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Power, Agency, Relationality and Welfare Practice

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Abstract

This article argues that constructions of social phenomena in social policy and welfare scholarship think about the subjects and objects of welfare practice in essentialising ways, with negativistic effects for practitioners working in 'regulatory' contexts such as housing and homelessness practice. It builds into debates about power, agency, social policy and welfare by bringing psychosocial and feminist theorisations of relationality to practice research. It claims that relational approaches provide a starting point for the analysis of empirical practice data, by working through the relationship between the individual and the social via an ontological unpicking and revisioning of practitioners' social worlds.

Introduction

This paper engages with, and contributes to, established and evolving debates about power and agency in welfare practice. Informed by theories of relationality, within and beyond social policy and welfare scholarship, it rethinks the construction of the objects and subjects of welfare practice, and the conceptual splits that these engender, in order to begin to work towards a theory of practitioner actions as constitutive of local state institutional space. The effect of this is to support appropriately complex understandings of welfare practices and welfare workers, and to develop an ontological revisioning of practitioners' social worlds. While the concept 'social worlds' is not new, it is used here to understand the relationship between policy, welfare and practitioner action as a type of interface that is 'lived' through day-to-day practices and actions.

It is shown that there is a lineage of psychosocial, critical race-informed and critical feminist-informed policy scholarship, which has used the study of social identity and human power and agency to rethink the essentialising terms of 'mainstream' social policy and welfare debates. It has done this through relational conceptions of the relationship between, and enactment of, the 'individual' and the 'social' (Hunter, 2015; Hoggett, 2001; Williams, 2000). This article builds into this body of work by recognising how key principles of relationality can be brought to the author's small-scale qualitative study of housing and homelessness practice.

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Relationality and social policy

A starting point for this article is that it understands phenomena associated with housing and homelessness practice as *neither* individualisingly collapsible to, *nor* ever outside of, human power and agency via a relationally driven reading of empirical data about workers' day-to-day practices. Critical feminist, critical race and psychosocial informed theories of relationality regard social reality as always in movement, processual and fluid, constitutive of and through dynamic and unfolding relations, social networks, social ties, social bonds and intra-personal relations (Roseneil, 2013: 7; Emirbayer, 1997). In basic terms, this means that relational approaches trouble the 'fixities' proffered to terms and concepts associated with social policy and welfare research, like 'welfare organisation', 'social policy', 'the welfare state', 'society' and 'neoliberalism', which are often conveyed as atomised, essentialised and determining entities that make things (e.g., workers, welfare users, policy, organisations) move or happen.

This is because, even where those phenomena are understood as socially constructed, there remains a tendency to think and write in terms of discrete, contained and pre-given phenomena,[1] such that the objects and subjects of social policy and welfare scholarship are conveyed as naturalised, self-evident and completed entities. That understanding of social phenomena tends to be found in social policy and welfare's preoccupation with the relationship between the 'individual' and the 'social', which is frequently used to think about how human actors – especially those at the sharp end of social welfare – are subject to oppressive action by the state and its practitioner agents. It is also used to think about welfare user and practitioner resistance to institutional power and governance regimes. In those analyses, individuals and social 'groups' tend to be represented as subject to, or as railing against, 'the social' or 'the structural', which is given a type of institutional, material and physical quality as government, the state, policy and organisation.

As a result, empirical data on welfare practice are often analysed in three broad and overlapping ways: to identify the difficult conditions that 'bear down on' welfare organisations and workers; to uncover the realities of human agency at the 'front-line' as it relates to 'gatekeeping', discretion and oppressive practice; and to highlight deviation, resistance and subversion from and to pernicious policy intentions and political cultures. While these different approaches provide important contributions, not least with regards to the unequal and abusive treatment of welfare users, problems remain because of the way that the relationship between the 'individual' and the 'social' is configured. Specifically, the objects (identified as the state, policy, organisations, institutions) and individual subjects (identified as practitioners, the users of services) of policy and practice tend to be represented in essentialising terms, with power and agency constructed (implicitly and explicitly) as the properties of individual human actors and/or institutional entities.

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One effect of this is that human actors and their actions are positioned in individualising, rationalistic and a-social terms. This can be seen in overly 'positive' constructions of the resilient welfare user and 'good' welfare worker who overcomes, gets by or resists within pernicious policy and political contexts, or negativistic constructions of the 'bad' welfare worker who complies with an oppressive state and thereby creates suffering for the vulnerable welfare user (Hunter, 2003; Hoggett, 2001). The latter construction resonates especially with the author's research into social regulation in housing and homelessness policy and practice.

