
Lack of Social Work and Housing: Comments on “Experiencing a Stay in a Shelter in the Context of a Lack of Social Housing”

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Introduction

The recent research note on shelters and shelterization in Czechia (Glumbíková and Nedělníková, 2017) provided results of extensive qualitative research among mothers who are living or had been living in shelters. In their conclusion, the authors on the one hand stress “shelterization” as a structural phenomenon due to the lack of social housing in the country. On the other hand, at least one positive role of shelters is stressed: “People living in the shelter are aware of the impossibility of these facilities to meet their long-term housing expectations or actual relocation of the service users to permanent housing. Nevertheless, shelters are often perceived by the clients as a *source of empowerment and recovery*” (Glumbíková and Nedělníková, 2017, p.171, emphasis added). This statement stimulated me to deeper analysis of the paper since it in some respects challenges current “mainstream” research and therefore – if solidly based – could bring new perspectives on effects of shelters to its residents.

Despite ongoing debates on specific conceptualizations and methodological issues (Marcus, 2003), the term “shelterization” signifies an adaptation process to long-term stay in shelters, characterized by a decrease in interpersonal responsiveness, a neglect of personal hygiene, increasing passivity, and increasing dependency on others (Grunberg and Eagle, 1990). “Shelterization” is – similarly to other kinds of adaptations to stays in institutions – a negatively perceived phenomenon which decreases capacities of long-term shelter or institutionalized residents to independent life in the outside world. Contrary to this, the concept of “empower-

ment” as used in many academic disciplines and policy realms stresses increase in capacities to shape one’s own life and bring about social change (Castree *et al.*, 2013) or make purposive choices and translate them into desired actions (Alsop *et al.*, 2006). In terms of social work, empowerment framework means such interventions which employ methods that encourage individuals and families to recognize, claim, and use their power to enhance the quality of their lives (Garthwait, 2012). Empowerment is thus the desired aim of such diverse interventions like psychiatric treatment, social work or international development.

In other words, Glumbíková and Nedělníková (2017) suggest that within (generally negatively perceived) processes of shelterization, for at least some clients the consequence of staying in shelter is their (generally positively perceived) empowerment and recovery. Nevertheless, recent research on (ending) homelessness relates empowerment and recovery mostly with stable housing and related multi-disciplinary support, which is provided by “Housing First” programs (Busch-Geertsema, 2013; Padgett *et al.*, 2016).

While reading through the paper, focusing on presented grounded theory and arguments, quotes or codes from the qualitative research, I argue that the conclusions made by Glumbíková and Nedělníková (2017) are not convincing. Presented arguments and quotes are not strong enough to support claims of shelters as a source of empowerment and recovery. In the following sections of this paper, I focus more on two main weaknesses of discussed paper, which I see as (i) un(der) defined and unclear use of the concepts like empowerment and housing and (ii) omission of some topics (codes) which were articulated by research partners. In the final part of this text, general comments on the research of shelters in the context of (a lack of effective and efficient) social housing policies are presented.

Housing or Accommodation? Empowerment or (some) help?

Interpretation of research responses elaborated by Glumbíková and Nedělníková (2017) stands on using three “lenses” – housing, empowerment and invisibility. The text does not clarify how and why exactly these three lenses appeared in their theory. Are the “lenses” results of coding and interpretation of interview data? Did they step in the research from the very beginning as pre-defined concepts based on previous research or literature review? What I consider much more problematic is lack of any definition of these “lenses”. It is thus unclear what “empowerment”, “housing” and “invisibility” mean in the text. Where are the foci of, for example, the “empowerment lense” and how can we conclude that shelters are sources of it?

The argument of shelters as places of empowerment is supported by two quotes of the research participants (p.169):

“There are some good social workers in the shelters, like the supervisor here is nice, really cool, it makes you feel that she is really interested in your problems. (KP17)

The good social worker will support you but the bad one not... in the shelters I met the good ones... it seems to me, however, that there are less of them than the others... it's not easy but not everyone can do this kind of job. (KP24)”

When compared to definitions of empowerment above, the quotes don't match them, unless we accept that “being interested in your problem” means the same as “(helping to) increase in your capacities to shape your own life”. Interest in clients' problems is, of course, a necessary condition to any kind of support provided by a social worker to his/her client. Lack of interest in the client and his/her problems, needs or desires is a sign of unprofessional social work. However, interest in clients' needs is not sufficient condition neither to the success of social work in terms of meeting such needs nor to empowering the client in terms of increasing his/her capabilities to control his or her life and to make social change. In other words, interests in clients' needs may be followed by a paternalistic (or similar) style of social work which will increase the dependency of the client on the social worker and may (or may not) meet some clients' needs. Or it may be followed by other activities which will eventually lead to empowerment.

The term “housing” or lense of housing leads to similar confusions. Housing is used in the sense of “a place to go” as defined by the authors (p.166) or as “a roof over your head”, as used by one of the research participants (p.166). However, shelters do not provide housing in a sense consistently used in academic and policy debates on homelessness. According to the ETHOS typology, people living in shelters are considered homeless under broader categories of “Houseless” and “people in accommodation for the homeless” (FEANTSA, 2006). Shelters are certainly accommodation or “a place to go” when someone loses their dwelling. On the other hand, shelters are not housing in a sense of one's own dwelling which can be stable over a long time, ensures privacy and enables independent control over how the dwelling is used and with whom (within the broader legal framework). Instead of “housing” and “empowerment”, the experience of staying in shelters should be framed or labelled by terms like “accommodation” and “social work”.

