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Affect, collective action and the policy process in housing safety crises

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ABSTRACT
International failures in housing safety have created complex policy problems for national governments, as well as creating severe negative impacts for those living in homes with significant defects. This article focuses on two cases—the post-Grenfell building safety crisis in England, and the defective concrete blocks or 'mica' crisis in Ireland—to explore the relational dynamics of policy processes, focusing on the role of affects. Through in-depth interviews with 28 residents living through these crises, the research explores how policy shapes collective affects and how, in turn, feelings associated with the crises can be reconfigured through collective action to influence the policy process. The concept of counter-affects is mobilised to explain how the 'subjects' of policy interventions strategically deploy personal stories to shape new collective feelings about the crises, disrupting the operation of power through the policy process. By building counter-affects of solidarity, recognition, empathy, and outrage, collective movements associated with housing safety crises built a broader coalition oriented towards the achievement of policy goals. Whilst effective, this strategy also has repercussions in the re-enactment of feelings of crisis, uncertainty, and unsafety.

Introduction

The safety of the homes people live in is under renewed scrutiny following international failures of building quality and regulation (Apps, 2022; Cook & Taylor, 2023; Ó Broin, 2021; James et al., 2017; Oswald et al., 2022; Symonds, 2024). This presents a significant policy problem for governments, but also for the residents of homes that fail to meet societal norms of safety, control, and security (King, 2004). This article presents findings from 28 in-depth interviews with individuals directly affected by two international exemplars of housing safety crises—the post-Grenfell building safety crisis in England, and the defective concrete blocks or mica crisis in Ireland.

The article explores the affective dynamics of policy processes, revealing the ways in which the 'subjects' of policy interventions feel crises of home, and how negative feelings can be redirected to drive policy change.

Whilst the policy process is suffused with feelings—with research using different terms such as affect, emotion, and moods (Pierce, 2021)—policy processes are relatively under-explored within housing scholarship (Clapham, 2018) with less attention to emotional governance than in aligned social policy fields (see Mills & Klein, 2021; Marquardt, 2016). The research is concerned with how collective affects condition social life (Anderson, 2016, p. 17). It draws on an understanding of affect as the capacity to affect and be affected (Anderson, 2016) and collective moods as affective expressions of a shared way of living and thinking which can be intensified around a particular group or problem (Harris et al., 2019)—in this case, housing safety crises.

Individuals affected by the building safety crisis in England live in multi-storey flats with fire safety risks from flammable cladding and insulation, missing fire breaks, and other building defects identified following the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire (Preece et al., 2024; Preece & Flint, 2024). In Ireland, the defective concrete block crisis primarily affects single-family homes—although other buildings such as school are also affected—in which deleterious materials in concrete blocks cause walls to progressively crack and crumble (Leemann et al., 2023). Homes are also affected by severe damp, cold and mould due to the poor condition of walls (RTE, 2023a). The crisis has been highlighted as a key governance failure by the Irish Government (Doherty et al., 2022). Both cases represent long-term crises within national housing systems, affecting thousands of households (Leemann et al., 2023; Apps, 2020) whose lives have been on hold. Homes often cannot be sold, with some individuals occupying buildings that are hazardous and crumbling around them, or at such risk of fire that they require 24-hour fire safety patrols (Lynn, 2023; McBride, 2024).

Addressing these problems necessitates extensive re-building work—and in Ireland can involve complete demolition/rebuild—a costly and disruptive process that centres on the conundrum of who will pay for multiple failures. The crises draw in a myriad of housing system actors, from manufacturers and developers to insurers and mortgage lenders. As in other international cases of building defects (James et al., 2017), complexity, poor mechanisms for holding private interests to account, regulatory failings, and the scale of the challenge has ultimately positioned the State as the only actor with sufficient reach, resources, and power to address problems. Individuals are commonly living through a profound reshaping of their sense of home and their relationship with the State (Preece & Flint, 2024), as they encounter a widening gap between expectations of policy and lived experience of its failure.

Substantial grassroots efforts from affected communities have increased awareness and sought policy solutions, in particular Government-backed financial support for remediating homes, without which households would

be liable for the exorbitant cost of remedying defects (End Our Cladding Scandal, n.d.; McBride, 2023). In England, building safety policy has evolved from a single 2018 scheme providing Government funding to remediate high-rise social housing affected by one type of cladding, to a mix of Government- and developer-funded schemes for the remediation of buildings from 11 metres in height with a range of cladding and insulation system defects (see Wilson, 2023). A 'cascade' of responsibility in the 2022 Building Safety Act made leaseholders the funder of last resort for rebuilding costs with a cap on contributions for eligible leaseholders in relation to some costs. Policy has evolved incrementally over many years, but with some buildings, types of work, and leaseholders still exposed to remediation costs, campaign groups continue to press for policy change (End Our Cladding Scandal, n.d.).

