Investigating Everyday Life in a Modernist Public Housing Scheme: The Implications of Residents’ Understandings of Well-Being and Welfare for Social Work

Stephen Hicks 1,* and Camilla Lewis2

1 School of Health Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK
2 Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives, University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK

*Correspondence to Dr Stephen Hicks, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, School of Health Sciences, University of Manchester, Jean McFarlane Building, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK. E-mail: stephen.hicks@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the concerns of residents living in a modernist social-housing scheme in Edinburgh, Scotland, chosen as a focus because the architects’ designs were originally intended to foster better community, well-being and welfare. After reviewing literature on community and social work, the article outlines the ethnographic approach used in this research, the purpose of which was to pay close attention to the ways in which residents’ well-being and welfare concerns arise in situ. Data were collected in 2016 via semi-structured interviews with seventeen residents, three of whom also took part in diary-elicited discussions and seven in walking tours of the community. These methods were used to elicit sensory and spatial aspects of respondents’ experiences. The article outlines findings relating to residents’ well-being and welfare concerns and goes on to discuss community relations, the association of stigma and social welfare and, finally, residents’ responses to those in need of community or social work support. Addressing social class and belonging, the complexities of attachment to place and how environment contributes to the emergence of relative welfare of residents, the article considers the implications for social work of an emplaced understanding of well-being and welfare.

Keywords: Community development, help-seeking, poverty, social care, social housing, urban issues

Accepted: August 2018
Introduction

Recent social work research suggests that state reduction in welfare spending under ‘austerity’ measures has resulted in services focused on assessment of risk ‘with little concept of the relationship of safeguarding to ... economic or community context’ (Bywaters et al., 2018, p. 54). It also argues that attention to such contextual matters may be ‘obscured, blocked, or avoided in individual case work and social work decision making’ (Morris et al., 2018, p. 4 of 9). While some of the research raises the question of how the stigma associated with social welfare need may prevent community members from seeking help—in part because they fear surveillance and blame (Bilson et al., 2017)—it tends to do so only in relation to those already subject to state intervention. However, little attention is given to the specificities of place, community interaction or how welfare need arises in situ.

Further, perhaps because much of the research tends to reinforce notions of particular places as sites of comparatively homogeneous deprivation, the interactions between residents, where communities are more complex than they might first appear, often disappear from view. Yet, interactions between persons and between persons and place are vital if we are to understand how it is that social well-being or welfare concerns are identified and acted upon, if at all. This article, therefore, focuses not on those already subject to state intervention, but instead, via immersion in a particular community, it asks how residents identify problems and highlights how some of their concerns are interpreted as part of everyday life.

The group of residents in question here are those of Claremont Court, a social-housing scheme in Edinburgh, built by Sir Basil Spence and Partners in 1959–62. Claremont was chosen as the site for this research because the original design was intended to foster better community and welfare through features such as deck access, courtyard gardens, cottages for older people and maximisation of light and space. The idea was that the building could help to promote sociability, mixing of different classes, care of ageing residents and personal welfare (Glendinning, 2008; Costa Santos et al., 2018). Comprising sixty-three dwellings in low-rise blocks plus two sets of cottages around courtyards, the Court today is socially mixed, with roughly one-third of dwellings belonging to the local authority, one-third private rental and one-third owner-occupied. Due to its architectural significance, the building was listed in 2011, but is in a relatively poor state of repair due to disinvestment and lack of maintenance. Via the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, the Court is in one of the fourth most deprived areas of the country by decile, with its housing stock ranking amongst the ‘most deprived’ (Scottish Government, 2016).

This article reports on whether residents experience community or belonging at the Court, and seeks to determine their views on well-being and welfare, with a focus on how the environment has a bearing on
human interaction and flourishing. After a brief review of existing research on community, social division and welfare, the article goes on to outline the project methodology before discussing findings on: residents’ well-being and welfare concerns; drug and alcohol use; disability and ageing; and how these relate to living in a post-war housing scheme. Finally, the article considers the implications of the findings for social work and for an emplaced understanding of welfare and well-being.

