

REVIEWS/RECENZJE

In permanently introducing this new section to our periodical, we wish to call the reader's attention to a unique approach we are consciously taking. In a desire to identify impending foci in our field, we have invited the youngest of our colleagues – MA and PhD candidates in social work – to act as our reviewers. Furthermore, considering the vast multitude of scholarly articles published annually, we have asked our students to primarily focus on this segment which is more likely to reflect the most recent findings. That said, we have not set a strict date range in the hope that our reviewers will freely discover or recover studies which might have been overlooked heretofore.

Middleton Michael K.

Housing, Not Handcuffs: Homeless Misrecognition and "Safe Ground Sacramento's" Homeless Activism. "Communication, Culture & Critique" 2014, 7: 320–337

Reviewed by: Zofia Markiewicz

In contemporary social work we often emphasize the importance of empowerment, of treating our clients as experts. However, when it comes to reality, there is little sign of those ideals being implemented. It is still very rare for social work scholars to give voice to the client or for social work practitioners to follow client's concepts. It seems that we talk about the empowerment but on our own terms.

However, Michael Middleton's article challenges this scheme as he tries to give voice to the people who truly are experts on homelessness as they experience it themselves. Unfortunately, in our present reality those people would not easily get to publish their ideas and concepts in such Journals as "Communication, Culture & Critique", so it is very kind of Middleton to try pass his message on to the scholars and students who might otherwise not have the opportunity to put forth their revolutionary ideas.

The article focuses on a group of homeless activists and its endeavors to challenge "mass discourse" about homelessness – especially the issues of criminalization and the exclusion of the homeless from political participation. It stresses the importance of recognizing the autonomy and potential of people experiencing homelessness; it also

attempts to blur the line between the “housed” and the “homeless.” Middleton sees the “Safe Ground” group as an authority and an expert; he carefully studies their message, methods, actions, and achievements. Presenting a truly empowering attitude towards the activists and their autonomous, alternative ways of dealing with homelessness, this author leaves us with the impression that we can learn a lot from the example of “Safe Ground”. Maybe, instead of investing funds in institutionalized forms of support which often do not seem to work, we should find time for dialogue with the “experts”, listening to their ideas and concepts which are best suited to their situations and needs. As social workers, we should act as assistants and companions, rather than as a barrier on the path out of homelessness.

The title of the article already suggests a kind of political involvement – an attempt to revolutionize or overthrow the present system. Its aim is to challenge popular ways of thinking and the existing reality as well as to shift focus away from individual factors and towards the structural causes of homelessness. It suggests structural changes rather than the criminalization of those devoid of proper housing.

One of the essential aspects of this change is to stop putting people into boxes. The key is to see each person as an individual. Middleton presents a very personalized approach to the homeless. This scholar attempts to prove that, if we get to know a particular homeless person face-to-face and listen to his or her story, then it would be difficult to discriminate the individual and exclude him or her from our communities as we currently do. If we get to know the homeless as individuals, it becomes clear that we should treat them as subjects, not objects, and therefore we should grant them exactly the same rights as we grant to any other human being.

The article is definitely politically engaged and carries a strong and important message. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that Middleton uses a lot of repetitions and vague phrases which are not clearly defined in the text. One such expression is “dissensus” which appears at the very beginning of the article and is repeated continuously in almost every paragraph. However, what we cannot find in the text even once is an argumentation shedding light on Middleton’s decision to use this specific term as a keyword in describing the activists’ political strategy. Personally, I see this term as very misleading in this context. Even though “Safe Ground” activists are indeed challenging and opposing the popular, stereotypical way of perceiving homeless people and their place in society, it is clearly not their long-term objective to create “dissensus”. They have aims much more practical and constructive which they want to achieve and are gradually achieving.