In Ireland, whilst the problem of minerals in housing construction materials has been a problem for many years, an expert panel focused specifically on mica/defective concrete blocks was set up in 2016, resulting in a 2018 announcement of a funding scheme for the remediation of affected homes (Doherty et al., 2022). Campaigners argued that the scheme was flawed, with a substantial shortfall in meeting the actual costs of demolition/rebuild. Following further pressure from affected homeowners, a new working group developed an enhanced funding scheme (from 2023), although there remain exclusions (such as for holiday homes), caps on support by floor area, and calls to improve the scheme (BBC News, 2024).

Whilst support running into billions of pounds is now available to remedy defects *via* the Irish and UK Governments, this has been an incremental and slow process, with gaps and uncertainties remaining. As in other cases of significant building defects (James et al., 2017), residents have largely been expected to navigate complex and bureaucratic processes themselves. Whilst there have been attempts to hold key actors to account for failures, for example developers of defective buildings (Wright, 2023) or producers of defective concrete blocks (Coleman Legal LLP, n.d.), this is a complex area that demands more effective governance from the state (Doherty et al., 2022).

For many of those affected, damage to home in its material and psycho-social dimensions has been exacerbated by insufficient policy action. However, inaction has also fuelled collective action for a more just outcome. The article makes a novel empirical and conceptual contribution to housing studies, first, in attending to the relational dynamics of emotion in housing policy processes, operating between the State and the 'subjects' of policy action, considering how policy shapes collective affects over time (Maor & Capelos, 2023). Second, the cases demonstrate the mechanisms—such as the strategic use of policy inaction and the framing of interventions—through which these dynamics play-out in international exemplars of housing safety problems. Third, the concept of counter-affects—insurgent feelings formed by, and deployed against, dominant forms of affective governance—is mobilised to explain how the 'subjects' of policy measures

strategically use personal stories to shape new collective moods such as solidarity and empathy. This highlights the way that affective impacts act as a form collective currency (Jupp, 2022) with which to resist the rationalities governing safety crises and counter dominant narratives and their stigma. The cases offer examples of the reconfiguration of policy processes, by demanding greater attention within policy-making to ways of feeling crises, disrupting the operation of power through the political and policy management of affective life (Maor & Capelos, 2023).

The article next situates emotions, feelings, and affects within policy processes, after which the methods are outlined. Results foreground the role of affects in the experience of housing safety crises, the governance of these policy problems, and collective action. The research shows that the under-production of policy is a mechanism of affective governance, generating societal moods that frame understandings of problems. However, collective action can disrupt governmental framings by using personal experiences to create 'counter-affects', or different emotional readings of crises. This tactic enables grassroots campaigns to build solidarity, empathy, and outrage directed towards the achievement of policy goals such as funding to remedy defects. However, this strategy also has repercussions in re-enacting feelings of crisis and unsafety.

Affect, emotions and the policy process

Affects, emotions, feelings and moods are a growing focus of research interest. Anderson (2016) distinguishes between structures of feeling and atmospheres in affective life. A structure of feeling is 'a collective mood that exists in complex relation to other ways in which life is organised and patterned' (Anderson, 2016, p. 116), a shared way of living and thinking that can be intensified around a particular group, place, or problem (Harris et al., 2019). Collective moods offer a way of exploring two cases in which common experiences shape a shared sense of home through its loss, bringing a collective dimension to the experience of unhoming through disruption to commonly held meanings of home (Baxter & Brickell, 2014).

Policy fields also actively shape collective moods, necessitating attention to the relational dynamics and affective relations between policy makers and the 'subjects' of interventions. The policy process is 'the study of change and development of policy and the related actors, events, and contexts' (Weible et al., 2012, p. 3). Policy studies explore relationships between the State, political actors, and the public, developing theories of policy development and change (Petridou, 2014). Recent interest has shifted from conceptualising policy as constructed by bounded rationality to greater attention to affect and emotions (Pierce, 2021), responding to calls for a better understanding of 'the role of emotionality in the policy process', especially 'how and when affective processes and their resulting emotional response influence policy dynamics' (Maor & Capelos, 2023, p.

443). Rather than focusing on policymakers (Boossabong & Chamchong, 2024), this article explores how the affective life of policy 'subjects' are shaped by policymakers' actions *via* the generation of collective moods about housing safety crises. This offers a window to understanding how societal feelings about policy problems shift over time and the role key actors play in this change.

Studies of affect show that collective moods scaffold the way that individuals experience and engage with social problems (Anderson, 2016). Policymakers define issues and problems (Clapham, 2018), construct target populations (Petridou, 2014), and mobilise affects, including by crafting hostile conditions towards particular issues or populations to constrain support for policy interventions (Mills & Klein, 2021). For example, recipients of social welfare are often framed as lazy or undeserving, shaping wider public orientations (Maor, 2016; Mills & Klein, 2021).

Crafting these moods is a dynamic and multi-modal process, including governmental and media narratives (Grant et al., 2019). It is also crucial to consider non-intervention as an action with specific outcomes (Clapham, 2018). These policy under-reactions—'the systematically slow or insufficient response by policymakers…or no response at all' (Maor, 2014, p. 425)—also have affective power. Recognition of a crisis can set a collective mood for action, for example compassion and empathy sustained support for rapid policy change under Covid-19 (Bierre & Howden-Chapman, 2024), whilst the crisis also shaped negative attitudes towards immigrants (Freitag & Hofstetter, 2022) and action to close borders. However, silence can promote inaction. This is important because the mood constructed by the state co-constructs affects for the recipients of policy (in)action. For example, the production of uncertainty can generate felt, affective, impacts that reconstitute orientations towards the self and society (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 267).