Social regulation, and housing and homelessness practice

The analysis presented in this article developed out of a small-scale lone doctoral study into what housing and homelessness practice 'looked like' within a contemporary regulatory policy, political and popular climate. Research methods involved a short observation exercise of day-to-day practices prior to thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews over 2008 and 2009. These were conducted with practitioners across five statutory and voluntary sector organisations in a metropolitan area in the North of England: a social landlord, a local authority homelessness unit, two drop-in centres and a supported housing project. Participants included organisation directors and managers, as well as 'front-line' workers, and two volunteers. Beyond the study, data analysis has been supported by additional independent empirical research with three Australian homelessness organisations (in 2009 and 2011), and the author's experiences as a practitioner in the participating statutory homelessness unit (Dobson, 2009).

While the historical nature of social regulation in social policy, housing and homelessness sectors in Western contexts like the UK is acknowledged, its modern incarnation is regarded as distinctive (Squires *et al.*, 2008; Flint *et al.*, 2006; Burney, 2005; Rose, 2000). Notwithstanding the range of perspectives across social policy and welfare, housing studies, criminology and law, it is claimed that social policy and welfare have become increasingly punitive, criminalising and controlling as a result of a popular and political concern about 'problem people'. The Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO), a result of successive housing and crime legislation by different governing parties, is just one example of how regulatory social policy and welfare are understood to downplay or deny structural understandings of social problems in favour of individualising, pathologising and moralising responses to poor people. More recent contributions have extended debates by observing responses to poor people as classed, raced and gendered phenomena, indicative of hate and disgust reactions to specific social figures like 'Chavs' (Tyler, 2013).

Empirical data highlighted practitioners' responses to the users of services in their day-to-day work, from 'informal' techniques to more 'official' statutory and organisational policies. Worker practices were interpreted as *regulatory*

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interventions to capture the popular and political ASBO-era climate in which practices were enacted, and the research conducted. Later sections elaborate on how relational approaches can be brought to the data, but at this stage it is useful to observe how findings were initially used by the author to further unpick the ways that ontological constructions associated with social policy and welfare matter.

Constructing the 'front-line'

Findings have already been used by the author to show how front-line practitioners do not straightforwardly comply with a climate of enforcement in social policy and welfare (Dobson, 2011). This is because the regulatory interventions introduced in the previous section highlighted workers' capacities for control *and* care in their interactions with the users of services, and their ambivalence towards 'tough' 'top-down' policy messages. This work contributed to a body of existing empirical research into the perspectives of welfare, criminal justice, housing and homelessness practitioners that explored how far, and in what ways, practitioners absorb and/or resist regulatory social policy (Whiteford, 2010; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010; Garrett, 2007a, 2007b; Nixon, 2007; Prior *et al.*, 2006). Put simply, empirically driven accounts showed that pernicious policy would not necessarily result in pernicious practices. These empirically informed debates were a methodological and conceptual departure from earlier work on social regulation in social and housing policy, which tended to normatively track and evaluate political, legislative and policy developments, and which were characterised by an *absence* of empirical data about the lived experiences of social actors associated with policy process (for exceptions see Dillane *et al.*, 2001).

While representing an important set of contributions to existing debates, one effect of these intellectual developments was that an epistemological and ontological split was drawn between 'policy' analyses on the one hand, and studies of 'practice' on the other. Although some researchers evaluated the connections between policy and practice (see Parr and Nixon, 2009; Prior, 2009) and have sought to evaluate the *range* of policy, institutional and contextual factors that structure practices (Whiteford, 2013; Flint and Batty, 2012), there remains a tendency to describe practitioners' differential responses *from* or *to* policy, state structures and socio-political climates via the investigation of empirical realities at the 'front-line'.

What this means is that even when empirical research establishes potential for varieties of resistances by practitioners (Prior, 2009), issues remain insofar as analyses rest on a somewhat narrowed and individualising understanding of human power and agency. Policy, state and socio-political climates remain constructed as externalised and potentially determining forces that 'come to bear' on practices and make worker actions and perspectives happen – unless of

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course practitioners (and the users of services) 'activate' themselves as a type of obstacle or constraint.

Despite the potential of empirical data on regulatory social policy and practice to complexify debates, practice remains configured temporally and hierarchically as something that takes place 'on the ground' or 'at the front-line', and which may deviate from policy's or government's 'original intentions'. In these representations, policy and the state appear as unitary and singular top-down entities that 'hold' aspirations and aims. They are at one and the same time disembodied and curiously humanised – or '*animised*' following Tess Lea's appraisal of the state's humanness and its peopling (Lea, 2008: 19, italics this author) – insofar as 'they' are determining forces, whose intentions are unquestioningly realised, except for when 'they' are resisted or subverted via human power and agency at the level of the local state and in practice. Phenomena associated with policy and welfare are ontologically imagined as monolithic and homogenous entities 'over' and 'up' there, discursively constructed as 'top-down' powers that (or who) hold control over 'us', and anthropomorphically configured as 'they'.

