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Spatial social work, social pedagogy and the arrival of COVID-19 in practice: Prospects for new ways of working in uncertain times

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Abstract

This practice paper explores a direct work tool within a reflective supervision session relating to spatial social work, inspired by Christian Spatscheck's 2019 article 'Spatial approaches to social work – theoretical foundations and implications for practice and research'. I talk about using a map with a young person to look at their social spaces and what they mean to them, gaining an insight into their lived experiences linked to exploitation. The paper also looks at how COVID-19 has changed our ways of working, and what opportunities this may bring for future planning of social spaces and the inclusion of young people.

Keywords: social spaces; social pedagogy; exploitation; direct work; COVID-19; social work

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I manage a team of eight frontline social workers in an assessment and intervention team in Essex. I have worked for this local authority for the last 16 years. We work with young people, children and their families who are affected by concerns around domestic abuse, child sexual and criminal exploitation, neglect, homelessness, or emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

Here, I am going to share a piece of work that was inspired by Christian Spatscheck's (2019) 'Spatial approaches to social work – theoretical foundations and implications for practice and research'.

The paper argues for a

conceptual consideration and reflection of the spatial embeddedness of individuals, organisations and professional interventions. On this background, spatial settings can no longer be adequately described as fixed and static containers. Rather, they need to be regarded as relational settings that can be changed and designed by human actors. Subjective processes and activities of acquirement need then to be seen in their relation to spatial settings. To develop and reflect social work interventions that support individual and social development, socio-spatial analyses can be designed and used for problem and resource analyses, spatial concept developments, and socio-spatial practice research projects. (Spatscheck, 2019, p. 13)

The paper intrigued me and made me curious about the importance of social spaces in our work with young people and their families.

As part of my role as a team manager I have very regular supervision sessions with my social workers and team colleagues, and recently I had supervision contact with one of my newly qualified social workers. We were reflecting on a young person who is at risk of exploitation and says he can't really go out in town, as he gets beaten up by different, sometimes random, people. The young person is not affiliated with any known gangs but is vulnerable to exploitation. The social worker was thinking about undertaking some relationship-based work with the young person to gain a better understanding of his *lifeworld* (see Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009) and had to think about a more creative way to do so. She had decided to drive around with the young person in the car after our supervision to find out more about the areas he felt safe and unsafe in, so I told her about the above-mentioned article on spatial social work by Spatscheck (2019), which I had read a couple of days earlier, and shared it with her. I suggested that the worker print off a map of the town centre and to use it as a tool with the young person whilst both were driven around by a support worker, for example, to map out different areas and bring herself into the process as well.

It went really well! The pair used different colours and the young person enjoyed the direct work tool and engaged fully. Both really liked the experience and further direct work has grown from this session, such as mapping different schools the young person in question has attended and documenting his experiences with various other young people there, as well as exploring what social spaces would look like for the young person if he had a magic wand or if he was a town planner.

After their session we reflected on how this tool had enabled us to gain a little more insight into the young person's lifeworld, and that sharing some of the social worker's views on spaces with the young person had built trust and developed the relationship. We were curious about the young person's daily planning routine when having to go to school, for example steps he took in order to avoid 'dangerous areas' and questioned whether we should accept that this was happening daily. Should we accept this for anyone? This led to further questions on how safe we both felt walking through town at night or through a scarcely lit park.