**Literature on community, place and welfare**

Many researchers point to stigmatisation of social housing, partly due to disinvestment and retrenchment of the welfare state (Glucksberg, 2014; Kallin and Slater, 2014; Vassenden and Lie, 2013). This stigma is ‘attached to places and people as forms of social labelling that have enormous resilience’ (Hall, 2012, p. 47) and, as Slater has pointed out, descriptions such as ‘sink estate’ are applied not only to places, but have ‘all sorts of very negative, disturbing associations with the class position of people living there’ (in Kirkness et al., 2017, p. 9). Residents, similarly, are characterised in negative, stereotypical terms (Paton et al., 2017; Roberts, 2017), represented either as victims of those developments or as the cause of social problems. For example, opposing listing of the now demolished Robin Hood Gardens in London, English Heritage suggested the estate had failed ‘as a place for humans to live’, while Sir Richard Rogers described it as ‘a sink estate to house those least capable of looking after themselves—much less their environment’ (Thoburn, 2016, p. 2). Thoburn and Miah’s research, however, highlights ‘the absence of residents’ voices from government and media pronouncements on the necessity of [estate] demolition’ (Thoburn, 2016, p. 2).

August’s research in Regent Park, a social-housing project in Toronto, has noted discourses that stigmatise public housing do not accord with residents’ experiences and that ‘careful analyses of public housing find that dissatisfaction can coexist alongside meaningful place attachment and residential satisfaction’ (August, 2014, p. 1320). Hall, similarly, suggests that researchers should pay close attention to ‘small-scale intimacies’ (Hall, 2012, p. 130) in such communities: routines, everyday conversations and use of familiar spaces. Gidley’s study of a modernist high-rise estate in London highlights ‘mundane conviviality’ (Gidley, 2013, p. 372), whereby most residents engage in ephemeral meetings maintaining unobtrusive distance.

Divisions within communities, built upon spatial differences but produced through distinctions concerning scarce resources, are bolstered by common experiences of locale. Black participants in Rogaly and Taylor’s ethnography of Norwich estates note advantages associated with signs of belonging, such as ‘accent and bearing, having a face that had been recognised by long-term residents since childhood, and knowing and following the unwritten rules of
living there’ (Rogaly and Taylor, 2009, p. 199). Class distinction is also pertinent (Watt, 2009; Swenarton, 2013; Bacqué et al., 2015) since, while middle-class dwellers use ‘elective belonging’ to establish moral entitlement to place (Savage et al., 2005, p. 29), working-class people are often associated with ‘born and bred’ kinship (Young and Willmott, 2007; McKenzie, 2015). Paton’s ethnography of urban regeneration in Glasgow argues the ‘degree to which someone has control over where they live is a valuable distinction and indicator of class position’ (Paton, 2014, p. 122), but Jeffery’s study of Salford gentrification suggests contrasting middle-class choice with working-class lack is limited, in that ‘forms of belonging articulated by the middle class, and the modes of urbanism (gentrification) designed to satisfy those desires, actively circumscribe the ‘agency’ available to the working classes’ (Jeffery, 2018, p. 258).

Houle et al.’s research on Montreal estates has argued that housing and locale exert a ‘profound impact on ... psychological and social flourishing’ (Houle et al., 2016, p. 19). But, in relation to social welfare, respondents in Holland’s study of south Wales valleys complained about the ‘stigmatisation of being visited [by social workers or police] because this is highly visible to neighbours’ (Holland, 2014, p. 397). While Närhi has argued that social work ought to ask ‘whether certain local living environments have an impact on the welfare of human beings in the sense of social exclusion or integration’ (Närhi, 2002, p. 255), studies on spatial aspects of social work have pointed out that, rather than seeing identities and places as separate components of well-being, these are mutually constitutive.

