

Unqualified social work: 'a positive caring approach' for the Scottish private rented sector

Benjamin John Bridgman

Date of deposit	17/04/2019
Document version	Author's accepted manuscript
Access rights	Copyright © 2019, Emerald Publishing Limited. This work has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies or with permission. Permission for further reuse of this content should be sought from the publisher or the rights holder. This is the author created accepted manuscript following peer review and may differ slightly from the final published version.
Citation for published version	Bridgman, B. J. (2019). Unqualified social work: 'a positive caring approach' for the Scottish private rented sector. <i>Journal of Organizational Ethnography</i>
Link to published version	https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-11-2018-0045

Full metadata for this item is available in St Andrews Research Repository at: <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/>





Unqualified Social Work: 'A Positive Caring Approach' for the Scottish Private Rented Sector

Journal:	<i>Journal of Organizational Ethnography</i>
Manuscript ID	JOE-11-2018-0045.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Private rented sector, Property management, Care, Ethics, Scotland, Housing

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Unqualified Social Work: ‘A Positive Caring Approach’ for the Scottish Private Rented Sector

Purpose: The paper explores the emic theme of 'unqualified social work' as part of the process of property management in a self-described 'letting agency with a difference' in Edinburgh, set in the context of the rapid expansion of the private rented sector.

Methodology: The paper is based upon ethnographic data from participant observation in a letting agency and unstructured interviews with their employees.

Findings: The paper suggests that the shift in Scotland in terms of the provision of housing and housing-related services from the public sector to the private rented sector in recent decades has engendered new social and economic relations in which property managers become ‘unqualified social workers’.

Practical implications: The paper aims to exemplify how anthropology and ethnographic research may contribute to the understanding of the private rented sector and of property management.

Originality/value: The paper aims to contribute to the wider literature on the private rented sector by foregrounding the role of the property manager. The paper also brings an analysis derived from the anthropology of ethics to an ethnographic understanding of property management and the private rented sector.

It is a Monday morning and I am sitting with Farhad, the Sales Manager, in the office of Almond & Thompson Edinburgh, a private letting agency, housed in a modern mill conversion in Leith, the city’s historic port area. It is only for half an hour until Andy, one of the Property Managers, is ready to go with me out into ‘the field’, so Farhad briefly talks me through what he thinks I ought to know:

It’s a bit dog-eat-dog in this business. We’re a full management service. Sales view the landlord and the Director as clients. The Property Managers would view both the landlord and the tenant as clients. From Sales’ perspective, it’s about offering the landlord the best possible package. For example, landlords pay £25 a year for an out-of-hours service. If tenants have problems after 5pm, their phone calls get redirected to the head office in London. Most of the time, the problems are insignificant, but tenants often need reassurance and they will send someone out if necessary, so it gives the landlord peace of mind as well.

Introduction

1
2
3 The past few decades have witnessed a substantial shift in Scotland in terms of the provision
4 of housing and housing-related services from the public sector to the private rented sector,
5 including a substantial expansion of the latter during the past ten years. According to the 2016
6 Scottish Household Survey, the percentage of households in Scotland in the private rented
7 sector increased steadily from 5% in 1999 to 10% in 2009 and then further to 15% in 2016.
8
9 Meanwhile, the percentage of households in owner occupancy had increased from 61% in 1999
10 to 66% in 2005, but has since fallen back to 61%. More significantly, the percentage of
11 households in social rented housing – covering council (i.e. state-owned) housing as well as
12 independent non-profit housing associations, including co-operatives – fell from 32% in 1999
13 to 22% in 2009, but has remained stable since. However, if ‘social housing’ is broken down
14 into council housing and housing associations, then the shift away from state-owned property
15 is even more dramatic; just 13% of households were renting from local councils in 2016,
16 compared with 27% in 1999 (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 48).

17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26 *Almond & Thompson Edinburgh* (a pseudonym) is the Edinburgh-based office of the
27 Almond & Thompson Group. Founded in 1988, Almond & Thompson is a property
28 management company that manages over 4,500 residential properties throughout the UK. Their
29 head office is based in London, and they have branch offices in several major cities. According
30 to their website, Almond & Thompson specialise in the provision of ‘affordable housing
31 models’ that ‘truly combine a positive caring approach to all of our clients with the commercial
32 discipline of the private sector’. Note also the use of ‘combine’; are we to understand that the
33 private (rented) sector is not ordinarily ‘caring’, but does, nonetheless, have greater
34 ‘commercial discipline’ than the public sector? Consequently, they employ staff from a range
35 of backgrounds, including from the private sector, from local authorities and from housing
36 associations. Indeed, many of their employees, including the Director, who left to work for a
37 major housing charity during my fieldwork, are what Lewis (2012) terms sector ‘boundary
38 crossers’, though in this instance between the private sector and the public and third sectors.

