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It's not just about where someone lives: educating student social workers about housing related matters to promote an understanding of social justice

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It's not just about where someone lives: educating student social workers about housing related matters to promote an understanding of social justice.

Abstract

The links between housing and wellbeing are well established, and yet failings of current UK policy and practice can result in severely limited and inappropriate accommodation options for those in greatest need. Access to appropriate and affordable housing should therefore be a key area of concern for social work professionals: such access is closely linked to social justice and the promotion of human rights. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of detailed research on the links between housing and social work practice, and practitioners have reported feeling ill-equipped to support service-users with housing related needs. This paper draws on the illustrative example of a teaching session developed by the authors to argue that educating social work students about housing related matters not only reduces this reported practice knowledge gap, but may also develop their understanding of social justice. In addition to supporting calls for further research, the authors therefore encourage those involved in social work education to ensure that practice in the context of housing related needs is covered clearly within the curriculum.

Keywords:

Housing; social justice; problem-based learning; case studies

Introduction

In June 2017 a fire destroyed Grenfell Tower, a council-owned West London based high-rise tower block, resulting in over 80 fatalities. Commenting on the tragedy, the United Kingdom (UK) shadow chancellor John McDonnell MP referred to the

phenomenon Engels termed ‘social murder’ (McDonnell MP, 2017). Ferguson and Lavalette (2017:266) argue that the event indicated that ‘four decades of neoliberal policies... followed by a decade of austerity have... left the most basic welfare infrastructure... in tatters’. With many survivors traumatised and significant numbers in temporary accommodation, social workers were active members of the ‘Grenfell Recovery Team’, working with housing professionals to source new accommodation, counselling and financial support (Hughes, 2018; McNicoll, 2017). However, in critiquing the response of social services to the Grenfell Tower fire, Anna Gupta, Professor of Social Work at Royal Holloway University, argued that it reflected the reduction of social work to ‘an individualised focus’, with assessments failing to explore social factors such as immigration status, housing security and poverty (Social Work Action Network, 2017). She went on to argue for the rediscovery of community social work and encouraged social work educators to cover this within university programmes (*ibid.*). This paper draws on the illustrative example of a teaching session developed by the authors, to argue that educating social work students about housing related matters not only reduces a reported gap in knowledge, but may also develop their understanding of social justice and human rights, both individual and collective.

Context: Housing Trends in England

The annually published English Housing Survey provides data on national housing trends (Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, 2019a). The Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (2019a) estimate that there are currently 23.3 million households in England across the three main types of housing tenure: owner occupation (64%), the private rented sector (19%) and the social rented sector (which includes local authority and housing association accommodation) (17%).

The numbers living in owner occupied properties has fallen from a high of 71% in 2003 but the real shift in tenure type has been witnessed in the rented sector. The number of households in the private rented sector has doubled since 2002, overtaking the social rented sector as the second most common type of tenure in England. In 1979 42% of the UK population lived in local authority properties; we have witnessed a dramatic decline for this type of tenure, albeit at a slower rate over the last decade. This changing picture is of importance to social workers: the contraction of the social rented sector means that many vulnerable and economically deprived people must rent from private landlords. Although this can be a mutually convenient relationship, rent in the private sector is on average £90 per week higher than in the social sector, levels of disrepair are greater, and tenancy legislation allows for accelerated eviction.

People experiencing homelessness are among the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups in society (Fitzpatrick, Bramley, & Johnsen, 2013). The UK government publish two sets of official homeless statistics. The first relates to the number of 'rough sleepers' and the second to the number of people offered assistance by the local authority when they report that they are homeless or threatened with homelessness. These data demonstrate a marked increase in homelessness in England in the last decade, with experts pointing to a lack of affordable housing and changes to the social security system as key factors behind this trend (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018).

