

Fourth National Housing Conference

**Perth, Western Australia
October 26-28**

**Housing Service Officers:
Life at the Frontline**

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September 2005

Introduction

Housing Service Officers (HSOs) in the Victorian Office of Housing are required to ‘exercise discretion’ in their day-to-day work managing housing assets and providing services to public housing tenants. The organisation of this work has been a focus of review and restructure over the past decade. This responds to both a new client service focus in the broader context of a changing tenant profile which places more complex service delivery demands on the ‘financially stretched’ Office of Housing. This paper focuses on the work that Housing Services Officers do on a day-to-day basis by drawing on recent ethnographic research of a group of HSOs in metropolitan Melbourne. It addresses the question: ‘What do we know about the way in which front line housing officers manage competing objectives in their daily work? It is very important that the day-to-day work of Housing Service Officers is understood at a time when larger scale processes of review and restructure are underway.

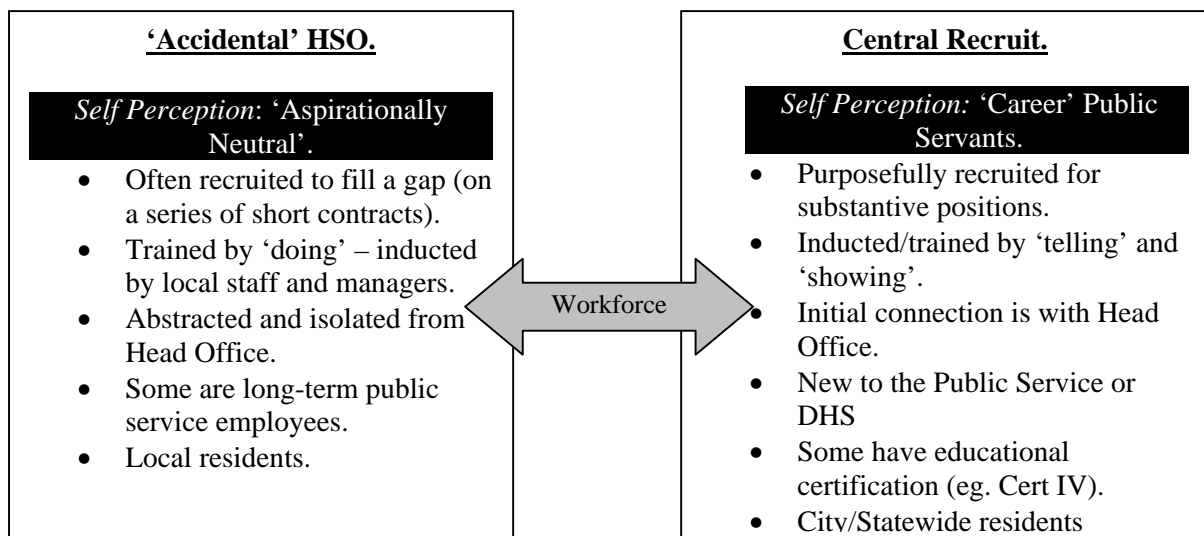
The paper responds to this question in three parts. First, it describes HSOs. This is done by distinguishing between ‘accidental HSOs’ and the newly arrived ‘central recruits’. These are two broad types of HSOs that become apparent when we examine factors such as recruitment, aspirations and careers. Second, the paper discusses the daily work of HSOs and illustrates how they fulfil the position description requirement to ‘exercise discretion’ in their day-to-day work. This is done by presenting three vignettes which give some insight into the way HSOs experience situations and make sense of their work. Finally, the paper examines how HSOs manage competing objectives in a ‘financially stretched’ organisation. It does this by using a narrative analysis method to locate and analyse contradictory story-lines. Using this approach, we can learn a good deal about how HSOs manage competing objectives in their daily work.

Who are Housing Services Officers?

There are approximately 400 HSO positions in the OoH and they comprise approximately 80 percent of all Office of Housing frontline positions. They are ‘the workers’ of the organisation who very clearly see themselves in these terms through self-description. They are ‘the foot soldiers’, ‘the worker ants’, ‘coalminers at the coalface’ and ‘the real workers’. Who are these ‘real workers’? One way of

understanding this is to distinguish between the ways in which they become a HSO. The stories they tell suggest two typical pathways into these positions: ‘the accidental HSO’ and the ‘central recruit’. This distinction in pathways is closely associated with the processes of induction and learning, relationship and knowledge of OoH and the public housing system, relationship to the area and career mobility. Figure 1 presents a summary of these two different pathways and helps us understand the people who become housing officers.