One implication for empirically informed practice scholarship is that practitioner power and agency becomes prone to interpretive and paradigmatic 'battles' about the construction of the human or 'governing' subjects of welfare practice. This is because intellectual focus is drawn to rather atomising and simplified appraisals of human power and agency. Who is complicit in and supportive of 'bad' policy, and who is willing to 'break out', to subvert and resist it? In that framing, practitioners (and those researching them, see Garrett, 2007a, 2007b; Nixon, 2007) risk being negatively positioned as a result of their perceived complicity and inadequate resistances to an oppressive state that attacks vulnerable welfare users (see Wright, 2012). Crucially then, even when empirical data are used to invoke complexity, the emphasis on showing 'resistance *to*' can offer an a-social imagining of *both* human actors and social structures that is overly rationalistic and under-theorised.

Having mapped out the ontological limitations of welfare practice debates in a context of social regulation, social policy, housing and homelessness studies, this article suggests that two bodies of policy scholarship provide foundations for an alternative relationally driven approach, and a way to think about empirical data on welfare practices differently.

Moving towards relationality

This section documents two lineages of policy scholarship, starting with contributions from political science and critical policy studies, and then moving to critical social policy. This article claims that these works, in different ways, support movement towards a relational imagining of social policy and welfare

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practice through concerns to bring a theoretically *dynamic* quality to the study of governance regimes and policy processes via the study of human experience, and encompassing questions of power, agency and social identity. This in turn has enabled more sophisticated theorisations of the individual–social relationship to emerge in social policy and welfare practice research.

Power, agency, policy and governance

A classic text on power and agency in social policy and welfare practice is US public policy scholar Michael Lipsky's study of North American 'human services' workers and his 'street-level bureaucracy' concept. Lipsky offered political science an ontological revisioning of power and agency in welfare practice by advancing conceptions of policy *as* a process. The author's work is well documented (see Durose, 2011, 2007) but an overview is provided here in order to clarify its particular contribution to the present discussion.

Lipsky (2010) argued that it was possible to develop a cross-sector typology of 'front-line' work(ers) because of key commonalities in the experiences of statutory practitioners, from court staff and police officers to social workers and teachers. He described the realities of working in high-demand and poorly resourced 'helping profession' services, and the techniques that workers developed in their day-to-day practice to 'get by', and claimed that those 'coping strategies' affected the experiences of, and outcomes for, the users of services. Specifically, he argued that requirements to engage in the 'mass-processing' of welfare users resulted in discretionary practices of convenience, favouritism, routinising and stereotyping. Lipsky understood welfare workers as people whose actions were structured by their social context and conditions. For example, he describes how people are drawn to helping professions only to be '*ground down*' by the '*social structure of their jobs*' (2010: 204, italics this author). He attributed this in part to the transformative power of institutions, which he observed could change people into street-level bureaucrats in ways that subsumed the effects of individual biographies (e.g., education) and social identities (e.g., class) (2010: 141).

In foregrounding human power and agency, Lipsky's work represented an important disciplinary intervention for the study of welfare practices and his typology has been frequently used to conceptualise discretion and 'gatekeeping' in front-line services work (Clapham *et al.* 2000; Cramer, 2005; Jeffers and Hoggett, 1995; Lidstone, 1994; Liddiard and Hutson, 1991; Carlen, 1994; Ford, 1975). However, this article argues that the utility of Lipsky's analysis is that it provides inroads into a relational theorisation of social policy and welfare practice.

Lipsky suggested that phenomena associated with social policy and welfare – policy, organisations, the state – only exist as the human and peopled effects of social relations. The author claimed that workers exercised discretion in their

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interactions with the users of services and then, '*when taken in concert, their individual actions add up to agency behaviour*' (2010: 13, italics this author). Workers were 'embodiments' of the state insofar as '*interactions with street-level bureaucrats are places where citizens experience directly the government they have implicitly constructed*' (2010: xi, italics this author). Citing one of the most popular aspects of Lipsky's work, practitioners were understood to 'make' policy in their day-to-day interactions and responses to the users of services, as opposed to it being something developed in 'elite offices' (2010: xiii).