Collective action and social movements

Whilst state action, inaction, and uncertainty shapes collective affects (Anderson et al., 2020), deployed as a tool of statecraft (Mills & Klein, 2021), less is known about how collective affects are transformed through dynamic relationships in the policy process. Different actors craft narratives to influence policy (Petridou, 2014), but there has been less attention paid to the way in which collective affects simultaneously catalyse communities against the state. The shaping and mobilising of collective moods is an important route to driving collective action, building networks of supporters to influence the policy process (Weible et al., 2012). The article will use the term 'counter-affects' to refer to the way that collective moods are reshaped by grassroots campaigns and deployed to resist and reshape affective governance by the State. This brings together an understanding of the Foucauldian notion of counter-conduct as the utilisation of tactics that modify relations of power between groups (Demetriou, 2016), and the specific role that the shaping

of collective moods—affects—has as a key tactic within the case studies. In exploring how affects influence policy through a politics of emotionality (Maor & Capelos, 2023), we therefore highlight the strategic use of emotion within collective action to develop, expand and sustain movements, creating a space of possibility for policies that ought to be (Roelvink, 2010, p. 114).

Affective collective dynamics operating between group members—for example trust—or shared emotions towards objects outside the movement—for example hatred of a policy –sustain movements (Jasper, 1998). These collective affects shape group identity through boundary work, as group members identify with each other and dis-identify from other reference groups (Fominaya, 2010). Affective appeals are also key to growing movements beyond those directly affected—for example, criticising policy may foster wider public outrage that can be channelled towards change (Pierce, 2021). Engagement with the policy process is often oriented towards achieving specific goals (Weible et al., 2012). In the cases discussed here, campaign groups particularly sought a financial settlement that would enable housing defects to be fixed at no (or limited) cost to residents.

To achieve policy goals, collective action movements may seek to construct particular feelings about social problems, using collective affects as a form of power to influence public opinion and policymaking (Huijsmans, 2018). Moral shocks, for example—'a visceral unease in reaction to information and events which signal that the world is not as it seemed, thereby demanding attention' (Jasper, 2014, p. 210)—may widen recruitment into movements or rekindle involvement. Affective appeals are therefore an important mechanism for social movements to influence policy processes. This strategic emotion work transforms emotions such as anxiety and fear into anger towards policymakers, or uses emotional appeals to achieve resonance with those beyond the movement (Ruiz-Junco, 2013).

There is growing interest in how affective experiences of social problems can be transmitted to wider audiences to build understanding, empathy, and action, including by utilising personal stories (Chatterjee et al., 2022). A range of creative mediums help personal experiences to connect with emotional registers, which can be a conduit to policy influence (Rogers et al., 2022). This raises questions about the crafting of affect as a State-led ideological and hegemonic project (Mills & Klein, 2021), and resistance by 'experts by experience' who deploy their own collective currency to achieve policy and political change (Jupp, 2022). The research therefore responds to calls for future research to 'examine the reciprocal dynamics between policy makers and takers, and the affective processes that shape and are shaped by their decisions' (Maor & Capelos, 2023, p. 444).

Methods

Empirical data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with those affected by either fire safety problems in England, or defective concrete blocks in Ireland. Fieldwork was carried out in 2023, following ethics

approval from the University of Sheffield (application 050469). Given the strong social media presence of networks of affected individuals, a call for participants was promoted on social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook, and by campaigning organisations and individuals. Potential participants completed a brief survey form, providing initial details to enable contact from the researcher. The survey also asked about the types of campaigning activities that individuals had been involved in. A purposive sample aimed to achieve a diverse range of household types and a range of types of campaigning, for example approaching MPs, meetings with government, and media work. In England, diversity of building height was also used to sample because this had been a key determinant of access to financial support schemes. Initial contact was made with potential participants *via* email, following-up if no response was received. If there was no response, another potential participant was selected.

Interviews were scheduled with interested participants and consent forms completed. 28 individuals were interviewed (14 per case), with most conversations lasting approximately one hour and the longest around 90 min. Most interviews were carried out by video conferencing or phone call, depending on the preferences of the participant. One interviewee opted to meet in-person. Some participants also shared images associated with their experience of housing safety problems, which were either discussed during the interview, or sent to provide additional context afterwards.

The characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1. Considering the two cases, participants in Ireland were more likely to be female, older, and living with children in the household. Most participants in Ireland were living in Donegal (generally considered to be the worst affected county). One second-homeowner lived outside Ireland but had a home in Donegal, one participant lived in Clare County, and two were from bordering counties in Northern Ireland but also living with defective concrete, demonstrating growing awareness of defective concrete as a cross-border problem. In the English case, all participants were leaseholders (including two shared-owners).