39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48 Tessa, the Director, describes Almond & Thompson as ‘a letting agency with a difference’.
49 Unlike most letting agencies in Scotland, they pay their landlords guaranteed rent, do not
50 charge their tenants deposits, and provide active support for tenants who are in receipt of
51 benefits. It is notable from my observations that the majority of properties managed by Almond
52 & Thompson in and around Edinburgh are former council properties that were purchased by
53 their former occupants under the Right to Buy legislation introduced in 1980 and have now
54 found their way into the private rented sector. It is also the received wisdom within Almond &
55 Thompson Edinburgh that many of their tenants are hoping to move into council housing as
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 soon as possible. Indeed, the lack of deposits charged to tenants in practice means that
4 abandonment without notice is common – and the default explanation advanced by employees
5 when this happens is that they have probably obtained a council house.
6
7

8 This paper centres upon one particular category of employee: the Property Manager,
9 responsible for a portfolio of around a hundred rented properties. Not only do they come into
10 regular contact with tenants, landlords, other letting agent staff, contractors and so forth; they
11 also spend much of their working day driving around the city, walking up and down semi-
12 private and semi-public stairwells, and viewing the insides of flats and houses. Almond &
13 Thompson Edinburgh typically employ around six Property Managers, each covering a
14 specified geographical section of Edinburgh and the surrounding area. The role, whilst hardly
15 new for a private letting agency, must be understood in the context of the recent expansion of
16 the private rented sector in Scotland. They find themselves, in their own words, taking on
17 ‘social work’, apparently at least in part due to ‘the nature of [their] clientele’ and variations
18 thereupon, and the sense is that this makes working at Almond & Thompson more ‘challenging’
19 than working at more traditional letting agencies. Such expressions may be taken as
20 euphemistic references to class, or to the fact that a large proportion of their tenants are long-
21 term benefit claimants. With the above in mind, this paper aims to follow the rhetoric and
22 practice of care within the letting agency through the role of the Property Manager. How is the
23 ethical manifested through their work in the context of the reduced role of the welfare state in
24 housing provision?
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

38 I conducted fieldwork with Almond & Thompson Edinburgh from the autumn of 2014 to
39 the spring of 2015 as the core component of a larger fieldwork-based research project into
40 property relations in the Edinburgh private rented sector. Research methods included
41 participant observation in the form of shadowing a range of employees in their work activities,
42 and unstructured contextualised interviews. The methodology was inspired albeit not wholly
43 guided by Actor-Network Theory, in particular that advanced by Latour (2005) in the sense
44 that the project endeavoured to trace the associations encountered at relevant sites of action in
45 the field with the view to reassembling the resulting social relations through the production of
46 an ethnographic text. If the text is to be successful in performing the social, it must stage its
47 actors so as to stabilise and compose the collected associations. After Tyler (1986), the resultant
48 text aims to be evocative rather than merely descriptive or representative. Whilst this
49 methodology was devised as part of an attempt to produce a broader ethnography of the sector
50 and the complexity therein, there are nonetheless opportunities to consider its potential
51 application in light of what Watson (2012) characterises as the ‘everyday ethnography’ of
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 organisations. At the very least, this paper aims to contribute towards exemplifying such a
4 practice.
5
6
7

8 **Making the Scottish Private Rented Sector** 9

10 Before proceeding, it is worth briefly charting how this shift from the public to the private
11 sectors has happened. Until the aftermath of the First World War, the most common domestic
12 dwelling in urban Scotland was a tenement flat rented from a private landlord (O'Carroll, 1996),
13 typically built and rented out privately by tradesmen who regarded build-to-let house
14 construction as a worthwhile investment (Worsdall, 1979, pp. 53-54). After the First World
15 War, local authorities started to undertake greater responsibility for working-class housing,
16 initially with the construction of garden suburbs and cheaper three-storey tenement blocks in
17 the 1920s (Worsdall, 1979, p. 11). It was after the Second World War, however, that housing
18 in urban Scotland was transformed on a grand scale through state intervention with the
19 construction of nearly one million new homes. Between 1945 and 1957, councils undertook
20 large-scale development on suburban greenfield sites, mainly of family tenements, to relieve
21 overcrowding in inner-city slums. From 1957 to 1969, central government sought to exert more
22 direct control over the location and form of state housing with the view to integrating housing
23 development with industrial incentives. Thousands of families were transferred from inner-city
24 slum tenements to newly built peripheral schemes, new towns, and overspill estates adjacent
25 to existing smaller towns. Slum buildings were demolished (Gibb 1989, pp. 157-159).
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

38 Widespread private ownership of individual tenement flats is a more recent phenomenon.
39 By the 1970s, it was often more financially viable for landlords to sell property rather than
40 continue letting it out. This frequently involved the sale of individual tenement flats after a
41 tenant either moved out or died. In other cases, older landlords would sell off whole tenement
42 blocks to new landlords, who would then refurbish the property with the view to either selling
43 or letting the flats individually. Moreover, the policies of the UK Conservative government of
44 Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s, in addition to the more famous Right to Buy scheme that
45 gave council tenants the right to purchase their council-owned properties at discounted rates,
46 also provided incentives for the expansion of the private rented sector. The introduction of the
47 *Short-Assured Tenancy* in 1989 allowed landlords to set leases as short as six months. At the
48 same time, rent controls were abolished, theoretically as a stimulating measure (McCrone and
49 Elliot, 1989, pp. 229-233). Whilst the private rented sector experienced slow growth during the
50 1990s, more rapid growth has occurred since the 2000s as the introduction of buy-to-let
51 mortgages in 1996 made landlordism more accessible to the middle classes as a form of asset-
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 based welfare, providing landlords with a safety net for retirement and so forth (Soaita et al,
4 2017).