Writing from the late 1970s, Lipsky was not the only author thinking in this way, and at this time, about power and agency in policy studies. For example, Susan Barrett and Colin Fudge (1981) explored the translation of policy into actions. Their *Policy and Action* thesis similarly queried the construction of policy as a 'top-down' phenomenon through claims that '*individuals' and organisations' actions and reactions may determine policy as much as policy itself determines action and response*' (Barrett and Fudge, 1981: 251, italics this author). The authors claimed the policy-action relationship as a negotiating and interactional process, structured by conflicting interests and value systems between individuals and agencies responsible for making policy and those taking action (1981: 4). Policy was thereby conceptualised as the humanised and peopled effects of competing priorities and individual mediation and interpretation.

Foregrounding welfare practitioners' and policy-makers' power, agency and actions provided an alternative way to conceptualise policy-making. It supported the development of implementation studies, which explored how policy could be understood as constitutive of 'bottom-up' influences (see Barrett, 2004). However, in the context of the present article, a more impactful contribution is evident in how the approach paved the way for *social* analyses of contemporary *governance* regimes. Indeed, works from Lipsky and Barrett and Fudge can be seen as part of a broader intellectual project in the UK and North America, which has used human power, agency and day-to-day practices as starting points for conceptualisations of social policy, policy-process and state structures that explicitly reject the idea of the monolithic, bureaucratic, linear, hierarchical and silo'ed state (see Rhodes, 1981).

Today, the influence of that intellectual project is evident in the way that empirical analyses of the power and agency of local state actors are central to theories of policy and the state. There are claims that welfare workers' power and agency are shaped by institutional contexts and organisational roles distinctive to modern and complex governance regimes (Evans, 2011; Ellis, 2011). In her empirical analysis of community development work and interactions in the North of England, critical policy studies researcher Catherine Durose (2011, 2007) argues that the often unstable evolution of local state structures, providers, practices and demands means that a more apt title for the 'street-level bureaucrat' is the 'civic entrepreneur'. Elsewhere, Marian Barnes and David Prior (2009) think about

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the now *multiple* social actors associated with social policy, welfare systems and the formation of policy as 'subversive citizens' whose power and agency are structured by their personal and professional identifications (Prior and Barnes, 2011).

Taken together, these contemporary debates offer three broad and interconnected contributions, which advance Lipsky's earlier interest in how far the conditions of human experience shape welfare workers' power, agency and actions, and the structures that they 'make up'. First, there is extended consideration of how far, and in what ways, practitioner actions are structured by shifting systems and contemporary state arrangements, in the light of mixed-economy provision. Second, there is conceptual engagement with the nature of welfare practices, such as whether practitioners are implementing, delivering, interpreting, mediating, negotiating, revising, refusing, resisting and subverting the political and policy systems in which they operate. Third, there is increased emphasis on practitioner experience and biography, and how far social identity and personal/professional experience might structure the practitioner/welfare user interaction.

The effect of this body of work is to emplace local state actors and their actions within the increasingly complex and diffuse nature of contemporary welfare and governance structures across local, national and global scales, through a focus on institutional location, social identity, professional status, professional and personal motivation and human interactions in the delivery and enactment of social policy and welfare. People, practices and structures are certainly complexified in those debates insofar as interpretive approaches imagine critically humanistic actors: people with varied perspectives who exercise power and agency, and who apply multiple, ambivalent and contested meanings to their constructed worlds. Post-structural theorisations of power, when coupled with constructionist and interpretive analyses, understand power's exercise as dispersed and networked *via* human agency, social relations and interactions.

However, returning to the present article's central interest in the individual–social relationship, problems remain with the ontological construction and representations of the objects and subjects of professional practice. Social phenomena remain positioned in ways that invoke essentialising ideas about human power and agency on the one hand (of welfare users, colleagues, day-to-day actions) and social networks and structures on the other (e.g., central government, commissioning processes, welfare providers). Context and conditions are said to structure practitioner power and agency, and this power and agency is understood to act back on, and shape those contexts and conditions, with potential effects for policy formation. Human power and agency is associated with individuals' biographical and subjective experience, such as what individuals *bring to* welfare work, by way of their personal and professional orientations, beliefs and missions.

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Overall, individual human actors are recognised as *objects* in the contemporary machinery of governance, and it is their *subjectivity* that structures those regimes. Distinctive conceptual splits between policy and practice, and objects and subjects, remain, and questions about the relationship between the individual and the social – the *relational constituting* of social policy and welfare practice – persist. This article claims that a lineage of critical social policy scholarship, which explicitly takes up theories of relationality, can be drawn on to work through those issues. This body of work thinks about how human power and agency are *relationally constitutive of* and *enacted through* institutional space via the study of human power, agency, experience, identity and affect.

