Constructing Empathy in Housing Discourse

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Abstract: This paper examines how empathy is constructed, mobilised, and contested in political discourse on housing, using Poland as a strategic case to explore broader mechanisms of affective governance. Drawing on a critical realist framework, Critical Discourse Analysis, and insights from social empathy theory, affect studies, and critical housing research, the paper analyses how political actors use empathy to legitimise policies, assign moral value, and frame housing tenure in terms of responsibility or failure. The study draws on a cross-party housing debate held before Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections, supplemented by media statements from 2023–2025. It identifies four recurring patterns: (1) withholding empathy from those who deviate from the ownership norm, (2) conditional distribution of empathy, (3) selective recognition of structural barriers, and (4) empathy as a site of ideological struggle. These patterns reflect broader ideological logics and institutional constraints. The paper contributes to housing studies by offering an affect-sensitive framework for understanding how emotional discourse shapes responses to housing inequality.

Keywords: East European housing; welfare policy.

Introduction

Political narratives, fuelled by emotional appeals, are powerful tools for shaping housing policy. They determine whose needs are prioritised, which strategies are pursued, and how housing is valued within society. Scholars such as Sahlin (1995), Gurney (1999), Ronald (2008), Manzi (2009), and Jacobs (2015) emphasise that understanding these narratives is crucial for analysing housing policies and their broader social implications. Achieving equitable housing systems requires policymakers to critically engage with dominant ideologies and foster counter-narratives addressing the diverse needs of all social groups.

This paper examines how social empathy is constructed in the political discourse on housing and how these constructions are shaped by material and institutional conditions. While the empirical material comes from the Polish context, the research addresses broader questions in housing studies: How are emotions mobilised to legitimise or deny claims to housing? How do political actors frame moral worth in relation to housing tenure? And how is empathy strategically extended, withheld, or instrumentalised across different settings?

Recent scholarship in housing studies and political theory has shown growing interest in the affective dimensions of housing policy – particularly how emotions like empathy, fear, or shame legitimise market-based approaches or reinforce symbolic exclusions (Jacobs 2015; Murphy and Levy 2012; Pedwell 2012). Yet little is known about the rise of a discourse centred on 'compassion', 'kindness', 'empathy', or 'care', which gained visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reframing extends caring values beyond private emotion into public imperatives within welfare and housing systems (Bierre, Howden-Chapman, 2022). A gap remains regarding how this language operates within European housing policies and intersects with inequality and legitimacy.

This study addresses that gap by analysing empathy as a central affective and political construct in housing discourse. It brings together insights from critical housing studies, affect theory, and social empathy theory within a critical realist framework. This lens traces how empathy operates not only interpersonally, but as a discursive and institutional mechanism within housing provision and moral regulation.

Poland is analytically strategic. Although shaped by its unique post-socialist context, it reflects wider patterns in housing discourse: (1) empathy is withheld from individuals who fail to meet the norm of homeownership; (2) empathy is distributed selectively, implying varying levels of moral deservingness; (3) structural barriers are acknowledged unevenly, constraining the potential for structural empathy; and (4) empathy becomes a terrain of ideological contestation, contributing to the fragmentation of institutional responsibility and care. These patterns are shown to reflect broader ideological logics and institutional constraints, influencing whose housing struggles are recognised. The 2023 housing debate – followed by two years of fragmented media interventions and intra-coalition tension – offers a rare empirical window into how empathy is unevenly constructed across ideological lines. Poland thus serves as a concentrated expression of dynamics observable in other housing regimes.

By applying a critical realist approach, the paper makes both theoretical and methodological contributions. It integrates Segal's (2011, 2018) model of social empathy with affective critiques and Bhaskar's (1998) stratified ontology. This enables a shift from analysing discourse to explain the emotional and ideological structures that condition it. Methodologically, it shows how Critical Discourse Analysis can be adapted to reveal the

causal interplay between discourse and structural conditions. As such, the findings speak to international debates on how emotion, power, and inequality shape housing governance.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a critical realist ontological and epistemological stance (Bhaskar 1998), which holds that while social phenomena are shaped by human interpretation, they are underpinned by real structures and mechanisms that exist independently of perception. Critical realism emphasises the interplay between structure and agency and the stratified nature of reality. It enables a multi-level investigation of both the discursive expressions of empathy in housing policy and the causal mechanisms – material, institutional, and ideational – that condition them (Fletcher 2016).

