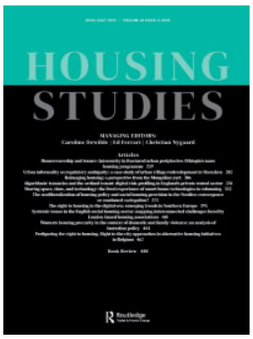

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Tenant participation to enable the experience of home in social housing

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ABSTRACT

Tenant participation in social housing is recognised as integral to good governance and has been incorporated in formal policy across many Western countries. While tenant participation has much intuitive appeal and is often viewed as a good thing of itself, there is limited empirical knowledge of the value it holds or why it should be progressed. This study contributes to contemporary research on tenant participation in social housing—including how it is experienced by tenants themselves—by analysing why tenant participation is important. Drawing on a participatory research design co-conducted and co-authored with social housing tenants, we collected and analysed ethnographic observations of tenant participation activities, semi-structured interviews with social housing tenants and social housing providers, and tenant survey data. Drawing on this rich data, we demonstrate that tenant participation is valuable as it constitutes a vehicle to contribute to tenants experiencing home.

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Home; social housing; tenant participation

Introduction

Not only does the international literature position tenant participation in social housing as both the new orthodoxy and integral to good housing governance (Manzi *et al.*, 2015; Stirling, 2019); it is and has been formal policy in numerous countries including the UK, parts of Europe, and Australia (National Regulatory System Community Housing, 2020; Pawson *et al.*, 2012). The nature of tenant participation in social housing governance varies across countries and has changed over time. Indeed, in the UK tenant participation can be traced back to the 1970s, yet the evolution of tenant participation differs between Scotland and England (Preece, 2019). In Denmark, tenant participation has developed to reflect the norm of

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tenant-controlled housing (Pawson *et al.*, 2012). In the United States, tenant participation is often examined through the practices of and experiences with formal tenant associations (Conway & Hachen, 2005), including participating in governance to oversee redevelopment (Alexander, 2009).

Across the different manifestations, tenant participation is viewed "as a good thing of itself" (Pawson *et al.*, 2012, p. 53). Tenant participation, which is the term used in this article, is frequently used interchangeably with the term tenant engagement. Both terms encompass a range of activities and processes that describe the relationships and interactions between social housing tenants and their housing provider (Condie & Ayres, 2025). As a catch all and contested term (Stirling, 2019), tenant participation typically refers to tenants influencing their housing provider, and ultimately, having an impact on the housing they reside in Pawson *et al.*, (2012). The impact implicit in tenant participation draws attention to assumptions of tenant empowerment, which Preece (2019) shows is expressed through tenants' involvement in housing policies, improvements to housing, and engagement in community projects.

The evocation of empowerment or involvement in community activities illustrates how tenant participation can encompass a range of different power relationships between a tenant and their social housing provider. For Campbell Tickell (2014, p. 20), the term empowerment implies a dynamic that depicts "co-operative or tenant managed organisations, rather than housing associations more generally." As we illustrate below, the broad term tenant participation is used to describe a wide variety of activities. The precise nature of the activities, including the power dynamics that shape the activities, links tenant participation to forms of housing where participation is synonymous with control (Campbell Tickell, 2014). Questions about tenant control are pertinent; Manzi *et al.*, (2015) explain that tenant participation developed as a challenge to landlord relationships with tenants that were characterised by both paternalism and bureaucracy.

The proposition that tenant participation is a good thing of itself or the new orthodoxy rests on uncontroversial justice and democratic normative positions that assume tenants ought to have some control over their housing. It is a rejection of, as Manzi *et al.*, (2015) observe, paternalism. Tenant participation is thus antithetical to a stigmatised positioning of tenants as problematic (Sisson, 2024), and it sits within a wider paradigm in the health and human services that is loosely described as lived experience, consumer participation, and co-design (Parsell *et al.*, 2024). The intuitive appeal of tenant participation notwithstanding – and beyond normative claims to justice and democracy – there is limited analysis about why tenant participation should be progressed. Stirling (2019, p. 4) notes that "much of the literature published on tenant engagement tends to spend a lot more time considering mechanisms for engagement than the purpose(s) of engagement." Even though there is some literature (below) outlining benefits to tenant participation, advocates for tenant participation often do so without a clear argument beyond 'it is the right thing to do.' The Regulatory Board for Wales (2019) for example, says that it is rarely clear why housing providers undertake tenant participation. There is agreement that tenant participation is the right thing to do but less conceptual clarity about why it is done.

Following Preece's (2019) provocation that contemporary research is needed on tenant participation, this article presents empirical research with tenants and a housing

provider to understand why tenant participation is valued. Engaging the idea that tenant participation is consistent with principles of empowerment and control, we contribute to the literature by illustrating how tenant participation sits within a democratic right to participate in decisions that affect people's housing that enables them to experience home. We show how the resources, practices, and underlying logics of tenant participation contribute an environment where home can be realised.

Our examination of why tenant participation is valued draws on a participatory research design co-conducted and co-authored by university researchers and social housing tenants. The study collected and analysed ethnographic observations of tenant participation activities, semi-structured interviews with both social housing tenants and social housing provider representatives, and tenant survey data. With this empirical material, the article first addresses the research questions: (1) what are the experiences of tenant participation? and (2) what principles underpin the practices of tenant participation? Addressing these questions helps bring to light the value of tenant participation as a vehicle for tenants to experience home. With the multiple data sources, the article shows that the control central to tenants experiencing home is reliant upon both the willingness and purposeful actions of the housing provider to engage tenants as valued stakeholders who have legitimate rights to exert control over the operation of their housing and how they live in it.

