STEADYING THE LADDER

social and emotional aspirations of homeless and vulnerable people

Gerard Lemos
Quick view:

Quick view is a navigation tool that helps you to explore web publications quickly and easily. Click on content items to be taken directly to the page. At the end of each chapter simply click the arrow at the foot of the page if you would like to return to the contents.
“The book makes you think deeply about identity, love, freedom and what makes the ‘good and virtuous life’ - the stuff that’s at the heart of the aspirations of our service users if only we cared to ask them.”

Gary Lashko, Chief Executive, Carr Gomm

“Steadying the Ladder provides an invaluable source of understanding to inform the work of anyone supporting homeless people in their struggle to live independent, fulfilling lives.”

Community Care

“Whether drawing on the insight of eminent poets and philosophers or reflecting on what the film ‘Four Weddings and a Funeral’ tells us about modern love, this immensely readable book never fails to challenge and stimulate.”

Jeremy Swain, Chief Executive, Thames Reach
Gerard Lemos is a partner at social researchers Lemos&Crane. He is the author of several books and reports on supporting vulnerable people including, The Communities We Have Lost and Can Regain (1997), with Michael Young; A Future Foretold: new approaches to meeting the long-term needs of single homeless people (1999); Dreams Deferred: the families and friends of homeless and vulnerable people (2002), and Military History: the experiences of people who become homeless after military service (2005), both with Stefan Durkacz.

Gerard Lemos was a member of the Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children. The Commission’s report, Families and the State: two-way support and responsibilities was published in 2005.
## Contents

Preface to 2010 edition ........................................... 7
Acknowledgements ............................................... 9
Introduction .................................................... 10

### Part One ................................................ 12
1. The social ethics of vulnerability ......................... 13
2. A hazy mirror ............................................. 23
3. Connections and continuities ............................. 29
4. The kingdom of individuals: aspects of positive identity 37
5. Toys of desperation: negative identities .............. 45
6. Identity as instinct and intuition ......................... 52
7. Tell me the truth about love ................................ 57
8. Family and friends .......................................... 68
9. Working towards capabilities and freedom ........... 74
10. Homes, not housing ........................................ 80

### Part Two ................................................. 83
11. Linking concepts to practice ........................... 84
12. Values and principles ..................................... 88
13. Needs, aspirations and agreements .................. 90
14. Support .................................................. 97
15. Independence and interdependence .................. 105

Afterword .................................................... 108
Appendix ..................................................... 109

### Figures .................................................. 122
1. The good and virtuous life .............................. 36
2. Components of positive identity ...................... 43
3. Positive and negative identities in conflict ....... 51
4. Friendships through the life cycle .................... 70
5. Circles of intimacy ...................................... 73
6. Personal mountains ....................................... 79
7. Circles of community .................................... 82
8. Proposed system for supporting vulnerable people 86
Preface to 2010 edition

Steadying the Ladder arose from a feeling on my part that services for vulnerable people, particularly homeless vulnerable people, were attending to symptoms rather than causes. The acme of ambition for these services seemed to be finding someone a rented flat and a low paid job. So my first objection was that these aspirations were simply too low. Secondly, my research and practice experience told me that, in fact, these aspirations were anyway not uppermost in the minds of clients. Actually they were objectives designed to save public money; not to add to the sum of human happiness.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, what vulnerable people wanted was the same as the rest of us, the deep continuities of humanity: love, family and a place in the world, a strong sense of identity. Not necessarily a startling insight but one that had become obscured by the history and politics of exclusion and empowerment. Not only were these universal aspirations what they wanted, but also they were, what’s more, the way to diminish, if not to eradicate their problems. Problems are rarely eradicated, mostly just made a smaller part of a whole life. Here, then, was a true virtuous circle: if support staff could help people to get what they truly wanted, it would also meet the objectives of saving public money by reducing reliance on expensive support services. I began to question whether these services really were intended to save public money. Unintentionally perhaps, services designed to help might in fact be consigning people to a ‘support ghetto’, which would leave them institutionalised and dependent and would be extremely costly as well. As far as people with mental health problems were concerned, we had been here before.

As I began to think and read about this apparent disconnection between universal values and policy goals I realised also that, while it was true that vulnerable people wanted the same as everyone else, what everyone wanted was itself changing. Our society, our post-modern condition, emphasises individual identities. We are encouraged to believe we are all different and we should not look to governments, employers or traditions to tell us who we are. We are what we want to become – and no one should decide that except ourselves. All talk of destiny and fate should be regarded as defeatist and anachronistic. In short, we had moved into an age of identity, partly replacing both the eras of fraternity and equality that had gone before. So here was a paradox: we were all the same but we were being encouraged to become different to each other. This was the world that vulnerable people had to be prepared to re-enter. This was the ladder that had to be steadied.

In writing a new preface four years on from the original publication I inevitably wondered whether I would write anything different now. I don’t think I would, but I think there are some notable omissions which I would, if I were writing this now, certainly include. In this text I have not emphasised either the importance of nature or, even more pertinently, the significance of
spirituality as markers of our common and individual identities and therefore important forms of engagement for support staff to encourage. I had perhaps focused too exclusively on the connections between people and too little on the connections that people make for themselves beyond other human beings and into the more existential world. The growth of religious identities and the significance of religion in people’s identities seem to me, the more I think about it, to be the big story of our times as authoritarianism and social sclerosis have receded. We notice it less in the UK and northern Europe because the phenomenon is less prevalent here. But we are the exceptions and we ignore the rule at our peril, as we have on a few recent occasions found out.

Looking back to the beginning of 2006 when Steadying the Ladder was first published I have been pleasantly surprised both by the reception the book has received and the impact it seems to have had on policy. From a practitioner point of view thoughtful people whose values and practice make them want to do a better job of supporting vulnerable people welcomed the attempt in Steadying the Ladder to connect philosophy and theory to practice. And policy makers seemed also to see that it would be in everyone’s interest to support people in a different way. So virtually all homelessness services now offer and provide family mediation services and when people present themselves to local authorities as homeless they are no longer either sent to temporary accommodation or put on a waiting list, the great organising principle of the British welfare state. Instead they are now offered all the housing options available locally in the private as well as the public sector and particularly young people are encouraged to resolve their conflicts and return to the family home which is still, despite everything, probably the best place for most of them.

I don’t claim that Steadying the Ladder was the unique catalyst for these changes in policy and practice. But I do like to believe that the book added light to the sum of light and removed some of the darkness that seemed to have obscured both old truths and new ones. In these small but important ways the world has become a slightly better place.

Gerard Lemos
Lemos&Crane
London
March 2010
Acknowledgements

This project – and its antecedents – has been funded by the City of London’s Bridge House Trust and the Ashden Trust. I would like to thank them for their continuing support. Mark Woodruff of the Ashden Trust has been a consistent supporter of this work. I want to thank him. Sara Llewelin of the Bridge House Trust has been a particularly active supporter, not just with funds, but also with ideas and moral support, which are of course far more valuable. Jeremy Swain, the Chief Executive of Thames Reach Bondway, was one of the initiators of this work some years ago and has stuck with it, always showing untiring enthusiasm for the rather roundabout journey he and Thames Reach Bondway have been taken on. I am greatly in Sara and Jeremy’s debt. Gary Lashko of the Carr-Gomm Society has also been constant in his encouragement and I am grateful for that.

Three researchers at Lemos&Crane have helped me with the project: Stefan Durkacz, Gayle Munro and Francis Bacon. I am grateful to all of them. Francis’s contribution has been the greatest, and I want to particularly thank him, not least for his insights into religion and football! He also got landed with the thankless tasks of working on endless re-drafts and re-edits, a load he bore with forbearance and great good humour. Paul Crane, as ever, was responsible for the publication. My thanks to him also for saving me from infelicities and indiscretions.

Responsibility for the views expressed as well as the mistakes or misjudgments is of course mine alone. Finally, my biggest thanks go to all the practitioners who attended the action research meetings over several months. Most of the ideas in this book are claimed by me, but originate from them. They are Mark Phillippo and Liz Rapoport (Look Ahead); Joe Tapsell and Bill Tidnam (Thames Reach Bondway); Michelle Knaggs and Megan Pacey (Alone in London); Glenn Bassett and Sally Parsons (Carr-Gomm Society); Claire Sheridan and Mark Jordan (Stonham); Roger Clark (Depaul Trust); Maxine Jordan and Kate Whalley (St. Mungo’s); Gary Dixon and Andrew Tyers (Peter Bedford); Helen Standen (The Passage); Julia King (Single Homeless Project); and Rob Fitzpatrick (Revolving Doors Agency).

Gerard Lemos
Lemos&Crane
London
January 2006
Introduction

Supporting vulnerable people, while often satisfying, may seem a frustrating and thankless task. The best efforts to find someone somewhere to live and perhaps a job or training; encouraging them to seek medical and other professional help for mental health problems or to kick drug or alcohol habits: all of the earnest endeavours may not make the difference. They may fail to turn the key to a more settled and fulfilled life. Something is still missing; something else is wanted.

Addressing this want, felt even more strongly by the vulnerable person than by the person seeking to support them, is the subject and purpose of this book. How are we to support vulnerable people better, whether we are professional helpers, family or friends? My starting point is rather simple, easy to express but more difficult to answer: What for all of us makes for a good and virtuous life?

In posing that question and seeking answers to it I have been advised and assisted by participants in action research from some of the leading supported housing agencies in London. Their contribution has already been acknowledged. Statistics are not the only, or even the best, way to find out what’s going on. Some of the most incisive insights, the sharpest conclusions, the most reflective wisdom is as likely to be in literature, philosophy, psychology or even sociology. I have drawn mostly on these sources and have not sought here to quantify the problem.

The first part of the book seeks to describe the components and qualities of the good and virtuous life. In the action research discussions we arrived at four overarching themes:

- Positive identity and self-worth
- Lasting and loving one-to-one relationships
- Family and friends
- Homes and work.
Each of these is described in the chapters that make up Part One of the book. Part Two interleaves these concepts with the main organisational processes followed in most agencies supporting vulnerable people:

- Needs assessment and making agreements
- Planning and delivering support, perhaps through a partnership of several organisations from different sectors
- Resettling people into a life of greater independence, recognising always that all lives are lived interdependently.

The appendix to the book deals briefly with the implications of the first two parts of the book for the recruitment, development and management of staff.
1. The social ethics of vulnerability

Do not mistake the abnormal for the untrue.
We are caught in metaphors. They transfigure us,
and reveal the meaning of our lives.¹

Every society thinks some groups among its citizens need greater assistance than the norm. In contemporary developed societies its principally small children and infirm older people that are thought to have a legitimate entitlement to a degree of dependency without payment or immediate reciprocal obligation. But groups of adults many of whom are not old are also thought to be ‘vulnerable’: people with mental health problems, people with learning and physical disabilities. Support for members of these groups continues to come principally from carers in the family at home. To a varying degree, in theory depending on the needs of the individual, professional staff in health and social care may also give support and assistance. Other groups are perceived to have brought their misfortune on themselves through their own action: committing crime and therefore being imprisoned; becoming addicted to drugs or alcohol, having nowhere to live and probably being out of work too. Having gone down the selfdestructive road less travelled by more ‘normal’ independent people, they become vulnerable, less able to resolve their own difficulties and then need help from others. Initially, before things get too bad, that help can be sought from informal sources, family and friends. But things may get worse. Family and friends start to feel exhausted, helpless and unable to cope. These feelings of exhaustion and helplessness are felt in an amplified form by the vulnerable person themselves. So recourse is sought to paid help, either from professional charities or from statutory organisations, in the health service, in local authorities, probation or social work.

Perhaps there never were many relatives, friends or neighbours to help some people so the institutional help was called on to step in sooner. Even if a judgmental view would suggest that some of these problems are self-inflicted, the need for help is also widely acknowledged and accepted. Staff in the health services, local authorities in supported housing and social landlords are asked by society and by the government, in general terms, to improve the living conditions and the quality of life of these groups of people. Ultimately the goal is their re-integration into an independent life lived without the support and assistance of paid help, though they may continue to need and enjoy the informal support of friends, relatives, neighbours and volunteers. That ultimate goal of independence is often not achieved. The person’s problems may prove too intractable; the methods of intervention are inadequate and do not make sufficient impact; the understanding of these problems may be too limited or confused. As a result, some people continue to receive support in a sheltered setting for a long

¹ Rushdie, S., The Firebird’s Nest, 1997/2
period, sometimes indefinitely. Attempts from time to time at independent living might collapse and the person may revert to their former life: sleeping rough; drinking too much; taking too many drugs; begging, or even worse, stealing to feed the habit. The condition to which they revert sometimes sets them back even further, undoing some of the good work done in detox, rehab, hospital or supported housing.

Unconvincing claims that this or that method of intervention is a new-found panacea do not cast much fresh light on these intractable issues. Instead, I want to set out a more general, social and integrated approach that might, if widely accepted, fill a substantial gap: an underpinning conceptual and social framework which could form a backdrop, framework and ethos for the specific interventions of medical, housing or other rehabilitative professional support services for vulnerable people.

Although these groups of people (and others, as I shall describe) have been seen as vulnerable for centuries, social attitudes towards any and all of these groups have been far from fixed. Specific attitudes about the nature, causes and consequences of their conditions or problems are all subject to frequent and sometimes absolute change, specifically how their problems might affect their behaviour; what others should think about them and their problems; and, above all how society as a whole should respond. I hope to show how underlying patterns influence the trajectory of attitudes about all these groups, even when attitudes appear to be changing almost randomly, or only changing in relation to one specific group or another.

Mental health and illness

Changing attitudes, without similar changes in the real conditions, are nowhere better demonstrated than on the subject of mental illness and mental health. There are long historical antecedents for colourful descriptions of mental illness but the evanescence of ideas and the unreliability of the epistemology that underpins these descriptions are easily illustrated by going back a few hundred years. In medieval times people with mental health problems were widely believed by God-fearing subjects to be possessed by demons and devils and so it was believed they were cursed and damned. After a while, medical, as opposed to religious, explanations were speculated about and eventually sought. Then it was some time before that led to the idea of ‘asylum’: for their own and everyone else’s good, people thought to be mad should be locked away from the rest of the community, if necessary against their will. A wide and often heart-rending range of ‘therapies’ was therein applied, often to little good effect and sometimes with extreme and permanent harmful consequences. The popularity of the idea of asylum – though it still has its subscribers – has also in its turn faded and many such large remote institutions have long since closed.
One of the first jobs I had, during a summer vacation from university, was as a cleaner in one such institution in the suburbs of south London. The buildings, from the outside, were built in a Victorian neo-classical style, complete with pillared porticoes. The place was stern and imposing but not entirely forbidding. From the gates to the front door was a twenty-minute uphill walk through tree-filled glades. The staff were provided with a minibus. This removed the need for a twice-daily constitutional and improved the chances of punctuality. Inside, wards were set off long, echo-laden corridors, often rather poorly lit. All the surfaces – floors, walls and ceilings – were hard and shiny. Each ward had a ‘day room’ that passed muster as a rather austere sitting room. Beds were in a separate room, dormitory style. Some wards were locked; most were not. Most of the patients moved around the place freely looking more bored than ill, but many betrayed the facial and physical gestures of their condition and the effects of the drugs they were taking for it. The patients extended across a spectrum from the profoundly disturbed at one end to those scarcely distinguishable from the population at large at the other.

At the sharp end were people, mostly men, who were disturbed and dangerous, though not all the time. They were in a locked, single sex ward. As one of the few male ‘orderlies’ I was often assigned to work in these wards. I didn’t complain. The men were generally younger and fit, pretty much capable of cleaning up after themselves (a definite plus from my point of view). They were mostly convivial, at least to me. Hence the job contained much interest and not much work. Most of the day passed in conversation with patients, sometimes rather halting with longish silences and occasionally punctuated by aggressive outbursts quickly responded to by the nursing staff. In the three or four months I was there I got to know many of them well and took many intimate and cheerful photographs of the patients.

The bulk of the patients in other wards were not dangerous, though some were quite disturbed by schizophrenic symptoms, often longstanding and no longer much susceptible to change or improvement. Many were now old and had little prospect of a future life in a normal house in a normal street. At the least needy end of the spectrum were people, also now often old, who would definitely not have been incarcerated in such a place had they grown up in a later era. Some had been teenage mothers, perhaps suffering from what would now be recognised as post-natal depression. Many had relatively mild learning disabilities that would not now be regarded as insuperable impediments to independent living. One man of this latter sort made the long trek down the drive early every morning and purchased a substantial supply of all the newspapers. He hauled them back to the hospital and sold them to staff and patients at a slightly marked up price. By dint of this enterprise he told me he had saved about £21,000 down the years and showed me the building society book to prove it, quite a lot of money in the late 1970s. He had, unsurprisingly, no wish to move from the hospital in the twilight of his
years. As already noted, most such institutions have now closed their doors, perhaps re-built as upmarket housing estates or out of town supermarkets. The patients have moved to smaller group homes more centrally located in neighbourhoods and communities. Some now live wholly independently. Many have died. The closure of these institutions was a manifestation of a wider intellectual sweep over the last hundred years or so.

The twentieth century saw the rise of psychoanalysis and a range of connected talking therapies, intertwined with the belief that locking people up and giving them psychotropic drugs was not doing them any good, not to mention the highly dubious morality of coercion and control ‘for your own good’. For a while during the 1960s, R.D. Laing led an anti-psychiatry movement, suggesting that the mentally ill were more misunderstood than mad. Their view of the world may, he suggested, just be different. Perhaps they were even stewards of ancient, alternative wisdom. Doing less for them was a great deal better than doing more. Things being done supposedly in their interest were, in truth, really designed to softly ‘police’ their behaviour and save the rest of us from fear or embarrassment. These libertarian ideas undoubtedly contained some disconcerting verisimilitude; they must have done to be greeted by such vociferous vituperation. Doing nothing, however, only led to a great expansion in the sum of human distress felt by the patients and their relatives. Psychiatrists were generally not so keen either. The upset caused to all concerned, not least to those with mental health problems themselves, ensured that psychiatry survived Laing’s onslaught.

The more low key but persistent challenges presented by psychoanalysis to more traditional medical forms of psychiatry have also to some extent subsided. Psychoanalysis offered important insights into the causes, particularly in early childhood and in the family, and consequential behaviour associated with mental and emotional health and illness. Talking therapies, though enormously popular nowadays with millions of people suffering from non-specific unhappiness, in the end seemed to have had less to offer seriously disturbed people. For this group the success rate of counselling, therapy and analysis was too low, not to mention too slow. The more widely used prescription antidepressants and other drugs, such as Prozac, seemed to offer quicker and more instantly soothing remedies and results. They became widely popular by the end of the twentieth century. Their appeal remains, despite the addictive hold that some tranquillisers and anti-depressants have over some people. Similar drugs have been developed for unruly children and are growing in popularity, especially in the USA. Drugs – albeit of a rather more sophisticated type and in more complex combinations – are now thought by the mainstream to be the best bet for the emotionally disturbed or mentally ill, though nevertheless inadequate in many people’s eyes.
That is a simplistic summary of the tidal historical shifts in attitudes to mental illness and health, but even after all that turbulence the prevailing view is not a stable consensus. Firstly, many would dispute the need for what they would see as the too ready and liberal distribution of powerful and sometimes addictive drugs. Secondly, even powerful advocates would be circumspect about making over-ambitious claims for the lasting beneficial effects of psychiatry, and even less convinced about the permanently corrective effects. There is neither a consensus nor a successful robust solution. The problem remains and the stigma too.

Roy Porter, the historian of medicine, certainly did not feel comfortable about where social attitudes to mental illness and psychiatry had landed by the Millennium,

For some, the twentieth century brought Freud’s revelation of the true dynamics of the psyche; for others psychoanalysis proved a sterile interlude, before neuropsychological and neurochemical understanding of the brain finally advanced and bore fruit in effective medications. Psycho-pharmaceutical developments certainly allow psychiatry to function better, but pacifying patients with drugs hardly seems the pinnacle of achievement and any claims to the maturity of a science of mental disorder seem premature and contestable.  

The liberation of lesbians and gay men

As a result of a similar trajectory of changes in social attitudes another group, lesbians and gay men, have fought with some recently accelerated success (unlike people with mental health problems) to be wholly exonerated from being classified by others in society as sinners, criminal or sick. Those who would have expressed their prejudices, more in sorrow than anger, while suggesting that lesbians and gay men need help or treatment have been widely, though not wholly, silenced. Most people, particularly the young in Britain, now accept, according to social attitudes surveys, that lesbians and gay men are not abnormal and should not be encouraged or coerced into conformity with the sexual behaviour of the majority. More people now see lesbians and gay men as just different but nonetheless equal.

As far as lesbians and gay men are concerned the discourse about ‘needs’, ‘support’, ‘cures’ and so on has given way to a rights-based discourse. Despite being different, the right of lesbians and gay men to be treated equally is asserted and, in the case of the UK, increasingly legally validated. Perhaps the lesbian and gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in achieving something the anti-psychiatry movement failed at.

Many lesbians and gay men either had always felt, or now concluded, that their sexual identity and behaviour was not a source of distress or shame to them. Nor should homosexuality embarrass their nearest and dearest and, if other people didn’t like it, they could go hang.

---

3. They are certainly not silent, for example, on the Christian right in the USA or among senior clergy in parts of the Anglican church in Africa.
4. The British Social Attitudes Survey tends to suggest that people don’t always change their mind and abandon their prejudices. In many instances they carry their prejudices to the grave. It’s more that the next generation don’t have the prejudices, or don’t feel compelled to express them, in the first place.
People with mental health problems, on the other hand, even at the time of their proposed liberation, were, in many instances, troubling to themselves and their loved ones. They mostly knew they still needed help, not just freedom, as I saw in those long ago summer months among the residents of that now abandoned Victorian asylum.

This change in widely held attitudes to lesbians and gay men did not come about like a bolt from the blue. It was neither the result of a sudden unheralded outburst of enlightened tolerance on the part of the legal, medical, religious and political establishment, nor the sudden success of effective campaigning, though all played a part. Attitudes to sex and sexuality, just as with mental health as Roy Porter described, have been fragmenting and re-shaping for centuries. Michel Foucault’s definitive study on the history of sexuality thoroughly demolishes the idea that the nineteenth century was uniquely repressive and has given way to the sunlit uplands of new found, easy going, post-1968 tolerance. Instead he argues:

Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse.

That discourse, as Foucault observes, has culminated in a discourse with oneself, a discourse about identity (a subject about which I shall have a great deal to say in the chapters to come).

The Middle Ages had organised around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centuries, this relative uniformity was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy and political criticism. More precisely, the secure bond that held together the moral theology of concupiscence and the obligation of confession. … was, if not broken, at least loosened and diversified: between the objectification of sex in rational discourses, and the movement by which each individual was set to the task of recounting his own sex.⁵

Foucault’s list in that quote of the main subjects that have taken on a new set of views to sex and sexuality (demography, biology, etc.) is fairly comprehensive. New ideas about mental health and the prison population have also had to emerge under similar headings; similarly, physical and learning disabilities.

Attitudes to sex and sexuality have also been affected by wider changes in gender roles, working and labour market patterns and the seemingly inexorable and never-ending rise of material consumerism. I shall return to these wider forces and their impact on sexual behaviour in chapter 7, when I discuss lasting and loving relationships.