Emotions are viewed here as emergent properties arising from interactions between individuals and socio-structural contexts (Barrett 2017). They are not merely psychological states or discursive tropes, but socially embedded forces that shape political practice and institutional response. This study focuses on empathy as an important emotion in housing discourse, drawing on Segal's (2011, 2018) concept of social empathy. This frames empathy as a socio-cognitive capacity involving structural awareness and macro-perspective-taking – essential for addressing housing inequality.

To better understand the role of empathy in housing, this study draws on research showing that different forms of housing tenure (such as owning or renting) often reflect and reinforce social hierarchies and exclusions (Sahlin 1995; Gurney 1999; Ronald 2008; Manzi 2009). Homeownership is commonly portrayed as a moral ideal, while tenants are frequently seen as socially inferior. Scholars such as Jacobs (2015), Bierre and Howden-Chapman (2022), and Murphy and Levy (2012) argue that housing systems operate as emotional regimes – where feelings of belonging, legitimacy, and worth are shaped not just by policies, but also by emotional and cultural norms.

Finally, affect theory (Pedwell 2012; Neumann 2012) informs the study's focus on emotional logics in political discourse. These perspectives show how empathy can serve as affective governance – selectively circulated to uphold political legitimacy without challenging structural injustice. Emotions, therefore, are not apolitical or private, but mobilised and regulated within neoliberal systems of housing provision.

Taken together, this theoretical framework supports the study's critical realist aim: to move from observing discourse to explaining the structural conditions that shape it. By combining social empathy theory, affective critique, and structural housing analysis, the study traces how empathy is both expressed and constrained by ideological and institutional arrangements.

Research Strategy

The research adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1995) as its primary methodological approach, embedded within a critical realist epistemology. This combination enabled a stratified exploration of how emotion – particularly empathy – is constructed in political discourse, while also addressing the material and institutional conditions that shaped these constructions.

The corpus was selected through purposive sampling to capture both the rarity and political breadth of housing discourse in Poland. The foundational dataset included transcripts from a housing debate organised by Habitat for Humanity Poland on 3 October 2023. This rare event brought together representatives from the entire political spectrum – conservative (Law and Justice Party – PiS), liberal (Civic Platform – PO), centrist (Third Way – the coalition created by the centrist Poland 2050 of Szymon Hołownia and the conservative Polish People's Party; and Non-Partisan Local Government Activists), left-wing (Left Together; the New Left; a member of parliament involved in the debate switched political allegiance between these two parties in 2023), and far-right (Confederation, Liberty and Independence Party) – to directly discuss housing policy. Although the Third Way participant was an adviser, they reflected the committee's stance. The debate provided a unique setting to examine empathy across ideological lines.

To extend the analysis, nine press articles published after October 2023 were added using purposive sampling. The articles (Zalewska 2025; Biejat: Mieszkania na wynajem dla młodych dadzą poczucie bezpieczeństwa 2025; Nawrocki obiecuje mieszkania i kursy na prawo jazdy dla młodych 2025; Trzaskowski o dostępie do mieszkań: samorząd nie rozwiąże wszystkich problemów 2024; Zandberg: w Polsce nie mamy sensownej polityki mieszkaniowej 2025; Tomaszkiewicz 2025; Hołownia: W budżecie musi znaleźć się 0,5 mld zł na budownictwo społeczne 2025; Sitnicka 2025; Karendys 2025) were chosen for their focus on housing and direct quotations from political actors – specifically major party representatives and presidential candidates. Quotations were prioritised over journalist commentary to maintain the focus on political discourse. These additions were necessary due to the absence of any parliamentary housing debate after 2023, as national-level discourse fragmented into isolated media interventions and ministerial disputes. The corpus of articles became the only means to trace how politicians continued to construct and mobilise empathy.

Given the nature of discourse analysis, the dataset was kept focused and selective. The empirical analysis was guided by a theory-informed coding framework based on Segal's (2011, 2018) model of social empathy, adapted to reflect the critical realist concern with causal depth (Table 1).

This framework aligns with Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model and Bhaskar's stratified ontology. Coding combined deductive and inductive approaches, allowing the identification of novel codes through three iterative rounds of analysis.

How is social empathy constructed in political discourse on housing, and how do material and institutional conditions influence these constructions?