Middleton mentions that, in 2010, the City of Sacramento approved “Safe Ground’s” scheme of creating a homeless encampment according to the vision and rules of the homeless themselves. In the quotations cited in the article the activists themselves talk about the importance of dialogue with their “housed allies”. Moreover, some of the activists found jobs working as advocates for their community. This would not have been achieved if it had not been for some kind of cooperation and mutual agreement to which the “other” side had contributed. Therefore I believe “dissensus” is not the most accurate as it emphasizes a lack of agreement, rather than the erosion of divisions.

The author, however, would definitely disagree, as in accord with his rhetoric, the world seems to be very polarized. He paints things as black and white: there is no in-between, no cooperation, no exchange, and no mutual learning. Still, it is not clear how he came to such conclusions. As a result of this way of thinking, the article seems at times to be more against “popular discourse” and “misrecognition” than it is in favor of a new alternative. It thus pushes indeed for “dissensus” which is rather destructive than constructive.

Nevertheless, taking everything into account, I am very grateful to Middleton for sharing the inspiring story of the struggle of “Safe Ground” activists. They are a living proof that seemingly voiceless, marginalized groups can successfully stand up for their rights, if only they have enough determination to unite and fight. Although I disagree with the conclusions of the article and the author’s polarized view of reality, still I admire his empowering and motivating approach to the activists. I believe such revolutionaries are what we need in our world today.

Browne K., Falshaw L.

Street Children and Crime in the UK: A Case of Abuse and Neglect. "Child Abuse Review" 1998, 7: 241–253

Reviewed by: Dominika Curyło

This article is mainly about the reasons why children and adolescents choose to run away from home or alternative care and how their situation can be addressed by street work projects. The children run away because they experience violence, bullying, and neglect as well as many kinds of abuse, such as sexual or psychological. In many cases, as a consequence of experiencing such abuse, children become perpetrators of anti-social acts and are more likely to commit similar offences. The reviewed article describes four street work projects that aim to provide support for young runaways in the United Kingdom.

In the beginning, the authors of this article emphasize that young runaways are increasingly seen in UK society as potentially dangerous offenders and troublemakers. This way of thinking steers society clear of a focus on the children's vulnerability and need for protection. This is why the authors attempt to outline the main reasons why young people would choose to live on the street instead of in a home or residential care.

The next part of the article mainly consists of recalling statistics concerning the number of children running away from home in the UK and in the USA as well as the reasons behind this phenomenon. The statistics, however, are taken from different studies. The data concerning the number of runaways, the length of time away from home, and the primary reasons for doing so is presented for different age groups (e.g., under 18, under 16, between 12 and 18, and under 8), for both boys and girls, and for children living in homes or in alternative care. Furthermore, data is presented on the percentage of abused children who become perpetrators of abuses they experienced themselves. It is also pointed out that, after living on the street longer than a month, one in two children who runs away will, in order to survive, resort to prostitution, stealing, drug dealing or other illegal activities. In line with the studies carried out by Dryfoos (1990) and the Children's Society Central London Teenage Project "Safe House" (Newman, 1989), it is said that up to 90,000 children prefer to live on the street in the UK and one million in the USA. Still, the authors of this article have provided too many statistics to keep in mind while reading the remainder of the article. It would be better to point out only those statistics most significant for clarification of the topics subsequently discussed.

The following part of the article describes and discusses four street work projects established around the British Isles in an attempt to remedy the failures of the care system with regards to the issue of runaway children. Abused children were often sent back to the same abusive "care placements" which put them in danger of being abused again or going back to living on the street. The four street work projects operate on a "young person-centered" basis, which means they aim to reestablish a link between the young person and his or her family or a child protection agency. These projects – "Youth Link" Birmingham 1988; "Safe in the City" Manchester 1989; "Leeds Safe House", Leeds 1991,

and “The Porth Project” Gwent 1993 – all aim to provide short-term refuge for the youth in need. The latter two of the afore mentioned projects also provide a 24-hour emergency telephone service. A study carried out by The Children’s Society showed that all these projects proved to be quite successful in providing immediate support and information to youth living on the street. An additional paragraph, introducing separate statistics concerning the street work project in Birmingham, was included in the article. A concise description of each project also provided a clear picture of their character and functioning.

