

## ***'People and their homes rather than housing in the usual sense'? Locating the tenant's voice in Homes in High Flats***

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### ***Introduction***

In recent years, the social research of Pearl Jephcott has received renewed attention as the work of a 'forgotten sociological research pioneer'.<sup>1</sup> As interest in the diversity of British sociology's formative post-war moment has grown, scholars have called for a reconsideration of Jephcott's wide-ranging work on the grounds that it displays a unique 'concern for people' and the 'quotidian realities' of everyday lives, together with a commitment to 'evidence-based recommendations' and an 'early adoption of autobiographical methods'.<sup>2</sup> If the ascendancy of British sociology was closely tied to its expanding capacity to enumerate the social, emblematic of the Jephcottian approach was a commitment to the unmediated reporting of 'the authentic voice of her participants'.

This article investigates the extent to which this portrayal of Jephcott's identity as a social researcher holds for her seminal 1971 study into the social problems of high rise living, *Homes in High Flats*. Funded by the Rowntree Trust, and conducted between 1967 and 1969, *Homes in High Flats* has regularly been cited as a 'landmark' study in the social investigation of multi-storey housing.<sup>3</sup> While it focused on local experiences in the city of Glasgow, at the time it was carried out the project was far and away the largest study ever undertaken into people's experiences of 'living high', and the study's main published output, the book *Homes in High Flats*, then represented the most extended and detailed discussion of the 'social implications' of high flats. Since then, *Homes in High Flats* has become an important reference point, not only in policy discourses on mass housing, but for sociologists and historians seeking to reflect critically upon the problems popularly associated with the British high rise experiment.

The project's scope and historiographical influence notwithstanding, however, *Homes in High Flats* was also a methodologically innovative intervention into contemporary debates about the social experience of mass housing. Where the focus of much previous social investigation had concerned problems inherent in the physical fabric of working-class housing, Jephcott's project set out to discover the personal views of working-class tenants recently settled in modern, newly-built flats, with a view to informing housing policy with evidence-based recommendations. In this regard, 'Homes in High Flats' was in the vanguard of a generalised methodological shift within the emerging field of housing research, whereby the experiences of the housing consumer were placed at the centre of the research agenda. In this sense, *Homes in High Flats* addressed a conspicuously contemporary preoccupation, namely the relationship between everyday practice, consumer 'wellbeing', and the modernisation of the post-war British city.

Based on a re-reading, and re-evaluation, of the project's archived research materials, this article reconsiders how the original researchers conceived and investigated this relationship with a view to

assessing how far the study conveyed, as it claimed to do, the 'authentic' voice of the multi-storey tenant.<sup>4</sup> Where the project's published report has been a source of historiographical discussion, the study's archives offer a unique opportunity to access the 'unconscious' behind the published text. This enables a more complex interpretation of the significance of the study through exploration of various 'sub-texts' screened out of the published document. In addition to a vast quantity of under-exploited empirical data, the archive presents traces of the researchers' reflections upon the methodological problems they encountered as well as providing details of the various approaches deployed to elicit and marshal tenants' views about their homes

This article seeks to evolve understanding of how Jephcott conceived of her subjects through re-examination of the archival traces relating to two key research methods employed on the project. Section 1 addresses the problems and possibilities raised by the research team's efforts to survey tenants' 'feelings' about their homes. While the study's concern here to prioritize the tenants' perspective appeared to give them a leading role in defining the meaning of their own housing experience, the researchers found it difficult to square their interpretation of tenants' responses with what the researchers' regarded as the truth about high flats. One response to this was to question respondents' capacity to assess their housing environment, revealing in the process the importance of a rationalist model of self as a core principle of *Homes in High Flat's* epistemology. A second response, however, was to pursue a more intimate relation with the tenant experience through recourse to a series of minor studies based on the smaller-scale, immersive and collaborative approaches Jephcott had deployed so effectively on earlier projects. Section 2 investigates the researchers' efforts to establish mother-led play-groups on flatted estates via reanalysis of 'The Royston Story', a particularly well-documented account of one such group sited in North Glasgow. While this endeavour represented a pioneering attempt to respond to a genuine need on the part of young mothers, signalling both Jephcott's human concern for her subjects and her interest in collaborative approaches, the 'Royston Story' also makes visible the social distance between researcher and researched and how this could mediate interpretation and re-presentation of the tenants' voice.

### ***'a constant anxiety in the current research': surveying tenants' 'feelings' in Homes in High Flats***

At the end of the Second World War, the mass provision of social housing was explicitly recognised as a principal aim of the new welfare state. Despite the commitment of successive national governments to policies of intensive housebuilding, however, at the end of the 1950s many local authorities were still wrestling with significant, and in some instances deepening, housing shortages. One solution to this problem in the decade that followed was the mass building of high rise flats: these, advocates argued, could be built quickly, were cheaper to build than low-rise houses, and could be established on suburban gap sites, all the while meeting most of the standards of the 1944 Dudley Report on housing design.<sup>5</sup>

Almost as soon as it got underway, however, the 1960s boom in high rise production occasioned wide-ranging public debate. While building contractors and local authority housing departments portrayed multi-storey flats as a fast and efficient solution to the pressing problems of housing shortage and slum clearance, architectural critics, planners and popular journalists were soon to identify a range of deleterious social consequences of 'living high'. Just as social observers had earlier expressed concern about the social effects of working class settlement on new suburban

estates, by the mid-1960s flatted estates were already being written of as 'vertical slums of the future', associated with fractured kinship relations, social atomisation and rising levels of 'delinquency'.<sup>6</sup>

