Reframing and re-enacting welfare: An empirical exploration of small-scale, horizontal forms of help

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Abstract

This thesis examines some ways in which ‘help’ is being done differently outside mainstream statutory and voluntary helping organisations within contemporary British society. Particular attention is paid to attempts made by grassroots groups situated in the British Left to move away from top-down helping practices and to create welfare in ways that challenge the foundations of an unequal society. The organisational frameworks used by these groups, which include non-hierarchical, mutual and collective forms of organising help across social difference, are examined in six London-based groups. Data generated in interviews with group members are analysed to examine how frameworks and principles are enacted in practice, and with what outcomes.

I contribute an empirical evidence base that demonstrates some of the problems with dominant forms of help as well as the benefits, challenges and dilemmas that can arise when attempting to enact alternatives. I argue that doing help in these alternative ways can be transformative for all involved but can also generate contradictions and frustrations, with a constant risk of slipping back into ‘learned’ top-down behaviours. I then suggest three shifts in dominant rationalities that could make these forms of help more sustainable: moving to a framework of ‘cooperative time’ in which ‘efficiency’ is not seen as an ultimate good; creating a sense of a collective subject and deepening frameworks of interdependence rather than valorising ‘independence’; and making interrogating and challenging of oppressive power dynamics a key part of frameworks of help.

This analysis contributes to an activist praxis in considering how to make alternative practices sustainable while also arguing for a shift in how help is currently conceptualised and practised in statutory and voluntary sector organisations. It contributes to welfare and care literature about meanings of ‘help’ in the welfare state and to social movement literature focused on non-hierarchical organising.
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Introduction

A lot of organisations will tell you you’re equal. But you don’t really feel it. It doesn’t matter how good the course or activity is, without equality [participants] are exactly where they feel they belong – at the bottom. That they don’t matter ... Unfortunately, the majority of people coming through our doors believed they were at the bottom of that hierarchy. So when we kicked off the hierarchical structure, for the first time in ages for some of them in a public space, they are equally important as everyone else in the room

... That really opens up people’s eyes to their value and shows them a way in to demand and matter. And to actually stand in their society. (Amy, interviewee, member of a women’s cooperative, former recipient of statutory and voluntary sector services)

The normal, accepted idea is that it’s the clients that need to change and we [service providers] are there to help them ... [but] instead of the burden and the hard work falling only on the person who’s come there because they’re in a vulnerable position ... we all have to do the hard work, go through that transformation together. [We need to ask ourselves] why am I doing this work? Maybe it’s because I’m a nice person and I want to help. But maybe I’m also patronising and controlling. And now that I have that awareness what am I going to do about that? ‘ (Marianne, interviewee, worked first in traditional services and then for many years in an organisation that pioneered user involvement and collaborative working in the homelessness and drug and alcohol sectors)

For me, these two quotes get to the heart of what this research is about. After many years working in the voluntary sector and being frustrated by the limitations of top-down, one-sided help, I am interested in the potential of help done differently to how it is done in formal helping organisations in the UK. By formal helping organisations I mean statutory and voluntary sector organisations whose purpose is to help people in difficult circumstances – either by providing or facilitating access to resources, such as money or housing, or through emotional and practical support for people in difficult situations. Such organisations may or may not also engage in campaigning to challenge longer-term, systemic causes of social issues.

Substantial empirical research over the last 10 years has shown the link between the existence of inequality in wealth and status within a population and social issues from youth violence to joblessness, drug and alcohol addiction and mental illness (see particularly Pickett and Wilkinson 2009 and 2019). Many helping organisations are committed to reducing the effects of inequality and empowering people. I argue, however, that these efforts are limited by the fact that mainstream helping organisations tend to replicate the structures, practices and assumptions that cause inequality and lead to some people feeling marginalised and excluded.
My intention is not to denigrate the entire mainstream voluntary and statutory service sector. Rather, I start from a position that help as currently delivered through mainstream helping organisations is shaped by wider socio-political narratives which, broadly, serve a worldview that sees the cause of and solutions to people’s difficulties as located in them as individuals. A binary division is created between people who need help and those who give it – helpers and helpees – with helpers seen to be functioning adequately in the world and as having knowledge and skills to offer, whilst helpees are deemed to need to change or ‘self-improve’ (de St Croix 2018) in order to be considered contributing members of society (even when they are regarded as having ‘potential’, as in asset-based approaches).

Within most mainstream helping organisations, people at the top tend to make decisions about how the organisation runs and what type of help is given. This is usually true even when helpees are ‘consulted’ or when (carefully chosen) clients are invited onto boards. In addition, many such organisations are embedded in frameworks of efficiency, targets and value for money – notions imported from the type of competition-driven corporatism that leaves many people economically marginalised (Land and King 2014; Gregory 2015).

By replicating unequal structures, practices and assumptions in these ways, many organisations hoping to fight social inequality end up reinforcing it. As a result, the impacts of their interventions and programmes will always be limited. In the words of Amy, quoted above, until people ‘at the bottom’ feel equal, materially and emotionally, there can be no real transformation (Newman 2013; Standing 2013; Unwin 2018; Williams 2001). Indeed, my understanding from this research is that these forms of help always have downsides, no matter how well-intentioned, compassionate or well-delivered they are. Their top-down nature, binary divisions between people who need and give help, and focus on individual change (which implies there is something ‘wrong’ with people who need to access formal help) can leave people on the receiving end feeling patronised, shamed and ‘less than’ others. This damage to their sense of self and self-worth often seriously undermines the intended benefit of the help (Baumberg 2012).

This research looks at grassroots groups situated in the British Left who have tried to move away from top-down helping practices, instead trying to organise in ways that value, regard and reward everyone more equally, and that challenge the foundations of an unequal society. The groups I look at are all examples of ‘prefigurative politics’ in that they try to enact their desired future society in the ways they organise in the here and now (Breines 1980). They range from formal charities to unincorporated groups. Some address specific and urgent needs, while others focus on longer-term building of relationships and mutual help. Some are more overtly activist in challenging external political structures than others. Some have existed for over 10 years, while others are just a few years old, or less, having emerged from the deprivations of austerity and an
ensuing need for new forms of collective advocacy and care (New Economics Foundation (NEF) 2013).

They are all, however, similar in very particular ways, perhaps most starkly in what they are not. They are not top-down: there is no group of people further up a hierarchy deciding what sort of help others should be receiving and judging whether that help is working or not working. They are not one-sided: they are not structured as one group of people ‘delivering’ help to and running the organisation for another group of people who are receiving help and following rules. Unlike most services, they are not set up as something people come to in order to learn, develop or change and then move on from: rather, people tend to become long-term members, giving and receiving help when necessary.

The key aims of this research are to create practical knowledge about these groups, their practices and framings, which can inform future practice; and to contribute in-depth, fine-grained ethnographic material to wider debates on helping and welfare.

I attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the dominant narratives about ‘help’ in the UK and how do these affect how help is done on the ground?
- What can we learn from groups trying to enact less top-down, more collaborative forms of help? and
- How can this learning help rethink dominant paradigms and practices of ‘help.’

**Thesis outline**

In Chapter 1, I look at how help has been framed in political rhetoric and policy over the last 30 years in the UK and outline how that influences the way help is currently delivered in mainstream voluntary and statutory sector organisations. I then look at alternative discourses of help that have arisen since the 1970s and examples of how these have been enacted in practice. I explore how these contesting discourses have been absorbed, time and again, into the dominant discourse – how radical demands for voice, involvement and valuing knowledges differently and more equally become sanitised forms of ‘participation’ and ‘co-production’, which seem to herald ‘progress’ without meaningfully shifting power or challenging individualist frameworks. I then suggest ways to help distinguish between radical and coopted discourses and practices and outline frameworks of power that I think are useful for this. I then outline my methodology in Chapter 2.

My empirical findings are divided into the next four chapters. First, I explore some of the problems with top-down help, as described by my interviewees, drawing out the common issues for people within a broad range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations. I then discuss the main components necessary to create less top-down forms of help that have emerged from my
research: mutuality; revaluing different types of knowledge and contribution; and sharing leadership decision-making. I document the benefits of these practices, as well as the challenges and ways groups try to overcome them. In Chapter 7, I consider the forms of ‘leadership’, ‘accountability’ and ‘safety’ that the groups use to support their practices.

In Chapter 8, I argue that for these types of practices to be sustainable, several underlying and unhelpful rationalities identified as key to dominant top-down practices of help and welfare need to shift. Firstly, I argue, we need to move away from doctrines of efficiency towards a more complex understanding of ‘time’ and its role in transformation (what one interviewee called ‘cooperative time’, as opposed to ‘capitalist time’ or ‘benefits-system time’). Secondly, I suggest that individualistic understandings of help should be interrogated and a sense of a collective subject and shared responsibility for each other’s needs consciously developed. Finally, I advocate normalising engagement with ‘power’ and making strategies for minimising oppressive power and generating a collective power core to frameworks of formal help. I draw my conclusions in Chapter 9.

Original contribution to knowledge and relevance of this research

This thesis speaks to and contributes to several bodies of literature. Welfare literature on meanings of ‘help’ in the welfare state; care literature that reframes ideas of ‘contribution’ and ‘responsibility’; and social movement literature, in particular that related to attempts at non-hierarchical decision-making and organising.

In The Kilburn Manifesto, Newman and Clarke (2015) advocate learning from ‘emerging experiments’ in participatory democracy and collective responsibility to help rethink existing frameworks of welfare. I agree with them that groups trying to create more horizontal, collective ways of looking after each other can contribute important insights which could help create new assumptions about and practices of ‘help’. I have, however, been able to find little work about these sorts of groups within the UK or comparable economic and political contexts which engages with the granular detail of day to day successes and challenges and looks at what new ways of working and wider understandings can be drawn from these. My project builds on the work that does exist to help create ideas for new, more collective and just, ‘welfare futures’ (Mooney and Neal 2010).

The groups looked at are part of a continuation of attempts to create more equal, collective forms of help. The context and challenges they face to some extent mirror those of earlier efforts (e.g. within non-hierarchical women’s refuges in the 1970s) but there are also new and particular challenges related to the inculcation of neoliberal attitudes and ways of working since those earlier attempts (Holloway 2010). For this reason, my analysis adds a contemporary dimension to research focused on these earlier movements.
Within the wider voluntary and statutory sectors, acknowledgement of structural causes of social issues has increased and interest in less hierarchical forms of working has grown significantly over the last 4–5 years. Mainstream helping organisations such as Clinks (an umbrella body representing voluntary organisations in the criminal justice sector) are actively engaged in discussions about how a focus on clients’ individual journeys can reinforce pathologising notions of poverty and detract from issues of structural inequality (Gibbs 2019). The language of ‘people-led’ help and the importance of people with ‘lived experience’ increasingly appears in publications by mainstream charities and funding bodies. Large national charities and social innovation organisations are debating questions about who measurement is for and how targets and desired outcomes can be created more collaboratively with clients (e.g. Neate 2018; Mulgan et al 2019). There has been an increase in interest in ideas such as ‘relational welfare’ (Stears 2012; Cottam 2014; 2018; Rustin 2013), which aim to mitigate the most disempowering aspects of top-down help by prioritising the relationship between professional and client.

These shifts are limited and perhaps do not yet amount to a fundamental change in who is thought about as needing or giving help (Unwin 2018) or full abandonment of the view that individuals are responsible for their own circumstances and changing them (Newman 2014; de St Croix 2018). Nor has there been a significant shift in structural power, as most helping organisations still operate hierarchically. But I suggest that these shifts do present a ‘space for resistance’ (Annetts et al 2009) in existing welfare frameworks. There is, however, a danger that emergent understandings that challenge the status quo will become absorbed into it, limiting the possibilities of creating a real shift in ways of thinking about and doing help. This research aims to help the more radical narratives, and associated practices of help, take a firmer hold by making them visible through a finely grained empirical understanding of the practices and concepts that emerge from them.

**Reflexive statement**

I decided to do this research because I wanted to know how non-hierarchical forms of help could be done better.

In 2011 I cofounded a women’s cooperative in South London, carrying out training, support and social action projects with local mothers living on low incomes, in a way which tried to challenge dominant discourses and conventional charity models. We all found it harder than expected to overcome learned ways of thinking and behaving around help and need and to get past entrenched power hierarchies. We shared learning with other groups trying to enact similar principles but there appeared to be little on-the-ground, granular written information available for any of us to learn from. I therefore decided to try to create some. I have tried to give equal
space to the different groups, but inevitably my interpretation has been shaped by
the knowledge, frameworks and challenges within my own group.

Before the women’s cooperative, I had worked in the voluntary sector for 10 years, largely in
more traditional top-down charity structures but also on and off at an organisation which has
pioneered more collaborative forms of welfare over the last 25 years. I kept returning to this
organisation because its ethos and broader ways of working appealed to me. I expect I am
shaped and informed by these ways of working and that this will be reflected in my analysis of
the interview data.

I am from a South Asian background and grew up within an immigrant community where
certain types of mutual aid were the norm. Within this context, collective needs were prioritised
above individual ones and responsibility for meeting those was seen as shared. I rejected this
framework wholesale when I was younger due to the strict hierarchies – particularly related to
gender and age - which determined how much individual agency and control people were
allowed. I have since, however, started to see some value in these forms of interdependence
and have become interested in how and if their beneficial aspects can be separated from the
more domineering, agency-denying ones. These elements of background will likely have
influenced my analysis.

Due to a privileged university education, however, I currently see myself as fairly entrenched in
certain ‘white’ middle-class cultural norms and perspectives (as well as economic privilege)
and although I try to question these norms, they will inevitably be reflected in my analysis.
Chapter 1: Context and Frameworks

This chapter looks at the wider narratives and policy discourses linked to help as they have played out in the UK over the past 30 years, in particular how they have influenced the way help is done ‘on the ground’. I initially provide a theoretical and political context of what welfare and help means in dominant discourses. These are important to understand because practice does not occur in a void. Wider theoretical and policy discourses affect how help is done and experienced on the ground. Garrett (2013: 3) describes what he calls ‘the fallacy of theoryless practice’, quoting Gray and Webb (2009: 5):

Social work practice is the bearer and articulation of more or less theory-laden beliefs and concepts. Even those who try to refute the value of theory by claiming that social work is just ‘good common sense’ are, in fact, articulating a distilled version of philosophical theories about ‘common sense’.

I would argue that the fallacy of theoryless practice extends into the majority of formal help. If help is less helpful than it could be, it is not, I believe, because practitioners have bad intentions. Rather, it is very hard for workers not to enact help according to dominant ideas. Organisational and funding guidelines often force practitioners to adhere to them. And the presentation of these framings as ‘common sense’ makes it hard for people who are overwhelmed by the demands of the job to analyse or critique them. Being explicit about them helps me better unfold my own findings of what those attempting to practise alternative forms of welfare are challenging and what the enabling and restricting context is in which they are operating.

The second part of this chapter explores how activists and scholars have challenged dominant ideas of help and promoted different understandings. After analysing these alternative ways of thinking about help, I move on to consider examples of how they have been enacted in practice.

I then look at how these emergent discourses became incorporated into dominant forms of help, and to what extent they have been coopted in ways that neutralise their radical power. Finally, I outline the frameworks I use for thinking about power in my empirical chapters.

Dominant ideas and practices of help

As the fabric of society crumbles at the margins what has been left behind is an underclass, where life is characterised by dependency, addiction, debt and family breakdown. (Centre for Social Justice 2007)

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), founded by former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith in 2004, identifies in its influential *Breakthrough Britain* report five ‘pathways’ to entrenched poverty: ‘family breakdown, serious personal debt, drug and alcohol addiction, failed
education, worklessness and dependency’ (CSJ 2007: 5). ‘Exposure’ to these is what traps people in poverty, the report contends, ‘not necessarily the economy’, a framing which effectively delinks social problems experienced by individuals from wider economic and structural factors and recasts them as causes of entrenched poverty. Long-term poverty could thus be presented as a consequence of individual ‘choices’ and failures (a narrative I discuss in more detail below).

The metaphor of a ‘pathway’, conjuring an image of people at a crossroads choosing whether to take the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ path, reinforces this. Within this narrative, British society is socially and morally ‘broken’. ‘Broken’ Britain is filled with ‘troubled families’ who have not worked for generations, are not taking personal responsibility and are not making the choices that would lift them out of poverty.

Duncan Smith was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions from 2010 to 2015, during which period CSJ research dominated narratives and policy-making around welfare and helping services, despite a body of academic research that questioned the CSJ research and approach. The CSJ’s work helped justify political language dividing the population into ‘scroungers and strivers’; ‘workers and shirkers’; those who ‘do the right thing’ (Duncan-Smith 2010) versus those ‘sleeping off a life on benefits’ (Osborne 2012). These ‘scroungers’ and ‘shirkers’ and the public sector seen to be ‘enabling’ them were blamed for the country’s economic problems. Helping services were said to be encouraging ‘dependency’, falsely framed as inherently negative and confined to ‘a small demonised group of people … the single mother or the long-term unemployed man with addiction issues’ (Wall 2014).

This extreme language is no longer so common. For instance, the Conservative government elected in 2015 started using language that was less about punishing wrongdoers and more about supporting ‘aspiration’ and those who are ‘doing the right thing’ (Cameron 2010). This language is still prevalent in contemporary political discourse (Anderson 2019). However, although the language seems less divisive, the underlying assumptions and judgements remain. Newman (2015) discusses the ‘malign consequences’ of the discourse of ‘aspiration’, which she argues ‘speaks to individual or familial-oriented concerns – and, implicitly, those of the nation in a global competition for status and power’, thus ‘narrowing the political imagination’ and undermining

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1 Wiggan (2012) observes that these invert Beveridge’s (1942) five giants (want, ignorance, disease, squalor and idleness): from a framing of wider, structural issues and collective responsibility to one of purely individual failing and responsibility.

2 These framings have echoes of 19th-century notions of the ‘idle pauper’ (Spicker 1984; Romano 2015).

3 E.g. Slater (2012) found the CSJ pathways to poverty research unreliable – due to leading questions and an unrepresentative sample. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Harkness, Gregg and Macmillan 2012) similarly cast doubt on its validity.

4 Disability-related research by Gaffney challenges the notion of ‘welfare dependency’, showing that ‘most assertions about [it] turn on an implicit and quite erroneous assumption that benefit claims are overwhelmingly long-term in nature’ (Gaffney 2011: 59).
any more ‘collective sensibility’. Even more insidiously, aspiration politics ‘generates a search for scapegoats (migrants, benefit scroungers) ... tends to exacerbate culture of division, hatred and blame’.

The Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments’ punitive approach to help and welfare has been paired with an economic framework of austerity. Austerity politics is characterised by cuts in public spending, applied especially to social-security and local-government budgets (NEF 2015) and thus to funding for voluntary sector organisations, here it has also led to an emphasis on ‘efficiency’ and ‘cost effectiveness’. The stated goal and rationale for austerity is to improve the state of public finances (after the 2008 financial crash) and ensure we ‘spend within our means’. However, some economists and left-leaning think tanks (e.g. Krugman 2015; NEF 2015; Institute for Fiscal Studies 2015) have long raised questions about austerity’s effectiveness at solving economic problems, on the basis that national debt is not the same as household debt, as the government had argued (Bishop 2016), as well as its negative social consequences. Damning indictments of the economic soundness of austerity have also come more recently from such establishment institutions as the International Monetary Fund (Alesina, Favero and Giavazzi 2018), while a UN Special Rapporteur concluded that austerity had inflicted ‘great misery’ on UK citizens (UN Human Rights Council 2019: 2).

The political discourse and policies of the last decade did not appear suddenly but have built on political discourse of previous decades. David Cameron’s ‘compassionate conservatism’ (2005) is in fact reminiscent of Tony Blair’s ‘compassion with a hard edge’ (1997). A key difference is that New Labour ‘sanitised’ the shift towards more punitive, individualistic understandings of help with increased public spending (Williams 2001). Nonetheless, Williams convincingly argues, if Margaret Thatcher started the shift from ‘citizens with rights’ to ‘citizens with responsibilities’, New Labour’s ‘rights and responsibilities’ agenda completed it. The subsequent Conservative–Liberal Democrat government needed only tweak it. This is crucial to make clear as it underscores just how entrenched these ideas are and, as Taylor-Gooby (2012) argues, the extent to which the left has been complicit for a long time in punitive, market-based, individualised discourses of welfare and help.

Below, I explore the context and development of three important discourses impacting the way in which help has been conceived and delivered in recent decades. Firstly, the construction of the ‘active citizen’ who shapes and controls their own destiny by making good choices (and can therefore be blamed for making bad ones). Second, the elevation of independence and self-reliance as the primary reason for and aim of ‘help’, and thirdly, the marketisation of helping institutions and the linked prioritisation of efficiency and measuring impacts (on individuals).
Constructing the active citizen-consumer who makes the ‘right’ choices

It has been argued that the frameworks of the post-war welfare state, whilst promoting a Keynesian redistributive ethos and unashamed commitment to creating better social outcomes, new public services and a safety net, also contained a patronising and agency-denying attitude to welfare recipients. These critiques divided into two broad types: the first a leftist challenge demanding more rights for citizens, especially marginalised groups, and the chance to participate in and influence decisions affecting them; the second a right-leaning case that overly strong rights to welfare needed balancing with ‘responsibilities’, and that welfare recipients should be forced to develop more agency in the sense of ‘self-reliance’, ‘personal responsibility’ and financial ‘independence’.