Jeyasingham’s ethnography of social work argues material aspects ‘come into being through social action and experience, rather than being features of the environment that already existed’ (Jeyasingham, 2015, p. 100) and found that ‘local spaces seemed tainted by a small number of dramatic, distressing or distasteful events that [social workers] knew about through their practice’ (Jeyasingham, 2018, p. 90). This analysis suggests interior spaces are crucial, not only for influencing atmosphere, but also for a broader understanding of community relations. However, this also highlights differing conceptualisations of place, based upon access not only to various spaces, but also forms of knowledge. This is also noted in Martin’s observational walks through Detroit, which identify an imaginary ‘boundary that discouraged the flow of people from one community crossing to the parks, shops and restaurants of the other’ (Martin, 2007, p. 466). While such boundaries are produced through community knowledge and interactions, they also have material effects in spatial terms, in that crossings rarely occur.

**Methodology**

The Claremont Court project was inter-disciplinary, drawing upon Social Work, Sociology, Anthropology and Architecture, and employed
ethnographic methods to understand how residents made sense of their community, with a focus on sensory and spatial practices (Lewis et al., 2018), such as how residents felt about particular spaces, whether this might change at different times and what influenced the atmosphere of these places. Although the project’s broader concerns were to do with how built environment and community mutually shape atmosphere and belonging, the research also considered how far residents thought there was a community at Claremont Court and, further, what contributed to this concept. For the purposes of this article, however, the aim is to understand how residents conceptualised well-being and welfare in place—that is, how far they thought that the Court promoted or prevented better community relations and, indeed, whether they felt such issues were of concern at all. In this sense, the research investigated how ‘social conduct is patterned through routine and ritualised methods of conduct’ (Atkinson, 2015, p. 13), attending to the in situ nature of community and welfare, or how people construct community and a sense of well-being through their practices in familiar spaces.

After some initial visits to the Court, the project involved three months of fieldwork in summer 2016, plus some follow-up visits in the autumn. A combination of methods was used, including visual and contextual mapping of participants’ homes (Lewis et al., 2018), attendance at residents’ association meetings and observational work in communal areas. However, for the purposes of this article, we focus upon the data generated from various types of interview. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with seventeen residents, eight men and nine women, from a mixture of middle- and working-class backgrounds. Although three had origins in other European countries, all were white. Participants were also invited to take part in a follow-up activity: three residents filled out a diary for a period of seven days, used to elicit discussion of an ‘ordinary week’, while seven took part in walking tours of the Court and their homes. Further discussion was prompted by interactions with the building, objects, sights, smells or sounds. Chance events (e.g. bumping into people or pets) and immersive experiences (e.g. descending into the cellars or accessing the roofs) produced reflections upon connection with place and other residents. In this way, the project used mobile and sensory methods in order to access feelings and opinions that might not have emerged otherwise (Ross et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2018).

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then entered into a software package, aiding the analysis of qualitative data. The data were independently thematically analysed and then compared across the set to enhance rigour. All participants were provided with information about the project, their written consent sought and researchers’ details given for follow-up questions. In addition, the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Northumbria.
Pseudonyms for participants have been used and identities disguised to protect their anonymity.

Findings

Well-being and welfare in the community

When asked where they might turn if they needed help, residents’ answers were not straightforward, with hesitancy demonstrated by eight and one answering: ‘I just don’t know.’ The most common response was to talk about others needing support: either neighbours, particularly longer-term and older residents, or those receiving health visiting, community or social work support. This may be because most saw their own families or friends as the proper site for resolution of welfare or well-being concerns—something of a moral imperative. Others mentioned privacy. For example, Paul said: ‘Personally, if I had problems ... I would probably go outside the Court first.’ Most residents described the Court as a friendly place, where interactions were based upon occasional contact or offers of help. This points to maintenance of friendly distance, as it ‘is necessary to show some commitment to neighbourliness, but it is equally important not to give the impression of interfering’ (Crow et al., 2002, p. 140).