*Homes in High Flats* relationship to these processes was complex. From one perspective, the published report could be read as an extension of the critique of flats already in circulation within public discourse. Certainly, this is how the study has been received by some historians, and not without justification.<sup>7</sup> As Jephcott explained in the report's introduction, while various features of high flats appeared to meet the 'current aspirations' of the people who inhabited them, *Homes in High Flats* began from the premise that 'the rapid creation of new communities' was bound to be a fraught process, and in the particular case of multi-storey's, with all their 'unknown dimensions', the picture was 'still more confused'. In particular, in addition to 'the difficulties associated with the family which has young children', flats were expected to pose special problems of 'anonymity' and 'social isolation' for 'community needs', whether 'welcomed or not by the individual'.<sup>8</sup> The project thus set out to discover evidence of social disintegration, and even when this was not readily apparent, was seemingly inclined to merge its voice with the chorus of criticism gathering against multi-storey housing by the late 1960s. Hence, whether 'evidence-based' or not, *Homes in High Flats* offered local authorities an unambiguous recommendation:

Multi-storey flats display few features which might outweigh their disadvantages in other fields and few indications that they make a home which is really satisfactory as distinct from one that is more or less alright. Indeed the evidence from this study indicated that they have positive drawbacks and may conceal actual dangers. Thus the conclusion cannot be avoided that local authorities should discontinue this form of housing except for a limited range of carefully selected tenants or in cases of extreme pressure.<sup>9</sup>

From another perspective, however, *Homes in High Flats*' relationship to the contemporary debate on housing was more nuanced than is first apparent. While Jephcott herself seemed to be personally antipathetic to multi-storey housing, the high rise debate as a whole was also underpinned by deeper assumptions about the connection between housing and the social: housing was in the first instance a solution to the problems of the social, and should be assessed on the basis of its functionality in solving these problems. Crucially, however, popular and academic ideas about what 'social' problems housing should solve changed over the course of the post-war decades. As Alison Ravetz has noted, where social observers of the Victorian and Edwardian periods had presented an image of working-class life defined by poverty and poor physical housing conditions, post-war constructions told a story of transformed socio-economic circumstances and aspirations.<sup>10</sup> Herein, the loci of critical attention shifted from 'social' problems as a function of material deprivation, to 'social' problems as an effect of adjustment to modern consumer culture. In the case of multi-storey housing, the boom in production took place at a time of generally improving levels of working class prosperity, and when professional and academic assessments of housing quality were coming increasingly to focus on issues of consumer 'wellbeing' and 'satisfaction' as the key to securing healthy 'communities'.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the policy recommendations propounded by *Homes in High Flats*, at a methodological level the project can be viewed as participating in the early stages of a generalised valorisation of the

experiences of the housing consumer within housing research. From this perspective, Jephcott exploited changing ideas about the 'social' meaning of housing to advance a programme of research focused squarely on tenants' experiences. As she explained in the report's opening pages, while the city of Glasgow had been pre-determined as the location for the proposed study,

the terms of reference were left fairly open except that the work was to concentrate on social issues, ignoring as far as proved workable those aspects of housing connected with densities, costs, architectural design and aesthetics.<sup>12</sup>

And since the 'social' had become increasingly tied to the domain of the 'personal' rather than the 'material', so in practice what this meant was that *Homes in High Flats* would address tenants' subjective responses to their homes. Where previous studies had focused on the issue of housing conditions, wrote Jephcott, *Homes in High Flats* sought to place tenants' 'feelings' centre-stage, as the chief form of data to be employed in assessing the 'social implications' of high flat living:

People and their homes rather than housing in the usual sense of the word are the subject of this study, and in particular the feelings of those who live there as to whether a high flat helps them to improve the quality of their life, that fuller life which most of us would like...<sup>13</sup>

*Homes in High Flats* thus set itself a distinctive agenda. Where earlier studies into working class housing worked off the premise that poor and overcrowded housing was a key cause of social problems, Jephcott's ostensibly affluent respondents were here positioned as subjects of aspiration, seeking 'to improve their quality of life'.<sup>14</sup> What is more, their 'feelings' about their new homes would now supply the data on which judgments about high rise living would be based: where many earlier studies had bypassed the perceptions of inhabitants, *Homes in High Flats* sought to give tenants a leading role in representing and defining the meaning of their own housing experience.

As the research team would soon discover, however, tricky questions attached to the implementation of such an agenda: how were respondents' 'feelings' to be elicited? And how were such 'feelings' to be marshalled as evidence of the social utility of a form of housing once collected? Herein, the project's archives are particularly revealing about the research team's travails with their chief research instrument. Where Jephcott's earlier work was characterised by sensitive handling of ethnography, autobiography and in-depth interviews, the scale of 'Homes in High Flats', based as it was on a sample of almost 1000 recently flatted households, called for an approach permitting more extensive generalisation. Consequently, and in keeping with wider methodological trends within the expanding fields of housing studies and social science, 'Homes in High Flats' was designed and carried out primarily as a social survey of residents' attitudes, to be gleaned through the use of a structured questionnaire.<sup>15</sup>

Modelled on the user-satisfaction surveys popular in market research, and completed via resident interviews conducted mainly by a team of London-based market researchers, the design of this device was the subject of extensive consultations with researchers and housing experts the length of Britain, undergoing two phases of re-design on the grounds that questions were 'not sufficiently precise'.<sup>16</sup> However, despite successive attempts to ensure respondents spoke directly to the project's basic themes, and in an easily-quantifiable form, the meaning of the survey transcripts proved difficult to interpret. While the questions sought to uncover a story of the 'general attrition of social life', in practice respondents often spoke with multiple and contradictory voices, and with reference to themes not constituted as variables within the project design. Perhaps most disconcertingly, where the project's basic premise was the supposedly negative effects of multi-storey design upon personal wellbeing, 91% of those surveyed reported being 'satisfied' with their new homes.