By the 1970s, the undercurrents of dissatisfaction with the welfare state had combined with wider structural issues stalling the rise in living standards – increasing inflation, unemployment and the decreasing availability of cheap commodities from the colonies (Mack and Lansley 1985). Aaronovitch (1981) argues that the failure of the left to attend to critiques of ‘paternalism’ and to agree on what was referred to at the time as the ‘alternative economic strategy’ allowed the ‘radical right alternative vision’ to come to the fore.

The New Right vision was greatly influenced by economists such as Friedrich Hayek (1944, 1960, 1973) and Milton Friedman (1962) and ‘a kind of neoliberal international’ (Stedman Jones 2012) network of businesses, thinktanks (e.g. the Institute for Economic Affairs), academics and activists, which it has been posited deliberately laid the groundwork transnationally for ‘neoliberalism’ – or a market-based, individualistic approach to social and economic policy – over many years. Much of this was coordinated by Hayek and his Mont Pelerin Society. Hayek was a key ideological influence on Thatcher and argued that the more the state provides the less people will provide for themselves. He believed that state activity crushes individualism and thus poses a danger to freedom, which he felt markets are best placed to guarantee. Friedman, in a similar vein, posited that states are inefficient ways for people to get their needs met and that people are rational economic actors, fundamentally self-interested, who will make best use of the opportunities provided by the market.

A related strain of sociological research argued that state welfare provision was nourishing an amoral ‘dependency culture’ and ‘underclass’ not just in Britain, but across the developed English-speaking world (Barry 1987; Murray 1984). While welfare recipients’ motives were being

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5 For instance, the ‘Fabian’ or ‘Blue Book’ approach was criticised for its empiricism (George and Wilding 1976; Taylor-Gooby and Dale 1981) and inherent paternalism. Schulz, Coates and Silburn (1970) and Jordan (1973), meanwhile, criticised the ‘demeaning treatment meted out to some benefit claimants, council tenants and NHS patients and the failure to consult citizens’ (Beech and Page 2015: 6).
questioned, public choice theory (e.g. Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Tullock 1965) questioned the motivations of public officials.

The four key themes of Conservative welfare policy between 1979 and 1997 were: attempts to control public spending/caps on welfare spending, privatisation, rising inequality and unemployment (Hills 1998). The New Right discourses presented the ideal of the active welfare consumer who was to actively meet their needs through the market (Williams 1991).

‘Scroungermania’, a media amplification of government suggestions about profligate welfare cheating (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992) set up a clear polarisation between those who met their responsibilities through the market and those who needed the state (Jessop et al 1988).

Hall, in ‘The Great Moving Right Show’ (1979), drawing on Gramsci, argues that from 1975 Thatcherism and the New Right ideology were able to gain hegemony by using the ‘language of the people’, who ‘wanted reform’. He claims this alliance brought into existence a new ‘historical bloc’ between certain sections of the dominant and dominated classes. An incongruous mix of free-market ideas and conservative values were crafted to seem like ‘common sense’. Crucially, he argues, this could only be achieved through an ongoing process of contestation and ‘struggle to gain ascendancy’ (Hall 1988: 48-49).

I agree with many on the left who thought Hall’s arguments exaggerated Thatcher’s hold on the working classes and underplayed structural issues (Jessop et al 1988; Miliband 1984). I also agree with Clarke’s (2004) arguments that the collapse of the Bretton Woods consensus and the adoption of a neoliberal, market-based approach at a transnational level inevitably influenced the direction of national welfare policy. I contend, however, that Hall’s framings of hegemony and ongoing struggles to determine what is seen as ‘common sense’ remain useful in analysing the succeeding periods of the welfare state and in thinking about alternative frameworks (see the section on ‘cooption or space for resistance’ below).

During the New Labour years, the direction of helping services shifted to a more positive-sounding framework of ‘empowerment’ and ‘helping people to help themselves’ (Lister 2003, Newman and Clarke 2009), but the individualistic, market-based and often punitive New Right ideology was retained and underlay these apparent shifts. Policy was underpinned by several ‘arch-theorist[s]’ (Dean 2007), most notably Le Grand and Giddens. In his well-known description of ‘knights, knaves and pawns’ Le Grand (1997: 149) argues that social policy in the era of the ‘classic’ welfare state (1945–79) tended to view welfare recipients as pawns, lacking agency, moved about at will and content with a universal but fairly basic service. It framed public servants as motivated by their professional ethic and working in the public interest (knights) and taxpayers as knights too since they were willing to pay for the public interest. He claims these ideas were only seriously questioned from 1979, when public officials began to be seen as self-motivated
(knaves) and conceptions of welfare users as pawns came to be considered undesirable. He argues that a quasi-market set up would recast them as ‘queens’ with an active choice in whether to be knights or knaves (Williams 1999; Welshman 2007). Giddens, meanwhile, posits the ‘good citizen’ as the skeptical, ‘reflexive’ citizen-consumer (Giddens 1991) acting in pursuit of enlightened self-interest (Williams 2001).

In this framework, patients, clients, citizens, passengers and consumers were redefined as ‘customers’ (McDonald 2006) and stakeholder participation in policy formation and service delivery was encouraged: ‘more democratic self-government ... by better educated citizens’, (Department of Social Security 2000, quoted in McDonald 2006). The voluntary sector and ‘social entrepreneurs’ were given more influence, rather than the ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘vested interests’ of the public sector, and encouraged to learn from the private sector to be more ‘business-like’ (Gregory 2015). As Rose (2005: 59) argues:

The disadvantaged individual has come to be seen as potentially and ideally an active agent in the fabrication of their own existence ... no longer merely the passive support of a set of social determinations: they are people whose self-responsibility and self-fulfilling aspirations have been deformed by the dependency culture ... And it thus follows, that they are to be assisted not through the ministrations of solicitous experts proffering support and benefit cheques, but through their engagement in a whole array of programmes for their ethical reconstruction as active citizens.

This approach could be seen clearly in employment support practices. Non-participation was no longer an option. A new crop of frontline employment advisers – the ‘street level bureaucrats’ of the work-based welfare state (Lipsky 1980) – created individualised ‘action plans’ and tailored job routes (e.g. through various New Deals) to support, motivate and push people into paid work (McDonald 2006).

Clarke (2008a: 141) contends that ‘at least three categories of person [were] visible in contemporary governmental discourse: established “independent” persons, people who might be “empowered” to become independent (through techniques of self-development), and the “residue” requiring containment and control’. The implication was, argues Widdowson (2008), that anyone in the middle group who failed to be ‘trampolined’ upwards could be accused of deliberately ‘self-harming’ and therefore punished. The citizen ‘respecified as an active agent as both able and obliged to exercise autonomous choices’ (Larner 2000: 13). In this way, seemingly empowering frameworks slide into more coercive, criminalising ones, as a distinction is constructed between ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ ways of living (Mooney 2008: 111, drawing on Wacquant 2007).
This punitive conception of ‘agency’ was further deepened by the subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments. Donoghue and Edmiston (2019b: 10) argue that it was no longer enough to be ‘work hard, pay taxes and abide by the law’ like New Labour’s ideal ‘active citizen’. The new idea was the ‘gritty citizen’ who had the ‘mental toughness’ to ensure they were safe and secure in conditions of ‘endemic insecurity’. They quote Cameron saying in 2016 that citizens ‘must exhibit and deploy the secret ingredients for a good life character, delayed gratification, grit, resilience’ to take charge of their own lives (ibid.: 10).

Despite the fact that its evidence base is contested (Rimfeld et al 2016; Bull and Allen 2018, cited in Donoghue and Edmiston 2019a), the idea that resilience, perseverance and grit have great potential to shape ‘socioeconomic destiny’ (ibid.) has been ‘highly influential in recent developments in UK welfare governance’ (ibid:4). Donoghue and Edmiston (ibid.) argue that ‘in great part, this can be explained by the pervasive notion within liberal meritocratic settings that individual effort, will and inclination to “get on” are the principal determinants of social (dis)advantage’.

Through successive welfare reforms and measures to ‘modernise public services’, emphasis has been placed on encouraging citizens, families and communities to acquire ‘the resilience and resources to lift themselves out of poverty’. This has happened without, as Gregory (2015) notes, questioning the need for resilience or what communities need to be resilient against. Rather, as Donoghue and Edmiston (2019a: 4) argue, ‘resilience promises a [re] centering of individual agency in solutions to overcoming socio-material insecurity’. They acknowledge that in a wider context, of course being able to be resilient in the face of uncertainty is useful. However, they argue that not all uncertainty is unavoidable. Some is due to deliberate socio-economic frameworks. But ‘resilience as an ideology’ ... shuts down recourse to action because of the inculcation of individual responsibility for socio-economic situations over which individuals may have little control’ (Donoghue 2019). In this way, it feeds into narratives of ‘responsibilisation’ (Foucault 1979; Rose 1990; Rose and Miller 1992), a form of indirect control employed by neoliberal welfare systems to make people see management of risks – poverty, unemployment, illness – as their own responsibility, not the state’s (see also Dean’s (1991) use of ‘governing the self’).

The language of ‘resilience’ and ‘grit’ has become common in many helping sector organisations’ goals, aims and programmes (see e.g. Roberts 2009). The paradox at the heart of the resilience agenda is, as Donoghue and Edmiston (2019) point out, that people living on low incomes already act in resilient ways to survive. But the framing of resilience within social policy and how help is delivered (for example, work-first agendas and welfare conditionality as discussed below) gradually grinds people down and limits their agency and autonomy.
In terms of how help is enacted on the ground, I argue that the approaches to agency discussed above do little to help people overcome material challenges. Rather, the faux rights-based discourse that claims punitive approaches are being implemented to help people ‘lift themselves out of poverty’ (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) 2015) can make people feel more disempowered, since ‘fixing’ their problems is framed as being within their control, and structural obstacles are unacknowledged (Johnson and Pleace 2016). As Kemp (2017: 122) argues, often this framing insists that individuals already facing multiple forms of disadvantage overcome situations created by ‘social inequalities’, that the ‘worker himself would struggle to overcome in similar circumstances.’

Work-first and minimising use of helping services

A key focus of government policy about help is to minimise dependence on the state and services and reduce what is regarded as unhealthy ‘passivity’ (Williams 1999). ‘Dependency has in the public realm been made to appear shameful and should be alleviated wherever possible by public policy measures, treatments or other interventions’ (Fine and Glendinning 2005:606). Fine and Glendinning argue that one result of this is ‘that in advanced liberal democracies acknowledgement of the reality of dependency is denied though the promotion of an ideal of individual autonomy’, which is ‘commonly promoted as the antithesis of dependency’ (ibid: 602). Donoghue (2019) argues that in terms of welfare rhetoric and practice, ‘independence’ has come to mean not needing to access any sort of formal help, particularly financial assistance. Not being independent in this way is then framed as being ‘irresponsible’.

In this framework, paid work, of whatever kind, is seen as an ultimate good and an almost compulsory way of contributing and enacting citizenship. Whitworth (2013: 5) notes that the system of employment support overall is still geared more towards ‘any job’ than a job that ‘lasts and provides an adequate income’. Jobcentres are given the options of benefit sanctions and mandatory work placements to help them shape recipient behaviour. This is based on the view that people need stronger ‘incentives’ in order to find work – being both pulled (by wages) and pushed (by sanctions and conditions) into work.

Since 2010, workfare has become widely used:

While workfare is a plastic and contested term, in the UK it has taken on the broad meaning of ‘reciprocity’ – that is, making welfare claimants perform mandatory activities in return for their dole, thus ‘restoring fairness to the welfare system’. Mandatory workfare activities vary, but generally include some combination of working for benefits, regular attendance at private workfare centres, re-training and attending case-worker interviews to provide proof of active ‘jobseeking’ activities. (Jordan 2015: 217-218)
Although the ‘work-first’ ideal has been promoted in a particularly draconian way since 2010, the ‘citizen-worker’ ideal and the view that not being in paid work was an individual rather than structural problem that needed to be remedied by compulsion was also central to New Labour’s agenda (Williams 1999), reflecting a trend across European and English-speaking countries (van Berkel 2010; Handler 2004, cited in Wright 2012). New Labour ‘welfare to work’ and ‘active labour market policies’ in turn were preceded by the second Thatcher government’s ‘make work’ schemes and the Major government’s ‘Project Work’.

In this context, the role of the state is seen to be to create ‘positive welfare’ support for those who are not seen as responsible to become responsible (Giddens 1998). This thinking was influenced by key US neoconservative academics such as Lawrence Mead – ‘the scholarly voice’ behind workfare policies in the United States (Slater 2012: 18). Mead (1986) argued that it was ‘the poor’ themselves who needed changing, rather than any systems, and that the state needed to ‘enforce values that had broken down’ with policies and processes that ‘helped and hassled’ people back to work. This ‘new paternalism’ (Mead 1995) contrasts in some ways with Murray’s approach of minimal state activity in welfare and sits uneasily with some definitions of neoliberalism, reflecting the ‘multiple’ and ‘contradictory’ (Clarke 2008a: 141, 142) formations that neoliberalism can take and alliances it can make, in this case with the ‘conservative authoritarian figure’.

The fetishisation of formal paid work across both the new right and ‘left’ can be seen in the use of the language of ‘hardworking families’ initially by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and then picked up by Iain Duncan Smith. In October 2018, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, announced a budget that delivered for ‘hard working families’ – the ‘strivers, the grafters’ (Hammond 2018). As with many seemingly innocuous phrases that are loaded with prejudice, ‘hard working families’ passes easily unnoticed. But sociologist Stephen Crossley (2016) argues that this term sets up an insidious binary against so-called ‘problem’ or ‘troubled’ families that are repeatedly presented as a burden on taxpayers. Insidious partly because the research that created the notion of ‘troubled’ families has been shown to be questionable, and yet programmes to help families surviving multiple forms of structural disadvantage are still based on it (Crossley 2013).

In the UK in 2012, the ‘voluntary and community sectors’ constituted 47 percent of Work Programme providers (DWP 2012), ensuring the disciplinary ethos was extended to organisations that might have been expected to be less punitive in their forms of help. Workfare is linked

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6 E.g. Levitas (2012) finds that ‘troubled families’ research ‘deliberately conflates families experiencing multiple disadvantage and families that cause trouble’; and Crossley (2016) argues that troubled families policies were based on assumptions the government did not empirically test, and that suggestions that family breakdown and poor parenting are causes of poverty are not supported.
ideologically to the doctrine of conditionality, which effectively ‘blames poorer citizens for their inactivity in relation to paid work’ by positing that a sense of ‘entitlement’ to social security benefits and other forms of help are ‘likely to promote idleness and unemployment’ (Dwyer 2017: 4). A recent large-scale piece of qualitative research looking at ‘conditionality’ within the UK welfare system concludes that it essentially frames freedom from poverty as a privilege not a right (Welfare Conditionality 2018). Dwyer and others argue that the doctrine of conditionality, and its claim to be able to shift ‘entrenched dependency’ means that not only social security but ‘currently almost all manner of support service – from services to the homeless to support for those in hardship – has either some form of behavioural requirement baked in or is designed to create incentives for behaviour change’ (Shafique 2018).

Workfare schemes have been mired in controversy, due to accusations that they are exploitative, ‘paying’ people below the minimum wage (Duffy 2013). Meanwhile, the narratives that these coercion-based approaches are based on – which link unemployment with irresponsibility – have been questioned. For instance, Shildrick et al (2012), in work for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, found no evidence of the ‘three generations of workless families’ the Department for Work and Pensions claims are ubiquitous. They struggled to find two. Their findings also question the need for punitive policies to force people back into work as they highlight participants’ desire to be in paid work where possible. Older research demonstrated that long-term unemployed people and single mothers did want to be in paid work as long as it was with dignity and did not affect their family and other responsibilities (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992; Duncan and Edwards 1999).

The punitive approaches have been found to be ineffective on their own terms as well. Numerous studies (e.g. Portes 2012; Institute for Fiscal Studies 2015; D’Arcy and Hurrell 2014; Child Poverty Action Group 2014) have found that sanctioning and workfare policies are ineffective at getting people into work. Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney (2012) further find that shaming practices in Jobcentres lead to people disengaging, driving them further into poverty and isolation. This sort of research, however, has done little to sway the dominant narratives. Pinder (2007) argues that this is partly because the narrative that people need to be forced into work and any job is better than none justifies economic and employment policies whereby poor people’s labour can be exploited – through reduced employment rights (perpetrated by both New Labour and subsequent governments) and low pay – by those in more privileged economic positions.

**Competition and measurement**

Neoliberal economic theory emphasises market principles in public service delivery (Johnson and Pleace 2016). From the Thatcherite period onwards, neoliberal doctrine has dictated that non-state actors should have an increased role in delivering services, and the state a smaller one, in
order to generate ‘efficiency’-driving competition (Clarke 2004). This ‘mixed economy of welfare’\(^7\) (Powell 2007) includes both the private sector (Le Grand and Robinson 1984) and the voluntary sector.

New Labour further developed this approach into the concept of ‘new public management’, which emphasised efficiency within the public and voluntary sectors.\(^8\) Johnson and Pleace (2016: 32) discuss how this conceptual framework is derived from ‘a particular view of what constitutes efficient capitalism, rather than, for example, defining organisational worth only in terms of public good.’ New public management placed great emphasis on targets – for both clients and workers – and promoted the idea of pre-defined ‘key performance indicators’ (or KPIs). This meant that the voluntary sector came under a lot of pressure to radically adapt how they worked in order to survive in a highly competitive environment (Gregory 2015).

Gregory (2015) argues that outsourcing state support services to voluntary sector organisations under New Labour lay the groundwork for larger-scale outsourcing and privatisation under the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments. Though initially framed as giving contracts to ‘civil society’, in practice much of the work has gone to large private, for-profit firms, which then subcontract to voluntary sector organisations. This has gone hand in hand with a doctrine of payment by results and contracts for services based on market principles, with emphasis on measuring ‘impact’, essentially meaning return on investment (de St Croix 2016; Gregory 2015).

This focus on measurement and impact has had two major effects on dominant forms of help. Firstly, rather than longer-term or more in-depth or open-ended activities, the ‘pressure to measure has witnessed the triumph of time-limited, outcomes-led, structured programmes of intervention, which ostensibly deliver the evidence demanded by politicians’ (Taylor 2017). Evidence, which de St Croix (2016: 2) argues is often flawed, based as it is on ‘positivist scientific method that recognises only what can be “proven” to be true’. The language of ‘interventions’, which has become a common way of talking about formal help, is important because, as

\(^7\) The mixed economy of welfare (MEW) is a concept in which diverse institutions or groups belonging to the state, market, voluntary and even informal sectors intervene in three fundamental tasks such as funding, provision and regulation (Powell 2007: 7).

\(^8\) A 2011 report (Kane and Allen 2011) from the National Council of Voluntary Organisations notes that approximately a third of income ‘in the voluntary and community sectors comes from the state’. This was even higher in organisations contracted to deliver ‘public services.’ Gregory (2015: 135) notes that ‘[g]rowing concern over the independence of the sector is being articulated by some elements of the voluntary sector’. 

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Featherstone, Morris and White (2014: 1740) argue, it suggests things being ‘done to [people] rather than with them’.

They argue that in the children and families sector, the ‘interventions’ approach in the New Labour years led to active government encouragement and funding for ‘transportable’ parenting programmes – that is, programmes developed in one country such as Triple-Parenting programmes or Incredible Years – and promoted for use in all other contexts. The notion of ‘fidelity’ was central to such programmes – they should be implemented in the same way across all contexts with the same formats and time limits. (ibid.)

The flaws in this approach are obvious: contexts and the social issues associated with them are different and importing programmes wholesale from one place to another is unlikely to be an effective way of engaging with what people need. The broader narratives behind it, which see people who need to access formal help as interchangeable and a collection of problems, rather than whole, competent people who might need different things, are also clear.

Meanwhile, the focus on ‘outcomes’, Johnson and Pleace (2016) argue, creates an emphasis on recording yet again how an individual is ‘positively changed’ by, for instance, homelessness service interventions (LyonCallo 2000; Dordick 2002; Löfstrand 2010, cited in Johnson and Pleace 2016). This then feeds into an underlying narrative painting the individual as the problem and said individual ‘changing’ as the solution: ‘the requirements of New Managerialism thus combine with a wider political and cultural tendency to reduce homelessness to individual pathology, downplaying or dismissing possible structural causation’ (Johnson and Pleace 2016: 32). Taylor (2015) argues similarly that the focus on measurement in the youth sector has led to forms of help focused on people ‘bettering themselves’, such as the profusion of ‘character-building’ courses for young people (de St Croix 2016).

The sections above outline how dominant forms of help over the past 30 years have encouraged the ideas of personal responsibility, individual agency and independence. These ideas have become embedded in how help is thought about and enacted on the ground, in both voluntary and statutory organisations. The onus is on people experiencing structural disadvantage to change themselves and help themselves – or potentially face punishment or discontinuation of the help. The combination of these approaches with austerity and an increase in pathologising and blaming language and attitudes since 2010 towards people living with poverty have helped create what Philip Alston (UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights) calls a ‘systematic immiseration’ of a significant part of the UK population (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019).

As Mooney and Neal (2010: 142) argue, however:
While Cameron’s term the ‘broken society’ may be new, the state of the poor and the responsibility of poor people for the state they exist in is an old and persistent argument that has always been able to find a ready audience...Such explanatory narratives are powerful. They offer an immediate and easy apparatus for making sense of inequality and human behaviour in complex social worlds.

