The perpetuation of inequality: the role of community engagement

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the disaster at Grenfell Tower there have been allegations that the local council failed to listen to warnings from residents about the potential fire risk in the building, along with other examples of attempts by the council to avoid dialogue. Whilst these apparent failings of the council may be extreme examples, they are not isolated ones. The underlying culture and taken-for-granted assumptions of many public agencies mean that they struggle to engage and conduct dialogue with marginalised groups. Using the example of inequalities in the distribution of fire, I argue that the failure of community engagement itself serves to perpetuate the widespread inequalities found in British society. Although the incidence of fire is falling, the social gradient that exists in its distribution remains. This fact can be linked to the failure of services to engage with marginalised communities, those communities most affected by fire. Both access to services and the success of social policy interventions depend on effective dialogue between the state and citizens, but many are shut out from that dialogue. There is a pressing need to direct attention towards the ways in which public services relate to the communities that they serve.

Keywords

community engagement, dialogue, public services, inequality, Grenfell Tower, fire, fire prevention

Introduction

The shocking events of Grenfell Tower have brought the inequalities of British society into sharp focus. The fire which engulfed a tower block in one of the richest boroughs in England is thought to have claimed the lives of 80 people. Hundreds more lost their homes and possessions and thousands are likely to endure delayed trauma in the years to come (Sherwood, 2017). Residential land values in the borough, Kensington and Chelsea, are amongst the highest in the England (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015a), yet the 2015 English indices of deprivation place the immediate area around Grenfell Tower in the top 6% in England in terms of income deprivation, and the top 2% in terms of barriers to housing and services (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015b)[1]. In the aftermath of the disaster there have been allegations that the local council failed to listen to warnings from residents about the potential fire risk in the building (Booth and Wahlquist, 2017). The council has faced widespread criticism for the way it has acted since the tragedy, with even the Prime Minister critical of its attempts to avoid dialogue with residents (Walker et al., 2017). In this paper I argue that whilst the apparent failings of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council may be an extreme example, it is not an isolated one. Part of the reason for continued inequality can be traced back to the widespread failure of public services to engage effectively with many of the more disadvantaged within society. This failure is itself attributable to taken-for-granted assumptions on the part of those

services—to a failure to configure themselves in a way which facilitates dialogue between them and those who it is their job to serve. To make this argument I look at the question of inequality in the distribution of fire. I will show that combating this inequality is dependent on effective dialogue between public services and those communities most affected by fire, and that such dialogue is inhibited by a number of important factors.

Fire is an inequality issue

It is now well established that fire does not affect all sections of society equally. Whilst the literature on inequality and fire cannot be described as extensive there are a growing number of studies that have sought to understand the way in which incidents of fire and loss from fire are distributed across society. Although there are differences associated with context and with methodology, the top-level findings from these studies are broadly consistent—those who are most disadvantaged in society are also at the highest risk of suffering loss from fire.

Jennings (2013) provides a useful overview of the state of much of the existing literature on socio-economic determinants of fire, noting that deprivation in general, and poverty and housing quality in particular, are repeatedly found to be strongly associated with rates of fire in the home. In the UK, government commissioned studies have linked rates of fire to the Index of Multiple Deprivation[2] (IMD) (Arson Control Forum, 2004), and to never having worked (Smith et al., 2008). Links to economic deprivation have been identified in fire data from South Wales (Corcoran et al., 2007, 2013), whilst in the area of public health unemployment has been strongly linked to death and injury from fires (Edwards et al., 2006). Ethnicity has also been found to be a significant determinant of the risk of fire, with a number of studies particularly reporting those from African and Caribbean background to be more at risk (Corcoran et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2008).

Efforts to reduce the incidence of fire in the UK have met with a considerable amount of success, with the number of building fires attended by UK fire and rescue services dropping by 39% in the decade to 2012 (Knight, 2013) and continuing to fall since (Home Office, 2016b). Despite this, however, there is little sign of the social gradient in incidence of fire casualties changing (Mulvaney et al., 2009), and a more recent study, using data from the West Midlands, confirmed the continued existence of strong associations between rates of fire in the home and a range of socio-demographic factors, including unemployment, ethnicity and living alone (Hastie and Searle, 2016). This continued inequality in the distribution of fire exists despite the fact that many fire services actively target their community fire safety work towards those at greatest risk (Higgins et al., 2013). Given this, it is important to ask why such targeting does not appear to be working, and it is to that question that I now turn.

