What is the Impact of the Changing Distribution of Public Housing in Sydney on the Systems' Emancipatory Potential for Vulnerable Children and Families?

Social Work in the 21st Century: Critical Issues for Practice

Calum Taylor

University of Sydney

Abstract

As Sydney's inner city rapidly gentrifies, so too does the long-standing egalitarian fabric of its suburbs. The New South Wales government is currently facilitating a rapid shift in the spatial distribution of its public housing stock, particularly in relation to the provision of housing for families. This paper seeks to interrogate the impact of this changing spatial distribution, with a particular focus on the emancipatory potential of the system to provide opportunities for children and families. Analysing this issue through a critical and post-structuralist lens, this paper identifies a split in the literature in which there is a discord between how public housing tenants are framed – as either an economic equation or as service users with valuable lived experience. This differential is interrogated and then grounded in the context of social work, where I explore the role social work can play in bringing equality to the debate in relation to public housing and its changing spatial distribution.

Keywords

Families, public housing, emancipatory social work.

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Names of people in this paper are written under a pseudonym to protect the identity and privacy of individuals.

Introduction

With the precision of an atomic clock, Eddie Smith trudges out the doors of the Henry Avenue public housing complex, in Sydney's Ultimo, on his daily pilgrimage to the Lord Wolseley Hotel. As a testament to the religious-like grandeur of this routine, he will arrive at four-thirty in the afternoon each and every day, not a minute earlier, not a minute later. Sometimes to my delight, I will be working behind the bar as he comes in.

Eddie grew up in the Jones Street housing commission terraces on the next block over from Henry Avenue. Eddie is an open, honest and compassionate man. He has on many occasions talked to me about his life, particularly his childhood growing up in housing commission around the corner from the hotel. It is a childhood narrative that charts a course through many trials, tribulations, traumas and at points, dysfunction; and yet in spite of it all, Eddie reflects back on his childhood growing up amongst the other families of the housing estate as "the good old days" which "taught me what it means to be a good person".

Beneath the often-bristly depictions of inner Sydney housing estates lie many families who, despite often contending with trying circumstances, deeply care about the place that they call home. Allan Morris (2018) observed that at the Millers Point housing estate, so strong was the sense of community and connection to place for families residing there that it acted as a sort of "ontological security" (Giddens, 1991) – in that the connection to place and community was a constant in the lives of residences that provided a foundation for continuity in their lives. However, the spatial distribution of public housing in Sydney is changing. Areas of inner Sydney where public housing is woven into the egalitarian fabric of many suburbs are having their public housing stock redeveloped, replaced with modern public/private developments that drastically increase the density of housing in the area whilst rarely leading to an increase in the stock of public housing. Often these developments fail to cater for family units larger than two, forcing families with children to leave their communities to newer housing estates in the outer suburbs of Sydney.

This paper seeks to question what impact the changing spatial distribution of Sydney's public housing stock has on the emancipatory potential of the public housing system for children and families. Through engaging a post-structuralist and critical approach, I will interrogate the differential that manifests in both the literature and general societal discourse as to how the intersection between public housing and place is framed and valued. I will make critical

observations between perspectives which frame public housing within a neoliberal lens against those that attest to the phenomenological and narrative insights of the consumers of the system: families residing in public housing themselves. I will then contextualise this analysis against the current disposition of the NSW public housing system. What I reveal is that not all approaches to valuing the public housing system, and valuing places, include input from the voices that arguably matter the most – public housing tenants. This creates a troubling void where the voices of public housing tenants are not only silenced but left totally unconsidered. I argue that this undermines the emancipatory potential of the system. Lastly and given the orientation of this paper towards social work practice, I will then explore the role social work can play in contesting the marginalisation experienced by families residing in public housing.

Literature Review

Children, Families, and the Broader Environment

There is a significant evidence base that argues that the community and broader environment in which children grow up in has a substantial impact on their ability to stratify upwards out of disadvantage – both during childhood and throughout the entirety of a person's life-course (Bennett, 2006; Calder, 2018; Carter, 2014; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Odgers, 2015; Shogren, 2001; Wachs, Ackerman, & Evans, 2010). Wachs (2010) evokes Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological model to explore how 'environmental chaos' at the microsystemic level of a child's relations can have a detrimental impact on children's cognitive-linguistic and socioemotional development. Bronfenbrenner (1999) defines the microsystem as orientating around familial, peer, community, schooling, and primary institutional relationships (health services, day-care, church etc.). Wachs (2010) engages in a succinct literature review and analysis that links disruptive experiences in a child's relations within their microsystem to poorer life outcomes. Wachs (2010) argues that disruptive and non-coherent social and interpersonal relations do not always equate to a lack of opportunity. Rather, the effects of chaos on life chances and opportunities are largely dependent on mediating factors that either exacerbate or subdue the impact of these negative experiences. Of these factors, the most consistently evidenced intervention in disrupting negative outcomes from chaotic experiences was accessibility to social and community supports.