Even within the post-war ‘golden age’ of the welfare state there was an undercurrent of criticism resonant of today’s framings. Welshman (2012: 117) recounts 1950s’ debates about ‘transmitted deprivation’, ‘problem families’ and ‘unsatisfactory tenants’, which led to stigmatising concepts such as a ‘culture of poverty’ (Lewis 1966: 19, cited in Welshman 2012: 68) and a ‘cycle of deprivation’ (Joseph 1972, cited in Welshman 2012: 131), echoes of which are heard today. Despite little evidence to back up these ideas, they did take hold to some extent, demonstrating perhaps that pathologising approaches to social issues are enduring. However, I would agree with Jordan (2015) that it is only through the mechanisms of neoliberalism over recent decades that the idea that the ‘former moral imperatives of mutual obligation … [and] … the meeting of need’ (Culpitt 1999: 35) have been ‘eclipse[d]’ (ibid.) and approaches to welfare and help based on looking after yourself and responsibility before rights this have become ‘ideologically ingrained in national discourse’ (Jordan 2015: 221).

Alternative approaches to help

Some of the most prominent criticisms of the post-war welfare state challenged its ‘forms of solidarity that assumed homogenous … populations’ (Newman and Tonkens 2011: 12). New critical approaches to welfare (Williams 1999) pointed out that questions of gender, race, disability, sexuality and age had all been neglected in the welfare state literature. As the ‘golden age’ receded and narratives of ‘responsibility’ and ‘self-reliance’ came to the fore, different veins of critique developed. The sections below look at some of these. I divide them into the concepts of ‘dependency’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘agency’ as these three concepts have, I suggest, been used particularly ideologically in order to create a punitive and individualist understanding of help. I think it is useful to explore how these understandings have been reshaped by activists and critical academic work. I then go on to look at some of the ways these alternative ideas have been enacted in practice. This is important as it provides the theoretical resources for critically assessing alternative conceptions and practices of help in Chapters 4-7, and I also return to it in Chapter 8.

Theoretical approaches

Dependency

Discourses framing dependency as a social evil propagated by irresponsible individuals who need to be weaned off it have been challenged, broadly speaking, in two ways. Firstly, by pointing out 25
that many groups categorised as ‘dependent’, such as disability campaigners, have actively sought social and political changes to ‘help them get out of unwanted dependency’ (Williams 2001: 478)\(^9\) and the oppressive power imbalances that can accompany dependent relationships.

Secondly, through efforts to destigmatisate dependency by arguing that everyone has periods of ‘inevitable dependencies’ and that this is neither bad nor shameful (Williams, Popay and Oakley 1999) but can in fact, when ‘flourishing’, help build societal bonds (Kittay 1998).

More recent critical welfare research uses empirical evidence that demonstrates it is not just a sub-set of ‘irresponsible’ people who are dependent on external help and support. Hills (2014), for instance, finds that all socio-economic classes benefit from welfare over a lifetime, with those in the highest income brackets benefitting more than most. Meanwhile, Bramley and Fitzpatrick (2017) demonstrate that supposed attributes such as self-reliance and independence are not protective factors against social issues such as homelessness. Rather, they argue that these issues are unequally distributed across the population and that people who have structural advantages which allow them to access the most help and support (e.g. being able to stay in the family home as a young adult) are least likely to experience them.

Fine and Glendinning (2005: 602) have suggested that ‘research and theory on “dependency” and “care-giving” have to date proceeded along largely separate lines, with little sense that they are exploring and explaining different aspects of the same phenomenon’. They argue that although the language of care and care work as a type of contribution has become more accepted in social science research, dependency is still not a concept that has received much critical attention: ‘these contrasting perspectives have led social theory, research and policies to separate and segregate the worlds of “carers” from those for whom they care’ (ibid.). Once care-giving is acknowledged as a valuable activity, then the stigma of needing care should shift.

But there are clear tensions between discourses that seek to acknowledge and destigmatisate dependency (and celebrate interdependence) and calls from disability activists for liberation from the control that can be inherent in relationships of dependence:

> Disabled people have never demanded or asked for care! We have sought independent living which means being able to achieve maximum independence and control over our lives. The concept of care seems to many disabled people a tool through which others are able to dominate and manage our lives. (Richard Wood, former Director of the British Council of Disabled People, quoted in Barnes 2006: 199)

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\(^9\) She cites the 1970s’ Campaign for Legal and Financial Independence for Women, which sought to ensure rights for women in social security, taxation, tenancies, mortgages, bank accounts etc. (McIntosh 1981, cited in Williams 2001), and the Independent Living Movement in the 1980s, which was made up of local disability campaigns (Morris 1993, cited in Williams 2001).
Relationships of care are emotive and rife with issues of power and control – for example, elderly people abused by carers, or low-paid carers unable to question or refuse the clients paying their wage (Shakespeare 2000). Any sense of your well-being being enhanced, and feelings of need and gratitude might be combined with feelings of resentment and loss of personal autonomy. The desire of people or groups that have experienced oppression to become self-reliant and self-sufficient and not to be controlled (e.g. women’s right to work outside the home) jars with attempts to accept ‘inevitable’ dependency (Kittay 1999) and develop discourses of ‘flourishing’ interdependence (Kittay 2011: 54).

Fraser and Gordon (1994) show how the positive connotations of the notion of independence developed, especially in the US, but to some extent in Britain, through its use by protestant dissenters in the 18th and 19th centuries asserting their religious freedom and notion of equality. Fine and Glendinning (2005) suggest we can resolve the tensions between the two narratives by maintaining some aspects of this positive connotation whilst acknowledging dependencies, through explicitly addressing power relations within dependency relationships. ‘In this context, independence is perhaps best understood not as non-dependence – a structural notion that suggests the absence of practical, social or economic ties with another person – but as “relational autonomy”’ (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, cited in Fine and Glendinning 2005: 615):

The principle of respect for autonomy ... calls for recognising the complex ways in which individuals compose their autonomy from their relationships ... and expresses itself not in atomistic decision-making, but through intensive sharing and interchange with family members and care providers. (Collopy 1995, cited in Fine and Glendinning 2005: 616)

Kittay (1999) and Fine and Glendinning (2005) propose that if we stop degrading dependence and start working with it we can build new types of interdependencies based on minimising oppressive power relationships and developing generative power – ‘power to’ not ‘power over’ (Collopy 1995 cited in Fine and Glendinning 2005: 616). What this could look like in practice, however, is unclear.

Some more recent theoretical contributions have focused on how to create a visceral rather than just intellectual sense of interdependence. For instance, the theory of ‘acid communism’ conceived by cultural theorist Mark Fisher and developed by Jeremy Gilbert after his death, which focuses on actively building a ‘collective subject’ rather than simply ‘desiring’ it (Fisher 2009: 66). Gilbert (Hughes 2018) describes the starting point:

We are dependent upon one another to survive and thrive, and aren’t in fact autonomous, separate individuals. Yet we live in a society where the social relations and the way the economy works make it very difficult to behave in a way which isn’t
individualistic ... Part of what [the theory is] about is finding ways of exploring what it would mean in cultural and political terms to really act like you’re conscious of that.

One of acid communism’s suggestions is rediscovering sources of ‘collective joy’. This is also discussed by several feminist theorists. Barbara Ehrenreich (quoted in Barcella 2007) describes ‘collective joy’ as something beyond the bonds of nuclear family, which helps ‘hold communities together ... and can even bring strangers together’. It has insurrectionary potential – which is why she believes it has been suppressed by ‘elites’. She argues that individual happiness is not necessarily socially beneficial as it is by nature competitive and acquisitional, and suggests looking at the ritualised, organised ways that people have engaged in activities that involve communality (for instance, dancing, singing, sporting competitions, drama, comedy). Such experiences of self-loss and pleasure create a bond in societies and communities and experiencing communal joy makes it less likely that you’ll try and experience joy at the expense of others. Segal’s (2017) version of ‘collective joy’, meanwhile explores the ‘radical happiness’ that can come from collective activism and consciousness raising. Within a context of a ‘collective subject’, viscerally felt through conscious acts of ‘collective joy’, perhaps relationships of dependency that are power aware and not oppressive could emerge.

While I cannot resolve the tensions between the desire for independence and the valorisation of care, I suggest that it is important to challenge the assumption that dependency is necessarily problematic. Instead, I suggest that conceptions of society that foreground the collective subject and value relational autonomy can make important contributions to normative ideas that posit individuals as interdependent and destigmatise the idea of dependency.

**Responsibility**

Contesting discourses of responsibility are bound up with those about care, contribution and work. Key challenges to the original welfare state ethos came from 1970s’ feminist critiques which argued it was reliant on a patriarchal family setup where women did unpaid, and often acknowledged care work (James 1972; Federici 1975; Wilson 1977; Finch and Groves 1983). Initially framed as the ‘burden of care’, this later shifted to an alternative feminist analysis, with different normative overtones (Fine and Glendinning 2005). The ‘ethic of care’ (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998) emphasised its socially positive and desirable features, challenging the newly dominant neoliberal ideals of ‘personal responsibility’. In particular, this literature highlighted the relationships in which care is given: ‘The ideal of care is thus an activity of relationships, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone’ (Gilligan 1982: 73).

If care is valued as a contribution, then the idea of ‘being responsible’ and ‘playing your part’ broadens beyond ‘being in paid work and not dependent on the state’. Some feminist critiques,
however, caution that reifying women’s family care responsibilities risks reinforcing patriarchal notions of ‘the good woman’ and narrow social constructions of the normative, heterosexual family. Other critiques attack Noddings’ original notion that family and immediate others should come first as a type of parochial conservatism (Puka 1990; Card 1990; Davion 1993). There have also been critiques of the ‘contribution’ discourse from disability theorists (Abberley 1996) who point out that individuals would be still valued on the basis of the work that they do (whether caring or other work) and so physical disability would still be a barrier to being seen as a full citizen. There are also relevant questions in the care literature when it comes to accountability. Some scholars, for instance, ask whether caring – if acknowledged as a ‘responsible’ activity – should be enforced and monitored by the state? Kittay (1998: 144) argues it should not, but Deacon and Williams (2004: 11) say perhaps it should, while worrying that this evokes a moralistic ‘communitarianism’ like that encouraged under New Labour.

This raises the need to interrogate the idea of contribution further. Weeks (2011), for example, argues that contribution should be framed more widely than just caring for family and should include community, general relationships and ‘imagining’ time. Roseneil (2004) suggests friendships and other care-giving relationships outside the nuclear family should also be acknowledged in welfare policy. Standing (2013) advocates learning from the ancient Greeks’ conception of ‘work’, and their prioritisation of ‘leisure’, which he says they defined as a type of work involving learning and democratic participation.

This questioning of whose contributions are recognised or not recognised are related to the ‘politics of recognition’, which demanded recognition of equal moral worth of marginalised groups (see Taylor 1994; Fraser 1995; Honneth 1995). Taylor (1994: 26) argues that ‘due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need’, while Lister (2004) stresses its importance for self-esteem. However, even the politics of recognition’s proponents worry that it has produced a type of identity politics that obscures issues of poverty and economic inequality, and that ‘aspirations (from women, sexual and ethnic minorities and disabled people) that had a clear emancipatory thrust’ have been subsumed into ‘state-organised capitalism’ (Fraser 2009: 107). Some argue that a demand for recognition can displace demands for redistribution or radical change (e.g. Honneth 2001). Fraser (1995) argues that an egalitarian society needs a politics of recognition and redistribution, though to some extent they are intertwined (recognition of people and their rights is needed before economic redistribution can happen).

Nelson and Goodwin (2009) and Cahn (2000) draw on the wider framings of what it means to contribute and be responsible in their idea of the ‘core economy’ which they see as the platform upon which the market economy runs. The core economy is made up of the ‘assets ... embedded in the everyday lives of every individual (time, energy, wisdom, experience, knowledge and skills)
—— and the relationships between them – love, empathy, watchfulness, care, reciprocity, teaching and learning’ (Simms and Boyle 2009: 168). Further work by Goodwin (2014) looks at restructuring the system of rewards and status for different types of work according to what they contribute or take away from the general well-being.

Widdowson (2008) suggests that the usefulness and desirability of work be seen in the context of ‘social harms’ – work that harms the worker cannot necessarily be seen as a social good, especially in an increasingly automated society where this ideal is not leading to higher standards of human welfare (see e.g., Aronowitz and Cutler 1998). Srnicek and Williams (2015) go further with their ‘post-work manifesto’, calling for an end to the ‘disciplinary’ work society, more leisure time and advocating a rejection of the idea of hard work as a moral good in an age where plenty of ‘work’ is unnecessary due to increasing automation.

Scholars (e.g. Alperowitz, Bollier and Helfrich) and institutions (e.g. New Economics Foundation) associated with the ‘new economy’ or ‘solidarity economy’ movement – which focuses on transforming our economic structure so that it prioritizes human and ecological wellbeing – take a similar approach to ‘work’. Rather than valorising paid work which contributes to economic growth, they suggest policies such as a shorter working week and focus on de-growth. They also call for a non-means-tested universal income which covers basic living costs to acknowledge the different types of contribution everyone makes to society and ensure people do not have to take on poorly paid, insecure work in order to survive.

So, in conclusion, there have been a number of challenges to the dominant discourses on help in which responsibility has been equated with paid work. While some have challenged the devaluation of unpaid care work for families, friends and communities, others have argued for the restructuring of the social values given to work, leisure, learning and communal and ecological well-being.

Agency

As discussed in section 1, in the 1970s, the post-war welfare state’s perceived denial of agency was challenged by both the left and right. The new left argued that the welfare state and corporate capitalism were becoming too bureaucratic, concentrating too much power in the hands of remote managerial elites (Williams 1999). To address this, they, along with radical strands of the labour movement, called for the democratisation of workplaces, public services and municipalities. However, it was the new right form of agency – one which argued that welfare made people lazy and that people should be forced to help themselves – which became dominant. Wright (2012) argues that the concept of agency became so associated with an individualistic understanding of social issues that many on the left steered clear of engaging with it for several decades. However, concepts from sociology that challenge the binary of structure
and agency (e.g. Bourdieul’s theory of habitus) helped spur a new leftist focus on agency in the 1990s (Wright 2012). There are several strands to this.

Lister (2004: 152-188) argues for a ‘respecting agency’ that doesn’t ‘other’ the poor and considers unseen ways in which they enact agency. For example, ‘getting out’ of poverty, ‘getting by’, or ‘getting back’ at the system through everyday resistances. She advocates ‘getting organised’ in order to challenge the agency of the powerful, which perpetuates the structural issues constraining agency and choice (see also Williams, Popay and Oakley 1999). Prior (2009) looks at power and resistance in public services, using the term ‘counteragency’ to describe how both service users and providers disrupt, together or separately, intended policy outcomes.

Hoggett meanwhile questions the dominant constructions of people as individual rational actors who make rational choices based on self-interest. He disagrees with Deacon’s (2004) notion of conscious motivation as a driving force for people’s decisions, arguing that the self is more fractured than that, and a conscious agent is not always in play. How responsible then are people for their choices? He argues that the idea of an entirely rational subject is a fallacy linked to the neoliberal economic model and the idea of homo economicus. He draws on Bauman (1993) to argue that choice needs to be understood ‘in the context of both an impulsive and passionate subject and of a world characterised by ambivalence, messiness, ambiguity and tragedy’ (Hoggett 2001: 48). Hoggett’s alternative model of agency acknowledges the possibility of a ‘collapse of agency’ (ibid.: 47), for example in the experience of depression, and proposes a continuum between reflexivity and non-reflexivity, and degrees of empowerment between self-as-object.

Dominant constructions of ‘choice’ have also been challenged in wider global debates. Sen’s (1985) capability approach insists that people’s ability to make use of available resources is paramount – choices have to be real choices, not just choices ‘on paper’, and need to relate to what people consider valuable.10

This idea of choice needing to be meaningful relates back to what constitutes agency and how rational people facing multiple socio-economic challenges can reasonably asked to be about their ‘choices’. A range of literature in the past few years illustrates the limited opportunities people surviving poverty have to enact choices and agency. For instance, a 2012 empirical study by researchers with business, psychology and economics backgrounds suggests that people who live in poverty tend to make poor long-term financial decisions because when people have limited resources, they tend to focus on immediate needs rather than the long term. They argue that this makes it near impossible for people surviving poverty to ‘pull themselves out’ of it (Shah,

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10 Widdowson (2008) describes, however, how the capability approach was transformed into a focus on ‘capacities’ under New Labour, which subtly shifted the focus from structural issues back onto individual attributes.
Mullainathan and Shafir 2012). Help that blames people for ‘bad’ choices and tries to get them to rationally make ‘better’ ones seems at best misguided in this context. Similarly, research about the social effects of inequality demonstrates how economic inequality within a society ‘gets under the skin’ of individuals. People at the sharp end of it feel undervalued and inferior. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009: 41) describe how ‘shame and its opposite, pride, are rooted in the processes through which we internalize how we imagine others see us’. People with lower incomes and wealth come to see their social position as a key feature in their identity, heightening their anxieties. I would argue that choices made from this position of feeling shamed, anxious and undervalued are unlikely to be ‘meaningful’ and blaming or punishing people for them is unlikely to lead to better outcomes for individuals.

I have provided here the theoretical critiques of key concepts of dominant discourses and practices of help. The notions of dependency, responsibility and agency will be revisited in my analysis of groups enacting alternative visions of help in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

Now, I will explore how such dominant notions of welfare have been challenged in practice. This provides a historical context, demonstrating how social movements have already contributed to shifting notions of help.

Examples of alternative practices

In terms of practice, over several decades these discourses have helped shape (and been shaped by) new ways of enacting help, which have emphasised mutuality, valuing different knowledges more equally and shifting – or sharing – power. Below, I outline a few examples relevant to my research.

One particularly relevant example (in terms of the challenges faced) is the part of the 1970s’ refuge movement that attempted to develop along non-hierarchical lines, on the basis that victims of domestic violence had already been deprived of control and the help they received should not replicate that dynamic. Work by Pahl (1985) Ahrens (1980) Murray (1988) and Watson (2004), for example, explores how these practices worked, and raises a few of the challenges encountered, many of which arose from the class differences between the women who started the projects (largely middle class) and the women who needed to access them (largely not middle class). These included difficulties in making horizontal decision-making truly inclusive and tensions that arose when those fleeing domestic violence were considered insufficiently willing to engage in ‘self-help’.

In the 1970s, 80s and 90s, user movements in health (physical and mental), homelessness, drugs and alcohol addiction challenged hierarchical notions of expert knowledge and demanded more democracy and rights to participation (Williams 1999; Campbell and Oliver 1998; Barnes 1999; Jordan and Lent Mead, Hilton and Curtis 2001). Some prefigured different forms of enacting help.
in the ways they organised, for instance the women’s health movements where women supported each other with basic health issues whilst fighting for more rights, based on the argument that their own knowledge of their bodies and one another’s needs was as valid as that of medical professionals (e.g. Annetts et al 2009); and mental health movements that developed peer-support models in place of medicalised and pathologising models of help. There is limited UK-based literature looking at the day-to-day challenges of these practices in detail. More detailed accounts can be found in US-based literature, for instance about Intentional Peer Support practices in mental health (e.g. Mead and Macneil 2006).

Another relevant movement involves emergent forms of solidarity-based social work within the public sector in the 1970s (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group Summer 1980). Most prominent within this movement was the Community Development Project (CDP), an ‘experimental programme of action-research in twelve “deprived” areas, set up in response to the rediscovery of poverty in the late 1960s’ (Banks and Carpenter 2017).

These projects were initially framed in terms of individualistic and social pathology-based approaches to help and need. But what emerged from the initial phases were reports exposing structural causes of poverty in the areas they were based in – chiefly ‘neoliberal capitalism (especially deindustrialisation and globalisation)’ according to Banks and Carpenter, who note these were ‘identified as emergent by the CDP teams in the 1970s, [and] continue to impact on disadvantaged neighbourhoods in negative ways’ (ibid.: 1). These led to more radical attempts to work with people in certain areas in more collective, less pathologising ways. Key was the idea that replicating hierarchies does not change much, and trying to share power is crucial (Craig, Derricourt and Loney 1982).

Interestingly, more radical critiques also challenged some forms of collective organising, such as trade unions for being dominated by white males and excluding women in a number of non-obvious ways (for instance, it was difficult for women to attend evening meetings in a context where they were expected to do all the housework). This led to some women’s groups adopting explicitly feminist approaches (Dixon et al 1985). The (female) social workers in these projects broke down hierarchies of helper and helped to some extent by taking the approach that they were not complete outsiders there to enable the women, but people who shared some of the same oppressions.

The projects ran from 1970 to 1978. The following year, Thatcher was elected and the ‘emergent’ forms of ‘neoliberal capitalism’ they had critiqued (Banks and Carpenter 2017) became dominant. Before they were able to build on the new framings and practices, funding for the CDPs was cut.

Another alternative practice of help with relevance to this project is collective and non-hierarchical forms experimented with by squatter and other housing movements, which fused the
identity and culture-based protests emerging at the time with more traditional ‘welfarist’ concerns around poverty and homelessness (Reeve 2009). While squatters’ movements still exist in the UK, they were particularly active in the late 1960s and 70s and tended to operate largely according to loose participatory structures (ibid.). As with the non-hierarchical refuge movements, a key area of tension was clashes in outlook and approach between people from different socio-economic backgrounds – those needing to squat and those doing so out of desire to live by alternative values. For instance, disputes about whether to work with local authorities and accept rehousing in permanent homes or not – for those squatting because they needed a home, the answer was yes; for those squatting because they liked the type of community and alternative lifestyle it offered, the answer was no. Of course, the lines between these two groups were rarely absolute.