---

⁵ Foucault, M., The History of Sexuality: An introduction, Peregrine. 1978
Abbé Pierre and the perceptions of homeless people

Something similarly shaky and unreliable has been going on with attitudes to homeless people, yet another group historically traduced as sinners, criminal or sick, or maybe all of the above.

The most famous campaigner against homelessness in France, perhaps across the entire developed world, was Abbé Pierre, a monk who became the founder of the Emmaus movement. He had a brilliant and brilliantly concise challenge to the leaders of prosperous societies: ‘Et les autres?’ [And the others?] That question was powerful and unavoidable but, at the same time, so imprecise and existential that it left open the possibility of numerous answers. All the potentially acceptable answers implied action more morally dependable and appealing than doing nothing. The inculcation of guilt in the mainstream of society in this direct way was more than just a spur to action. It also opened the space where the powerless, or their advocates such as the Abbé himself, might speak their own truth; answer the Abbé’s question themselves. Guilt widely felt and fuelled by media attention, would make sure the powerful listened. The fact that Abbé Pierre was a priest also brought a moral authority making him even harder to ignore. Notwithstanding those powerful, affective forces, not everyone was comfortable with an ethical discourse about poverty and homelessness which had as its end point religious charity, however celebrated and charismatic the main progenitor.

Roland Barthes made a lifetime’s work out of the interpretations of the signs and codes of everyday life, often revealing their contradictions and the way they fostered illusion while undermining insight. He trained his analytical range finder on Abbé Pierre’s appearance, seeing it as a collection of signs.

*It is a fine physiognomy, which clearly displays all the signs of apostleship: a benign expression, a Franciscan haircut, a missionary’s beard, all this made complete by the sheepskin coat of the worker-priest and the staff of the pilgrim.*

These symbols of physiognomy and appearance he concluded were hollow ‘attributes of goodness’, the ‘bric a brac’ of the fake modern ‘apostle’, the real apostles having long since departed this life and this world along, some would say, with much of their message. Barthes’ conclusion is stark and damning. The answer to the question ‘et les autres?’ for Barthes was definitely not more and more charity. The Abbé is not the person condemned for this false consciousness. His admirers are, in Barthes view, more selfdeluded and self-excusing and therefore the ones who are truly casually culpable.

*I get worried about a society which consumes with such avidity the display of charity that it forgets to ask itself questions about its consequences, its uses and its limits. And then I start to wonder whether the fine and touching iconography of the Abbé Pierre is not the alibi which a sizeable part of the nation uses in order, once more, to substitute with impunity the signs of charity for the reality of justice.*

---

From religion to science

Despite the many differences between these examples of mental health, homosexuality and homelessness, some themes are discernible. One theme is that, looking across the broad historical sweep, contemporary social attitudes are now much more likely to have recourse to scientific (if not always medical) explanations in circumstances where historically religion might have stood in.7

Religious explanations, however, evidently gave rise to a range of oppressive incarcerations. To take another example, in Ireland young single unmarried mothers were put to work in the notorious Magdalen laundries keeping church linen white and spotless. As well as the hard work, they suffered many humiliations and depredations besides. Yet religion has over the years given rise also to compassion and charity. In many countries of the world, including the relatively secular UK, some of the largest and most creative charities have religious roots and the philanthropists that established them often did so out of religious instincts. Even if one shares Roland Barthes’ suspicion that charity is a doubtful decoy from the need for social justice, the hard facts of people and resources delivered through religious organisations cannot be entirely ignored or dismissed as just pointless and damaging.

A world without religious charity would be pragmatically the poorer socially, whatever view one has of organised religions and spirituality. In what I have to propose in chapter 14, faith communities will have an important role to play in helping vulnerable people to re-join mainstream communities and neighbourhoods. But that role will not be as arbiters of public opinion.

Scientific explanations, especially when combined with calls for equity or justice (such as the one made by Barthes), also create the social conditions in which research, medical inquiry and resources are proactively deployed. However, if the ‘cure’ is not forthcoming from the research, an intellectual dead end has been reached. Scientists and doctors then fall back on the hope that further resources and research will eventually turn the magic key of knowledge and open the door to solutions.8

Justice and identity

Even if a scientific explanation may be found, or still sought, hyperrational scientific explanations are almost always tempered by the philosophical and political constraints applied by exactly the notions of social justice that Barthes was keen to recognise and thought should be promoted. Without those constraints, without some notion of equal and universal human

7. Some communities, even in the UK, might still make a connection with religious belief. The death of Victoria Climbié at the hands of a relative seemed, according to the Laming inquiry, connected in some way with religious practices. Much more explicitly, in the prosecution of Sita Kasanga for the abuse of a child, several members of the family expressed the belief that the child’s behaviour, which they took to be abnormal, was the result of witchcraft. Scientific reasoning as first promoted by the philosophers of the British enlightenment tradition is certainly not universally accepted.

8. Even geneticists will admit that some of the larger claims made for stem cell technology, particularly as to the speed of progress, are implausible.
rights, horrific possibilities, such as radical involuntary surgery, eugenics and even genocide gain currency. Scientists are not to blame for that. Their names are taken in vain by temporarily powerful people acting in grave folly.

Justice is also the leitmotif promoted by campaigners for the rights of people with physical disabilities. They argue with conviction and some effect that it is not so much them that have deficits, shortcomings and disabilities. Instead the deficit and deficiency lies in a prosperous society which fails to provide accessible transport facilities, education and employment opportunities among other things. Not unreasonably, they call in evidence other countries, for example in Scandinavia, which do a much better job than the UK. They headline this as a ‘social model’ of disability, as opposed to a ‘medical model’. The latter would see the people with disabilities themselves as the ones with the illness or the problem.

The rights-based social justice discourse is a characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century in the western world. Many social groups, not all of which I am concerned with here, began to see themselves as agents in changing other people’s perceptions of them and the social arrangements that are made for them, but first they had to change how they saw themselves. Identity became an essential pre-requisite for social change. The components of the chosen identity were self-defined and selective. Women, black people and lesbians and gay men changed the way they saw themselves and then set about swiftly changing the views of others. They sought to retain a group identity while absolving it of prejudice and stigma in other people’s eyes. Black was beautiful. Gay men were glad to be gay and so on.

Group pride and identity became the wellspring of powerful and effective campaigns that put to the sword traditions and norms of family life and social hierarchies. Social justice, in this view of the world, does not reside in giving charitable help or researching scientific solutions. Instead, justice is to be found in the right to articulate your own identity and to demand for all those who share that identity the right, at the least, to be treated equally (especially under the law) as well as receive an equitable distribution of state resources. More on this subject in the chapters that follow on strengthening positive identity.

Advocacy and celebrity

Switchback, jack-knife changes in social attitudes are more likely when the prevailing consensus is overly simplistic, failing to understand or respond to all the subtle aspects of a particular problem or difficulties. In those circumstances, dialogue and debate rages and consensus, even if it is temporary and incomplete, is formed in part by the power of advocacy. In our times advocacy in the media, especially by celebrities operating with the complicity of the media, can easily, quickly and absolutely change or distort public attitudes.
Being a Catholic priest like Abbé Pierre is not an essential qualification, though the gaining of moral authority one way or another is required. This raises Barthes’ concern that compliance with the over-simplistic views of a celebrity who has made themselves a symbol is more a way of gaining easy absolution for the lazy and the selfish than a call to altruism or another form of social action. Benefits may nevertheless accrue, albeit contingent and interim. An initial sense of outrage and the rush of energy that is produced as a result, particularly by politicians, can produce benefits, particularly in the rapid deployment of public resources, but a simplistic, incomplete consensus, however well-meant and passionately argued, is almost never sufficiently transformational or beneficial to be long for this world.

Perhaps the best recent example of this is Bob Geldof’s powerful and passionate advocacy of aid as the way to end famine in Africa. Decades since his first Band Aid campaigns, famines recur in Africa as do his clarion calls for more aid. He is not to blame for that, but the solutions he proposed – essentially charitable donations on a mass scale – were never going to achieve all that was needed to end famine. Quieter but more comprehensive analysts, such as the economist Amartya Sen, would argue that famine is the result either of a sudden fall in the lowest incomes or a sudden increase in food prices, or, in conditions of subsistence, both simultaneously. The better short-term solution to famine is to seek to raise the income of people affected by famine, perhaps by giving them paid employment on public works projects. These strategies have been widely applied in India and have contributed to the long-term reduction in famine on the South Asian subcontinent. Those same analysts would also argue that debt relief and changing the terms of global trade would have rather more significant positive consequences in permanently raising the incomes of people in famine-affected areas than even huge increases in aid. In any event current levels of international aid are vastly outstripped by repatriated migrant remittances. All this simply illustrates the limits, but also the power, of the tabloid headline, the rock concert and the headline-seeking political encounter as the modus operandi for social change.

Since the social consensus about the problems discussed so far and their potential solutions seem so often partial and mutable, there is an inherent weakness in describing a simple intellectual journey from religion through science to justice in the ways that these problems are described or understood. So, as a consequence, each phase does not wholly supersede the previous one. Progress is not linear. The response to all the groups of vulnerable people being considered here, homeless people, ex-offenders, people with mental health problems, to this day, will still frequently have recourse to all of the above: religion, science and social justice in a variety of combinations.
2. A hazy mirror

All these explanations for shifts in social attitudes, despite their pervasive application across different groups of vulnerable people and their superficially benign qualities, may nevertheless be decoys for something quite different, even less rational and rather unappealing. They may be a deceitful projection of some of the worst aspects of ourselves and our human failings onto people more vulnerable and less able to speak out for themselves. The social, epistemological analysis as set out in the previous chapter is not the only way of looking at social attitudes to vulnerability.

Attitudes to vulnerable people may more truly be subject to changes in more general attitudes the public have to themselves, and more especially, ways of making people feel better about themselves. If we, the more independent, are to believe that we are our autonomous selves, then vulnerable people are on the other hand the needy other. Looking at others we see ourselves in a hazy mirror.

Out of sight, out of mind

One way of establishing and sustaining a split in the public mind between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is by keeping vulnerable people out of sight and out of mind. Even if they cannot be kept out of sight, looking away may be the next best thing. The poet W.H. Auden noted that ability to look away even when the most attractive stars fall from the sky. As in all Brueghel’s paintings, plenty of people are all around, busy and distracted. Brueghel’s style was rarely to focus on a single individual. He was not a portrait artist. This is from Auden’s poem ‘Musee des Beaux Arts’ (1938), written in response to a painting by Breughel of Icarus falling from the sky.

In Brueghel’s Icarus for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure: the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky.
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
In the 1980s rough sleeping on the streets of London and other British towns and cities (and, for that matter, many other European cities) ceased to be seen as the lonely preserve of a few winos and tramps, who had in any event been a longstanding feature of the city streets. A noticeably increased number of young people seemed to be sleeping rough. They appeared to have nowhere to go for the night, lived principally by begging and, in many cases, apparently had rather serious drug habits. British city centres seemed quite quickly to have become, in this respect at least, rather like their American counterparts. The fact that the new rough sleepers were young and apparently not completely washed up and irreversibly derelict may have made it seem a more urgent political problem than in the past. The ascent of youth had been stalled, like Icarus, but could perhaps be re-started. Sir George Young, a former Conservative housing minister noted with heavy irony that young homeless people were ‘the people you trip over on the way to the opera’. They were Icarus fallen.

Perhaps the minister was pointing to the discomfort many people feel at having their line of vision disturbed by shocking and unavoidable evidence of the contradictions so clearly visible in a society in which people can pay £250 for an opera ticket while at the same time other people appear to have nothing, not even a bed for the night. One slightly reprehensible, but nevertheless understandable, response to that troubling and superficially inexplicable contradiction is to want it to go away. Someone else should either solve the problem or, at least, put it out of sight if not out of mind.

By the 1990s something had to be done and something was indeed done. A series of government initiatives under both political parties culminated in the arrival of a civil servant designated a rough sleepers’ ‘tzar’. Services for homeless people were redirected at some considerable extra cost given the relatively small numbers of people involved. Rough sleepers were actively encouraged to leave the streets by ‘contact and assessment’ staff. Sometimes they appeared to outnumber those they were charged with removing. More temporary housing was made available and the management of demand and supply for temporary housing became more efficient. This effort had the effect of removing small numbers of rough sleepers from small towns and cities where, in any event, there had only ever been a few. In the big cities, the numbers were reduced but sleeping rough was not removed. The intractable few who were still sleeping rough, if they could not be removed, had to be re-labelled, otherwise scepticism and obloquy might descend on the government’s many initiatives and considerable expenditure. What were once rough sleepers were metamorphosed by a new kind of rhetoric into ‘drug addicts’, ‘aggressive beggars’ and people guilty of ‘anti-social behaviour’ – the sorts of individuals that were likely to frighten small children and old people according to politicians.

Governments are notoriously bad at single-handedly changing public attitudes and habits (say, on healthy eating or taking exercise) but on this occasion they succeeded. They launched an advertising campaign seeking to persuade people not to give money to beggars as they would only use it to buy drugs and thus thwart the government’s well-meaning efforts to get them into
treatment and rehabilitation (which was then and still is in rather short supply). It seems that
the donors did not need much encouragement to give up their sliver of vestigial guilt and stop
making their small financial contribution. After all, it was now official: rough sleepers’ problems
were all their own fault. This rather disagreeable episode at the end of a moderately successful,

if expensive, policy initiative to reduce rough sleeping illustrates a common feature of the social
ethics of vulnerability. Official permission to look away when passing a rough sleeper was given
and readily accepted. Persuading the public that problems are self-inflicted, however real they
are, drastically and absolutely stems the trickle of generosity. It becomes legitimate to look
away and pass on at a slightly quickened pace, dismissing guilt or fear in the instant before
it can take hold. On the other hand, if the ‘victims’ are beatified by celebrity compassion, as
already noted, no generosity can be too great.

Bad luck

Others who don’t turn away might look, but they remain baffled. That bafflement makes them
feel impotent and fatalistic. The principal character in Ian MacEwan’s novel Saturday (2005)
is a surgeon, Henry Perowne. Looking out of his bedroom window early one morning, he
contemplates a town square in London’s Fitzrovia. He can’t help but contrast its lunchtime
denizens, the smart office workers, absent at this early hour, and the ‘drunks and junkies’,
present most of the time, whatever the time. The sight of the bedraggled night time residents
provides him to speculate about the causes of their degradation.

\begin{quote}
The drunks and junkies come from all kinds of backgrounds, as do the office people. Some
of the worst wrecks have been privately educated. Perowne, the professional reductionist,
can’t help thinking it’s down to invisible folds and kinks of character, written in code, at the
level of molecules. It’s a dim fate, to be the sort of person who can’t earn a living or resist
another drink, or remember today what he resolved to do yesterday. No amount of social
justice will cure or disperse this enfeebled army haunting the public places of every town.
So, what then? Henry draws his dressing gown more closely around him. You have to
recognise bad luck when you see it, you have to look out for these people. Some you can
prive from their addictions, others – all you can do is make them comfortable somehow,
minimise their miseries.
\end{quote}

Perowne is a scientist and, characteristically, defaults to the scientific, rational explanation.
But he can see that those explanations don’t entirely cover all the possibilities. So he falls
rather lamely back on the sweeping and irrational conclusion of ‘bad luck’. He does not share
Barthes’ view about the healing capacity of social justice. Bad luck might be an irrational and
unconvincing explanation, but the belief in the hand of fate affecting the behaviour and destiny
of individuals is widespread, perhaps almost universal. As the philosopher John Gray puts it,

\begin{quote}
\textbf{At bottom, we know that nothing can make us proof against fate and chance.}\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9} Gray, J., Straw Dogs: Thoughts on humans and other animals, Granta. 2002
Perowne is reminded of the impact of fate and chance later in Ian MacEwan’s book. A small deceit on his part in an apparently trivial conflict over a minor scrape between two cars leads to a life and death confrontation in Perowne’s home later, because the original argument turns out by chance to have involved Perowne with someone with incipient Huntington’s Chorea, a genetic neurological wasting condition that produces unpredictable behaviour and results eventually in certain death with much pain and distress en route. In the novel life triumphs over death in the moment of the final facedown as a result of Perowne’s daughter, a poet herself, reciting Matthew Arnold’s poem ‘Dover Beach’. The attacker who is threatening the young woman with a knife is so transfixed and transformed by the beauty of the poem that he is distracted from violence, calms down and is disarmed. That rather romantic reaction to poetry is perhaps more likely in fiction than in fact.

The underlying dynamics of this series of encounters are the ones already referred to. The danger is thought to come from a medical situation scientifically understood; that is the modern condition. It does not help necessarily to avert the danger, much less resolve the problem. Something else is needed for that. One might expect a writer of literature to decide that the danger is most likely averted by the more humanistic balms of literature. Others might ask, as I am asking in this book, what are the alternatives if science or social justice, together or separately, don’t seem to be doing the trick?

Schadenfreude

Reactions, other than turning away or fatalism, if admitted, might make one feel guilty. In the words of the old folk song, one might think, ‘There but for fortune, go you and I’. The attitude that people are perhaps least likely to admit to is that the misfortune of others might make them feel better about their own relative good fortune by comparison: schadenfreude. It shows, they might rashly and privately think, what good decisions they have taken; how their innate talents have been justly rewarded; how lucky they’ve been compared to others. In essence it demonstrates their superiority, something even the most supremely self-confident have occasion to doubt. Adler and Jung noted that, in fact, there was no such thing as a superiority complex. What appears as a superiority complex is really just over-compensation for an unusually large inferiority complex.¹⁰

These complex reactions to vulnerable people and the manifestations of their problems, often in the face of little other than superficial evidence, attest to the more or less constant but silent questioning that people conduct of their own emotional foundations while they seek to understand others: the whys and wherefores of what has happened to others and to themselves, what might happen, how they might react to it and what it might mean. The views of psychoanalyst Marion Milner are discussed in chapter 6. She has something to say about our compulsive attachment to the ‘mean mind … unable to escape from the narrow circle of its own interests.’¹¹ That ‘mean mind’ sees other people’s difficulties and shortcomings as a kind of shoring up of its own defences against its problems and difficulties.

¹⁰ Adler, A., Mind and Body (1931); Jung C. G., Memories, Dreams and Reflections (1961)
¹¹ Milner, M., A Life of One’s Own, Virago. 1986 (first published 1934)
The risks of doing something

The relevance of these more general perspectives is in the first instance to encourage the questioning of long-held assumptions, because social values do change and sometimes without much warning. Above and beyond the benefits of standing outside the philosophical mainstream for a moment’s reflection every now and again, there are risks here. The assumptions made, as already indicated, about the causes of the problem may influence the nature of the solutions proposed and delivered. Since the groups involved are vulnerable, they are by definition poorly placed to mount an articulate rearguard action against the application of ill-fitting labels or the receipt of inappropriate or stigmatising services. The risk of inappropriate or ill-informed services being deployed is the first risk. The second is that services needed are not delivered because they are hard to access from the service channel in which the individuals find themselves, perhaps slightly arbitrarily. For example, family mediation services for vulnerable people are still notable for their scantiness, although there is increasing provision of mediation services for divorcing couples.

To take another example, detox and rehab are in short supply for people living in hostels for the homeless. The third possibility is that the services do not exist at all for any group however their needs are defined. The last risk, and the one that probably gets least discussed, is that people get services they don’t need at all. They are, metaphorically speaking, overfed while still undernourished.

All of this assistance, given in a variety of forms, has its own impact, mostly positive but sometimes negative. The original analysis and effects may be beneficial, but the collateral consequences might not. For example, fairly conclusive evidence now shows that taking children away from dangerous families into the care of the state may solve one immediate problem but, for some of the children, bring forth another. Being in care may expose them to the risk of many different kinds of abuse. Services, even if well intentioned, remind the receiver that they are the kind of person who needs help. More disturbingly, receiving services, particularly over a long period, may also lead the receiver to diminish or forget those aspects of their persona for which help is not needed – their areas of strength. Instead they might focus more exclusively on their needs and problems. Their identity might become dissociated from their life story as they would have written it. ‘Situations have ended sad; relationships have all been bad’ as Bob Dylan wrote in his song ‘You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go’. They might start to see themselves as someone whose problem is constant and overwhelming and can only be coped with by the constant application of assistance. Even in the best interpretation identity has been killed by kindness, which has led to dependency or even worse, so-called kindness has become a form of social control.

---

12. In living memory, for example, in some European countries it was thought undignified for women to work outside the home, but not for children to do so. As Eric Hobsbawm put it in the Age of Extremes: the short twentieth century (1994), “Women work because children don’t anymore.” In many parts of the world it would still be commonly the case that children were in paid employment while their mothers worked in the home.

13. Helena Hargaden, a brilliant and original psychotherapist, gave me that insight.
Unanswered questions

Social trends influence intellectual fashions and, reflexively, intellectual fashions work to re-direct social trends. This effect, like an old-fashioned telephone wire, creates an intertwining that makes distinctions between cause and effect imperceptible. As a result, the fundamental questions about the social ethics of vulnerability still lack durable answers. Firstly, who should be thought of as vulnerable and in need of extra generosity and compassion over and above the norm? Secondly, in what way are they vulnerable or needy? Is being vulnerable or needy their own assessment of their situation or one that reflects other people’s perceptions? Thirdly, who should do what about it? Is it the state, or institutional charities perhaps with the state’s financial support and under the state’s regulation or is kindness freely given by families and friends always ultimately the best thing?

Even if the answers to these questions were straightforward and the subject of a settled social consensus, the problems of individuals in each group would need to be separately considered. What is going on in each group and what specifically should be done for people with particular types of problems: people with mental health problems, those leaving prison, single people with nowhere to live, those seeking to shake off the habit of misusing drugs or alcohol? No doubt over time these distinctions and definitions will further sub-divide, be re-shaped, re-interpreted and re-presented as definite and definitive, unlike all supposedly erroneous previous categorisations. Supposing all that could be satisfactorily sorted out, there would still be the question of people who were in more than one category, or those who belonged in none of them, those with complex or multiple needs. A rapid resolution to all that seems unlikely. As New Yorkers used to say when presented with an implausible claim, ‘I should live so long…’.
3. Connections and continuities

The previous two chapters have described the points of separation between vulnerable people and others: the ideas that society has developed and disseminated to distinguish the perception and treatment of vulnerable people from the perception and treatment of ourselves. Concepts have been developed and applied with a view to marking out difference from the norm. That difference is then explained in various ways, as I have already described, and a methodology is proposed for responding to, or perhaps containing, that difference. The difference will most likely be described, at least implicitly, as a deficit: a shortcoming. The characteristics of inferiority may be the result of sin, illness or crime; that last possibility puts the protagonist at fault. The inferior also need help. The help given is often beneficial, but sometimes ineffectual and on occasions actually harmful. The additional benefit of giving help is that the rest of society is pardoned the troubling emotions evoked by vulnerability: guilt, superiority, schadenfreude and fear. Fear both of what unpredictable vulnerable people might do to you and fear also that the same might happen to you. If nothing were done, those confused emotions would certainly be widely felt. These, from an iconoclastic point of view, are apparently the prevailing social ethics of vulnerability. Something must to done to cure, or at least contain, the problem and it must be cured or contained in ways least troubling to everyone else.