The crucial role of community engagement

Whilst the inequality in the distribution of fire is well established, there has been little research into why it exists. There are many possible reasons—older, badly maintained, or poorer quality

electrical equipment, the higher incidence of smoking amongst disadvantaged groups (Marmot et al., 2010), or poorer quality housing, to name but a few. The truth is probably a complex mix of all these factors and more. I argue here that a crucial area that needs attention is the relationship that exists between public agencies and communities—that is, how successful agencies are at engaging with the communities that they serve. This is an area that seems particularly pertinent to the tragedy at Grenfell Tower given the role played in events by the council's apparent failure to respond to residents' concerns about fire safety.

In discussing community engagement I take a broad view of what it is, seeing it as a term that encompasses any of a wide range of activities that involve dialogue between state agencies and communities, including access to services by members of those communities, the exchange of information and knowledge, participation, and consultation. I also take a broad view of which agencies should be considered, including within the discussion the emergency services, health and social care, welfare, and local government. This is partly because fire safety is a 'wicked' problem (Rittel and Webber, 1973) and wicked problems should be the concern of a wide range of agencies (Ling, 2002; Williams, 2002). It is also because my own research suggests that decisions on whether or not to engage with the fire service are partly based on past experiences of other public services, well beyond the fire service itself (Hastie, 2017).

There are two complementary reasons why I consider community engagement to be important to the question of fire inequality. The first is that most fires are the result of human activity (Merrall, 2002), of the choices, decisions and actions of people. In order to influence those choices and decisions, agencies that seek to promote fire safety must engage on some level with those they hope to influence. Like many interventions in public health, fire safety is not something that can be done to a community, it is something that community members must play a large part in doing themselves—fire safety, in effect, is co-produced. Community fire safety is the result of the interaction between community members and the agencies that seek to improve fire safety, as are most health promotion interventions. Influencing citizens to change behaviour inevitably requires engagement and dialogue between agencies and citizens, thus an understanding of engagement is central to understanding effective fire prevention.

The second reason that community engagement is important is because those experiencing high levels of fire may well have some understanding of why this is the case. This is knowledge that is of great value to those who wish to promote fire safety, but it is knowledge that may not be available to them if engagement with affected communities is poor. Improving community engagement, facilitating the interaction between communities and agencies, has the potential to facilitate the co-production of further research and the co-creation of solutions that both meet the needs of the community, and the desire to reduce the incidence of fire. Again, this is not something that is unique to fire prevention. There are many situations where promoting effective change within a community will be enhanced by the understanding that the community itself has of both

the underlying issues and of the barriers to change. Facilitating access to that knowledge is a vital part of enabling social change.

The inequality of community engagement

Despite the importance of dialogue and engagement in shaping the outcome of social policy, the way in which public agencies operate often favours engagement with certain sections of society over others. Marginalised communities experience a number of important barriers to engagement, barriers that are much less evident for those from less disadvantaged backgrounds.

Negative consequences of engagement

For many in marginalised or disadvantaged communities engaging with the state is perceived as risky (Canvin et al., 2007). There is a fear of having information passed on to other agencies, such as the police or social services. This fear is unlikely to be diminished by recent revelations that sensitive data collected by outreach workers working with the homeless has been passed to the Home Office and used to target deportations (Townsend, 2017). A further risk for communities is that effort will be invested in engaging but no apparent benefit will come of it, with attempts by the state to engage with communities in the past being perceived as having been tokenistic and leading to no real change (Durose, 2011). This is a risk that seems to have been realised for those residents of Grenfell Tower who tried to raise their concerns with the landlord. There are also fears, grounded in past experience, of being judged harshly. For some, experiences of contact with the state are experiences of being told that they are doing something wrong and of having their lifestyles criticised (Mathers et al., 2008). Such experiences have been found to discourage further engagement (Winkworth et al., 2010), particularly when combined with the expectation that engagement will not result in change anyway. Beyond these risks however, is a deeply ingrained difference in ways of working between many more marginalised communities and public services, a difference that makes any attempt to engage challenging.

