How the other half lives: coronavirus, housing and justice

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In the 1880s Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant working as a photographer and journalist in New York City, literally shed light on the deplorable housing conditions of the poor (Figure 1). As an early adopter of flash photography, Riis revealed the inconvenient reality to the more fortunate in the book How the other half lives. As did Jacob's camera flash, Covid-19 and especially the extreme measures of the lockdown in response to the virus, have exposed existing housing inequalities. They revealed how, in the 21st century, households still live in poor and insecure housing conditions exposing them to increased physical and mental health risks. In the Netherlands, where we as authors are based, similar inequalities and injustices in the housing sector can be observed. How can the wide variety of impacts of the coronavirus be understood, and what should be done to address them? Justice theories offer a valuable framework. By spotlighting the impacts of the coronavirus crisis on four households who are differently affected, we explore different critical perspectives to analyse the current crisis more coherently.

Figure 1. A New York City Bayard Street tenement providing a place to sleep for 5 cents a night in a room for 12. Jacob Riis/Wikimedia Commons

SYMPTOM VS SICKNESS: SURFACING UNDERLYING PROBLEMS

Clearly, the coronavirus is having a tremendous impact on societies all over the world. Beyond the direct impact of the virus on public health, the measures taken by governments have had far-reaching consequences in nearly all aspects of life. Regarding housing, we can observe several effects: the economic crisis has caused a sudden increase of payment problems among tenants, home health care has become more difficult, domestic violence has been intensified, and housing corporations and

municipalities have observed an increasing disturbance in neighbourhoods. In this article, we illustrate with four fictional households how Covid-19 has divergent effects on different households, both in the long and short term (see text box).

Whereas the problems discussed seem to have emerged during the coronavirus crisis, we must be aware that certain 'underlying problems' could have already existed beforehand. This becomes clearer by distinguishing symptoms from sicknesses. As Olivia's household shows the sudden loss of income due to a decline of clients is an unforeseen risk for her financial situation. As a symptom, we can observe her having difficulties paying the rent. However, the actual problem (sickness) is more structural than the immediate effects of Covid-19. What matters is how structural problems (cure the sickness) can be corrected and how the emergence of similar problems can be prevented by improving the housing system.

In current debates, the question has been raised as to whether public health security has received a too high priority given the economic effects: 'is the cure worse than the disease?' We suggest broadening the scope of this discussion by relating the problems in housing, as effects of the Covid-19, on the principles of justice: what are symptoms we currently observe, what is the underlying sickness, which treatments and cures could improve peoples' wellbeing? Discussion in the theories of justice can allow housing researchers and practitioners to see emerging problems from a more holistic perspective and to revisit underlying problems of the observed issues. It also provides well-grounded theory and ethical principles that can guide debates on necessary interventions.

***Olivia**, a 29-year-old, is self-employed in the creative sector, sharing a private rental apartment with a friend. Revenues have been re-invested in her company. After the recent lockdown, her earnings have dropped.*

*The **Smit family** consists of two parents and three children living in a four-room apartment with a balcony in the city. Earnings have not been affected while expenses have even decreased. Both parents need to work from home, as the children were home-schooled and later returned to school part-time.*

***Adam** is a 45-year-old who has been staying on and off with different friends and relatives after his divorce. Since the coronavirus crisis, he has been less welcome and more dependent on shelters, also to comply with government regulations.*

*38-year old **Alexander** is a labour migrant who has been working in the agriculture sector in the Netherlands for the last three summers. He resides in a housing unit offered by his employer. The unit is shared with three other employees. Social distancing during the coronavirus crisis has been hardly possible for Alexander, both at work and at home.*

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHANGING VALUES

A first aspect of the justice debate is concerned with the prioritisation of social values: which values do we find essential, and how can those values be guaranteed through principles? How should we prioritise a certain value over another, and how can we make the rightful (ethical) judgement? In times of Corona, we observe changes in the prioritisation and conflicts between different societal values. Conflicts between health, privacy protection, freedom of movement, individual liberty and social goods for communities have been part of the current debates. In the middle of the lockdown,

the majority of people prioritised public health over the individual freedom of movement, while personal freedom of movement and gatherings is known as an essential value for human beings.

Before we continue, we would like to clarify that, under the theme of justice, we are concerned with normative and moral/ethical values. Such values might be divided into the individual level (e.g. autonomy) and the community level (e.g. sustainability), which are, however, not necessarily in dichotomy and conflict. Part of the justice debate is about the tensions and linkages between individual ethical values and collective ethical values. In addition, we find it necessary to distinguish between values and of individual preferences (e.g. a centrally located house providing autonomy), which are more concrete wants that may relate to different values.