The movements and practices described above had corollaries in the US and other European countries, although in different forms. Activists and academics throughout this period challenged the dominant theoretical constructions of dependency and responsibility and, increasingly through the 1990s, problematised simplistic constructions of ‘choice’. These emergent framings and practices did not, however, replace the dominant ones. Some, such as the refuge movement, were reshaped along more hierarchical, ‘professionalised’ lines; others disappeared and others, such as squatters’ movements, have continued in the margins.

Another sphere in which some of these collaborative caring experiments continue to take place is autonomous social centres. Some of the small body of auto-ethnographic literature about practices in anarchist social centres raises key issues, such as where is the line between personal freedom and collective equality (Eisenstadt 2013); and how do you work out the relationship between time/ability to contribute and decision-making power (Jeppeson et al 2014). However, in general, despite being important spaces for radical politics and experimentation (Carmona et al 2008), these spaces have been critiqued as ‘activist ghettos’ (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006), with particular ‘countercultural’ norms that could be exclusionary for people from more working-class backgrounds (Carmona et al 2008).

There have also been, in the years just before and since I started this research, a flourishing of non-hierarchical movements engaging in collective care and advocacy. The New Economics Foundation describes these as a form of resistance to austerity politics and the austerity story (NEF 2015). Rather than adapt to the situation, these groups are imagining different forms of help in how they organise at the same time as challenging the current structures. One area where there has been a profusion of groups is housing. In London, for instance, there is a network of direct-action casework groups and renters’ unions. Groups such as Sisters Uncut (SU) have reclaimed the radical heritage of the refuge movement in their attempts at mutual, non-hierarchical help organising. Whilst opposing austerity, these groups also try to prefigure the 34
societies they want to create. Many have been formed as ‘alternatives … to the existing anti-austerity or left wing activism’ (which are felt by some to be dominated by people from more privileged backgrounds, particularly white males) that allow greater space for political participation by people from a wider range of backgrounds (Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019).

Ishkanian and Saavedra’s participatory action-research-based study of SU is particularly useful in relation to my research. They describe how one of their participants contrasted her previous experiences in activism with her experience in SU saying, ‘unlike other [anti-austerity or left wing] groups, the people front and centre in organising in Sisters are the people who are marginalised in other groups … black and brown Sisters, disabled Sisters, and trans Sisters are front and centre of organising’. (ibid.: 12)

Ishkanian and Saavedra focus on ‘the micro-politics or what some call the “backstage” work in movements’ (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017: 650, cited in Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019: 1). They use the term ‘intersectional prefiguration’ to describe SU’s approach to creating equality within the group, and explain it as a way of organising that ‘acknowledges inequalities and relations of domination and seeks to challenge them, both in organisational spaces and society’ (ibid.: 2). The authors describe approvingly the multiple collective processes used to address ‘all kinds of inequalities … [such as] … class, race, and disability…shaping participation’ (ibid.). But they also acknowledge the ‘challenge of integrating multiple vectors of identity in organising and the tensions of different subjective positionalities’ (ibid.: 16). They note that interviewees felt that class oppression was least well engaged with in SU, and observe that in the British context Evans (2015: 67, cited in Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019: 16) has noted that despite the focus on ‘the intersections between sex, race, disability and gender’, little attention is paid to class and this was certainly the case in SU’. This analysis is relevant to the challenges faced by the groups I studied. All of which acknowledge the ways economics, education and racial and cultural privilege undermine attempts to create equality, are committed to finding ways to overcome this but nonetheless struggle to do so fully.

Cooption or space for resistance?

In some ways, these radical movements that challenge dominant ideas of help seem to keep disappearing, or they become absorbed into the mainstream. For instance, some New Labour welfare-related policies did incorporate progressive demands, such as demands for better childcare provision to allow women to work outside the home; and demands from user movements for increased say in service provision and policymaking. But these concessions came with a cost in that they potentially ‘depoliticised’ (Fraser 2009; McRobbie 2009) radical demands and introduced new forms of coercion, so that women were made ‘responsible’ for doing formal paid work and service users were made responsible for ‘participating’.
The once-radical language of ‘giving X Group a say/voice’ or ‘seeing X Group as the solution not the problem’ is now commonplace in the statutory and voluntary sector in the UK. Seeking clients’ views or ‘co-producing’ services with them is an increasingly important part of gaining funding and credibility. Gregory (2015: 9) argues that ‘[t]he concept of co-production has received increasing policy attention and refers to public service reform seeking to engage service user inputs into service provision, alongside the activities of traditional service providers’. But I would argue that the apparent acceptance of these ideas has not led to significant shifts in structural power within dominant forms of help. Despite moves towards user involvement and co-production, fundamental decision-making structures remain the same: there are chief executives, trustees and senior managers at the top of the hierarchy who ultimately control what happens.

There is also little awareness of the subtle hierarchies present in day-to-day interactions, often obvious to those with greater experience of oppression (used to deferring, agreeing and apologising); less so to those with more hidden and invisible power. The term ‘empowerment’ appears in the stated goals of many helping organisations (Land and King 2014). Often, however, it is used in ‘a diluted form’ as code for ‘personal development’, rather than building ‘collective power in the struggle for a more just and equitable world’ (Cornwall and Brock 2005: 5). I agree with Newman and Tonkens (2011: 12) that empowerment has become ‘seamlessly coupled’ with choice, part of a ‘chain of equivalence’ (Laclau 1990: 33) with neoliberal ideas of individuality ‘personal responsibility’.

Newman (2013), in research based on a series of interviews with female activists in the voluntary and statutory sector, shows how some alternative discourses have affected the dominant discourses, but in compromised and distorted ways. She quotes a feminist activist interviewee who encapsulates the problem:

I heard the leader of the Tory party quoting back my own words [about promoting active citizenship among women living in poverty] ... they’ve listened to the words and ... they are coming back and biting us on the bum with them, saying, well, we’ve listened, this is what you have asked for. But oh my god we didn’t mean that. (Ibid.: 89)

By ‘that’ she means a type of ‘active citizenship’ which, rather than being based on a rights-based approach which prioritises democratic participation, is based on a punitive idea of ‘help yourself or face repercussions’.

Dagnino (2007: 1) describes the ‘perverse confluence’ between key organising ideas and principles of radical social movements and neoliberal politics, especially those of participation and citizenship, which throws up some difficult questions. Can participation be excluding and demoralising rather than empowering if not done with real awareness and skill (Beech and Page 2015)? Does ‘democratisation’ of services through participation foster more equal relationships of
care? Or does it undermine professionalism within care services and put the onus on service users to 'help themselves' (thus sliding into an individualist rhetoric that holds individuals primarily responsible for their circumstances)? Do these approaches risk straying into conservative, smaller-state approaches and the idea that people have become too dependent (thus in fact lining up with a New Right framing of agency)? Does participation in this framework become more about being active consumers and less about collective democracy (Gregory 2015), and is it transformed from a right to a duty? (Newman and Tonkon 2011).

Ultimately, therefore, is the new policy focus on ‘active citizenship’ in a number of welfare state systems a ‘triumph of the new social movements of the later decades of the 20th century’ (ibid.: 9), or ‘the ultimate disowning or even devouring of social movements’ by the establishment/policy makers/existing institutions (ibid.: 12)?

Some feminist theorists argue the latter. Power (2013), writing in the magazine Jacobin, reflects on the insights shared in Beyond the Fragments (Rowbotham et al 1979 cited in Power 2013), the ‘classic statement of socialist feminism’:

A clear tension existed between the desire for autonomy and the need for state support. Wainwright tells of ... when she and Rowbotham worked at Greater London Council from 1982 to 1986, creating women’s refuges, self-run nurseries, and other resources. They were precisely the combination of institutional autonomy and progressive causes that have been destroyed by successive governments in the UK, Conservative and Labour alike. Even at the time, the possibility that such autonomy might be turned against their intentions was in the air. (Power 2013)

She notes that Segal argues that there was a contradiction ‘between our emphasis on self-help and collective activity and the idea of self-funding’, and she bemoans the fact that ‘[n]ow we live in a period when little or no public funding exists, and notions of the “Big Society” lead people to volunteer their labour for free, under the guise of “self-help” and “collective activity”’ (ibid.).

Perhaps, however, the situation is not so clear cut. Larner (2000) argues that Hall’s idea of contestation is key in this debate as it implies that that neoliberalism is not a coherent, impenetrable monolith. It is ostensibly based on five key ideas (individualism, choice, competition, free market, small state), but it is a ‘promiscuous’ term (Clarke 2008a: 135) always contingent and contested (Ong 2006; Clarke 2008a; Newman 2013, 2014). In order to retain dominance, in different countries, at different periods, it has to form multiple, often contradictory alliances. For instance, Thatcherite alignments with conservative discourses about family and nation and New Labour engagement with ‘the politics of recognition’. Although these alignments were often compromised, to reject them as simple cooption, Larner argues, is perversely to deny the power of discourses ‘from below’ to affect the dominant discourse (Larner 2000: 17).
Similarly, Coalition discourses were aligned with more traditionally leftist ones about increased mutualism, community engagement and democratic service delivery. Now often dismissed as a cover for shrinking the state, they nonetheless demonstrate that ‘neoliberal’ hegemony is not total or static (Newman 2013). Hall, Massey and Rustin (2013) argue that the fact that the UK government at the time seized on these discourses and tried to coopt those of ‘social justice’ and ‘fairness’, shows these ideas have a traction and appeal that ‘neoliberalism’ has been unable to erase. This perspective, Newman and Clarke (2015) argue, opens up space for resistance to hegemonic discourses and room for emergent ones. Newman (2013: 8) further notes of her interviewees, who worked in the public sector and had also fought for the radical versions of these ideas as activists, that ‘processes of re-signifying of... ideas and values that they had fought for did not mean that the original meanings had been lost’.

Annetts et al (2009), meanwhile, argue that, contrary to how it is presented in most social policy literature, the welfare state was not generously granted from on high to passive beneficiaries as the result of an evolutionary journey towards equality (see Marshall 1949). Rather, it was formed through a process of ‘conflict’ and ‘contestation’ (Clarke et al. 2014) by the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement and other social movements. The dominant framing, Annetts et al argue, obscures the labour, agency and personal capacity of the ‘ordinary people’ who fought for these rights. This framing, along with those of Newman and Clarke and Hall provide, I would argue, a compelling rationale for continuing to push forward alternative narratives about and practices of welfare and help to challenge the punitive dominant ones.

One way of doing this, I suggest, is to find ways to differentiate between radical and coopted discourses and practices. I have found Gregory’s (2015) work on timebanking particularly useful here. He argues that ‘the alternatives to capitalism can often [be] presented as both a contradiction and complement to neoliberal praxis’. He draws on ‘the social theory of time’ to analyse how timebanks can perpetuate radical, non-punitive forms of ‘self-help’ (those that regard people as already responsible and ‘decent’) as opposed to being coopted into neoliberal forms (those that consider people lazy and dependent and needing to be made to be responsible). One of his arguments is that resisting cooption necessitates a deliberate shift towards valuing process at least as much as outcome and thinking in terms of efficacy rather than efficiency. He argues for frameworks of co-production which focus on its potential for enhancing empowerment and democratic participation rather than improving productivity, creating ‘a framework for valuing work outside of the market economy’ (ibid.: 64).

I suggest as well that in order to further develop and strengthen the alternative frameworks of welfare, it is useful to learn from examples of non-hierarchical working and mutual aid away from the sphere of UK-based ‘welfarist’ organisations. Firstly, longer-term experiments in the Global South, particularly in contexts where neoliberal frameworks and policies have long...
challenged and understood as a cause of social problems. Some of the most useful literature I have found in this vein is Holloway’s (1996, 2014) work on the Zapatistas and work by Sitrin and the Lavaca Collective (Sitrin 2007; Lavaca Collective 2007) on worker-run factories in Argentina. I have also found work on municipal democracy experiments in Northern Syria useful (e.g. Knapp, Flach and Ayboga 2016). I refer to some of these examples at various points in my empirical chapters, and particularly in my discussion chapter, where I feel their practices and framings could be helpful in moving past some of the tensions and ‘stuckness’ experienced in the UK-based groups studied.

Secondly, protest movements that attempt to organise non-hierarchically, for instance the alter-globalisation protests of the late 1990s/early 2000s (see e.g., Notes from Nowhere 2003) and the Occupy movement of the early 2010s (see e.g., Della Porta and Mattoni 2014). These groups are committed to similar principles of collectivity, collective care and participation as the ‘welfarist’ groups described above, and to similarly prefiguring ways of living together and looking after each other without ‘authority’ (Sotirakopoulos 2016: 135). Some literature about them is therefore relevant to my research, particularly that which looks at the challenges they face in creating inclusivity in collective decision-making across class, gender and race lines (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2011; Smith and Glidden 2012). I therefore draw on them to help analyse the decision-making practices of the groups studied in this research.

Looking to social movements and longer-term experiments in the Global South for ideas about welfare is advocated by some prominent welfare scholars. In the final chapter of Rethinking Welfare, Ferguson, Lavalette and Mooney (2002: 182) reference the Zapatistas and the alter-globalisation protests of the late 1990s/early 2000s, stating that ‘once again it is popular struggles and protests rather than the musings of academics or policy-makers which are giving rise to new demands, new forms of thinking and organising, new notions of welfare’. And Williams (1999) attempts to glean ‘speculative’ ‘good enough principles for welfare’ from the ‘new social movements’, for example the feminist, anti-racist and environmental movements of the 1980s and 90s.

Older social movement literature is also relevant, particularly the critique of non-hierarchical organising The Tyranny of Structurelessness (Freeman 1972). Freeman argues that non-hierarchical organising can become ‘a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others’ as unaccountable informal leaders emerge. ‘Thus, structurelessness becomes a way of masking power’ (ibid.: 1). There have been critiques of Freeman’s argument (e.g. Levine 1979), particularly the fact that it is based on her experiences of feminist activism in the US in the 1960s and 70s in groups that consciously did away with structure as they felt it reinforced patriarchal hierarchies: whereas other non-hierarchical groups
do have some structures. However, I suggest that its central premise is one that groups trying to organise non-hierarchically need to guard against constantly (as demonstrated in Chapter 7).

**Power**

A key concept I will return to throughout thesis is that of power. I draw from several theories about power to aid my analysis of how different forms of shared decision-making and leadership work. The most pertinent for this chapter are the ideas of shifting from ‘power over’ to ‘power with’, ‘power to’ and ‘power within’ espoused by VeneKlasen et al (2002; see also Rowlands 1997) and theories of visible, hidden and invisible power (Lukes 1974, 2005; Gaventa 1980, 2007). These frameworks are prominent in attempts to address power differentials within international development work. Although operating in a different context to welfare in the UK, I believe the frameworks are relevant to my analysis. Partly because they provide practical theoretical tools for looking at how power – obvious and more insidious forms – plays out in decision-making across class, race and other divisions. And partly because they recognise possibilities of resistance and power can be used by the ‘disempowered as well as the powerful’ (VeneKlasen et al 2002) and possibilities for transforming power relations and creating change. VeneKlasen et al’s framework also tallies with debates in feminist care literature about how to create ‘generative power’ in care and helping practices whilst minimising ‘oppressive power’ (Kittay 1998; Fine and Glendinning 2005).

**Visible, hidden and invisible power**

Visible power is related to who has obvious, observable decision-making power and how those in positions of power use formal rules, structures and procedures to maintain control. Hidden power is about who sets the agenda behind the scenes – how the powerful control who gets to be involved in decision-making and what is on the agenda, thus maintaining influence. These dynamics often exclude and devalue concerns and contributions of less powerful groups. Invisible power is an insidious form of power that shapes meaning and influences norms, beliefs, self-image, desires and social attitudes without us realising. It influences how people think about their place in the world and accept the status quo, meaning social issues and problems are not only underrepresented in formal decision-making forums, but also kept from the minds and consciousness of people affected. This form of power maintains and exacerbates inequality and exclusion by defining what is acceptable and normal.

Gaventa (1980), drawing and expanding on Lukes (1974), describes these concepts as part of his study of extreme poverty in an Appalachian mining town dominated by a largely absentee mining company. The three types of power are interrelated in his analysis:
Victories by dominant actors in public arenas (visible power) shape the barriers which may keep people from engaging (hidden power). Over time, the lack of visible conflict or contestation contributes to an acceptance of the status quo as normal (invisible power). (Gaventa 1980)

If dominant forms of power are interrelated in this way and can accumulate, then resistances to this could also benefit from strengthening each other. Gaventa is clear, however, that ‘increased participation in itself does not alter power, nor change the status quo’ (2007.: 6). He also asks pertinent questions about how some forms of ‘help’ (e.g. ‘professional’ campaigning on behalf of people facing exclusion or disadvantage) can at some level re-enforce hidden and invisible forms of power.

Power over, power to, power with and power within

‘Power over’ describes control over others – someone or something dominating or having authority over another person or group. It most obviously comes from force or threat, used by a person or institution to control or constrain another’s actions. But it can also come from influence over others’ perceptions of what they can do, or even imagine possible. ‘Power to’ is about an individual’s ability to act. It starts with awareness that action is possible and grows as knowledge, skills and capacity to take action develop, bringing the realisation that one can effect change.

‘Power with’ is about both the psychological and political power that comes from uniting, building shared understandings and acting collectively to create change. It is often used in reference to oppressed people or groups (facing either overt or covert oppression or domination). ‘Power within’ is about having the dignity, confidence and self-esteem to act. It comes from awareness of one’s situation and the possibility of doing something about it. It is often linked to culture, background, experience and sense of identity, which influence what thoughts and actions seem imaginable, acceptable and right to you.

The concepts are often used together: people need power within in order to act, and power to in order to act collectively, while power with can strengthen self-esteem and agency. The expressions of power framework is also useful because it highlights the fact that power is not always negative or oppressive – it can be used in ways that are creative and provoke resistance and change.

These two ways of looking at power can be used together to explore how domination takes place. Taken together, they help to expose who has more or less ability to take action (power over, power to, power with, power within) to achieve their goals in diverse instances: cases of observable decision-making or conflict (visible power); less observable experiences of bias and exclusion (hidden power); and actions or behaviour that support or resist social norms and beliefs (invisible power). Thinking about power in these different ways can also, I believe, help re-radicalise the idea of ‘empowerment’. (As demonstrated above, without thinking about the other
types of power, attempts to empower people in vulnerable positions are at best non-transformative and at worst can be punitive and entrench individual pathology ideas.)

They also shed light on how resistance can work: for instance, by understanding invisible power, activists can think about how to develop power within so that invisible power can be resisted, or even redefined. Power to and power with are interrelated with hidden power. Developing the former helps change the latter, and understanding the latter helps develop the former. All of these things can help shift power.

Chapter summary

This chapter has looked at the dominant ways of thinking about help in the UK over the last 30 years, with a focus on the last decade. I have argued that these forms of help place individual responsibility at their centre and use the once-radical language of ‘agency’ and ‘empowerment’ to enforce a punitive agenda that fails to engage with structural causes of social issues. I then look at the counter-discourses that have challenged these dominant ones. These question the idea of ‘independence’ as desirable or even possible and view agency in terms of rights rather than obligations, question the idea of people as always ‘rational actors’ and assert that a wide range of contributions should be acknowledged and valued. I have also given an overview of some practical examples of these alternative helping practices, and have looked at how these emergent ways of thinking about help have become absorbed in the dominant discourse and whether or not this opens up space for resistance. I have explained the frameworks I use for looking at ‘power’ in my empirical chapters, which help me recognise where groups are building positive and collective forms of power, as well as minimising oppressive power. Finally, I have outlined how current shifts in mainstream discourses and helping organisations towards more collaborative and structural understandings of help make this research particularly relevant at the current time.
Chapter 2: Methodology

I describe in the introduction to my thesis the personal and professional experiences that have driven me to want to research mutual, collective forms of organising and support. In particular, my disillusionment with more mainstream charitable and state welfare organisations I have worked with led me to co-found a women’s organisation, South London Women’s Collective (SLWC), which aimed to do ‘help’ differently. From the start, we drew from participatory, user-led approaches and experimented with ways to work with and support each other ‘as equals’. The challenges we encountered – and witnessed others doing similar work facing – have shaped my research interests.

My experiences as a practitioner have led me to agree with Gibson-Graham (1996) that capitalism and its ways of working and being are ‘overdetermined’. We are conditioned to see individualistic, hierarchical, competition-based organising as ‘the only alternative’. We therefore do not see the numerous formal and informal ways in which people are organising differently all around us. The role of the ‘engaged scholar’ who wants to support these already existing forms of ‘post-capitalism’ is to help make them ‘visible’ (Gibson-Graham 2008: 8). Given this starting point, it made sense for me to take a critical ethnographic perspective, which views human narratives and interactions as part of a wider structural framework and has a ‘particular purpose of overcoming social oppression’ (Madison 2005: 7). This approach also encourages researchers to build awareness of their own ‘acts of domination’ (ibid.: 8; see also Noblit, Flores and Murillo 2002) and striving to be aware of and reflect on the impacts of my own power in the process has been an important factor in my research design.

In particular, two important considerations – beyond the question of how best to answer my research question – have significantly influenced my methodological approach. Firstly, my position as an ‘insider researcher’ and the ethical and methodological advantages and risks thereof. Secondly, my position as an ‘invested’ (Gibson-Graham 2006: 102) researcher and the ways in which this might impact how I steer data collection and analyse data. In this chapter, I will first elaborate further on these ideas. I will then outline the research methods I have chosen to use, attempt to explain my decisions and reflect on their advantages and limitations.