The issue of 'access' is consistently linked to the availability and provision of life chances and opportunities throughout the literature. Carter (2014) frames child poverty entirely through the

prism of the availability of life chances. Poignantly in doing this, they argue that housing is one of the most salient mediating factors in facilitating life chances for children growing up in poverty. They state that poverty fundamentally "affects the life chances of children in many ways, such as the community in which they live, the quality and type of housing they live in and the sense of security they experience within the home" (p.3). Quoting Thornhill (2014), they argue that housing is the "prism through which they experience many other services" (Thornhill 2014 as cited in Carter 2014, p.3) and hence, as is argued by Wachs (2010), the nature of housing and the community is framed as a key lever in the facilitation or inhibition of life chances for children.

It was a similar conclusion that was settled on by the Tony Blair enlisted 'Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty' (Bennett 2006) in the United Kingdom. The report argued that one of the keys and readily identifiable mediators in facilitating life chances for children is the actual community in which a family resides. The report argues that "it is easy to see how more affluent parents will be able to bring their resources to bear for the benefit of their children. They can afford to live in better quality accommodation in safer, more prosperous areas, with better public services, transport links and amenities" (p. 50).

The literature also considers the 'knock-on effect' that community characteristics can have on more indirect factors that further inhibit life chances – particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged children and children contending with poverty. This is considered by Shogren (2001) in their exploration of indirect factors that implicate the life chances of children. They argue for a revaluation of how indirect factors are framed in discourses on welfare and child poverty. This would in turn appreciate the substantial impact indirect factors contribute to inhibiting the life chances of children in disadvantaged circumstances. They classify what they call 'indirect impacts' into three categories: caregiver health, sibling health and damaged natural/external environment; arguing that these factors fester upon, compound, and extend upon disadvantages already apparent in a child's home and communal environment. Shogren (2021) ultimately concludes that these indirect effects that restrict opportunities feed upon already prevalent disadvantages in children's' external world, causing "the same potential consequences as poor child health itself: less education, less time spent as a family, reduced life chances, and less parental empathy" (p. 390).

The evidence on public housing

A rich and complex tapestry of factors make up how people construct and relate to the places that

they live in. The physical characteristics of dwellings, the planning and geography of urban spaces, collective and communal shared human identities and even the nature and wildlife that reside in an area, all contribute to how people come to understand and construct what a place means to them. Whether it be on a physical, metaphysical or intrinsic level, the literature overwhelmingly argues that the ability for public housing residents to form a connection to the place in which they live has a direct impact on their holistic wellbeing (Darcy & Rogers, 2014, 2016; Harrison & Davis, 2001; Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2015; Morris, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Weatherburn, Lind, & Ku, 1999). While this literature implicates individuals, couples, families and children, there is additional literature that explores the importance of the dynamic between housing and place with a focus on children specifically (Chyn, 2018; Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2015; Kersten, LeWinn, Gottlieb, Jutte, & Adler, 2014; Shier, Miller, & Datar, 2022). As to what represents the ideal 'place' for public housing to be located, there is a plurality of arguments represented in the scholarship. Chyn (2018) argues that when children are moved out of disadvantaged public housing, and are then moved on into less disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and assisted into the private rental market through government intervention, they are more likely to have better outcomes across their life-course. Chyn (2018) combined data from a range of administrative sources in Chicago, Illinois, and applied this data to a formula which compared outcomes between children who were 'displaced' from public housing and children who remained in public housing. Chyn (2018) found that across the areas of labor market activity, social assistance reliance and criminal activity, displaced children had statistically significant better outcomes that those children who remained in public housing. It was concluded that "in terms of housing policy, this paper demonstrates that the relocation of low-income families from distressed public housing has substantial benefits for children (of any age) and government expenditure" (p. 3054).

The way Chyn (2018) utilizes economic modelling forms what is seemingly a rather concrete conclusion on the relationship between public housing and place. Galster (2011) in comparison frames the issue a lot less discretely – shifting away from a focus on yielding statistically significant quantitative data and economics. They implicate contextual factors as a key mediating factor that must be engaged with when developing policy in relation to the spatial distribution of public housing. They argue that "a holistic examination of prior work on measuring the magnitude of the neighbourhood effect makes one thing clear: the magnitude is contextualised by gender, ethnicity, and the development stage of the low-income population being studied" (p.

230). They further stipulate that “the degree to which the outcomes for these mover families will be substantially better in their destination neighbourhoods depends on a host of contingencies” (p. 233).