Literature review

Benefits

Hickman & Preece's (2019) threefold benefits of tenant participation – including benefits to housing organisations, tenants, and social benefits to local communities – encapsulate findings from the housing literature. The benefits to housing organisations are myriad, and they pertain to the enhancement, and potential enhancement, of housing services. The literature presents the association between the introduction of tenant participation and improved housing provider cost effectiveness through the capacity to more efficiently meet tenant needs (Bliss & Lambert, 2016). Bliss and Lambert (2016, p. 3) conclude that if tenant participation is done well, "it can produce considerable business benefits." The research has also pointed to housing provider benefits that are realised through tenant participation as a vehicle to both improve housing allocation and life on public housing estates (McDermont, 2007). Manzi *et al.*, (2015) report a strong correlation between tenant participation and improved performance of housing organisations.

There is a limited literature that reports individual benefits that tenants derive from participation. Muir & McMahon (2015) recognise it is difficult to measure benefit, but they nevertheless assert that tenants should benefit from their involvement with their housing organisation. Consistent with the broader lived experience literature in social work (Parsell *et al.,* 2024), the individual benefits include increased confidence and even skill development that is a product of tenant participation (Bliss & Lambert, 2016; Hickman & Preece, 2019). Drawing on a Dutch case study, Huisman & Czischke (2023) examine how tenants are impacted when they take over several practical functions of their housing that are otherwise

managed by the housing provider. They found that the introduction of self-management into housing meant that tenants were more involved in their immediate environments and in turn were able to exert greater control over decisions about how their housing was managed. Of particular significance for the present article's focus on participation as enabling home, Huisman & Czischke (2023) found that greater control over the management of one's housing increased ontological security.

Simmons & Birchall (2007) note the importance of housing organisations providing training to help tenants develop the necessary skills for some forms of participation. Reflecting on the benefits that come from tenants being afforded opportunities to exercise control over their housing, Hickman & Preece (2019) make the important point that tenant participation as a mechanism of choice is critical, as tenants are in all likelihood not able to choose to live in different housing with an alternative social housing provider.

Hickman & Preece's (2019) research, including fieldwork with both housing providers and tenant organisations, note the societal benefits to include social interaction among neighbours, reduction of social isolation, enhancement of social cohesion, and interaction among generations. Although not presenting empirical evidence, Bliss & Lambert (2016) identify the potential of tenant participation to contribute to community harmony and social cohesion.

Critiques of and caution about tenant participation

Alongside the evidence outlining benefits, housing scholars have produced critical analysis to locate the political/social drivers of tenant participation and the practices that are likely to subvert or enable positive outcomes to be achieved. Recognising that legislation is necessary to provide the regulatory environment for tenant participation (Hickman & Preece, 2019), tenant participation sits within wider governance and ideological forces that seek to shape society. Tenant participation has been advocated on both the political left and right (Simmons & Birchall, 2007).

Pawson *et al.*, (2012) observes that, especially in England, tenant participation was based on consumerist ideas about individual tenants rather than collectivist ideas based on representative ethics. They found that some housing providers viewed tenant participation as consistent with their customer focused business model, and indeed, promoting and highlighting the customer focus *via* tenant participation is a means to maintain public legitimacy and not-for-profit status (Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

Other housing researchers have argued that tenant participation fits hand in glove with neoliberalism. This body of work is important, as it engages critical theories that represent a challenge to the idea that tenant participation can achieve a power redistribution from the housing provider to the tenant. From this critical literature, tenant participation is advanced to progress a collective of cognate ends, including challenging welfare dependency (Bradley, 2013), responsibilising tenants into active citizens (Flint, 2004), and controlling tenants through dictating their behaviour (McKee, 2011). This research contributes significant knowledge by illustrating that despite tenant participation presented as a response to paternalistic models that sought to do things *to tenants*, the empowering rhetoric of tenant participation can

be contested and moreover rejected by those who are intended to be empowered (McKee, 2011).

This rejection is consistent with the broader literature on empowerment which highlights that empowerment of marginalised populations can be government rhetoric to conceal practices that function to control marginalised populations. The state can use the language of empowerment to further entrench exclusion (Miraftab, 2004). In the housing context, and as Huisman & Czischke (2023) observe, the common strategies to progress tenant participation typically fail to transfer substantial power to tenants. Kruythoff's (2008) study from the Netherlands found that despite an enabling legislative environment and resources to promote tenant participation, housing providers maintained ultimate decision-making authority and thus the power of tenants to influence their housing was limited. From the United States, Alexander (2009) found that the power of tenants to participate in decisions about their housing and neighbourhoods was constrained when a right to control housing was absent. Huisman & Czischke (2023) likewise point to the disempowering potentials by illustrating how a societal failure to promote a right to participate in housing subverts the capacity of individual initiatives to promote participation to achieve their objectives. On the other hand, Alexander's (2009) research from the United States demonstrated that tenants receiving legal representation provided the material resources they drew on to exert power in shaping housing decisions that affect their lives and communities (Alexander, 2009). The aspirations for greater tenant power in tenant participation activities represents something of a paradox, in that broader strategies of tenant participation can be both empowering and responsibilising (McKee & Cooper, 2008). The potential of tenant participation as either liberating or controlling, however, is not random.

Housing researchers have identified conditions that can either facilitate the former or the latter. What matters here is not whether tenant participation is formal or informal, long-term or short-term, directed at operations or governance. It is when housing providers control the nature of participation that tenant participation loses its potential for influence, and thus is unlikely to be liberating (Bradley, 2013; Hickman & Preece, 2019; Preece, 2019). A recent study adds to this literature by showing, despite intentions to engage with a broad group of tenants, when social media and digital technologies are used to promote participation, it can exclude some tenants which reinforces historic barriers to participation (Condie & Ayres, 2025).