Reflections on my position

The ‘insider’ researcher

This is ‘insider’ research; it is situated within a field that I am already part of. Of the six organisations I use as case studies, I have founded one, been an employee at another and worked collaboratively with individuals from almost all the others. The status of insider brings many advantages. I have many contacts I can draw on and a detailed understanding of both the
language and context of non-hierarchical working in this country. There was also a certain amount of pre-existing trust and social capital amongst the respondent group, which made many feel more willing to take the time to participate in my research. The fact that they knew that I had personally struggled with a lot of the same issues reassured many that I was not going to judge them harshly and made it easier for them to talk frankly. But being an insider also creates particular methodological and ethical challenges. Researchers undertaking this type of research need to be aware of negotiating complex power relations and being clear about when they are in the role of researcher rather than friend, colleague or co-activist (Browne 2003; Taylor 2011). Sometimes, people feel more hesitancy and shame speaking to someone with similar experiences than a complete outsider. In addition, I found it was important to find ways to be aware of my own interpretations of events and issues that I had witnessed or been part of, undermining the right of respondents to represent themselves and their experiences as they choose to.

The ‘invested’ researcher

Having spent much of my working life exploring and promoting more horizontal, collaborative models of being, I am also what Gibson-Graham calls an ‘invested’ researcher (Gibson-Graham 2006: 102). They observe that such researchers often either reify the experiments they research, ‘reflecting the desire for an oasis of success in the bleak contemporary landscape of economic politics’ (ibid.) or become disillusioned, pointing out their failings without acknowledging the real difficulties of this kind of work. I do not want to idealise or romanticise the groups I am researching. Their practices are by no means ideal, even on their own terms. There are often contradictions and conflicts involved in how they translate their principles into practice. It is imperative to rigorously critique them, not only in order to help create better practices but also to demonstrate that trying to work in these ways is hard and requires painful and fundamental shifts. I want to challenge what one interviewee described as the ‘slick’ forms of co-production and participation that he feels have become popular in the third sector and are promoted by ‘innovation’ organisations (see e.g., Boyle and Harris 2009; Horne, Khan and Corrigan 2013) by documenting how, as another interviewee put it, ‘if you’re not covered in bruises, you’re probably not doing it right’.

At the same time, I also feel it is important not to ‘destroy’ a ‘sense of possible alternative futures (Graeber 2008: 1). The sorts of groups I am looking at tend to have little visibility and little mainstream credibility (partly as they are often seen as not ‘professional’ enough). I therefore try to highlight the positive aspects of the groups’ approaches wherever possible; to always put shortcomings into context (rather than generalise about them); and to not interpret ‘deviances from the cooperative ideals’ (Gibson-Graham 2006: 102) as evidence that these types of experiments are always doomed to become compromised or coopted.
In order to try and counter the risks of being both an insider and an invested researcher I used structured reflection through detailed reflection journals that I rigorously kept during data collection, and through short (approximately 10-15-minute) debriefs with interviewees. These occurred either directly after the interview, if the interviewee had the energy, or in follow-up phone calls. The key questions I was trying to answer through this reflection were: to what extent was I exerting various forms of power over interviewees, and how could I try and equalise this?

Fieldwork

To produce data, I used a broadly ethnographic approach, drawing extensively on my own experience working in the field in combination with semi-structured interviews with individuals affiliated to organisations that fitted my criteria (see below). I also conducted one focus group involving some people I had interviewed one to one, and three other participants. This focus group helped to identify key themes and gave me an opportunity to test my early interpretations.

Sampling

I used purposive sampling to select the research participants for the interviews and group sessions. Purposive sampling is an appropriate approach when only representatives of certain groups can meaningfully contribute to the research and primary data (Creswell 1998) and when the researcher has sufficient knowledge of the topic to be able to choose appropriate ‘experts’ to participate (Patton 1995). I had a network of contacts within London built up over years of working in this field, whom I invited personally to participate in the research. Many of these contacts suggested other people from within their own organisations to interview (the snowball approach).

I decided to use a purposive approach rather than other methods such as more open call-outs because of the considerable number of organisations and individuals using the language of and claiming to enact mutuality and non-hierarchical approaches. One issue I address in Chapter 1 is the rapid cooption of this language and its use by organisations that are not necessarily overtly challenging top-down forms of help. I did not think that, in the time given, I could effectively assess whether the practice of organisations I do not know met the specific criteria outlined below, so decided to start with the contacts I already had personal and working relationships with and the groups they were able to introduce me to. Trust was also an important factor – groups who knew of me and my organisation (or were introduced to me by people who did) were more likely to trust my intentions as a researcher and thus more likely to speak openly to me.

I approached people who were members of groups that were enacting or aspiring to flat structures and shared decision-making practices; sharing or working towards sharing resources (including money) and power; had some deliberate practices of looking after each other that did not subscribe to dominant punitive narratives of help and were to some extent mutual (i.e. not
one-sided); had some transformative vision for society that they were attempting to prefigure in their day-to-day practices. I also only approached groups based in London – partly for practical reasons of access and time constraints, partly because that meant they were working (to an extent) in similar contexts.

**Challenges and limitations of this sampling method**

The majority of individuals I approached responded positively and wanted to participate. My insider status was, on the whole, helpful; people trusted that I was not out to debunk their principles and practice and most were keen to contribute to increasing the visibility of their work. Most were also interested in using the research process as an opportunity to reflect on their own group practices.

However, this was not always a given: I wanted to collect data from groups that have ‘failed’ – not achieved what they wanted to or had to disband – as well as ones that were ‘succeeding’, in order to document in detail the difficulties of these practices. But – partly because I was known in the field, partly because the ‘failure’ of an organisation is painful for those involved – I had to approach this carefully. It was helpful that the organisation I had co-founded had had to downscale significantly because of the tension between achieving outcomes for funders and maintaining the integrity of our way of working. I could with truth frame my question as ‘this happened to us also and I am trying to understand why’.

I was also particularly interested in interviewing group members who have received formal state welfare, which presented another set of challenges. Often, these interviewees were less economically privileged and in less well-paid and secure jobs. In addition, some interviewees who had used statutory services felt uncomfortable with the formal aspect of signing consent forms, which they associated with the ‘officialness’ of statutory services (see below). A number had been ‘researched’ and ‘consulted’ several times before in their role as ‘users’ of various services and were fatigued and perhaps suspicious of my motives. I was lucky to already have built strong relationships with a number of individuals in this category through my own work. One issue these colleagues had highlighted was the frustration they felt at being constantly asked to describe their ‘gritty lived experiences’ without being given the opportunity to present their analysis of these, or their ideas about how things might be different. I discuss below how these concerns impacted my approach to interviews.

Finally, my decision to research only London-based organisations does limit the breadth and relevance of my findings fairly significantly. London has particular characteristics, including wide ethnic diversity, high immigration and large wealth gaps, all of which affected the groups looked at.

At the outset of this research, I considered including movements from outside the UK. In the end though, aside from the practical challenges, I felt that the very different contexts in which
these organisations operate would make meaningful comparison extremely difficult. Instead, I refer to the rich, existing literature on these movements and organisations as and when they are relevant to my analysis.

**Interviews**

To collect data, I used semi-structured interviews (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Futing Liao 2004) as they are useful when conducting just one (rather than multiple) interviews with someone (Bernard 1988). The semi-structured interview approach also allows for the comparison of data, but with the room to follow relevant topics and ask open and follow-up questions. Semi-structured interviews are ideally preceded by a period of observation and a period of unstructured, informal interviewing in order to gain enough understanding of the topic in order to be able to develop meaningful topic headings. I did not do formal observation as such, but I felt that many years’ experience in trying to enact the types of approaches I was looking at gave me some insight into areas to focus on, particularly when combined with informal discussion with potential interviewees as well as knowledge gained from literature about small-scale groups trying to enact non-hierarchical approaches to help.

The flexibility of the semi-structured approach also allowed me to explore some biographical information where relevant – for instance, experiences that might have triggered or affected interviewees’ involvement in the group – without having to do a full life history, and to contain and guide the conversation towards certain topics and biographical instances, whilst focusing on the detail of the practices of their current work and allowing enough room for interviewees to also steer the conversation to areas they felt were important (Denzin 1989), within a reasonable timeframe.

I conducted 30 interviews with members of groups attempting to enact less hierarchical forms of help. Each interview lasted between one and a half and two hours. With about a third of the interviewees I did follow-up interviews as we did not get through all the topics in the first interview, or they felt they wanted to say more.

The topic guide I used covered several areas: day-to-day practices in their non-hierarchical groups from interviewees’ perspectives; relevant aspects of interviewees’ biographies to understand how and why they became involved with their group; and their experiences of mainstream forms of help (as service users or providers) and how these (and dominant discourses about help) had affected them (see Appendix 1).

I piloted the topic guide with two volunteers before starting on the official interviews. One key change that came from the piloting was to switch the order of the first two topics. Originally, I was going to ask interviewees to tell me about where they were in their lives when they joined the group, and then to give a broad description of the group and its purpose. But after piloting I decided
it would be better to ask them to give a basic description of the group first as a ‘warm up’, and then ask the more personal question.

Most of the interviews were conducted face to face in public settings chosen by the interviewees. Interviewees were sent the topic guide before the interview.

**Asking theoretical as well as experiential questions**

I questioned interviewees about their experiences, but also engaged them in thinking through particular practical and theoretical issues – ones raised by them, but also ones raised by other interviewees and from the literature and my own experience. I did this as, although time constraints did not allow me to engage in formal collaborative analysis with interviewees, I wanted to in some way still enact the spirit of the participatory action-research approach of ‘challenging the separation between analyst and subject’ (Wakeford: 2002: 1; see also Chambers 1980, 1983; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991).

There were some challenges to this approach. One interviewee who had experienced homelessness and now worked as an advocate and peer supporter with a non-hierarchical group, for example, initially responded to a question about his thoughts on different peer-support and decision-making models by saying ‘I don’t know about that sort of thing, you’ll have to ask S’. Once I had adjusted my tone, however, and made efforts to avoid jargon or overly academic language, his interviews provided some of the most insightful theoretical knowledge of the research. At other times, I found myself taking up far too much time trying to explain theoretical concepts, which risked derailing the flow of the interview. Overall, however, I found that interviewees were comfortable moving between descriptive accounts and more theoretical inquiry and the process felt natural. By definition, all of the people I interviewed for my research were part of groups that encouraged and required them to participate in decision-making and actively critique conventional notions of how we value different knowledges. It is possible that for this reason they were more prepared for, and comfortable with the theoretical, inquiry-based aspects of the interview process. Often, I asked interviewees questions I was thinking about that had come up from previous interviews. One, for instance, was about whether, within the current socio-political frameworks, it was better to accept compromised forms of collectivity – where one or several people were more ‘in charge’ or were paid whilst others were not. This was a particular area where interviewees’ understanding of the issue formed the basis for my analysis of it.

**Using data production tools**

I used several tactile, visual ‘tools’ during some interviews (Appendix 2), created with one of my interviewees (who I had known previously). They were simple – made of cardboard and velcro – and their purpose was to provide interviewees with a way of thinking through and expressing their thoughts about some of the topics we were discussing without having to rely solely on oral
verbalization (Chambers 1994). I showed interviewees the tools and gave them the option to use them or not.

The first tool was a physical timeline, for discussing interviewees’ previous experiences of help and their journey towards joining their group. It seemed to work well for most interviewees, allowing them to remember events in non-linear order and to make sense of cause and effect in different ways (Adriansen 2012). Some, for instance, spent time moving events between different places on the timeline, as they moved between different understandings of how they had arrived at a certain place in their lives.

The second tool was a spectrum line to help participants think through the effectiveness of different practices in their groups. Participants wrote down, or I wrote down for them, the practices on cards (some also drew symbols or pictures instead). They then placed them on the spectrum line according to their evaluation of them, and we discussed why they had placed them there. The physical act of deciding where to place cards seemed helpful for some interviewees in thinking through how they would rate certain practices, and seeing a visual representation of their thoughts also seemed to provoke further reflection. One interviewee commented that it felt easier to initially express negative feelings about certain practices in this externalized way – through putting a card in a certain area – rather than just saying it verbally.

The final tool was to help interviewees think through conflicts in their group (if they raised them) and to reflect on whether they thought the group needed to rethink any of their principles or theoretical understandings after trying to practically enact them. However, the layout of the board did not work for moving from feelings and reflections to broader analysis in the way that I’d hoped, and few interviewees chose to use this tool.

I also used a collaging exercise with several participants. I tended to use it at the point where I was prompting interviewees to think about what aspects of working together non-hierarchically they felt suited them and what they personally struggled with. I offered them the option of answering verbally or creating a collage to help them think about and express their answers. I brought along card, scissors and a stack of magazines for them to create the collage from, but left it quite open for them to decide how exactly to do it. I let them get started for 5 -10 minutes and then asked them if they felt ready to talk about what they had done and why. I then gave them space to do more, whilst asking them at intervals to describe what they had done. For the interviewees who took to it, their feedback and my observation suggest that this method produced different insights from those they had given in direct questions, reflecting Rose’s (2001) argument that using activities like collaging in research can create less linear thinking. One interviewee, who struggled to explain why her group was important to her in a purely verbal way, gave much more detail and insight once she
started searching through the magazines and cutting out pictures that resonated with her. 

Below is an extract of our discussion about her choices:

Interviewee: I have got a [picture of a] turtle for [friend]. I think this was [friend] because [friend] has got a long neck and it reminded me of her ... and one of the things that was most important about the group for me. I’ve never had friends like that before. I have got [a picture of] Theresa May pointing her finger here. That’s how I felt with the Jobcentre ... it was like I have to do it kind of thing. I have got this [picture of] lake and trees. That shows peace and sort of within [her cooperative group]. Totally different. It was a nice place to go to and you didn’t have to feel judged ... [Pointing to picture of a fox] ... It was like being taken somewhere ... the little fox is being taken somewhere ... For me I have been taken ... out of where I was into where I am now.

Kiran: And what is the heart?

Interviewee: This is like ... when people join [X Group] and when they move [to X Group] ... it’s all ... maybe they couldn’t talk to others or express their feelings and stuff like that. And then you can actually do it.

Activities like collaging can also be enjoyable and unthreatening for participants, as most people are comfortable cutting and sticking (Butler-Kisber 2008) and one interviewee said that doing it put her at ease during the interview.

Overall, I feel it was productive to engage some participants in tactile and visual methods, allowing them to discuss a range of important aspects of their group’s practices and their own feelings that they were unlikely to have addressed through verbal methods only. However, I would need to get feedback on and probably redesign the layout of the tools before using them again.

**Challenges and limitations of interviews**

Overall, I felt that the interview format worked well. It allowed participants space to talk about themselves and their journeys towards trying to create less hierarchical forms of help, which many said was enjoyable for them and helpful for their own thinking and reflection. It also allowed me to find out about the practicalities of groups’ detailed practices, which in my view is crucial for understanding how horizontal forms of help work more generally. How groups manage their travel expenses, who takes the minutes at a meeting or has the keys to the office, who brings the snacks in for a workshop – these things, and the (heated) debates and arguments around them reveal a great deal about the wider challenges of the practice.

However, despite opting for a shorter, more structured approach than life histories, and only intending to do one, contained interview with each interviewee, I ended up doing extended
interviews with most people and repeat interviews with about a third of interviewees. This was due to several factors. Firstly, the breadth of my topic guide, which covered many areas. Also, the interviews often seemed to flow more smoothly if I chatted to interviewees for a while informally before starting the interview. This, however, meant that they were often tired of talking about an hour into the formal interview. But most had more they wanted to say, so wanted to meet again to continue.

For some people, it seemed useful to do half the interview and then return a few weeks later to finish it. This gave them time to reflect on the questions and sometimes they came back with quite different answers to the ones they had originally given. Several people commented that their initial answers were quite defensive of their group, but that they then reflected on this and wanted to give a more detailed picture the next time. I quickly found that although interviewees were sent the topic guide in advance, it was not easy or feasible for everyone to look at it before the interview, so the interview was the first time many were being exposed to the questions and I had to factor in additional time in subsequent interviews.

For other people, it seemed useful to give them a lot of time and space to talk about their background, their experiences of welfare etc. Allowing space for this seemed to generate richer data and also felt like a more ethical approach, rather than rushing people to tell me the things I wanted to know about.

From my perspective, it felt important to give interviewees as much time as they wanted to answer the questions in the way that they wanted to – both from an ethical perspective and due to the fact that I was so interested in what interviewees were saying that I wanted to hear as much of it as possible. The main challenge of this was the time it took to do several sessions with each interviewee and the time it took to transcribe.

Group session

In addition to interviews, I ran one focus group session, looking specifically at the benefits and challenges of making help more two-sided and mutual. Group sessions often bring out different types of information to that gained through individual interviews: for instance, sometimes people say things that they would be too embarrassed to say one on one (Liamputtong 2007); or group members can elicit information from other participants that the researcher cannot (Sprague 2005; Braun and Clarke 2013). Simply hearing someone talk about an issue they are experiencing in their group may well trigger a memory or insight for another participant that they might not otherwise have remembered (Wilkinson 1998).

I organised and facilitated the session in conjunction with one of my interviewees, who was also a friend and former colleague. The topic arose from both my initial analysis of my data and from conversations she had had with others trying to work in similar ways about what the challenges
were. Participants were all members of groups trying to create less hierarchical forms of welfare. Approximately half had experience as ‘users’ of statutory and voluntary sector services outside of these groups and the other half had previous experience as ‘service providers’ outside their non-hierarchical groups.

We decided that, instead of having a highly structured session, with different activities, pair work etc., we would just have a closely facilitated group discussion. We chose this method because our feeling from the participants at the time was that they were all exhausted from their work, and that structured activities would feel too much like ‘work’. This approach created a much more relaxed, informal atmosphere, which some people seemed to appreciate. It made it feel more like a ‘supportive group’ than ‘someone trying to draw things from you’, according to one participant. We had decided to make the session ‘experiential’ in that as well as talking about mutual and collective support, we also tried to enact collective support. This involved cooking together and then eating whilst we talked: everyone being encouraged to share their experiences with top-down support and their challenges with enacting more mutual support; with the rest of the group supporting them with their challenges and in the process generating together new ideas about ways forward. We would therefore be producing ‘research data’, but in a way that was designed to be cathartic for participants. It was a slightly unusual set-up, but participants said in debriefs that they enjoyed it.

In terms of producing research data, this comfortable, informal atmosphere, where people were able to compare experiences and build on each other’s thoughts led to a lot more detail about what people found difficult about mainstream, top-down forms of help than I had gathered in one-to-one interviews. This was true for people who had experienced these forms of help as services users but also of people who had been service providers, some of whom seemed more comfortable reflecting, or more stimulated to reflect on these issues in the group than they had been one on one.

The experiential nature of the session also brought up wider reflections for people that were useful for my research and, I believe, for their own thinking and practice. For instance, one participant from a more socially and economically privileged background was asked by another participant why he was not sharing his challenges much. He then reflected for a while and said that it was probably because he had decided that in groups of mixed privileged he should try and stay silent because his problems were not as weighty as others’, and he had other spaces to discuss them in. This then led to a debate as to whether this was a useful approach, with some participants from less privileged backgrounds giving him some unexpected feedback on it (see Chapter 5). Another participant, who did not speak much during the first half of the session came to the realisation that this was his normal tendency in ‘helping’ relationships. He needed to feel
like other people were sharing as well, exposing themselves, before he felt safe to, and that was why he was interested in more mutual forms of help.

The less structured approach had disadvantages as well. Firstly, it required me and the other organiser – a former colleague who I interviewed in her role as a member of another cooperative group and someone with whom I reflect regularly on processes – to be constantly in the role of facilitator, trying to manage the dynamics in the group. So, we did not contribute our own experiences or thoughts much. A few participants later reflected that this set us apart and instituted a hierarchy, with us having more power than the others, as we were not revealing anything ourselves. This was useful learning for my research, however, as it re-emphasised an idea that had come out in my interviews about vulnerability and how help rarely felt equal if vulnerability was not a two-way condition (see Chapter 4).

Having more structured exercises would have allowed us to share more of our own experiences and thoughts. Also, although we did have an initial round of introductions, one participant said this should have been longer and more structured to allow everyone space to reveal things that were important to them about their identities (for instance, they suggested, we could have asked everyone to share one thing about themselves that was surprising, or that they thought the group should know). They were a transgender man, but only revealed this to the group at the end of the session as they felt that there had not been space for it before, due to the fact that they were from a middle-class background and did not feel their oppression was as severe as that of some participants from less economically privileged backgrounds. They also felt, however, and others agreed, that this meant they lost the chance to build connection and solidarity with other group members through shared experience of oppression.

Again, however this participant’s experience, and the subsequent discussion, contributed useful data to my research in terms of potential ways forward for building more mutual forms of help. Overall, the group session contributed more about problems with top-down help and there was less space for ‘visioning’ new ways forward for more mutual forms of help than I had hoped.

However, because of the interplay between participants (several said that they had shared things they had never shared before, partly because they felt safe being vulnerable because other people were), I believe it did generate data and insights into the problems with top-down help that would not have been generated in one-to-one interviews.