There was also a narrative of community decline amongst some respondents, with the suggestion that social ties may have been stronger in the past. Julie said ‘I think people tend to keep themselves to themselves’ and Michael, who had grown up at Claremont, responded with ‘you don’t get that sense of community anymore’. In contrast, Tasha emphasised the Court as an inclusive place in which residents help out those in need:

There was somebody ... that was downstairs one morning ... having some sort of ... psychosis or something ... someone distressed or talking to themselves ... so like we could all hear it, and we all kind of came out and were speaking to each other, and I think Rob in the end ‘phoned somebody, you know, for some support ... It was nice that they were trying to help them (Owner-occupier).

Drug use

Eight households talked about drug use at Claremont Court and were concerned about safety, intimidation and whether the building attracted illicit behaviour:

... maybe about three or four ... boys who were all quite clearly either high out of their brains or hashed out of their heads ... were just
hanging about ... so that got a bit kind of intimidating ... Where their flat is [a resident drug dealer], away along up the stairs at the end. That was another favourite spot of theirs ... They were quiet. Not disturbed (Susan, owner-occupier).

This sense of intimidation was mentioned by six residents, who variously described dread, insecurity or feeling that their movement around the Court was curtailed. Shona and John mentioned urination in corridors or stairwells creating unpleasant smells and Alastair talked about passive inhalation of cannabis fumes. This suggests that a feeling of encroachment, or sensory awareness of the presence of drug use, is heightened for residents at certain times. Several, for example, mentioned feeling intimidated by young men ‘hanging about’ at night.

Another aspect of safety, however, was concern for drug users themselves. Rob said that one of the reasons for installing security gates to the roof, which had previously been open, was to prevent gatherings of young people and possible injury:

I often wonder if you could trust kids not to climb the fence and throw themselves off the roof or go up there and take legal highs and fall off the roof ... they put metal fences up and stopped people going above that because it was a space that encouraged drinkers and drug takers (Rob, owner-occupier).

There was also some feeling that movement around the Court was curtailed, with compromised ownership of space in the Court contrasted with the encroachment of drug users. Phrases such as ‘people can just come in’ expressed this feeling of invasion. Four residents noted that security measures gave some reassurance, but they resented restriction of movement. Some said that the design of the Court encouraged criminal activity, as drug users took advantage of the warren-like aspects of some of the deck access and stairwells. While these features were originally designed as ‘conducive to sociability’ (Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994, p. 113), they are now also associated with loitering, intimidation or illicit behaviour and are sometimes perceived as areas exploited by outsiders. But, as Highmore points out, this is also because streets in the sky are now associated with the discourse of social housing as ‘social failure’ (Highmore, 2010, p. 98). Our research did not merely confirm such negative views. Michael, for example, fondly remembered the excitement of chasing around decks and stairways as a child and many described them as good for bumping into neighbours and passing the time of day.

Disability and ageing

Disability issues were mentioned by seven residents, either within the context of their own living arrangements or ageing. Rob, a disabled
man, demonstrated his skill in sliding down the banisters in his maisonette, which he explained was easier than negotiating stairs:

... people keep asking me, and they say, ‘Why do you stay two-up and you’ve got a disability?’ and whatever, ‘... and you have to slide down the stairs,’ and all that stuff, but it’s because I like the space. And I often wonder if I was on a ground floor flat, would I like the space as much and is it because the outlook is so unusual here? (Rob).

In a separate interview, Susan, Rob’s wife, talked about access differently:

... we will probably have to move in terms of like stairs, for when we’re ancient and we can’t manage stairs, so ... that’s my forward planning although it didn’t really occur to us when we were looking at the flat to begin with, that it was not accessible.

While Susan imagines a future when the couple may not be able to manage, for Rob, current inaccessibility is circumvented through inventive, bodily skill and is outweighed by the benefits of space and outlook.