The liberating possibilities of tenant participation require the coming together of organisational culture and structure. Consistent with Arnstein's (1969) much cited ladder of citizen participation, the authenticity required to avoid tokenistic participation is enabled through housing organisations that genuinely value tenant participation as a resource (Pawson *et al.*, 2012). Both housing providers and tenants must want participation to happen (Kruythoff, 2008). Tenant participation's potential relies upon a mindset in the housing organisation that values what tenants have to offer (Department for Social Development, 2016). Leadership is important to promote the culture, but also the organisational structure. The literature shows that tenant participation is limited when it is an add on to a housing organisation. Tenant participation is about a way of working and not a function (Hickman & Preece, 2019); in this way embedding tenant participation into the structure of housing

organisations is seen as the necessary ingredient for the realisation of liberating possibilities (Manzi *et al.*, 2015; Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

Even in the presence of a conducive organisational culture and enabling structure, housing organisations that do want to progress tenant participation struggle to achieve a diverse representation among their tenants. Tenants who do participate are rarely representative of the broader tenant cohort (Pawson *et al.*, 2012; Preece, 2019). If participation is about sharing power and ensuring tenants have control, it is critical to ask which tenants have control and control over what. There are not only technology barriers to participation (Condie & Ayres, 2025), but the bureaucratic processes that some forms of participation entail can be alienating for many social housing tenants (Hastie, 2021). Tenants report time constraints as a barrier, although when they start participating in limited ways it can increase the likelihood that they participate in additional ways (Simmons & Birchall, 2007). Scholars argue that the onus is on housing providers to provide a suite of modalities for tenants to have opportunities to engage (Condie & Ayres, 2025; Stirling, 2019), including skills training and resourcing (Simmons & Birchall, 2007).

The critical literature that identifies the necessity to assess whether the power in tenant participation is about tenants wielding control over their housing or housing providers and the state using tenant participation as a form of control offers an important reflection on the scholarly literature on home. As Huisman & Czischke (2023, 222) note, "for tenant participation to have a meaningful effect upon their ontological security, beyond giving advice, decision making power needs to be transferred to tenants."

Power and control are core elements of home. Housing scholars have provided a rich and conceptually complex characterisation of what constitutes home. This literature provides critical insights for locating the value of tenant participation, but as Meers (2023) observes, the first challenge is to distil the working principles of home to arrive at a definition. When presenting a definition of home, it is important to be upfront that it is an interpretation that is far from universally recognised, experienced, or morally neutral (Hoolachan, 2022; Meers, 2023). The meaning of home all depends, as Mallett (2004) explains, because home can function as a repository for a disparate set of ideas, experiences, and individual ways of being.

The complexity that housing scholars have produced enables the realisation that being at or experiencing home does not necessarily just happen through being housed, but rather for many people involves an active meaning and home making process (Hoolachan, 2022). Because home is about an imaginary (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), is personalised (Pohl *et al.*, 2022), affective (Plage *et al.*, 2025), and represents a sense of belonging (Brickell, 2012), for many the home making process requires particular environmental and relational conditions. These conditions are important for an investigation about whether that tenant participation can be a vehicle to enable home.

The capacity to exert autonomy over day-to-day living is a core defining feature of what constitutes home (Saunders, 1989). In turn, it is surveillance and limited capacity to live according to one's choosing that subverts feelings of home (Hoolachan, 2022); people living on the streets idealise housing as the practical resource they

require to bring their lives under control to experience home (Parsell, 2012). Home is about the privacy and freedom to achieve control (Mallett, 2004).

Research design

Reflecting the right to participate in decisions that affect people that provides the ethical and conceptual basis for tenant participation (Rothschild, 2018), this article draws on a participatory research project co-conducted and co-authored by university researchers ($n = 4$) and social housing tenants ($n = 3$). The study was funded by a statutory authority that commissioned the research to contribute to their mission to embed lived experience knowledge in resources and practices that impact the lives of people who are marginalised by existing systems, including social housing. Their commissioning of the research thus meant that the broad parameters of the study were set. This falls short of ideal participatory research where lived experience communities contribute to the funding priorities and aim of research that is funded (Bednarek *et al.*, 2025). On the other hand, the participatory research involved the social housing tenant co-researchers and university researchers collaboratively deciding on and shaping the research aims, research questions, research design, and research instruments. Further, two of the tenants also co-conducted 15 of the tenant semi-structured interviews. All three tenants were involved in analysis and writing.

Consistent with the principles necessary to achieve ethical participatory research (Parsell *et al.*, 2024), two of the social housing tenant co-researchers were paid for their contribution and employed by the university. The third social housing tenant declined payment and employment. Payment and especially employment at the university was not only about recognising social housing tenants' intellectual contributions, it was also a means to contribute to the ethical imperative to ensure that lived experience co-researchers can derive benefit from participation, and benefit determined by them (Ní Shé *et al.*, 2019). Two of the social housing tenants lived in the building where the study was conducted, and the third lived elsewhere. The three tenants were chosen at random (drawn out of a hat) from a pool of nine social housing tenants who indicated their interest in participating in the research.

The study was conducted at an Australian permanent supportive housing (PSH) building. The building comprises 146 single-occupancy apartments. Each apartment is leased to a tenant with a regular residential tenancy agreement. The model of PSH is social housing and allocated to people on the basis of low-income or homelessness and a recognition that the market cannot meet their needs. The PSH, however, differs from Australia's typical forms of social housing or state-led housing responses to marginalised groups that focus on decentring social housing as the long-term option and instead promote the market as a means to achieve housing independence (Clarke *et al.*, 2025). Through integrating long-term psychosocial support and social housing, the PSH examined in this study is a highly resourced and state funded housing response that seeks to achieve housing stability and prevent entries into homelessness.