What dynamics of value changes and conflicts do we observe or expect in housing at the moment? In both research and practice, there is currently a considerable discussion about how the coronavirus crisis influences the things people value regarding their housing and surrounding neighbourhood. Let's have a look at the changing living conditions of Family Smit. Being packed together in an apartment in the city, the family's preferences have changed. They would now like to live in a house with a more spacious living room, a larger balcony and/or a private garden. They have started to prioritise private spaces over public space for the lower risk of contamination. Not to mention, father Smit even started to miss commuting to and from work, as a valuable activity providing benefits to one's wellbeing. While personal preference changes are apparent, it remains a question whether those changes are temporal or structural and whether the reflection of such individual preferences can be aligned to normative values both at individual and community level. In other words, does the preference for a house with more outdoor space by the Family Smit align with a wider changing societal value for housing quality? Should we consider those individual preferences as personal interest fulfilments only, or are they aligned with ethical concerns?

Contrary to the mentioned shift in preferences towards the private realm, a resurgence of ethical values at the community (or society) level can be observed. For a long time, economic growth and deregulation of markets have been at the centre of housing policy. However, in the middle of the sudden coronavirus crisis, societal values that have long been somewhat marginalised are returning to the forefront of societal concerns. Health has become a priority over economic growth. By placing the concern with people's wellbeing first, some governments agreed not to increase social housing rents for the time being or implemented measures to allow households to postpone mortgage payments. At the micro-level, some people started to notice and appreciate the qualities of their immediate living environment that they had been less aware of, such as a beautiful little green space around the corner or a chat with neighbours.

So, there are some changes in values due to the coronavirus crisis, but the essential question is to what extent values of people are actually changing and whether we should incorporate those changes in the development of housing policies and systems. Some of the changes might be from temporary increases in awareness in the middle of an emergency, and some might be from a realisation of more socially significant values that have long been neglected. As Amartya Sen has proposed, we need to continuously discuss what we value as a community or society. By engaging with perspectives of those in different positions, such a public reasoning process allows people to scrutinise gaps or connections between individual and societal values, and with ethical values. Public policy can consider the role of such public interaction in making a social value judgement. In such a process, one of the essential issues would be to enable people to have adequately informed public reasoning. Inputs of adequate information avoid the risk of public reasoning being confined to a simple majority rule and shaped by local prejudice.

DISTRIBUTIVE CONCERNS - WHO GETS WHAT AND IS IT ENOUGH?

A second aspect of the justice debate is the distributive aspect, which is, bluntly described, concerned with the assessment of 'who gets what?'. Whether a given distribution of goods (or a change therein) just depends on what your definition of justice is (e.g. based on equal distributions, equal outcomes, people having enough). Distributive concerns apply to the (primary) goods and services that are scarce and for which the allocation to one limits the availability for others. Housing is such a scarce good. Simultaneously, a house is a primary good marked as a social right and also as a consumer and investment good traded on markets. Housing consumption differs because households do not have equal access to resources, but also because individual housing preferences differ.

Different distributive 'standards' can be used to evaluate whether a given distribution is just. Which standard is applied depends on the characteristics of the good and what it provides to people. Frankfurt, a proponent of the doctrine of sufficiency, argues that instead of focusing on equality our normative concern should be about whether people have enough (i.e. meet a certain threshold) for a sufficiently good life. It is not about having the same house or spending an equal share of one's income on housing, but it is about having access to adequate housing that is affordable. What is regarded enough (adequate and affordable) is closely related to individual and community level values and is, therefore, time and place dependent. For instance, both building codes and affordability norms change over time and differ between countries and cities.

While the sufficiency-standard is aimed at maximising the share of households meeting the thresholds, the priority standard states priority should be provided to those least advantaged. The least advantaged should be prioritised even if this would result in fewer people actually meeting the sufficiency-threshold.

Looking at the current situation of social distancing and lockdown measures from these two standards shows that how we assess the level of justice may change in three ways:

1. The threshold corresponding to what is deemed enough/sufficient may shift temporarily or structurally in response to changing needs. For example, having school and working from home resulted in changing needs and preferences for the Smit family. Crowded living can also provide extra tensions and even invoke physical or mental distress to household members.
2. The threshold may also shift because of a changed understanding of what is enough. This could, for example, be the result of increased attention to living arrangements and households in different difficult circumstances. For example, questions may be asked as to whether the lower norms in regard to what is considered adequate housing applied to migrant workers like Alexander are high enough. Recent Covid-19 outbreaks and stories about health and safety concerns show that people like Alexander are exposed to structural vulnerabilities.
3. Particularly applying to the priority-standard, who are considered those least advantaged may shift temporarily or structurally. For example, temporary crowded living of households with children (like the Smit family) due to lockdown measures has received much attention and triggered concerns over inequalities in the development of children. However, should (in case of limited means) priority for government help be given to more structural vulnerabilities (e.g. migrant workers like Alexander or divorcees like Adam) or especially focus on alleviating temporary distress caused by this crisis (e.g. households like the Smit family)?

