis - press articles. The second group is divided into 11 subcategories (covering diverse groups of residents of council housing). I selected one subcategory for an in-depth analysis: 2c, which concerns the inclusion of the council tenants of the Jazdów Estate (Finnish houses) in decision-making processes. The data were selected for analysis according to the following criteria: (1) the data had the potential to reveal ways in which the inclusion of council tenants in housing policymaking was conceptualised, (2) the need to narrow down the research given the space limitations of this article. Four articles were examined in greater detail: Article 2011/1, Article 2012/4, Article 2013/4, and Article 2015/2.

Based on a preliminary review of the data, the main research question was formulated: what discursive representations of the issue of council tenants' participation appeared in connection with the inclusion of tenants of council houses from the Jazdów Estate in the decision-making process in local housing policy in Warsaw?

The data analysis and interpretation were carried out in three stages that focused on: (1) how the involvement of council tenants in decision-making in the Jazdów Estate was interpreted, (2) the assumptions that underlay the representations, and (3) the 'genealogy' of the issue of the involvement of council tenants in decision-making relating to the Jazdów Estate. I first identified and described two different representations of the involvement of the Jazdów Estate residents in Warsaw's housing policymaking. I then focused on key concepts, dichotomies, and 'categories of people' (Bacchi 2009: 16-18) related to different interpretations of the involvement of the Jazdów Estate residents in Warsaw's housing policymaking. Finally, I set the issue of the representations of council tenants' participation in decision-making relating to the Jazdów Estate in a wider historical context - namely, how council tenants have been included in the decision-making process on local housing policy in Warsaw since 2004.



Discursive representations of council tenants' participation in decision-making in the Jazdów Estate

I identified two different representations of the involvement of the Jazdów Estate residents in Warsaw's housing policymaking.

Council tenants as an expected passive audience in top-down policymaking

The first representation coincided with the period during which Warsaw's authorities were 'learning' how to share power with tenants (2010-2011). The review of documents from the years between 2004 and 2016 revealed that until 2010 tenants were afforded very little involvement in the decision-making process on local housing policy. City officials and managers had difficulty even maintaining contact with the tenants of council housing buildings. Tenants were only informed about the general features of the council housing stock in Warsaw and about procedures associated with it. An example of this type of activity was the 'Warsaw Housing Meetings' project. On 4 October 2010, a meeting on council housing was held (Warszawskie spotkania mieszkaniowe 2010). Warsaw residents interested in council housing could learn about the city's plans for the development of council rental housing, renovation policy, and sources of financing. No form of consultation with the residents of these plans was proposed.

In this context, the first representation of the involvement of the Jazdów Estate residents in Warsaw's housing policymaking showed how city authorities communicated with the estate's residents in 2010. At the time the city was organising a meeting with residents about the future of the estate. However, it was not until 8 December 2010 that officials informed residents about the new situation: 'There is no place in the city centre for a settlement of wooden council houses' (Article 2011/1). There was no deliberation, negotiation, or consensus-seeking. The information meeting conducted with residents resembled an exercise in top-down governance (Article 2011/1), with residents treated as a passive audience and the recipients of actions taken by political decision-makers.

Regarding the first representation, the texts suggested that a city representative (the mayor of Śródmieście district - Wojciech Bartelski) was blackmailing the council tenants occupying the Finnish houses at the Jazdów Estate. The mayor labelled the tenants 'reckless' (Article 2011/1). This was how he described the residents who arbitrarily reconstructed, fenced, and attached gardens to the occupied houses, for which they did not pay rent. The mayor called this a breach of lease and treated it as grounds for eviction.

Some dichotomies were also established in the texts. Some concerned the council housing estate slated for demolition: it was suggested that what was described brightly as the 'urban life of the houses' on this bustling housing estate was deemed to have no future and to be 'coming to an end' (Article 2011/1). It was indicated that the council housing estate with the 'huts, gardens, laundry drying outside the houses, smoke from the neighbours' summer barbecue' is in opposition to its immediate surroundings, the 'area of the Polish Parliament (Sejm), ministries and embassies, Ujazdowski Park and limousines and ties' (Article 2012/4). The dichotomies were intended shape people's thinking about the council housing estate in a specific way. They were used to justify a decision taken unilaterally by the city authorities, which the residents



were merely notified of and not consulted. They were also used by the mayor to confirm that the decisions taken by the city authorities were appropriate and irreversible.

A division was formulated between the ‘reckless’ residents of the council housing estate that had ‘no future’ (Article 2011/1) and the ‘resolute’ representative of the city authorities who redressed the problem of the ‘swampy’ legal status of council housing in Warsaw (Article 2011/1). However, in texts published in later years (2012, 2015), the division moved in the opposite direction: the residents of the council houses (architects, urban planners, artists) were dubbed ‘exceptional’, while the officials were described as ‘hard-hearted’. The change in the perception of local authorities and tenants reflected in the public discourse was associated with a gradual change in the social division of power. Initially, the local authorities (and their point of view) dominated in the relations with tenants. Later on, the tenants (and their ‘problematisations’ of the Jazdów Estate) gained in importance. This was possible thanks to the work of NGOs and the matter being made public.

The limited acceptance of the agency of council tenants in policymaking

The second representation appeared when the development of deliberative democracy practices in the Polish capital’s housing policy were accelerating most (2015-2018).