Close to the end of the article the authors discuss the need for counseling when it comes to addressing the problems and behavior of young delinquents living on the street. Counseling is defined as “the means by which one individual helps another to clarify their life situation and to decide upon further lines of action” (1998: 244). In order for counseling to be successful, the therapeutic relationship has to be genuinely warm, respectful, empathetic, and understanding of client feelings and needs. However, the authors mention that these characteristics are insufficient in evoking a positive change in the life of young delinquents. In such cases the counselor must develop the following skills in response to the child’s unique characteristics: commitment, responsibility, intensity, skepticism, and leadership. Furthermore, in order for the program to be effective, the following factors must be included: targeting a variety of problems which the runaways face and not just their criminal activity; teaching the young person skills such as problem-solving and social skills; and employing behavioral, cognitive, and cognitive-behavioral methods.

In closing the reviewed article, the authors point out three needed levels of intervention done by the street workers. Firstly, increased outreach work must be provided to young runaways. Secondly, counseling should be made available to the young homeless people with an aim of befriending and supporting them in re-entering the care system. Thirdly, counseling should be offered which addresses the runaway’s victimization and/or delinquency, and facilitates exploration of child protection issues by statutory child care services. What is very important and innovative in this approach is that young runaways living on the street can be provided with counseling without having to go through primary health care and mental health services which, due to long waiting lines and administrative structure, discourage the young runaways.

Overall, this is a very interesting article presenting extended data concerning many issues crucial for street workers throughout the world. Its main limitation is that it contains too much data which is hard to absorb. This article is valuable because it presents, in a professional manner, different types of street work projects which can be compared to those conducted in Poland. As I am a street worker, it is very useful for me to broaden my knowledge on relevant activities – not only in Poland, but also in other countries. In the description of the street work projects in this article I found some new approaches, but also certain elements similar to activities in Poland.

Although, it is not one of the newest articles, I can truly recommend it for its universal advice for social workers wanting to work with young delinquents. The other reason

for recommending it is that it illustrates good street work project practice which can motivate those who wish to engage in such outreach methods themselves.

References

Dryfoos J. (1990). *Adolescents at Risk*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Newman C. (1989). *Young Runaways: Findings from Britain's First Safe House*. The Children's Society, London.

Timothy P.W., Rogers J.

Rejecting “the child”, embracing “childhood”: Conceptual and methodological considerations for social work research with young people.
“International Social Work” 2014, 59 (6): 734–744

Reviewed by: Anna Paulweber

“Do we really know and understand what childhood is and what it means to be a child?” Probably everyone would answer, “Yes, of course, I have also been a child and we know what is and what is not good for a child.” Think again! The perspective of the parties concerned is missing, or more precisely the perspective of the child.

This leads me to the article I read which deals with the emergence of how social work with children might be understood in relationship to the sociology of childhood. Above all, the experiences of children and young people have been integrated. Distinct from this, we can find a lot of theoretical literature about understandings of childhood and about how research methodologies and fieldwork strategies used by social workers define it. The purpose of this article is to discover ways to fill the gap between.

The article abstract provides an overview about what can be expected. The main points pertain to different ideas of how notions of “childhood” can be seen and what outcomes of social work research can contribute to this topic. Furthermore, the results of the social work research refer to current foster care literature in the UK.

The first part of the title – “rejecting the child” – can be seen as highly provocative, but, in the meantime, it might indicate how many people have assumptions about what constitutes the lived experience of being a child. I was expecting that the authors would comment about this title: it might lead to misunderstandings, rather than underscore that children and young people should be at the center of research into their experiences. This is especially true when social sciences focus on a topic relevant to the viewpoint of children – and the authors here mention foster care as an example.