Both standards can be used to identify situations that should receive our normative concern and may require policy action. Applying one or another standard results in a different assessment, therefore

the choice for applying a certain perspective should be made explicitly, argued and discussed. The three points also show that not only 'who gets what?' is shifting, but that also what we see as enough, what we prioritise and what we consider a just distribution may shift (temporarily).

NON-DISTRIBUTIVE CONCERNS - WHOSE RIGHTS, POWER AND OPPORTUNITIES?

A third aspect of the justice debate is concerned with non-distributive issues, which become evident from the different housing situations of our four characters. This concerns the less measurable elements of the social environment, such as vulnerability, possibilities, rights and power relations. Concerning the housing situations of our characters, Alexander, a seasonal migrant worker, immediately lost his right to housing when the coronavirus crisis emerged. Oliva's residency in a private rental apartment became vulnerable as soon as her income sharply dropped. For the Smit family, no such risks appeared as their residence is owner-occupied, and no changes in income occurred. Therefore, amid the lockdowns, one of the housing inequality aspects that distinctively appears is the inequality in residency stability. This is strongly related to the issue of the right to adequate housing, citizenship rights, or unequal power relations between tenants and landlords. Such inequality is certainly not solely dependent on resources that individuals possess: it also depends on the housing systems and policy measures in place.

To what extent is the norm 'right to adequate housing for all' embedded in the urban policy discourse in the country? It can result in different levels of inequality in residency resilience amid or after the lockdowns. For renters, for instance, to what extent are the tenants' rights ensured? What about the issue of power inequality and the unfair relationship between tenants and landlords? Are the voices of people whose residency is adversely impacted fairly channelled to media and decision-makers, and thus they get empowered? To what extent can people have opportunities and choices for adjusting their housing strategy (such as shifting between homeownership and tenancy) while recovering the impacts on their livelihoods?

These questions about rights, powers, voices and empowerment, opportunities and the extent of feasible choices—in a philosophical term, substantive or positive freedoms or capabilities—are essential subjects in theories of justice, in addition to the distributive concerns discussed above. These subjects are about how to enable people and are not the object we can distribute. These non-distributive subjects are often intangible, unlike distributive objects such as adequate housing, and thereby they can easily be neglected. But close attention to them can help housing researchers and practitioners to diagnose housing inequality in multiple aspects, especially to address underpinning structural causes of the observed unequal and unjust housing cases.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

In this contribution, by connecting to the subjects of theories of justice, we discussed the housing issues that emerged amid the coronavirus crisis. We addressed and questioned how we can perceive the changing values, distributive concerns and non-distributive concerns among a broad range of subjects of justice. Perspectives and theories of justice are diverse. The aim of this article was, of course, not to discuss them comprehensively. Instead, we aim to place the debates on housing and the Covid-19 impacts in a broader perspective, and to lay out critical questions that the housing community may need to examine before promptly defining solutions and policies. Our exploration shows that, for example, the following questions can be asked:

- What dynamics of value changes and conflicts exist under the observed housing issue?
- Ethically speaking, how should we incorporate conflicting ethical values in housing solutions?
- Whose deficiencies should we prioritise, and how should we distribute resources?
- Are the deficiencies temporary or structural?
- Has the observed housing problem originated from the underlying inequality of intangible issues such as rights, powers, or opportunities?

Jacob Riis' flash photography raised awareness on how the other half lives. Housing conditions have improved spectacularly since Jacob Riis' time. However, Covid-19 has revealed how still many people have to cope with poor housing conditions and that these people and their living conditions usually remain out of sight of the general public. We illustrated some of the symptoms (i.e. observed problems) in this article, and there are many more symptoms appearing at every corner of society. We hope that the discussion in this article brought the perspectives through which the housing community can raise critical questions about sickness (i.e. underlying problems) in our society and contribute to the debates on better housing measures in the amid and post Covid-19.

FURTHER READINGS RELATING TO THE SUBJECTS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

The literature of Jonh Rawls (concerning institutions, primary social goods and distributive matters), of Amartya Sen (concerning capabilities, values, public reasoning and both distributive and non-distributive matters), and of Iris Marion Young (concerning non-distributive matters). The key readings are Theory of Justice (Rawls 1971), Justice as Fairness: A restatement (Rawls 2001), The Idea of Justice (Sen 2009), and Justice and Politics of Difference (Young, 1990). Other literature of these scholars is also worth to explore, as an entry of the subjects this article addressed.