

LANDSCAPES OF HELPING: KINDLINESS IN NEIGHBOURHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

The giving and receiving of help within communities is an aspect of social life that is taken for granted, yet it is little researched or understood. This study explores informal helping – which we term ‘kindliness’ – in a semi-rural location in West Yorkshire, in order to understand how it can be fostered in communities.

Key points

- Attachment to place can function as important emotional ‘glue’ which fosters kindliness, but this is as much to do with imaginative identification, and narrative building, as geographical rootedness.
- As well as the social and physical environment, we also need to understand conflicting emotions and messages about help and support, and the complex ways in which people negotiate these.
- Individualism, rigid notions of self-reliance and ideals of independence can impact on people’s ability to ask for or accept help from others. This is especially important when social norms of obligation and reciprocity are lessened and people cannot rely on being helped without ‘having to ask’.
- To some degree, these broader tensions were mediated through the creation of interconnected networks; forging ‘common cause’; the renewed use of public spaces as ‘third’ spaces; the development of community facilities as ‘hubs of helping’; and creating more ‘palatable’ ways of presenting help.
- In Hebden Bridge the energy of incomers, drawing on new ideas and technologies, worked alongside older forms of neighbourhood-based community solidarity and this provided a fertile ground for the development of new networks of interdependence and mutuality.
- Having social enterprises whose business aims were about more than the ‘bottom-line’ expressed positive values about care and human connection that were shared across communities and fostered kindliness. This highlights the need to think about how the economic, as well as the social, world is organised.

The research

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INTRODUCTION

Increasing geographical mobility, economic change and the rise of an individualist culture in the UK have contributed to the loosening of close ties in communities. Communities need to evolve, to reconnect, so that people cultivate the 'background hum' of sociability that has been associated with neighbourliness. This 'background hum' is characterised by people's awareness of each other, by a respect for each other's privacy and by a readiness to take action if help is needed. In this research we define kindness as 'neighbourliness enacted' and describe the process of reconnection within communities as the 'reinvention of sociality'. Hebden Bridge's relative success in melding traditional and more contemporary forms of sociality helps to identify some broader lessons about fostering kindness in neighbourhoods and communities.

Mapping the Landscape of Helping

Hebden is made up of a mixture of settled working class communities, hill farmers and more cosmopolitan incomers including people seeking alternative lifestyles and a population who often worked within the public sector, holding pro-social and liberal values. This has created a relatively diverse population with a high level of social and cultural capital spurring many social networks and interest groups. These networks and groups did not necessarily overlap, but there was enough 'permeability' between them to foster connections within and across communities.

These connections were supported by co-operative values which were shared by both established and newer sections of the community. These values were expressed in public events that reflected an openness and general 'invitation to belong'. Such activities provided a shared focus for discussion, gave a sense of cohesion, and generated overlapping social networks. The architecture and geography of Hebden Bridge has also been key in creating such networks. Not only was the love of the landscape a unifying feature for both old and new communities, but long rows of terraces with shared access, and the town's location in a steep valley where people must descend to the centre to access services, facilitate regular social contact. There has also been a purposeful construction of public spaces such as the creation of a town square and the re-development of the town hall as a community facility. The melding of newer and older forms of co-operative business ethic also helped develop relationships of trust which fostered kindness.

Navigating the Landscape of Helping

Whilst Hebden Bridge and the surrounding parishes were largely perceived as supportive and 'helpful' places to live, individual responses were more complex and sometimes appeared contradictory. Whilst most people felt that giving help was a good thing, they simultaneously expressed a reluctance to ask for, or accept, help themselves. This reflected people's struggle to strike a balance between expressing vulnerability and maintaining their dignity. This struggle was informed by their feelings about vulnerability, self-reliance and dependency in a context that valorises independence. People often felt they had to present as capable and independent in order to maintain their dignity. The broader tensions were common, but the particular ways people negotiated them in their lives differed. We constructed narratives to illustrate specific 'orientations' to kindness.

For example, many long-established residents held a 'traditional' orientation shaped by a deeply held belief that people should be responsible for each other. This orientation prized self-reliance yet was also closely related to being able to help others. Their own close ties facilitated regular social contact and so allowed their needs to be known without 'having to ask'. Others adopted a 'rescuer' approach to kindness, helping others through a projection of their own sense of personal invulnerability. Both of these orientations played an important role in creating thick ties between people which facilitated one-to-one helping in communities. However, they could struggle if wider social conditions or personal circumstances changed, if help is no longer anticipated because of weakening social bonds, or if they suffered hardship and needed help from others.

We also noted an 'activist' orientation to kindness which focused on helping through public and civic activity. This orientation contributed to the connections between different sections of the community, however it could result in a public profile which made it difficult to ask for help. There was also a tendency amongst the 'incomer' community to express a more 'empathic' approach, seeing helping as an indirect 'virtuous cycle' of giving and receiving, not dependent on direct reciprocity. Despite the tensions people had to navigate, these orientations often worked in tandem to strengthen networks and foster kindness.

'Cultivating the Landscape of Helping'

We identified some conditions that may help kindness to flourish in communities. Social connection increases the likelihood that people will be known to one another, have their needs recognised and have people to draw on for support. Therefore, in identifying mechanisms which foster kindness we also describe those which simultaneously build neighbourliness and sociality.

Making kindness palatable – it was important that kindness was facilitated in ways which were sensitive to language and presentation. If people retained a sense of personal independence and dignity they were more likely to ask for and accept help. Non-help-focused conversations and activities could help people express their needs indirectly.

Nurturing bonders and bridgers – Hebden had many people who worked to strengthen the bonds between individual members *within* communities or 'bonders', as well as people who worked across different sections of the community or 'bridgers'. These people were important in facilitating one-to-one kindness and also creating connections between different sections of the community.

Creating a shared myth – it seemed important that people feel a strong sense of attachment to the place where they live because if they value a place they are prepared invest in it and in the people who live there. In Hebden this was built around its positive unifying features and expressed through community-wide events, communicated in local media and through newsletters and joint ventures around common interests.

Building common cause – it was important that people had opportunities to come together to articulate common values and build 'common cause' because this offered a means to break down barriers and mis-perceptions, enabling people to appreciate that they have similar values and experiences. In Hebden, communities expressed these shared values when uniting to defend the landscape or by coming together through shared interests.

Hubs of helping - a sense of community can be more easily developed when there is an identified focal point for people to share information and make contact with others. The erosion of such facilities as shops or Post Offices has been detrimental in many neighbourhoods and this research highlighted how important it is to develop ways of connecting communities. In Hebden this had taken the form of 'virtual hubs' such as Google groups or Facebook pages and the creation of a wealth of formal, group-based associations. In addition, the idea of community-run shops, pubs and other local facilities offer promising new possibilities.

Third Spaces – a conscious attempt to create public spaces where people could come into daily informal contact was key in promoting sociability and trust. Public space has long been an essential feature of urban housing design, yet it is not always ‘owned’ by people locally. It was important that the development of space tapped into the emotional connections people had with their neighbourhood.

Creating kinder economies – social enterprises whose business aims were about more than the ‘bottom-line’ worked to support local networks and facilitate helping. In Hebden this relied on people having the resources and time to develop alternative business models, as well as resist threats such as the encroachment of big corporations.

Conclusion

Kindliness cannot be considered apart from wider processes of individualisation which are often perceived as threatening social bonds. However, given certain conditions, cultures of kindliness can still be developed; based on emotional attachments, shared values and social forms that actively sustain relationships of trust and mutuality.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF’s research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of JRF.

The main report, **Landscapes of helping: kindness in neighbourhoods and communities**, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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