There is an alternative social ethic, which is far more generally subscribed to, though receiving far less technical attention from analysts, commentators and professionals. That other ethic stresses points of similarity and connection among everyone, not the points of separation and difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ suggested in the previous chapters. Similarly, this other ethic stresses continuities in widely held beliefs, not the seismic but nonetheless aberrant and unstable intellectual shifts described in the first chapter.

The distinguishing characteristics of this other and better social ethic are threefold. Firstly, everyone has a great deal more in common with each other than the things that make them different and separate. Secondly, however their vulnerability arose, most vulnerable people do a great deal for themselves without help and, with the right kind of help, could do a great deal more. They could move, as we all wish to, towards fulfilling their potential through education, work, relationships and leisure interests; making the best of themselves; respecting themselves and others; helping themselves and others. Thirdly, the obligation to care for each other to the different extents that everyone needs to be cared for falls primarily on the family and, to a lesser extent, on friends.

That obligation is now, as it always has been, generally readily accepted, fulfilled compassionately and largely without complaint, sometimes at considerable personal and familial sacrifice. Often no outside help is received from statutory or charitable agencies.
Even if statutory or institutional help is received, it is never a wholly adequate substitute for loving kindness freely given, just a complement or respite. In 1986, Sir Roy Griffiths noted in his proposals for community care, Publicly provided services constitute only a small part of the total care provided to people in need. Families, friends and neighbours and other local people provide the majority of care in response to needs which they are uniquely well placed to identify and respond to. This will continue to be the primary means by which people are enabled to live normal lives in community settings.  

Informal and formal mutual aid

In an earlier era, what Griffiths is describing would have been called mutual aid. Michael Young and I coined a distinction between informal and formal mutual aid in a book we wrote together in 1997. Our idea was that informal mutual aid had always been there, but public policy in housing, child protection or the care of old people could inadvertently, but nonetheless harmfully, undermine the fretwork of neighbourly, friendly and family ties that are the wires down which mutual aid passes back and forth. The job of institutional service providers, such as social services departments, housing associations or large charities was, by contrast, formal mutual aid. Their job was to use institutional and organisational structures to assist – proactively and intensively – particularly needy people if the informal structures were not strong enough. Seeing organisational support as formal mutual aid emphasises Sir Roy Griffiths’ point: public policy and the deployment of public resources should not inadvertently undermine informal mutual aid, which will always remain the bedrock of society. On the contrary the role and goal of local authorities, housing associations, probation officers, staff in large charities and so on should be to facilitate and support the growth of informal mutual aid given in families and communities everywhere.

The dynamics of informal mutual aid merit a little further exposition to show that the other social ethics, the eternal and universal social ethics I have started to describe in this chapter are expectations, not hope; facts, not fiction. The first and most humble form of mutual aid is more or less simultaneous reciprocal assistance between two people. To take a simple example: I help you fill in a complicated form this morning; you give me a lift to the doctors this afternoon. There may be a small or large time lag between the giving and returning of help. I look after you when you are ill. You do likewise when I am similarly afflicted at some later date. The most fundamental extended time lag is between parents and children. Affection is said to descend more easily than it ascends, but most parents will give freely to their children and will expect and receive (perhaps without shouting about it) some return in a different currency when they are old and in need of help themselves. The parent who says they do not want to be a burden to their children does not generally mean that they want their children to go so far as to give no

14. Griffiths, R., Community Care: Agenda for action, a report to the Secretary of State for Social Services, HMSO. 1986
help at all. This is mutual aid given at different points in the life cycle. Mutual aid in the prime of life is a repayment of the debts incurred in childhood and a down payment on the care that might be needed in old age. Friends and neighbours might help one another too with no immediate return but with a strong implicit presumption of help to be returned at an unspecified moment of future need.

The knowledge that help might be needed and readily available from family and friends nearby is often sufficient to persuade people they should continue to live in a particular neighbourhood. That promise of mutual aid nearby, now or in the future, may be enough to keep people living in places with other shortcomings and depredations. These are outweighed by the proximity of mutual aid.

The Aylesbury housing estate in south London is one of the largest in Europe. More than 10,000 people live in more than 3,000 homes. In terms of population the estate is the size of a small market town. It has many problems. There are many unemployed people, single parents and old people living on their own. The buildings are ugly and their design makes them an easy target for vandalism. The wide-open spaces between large systems-built concrete blocks of flats, reminiscent of some of the worst excesses of Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, feel unsafe and unwelcoming. These physical features are so overwhelmingly negative that the estate had become almost a byword for the disasters of post-war housing policy and a symbol of what needed to be done. So much so that, soon after his first election victory in 1997, the new prime minister Tony Blair visited the estate to announce his government’s mission to eradicate social exclusion in the UK. The symbolism was straightforward to everyone. This place needed to be radically altered. Help – and hope – was on the way courtesy of the new government.

My colleagues and I were contracted by the local authority to find out what the residents thought about the place and what they thought should be done about it. We found out something rather different to the notorious and negative public perceptions. Most residents, it turned out, knew and liked their neighbours, had friends living nearby and liked being in easy reach of family members. They liked the neighbourhood and its proximity to local facilities, including the public transport network and East Street market. They also generally liked their flats, which are light and spacious by contemporary standards. However, they had many complaints about the failure of the local authority to look after and develop the extensive public open spaces on the estate and to keep the buildings up to scratch. They were opposed to wholesale demolition and would have preferred not to move at all if there was a way of improving their homes and the environment without them having to move out. Indeed, many had tales of friends and family who had moved out of council flats on other estates having received a promise of a swift return, only to find that the redevelopment could take a decade,
perhaps longer. At the end of years of disruption they were offered a modern, but smaller and more expensive flat, entirely surrounded by strangers. Many were newcomers to the estate because other people had decided not to move back, having grown attached to their new neighbourhoods in the long intervening years.

At the same time as we were conducting this study, architects made proposals for the demolition of more than 70 per cent of the estate and set a 20-year schedule for its rebuilding. Those proposals were put to the tenants in a ballot and they were comprehensively defeated; hardly surprising considering the findings of our survey about residents’ affection for other local people and, to a lesser extent, for the place. At the time of writing, more than eight years after the initial announcement of redevelopment, no plans have been agreed, though large-scale demolition is still a possibility. I tell this tale to demonstrate the value that people place on mutual aid, over and above the need to rectify more visible but less important shortcomings.

To take another example, this time from the world of international development: a movement has developed in recent years which brings poor people together from different parts of the world to share their experiences, shore up their joint strength and build mutual aid. Pavement dwellers in Mumbai, for example, get together with people who live in shacks on the edge of South African townships and they all go on to Manila to meet people who live by collecting rags from a rubbish tip and selling them. Far from being miserable encounters, despite the indisputable misery of many participants’ lives, these gatherings are often joyful and revelatory occasions. Those present celebrate their own survival and resilience, even their optimism for the future. They share tactics and strategy and agree to try to stay in touch. A British NGO, Homeless International, invited some of these really poor people to come and spend a short period of time living with communities on housing estates in the UK. They were fascinating encounters. With no exceptions, the poor people from the developing world were anxious to return as soon as possible to their ordinary lives.

Their reason for such a visceral dislike of the relatively more prosperous lives of poor people in Britain could be summed up in just one word: isolation. To people living on crowded and busy streets, favelas and railways backlands, the atmosphere in a British council flat, though definitely materially more comfortable, was eerily silent; people moved round like shadows, their faces devoid of expression or emotion. Children, if there were any about at all, were unsupervised, unruly and grossly impolite. The hours seemed long; the days never-ending, filled with an endless diet of junk food and daytime TV watched in mindless silence. To many of the visitors the most striking feature of the British communities they stayed in was the complete absence of weddings. This was not a moral judgment about single parenthood, or about
partners living together without being married. The absence of shared celebration just seemed to them profoundly depressing. Weddings are rites of passages for the protagonists, but they are also highly significant, perhaps the most significant of social and community rituals for everyone in the family, for friends and even for people living in the wider neighbourhood who scarcely know the bride and groom. In India, where I come from, even the poorest Dalit, formerly known as untouchables, will, if you get to know them, tell you they are saving up for their children’s wedding.

Both these examples illustrate the overwhelming importance of mutual aid and the bonds and ties in families and communities, which are the communication channels for mutual aid. The least humble meaning of mutual aid is when it becomes multilateral. A helps B; B helps C; C helps A and so on, in ever widening circles which might eventually spread themselves into national or international movements which politicians and other powerful people find extremely difficult to ignore indefinitely.

Again an illustration will convey the importance of mutual aid and the bonds and ties in neighbourhoods and communities that are the streams, rivers and tributaries, down which mutual aid flows and, at the turn of the tide of need, flow back. In an earlier chapter I noted the impact of prevailing religious beliefs on public attitudes to vulnerable people. The dominance of religions over social attitudes is much less strong in modern societies than say in medieval times, at least in the UK.¹⁶ I also noted the more inglorious aspects of the history of religious charity some of which, from today’s viewpoint, seems more oppressive than charitable.

Notwithstanding all these negative aspects of religion, faith communities, again as previously noted, also have many socially benign and beneficial effects, despite widespread secularism and a fairly common belief that it’s all over for organised religion as far as most people are concerned. Someone who attends a suburban Church of England parish church in any British city on a Sunday morning for the first time may be forgiven for a slight feeling of depression. The church may be well scrubbed and tidy but only a few people are present, mostly elderly, grabbing desperately on to the newcomer, and listening to a sometimes eccentric and out of touch clergyman. But if you visit that same Church’s hall or community centre on a weekday, clubs and nurseries for children under fives will be noisily taking place; mother’s groups will be getting together. Activities for old people, food co-ops, day centres and soup kitchens for the homeless, training classes and all manner of other community activities may all be going on, the participants of each getting to know those involved in the others. Churches that are attended only by tens of people on Sundays attract thousands of people every week

¹⁶ In the USA and some middle eastern countries, the opposite might be true. In the USA the Christian right looks for a more religious and moral modernity. For some people in some parts of Muslim communities, modernity itself is distasteful in the extreme.
to their community facilities and activities. That same eccentric and out of touch clergymen
turns out to know virtually everyone living in his parish, if not directly, then through others.
Since the average Anglican parish covers an area with between 5,000 and 9,000 residents,
the contacts and connections of the thousands of regular users of the community centre will
extend to virtually everybody in the neighbourhood, separated by rather less than the six
degrees of urban folklore. No social worker, youth or community worker, local authority official,
head teacher, police officer or probation officer can claim as many local contacts as the vicar.
These contacts will be people who have religious beliefs as well as those who don’t. The most
vulnerable people in the neighbourhood will be the one that the vicar knows best and sees
more frequently than any other professional does, not least because the vicar is probably the
last senior local figure still actually living in the community in which he or she works. Anyone
who has ever lived in an urban vicarage or a rectory as I have, whether they are a member of
the clergy or not, will have found themselves, at an unlikely hour of the day, making a cheese
sandwich for one of an ill-assorted selection of itinerants and recalcitrants. All those paid to
help and care have retreated to the semis in the suburbs, gone home to the quiet streets in
nice places for nice people.17

The just claims of adult dependency

Multilateral mutual aid of this kind is the bridge from the informal to formal. Beyond local
religious groups and societies, there are national charities and voluntary organisations and
millions of communities of interest now firmly established on the Internet. Democracy of course
makes state provision a kind of formal mutual aid. No government which sought to win a
mandate to do nothing for vulnerable people would last long, cut down in a blizzard of publicity
about broken homes, broken hearts and broken reputations, the last principally their own. The
fate of vulnerable people provokes strong, contradictory and complex emotional reactions as I
have already described, easily amplified to a deafening volume by media hyperbole. Politicians
ignore such strong feelings, so widely felt, at their peril.

The contention of this book is that the formal mutual aid institutions of large charities and
voluntary organisations and the state are in rather greater need of repair than the informal
networks and fretwork of friends, families and neighbourhoods, even though the latter are
frequently ignored and neglected. In part the need for repair derives from the misbegotten
denial and dismissal of the connections and continuities I have sought to draw attention to in
this chapter. Things need to be brought back into balance. This is Richard Sennett’s conclusion
on the social qualities that have been ‘tarnished’ which now need to be polished and restored
for a better balance in society.

17. That phrase was coined by Paul Barker to summarise why, despite their uncool reputation, the popularity of
the suburbs continues to grow.
Treating people with respect cannot occur simply by commanding it should happen. Mutual recognition has to be negotiated; this negotiation engages the complexities of personal character as much as social structure. Social solutions seem more apparent in considering the inequalities which tarnish the three modern codes of respect: make something of yourself, take care of yourself, help others. The tarnish could be removed somewhat, by honouring different practical achievements rather than privileging potential talent; by admitting the just claims of adult dependency; by permitting people to participate more actively in the conditions of their own care.18

In the chapters to come I shall have a good deal to say both about Sennett’s splendidly concise definition of the ‘three modern codes of respect’ and the manner in which professional helpers could remove the tarnish and restore the balance, just as he suggests. ‘Admitting the just claims of adult dependency’ is precisely the subject that this book seeks to address. Beyond that, once the just claims are admitted, what then is to be done?

Whichever formulation is used, either Sennett’s about respect, Michael Young’s and mine about mutual aid, or another analysis, the conclusions would not be so different. Vulnerable people should not be separated from the mutual aid of family, friends and community. On the contrary, they more than others need the benefits of informal mutual aid given by those close to them emotionally and geographically. The formal mutual aid of paid help will never entirely be a substitute for informal mutual aid. Lasting solutions to the problems of vulnerable people depend on sustaining these networks and building new ones if the old ones are attenuated or have died. The connections and continuities need to be strengthened; the separations and breaks need to be diminished and repaired, but not ignored, because people are different. Potential and talent are universal but not equally or evenly distributed. To build the case for assisting vulnerable people on the presumption of an entitlement to either of equality of opportunity or equality of outcome may be ideologically appealing, but it is profoundly misguided. Those who work hard and have a lot of talent sometimes tend to take the harsh and mistaken view that those with less talent fall short only on effort. I take a different view. In the next few chapters I will seek to come to a view about what would be a good life in a virtuous society that could equally be applied to, and aspired to, by everyone, regardless of ability or history. That would then become the goal in supporting vulnerable people. Policy and resources would move away from describing difference and diagnosing difficulties, hoping, probably in vain, that the cure, social or medical, is around the next corner. Once the goal of good and virtuous lives in good and virtuous societies comes more clearly into focus, the methods by which it might be achieved, may also become more discernible. Put simply, some need more help than others. Why should we or they be ashamed of or surprised by that?

I have divided my description of the good and virtuous life into several parts. The logic of the chapters that follow is to start from the most personal and widen out in concentric circles of people and activities beyond that, a kind of personal topography. So the next chapter looks at identity: the way the individual sees themselves. Just beyond personal identity is the desire for loving and lasting one-to-one relationships. Outside these most intimate relationships is the wider network of family and friends. A home to live in and work to do is then the outer circle at, as it were, the most remote emotional point of the circle from the individual themselves. This topography is represented in figure 1.

Figure 1: The good and virtuous life
4. The kingdom of individuals: aspects of positive identity

Under the influence of flux and fear is an underground movement
Under the crust of bureaucracy, quiet behind the posters
Unconsciously but palpably there – the kingdom of individuals

‘Who do you think you are?’ used to be a rhetorical question designed to remind, for example, an uppity youngster of their lowly place. Now the question has a different meaning and requires a different answer. This rhetorical question was designed to remind people of the need for deference, but deference has gone out of fashion. Although the date and time of death were not exactly recorded, some time after the second world war the era of deference gave way to an age of equality. The age of equality, or at least the aspiration to equality that was the social and intellectual foundation stone for the post-war welfare state, seems in turn to have receded since the 1980s. Equality came to be associated with mundane and lowering homogeneity and class-based, collective conflicts which could not encompass the full range of contemporary experience and emotion, particularly for those who were not white, working class, male workers in now extinct manufacturing industries. Life in the Soviet-controlled countries of Eastern Europe seemed to be a warning that life could be drab, boring and unappealing, even if superficially equal. Diversity, and its close conceptual cousin, identity, therefore have become the watchwords. Because people are different, treating people equally cannot mean treating people the same. On the contrary, in order to treat people fairly and, in that sense, equally, or, more importantly, equitably, individual differences must be recognised and responded to. The age of identity has arrived and arrived in fast forward. The acceleration came from the vastly expanded possibilities of consumption of material goods. Acquiring the symbols and signs of a specific identity was simply a matter of going shopping, income (or credit) permitting. Emotional services and goods could be purchased in the form of a vast range of therapies and activities with apparently life-changing properties, which hardened cynics simply condemned as the modern equivalent of snake oil or old-time religion. If you want to abandon the identity you have purchased, you simply put the recently acquired accoutrements into a black plastic bag and deposit them at a charity shop. A few visits to a gym or a spa, where a bewildering range of ‘treatments’ are available, will do the rest.
Your identity will be re-born, like a new season.

Identity as a consumer good allows for (almost encourages) frequent change. Identifying over the whole of the life cycle with the groups you were born into has also lost its appeal; it is too constraining. Universal education, professional preferment and increased income have made social mobility possible. People can change their class identity and much else.

20. The political elite of those now defunct states were of course completely exempt from the strictures of this equality, as we now know
besides. Nevertheless, people, of course, do want to retain links with their cultural inheritance. They see parts of that inheritance as a golden thread in their sense of who they are which won’t change what ever happens. Yet they also want to see themselves in a more personal, individual way; a way they have chosen for themselves. Not all girls will want to be wives and mothers, for example. Some might want to be free-spirited Bohemians. Other women are increasingly finding, as many men do, that the strongest expression of their identity is their profession. All these choices will be signified in the form of acquired goods and probably also acquired attitudes.

The third element of identity alongside inheritance and personal choice is deciding your peer groups: deciding with whom you identify. That group identity aligns and allies you with a peer group who have made a similar choice. That peer group’s choices and behaviour will influence yours, just as yours will influence theirs. In his classic study, *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman delineated the distinctions between these three disparate aspects of identity. He labelled them ‘tradition-directed’, ‘inner-directed’ and ‘other-directed’, reflecting my descriptions of inherited identities, chosen identities and peer group identities. Everyone has all three aspects in their identity, but to different degrees and in a unique, personal distribution and combination.

Notwithstanding how individuals see themselves, the general historical trend in consumer societies moving into post-industrial phases is the increase of inner and other direction at the expense of tradition direction. The influence of self and peers are increased, emphasised and perhaps even placed above the influences of the past and of elders. Elders are no longer always thought to be betters. The rise in the importance of these ideas about identity have developed across a wide intellectual waterfront in the twentieth century, not just in sociology, but also, for example, in literature and psychoanalysis, a flavour of which I hope to give later in this chapter. Nowhere is the explicit significance of chosen identities more evident than in the modern movement in the arts. The grip of the dead hand of other people’s traditions and expectations, particularly those of parents as representatives of those traditions, is to be prised off in the view of many twentieth century writers, as exemplified below.

**Inherited identities**

Inherited identities, particularly in relation to ethnicity, are the source of much pride as well as some social angst. Parts of all of us, signified by appearance, behaviour or belief, point to difference, usually difference from the mainstream. Aspects of inherited identity might include ethnic or cultural origin, religion, mother tongue, social class or regional identities. Many proud Yorkshiremen would say that they were a Yorkshireman first and foremost. Many Catholics would say they were Catholics first and foremost. These differences were not chosen and other people’s reactions to them cannot be wholly controlled. Other people will attach their

---

own assumptions and stereotypes to aspects of appearance, which seem to signify difference. According to one of Jean Paul Sartre’s characters in *Huis Clos* (‘No Exit’, 1944), ‘Hell is other people’. The predicate of the play is that the characters are condemned forever to be with the same people. Their understanding of each other does not improve at all as a result of infinite access and close exposure. Categorising by stereotype is an incorrigible human habit, which has some protective social and psychological functions: hence its persistence.

Even inherited identities are subject to re-definition. Stephen Dedalus, in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), suffers great indignities and emotional pain in seeking to make his peace with Catholic Ireland. In the end making peace with the accepted tradition is not possible for him. The boy, now nearly a man who will become an artist, must become himself and change not just himself, but also the place of his inherited Irish identity in his own mind.

*Mother is putting my new second hand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.*

Inherited identities may cause great turbulence but are not easily avoided.

### Chosen identities

Almost everyone has aspects of their past or present life which, from their personal perspective, gives their life meaning and, more than that, makes them who they are – and even more than that, makes them feel good about who they are. Some of these sources of pride may be the inherited identities already discussed above. Others will be personally chosen, expressions of interests, such as a profession, supporting a football club or a musical taste. The chosen aspects of identity reflect personal values or interests and feeling a sense of shared belief and purpose with the group of other people who share those values. Though they may have been chosen, they are not regarded as necessarily less important than those things inherited. Many a Leeds United fan would say being a Yorkshireman is a lot less important to him or her than being a Leeds United fan. A choice can be made between two possible group identities.

Never more popular than now, football is sometimes said to be a religion for some. Although it may seem tempting to dismiss as a worthless cliché the notion that ‘football is a religion’ there are similarities. The most evident is the comparable time commitment that followers put in. Indeed, some would say that ardent football supporters spend more time and energy reading and talking about their sport and travelling to watch games than even the most committed church-goer. If economics were a foolproof measure then football supporters are definitely the more committed: season tickets for Premiership clubs cost several thousand
pounds. There are also deeper similarities. Football chants can sound like, and sometimes are, hymns. The game is full of rituals like this. What too of the ‘faith’ that football supporters express in their team’s fortunes for the coming season? Football to many young men, is more than a sport: it is almost a framework for their lives. Much like the church’s cycles of readings, the cyclical nature of season following season creates and enhances the recurring expectation and interest that gives people hope and purpose. Like the church’s hierarchy, the deep patriarchy in the game provides role models for young men to aspire to. Sports stadiums rise out of the landscape like shiny new cathedrals, complete with arches and towers.

Nonetheless the comparison should not be overstated. Football may be identity but unlike religion, morality is not at its core. Each supporter, despite their common allegiance, morally speaking, has a very different fundamental take on life. The violent and racist fringes of all clubs (however ‘family-orientated’) are testament to that. Football message boards on the Internet, the purest site of debate for fans of the same club, are rife with disagreement about everything imaginable. It is simply too facile to say that ‘football is the new religion’. Each provides an important structure and rhythm, but only one can direct our actions.

Feelings can run high about chosen identities. In the formative years of adolescence these chosen identities are given greater prominence over tradition or inheritance. Mrs Ramsey, the mater familia in Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, seeks subtly but absolutely to control the lives of those around her, not just her family but their friends too, thereby diminishing their personal choices and reducing the space available to make these choices. Most of all she is intrigued by who will marry whom and, of course, has implicit faith in her own judgment when seeking to influence their decision. Her husband, Mr Ramsey, the intellectual and scholar, is more or less continuously gripped by the fear that his will never be one of the great minds; that he will only ever understand the fruits of the classical mind from A to Q, never from A to Z. Their children feel the weight of the suspicion that their parents think them, in one way or another, inadequate; inferior. By the time Cam and James, the two youngest children, finally make the trip to the lighthouse of the title, with its great symbolism as a destination of safety, permanence and omnipotence, they have grown into adolescents; their mother is dead. On the journey they experience a turmoil of love and anger, mostly because it was time, as far as James is concerned, to become his own man and to break free of his father’s ‘despotism’ as well as committing himself to resisting all such ‘tyranny’, not just as it affects himself. The affliction is general; the need for resistance is universal.