In 2016-2017, at the initiative of City Hall, several housing debates were held and council housing issues were raised. Intended to be informative and deliberative, the debates were organised as part of the ‘Housing2030’ project. The directions of housing policy development were set out in ‘The Housing Policy - Housing2030’ strategy (Mieszkania2030 projekt do konsultacji 2017), adopted by the Warsaw Council on 14 December 2017. They were specified in the ‘Housing2030 Programme’ of 2018. In this operational programme it was recognised that the city’s representative in the homeowners’ associations (in which the city owns only a portion of the flats) should act as an intermediary between council tenants and the boards or managers of the homeowners’ associations. It is expected that in council housing and in urban real estate in which the city is involved the role of the manager should therefore be not only to maintain the residential real estate in good condition, but also to help residents access relevant urban programmes and NGOs, and to support local neighbourhood communities. The inclusion of council tenants in decision-making processes is further specified in the Annex to ‘Housing2030 Programme’ concerning the ‘Warsaw Housing Standard’. However, these documents have yet to be implemented.

Finally, in 2016, at the Housing Policy Office of City Hall, a Social Dialogue Committee was appointed to meet housing needs and prevent tenants from being excluded (Urząd m.st. Warszawy). The regulations of its operation were adopted on 9 November 2016 (Regulamin Komisji...). Thirty organisations joined as members (Sprawozdanie... 2016). At the same time, the Social Dialogue Committee for the Protection of Tenants’ Rights was also established. According to the regulations of 15 December 2016, its activities – apart from restitution – would include protecting the rights of council tenants.

The second representation, which appeared in the context outlined above, surfaced as a result of the residents’ disagreement with the first discursive representation imposed on them by the city’s authorities. In 2013, the residents submitted a request to City Hall for public consultation on the Finnish houses: ‘This was the first such application in Warsaw. Fans of the wooden



houses collected nearly 2,000 signatures of support' (Article 2015/2). The city authorities (especially the Centre for Social Communication) extended an olive branch. Legal proceedings for evictions were suspended and public consultations began (Article 2015/2). The change in the behaviour of local authorities, as reflected in the discourse, was related to the gradual acceptance by the authorities of the concepts of deliberative democracy and public participation in housing policymaking. This happened under pressure from the first collective action undertaken by tenants and NGOs in Warsaw that involved council housing. In May 2015, a summary of the three and a half years of public consultation was produced, and the Finnish houses remained in Jazdów. The character of the houses has changed, with only a fraction of them retaining their function as housing. Many houses are now used for social, cultural, and educational activities. Some tenants have 'voluntarily' moved out of the council housing and into other flats. They did so in response to pressure from city officials. Other tenants have moved into flats rented on the market (they had high income and were not eligible for another council flat). Some are still living in the Finnish houses. Along with the wooden houses, the dream of a participatory decision-making process in council housing stock has been saved.

Concerning the second representation, the idea of 'city authorities offering residents a gesture of goodwill' was associated with the second phase of involving residents in the decision-making process (Article 2013/4). The city's willingness to consult the tenants of the Finnish houses prevented them from being evicted while it also allowed them to participate in meetings with representatives of the city without having to worry about securing accommodation elsewhere. However, the city's decision was justified not by care for or adherence to good practices in consulting residents, but by fear of social criticism (Article 2013/4). The analysis of the discursive representations of council tenants' participation using the example of the Jazdów Estate revealed that the city authorities are not very accepting of the idea of sharing power with residents. They are also reluctant to implement arrangements that emerge out of social consultations. However, tenants' participation forced the city authorities to at least partially change their plans, as a result of which the estate was saved.

There were also dichotomies that were established in the texts. Some concerned the features of the Jazdów Estate before and during the information and consultation processes. It was pointed out that the estate had changed from a 'semi-privatised place' to 'a public space' (Article 2013/4). It has gone from being a space that was somewhat inaccessible to Warsaw residents (who are not council tenants) to become a place where every Varsovian can go.

Two categories of city officials were represented: those seeking to dismantle the Jazdów Estate and those seeking to protect it (Article 2015/2). Likewise, the residents of the Finnish houses were also divided into two categories: those who followed the rules but would have to endure the 'tidying up of Jazdów' (Article 2013/4) and those who had breached their lease and would suffer the consequences.

Discussion

The WPR approach attracts the attention of international audiences in many social-science disciplines such as political science, gender studies, Asian studies, European studies, and education studies. I argue that it has the potential to supplement approaches to the study of tenant participation. The simplicity of the WPR methodology (a list of questions) makes it



possible to analyse various housing issues. The WPR approach is suitable to capture the social context and history of housing policies in different countries.

In my research, I focused particularly on how discursive representations impact the way in which policy problems in housing policymaking are defined. This kind of research lends itself well to the What's the Problem Represented to Be approach. Using WPR as a tool of analysis in the research strategy brought to light its advantages and limitations for urban and housing policy research. In terms of advantages, it proved useful for obtaining data through the analysis of documents and press articles. It also facilitates further consideration of the discursive representations of council tenants' involvement in policymaking. It is helpful for illustrating the impact of the presuppositions and assumptions that are behind the way in which a 'problem' is defined and for developing policy strategies. It revealed the hidden agenda behind the enormous importance assigned to simplified discursive 'problematizations', which then determine the framework in which social actors are viewed and the content of an issue is discussed. This is demonstrated by the dichotomies connected with council housing tenants, local authorities, and the Jazdów Estate within the context of its surroundings. The critical nature of the approach made it possible to capture the suppressed and unproblematic aspects of discursive representations. My research provided new insights into the agency of social actors (e.g. council tenants and NGOs) of shaping housing policymaking and making it more participatory. On the other hand, it showed how reluctant local authorities are to negotiate the content of housing policy with residents. However, the WPR approach requires a profound knowledge of the object of analysis. It does not facilitate the formulation of generalisations. Finally, its use is limited to small-n research.

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