Methods

The study is a mixed method design that draws on and triangulates multiple data sources. First, we conducted participant observations ($n = 5$) of tenant participation

activities. These included observations of tenant forums ($n = 2$) lasting 90 min each and tenant working group meetings ($n = 3$) lasting 60 min each. Observations focused on the dynamics between tenants and housing providers and the extent to which tenants' perspectives were prioritised.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews ($n = 5$) with representatives of the social housing provider, including a Board member ($n = 1$) and housing provider staff ($n = 4$). Semi-structured interviews with this sample sought to examine (1) how they understood tenant participation, (2) what they did, if anything, to facilitate tenant participation, (3) what they observed as working well to enable tenant participation, and (4) what ideas they had to improve tenant participation.

Third, we conducted semi-structured interviews with tenants ($n = 55$). These interviews sought to understand what tenant participation meant to them, including what forms of participation they did and did not want, and what worked well and did not work well in facilitating any participation they were interested in having. Through notices shared with all 146 tenants, we invited any tenant willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. The 55 participants represent all tenants who volunteered to participate in an interview during the period interviews were conducted (July and August 2024). Participating tenants were provided a $50 voucher for their time and contribution.

Fourth, we drew on and analysed tenant survey data ($n = 72$). The survey instrument was purposefully designed to capture views on, knowledge about, and personal interest in tenant participation. The survey instrument was added to the two-yearly tenant survey administered by the housing provider in October 2024. All 146 tenants were invited to participate, and a total of 72 tenants responded to the survey. This represents a response rate of 49 per cent. The 49 per cent response rate in this hard-to-reach population is high (Bacher *et al.*, 2019); the 2021 and 2023 Australian National Social Housing Surveys achieved a 26 per cent response rate (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Nevertheless, the sample size of 72 is small and due to the sampling strategy, is not representative.

We conducted a thematic analysis of both the semi-structured interview data and participant observations (Padgett, 2017). The former data capture tenant participation as described by both groups, whereas the latter identify incidences of tenant participation in practice. Participant observations and semi-structured interviews occurred in tandem and informed each other: initial learnings from semi-structured interviews helped hone the focus of observations, and initial learnings from participant observations informed questions that were progressed through semi-structured interviews (Wolcott, 2008).

The survey data was analysed to identify categorical variables that reflect tenants' familiarity with participation, their perceptions of importance of and opportunities for participation, as well as personal interest in tenant participation. Reflecting the limitations noted above about the small and non-representative sample size, we present descriptive statistics from the survey results.

The three data sets were triangulated to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of tenant participation. Neither qualitative data (including from observations and semi-structured interviews) nor surveys were deemed as superior source of knowledge. Rather, they were analysed together to help determine how tenant participation

was understood, spoken about as an ideal, and practiced *in situ*. This position of triangulation is consistent with Padgett's (2017) recommendations for achieving rigour. To further enhance rigour, all 146 tenants were invited to attend a workshop where they were presented the draft research findings and invited to provide feedback. Seven tenants attended and endorsed the findings presented in this article. Padgett (2017) refers this process of seeking verification from study participants as member checking.

Best practice in ethical participatory research requires that lived experience co-researchers receive formal research training (Blair *et al.*, 2022). The social housing tenants were not provided research training, and thus their capacity to actively contribute to the thematic analysis was limited. Nevertheless, the strength of their contribution is evident in the diverse knowledge source that their perspectives brought to entire research project (Videmšek, 2017). Their contribution to interpreting the results was invaluable (Bednarek *et al.*, 2025), particularly in the innovative way they drew out the importance of tenant participation as a vehicle for realising home. The study received ethics approval from the researchers' university ethics board [ethics number 2024/HE000540]. To protect anonymity, we assigned pseudonyms when presenting participants' direct quotes.

Findings

What are the experiences of tenant participation?

Data obtained directly from tenants, including from observations, the survey, and semi-structured interviews, demonstrate that they see value in tenant participation, and are afforded and aware of opportunities to participate. For example, 68 per cent of survey respondents were familiar with tenant participation[1] activities. Twenty-one per cent said that they were unfamiliar, whereas 11 per cent indicated that they were unsure.

Tenant interviews provided further insights into familiarity with participation activities. Tenants who were familiar with tenant participation observed that it was a new development. As one tenant remarked when reflecting on tenant participation:

> It's sort of a new energy that's in the building, and I'm assuming that that's got to do with our new CEO… someone who's really energetic and wants change, like wants to sort of disrupt the model… And that includes, you know, not the, not the patriarchal, patronising way of welfare, but something quite different. So it's something new and 21st century (Annette: Tenant).

Another tenant pointed to specific changes that created the conditions to participate:

> They've changed the tenant forum system, they've always done it over the years, but with [new CEO] now, it's a little bit different… they're trying to make it easier for tenants. So you go in and we can say what you need to (Nadine: Tenant).

Reflected in the sentiment from the above tenants that described tenant participation activities as part of a progressive movement that values tenants as partners

("not the patriarchal, patronising") who can be enabled to contribute ("say what you need"), is the recognition that the tenant participation activities are the product of purposeful strategies to engage tenants.

Active efforts to engage tenants are congruent with their preferences. The survey revealed that a majority of tenants view tenant participation as important (Figure 1).

Among the majority of tenants who reported the importance of tenant participation, we observe modest differences depending on what aspects of participation tenants were asked about. Some 83.3 per cent reported the importance of involvement in policies that affect tenant engagement and participation; only 2.8 per cent said that was not important. A similar majority, 80.6 per cent, indicated the importance of involvement in polices that affect tenants. A lesser majority, 75 per cent, indicated the importance of involvement in events and activities in the building.

The importance tenant place on being involved in activities associated with their housing animates the necessity to ask whether they do indeed report opportunities for involvement congruent with their preferences. The survey data shows that most tenants do report opportunities for involvement (Figure 2).