People are classed as 'rough sleeping' if they are bedded down, or about to bed down, in the open air (which excludes people in hostels and shelters). In autumn 2018, 4677 people were recorded as rough sleeping in England, a 165% increase from 2010 (Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, 2019b). This is based on a

single-night count from autumn 2018, the reliability of which has been questioned (UK Statistics Authority, 2015). Legislation details the way in which local authorities must assess statutory homelessness (*Housing Act 1996, Homelessness Act 2002, Localism Act 2011, Homelessness Reduction Act 2017*). Quarterly figures for April to June 2018 show that 65,330 households were owed some form of ‘homeless duty’ (Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, 2018). If suitable accommodation is not immediately available for these households temporary accommodation may be provided. On 30 June 2018, 82310 households were in temporary accommodation, a 71% increase on figures published at the end of 2010 (Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, 2018).

The worrying increase in UK homelessness underscores the importance of social workers developing positive relationships with housing professionals. A local authority housing department has responsibility for a wide range of functions: homelessness decision-making and prevention, housing strategy, disabled facilities grants, enforcing standards in the private rented sector, bringing empty properties back into use, tackling fuel poverty, and monitoring/enforcing standards for owner occupiers. The precise nature of local authority functions depends on location and whether services have been outsourced to external providers. Social housing providers (housing associations) have a similarly broad range of roles which extend beyond their traditional functions of rent collection, repairs and lettings. These accommodation providers recognise the links between accommodation and wellbeing and increasingly work with tenants to support them with the challenges they face, including domestic violence, worklessness, and disability. As such, there are obvious synergies between housing professionals and social workers.

Background: Collaboration between Housing and Social Work Departments

As described by the International Federation of Social Workers (2014) social work ‘embraces... socio-economic and cultural rights that include the right to reasonable levels of... housing’. The need for social workers to work collaboratively with housing providers and housing services has been recommended by independent bodies, such as the Smith Institute (Feinstein et al., 2008), and is consistently reinforced in UK social policy (see for example Department of Health, 1989, 2005, 2007, 2012). Policies requiring such collaboration highlight the well-established link between suitable housing and well-being, health and independent living (see, for example, Department of Health, 2001; House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2016) and it is therefore unsurprising that housing has been recognised ‘as an essential element of community care’ (Means, Richards, & Smith, 2008:154). Commenting on the forthcoming UK Green Paper on social care, the Health and Social Care Secretary has indicated that it will include a whole chapter on housing, as the Government acknowledge its significance in care and support reform (Jarret, 2018). Governments across all jurisdictions of the UK have recently committed to further exploration of the alternative homelessness intervention model for adults with complex needs known as ‘*Housing First*’ (Bellis & Wilson, 2018). This is a rights-based approach based on a set of principles including the separation of housing and treatment, a recovery orientation and a focus on person-centred planning (Pleace, 2016). *Housing First* intervention involves the offer of housing to rough sleepers with complex needs without requiring them to demonstrate ‘housing readiness’ first. Non time-limited intensive support is then offered by wrap around and floating services (Bellis & Wilson, 2018). The UK Department of Health and Social Care has also announced they will make £76

million available to fund the building of accessible homes for those with care and support needs (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018). Furthermore, there have been calls for greater engagement between local authority commissioners and Homeshare Schemes (Macmillan, Gallagher, Ronca, Bidey, & Rembiszewski, 2018). These schemes involve matching older people with care and support needs (householder) with a younger person in need of affordable accommodation (homesharer); in return for accommodation, the homesharer agrees to provide companionship and support, enabling the householder to remain at home (*ibid.*).