---

22. Many football chants have the same tunes as hymns, because traditionally hymns were sung before the start of all football matches in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The hymn ‘Abide With Me’ is still sung before the FA Cup Final every year.

23. I am indebted to my colleague Francis Bacon for this comparison of football and religion. His knowledge about both exceeds mine.
That he would kill, that he would strike to the heart. Whatever he did – (and he might do anything, he felt, looking at the Lighthouse and the distant shore) – whether he was in a business, in a bank, a barrister, a man at the head of some enterprise, that he would fight, that he would track down and stamp out – tyranny, despotism he called it – making people do what they did not want to do, cutting off their right to speak.  

Group or social identities

Like James Ramsey, everyone feels a strong commitment to the identity they chose and then made for themselves. But some aspects of individuality and difference will be suppressed in accepting a group identity. In David Riesman’s formulation ‘inner-direction’ may be compromised by ‘other direction’. The group identity and the associated peer pressure, in all its particulars, may overwhelm individuality and become paramount, whether or not they are accurately applied to this person or that. Millwall and Chelsea were thought for a long time to be football teams with many hooligans among their supporters, but surely some were innocent and peace loving. The innocent and peace loving may have found themselves branded nonetheless as violent hooligans. In a particular situation someone may be happy to be seen as having a particular identity, say as an aficionado of blood sports, but that person may also be a vegetarian. Many would discern a conflict of values between these two interests, but that depends entirely on the individual’s reasons for their commitment to blood sports and to vegetarianism. In taking on the group identity they are, willy-nilly, becoming associated with qualities that they may not have and may not want.

Joining groups comes with consequences. It’s best to know what those consequences might be before joining up, because they affect the ‘life we want to make’. Describing the process by which social encounters reinforce an identity and amplify the resolve to keep this identity and abandon that one, the philosopher Kwame

Anthony Appiah writes,

We respond to others with gratitude and anger, praise and blame, and so forth – and we wish to hold on to and make sense of these attitudes. It’s in this realm that we conceive our goals and aims, our decisions large and small, the life we want to make.

---

24. Woolf, V., To the Lighthouse, Hogarth Press. 1927

Multiple adult identities: ‘A crowd of ones’

Adolescence is no longer a one off, irreversible, immutable transition to a fixed adult identity as James Ramsey imagined it would be. Adult identities are impermanent and plural, depending on the situation or the encounter. The benefits for most people are innumerable. You are not forced to live a life circumscribed by other people’s choices, small ones as well as big. To try to demonstrate the plural aspects of adult identity I want to switch from discussing novels to reflecting on paintings. The painter, Lucian Freud, has taken intimacy with his subjects to new levels. His portrait of Brigadier Andrew Parker Bowles features the subject in his uniform as head of the Household Cavalry. The uniform is unbuttoned and informal. Military uniforms are generally very defining but it is not only the uniform that gives the Brigadier his sense of identity. It is who he appears to be within the uniform, which for Freud the portrait painter is connected, not to his professional garb but to his physical shape, as he observes,

*I think most people have a size and shape in which they feel well, not just physically but more confident. Balzac said, “He had the firm thighs of a well-to-do man.”*  

Paradoxically, in one sense the painting is not of an individual at all. As it happens the painting is a genre painting. Freud based the Brigadier’s pose on a portrait by James Tissot in the National Portrait Gallery of Captain Frederick Barnaby. Nevertheless, though based on a portrait of an archetype in art history as well as depicting that strongest of group identities, the military regiment, with all its attached symbols of power, hierarchy and tradition, the painting is still according to the art critic and curator William Feaver ‘a triumph of individuality over genre’. Brigadier Parker Bowles is, with no doubt, the subject and the viewer seems to find out something about him when they look at the painting, as well as finding out something about the factors that made him who he is. That of course is testament to Freud’s sublime and transcendent skills as a portrait painter but it relates also to his view of people, which he explains,

*It’s what inside their head that is so important to me. I want to actually get something from that because otherwise it would be awful … A crowd is only a lot of ones.*

Understanding who people are requires insight into their oneness as well some knowledge of the crowds they might be found in. Everyone in some ways blends in with the crowd and, in other ways, sticks out from it. Hence the feeling that an adult’s identity is plural and situational: we all have identities not identity. So how are these multiple identities to be put together into a unified and coherent whole? How are the separate strands of experience, instinct, choice, personal and social heritage, group membership and the ephemeral situation converted from being a pile of colourful but chaotic beads and a piece of string into a stylish necklace? Nietzsche, an unlikely source of fashion tips, has something to say about style in relation to identity.

---

26. Quoted from Feaver, W., *Freud at the Correr*, Electa and Musei Civici Veneziani, 2005
27. Ibid
28. Ibid
To ‘give style’ to one’s character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed – both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime.\footnote{Nietzsche, F., The Gay Science. 1882}

Figure 2 shows how different aspects of identity influence each other and come together in a collection of multiple identities.

\textbf{Figure 2: Components of positive identity}
The main factors affecting identity: inheritance, choice and group influences are assembled, displaced and re-assembled through the life cycle, mostly benignly, but sometimes with troubling consequences. Each upheaval may give rise to a new but equal certainty. People often express satisfaction with their recent choices of job, partners or homes with the zeal of a convert. In the process they reject and trash all that went before as a misguided delusion, probably imposed on them by a tyrannical and unforgiving elder of the sort that so enraged James Ramsey. Sometimes new choices quickly come to seem less certain and are swiftly abandoned or replaced. As change supersedes change the lifestyle becomes itinerant: the choices evanescent. To the outsider things seem to have descended into chaos. Such is the condition of many vulnerable people living temporarily in supported accommodation. Reinforcing more solid aspects of identity from the swirl of uncertainty is therefore an important priority, perhaps one of the most important.
5. Toys of desperation: negative identities

To live a fulfilled life a strong sense of self is essential according to psychologists. Those aspects of identity discussed in the last chapter are those which are or have been positive and, even if now diminished, could be positive again. This chapter deals with aspects of identity that are negative: how they arise; how their effect may be ameliorated and how, in time, they may be eradicated. Since the thrust of the last chapter was the ways in which identities have come to be seen as more important at the same time as they have come to be seen as more changeable, the question then is can unwanted negative aspects of identity be displaced into the more benign sphere of memory? Can they become something you had but now you have given up? 

Negative identities

Some identities are negative in the absolute sense that people simply want to escape from them once and for all. The negative identity may derive from a problem, such as the misuse of drugs. Giving up the problem is also the abandonment of the negative identity: a wholly beneficial and welcome consequence. Kicking the drugs habit is also absolution from the prejudices and stereotypes, all negative, that derive from the label ‘drug addict’. Other problems may also give rise to negative labels. Misuse of alcohol, mental health, homelessness – may lead others to apply an alternative negative identity, as a ‘rough sleeper’, a ‘beggar’ or as an ‘alcoholic’. And troubles come not in single spies, but in battalions. More than one pejorative label may be acquired. Those labels may, over time, come to affect not just how others see you, but how you see yourself.

In thrall to the past: internalised negative identities

A surfeit of choice can stir up troubling uncertainties. These uncertainties can become confusion and overwhelm the more definite aspects of identity leaving the person feeling agitated and inadequate never, in any circumstances or in any company, feeling entirely sure, comfortable or satisfied. A weak and unresolved sense of self of this kind, with all its attendant unjustified hesitancies and, contrary-wise, impulsive rushes of thought and action, is a dimension of the personalities of many vulnerable people. Psychologists have argued that addiction to drugs and other forms of vulnerability are connected and, to some degree, a consequence of failed early attachment in significant emotional relationships, particularly relationships with parents. A weakened sense of identity can be expressed as an inability to reconstruct individual and positive identity in adult life diminishing negative

---

30. It was the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) who first asked the question are memories something you have or something you have lost?
and confusing parental and familial influences from the past. The psychologist Oliver James notes these connections between a weakened sense of identity and the behaviour that might make one vulnerable.


For a weak-selfed person desperately in need of reliable and existing sources of satisfaction [mind-blurring drugs and alcohol] seem a godsend. Those who least should be taking drugs which reduce realism and encourage childish fantasizing are those most attracted to it.31

The sociologist Anthony Giddens in his Reith lectures in 1999 made an explicit comparison between the traditions of inherited identity and addiction and the way in which anxiety can contribute to addiction. He states,

Like tradition, addiction is about the influence of the past on the present; and as in the case of tradition, repetition has a key role. The past in question is individual rather than collective, and the repetition is driven by anxiety. I would see addiction as frozen autonomy. Every context of de-traditionalisation offers the possibility of greater freedom of action than existed before. We are talking about human emancipation from the constraints of the past. Addiction comes into play when choice, which should be driven by autonomy is subverted by anxiety. In tradition, the past structures the present through shared collective beliefs and sentiment. The addict is also in thrall to the past – but because he or she cannot break away from what were originally freely chosen lifestyle habits.

Early childhood experiences may be part of the explanation for self-destructive behaviour in adult life, such as taking drugs or drinking too much. The writer and former psychoanalyst Alice Miller, in her influential book, The Drama of Being a Child (1987), noted that the conventional way of seeing childhood, that the parents, particularly the mother, are looking after the child isn’t always the case. Conversely in many cases, the child is obliged to fulfil the parent’s needs by the emotional and psychological tactics and wiles of the more worldly and effective parent. The parent doing the main caring is the centre of attention. The child is dependent and generally adaptive. They can be bent to the will of the parent and if they become unco-operative they can be ‘abandoned’ into someone else’s care or left in solitude. Most small children quickly learn to adapt to those requirements for fear of these disturbing consequences and punishments, though by adapting to meet their parents’ need they may be psychologically damaged by repressing their own needs and instincts.

31. See James, O., They F*** You Up, Bloomsbury. 2003
Accommodation to parental needs often (but not always) leads to the ‘as if’ personality. This person develops in such a way that he reveals only what is expected of him and fuses so completely with what he reveals that one could scarcely guess how much more there is to him behind this false self. He cannot develop and differentiate his true self, because he is unable to live it. Understandably this person will complain of a sense of emptiness, futility or homelessness, for the emptiness is real.32

Their fears of desertion may become anxieties carried into adult life of the sort that James and Giddens noted. Or the repressed needs can be ‘perverted’. These perverted needs are, according to Alice Miller, ‘fulfilled’ through an ‘exhausting struggle with the help of symbols such as ‘cults, sexual perversions, groups of all kinds, alcohol or drugs.’ More extreme parental abuse leads to more extreme ‘repression’ by the child and creates a greater risk of self-destructive behaviour in adulthood.

The normal reactions to such injuries should be anger and pain; since children in this hurtful kind of environment, however, are forbidden to express their anger and since it would be unbearable to experience their pain all alone, they are compelled to suppress their feelings, repress all memory of the trauma, and idealise those guilty of the abuse. Later they will have no memory of what was done to them. Dissociated from the original cause, their feelings of anger, helplessness, despair, longing, anxiety and pain will find expression in destructive acts against others (criminal behaviour, mass murder) or against themselves (drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, psychic disorders, suicide).33

A great weight of research evidence confirms that neglect and abuse in early years is often a feature of the later life of people who become offenders, homeless people and people who are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Nevertheless many people, perhaps particularly parents, would dispute Miller’s analysis that the principal trigger to repression and later self-destructive behaviour is seeking to meet the needs of your parents or, in more extreme cases, the consequence of their abuse. But I am sure I am not the only person who has spent time with vulnerable people talking about their childhoods and been told things like, ‘My mother couldn’t look after me, I had to look after her.’ So for some people at least, this kind of inverted relationship with their parents is a part of their pain and must contribute to the feeling that, at the least, they missed out on something in childhood. Worse still, those early experiences have left an emotional scar, the effects of which include an inability to lead an independent, content life without self-destructive behaviour or difficulties in making and keeping relationships with partners, friends and family members. These ‘attachment’ difficulties are discussed in chapter 7 on the importance of loving and lasting one-to-one relationships.

32. Miller, A., The Drama of Being a Child, Virago. 1987
33. ibid
Deviancy prevails

In his novel *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth puts, as it were, the opposite point of view to Alice Miller’s. He describes the life of a hard-working, well-meaning parent, Swede Levov, the son of an immigrant who has done well with his own business making gloves. He feels he’s done the best job he could for himself, his wife and his daughter Meredith. As an adolescent she leaves home, falling in with people with itinerant and eccentric lifestyles and eventually becoming a bomber of the seemingly innocent suburbs. She had been a child with a bad stutter and ‘a stubborn streak’ according to her teachers but that was no clue to her father of what was to become of her and what that would do to him.

He could not prevent anything. He never could, though only now did he look prepared to believe that manufacturing a superb ladies’ dress glove in quarter sizes did not guarantee the making of a life that would fit to perfection everyone he loved. Far from it. You think you can protect a family and you cannot protect even yourself. There seemed to be nothing left of the man who could not be diverted from his task, who neglected no one in his crusade against disorder, against the abiding problem of human error and insufficiency – nothing to be seen, in the place where he stood, of that eager, unbending stalk of a man who, just thirty minutes earlier, would jut his head forward to engage even his allies. The combatant had borne all the disappointment he could. Nothing blunt remained within him for bludgeoning deviancy to death. What should be did not exist. Deviancy prevailed. You can’t stop it. Improbably, what was not supposed to happen had happened and what was supposed to happen had not happened. The old system that made order doesn’t work anymore. All that was left was his fear and astonishment, but now concealed by nothing.

Once deviancy has prevailed people start to see themselves as an expression of their troubled histories: their problems become their identity. Having acquired that identity, they start to identify with others similarly labelled and those who have similarly learnt, perhaps not consciously, to label themselves. At that point the group identity is frequently reinforced by others and becomes progressively harder to break. By the same process and at the same time positive aspects of inherited or chosen positive identity recede, may even be almost forgotten if ignored by everyone else for long enough. Only the negative identities are left, by then thoroughly cooked into a full-scale crisis of confidence and selfesteem, initially decayed and then perished altogether.

---

34. We know from many American movies, such as *American Beauty*, that the suburbs are not as innocent as they seem.

Positive and negative identities in conflict

These contradictory and self-cancelling dynamics can be seen in the experiences of people who have served in the armed forces, of which they are almost without exception proud, and who have subsequently slept rough, begged or become homeless; of which they are, by contrast, generally ashamed. A past in the forces sets people apart, in their own view, from other homeless people. Their greater survival skills, ‘code of honour’ and sense of pride mean they stick together and are not reduced in their appearance or behaviour to ‘ruffians and bums’. On the other hand, the pride that is in part derived from their forces background may make them minimise or deny their problems and so they may be less likely to seek help. The absence of timely help may in some cases have exacerbated underlying mental health problems. The proud reluctance to express their need for loving kindness may also have worsened their sense of loneliness and isolation from family and friends.

The quote below is from a man aged 61 who had spent many years in the army and many subsequent years sleeping rough ‘off and on’. He conveys, on the one hand, his sense of pride in his military past and on the other hand a sense of shame about being homeless. To some extent he can square the circle between these diametrically opposed notions by associating only with ex-service people among homeless people.

You can always tell an ex-squaddie, always clean and upright. There’s no need to look like some of these types you see walking around. It tends to happen that the ex-squaddies stick together. Ex-squaddies tend to find each other. We are not alcoholics although we might drink a bit. There’s no need to starve in London.  

36

Identities turned from negative to positive: from denial to defiance Some identities may make someone the object of other people’s prejudices and hostility, as already noted. In those circumstances, it is the discrimination and unfairness that a person might wish to escape, not the identity that gave rise to it. St Peter was accused three times of being a follower of Christ and three times denied it before the cock crew, as had been prophesied. He, we are led to believe, feared the consequences of admitting to being a disciple but he did not abandon his faith because of the vilification Jesus was then receiving.

A more recent example would be slaves of African origin in the USA before abolition. They certainly saw themselves as different from white people, particularly the white slave owners. They did not want to stop being black (a description which came eventually to signify identity as well as pride, not just colour), but they certainly wanted an end to slavery and its successors, Jim Crow laws, segregation in schools, on public transport and the rest. W.E.B. DuBois points to the juxtaposition of hard times at other people’s hands and hope for the future in your own hands. Hard times and hope are an anvil on which a proud and sometimes

36. Quoted from Lemos, G., and Dukacz, S., Military History: the experiences of people who become homeless after military service, Lemos&Crane. 2005
defiant identity can be forged. *The Soul of Black Folks* was published in 1903. In the book he discusses the spirituals sung by black people in the American south, the ‘Sorrow Songs’. Turning negative identities positive is here an expression of optimism; faith rather than fact.

*Through all the sorrows of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?*

Most of the vulnerable people in the groups being discussed here are also seeking to shake off unwanted stigma. People with mental health problems don’t want to be described as mad. Disabled people do not wish to be labelled cripples. On the contrary, the ‘social model’ of disability is, as noted, coming to be more widely accepted as an alternative to the ‘deficit’ or ‘medical’ model. In the previous chapter I noted the obligation on the professional supporting vulnerable people to assist them in shaping and reshaping a positive identity for themselves, drawing on the good things of their pasts, on the interests and identities they would choose for themselves and an understanding of the groups to which they would seek to belong. A similar obligation falls on the same professionals to assist people to see ways of shaking off negative identities.

If the negative identity is the result of a particular aspect of behaviour, such as taking drugs or drinking too much, then the first and most obvious question is how to address and reduce the behaviour in question. So detox and rehab are important resources. Changing the behaviour is also likely to go some way to changing the way that others react to the behaviour, making the individual less likely to be the victim of prejudices and discrimination.

The more internalised aspects of negative identity, reaching back into early childhood experiences, may need more lengthy scrutiny and intervention, possibly counselling or psychotherapy. There will also be some value in seeking strengthening and defiant personal messages from negative experiences. Working together with peers who have had similar experiences, both to understand those experiences and to draw strength from the shared experience and, hopefully, the shared recovery, is also likely to consolidate positive aspects of identity, such as resolution and resilience, while at the same time coming to terms with negative experiences in the past. Some strength can be distilled from the weight of negative experiences and the uncertainty and confusion they have inculcated.

---

Figure 3 represents the two possible responses to other people’s prejudices, stereotypes and labels. The positive route culminates in defiance and social advocacy; the other is a downward slope to social exclusion.

Figure 3: Positive and negative identities in conflict

- **Negative labels**
  - Internalised negative identities
    - Anxieties, denial, confusion
      - Positive and negative identities in conflict

  - Positive identities
    - Defiance
      - Group defiance
        - Social advocacy
          - Social and political change
  
  - Negative identities
    - Bad company
      - Bed habits
        - Social exclusion
6. Identity as instinct and intuition

Will and agency

The greatest thinker and writer on the nature of individuality and identity was the English philosopher John Stuart Mill. He stressed that character required purpose,

A habit of willing is commonly called a purpose; and among the causes of volitions and actions which flow from them, must be reckoned not only likings and aversions, but also purposes. It is only when our purposes have become independent of the feelings of pain or pleasure from which they originally took their rise, that we are said to have a confirmed character. ‘A character’, says Novalis, ‘is a completely fashioned will’, and the will, once so fashioned, may be steady and constant, when the passive susceptibilities of pleasure and pain are greatly weakened, or materially changed.39

The point about a ‘steady and constant’ will is particularly apposite to vulnerable people. Their history of pain, emotional or physical, has weakened their steady and constant will and that needs to be strengthened again. Then, whatever pains and pleasures the future may yet hold in store, some resources of resilience are held in waiting within that will. The absence of that steady and constant will is precisely the crisis of confidence, the chaos and confusion already described.

The first difficulty is the one that the psychoanalyst Marion Milner, describes pointedly in A Life of One’s Own (1934),

People said ‘Oh, be yourself at all costs.’ But I had found that it was not so easy to know just what one’s self was. It was far easier to want what other people seemed to want and then imagine that the choice was one’s own.

She also noted the particular thought processes that emanate from an unsteady and inconstant will. She calls it the ‘chattering mind’. The mind becomes cluttered and confused to the point where weighting the importance of this thought over that one becomes almost impossible, diminishing and destroying discernment to the point of inertia and inaction. On top of the paralysis that may result from confusion, the impact is eventually to diminish selfworth. A sense of inferiority is engendered, perhaps lasting and difficult to shift, as Milner explains,

In the first place, this chattering mind was an unreasonable mind, it was liable to cling to its own view of the facts quite regardless of distortions and contradictions. It was also a mean mind, it seemed unable to escape from the narrow circle of its own interests, it recognised only itself and was always trying to force the rest of the world to do the same. Further, in the face of the facts of my own imperfections it set me all sorts of impossible standards without my knowing it. It wanted me to be the best, cleverest most beautiful creature, and made me feel that if I was not all of these things then I was the extreme opposite, the dregs of creation and utterly lost.

Nietzsche, as noted, suggests identity requires purpose and will. Milner is suggesting it also requires clarity of mind and thought. Analysing thoughts and her own behaviour, Marion Milner manages carefully and precisely to define and describe the habit of a clear mind essential for purpose and will, which enlivens paralysis, calms confusion and ameliorates self-doubt. She was sure that she could choose to manage herself better,

By a simple self-chosen act of keeping my thoughts on one thing instead of dozens I had found a window opening out across a new country of wide horizons and unexplored delights.

The mysterious landscape of another country

Others would suggest that that new country may be another country but it is not new at all. It may be going forward toward the past. That new country of wide horizons and unexplored delights may in fact be a recovery of lost instincts, re-discovering a suppressed or lost sense of self, as described by Alice Miller: in seeking to understand or please other people, or simply just to understand their behaviour and lessen its negative impact on us, we might have been forced to lose sight of that country that Marion Milner seeks.

Portia is the young character at the centre of Elizabeth Bowen’s novel The Death of the Heart (1938) who falls in love with a young man who, it turns out, is in love with her elder sister but Portia does not know this. The elder sister is already married to someone else. Portia is treated badly by both the young man and by her sister. Her sister responds to his affection; although she intends to reject him she thereby denies Portia his attention. The discovery of other people’s treachery is the death of the heart of the title. And what has died at the hands of her sister and the young man she admires is not just her innocent trust in others, but much more seriously, the ‘fidelities’ of her own instincts.

One’s sentiments – call them that – one’s fidelities are so instinctive that one hardly knows they exist: only when they are betrayed or, worse still, when one betrays them does one realise their power. That betrayal is an end of an inner life… At the back of the spirit a mysterious landscape, whose perspective used to be so infinite, suddenly perishes.40

40 Bowen, E., The Death of the Heart, Jonathan Cape. 1938
Attention undivided

Marion Milner, in her self-analysis, wants to discover if there is a way to keep that ‘mysterious landscape’ in view, to stay in touch with those instincts. That wish led her to understand the single, central thing needed to achieve that. Attention undivided may be the thing to help to reveal or to re-connect with ‘an intuitive sense of how to live’.

I had also learnt how to know what I wanted; to know that this is not a matter of momentary decision, but that it needs a rigorous watching and fierce discipline, if the clamouring conflict of likes is to be welded into a single desire … my day-to-day personal ‘wants’ were really the expression of deep underlying needs, though often the distorted expression because of the confusions of blind thinking. I had learnt that if I kept my thoughts still enough and looked beneath them, then I might sometimes know what was the real need … though so remotely that I might easily miss it when over-busy with purposes. Really, then, I had found that there was an intuitive sense of how to live.