However, one limitation with these sorts of methods, I would suggest, is the time needed to do them well. This session, for instance, needed careful thought beforehand to ensure it felt safe for participants from a wide range of backgrounds, and that various forms of power differentials did not affect the conversation or people’s experience too much. The session itself involved careful facilitation by two people to ensure everyone could speak and disagreements did not turn into
conflicts that might make people feel unsafe. After the session, it emerged that a number of participants had feelings they wanted to share from it (some positive feelings, some unease) so I debriefed with all of them individually. This felt particularly important as some participants mentioned that they did not have anyone else who they could debrief with. My previous experience of facilitating groups where participants are from a range of backgrounds and where the subject being discussed is an emotive one for many of them, suggests that the need for this type of emotional labour is not uncommon (Williamson and Burns 2014). This is a limitation for participatory research methodologies. If the researcher is taking seriously the idea of mitigating the risk of emotional harm to participants, it can require quite an intense emotional investment by the researcher themselves (and potentially access to supportive reflection spaces to process their own thoughts), which may limit who has the capacity to do it well.

Transcription

I did most of the transcription myself. However, I was also able to pay for some transcription support with a grant from the Open University. All parts of the interviews were transcribed ‘verbatim’ to capture pauses, hesitations, laughing etc., as how participants felt about their experiences is important to my research aims. I was as interested in what they were omitting or unsure or nervous about as the actual content of what they said (Bazeley 2013). I was not always able to do this in as much detail as I would have liked to, however, due to time constraints.

Interview transcripts were verified with interviewees for accuracy. They were given a month to check them and ask for any corrections to be made. I also gave them the opportunity to delete anything they felt was accurate but that they later decided they did not want on the record.

Data analysis

I chose to take an exploratory approach to data analysis, based in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Rather than taking Glaser’s approach of non-engagement with the relevant literature prior to fieldwork and analysis of the data (Glaser 2001), I took the approach advocated by Goulding (1998) that the researcher will already likely have some knowledge and assumptions and that some prior engagement with the literature is helpful in terms of challenging embedded assumptions. I therefore used a more iterative process. After doing an initial literature review, I drew on relevant literature as guided by data production and analysis (ibid.).

I used a thematic analysis approach, as put forward by Braun and Clarke (2013), with six steps. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the data by reading transcripts repeatedly. I began initial coding after doing eight interviews, using NVivo. I then continued to code interviews after having completed a batch of five or six. This initial coding process generated a few additional questions and areas of interest to ask interviewees about. Given the nature of the data and my research
questions, I had initially planned to loosely divide my coding into high-level coding (more abstract ideas) and low-level coding (more concrete data) (Carspecken 1996). However, trying to find clear divisions of this type in the actual data proved challenging so I did not divide my coding in this way. In retrospect, it might have been useful to find some way to divide the data, so that some more purely practical, day-to-day information and ideas about the groups’ practices could have been separated and designated as data for research outputs other than this thesis (outputs aimed more directly at practitioners and activists).

After initial coding, I organised the codes into initial clusters or ‘themes’, which I gave a heading to, and then went back through the interview transcripts and attempted to organise the data under these themes and sub-themes. I found, through this exercise, that there were several areas in the data that did not fit into the themes as they were (for example, the idea of how to create ‘generosity’), but were able to be accommodated when several themes were broadened slightly.

The next step I undertook was to create a name for each theme that comprehensively conveyed the meaning (for instance, ‘what counts’ became ‘revaluing different types of knowledge and contribution’) and to define each theme (e.g. ‘participant background’ became defined as ‘the problems with top-down help’ as the majority of the data gathered under that theme was about interviewees’ engagement with mainstream help and how their personal biography affected and interacted with this).

At this point, I went back to my interviewees to get their thoughts on the themes I had come up with. While member-checking – gathering feedback, questions, critique and affirmation from interviewees about initial themes (Braun and Clarke 2013)\(^\text{11}\) – would have been useful, it proved too time consuming. Instead, I decided on a process that would also allow participants to feedback on the findings, but in a less time- and labour-intensive way, by producing a document about the key themes I felt had emerged from the research and sending it to interviewees for feedback. About half fed back, both in person and by email. I then continued to engage in further informal discussions (through email and in informal face-to-face meet-ups) with them about the points they were interested in engaging on – all of which fed into my analysis. Throughout my writing-up process, I also regularly checked back with interviewees (those who had said they were willing to engage in this) about whether I had interpreted their words accurately when it felt unclear, and had informal discussions with some interviewees about what they thought about some generalisations and assertions I was making. This felt important to the integrity of the participatory ethos of this research and has helped check the extent to which my own assumptions and opinions have shaped my analysis. I therefore believe it has increased the

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\(^\text{11}\)Rather than a ‘testing’ to check whether I ‘got it right’ approach, which assumes a ‘single authentic reality or truth’ (Tracy 2010: 844), I saw this as an opportunity for ‘reflexive elaboration’ (ibid.) of the findings.
validity of my analysis. However, it is a long and laborious process, and can derail analysis when individuals change their narrative during the checking process. At this point, I decided on the headings of my empirical chapters (largely based on the themes that developed earlier) and began writing the thesis.

**Ethics**

My project was approved by the Open University Human and Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 3).

**Obtaining informed consent**

Fully informed consent was obtained from all participants (see Appendix 4). Potential participants were provided with a written information sheet outlining the project and their potential contribution as well as a formal consent form, which made clear that participation was voluntary, they were free not to answer specific questions, all contributions would be anonymised and they had the right to withdraw from the project at any point. The form was emailed to participants before the interview and I then discussed it with them in person and asked them to sign it if they were happy with it before the interview started.

This approach worked fine in general. However, for several interviewees it was noticeable that my getting out the form and asking them to sign it changed the tone of the encounter significantly. One interviewee later explained that it had made it all feel quite formal, and also made her feel tense and a bit worried as she associates form-filling with unpleasant experiences of receiving statutory help. Another said she felt uncomfortable signing her name to anything official seeming. This discomfort, when it occurred, seemed to largely occur in interviewees from less privileged backgrounds, who had more experience of systemic oppression and were therefore more wary of official documents and form-filling. I tried to mitigate this by attempting to be quite informal in how I talked through the form (whilst also trying to be thorough and ensure consent was really informed), and asking about and acknowledging any concerns interviewees might have about signing it.

**Mitigating risks to participants**

Before starting my fieldwork, I undertook a risk-assessment exercise and judged the risks of any psychological or material harm to participants to be low. However, there were still some potential emotional risks. A number of potential participants were still at the sharp end of the state welfare system and experiencing the challenges this entails. There was a chance that the interview could raise difficult emotions for them. To mitigate this, I provided participants with an information sheet with descriptions and contact details of relevant support organisations. I also tried to be sensitive to their mental and emotional states and not push them to go into subjects that might harm those.
‘Giving back’

More often than not, respondents were happy to share ideas and contribute to a study that aims to make their work ‘visible’, but I wanted to acknowledge participants’ time and effort in being involved in my research and ensure it did not negatively impact them financially, compensating each participant 15 pounds in multi-shop vouchers as a thank you for their time, as well as refunding their travel expenses.

In addition, I have tried to ‘give back’ by offering my initial analysis and learning back to the groups involved in the research, as well as to other groups working in similar ways (Tubar 2019). For instance, one interviewee was involved with another group trying to work non-hierarchically around housing rights. She arranged for me to help them with interviews for a participatory research coordinator and reflect on their non-hierarchical practice. Another group asked for my facilitation to address some organisational changes. Another group mentioned that they rarely get the sort of publicity that would help them with funders, so (after checking with them that they wanted their name revealed) I made sure to mention them and the benefits of their work explicitly in an article I wrote in 2018. I have also shared my learning with groups doing training about non-hierarchical working for social justice movements and organisations who intend to use it in their own guides. I intend to keep offering my learning to groups it could be useful to as well as, within the next year, to try and produce usable online materials about my findings for the groups interviewed and other groups trying to work in these ways.

Participants

I have anonymised the names of all participants and groups. Throughout the thesis, I refer to them by their anonymised names. At certain points, however, I refer to ‘an interviewee’ or ‘one group’. This is when the material is sensitive and I want to reduce the risk that anyone reading it from one of the groups (most of whom know or know of each other) will be able to identify the group or the interviewee through piecing together elements of their stories.

Homes Before Profit

Homes Before Profit describes itself in their emails to supporters as ‘a group of Lambeth and Southwark residents who believe that decent housing is a right. We organise together to support each other with housing problems we face and to take action to ensure that everyone has decent homes.’ Although the group started off focusing on just housing issues, they now also deal, to some extent, with other issues members might be facing, for instance around benefits and immigration:

[We] meet together two times a month ... and that’s where we provide support for each other, learn our rights, share our experiences, sometimes plan action on the cases ... we
try and collectivise it, because dealing with those problems is really, really difficult.
(Sarah)

They also support each other in other ways including buddying up for housing office meetings; sharing knowledge, for example someone who has previously filled in a homeless application helping someone else do the same; and making more organised call-outs for people to do things like go to court with someone on a particular day. They also organise sit-ins and protests to support each other’s cases and work to change housing laws they oppose.

The group was founded in 2012 by several welfare activists who wanted to do something more local and which involved people more directly affected by the issues. One founder explained how she grew up in a single-parent family reliant on state support, on an estate in South London and that part of her motivation for helping co-found Homes Before Profit came from the informal, mutual aid she saw between her mother and other women, such as helping each other with benefits applications and sharing food.

The group started off with just five members, but the size has increased exponentially in the last two years. They now have about 120 members who are involved in different ways. Some come to their bi-weekly meetings and help others with their cases (as well as getting help themselves if they need it), others buddy people on visits to housing offices and help out with writing letters and pushing cases through. The largest group is those who do not attend regularly but respond to call-outs for collective actions – for example, occupying a housing office when a local authority is refusing to respond to requests, or online campaigning.

Homes Before Profit is reliant on people giving their time for free and a small amount of funding from individual donations.

South London Women’s Collective (SLWC)

An organisation I co-founded in 2011 with Celine. It brings together women from diverse backgrounds to share concerns; learn together about how to support children’s education; share this knowledge more widely with other parents and carers; and undertake social action projects around issues faced by women in South London.

Celine, a part-time learning support teacher had met women in her local laundrette who wanted her to help their children, who were facing exclusion from school. Celine thought it might be more sustainable to support them and other mothers and carers in similar situations to help their children themselves. At the time we were both frustrated with the top-down helping relationships we had previously enacted. Celine felt that in her previous international development work she had tried to ‘rescue’ people, ‘replicating imperialist dynamics’. And I had reflected on how I infantilised and blamed the young parents at the charity where I was working at the time.
We wanted to do help differently, based on the principle of ‘acting like equals’. Celine described how she interpreted this:

I think the phrase ‘acting as equals’ was quite new to me but became important because I saw it as a demand to always be trying to chip away at the sorts of differences ... all the different roles and habits had aspects that conferred power and aspects that took away power from individuals ... the ones that are often more obvious to people with less power than those with more.

SLWC has approximately 30 members. Decision-making is done collectively. It was previously registered charity (although this was largely for funding reasons and the trustees were side-lined in practice) and had substantial grant funding from charitable trusts. Several years ago, however, we stopped registering with the Charity Commission, returned the majority of our funding, gave up our rented space and reduced our activities – as we felt that our cooperative approaches were not compatible with meeting funder outcomes. We now rely on small individual donations and contribute our time for free.

Upsurge

Upsurge started in the 1990s as a movement ‘very explicitly campaigning for the homeless and roofless – engaging with people who were having those experiences and following their agenda’ (Marianne). Initial members were a mix of people who had experience of homelessness in conjunction with more middle-class homelessness activists. Decision-making is done through informal democratic processes.

Frank described how the initial phases were about ‘galvanising the public and the policy with the message that homeless people are not the problem, they are part of the solution’. Over time, it grew into a network of smaller groups doing localised ‘self-help’ that started to advocate for more fundamental changes to policies and attitudes around housing and homelessness. They also ran a scheme that provided grants directly to groups or individuals who had experienced homelessness who were trying to start up their own projects.

From the mid-2000s, its structure formalised and ‘professionalised’ as their initial open grant funding ran out and they had to meet more specific outcomes. During the New Labour period also, as ‘user involvement’ moved up the political agenda, they came to be seen as leaders in the field and much of the work was about, as Frank described, ‘training organisations (local authorities and homelessness organisations) in how to do involvement right across the board’. They also pioneered programmes that trained people who had experienced homelessness to set up enterprises, based on the idea that people who had survived homelessness had a tremendous amount of skills and knowledge that could be applied elsewhere.
The organisation, despite professionalising, remains committed to what it calls ‘people-powered processes’ and valuing the contributions of people with experience of homelessness in decision-making and delivery of programmes. The majority are run by people with experience of homelessness or drug/alcohol addiction and their projects focus on peer advocacy and support and peer research around homelessness and drug and alcohol issues. One core belief is ‘there is no “them” and “us” – only us’.

My interviewees had all been involved with Upsurge throughout its history. There are currently about 50 people active in Upsurge. They receive (substantial) funding from charitable trusts and some from local authorities and central government.

Hawthorne Square Timebank (HSTB)

Hawthorne Square Timebank describe themselves as a ‘member led organisation’ based on the principles of co-production. They have several staff members – a coordinator and two ‘brokers’ – who facilitate the running of the organisation, but the members (there are currently approximately 300 active members) decide on and run most of the activities.

The timebanking movement seeks to create ‘operating systems’ which consciously facilitate exchange and support in a way that makes clear that ‘nobody is better than anybody else’. They do this by focusing on ‘proactive’ time as the principal unit of currency. For every hour participants ‘deposit’ in a timebank they can ‘withdraw’ the equivalent in support when they need something: ‘ironing or accounting … an hour is an hour’. In this context, being ‘in need’ is not stigmatising or shameful – it’s a normal part of everyone’s life.

The timebank grew out of a GP surgery in 2008. Laura explained:

So, two of the GPs at X Group Practice, they recognised that a lot of people when they come to the doctor it’s because they want to have a chat as much as the fact that they want their medicine. And maybe it’s the only time they really get to see somebody and have any conversation with them. And then obviously you only get sort of 10 or 15 minutes at the doctors, don’t you? So, they wanted … to be able to prescribe community activity to people.

She described how, in contrast with the ‘passive’ and ‘unequal’ interaction between a doctor and patient, at the timebank you are asked what you can do, what you can share, what you can contribute. As a result, you are ‘more in control’; there is a ‘power shift … more of an equality’. According to A, the knock-on effects for mental and physical health are significant:

You also feel better about yourself because you are getting to know more people. And then you might make more positive health choices. So, you might be more likely to take
your medicine. Or because you are out and about more, you are doing more experiences, you are walking more.

Operational costs are paid for through funding from charitable foundations and local authorities.

Odessa Square Timebank (OSTB)

Odessa Square Timebank operates along similar principles to HSTB. It is located nearby, and the two groups have close links. Pierre described its origins:

Dr X at the surgery had heard about timebanking. He just wanted to do something else than prescribe medicine to people who were isolated or depressed ... he realised that... a lot of people were interested to be part of a community and they want to feel involved in ... to use their time and skills.

The group’s website describes the timebank as:

a community of diverse people who can find a project or a space where they can spend time and share skills with others as they wish. Whilst the exchange of skills is a core aspect of time banking, our members are often in the time bank for the relationships and shared experiences of belonging, and feeling useful and valued in the projects and activities they partake in. By getting involved, our members help shape the ethos and values of the time bank.

Pierre reiterated this idea when he talked about how what is important about the timebank is ‘it connects you with others’. He made clear that anyone can need this connection: ‘people who tend to be – actually isolation and depression are not necessarily caused by an illness. It can be caused purely by the fact you’ve lost your job, or you’re bereaved or you’re redundant from your work, or you’re retired’.

Like HSTB, OSTB has limited staff and receives charitable trust and local authority funding. Interviewees explain how members all help with admin tasks and the general running of the timebank and get time credits in return.

Future Voices

Future Voices define themselves as a ‘youth work cooperative’. They formed in 2011 and their website describes how they work with young people from the ages of 8 to 19 ‘on a variety of projects, including arts and drama, sports, trips, detached (street-based) work and residentialas’. The website also states that one of their key principles is: ‘We believe in emancipatory and democratic youth work – a space that is free from adults determining what young people want. A space that is free from prescribed outcomes and outputs’.

Jane described what she sees as important about Future Voice’s approach:
It’s providing space that’s independent from school and independent from parents. Because there is a lot of controlling and authoritative forces on young people. I think it’s an inherently radical thing just to have a space where they are not being told what to do.

She also described how they encourage young people to get involved in ‘consciousness raising’ and political activities. They do not push them to do these but do try and facilitate critical thinking around these issues. Future Voices believe that democratic principles and political engagement should be – and at one time were – central to youth work but have been sidelined in favour of more targeted ‘interventions’ with young people within mainstream helping services.

Future Voices are registered as a workers’ cooperative and cooperative principles are central to their approach. Members can join from the age of 16.

Future Voices has received some grant funding from charitable trusts in the past. However, funding is a regular problem for them as, firstly, they are not a registered charity, and because, L explained, they allow young people to determine what they want to do rather than ‘letting funders constrict’ their activities. They currently rely on people contributing for free, although they have in the past been able to pay people for some of their hours. They have in recent years had to scale down activities because, Kimberley explained, ‘we’ve had a lot of cuts in funding and because of that lack of ability to pay workers, people were obviously prioritising paid jobs over the co-operative stuff’. They are currently trying to decide on their future and whether it is possible to keep the organisation going.

Other interviewees

I also interviewed several individuals who were not from any of these groups, but who had experience of a range of non-hierarchical groups, in order to access a wider range of perspectives on how power-sharing processes can work well. These included several people who had extensive experience of non-hierarchical activist groups in the UK and one who had experience of non-hierarchical anti-racist organising in the US (as well as cooperative youth groups London). Another was a core member of an eviction resistance group formed through a housing occupation in North London, as well as of Project 52, a group which attempted a form of non-hierarchical community organising with residents of a council estate in north-east London. Another was a coordinator of a renters’ union which organises non-hierarchically. One was a clinical social worker who had worked in both statutory and voluntary sector organisations. I also did an interview with two people who ran a centre for young people with special educational needs in the 1970s as I wanted to understand how their cooperative practices worked in a period before neoliberal thinking, and doctrines of ‘efficiency’ took hold.
The group session involved people I had interviewed, as well as several other members of their groups and one participant who was not involved in any of the groups but was a refugee who had experienced non-hierarchical welfare with a solidarity-based group in Calais.

A limitation in terms of participants was that although in one group I was able to talk to someone who had dissociated from the group due to unhappiness with its ways of working, in most of the groups people who had left the group were unwilling to talk to me. I therefore only gathered the perspectives of people who were content enough with how the group functioned to remain a part of it.

Demographics

18 participants identified as female and 16 as male; 20 were white and 14 were non-white or mixed-race; 8 were first-generation immigrants or asylum seekers; 18 had experience using mainstream helping services and experience delivering them.

I chose not to do a table showing participant demographics due to concerns about participants' anonymity. Many of my interviewees, as well as members of other groups working with a similar ethos, have expressed interest in reading my completed thesis. As the number of groups and organisations working in this way in London are small, and many are interlinked, I was concerned that describing the demographics of each participant would make them more identifiable to members of their own and other groups. A few of my participants expressed similar concerns.

Chapter Summary

In the sections above I have described my position as an ‘insider’ and ‘invested’ researcher and the benefits (such as trust and contacts) and challenges (such as conflicting loyalties and blurring of roles) this has brought to my research. I have then gone on to describe my fieldwork. I have explained why I chose to use a purposive sampling method and the benefits and limitations imposed by my decision to only look at groups in London. I have explained my semi-structured interview approach, which I believe provided rich data, but also in retrospect was perhaps too time-consuming and provided more data than I could meaningfully engage with. I have described the group session I ran looking at the problems of top-down, one-sided help and strategies for doing mutual help better: how it affected the participants and the level of insight it contributed to my data, as participants opened up to each other more than they might have done in a one-to-one interview. I have outlined the steps of the thematic analysis I undertook and the (limited) amount of checking my analysis with interviewees that I did as well as the transcription method I undertook. I have outlined how I met ethics requirements through ensuring informed consent, minimising risk to participants and making sure I ‘gave back’ to participants. I have also provided an outline of the groups studied as well as some basic demographics about interviewees.
Chapter 3: The problems with dominant forms of help

Although my empirical research was not focused on the problems with mainstream services, it is important to understand how the research participants had experienced dominant forms of help in order to better grasp why they were motivated to explore and enact alternative forms.

Understanding the problems with mainstream forms of help also helps to better lay out the challenges these groups have faced when enacting alternative visions. I asked participants about their experiences of help before joining their non-hierarchical groups. The stories of those at the receiving end of these services demonstrate clearly how the assumptions, practices and power dynamics inherent in top-down, one-sided forms of help can create less effective, inauthentic and skewed helping relationship. Interviewees talked about having their need doubted and judged in a wide range of services – from housing support to domestic violence; immigration to mental health. They described feeling violated, witch-hunted, mad, exhausted, less than human. They talked about having to expose themselves and make themselves vulnerable and not having their knowledge, analysis or abilities taken seriously. The consequences of these experiences and feelings are difficult to determine and measure.