Identity, social policy and welfare

As noted at the start of this article, there is a lineage of feminist and psychosocial informed critical social policy scholarship that has used questions of social identifications, subjectifications and positionings in order to advance a relationally informed approach to social policy and welfare. This section claims that mapping the contributions of those researches is important for two reasons. First, it details how researchers have explicitly re-thought the relationship between the individual and the social by re-imagining what social policy and welfare practice are and what they 'do'. Second, it draws out some key principles that can be brought to the author's analysis of empirical data on housing and homelessness practices. A starting point is found in the early origins of an explicitly critical social policy.

Critical social policy came out of critiques of a UK-based and Fabian-influenced social policy and administration tradition, which supported and defended a universalist welfare state on the basis of the deleterious effects of social divisions, understood primarily in relation to class (Sinfield, 1978; Titmuss, 1958). Writing from the early 1980s, critical social policy scholars argued that the universalist imperative failed to address the complexity and particularity of human experience, as it related to service users' power, agency and identities. Researchers sought to give voice to the experiences of specific social 'groups' and new social movements (Taylor, 1996), recognising the tensions that 'particularity' posed for those working for universalist principles (Williams, 2000).

Critical social policy scholar Fiona Williams went beyond recognition of marginalised experience. Williams' (1989) groundbreaking critical race- and feminist-informed critique of the Beveridgean settlement showed how the state's naturalised conception of the universal welfare subject masked its raced (white), gendered (masculine) and sexed (heteronormative) identity. This meant that social inequalities, as they related to intersectional/categorical social identifications, were *written in to* the post-war welfare state. Thus, social policy and administration's aspirations for universalist provision protected a vision of the welfare state, which *reproduced* and *sustained* social inequalities. The central

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contribution of Williams' thesis, in relation to the present article, is how it represented the beginnings of relational approaches in social policy and welfare scholarship by recognising how human experience was *realised through* the social relations of the state.

The introduction of human power, agency and social identity as central analytical devices for the study of social policy and welfare went on to provide foundation for the University of Leeds-based Centre for Care and Values (CAVA[2]). CAVA explored human, moral and ethical subjectivity, and it provided an intellectual space for the ongoing development of relational approaches. CAVA researchers' psychosocial informed works developed analyses of the individual-as-social *in order to* advance theorisations of social policy, welfare and social change (see Hollway, 2008; Roseneil, 2006). CAVA's aims operated in synergy with researcher members' psychosocial orientations, with the effect of foregrounding questions associated with welfare user experience and biography. At the same time, they conceptually transcended the sorts of 'troublesome boundaries' that were central to questions of human agency and identity associated with both a social policy and administration tradition *and* critical social policy: universal-particular, natural-social, freely chosen-heavily regulated (Hollway, 2008: 4).

Later, critical social policy academics built on CAVA's researchers' analyses of human power, agency and social identity by calling for more complicated understandings of human subjectivity that recognised the importance of social *positioning* alongside human identifications and subjectifications, incorporated an *affective* and *interior* quality to human actors' social worlds and were accepting of the *unconscious* components of human power and agency. The effect of this was to support accounts of human power, agency, identity and experience that theorised human actors' capacities for social *action* and social *change* via more sophisticated accounts of subjectivity and positioning, which conceptualised policy and the welfare state *as* process *and* practice.

For example, Paul Hoggett's (2001) psychosocial analysis observed that while a mainstream social policy and administration tradition tended to position welfare users as victims of oppressive and exclusionary state regimes, critical social policy scholars' analyses of lived experiences tended towards overly optimistic portrayals of human subjectivity–human capacities for hope and resilience, for example. For Hoggett, this represented a universalistic, rationalistic, naturalising and simplistic way of thinking, which reproduced the sorts of 'environment-bad'/'person-good' assumptions that critical social policy scholars sought to challenge (Hoggett, 2008: 69). Hoggett's response was to bring psychosocial models of human subjectivity to extant debates in social policy and administration *and* critical social policy through his theorisation of the non-unitary welfare user who has capacities for reflexive-non-reflexive, rational-irrational, conscious-unconscious and constructive-destructive power, agency

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and action. Hoggett concluded that there needed to be stronger recognition of subjectivity, both tragic and realistic and internal and feeling, which recognised that human power and agency were always formulated through relationships with others (Hoggett, 2008: 70).