Residents also discussed the ways in which older, longer-term tenants look out for each other, offering to do a bit of shopping or helping if someone becomes ill. Morag had looked after someone who was dying, and Susan and Rob looked in on older residents, when and if they needed help. Susan also mentioned that older women on her deck used to clean and go shopping together and Margaret had looked after at least two neighbours when they were sick. Alastair said: ‘it’s all the older people now that are passing away that have been here since day one.’ Here, Alastair’s language expresses both regret at the passing of older residents, but also associates caring between neighbours with the original (‘since day one’) council tenants.

The story of Mr Brown, an older man with dementia, was recounted by Elouise:

this guy who was probably suffering from Alzheimer’s ... he really annoyed my husband because he never, ever exchanged any kind of acknowledgement ... in a way it became a sort of joke.

There is some concern about welfare here, but also effrontery caused by lack of neighbourly greeting and, perhaps, some difficulty about how to engage a person with dementia. Mr Brown becomes a ‘joke’, in part due to the breaching of social niceties. He reappears in another version of this tale:

My door went and I just presumed it was the workmen, and it was this man all in black and he wore a hat and ... he actually came in, sat down on the sofa and it was Mr Brown ... he got out his nursing home [and] he’d come home (Alastair, local-authority tenant).

Of note here are the mysterious characterisation (‘all in black’) and the idea of returning ‘home’. This evokes both the familiarity of place and
allots some agency to the figure of Mr Brown, even though he is now also out of place. At the same time, there is a tension here between the comfortable memory of a former neighbour mixed with the presence of someone whose changed character is deeply unsettling to some.

Finally, questions about ageing, disability and ill-health were raised by seven residents in relation to the cottages, since the original design for Claremont Court included five bungalows for older people. This suggests provision for those who might no longer be able to manage the flats, but there is now no mechanism for such occupation, particularly as some cottages are privately owned. Michael said ‘They’ve always been used to house elderly people, erm, or disabled people. I’m not sure specifically’ and Chiara noted the cottages were referred to as ‘pensioners’ bungalows’, which she thought ironic, given many of the residents using this phrase were pensioners themselves. This indicates some confusion about who properly belongs in the bungalows, both in the sense of ‘type’ of person and concerning entitlement, but it also points to ideas of privacy concerning the home. There was no sense of the cottages being under any kind of community purview, with the original intention of the design superseded by private ownership.

Social housing and welfare

Residents demonstrating unusual behaviour were sometimes associated with welfare concerns and discredited, as in the case of Mr Brown. Kate and Jack suggested social-housing residents had caused problems and Hamish added: ‘the stairs at the back ... they’ve got a bit of an ominous feel ... and it’s in the area where the people with problems [laughter]—, people who cause problems are.’ Hamish’s hesitancy is interesting because other residents similarly struggled with terminology. James noted:

... as I understand there’s a, I don’t know if this is the right term, but a ‘crisis care’ flat ... And a couple of times they’ve put people into that flat unsupervised and people without the right kind of level of support and it’s not gone well.

Susan, too, added:

Flat X I think it was, is known to be a flat the council use for people who have been homeless and trying to kind of get them back into the community. So sometimes there’d be all sorts of odd folk that would be placed in that flat. I’m not entirely sure if it really was hugely successful really, because being there that people are generally quite isolated.

These kinds of distinctions between residents are highlighted by other studies (Arthurson, 2010; August, 2014) but, while the Claremont Court residents may be disturbed by ‘odd’ behaviour, they also identify lack of
support as part of the problem, also confirmed elsewhere (Melhuish, 2005). Implicit is the suggestion that support ought to come from outside—either relatives or social welfare agencies—rather than from within the community.