Figure 1. Pathways to housing services work.



Traditionally, the Office of Housing, like many employers, has filled vacancies with people simply looking for a job that meet the basic HSO skill requirements. Very often, the way they find these jobs is through personal networks. We can call these HSOs, who comprise the majority of HSOs, the ‘accidental HSOs’.

‘I came to answer the phone for a few weeks and never really left’ and ‘I was bored at home and my neighbour worked for the housing commission, she asked if I wanted some work now the kids were at school’ are typical stories of how people ‘accidentally’ come to be HSOs. ‘I never intended to stay in this job and sometimes I’m surprised at how long I have been here’ and ‘you reach a point that it’s not really worth looking for another job, anyway, how do I know that a job elsewhere is going to be better?’ also illustrate the ongoing ‘accidentalness’ of some long serving HSOs.

The second, more recent pathway is central recruitment. These are people recruited by central office through advertisement, information sessions and a formal selection processes and at present, comprise a small percentage of the HSOs. Because these

HSOs are recruited centrally, there is no connection made between where they live and where they work. The primary concern is that these HSOs are interested in housing management. The applicants on the other hand, view the HSO job as an opportunity to start a public service career. Comments such as ‘I was interested in this job because the department offers a chance to step into other fields and other roles’ and ‘It’s just a starting point for me, a chance to skill up. I’m not going to be a HSO forever, but you have to learn fast and learn lots in this job’ typify the way these central recruits talk about being an HSO.

The induction of ‘accidental HSOs’ and ‘central recruits’ is markedly different. The traditional, ‘accidental’ HSOs are locally inducted and trained by ‘doing’ and ‘being thrown in feet first’. ‘Accidental HSOs’ are trained under a largely informal apprenticeship model where new staff are shown around the office, introduced to staff, mentored by a fellow HSOs, enrolled in formal training sessions and quickly allocated ‘a patch’. The duration of this ‘apprenticeship’ varies; under optimum conditions some weeks are spent ‘skilling up’ and ‘learning the ropes’. Staffing shortages, large and redistributed patches with escalating rent arrears sometimes shortens this process to a few days. In contrast, the induction of central recruits is a lengthy process. ‘Central recruits’ spend six weeks at Head Office learning about the Department of Human Services; roles, responsibilities, policies, customer service, conflict management, computer software, and team work. Centralised induction is used to promote a culture of customer service, an understanding of the changing nature of the ‘public tenant’ and aims to produce HSOs who support and implement the customer service charter of the department.

The final distinction between ‘accidental HSOs’ and ‘central recruits’ is a different home/work relationship. Typically, ‘accidental HSOs’ are local (or in live in surrounding suburbs) and have chosen to work in a particular office due to family commitments, ease of travel, a relationship with existing staff or as a career progression. Of course, there are exceptions; some staff live some distance away and accept a job in order to re-enter the workforce (and over time, hope to secure a job closer to home); ‘I have been at home with kids for a few years and took this job to

re-enter the workforce – I’m really interested in aged care and the drive from home is killing me. Being a HSO is just one part of my long term plan.’

In contrast, Central recruits are more likely to live further away from the OoH local office. Centrally recruited HSOs are initially not allocated to a particular region, office, or patch. Their role in the organisation is as a member of ‘a trained pool of work ready HSOs’ and ‘a resource to backfill vacancies’. ‘We were told that we would be offered positions anywhere in the metropolitan region, not necessarily close to home.’ In theory, central recruits have little or no knowledge of a particular office and are perceived as ‘neutral’ and without the ‘idiosyncrasies’ that come with unstructured and informal peer based training. As a result of this formal training and induction, centrally recruited HSOs are exposed to contemporary housing management discourse. One HSO describe this process as ‘being taught the party line’. Unlike their ‘accidental’ counterparts, centrally recruited HSOs are more likely to see their housing work as the first step in a planned and deliberate career as a public servant; ‘to accept responsibility above and beyond the stated job; generate and promote new ideas...to talk and act with clients in mind” (Housing, 2002)

Whether the central recruits can change the culture and practices at the local level is not yet clear. Certainly, the number of ‘central recruits’ in the local office is small when compared to the number of ‘accidental HSOs’. Also when central recruits arrive in the local office they are quickly exposed to ‘how things really are’. One centrally recruited HSO told of a ‘baptism of fire’ as she discovered that her patch was large and disparate, her arrears required daily intervention, some of her tenants were ‘actively anti-social’ and some properties were difficult to let, even though the minister spoke of ‘thousands on the waiting list’. When centrally recruited HSOs approach fellow HSOs with complex issues, they receive localised advice; ‘home grown remedies’ simultaneously offering an attractive ‘quick fix’ and compliance with policy.