It was somewhat irritating and shocking for me to read of an overall comprehension of the child as influenced by Western thinking: children who do not fit Western conceptions are seen as “the others,” “backward,” and “underdeveloped.” This opinion seems rather outdated, but perhaps actually still in use; it does make sense to mention this still existing opinion. From my point of view, the literature which encompassed this type of thinking is not state of the art because the books to which the authors refer are more than 15 years old. Still I wondered if there is not also an argument against this declaration, and, in fact – just a few paragraphs later – the authors did point out that perceptions of the child as an incomplete being should be rejected, because it is contrary to the empirical scholarship of many sociologists and anthropologists today.

However, to be realistic, seeing the child as an “incomplete human being” continues. After this thought, I was curious as to the part that social work plays in refuting this archaic opinion. The most recent conceptualizations of childhood are a consequence of the engagement and principles of social work, and particularly because of the research done

among children and young people. From my perspective, it seems that the experiences and opinions of children and young people should be the focal point when anyone is conducting research about them. This article does spotlight this very important fact.

Furthermore, childhood is also understood as a social construct which should debunk the notion of a “universal child.” Conceptualizing childhood as a construct has been possible because researchers focus on learning about the real lives of children and not on making assumptions about how their lives look. Nevertheless, I fear that this sort of approach is not as popular as the envisioning of a framework as to how children’s lives look and how people went through their own personal childhood experience. It is obviously more work to learn about children’s lives from children and not just from our own suppositions. Hopefully, this kind of progress will spread all over the world, but, in my view, it will take a very long time to change people’s minds. The authors add a very essential statement that children must be viewed as social actors in their own right.

Another noteworthy feature of this article is that it demonstrates how children and young people in foster care have recently been involved in research. Previously, this comprised just a small part of a broader field of studies. It was not new to me that there is a lack of this kind of literature. Nonetheless it really surprised me to learn from the authors that even the latest reports need to be regarded critically because the children and youth who are or were living in foster care have been treated during interviews as if they were consumers of a service. Indeed, the authors of this article are absolutely right; worth mentioning is the great progress this reflects when even the most contemporary literature in this field is critiqued. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that surveys and interviews are also shaped by adults. It should be accentuated that questions in a survey or interview are suitable from the interviewer’s perspective, in order to gain an anticipated answer; yet such queries are not necessarily suitable for children and young people who are expected to provide answers about very personal experiences.

Overall, the article is well organized and well-written; additionally, it is written in high quality English: one gets accustomed easily to the vocabulary and hence the article is easy to understand. In the end, however, one thing is crucial in conducting research with children and youth. Specifically studies of foster care should not entail simply asking straightforward questions of children and young people. There must be a balanced concern for ethics and a mandate to do no harm. This should be a requisite principle guiding social work research and practice, particularly with children. From my point of view such an attitude should be part and parcel in the basic thinking of a social worker (or any person) assisting children. This is especially the case when working with youth who have suffered negative experiences in their lives.

Michael L Shier, John R Graham

Subjective well-being, social work, and the environment: The impact of the socio-political context of practice on social worker happiness. "Journal of Social Work" 2015, 15 (1): 3–23

Reviewed by: Aleksandra Waszczuk

This article was different and interesting. When we usually think about social work, we see the clients and people who need help. Social workers themselves (not to mention their individual feelings) are often overlooked in the process of providing assistance. Yet it cannot be disregarded that the effectiveness of a social worker depends, to a large extent, on his or her wellbeing. This article shows the most meaningful factors influencing the feelings and emotions which accompany practitioners in their everyday work. As a future social worker, I find this issue important and worth studying because I will need to cope with similar problems and experiences in my profession.