5
6 Changes to the demographics of housing tenure in Scotland, especially during the latter part
7 of the twentieth century, have engendered changes to the expectations of the state, especially
8 local authorities. Currie (1996, p. 48-49) argues that this has coincided with a shift in the role
9 of local authorities in the provision of housing from that of providers to that of enablers.
10 Although they continue to play a significant part in ensuring that their residents are adequately
11 housed, it is now less likely to be the local authorities themselves who provide the housing.
12 Instead, local authorities have increasingly sought to secure housing via housing associations,
13 housing co-operatives, urban renewal companies and other private house-builders. All in all,
14 this has made for a much less monolithic mode of housing provision in which the state is much
15 less directly implicated in the administration of housing.
16
17

18
19 The Short-Assured Tenancy was actually abolished in December 2017 when the Private
20 Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016 came into force, giving tenants increased security of
21 tenure. Tenancies now last for as long as the tenant wishes to rent the property unless the
22 landlord uses one or more of eighteen grounds for eviction, such as the tenant breaching the
23 terms of the tenancy agreement or the landlord intending to live in or sell the property.
24 Consequently, the specific politico-legal context in which the fieldwork upon which this article
25 is based no-longer exists. Future research may, therefore, wish to revisit the themes discussed
26 herein in light of the new legislation.
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38

39 **Ethics of Economy**

40
41 The notion of 'a positive caring approach' at Almond & Thompson would at least appear to
42 imply a sense of ethical regard through practice. Indeed, of particular interest throughout my
43 broader research has been the role of the ethical in the practice of property management. In one
44 sense, the posited link between property and ethics or morality is not new. Macpherson (1978,
45 p. 4) argued that property is both a 'political relation between persons' and an 'enforceable
46 claim'. Although this 'enforceability is what makes it a *legal* right, the enforceability itself
47 depends on society's belief that it is a *moral* right'. Property as an institution, he claims,
48 depends upon a 'justifying theory' (p. 11) or legitimising narrative through which the professed
49 owners convince others that they should accept their claims of ownership. Wilk (1996, p. 38)
50 outlines the notion of the 'moral economy', in which 'behaviour and choices are guided by the
51 desire to do what is right, and these moral values flow ultimately from a *cosmology*—a
52 culturally patterned view of the universe and the human place within it'. This has certain echoes
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 of Weber ([1905] 1930), who regards economic acts as products of social, personal and ethical
4 conditions.
5

6 Csordas (2013, p. 536) argues that morality is not a cultural system, but rather, that ‘the
7 moral can enter into – spontaneously or by conscious evocation – virtually any corner of human
8 concern’. The ‘ordinary ethics’ of Lambek (2010, p. 2), which is to say, an ethics that is
9 ‘relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or
10 belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself’, has been methodologically
11 useful. In characterising ethics as intrinsic to action, Lambek (2015, p. 129) argues that
12 ‘practice is always understood in relation to [ethical] criteria and based on judgment about the
13 relevance of specific [ethical] criteria’, and ‘new [ethical] criteria are instantiated by means of
14 illocutionary force or acts’. In this sense, the ‘positive caring approach’ might be understood
15 as an ethical criterion in relation to which economic practice is played out.
16

17 Lambek (2008, p. 134) contrasts ethical values with economic values, arguing that the
18 former are ‘generally posited according to some absolute standard’, whilst the latter are
19 ‘intrinsically negotiable and relative’. Economics, he argues, is concerned with choice, whereas
20 ethics is concerned with judgment. Any absolute ethical values must, however, be ‘qualified in
21 and through lived practice’ (p. 137) and are thus inevitably relativised. ‘[E]thical and market
22 value are incommensurable to one another,’ Lambek concludes, ‘precisely because economics
23 chooses between commensurable values operative under a single meta-value while ethics
24 judges among incommensurable values or meta-values’ (p. 145). Private sector property
25 management may be understood as a site for potential economic conflict of interest and thus
26 for ethical tension.
27

28 Of particular interest here, however, is how these negotiations between the ethical and the
29 economic take shape in the context of socioeconomic change, in this instance, the rapid
30 expansion of the private rented sector in Scotland. Robbins (2007, p. 311) suggests that
31 ‘situations of cultural change are particularly good ones in which to study the way morality
32 shapes culture and experience’ on the grounds that they ‘often upend previously stable value
33 hierarchies [and] generate the kinds of conflicts that push the morality of choice and freedom
34 to the foreground’. This shift in the provision of housing and housing-related services from the
35 public to the private sectors has produced particular kinds of moral and ethical reasoning,
36 grounded in the practice of the new economic relations that have ensued. How might these
37 come into play for the Property Manager?
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Duty of Care

‘Sales view the landlords and the Director as clients. Property Managers would view the landlords and tenants as clients.’ That short exchange with Farhad in the opening vignette prompted reflection upon the notions of responsibility that obtain between diverse actors within the private rented sector. David, one of the Property Managers, outlines his perspective:

Officially, I'm employed as the landlord's agent. But particularly with the type of tenants we deal with just now, there's a lot of social factors involved where they might be struggling with money, with health, so I always want to make sure tenants are okay. So, I do feel like I have to be closer to tenants than landlords in terms of the relationship, more in a kind of duty of care responsibility to make sure they're able to cope and to point them in the right direction if they're going to fall down. There are people who are more irate than usual, or you can see them getting angry, or there's some tension building up, so it's just a case of managing that person at the time, and reassuring them that things will be done, to calm them down.

Over the past year, David has had half a dozen ‘out of the blue’ calls from landlords asking him to serve notice on the tenants because they want to sell the property. When this happens, it is his job to ‘try to facilitate that the best [he] can’ while being apologetic towards the tenants. ‘I’m really the meat in the sandwich between the two,’ he says, ‘trying to keep both parties happy’. This, it seems, can be extended to much of the Property Manager’s work – trying his best to facilitate the relations between tenants, landlords and property with the least detriment to any one party, whilst acknowledging that his ultimate priority is to the landlord as his or her agent, subject to certain legal constraints. There is a need, then, to shift between thinking with the tenant in mind and thinking with the landlord in mind in attempt to keep both sides happy, which presents challenges.