Interviews were guided by topics and an initial set of questions, providing flexibility to guide the conversation towards issues that interviewees felt were most important. All interviews were transcribed to enable textual analysis, which proceeded in stages. First, transcripts were read-through with notes made of keywords. From this initial reading, a coding framework was developed using a large number of keyword topics, nested under broader themes. Text was coded to specific keywords, for example feelings of home and its loss, types of affect related to policy action such as anticipation, uncertainty, anger, government narratives such as taxpayers and limited action, and dimensions of collective action such as solidarity, recognition and personal stories. Transcripts were also anonymised, and all participants have been given pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

	England	Ireland	Total
Gender			
Female	6	10	16
Male	7	4	11
In another way	1	0	1
Age			
25–34	3	0	3
35–44	6	3	9
45–54	2	5	7
55–64	2	3	5
65+	1	3	4
Tenure			
100% leaseholder	12	N/A	12
Shared owner	2	N/A	2
Homeowner—with mortgage	N/A	8	8
Homeowner—owned outright	N/A	6	6
Household characteristics			
Living alone	4	2	6
Living with spouse/partner	7	3	10
Living with spouse/partner and child/children	2	6	8
Living with child/children	0	3	3
Living with friends or non-family members	1	0	1
Occupancy			
Living there now	12	10	22
Moved out due to safety problems	1	0	1
Moved out due to fire	1	0	1
Second/holiday home	0	1	1
Moved out due to condition or rebuilding	0	3	3
Building height			
18m +	7	N/A	7
11–18m	6	N/A	6
<11m	1	N/A	1

Results

The affective impact of housing safety crises

The unsettling of home through material, financial, emotional, cultural and political dimensions generates feelings that can become important drivers of action towards policy change to restore a positive association with home. Understanding the way that home has been disrupted is therefore important. Ruth (England)—who had experienced the loss of her home through fire—explained that these 'losses aren't just things you can tot up on a calculator…you're thinking about…your vision for the future'. Whilst material safety concerns existed, the loss of home as a safe space was also related to stability and security. As Sarah (Ireland) reflected 'there was three [people] in a bed when I was growing up…I'm a grown-up… We've been working for years…You just think…"when is life going to get better?"'.

A range of feelings are produced in the process of home unmaking (Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021), but these are dynamic, and included commonalities across affective journeys of housing safety crises. Feelings 'kind

of ebbed and flowed' (Robert, England), with 'different waves' characterised by affects such as 'fear….the financial element…now it's the pure feeling of anger and frustration, of being completely let down by Government' (Elizabeth, England). Susie (Ireland) also described an evolving 'emotion chain' (Jasper, 2014) on discovering she was affected by defective concrete: 'You're numb and then…you don't believe it, and then you believe it… then you get depressed…angry…then…acceptance…the way grief is'.

As well as present-day challenges, negative impacts also derived from chronic uncertainty and disruption to anticipated futures. Sarah (Ireland) described 'planning to take my husband and myself down to the water… to take us out of this world' because the estimated cost of rebuilding their home far exceeded available financial support. Whilst it later transpired that Sarah had been incorrectly given the wrong costing, the anticipation of future financial devastation had created real present-day impacts. Others looked ahead to 'all these things you hope to have by a certain age…certain milestones…and you find yourself thinking, "oh my God, am I still going to be…stuck here?"' (Elizabeth, England). Affected households live with in-betweenness (Bathla & Papanicolaou, 2022), a present inhabited and reshaped in response to future uncertainty (Anderson et al., 2020). Having no end in sight, uncertainty around resolving problems, and deficient/partial policy measures, were all important pathways to engagement with grassroots campaigns. As Bethan (England) explained, 'I can't tell you how deeply it affects me. It's in my soul and my bones. It's there all the time. And it has been for years'. Whilst much was beyond her control, it was in her power to 'share an experience…talk' (Bethan); talking about experiences was often an early step in policy engagement.

Affective governance and the policy process: under-reaction, division and disillusionment

The research shows that government policy under-reaction (Maor, 2014) compounds the negative impacts of living through housing safety problems. Furthermore, affected individuals highlighted the affective impact of over-simplified government narratives that presented slow and insufficient measures as having resolved problems. Harry (England) explained that 'changes happen, but it's so glacial and it's so incremental that it's hard to get too excited or confident' about policy announcements. This was contrasted with other times of swift action to address national challenges. For example, during Covid-19 '[Government] did something, they took control…it can be done…Even the idea that nobody's quite taken a grip of it, six years on [from the Grenfell Tower fire]…How many more years until they do?' (Ruth, England). In both cases, policy inertia was possible because of the characteristics of the crises, which were 'not like a humanitarian crisis where a specific thing happens like…an earthquake, and you know "that's the damage, that's how many people are affected"… This is…just kind of unfolding…in slow motion' (Lucas, Ireland).

Governments not knowing—or failing to know—could therefore be a driver of policy under-reaction.