**Promoting welfare at the Court?**

Residents were positive about balconies, regarded as promoting community and relaxation. Tasha said: ‘it does feel like you have privacy, but at the same time you see people and talk to people.’ Jack observed: ‘it does feel … quite cool and communal’—something of an interesting blurring of the public/private threshold. Rob, who has experienced serious illness, talked about the calming effects of light from the large windows and views from the front room, adding he:

> never felt it was like a dark space where you wanted to give up, it always felt kind of —, and that's the other aesthetic for me ... it was calming, at a point where you're really feeling stressed.

While some residents related balconies to community contacts and views of the courtyards, others were much more connected to Edinburgh’s landmarks. Kate and Jack, for example, said there was ‘such a lovely change of light over the city’. Their comments were implicitly about well-being, with Jack adding that the skyline at night was ‘beautiful’ and Kate that ‘You get some cool, yeah, like lights’. Thus, views and balconies, while offering welfare benefits, allow some residents to disconnect occasionally from the building and focus their identifications towards city landmarks and urban ‘cool’. This perhaps also allows some escape from issues within the Court, such as noises that unsettle.

The courtyard gardens were mentioned by six residents and associated with positive feelings and opportunities to mix. Susan said the gardens are

> nice to look at [and] ... normally during the day, if there’s many people that come and sit out, even. I don’t think there is to be honest. I think it’s just very much left to its own kind of devices really.

Elouise made similar comments, saying: ‘It’s got a courtyard in the middle, which lends itself to kind of the communal aspect, you know, getting together. Unfortunately, that didn’t really happen, but I think maybe in the early days it did.’ Others commented on the lack of play facilities for children at Claremont Court. Michael, however, was more critical. He felt that the single bench (commemorating Spence’s design) was not conducive to sociability:

> This bench for example, why is there only one bench? Do three people want to sit and face that wall over there and not talk to each other? ...
I mean, most seem to have two benches facing each other ... why not a couple of benches, why not put a picnic table, why not do something to make this feel like a community?

Six residents also mentioned one-off events—a summer barbeque and a litter-picking day—as methods to improve community mixing and environment. Although residents appreciated such events, they were not well attended and often only involved those already part of the Residents’ Association. Alastair said: ‘it’s all gone’—something of a familiar trope wherein residents imagine community relations a thing of the past. Yet, Lewis has noted an ‘oft repeated remark in these settings ... [is that there is] no community any more, but what [is] striking in these sites, paradoxically, [is] that intense social relations and attachments to places ... exist’ (Lewis, 2016, p. 9). Michael, for example, demonstrated pronounced attachment to Claremont Court, saying: ‘I’d find it quite hard to move away from here ... This is home.’

Discussion

Although some residents bemoan the loss of community, they do not wish to be immersed in close connections at all times, maintaining friendly distance or managing ‘neighbourly relations’ (Crow et al., 2002, p. 127). However, residents affiliate closely with the locale via practices of home making, feelings and talk, drawing upon autobiographical as well as contextual factors. As Savage et al. have suggested, these processes involve ‘managing proximity ... maintaining proper distance from [neighbours], yet ... constructing the right kinds of ties’ (Savage et al., 2005, p. 81). Working-class residents, in some but not all cases, talked about closeness of family and neighbours, while for others it was still important to maintain boundaries, particularly imagined ones that were about avoidance of intrusion. As Susan noted: ‘We wouldn’t see neighbours stuck, but we’re not wanting to be in each other’s pockets.’

In some cases, people maintain distance, as they fear information about living conditions being passed on to employment and social welfare agencies, which, in a more punitive state, are not always perceived as having their interests at heart. Bilson et al.’s discussion of child protection suggests asking ‘for help in a climate of suspicion is highly risky ... [and] fear of exposing your family to the suspicious gaze of “the authorities” may foster behaviour that is interpreted by professionals as suspicious’ (Bilson et al., 2017, p. 419). Residents distanced themselves from health and social welfare concerns, often associated with stigma and need, but in some cases talked about helping others or imagined future needs to do with ageing and infirmity. In addition, residents largely saw help with welfare concerns as something that outsiders, particularly social services agencies, ought to provide, yet only
sometimes acknowledged such agencies ‘being hollowed out’ (Bilson et al., 2017, p. 416) under austerity measures.