Failure of local authority social care departments to fulfil the statutory duties they owe to homeless adults with care and support needs have come to the attention of both the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (for example Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Council 16 019 229) and the courts (for example R (SG) v London Borough of Haringey [2015] EWHC 2579 (Admin)). It can be firmly argued that collaboration between housing and social work departments should occur at strategic and operational levels, and involve a range of professionals and providers, in order to help prevent such problems (Simcock & Castle, 2016; Taira & Carlson, 2014). Furthermore, despite both the known link between unsuitable housing and reduced well-being and poor health (Quinney & Hafford-Letchfield, 2012; Ritchie & Victory, 2014) and this clear policy imperative for collaborative practice, Stewart and Stewart (1993; cited in Quinney & Hafford-Letchfield, 2012:114) report that ‘social workers found assisting service users with housing problems [to be] one of the most difficult parts of their work... and felt ill-prepared to undertake [it]’. More recently, observing a paucity of detailed research on the links between housing and social work, Sillman (2018:2) argues that the ‘housing crisis is a deliberate and structural concern that

current social work does not pay enough heed to'. This reported knowledge gap was the initial rationale for the development of the teaching session on housing and social work, described next.

Case Example: The 'Housing and Social Work with Adults' Session

The authors, one a social work academic with research and practice experience in English local authority adult social work settings (PS) and the other a social welfare law academic with expertise in UK housing policy and experience in advice and tribunal representation (RM), collaborated to design, develop and deliver a teaching session entitled 'Housing and Social Work with Adults' to social work students. This was part of a second year undergraduate module on the BA (Hons) Social Work programme, delivered prior to the students' first 70-day practice-learning placement, but subsequent to a broader exploration of housing law and policy covered in a first year module. The session was delivered twice a year to full and part-time students between December 2013 and February 2018.

The session began with a 'Socratic discussion' (Paul, 1993) on the concept of home; students were asked to work in small groups and explore what 'home' meant to them. Adopting a problem-based learning approach (Barrows, 1998) and recognising the value of experiential learning in enabling students to identify the links between theory and practice (Gould & Taylor, 2017), the session then focused on four fictional case studies, based on the experience of one of the authors (PS): Lizzie; George; Elsie; and Ramesh. Students worked in small groups to explore the case studies and consider how they would respond as the allocated social worker.

Lizzie: There has been an increase in rough sleeping in England (Bellis & Wilson, 2018), and a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties, substance misuse, dual diagnosis, disability and complex needs amongst the homeless population have been reported (Mayor of London, 2018; Melvin, 2004; Rees, 2009; Ritchie & Victory, 2014). Therefore, the first case study concerned Lizzie, a woman of working-age with undiagnosed mental health difficulties, sensory impairment and substance misuse related problems, presenting to the adult social care department as homeless and in need of care and support. Recognising the boundaries between different housing and social care departments (Cornes, Joly, O'Halloran, & Manthorpe, 2017), the authors used role-play to demonstrate the experience of being passed to and fro between social care departments and homelessness services. This was facilitated by one author (PS) taking the role of the social worker and the other (RM) that of the homelessness services worker. Different students took on the role of Lizzie and 'met with' the social worker and homelessness services worker to discuss her situation. The role-play was observed by the cohort as a whole.

George: The UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2006) observes that older people spend, on average, between 70%-90% of their time at home. However, the significant number of non-decent homes occupied by older people has been noted (Adams & White, 2006; Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016), and poor quality housing has been associated with both the exacerbation of pre-existing physical and mental health problems (Handy, 2014; Quinney & Hafford-Letchfield, 2012) and premature care home admission (Lewis, 2007). For many older adults, the home itself becomes disabling (Harris & Roulstone, 2011; Ritchie & Victory, 2014). The second case study therefore concerned George, an older man with care and support needs living

in an owner-occupied property that is in need of significant repair, both internally and externally. Owing to his health conditions, George cannot undertake repairs himself. He is reluctant to call for help as he is hearing impaired and has difficulties using the telephone. He is also concerned about both funding the repairs and being the victim of ‘rogue traders’.

Elsie: Offering security of tenure in a self-contained flat, with 24-hour care and support and access to communal facilities (Laing and Buisson, 2010), ‘extra care’ or ‘very sheltered’ accommodation was announced as a priority area for expansion in 2002 (Dawson, Williams, & Netten, 2006). Such accommodation can provide community based support, promote independence and well-being, and prevent unnecessary hospital and care home admission (Dawson, et al., 2006; Vallely, Evans, Fear, & Means, 2006; Wright et al., 2010). The third case study concerned Elsie, an older woman with care and support needs associated with both physical and mental health difficulties, currently living in a ground floor flat but considering a move to extra care accommodation. During a meeting to review her ‘care package’, Elsie asks for advice on whether or not to make such a move.