Unsurprisingly, such findings proved a major source of confusion to the research team. In a report to the Rowntree Trust in July 1968, Jephcott endeavoured to justify a request for further funding with reference to the troubling trends emerging within the data, writing that further investigation:

might throw light on a matter which has been a constant anxiety in the current research. This relates to the extent of satisfaction and the relatively small amount of adverse comment which is expressed by the tenants. Are these their considered views on multi-storey housing as such, or is the tenant merely saying that he likes a new, convenient and attractive home? Would he be equally or more satisfied with a similar type of house in a traditional setting? The sheer number who expressed satisfaction and in almost identical terms suggests something of a stereotype. Is it perhaps the stylish attitude to take at the moment?<sup>17</sup>

It was perhaps not surprising that Jephcott discerned homogeneity and repetition as troublesome features of the questionnaire responses. While care had been taken to ensure a range of household types were represented within the sample, the binary format of many questions on the questionnaire pre-structured answers in routinized ways, leaving respondents with two opposing responses to complex issues. This was exemplified, for example, in the major summative question: 'On the whole are you satisfied or not with living here? Yes: No'.<sup>18</sup> In addition, many respondents were clearly not enthusiastic participants in the study, signalled by the short duration of many interviews. Typical in such instances were transcripts characterised by a series of perfunctory answers to open questions, often employing stock phrases or suggestions already implicit in the question.

At the same time, however, the distinction invoked in Jephcott's question, between tenants' 'considered views on multi-storey housing' and a less rigorous form of personal 'liking', also hints at the deeper epistemological assumptions underlying the research team's strategy of biographical analysis. Jephcott's earlier insistence on the centrality of tenants' 'feelings' as a source of data is here further broken into two opposing senses; on the one side affective response, on the other 'considered views'. The latter were based on clear perception of the realities of high rise housing, which combined with correct reasoning from the 'facts' towards 'considered' judgements about their 'social implications'. This constituted the 'feelings' which the researchers posited as a 'reliable'

form of sociological evidence. The coding of tenants' answers, by which statements were classified and enumerated according to pre-defined thematic categories, worked on the presumption that the aggregation of responses would make visible objective social patterns, and so necessarily presupposed this conception of reliability. This was achievable in principle, if and only if, a direct and fixed correspondence obtained between tenants' words and the presumed objectivity of the social, which the procedures of grouping and counting statements could then pick out unproblematically.

Without question, this approach to analysing the survey transcripts yielded important knowledge about the social experience of living on a flatted estate in Glasgow in the late 1960s. The project archive here supplies the social historian with a profusion of tables, comparing everything from rent increases to elevator waiting times, all of which aid reconstruction of the objective regularities of spatial practice. More particularly, as Abrams et al observe in this issue, Jephcott was alert to contemporary debates about the impact of post-war rehousing upon the lives of women and children, and built into the questionnaire a series of questions designed to expose the special problems multi-storey's posed for these groups. The study's most significant achievement concerned the evidence it gathered on young mothers' fraught negotiation of everyday routines on flatted estates, contributing to and reinforcing research questioning the appropriateness of high rise housing for young families.

Nevertheless, a significant limitation of the researchers' emphasis on rational judgement as a criterion of evidential reliability was that the narrativity of tenants' responses did not register as a form of useable evidence in its own right. Indeed, a chief effect of the coding procedure was to abstract statements from their discursive context, thus fragmenting the integrity of respondents' narratives and their dynamic relationship to wider discourses. The form of respondents' narratives, however, often offered important clues about the social processes and dynamics shaping evaluation of their new flats. While the sparseness of narrative data in some transcripts restricted their utility as documents of subjectivity, many others were much richer. One example here is the transcript of Mr Evans, who was interviewed in May 1967 about his experiences of moving to a newly-built, 3-bedroom flat in Dougrie Road, Castlemilk, where he had been living with his wife and two young sons since November 1965. Whilst Castlemilk, one of Glasgow's four large 'peripheral schemes', would later become notorious as a place of urban decay and social deprivation, Mr Evans' response to his new home radiated enthusiasm. Asked about the dwelling, Mr Evans compared his new flat to a 'big luxury hotel', explaining that

Its larger than other types. We think they are absolutely superb. There is a lack of electric sockets. The number we have is quite inadequate. Rubbish disposal is difficult and you can't use the shoot after 8pm. The living conditions here are superb – we're really pleased with it. The children's health is much better since we moved here. Plenty of cupboard space. We would have liked built-in wardrobes. Its like living in a big luxury hotel.<sup>19</sup>

Luxuriousness, spaciousness and improved physical health, however, were not the only positive features Mr Evans sought to underscore. Living conditions in Dougrie Road were also 'superb' because of the value Mr Evans placed on a new-found domestic privacy:

No dislikes at all. I know by sight most of the people in the block but I don't know them well. I think this detached form of living is what people really want. I think it is so much better than being in and out of people's houses all the time...I'm very thankful to be here. I'd like to see a cinema and a public house here. I think it's a beautiful place to live, it's always quiet, I love to come home here.<sup>20</sup>

These extracts do not present Mr Evan's 'considered views' on high flats; while significant social facts can be distilled from them, including references to a number of ways in which design was 'inadequate', they do not embody an objective assessment of whether or not flats enable the realisation of some abstract definition of the social function of housing. Nor, however, do they merely express a cognitively 'dumb' emotional response to a 'new, convenient and attractive form of home'. The meaning of Mr Evans' new home, encompassing processes of thinking and feeling simultaneously, is here constructed through its embedding within a contemporary myth of post-war modernisation and housing improvement. If some public critics sought to depict multi-storey flats as Britain's new 'slums' by the mid-1960s, this representation by no means monopolised the discursive field, but was constructed against a powerful public narrative celebrating the high rise flat as the symbol of an epochal transformation in domestic living standards. Disseminated across numberless press reports and official publications, and evoking themes of technological advance, domestic convenience and affluent consumption, this narrative supplied a subject-position from which newly-housed tenants could interpret their experiences in terms of improved living conditions and social mobility.