HSOs work

HSOs in Melbourne’s western suburbs work in a community where they are constantly interacting with people who are on low incomes and experience many

other forms of disadvantage. These people include those experiencing mental illness, physical disabilities, homelessness, single parenthood, drug dependency and family violence. HSOs interactions with these tenants take place in the local office waiting room, at the counter and in interview rooms. A large percentage of the HSO's day is spent talking with current tenants or those hoping to be allocated a property. HSOs talk with aging Greek and Italian couples, young men wearing beanies and mirrored sunglasses, large Somali families, and young mothers looking after their children while frantically typing text messages on their mobiles. These discussions cover a range of topics; recent prison experience, domestic violence, difficulty with rent, the birth of children, the introduction of a new partner, maintenance problems and a range of other issues.

It is against this background that HSOs will often depict their work as overwhelmingly mundane. This is the term they use to describe their work on a typical day which can include assessing applications for rent rebates, transfers and bonds, conducting interviews, obtaining quotes for new fences, attending the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), attending staff meetings and chasing rental arrears make up a standard day. 'Sometimes it feels like my work is little more than factory work – rent arrears, occupancy rates, interviews and more of the same.' In their stories, HSOs portray their job as dominated by routine and procedure; 'chasing rent arrears is like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge, you finally get to the end of your list and the people at the start are behind again!'

These stories of 'mundane' work also carry a sub-text which suggests that the work is anything but mundane (if we take the word 'mundane' to mean routine and monotonous). This sub-text indicates that the work is also complex as HSOs assist tenants with rent rebates, repairs and neighbourhood disputes. The complexity of the OoH procedures is often made even more complex when the tenants and applicants are experiencing domestic violence, depression, disability and drug dependence. As one HSO remarked, many of the issues they deal with day-to-day 'are more social than housing'. One HSO calls these interactions 'the thorny ones'; family violence, poverty, child protection and health issues; interactions that are sometimes forgotten when new incidents take precedent. 'I'm like a computer; I overwrite one event with the next, often an even bigger one'.

Head Office represents these ‘thorny issues’ in terminology such as ‘Complex and Multiple Needs’, ‘Anti-Social Behaviour’, ‘the provision of joined-up services’ and ‘transcending traditional program boundaries’. At the frontline ‘transcending traditional program boundaries’ becomes working with ‘young single mothers’, ‘the mentally ill’, ‘the recurring homeless’, ‘recently released prisoners’ and ‘the drug/alcohol affected’. HSOs stories describe dealing with often-intractable problems, a challenging workload with sometimes competing objectives, in an environment with limited and declining resources.

Some examples are;

- HSOs tell of their intervention in neighbourhood disputes spanning years; motivated by an event that occurred so long ago that details have been forgotten, only to be supplanted by a new set of issues and disputes.
- Attempting to house a prospective tenant in a particular neighbourhood, with the applicant subject to three intervention orders from tenants in the vicinity.
- Pressure for placement resulted in an HSO’s reluctantly placing a young ‘mentally ill’ and ‘drug affected’ tenant in a block of flats that is, in the main, housing elderly persons.
- Moving new tenants into homes that have been ‘inadequately’ prepared due to budget constraints.

HSOs acknowledge that these are not the most appropriate solutions, not ‘best practice’; but it gets someone ‘off the waiting list’, and provides the HSO with some ‘breathing space’ whilst a more appropriate housing outcome is found.

Stories such as the ones above, illustrate the pressure HSOs feel to find expeditious and prompt solution(s) to complex and enduring problems. ‘This tenant has a history of violence; he fights with his neighbours, abuses his girlfriends and hates his brothers. It’s taken him a lifetime to become like this, and I’m expected to provide a house that will address all these problems!’ HSOs feel that high staff turnover (during my 7 month placement, 13 of 30 HSOs left), large patches (a ‘patch’ being the number of properties an HSOs is responsible for), more time spent on the front desk, increased VCAT hearings, frequent phone calls, and home visits result in ‘an ever

increasing' workload for HSOs. One HSO expressed this increased workload as 'a cake that is being carved into ever thinner slices'.