Silent issues: What did the partners also say?

While the previous section illustrated some weaknesses in how interview quotes were used to build the arguments and theories of Glumbíková and Nedělníková (2017), this section will be focused on issues mentioned in the interviews which are presented as quotes in the paper but are not further elaborated in the theory. In other words, the theory and conclusions of the paper do not include several issues

mentioned by research participants on their understanding and expectations on the shelter (p.166), on the regime of the shelter (p.168) and on social work and relationship with the social worker (p.169).

In terms of expectations, several quotes share the same code of having very low expectations from the shelter. While the legal status of shelters¹ stresses their role as a residential social service which should “provide help and support [to] persons with the aim of social inclusion or prevention of social exclusion”, inhabitants of the shelters claim that they “do not expect anything from the shelter”. One interviewee stated that only new (first time) inhabitants of the shelters have some expectations on receiving help from the shelters. Low expectations are interlinked with the experience of social work provided in shelters which is described with the use of expressions like “pointless meetings” or “doing just what (social worker) wants”. Moreover, this kind of social work is provided in the context of shelter regime which imposes some rules on the inhabitants in terms of their daily regimes and movement. There are rules on receiving visitors in the facility: “The visit must be reported, they can go out, sometimes into the kitchen, but not in the room or so... those hours there are limited... it’s like visits in the hospital” (p.168). Moreover, the residents have limited time to spend out of the shelter: “Well, we have to be here to six, we can no longer go out. When we, moms, want to go out at night, so we get paroled into eleven o’clock a week.” (p.168).

All these quotes above show is that experiencing a stay in a shelter includes (at least for some inhabitants) disillusion from the social work received by them, without a meaning they could understand. Their face to face contact with the world outside of shelters is limited to certain parts of the day. Shelters as a social service are thus reduced to simple provision of accommodation. In other words, there is not much of a difference between a shelter and a private dormitory. These statements presented in the paper (which is of course a tiny part of interview data) could be interpreted as a failure of shelters and failure of social work in the shelters, which are not able to create partnership with their clients or provide individualized support that would be meaningful for the clients or to be perceived as a supporting partner instead of as “a guardian of the order of the facility”. To my surprise, Glumbíková and Nedělníková (2017) do not follow this topic. They do not attempt to describe and analyse perceived weaknesses, do not call for further analysis and do not suggest that practices of social workers in shelters may need some improvement. All problems stated by the residents are quickly related to “a non-existent system of social housing” (p.169). However, a lack of social housing is not the cause of “pointless meetings” – such meetings are caused by the social workers organizing them and insisting on clients’ participation. Lack of the system of social housing

¹ Act. No. 108/2006 on Social Services

and low chances to get from shelters to independent housing must not serve as an excuse for poor quality social work, low professional standards or strong institutional regimes.

Meaningful activities for the homeless and a lack of social housing: concluding thoughts

Glumbíková and Nedělníková (2017) indeed present many interesting views from clients of shelters, which seem to be a rich material for further analysis of multiple faces of experiencing a stay on a shelter in a wider context (of which “a lack of social housing” is just one of many characteristics). However, the theme of shelters, shelterization and wider (structural) context opens several general issues on the role of agents (including shelter providers and social workers) within wider structures.

First, providing social services to homeless clients is a demanding job with many challenges and complex linkages, ranging from the individual situation of the homeless person to systemic limits of institutionalized social work and structural conditions of housing markets and housing policies. Shelters are situated in the context of institutional and individual policies and practices which often keep people homeless instead of helping them. A lack of affordable/social housing is a widespread phenomenon in many cities around the world. However, any lack of social housing is neither static nor a “given” condition. Nor is it an excuse for resigning on professional standards and quality of social work in shelters, street-work or any other type of social service. Any professional activity needs to reflect its context and find a mode of operation which will bring about (some) social change. Waiting for a top-down solution (like a policy change from a lack of social housing to adequate provision of social housing) does not make social change. Neither in the short-run nor in the long-run perspective.

Second, recently a shift in policy approaches from “managing homelessness” to “ending homelessness” has been taking place. Policies on ending homelessness (e.g. Padgett *et al.*, 2016) are based on the simple idea – homeless people will stay homeless until they move in to a home and stay housed for a substantial time. The goal is to get homeless people into housing as soon as possible and provide them with support needed to stay housed. In other words, the aim is to increase the number of apartments available to people who are homeless from public, private or non-profit housing providers. This shift did not start with increased supply of social housing but with an active approach of social service providers, local and national policymakers and other actors to provide to house the homeless. In the Czech context, at least some shelters are active in this way and managed to find permanent housing for its clients.

Finally, what role can academic research play in this context? Based on the ethical principle of beneficence, researchers should have the welfare of the research participant as a goal of any research study. Housing, as one of the basic needs, is necessary for well-being and quality of life. Since there is no social housing legislation in Czechia and access to both public and private rental markets is limited for homeless people (Matoušek, 2013; Kocman and Klepal, 2016), increased social housing is needed. However, beneficence of academic research should not be limited to big goals, wide changes and sometimes (from practitioners' perspective) abstract recommendations. In the context of homelessness, research should provide necessary feedback to any policies and practices that have an impact on homeless people, be it structural failure of housing or social policies, local practices of displacement or criminalization of homeless people or inefficient interventions that aim but fail to help them. Paradigm change towards "ending homelessness" includes a shift in minds of social workers, since social housing is based on the support of households by social workers or other professionals. Frank but fair feedback and debate on social work with people who are homeless is thus as necessary as social housing provision.

► References

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