Later, Hoggett developed a relationally informed analysis of practitioners' capacities for social action and social change, which drew on his earlier complexified appraisal of human subjectivity (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008). Drawing on political scientist Bonnie Honig, Hoggett conceptualised community development workers' 'dilemmatic experiences' in order to analyse the complex, painful and challenging experiences that structure workers' day-to-day practices and interactions with the users of services. The author demonstrated how practitioners' understanding of their mission and purpose was constituted through their relationships with the users of services in ways that drew on, and found meaning in, their narrations of intersecting personal biography and professional experiences. At the same time, practitioners' realistic observations about welfare users' destructive tendencies towards self and others were understood in relation to a range of institutional, local and global factors, which in turn structured workers' sense of the possibilities for social change. These factors invoke both frustration and anger, while also *mobilising* workers' commitment to social justice.

Shona Hunter's (2003) psychosocial feminist theorisation, 'relational identity', built on Hoggett's early psychosocial analysis by recognising that social identity and subjectivity were formed *through relations with others*. Hunter observed the evolution debates about identity in social policy and welfare debates, recognising categorical identity (identity as belonging to a collective subject position) and ontological identity (processes of creating coherence from personal experience) (Hunter, 2015: 28; Taylor, 1998). By adding *relational* identity, the author showed that human actors were not merely the *bearers* of a categorising discourse, whose experiences were deterministically transformed by virtue of their individually formed/allocated, and consciously, cognitively and discursively organised, identifications.

Hunter's argument developed out of recognition that advances in how to think about social identity and subjectivity had yet to benefit those on the 'other' side of the policy process: policy-makers. As a result, welfare workers tended to be understood in relation to their categorically defined institutional affiliation with the state, which led to overly pessimistic and cynical portrayals of their power and agency. By theorising how human power, agency and identity were constitutive of relationships and biography as well as situation and structure, and identification and commonality of purpose with the 'other' (e.g., the welfare user), Hunter developed an advanced understanding of welfare workers that could explain their capacities for social change within policy processes and state structures (2003: 339).

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The purpose of tracking these debates, which show how critical social policy has grappled with questions of human experience, is to show how they are central to contemporary appraisals of the conceptual links between human power and agency, and state structures. Specifically, early work on subjectivity and relational identity has provided foundation for Hunter's (2015) more recent innovative theory of 'relational politics', which brings together conceptions of human identifications, subjectifications and positionings as *affective* and *relational* in order to think about how these are *constituted by*, and *constitutive of*, social policy and welfare. Hunter's analysis is complex, but specific insights are especially relevant to the present article because of how they open up intellectual possibilities for rethinking the terms of the individual-social relationship within critical social policy scholarship and beyond.

Hunter's relational politics understands that the state does not exist as a thing in itself, but rather comes into being through everyday processes of relational contestation: everyday actions, investments and practices of the multiple and shifting range of people and other material and symbolic objects that make up the state (2015: 5). Drawing on actor network theory (Latour, 2005; Mol, 2002), along with critical race and policy scholarship (Lewis, 2000), and critical whiteness studies, Hunter understands the subjects and objects of social policy and welfare as relational and multiple; not things in themselves, but more fluid temporary effects of multiple relations, brought into being and materialising as the effects of networked attachments via a range of practices, which include, but are not confined to, language (2015: 35). The emotions are central to Hunter's claims insofar as the state relationally materialises at the negotiation of ethics and politics, by subjects in their worlds (2015: 38). Following this, policy is enacted in the *performative* sense, through the ambiguous, often conflictual, and always emotional interaction between various people, objects and ideas (2015: 147).

Beyond a UK-based critical social policy tradition, a different policy theorist whose work aligns with Hunter is Australian institutional ethnographer and critical anthropologist Tess Lea. Like Hunter, when Lea (2008) understands policy documents as 'living' and the welfare state as peopled and affective she goes beyond the rather instrumental logic that institutional phenomena only exist as the effects of social relations and human actions. Lea's richly detailed anthropological study observes practitioner and policy-maker responses to Aboriginal Indigenous people in the Australian Northern Territories in the 'Interventions' era and identifies the relationally affective, interactional and ritualistic processes through which human actors 'become' institutional actors and living embodiments of policy and the state. The investments that Lea's '*bleeding hearts and bureaucrats*' make in their work – their despair, hopes and helping imperatives, for example – are ways through which the state and social policy come into being via day-to-day practices.

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What these analyses achieve is that they move beyond critical humanistic accounts of meaning production within a specific institutional locale highlighted in the previous section, by bringing together questions of materiality and embodiment, with human affect and subjectivity. In these accounts, power and agency are paramount; nothing happens outside of agency. However, power and agency are complexified through the notion of *relational enactment*, which thinks about the individual-social relationship in ways that offer a sustained relational understanding of social reality. The final section thinks about how the principles of these more recent works, and the foundational theories that they draw on, can be brought to the author's study of housing and homelessness practices.