The 'demi-regularities of social empathy in Polish housing policy discourse at the empirical level of reality

At the textual level of analysis, this study examines how empathy is constructed and mobilised in political discourse. This includes whether structural causes of housing problems are acknowledged or obscured, whether systemic barriers are made visible or minimised, and how empathy is framed – as a moral duty, political risk, or strategic necessity. The aim is to identify demi-regularities – recurring but non-deterministic patterns – that serve as entry points for deeper inquiry.

One significant demi-regularity involves the construction of homeownership as a cultural and moral norm. Conservative and centrist representatives reference tradition and history to justify private ownership as economically and culturally superior. For example, a representative of Law and Justice invokes 'nineteenth-century values', presenting ownership as part of national identity. Likewise, the Non-Partisan Local Government Activists frame it as a sign of maturity and responsibility. This narrative is relevant to social empathy because it frames housing needs through an individualistic lens, which risks obscuring the structural constraints that limit access to ownership – such as income inequality, precarious employment, or a deregulated rental market. By presenting ownership as a matter of cultural preference or moral virtue, these statements divert attention from the systemic barriers that prevent many from accessing stable housing. In doing so, empathy is subtly withheld from those who do not or cannot conform to the ownership ideal, as their circumstances are rendered morally inferior or culturally 'other'. In contrast, left-wing and progressive voices – such as a politician from Left Together/the New Left and an adviser from Third Way/Poland 2050 – challenge this ownership-centric view, emphasising that the choice between renting and owning is structurally constrained. Their discourse draws on everyday hardship, highlighting students forced to protest or families choosing 'between rent and food'. Here, empathy is framed as a moral imperative rooted in structural critique, aligning with Segal's concept of social empathy.

A second demi-regularity concerns the conditional framing of empathy – suggesting some are more deserving than others. A representative of Non-Partisan Local Government Activists points to individuals who 'never paid rent' to illustrate the limits of public support. This selectively extends empathy, failing to consider systemic causes of non-payment like poverty or illness, and instead individualises blame.

A third pattern involves the selective recognition of systemic barriers. While some discourse mentions economic or legal constraints, these are often abstracted or downplayed – especially in centrist and liberal rhetoric. A politician from Civic Platform, for example, emphasises 'freedom of choice', but offers technocratic solutions without addressing the deeper emotional or structural aspects of housing insecurity. Such discourse nominally acknowledges barriers but neutralises them, limiting space for structural empathy.

A fourth demi-regularity, emerging after 2023, involves an intra-coalition conflict over how institutional empathy should be operationalised – that is, how state institutions express, regulate, or withhold care and moral concern through policy frameworks and political discourse, influencing whose housing struggles are recognised as legitimate and deserving of support. Disputes among officials (e.g. the Minister of Funding and Regional Policy, Poland 2050, the Minister of Economic Development and Technology, and the Polish People's Party) over funding and programme priorities – such as the 'First Keys' housing programme or credit subsidies – highlight how empathy becomes a site of ideological negotiation. Housing is framed not only as a material need but as a reflection of political identity and coalition tensions.

Together, these patterns demonstrate how empathy is unevenly constructed in housing discourse. They reveal how political language shapes perceptions of moral worth, legitimises certain struggles, and renders others invisible. These findings align with Segal's model of social empathy, pointing to both the potential for structural awareness and the rhetorical strategies that constrain it.

As such, they form a basis for the abductive and retroductive phases of the study, in which surface-level expressions are reinterpreted through the deeper institutional and ideological structures that sustain them.

An abductive interpretation of the discursive circulation of social empathy in the context of housing

At the level of discursive practice – corresponding to the actual dimension of reality – the analysis focuses on how meanings related to empathy are reproduced, circulated, and strategically modulated in political discourse. In this abductive phase, previously identified demi-regularities are re-described through the lens of the theoretical frameworks established earlier in the study. These perspectives provide a basis for reinterpreting the patterns observed at the discursive level as products of deeper institutional and ideological structures.