Understanding that ‘intuitive sense of how to live’ brings with it choices and the need for realism. Intuition which is founded on an unreal sense of oneself and, leading on from that, an unrealistic assessment of one’s future, inevitably leads to disappointment and then a dispirited reluctance to try again. So for Marion Milner intuition is not only a matter of knowing what one wants, but more profoundly and significantly, she wants to answer the question ‘What have I the power to do?’ She found that ‘no one offered me an answer, because they had not even asked the question.’ So she felt that she had to find an answer for herself. The critical distinction is understanding, of all the things that one might do, what one can influence and what is not so susceptible.

That brings her back to the question of attention and concentration and leads her to a powerful insight highly relevant to ways of supporting vulnerable people, who have often lost their capacity to pay close and extended attention to one thing and, on the larger scale, to have a strong and confident ‘intuitive sense of how to live’. Perhaps for some it was lost as Alice Miller suggests during those early years when their needs and security were placed second or third in the order of priority, below the need to please and satisfy others. Helping people to acquire or regain the quality Milner describes below would be an asset for virtually everyone, not just vulnerable people.
It seemed to me that the only thing that was even potentially so controlled was my attention...
Also it was what I did with my attention, whether I let it wander unobserved or held it still
and expectant, whether I spread it in feelers beyond my body or narrowed it to a pin-point of
brightness within my brain, it was this which determined what I saw.

The intuitive sense of how to live can be lost, either early in life, perhaps even in early
childhood. Later experiences with relationships may compound those uncertainties. Bad and
addictive habits, such as the misuse of drugs or alcohol, can deeply bury those instincts,
to the point where they may seem irrecoverable. Associating with and emulating those with
similar bad habits only reinforces negative and destructive patterns. The prejudices, labels and
stereotypes engendered in others by those bad habits and destructive behaviour complete
the effect. The true self is submerged. It can be re-connected with, but not by simply receiving
more and more services or treatments. A change in the habit of mind can be encouraged and
enabled by staff working in supportive settings. The key to the change is in the approach, the
values and the dialogue, not in special or specialist interventions or services. Parts Two and
Three of this book deal with how that might be achieved and the skills needed to achieve it.

Some fatalists would argue that this approach and indeed practically any approach to this idea
of self-made will or character is a deluded fallacy and doomed from the start. Joseph Conrad
wrote in Nostromo (1904), ‘Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of
flattering illusions.’ The philosopher John Gray goes even further, ‘most of those who work
for world betterment … seek consolation for a truth they are too weak to bear.’ I shall argue
later in this book, in chapter 9 on work, that a life of action in the absence of contemplation
is indeed doomed not to achieve much. It might even further obscure the intuitive life
reasonably chosen. Contemplation or reflection, followed by action is not merely consolation,
but productive. The action required and taken is most beneficial if it is worthwhile in itself and
productive in its result.

Seeing yourself differently is an essential first step in being seen differently by others. Changing
behaviour is clearly important, getting off the street or giving up the booze, but a lasting
solution, a definitive change depends on a change in your sense of yourself. If you see yourself
differently, others might start to see you differently; the positives are reinforced. The vicious
circle of negative behaviour being reinforced by group pressure is turned into a virtuous circle
of a new positive identity being recognised and reinforced. That different identity may soon
mean that you can make new friends and find new interests. You have then become somebody
different and, in important ways, new, in your own eyes and in other people’s.

A critical dimension of seeing yourself differently is likely to be the initial connection to the
‘pinpoint of brightness’ that close attention can bring into focus. Professionals working with
vulnerable people can through patient listening, questioning and dialogue help people to gain
the focus they need, developing their capacity to pay close attention to their own intuitions
and instincts, helping people to locate that pinpoint of brightness, dimly at first, but eventually
brighter and brighter.

41. Gray, J., op.cit
Mazes not motorways

The novelist Jeannette Winterson, talking about her novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), describes how insight is revealed,

> Our mental processes are more like a maze than a motorway. We do not remember our lives chronologically, nor do we reflect on them in exact order. We roam the labyrinths of our experiences, sometimes trying to find the way out, sometimes trying to find the way to the centre, always little bit lost unless some unexpected insight shows us the way. Such insights are by their nature imaginative, poetic, heightened, revelatory. They are not the everyday accumulation of data.

The journey through the maze to the pinpoint of brightness is unlikely to lead to a startling insight that it is time to undertake vocational job training or move to another flat. But it may bring determination to achieve a long-cherished goal, perhaps learning to drive, or to play the piano, live on a farm, read poetry or get in touch with old friends or, like someone of my acquaintance who lived in a group home for people with learning disabilities, to decide to become an Elvis impersonator. The recognition of that instinct followed by the enactment of it may be precisely the thing that brings a sense of achievement that will engender a modicum of self-respect. That self-respect is a counterweight to negative experiences and a weakened sense of self. Something is added to the other end of the balance and the scales may slowly start to tip. One thing may lead to another. Learning to drive, or making a new friend or acquiring a new interest may lead to a larger goal or a more distant horizon. That initial achievement, seemingly small in the eyes of the others, which will not win much recognition from government officials urgently seeking to measure successful outcomes, may be the pebble to divert the stream.
7. Tell me the truth about love

Lasting and loving relationships are said to be declining in modern society. People are leaving it much later before getting married. Many are not getting married at all, either choosing to live together or being ‘serial monogamists’, despite the strong evidence that married people are more likely to stay together for life than people who live together but don’t get married. One in three marriages end in divorce. There are more single people living alone than ever before. The number of people depressed and talking about the state of their relationships in therapy has reached epidemic proportions. From a conservative perspective these changes in the west are seen as a tide of feckless permissiveness, the atomising of human relationships, but the true underlying reasons are more complex and interesting than that.

Women at work

The wider social shifts that have produced these results relate in large measure to the changing role and status of women as economic actors. Women who control their own economic destiny, now much greater in number, are firstly likely to feel less urgency about finding and marrying a ‘breadwinner’ and secondly, will think more carefully before opting out of economic independence for motherhood. After all, they have a lot to lose. Since women can now control their own fertility, a development only widespread for a few decades, they can plan their lives differently, taking decisions for themselves and asserting control. Having economic independence may also make women less likely to put up with unsatisfying, abusive or violent men indefinitely. All of those factors may have de-stabilised the institution of marriage, but the gain in women’s freedom has been enormous. As Amartya Sen has argued, women’s freedom represents the biggest spur to social and economic development. Contrary-wise if women’s freedom is restrained by history, culture, law or institutions, that restraint is a huge impediment to wider social development. Similarly some of the great rise in national prosperity in the UK and other developed countries since the second world war has been the result of large numbers of women joining the labour market. Families who want to enjoy the modern middle class consumer lifestyle of foreign holidays, expensive cars, eating out frequently and indefatigable shopping will, in most cases, need two incomes to afford it.

Men at home

Men have changed too, perhaps, at least in part, because they had to. They needed to become more sensitive to women’s emotions, because, as noted, women had more options if men remained incorrigibly insensitive or brutal. Rejection is definitely on the cards. In order to become more sensitive to women, they have also had to become more self-aware. Fatherhood is slowly being transformed. Men now play a much fuller and more varied role in bringing up

42 Sen, A., Inequality Re-examined, Oxford University Press. 1992
their children. Fathers in the UK now spend on average two hours a day with their children. A few decades ago it was 15 minutes. Unlike Walter Morel in D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers (as I shall quote below) women are less likely to exclude their men from their relationships with their children. Men do not so readily exclude themselves either. They have discovered the appeal of the subtle, filigree joys of intimacy with tiny, dependent loving beings that taps the well of their own emotions, which was previously silent and cut off in most men. Women too have discovered the benefits of sharing not just childcare duties, but childcare responsibilities. The joys of the intimacies of childcare are not halved by sharing but doubled, while the work is halved for each person.

The love that dares to speaks its name

Some of the consequences of lesbian and gay liberation in the west have already been noted in the first chapter. As well as the greater number of lesbians and gay men living the life they have reason to value without fear, stigma or discrimination, the corollary benefit is that there are rather fewer people in unhappy and unsatisfying marriages than before. A modern day Oscar Wilde who, by all accounts, was a loving father and husband as well as being an active homosexual would nowadays perhaps not get married in the first place.

The combined effects of the liberation movements of women and lesbians and gay men is that people enter marriage with a great deal more circumspection and experience of life. The feeling of making a choice has gained greater weight; the sense that marriage is an unavoidable fate has diminished. Marriages that end in divorce, or long-term relationships which end in separation, are now less likely to end because the participants should never have got married in the first place and more because people have changed or perhaps fallen in love with someone else. And, of course, most people who get divorced then re-marry. They have lost their taste for their spouse, but not for marriage. Their first experience appears to have put them off the person involved. They don’t seem to have gone off the whole idea. All these changes gave rise to what Francis Fukuyama called ‘the great disruption’. He suggests, with some supporting evidence, that calm is now returning.  

The invention of democratic love

There is also a wider historical change here, which is relatively recent but nonetheless absolute. The idea of romantic love has been democratised. In medieval times, particularly before the Renaissance, romantic love was seen, at least in art and literature, as an aristocratic preserve. Not for nothing was this called courtly love, since it was almost the exclusive preserve of those in the courts of monarchs and aristocracies. With complex and precise forms and rules, romance was conducted as performance and emotion was performed as theatre. It was not all artifice. True feeling did flow too, but down stylised pathways and straight roads. In its time

---

43. Fukuyama, F., The Great Disruption: human nature and the reconstruction of social order, Profile. 1999
this was a radical idea too. One important dimension of the European Renaissance was the discovery of Petrarch’s worldly love of Laura, which was formed only of human (not divine) feeling. This worldly human love was not immediately thereafter for all human beings, just those with refinement and sensitivity. Many more centuries needed to pass before ordinary or poor people were thought capable of such finer feelings.

Baser emotions were still thought to be the norm, even into the twentieth century. D.H. Lawrence, from a family of miners, wrote in Sons and Lovers about how romance struggled to survive the harsh depredations of the miners’ lives. The characters based on his parents certainly loved one another once, but hard work, alienation and affection too thinly spread across large numbers of children reduced those feelings and instincts to embers and then to ashes. Harsher and more practical emotions of power, control, resilience and resourcefulness grew in their place. The initial contact between the two that were to marry, Walter and Gertrude, is almost mystic and certainly physical. Their pull to one another is also the pull of opposites, people of different classes and outlooks, seeing in each other a complementary possibility. They each like the thing in the other that they feel themselves to lack. This was Walter’s reaction on meeting Gertrude,

Walter Morel seemed melted away before her. She was to the miner that thing of mystery and fascination, a lady. When she spoke to him, it was with a southern pronunciation and a purity of English which thrilled him to hear. 44

And her reaction on meeting him,

The dusky, golden softness of this man’s sensuous flame of life, that flowed from off his flesh like the flame from a candle, not baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit as her life was, seem to her something wonderful, beyond her. 45

Within a few years, all was changed and for the worse, at least as far as Walter was concerned. By this time they had three children,

After this she scarcely desired him. And standing more aloof from him, not feeling him so much part of herself, but merely part of her circumstances she did not mind so much what he did, could leave him alone. There was the halt, the wistfulness about the ensuing year, which is like autumn in a man’s life. His wife was casting him off, half regretfully, but relentlessly; casting him off and turning now for love and life to the children. Henceforward he was more or less a husk. And he half acquiesced, as so many men do, yielding their place to their children.46

The strength of instincts and intuitions could not be suppressed, at least in the young Lawrence as transposed to the character of Paul Morel, the second son. He was sure, for himself and for everyone else, that there was a richer life to be lived, whatever their class background, whatever their place in the world. This would be a life of quick, natural emotions,

44. Lawrence, D. H., Sons and Lovers. 1913
45. *ibid*
46. *ibid*
reflective artistic endeavour; a stimulating engagement with the wider world and wide, deep
rivers of emotion and passion which would characterise long-term relationships between
people. That would bring satisfaction not just to Paul but also to his mother.

There was so much to come out of him. Life for her was rich with promise. She was to see
herself fulfilled. Not for nothing had been her struggle.47

Just as the characters in Sons and Lovers show the limits on relationships and marriage in the
era of hard manual work, the four principal characters in Lawrence’s Women in Love (1920),
Ursula and Gudrun Brangwyn, Rupert Birkin (like Paul Morel loosely based on Lawrence
himself) and Gerald Crich were archetypes of that different life that he believed to be possible
for everyone. He was seeking to keep in touch with the mysterious landscape that Elizabeth
Bowen feared that Portia had lost forever in The Death of the Heart. Elizabeth Bowen said
of herself, perhaps in a low moment, that she had lived a life of ‘sensation sought after, but
emotion withheld.’ Lawrence, on the other hand, was sure that emotion should not be
withstood. Sensation, as for Marion Milner, was a decoy and a distraction. The true thing
was instinct, if one could only stay in touch with it. The sociologist David Riesman points to
this class shift in attitudes to romance and relationships and notes its wider connections to
changes in industrial and economic structures,

Only in the upper classes, precursors of modern other-directed [people heavily influenced
by peers, fashion and the media] did the making of love take precedence over the making
of goods … and reach the status of a daytime agenda. In these circles sex was almost
totally separated from production and reproduction. This separation, when it goes beyond
the upper class and spreads over almost the whole society, is a sign that a society, through
birth control, and all that it implies, has entered the population phase of incipient decline by
the route of industrialisation … [Sex] is viewed as a consumption good not only for the old
leisure classes but by the modern leisure masses.48

So the frequently foretold death of marriage and romance is in fact the opposite of the truth. On
the contrary daytime romance is now perceived to be everyone’s entitlement, not reserved for
some and denied by economic circumstance to others. Daytime romance may have become
democratic, but what are its modern rules and rituals?

The film Four Weddings and A Funeral (1994) became the most massively popular romantic
comedy since the days of Spencer Tracey and Katherine Hepburn. Richard Curtis, who made
the film, created a kind of definition of romance in the age of identity I have already described
in the early chapters of this book. In the preternaturally English world of the film, there are gay
men, people who use wheelchairs, deaf people, rich people, short people, strange people.
For all of them, modern love and modern marriage is a fixed, if sometimes seemingly distant,
point of light. The film contained frequent references to the poems of W.H. Auden and, as a

47. ibid
result, re-kindled an interest, affection and popularity for his love poetry. Auden’s poems ran the whole gamut of emotions associated with love, from the pining for love to death being the passing of it. His poem ‘O Tell Me the Truth About Love’ (1938), conveys all the confusions and uncertainties of the romantic but inexperienced novice, who does not know quite where to start.

**When it comes, will it come without warning**  
> Just as I’m picking my nose?  
> Will it knock on the door in the morning,  
> Or tread in the bus on my toes?  
> Will it come like a change in the weather?  
> Will its greeting be courteous or rough?  
> Will it alter my life altogether?  

O tell me the truth about love.

Everyone feels that uncertainty at some point, particularly in adolescence. Everywhere one seems to see couples in love, but, if you are single and inexperienced, you wonder where did they meet, how did they meet, then what happened and, most of all, why hasn’t it happened to you and will it ever happen to you or, if you’ve been in love before, the question is when will it happen to you again?

There may not be one, or even just a few, ways to make romance and relationships happen, but once it has happened, the universal conclusion is that it is a sublime experience, among the most sublime that life has to offer. Those sublime experiences, like one’s greatest fears, come most vividly into focus in moments of privacy and quiet, often at night when the rest of the crowd disappears, the chattering mind falls silent and even the mind’s eye temporarily closes. Doubt, uncertainty, guilt, sinfulness, fear: they all recede. W.H. Auden captures those moments of quiet nights when describing holding his sleeping lover in his arms in his poem ‘Lullaby’ (1940).

**But in my arms till the break of day**  
> Let the living creature lie,  
> Mortal, guilty, but to me  
> The entirely beautiful.

The bloom of a love affair may grow or fade. Even if it fades, it might still be the source of poignant and happy memories. Not every relationship is sublime or definitive, but most are worth something. It does not have to be the only or most important relationship in one’s life to be remembered with sadness – and acceptance. Memories are something you may keep, not always something you have lost. W.B. Yeats wrote about the end of an affair in his poem ‘When You Are Old’ (1893),
How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;
And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

In James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’, the final and brilliant summation of his book Dubliners (1914), an ageing singer sings an old folk song, ‘The Lass of Aughrim’, at a Christmas party given by two elderly ladies. Gretta, one of the guests is reminded of a young man, Michael Furey, who had sung that song as a serenade to her when she was a young woman still living at home with her family. Michael Furey was ‘very delicate’. He was ill in his lodgings and his family had been informed that he was ‘in decline’. Nevertheless, on a cold, wintry night he had come to her window to see her. She begged him to go home out of the cold. He refused. A week later he was dead. Of his love for her, it seemed to Gretta, he had died. When she hears the song again these memories come rushing back to her, now a middle-aged married woman. She is reduced to sobbing and Gabriel, her husband, struggles to come to terms with the depth of her emotion for a young man long dead whom she had known for scarcely any time at all when she was so young herself. Struggling also with what this might mean about her feelings for him and struggling with shame at his own cloddishness when compared to the depth of her sobbing grief, he eventually falls to wondering not just about the dead Michael Furey, but about all the dead and the enduring place, the enduring love that is kept for them in the hearts and minds of the living. Joyce writes,

One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age. He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover’s eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live. Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached where dwell the vast hosts of dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world; the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.
Such is the power of love, almost as strong in its emotional grip as death itself. To exclude the possibility of love from people’s aspirations then is a kind of living death for James Joyce and for many others too. Love may mature over time, grow more companionable and tolerant, troubled sometimes but constant even in difficulties and all the way to the edge of despair. This is from one of Shakespeare’s sonnets,

Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even on the edge of doom.

If this be the error and open me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

As already noted, almost everyone aspires to be in a loving and lasting relationship. Vulnerable people have sometimes been seen, without any convincing good reason, as somehow beyond the pale when it comes to lasting and loving relationships, exempt from everyone else’s romantic life history of Love looked for; Love found; Love changed and sustained; Love lost.

The unquiet past: insecure attachments in adulthood

Although everyone dreams of it, not everyone, vulnerable or otherwise, believes a lasting and loving relationship is achievable. Vulnerable people however may have more than usually intractable doubts, self-dislike and a lack of confidence in their ability to make and sustain relationships. Their family history may leave them with few positive expectations of relationships and have left a residue of uncertainty or bitterness. Instead, their own personal history of relationships might lead them to the conclusion that relationships always end in failure. Others may more generally have lost the self-belief that they can make the life they might want to make.

As well as not being able to make it happen, some people, not just vulnerable people, also struggle to understand why it isn’t happening for them. They may tend to blame themselves. Something is wrong with them but they can’t work out exactly what, or perhaps how to put it right. If adult life has been itinerant, moving between indifferent temporary accommodation in different towns, or living for long periods in institutional or supervised environments, without the normal run of human relationships across genders and ages, the opportunities may not have arisen and the aptitudes for forming relationships may not have been inculcated. Beyond an uncongenial lifestyle and fewer chances to form relationships, more deep-seated psychological barriers would have to be addressed and overcome.
In many people, to some extent in all of us, there is a sense of an unquiet past; emotional ghosts that will not be laid to rest which still have the capacity to upset the apple cart, destroying peace of mind and undermining self-confidence. This sense of the unquiet past being replayed is what Oliver James, in common with other psychologists calls our ‘script’ which, if unrecognised and uncorrected, everyone is apparently doomed to repeat: a sort of emotional Groundhog day. The key determining factor of the script in his view (as in Alice Miller’s already quoted view) is early experiences within the family. According to James,

James is drawing on ‘attachment theory’, the most famous proponent of which is John Bowlby. The suggestion is that ‘attachment’ between parent and child is instinctive, possibly even hard-wired in the brain. It is distinct from the need for food or more Freudian motives about sexual attraction and behaviour between children and parents. The motivation for attachment is protection: the parent instinctively wishes to protect and the child instinctively seeks that protection. If the attachment is secure through the early years, the child will be able to seek greater and greater independence and distance from the parent, safe in the knowledge that, when necessary, they can return to be protected and looked after.

There are two other types of attachment that are less secure. A child who feels uncertain that their parent will be available when called upon can develop what is called an ‘anxious resistant attachment’. The pattern of behaviour that gives rise to these feelings is a parent being available to protect them at some times of need but not others. That child is always prone to separation anxiety, tends to be clinging and is anxious when exploring the world, fearing there will be no one there to return to if anything goes wrong.

The other sort of insecure attachment is seen in children who have experienced longer periods of absence from their parents or are frequently and more or less consistently rebuffed when they seek parental help and protection. Bowlby calls this ‘anxious avoidant attachment’. Those with these latter anxieties are characterised by attempts to live their lives too independently, without love or support. This kind of person is also apt to seek to control and, in the most extreme forms, to be a bully or violent towards others.

49. James, O., They F*** You Up, Bloomsbury. 2003
These are typologies rather than cast-iron personalities. People may tend more towards one than another, but retain elements of more than one. People may also change over time or operate differently in different relationships, depending on the motives, emotions and behaviour of the other participant in the relationship. Extensive research shows that these patterns of early behaviour are predictive but only for children of primary school age. The impact on adult behaviour is not thoroughly researched and the impact on homeless people in particular, who evidently manifest some of the consequential behaviours hypothesised such as distancing themselves from intimacy, has not been the subject of systematic research. This is regrettable. Knowing that many people who end up homeless come from broken homes or have fallen out with their families, for which there is a huge supporting data, does not fully explain the kinds of experiences in the family and in childhood that may subsequently increase the chances of people becoming homeless. Nor does the research show whether these patterns are carried forward beyond childhood into relationships and partnerships formed in adult life. The proposition nevertheless seems a plausible one that is highly applicable to the needs and behaviour of vulnerable people, many of whom have had a troubling past. As Bowlby explains,

*Initially the only means of communication between infant and mother is through emotional expression and the accompanying behaviour. Although supplemented later by speech, emotionally mediated communication nonetheless persists as a principal feature of intimate relationships throughout life... Nor is the urgent desire for comfort and support in adversity regarded as childish... Instead the capacity to make intimate emotional bonds with other individuals, sometimes in the care-seeking role and sometimes in the care-giving one, is regarded as a principal feature of effective personality functioning and mental health.*

The role of support staff assisting vulnerable people could also be considered through the lens of attachment theory. Frequent changes of support staff, or insensitive or rejecting behaviour may well sustain the feeling in the vulnerable persons that all intimate attachments are, in one way or another, insecure. People who have spent long periods in impersonal institutions with many changes of other residents and staff are also unlikely to have their feelings of security and attachment strengthened, especially if separations and a moving population are features of the formative years in childhood.