Relational principles

This section argues that key principles can be brought to the author's study of housing and homelessness practices, which provide foundations for future empirical analysis of practice data. These principles include: *theorising out*, *revisioning social reality*, and *relational enactment*.

Theorising out

Earlier sections of this article referred to research findings about regulatory interventions, a term that refers to the different techniques that housing and homelessness practitioners used in their responses to the users of services. Regulatory interventions were interpreted and categorised into strategies of *management and containment*, *suspicion and control* and *negotiation and persuasion*. These interpretations of the data support the established finding that welfare workers understand their 'clients' and 'customers' as in need of both care and control (Parr, 2009; Damer, 2000) due to a range of perceived 'support needs' and associated behaviours, 'vulnerabilities' and 'transgressions' (Dobson, 2011, Scanlon and Adlam, 2008). However, a relationally driven approach enables a more expansive analysis to emerge. Specifically, it highlights what is *not* consciously and cognitively observable, such that data can be 'theorised out' to develop an alternative reading of interventions.

Inspiration for this specific insight is found in postcolonial, critical race and gender scholar Vron Ware's historical and relational study of the production of whiteness, which explains '*the components of a specifically white femininity only makes sense in the context of ideas about black women as well*' (Ware, 1992: 17, italics this author). When brought to the study of practices, Ware's argument helps us to understand that what is thought to be the 'vulnerable' or 'transgressive' client or customer only makes sense in the context of practitioners' ideas about what is understood to be the 'well' person and functional life. Desires to 'care' for clients and customers only make sense in the context of relationally constituted understandings of 'control'. These concepts are not the static properties of any

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given individual human actor but are interactionally constituted, culturally, socially and politically located and contingent phenomena. This does not mean that practitioners' understandings and actions are 'opposing' descriptors as if one (care/vulnerability) can only take place if another (control/transgression) is on hold, or that phenomena (care/control, vulnerability/transgression) take it in turns to appear. Rather, terms like care, control, vulnerability and transgression *only make sense* because they are always interdependently 'in frame' together, possible and recognisable only in relation to each other, and because they are only ever constituted via situated interaction with material, affective, social and symbolic 'others'.

However, to avoid the problematic conceptual and essentialising splits identified in previous sections, this 'meaning-making' needs to come out of a relational conception of practitioners' social worlds.

Revisioning social reality

This article proposes an analytical framework that offers a starting point to think about the relational enactment of institutional space in ways that work through questions about the individual-social relationship. The purpose of this framework is to think about housing and homelessness practitioners' social worlds differently via an ontological revisioning of human subjects' experiences.

Drawing on the relational theorisations in the previous section, practitioners' social worlds can be understood as expansive environments that are constituted by, and constitutive of, dynamic and interrelated components of practitioners' social worlds. The components of practitioners' social worlds are, in the present article, labelled '*inter-action*', '*mechanism*' and '*climate*', and they are used here to convey how practitioners understand social phenomena associated with day-to-day work. 'Inter-action' refers to workers' perceptions of human attributes, characteristics and experiences, both their own and the users of services. 'Mechanism' refers to workers' perceptions of operational models, process flows and institutional regimes, which they think affect their work and the users of services. 'Climate' refers to workers' perceptions of national and global socio-political and economic issues, which they think affect their work and the users of services.

The purpose of this (re)configuration of practitioners' experiences is to make an explicit departure away from terminologies traditionally associated with social constructionist and interpretive explanations of welfare workers' realities. The labels are used to trouble a contained, nested, completed and accomplished quality to social reality evoked by terminologies like 'micro', 'meso' and 'macro' or 'individual', 'institutional' and 'structural'. This is because those terms split social reality off into narrowed, singular, size-oriented and hierarchically organised categories of externalised, linear and determining forces and objects that move things or make things happen. In contrast, 'inter-action',

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'mechanism' and 'environment' represent a deliberate push to capture and convey a relational quality to social reality, which is *performative*, layered, enacted and infinitely interchangeable. Following Hunter's (2015) feminist psychosocial approach, it visualises practitioners' social reality as multiple and inter-linked parts, all interdependently and constantly moving together.

The purpose of this framework represents more than just a semantic move. Rather, it is an attempt to be explicit about how workers and their actions are *not* understood as controlled by singularly defined 'external' forces, which exist outside of their own human experiences. Regulatory interventions are therefore *not* best understood as the outcomes of 'top-down' factors like political parties and ideologies and policy, and/or 'bottom-up' factors like organisational and institutional cultures and welfare users. Practitioners are *not* therefore conceived of as people working in a set of conditions, contexts or structures that intentionally or unintentionally determine their actions.