Language and culture

Residents of Grenfell Tower came from diverse backgrounds and for many English was not a first language. In the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy commentators pointed out the need to ensure that information for those affected was available in a variety of languages, highlighting the initial failure of the council to provide translations or interpreters (Allen and Duckworth, 2017). Language difficulties, however, are not restricted to those with poor English. Public servants and professionals have a language of their own, a technical and bureaucratic language that can create barriers for those not familiar with it. The use of acronyms and specialist terms may have value internally, but when used in dialogue with community members they not only impede comprehension, but serve to reinforce a sense of being outside, discouraging further interaction.

This use of 'insider' language is but one part of a wider problem of the culture of many public sector organisations. Agencies behave in ways which make sense to them, which align with their

prevailing culture, the 'shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds' (Schein, 1996: 236). However, communities and state agencies may have different ways of doing things, different ways of organising and different ways of communicating (Eversole, 2011). With the management of most public services dominated by white, middle-class professionals it is unsurprising that the ways in which services operate are aligned more closely to the cultural expectations of the white middle-classes. This alignment of cultural values between middle-class public servants and their middle-class clients allows those clients to exploit their cultural capital to gain an advantage in accessing services (Matthews and Hastings, 2013). Conversely, those from other backgrounds often find the ways of working of public services unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and the systems difficult to navigate. They can find it difficult to adapt to unaccustomed procedures, limiting their effectiveness when they do try to engage (Taylor, 2011).

The problems involved in sustaining dialogue across the cultural differences between public agencies and communities can be illustrated by my own reflections on recent fieldwork. There are many parallels between public agency-community engagement and researcher-participant engagement, particularly where, as in my case, the researcher has a middle-class professional background. During recent fieldwork in a disadvantaged area in the English Midlands I found myself reflecting on a series of interactions I had at one residents' meeting. A conversation with a housing professional played out very differently to my conversations with residents. The understanding of the context of work within a public sector organisation that I and the housing officer had in common, a series of underlying assumptions that we shared, made for a much more animated and engaging conversation than those I had with residents that day. I felt more comfortable in the conversation with the housing officer, more at home, and the result was a conversation in which both of us felt that we learned more. The way in which this dialogue was facilitated by our shared assumptions mirrors the way in which those who share cultural assumptions with bureaucrats are more able to engage with them and to reap the benefits of that engagement.

One specific area in which the cultural gap between state agencies and communities may manifest is the question of what constitutes valid knowledge. Public sector organisations, and the professionals that inhabit them, expect knowledge to be generated in formal ways and supported by objective evidence. In contrast, community based knowledge may be experiential and built around more subjective notions. Underlying assumptions about the greater value of their own ontological notions can result in community based knowledge being ignored or rejected by professionals (Gilchrist, 2016). This situation is further exacerbated by the differences in approaches to communication, making it difficult for communities to frame their concerns in a way which is heard by authorities. We see an obvious example of this in the apparent failure to take Grenfell Tower residents' fears about fire safety seriously.

Broader implications of poor engagement

Fire safety does not exist in isolation. It is part of the complex network of wicked problems that contribute to inequality. Effective dialogue between the state and communities has an important role to play in a tackling many of those issues. It affects the ability to access services for those who most need those services; it affects the ability of the state to learn about issues from those most affected by them and to make use of valuable community knowledge; and it affects the ability to influence behaviour that brings with it risk. Yet at the moment public services often struggle to engage with those who most need them. There is a clear need for more attention to be paid to the question of how to ensure that community engagement works effectively with all communities.