It is important here to stress that Mr Evans' habitation of this subject-position does not represent a form of perceptual distortion; through locating himself in this way, Mr Evans gave shape and form to his experience of moving in terms that were meaningful within the context of his particular housing journey, and which embodied the historically engendered values definitive of the collective meaning of housing for many similarly situated working-class housing consumers. Where Jephcott tended to background the ways personal and collective housing histories shaped tenants' perceptions of their new flats, viewing this as a constraint on clear perception, in point of fact tenants' interpretation of their experiences of rehousing was inherently relational.<sup>21</sup> In Mr Evan's case, prior to being allocated a house in Castlemilk he had been registered on the council house waiting list for some 13 years, and his last house before moving, a 1-bedroom dwelling he shared with his wife and two children, was located in an ageing tenement block, soon to be demolished. In turn, when he spoke of his modern, 3-bedroom flat in Castlemilk as a 'luxury hotel', set in a 'beautiful place', this was less a form of stereotyping than an effort to express a sense of the social and material distance travelled as a result of moving. The popular myth of housing improvement supplied a way of framing this trajectory which counter-posed past and present, there and here: Mr Evan's inscription of his home as the symbol of a new, 'modern' lifestyle, identified with leisure, luxury and improved social status,, articulated a structure of domestic fantasy whose central ideals were both engendered through lived experience of the deficiencies of the 'traditional' slum and given public form in popular myth.

Of course, this brief analysis does not present an exhaustive account of the dynamics shaping Mr Evans' evaluative strategy. The relational construction of home in these extracts, for example, is also

mediated through the ways contemporary discourses of masculinity separate out work and home as functionally discrete spaces, identified with different forms of masculine desire. Where the narratives of some young mothers living in Castlemilk figured home as the scene of domestic labour and the vexed performance of maternal imperatives, for Mr Evans home appears as a retreat from the world, a 'beautiful place' of luxury and quietness he 'loved to come home to' at the end of the working day. Mr Evans preference for 'this detached form of living', contrasted positively against 'being in and out of people's houses all the time', here suggests how the valorisation of domestic privacy within classed fantasies of new housing was gendered, pointing to the different ways men and women inhabited domestic space in both the 'traditional' tenement and 'modern' flat.

Yet, if this analysis is not exhaustive, it is suggestive of the multi-layered and intersubjective character of tenants' narratives of home. Tenants' responses were neither purely descriptive nor a reflection of internal cognition; rather, responses were 'performative' in the sense of constituting a meaningful relation between self and domestic space. Within this, housing figured as an extension of self via the ways it was inserted within a particular narrative framework, drawn and adapted from a repertoire of culturally available formulas. From this perspective, interpreting the meaning of housing within these transcripts requires thinking about the relationship between the particular details shaping a given housing journey and the narrative strategies formulated by tenants to make sense of, and give form to, the experience of domestic transition. In this way, the transcripts also offer insights into how the meaning of flats was mediated through the complex interplay between self and society.

For Jephcott, however, the relation between self and society was of a different form. *Homes and High Flats* displayed an interest in processes broadly classifiable as 'psycho-social', but Jephcott's understanding of the connection between the 'psycho' and the 'social' was ultimately defined by an underlying rationalism. Perplexed by the strange obduracy of the tenant voices she encountered, she elected in the end to restore the primacy of the detached rational observer, revealing the relation of class difference underlying the research process:

it does seem curious that the tenants' own reactions should by and large run counter to the general popular antagonism towards this new form of home. In considering what the flat dwellers themselves have to say it is worth remembering that people tend to be chary about disparaging their home ... In any case views on such a tender subject are less likely to be a rigorous assessment than an expression of the speaker's personality. His level of education is also relevant; it is easy to drum up an opinion on the fittings of a new bathroom, but less so to weigh up and then put into words such a nebulous matter as the influence of life in a high flat on one's social contacts.<sup>22</sup>

A 'rigorous assessment' or an 'expression of the speaker's personality'? This opposition, operative throughout the archive of *Homes in High Flats*, forms the basic duality upon which Jephcott's assessment of her respondents' answers rested. When Jephcott wrote of placing tenants 'feelings' at the centre of her study, what she was interested in was reasoned judgment, reliable to the extent it cohered with the scientific precept of objectivity (the absence of 'personality'). What this suggests is that, while Jephcott was certainly invested in eliciting the voice of her subjects, her apprehension of



this voice was unavoidably filtered through the dualities of Cartesian subjectivity. Underlying Jephcott's approach to the voice of the tenant was a concept of self predicated upon separating the autonomous and rational domain of the 'I' from the clouding effects of 'emotion' and 'sentiment'.<sup>23</sup>

One implication of this was the methodological repression of the performative and intersubjective dynamics of narrativised tenant subjectivity: by giving epistemological priority to rational judgement as autonomous from culture and affect, *Homes in High Flats* screened out the socially and affectively mediated nature of subjectivity. Much of the richness of the transcripts was left untapped for this reason. A second implication was the concomitant naturalisation of the researcher's gaze. By identifying tenants' opinions with the 'emotional' side of the Cartesian dichotomy they became 'unreliable' by default. Where the respondents' own narrative framework was thus subjugated as a form of knowledge, the researcher's categories were naturalised as transparent, hidden from critical scrutiny through their identification with the privileged tropes of objectivity and truth. This enabled the researchers to re-present their premises as conclusions, the 'constant anxiety' induced by the tenants' voice having been contained and split-off. But it also inscribed a basic disjunction at the heart of *Homes and High Flats*, between the putatively 'objective' perspective of the researchers (in practice based on a historically contingent understanding of the social function of housing and the identities of inhabitants) and the unreliably 'subjective' perspective of the tenants.

#### **'The Royston Story': the difficulties of establishing playgroups for the under fives in high flats**

If *Homes in High Flats* sought to give tenants a leading role in defining the meaning of their housing experience, the researchers' travails with the survey method reveal how they struggled to square tenants' meanings with what they viewed as the truth about high flats. One response, as we have seen, was to problematise the credibility of the tenant as a source of evidence. A different response, however, was to pursue a more intimate relation to the tenant experience through recourse to a series of minor studies based on the smaller-scale, immersive and collaborative approaches with which Jephcott's legacy is increasingly identified.