For those living with safety problems, this atmosphere of not knowing constructed different affective orientations within uncertainty (Anderson et al., 2020), such as hope, frustration, and disappointment. Almost all participants expressed frustration in Governmental communications, which fostered the impression that complex problems had been solved by measures that were viewed as insufficient. As Fiona (England) explained, 'I've become much more cynical because…[Government] announce something which is obviously going to be unworkable…then you read the small print…What they've announced isn't remotely the truth'. Similarly, Ellen (Ireland) explained that the Government may say '"we've set aside a billion Euros to help with the defective houses", so the whole population think that…we're getting looked after…It's just pure misguidance'. Many experienced 'frustration, and ups and downs, and disappointment' (Harry, England), because 'changes…have got our hopes up, and then nothing has really happened' (Charlie, England). Whilst the 'big gloss and…big spin' (Lucas, Ireland) of policy announcements created the impression of substantial progress, those affected were left explaining that 'it's not the reality' (Deborah, Ireland).

Confronting over-simplified public discourses and the hopes and expectations of others carried an emotional toll. As Andy (England) explained, 'half of the public…and the newspapers think it's sorted…I found it quite frustrating'. Similarly, Lucas (Ireland) argued that this was done 'quite consciously' by Government in order to 'direct [your energy] in a negative way…It does make you feel kind of isolated'. For Ellen (Ireland), the apparent unwillingness of Government representatives to engage with the gap between policy proposals and on-the-ground experience, for example *via* parliamentary debates, was 'heartbreaking, and the anger…I never thought I'd be capable of killing somebody. That's the anger I feel. I hate these people, the Government'.

Partial policies also served to divide, drawing distinctions between those more or less 'deserving' of support. In England and Ireland, Governments mobilised concern for taxpayers given the substantial cost of building works. Yet, as Lindsey (England) explained 'we are taxpayers, we're not some kind of alien group that exists outside of taxpaying people'. Similarly, Lucas (Ireland) argued that Government deployed the construct of taxpayers as though they were 'protecting all you other taxpayers away from these…greedy taxpayers in Donegal'. This created feelings of stigma, as Governments sought to 'blacken the situation…to tarnish…to…taint' (Marie, Ireland), leaving those affected feeling that 'you're there to blame' (Deborah, Ireland).

Drawing boundaries around support was also a political determination: '"What can we calculate that works right now to get us through this political problem?"' (Ruth, England). This resulted in a 'piecemeal' and 'divide and conquer kind of approach…You satisfy some people, and some people will

continue voting for you…Forget about everyone else' (Margot, England). Exclusion from financial support for remedying defects created winners and losers, 'picking off' people (Lindsey, England) and creating a wedge to divide movements. This individualisation of policy problems ignored housing safety crises as 'a community problem…a societal problem', and instead 'caused these little cracks' in the collective movement (Lucas, Ireland). This highlights the role of policy in promoting new forms of boundary work (Fominaya, 2010), which can ultimately fragment movements and weaken collective identities. This strategy neutralises the power of collective action by creating hope for some but losses for others, implicating emotions in the fragmentation and decline of movements (Jasper, 2014).

These strategies of policymaking, governing through the affective impacts of delay and division, could be important pathways to reconfiguring relationships between citizens and the State. Disruptions to the experience of home, failures of policymaking, and stigmatising narratives about the crises could be felt as a disorientating experience in which understandings of how to behave are destabilised (Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021), resulting in a loss of orientation relative to previous expectations of State action and protection. Shock, anger, and disillusionment were all common outcomes from people's experiences of policymaking, demonstrating the feelings that stemmed from experiences of disorientation. Bethan (England) described herself as 'a mushroom, I'm left in the dark and…fed little bits of rubbish…propaganda…to make the government look better'. Charlie likened his experience to the novel *Animal Farm*, reflecting on the inequalities between the governed and governing.

> I'm very shaken…very little faith in the Government…If they can just say…"I don't care because I live in my mansion…You're filth to me!"…That's kind of the impression that I get…We're peasants and…they've got their three or four properties…If their buildings had cladding on, I'm sure it would have been resolved by now…They would be first on the list, you know? *Animal Farm* (Charlie, England)

Similarly, Ellen described the bodily feeling of having her problems seemingly deemed insignificant:

> It's a weight on you…You literally feel like a piece of gum…on the bottom of the shoe. Like you're just disposable….The Government will always look after where the populus vote is…it's always going to be party before people…I took the blinkers off when this happened…The bottom line is they don't care (Ellen, Ireland)

In Ireland, it was notable that individuals often situated their experiences within a much longer history of political marginalisation linked to Donegal as 'the forgotten county…things just don't get done here' (Susie, Ireland). By contrast, in the English case, the crisis was more likely to be experienced as a fracturing with previous conceptualisations of the state—as Charlie describes, being 'shaken'.

As in previous research (Preece et al., 2024; Preece & Flint, 2024), some participants set their own experience alongside that of other national scandals: '[I'm] far more emotional when I hear stories like the Post Office [Horizon] scandal…it feels like I can understand…if only a little bit, how that must have felt, because it's like screaming into a void' (Rosie, England). In Ireland, Ellen explained that there was 'an inquiry into the Stardust [fire, which caused the deaths of 48 young people]…it's taken 45 years for that to come…It's like…the babies, the Magdalene Homes…This is what is going to happen to us'. Individuals living through housing safety crises therefore experience state feelings with other moral shocks or cases of injustice in which State action was not commensurate with the significance of events for affected communities.