Ramesh: Drawing on data from the Care Quality Commission (the independent body that regulates health and social care in England), the Institute of Public Care (2017) reports that there are currently more than 16,000 care homes for older people and disabled people in England. The fourth and final case study concerned Ramesh, a 93-year-old man assessed as having care and support needs that could best be met in a care home. Ramesh has agreed with this proposal, and local authority funding has been agreed for the placement. Ramesh and his family state that although they are in

agreement with the placement, they are worried about the impact of the move; they are also seeking a care home recommendation for Ramesh.

Discussion

The case studies were intentionally challenging and students grappled with the complexities of supporting service-users with housing related needs. However, the authors observed that asking students to critically reflect on housing policy and social work practice also required them to consider a broader range of social policies, which arguably perpetuate social and structural inequalities. Students were asked to consider what it means to adopt a person-centred approach (Department of Health, 2016) that recognises the impact of severely reduced welfare structures on the personal experiences of service-users. This process of reflection can prove challenging for experienced professionals as well as students, as fundamental questions are examined about both the professional responsibility to the individual and the broader imperative to recognise the structural factors which impede social justice and human rights. These tensions were evident in the initial group discussions around the importance of ‘home’ and the extent to which it is viewed on an individual level as ‘shelter’, a place associated with wellbeing and safety (Giddens, 1991) but in policy terms is often reduced to a ‘commodity’ (Robbins, 2018).

The case study of Lizzie emphasised the tensions described above. The role-play highlighted that her housing options are dictated not by her accommodation needs but rather by the limits of restrictive policy characterised by commodification. Here we have an individual who from a social work perspective would be considered to be in a vulnerable situation and as having care and support needs: living in poverty and facing

multiple risk (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). Students were asked to consider what role social workers could reasonably expect housing policy to play in responding to Lizzie's situation. Key housing policy goals may be to provide adequate and affordable housing in an appropriate location (Hudson, Kühner, & Lowe, 2015). The role-play enacted in the session demonstrated that homelessness legislation (see, for example, the Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Act 2002) deviates from these goals and can often lead local authorities to adopt 'gatekeeping' principles, where a narrow interpretation of 'vulnerability' and judgements about whether someone is intentionally homeless mean that there is no statutory duty to provide accommodation (Dwyer, Bowpitt, Sundin, & Weinstein, 2015; Sillman, 2018).

The use of role-play was also effective in highlighting how service users can be passed between local authority housing and adult social care departments. The case study was concluded with a discussion of how the rights (both social and human) of this service user could be upheld by a social worker. In practical terms the importance of effective advocacy was highlighted to ensure that service users are aware of their rights to request reviews of decisions made by statutory bodies and to access professional support with these processes. It was acknowledged that this may be more challenging for social workers who themselves work for a statutory agency, where there is the possibility of an unreceptive response (Timms, 1995). In such situations practitioners need to critically reflect on the boundaries of social work advocacy and facilitate access to independent advocates (Dalrymple & Boylan, 2013). In policy terms, a more effective way of meeting the accommodation needs of a service user such as Lizzie may be found in the *Housing First* Model, the rights-based approach referred to earlier in this paper.

This approach avoids the so-called ‘staircase’ model (Sahlin, 2005), ordinarily adopted in UK housing policy, where accommodation is only allocated at the end of a long process of assessment and approval.