One key abductive insight is that empathy is not distributed evenly across the political field, nor across the populations discussed. Rather, it is subject to selective extension and contingent upon the dominant moral frameworks and the political utility of certain social groups. This dynamic closely mirrors Sahlin's (1995) analysis of how homeless populations are discursively split into 'worthy' and 'unworthy', legitimising selective support and the unequal distribution of resources. In the Polish context, politicians draw similar affective boundaries, directing empathy primarily towards economically 'productive' citizens – such as young working families or aspiring homeowners – while low-income tenants, youth, and migrants remain affectively invisible or problematised. These findings also echo Bierre and Howden-Chapman's (2022) study of Aotearoa/New Zealand, where a state-led rhetoric of 'kindness' is mobilised during the pandemic but remains structurally constrained. As in the Polish case, compassion in housing discourse is often framed as a moral gesture delegated to individuals – particularly landlords – without institutional backing. The authors argue that this limited form of political empathy obscures power asymmetries, leaving tenants dependent on benevolence rather than rights. Such dynamics reflect what Murphy and Levy (2012) describe as the affective architecture of housing systems, in which home is constructed not only as a physical asset but also as a space imbued with emotional meanings – belonging, worth, and identity. Their analysis shows how emotions like love, fear, and ontological security become embedded in discourses of homeownership, reinforcing a moral hierarchy in which owners are valorised as responsible and emotionally invested citizens, while tenants' affective claims remain marginalised. This aligns with Ronald's (2008) assertion that homeownership operates as a hegemonic ideal in housing discourse, often marginalising alternative tenures like renting or social housing. This is particularly evident in statements from a representative of the Non-Partisan Local Government Activists, who frames empathy towards non-paying tenants or those receiving assistance as a threat to social fairness. Through such a framing, empathy is not only withheld but morally policed, reinforcing a narrative in which state support is equated with personal failure or dependency. These rhetorical patterns exemplify what Findor et al. (2023) describe as the strategic humanisation of disadvantaged groups – empathy employed as symbolic inclusion without altering underlying power structures. By contrast, left-wing discourse – most notably from Left Together/the New Left – engages in repoliticising empathy as a collective and structural obligation. The politician's assertion that 'owning is not a free choice' disrupts the meritocratic logic underlying the dominant narratives and aligns with Segal's (2011, 2018) concept of macro-perspective-taking, in which empathy necessitates recognition of institutional and historical barriers. This discursive stance challenges the moral hierarchy of housing that privileges ownership as a marker of value.

A second abductive thread concerns the instrumentalisation of empathy, particularly within centrist and liberal discourse, where emotional language is used to signal responsiveness to housing insecurity without any firm policy commitment. This rhetorical pattern aligns with Pedwell's (2012) argument that, within neoliberal frameworks, empathy becomes a self-regulating emotional skill – deployed more as an indicator of civility or responsibility than as a basis for systemic change. Such gestures are better understood not as efforts to

redistribute care but as affective signalling that maintains political legitimacy while managing electoral risk. This tendency to mobilise empathy selectively and symbolically also echoes Neumann's (2012) critique of 'feel-good' empathy – emotions that allow political actors to indulge in seemingly unselfish sentiments without altering material inequalities. Empathy, in these instances, serves more to preserve the image of moral concern than to provoke meaningful intervention.

In the post-2023 context, a further abductive insight emerges: empathy as a contested political asset within coalition politics. Disagreements among members of the ruling bloc over housing policy directions – whether to prioritise ownership support or social rent – highlight the strategic use of empathy to define political identity and differentiate constituencies. These negotiations reveal how institutional empathy is not merely unevenly distributed but also actively weaponised as a tool for coalition bargaining and ideological signalling.

Retroduction: structures and mechanisms that condition social empathy in the context of housing

At the level of social practice – corresponding to the real dimension of social reality – the analysis turns to the underlying structures and mechanisms that condition how empathy can be mobilised, silenced, or constrained within political discourse. This final analytical move draws on the logic of retroduction, which involves reasoning from the manifest phenomena of discourse to the deeper, often invisible social relations that lie behind them (Bhaskar 1979; Fletcher 2016). It also builds on the theoretical approach outlined earlier to trace how emotions are embedded in wider institutional and ideological structures.