One of the most richly documented of these within the project archive concerns the team's efforts to establish mother-led play-groups on a number of flatted estates. The need for designated space for children to play was a major preoccupation in the planning of post-war reconstruction. In the old tenement areas of Glasgow, such as the Gorbals, there were few places for children to play except on the street and in the insanitary back courts. It could be assumed that there would be better facilities for children's play in the new high rise housing estates that replaced these inner city 'slums'. However for those young children who found themselves 'living high', it was more difficult to get out to play and there were fewer places to play than for those living in low-rise flats or houses. Or at least that was the conclusion that Pearl Jephcott came to in *Homes in High Flats*. She suggests, quoting her respondents, that high flats were 'nae use for the bairns' and describes multi-storey life as 'somehow alien to the children'.<sup>24</sup>

In the postwar years, play and opportunities for play became central to child welfare and more specifically child development. Children *needed* to play. Play improved socialisation and it improved intelligence. Such discourses were clearly evident in official government discourse and reports on

play provision.<sup>25</sup> The lack of play facilities for children was therefore one of the main criticisms of high flats.<sup>26</sup> In the context of the increasing emphasis placed on child welfare in the postwar years, these were widespread concerns, which were influential on Jephcott's findings in relation to the suitability of flat life for young children.<sup>27</sup> This was true in relation to Glasgow as well as in her earlier work in Notting Hill in London and later work in Birmingham.<sup>28</sup>

While the problems of children's play were not 'immediately relevant' to her research, Jephcott could 'hardly avoid being involved since the pressures for help are so constant'.<sup>29</sup> In *Homes in High Flats* she made an extensive range of recommendations relating to the provision of facilities for children's play, both outdoor and indoor and for all ages.<sup>30</sup> However her experiment to establish play groups for the under-fives living in high flats in Glasgow was particularly notable as this was the age-group receiving most contemporary attention. Early childhood, or the preschool age ranges, were seen as the most 'at risk' as the care of such children was largely in the hands of parents, and specifically mothers. There was little state intervention in the education and care of the under-fives, nursery education was limited and child-care largely unregulated. Given the emphasis placed on the importance of these formative years in determining an individual's 'life chances', voluntary sector organisations were established to meet the needs of mothers and their young children. This movement was as much about educating mothers in how to stimulate their young children as it was about educating the children.<sup>31</sup>

The Pre-school Playgroup Association (PPA) was established in 1960. Davis suggests that while early playgroups 'principally flourished among middle-class mothers', by the mid 1970s 'deliberate attempts were being made to set up groups in less-advantaged areas'.<sup>32</sup> In Scotland the Scottish Pre-schools Playgroups Association (SSPA) initiated the Stepping Stones programme, which worked with 'deprived communities in Glasgow', in 1979.<sup>33</sup> Jephcott's efforts to establish play groups in high flats in Glasgow in the late 1960s to provide facilities for young children and their mothers was therefore pioneering. In fact she had helped to establish outdoor playgroups in Notting Hill in the early 1960s. During her immersive ethnographic research in London Jephcott established three 'self-help' projects one of which was the development of two outdoor play groups for 'small children'. Each playgroup had a 'trained part-time worker' with salary paid for by the Save the Children Fund, who would 'take responsibility and know how to create and maintain a satisfactory environment'.<sup>34</sup> One of the workers also hoped to 'help some of the mothers to be more resourceful, despite the cramped and difficult conditions in their homes, about making interesting provision for the indoor play of their own children'.<sup>35</sup> For Jephcott this was a 'reassuring outcome'.<sup>36</sup>

Thus Jephcott did not merely enumerate social problems, she used her practical organising experience to, as she saw it, empower people to try and solve them. This was no different in Glasgow's high flats. If Jephcott's travails with the survey method revealed her rationalism, other facets of her intellectual identity emerged through her research into the needs of children and young mothers. For example, in Glasgow, she suggested that 'we ourselves think there is a strong case for trying to involve mothers themselves, especially those in multi-storey flats, in the running of certain types of provision'.<sup>37</sup> However, the inclusion of a paid organiser was essential in ensuring that the project was successful; since voluntary organisation could not be sustained. These were important lessons to learn and shaped the experiment in Glasgow.

Initially Jephcott set out to find if young mothers shared her concerns relating to the lack of opportunities for play for the under fives. In 1967, along with Hilary Robinson, her research assistant and Valerie Somerville, who Jephcott described as a 'knowledgeable graduate', Jephcott held a few small discussion groups with mothers who lived in the high rise blocks of flats in Charles Street in Royston. This is an area in the North of the city, formerly known as the Garngad, which had a notorious reputation, associated with high levels of Irish Catholic immigration and poor quality tenement housing. Jephcott suggested that the mothers in Royston 'seemed to feel vaguely that something ought to be done about the small children'.<sup>38</sup> As had been the case in Notting Hill, Jephcott acted as an advisor to the experiment of establishing the play group in Royston. Somerville was given the task of acting as a facilitator to help the mothers 'get things going' and write up her findings as her masters' dissertation. This was an experimental, qualitative approach to solving the issue of lack of play facilities for the under fives. Jephcott was attempting not only to record people's feelings about what she perceived to be a failing of high rise housing, but also to make a real improvement in the quality of life of these young children and also empower their mothers to make this change for themselves.

Jephcott suggested that from the beginning of what she described in *Homes in High Flats* as 'the Royston Story' the 'dismal history of the estate's tenants' association had sapped the mothers' confidence', as a result they were 'scared to have a go at anything'.<sup>39</sup> She also noted that 'they probably sensed that they lacked the ability to run a group'.<sup>40</sup> The mothers involved were all working-class women from a fairly isolated and 'deprived' area of the city, just like those that had participated in her outdoor playgroups in Notting Hill. Slum clearance and the construction of high rises in Royston did little to change the reputation and socio-economic deprivation of this area. It was perhaps not surprising that working-class mothers living in such an area would lack confidence in meetings with academics from the University of Glasgow, especially 'knowledgable' middle-class women. They may have had more confidence if there had been more of them, but the experiment was conducted with a group of seven participants. It was Somerville's task to build their confidence in their abilities and educate them on how to run a playgroup.