Many interviewees who had experience using mainstream services did not doubt the intentions or skills of workers they had encountered. But they felt that the frameworks of help the workers were operating within, the structures and worldviews of the helping organisations made it difficult to do help in a way that made people feel more equal. I suggest this is linked to Garrett’s (2013) idea that all practice is based on theory, whether knowingly or not. I have, myself, in previous jobs, enacted ‘work readiness’ programmes and forced clients into ‘action planning’ towards goals that were not particularly meaningful for them. I have made young parents pursue qualifications that teach them the concept of ‘responsibilities before rights’. When coordinating a mentoring scheme at a young offenders’ institute, I willingly agreed to shift our forms of help from longer-term relationship building to short, easily measurable interventions designed to ‘improve’ the young men. Had I understood at the time how dominant narratives and policies were affecting the type of help I had been enacting – the ‘work first’, ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘what works’ agendas – I might have questioned some of these practices.

Newman and Tonkens (2011: 228) argue that the dominant forms of help derive from binary constructions, which disregard the notion that ‘citizens can hold multiple identities’: they may ‘be services users as well as activists’, ‘dependent as well as independent’, ‘want rights as well as express needs’. Theirs and others’ research provides insightful analysis of how certain aspects of top-down helping regimes can negatively affect people’s sense of self (e.g. Dean 1991; Rose 2005;
Where I find the existing literature to be more limited, however, is in terms of providing grounded data on how the power dynamics and assumptions that often accompany top-down forms of help can have detrimental emotional, psychological and practical impacts on individuals on the receiving end of them.

This could be because these negative impacts are rarely voiced by clients to ‘professionals’ (this has been my own experience), presumably due to the same power dynamics that have caused the issue in the first place. As one interviewee said, ‘you can’t have an honest conversation with someone who has the power to sanction you or take away your help’. I first learned about these dynamics from other members of the women’s cooperative I was part of – specifically those with extensive experience of being on the receiving end of helping services. But it took years of trying to work together cooperatively for them to feel safe enough to point out when I, or the other people from service-provider backgrounds, were unwittingly replicating top-down forms of help. Their insights are what alerted me to the gravity of the issue and led me to ask interviewees in this research about their previous experiences of services. Meanwhile, several interviewees who had been in the service-provider position reflected that it was only once they had experienced less top-down ways of working that they were able to see some of the problems in top-down, one-sided, behaviour-change-focused forms of help (see discussion on the fallacy of theoryless practice in Chapter 1).

In this opening empirical chapter, I set out some of these experiences. I feel it is important to understand these subtle but potentially corrosive impacts of current helping arrangements as a starting point for analysing the experiments testing different ways of arranging help. In generating an empirical evidence base I am making a crucial contribution to academic debates and practices of help, interdependence and welfare in a UK context.

What do the dominant forms of help look like?

Below, I summarise some shared characteristics of the forms of help I am referring to, based partly on what interviewees described as their experiences. Firstly, these forms of help are framed by the organisation’s priorities and targets rather than those of the client. This means that those delivering the service or programme (‘professionals’) are primarily accountable not to the ‘beneficiary’ or ‘client’, but to someone above them in a hierarchical structure. Often, these services are embedded in chains of hierarchy, for example a frontline worker answering to a manager answering to charitable trustees answering to funders. This accountability is usually measured by whether services meet or fail to meet some implicit or explicit targets or ‘performance indicators’ – usually created without input of clients.

Secondly, the ‘problem’ that causes the beneficiaries or clients to need help tends to be defined – or at least framed – by the service providers, policy-makers and ‘experts’ higher up the hierarchy.
They also decide on the most appropriate solutions. Even within ‘person-centred’ frameworks, where practitioners are encouraged to ‘talk with’ rather than ‘talk to’ or ‘talk about’ (Lent 2001) the client, and support them to identify their own needs, desired outcomes and paths towards them, the broader framework is still defined outside of them. Similarly, even in organisations where service users are ‘consulted’ on their views about programmes and services, the power of definition still ultimately rests with those at the top of the hierarchy.

Finally, help in these organisations tends to be one-way. Programmes often rely on interactions between a client or beneficiary in need of help and a professional. Even in more recent ‘asset-based’ (Foot and Hopkins 2010; King 2014) approaches, which try to define helpees by their ‘potential’ rather than their ‘need’, there is still the inherent dynamic that it is the person in the less privileged position who either needs to change or needs things ‘done’ to or for them in order to be able to function appropriately in the world. In contrast, the helper is assumed to be functioning appropriately in the world already. My interviewees experienced this in their interactions with a range of statutory and third-sector services: Jobcentre Plus, social services, parenting courses, addiction recovery services and immigration and housing advice services, to name the most common.  

This situation – where the client or beneficiary has little or a limited role in deciding processes, solutions or holding the professional to account – creates inherently unequal power dynamics and a sense of disconnection between the client and the professional.

The ‘what’s wrong with you?’ assumption

They keep asking, ‘why don’t you have more hours [of paid work]? If you don’t get more hours, you’ll be sanctioned’. But I’m working. I’m working the hours that I can and still get [my children] from school. I have to do that – imagine I’d have social services on me so quickly if I didn’t. And anyway, I can only work the hours that they give me … They’re not guaranteed ... But at the Jobcentre they just think I’m lazy, that’s why I’m poor, because I’m lazy or I messed up ... it doesn’t feel helpful. (Interviewee)

A number of interviewees described the shame and anxiety they feel visiting Jobcentre Plus. They explained how they are careful about what they wear (for instance, one interviewee talked about how she does not wear any jewellery to her appointments) and how they act, in case they are seen as ‘undeserving’ or accused of cheating the system. They report continuously feeling on the

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12 It is worth noting here, potential differences between voluntary sector organisations in this regard. Gregory (2015: 142-3) argues for distinguishing between the larger, less community-rooted organisations that have been drawn into formal welfare systems’ - and whose ‘potential’ to offer ‘alternative values and practices’ might have been ‘eroded’ - and smaller, more grassroots organisations, which may still promote some of those alternative values and be more oppositional towards government policy.
back foot, or in the wrong. The underlying assumption seems to be that there is something wrong with them – in their personality or behaviour – that has landed them in the position of needing help from the state. The help they are given is therefore negotiated through threats, compulsion and demands that they be somehow ‘better’ or ‘different’. As Esmee said, ‘if you can’t use the computer to fill in the forms, they tell you it’s your fault, and ... then you get sanctioned’.

In this context, it is clear how and where visible power is playing out – the ‘power over’ benefits claimants that the worker and the system have. However, equally damaging, I would argue, is the insidious invisible power that shapes these pejorative views of benefits claimants, and how they can affect how people see themselves and increase their sense of powerlessness. Paula, in response to a question about how these practices at Jobcentre Plus make her feel, replied: ‘[it] puts you down as a mum, as a woman. It un-empowers you, take[s] all your power, you don’t have no power’.

Jobcentre Plus is of course an extreme example. The culture of suspicion and the punitive practices within the current UK social security system are well documented in the literature (e.g. Baumberg 2012; Taylor-Gooby 2013). Political rhetoric around the idea of unemployment benefits in the UK has for years been suffused with notions of ‘benefits scroungers’ and unwanted ‘dependencies’, and the idea that clients need to change their behaviour and values is overt (Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney 2012). But, my research suggests, the assumption that people who access formal helping services are somehow personally lacking and need become ‘better’ is also implicit in many different forms of top-down intervention, no matter how benignly intended or implemented.

Amrine talked about how ‘help’ from social services and housing agencies felt to her when she was already in a vulnerable state after leaving a domestic abuse situation:

If I am crying then I’m crying, if I’m sad it’s because something has happened ... then why do they always tell me you’re wrong, you need to fix this, fix that? I need someone to help, not just tell me you’re doing this wrong, that wrong, you need to do this course, get this job.

However it was intended, the feeling Amrine got from these services was that she was somehow in the ‘wrong’ for being vulnerable and needing help, and that she needed to change or improve herself. Another interviewee, similarly, described parenting courses run by children’s centres and voluntary sector organisations, which she was ‘recommended’ to attend by social services and her children’s school because she was judged to be struggling. She reflected that, firstly, the recommendation felt more like compulsion than an actual choice for her. In addition, although the facilitators were ‘nice’, the course material often felt quite judgemental. Rather than simply teaching people new skills, she says the approach implied that ‘you are not doing okay as a
parent, or not doing your best’. She noted, for instance, how these courses often remind people to spend ‘special time’ with their children. ‘It’s insulting’, she said in frustration, ‘of course I know I should spend time with the kids, I try to, I just don’t always have that time, I have to do everything myself’. She and others also remarked on how these courses seem to be deliberately targeted at parents on low incomes, reinforcing the ‘you’re not good enough’ feeling.

In this way, a social problem is framed as an individual one. It draws on flawed, behaviourist narratives, such as the ‘troubled families’ one (see e.g., Crossley 2016) and perhaps also a wider history of pathologisation of single mothers and low-income families. The impacts of this are the cementing of individualist framings in a form of feedback loop: if you start out assuming individuals are to blame for their circumstances, then you look for the problem with individuals, and as you ‘find’ these you reaffirm the assumption.

Often, people’s need to access formal help was (implicitly or explicitly) blamed on having made bad ‘choices’. For example, several interviewees talked about how Jobcentre Plus and other statutory agencies would sometimes refer them to courses where they were meant to learn how to make better choices. As one interviewee said, ‘I make the best choices that I can – but the options aren’t great’. Several interviewees wondered why these types of courses were only targeted at poor people and people accessing services. Why, one asked, were they not targeted at the cleaning agencies she worked for, which hired people on insecure contracts? Or at the well-off people who used these agencies? Or the residents of the art college she cleaned who left things in ‘a disgusting mess’? Why was there no assumption that there was something wrong with their behaviour that needed modifying? This resonates with some care literature which points out that responsibility is framed as individual only for those who have less power, while those with more economic privilege – and particularly males (Kershaw 2005) – are able to outsource their domestic responsibilities through commercial transactions (Glenn 2010; Hochschild 1995; Tronto 2013).

Another interviewee questioned the notion that her choices are real choices at all (reflecting Sen’s (1985) theory that choices needed to be real and realisable in order to meaningful). ‘I suppose I made a choice’, she said, in relation to not doing paid work when her oldest son was very ill and needed to be rushed to A&E frequently, ‘but I’m not sure there were any other ones’. She felt that she was, however, always judged harshly by services, on the underlying assumption that she ‘just wants to sit on [her] arse and do nothing’, that she needs to ‘better herself’ in order to be seen as a contributing member of society.

The ‘what’s wrong with you?’ assumption can often even be lurking in advocacy organisations which take a social justice approach that critiques wider socio-political structures. Harriet talked about her work at a charity supporting immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The
organisation was broadly supportive of the rights of people coming into the UK and critical of the immigration and asylum systems. But, despite its political outlook

[t]he system isn’t set up for us to treat people coming in as equals with their own resources, and own intelligence. [You end up] treating them like they are incapable or lesser in some way – not people who are simply there because they have come to the end of their tether with their really difficult lives.

Jane described this as ‘inheriting the power dynamics’ of dominant forms of help and reflected organisations that there is rarely the time or space to ‘break these down’. It is not always easy for workers to avoid slipping into these dynamics of treating people accessing formal help as somehow ‘less than’, even if they do not reflect their conscious beliefs.

The impact on helpees of the ‘what’s wrong with you?’ assumption is huge, beyond the (already significant) factor that the form of help they are given is not necessarily that which is most likely to deal with the actual challenges they face. Amy, in her feedback on my initial analysis, reflected (both in terms of her own experience and that of others):

What we can see is the shame or embarrassment of being a person who has to ask [for] or receive support from others. Even in seemingly ‘good-willed’ projects … the way they work somehow implies negative values about a person, along with fears or distrust … seeing the differences between people instead of common shared goals … And if you get it repeatedly, from everywhere, you lose confidence, you start to believe it. You don’t think ‘what’s wrong with the system?’, you think ‘what’s wrong me?’

The ‘what’s wrong with you?’ assumption is related to the notion of ‘independence’ as an ideal and the ‘resilience’ agenda (as discussed in Chapter 1). The underlying idea seems to be that if people need to access helping services, they are too dependent and must undergo self-development in order to improve and not need help. But, as one intervieweee from a more economically privileged background argued:

the whole self-development agenda which runs through so much work with ‘vulnerable’ groups, explicitly or implicitly is missing the point. By virtue of the material advantages I’ve had in life, I have a network of people around me who make me not fall too far ever. And of those people, a lot of them are not that amazing at picking themselves up but they similarly get picked up by the sea of people around them.

People with less economic privilege, however, are not allowed by mainstream helping services to rely on being ‘picked up’ but must instead learn how to not need help.

In this section, I have examined how the idea that people who need to access helping services have something wrong with them that needs fixing is embedded in many forms of help. It is more
overt and extreme in, for instance, the social security system, but can also lurk in seemingly innocuous forms of help such as parenting courses. The shame and embarrassment it causes can undermine some of the benefits of the help being given. The ‘what’s wrong with you?’ assumption is related to a number of other problematic aspects of top-down help, as discussed in the sections below.

Help as a one-sided process

If formal help is organised from a starting point that people accessing it have something wrong with them and need to change (rather than from the starting point that everyone needs and accesses different forms of help at different points in their lives, and that people who need to access formal help are most likely facing particularly challenging circumstances), then the default mode of this help will be one-sided. Some people will be framed as helpees, others as helpers. This set-up is ingrained in most services, even ones where there are nods to ‘participation’ or attempts at ‘co-production’.

Jane, who has both delivered and used mainstream services, described a subtle dynamic that she has experienced as the helpee in these services, one which was also raised by several other interviewees. This is to do with the way in which the helper as part of their ‘professional’ persona, can (sometimes unwittingly) take the role of ‘this kind of perfect, very very solid grounded being that you don’t know anything about’. She described how she struggles with the ‘power dynamics’ of being helped by people who seem to take an approach of “‘I am going to be incredibly calm and sane in this moment so that we can deal ... with your problem or madness” ... It’s so unequal and to me isn’t helpful. Doesn’t make me feel better ... completely unequal’.

She described how this kind of help can make her feel her own problems and issues more acutely. She also identified an additional source of discomfort: the fact that ‘it’s very open [that you are] relying on that unequal relationship’. In this context, where the helpee is clearly reliant on the helper, both visible and hidden forms of ‘power over’ come into play, hampering communication. How, asked Jane, can you speak freely to someone who has that kind of power over you.

Suzy also found the one-sided dynamic uncomfortable: ‘you are giving, giving, giving and the other person is saying “yes, I see, hmm”’. She located this discomfort partly in the fact that ‘you are being personal with them and they are being professional’. She described the feeling as being ‘unequally yoked’: i.e. you are tied to each other, but in a way where one person has ‘got the power because they are taking all the information’. She talked about how an inability to escape from this dynamic meant she experienced her relationship with a key mental health worker as a ‘pupil/student relationship ... instead of a supportive environment’.

The idea of these one-sided forms of help feeling like ‘information being taken from you’ was raised by several other interviewees. Kenneth talked about how ‘if you [have] somebody ... just
sitting there and you are sharing all this thing and they are not saying nothing ... it looks like a counsellor’. It can also make you feel like a ‘case study’. He described how sometimes it can feel like ‘you [the professional] are just there, you don’t care about what is going on with me. But you care about this information scientifically’. He acknowledged that the worker probably does care more than just scientifically, but what he seemed to be trying to convey was how the one-sided dynamic can make people feel, especially if they are in a place where they feel, as he said, that ‘nothing is progressing with my life’.

Most interviewees did not discount the skill of the professionals they had worked with, or their intent and ability to be helpful. But most were at pains to express that the unhelpful and demoralising dynamic between professional expert and person with ‘problems and madness’ (Jane) needs to be recognised and addressed. ‘I want some interaction. I want to hear your stuff’, Suzy pleaded, ‘stuff I can link onto, stuff I can understand’. She went on to discuss how

what makes people comfortable as well for sharing is if whoever you are talking to – especially if it’s on a one to one – if that person is quite happy to share about themselves, because then if they are then happy to share about themselves and you are sharing about ... there is no power dynamics ... that’s what you want. And it’s more reassuring ... if you both give to each other and take from each other. It’s much more equal.

Elizabeth similarly talked about how just acting like regular people with each other sometimes can make the helper–helpee relationship feel less unequal:

Sometimes I just oh I just want to go to say hi, to see how you are doing. Not that I need something from you, not that I want you to do something for me. But that is the relationship we both built together with each other. Where I think if you both give to each other and take from each other. It’s much more equal ...

Several interviewees who worked in mainstream services felt a slightly more two-sided relationship, one where they are able to be a bit more ‘human’ (Jane), would be better for them as well as clients and make this sort of helping work feel less ‘exhausting’ (Kimberley).

But even when workers were very aware of the unbalanced dynamic and wanted to shift it, it was difficult, as the dynamic is to some extent built into top-down forms of help. Connor, a youth worker, talked about how he does not want to make the young people he is working with feel exposed, so he tries to share information about himself as well. But he said it is difficult to be able to do this, to be aware of all the ways in which you are just casually asking people to share so much about themselves. He talked about going through the membership form at a youth club he works at (as well as his cooperative group) with a young person:
It’s like asking you what is difficult in your life ... It’s designed to be like ... helpful. But it’s also asking them to expose a lot about their life ... And I found myself [thinking], I am not sharing, I am asking you all these questions about your life. And so I ... started to try and share a bit as well ... So then it opened up a bit more. But you can find yourself so easily like you are sinking, like caught in those traps.

This section has looked at how interviewees on the receiving end of one-sided help felt that the structure limited what they felt able to say and could make them feel objectified and disempowered. They would have preferred relationships with slightly more give and take. Several interviewees who had been in the ‘professional’ position also felt that such a shift was important and necessary in order to break down hierarchies and ensure everyone felt cared for. However, actually doing this within mainstream services was difficult.

Control and performance of gratitude

The underlying assumption that people needing to access formal help are somehow wrong, bad, incapable or childlike, and the division of people into helpers and helpees, as discussed above, legitimises and normalises a form of doing help that involves telling people what to do and controlling them in some way. Feeling controlled is something that a number of interviewees talked about in relation to a range of helping organisations, from Jobcentre Plus to refuges and children’s charities.

Frank talked about the decades he spent using addiction recovery services. He explained how he had felt ‘mollycoddled or institutionalised’ by most of them, a way of working that can only be legitimised by an underlying assumption that people seeking help are somehow not quite right and need to be treated like children. The way Frank saw things, yes, he was addicted to alcohol, but there were reasons for that. He was aware it was a problem and he had ideas about what would help him quit. And although he came across many kind, skilled frontline staff who he felt were trying to do their best for him, he also felt that he was seen as someone who needed to be ‘told what to do’: They ‘never listened to what I wanted ... never listened to what I thought I needed. They just told me you have to stop drinking’.

Elizabeth talked about a similar feeling of not being listened to and being controlled:

I remember with everything going on [with immigration and housing benefit claims], I just wanted someone to listen to me ... Nobody out there is listening. Police are not listening to me. My lawyer is not paying attention to what are my needs ... they will just go do it ... [you] feel like they have the power to control you [rather] than you controlling yourself.

Suzy similarly commented on how, even when service workers ask her what outcomes she wants to work towards, ‘they don’t listen when I say’.

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As well as not feeling listened to, and being told what to do, a number of interviewees described how they did not feel able to say no. Paula, reflecting on all the forms of formal help she had experienced outside of her cooperative group described one unifying factor: ‘it was like I have to do it kind of thing’. When I asked her whether she felt able to challenge the advice given, she described how people in her position – a single mother on a low wage and reliant on a number of services to get by

already have got low self-esteem ... so ... where do you go? Who do you complain to? Who do you go [to] and make a noise ...? Like there is no one to go[to] really. Because you have to do what they tell you to do.

Simran, talking about the refuge she went to after she left her abusive husband, told a similar story of being given advice that she did not feel able to challenge:

They said they were going to make me do private renting. I said to her, my key worker, I said I am going to apply for council house. She said no, no, they are not going to give anybody council house. In [the refuge] we can’t discuss some stuff with them people ... because they get annoyed if we say something. So, like sometimes we stay quiet.

A number of interviewees also talked about how it felt like their time was both controlled and deprioritised in some services they used. For instance, being penalised for not managing their time well if they could not make a last-minute Jobcentre appointment, or one that coincided with their child’s school pick-up time. But also being forced to wait for a long time at appointments and having them cancelled at the last minute, as if their time was of no importance.

As well as feeling like they had to do what they were told, some interviewees talked about having to pretend that certain forms of help were useful for them when they were not, for fear of being cut off from other forms of help. Kenneth described being given a bus ticket he did not need by a support organisation and being told he should feel ‘lucky’ to be getting help at all. He talked about how ‘at that point, I felt so shit, but in the same time I am in a position that I can’t do anything about it’. He explained that he wanted to ‘be angry’ and ‘cry’ but ‘when ... you are getting support you can’t be angry ... [as] that would put me in a really shitty position’. Instead, he had to suppress his emotions and pretend he did feel ‘lucky’.

Eventually, people may stop trying to convey their own needs or challenging the denial of their needs. Kenneth described how he used to like challenging things when he disagreed with them, but has now started to ‘feel so powerless’ that, despite living in dire circumstances, he does not bother telling services about them or fighting for more for himself: ‘I just say yeah I am OK, even though I’m not’. Suzy talked about how ‘everyone makes decisions for you ... and then you are left in a circumstance that you don’t recognise because you didn’t have the autonomy to get...out [your views]’.
Amrine described this control and silencing as a denial of one’s ‘senses’: ‘I believe … housing and social services … have become so strict … it makes your life worse … Because we are human beings, we are living with all the senses. And … you can’t close (off) your senses.’