These connections could indicate scepticism about whether justice would ever be achieved—as Ellen (Ireland) argued, 'we will be like every other scandal, it'll be 40, 50 years and my grandchildren might be watching a documentary on this'. For others, such connections fuelled the search for justice and sustained action:

> You're angry, you're frustrated, you're…determined because you just feel… this shouldn't be happening…We're a little bit…fuelled by all those…Erin Brockovich-type films…"somebody has to fight the cause…If not me, then who?"…I can't be the one who sits back in the shadows (Helen, Ireland)

As Pierce (2021) argues, anger may emerge from the violation of morals and norms, driving collective action. In these cases, multiple dimensions of home were undermined by safety problems, exacerbated by a slow and insufficient policy response which misrecognised the scale and severity of problems. For some, this governmental failure was a moral shock, for others a continuation of feelings of injustice. It is important to understand the relational dynamics of policy processes—involving State actors and public policy 'subjects'—and the affects that are produced, because collective feelings of anger, shock, and outrage can mobilise counter-affects that challenge State framings and responses to the crises.

Mobilising counter-affects as collective currency in collective action

Shared ways of living, feeling and thinking housing safety crises (Anderson, 2016; Harris et al., 2019) transform an individual crisis into something collective. Affective bonds helped develop and grow movements for redress, as participants' oriented anger and frustration towards policy changes, such as financial protection from remedying building defects. Through telling their stories, individuals came to see that 'you're not alone' (Marie, Ireland). As Rosie (England) explained, 'finding out it wasn't just you…was very important', creating 'a sense of hope' (Sarah, Ireland). These emotion chains (Jasper, 2014)—from confusion, isolation, shame and disbelief, to hope, connection, and solidarity—were crucial in creating new political constituencies for policy change (Rogers et al., 2022) shaped by shared affective experiences.

Individuals drew value from the recognition gained from others, which provided 'an identity…you're with other people who've had similar experiences…fighting the same fight…or who have the same sense of loss' (Marie, Ireland). Shared rituals could sustain this identity function:

> It's nearly become an identity for us that we're a mica family…There's that immediate…understanding of what you're going through…With the protest march…I remember just standing there and just crying and being overwhelmed looking around me. And there was nearly a silence…you know when you go into church, there's that silence…and it was kind of, "ok… we're not all…a group of dirty people with a dirty house…We're all people, from all walks of life here"…I was amazed at the number of people I knew that had it, but hadn't said anything…Why do people keep this…a dirty little secret? (Deborah, Ireland)

Deborah's narrative showcases the affective force that exists between individuals, flowing through multiple channels such as gatherings, movement, and voice (Roelvink, 2010). Ruth (England) similarly described a protest as 'quite therapeutic…it felt good…you're not alone'. The inescapability of problems was not necessarily negative, as Lucas (Ireland) reflected, 'it's with me all the time, but not in a…negative way. It's with me in a positive way in the sense that…you feel part of a movement of people that are resisting'. The collective nature of the crises therefore generated solidarity as a positive counter-affect that dissipated some negative everyday experiences.

Drawing strength from solidarity and recognition *within* affected communities, movements then directed this *outward* to mobilise collective moods as a form of collective currency (Jupp, 2022) to achieve policy interest, public support, and policy change. Personal narratives sought to change the collective moods associated with the crises by forging connections between the experiences of 'ordinary' people and wider stakeholders and publics. This strategy of normalisation—nested within experiences of exceptional crises—generated counter-affects of sympathy, empathy, and injustice, which challenged dominant framings of the crises by Governments.

Initial appeals to policymakers sought 'somebody who had…power or influence to hear what we were saying', because early-on 'not being heard…was the hardest part' (Rosie, England). Lucas (Ireland) similarly argued that the first hurdle was generating a sense 'enquiry', so that policymakers actually 'want to know more'; only then could attention shift towards 'empathy and…solidarity' (Lucas). Empathy has featured in policymaking during national crises such as Covid-19 (Boossabong & Chamchong, 2024), but remains under-investigated within social movements (Ruiz-Junco, 2013). Empathy forges an affective connection with individuals' experiences, for example, Tom (England) consciously involved other residents in meetings with his housing association landlord, creating a particular atmosphere, as residents were 'crying saying "I think

I'm going to lose my home'". The aim was to help stakeholders to 'recognise that this is affecting real people's lives and stopping them from doing the things that everybody would hope to be able to do' (Tom). Trying to build a politics of compassion and empathy can open a space of possibility in which to address injustices (Bierre & Howden-Chapman, 2024).

However, engagement with stakeholders and policymakers was not a linear affective journey towards increasingly positive outcomes. As Susie (Ireland) explained, 'at first, I thought it was positive, because…we're getting a seat at the table…And then you get to see how Government works, and they can…run you over'. Similarly, Helen (Ireland) highlighted that government ministers had 'seen the houses, they've put their hands into the cracks, they've crumbled the blocks…they've seen children who are crying', but this did nothing to influence 'the civil servants in the background…they're totally removed from it. To them it's theoretical'. Some power-holders were therefore viewed as being more insulated from the reach of empathetic connections.