The research began in November 1967; at this point the three blocks in Charles Street, built in 1961, had 56 children under five.<sup>41</sup> Somerville's study had two assumptions: 'first, that children in multi-storey blocks have a need for play facilities, which relates to the nature of the housing and secondly, that the mothers of such children in a working-class area are not able to organise themselves to meet this need, unless with external help and support'.<sup>42</sup> Somerville made initial contact with mothers in the blocks through Sister MacWhee, the Health Visitor for the area, who was 'sympathetic to the project, partly because she herself feels that children in multi-storeys are too cooped up and as a result, are not so robust as their contemporaries'.<sup>43</sup> Somerville reports in her dissertation that 'the mothers themselves' felt that their children were affected in many ways by the lack of play facilities:

First, they felt that their children just didn't know how to mix with other children. On the rare contacts they had with other children, they either 'went wild' or else they sat in a corner and seemed afraid to join in play. Secondly, the mothers felt that their children clung

too much to them. They couldn't allow them to go outside the flat to play unaccompanied and this meant the children were never away from their company and, in consequence, were too dependent on their mothers. One of the mothers mentioned that she found this very demanding and often felt strained and irritable with her children by the end of the day and thus the children suffered.<sup>44</sup>

However in this extract it is the researcher's voice which can be heard rather than 'the mothers'. Somerville does not assign each individual an identity; rather they are discussed as a collective group, except if they are singled out for attention, such as Mrs Peden, the treasurer, who was accused of embezzling funds by the rest of the group. In contrast all of the outside visitors asked to come and give talks to the group are named and positions described in Somerville's dissertation.

In the playgroup's first six months Somerville tried to provide structure by involving the Scottish Pre-school Playgroups Association and its literature on the pedagogy of play. However it is highly likely that the mothers found this intimidating. After the first visit of a representative of the PPA Somerville suggested that the mothers found this to be 'a much more sophisticated concept than the mothers themselves had in mind'.<sup>45</sup> Somerville described the visits to other playgroups as useful, commenting that after a trip to the University's play group the mothers were 'much more playgroup orientated' in spite of the 'very different context'. But it was clear that the mothers were also overwhelmed by what they felt was expected of them. This was too professional for them. They wanted somewhere their children could play; perhaps the introduction of educational theory was simply too much. Moreover it was telling that Somerville justified the idea of a paid experienced play leader as she felt that if the mothers were left to do it themselves they would shout or smack children which would lead to resentment among the mothers.

As the project evolved, the ways in which the researchers' perspective on the mothers was mediated by the discourse on 'normal child development' become increasingly apparent. In particular, where the mothers were initially viewed as victims of their environment, in pressing need of external help, the mothers' evident difficulty in adapting to the playgroup ideology drew explanations based on notions of competence and intelligence. In describing the mothers' fraught attempts to run the playgroup, Somerville states 'they did not find it easy to absorb the idea that this was not simply a place where children were for a few hours'.<sup>46</sup> Here the mothers are not understanding the pedagogy of the playgroup as instructed by the PPA. For them maybe it was simply a place where their children were for a few hours. But Somerville sees this as the mothers missing the point. Also she suggests that 'the importance in children's development of well-organised play did not really make sense to them'.<sup>47</sup> Again the mothers are 'not getting' the discourses on 'normal child development' which was encouraged by the activities suggested by the PPA. As a final example, Somerville states that 'the letters which they wrote were also badly put, they were ungrammatical and tended to be chatty. They would certainly carry less weight with officials than well expressed letters such as professional women in the same situation might have written'.<sup>48</sup> This may have been true, but such an assessment simply draws attention to the class differences between the mothers being observed and Somerville as the researcher. It was notable that just before she finished her research in May 1968 Somerville found the group becoming more successful as they began to use some of the 'in phrases' learned from the PPA. This was her judgement, not that of the mothers themselves. Again

we do not hear their voices in Somerville's dissertation, we do not hear their assessment of the play group.

Following this initial six months of what Jephcott describes as 'quiet backing' from Somerville, the mothers 'got something started'.<sup>49</sup> The playgroup opened in May 1968 and Somerville withdrew from the group around the same time. Jephcott noted that 'by the time her work was finished she had almost certainly left them with more confidence in their own abilities than they had before'.<sup>50</sup> This was Jephcott's assessment we do not know what the mother's themselves felt about their achievements. At this point the mothers were in charge with no regular external help. The children loved it – as one mother stated 'First thing he asks when he wakes is whether it's the play room today'.<sup>51</sup> Jephcott continued with 'the experiment to test the assumption that some external personnel is needed if the beginnings of local initiative on a new housing estate are to be developed'. The group was kept 'under fairly close observation' for another 18 months.<sup>52</sup> Her plan was to formalise the group and for the University to appoint a part-time trained supervisor.<sup>53</sup> She was successful in gaining £100 from Rowntree Memorial Trust to pay for salary and equipment. A Mrs Gowan was hired, but when she was off ill 'Mrs McGregor was flustered and shouting at the children. Morale was low again'. Problems seemed to persist with children 'not playing with the toys constructively' and 'throwing them about' although at other visits the children 'appeared happy and were obviously enjoying the freedom tremendously'.<sup>54</sup> Jephcott states in *Homes in High Flats* that the group 'would have floundered time and again but for support from various sources, a councillor, Corporation officials, the Pre-School Playgroups Association and a grant from the Bellahouston Bequest Fund'. Moreover, its 'future was precarious' until it was taken over by the Save the Children Fund in July 1969.<sup>55</sup> Again we get no sense of the mother's own views on the group in *Homes in High Flats*.