The role of home adaptations in promoting independence, enhancing quality of life, and improving health and well-being have been reported (Care & Repair England, 2015; Clements, 2017; Heywood & Turner, 2007). Discussing more practical responses to housing need, which may include referrals to Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs), applications for a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) or consideration of equity release, proved helpful to the students in exploring interventions at the individual casework level when considering the case study of George. However, this case study also emphasised the common phenomenon of a service user who may be ‘asset rich but cash poor’ and the challenge of maintaining independence and housing dignity for an ageing population. The discussions about George highlighted a tendency to make assumptions about the socio-economic rights of an individual based on basic profiling information. In calling for a national strategy for older people’s housing the UK Communities and Local Government Committee (2018) stated that older people:

may be healthy or have health problems, physical and/or mental. Their housing situations and the options open to them vary greatly dependent upon their tenure, geographical location, income and equity. Their personal situations — links with family, friends, neighbours, their interests, lifestyles and aspirations — are also diverse

Students were able to reflect on the increasing levels of fuel poverty experienced by households in which an older person is living. Annual fuel poverty statistics indicate that the levels of fuel poverty have increased in each of the last three years for UK households with a resident over 60 (Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2018). This is due to a complex interplay of household income, fuel prices, accommodation type and location. This distribution of income and resources has clear

links with social determinants of health (Marmot, 2016). This was particularly relevant to discussions about George's wellbeing and the statutory duty on local authorities in England to promote well-being, which includes considering the suitability of an individual's accommodation (*s1 Care Act 2014*). It is clear that there are links between social disadvantage and health disadvantage (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999). The role of a social worker in addressing these two forms of disadvantage may be dependent on factors such as the service-user's individual circumstances and professionals' caseloads. A focus on the social determinants of health also raises questions concerning the balance between individual choice and the intervention of policy makers and professionals. These tensions were evident in discussions around the right of a homeowner such as George to make a decision to remain in his own home when there is clear professional opinion that moving to alternative accommodation would benefit his health and be more financially viable.

Sillman (2018) maintains that a person's needs can be exacerbated or addressed by the appropriateness of their housing. In discussing the case study of Elsie, students were required to explore a potential move of accommodation in relation to an increase in needs. Initial perceptions that any move for older people may be associated with negative events and the disruption of a strong emotional attachment to their home were challenged by a warning not to make overgeneralisations about the older population (Means, et al., 2008). Social policy provisions that homogenise the ageing experience have been similarly critiqued (Lloyd-Sherlock, 2002; Walker, 2017). Whilst a preference amongst older people to remain in their own homes has been a consistent finding in research (Park, Han, Kim, & Dunkle, 2017), Means, et al. (2008:160) observe that:

[f]or some elderly people, their present rented accommodation may hold little emotional attachment and for some the memories may be largely negative. A move in later life may represent an opportunity to establish a sense of home.

However, a move for Elsie to extra-care accommodation is problematised by the fact that the provision of such accommodation remains limited (Dawson, et al., 2006). Furthermore, Wright, et al. (2010) highlight problems such as local variation in eligibility criteria, a high turnover of care staff, and inaccessible environments within such accommodation. Whilst such practical matters were illustrated in the case study, students were also challenged to consider the pursuit of ‘independence’ for older people in UK social policy, reflected in the provision of extra-care accommodation. Wright et al. (2010) argue that a move to extra-care accommodation may be inappropriate for older people with care and support needs who have struggled for some time in their own homes; they suggest that they ‘may be happier in a care home setting where they can be looked after’ (*ibid*: 2253). Such an argument is arguably supported by research on the use of direct payments by older people, which highlights that independence is not always what older people want (Woolham, Daly, Sparks, Ritters, & Steils, 2016). Students were required to reflect on the relationship between such findings and current social policy imperatives in adult social care, particularly personalisation. This relationship has raised questions about the way dependence, independence and inter-dependence are conceptualised in social work practice with older people (LyMBERY, 2010), matters explored in the concurrently running *Lifespan and Human Development* module.

