JRF JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

INSPIRING SOCIAL CHANGE

UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY HELP AND SUPPORT

This study examined low-level or everyday help and support and the role it can play in allowing people to lead 'liveable' lives. It explored the ways in which the need for (and availability of) such support is shaped by social context, biography and relationships. It also looked at how support actually happens (or not) and how it is sustained over time.

Key points

- Small acts of help, support and kindness were often mundane and barely noticed (even by those involved), but had fundamental consequences for individual and community well-being.
- Although this everyday help was often practical, it could have important emotional consequences, creating opportunities for talk about feelings or simply through physically 'being there'.
- The physical characteristics of residential and public spaces shaped everyday help and support by creating and restricting opportunities for engagement and civility. However, the perceived image of places and neighbourhoods also played a role in facilitating or constraining interactions.
- Individual circumstances, life stage and life events (e.g. parenting, ill health, retirement) created needs for informal help and support, but also ways of potentially meeting those needs.
- Powerful emotions and moral considerations attached to these apparently straightforward acts, particularly notions of reciprocity and who should be considered deserving of help. These surfaced most clearly when rules or expectations about helping or being helped were breached.
- Many of the perceived risks of helping or being helped related to people's concerns about their self-image or how others saw them. Strategies and practices to manage these complexities included helping 'by the by', and 'helping the helper' by accepting some offers of help even when not needed.
- Collectively, these acts and relationships of everyday help and support had an 'infrastructural' quality. They made possible other aspects of social life, but needed attention, maintenance and repair in their own right.

The research

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MAY 2015

BACKGROUND

This qualitative study explored the experience of everyday help and support of people living in three diverse areas in and around Glasgow – Maryhill, Bearsden and Hillhead.

Study participants reflected on specific examples of everyday help and support, and detailed the richness of these interactions, emotions and negotiations. One challenge was to bring to the surface aspects of everyday life that might otherwise have passed unnoticed. To do this, participants kept a log of help or support given or received, withheld or refused. Many found this simple act of 'noticing' interesting and rewarding, revealing dependencies and inter-dependencies of which they were previously unaware.

Places, spaces and communities

The characteristics of particular areas combine with local and broader aspects to shape needs for help and support and the response to those needs. The overarching image of Glasgow as the 'friendly city' gives people licence to interact with each other in particular ways. At the same time, this could be experienced as excluding those without roots in the local culture on which this image draws.

Counter-images of the city remain, too, of deprivation and dangerousness. For example, some of the associations with Maryhill are negative, involving poverty, physical decay and crime. But participants also saw it as the kind of area where people 'stick together', and as still having a sense of 'traditional' community. This permitted certain very basic kinds of help – such as small loans to 'tide people over', a roof for the night or something to eat – which might be considered unusual (or even threatening) in some other areas.

Hillhead, by contrast, is characterised by a narrative and history of relative diversity and transience. Some participants felt that its large student and multiple occupancy population disrupted 'normal' neighbourly relations, limiting the scope for interaction and mutual help and support. Yet from within, the student community was often experienced as highly cohesive and supportive.

As Bearsden is seen as suburban, middle-class and sometimes 'posh', its image clashes with the dominant idea of Glasgow as an open, predominantly working-class city. Yet Bearsden has well-used local amenities serving as accidental or intentional meeting points. Many participants described close and supportive relationships, albeit often with a residual sense of reserve and the importance of not 'overstepping the mark'.

In all three areas, physical place was by no means the only or most important marker of community. Many people belonged to multiple communities within communities, revolving around the church, the pub, child-rearing or particular leisure activities, for example. Despite the diversity of such networks, they acted as powerful enablers for belonging and low-level support, ranging from the minor and ostensibly practical to explicit emotional support or simply an awareness of other people potentially 'being there' in case of difficulty.

Participants also saw non-local and virtual communities as increasingly important sources of help and support, which seemed to complement as much as substitute for local relationships.