The survey data reveals that although a majority of tenants report opportunities to be involved, including 72.2 per cent in decisions that affect tenants, 76.4 per cent in events and activities, and 70.8 per cent in policies that affect tenant engagement and participation, a smaller proportion report having *opportunities* for participation compared to *importance* of participation when it comes to decisions and policies that affect tenants.

A minority of tenants disagreed that they had opportunities to participate, including 9.7 per cent in decisions that affect tenants, 4.2 per cent in events and activities, and 9.7 per cent in policies that affect tenant engagement and participation. Qualitative data from tenants provides an understanding of opportunities – and

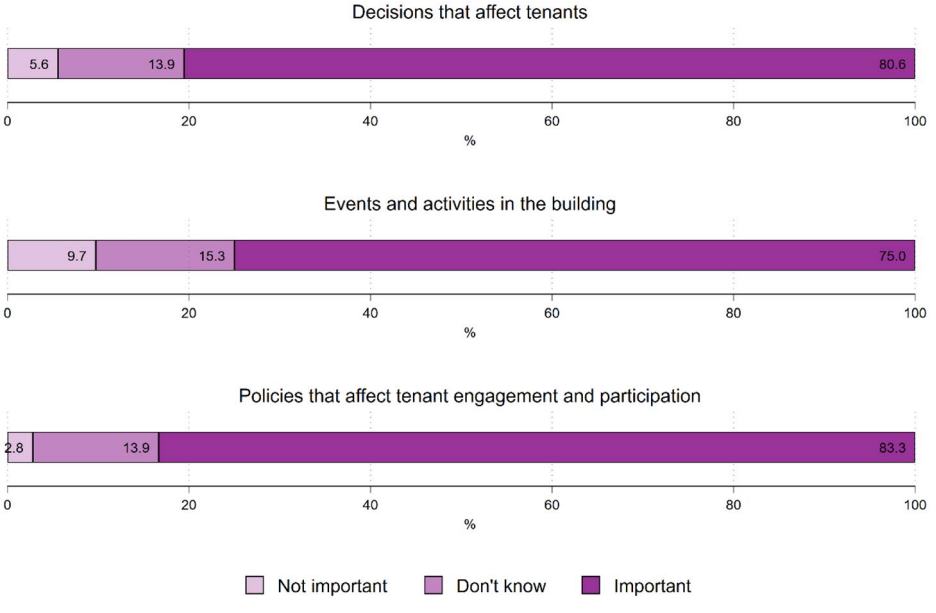

Figure 1. *Importance* of involvement in….

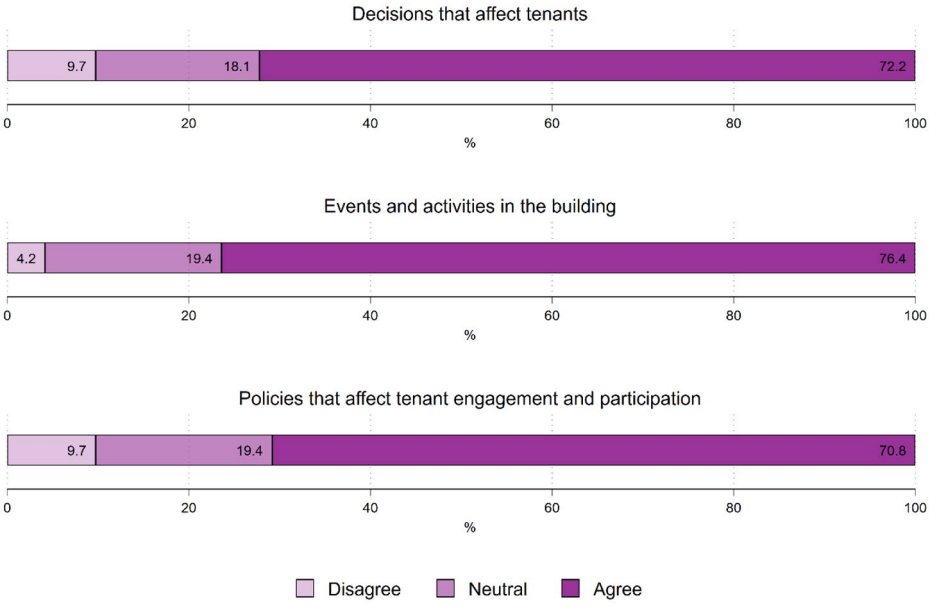

Figure 2. *Opportunities* to be involved in….

constraints – for participation. A recuring sentiment expressed by tenants identified the health and interpersonal barriers that subverted their opportunities to participate, particularly in groups of other tenants. Two tenants highlight this barrier:

> I get really nervous and anxious and stuff around larger groups… I've got a generalised anxiety disorder. So I just get, I start shaking and yeah, all the rest of it (Gwen: Tenant).

> I'm quite shy. And I can get a bit tongue tied, depending on who's in the room… someone that I don't like, I don't trust, I don't want them to hear me speak. I don't want to be the same room with them, and I don't trust them, I think that they have a potential for violence… so if that person's in a room, I generally get a bit uncomfortable, so I won't say anything (Sally: Tenant).

In addition to outlining some of the reasons why a minority of tenants did not engage, tenant semi-structured interview data illustrated how others understood and engaged with the opportunities made available by their housing provider. Tenants highlighted the opportunities for engagement that came from their housing provider resourcing staff to facilitate participation. As Sally put it when describing how the tenant forum was an opportunity for tenants to participate:

> There's good chairing that happens… he's just employed separately as a contractor to come in and be that person… he does exactly what he's supposed to do, he facilitates the meeting (Sally: Tenant).

Another tenant likewise referred to the tenant forum as an opportunity to participate, because of the professionalism with which participation was enabled:

> They [housing provider] send you a sheet out before the next meeting and tell you what's been done about what you spoke about last time, so you know exactly where you're going and that (Rick: Tenant).