Through retroductive inference, the study identifies a set of structural conditions that underpin the recurring discursive patterns observed at earlier levels of analysis. Chief among these is the neoliberal configuration of housing as a commodity rather than a social right. This shift, as Jacobs (2015) argues, leads to policy environments in which market priorities dominate and less profitable populations – such as renters, low-income groups, or migrants – are pushed to the margins of concern. Bierre and Howden-Chapman (2022) show how, even in a policy context rhetorically aligned with compassion, institutional empathy is constrained by commitments to property rights and market equilibrium. In New Zealand's pandemic response, tenants are offered debt-based support while systemic protection remains limited, revealing how care is ultimately framed as a personal virtue rather than a structural guarantee. Similarly, Gurney (1999) and Manzi (2009) demonstrate how dominant housing ideologies assign moral value based on tenure status. Empathy is tied to homeownership, reinforcing the notion that homeowners are more deserving of care and voice, while renters are framed as passive recipients or morally suspect actors – constructs that reflect and reproduce deeper class-based exclusions.

Finally, the post-election silence on housing policy in 2023 – despite worsening housing conditions – can be understood as a strategic form of 'affective containment'. Rather than confront growing inequalities, political actors defer structural debate in favour of maintaining electoral alliances and market confidence. What remains unsaid about empathy in housing, as this analysis suggests, is itself a product of power.

Another retroductive insight involves the fragmentation of institutional responsibility for housing within the state. The struggle between ministries, public disagreement over budget reallocations, and competitive narratives of who best represents the interests of tenants or first-time buyers illustrate that empathy is not only filtered through market logic but

fractured by institutional design. When multiple actors claim jurisdiction over housing but advance incompatible models of care, the result is an affective diffusion that hinders structural coherence. In this way, empathy becomes a casualty of interministerial competition, reflecting not only ideological rifts but the material constraints of fragmented governance.

In this context, empathy is not merely an emotion, it is a political mechanism— circulated through discourses, regulated by ideologies, and constrained by institutions.

Discussion

This study examines how empathy is discursively constructed, mobilised, and contested within political narratives about housing in Poland, offering broader insights into the emotional dimensions of housing governance. By tracing how empathy operates across textual, discursive, and structural levels, the analysis contributes to housing studies in several key ways.

First, it shows how political discourse constructs moral hierarchies around housing tenure and embeds them in affective language. While earlier research documented the moralisation of homeownership and stigmatisation of renting (Gurney 1999; Ronald 2008), this study advances those findings by demonstrating how empathy functions as a discursive mechanism of legitimation or exclusion. Empathy is positioned not merely as a sentiment but as a political resource – mobilised unevenly across party lines and tenure types.

Second, the study adds to research on affective governance in housing (Murphy and Levy 2012; Pedwell 2012) by showing how empathy is both moralised and instrumentalised. In Poland, institutional actors selectively evoke empathy in ways that uphold neoliberal logics. The concept of 'affective containment' – where housing insecurity is emotionally managed without structural change – offers a transferable analytic for interpreting symbolic responsiveness.

Third, by grounding the analysis in a critical realist framework, the study introduces a stratified methodology linking discourse and structural critique. Integrating Segal's (2011, 2018) theory of social empathy with institutional analysis enables a deeper understanding of how affective language reflects, reproduces, or resists systemic injustice.

Though focused on Poland, the findings have broader relevance. The identified discursive patterns – (1) withholding empathy from those who fail to align with the homeownership norm, (2) framing empathy as conditional and dependent on perceived deservingness, (3) uneven acknowledgement of structural barriers, which narrows the scope of structural empathy, and (4) deploying empathy as a site of ideological struggle, which fragments institutional care – mirror wider ideological frameworks and institutional limitations that influence which housing needs are recognised as legitimate. Similar trends are evident in studies from Aotearoa/New Zealand (Bierre and Howden-Chapman 2022), the UK (Jacobs 2015), and beyond. Poland serves as a critical case for examining how affective discourse operates amid institutional inertia and coalition politics.

The study has limitations. Its empirical base is restricted to debate transcripts and media quotes, with limited representation of local, activist, or tenant voices. While consistent with the focus on elite discourse, this narrows the view of how empathy circulates outside formal institutions. Future research might be expanded to include media reception, policymaker interviews, and comparative housing studies.

Lastly, this research opens new directions for housing studies: cross-national analysis of affective housing discourse; empirical work on the emotional labour of marginalised actors; and further theorisation of institutional empathy as a regulatory mechanism shaped by ideology and administration.

In sum, this paper contributes theoretically, methodologically, and empirically by showing how emotions – particularly empathy – operate not only as signs of care but as instruments of power. Recognising these affective dynamics is key to understanding how housing inequality is both justified and resisted.

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