The final case study, concerning Ramesh, raised a number of ethical and practical considerations for the students. Andersson, Pettersson, and Sidenvall (2007) maintain

that a successful care home placement for older people necessitates careful preparation and involvement of the older person. As such, chief amongst these considerations was ensuring that Ramesh remained central to the decision-making process. The scenario clearly demonstrated how a decision that is ostensibly a 'housing issue' is linked to a much broader range of matters such as identity (especially ethnicity), place, transition, and loss. Further complexity was brought to this case study as consideration was given to the staffing of a care home, inspection reports and the provision of accommodation, which may be publicly or privately funded (Johnson, Rolph, & Smith, 2012). The authors adopted a broad perspective when debating social justice with the students. This included recognition that institutions such as a care home can play a significant role in promoting dignity and opportunity for individuals, but also the potential for abuse and neglect in such settings (NHS Digital, 2017) or other iatrogenic risks associated with care home placement. In a situation such as the one presented by this case study the importance of avoiding cultural racism, where decisions are based on stereotypes rather than need (Pierson, 2016) was especially emphasised.

Ramesh had agreed to move to a care home. Nevertheless, Vallely, et al. (2006) maintain that older people are often offered care home placements by the local authority because alternative services are not available, especially for those with complex needs. In particular, they identify that long-term funding dilemmas and fragmented community services often result in premature admission to such settings (*ibid.*). Students were therefore encouraged to consider choice and the realisation of choice in such situations. This included acknowledging the growth of residential care provision despite decades of policy promoting support at home, and research findings that older people valued social workers who were committed to supporting them to remain at

home, even when this involved high levels of risk (McDonald, 2010; Ray, Bernard, & Phillips, 2008). The duty to offer a choice of care home accommodation, albeit limited for those funded by the local authority, was also considered (*The Care and Support and After-Care (Choice of Accommodation) Regulations 2014*); the failure of local authorities to offer an appropriate choice to individuals has come to the attention of the ombudsman (see, for example, Knowsley Council (17005 594) and Lancashire County Council (17 006 095)). Exploring such matters may, therefore, support students to consider how legal literacy enables social workers to uphold the accommodation choice rights of those funded by the local authority.

Conclusion

When considering the socio-economic rights of service users, an appreciation of housing need is crucial. Alongside the needs of an ageing population and increased integration of health and social care, it can be argued that access to appropriate and affordable accommodation should be a key area of concern for social work professionals. The links between housing and wellbeing are well established and yet the failings of current policy and practice all too often result in severely limited and inappropriate accommodation options for those in greatest need. The provision of suitable accommodation is also closely linked to social justice and the promotion of human rights. As the Grenfell Tower fire so vividly illustrated, the decisions that are made about the allocation of housing, and its standard and location, are a bellwether for the effectiveness of the welfare safety net. The multiple failings of housing in the private sector places an even greater responsibility on public infrastructures to meet the needs of those in the most vulnerable situations.

From an educational perspective, the authors of this paper found the use of case studies, and associated role-play, to be an effective way of encouraging social work students to consider the housing needs of service users and the importance of fostering positive professional relationships with housing professionals such as housing association staff and local authority homelessness decision makers. The fast changing nature of UK housing policy and practice means future sessions which adopt this format will need to be reviewed to cover emerging matters that may arise from the forthcoming green papers on social housing and social care for older people and those of working age. Attention will also need to be given to more recent legislation such as the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. This offers more effective referral arrangements between agencies and a more personalised response to homelessness, which recognises the causes of homelessness (Massie, Machin, McCormack, & Kurth, 2018). As Sillman (2018) identifies, there is a significant body of national and international research noting the adverse effect of poor quality housing on children; future sessions may therefore also include case studies relevant to those working in children and families' settings, and not just adult services.

The case studies promoted significant debate and discussion on issues such as the tensions between housing need and the commodification of housing and choice and control over housing options. As such, students were also encouraged to consider wider social justice and human rights matters, central to social work practice, in addition to being equipped with tools to advocate and promote the housing rights of service-users. Therefore, whilst supporting calls for further research on the links between housing and social work practice, we also encourage those involved in social work education to

ensure that practice in the context of housing related needs is covered clearly within the curriculum.

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