Also pointing to the active work done by the housing provider to create opportunities for tenant participation, another tenant remarked:

> Here at [housing provider], they do have, really, really good, engagement services. They have work groups, expression of interest, where you can apply for that. And it's basically like, you know, the engaging all the tenants together, and they discuss on issues that affect them (Maggie: Tenant).

The opportunities that tenants experienced to enable their participation are resource intensive. The resources that tenants identified as facilitating their participation require funding to pay staff, for example, to chair meetings, to prepare minutes, report outcomes, and to share information, as well as organising expressions of interests and working groups. The investment in resourcing to enable tenant participation provokes two questions: what principles underpin the practices of tenant participation, and why is tenant participation valuable? We address these questions in turn in the following two sections.

What principles underpin the practices of tenant participation?

We found that the practices of tenant participation are underpinned by two linked logics. These are: (1) valuing tenant knowledge and (2) recognition that housing organisations exist for tenants.

Multiple data sources illustrated how the knowledge that tenants possess based on their experiences and positions as tenants was valued. This valued position was illustrated by a housing provider representative:

> We're not the expert of being the tenant. In fact, some of us don't know what that has ever been like, and we'll never know what that's like. So, we need to ask so that we understand what that's like (Beryl: Housing Provider Representative).

Here the housing provider representative is making a subtle point. Although it is premised on rejection of a stigmatised characterisation of social housing tenants as deficient, it is not a romanticised version of tenant exceptionalism that assumes the knowledge that tenants hold can only be understood by tenants (Mounk, 2023). The position encapsulated in the quote, which reflects a wider engagement with tenants, is premised on a moderate interpretation of standpoint theory. A moderate interpretation of standpoint theory proposes that (1) social housing tenants have unique knowledge and perspectives that come from being a tenant and (2) housing providers can understand and benefit from that knowledge when deliberate engagement strategies are adopted (Mounk, 2023). Tenant participation as a principle is based on valuing the unique knowledge that tenants hold, and as a practice, tenant participation activities create opportunities for housing providers to learn from the perspective that social housing tenants have. In turn, housing providers can understand the experience of tenants, so long as purposeful strategies are progressed to elicit tenant knowledge. As we have found, purposeful and authentic tenant participation activities must be first premised on a recognition that tenants have valuable knowledge to contribute.

We observed the value placed on tenant knowledge play out in practice. An issue that many tenants discussed and worked through over several months during

fieldwork pertained to an outside gazebo area at the rear of the building. Some tenants, although not all, were concerned about their safety as people were sleeping rough in the outdoor gazebo area. Through the tenant forum and then a tenant working group, they agreed that the housing provider would install a lock on the gate to the area to prevent rough sleeping. A tenant, Howard, who disagreed with the installation of a lock on the basis that it is "the ultimate hostile architecture", said that the housing provider also did not agree with the installation of locks. Nevertheless, Howard cited this as tenants' perspectives and realities being validated, even though they were at odds with what the housing provider wanted. He argued that housing provider CEO described the installation of locks "as a bit of a shame." Howard said, however, the housing provider "did it anyway. And that to me, is the sort of thing that builds trust, right?" The housing provider implemented changes that they disagreed with because the changes made sense from the perspective of (some) tenants.

The example of the lock installation, similar to other examples of tenant knowledge shaping how the housing provider operates, including those discussed below, are important in addition to the significance of this fostering trust between the tenants and the housing provider. These examples illustrate some of the messiness of tenant participation in that tenant knowledge is heterogeneous. Further to the significance of taking on tenant advice that housing providers may disagree with, valuing tenant knowledge requires the housing provider creating an environment where the multiple and often contradictory tenant voices can be raised and debated. This highlights how valuing tenant knowledge is not simply making whatever changes tenants want, but rather ensuring that all tenants have opportunities to share their experiences and perspectives.

Valuing tenants' knowledge is closely linked to the second logic that underpins tenant participation, namely that housing providers exist for tenants. As a housing provider, George, representative remarked, "our whole purpose is for them." Beryl another housing provider representative likewise explained that "we wouldn't exist if it wasn't for our tenants." They extended this position to explain how tenant participation is part of their responsibility to ensure that their powerful position is used to benefit tenants, in terms of how tenants understand benefit. As Beryl said:

> Well there is a power imbalance here. We have the ability to make decisions that impact people's lives, sometimes in quite significant ways, but that might not feel like that to us. So I think, I just think that's [tenant participation's] part of what we do (Beryl: Housing Provider Representative).

As with the logic of valuing tenant knowledge, the statement that housing providers exist for tenants can be meaningless if not enacted. Public commitments of this type characterise the outward facing discourse of many social housing organisations. Even if genuinely believed, furthermore, it is difficult to enact given that tenants do not all want the same from their housing provider. Further, and as noted above, the power that housing providers wield is considerable. This is a self-evident statement, yet the complexities and capacity to wield power becomes evident when tenants call on their housing provider to enact their power to make decisions that benefit some tenants at the expense of others. In working to operationalise the logic

that 'housing providers exist for tenants', we observed how the complexities shape tenant participation.

Effective policy co-design works through engagement between housing providers and tenants, which requires recognition of tenants' expertise throughout the process. Following the suggestion from a tenant forum to alter the visitor's policy, a tenant working group was formed to develop the revised policy. Tenants decided that they wanted the policy changed, and then were resourced to develop a working group to design the policy change. The first and sixth author observed a meeting of the working group. Some tenants advocated for the new policy to provide autonomy to enable tenants to let their visitors into the building without concierge checks and without tenant escort; they argued for more tenant control. Other tenants advocated for the opposite, whereby they wanted strict concierge monitoring of visitors to ensure their safety; they wanted more housing provider control. The tenants could not agree on what changes should be made to the visitor policy and they turned to the senior housing provider to make a decision. The housing provider responded by stating it was a tenant issue, and it was up to tenants to determine what visitor policy they wanted. The tenants then agreed on a six-month trial of a policy to provide greater tenant control (fieldwork notes 9 May 2024).