Representing a pivot in the scholarship towards the application of a more critical lens, Morris (2019) invokes a phenomenological and narrative approach that draws upon the lived experiences of public housing tenants when exploring the changing spatial distribution of public housing. They conducted forty-one semi- structured interviews with public housing tenants from Millers Point, Sydney, in 2014, after the New South Wales government announced that every public housing tenant was to be forcibly relocated out of the area. Based off these interviews, they conducted a thematic analysis that elicited the key perspectives of the residents.

Morris (2019) argues that the insights of residents demonstrated the impact of the forced relocations as being an act of ‘communicide’ – of which they define as the complete destruction of a strong and vibrant community that dually elicits a tremendous level of dislocation and stress upon evicted residents. Darcey and Rodgers (2014) similarly argue that the changing distribution of public housing is a destructive trend inherent in the metropolitan global west. However rather than presenting their arguments through phenomenological accounts, they engage a humanist and critical lens that argues the inherent motivation behind the shift in the spatial distribution is a neoliberal agenda. Engaging Lefebvre’s (1996) ‘rights to the city’ theory – the idea that all people should have the right of access to life and exist in places regardless of their circumstances, they argue that “neoliberal regimes of urban governance are imbued with the idea that the right to urban life should be secured and protected through the market, so that urban citizenship is exercised through performance as a consumer” (p.237). They theorise that public housing residents are inherently framed as ‘flawed consumers’ through this lens and hence, have voided their ‘rights to the city’.

Discussion

As an imminent graduate of social work, I admittedly have a predilection towards critical reflection and reflexivity. When I consider Eddie Smith, I reflect on the narrative of Eddie through the lens of the literature. In some respects, the literature that equates living in concentrated public housing through childhood to low productivity throughout the life course rings true; it is my understanding after all, that Eddie has been welfare dependent for most of his life. But I then reflect on Eddie’s phenomenological account for his childhood in the public

housing estate; I vividly recall the gleeful expression on his face when telling stories about his childhood for all the patrons at the pub, myself included. Eddie frames his childhood as identity shaping in a way that reflects an inextricable link between himself and the place where he has spent his entire life. This, then makes me consider Morris (2018, 2019), and the idea that public housing residents find solace in their deep connection to place and community; that it provides ontological security amongst a life narrative that often resembles anything but secure and stable circumstances, and a sense of identity that is enduring and unquantifiable.

My thoughts then turn to then Minister to Family and Community Services Pru Goward and her statement in 2014. She declared that the sale of the Millers Point public housing assets would go on to fund new public housing developments. I then check the department's own disclosures on their website on what developments the funding from the Millers point sale have funnelled into. To my surprise, or perhaps not, it has funded new developments well outside anywhere that could be considered inner Sydney or anywhere that could be justified as a reinvestment back into the egalitarian fabric of inner Sydney communities – except for a small public housing refurbishment in Woolloomooloo (Department of Communities and Justice, 2022).

The discord evident here in framing successful public housing policy and experiences emulates this clear split in the literature between how the provision of life chances and, more specifically, how 'success' is conceptualised. On one hand is the idea that successful public housing policy and infrastructure is something that facilitates the stratification out of poverty and out of situations in which a person is reliant on the state. On the other hand, there is the perspective that is informed by the lived experience of families – those who frame 'chances' and 'success' as relative to their own narratives that are often marked by chaos and dysfunction. In this perspective, a 'life chance' or even 'success' and 'emancipation' can be best understood as having stability, or being able to connect to place and community, or just having supports that allow for themselves and their children to finally get life back on track.

While the literature displays breadth in its framings of what a successful 'place' of public housing looks like, government policy specifically demonstrates a fixation on only the neoliberal or economic framing of what constitutes a successful 'place'. This is demonstrated in the New South Wales government's disregard for acknowledging the phenomenological accounts of inner Sydney tenants – ignoring the impact that they have had on these communities and the instances of 'communicide' in which they have facilitated, as demonstrated at Millers Point. Families are

left in a state of normlessness as they are offered housing in unfamiliar communities, their ontological security shattered. But then again, when one subscribes to a neoliberal understanding of the nature of place and its intersection with public housing, one can become blinded and almost dizzy by figures about cost – benefit outcomes and cost savings, land values and long-term projections. Left unacknowledged and ignored are the lived experiences and voices of tenants, their connection to place, and their own understanding of what a successful community looks like.

The microsystem's model (Wachs 2010) and the Fabian Commission Report (Bennett 2006) highlight that the most important factor in the provision of life chance and wellbeing for children is access to the things they need to thrive: good schools, good transport, and amenities. Millers Point, in the context of this argument, imbues a stark irony – it has had its entire public housing stock sold off, and yet it is one of the most well serviced, accessible, and socially diverse areas of Sydney.