Knowing that we are repeating patterns from the past, that we lack volition, or that we are actors not authors, offers little by way of assistance or advice about what to do to change the unacceptable parts. Oliver James states,

*The key to changing the impact of our past on the present is not suppression of reality but insight: being able to picture ourselves, to analyse what we are like, to see ourselves as others do, to evaluate our motives – these are the capacities that separate us from other species. Most valuable of all is the realisation that what is happening in the here-and-now is an expression of the there-and-then. When such moments occur they can change who we are.*
Although the possibility, sometimes dreamt of but not hoped for, of forming and keeping a lasting and loving one-to-one relationship is often central to people’s hopes for their future, it is not generally thought to be part of a support plan or something requiring professional help. These strong aspirations and emotions are discussed, perhaps in private or in passing, maybe with other service users, or even strangers. Yet they are not one of the goals of professional intervention. Vulnerable or homeless people should not be assumed to be single now and forever. On the contrary, many are already in relationships and many are busy starting them up. These relationships are sometimes longstanding and a profound source of well-being to the people involved. Professionals too readily assume that relationships involving vulnerable people are doomed not to get off the ground, or, if they do, bound not to last. Many would even assume that they are actively harmful, re-activating suppressed disquiets and disturbances in the smooth surface of day-to-day emotional stability. Those very disturbances might be the true thing, the real instinct, the intuitive self that I have discussed. Even if professionals are not hostile to these relationships, they may scarcely notice they exist and, as a consequence, do little practical to facilitate or assist. In many supported housing settings for single people, for example, those who form relationships and sleep together are evicted. Nor are they helped to plan a joint future by, for instance, being jointly rehoused.

For a time in the early 1980s I was a hospice nurse. One day, two of the patients, both in the advanced stages of multiple sclerosis, permanent wheelchair users and in need of 24-hour nursing care, announced their intention to get married. The staff had been aware that they were close friends but we had swiftly to overcome our ignorance and prejudice: that people with terminal illnesses had lost the will or capacity to form lasting and loving relationships.

We also had to make some rapid practical alterations to the arrangements in the home, like finding a double bed and a double room, neither of which had formerly figured in any plans. One of them also needed assistance with finding legal advice to extract themselves from a moribund former marriage that had never been dissolved. That too was rather beyond our ken. Even in the lengthening shadow of imminent death the heart can still beat faster; a little joy in the vale of tears.

Supporting people in creating and sustaining lasting and loving one-to-one relationships is a central aspect of the journey from needing professional support to a fulfilled life of independence and interdependence. One ex-homeless person who was recovering from a long period of depression and who, after a while, met someone he loved, then got married, found work, bought a house – and developed strong religious feelings during these experiences, a not uncommon event. He called the experience of living in supported housing being in a ‘state of mercy’. Being in his own home with his wife and feeling his depression fading into the past was, he said, ‘a state of grace’. That is an elegant and profound distinction.
A loving future

The benefits of lasting and loving relationships are not only felt by the participants. The rest of society also feels the benefit. The American criminologist, John Laub, 51 contacted and interviewed men in their sixties and seventies who had all been young offenders and in youth offending institutions about half a century before. He wanted to understand what had happened to them in later life, particularly with regard to the factors that may have reduced their likelihood of re-offending. It should come as no surprise, after what I have already said, that the most important single factor that those who had given up offending had in common was that they had formed a lasting and loving one-to-one relationship and many had married. The love of a good woman does not somehow magically transform a former bad boy into a good boy. In fact, the partner actively intervenes to change behaviour, encouraging them to go home from the bar or the pub before they get too drunk, in some instances, coming to collect them and taking them home. The partners also get them away from potentially violent situations. The thing that probably produces the most lasting benefit is that the partner introduces them to a new social circle and, by and by, the bad company and influences fade from their life and are replaced by new people and new interests. One finds it hard to imagine prison or probation officers engaging in such intensive assistance; indeed they would be actively discouraged. They would be said to be breaching professional boundaries.

8. Family and friends

If any of us fall sick, wind up in debt or are in some other way in need of help, our first port of call in almost every case, will be family and, failing that, friends. Only if they can’t help, or if we are isolated from them, will we turn to charities or statutory assistance. Relationships of all kinds matter to people, not just those that are the most intimate. The wider circle also, as I have already described in chapter 3, plays its broad role in mutual aid given and received, introducing us to new people, new interests and new opportunities. The wider circle provides what Robert Putnam has called, ‘bridging social capital,’ while our longstanding intimate circle of family and friends is, in his description, ‘bonding social capital’. 52

Proximity without intimacy

People may regularly see others who live nearby, or those who work in local shops, but that regular contact does not necessarily lead to sharing of personal information or any degree of intimacy. In these kinds of relationships people feel little obligation to one another. Vulnerable people may also have contact with professionals paid to help them – housing support staff, community psychiatric nurses, social workers, probation officers and so on. These professionals are not their friends. The person using the service may share intimate personal information with the professionals, but that is with the specific goal of getting access to a service. Even if the relationship may be intimate from the point of view of the service user, it is one-sided. The service user probably knows almost nothing about the professional worker’s life outside work. Lacking intimacy, these relationships with a professional also lack permanence. Although it may last for several years, the relationship is usually temporary and finite. None of these kinds of relationships – the glancing contacts with frequently encountered but distant faces and the transitory contact with those paid to provide – can be thought of as true networks of emotional and social support.

Family and friends

Lasting social networks are likely to have the following three characteristics. Firstly, they are mutual. I may help you; you may help me, maybe not straight away but you feel some obligation to help me in the future because I helped you in the past. Secondly, they are lasting. Although I may not see you daily, weekly or even monthly, I still expect to be seeing you years into the future. 53 Thirdly, they are beneficial. I feel more secure. If I am ill or broke for example, I know that you might help me.

53. Game theorists have argued that the likelihood of frequent future contact is the most effective suppressant of selfish and aggressive behaviour. ‘Road rage’ may be so selfish and aggressive because it flows from the assumption of no contact ever again. See Ridley, M., The Origins of Virtue: human instincts and the evolution of co-operation, Penguin. 1998
For many people the strongest of these networks are with their families. In the early years of life a parent cares for a child. Later on, in old age, the parent may expect that the child will care for them. One of the most painful things that can happen is enduring conflict and the loss of contact between parents and children. Conflicts of this kind are much more common in the families of vulnerable people and people who become homeless than they are in the population at large. Grandparents too have a hugely significant role in supportive and sustained family networks. Children and young people relate differently to their grandparents than they do to their parents. There will be less authority and restraint and more tolerance and indulgence from the grandparents. So much so that parents will often be shocked by the irksome discovery that their children are treated in a much more relaxed and indulgent way by the older generation than the parents themselves were treated when they were children – and by the same people. Anthropologists call this ‘the merging of alternate generations’ and it is a feature of virtually all societies with sufficient longevity, regardless of culture. It has also been noted among long-lived animal species, such as elephants, that have complex extended family structures, often stretching over hundreds of miles. Humans are not uniquely unselfish.

Adult siblings may also share each other’s childcare or other responsibilities, or they may be close companions with whom experiences and problems can be discussed in a non-judgmental way; advice can be sought, or a listening ear may be all that is needed. Longstanding close friends too can share experiences and problems in these ways; helping out; being a companion or a confidant.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle divided friendship into three types. The first is based on brief pleasure, favoured by the young; the second on utility; the third and perfect friendship is founded on goodness. A rare thing, needing time and extended contact with the promise of more to come, this kind of friendship is founded on mutuality and is the fount of altruism. This selflessness is the highest goal of friendship according to Aristotle,

*It is those who desire the good of their friends for the friends’ sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is and not for any incidental quality.*

The nature of friendship changes through the lifecycle also. I have set out in figure 4 the wide networks of friends in youth, compared to the narrower but perhaps deeper friends of maturity.

In the absence of family and friends, people may feel isolated and lonely, even if they talk to plenty of people. Having a strong social network can also increase the chances of a person overcoming problems elsewhere in their life. Friends and family can often have a greater determination and persistence in helping to alleviate the worst effects of drugs and alcohol than professionals. From love for one another is born the resolution to give help and the willingness to receive it.
The benefits of friends to vulnerable people

Research indicates that an element of ‘coercion’ is often needed to get people using drugs or drinking too much alcohol to overcome their denial, fear and resistance to go into, and stay in, rehab or detox. That ‘coercion’ is far more likely to be effective when it is the work of family members, administered with determination, but determination lubricated by mutual love. Police, probation, prison staff, even social work and medical staff, are less likely to succeed either in getting people to undertake the treatment or, as significantly, to stay the course and to permanently kick the habit without recidivism. The criminal justice pathway into drugs treatment has recently become a fashionable notion. The idea is that arresting and detaining more drug users will make it possible to get them into treatment while they are imprisoned. This is a delusion. The same applies in mental health. The people who are most successful at getting people to keep taking their anti-psychotic drugs are family members. Anyone, like me, who has ever been involved in ‘sectioning’ people with mental health problems (in other words taking them into hospital without their agreement) knows that this is immeasurably easier to achieve.
and a good deal less painful and fraught for all concerned if family members are helping. Local authorities have also finally started to realise that, when children need to be taken into care, fostered or adopted, the best place to look for a stable environment in which the child can grow up, is arranging for them to live with a member of the extended family if that option is available. Kinship care, mostly by grandparents has, not a moment too soon, grown more fashionable in social work. In a similar vein, those people who become homeless after leaving the armed forces are those whose family relationships have long degraded and become decayed. A similar story could be told for people leaving prison. Most jobs, especially at the lower end of the pay scale, are still filled through word of mouth, networking and contacts. In all these situations escaping the patterns and experiences that have rendered people vulnerable is more likely to be started and finished with the help particularly of family, but also of friends. The ascent into interdependence and independence is steeper and a more slippery slope.

Families: positive or negative?

At first sight the positive role for the family I have described runs counter to some of the views expressed in the last chapter about the damage that parents may do their children, perhaps having had similar negative experiences themselves in their own childhood. Now I seem to be suggesting that, far from being the problem, family members can be part of the solution. This is certainly a paradox but it is also possible. That the family may be both part of the problem and part of the solution is the way it is; that’s why the complexity of family dynamics have been, and probably always will be, a source of more or less continuous consideration, conversation and incomplete conclusion. The mistake is to imagine that if some part of the family has been negative other parts of the family could never be positive, and vice versa.

Homeless and vulnerable people who move around frequently are greatly at risk of isolation and the breakdown of relationships with family and friends, thereby possibly losing all the benefits already mentioned. Family conflict may be the reason that people became homeless in the first place – it is the most common cause given for homelessness. Sleeping rough and living in temporary accommodation also makes it harder to form and sustain lasting friendships. The sense of crisis that goes with homelessness is also not a strong emotional platform for resolving old disputes, building bridges and starting afresh. Many homeless people, in part because of their other problems such as mental health or a history of drug or alcohol misuse, also feel that their own behaviour, and the reactions of others to that behaviour, is also an impediment to forming new friendships and repairing old ones. People becoming homeless because of a lack of others around committed to support them when they need it, find it hard to escape being homeless because no one’s around to help them. So isolation and the absence of social networks are both cause and consequence of homelessness and vulnerability.
Combating isolation and loneliness and building and re-building social networks should be a fundamental purpose and activity for all those involved in supporting vulnerable people, not just an add-on. Relieving isolation is not something additional that can be done once the urgent practical questions of having somewhere to live, needing detox or drug rehabilitation or leaving prison have been dealt with. On the contrary a resilient and trusting group of friends and family members at one’s side is an important bulwark against, and a method of combating, vulnerability and homelessness. Paid support staff can do a lot, but they can’t do everything. When it comes to care and support more will always be given by those attached to us emotionally than can ever be given by those attached to us professionally.

Even with a place to live, perhaps in supported or permanent rented housing and the prospect of work, or at least ‘meaningful occupation’, other problems remain, notably loneliness and isolation. Living in shared housing, however supportive, may mean scarcely a moment to call one’s own, but people may still feel lonely, isolated and bored. Though there may be some shared esprit between peers, they may not relish the continuous company of others in a similar situation to their own. In the late 1990s I conducted a survey of formerly homeless people in supported and temporary accommodation. When they came together in focus groups they talked of camaraderie between them. When individually interviewed the same people responded rather differently. They said that such proximity to people with similar problems to theirs made them feel claustrophobic and isolated at the same time. They did not want continuous reminders of their problems. They wanted to meet other kinds of people and find other things in common, not just their problems. They wanted as it were, to re-assert other more positive aspects of their identity. This reminded me of the rather shrewd insight of the radical composer John Cage, ‘To make the world a better place, spend more time with people you haven’t met yet.’

Families and friends for vulnerable people

Disrupted lives mean disrupted relationships, with ex-partners, family and old friends. I and my colleague Stefan Durkacz researched the families and friends of homeless and vulnerable people. We concluded that whatever pain has been suffered, however much the loss, homeless people who took part in that study:

• did value relationships with friends and family;
• had not lost contact with all their old friends and family
• members, particularly not grandparents and siblings;
• felt the loss of broken relationships;
• were keen to re-establish some ties with family members;
• wanted to make new friends;
• valued the support of staff in discussing these matters and help thinking about how to address them; and
• needed support in identifying places and activities where they could meet new people and make new friends; perhaps even meeting new partners.54

Figure 5 shows the circles of intimacy in peoples’ lives as they would mostly see it. In the nearest circle is the family. At the furthest extreme (though they may not realise it) are professionals.

Figure 5: Circles of intimacy

54 Lemos, G., and Durkacz, S., Dreams Deferred: the families and friends of homeless and vulnerable people, Lemos&Crane. 2002
9. Working towards capabilities and freedom

Work, or at least training for employment, is also an essential element for a good and virtuous life, not just as a way of gaining material means. Doing no paid work when one could and living off benefits is definitely not good for self-esteem or for meeting new people. Finding work is not just important to raise people’s incomes. Work can also be the source of stimulation, interest, pride and conviviality all of which can strengthen positive identity.

Aristotle’s original and ancient insight into the relationship between employment and income needs no modern reinterpretation.

Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.  

The many meanings of work

Aristotle also made the fundamental and enduring distinction between different types of work. He distinguished praxis from poiesis. In this context praxis is activity which is virtuous in and of itself, as well as perhaps secondarily being congenial, remunerative and of wider value. Other kinds of work may be wholly instruments towards other ends (poiesis), mostly financial. In this latter type of work the act itself has little value to the person doing it. The value is in what it produces for them; what is derived from it. The aim and the gain of this second kind of work is product not action. Everyone wants their work to be productive and beneficial. Even the makers of weapons would argue that the output of their factories make the world a safer place, since every country needs some defence. Almost everyone would also prefer it if the act of work itself were to be satisfying and virtuous as well as productive. Remuneration is necessary but insufficient. Remuneration, and whatever it may purchase in goods, opportunities and freedom (to be discussed shortly), comes behind the need for virtuous action (praxis) and product (poiesis) in the order of priority.

The best endowed in any society – musicians, artists, entrepreneurs, sports stars – will make a good living and much more, maybe even enjoying the lavish lifestyles of celebrities, from doing the thing that they are exceptionally good at, generally a long way above and beyond the abilities of the common weal. Since that is too high a bar for the great majority of people, the most generally beneficial kind of work for the less uniquely gifted is varied, interesting and satisfying of itself. Meeting interesting people, some of whom might become friends, or even perhaps meeting someone with whom to form a long-term relationship, will hopefully be a part of it. As well as these intrinsic advantages, this kind of work is usually well remunerated.

---

55 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. I am also indebted to my colleague Carwyn Gravell for pointing out that much of what I have to say here was said by Aristotle some time ago!
often including long paid holidays and financial provision for old age. Status among peers and others is also likely to be greatly enhanced by this kind of work. Accessing this kind of work requires skills, qualifications and what has come to be called ‘employability’: a willing attitude, courtesy, punctuality and general adaptability to the wishes of your employer and colleagues. This is the most appealing kind of work for the vast majority of people, even if it requires a certain compliance.

Another less appealing kind of work is the sort of work done by Walter Morel and his fellow miners in *Sons and Lovers*: physically taxing, often repetitive and only decently remunerated as a result of the collective bargaining of trades unions or a statutory minimum wage. Increasingly this kind of work is either done by people in poorer countries or, if it is done in the UK at all, it is done by immigrants.

In the UK work in the service sector has proliferated. This does not require many professional skills, is perhaps not so physically taxing, but the working day is still probably dull and repetitive, mostly involving serving others, for example in cafes, restaurants or call centres. Companionship with fellow staff is often also pretty minimal. On top of these rather soul-destroying qualities, work such as this is also poorly paid, casual and insecure, paid by the hour or by the day with no certainty for next week or thereafter.56

This last kind of work is the one most widely available to vulnerable people or those emerging from a period of institutional life. Their talents and perhaps their aptitudes often result in them having few skills or qualifications. More than 70 per cent of children who grow up in local authority care emerge at 16 with no GCSE passes. They are also more likely to be prosecuted for crime and to wind up homeless. Bad company and bad habits acquired among drug users, in prison or while sleeping rough are hardly conducive to the biddability of appearance and behaviour needed to be employable in a service environment. Sullen and shy behaviour is unlikely to be thought to meet modern expectations of customer service. An endless stream of short term, poorly paid, boring, uncompanionable, insecure jobs does little for people’s self-esteem. Although the value of such work is not inherent in the activity itself, it may nevertheless be a beneficial alternative to no work. It may be a stepping-stone to something more lasting, congenial and remunerative. If it is to be a stepping-stone to something better, a different kind of help is needed, not just pointing them towards existing unskilled vacancies. Much greater clarity is needed about what vulnerable people want and what they get back from work and therefore what is needed to help them seek it and keep it.

**Work for self-respect**

Adam Smith had a straightforward formulation for the point at which poverty ceased to be bearable. Not to do with straightforward notions of utility or purchasing power, it was more about psychology and society, ‘the ability to appear in public without shame’.57

---

56. This analysis is not original. It is based on J. K. Galbraith’s *The Good Society*, Sinclair Stevenson. 1996
Holding one’s head up in public without shame, though undoubtedly the minimum necessity, would hardly be thought the apotheosis of the virtuous life. Over and above escaping public shame, John Rawls set out the classic analysis of those universal things that a just society should provide for everyone, what he called ‘primary goods’. Primary goods are the means, in general terms, which help someone not just to meet their essential needs for nutrition and shelter but also to promote their own ends and include, as Rawls puts it, ‘rights, liberties and opportunities, income and wealth and other social bases of self-respect’.

Self-respect, to take the last of Rawls’ primary goods, is by definition subjective and perhaps evanescent, but Richard Sennett in his book on respect in modern times, pins the concept to the page. He sets out the three modern codes of respect as, ‘make something of yourself, take care of yourself, help others’. Those are precisely the three capabilities that vulnerable people are often thought to lack. They need others to take care of them, have little capacity to make anything of themselves and, because they need help themselves, they are thought erroneously to have no capacity at all to help others.

Rawls saw these primary goods, including self-respect, giving people the possibility of pursuing their own objectives, their own ‘conceptions of the good.’ To that analysis of primary goods the economist Amartya Sen has added an understanding of the heterogeneity of what those conceptions of the good might be. He cites the following as the key personal variations that might lead one person to form one conception and another person to form a different one, ‘personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives and distribution within the family’.

Capabilities and freedom

Sen brings this embellishment to the Rawls-ian definition into his classic formulation of capability as, ‘substantive freedoms – the capabilities to choose a life one has reason to value’.

The emphasis on freedom is important. And freedom is instrumental not just existential. Freedom is a way of doing as well as a way of thinking.

Freedom actually enjoyed – both (1) from primary goods (and other resources) and (2) from achievements (including combinations of functionings actually enjoyed and other realized results).
To put it another way, what you can do is not just about what you can earn from doing it, but what the income derived purchases and, more importantly, the freedom the person gains thereby. Resorting to Isaiah Berlin’s famous formulation, it is not just freedom from having nowhere to live and no way of making a decent living and thereby gaining self-respect that is being sought. It is also freedom for a good and virtuous life that work needs to enable.

On a hot, dusty, humid roadside in Madras (now Chennai) in India you might in the late 1960s and 1970s have seen a small, dark, slightly stooped Tamil woman selling home-made idlis and sambar, a savoury cake made out of rice flour and soaked in a hot, spicy sauce. She might seem, on first sight, a poor woman without much in this world. She had been the daughter of a servant woman and had in her childhood been a servant herself, never going to school or learning to read or write. Once grown up she had become the servant, the ayah, to a family who had grown fond of her and she of them. She worked with them for many years, indeed from the time that the couple married in the late 1940s to the birth of their third and last child in the late 1950s. While working for them she had an illegitimate son by the cook in a house nearby to whom she was briefly emotionally attached. Her son, born of that short relationship, was the same age as the youngest child of the family she worked for, also a boy, whom she looked after, the mother being at work. These two boys were toddlers together and inseparable companions. When the boys were five years old the family who employed her decided to emigrate and the boys were separated. She decided that she did not want to spend her life as a servant and, much more importantly than that, she knew that her son would not get far in life as the son of a servant. So when the family emigrated she went back to her home village, where in fact she had never lived as she had always lived with her employers, and started selling hot snacks by the road side while bringing up her son. With the small proceeds from her business she paid for her son to go to primary and secondary school and eventually to university. Undoubtedly she endured considerable personal hardship, probably daily hunger, to achieve that. He became a civil servant and eventually his mother stopped selling food by the roadside and kept house for her son and he looked after her into her old age.

Meanwhile the other boy had gone to England and grown up there. That was me. As a young man I returned to India and had an emotional reunion both with the woman who had cared for me when I was a baby and with my old playmate, her son. I had cause to wonder at that powerful encounter, with respect and admiration, about the resolute way in which she had purchased freedom and dignity for herself and her son by dint of nothing other than hard work and, more importantly, strength of character. Freedom matters, but is not always visible to the naked eye of the onlooker. You certainly would not have seen the fight for freedom in that woman selling snacks by the roadside.

This set of arguments and the principles that are derived from them – incomes, primary goods, capability, and freedom – is not meant to be arcane or overly theoretical. On the contrary, the intention is to encourage staff who work with vulnerable people to think in an instrumental...
way. Would taking up a job as a security guard or in the kitchen of a restaurant enhance someone’s income, capability or freedom? For a lot of people the answer may very well be yes, notwithstanding the snobbery that says this kind of work is beneath their dignity. One may even go a little further and think about the possibilities of social mobility for vulnerable people in the same terms that the constraints on the social mobility of poor people are considered.

Social mobility

One of the characteristics of good societies in which people have freedom is a degree of social mobility. People should be able, through dint of talent and effort, to make progress from the social and economic condition in which their lives begin towards a better and different place. In changing themselves for the better and for good, through education, effort or both, they should be able also to change their situation. This might be called the merit principle. Progressive taxation makes it possible to redistribute some of the greater material wealth. No one should morally object to redistributing the gains from those well off people who are trying as hard as they can to the less well off who are also doing their best. But using criteria established by the state for that redistribution may undermine people’s freedom to do more and therefore receive more while unjustly rewarding the feckless who do less. State financial distribution systems are also almost everywhere in the world corruptible and susceptible to perverse incentives and moral hazards. People may be discouraged from determined effort. Welfare, in short, may breed dependency and reduce self-respect. Taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor will however, not achieve all that is needed, not to mention the enormous transaction costs of doing it. Another means of achieving progress towards equality must be found. More than equality of opportunity is needed to achieve that. Equality of opportunity implies that, given a common starting point, if people have equality of opportunity, there will also be equality of outcome. Of course, there are no common starting points. Life’s advantages, innate or acquired, are not equally or similarly distributed and many vulnerable people have been short-changed in that distribution. A wider notion of equity, not just financial redistribution, as well as equality of opportunity then becomes important. To those who need more to achieve the same, in an equitable society, more should be given. Progress towards equality may then reside in assisting people in building their own capability and removing obstacles to them doing that. The nature of those obstacles will vary. For some it will be a lack of freedom; for others it will be a lack of marketable skills, or perhaps the legacy of a disrupted and disrupting upbringing which failed to inculcate hardy habits and a commitment to the dignities of hard work. So as far as the provision of support to vulnerable people is concerned, approaches that will increase people’s capability, not just their income or employment are needed. It is legitimate and not too grandiose to ask what contribution a particular activity might make to increasing an individual’s capability and ultimately their greater freedom to live the life, as Amartya Sen would put it, they have reason to value.