The logic that housing providers exist for tenants confronted challenges when some tenants preferred housing providers to assume control. Australia's residualised social housing sector with the rhetoric of focusing on those in greatest need (Fitzpatrick & Pawson, 2014) is a significant context to tenant participation. Access to social housing in Australia is targeted to people who are required to demonstrate that their needs are so significant that the private sector is inaccessible. This requires their participation in a sophisticated health and welfare system to substantiate housing need and priority (Morris *et al.*, 2023). This system is interlinked with other systems, such as health and employment, but operating to different and at times contradictory logics and controlled by professionals from various government and non-government agencies. Navigating such fragmented systems is challenging enough, yet, tenant participation that is based on a belief that tenants have valuable knowledge that they can draw on to *alter* what they receive goes even further and comes up against normative expectations. We observed this directly with the expectations of some tenants that housing providers will control visitors and determine changes to visitor policies.

The challenges to who holds power and the vulnerabilities that shifting power relations uncover are not exclusive to social housing tenants. The logic that housing providers exist for tenants and thus constitutes a basis for tenant participation can create challenges for the housing provider. As one housing provider representative, Beryl, observed when describing tenant participation as a means to improve their service as "the easy bit":

> The really hard bit is, as a community housing provider, you're putting yourself out there. You're holding yourself out and saying, bring it all, bring all your criticisms and your irritations and your annoyances, and point out all of our mistakes and flaws to us so that we can do better. But that's a pretty, you know, that's a hard thing to do (Beryl: Housing Provider Representative).

It is important to recognise the vulnerable position that housing providers can assume when they progress tenant participation. This vulnerability highlights a barrier that other housing providers may confront when considering the introduction of tenant participation. We now engage the data to address the question: why is tenant participation valuable?

Why is tenant participation valuable?

As outlined in earlier, the literature advocates for tenant participation by drawing support from normative arguments that people have a democratic right to participate in decisions that affect them. This right to participate is, Rothschild (2018) observes, essential to the value of an organisation. The housing literature outlines multiple benefits, but also illustrates how tenant participation can be imposed upon tenants and thus represent a disempowering force in their lives. In the context of this literature and the complicated ways that participation can enable or limit power, we found that tenant participation is valued because it is a vehicle to enable people to experience home.

As one tenant explained when outlining why they wanted the opportunity to be involved in decisions made by their housing provider:

> This is my home as it is everybody else's who live here. And to that end, we've also got a stake in what the place is like, and to that end, all who both have a right to participate, but also in participating, it will improve the place (Ben: Tenant).

A housing provider representative explained likewise. They described tenants providing their perspectives about what should happen in their housing thus:

> You know, most of that stuff we don't, [housing provider] doesn't really care about, but this is tenants' home. They absolutely care about that kind of stuff (Beryl: Housing Provider Representative).

This explicit framing of the value of tenant participation connects well to the literature on home as a place where people have the opportunity and freedom to shape their housing and how they live. Important to this linking of home with tenant participation is opportunity for autonomous decision making. We found that for some tenants, being at home meant being free to not participate. One tenant said that they were aware of opportunities where they could participate, but they chose not to. They explained not participating as:

> I'm pretty alright with everything (Wendy: Tenant).
>
> So do you know that there are places within [housing provider] where you can get involved with, you know, having a say and things like that? (Researcher).
>
> Yeah, but no, I don't get involved in those things (Wendy: Tenant).

Another tenant said that they did not engage with the tenant participation activities that they knew were available. They explained that:

> I feel like, safe and happy. So like, I don't really want to, like, change anything (Rose: Tenant).

Rose did remark, however, that they would be open to tenant participation if something was "relevant to me." These observations underscore the significance of tenant participation as a vehicle for home when it is an opportunity that tenants can chose to engage with or refrain from. Home as a place where people can exert control over how they live, including the choice to participate or not, is predicated on principles consistent with what other tenants described earlier in this article as an approach to tenant participation that was not patronising.

The principle that tenants possess knowledge that is valuable to inform and improve housing equally relies upon the principle that tenants know when they would *not* like to participate. Refraining from participating is not only consistent with home as a place where people organise their own lives, but also challenges the idea that tenant participation is about imposing obligations on tenants to responsibilise them as a means to address welfare dependency (Bradley, 2013; Flint, 2004; McKee, 2011). Home is a place where one is free to not engage.

Discussion

The emphasis on opportunities for tenant participation was a consistent learning in this study and it has important implications for housing scholarship and practice. Developing the above point about opportunities for tenant participation being consistent with the choice and autonomy central to home, care must be taken to examine whether tenants not participating have opportunities to do so. As we have found in this study, tenants were clear that their capacities to participate were substantially enabled by the resources provided by their housing provider. Autonomy is not an individual achievement; autonomy is a social product: "we are never autonomous alone; we are always autonomous in social and political contexts" (Roessler, 2021, 154).

The valuing of tenants as knowledge holders is hollow if the conditions do not enable their unique and diverse knowledge sources to be shared among each other and with their housing provider. Although it may seem trivial, many tenants observed that it was the independent Chairing of tenant forums, along with housing staff that could take minutes and circulate resources and outcomes, that facilitated their participation in ways consistent with the preferences. Tenants described the Chairing of forums in particular as necessary to ensure that discussions did not descend into confrontation (as they did prior to the external Chair). The criticality of resources to enable participation, including assessing whether decisions to not participate can meaningfully be referred to as an exercise of autonomy, has been found in policy efforts to facilitate direct forms of democracy (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

The provision of resources to create the conditions for people to autonomously decide whether to participate or not highlights an additional element of tenant participation as a vehicle for home. As noted in the literature review, the housing scholarship on tenant participation resonates with the wider literature on co-design and consumer participation in that authenticity and a genuine desire to engage with and learn from consumers sits at the heart of effective participation. Without both a genuine desire to engage or the resources to enable participation, efforts can be tokenistic and even alienating. Data from both tenants and housing provider

representatives in this study highlighted how tenant participation was understood to be a genuine means to learn from tenants to inform change.