Individual stories, life events and life stages

Individuals drew on narratives of character and upbringing to explain their attitude towards informal help and support. Like the images of the areas, these were not straightforward reflections of 'how things are', but they still had real consequences in enabling, constraining or justifying particular courses

of action. Sometimes these accounts explicitly referenced religious or spiritual beliefs; others related to the influence of particular individuals (typically parents and grandparents) or class of origin. But while these accounts emphasised the importance of 'helping others less fortunate than yourself', they often constrained people's ability to seek or accept help for themselves, by emphasising independence and stoicism.

Individual need for help and support varies across the course of life, along with the capacity to access or offer such assistance. Early adulthood, for example, often involves a broad network of acquaintances, rented accommodation, limited income and a corresponding 'moral economy' of sharing, lending and 'wee favours'. For many participants, parenting (particularly in the early years) created an acute need for help and support, but also the potential networks through which to receive such support. Ageing, ill health and bereavement also radically altered individuals' needs for low-level help and support and, equally critically, the ability to offer it. These impacts were not simply on social networks, but also on the extent to which individuals felt able to ask for or accept help when they no longer felt able to give it.

However, participants did not experience life stages and life events uniformly; their experiences were shaped by broader contexts, individual relationships and social resources. For example, while parenting could lead to the creation of mutually supportive networks, it could also reinforce isolation, especially for single mothers, those for whom English was not a first language, or recent arrivals in an area. Similarly, the negative impact of health crises and physical incapacity on experiences of help and support could be compounded by poverty, absence of strong social networks and poor local amenities.

Negotiating everyday help and support

Powerful moral considerations underpinned interactions around low-level help and support, sometimes pulling in different directions. Participants emphasised the importance of helping others, but also of independence and stoicism in the face of their own difficulties. People assessed requests for help against the criterion of genuine need, expecting that some people should be asked before others, and seeking to avoid being a burden or imposing on others.

An important feature of help and support was the expectation of reciprocity, although this could be stretched across time or relationships – for example, repaying a debt from many years earlier or helping a friend or relative of someone who had helped you. There were also elements of mutuality, where both parties benefited directly from an interaction or where the 'helper' indirectly got something back.

Although physical or financial risk sometimes informed participants' accounts, concerns about 'affective risk' – related to how they saw themselves or how others saw them – were more common. Trust mattered here. In asking for help, people trusted others not to exploit the relationship imbalance, however temporary, that could result from a situation where they had to acknowledge their own need. This kind of trust might have mundane beginnings – in everyday encounters and exchanges – but could be slow to build and, equally, could be quick to dissipate.

People used a range of strategies and practices to manage the complexities of helping and being helped, including helping without appearing to help; minimising demands on the helper; offering help before it was asked for; and accepting help as a way of 'helping the helper'. Relationships of everyday help and support were most likely to be sustained where these 'rules' and norms of helping were respected. Over time, however, normal expectations of reciprocity could be diluted through habit and routine, and relationships with friends or acquaintances could take on a quality of kin-like obligation. This suggests that help or support cannot be separated from the relationships within which it occurs, and that relationships should certainly not to be seen simply as the 'cabling' through which social capital flows.

Conclusion

While it is not possible to legislate for kindness, we can try to avoid damaging – and, where possible, foster and extend – the conditions in which it occurs. That means recognising the 'infrastructural' qualities of everyday help and support – how it makes possible other aspects of social life, but also requires maintenance and repair in its own right. This can be aided by highlighting: the complexity and emotional significance of apparently mundane acts; the role of residential and public spaces in fostering everyday civility, public sociability and trust; how some forms of cohesive community can exclude others; and the potential role of information and communication technologies and local communities of interest in supplementing other forms of help and support. By recognising the interaction between context, biography and relationships, it may be possible to break down some deep-rooted moral dichotomies around help and support that have the potential for politicisation in the context of austerity – between state and community, deserving and undeserving, helpers and those who are helped.

About the project

A team from ScotCen Research undertook the study, in collaboration with Dr Julie Brownlie and Dr E-J Milne of the Department of Sociology at Edinburgh University, between January 2013 and December 2014. The study used a variety of qualitative methods to engage with individuals and organisations in the three study areas.

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 full report,**The Liveable Lives study: Understanding everyday help and support** by Simon Anderson, Julie Brownlie and Elisabeth-Jane Milne, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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ISSN 0958–3084

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