64. Michael Young is responsible for the famous equation merit = talent + effort. See The Rise of Meritocracy, Thames&Hudson. 1958.
Figure 6 represents the journey from skills to freedom. It is important to stress that this can be a short journey in time. Work is not all about status and class. Work is all about what it does for you. Someone who works in a shop or a pub may have all the remuneration, capability, self-respect and freedom they want. It depends on the shop or pub – and how they feel about being there. Conversely, a highly paid merchant banker working unsociable hours, in fiendish competition with his colleagues and too tired to have any meaningful emotional contact with his friends and family may have remuneration but he won't have much else.
10. Homes, not housing

Organisations providing services to homeless and vulnerable people who are members of the other groups under discussion here – people with mental health problems, ex-offenders and people with physical or learning disabilities – for many years focused principally on the provision of housing and to a lesser extent on care. The belief was that someone who had somewhere secure to live would then be able to get on with the rest of their life with little further assistance. Their housing was seen as a springboard. If they needed more long-term or permanent support, the main goals of that support were security and protection. In recent times the focus has become more wide angle to incorporate ideas like ‘independent living’ and ‘empowerment’.

The importance of community

A house is not a home without one or two other things. More than just a roof over their heads, people want to feel safe and secure in their home. Whether or not they feel that depends to a great degree on the neighbourhood; not just what is in the home, but what is near it, or to be more precise, who is near it? Notably people need to feel themselves in some ways tied to other people living nearby. In a hostel or supported housing environment people live in close proximity, in the main under the same roof, with many other people with whom they usually share aspects of a common problem and perhaps also aspects of a common identity. When they move out they may know no one in the new place they live and, if they don’t know them, they are unlikely to know of anything they may have in common with them. Places full of strangers are inevitably felt to be places full of dangers. The less confident and independent an individual feels the more anxious they are likely to feel about these perceived dangers. Houses are turned into homes when people feel themselves to be part of the community or neighbourhood in which they are located. How is that to be achieved? Michael Young wrote up what he saw as the three growing points of community in what was to be his final book, with my help.

Stability of residence

People living in a place for a short time as a transient will be unusual if they develop any great attachment to the place or the people who live there. Even people sleeping rough tend to return to the same place to sleep, sometimes for several years, and get to know others in similar circumstances nearby. Staying anywhere for a length of time, particularly if it should last for years, starts to give rise to the feeling that that is the place you belong, a place you can

---

65. Jane Jacobs in The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961) first noted that one of the key characteristics of city life was the need to get on with larger numbers of people you don’t know who are in every way very near you. Anyone who has seen Alfred Hitchcock’s film, Rear Window will know how easily one can become mistrustful, perhaps even paranoid, about overlooking strangers nearby. These fears are generally more justified in movies than in real life.

66. Young, M., and Lemos, G., The Communities We Have Lost and Can Regain, Lemos&Crane. 1997
identify with which may become part of your identity. Stability of residence is therefore the first key. People living in supported housing for years who stay longer than intended for want of anywhere else to go may have had stability of residence and got used to the other residents, staff and surroundings. Little wonder then that they find it difficult to contemplate ‘moving on’.

**Multi-generational communities**

The second key element in making a place feel like a community is having residents from all generations. Few people know or are bothered about each other in neighbourhoods where the residents are all similar ages with similar lifestyles. Paradoxically similarity leads to distance and alienation. Older people who don’t work any more and parents with smaller children out and about enliven the daytime streets. People are friendly; the place feels safe. A neighbourhood used to be defined as the area covered by the distance someone could push a pram without feeling too exhausted, say 15 or 20 minutes. That definition probably still holds good. Babies are objects of universal affection. The friendly and attentive passer-by easily summons up their sense of dependent affection. They are also a sign of hope for the future of a community. Children at primary school know each other and, by dint of having to deliver and collect them to and from school, their parents get to know each other too.

The absence of these different generations with their lives tied together across families and communities creates an empty, eerie feeling in some neighbourhoods, even in some prosperous areas. It feels like a ghost town, populated only at the weekend. In the week it’s just a barracks for the labour market soldiers who disappear for all the day and most of the evening to their various and far-flung professional assignments.

**Kith and kin**

The third element of community is added when kin is added to kith. If a parent has several children and some of them stay living not far away in the same neighbourhood a local kinship group is in the making. When and if the children become parents, often forming loving and lasting partnerships with someone nearby in their turn, a further and even more important strand is added to the web of human ties. Neighbours and friends become family in due course – uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents. Living near members of your extended family greatly enhances the feeling that you are part of the local community.

Vulnerable people, partly as a result of their problems and the life that the problems have led them to live, may not have these local bonds and ties. They may not be plugged into the networks of mutual aid already described. Those local groups and community centres are full of strangers. For a house, independent of support and not shared with other vulnerable people, to start to feel like a home, professional staff may need to provide information about local activities and groups, initiate contact, accompany people on initial encounters and in a number of other seemingly small but significant ways, ensure that vulnerable people in a new
home start to feel themselves part of that wider community in which they may, given a little time and support, want to stay. At present a significant proportion quit their new homes shortly after moving into them, hence considerable government funding for supported housing agencies’ work to sustain the tenancies of vulnerable people. Figure 7 shows how accommodation is only the first factor in deciding whether a house is felt to be a home. The resident also needs to feel safe in the area, to be near people they know and like and to be part of what’s going on in the neighbourhood.

Figure 7: Circles of community
PART TWO
PRACTICE
11. Linking concepts to practice

The early chapters have, in overview, stressed the importance of understanding the vulnerable person needing support as a whole, a multi-faceted individual with a complex identity and with social and emotional aspirations as well as practical ones. In addition I have sought to draw attention to the need to understand and support vulnerable people, not just as individuals but also as members of families, communities and groups of friends.

In summary, the four collections of concepts that I have described as the components of a good and virtuous life that vulnerable people, along with everyone else, might aspire to are:

- Positive identity and self-worth
- Lasting and loving relationships
- Family and friends
- Housing, work and practical skills.

These aspirations, once understood, need then to be located within the processes and structures of organisations that support vulnerable people in order to be given practical life. When a vulnerable person applies to, or is referred to, a statutory or voluntary agency for support, they will be asked, or perhaps obliged to engage in a series of processes. In the first instance, they will be asked to undertake a ‘needs assessment’. This, as the judgmental description implies, is likely to focus on their problems and shortcomings and their history of problems and shortcomings. An element of that assessment will be the extent to, and the ways in which, the individual might represent a risk to themselves and to others. Once that process is complete, a plan will be made for the support the agency might be able to offer them and an individual member of staff (the key worker) will be responsible for implementing the support plan. Not all the support will be provided by the principal agency and the key worker who has drawn up the support plan. They may refer the person to other agencies for more specialist assistance, in relation to mental health, drug or alcohol needs, for example, and draw in other services.
The intention is that, over a period of time, the individual client or service user (rarely referred to as a customer) will grow more independent. Perhaps, if they have been living in a hostel or shared house, they will have been eating meals cooked for them, not doing their own cleaning, not paying their own bills and so on. After a while and with support the person may be able to live in a flat on their own, attend training or get a job if they have not had one. When they are approaching this point a resettlement plan will be drawn up between staff and the individual. Once they are living in a more independent setting they may continue to receive some ‘floating’ support for a while, that is less frequent, less intensive and not continuously on the spot. At the end of this long journey, which might take several years, they are returned to the state of citizenship that the rest of society enjoys. From the perspective of the client or service user they have essentially been through three stages, all of which will have required their consent and co-operation. At the first stage they will have been ‘assessed’ by the agency but they will also, in their own mind, have made an agreement to abide by the requirements stated or implied as a condition of receiving the service. Once they have become a client they will receive support and, when they move on, they don’t anticipate complete independence (no one does) but rather interdependence with others: partners, family and friends. That could be described as ‘the user journey’. This interlocking framework of concepts, organisational structures and processes and user experiences could be seen as the ‘whole system’ of supporting vulnerable people. It is set out diagrammatically in figure 8.
Figure 8: The proposed system for supporting vulnerable people

- Housing, work and practical skills
- Family and friends
- Lasting and loving relationships
- Positive identity and self-worth

Concept

Social and emotional aspirations

Organisational processes

Support planning

Needs and risk assessment

Key-working

Referral and partnerships

Resettlement plan

Sustainable outcome

Assessment and agreement

Support

Independence and interdependence

User journey

Housing, work and practical skills

Positive identity and self-worth

Lasting and loving relationships

Family and friends

Social and emotional aspirations

Figure 8: The proposed system for supporting vulnerable people
In the chapters that follow I seek to translate the concepts already described into the key stages of the interaction and relationships between the clients and the organisation and its staff. The ideas have emerged from discussion in the action research. The practitioners and organisations that participated in the action research are already doing some of what is described here; some are doing most of it. The website that develops the ideas in this book is www.SupportActionNet.org.uk.
12. Values and principles

**Personalised approaches / Aspirations as well as needs / Maximising choice / Minimising bureaucracy / Respecting privacy**

Values are beliefs in action. As has already been discussed in the first chapter, underlying assumptions and social trends have an impact, sometimes implicit, on the approach to and the delivery of the support services. So, before considering the precise approaches to assessment, support, and resettlement, the underpinning values need to be established.

**Personalised approaches**

The person receiving the service is a complete individual with a history and an identity, perhaps different identities in different situations. Their own perspectives on their needs and aspirations, social and emotional as well as practical, should be at the centre of planning and delivering services. They are not merely a collection of problems. Personalised approaches to assessment, support and independent living need to take into account the whole person, not just their problems.

**Aspirations as well as needs**

Focusing only on needs may define an individual as a set of problems and labels, rather than as a person with an identity and a sense of self-worth. Everyone has dreams and aspirations, going beyond practical ambitions like jobs and flats. Personal and emotional goals, such as in relationships or friendships, are also likely to be part of what people want to achieve. Not all may be immediately realistic or achievable, but taking initial steps, however tentative, towards long-term aspirations must be a good thing in itself.

**Maximising choice**

While funding or other external restrictions may place limitations on the choices available to service users, agencies will want, wherever possible, to give people a choice over their circumstances and lifestyle. Choice can easily be denied out of bureaucratic habit or for greater staff convenience. For example, people might reasonably expect a choice over where and with whom they live. The response that local authorities nominating clients to houses will not accept the service user having any choice is an unconvincing answer. User involvement in decision-making, on committee or in consultation forms is not the same as, or a substitute for, individual choice. Any sensible organisation will want to consult and involve customers or clients in planning and delivering services to ensure they are relevant and sensitive, but people
will also understandably want a more direct say in specific decisions that affect the quality of their own lives. They would get such a choice in commercial situations in which they were a customer. They might now even get a choice if they were moving into permanent rented housing without support.

**Minimising bureaucracy**

A certain amount of form filling is needed for record keeping and information sharing between staff and agencies supporting a service user, but agencies will want to minimise the paperwork, the use of language that people cannot understand and intrusive and unsupportive questioning. Again, the guiding principle will be making record keeping and information sharing as personal as possible.

**Respecting privacy**

Service users have a right to privacy. Relevant personal information can be disclosed at a time and in a way they choose. Confidentiality of information about service users should also not be used by agencies as a way of failing to share information with other agencies, with the result the service user is forced to repeat themselves and their problems endlessly. Disclosure of private information either within the agency or to other agencies should be with the client’s consent.
13. Needs, aspirations and agreements

Introduction

When someone is referred to or approaches an agency for help they may be treated – even unwittingly – as an ‘applicant’ who needs to be ‘assessed’. This approach emphasises and repeats people’s problems and can easily have the effect of labelling people as having no other identity than their collection of problems. After endless repetitive descriptions of their problems, people may themselves start to believe that their problems are the most important part of their identities. The focus therefore should be on understanding needs rather than assessing and describing problems. As well as needs people also have aspirations: things that are personal to them which they want to achieve. These might be things that other people think insignificant, such as going out at least once a day and overcoming agoraphobia. They might have more practical aspirations, such as passing their driving test. Or they might be more long-term goals, such as finding a partner and settling down. The initial set of encounters between a potential service user and a member of staff from an agency can be seen as a one-way process: the agency decides whether that person is a suitable recipient of their service. In fact, the potential service user will also want to decide whether the service is suitable for them. It is a mutual assessment. They will want to understand what they might get from the service, but also what they might be expected to give and how they will be expected to behave. An agreement can be made between the individual and the agency setting out clear expectations and obligations for both sides.

Housing options as well as needs

Service users will want information on all the housing options available to them. The focus should not be exclusively on social housing. This might include returning to their previous home with their family; shared or self-contained accommodation in the private rented sector as well as temporary supported housing and permanent social housing. Home ownership, including low cost or shared ownership, may also be an option for some people, if not immediately, then in the longer term. To give information about these possibilities staff will require accurate and up-to-date information about all available local accommodation options.
in all sectors and tenures. They will also want to discuss all choices with service users and to record their preferences. They may also assist with referral to other accommodation agencies if necessary and be willing to act as a companion or an advocate for the service user in dealing with other landlords or agencies.

**Stretching aspirations**

As well as needs, service users’ aspirations will also be discussed with staff. For example, do they have problems or other challenges other than finding housing they want to get on top of, such as mental health difficulties or using alcohol or drugs? They may also be interested in training or finding a job. Taking up new interests; making new friends and perhaps finding a partner might also be important. Overall, people might wish to become more self-confident, have a greater sense of self-worth and to think differently about themselves. Since some of these issues are rather personal, service users may be reluctant to discuss or disclose them with staff or others on first encounter. Even after that if they feel they will not be listened to or taken seriously they may still be apprehensive. When asked about their aspirations, service users might say what they think the member of staff wants to hear. They may say, for example, that their highest aspiration is somewhere secure to live. Their experiences of homelessness and other traumas and vulnerabilities may also have had the effect of denting their self-confidence and lowering their sense of what they could achieve.

**Achievable expectations**

It is important for service users to have dreams, to talk about them and to feel that they are changing and their lives are changing in a way that helps them to fulfil these dreams. People need also to be realistic. Otherwise they will be disappointed and that may be demotivating for the future.

In implementing this approach support staff will want to behave at all times in a way likely to engender trust and reassure service users that their views will be listened to and respected. In order to try to ensure that people are not coy for fear of being ridiculed or thought wildly unrealistic, open questions and seeking different ways of approaching the issue of aspirations will be helpful. That way staff will get a rounded picture of people’s aspirations. Staff will also need to take care to make sensitive and empathic judgments about when it is appropriate to challenge and stretch people, to encourage them to set more demanding goals for themselves. Good recording systems which are not too bureaucratic will also be necessary.
Personal and qualitative

information can be recorded in a way the service user feels comfortable with. This may include drawings or diagrams, for example, not just writing down responses to questions. When appropriate, staff may have to suggest, in all honesty, that the service user’s goals are unrealistic. It may be that the goals themselves are hard to achieve or that the timescales are unrealistic. Like the elephant in the poem below, staff in these situations will want to help people revive from the disappointment.

Dealing with disappointment

With trunk tucked up compactly -  
the elephant’s sign of defeat -  
He resisted, but is the child of reason now.  
His straight trunk seems to say:  
When what we hoped for came to nothing,  
We revived. 67

Alongside stretching aspirations and achievable expectations comes the need to manage disappointment. Not all goals will be met at the first time of trying; some may never be met. Disappointment slides too easily into despair and hopelessness. Disappointment is sometimes an important consequence of trying hard and should not be seen as an irreversible failure. Disappointment can be seen as something to reflect on and learn from, though it may not always be possible to conceal or overcome feelings of failure.

In helping people to deal with disappointment staff will want to reassure people that their sense of disappointment is natural and understandable. They will want to discuss openly the feelings of disappointment and encourage them to consider ways of trying again. Staff can encourage people to make a realistic plan and support people in achieving that plan. (See also chapter 14.)

Employment and income

Stable employment, or training towards stable employment, is an important aspect of people becoming more independent. Work is important as a way of raising income. It also means people have interests and activities and is therefore an important protection against loneliness and boredom. The workplace is also the place where people make new friends and, in many instances, meet future partners. A string of unsatisfying and unstable jobs is unlikely to achieve any of these goals or produce any of these benefits.

For many people who have been homeless or are vulnerable, employment may not be an imminent prospect. In some cases, it may play no part in their future plans at all. For people who do not intend to seek paid employment for the time being, ensuring that they maximise income through benefits remains an important support activity.

Whether income is from work or from benefits, managing money well is essential: not spending money as soon as it received, not wasting money, avoiding or paying off debt, saving for the future and seeking value for money when buying things are all skills that people may need support in acquiring. In understanding needs and aspirations for employment and income, support staff will want to question, discuss and record current employment as well as current training being undertaken and training needed. They will also want to discuss financial capability and managing money and ways to maximise income from benefits. Future aspirations for work and the wider benefits it might bring will also be on the agenda. (See also chapter 14.)

Mental health

Many homeless people have had, or may still have, a mental health problem. Doing something about that, along with other professional agencies, is likely to feature in any needs assessment and support plan for many groups of vulnerable people, not only those who are already in the primary care of the mental health services. Often this will involve working with statutory agencies and sharing information with them. (See also chapter 14.)

Drugs and alcohol

As with mental health, working alongside other agencies to help people tackle their problems with drugs and alcohol is likely to feature in needs assessments and support plans. In relation to mental health problems, drugs and alcohol, staff need to have accurate, up-to-date information about local professional mental health services. They should also discuss and record mental health problems and needs. Support staff will also want to discuss and record services being used currently and assist in ways to ensure that people continue to use those services. Referrals to other agencies may also be appropriate, as will sharing information with other agencies, taking account of the need for privacy, but seeking to avoid a service user having to repeat the same story to several agencies. (See also chapter 14.)
Families and friends

Re-connecting with family and old friends, as well as making new friends is a central aspect of supporting people who have been homeless towards a greater degree of independence and mutual support with other people. As well as alleviating loneliness and isolation, friends and family are also important informal supporters if anything else goes wrong in the future; they are a kind of insurance policy that might prevent another crisis before it occurs. Having close links with family and friends also give service users the option of being givers as well as receivers of kindness and support.

Support staff can assist service users to map their current relationships with family and friends. They can also keep an accurate record of key relationships with family and friends in a format that is user friendly to the service user. Staff may also need to refer people to family mediation services if they feel ready to re-establish contact. If clients want to make new friends, staff can refer people to befriending services or identify interests and activities that might be the source of new friendships. (See also chapter 14.)

Loving and lasting relationships

Service users may have encountered many and frequent changes in some periods of their lives. They may find it hard to believe that services are stable and continuing because so little has been in their lives. These persistent feelings of instability may be reinforced by frequent changes of setting or staff. If changes such as these cannot be avoided, the reasons and timescales need to be fully explained. One of the main goals of key-working is to ensure that service users, many of whom may not have had strong one-to-one attachments in the past, do form stable attachments initially with staff and eventually with peers.

In the long term, a key goal in providing support is helping service users to establish and maintain strong relationships and attachments with people other than those paid to help and support them. Strong attachments to paid staff may be seen as an important first step in developing the capacity, often reduced by past experience, to form strong attachments.

As relationships and family breakdown are the most frequent causes of homelessness, many service users will have a chequered history of fragmented relationships. They may still want to try to keep in touch with former partners or the children of former relationships and start to think about ways of starting new relationships.
In having a sensitive and supportive discussion about service users’ past and present aspirations and experiences of lasting and loving one-to-one relationships staff will want to question people in a probing but non-intrusive way about their lasting and loving one-to-one relationships, in the past, in the present and their aspirations for the future. They will also want to listen carefully to people’s feelings and accounts of past and current relationships and their hopes for future relationships. The discussion of past, present and future relationships needs to be frank and nonjudgmental. Support staff will also want to validate feelings about relationships. Information about relationships needs to be accurately and thoroughly recorded. Since some service users may be in relationships currently staff will want to consider practical ways in which present relationships could be recognised and supported, for example by considering joint re-housing, a joint key-worker or a joint support plan. (See also chapter 14.)

Mutual expectations and obligations

When people apply for services such as supported housing, assessment is a two-way process. The prospective service user needs to be sure that the service is right for them, as well as the agency providing the service feeling sure that they have the skills and other resources to meet the person’s needs. In order for the prospective service user to decide whether the service is right for them, they need to be given a full briefing on what they might expect from the service. They also need to understand their obligations if they take up the service. Not only do they need to understand the expectations on them from the agency providing the services but also they need to understand their obligations to other service users.

Staff will want to listen to, understand, reflect back and agree a clear and accurate understanding of the service users’ expectations of the service. If service users’ expectations are unrealistic, such as wanting to be re-housed in a few weeks, explanations can be given about how unrealistic those expectations are. Alternative more realistic expectations need to be discussed and agreed upon. Tenancy obligations need to be fully explained as do the other rules and boundaries associated with the housing, such as any restrictions on drinking. There will also be obligations to other residents that need to be made explicit, as well as the obligations on other residents. Staff will want to explain and ensure that the person understands what they can expect from staff. The conclusions from this whole conversation need to be summarised, reflected back and agreed on.
Risk management

Agencies should by now have developed risk assessment and management frameworks. These frameworks should not be methods of avoiding risk altogether, either to the service user or to the staff. Risk assessment will be needed in considering the suitability of particular services for individual clients. In services for young people, staff will need to ensure that legal and other requirements of child protection are properly addressed in considering people’s needs and whether a particular service is suitable for them.

Making agreements

Once everyone is satisfied that they understand the obligations on them and their expectations of others, an agreement needs to be made. This agreement needs to go beyond the legal requirements of the tenancy agreement or licence and consider some of the issues mentioned above about aspirations and goals and the support they might get to help to achieve them.

In making clear, mutual agreements staff will need to clarify the expectations that the service user has of the service and ensure that the service user understands the expectations and obligations placed on them by the organisation. They will also want to ensure that the service user understands their obligations to other service users and to record the agreement in a way that the service user understands and agrees with. Staff will also want to ensure that the service user understands and agrees to the information being recorded. The service user can then be asked to sign a written confirmation to the agreement.
Introduction

During the time that somebody is a service user they will deal with a range of staff giving different kinds of assistance. Traditionally, the focus of this support has been practical: welfare benefits, finding housing, training and employment. While this practical support is important, the goals and aspirations, including social and emotional aspirations, of the individual as they themselves define them need also to be addressed by the support services being offered. A personalised or person-centred support plan will make it much easier to achieve that.

Many people will also be seeking emotional support: help with understanding their feelings and relationships – both past and present – with family, friends and partners. Some people may also need professional support with, for example, mental health problems, drugs or alcohol.

Interests and quality of life

Sometimes referred to as ‘meaningful occupation’, the importance of people rekindling old interests and cultivating new ones has begun to be recognised. After a period of disruption in their lives they may have stopped playing chess, or attending a club or whatever. Staff will want to ask about these interests and then assist people to get back in touch with these activities. Where people want to develop new resources, staff might be able to suggest new contacts, places to go or groups to join. They may need a database of local organisations and activities to be able to assist in this way.