It was not clear whether the mothers welcomed the intervention of the Save the Children Fund in 1969 and which mothers continued to use the playgroup. There was a distinct lack of the mother's voices in Somerville's description of her research which in turn influences Jephcott's analysis in *Homes in High Flats*, where she suggests that 'experience showed in Glasgow anyhow one could not depend on the tenants themselves to meet this sort of need' Nonetheless, the playgroup in Royston, a disadvantaged area of the city, was pioneering in attempting to provide an opportunity for play that was otherwise lacking. Unlike other sociologists and social scientists, Jephcott did not just focus on quantifying social problems and analysing data generated from questionnaires. She got out into the field and tried to empower people to help themselves to make positive changes. Jephcott secured funding for the extension of the experiment. There were also attempts at 'capacity building' in terms of educating the mothers in play pedagogy. This could be read as imposing the views of the researcher on the subject. Nevertheless in Somerville's description of this immersive research, and as a result the interpretation in *Homes in High Flats*, the voice of the mothers were largely absent. Instead their opinions and views are mediated through Somerville's description of events, her perspective, her views. We are left wondering how the mothers' felt about their experiences.

### **Conclusion: the mediated voice of the tenant and the archive of *Homes in High Flats***

While *Homes in High Flats* has been subject to criticism from historians of mass housing in Britain, the study can also be seen as pioneering in at least two important respects. Firstly, while it is

questionable how far Jephcott's policy recommendations were rigorously 'evidence based', by framing 'people and their homes' as the central research object *Homes in High Flats* participated in the first wave of a generalised valorisation of the experiences of the housing consumer within housing research. If previous studies had focused on the issue of housing conditions, *Homes in High Flats* sought to place tenants' 'feelings' centre-stage, as the chief form of data to be employed in assessing the 'social implications' of high flat living. As a result, the archive for the project constitutes a rich source of evidence for historical investigation of various aspects of the social experience of living on a flatted estate in Glasgow in the 1960s.

Secondly, where the general trend in housing research from the early 1960s was towards ever-greater quantification of 'user-satisfaction' levels, *Homes in High Flats* was unusual in the diversity of methods it employed to get beyond the abstractions of the social survey. The 'Royston Story' here illuminates a pioneering attempt to address a genuine need on the part of young mothers on some flatted estates, distinctive in the way it sought to integrate research practice with an effort to effect social change. Although it drew on an ambiguous language of 'self-help', the playgroup initiative could be seen as empowering women given the overarching aim to constitute groups as self-generating and self-regulated. More generally, where the practice of the social survey was highly impersonal and detached, the establishment of playgroups involved sustained researcher-participant interaction, evidencing a desire to establish a more intimate relationship between researcher and researched. This introduced a collaborative and immersive dimension into the research conspicuously lacking in studies of housing conducted in the following decade.

Yet, if these facets of *Homes in High Flats* were innovative and pioneering, what the above analysis also suggests is that the issue of the tenant's voice proved problematic during the course of the research. In her history of British public housing, Alison Ravetz has observed of post-war studies of council housing that:

However perceptive such work was there remains a virtually uncrossable barrier between the observer and observed. For anything closer to the actual subjective experience of living in council housing, we can only have recourse to a growing number of historical and autobiographical reminiscences.<sup>56</sup>

This judgement does not apply squarely to *Homes in High Flats*: the project archive is in fact a rich source for the historical study of 'the actual subjective experience' Ravetz mentions. Yet, the archival traces of Jephcott's deeper methodological thinking, read in conjunction with the claims put forward in the published report, also reveal the operation of a number of important 'barriers' mediating the interaction between 'observer and observed'. One such was the inflexibility of Jephcott's rationalism. The survey questionnaires enabled the team to collect interesting data, which might have been interpreted in a number of different ways. Because the data was at odds with the researchers' preconceived view of flats and their inhabitants, however, Jephcott effectively deemed it unreliable. Jephcott's commitment to rational judgement here, coupled with the class distance obtaining between observer and observed, blinded her to the complexity of the tenant's voice and, invoked as a necessary pre-condition for truth, formed the basis on which she could screen-out the

‘constant anxiety’ induced by the tenants’ responses. The ambivalent character of this screening-out was realised finally in the uneasy relation between the archive and published text: where Jephcott speaks on behalf of the tenant in the latter, substituting her own voice for theirs, the former remains a repository of the repressed, of meanings that unsettle the published text’s central ideas.

The Royston Story illuminates this process from another vantage point. Where the playgroup initiative reflected Jephcott’s interest in immersive and collaborative approaches, the voice of the young mothers concerned is not present in the materials documenting, judging and evaluating the progress of the initiative. Instead, how the women felt, what they apparently said, is reported indirectly, via the representational strategies of Jephcott and her researchers. What this language reveals is the close co-operation between Cartesian precepts and wider social relations of power in structuring the interaction between researcher and researched. Where the young mothers are initially cast as ‘victims’ of their domestic environment, as suffering with their ‘cooped up’ children, the discourse on ‘normal child development’ also subjected mothers to special expectations and judgements. When the mothers fail to perform the definition of motherhood expected of them, judgement comes to focus on the competency, intelligence and behaviour of the women themselves, rather than the incompatibility of the playgroup ideology with the mothers’ habitus and circumstances. Once again, where the precepts of the researcher are rational and incontrovertible, the mothers are assessed on their capacity to make themselves known in terms intelligible to the observer. The dualities of Cartesian subjectivity are thus mobilised in naturalising the hierarchical effects of both class and gender, illuminating how the asymmetry between observer and observed was in practice embedded within wider social relations of power.

On these grounds, then, the idea that Jephcott was committed to the unmediated reporting of ‘the authentic voice of her participants’ is subject to a number of significant qualifications. Such qualifications, however, do nothing to diminish the value of Jephcott’s work to the social historian of post-war British culture. The archive of *Homes in High Flats* is not only a rich source on the subjectivities of high rise tenants; it is also a deeply ambivalent textualisation of the intellectual subjectivities of the researchers themselves, forged through their struggles to make sense of the social world via the lens of contemporary research methods, epistemologies and social relations. Through making these struggles the object of analysis we are better able to understand the dynamics shaping the production of sociological knowledge during the 1960s and, though this, to further understanding of Pearl Jephcott’s complex and multi-dimensional approach to social research.