Let us return to Wilk’s notion of the moral economy, whereby ‘behaviour and choices are guided by the desire to do what is right’ (Wilk 1996, p. 38). Does such a desire guide property management, or at least the management as practiced by Property Managers at Almond & Thompson Edinburgh? In a sense, yes, though, after Lambek (2010), with continuing reference

1
2
3 to specified ethical criteria, in this instance property law, signed leases, and in-house
4 bureaucratic procedures and policies. The ethical, however, is not merely a function of the
5 economy or indeed of property management; ethical reasoning is integral to the continuing
6 management of property relations.
7
8
9

10 It may also be useful to consider this in light of the wider anthropology of care. Much of the
11 literature is concerned with medicalised care (e.g. Heinemann, 2015) and with domains more
12 conventionally associated with 'care work', such as care for the elderly (e.g. Brijnath, 2014;
13 Buch, 2013; Mazuz, 2013). It may be useful to turn to Ibarra's depiction of 'emotional
14 proletarians' in the service sector, defined as 'workers paid to perform not only routinized
15 instrumental tasks, but also scripted emotional labor' (Ibarra, 2002, p. 345). Ibarra distinguishes
16 between two categories of 'emotional proletarian'. On the one hand are those such as 'fast food
17 servers, waitresses, and flight attendants' who 'school the expressions on their faces and
18 modulate their tone of voice, faking feeling' in order to 'make customers feel good and produce
19 profits for corporations'. On the other hand are those like the Mexican immigrant women
20 private elder care providers in California in her study, who create their own routines and
21 'produce authentic emotion in exchange for a wage' (p. 346). The reader is invited to reflect
22 upon the applicability or otherwise of this broader claim of a distinction between those
23 employed to feign 'care' because it is in the interests of the business, and those employees
24 whose work tasks lead to the production of what Ibarra calls 'authentic emotion'.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36

37 **Unqualified Social Worker**

38
39 Andy grabs his jacket from the coat stand and indicates to me that he is ready to go. I thank
40 Farhad and follow suit, grabbing my sandwich from the fridge in the kitchenette as we head
41 out through the faux-wood door, down the lift, out of the building and onto the street where
42 Andy's car is parked. We get into the car and drive off, this time towards the Dalry area of
43 Edinburgh.
44
45
46
47

48 Andy is employed as the Property Manager for the North of Edinburgh. He is twenty-nine,
49 tall and thin, with wavy black hair, a groomed beard and bold black-rimmed glasses. He is
50 wearing a waistcoat and bow-tie. He grew up in a suburban area of Edinburgh, but now stays
51 in a small commuter town just outside the city boundaries in a private rented house with his
52 girlfriend and 'the wee one', or his girlfriend's ten-year-old daughter. Andy has worked mostly
53 in property management at a range of different companies since leaving school. Frequently, he
54 is the first to arrive at the office in the morning and the last to leave in the evening.
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 'This guy is a fucking pain,' he says as he drives with Capital FM on in the background.
4
5 'He was on the phone to me over an hour the other night, until about eleven.'

6
7 'An hour? When you were at home?' I ask.

8
9 'Aye, he's always doing it. Constantly. He asks me the same questions that he already kens
10 [knows] the answer to again and again. He has my mobile number so he just calls whenever
11 he's wanting to complain about something. The shower and oven in his flat have broken, and
12 he's no satisfied with the way his fridge's been cleaned, so now he's saying the flat's
13 uninhabitable. He's effectively moved out of the property and is threatening to withhold his
14 rent.'

15
16
17
18
19 'Oh *him*! Customer support folk were dealing with him the other week, I remember. Do you
20 have to speak to them if they call you in the evenings?'

21
22 'I probably shouldna [shouldn't],' Andy replies, 'but I feel a duty to my tenants, and I
23 couldna [couldn't] get him to go away. In the end, I telt [told] him I had to go to bed, and he
24 was shocked I wisna [wasn't] just there for him twenty-four seven. I just dinna ken [don't know]
25 what some folk think.'

26
27
28
29 'Christ.'

30
31 'As I say, it's five percent of tenants that take up ninety-five percent of your time. Most you
32 hardly ever hear fae [from], and would maybe like to hear fae a bit more. But with some, it's
33 one thing after another. Thing is, I ken he has mental health issues, but I often feel like an
34 unqualified social worker. We're no actually trained to deal with this stuff.'

35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
Andy continues to talk at length as he drives. I listen.

60 'And the other thing is, some of these tenants have their own support workers who
sometimes contact us too. This guy does. I think the support workers are sometimes egging the
tenants on. Like, a tenant has telt their support worker that the flat's uninhabitable, and then
the support worker encourages them to withhold their rent, but they've no actually seen the flat
for themselves, so they dinna ken if it's uninhabitable or no.'

We park on one of the side roads in Dalry. This is an area of traditional sandstone tenements,
probably from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

'I'm gonnae hae [going to have] a cigarette first, so I dinna ken if you're wanting to sit in
the car?'

