Liveable Lives

Making the links between small acts of kindness and loneliness

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Some key themes (and possible links)

• *Noticing*: the challenge of researching topics that are both mundane and highly significant

• *Not so random acts*: seeing kindness as a social issue

• *Affective risk*, and why there are more helpers than ‘helpees’

• *You can’t legislate for kindness*, or why this issue can’t be addressed head on
Spraying water on the web

• Three windows onto Glasgow: Maryhill, Hillhead and Bearsden
• Multiple methods, but a core of 2-part interviews with 44 individuals
• Methods for noticing the unnoticed
Logging kindness

• A way of noticing the things we don’t notice
• Not ‘dear diary’ or a rigorous record but an aide memoire
• The power of noticing

I guess I quite liked the fact that it showed me that people do help each other out on a daily basis really, but it’s a subconscious thing. And so it’s quite nice to see actually: you might think you’re alone, but then you see all these different situations where you’re helping or people are helping you.

Sophie, Bearsden
Unpacking the ordinary

- Not taking for granted the taken for granted
- Simple acts - complex origins, emotions, consequences
- Everyday help and support as inseparable from relationships
This stuff *matters*: the infrastructure of kindness
Not so random acts of kindness?
Three (sociological) lenses for looking at everyday help and support

**Context/structures:**
spaces, places and communities

**Life stories:**
biography and life course

And the stories we tell about all three

**Relationships and interactions:**
navigating and negotiating help and support
Place (still) matters...

- Residential environments
- Public spaces and third places
- Local cultures of neighbourliness and support
But the stories we tell are important too
See us... Glasgow-wegians? We're more friendly than the English people. That's the honest truth. If you go to England, nobody wants to know you. But if you come to Glasgow, they're all friendly. Every part is friendly, as far as I know that. They're all friendly. So nobody can neglect you. If you're lost, they'll tell you the way. If you're looking for something, they'll help you. Or, if you need help, they will help you. I've already helped lots of people – the older people – like carrying bags.

Fatima, 40–49, Maryhill
The middle layer: groups, organisations and associations as ‘junction boxes’

• Key role in promoting interaction
  • But access is not equal and not a case of ‘build it and they will come’

• Corporate and commercial settings can be sites of ordinary kindness too
  • What often matters here are the moment where people move beyond the script – points of human connection

• Same organisational setting/different significance – or why no two Tesco stores are the same
I cannae afford to go into half the cafes in Byres Road, you know? It’s just far too expensive. So I’d rather go back up to Maryhill and I walk through to Partick, you know, because there’s got normal cafes there... Instead o’ having a roll and sausage, you know, it’s ciabatta rolls, and ciabatta this, you know? I like all that kinda food as well, but it’s just so expensive sometimes, you know? And just being able to sit in [a] cafe and pass the time o’ day wi’ somebody, you know, just to chat and ask somebody how they are.

Focus group participant, Hillhead
Experiences of everyday help and support can be radically changed by life events and stages.
It’s been very quiet now for 10 days. [I’ve] absolutely nothing to record in my help and support log. I hadn’t been out the house and I’ve had no contact with anybody, and I haven’t phoned anyone, and the only phone call I’ve received in 10 days has been from you to make this appointment.

Ivan, 60–69, Maryhill
If you’re young, fit, you’ve got a car, lots of money and all these kinds of things… there’s a different range of things that people can ask you to help with; the less you have, the less people perceive that you… you know, the different things that they might be asking you for. In the past I’ve been asked to do all sorts of things but there you go.

Ivan, 60–69, Maryhill

But since we’ve had children, and you’re involved in the school, and you get to know all the parents in the school, it’s kind of changed as a place for us, and it’s much more a community than it probably was beforehand… Now that we’ve got kids there’s much more focus – it’s almost like your world shrinks, really, to your local place… in a good way, really.

Joanne, 40–49, Bearsden

When I [became disabled], I started to kinda be more helpful. Obviously [before], I was busy daein’ things’.

Suzie, 50–59, Maryhill
It’s complicated: navigating and negotiating everyday help and support
Simple acts, but complex emotions and moral considerations: the rules of helping

In principle, we should help other people

But we should be stoical in the face of our own difficulties

And certain conditions should be respected:
  • The need for help should be genuine
  • The need for help should not have resulted from the individual’s own actions or behaviour
  • Some people should be asked or expected to help before others
  • We should help those who help us
Well, to me, I ask a daughter or son to do a thing for me, before I would ask strangers or have acquaintances or friends... Why would it be more difficult to ask? Well, just because I’m frightened in case they say to you, ‘Your family, why are you no ask[ing] your family?’.

Bonnie, 70–79, Maryhill
Reciprocity and risk

- Reciprocity is key but it does not have to be like for like
  - Can be deferred, transferred and indirect
  - Mutuality as a form of indirect reciprocity
    
    *I met one friend who was widowed young the same as I was, so I suppose whenever we have a conversation, it is a mutual support.*
    
    *Dorothy, 60–69, Bearsden*

- A risky business, but what kind of risk?
  - Affective risk, affective trust
  - Often slow to build but quick to dissipate
    - Background emotions and hot emotions
The skills of helping and being helped

• Helping ‘by the by’
• Not putting others out
• Offering help before it has to be asked for
• Helping the helper
• Giving people the option of saying no
I think the first day, he was a bit embarrassed that we were cleaning his house and things, but I said to him, ‘You know? You’re doing me a favour,’ I said, ‘because I like cleaning, so therefore don’t look at it as if I’m doing you a favour. You’re helping me because I like doing it, so it’s not a problem.’

Mary, 30–39, Bearsden
Like when I was looking after the elderly neighbour, he didn’t feel as if he was being looked after, I don’t think. You don’t want them to, you don’t want people to realise they’re needing a lot of help. You do it by the by.

Claudia, 60–69, Hillhead
I offered it instead letting him ask because it’s much harder for somebody to ask, in my opinion, if you’re struggling with money... People like to think in general, I think, that ‘I run my life, I’ve got everything sussed out, I can do this, I can do that and I’m organised’. But when it comes to the crunch that you do need help... well, for me personally, it’s like I don’t wanna ask.

Matthew, 40–49, Hillhead
“You can't legislate or mandate kindness, you can only inspire it.”

Vivek H. Murthy

Discuss.
Promoting kinder communities: some general principles

• By all means encourage (or inspire) random kindness, but recognise its limits in the face of not so random circumstances, needs and capabilities

• No ‘one size fits all’: work with the grain of particular places, spaces and communities

• Focus on the building blocks: promote opportunities for incidental interaction and connection

• Allow people to help as a way of making it easier to accept help – don’t create rigid distinctions between helpers and ‘helpees’

• Anticipate the ways in which changes in life circumstances affect both needs and capacities

• Promote social mindfulness by noticing, acknowledging what already happens, and seeing where the gaps are

• Strengthen the middle layer – in all its forms

• Make kindness a by-product, not the thing you are aiming at

• Create the conditions... or at least avoid damaging them!
Outputs from the study


• Brownlie, J., & Spandler, H. (forthcoming). ’Materialities of mundane care and the art of holding one’s own’ *Sociology of Health & Illness*. 
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