The stigma sometimes associated with the estate and modernist blocks did not provoke any residents to want to move or, more importantly, feel forced to do so, echoed in other studies (McKenzie, 2015; Jeffery, 2018). Here, elective belonging is highly relevant, as some middle-class residents saw the Court as an ‘investment’ and a stepping-stone to a future, imagined residence, linked to notions about the family and bringing up children. This is what Benson refers to as a residential trajectory, ‘not entirely satisfying long-term residential aspirations, but good enough for now’ (Benson, 2014, p. 3100).

Many working-class residents mentioned rising prices of the privately owned dwellings but did not see their home as temporary. In that sense, while they sometimes did not believe they had much choice about where to live, they also maintained a sense of belonging. Despite saying that there was not much community anymore, Michael insisted on his sense of the Court as ‘home’. Bottero also reminds us that residents often use more fine-grained distinctions than class ‘based on their local knowledge’ (Bottero, 2004, p. 994). At Claremont Court, residents’ attachment to place varied by a number of different factors, not solely reducible to class, and all maintained some kind of friendly distance which was usually convivial but, nevertheless, based upon boundaries that were not crossed in relation to ‘problem’ neighbours.

The drug-related concerns raised by residents of Claremont Court are common to other studies of estates (Seaman et al., 2006; August, 2014) and, while some adopt a ‘live and let live’ approach, others are more concerned about safety. In other research on Edinburgh and Glasgow, fear of reprisal prevented residents from intervening where they had concerns about drugs (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004). Further, residents construct micro-distinctions in their accounts that usually differentiate them from ‘types’ that they do not approve of or that they feel cause a bad atmosphere. Feelings generated by the encroachment of others (drug users, hangers about) or even phenomena (smells, sounds) were associated with the illicit, intimidating or unpleasant, which indicates that how spaces are used in the day-to-day matters to all those who take part. This may result in attempts to curtail certain uses (via added security measures) and highlights some of the unintended consequences of spaces with design specifically aiming to promote better well-being for residents.

Participants expressed complex, often contradictory, feelings about stairwells and deck access. Here, temporal questions came into play. Changes over time, either longitudinal ones such as growing up at the Court or shorter-term ones such as differences between seasons or day and night, were part of this picture. Responses to young people hanging about, for example, had as much to do with perceived generational
difference as they did with personal safety concerns or feelings of intimi-
dation. This point relates not only to lack of suitable local amenities, but
also to ongoing cuts to the kinds of welfare services that work with drug
users and young people who may have little to do with their time.

The issues of ‘problem’ social-housing dwellers raised by residents
also highlight the lack of homogeneity of any community and point to
decreasing levels of welfare support for those with mental health issues,
recovering from various forms of violence and abuse, in the care system
or who may have complex needs. A figure such as Mr Brown evokes
questions for all residents about what counts as home, whether choice
about residence exists and, due to the breaching of social niceties that
dementia may cause, expectations concerning neighbourly relations. Mr
Brown’s disappearance/reappearance to and from the nursing home
raises questions for residents about belonging, now and in the future.

There were similarly mixed views about amenities such as courtyard
gardens, balconies and light/windows at the Court. These features were
designed to promote the well-being of residents and they are generally
well liked, but participants raised some concern about their lack of use
and poor upkeep. Regarding communal areas, concerns included imprac-
tical aspects of design and fears about personal safety, particularly for
children. This led to the perception, particularly amongst some of our
middle-class respondents, that they would need to move elsewhere in or-
der to create a suitable family home. Elouise, for example, said that the
Court ‘just didn’t feel like a place I would want to bring up children
particularly’.