Reducing inequality in community engagement

As a first step towards reducing inequality in community engagement, those that seek to engage could take a critical look at some of their practices and consider how the issues highlighted here could be addressed. There are unlikely to be easy answers. The issues are sometimes deeply ingrained, at other times they are tied up with separate needs or objectives. A particular example of conflict between improved engagement and other objectives can be seen in the question of citizens' fear of information being passed between public agencies. Joined up working has become an important strategy in the public sector, seen as a vital means of both tackling wicked issues and improving efficiency. At the same time, there is evidence that the fear of data being shared is important in discouraging people, particularly in more disadvantaged areas, from accessing services that would benefit them (Canvin et al., 2007). I have found evidence that public sector workers at the coal face are often aware of this problem and sometimes even exercise a degree of discretion to try to overcome it (Hastie, 2017). Nevertheless, there remains a need to widen the debate about how the benefits and adverse effects of data sharing are balanced to ensure that services are delivered effectively where they are most needed.

The fear of feeling judged has been identified as an important barrier to engagement in a number of studies (e.g. Mathers et al., 2008; Roddy et al., 2006; Winkworth et al., 2010). In my own research I encountered a successful project to take fire safety advice to a group of sex workers. Here the outreach worker who ran the project was in no doubt that the non-judgemental approach of the particular firefighter involved was key to its success (Hastie, 2017). Whilst each project and initiative will be different, examples of good practice such as this can contribute to public sector organisations' learning about engagement and help in creating an ethos of being non-judgemental.

One of the most important ways in which public sector organisations might facilitate wider engagement is by creating environments for dialogue that make sense to those that they most need to reach; environments that are culturally accessible and comfortable to their communities. In a diverse society this is likely to mean that public agencies will need to adopt multiple different approaches to engaging with their communities; to create multiple different environments. There is unlikely to be a one size fits all solution. Agencies may find this easier to achieve if they are able

to acquire a good understanding of the cultural needs of the communities they serve. This, in turn, may be helped by increasing the diversity of the public sector workforce itself, ensuring that members of many communities are part of the staff. Whilst diversity is an issue throughout the UK public services, it is a particular issue for the fire service. In March 2016 just 5.0% of operational firefighters in England were women, and of those who stated their ethnicity only 3.8% were from an ethnic minority (Home Office, 2016a). Whilst this need to improve workforce diversity has been recognised, with the UK Government publishing a 10 year strategy in 2008 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008), progress has been slow. The reasons why it has proved so difficult for fire services to recruit and retain a more diverse staff remain under-researched and would certainly benefit from further attention.

Continued dialogue is more likely if both parties feel that they derive some benefit from it. Consultation has little meaning unless citizen input is valued by the organisation (Andrews et al., 2006), and one of the biggest deterrents to participation is the perception that nothing will change (Lowndes and Wilson, 2001). Public sector organisation are likely to find effective engagement easier to sustain if they are perceived to have listened and responded to what is said. Being listened to is not just a benefit to the communities. It also gives the organisation access to valuable knowledge held within the communities, enabling organisation and communities to work together more effectively to create solutions that make sense to the community members, not just to professionals. The key benefit here is that such solutions are far more likely to achieve the community support needed to make them work.

Conclusion

Amongst the many complex and intertwined factors behind the tragedy of Grenfell Tower the failure of the local council to listen to, engage with, and effectively respond to residents has emerged as a contributor. This is not an isolated failure. Effective dialogue between public service providers and communities is a vital component of delivering services and effecting social change. Yet for many in marginalised communities entering into dialogue with the state is a threatening and uncomfortable experience. The taken-for-granted assumptions of state agencies place significant barriers in the way of effective engagement with many disadvantaged groups, the very groups that most need the state's help. If inequality is to be tackled and further tragedies like Grenfell Tower avoided then public services need to learn to work with such communities in very different ways. This requires a major cultural shift in public sector organisations. There can be little doubt that this will be a huge challenge, but it is a challenge that can no longer be ignored.

Notes

1 Based on the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) in which Grenfell Tower stands. LSOAs are small areas with a population of between 1,000 and 3,000.
2 The Index of Multiple Deprivation is a multi-dimensional measure of deprivation published periodically in England by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Similar measures are produced by the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.

Acknowledgements

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