'Aye, sure,' I respond. Andy gets out of the car, takes off his blazer and puts on his black
leather jacket. He wanders up and down the street smoking while I sit listening absentmindedly
to Capital FM. A few minutes later, Andy opens the door, changes back into his blazer, and we
head over to one of the entrances. Andy takes out a large bunch of keys, tries a few of them,

1
2
3 and eventually we gain access to the stairwell. There is a large skylight at the top, so it is not
4 too dingy, though the floors could do with a clean.
5

6 After climbing two flights of stairs, we approach one of the doors. Andy knocks, waits a
7 while, and then knocks again. ‘Hello?’ No response. He pulls out the bunch of keys again,
8 and begins trying them in the lock until one of them fits and lets us in.
9

10 It is a small one-bedroom flat. The bedroom is through a door immediately to the right and
11 contains little more than a double bed and a chest of drawers. The next door along leads to the
12 living room and kitchen, which is a single larger room with purple walls and a light wood-
13 effect lino floor. The most noticeable thing in the living room is a large black-and-white
14 photograph of a white tiger, perhaps a square metre in size, on one of the walls. Back into the
15 hall, and immediately opposite the front door, is the door to the bathroom, which is a small
16 windowless room containing a toilet, sink, and combined bath and shower. Andy wonders
17 around the flat looking at the walls, ceilings, floors, windows, and kitchen work surfaces. He
18 opens the fridge, frowns slightly, turns the hob rings on and off, tries the oven, tests the taps,
19 checks the shower and goes to the toilet. I also wonder around, sometimes watching Andy, and
20 at other times investigating the flat myself. It is true that the oven and shower are not working,
21 but the hobs are fine, there is still a bath, and I can see no obvious problem with the fridge.
22

23 ‘Tell me,’ Andy says to me after about ten minutes, ‘is this flat *uninhabitable*?’
24

25 ‘No,’ I answer, thinking of my own flat, complete with broken oven, broken heating,
26 temperamental toilet and no living room.
27

28 ‘He should just terminate his tenancy now if he’s no wanting to live here. The rent is only
29 five-twenty a month for a one-bed in quite a central location. There’s very few one-beds in
30 Edinburgh, and certainly no at that price. I think it’s just he’s no wanting it any more, especially
31 as he’s threatening to withhold the rent. He should make it available for someone who needs
32 it. Makes me so angry.’
33

34 We leave the flat and head back down the stairs, out into the street and back to the car.
35 Sitting down, Andy briefly checks the schedule on his smartphone, pulls on his seatbelt and
36 starts the engine. We drive towards Pilton, an estate consisting mostly of rows of council and
37 ex-council tenements, built during the 1930s and 1950s. The area, Andy tells me, has a
38 reputation for young joyriders who steal cars and motorbikes, and drive them recklessly around
39 the area. The street, he tells me, makes a significant difference in terms of letting properties.
40 Nobody wants to live on West Pilton Gardens, because that is where the joyriders drive. Flats
41 on nearby West Pilton Lea, on the other hand, attract far more interest as it is a cul-de-sac.
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Fifteen or so minutes later, we arrive on West Pilton Lea outside one of the characteristic
4 tenement blocks. I've been here before, and there is still rubbish strewn about over the lawn in
5 front of the entrance. The black wheelie bin appears to have been set on fire at some point. We
6 leave the car and enter through the main door, which is already ajar. A large collection of
7 houseplants greets us on the first-floor landing as we proceed to the front door of our next
8 property. This time, it is for a viewing.
9

10
11
12
13 'I did have one applicant for this flat,' Andy tells me as we wait inside the empty flat for the
14 prospective tenants to arrive. 'Australian woman with a wee one, just arrived in Scotland. It
15 wouldna've been right for her. Lovely woman, perfect references and everything, but Pilton's
16 just no the right area for her. She wouldna've got on well here at all. But I encourage Polish
17 people to live in Pilton, because there are lots of other Polish people in the area, so I ken they'll
18 have a good amount of support.'
19
20
21
22
23

24 *

25
26 I have always been struck by Andy's comment that he rejected an application for a flat in Pilton
27 on the grounds that the 'lovely' Australian woman with 'perfect references and everything'
28 would have been 'lonely' in what he regards as a 'dodgy area'. One might expect that Andy's
29 objective would be to find tenants with the best possible references and background check
30 results as they may be deemed more likely to pay their rent on time and take good care of the
31 property, and to find them as quickly as possible. It is certainly not part of the Property
32 Manager's formal job description to protect prospective tenants with 'perfect references' from
33 'dodgy' areas contrary to their own wishes – she had, after all, chosen to put in an application.
34 Andy is of course a sample of one and, based on my experience with a range of Property
35 Managers at Almond & Thompson in Edinburgh, takes personal involvement with his tenants
36 to a relative extreme even within the 'letting agency with a difference' with its 'positive caring
37 approach'. Nonetheless, the entry of idiosyncratic moral reasoning into the process of property
38 management did not come as a surprise to me by this stage in my fieldwork either.
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

48
49 In light of this idiosyncrasy, it is useful to turn to Mattingly's notion of 'first person virtue
50 ethics' in which the good is understood from a first-person perspective with narrative at the
51 centre of moral action. Mattingly (2014, pp. 56-57) argues that 'the moral frameworks
52 developed within first person virtue ethics offer a rich vocabulary for considering humans as
53 "self-interpreting" moral beings whose perceptions, interpretations, and actions help shape
54 moral subjectivities in the singular as well as the collective'. Moral striving may, therefore, be
55 understood as 'experimental, even perilous, traversing private and public life while also deeply
56 embedded in the routines of everyday care' (pp. 25-26). This does not occur separately from
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 everyday action as part of a ‘deliberative ethical moment’, but is instead ‘accomplished in the
4 midst of the everyday as the normative becomes subject to experiment and problematization’
5 (p. 26). The Property Manager, in shifting between thinking with the landlord in mind and
6 thinking with the tenant in mind, is continually confronted with new ethical dilemmas that, as
7 part of their job, demand resolution. Hence the ‘moral laboratory’, to invoke the title of
8 Mattingly’s book, in which ‘everyday spaces can become spaces of possibility, ones that create
9 experiences that are also experiments in how life might or should be lived’ (p. 27). It is through
10 this process that Andy’s authentic emotion – and, by extension, authentic care – come to the
11 fore.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19