Tenant participation was not a benign strategy of hearing tenants' stories; it was rather a mechanism to change housing, as determined by tenants, for the benefits of tenants. This means that for tenant participation to be a vehicle for realising home, housing providers must not only value what tenants have to say, but to also be structured and resourced to change parts of how they operate and provide housing based on tenants' contributions. A housing provider representative, George, explained that they fundraise to "make money to pay for the programs that tenants want." He said that "government's not going to fund it because it is out of their remit." George said:

> if there's a group of opinions, or there's a common theme about something which the tenants as a group would need, then we'll look at sourcing that…we look at using fundraising money. So that's the pathway (George: Housing Provider Representative).

The choice and control that scholars have presented as critical to the meaning of home is mediated and situationally bound; empirical studies demonstrate that age, the nature of the living environment, household dynamics, and indeed domestic violence constrain control and choice (Mayock *et al.*, 2015; Souralová & Žáková, 2022). Tenant participation is about valuing tenants and providing choices so that they can determine what they want from their housing provider, but the capacity for their wishes to change how their housing is delivered will always be contingent and open to debate and compromise. Not only will tenants' wishes be limited by the resources that housing providers have, but also because a broad engagement with tenants will illustrate that they do not all want the same thing. We observed this with reference to changing the visitor's policy and the gate to the gazebo area. In line with the benefits of direct citizen participation in democracy being not dictating policy but rather having one's ideas, wants, and concerns raised, discussed, and valued (Michels & De Graaf, 2010), tenant participation contributes to home when people are afforded the autonomy to share their views on what they want. This includes tenants determining whether they do not participate, because for example, as the tenant above observed, "I don't really want to, like, change anything."

For tenant participation to enable home, housing providers need to understand the valuable knowledge perspective tenants hold and work to ensure that knowledge is shared. The sharing of knowledge is not only between tenant and housing provider, but also among tenants. The control and autonomy central to home will be enabled, not when housing simply changes based on what tenants say, but instead when tenants can participate in an authentic exchange where their knowledge sources are voiced, heard, debated, and taken seriously.

Conclusion

The move toward tenant participation in social housing is supported by the body of work that advocates for people's democratic right to participate in decisions that directly affect them. The housing literature demonstrates that tenant participation does offer promise of enhancing the power of tenants to shape the operation of the

housing they reside in, however, it also shows that tenant participation can be disempowering through failing to provide the resources and opportunities that are required for tenants to exert control. Our study aimed to contribute to this literature through a multi-method and participatory research design.

An important limitation to note is the single housing provider as our study site. Both the selection of this site and the sampling strategy within the site means that our data is not representative of social housing in Australia and no claims for empirical generalisation can be made. Strengths of the study include the triangulation of multiple data sources to develop an understanding of how tenant participation operates and why it is valuable, and the participatory research design with social housing tenants. The contributions of tenant co-researchers are significant and many. Not only did they enhance the study through informing the aims, research instruments, and collection of tenant semi-structured interviews, they emphasised and sharpened the analysis on the meaning of home. Even though their analysis of home prioritised tenants over housing providers and thus places them in a potentially challenging relationship with their housing providers, as we found, a social housing representative described tenant participation as a necessary force to open up and make housing providers feel uncomfortable to progress tenant-led innovation.

Our study addressed three research questions to contribute to the housing literature. First, we found high levels of tenant participation. The high levels of engagement were enabled by a purposeful strategy to embed tenant participation in the housing organisation and the resources to achieve tenant participation in practice. Despite the high levels of tenant participation being achieved through a deliberate strategy and dedicated resources, we found a minority of tenants did not participate either because they lacked the interest or because they described personal and health barriers to engage. Second, we demonstrated that tenant participation is underpinned by the logics that tenants have valuable knowledge to contribute to their housing and housing providers exist for tenants. We found that these logics inform a practice whereby the housing provider is able to engage with tenants to learn from and be informed by their perspectives. Valuing tenant knowledge is insufficient to underpin tenant participation; both a deliberate strategy and resources to support tenant participation provide the means for housing providers to learn from tenants. We found that leaning from tenants requires a housing provider that is willing to open themselves up to critique and change. Third, tenant participation is valued as it is a vehicle for tenants to assume the autonomy and control central to the realisation of home.

Our study foregrounds the important reality that for tenants, it is their home that is at stake. Recognising that experiencing home does not simply happen through being housed, but rather involves an active meaning making process, tenant participation provides a mechanism through which social housing tenants may more meaningfully experience home. Indeed, tenant participation and the autonomy it facilitates—including the autonomy to not participate at all—aligns with an understanding of home as a place where people have the authentic opportunity to have their voices heard and respected in matters that shape how they live. This analysis of home, informed by our data with tenants, shows that home means the opportunity to not participate at all, and tenant participation is not about generating a

unanimous tenant voice to simply change how housing is managed. Rather tenant participation is a vehicle to home when it provides opportunities for tenants to express and debate their contrary views, and have them engaged with and responded to seriously by both their housing provider and fellow tenants. If tenant participation contributes to the experience of home, it inevitably means engaging the messiness that democratic participation entails.

Note

1. The survey used the term engagement rather than participation. Given that these terms are used as synonyms, we used the term participation when referring to the survey for consistently throughout the article.

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