As already indicated, the text at hand discusses basic themes which are related to the sociopolitical environment and which can contribute to practitioner wellbeing. According to the authors there are three areas which can have significant impact on a subjective sense of comfort and security. These include: (a) perceptions of practitioners by community members; (b) conflicts with social work program mandates; and (c) changes within the social welfare system.

The findings are based on an analysis of a group of 19 practitioners and their experiences in the field. It needs to be added that the social worker environs lead to both positive and negative impacts. Additionally, this paper illustrates two perspectives on social work – the micro and macro perspectives. The former is dedicated to the communities and is a direct aspect of this profession; the latter includes the whole system of social assistance, organizations, politics, and formal, governmental decisions.

In first order, I would like to review the influence of community member perceptions on practitioner wellbeing. In my opinion this is a key issue. Social workers commonly choose this profession because they hold strong beliefs in altruistic values or have a sense of mission. Yet it often happens that they receive insufficient support from the community and the government in fulfilling their career roles. Moreover, a great burden of responsibility is associated with this work.

On the one hand, practitioners have power and authority in the community, but, on the other hand, this could be seen in different ways. Sometimes clients could be afraid of this "power" which social workers have ("She can take our kids away," etc.). This negative and inaccurate perception of social workers by community members may influence the ability of the former to actually do their job, affecting them psychologically and emotionally. This lack of understanding and trust could be disappointing and discouraging indeed for the young social worker embarking on a career in this field. Not always is this profession appreciated. The constant need to justify the significance of social work, and a sense that this mission is underestimated and underrated might

be disappointing and have an emotional effect on practitioners. Still, at this point, it should be noted how great an inspiration our communities could be. When you see that people actually get involved in the helping process, it makes you feel you are not fighting this fight on your own. Overall, the community could be a sufficient support system or it could be the leading source of discouragement.

The second factor influencing the social workers' subjective wellbeing is an incongruence between the practitioner and program mandates. The workplace and organizational politics are well-known stressors for employees in all sectors. Additionally, a serious problem is the intrusion of bureaucracy upon professional autonomy in social work. Structural control can cause tension as practitioners get caught up trying to meet formal requirements and hence do not perform the basic tasks which comprise direct interaction with clients and communities. As a consequence of organizational level mandates, some social workers might feel that they are unable to meet client needs or to provide services in a manner conducive to the ethics and principles of social work practice. Furthermore, they are hampered by budgets imposed in advance which can prevent effective and comprehensive execution of duties. Financial constraints may arouse a feeling of being less than properly engaged with work. Large disproportions between the mandates set by government and the actual needs in the community can lead to a sense of frustration and powerlessness. Working collaboratively makes you feel you are not a lone person on the ship, that you are sharing the load with another organization and have the same vision as other people. That is why the individual actions of practitioners should be in line with the formal requirements. This would build a sense of unity, empowerment, and credibility.

Last but not least, I would like to introduce the problem of practitioners and the state social welfare system. The sociopolitical context of social welfare reforms undermines the actual work being undertaken by social workers and may not fully consider the local community and direct practice implications. In addition to this, practitioners might be unable to carry out their roles in effectively and supportively. It is significant that in many cases the bureaucratic process seems more important than service delivery which is completely contrary to the idea of contemporary social work. Practitioners are trying to change but often think inappropriately of their assignment as a distribution of financial social benefits. Still the government allocates most funds to social benefits rather than focus on a holistic development of the sector.

Some might ask why focusing on the subjective wellbeing of the social worker is so important. I believe that a practitioner who feels unsupported, miserable, and lost cannot provide proper assistance to beneficiaries. As is evident, the authors of the reviewed article have pointed towards multiple factors which strongly affect practitioners. We should be aware of that so as to react and create our own happiness and self-esteem as we envision it. Furthermore, we should work on issues which we do not like or with which we disagree so as to have an impact on the shape of our profession. This could prevent the burnout so very common in this job. I would definitely recommend this article to other social work students as it raises highly relevant issues likely to manifest themselves in the course of our work in the future.