Glebe, Redfern and Waterloo are also highly accessible and socially diverse areas which house many families in public housing. The New South Wales government, however, has scheduled to have the stocks of public housing in these areas significantly overhauled and densified, pushing families away from the area. This begs a simple question: if the literature suggests that location is one of the most important mediating factors in providing life chances for children and families in public housing, then why is the New South Wales government so intent on reducing the capacity for children and families to live there? I cannot tap into the consciousness of state politicians nor sit in on the board meetings of the Land and Housing Corporation, but my critical inclination leads me to a conclusion which seemingly allows for the government to justifiably ignore and silence the lived experience of public housing tenants: a societal and governmental consciousness pervasive with neoliberalism. This reflects precisely the critical stance taken by Dacey and Rodgers (2014) in that the right to live in a place, according to the normative mentality of a neoliberal society and its government, is defined solely by a family's capacity to adhere to the tenants of the productive citizen, for to not do so shall deem one unworthy of calling the inner-city home.

The role of Social Work: Putting forward a critical lens

It almost feels provocative to ask social workers if they feel like they have any sort of obligation or role in the context of such a debate. The spatial distribution of public housing, as demonstrated

by the literature, strikes at the heart of not only an ideological contest, but at a contest of power. The phenomenological accounts in the literature are overwhelming in their articulation of the significant imbalance of power that exists between decision makers (and their ideological predilection to neoliberalism) and public housing tenants, consequentially silencing them - or in the spirit of this post-structuralist article, prohibited from even entering the arena of debate.

Advocacy is an obvious role in which social work can play in this regard. Social workers hold positions of power that can amplify and elevate the voices of public housing tenants and their lived experience. They can be transmitters of these narratives to ensure they enter the arena of debate. However, this is no substitute for the legitimate decay and deconstruction of the tropes, knowledge, cultures and barriers that are inhibiting the voice of families in public housing. There is an added irony in the fact that the Department of Communities and Justice, which has the responsibility of the spatial distribution of public housing stock, is coincidentally one of the largest state-based employers of social workers in New South Wales. This provides a unique position for social workers to engage in critical social work practice as they work with families in public housing whilst simultaneously attaching themselves to the institution that contributes to their oppression.

Pease and Nipperess (2020) argue that "significant opportunities exist for critical social work to practice within spaces provided by contradictions with state organisations of social work as well as within the wider terrain of the state" (p.6). Through facilitating an understanding for social workers to link their micro practice context to structural dynamics, they further argue that this approach emboldens social workers in contradictory scenarios working for the state to resist state-projected oppression and activate the emancipatory potential that lies with the power they hold. The contradictions caused by the neoliberal doctrine undermining framings of public housing can be resisted through a critical approach in casework contexts, for example, by paying attention to use of language when working with families in public housing – framing them in ways that are empowering and practicing in a way that conveys their lived experience. This can provide a true means of communication and linkage between themselves and the institution of the state. This is opposed to the caseworker functioning as a mere pawn to carry out the oppressive functions of the state. At a policy level, a social worker subscribing to the tenants of a critical approach could yield their power and privilege to develop policy that acknowledges power differential experienced against public housing families. In the spirit of an emancipatory imperative, they could develop policy that mandates genuine engagement with families in a way that works to

bring equity to their voices against the demands of property developers and the vested economic interest of government. Yes, these are arguably radical propositions. The point here is to demonstrate that social workers do hold power and agency in this space and, hence, do have the potential to exert incremental or potentially large-scale shifts that can elicit emancipatory outcomes. This is provided when they can link their practice to the systemic perpetuation of social injustice – and reflect on this relationship critically.

Conclusion

If it was not for the contradiction in Eddie Smith's framing of his childhood growing up in public housing against the normative framing of childhoods in public housing being marked solely by degradation and dysfunction, I may have never cast a critical eye over the issue of the changing spatial distribution of public housing. As is fundamentally evidenced in both the literature and the lived experience of residents and families, there is more to the issue of this changing spatiality than merely renewing the stock of housing. The post-structuralist and critical lens which I've applied to this paper highlights how language and constructions pervaded by neoliberal ideology work to amplify particular tropes in relation to the changing spatial distribution of public housing and silence the lived experience of tenants. In the end, being critical of this dynamic highlights that emancipation is more important than the mere sum of stratifying upwards out of socio-economic precariousness. The phenomenological accounts of tenants, including Eddie, highlight that stability, connection to community, and ontological security are the most valued aspects of framing where they live. To take this away doesn't facilitate emancipatory potential because it rejects the insights from families in public housing self-identifying their housing needs. The emancipation of lives needs to dually tend to economic and social stratification in tandem with the needs self- identified by residents in maintaining a connection to community and ensuring their ontological security. For without doing this, breaking cyclical patterns of intergenerational disadvantage will be unachievable.

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