20 **‘In case it comes back to bite us’**

21
22 ‘We need to head back to the office for a bit,’ Andy tells me later on that day, sounding slightly
23 nervous.
24

25
26 ‘Right enough,’ I reply as we drive off. I don’t give any further thought to his apparent
27 nervousness as I sit in the passenger seat, mulling over our activities of the morning as we
28 progress down Ferry Road. If talking on the phone to uncooperative tenants for hours after
29 work is what the head office describes as ‘commercial responsibility’, then surely that is taking
30 responsibility to a whole new level.
31
32
33

34
35 ‘Seriously, you can get way too involved with folk’s lives in this job,’ Andy says after a
36 short while. ‘I’ve got this flat in Restalrig just now. It’s supposed to be just the mother and
37 daughter, but the daughter’s boyfriend has moved in and smokes weed in the flat. He’s no even
38 meant to be there, and I’m trying to get the mother and daughter to understand that they need
39 to get him to move out as he’s no on the lease. Thing is, I think they’re scared of him. Last time
40 I went there, he came out the bedroom in his boxers, shouting at me to get out. It’s no even his
41 flat! It’s getting to the point where I’m saying to the mother and daughter that I’ll have to serve
42 an eviction notice on them if he disna [doesn’t] leave as they’re responsible for the weed
43 smoking as they’re on the lease. It’s just gonnae be harsh on them as I dinna think it’s their
44 fault – I think the daughter’s boyfriend is abusive and they canna dae [do] anything about it.’
45
46
47
48
49
50

51
52 We pull up outside the office, leave the car and head back in. Back in the office, I sit
53 awkwardly with Andy, watching him read and answer emails and modify his diary. He says
54 little to me directly. To break the awkwardness, I offer to make coffee, which he accepts.
55
56

57
58 ‘We need to do a void [empty property] report on this flat on Elgin Street,’ Andy tells me
59 after about half an hour. ‘The tenant committed suicide last week. Nice guy. Only stayed there
60 a few months.’

1
2
3 'Christ.' Clearly this is why Andy seemed nervous earlier.
4

5 'It's really upset the neighbours as well. Thing is, they'd had bad experiences of past tenants
6 there, and I chose him because he seemed like he'd be quiet and responsible. Recently divorced
7 professional working man and all that, ken what I mean. I ken it's no my fault, but I find it hard
8 not to blame myself in some way. Like, if only I'd spoken to him earlier, maybe I could've
9 done something...'
10
11

12
13 'I'm not sure you can hold yourself responsible for this sort of thing,' I comment.
14

15 'Aye exactly. The other thing is that his ex-wife has been round, and has taken out some of
16 the furniture, and now his son is claiming it disna belong to her. I'm hoping we'll no get too
17 involved in that, but she's also been on the phone telling us there's a suicide note left in the
18 oven. We'll have to check that out as well.'
19
20
21

22 Andy retrieves a set of keys from one of the key cupboards. We put on our jackets, grab our
23 bags, and once again head out of the office, down in the lift and out of the building to Andy's
24 car.
25
26

27 'So... Elgin Street,' Andy says as we drive off. 'That's off Easter Road, isn't it?'

28 'Eh... maybe?'

29 'Right useful you are,' he half-jokes in response.
30
31

32 Elgin Street, and indeed much of the surrounding area, is populated with four-storey
33 sandstone tenements, mostly built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with
34 higher ceilings and cornicing, larger and often bay windows with decorative features above,
35 and wider stairwells with coloured tiles. We enter one of the tenement stairwells. It is getting
36 dark now, and only one of the stair lights is working.
37
38
39

40
41 'I'm gonnae check on the neighbours first,' Andy tells me as we approach the second-floor
42 landing. There are three flats on each floor. Andy knocks on two of the doors in succession,
43 but there is no response. 'I'll have to come back to them later, just to make sure they're alright.'
44 Andy then unlocks the third door and we go inside. The lights are already on.
45
46
47

48 'First things first,' Andy says, leading me into the kitchen. The kitchen looks to be quite
49 recently refitted and redecorated, with magnolia-painted walls and a light wood-effect floor.
50 Something about the heavy fire door, the room's total lack of windows, and the ceiling that is
51 higher than its length or breadth strikes me as eerie, though perhaps it is just because of the
52 circumstances. Andy kneels down in front of the oven, gulps, and opens it. 'Phew. Nothing
53 there. Either the ex-wife has taken it, or she's just trying to wind us up.'
54
55
56
57

58 Andy then carries out the process of the void report. With the aid of the void report form,
59 he switches on the heating, turns the lights, taps, oven and hob rings on and off, opens and
60

1
2
3 closes the windows, and briefly assesses the state of walls and floors. I finally manage to make
4 myself useful by writing down the gas and electricity meter readings as Andy calls them out
5 while standing on tiptoes on a chair. The living room is indeed partly furnished – there is one
6 sofa, though it would appear from the marks in the carpet that other items have been removed.
7
8 The bedroom is untidy, with a few items of clothing strewn over the bed.
9

10
11 ‘The thing is,’ Andy says to me, looking scared and upset, ‘I dunno how he done it.’

12
13 ‘Hmm,’ I reply, imagining a handful of possibilities.