We discussed how a lot of the young people we work with face similar dilemmas. Social spaces for young people, such as accessible playing fields, youth clubs, leisure centres, libraries and community hubs, appear more and more to be disappearing. Where can young people today go and be young and adventurous? What opportunities do they have to grow up safely and develop into content and happy adults?
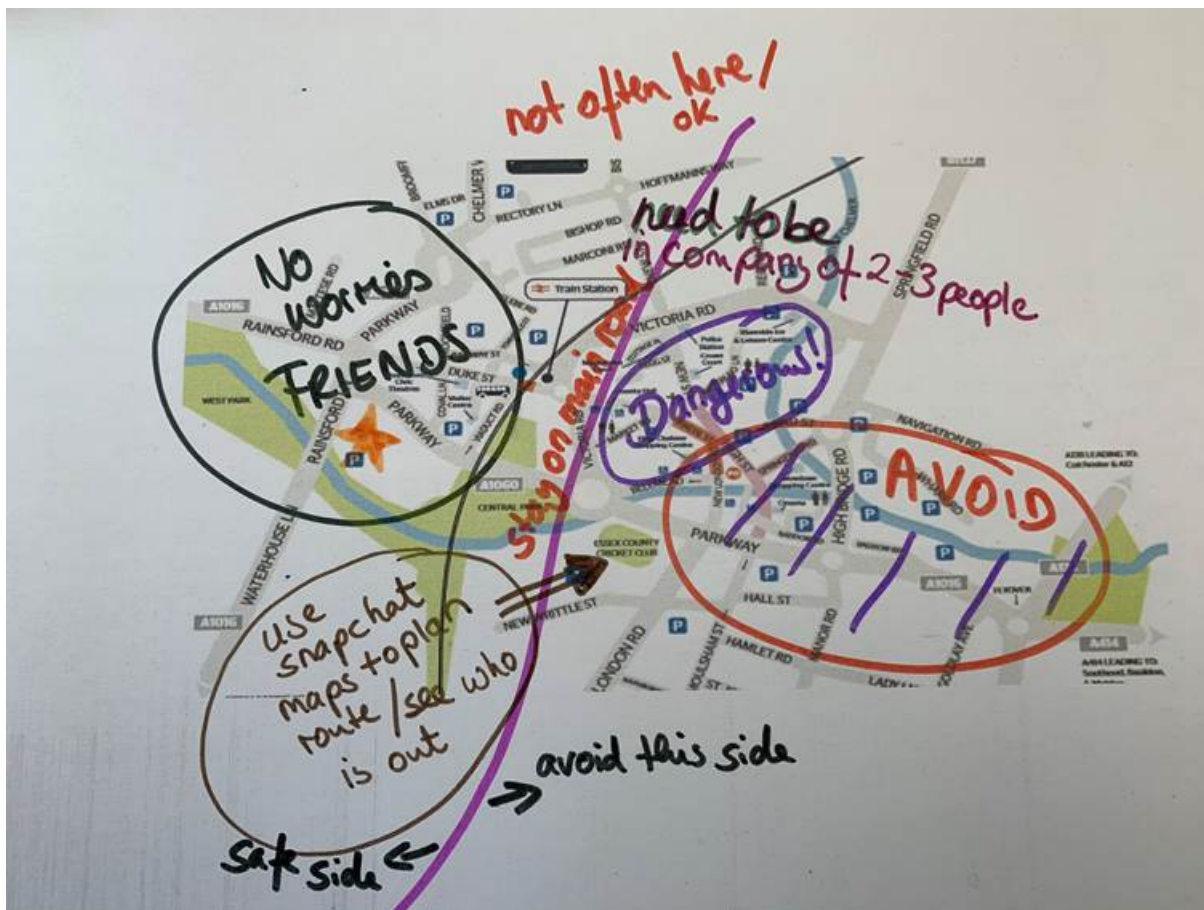
Figure 1. Example map created to preserve the young person's anonymity – his real map included much more information, drawings and figures [Copyright 2020, Bianka Lang].

And then came the virus...

The COVID-19 virus reached England in 2020 and took over everyday life. Everything changed. We have all moved into isolation or social distancing. Our cities now appear like ghost towns. Our social spaces have become digital spaces. For our young person that has meant that he is safer, as he does not have to plan his routes to avoid dangerous places any longer.

For social work and social pedagogy, in general, the ways of working have changed. We still undertake face-to-face visits whilst adhering to social distancing, using PPE (personal protective equipment) such as gloves, masks and goggles if required, but also undertake virtual check-ins, using FaceTime or WhatsApp calls and Microsoft and Zoom technology with families, young people and children.

Interestingly, young people appear to be 'at home' with the technology used and some open up more via virtual chats, as this is their familiar reality, their *social space*. We as workers must adapt to this: we must gain an understanding of ourselves and learn *from* the young people in order to become as adept as them. The young people seem to like this; the roles have reversed. Social pedagogy practice at first hand!

Here we have an opportunity: to learn from each other, alongside each other and with each other

We now have opportunities to come together as a community, not only to think about using cultural genograms, timelines and chronology work with families to gain a better understanding and to build relationships, but also to use spatial approaches, lifeworld orientation and ecomaps to explore their surroundings and the current world they live in. The Fostering Network have put it well when they say that

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We must first understand what their (the child's) current world feels like for them, and how this impacts their view of themselves and their place in society. It is a structured approach that helps you to 'put yourself in someone else's shoes', but it takes you a step beyond simply thinking about what their world is like, and helps you to really explore how this may influence their thought processes, interpretations and behaviours. (Fostering Network, n.d.)

In our line of child protection work it is vital to work *alongside* families to bring about positive change. This applies to working in COVID-19 times as well. It is lovely to see and it makes me proud that my team colleagues continue to put children first and carry on working with them and their families in the usual and unusual way, and we feel very much supported by our local authority.

Although the lockdown can be frightening and isolating for workers and families alike, I truly believe that we have chances to build a better future now, to think about developing social spaces for our families, young people and children after the isolation, to think about youth involvement to develop social spaces, to tackle exploitation and to make our cities safer for all of us.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author confirms that there are adequate confidentiality protections in the example used of the young person and the social worker involved, who have been fully anonymised in the work.

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