In their stories, HSOs acknowledge this combination of 'mundane' and 'complex' work results in some confusion around how their performance should be measured. A number of HSOs felt that Key Performance Indicators (K.P.I.s) fail to measure 'real' work and believe that Key Performance Indicators overlook complex and difficult work in order to appraise easily measured and quantifiable tasks. 'It's dead easy to measure rent arrears and how much you've blown the budget, it's another thing to measure how you have resolved an anti-social'. A number of HSOs told of the seemingly contradictory nature of some K.P.I.s; one indicator measures how occupancy levels are maintained through sustaining tenancy; another measures rent arrears and the subsequent action taken to recover lost income. 'Do I call round to see how they are going, or do I take them to VTAC to get their rent or evict them? It's very hard to do both'

In order to better appreciate these competing objectives, this paper illustrates the work of HSOs in a series of stories – drawn from HSOs first hand experience and my participant observations of their work. To protect the identity of individuals and ensure participant anonymity, HSOs stories are represented as vignettes. The result is a journal of interwoven contributions, single stories merged to form case studies. Admittedly, case studies lack broad representativeness, but they make up for this weakness in the explanatory power of intensive research that produces 'thick descriptions' (Van Maanen, 1988) The development of these 'thick descriptions' provides opportunities to explore alternative perspectives and understandings of the complexity of HSOs work:

Story One; "The smacker"

'Sue' is a (new) single mother presenting at interview to discuss housing, as her relationship with both her partner and neighbours has reached the point that 'nothing can repair the damage'. She is accompanied by her 6 year old son, an energetic and bored boy who has just spent two hours at Centrelink. She is seen after a short wait and as she outlines her situation, she casually smacks her son for jumping around.

After the HSO explained the procedure, what documents are needed and the likelihood of time on the waiting list before a permanent solution is found, Sue accompanies the next smack with the sentence “sit still, or this nice man won’t give *us* a house”. The jumping continues, as does the smacking until the HSO asks her ‘not to worry about the jumping’, as it doesn’t bother him at all and it will have no effect on the outcome of the interview.

As the interview draws to a close Sue begins to understand that she will not leave the office with her new keys (as she had hoped) and begins to direct her disappointment towards her son, grabbing him and shouting “see, I told you that if you didn’t behave we wouldn’t get a house”.

Common stressors in HSOs work include; acts of physical violence, threatening language, anger management, verbal abuse and other explicit ‘critical events’. In their stories, HSOs explain that, in reality, it is frequent and commonplace events, such as the one above, that result in workplace stress and anxiety. ‘The dangerous stuff has protocols, counselling and is seen as ‘serious’ by management. But really, the little stuff wears you down; the kids, the drugs and the genuine poverty of some people can make this difficult work’. In cases such as these, HSOs believe that the stress comes not from the complexity of these interactions, but from the regularity of their occurrence.

Story Two; The update letter.

Early in the fieldwork, I spent some time sitting in the waiting area, occasionally talking with tenants, but mostly waiting in silence, watching the television that was rarely turned on. On this occasion, a Somali family arrived at the counter. Both the parents and the children were immaculately dressed and seemed to be in high spirits. The father was carrying a letter. It became obvious that their English was very basic; the father was the family spokesman and after a few minutes and some negotiation it became apparent that the letter he was holding was assumed to be a letter of offer; a house!

The staff member at the counter asked to see this letter, and after a few minutes of considered silence, set about explaining that this letter was a ‘merge’ letter – one of many ‘update’ letters, generated to ensure that the department has the most up-to-date family contact details.

The response of the family was palpable – the older daughter began to weep, their mother gazed out the window as the father carefully re-folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. They left the office.

The ‘update letter’ is not an unusual story, nor is this story specific to housing; the same story might be told in many other agencies and departments. The importance of this story is the impact such correspondence has on the day-to-day interaction of HSOs and OoH clients. HSOs feel that ‘update’ letters and other communications that are ‘poorly structured, convoluted and difficult to understand’ further exacerbate an already strained relationship with some tenants. ‘Some of the stuff that comes out of here and head office is so hard to understand, it takes me three reads to explain it to tenants, and I’ve been in housing for years’ This type of ‘needless’ and ‘pointless’ interaction is seen by some HSOs as contributing little to the development of a ‘customer service ethos’ as ‘dictated’ by head office.