Implications

The strengths of this study relate to methods that allow the complexities
of lives at Claremont Court to emerge. For example, an individual might
respond very differently to researchers in a walking tour, a diary-based
discussion or an interview but, crucially, these various methods provide
a detailed account of life at the Court. This has enabled the building to
be brought to life via an intimate understanding, not only of residents’
use, their feelings of space and place, but also the embodied and affec-
tive dimensions of living at the Court. Although limited to consideration
of one estate, Atkinson’s argument that ethnographic practice produces
‘generic concepts that transcend the local and that can be applied across
a range of social situations’ (Atkinson, 2015, p. 37) applies here, rein-
forced by comparative findings across a number of other studies dis-
ccussed in this article.

This suggests that a number of implications for social work research
and practice may be drawn, based upon emergent concepts. First, space
and place are not mere backgrounds to daily life and to the health and
welfare concerns of residents; rather, they shape the spatial practices of community life in interaction with residents’ uses. They are implicated in the ways in which such issues arise and are important resources in the workings of any community. For practitioners, reflection on the ways in which the stigma often associated with health and welfare might be reduced is important, given that residents distance themselves from concerns that they associate with ‘other’ community members.

For social work research, this project highlights the need to develop emplaced understandings of how residents identify questions of welfare and well-being, if at all, rather than a starting point that assumes measures of deprivation and issues such as child neglect. This is, in part, because sensorial and temporal interactions affect both production of and responses to welfare need, but also because immersion in a community helps to identify its complexity. Thus, like social work itself, the argument here is for a research practice that is ‘mobile, deeply sensory and embodied’ (Ferguson, 2018, p. 72). This is important if we are to avoid the repetition of images of homogenised communities and the ‘decay’ associated with public housing estates.

Everyday community relations depend upon maintenance of some distance from neighbours and so residents are also circumspect about interfering, but also reluctant to refer need to state agencies, including social work, because either they may be wary of such interventions as increasingly ‘punitive’ (Morris et al., 2018, p. 5 of 9) or because they assume that such agencies already carry responsibility for welfare concerns. Nevertheless, it is also important to note the micro-distinctions that residents draw between themselves involve some discrediting of those with welfare needs, such as residents of the ‘crisis care flat’, or the suggestion that they are ‘out of place’. The danger here is that residents with social welfare needs are stigmatised within their own community, although it is also pertinent to note that our respondents identified a lack of support from community agencies as part of the problem.

Social work has a role to play here, not only in continuing to argue against ‘austerity’ and for better community resources, but also to work alongside those communities to challenge poverty and to propose sources of welfare support. Further, social work also has a crucial function, which is to question stigmatisation processes and to highlight that it is actually powerful state, economic and anti-welfare forces that produce poverty and need, rather than the supposed failings of individuals. As Parker and Aggleton have noted, the individual is often blamed, since ‘stigma comes to be seen as something in the person stigmatized, rather than as a designation that others attach to that individual’ (Parker and Aggleton, 2003, p. 15).

It is possible to argue that Claremont Court residents’ responses are subtler, since, while they do stigmatise some residents as ‘problems’, at the same time, they also note that extra community support would
greatly help to alleviate personal distress or need. Finally, for social work, while the need to avoid stigmatising services and ignorance of deprivation are vital (Morris et al., 2018), it is also necessary that both practice and research allow for the complexity of community experiences of well-being and welfare in place. While the design of buildings is a crucial component of such experiences, this research argues for greater attention to interactions between persons and places, since understanding the dynamics of such everyday relations might enable a better imagining of future welfare services.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to the residents of Claremont Court for their willing participation in the research. This article is drawn from a project undertaken in collaboration with Dr Sandra Costa Santos, Dr Nadia Bertolino and Dr Vanessa May. We would also like to thank Vanessa for her helpful comments on our ideas.

Funding

The funding for this study was provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK), ref. AH/N002938/1. There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

References