14
15 ‘I’ll try the neighbours one more time,’ Andy says as he turns off the heating and lights. We
16 leave the flat. Andy knocks on the neighbouring doors once more, but still no response.
17

18
19 ‘What will happen to this flat now?’ I ask as we leave the building and walk back towards
20 the car.
21

22
23 ‘Contractors will come and clean the place and remove any remaining furniture. Then it’ll
24 be remarketed and hopefully re-let. But we’ll have to inform any future prospective tenants
25 what happened – in case it comes back to bite us, ken what I mean.’
26

27
28 *

29
30 Let us return to Ibarra’s dichotomy between formal and informal ‘emotional proletarians’, and
31 consider how Andy’s activities as a self-described ‘unqualified social worker’ may fit into it.
32 On the one hand, the strong sense of responsibility that he displays towards his tenants
33 contributes indirectly towards the continuation of their tenancies and thus ultimately towards
34 their financial returns. On the other hand, despite being ‘unqualified’ and thus not specifically
35 employed to perform social care duties, Andy displays what Ibarra would term ‘authentic
36 emotion’ as part of his job, frequently going above and beyond what might be expected from
37 his job description. Indeed, in this latter instance, it would appear that Andy’s duty of care even
38 extends to protecting potential future tenants from the flat’s own agency, lest they be haunted
39 by the legacy of the suicide (cf. Miller, 2001).
40
41
42
43
44
45

46
47 In the context of home care of older adults in Chicago, Buch (2013) argues that home care
48 workers often find themselves conflicted between their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of
49 those for whom they care, especially in the context of their relatively low wages. ‘Through
50 intimate and daily acts of care,’ Buch argues, care workers ‘repeatedly enacted broader social
51 hierarchies within and on their bodies—they came to feel that their immediate bodily needs
52 were less important than those they cared for’ (p. 647). Certain parallels should be readily
53 apparent, though less clear is the extent to which Andy enacts ‘broader social hierarchies’,
54 given that he also acts as an authority figure to some of his tenants as well as prioritising their
55 wellbeing over his own. At best, his socioeconomic positionality is ambiguous.
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 On the face of it, however, 'care' may be regarded as ancillary to the role of the Property
4 Manager, even though the practice of ethics is present within the process of property
5 management. Andy's 'unqualified social work' in effect contributes to the stated 'positive
6 caring approach' of Almond & Thompson, and helps tenants to sustain their tenancies, pay
7 their rent on time and keep their homes in good condition, ultimately if indirectly contributing
8 to the financial returns of both the letting agency and their landlords.
9
10
11
12
13

14 15 **Conclusion**

16
17 This article began with a cursory unpacking of Almond & Thompson's stated aim to 'combine
18 a positive caring approach to all of [their] clients with the commercial discipline of the private
19 sector'. Some sense of care and social responsibility is in evidence from our Property Managers
20 in this instance. Almond & Thompson's formal mission statement, and indeed their wider
21 business model, were of course not written by any of the Property Managers encountered in
22 this chapter. It was not even written by anyone in the Edinburgh office, but is rather a product
23 of central management based largely at the head office in London. I had no direct interaction
24 with the London office during fieldwork, and it is not often a highly visible actor for most
25 employees of the Edinburgh office either. Of more immediate concern, therefore, is not the
26 mission statement itself, or the motivations of higher-level management, but the ways in which
27 Edinburgh-based employees negotiate and, where applicable, reproduce these values or virtues
28 through their work with tenants, landlords, properties, state bodies and other actors, as it is
29 through these associations that the relations of property, responsibility and care within the
30 private rented sector are continually constituted.
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

41 Van Eijk (2017) argues that the privatisation of care increases costs and adds additional
42 bureaucratic levels. It is beyond the remit of this article to address the relative financial merits
43 of different housing models, but I cannot avoid the conclusion that the large-scale transfer of
44 council-owned properties into the private rented sector has led to additional layers of payment,
45 profit and management. Almond & Thompson may be a 'letting agency with a difference' in
46 providing additional support services that would previously have been provided by the state,
47 but these are, at least as far as their business model is concerned, a means to ensure that
48 privately rented properties are suitably maintained and that rents are paid on time. Their
49 mission statement, and indeed the actions of their employees, may appear to distance
50 themselves from 'politics' in pursuit of a 'positive caring approach' and 'efficiency'.
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

What does seem clear to me is that the current economic and political context engenders a particular state of affairs for the private rented sector in which the lines between business and social care are blurred. Does this new social, political and economic reality itself engender particular types of ethical relations? Whilst I do not seek to speculate as to possible alternatives, it does occur to me that the politically fragmented nature of rented housing in Scotland today, with competing and perhaps contradictory interests at its core, lends itself well to an analysis derived from the anthropology of ethics, or at least in the sense of ‘ordinary ethics’ in the vein of Lambek (2010) – an ethics that is grounded in everyday practice. Returning to Mattingly (2014, p. xvi), I argue that taking ‘people’s moral projects and their beliefs about the good seriously’ – what she terms ‘first person virtue ethics’ – can shed light on how the process of property management is played out in practice, which itself is integral to an ethnographic understanding of the private rented sector.

There are two major caveats, however. One is that this self-styled ‘letting agency with a difference’, with its ‘positive caring approach’, is not typical of the private rented sector in general (see e.g. Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2018). The other is that the very nature of property relations in the private rented sector, with all their implications of vested interests and inequalities of ownership, by definition imposes certain constraints – or at least disincentives – upon the virtues that may be freely and explicitly espoused or practiced. In certain respects, this is somewhat reminiscent of the alleged contrast between politics and humanitarianism as critiqued by Fassin (2007). Fassin argues that there has in fact been a tendency towards the merging of politics and humanitarianism, and that claims to the contrary can ‘relegate the dominated and the excluded to this depoliticized space, leaving the political space to the dominant and the included’, and risks ‘denying the possibility of a political life to those who are subjected to them in practice’ (p. 509). These ideas also have echoes of *The Anti-Politics Machine* by Ferguson (1990). Future research may wish to consider whether the economic reality of private property serves to ‘depoliticise’ activities such as ‘caring’ property management. There may, after all, opportunities for property managers to be politically engaged, and indeed many are tenants themselves. For now, however, my primary comment is that ethics or ‘the good’ – including any first-person virtue ethics – is always ultimately contextual within the constraints of the wider political economy, as agentic ethics are always mediated through historically constituted circumstances and relations.