Story Three; the Smokers Coffee Table.

One component of the work of HSOs is home visits, a cyclical process that requires HSOs to visit tenants at least once every two years. Individuals approach this activity in different ways and with varying degrees of success – some telephone first, some drop by, some send out letters to make appointments. Some do a mixture of the above. In this case, the HSO was spending the morning catching up with tenants who rarely called in at the office as their neighbourhood was some distance away. When the HSO knocked on ‘Bills’ front door, he invited them in, put the kettle on and lit up what was to be first of many cigarettes. The lounge room was clearly the ‘heart of the house’; TV, DVD player, photographs of kids and a coffee table as the centre piece to the room. The coffee table was one of Bills favourite possessions and over a smoke he described how he came to own such a work of art.

It was a full size sculpture of a nude woman, lying on her back with her arms and legs spread to hold the not insignificant weight of the large glass surface (on which the HSO's coffee cup was strategically placed).

The artist had gone to great lengths to achieve anatomical accuracy and represent physical features and skin tone. After coffee and a lengthy chat, both the HSO and Bill left the house at the same time, as Bill had run out of smokes.

The 'Smokers Coffee Table' illustrates the difficulty of providing a home-based service to tenants and 'a healthier and safer environment for employees' in a workplace 'free from unacceptable behaviour including discrimination and sexual harassment'. In their stories, HSOs understand this complexity and recognise the challenge faced by head office as they attempt to reconcile these conflicting objectives. As one HSO puts it 'I know strictly speaking it's a government building, but really, it's their home first and they should be able to relax and smoke'.

The 'smacker', 'the update letter' and 'the Smokers Coffee Table' are three of many stories told by HSOs of their interactions with tenants. HSOs use these stories as a device to share and make sense of their experience. Public narrative (that is; talking with other staff about your work) is commonly used to share a problem, listen to similar accounts and develop a subsequent 'a plan of attack'. HSOs use narrative to guide their decision-making, evaluate their 'plan of attack' and to interpret housing policy.

Resolving the tensions

How might narrative analysis help to understand how HSOs resolve tension in their work? Narrative analysis is the method often used in ethnographic research because it guides the researcher in locating and analysing contradictory story lines. It also allows for exploration of the way in which narrative meanings are constructed through social relationships (Daly, 1997). Discourse theory proposes that the forms and characteristics of organisations are constructed by (and sustained through) 'the discourse of the individual'. This being the case, housing officers both shape and are shaped by what is 'said' about working in the Office of Housing. Narrative is the

means by which HSO's work to create and reproduce their social structures, relationships and identities within the organisation.

This research uses a variety of collection methods to capture HSO narratives including; unstructured interviews, notes from staff meetings, discussions over lunch and morning tea, overheard conversations in an open plan office and many 'door stop' discussions with staff. This approach results in a 'HSO story' that has been constructed from data gathered from these different types of interactions. How, the tension in the job is managed can, at least in part, be understood by identifying two types of narrative constructions: low-tension narratives, typically positive statements about the work, and high-tension narratives, typically negative statements about the job.

Not every HSO uses narrative to resolve tension in their work, some simply leave. As mentioned earlier, in seven months, more than a third of the HSOs left my fieldwork office. They left for various reasons: OoH projects, higher duties, promotion, family illness, workcover, birth of babies, fatigue, dissatisfaction with the OoH and the lure of a higher paid job with other agencies. One new HSO commenced work with the understanding that he was hoping to be offered a 'better' job with another department. After a few weeks, he accepted this offer and departed.

Nevertheless, all HSOs, even those hoping to 'get better jobs', share and understand their experience by 'talking about' their work. They are constantly talking about tenant behaviour, regulations and policies, the physical infrastructure of public housing, other agencies, interactions with management and their own ethics. Through this talk HSOs are resolving tensions in their daily work by conversing with other HSOs, listening to the experience of fellow staff, speaking with managers and then formulating a 'plan of attack'.