Alongside direct pathways to policymakers, in parallel collective movements used the affective power of experiences to build a broader coalition towards policy change. This was largely focused on media engagement, recognising its important role in setting agendas and framing arguments (Grant et al., 2019):

> It was important that the stories were forced into public consciousness, to be like, "look, these are normal people, who bought flats, who are now facing hundreds of thousands of pounds in remediation bills". The human impact of that…was really important…That's generally how…people will engage with a story, and feel connected to it…Maybe some of those people have experienced…other things in their lives, whether it be anxiety, or struggling with debt (Elizabeth, England)

This strategy of normalisation echoes approaches used in representing other marginalised communities (Chatterjee et al., 2022) in which populations are positioned as 'ordinary', whilst facing extraordinary circumstances. Representation as 'normal' was central, because it sought to counter divisive State framings that had generated negative moods by positioning those affected by defective blocks as living in 'mansions' compared to other Irish households, or leaseholders as being distinct from 'taxpayers'. As Charlie (England) explained, 'I'm hoping that people can sympathise…Try to put yourself in that situation—how would you feel?'.

The other side of this boundary work involved setting the stories of 'victims' against those responsible for creating and sustaining the housing crises:

> You can't fight with the people who have done it to you…But…you can… get all that dirty laundry and fly it around the air and then stick up for all the people who are being condemned…I particularly like to let it all rip… on Twitter…that…releases all that pent-up energy and frustration (Sarah, Ireland)

Social media offered a channel to grow movements and direct anger to draw boundaries against those responsible, reinforcing solidarity within campaigns. Individuals also sought to transform the collective mood—as Fiona (England) explained, when she talked to people about the issues 'I want them to get angry'. Conversely, failing to generate these feelings could be frustrating: 'Nobody's getting angry…When I speak to people, they're like "Oh, that's terrible"…but they don't get *how* terrible' (Rosie, England). Elizabeth (England) wanted people 'to see the complete injustice of it. I want them to feel like this could happen to anyone', whilst Helen (Ireland) was driven by 'a sense of justice needs to be…achieved'. Shifting the national mood offered a chance to direct shared outrage and injustice to open an agenda window leading to policy change (Pierce, 2021).

The affective residue of collective action

Emotion is important in drawing attention to policy problems (Pierce, 2021), with personal stories central to building support. This 'emotional angle' was seen as 'necessary…you're only getting so far with the head… you need to pull on the heartstrings' (Marie, Ireland). However, this mechanism of action left a lingering affective residue. As Elizabeth (England) explained, 'you feel like you're the one that's constantly forcing yourself to tell your story…and it can be quite embarrassing'. The focus on the personal experience brought a high level of visibility when 'you don't want everything about your whole life known…You have to hold a little bit back…It's hard to share your full life…what every day means, because it is hard, it's horrible' (Emily, Ireland). Speaking out brought affective repercussions, for example early-on the stigma associated with defective concrete brought judgement that 'you must have bought something cheap' (Deborah, Ireland), and could deter participation. In England, speaking out brought attention to buildings with multiple households, who may not welcome publicity. This meant that 'anger comes towards us…Neighbours start turning on you instead of the people they should be turning on who's the Government…and [the developer]' (Rosie, England).

The pressure to achieve wider understanding left individuals sometimes feeling that 'you're having to sell your soul because…the worst story is the best thing…You feel like…that's the only way that anything's going to happen' (Emily, Ireland). This left an affective mark:

> It drags it all up and because you have to go quite intense…you're just reliving the kind of horror of it over and over…It's like my body is being covered in cuts and bandages and being slowly taken off and put back on again, taken off and back on again…It's quite horrendous (Sarah, Ireland)

Others explained that the slow pace of change and need to keep issues alive meant 'you're keeping yourself stuck…in this constant anxiety of talking about fire and loss and homes…[But]…there's a compulsion to do it…you can't walk away' (Ruth, England). Whilst recognising the strategic power of

counter-affects as tactics to generate connection and empathy, this also placed a burden on the subject. Some found that their expertise became limited to only telling their story, with their deep technical and policy knowledge—a key contributor to policy change (Weible et al., 2012)—not always recognised as having value. For example, Lindsey described frustration with a wide-ranging interview about 'how we got into this situation…the government…regulations…building control…And then they'd say 'and how do you feel?'…And then they will get…an expert on to cover the detail and I'm kind of playing the upset girl…it's almost like I'm wheeled out to be that person'. The multi-dimensional affective experience therefore comes to be narrowed into one aspect—upset—in isolation from other important dimensions such as solidarity, justice, empowerment, and resilience.