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- <sup>1</sup> John Goodwin and Henrietta O'Connor (2014) 'Pearl Jephcott: The Legacy of a Forgotten Sociological Research Pioneer', *Sociology* 49, pp. 1-17. See also, Annmarie Turnbull (2000) 'Giving girls a voice: Pearl Jephcott's work for young people', *Youth and Policy* 66, pp. 88-100; Annmarie Turnbull (2002) 'Classic texts revisited: Clubs for girls', *Youth and Policy* 73, pp. 66-74.
- <sup>2</sup> Goodwin and O'Connor, 'Pearl Jephcott', p. 5-6
- <sup>3</sup> Mark K. Smith (2008) 'Pearl Jephcott and the Lives of Ordinary People', *Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*. Available at: [http://www.infed.org/thinkers/pearl\\_jephcott.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/pearl_jephcott.htm); Alice Coleman (1984) *Utopia on Trial. Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (London: Hilary Shipman), pp. 11-13.
- <sup>4</sup> University of Glasgow Archives (UGA): DC 127. Study of High Flats. Department of Economic and Social Research, University of Glasgow
- <sup>5</sup> For general accounts of the British high rise experience see Miles Horsey (1988) 'Multi-storey council housing in Britain: Introduction and spread,' *Planning Perspectives* 3, pp. 167-196; Anthony Sutcliffe (ed.) (1974) *Multi-storey living: the British working-class experience* (London: Croom Helm).
- <sup>6</sup> 'Getting Tough with Housing Hooligans', *Glasgow Herald*, 15 March 1965
- <sup>7</sup> See in particular Miles Glendinning and Stephan Muthesius (1994) *Tower Block: modern public housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (New Haven: The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art), p. 315 and Patrick Dunleavy (1981) *The politics of mass housing in Britain, 1945-1975: a study of corporate power and professional influence in the welfare state* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 149-151.
- <sup>8</sup> Pearl Jephcott and Hilary Robinson (1971), *Homes in High Flats: Some of the human problems involved in multi-storey housing* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd), p. 9-10.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 131.
- <sup>10</sup> A. Ravetz (2001) *Council housing and culture: The history of a social experiment* (London: Routledge), p. 105.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>12</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, p. 2.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Jephcott suggests that 'the fact that rent and rates were rather above those for other council dwellings of corresponding size, suggested that high flats might attract a better-off population. [...] Popular opinion supported this hunch about the socio-economic level of this new population. It was "a wee bit class" to live in a high flat. You had moved up in every sense'. *Ibid*, p. 47.
- <sup>15</sup> M. Savage (2010) *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 187-214.
- <sup>16</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, p. 26.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Suggested subject for continuation on intensive lines of current study on the social implications of multi-storey housing', 24 July 1968, (UGA) DC127/14
- <sup>18</sup> It has been remarked by housing researchers that the use of such a tenant satisfaction question can be misleading, even when used with a five-point Likert scale, never mind a binary response structure as Jephcott used. M. Satsangi and A. Kearns, (1992) 'The use and interpretation of tenant satisfaction surveys in British social housing', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 10, pp. 317-31.
- <sup>19</sup> Transcript of Mr Evans, Castlemilk, (UGA) DC127/1/2
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>21</sup> Jephcott was in fact inconsistent on this issue. On the one side, she viewed tenants' prior experience of atrocious housing conditions as inhibiting their ability to arrive at an objective assessment of flats' social utility. On the other, her efforts to elicit evidence of women's isolation presupposed a contrast between women's experience of past and present housing.
- <sup>22</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, p. 127.
- <sup>23</sup> For a useful account of the way thought and emotion are related within Cartesian subjectivity see, Alison M Jaggar (2009) 'Love and Knowledge: emotion in feminist epistemology' in J Harding and E. Deidre Pribram (eds.) *Emotions: a cultural studies reader* (London: Routledge), p.50-69.
- <sup>24</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, p. 80.
- <sup>25</sup> Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Homes for today and tomorrow* (London: H.M.S.O., 1961), para 176 .
- <sup>26</sup> Report of the Sub-Committee of the Central Housing Advisory Committee on Social Needs and Problems of Families Living in Large Blocks of Flats (1952) *Living in Flats* (London: H.M.S.O); J. Maizels (1961) *Two to Five in High Flats: An enquiry into play provision for children aged two to five years living in high flats* (London: Housing Centre Trust).



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- <sup>27</sup> Lady Allen of Hurtwood (1968) *Planning for Play* (London: Thames and Hudson); A. Davis (2015) *Pre-school Childcare in England, 1939-2010* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 4; M. Thomson (2013) *Lost freedom: The landscape of the child and the British post-war settlement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- <sup>28</sup> P. Jephcott (1964) *A Troubled Area: Notes on Nottinghill* (London: Faber and Faber) and P. Jephcott (1975) *Young families in high flats : a short study based on sustained contact with parents and their children in three areas of Birmingham* (Birmingham: Social Development Division, Birmingham Housing Department).
- <sup>29</sup> (UGA) DC127/15/5, 'The situation in Glasgow as seen in the course of our study', 1968.
- <sup>30</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, pp. 140-41
- <sup>31</sup> Davis, *Pre-school Childcare in England*, pp. 160-87.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>34</sup> Jephcott, *A Troubled Area*, p. 127.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 129.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 130.
- <sup>37</sup> (UGA) DC127/15/5, 'The situation in Glasgow as seen in the course of our study'
- <sup>38</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, p. 98.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>41</sup> (UGA) DC127/15/5, 'Provision for children in multi-storey blocks'.
- <sup>42</sup> Valerie Somerville (1969) 'Charles Street Playgroup' (University of Glasgow: unpublished masters dissertation), p. 1 (copy in (UGA) DC127/16).
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.
- <sup>45</sup> *ibid*, p. 6.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>49</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, p. 98.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.
- <sup>52</sup> (UGA) DC127/16/4, 'Playgroups in Royston', 1968.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>55</sup> Jephcott and Robinson, *Homes in High Flats*, p. 98.
- <sup>56</sup> Ravetz, *Council housing and culture* p. 158.