Figure 2. Examples of ‘everyday narrative’.¹

| Low Tension | High Tension |
|--|---|
| Being a permanent member of staff gives you security and confidence. | Your hands are tied by management everywhere you go. Being on contract makes you nervous about speaking up. |
| I have to put on different hats for different tenants. | My worry with the Housing Office Review is a loss of skills – multi-tasking is the best part of the patch model. |
| It’s my patch and I’m proud of it. | There are some nasty ones out there. |
| I came to answer the phones for a few weeks and never left. | Rosters, standby, vacant positions and covering the desk negate the value of planning ahead. |
| Home visits are really valuable, but mainly as a mobile maintenance call centre. | Clients now have major issues, when you knock on the door you don’t know what you will get. |
| Having been a ministry tenant is really valuable – you have lived it. | They should be told that they will never get a house – 11 years on the waiting list, it’s not fair on the HSO’s to have to fob these poor people. |
| Knowing that you can make a real difference to some ones life is rewarding. | The crap printed in the papers is always wrong and head office never corrects it. |

High-tension narratives are used to present individual tensions or anxieties. HSOs express conflicting objectives in phrases such as ‘poor management’, ‘lack of leadership’, ‘mixed messages from head office’, ‘your hands are tied everywhere you go and being on contract makes you too nervous about speaking up’ and ‘the crap printed in the papers is always wrong and head office never corrects it’.

High-tension narratives are frequently public; expressed in staff meetings, briefings, training sessions, the lunch room, morning teas, team meetings and other gatherings where there is little or no management moderation. These narratives are typified by the absence of tenant related stories and the preponderance of ‘management’ related stories. Through these narratives, HSOs begin to understand the tensions and conflicts in their work. High-tension narratives also serve another purpose; they allow HSOs to ensure that their experience is not exclusive; HSOs use high-tension narrative to audit the experience of others and ‘make sure that this crap is happening to everyone, not just me’. At one staff meeting, a HSO complaining about the smell at a property was provided with immediate feedback; other HSOs had all been subjected to the same, or worse, and it was simply part of the job.

¹ Note: The examples used are paraphrased and represented in a single voice, so as to ensure participant anonymity.

Low-tension narrative is regularly used to describe workers experience with customers. Terms such as ‘reasonable’ or ‘unreasonable’ are used. Light-hearted labels are also found in low-tension narratives. Low-tension narratives ‘the nutters’ and ‘the counter-jumpers’ are used by HSOs (amongst others) to understand tenants with difficult behaviours. Low-tension narratives are dominant in one-on-one interviews, tenant related stories are used to explain and illustrate the complexity of day-to-day work and the sometimes-difficult relationship with tenants, fellow workers and management. Low-tension narratives are also used to evaluate and interpret housing policy when HSOs test policies against their knowledge of tenant behaviour. ‘How does the policy for anti-social behaviour help me deal with a person that the police can’t control?’ is one example of this ‘testing’ of policy.

In some story telling HSOs use both high-tension and low-tension narrative. In the Smokers Coffee Table story the HSO describes her experience with a blend of both low-tension and high-tension narratives by using saying ‘I ask politely if they would mind not smoking, but at the end of the day, it’s their home’ and ‘the coffee table was a hoot, not intended to offend me particularly, it was there for all to see – a work of art so to speak’. In this way the HSO ‘safely’ positions herself in an experience that might be considered by some as a breach of worksafe policy which includes the right to freedom from sexual harassment and the provision of a smoke free workplace.

In order to resolve the tensions in their daily work, HSO’s move between high-tension and low-tension narratives, rewriting and reinterpreting their experience in an effort to resolve the tension of working in a ‘financially stretched’ organisation

Conclusion.

HSOs manage competing objectives in their daily work in a number of ways. First, they make sense of their work by ‘talking about it’. HSOs begin to understand their experience by sharing stories about tenants, fellow workers, and management. These stories, expressed in both high-tension and low-tension narratives, are fundamental to the formation of ‘group narratives’. Group narratives are promptly passed on to new staff and become an integral part of ‘telling it like it is’. These narrative constructions do two things; form a shared set of beliefs and develop a suite of common responses

which are used to manage the tensions in HSOs work. Both 'accidental' and 'centrally recruited' HSOs, over time, come to a 'rough' consensus about these shared beliefs and common responses.

Finally, HSOs use narrative to interpret and manipulate policy to manage competing objectives in their daily work. HSOs are profoundly influenced by policy; hefty manuals cover property allocations, rebates, complaints, bonds and rental arrears. HSOs interpret these manuals to solve problems; to check on 'the official line' and ensure that their understandings are accurate. Further, HSOs use narrative construction to comply with policy. HSOs clarify the problem, read the appropriate policy to other HSOs, corroborate their interpretation and finally, develop a 'plan of attack'.

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