In promoting a better quality of life staff will want to discuss people’s interests in support planning. They will also want to help service users to identify groups and activities in the organisation that they might want to become involved with, as well as groups and activities in the neighbourhood. Support staff can also assist people to make contact with groups and activities in and support people at the early stages of joining in. They can help review service user’s experiences of groups and activities in key-working sessions and if the service user is unhappy or disappointed with the groups and activities with which they have become involved, staff can support them in finding alternatives that are more suitable over a period of time.
Maximising personal potential

Not everyone will see their goals as a flat and a job. Some may not be ready for work or for living on their own. Nevertheless there will still be things that they don’t do now but they want to do and with which they might need support. Staff need to recognise that, on the one hand, people’s experience of disruption and vulnerability may have reduced their sense of what they could achieve. On the other hand, they may be encouraged to do things for example, by job centres they don’t feel comfortable with, ready for or which seem beyond reach.

In practice staff will want to listen carefully to the ways in which people express their sense of their personal potential, stretching them where appropriate and offering reassurance in a time of uncertainty. Person-centred planning approaches encourage people to express their feelings, fears and aspirations creatively without questionnaires, filling in forms and making lists. Staff can ask appropriate and probing questions, as well as reflecting back the discussion and summarising next steps at the end of each stage of the discussion, and the discussion as a whole. This approach will elicit the necessary information and structure it in a way that helps service users to think constructively about the future in a non-bureaucratic or overly formal way. Service users can, with staff help, make an action plan of activities and goals that people feel will help them to maximise their personal potential and support people in making the contacts necessary to initiate those activities. Key-working sessions can be used to review progress. In between key-working sessions staff can offer reassurance when necessary and sensitively challenge and stretch people when that is appropriate.

Dealing with disappointment

Discussing and agreeing stretching aspirations that maximise personal potential are precisely about planning for and bringing about change and not accepting the inevitability of the way things have been. However realistic the goals or carefully thought through the approaches to meeting them, people will sometimes encounter setbacks and disappointments. A vital role of the staff in these circumstances is to acknowledge the disappointment in a way that encourages people to try again and not to be permanently put off.

Service users will benefit most if staff listen carefully to what has happened, how it made people feel and their concerns and fears about doing it again. They can then discuss with staff ways of trying again which would overcome these feelings as well as making success more likely. People need to feel that disappointment is not failure and that support is available for a further attempt, perhaps in a different way. People’s goals may have become unrealistic and persistent disappointment may undermine their morale and reinforce feelings of inadequacy or impotence. In those circumstances staff may need to help service users to set more realistic goals. (See also chapter 15.)
Families and friends

Reducing isolation, loneliness and a sense of emptiness depends on the presence and support of family and friends. Re-establishing contact with family and friends, sustaining existing contacts and making new positive relationships are essential to people’s sense of self-worth and sustainable interdependence, which in part comes from other people’s affection. Family and friends are also part of the long-term informal support arrangements that people will need when they are no longer wholly reliant on formal service providers. Giving support to other people is also an important source of pride and self-worth, reinforcing a sense of usefulness alongside the frequently reinforced feeling of being someone who needs help.

In practice staff can support people in mapping and understanding their current relationships with family and friends and help service users to identify those which they want to strengthen. They can then discuss ways of strengthening these relationships by, for example, re-establishing contact with family or friends with whom service users have lost touch or have not been in contact with for a while. Staff can also discuss ways of making new friends and identify groups, activities and settings where people might make new friends.

Lasting and loving relationships

Almost everyone, whatever their background and history, wants to have a partner in life. The loving kindness of friends and family is necessary but not sufficient. Service users may have had past relationships that they want to re-establish, perhaps on a different basis to the past. There may also be children from former relationships that they want to establish or keep contact with. They may also be in current relationships. Or they may wish to think about ways of meeting someone new for the future. Staff need openly to discuss lasting and loving one-to-one relationships, both in the past and the future. Staff will also want to recognise that, after a period of instability elsewhere in their lives, the relationship with the staff may be the most stable relationship in that person’s life. As a result, some of the emotional ups and downs that go with all intimate relationships should be expected and managed. Staff will want to strike an appropriate balance between respecting boundaries and not being intrusive on the one hand and, on the other, behaving in a way that people feel they can talk openly and intimately with them. This requires listening, giving time, reflecting positively people’s emotional concerns and insights, supportive questioning and helping to plan for the future. Service users may also need assistance in thinking about and addressing aspects of their behaviour that may be barriers to forming those relationships, such as excessive consumption of alcohol, or extreme bad temper or aggression.
Staff can also help people to think positively about ways that they might meet new people and discuss, validate and review people’s efforts to meet new people and to start new relationships. This aspect of people’s lives should not be simply ignored or treated as off limits by staff. Of course, intrusive questioning should be avoided, but so should ignoring an important aspect of people’s life in the past, present and the future.

When people start relationships, they may want to talk about it. Staff should not discourage either the starting of relationships or talking about them. If someone establishes, or is already in, a relationship with someone in which they both think that the relationship will be loving and lasting, that may lead to practical requests for help, such as finding joint accommodation or a joint tenancy. If a couple is well established, positive consideration should be given to them having the same key-workers. Consideration could also be given to agreeing a joint support plan, which is jointly reviewed.

**Negative behaviour**

In some instances service users will behave in ways that either they know are negative or which other people experience as negative. This behaviour might include drinking too much and becoming aggressive or overly miserable; chaotic behaviour as a result of drug misuse; outbursts of anger or aggression; being withdrawn or anti-social. In providing effective practical support staff will benefit from recognising these patterns of behaviour and the factors that may lead up to them. They will also want to discuss such behaviour in one-to-one or key-working sessions, why they occurred and what can be done to prevent them in the future. It may also be possible to set goals as part of support planning for managing or reducing negative behaviour and to review progress in key-working sessions.

**Building positive identity and self-esteem**

A long history of problems, which often have to be repeated and re-described to newly arrived staff or to a new agency, combined with negative and stigmatising social attitudes to the people with, for example, mental health or drugs problems, can leave people feeling they have a visible label that can become part of their own identity, the way they see themselves. Older, more personal and positive identities, drawn from childhood or positive experiences in the past can recede and seem to be less relevant in the face of seemingly overwhelming and intractable problems. The turning of problems into labels is itself a problem, because the label has become an identity which is difficult to shift. A long-term break away from problems will for many people depend in part on their ability not just to be different, but to see themselves differently. It will influence their own behaviour and the way that other people behave towards them. In order to make an impact on some of these problems, staff will want to recognise negative identities and encourage people to challenge them in themselves and work towards
dislodging them. They will also want to reinforce positive identities, either from the past or new ones being created. Positive identities in the past may come from inherited qualities or chosen activities or groups, including: interests, group membership, religious or other beliefs, relationships with others, cultural background or regional or local identities. All of these can be reinforced by staff in day-to-day conversation; in setting goals in support plans and key-working sessions and in relationships with other service users, family, friends, staff and partners.

Sexuality is, of course, an important aspect of identity. Most agencies will have policies and practices to challenge discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. In addition, prejudices of other service users should not be barriers to people being open about their sexuality and that positive relationships, regardless of sexual orientation or the gender of the partners, are all validated.

It is taken for granted that attendance at places of worship and religious belief are in terminal decline in our society and may already be extinct in many people’s lives. These views need considerable qualification as far as the needs of vulnerable people are concerned. In black and minority ethnic communities religious belief and regular attendance at places of worship is far more common than among white British people. Participation in religion may be important for service users from black and minority ethnic communities. This should not be ignored by staff, simply because religious beliefs are not important aspects of the staff’s identity or social life. The views of the staff on religious belief are neither here nor there. Staff are expected, in the context of equality and diversity, to behave in a non-judgmental way in relation to ethnicity, disability, gender, sexuality, age and other issues, setting aside their own prejudices or beliefs. The same is true about religious belief. In that sense not recognising and validating people’s religious beliefs is a form of unfair discrimination.

For vulnerable people, religious communities and places can be spaces where they feel accepted and welcomed, without receiving the judgments and denigration they may feel they get elsewhere. Even if they do not subscribe enthusiastically to the beliefs of the community they may get support, serenity and comfort from religious attendance and religious communities. All the more so if they do have strong religious beliefs.

While there may be a decline in organised religion, there is a rise in alternative and more personal ways of expressing spirituality. That tendency is widespread across society and is important for many people, including many vulnerable people. In needs assessment, support planning and reviewing, staff will need to include religious belief, spirituality, and participation in religious groups. For some people it will not be important to them.

For others it will already be an important part of their lives and staff should validate, encourage and give practical and facilitative help to people who seek it. There will be some people who want to start to engage in religious activity, even though they have not in the past. Staff should
assist them with that and will need information about local religious groups to be able to signpost people to those groups. Staff can also assist in making contact with local religious groups or places of worship and make introductions, and accompany people if necessary, to their first few visits to new religious groups or places of worship. Most agencies will have policies and procedures that seek to discourage discrimination on the grounds of racial background. Recognising and valuing cultural diversity goes beyond simply avoiding unfair treatment. People’s cultural identities, if they are from a minority ethnic group, may mean those with whom an individual closely identifies are not around in their current situation. Those people who are around may look different, speak a different language, have different religious beliefs and their values may also be different. Staff will want to make sure that being different is not seen as a negative thing, making people inferior or feeling that they have to comply with group norms to avoid being stigmatised or picked upon.

In their day-to-day contact with service users of diverse backgrounds, staff should not ignore difference, but be inquisitive as well as polite and encourage people to express differences positively. Staff will also want to ensure that specific needs in relation to diet or religious observance are met and to encourage other service users and staff to be positive and inquisitive about difference. Staff can also encourage group activities which are based around the individual’s lifestyle so that they do not always feel like they are a minority of one, for example encouraging them to prepare their own food for everyone to share; discuss photographs or personal histories and journeys. This will also help other service users and staff to understand the individual better.

Practical independent living skills

If people are to move on from shared or institutional living they will need some practical skills such as shopping and preparing food; managing household equipment; managing money and the benefits system; understanding and managing their own health needs; being well informed about local primary care services.

Basic skills: numeracy and literacy

Many homeless and vulnerable people have missed out on basic education and have not acquired basic skills in literacy and numeracy. They may have successfully concealed this fact for many years. It is nevertheless a serious handicap in managing day-to-day life, as well as an almost insuperable obstacle to anything other than casual and poorly paid work.

Staff will want to be discreet and diplomatic in finding out whether a service user has a problem with basic literacy and numeracy. If service users are to be open, they will need to trust the staff. If so, staff will want to encourage them to participate in training activities to help them acquire these skills either within the supported housing organisation or elsewhere.
Drugs and alcohol

Most agencies now have clear boundaries and rules in different settings about the use of drugs and the consumption of alcohol, as well as a clear understanding about their attitudes to breaches of these rules. They also have arrangements in place for referring service users to specialist help if they need it.

Mental health

Similarly, most agencies now have approaches to recording people’s mental health needs and arranging for support from mental health professionals if necessary.

Health and well-being

Health and well-being is not simply the absence of illness and access to primarily health care when needed. It is also healthy diets, regular exercise and reducing bad habits like smoking, excessive drinking and over eating. Health and well-being are also influenced by whether people have friends and convivial activities in their lives.

Staff will want to ensure that support plans cover promoting good health and this is part of the goals that people set for themselves and to review these support plans regularly. Some people may need to receive specialist help or attend more focused therapeutic activities, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, to deal with particular health problems. Staff need information about these services locally and to have referral arrangements in place.

Training and sustainable employment

Having skills and getting a job are important in themselves. They bring a sense of pride and normality, leading a normal life in a mainstream setting. They also bring social benefits, of reducing loneliness and isolation and meeting new people and joining a social circle, which is often a feature of workplace life. Work is also a way of distracting people from the bad habits associated with isolation and boredom.

Staff will want to find out what skills people have and to identify the skills they have a realistic chance of acquiring. Staff can also signpost people, with help from agencies such as Job Centres, towards training and employment opportunities and help people not to get stuck in a series of casual, poorly paid jobs, but instead use those kinds of employment opportunities to work towards a more secure, satisfying working environment which will bring service users nearer to their social and emotional aspirations and give them more control over their lives and more freedom over future choices.
Working with other agencies

In order for the concepts and values already described to be consistently sustained and therefore to have a lasting impact, integrating a focus on aspirations, identity, lasting and loving relationships, family and friends, homes and work has to be implemented throughout the systems, structures and approaches to working with service users. In addition, people may need access to specialist support or services such as further education or training, job-seeking services, family mediation, or counselling. To achieve this staff need up-to-date and accurate information about local services. They will also need to have referral arrangements in place and to support people in making contact with other agencies and establishing a relationship with these services.
15. Independence and interdependence

Interests and quality of life / Family and friends in the wider community / Stable one-to-one relationships and partnerships / Personally appropriate interdependence with others: being a giver as well as a receiver / Housing options and tenancy sustainment / Training and sustainable employment

Interests and quality of life

In chapters 13 and 14 mention has already been made of the importance of ensuring that support plans encourage service users to think, not just about housing, training and employment, but also about interests and quality of life. They are important as ways of dealing with loneliness and boredom, as well as contributing to a sense of health and well-being and helping people to form new relationships.

All of that is just as true when someone moves into more independent circumstances, living on their own or in an environment where less on the spot support is available. Without interests, relationships and a good quality of life people may feel that they were better off in shared housing, which was more convivial and there was more support on offer. They may even feel that rough sleeping is a better alternative. Street networks, even if they are destructive and chaotic, can seem preferable to isolation and boredom. Hence, sustaining the tenancy needs a focus on interests and quality of life as well as practical things like accommodation, benefits and employment.

Staff engaged in resettling service users in permanent accommodation in the community note that people who have been working towards a flat on their own sometimes experience a feeling of disappointment. Things haven’t turned out the way they’d hoped. In order to avoid feelings of disappointment, a sense of isolation or boredom or the breakdown of the tenancy and a move back to the streets or elsewhere, staff will want to ensure in discussions about where people may move to, when and in what parts of the discussion or series of discussions, their interests and quality of life are also taken into account. In planning the move, staff will also want to take steps to identify local groups and activities in the place that people are moving to with whom the person can be put in touch. As part of supporting people once they have moved, staff can review the extent to which they have identified suitable local activities and groups, suggesting alternatives if necessary.
Family and friends in the wider community

In order for people to feel they belong in a neighbourhood and community that is new to them, having friends or family nearby and easily accessible will be a significant contributory factor. Unfortunately, local authorities take little account of the need to be near friends and family in their nomination and allocation arrangements for social housing. Nevertheless staff should bear in mind, when people move into more independent settings, the need to encourage and support them in retaining links with old friends and family and to help people to make new friends, by becoming involved in local activities and pursuing their interests locally.

If people have been sleeping rough or been in temporary accommodation for a long time, they will no doubt have made friends among other people living in supported housing. If these relationships are positive and healthy, they will want to keep in touch with those people. On the other hand, they may want to move away from some of these relationships formed in an environment of shared vulnerability and form new relationships with people of different backgrounds and experiences to their own. In planning for independence and interdependence, supporting people in achieving it and reviewing progress, staff will want to seek as far as possible to ensure that the new accommodation is in a neighbourhood in which people have friends and family so they will not be isolated or lonely. They will also want to ensure that move on and resettlement arrangements help people to keep in touch with friends and family. Opportunities can also be created for people to engage in activities and join groups that will help them to meet new friends and make new relationships.

Stable one-to-one relationships and partnerships

If people have formed lasting and loving relationships while they have been homeless or living in temporary accommodation, every effort needs to be made to ensure that move-on accommodation allows that relationship to flourish. This might include joint rehousing in permanent accommodation.

Staff will want to make joint resettlement plans for people in relationships and seek joint accommodation options for people in relationships. If people do not feel ready to live together, they can be helped to seek accommodation arrangements that make it practically possible for them to keep the relationship going. If people are interested in forming new relationships, staff can help them to identify groups and activities in which they can participate that create the possibility of meeting someone suitable.
Personally appropriate interdependence with others: being a giver as well as a receiver

No one is wholly independent. To a greater or lesser extent everyone is reliant on other people for things that people find it difficult to do for themselves or which the other person finds easier. In return, most people will help and support others, not necessarily in the same way or at the same time. Such reciprocal arrangements are healthy and beneficial, not just for the help received, but also because being a giver gives the giver a sense of self-worth and confidence. If people have such mutually dependent relationships, living near to those whom they help or by whom they are helped will make it a great deal easier to sustain those reciprocal benefits.

People who have been receivers of services for a long time should also be encouraged to think of themselves as givers by becoming volunteers, for example.

Staff will want to take into account the interdependent mutually supportive relationships that people have and seek to ensure that, in the resettlement arrangements made, those mutually beneficial arrangements can be practically sustained. They will also want to encourage people to volunteer and make a contribution to their communities, perhaps through faith communities and other voluntary and community organisations.

Housing options and tenancy sustainment

Whether a particular housing option is suitable at the time someone moves in and remains what they want thereafter depends on factors other than the property itself. Even if the accommodation is suitable in terms of size and amenities, proximity also matters: whether it is near to people and activities that improve quality of life and peace of mind.

In considering housing options, staff will want to take into account location of the accommodation and how it fits in with people’s relationships with friends, families and partners and with their interests. They will also want to consider proximity to support services, for example, for mental health or drugs.

Training and sustainable employment

Training for employment or having a job and an income are important factors in preventing people becoming homeless or vulnerable again. An income provides desirable financial independence. Going to college or work provides structure and interest for the day, as well as opportunities to meet people and socialise. Perhaps most important of all, work can make people feel that they are participants in mainstream society, no longer outsiders, excluded or alienated. In helping people to move on from supported housing services staff will want to take into account whether the housing options being considered will make it possible for people to
keep up the training and employment commitments they have entered into. If people are not in training and employment, resettlement plans will need to consider those options. As part of resettlement and tenancy sustainment, staff could seek to encourage people to participate in training or to seek work, helping them with contacts, signposts and referrals where necessary.

Afterword

The world in which I think we all live, which I hope I have described, is one in which people value mobility, change and growth. Over the lifecycle, the good and virtuous life is not to be lived statically, ending where it started, the next generation continuing where the last one left off. I have attempted throughout this book to draw the lives of vulnerable people into that world of aspiration and social mobility that is the modern condition. Life, as it were, is lived as a ladder, hence the title of this book. For vulnerable people the ladder may seem shaky and uncertain; progress, if at all, is slow and hesitant and, of course, they may not get the right help. We are all more or less on the same ladder of life. The activities of supporting vulnerable people should steady their ladder.
Appendix

Recruiting, Developing and Managing Staff

Parts One and Two have linked concepts to practice. This appendix focuses on the staffing aspects of giving life to these concepts and practices. Staff with relevant attitudes, aptitudes, values and skills need to be recruited, developed, supervised and appraised to fulfil these expectations. In addition, staff in support settings are in such close proximity to and in such frequent contact with service users that inevitably their behaviour is scrutinised and, to some degree, emulated by service users. Conscious of this, staff should seek to model good behaviour. No organisation should be satisfied simply with minimal compliance by their staff. They should seek firstly improvement and eventually excellence. Set out below are the approaches to staff and their management that would make a reality of the suggestions already made.

Competency framework

1. Interpersonal competencies

Listed below are the competencies required in staff doing direct, face-to-face work with service users in support situations.

- Building trust and empathy
- Listening
- Questioning
- Structuring and ordering responses
- Summarising and reflecting back
- Offering reassurance and security
- Encouragement
- Challenging sensitively
- Good judgment about stretching people
- Making clear, realistic agreements
- Empowering support and practical advocacy, for example, accompanying people to new encounters
- Structured review.
2. Technical competencies

- Record keeping
- Information sharing internally and with other agencies
- Investigating resources
- Joint working with partner agencies
- Risk assessment and management
- Working within structured frameworks.

3. Knowledge

- Organisational compliance structures, for example, nondiscrimination and equality of opportunity, health and safety, data protection
- Welfare benefits
- Health and well-being
- Mental health
- Drugs and alcohol support
- Employment and training.

Organisations will want to ensure that the competency framework is integrated into the staff management activities that follow.

Recruitment and selection

Organisations will want to ensure that the interpersonal competencies are tested in a thorough and rigorous way, either by using comprehensive, structured interviews, drawing on examples from previous life or work experience, discussed in detail and from different perspectives. Alternatively, role plays or observed group exercises will also provide valuable data on interpersonal competencies. Psychological and psychometric testing could also provide important evidence about past and future behaviour.

Technical competencies and knowledge can be acquired after joining, provided staff have the aptitude. Practical exercises as part of assessment techniques will provide evidence of that. Short panel interviews are unlikely to provide the range of information and evidence needed to make a good recruitment decision. They can be used as a way of confirming evidence got through other more rigours and detailed assessment techniques.
Induction

Induction should cover,

• Organisational values, policies and procedures
• Working with a line manager on day-to-day practice in the job
• Working alongside a more experienced member of staff
• Acquiring knowledge relevant to job
• Handover of relevant information.

Short and uniform induction programmes are unlikely to achieve this. Induction is a one-to-one management activity between a line manager and a member of staff. Structured inputs in workshops or through online training modules may be part of it, but the responsibility for ensuring that induction has taken place lies with the individual and their manager.

Staff development and learning

As with induction, attending standardised courses is one of the least effective ways of learning, particularly about interpersonal competencies. Learning is most effectively done on the job with the help and support of a more experienced person. The more experienced person may also act as a mentor. Action learning, discussing problems with colleagues in a structured setting and resolving on action that is then reviewed at a future date, is also a proven technique for improving practice and simplifying organisational processes. Job swaps and secondments are also useful in-depth learning experiences about ways of working in other settings and other organisations.

Staff supervision

Manager should meet regularly with their staff one to one at a pre-arranged date, undisturbed for an agreed period of time and with an agreed agenda. That agenda should include,

Reviewing progress on support plans for service users

• Learning needs
• Reviewing agreed targets and goals
• Team relationships
• Action planning before the next one to one with the manager.
Performance management and appraisal

At least every six months and no less frequently than every year, managers will want to meet their staff for a structured discussion about,

- Reviewing work done in the last period
- Plans for the forthcoming period
- Personal goals and targets
- Learning needs
- Any other concerns that the member of staff or the manager may have.

Performance appraisals should always result in an action plan, which will be reviewed at the next appraisal.

Modelling positive behaviour

As well as specific job competencies, making action plans and meeting goals and targets, staff are expected to model positive behaviour that reflects the organisation’s values and does credit to the organisation’s reputation, particularly with service users. Many organisations have enshrined these expectations in a staff code of conduct. Without being too prescriptive, staff need to recognise that they are, in some ways, role models for service users, who will want to think about and experience different ways to lead their lives. So modelling positive behaviour in support settings would include the following, which is not an exhaustive list,

Not smoking in front of service users and only in designated places

- Not swearing
- Being courteous
- Patience and managing anger
- Not using drugs or illegal substances
- Not drinking too much alcohol
- Being friendly, but not socialising inappropriately.
Validating excellence

Some staff will do more than is expected of them, develop skills over and above those they need and make a wider contribution to the organisation. Many organisations have few ways to acknowledge or celebrate excellence except pay rises and promotion but they may have wider organisational ramifications. Acknowledgement through awards, publicity on the intranet or at the staff conference for example can make a significant contribution to staff motivation.