References

- 1
2
3 Brijnath, B. (2014), *Unforgotten: Love and the Culture of Dementia Care in India*, Oxford,
4 Berghahn.
5
6
7 Buch, E. (2013), "Senses of Care: Embodying inequality and sustaining personhood in the care
8 of older adults in Chicago", *American Ethnology*, Vol. 40, pp. 637-650.
9
10
11 Csordas, T.J. (2013), "Morality as a Cultural System?", *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 54 No. 5,
12 pp. 523-546.
13
14
15 Currie, H. (1996), "The Government Administration of Housing", in Currie, H. and Murie, A.
16 (Eds), *Housing in Scotland*, Coventry, Chartered Institute of Housing, pp. 42-56.
17
18
19 Fassin, D. (2007), "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life", *Public Culture*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp.
20 499-520.
21
22
23 Ferguson, J. (1990), *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and*
24 *Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
25
26
27
28 Gibb, A. (1989), "Policy and politics in Scottish housing since 1945", in Rodger, R. (Ed.),
29 *Scottish Housing in the Twentieth Century*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, pp. 155-
30 183.
31
32
33
34 Hafford-Letchfield, T. et al (2018), "Vulnerable Adults in the Privately Rented Sector in
35 England: A Snapshot of Current Practice Issues", *Practice*, DOI:
36 [10.1080/09503153.2018.1455176](https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2018.1455176).
37
38
39
40 Heinemann, L.L. (2015), "Accommodating Care: Transplant caregiving and the melding of
41 health and home life in the United States", *Medical Anthropology Theory*, Vol. 2, pp. 32-
42 56.
43
44
45 Ibarra, María. (2002), "Emotional Proletarians in a Global Economy: Mexican Immigrant
46 Women and Elder Care Work", *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and*
47 *World Economic Development*, Vol. 31 No. 3/4, pp. 317-350.
48
49
50
51 Lambek, M. (2008), "Value and Virtue", *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 133-157.
52
53
54 ——— (2010), "Towards an Ethics of the Act", in Lambek, M. (Ed.), *Ordinary Ethics:*
55 *Anthropology, Language, and Action* (ed.), Fordham University Press, pp. 31-63.
56
57
58 ——— (2015), "On the Immanence of the Ethical: A Response to Michael Lempert, 'No
59 Ordinary Ethics'", *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 128-132.
60

- 1
2
3 Latour, B. (2005), *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford,
4 Clarendon.
5
6
7 Lewis, D. (2012), “Across the little divide? Life histories of public and third sector “boundary
8 crossers””, *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 158-157.
9
10
11 Macpherson, C.B. (1978), *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions*, Oxford, Basil
12 Blackwell.
13
14
15 Mattingly, C. (2014), *Moral Laboratories. Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*,
16 Berkeley, University of California Press.
17
18
19 Mazuz, K. (2013), “The familial dyad between aged patients and Filipina caregivers in Israel:
20 Eldercare and bodily-based practices in the Jewish home”, *Anthropology of Aging Quarterly*,
21 No. 34, pp. 126-134.
22
23
24
25 McCrone, D. and Elliot, B. (1989), “The decline of landlordism: property rights and
26 relationships in Edinburgh”, in Rodger, R. (Ed.), *Scottish Housing in the Twentieth Century*,
27 Leicester, Leicester University Press, pp. 214-235.
28
29
30
31 Miller, D. (2001), “Possessions”, in Miller, D. (Ed.), *Home Possessions: Material Culture*
32 *Behind Closed Doors*, Oxford, Berg, pp. 107-121
33
34
35 O’Carroll, A. (1996), “Historical Perspectives on Tenure Development in Urban Scotland”, in
36 Currie, H. and Murie, A. (Eds), *Housing in Scotland*, Coventry, Chartered Institute of
37 Housing, pp. 16-30.
38
39
40
41 Robbins, J. (2007), “Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical
42 Culture Change”, *Ethnos*, Vol. 72 No. 3, pp. 293-314.
43
44
45
46 Scottish Government (2017), *Scotland’s People Annual Report: Results from the 2016 Scottish*
47 *Household Survey*, Edinburgh, Scottish Government.
48
49
50 Soaita, A. M. et al (2017), “Becoming a landlord: strategies of property-based welfare in the
51 private rented sector in Great Britain”, *Housing Studies*, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp. 613-637.
52
53
54 Tyler, S.A. (1986), “Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult
55 Document”, in Clifford, J. and Marcus, G.E. (Eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and*
56 *Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 122-140.
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Van Eijk, M. (2017), "Insuring Care: Paperwork, Insurance, Rules, and Clinical Labor at a
4 U.S. Transgender Clinic", *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*.

5
6 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-017-9529-8>
7

8
9 Watson, T.J. (2012), "Making Organizational Ethnography", *Journal of Organizational*
10 *Ethnography*, Volume 1 Issue 1, pp. 15-22.
11

12
13 Weber, M. ([1905] 1930), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans.) Parsons,
14 T., London, Allen & Unwin.
15

16
17 Wilk, R.R. (1996), *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology*, Boulder,
18 CO, Westview Press.
19

20
21 Worsdall, F. (1979), *The Tenement: A Way of Life: A Social, Historical and Architectural Study*
22 *of Housing in Glasgow*, Edinburgh, Chambers.
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60