Everybody has a story but what is that story really saying?

An exploration of Social Workers’ experiences of working with adults who self-neglect

Maria Brent, Doctoral Research Study
Defining Self-Neglect
A wide range of behaviour neglecting to care for one’s personal hygiene, health or surroundings and includes behaviour such as hoarding.

A decision on whether a response is required under safeguarding will depend on the adult’s ability to protect themselves by controlling their own behaviour. (DH. 2016. Care and Support Statutory Guidance)

Hoarding disorder (HD) now recognised within Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (APA 2013)
Influencing Factors:
- Range of physical and/or mental health issues
- Financial problems
- Substance misuse
- Loss of role
- Significant life events, trauma, divorce, death of family members
- Lack of social anchors
- At risk from abuse from others in the community

Person’s Views:
- Respect their choices
- Want time to be listened to
- Work at their pace
- Self neglect is a way of preserving self & control
- Sense of pride & resilience
- Do not see themselves as self±neglecting
- Fear, inability to do things, e.g. after a health issue, fall.
- Want time to be listened to
Multi-Agency working in Self-Neglect
(Adapted from RIPA 2017)
Research study

- **Aims** – To explore social workers' experiences of working with adults' who have capacity and self-neglect.

- **Rationale** – Limited research that gets up close to practice to explore this topic. Themes from Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARS), need for engagement, person centred practice.

Research Questions:

- How personal and professional values may be challenged when working with people who self-neglect.

- How social workers balance the service user's right to autonomy with issues of capacity and a duty of care.

- The impact of self-neglect work.

- What can be put in place to support social workers and improve practice.

- **Methodology** – Qualitative, ethnographic approach. To date, 7 interviews across 4 boroughs.
Emerging Themes

Organisational/Management pressure

Weight of responsibility

Sensory and emotional impact

Affection & Respect
“I think people don’t understand, “we’ll just go in and clear it” well actually that's not going to help them!”

“What do they expect us to be? Like Harry Potter and just go [snaps fingers] just like that? And everything is all just lovely and tidy?”

“When people have been doing a managerial role for a long time they forget the actual day to day work, it’s more about the budget, productivity”

“I think a lot of it stems from Grenfell, a lot of Housing are like “we need to make sure all the residents are safe”

“It’s not the work itself burning social workers out.. It's more about the procedures, expectations demands.. its everyone else. The client’s not the problem at all”
“Oh my God, are they going to be alright? … you’re just sitting there with a sleepless night thinking I hope I don’t come back tomorrow and they've gone back into hospital.”

“Have you done everything you can do and if something does happen to him which is likely to happen where do you stand? And that’s a big worry.”

“You’re a social worker, how can you let this person live like this?”

“If the house goes on fire it’s all your fault”

“if you died, if all that tumbled down on top of you, if you died underneath that, I'm the one, I’ll be blamed, so it will be on the national news, it will be a national scandal, people won’t know that I'm helping you but it will be seen as social worker neglected vulnerable deaf lady”, and she’ll laugh and I’ll say, “You’ll be up in heaven”
"It’s like you’re in your world, then you open up the cupboard and you go to the back and you’re in Narnia, but it’s not Narnia...this is a totally different world...you’re in a world where everything is upside down and a bit mad and a bit skewiff."

"You get used to it, it doesn’t bother me too much... especially new social workers coming in, to see that for the first time is quite horrific, to see someone in that state"

"I think you can lose a sense of what might be normal, what’s not, what’s acceptable what’s not,...what’s that quote? A social worker is a broker of shades of greys...we work in the greys of human existence"

"Trying to deal with it emotionally, I have to be honest, I ... just feel a bit helpless"

"Guilt is my overriding emotion...."
“If you met her you would love her.. she’s a real character and still causing havoc.. She had the gall to stand up to people... she stood for her rights... I’m a bit like her! She was a social worker as well which made it worse!”

“There is a lot of potential there…”

“She is lovely, you will be really interested in her, you will be intrigued”

“We are an organisation, that’s their home.. I must say sometimes we panic... they’re big people, they’re adults!”

“Some of it was crazy but she made me laugh”
Implications for Practice - What helps?

Changing a light bulb - Building up trust through working on practical tasks

Tough Love & Negotiation

Drawing on theoretical frameworks to support understanding – Stages of Change (Prochaska & Di Clemente, 1983)

Taking time out, a walk in the park, reading a chapter of a book

Timing of visits

Supervision that explores the emotional and sensory impact of self-neglect work

Managers who understand and who have experience of working with self-neglect

Co-working and sharing experiences

Specialist teams that have resources for longer term work
Suggested Reading