Concluding discussion

In exploring the relational dynamics at the heart of housing safety problems, the research makes a novel empirical contribution in specifying how and when affective processes operate within policy processes (Maor & Capelos, 2023). Although in both countries state responses to crisis shifted over time, for many of those affected responses remained slow and inadequate, generating pain. Piecemeal policymaking resulted in significant uncertainty, which remade the affective experience of the present in response to disrupted futures (Anderson et al., 2020). Many participants described living an ambiguous, liminal existence in which they tried to anticipate and navigate the possible futures that policy inaction brought into being (see Bathla & Papanicolaou, 2022). The research shows that although inaction is embedded in the notion of the policy process (Clapham, 2018), it is often hidden and under-explored. In drawing attention to inaction and its role in producing particular affective impacts on policy 'subjects', the research makes a conceptual contribution by highlighting the role of counter-affects as a practical tactic of 'counter-conduct' (Demetriou, 2016)—insurgent feelings which are harnessed to challenge policy inaction and achieve strategic goals.

Living through disruption to the home was a profoundly unsettling experience (Baxter & Brickell, 2014), exacerbated by the way that limited measures were framed by Governments. States govern through shaping collective moods towards policy problems (Mills & Klein, 2021), in these crises marking out those affected as different and sometimes undeserving of swifter or more comprehensive action. For some, the unfolding policy process created a sense of moral shock (Jasper, 2014) and disillusionment, transforming a housing problem into a wider crisis in citizen-State relations. The chasm between expectations of policy action and the reality as experienced could be disorienting (Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021), but it could also lead to re-anchoring in other examples of injustice and State failure, such as the Post Office miscarriages of justice in England—whereby

sub-postmasters were prosecuted for crimes resulting from IT system failures—and the Stardust inquiry in Ireland—in which the families of young people killed in a nightclub fire received an apology from the State after more than 40 years. Participants used these examples not to draw equivalence, but to demonstrate the shared emotions that were generated by state inaction and failures. This suggests the importance of exploring 'the fallout' from the under-production of policy over extended periods (Maor & Capelos, 2023, p. 443), going beyond the immediate impacts of lack of policy measures, to consider the way in which the affective impacts of living 'without' can be harnessed to drive policy change.

Affective governance by the state, through shaping structures of feeling (Anderson, 2016), is one side of the relational dynamic within policymaking. The collective moods created by state inaction—a sense of powerlessness, frustration and anger—were core drivers of journeys into collective action. Conceptually, 'counter-affects' extends the notion of counter-conduct (Demetriou, 2016) by outlining the specifically *affective* tactics which unsettle relations of power. The concept highlights the interdependencies created between different positions, as those living through housing safety crises harness the negative affective impact of failures in policymaking and reshape them as an affective force to achieve policy goals. This reconfigures power in the policy process, disrupting affective governance as a form of Statecraft (Mills & Klein, 2021). Feelings such as anger and shame are used as a means to further political activity, becoming productive feelings as individuals harness the violation of social norms and a desire for justice to drive group action (Jasper, 1998, 2014).

Counter-affects work in two primary ways—first, the collective moods that characterise action neutralise negative and stigmatising discourses, replaced by solidarity, recognition of the self in others, and collective outrage. Second, by sharing their stories, campaigners built connections into policymaking and public spheres, generating empathy and a sense of wider injustice, creating pressure for policy change. These insurgent feelings are therefore used to unsettle forms of affective governance, demonstrating the way in which common experiences generate affective force and collectives with the capacity for being affected and affecting others (Roelvink, 2010). This aligns with the way in which other groups may generate counter-representations of everyday life to challenge dominant portrayals (Chatterjee et al., 2022, p. 345). The cases demonstrate how policy 'subjects' are therefore involved in complex relational entanglements, strategically deploying affects as a form of collective currency to reshape policy agendas and achieve justice (Huijsmans, 2018; Jupp, 2022).

Many participants were oriented towards achieving particular policy goals. Whilst there are many contributors to policy change, from events that shift public opinion to learning and negotiation between key stakeholders (Weible et al., 2012), the research highlights the important role that the shaping of collective moods plays, by influencing ways of thinking about a policy problem and target populations. This is a dynamic and relational process,

taking place between the state, citizens directly affected by policy problems, and wider publics. Although change has been slow and incremental, campaigners have achieved progress, particularly in expanding the financial support available to remedy defects in homes. There has also been some progress in holding to account other key actors, for example through developer contributions to remediation (Wright, 2023) and a levy on the manufacturers of concrete blocks (RTE, 2023b), although this is a complex area.

The centrality of personal stories to movements for redress is an example of the strategic use of emotion (Ruiz-Junco, 2013), deployed *via* print and social media, personal videos, and documentary films to build a coalition of support for policy change (see Rogers et al., 2022). Emotion work sought to build empathy, connection and recognition among wider publics. Normalising experiences as something that—but for chance—could have occurred to anyone helped to counter stigmatisation and to build a coalition of support for redress. However, strategic emotion work also compelled individuals to relive trauma and make public their private lives and feelings. When the emotional toll was the currency that held value in forging connections (Jupp, 2022), individuals could hold themselves within negative experiences, leaving behind an affective residue. Although collective action could provide a valued sense of control, action was also driven by a vacuum in leadership from central Governments to understand and address policy problems at a pace commensurate with the scale and severity of the issues. Reliance on volunteer efforts to scrutinise, hold to account, and press for policy settlements that address all problems, for all those affected, places a significant burden on 'experts by experience'. Despite this, many gains have been made through grassroots action, and many of those affected remained determined to pursue redress.

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