That said, taking seriously practitioners' practice realities and the complexities of welfare work demands more than the risk of suggesting that the issues that workers encounter – from global housing crashes, politics, contract and audit regimes, to addiction and pain – are imagined and ineffectual figments that could cease to exist, or could alter, if practitioners learned, were inspired to, or just *decided* to think and speak differently in order to create an alternative reality and select what local and global phenomena they wish to engage with at any one time. That approach would take us back to the rather limited individualising, rationalistic and a-theoretical individual-social relationship that this article is interested in overcoming. The next section shows how feminist- and psychosocial-informed conceptions of performativity and relational enactment offer a way to overcome this intellectual predicament.

Relational enactment

Understanding housing and homelessness practitioners' actions and interventions as *performative enactments* in ways that bring together the discursive with lived experience is a key way to develop a sustained relational reading of empirical practice data (Hunter, 2015; Lewis, 2000). Theoretical ideas about performativity are therefore central to the type of relational analysis developed here. As well-established by gender theorist Judith Butler, and consistent with the construction of social reality outlined in the previous section, performativity starts from the idea that human identity is not a fixed 'thing' that can be accomplished and completed. Rather, human identities involve 'doing' work through the process and determining of continual and incessant materialising of possibilities, responses and movements in relations with others (Butler, 1988: 521). Remaining with the example of gender, this means that day-to-day patterns of talk, language, gestures and behaviours construct, form the impression of, and reproduce human identifications, subjectifications and positionings such

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as 'woman' and 'femininity' (and their relational 'counterparts', 'man' and 'masculinity').

Performativity is particularly helpful because it enables connections to be drawn between theoretical ideas about power and agency on the one hand, and empirical data on speech, actions and practices on the other, by understanding that what is meant to 'be' (whether a woman, a man or a welfare worker) as the constantly interchangeable products of certain truths that social actors circulate, and which have the effects of engendering particular possibilities and responses in social actors and 'disciplining' their movements (Cooper, 1994). This, of course, is what is commonly understood as 'discourse', and it provides a central justification for a discursive analysis of housing and homelessness practitioners and their practices. It means that researching workers' languages has the potential to highlight not just the ways that workers' perceptions are socially and politically meaning-laden, but also to chart the processes and practices through which particular kinds of power, knowledge and ways of 'being' come into being and dominate (Foucault, 1988; Cooper, 1994).

Returning to the data, housing and homelessness practitioners' performative enactments and actions are, in large part, identifiable through the study of workers' 'practice languages', which highlight what practitioners claim to understand, recognise, see, name and know within a particular and temporal cultural, social and historical frame. Languages can also be conceptualised as 'sector speaks' (Dobson, 2009) to claim the institutional nature of patterns, continuities, intensifications and repetitions in worker narratives, and to think about these as the 'process flows' or the 'connective tissue' (Hunter, 2015) through which the local state materialises as the effects of performative enactments.

Conclusion

This article has come to existing policy and welfare scholarship with ambitions to think in an ontologically driven way about the study of human power, agency and action. It started by mapping what happens when there is an *absence* of relational theorising in the study of social policy and welfare in general terms, and for regulatory social policy and welfare practices in housing and homelessness fields specifically. It looked at how the objects and subjects of welfare practice can be constructed and represented in a-social, as well as potentially cynical, terms in ways that are observed here as 'conceptual splits'.

It concludes by arguing that principles of relationality can be used to think about the relationship between policy, welfare and practitioner action as a type of interface, which is 'lived' through day-to-day actions. It makes this claim having identified the contribution of a lineage of critical social policy scholarship that brings together theorisations of social identity, human subjectivity, power and agency, affect and relationality in order to theorise the enactment of the social

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policy, welfare and the central-state. While intellectual enrichment has been found in extant work on human identifications, subjectifications and positionings and their associated investments, this article wants to use welfare practices and interventions at the level of the local state as its starting point for future empirically driven analyses.

A central task is now to develop analyses that include empirical data, in order to substantiate the processes through which the local state comes into being via day-to-day practices and interventions with the users of services. This challenging task involves exploration of the nature of the 'sector speaks' as 'process flows' claimed in the previous section, the ways that speech and language are central, but not reducible, to these processes, and the role of affect therein. How can practitioners' social realities be unpicked, and the relationship between speech, action and practices empirically deconstructed, in order to think about the day-to-day enactment of institutional space at the level of the local state? Responding to these questions will further develop the notion of a policy/action interface as 'lived' through day-to-day practices.

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1 In conversation with Shona Hunter, October 2012

2 Fiona Williams, Wendy Hollway and Sasha Roseneil were all part of the CAVA group.

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