Amy felt that many workers ‘don’t get that that dynamic even exists. You think they [clients] are being genuine. No, they are not, they are telling you what you want to hear’.

Even when workers have the space to reflect on these issues, however, it is difficult for them to move away from controlling dynamics, as they are so embedded in top-down forms of help. Juliet, a clinical social worker who has worked with refugees and families in a range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations, admitted that she ‘kind of enjoys the power’ she has in the relationship with her clients. Later, when I asked her more about what that looked like, she described how

[i]t still amazes me [that] people come all the way here to have an appointment with me, with the hope and expectation that I will help them in some way … I bring them to my office, I talk with a certain amount of ‘authority’ … I control the appointment [somewhat] … basically I have the power to affect how someone feels.

She described how she tries to mitigate that power ‘largely by treating them with kindness and respect … and because they are vulnerable’. She further reflected that she is meant to be an ‘expert’ who has studied and trained and has experience, but feels that ‘really most of the time we don’t know, and it feels so much better and more collaborative when I really try to listen and understand’. Unfortunately, she is unsure how far she can be successful at this as ‘control’, and ‘knowing’ is so built into her role.

I would argue that this idea is crucial to shifting the controlling aspects of top-down help – the person in the position of helper acknowledging that they ‘don’t know’ and trying to listen. Without this shift, help will not address people’s needs as well as it could and could make people in vulnerable positions feel worse about themselves, by removing their sense of agency, even over their own emotions.

Exposure and performing need

Amy described another aspect of performance that is part of accessing services for her – having to ‘perform’ need:

No one knows you on your worst day. When you can’t get out of bed, when you can’t make it out. They only see how you present yourself. The fact that you are articulate. That’s all they care about. They don’t know you when the doors are shut, on your worst day … [I]f you turn up in your pyjamas and haven’t washed for a week … that might help you get help. They gave me ten points. [They thought] ‘she presented herself well, she is
not on drugs, she is not an alcoholic’. So then they ticked all the boxes. And then I don’t get any help.

The doctrine of conditionality in its wider sense not only pushes behaviour change but also, as described in Chapter 1, because of a shortage – or perceived shortage – of resources, most top-down statutory services (and some voluntary sector services) in the UK require individuals to ‘prove’ (either formally or informally) that they need help. Interviewees talked about constantly having their ‘need’ doubted and judged in a wide range of services, both voluntary and statutory, from housing support to domestic violence, immigration and mental health. The system forces people into presenting a particular form of victimhood to access what they need.

Suzy described it as being part of the ‘traps and illogic of the system’. She talked about how you feel judged for needing help, but also for not needing it enough: ‘your currency is your terrible experiences’, and you have to both have and share those in order to get help. You have to show that your need is bad enough, otherwise you are judged for asking for help, she explained, but showing your need leads you to feel patronised and can also make you feel worse about yourself.

For instance, in a conversation or interview, the provider assesses the ‘neediness’ of the client by forcing them to answer intrusive personal questions about their life. ‘Nothing is sacred’, said Amber, ‘not even the person in your bed’. The more willing you are to reveal all and talk about your ‘terrible experiences’, the more likely you are to get financial and other forms of support. Giving up every detail of their lives to prove they need help often left my interviewees feeling judged and patronised.

I argue that this type of gatekeeping of need reinforces the underlying assumption that the people seeking support are different from other people. Either, as one interviewee put it, they are ‘not a full person’, so therefore not entitled to privacy and dignity, or they are inclined to try and cheat the system and therefore must be tested. (This is despite evidence that benefit fraud is actually a very limited practice – see Baumbeerg, Bell and Gaffney 2012.)

Suzy, quoted above, who missed out on support because she did not show her ‘worst day’ and presented too well in the interview, argued that needing help is so vilified in certain services that the cost of receiving it is paradoxically high:

It’s like [when] they used to drown witches. And the test was if you drown you are not a witch. So, you are innocent, but you are dead. But if you don’t die, you’re a witch, so they are going to kill you. If you go to those appointments and you do really well [in the interview] ... you are fucked, because you don’t come out with the support that you need. But if you go and do ‘badly’ then you get the help. But because you need help you are vilified ... and killed in other ways ... it’s the new witch hunt.
Suzy and Amber both also referred to another consequence of being required to present the worst, most incapable, ‘helpless’ sides of oneself so frequently: ‘it like diminishes you as a person. You don’t know what your capabilities are [anymore]. So you have to separate yourself a bit’ (Suzy).

This idea was echoed by several interviewees who were trying to implement collaborative help and said they were finding it difficult to shift ‘dependency’. At first, I was wary of their use of the word. The trope of poor people being ‘dependent’ on services has decades-worth of shaming undertones. More recently, during the Cameron, Osborne and Duncan Smith era, the idea of needing to ‘compassionately’ (Cameron 2011, 2013) ‘wean people off their dependency’ (McEnhill 2015) was used as moral cover for cutting and privatising services. But when I asked interviewees to explain further what they meant, I learnt they were talking about something different and more complex. Yes, they seemed to be saying, some people who are used to using services may to some extent be dependent on them. But this is not due to laziness, or not wanting to do things for yourself. Rather, it is to do with constantly having to position yourself as ‘needy’ in a whole host of ways to get basic support. As Bregman (2016: 132) argues, whereas employees are expected to demonstrate their strengths, ‘[people within the welfare system] have to demonstrate their shortcomings’. Not everyone is able, as Suzy recommended, to ‘separate themselves a bit’. For some people, presenting as incapable becomes habit, while others internalise this view of themselves entirely.

This then exacerbates ‘rescuer’ or ‘saviour’ and ‘victim’ dynamics. As one of my interviewees, Pierre, said: ‘the professionals’ expertise and specialisms are validated by the confluence of unresolved “problems” and the growing number of needy people “with problems” – the deficiency model of institutions and many charities set up to “help” people’.

Moreover, it is not only in order to prove need that clients of services are made to expose themselves. It also occurs in assessments, as part of data collection, in training courses and during one-to-one help sessions. ‘Showing yourself’, as one interviewee put it, is an integral part of being a helpee. But for many interviewees, exposing themselves in this way comes at great cost to their dignity and sense of self. Suzy described the terrible choice she feels she has to make:

Either I have my self-power, and my privacy and keep my story to myself until I am ready to share it with you but then I might not get any help … Or I share everything, and I lay on my back and you just take it all off me. And then I don’t have any power.

Suzy’s metaphor – ‘I lay on my back’ – evokes her sense of personal disempowerment, even violation. She does not blame individual workers for this dynamic but sees it as part of a system they are also subject to. She talked about a time when ‘the questions on the form’ had forced a worker, who she had previously had a good relationship with ‘to ask … about all of this horrible
stuff that we’d never spoken about. It was like the system forces people to do those same power dynamics sometimes’.

Marianne cautioned that this dynamic can occur, and even be magnified, when organisations are trying to ‘involve’ helpees more in services. For instance, by getting clients to ‘tell their stories’ – their journeys of ‘recovery’ from addiction to sobriety, homelessness to ‘stability’, crime to law-abidingness. In some ways this can be empowering, but if the fundamental top-down structures remain unchallenged and unchanged, it can also be

problematic on a number of levels … as it’s like people are re-traumatising themselves telling that story over and over again, [as well as] becoming enclosed in that past. It’s like that’s who you are essentially. And the other thing is that it must be really confusing because it’s because you become needed and it’s like you are doing a good thing for an organisation that you believe in and you are getting massive admiration. (Marianne)

A few interviewees talked about how they were aware that funders and other external requirements necessitated telling clients’ stories and journeys to demonstrate how the organisation’s interventions had ‘helped’ them – and they understood this. But all said they would rather the fact that they were their stories was respected, even though they were usually anonymised, and that it was the default to ask permission to use them (or better yet, construct the story together with them).

My interviewees’ feelings that they have to tell their stories in order to be seen as ‘successful’ clients who have undertaken a journey towards self-improvement are reinforced by literature from user groups such as Recovery in the Bin. In their manifesto critiquing the recovery model, they assert that ‘feel(ing) like you have to tell your “story” to justify your experience is a form of disempowerment, under the guise of empowerment’. They demand that ‘a broader range of survivor narratives … be recognised, honoured, respected and promoted that include an understanding of the difficulties and struggles that people face every day when unable to “recover”, not just “successful recovery” type stories’. They also argue that the focus on individual stories hides the structural causes of the issues people are facing.

Again, it seems this exposing dynamic is to some extent built into top-down forms of help, even when the worker is trying to engage in a more equal way. Frank, for instance, spoke about a visit to an ad hoc homeless shelter in an abandoned hotel building with a group of workers from various homelessness charities, workers he very much respected. Frank, who had spent 20 years sleeping rough, had been invited on the visit as a ‘service user representative’. He talked about his ‘disgust’ at the other members of the group taking pictures without asking residents’ permission. One worker told him ‘not to take it to heart’. But Frank still felt ‘upset’ at the situation. His feeling
was that ‘they may just be mats on the floor and some random bits and bobs to you, but these are people’s homes ... it doesn’t cost anything to be polite, it doesn’t cost anything to ask first’.

Amy, who fed back on my initial analysis of this theme, commented on how ubiquitous and normalised the act of ‘exposing’ clients seemed to be for many service providers. She reflected that perhaps people who are not forced to use formal helping services, and ‘are not used to the constant vulnerable exposure or negative judgements of society ... forget to expose themselves or give those they support the same dignified privacy’. Again, she was not blaming individual workers, and said, ‘I don’t believe there should be any shame in this, just acknowledgement and ownership’.

This section has explored the damaging effects on interviewees of having to show – or even exaggerate their ‘worst self’. It can distort people’s sense of themselves and make them think they are less capable than they are. It can also make them feel exposed and humiliated. The issue of exposure also comes up in other ways: namely in terms of people accessing help being made to feel like they have to ‘share their stories’ repeatedly. When people want to do this, it can be empowering, to some extent, but not when it feels compelled, as is often the case. This can occur even in organisations where unequal power dynamics are recognised and engaged with.

The effects of target-driven interventions

Many interviewees talked about the dehumanising effects of target-driven, standardised help. Help that, as de St Croix (2016) points out, is often tailored to meet the demands of impact measurements and payment by results systems (see Chapter 1). This kind of help tends to come in the form of short-term, standardised programmes, with easily measurable ‘outcomes’ which are defined before the practitioner has even met the client or asked what they need (de St Croix 2018).

Becky described the short-term nature of the (many) self-improvement courses she was encouraged to attend at the children’s centre attached to her children’s school:

I had a couple ... that I went to but just found it was a bit like you are here, do it, and then you are gone. Wasn’t much to it. You talk to people whilst you were there but that was it ... you do it, you go home. You don’t really get anything out of it. Whether that be on the learning side or personal, making friendship, or connections with other people. Another learning, training slash course done by Lambeth that was a bit samey as everything.

The idea that there ‘wasn’t much to it’ was reiterated by several interviewees about a number of courses and interventions that they were encouraged or recommended to attend (often by organisations or institutions they were in some way reliant on). Amrine talked about courses and ‘interventions’ she has been sent on where ‘you go, you do something, but nothing changes’. My
Interviewees were not arguing that some types of short-term courses are not useful for some people in some situations. Esme, for instance, talked about how a debating course she was encouraged to go on by her local children’s centre helped her confidence with speaking in groups. But, when people are in difficult situations and facing multiple challenges, these sorts of short-term, easily countable interventions can take from people more than they give. Especially if they are generic, easily ‘replicable’ courses that do not have much relevance to what people know they need. Paula, for instance, talked about how, at the Work Programme, she repeatedly requested help with interviews but, although she had to attend the programme five days a week and undertake lots of short-term training, none of it was the interview training she needed.

The focus on numbers extends to a wide range of agencies. Harriet, who worked as an advice worker in a charity that supports refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers, noted that even though the organisation is ‘pretty enlightened’ in terms of thinking about ‘power and stuff … due to funding obligations and other priorities … it was numbers over any kind of quality work. I got shouted at for spending too much time talking to one person at a drop-in session’.

As well as numbers coming through the service and being ‘helped’, providers often have to make sure targets are met in terms of the work done. Interviewees who had been on the client side of this experience felt that the need to meet targets led to an absurd waste of time and energy. ‘You just apply for any silly job just to show that you are applying for it’, said Paula about her experiences at the Jobcentre, the Work Programme and ‘back to work’ programmes at voluntary sector organisations:

They know you are not going to get that job, you know you are not going to get that job. You just end up feeling shitter … they have someone to answer to as well, so they have to show that you have done this and that … [to] the hierarchy.

The problem of target-driven interventions becoming ineffective in this way has been discussed in some policy and academic literature (see Chapter 1). Paula’s words also capture the profoundly demoralising effects of these kinds of interactions on those seeking help; the sense of futility and the feeling that what you want and what you know, the context of your life and what is realistic and desirable for you, is not heard and does not matter. It can feel, as Kenneth put it, like ‘you’re just there to tick box things isn’t it’. It also reveals a disciplinary understanding of time – certainly for people on low incomes (Standing 2013). In this understanding, people who are not in full-time formal paid work, for whatever reason, need to be ‘kept busy’, as some form of moral imperative, even if the work they are made to do is meaningless for them.

Kimberley commented on what these box-ticking forms of help felt like for her as a young person accessing youth services (within the past 5 years):
You sort of felt like sometimes you were just having conversations with people because you needed to have those conversations rather than because you wanted to ... and you know that it’s for them to write on a form to hit a target.

She then described how now, as a trainee youth worker herself in a large national youth work scheme, she is expected to enact help in a similar way: ‘Yeah, so we literally have a sheet where it’s like we tick this off, we’ve done this today ... We sort of hate it’.

Marianne argued that it is ‘essentially a mechanistic way of looking at how we work with people. These frameworks see people as cogs to be moved into place. But people are not cogs. They are complex’.

It could be argued that this sort of target-driven work is not an inherent component of top-down help. However, it is ubiquitous within much top-down help, due to the imperative for providers to prove ‘value’ to funders, trustees, commissioning bodies and others higher up the accountability chain. One way around this is to explore how more horizontal structures can create space for different, less punitive and narrow forms of accountability (see Chapters 5, 7 and 8).

The culture of meeting targets also defines for service providers what constitutes ‘successful’ behaviour from clients. Kimberley described how those who designed and assess the structured youth programme she implements are expecting certain outcomes and behaviours and do not appreciate the complexity of her work:

    I could be having a conversation with a young person and they could be screaming at me, that’s going to look horrible from their [the policy-makers’ and bosses’] perspective but if you’re involved in that conversation and this young person has never spoken out in their life, never answered back to you in their life and has always been scared to question authority and this is the first time they’re doing it, that’s a breakthrough in youth work. That’s an amazing moment. But to someone from the outside watching that, it’s ‘She has no authority. What is she doing?’

Kimberley’s analysis is reminiscent of Taylor’s (2017) argument that we need to question what we’re measuring. He asks:

    Are you measuring how successful you have been in manufacturing an emotionally resilient young person who will put up with the slings and arrows of outrageous social policies...and believes there is no alternative? Or are we evaluating how successful we have been in creating.. a critical, questioning young person, who seeks to change their lot in concert with others, who continues to imagine that a fairer, juster, more democratic society is possible?
Even without intending to, he concludes, standardised, highly target-based approaches to help can reinforce the status quo and neoliberal norms.

The situation can become even more dispiriting for clients when they realise that even if they do find the strength to speak up and say that these forms of help do not work for them, it is difficult for the helper to change things much, even if they want to. The system forces them into a certain way of working. Suzy talked about how she tried to shift the dynamic with one of her mental health workers:

I said I don’t like writing and filling out things … He said OK, fair enough … is there anything that you want to do? I said I don’t mind recording [instead of doing the activity sheets]. But it didn’t work out for him, because he was saying to me that he keeps the activity sheets … to prove that he has done his job … otherwise he gets into trouble … It’s bullshit.

Several interviewees who had been workers in these sorts of services talked about how hard it could be to resist the pressure to fulfil targets, as how you are rated at your job would likely depend on them.

**Resisting disempowering ‘help’**

Some interviewees did speak about ways that they have found to exert agency even within their seemingly impossible situations.

Several discussed protecting their sense of control and autonomy by choosing to mentally and emotionally disengage. Frank, for instance, who became frustrated with homelessness and substance abuse services, which treated him only as a ‘problem’, talked about how, at a certain point,

> [t]hat big wall would come up and say, ‘Right, that’s it. You’ve come far enough. I don’t want you any further’ … And that would be the end … That would be the end of the conversation. In all those years I never stopped drinking … I’d only used services to get what I wanted. To get out of them what I wanted.

Elizabeth, meanwhile, described how she protects her own integrity and sense of being a ‘whole person’ by shutting down when she feels she is being interacted with as a number:

> As I am talking, you are writing. OK what are you writing? Then I won’t talk to you again. I have a case worker like that and every time she comes to see me, she doesn’t want to see how I am doing, how my kids are doing and every little word that I say – OK I went to the park with the kids … you are writing it down. How are you doing? I am fine. Write it down. I am not fine. But I am not going to tell you what is really happening … they will never get to know anything real about me. Even if they know me for 10 years, they won’t know me.
Amy talked about how she often feels ‘at the mercy’ of the professional helping her. But by consciously choosing to be excessively grateful to make them feel good about themselves, or ‘acting like I don’t know anything, I’m an airhead’ she is able to assert a type of power, a ‘grabbing back control’ and ‘gaming the system’ as she framed it.

She said pretending in these ways can be empowering (rather than destructive as described in the sections about performing need and gratitude above) if you can do it in a way where you feel ‘in control’. For instance, she described a situation with her autistic son, where she deliberately provoked him before an assessment meeting so that he would act in a very inappropriate way, and the professionals would allow him to be on PIP (Personal Independent Payment disability benefits) indefinitely. She explained how she needs to make sure they ‘see the worst of him’:

They have changed the benefit system recently ... everybody that used to be on DLA has to go on PIP. And DLA was Disability Living Allowance. PIP is Personal Independence Payment ... Indefinite doesn’t count anymore ... and we have to reassess. And it’s so much hell. It’s really hell on earth. And I thought ‘this is going to be a real problem’. So I thought what can I do to – because sometimes [J, one of her sons] can have good days and sometimes J’s days are horrendous. And I thought what can I do ... to ... when I go for the assessment, for J to be on a bad day so they get to see the worst of him. So [I] get the result I want. Because – and I am not lying to them – because this is how he can.

As Elizabeth and Amber demonstrate, if people receiving formal help do not trust that they will get recognition, either as ‘full and equal partners’ (Fraser 2000), or as nuanced, complex people, one way of resisting misrecognition is by withholding information, presenting false information and playing on the image of the ‘deserving’ helpee. Several welfare scholars have cited these ways of ‘grabbing power’ as positive challenges to imposed forms of help. Lister (2004), for example, uses the terminology of ‘everyday resistance’ and Prior (2009) talks about ‘counteragency’. But although the use of these ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985: 1) by those in less powerful positions are often celebrated by academics and activists, in reality the costs of such resistance are high – Amber pretending to be an ‘airhead’ and having to upset her son, something she would not contemplate in any other circumstances; Frank putting up a wall, which meant he was unable to get the support he needed to stop drinking. As one interviewee commented simply, this kind of resistance ‘takes a lot of energy – you have to really feel strong enough in the first place to do it, a lot of people aren’t there’.

As Paula said above, many people who need to access formal help do not have the ‘self-esteem’ or English language skills to challenge the system, so they just have to ‘go along with it’. It is also doubtful that a back and forth power grab is an effective way of creating help. One interviewee,
whose job partly involved deciding who got access to scarce basic resources, talked about how much she hated the back and forth power grab that happened between her and her clients:

I know some people are lying to me, some people are trying to make me feel sorry for them, some people are trying to make me feel scared – everyone does what they can, they have to. But it just goes back and forth. It feels horrible, it means I can’t properly help people. No one wins.

Suzy talked about how she started subverting the system in how she filled in the forms her mental-health worker gave her. But the tactic ended up not helping her get the help she needed:

So do you know what I did? This is sneaky. I just started filling in crap. Because he had the upper hand here. And then he assumed I got better. I didn’t get better, I just filled out the sheets like he wanted me to do it. So that I could just like ... get away. Instead of a supportive environment ... it turned into a pupil/student relationship.

Marianne, during our interview, attempted a physical depiction of the problem with the back and forth power grab. She acted out two hands moving up and down in relation to each other. The problem with this, she said, was that it maintained a ‘them and us’, rather than moving towards ‘more of an us thing’.

Sometimes it is the worker who tries to resist the structures imposed on them and grab space for connection. Elizabeth, for instance, talked about a social worker who did not ‘treat me like a case’, who shared a bit about herself and took Elizabeth’s knowledge and understanding both of her situation and wider social factors seriously. For Elizabeth, this worker’s way of interacting with her meant that ‘we sort of connected together’. However, although the worker ‘is trying her best ... she is trying [to] do that solidarity’, ultimately, ‘she has to follow the policy’.

I would argue, then, that it is possible for some people accessing formal services to exert agency in situations where they are given little, to refuse to be treated as victims, deviants or numbers and to find ways to access much-needed resources that might otherwise be denied to them. But to be able to do this, they would already need to have a lot of power within and not have internalised a sense of their own powerlessness, which is difficult in a context where formal support systems as well as wider social and political norms repeatedly reinforce the idea that there is something wrong with them. Even when it does work, however, ultimately it can lead to people’s needs not being met and a back and forth power grab. Therefore, although it is heartening that some people are able to do this, I suggest that it is by no means a sustainable solution to the problems with top-down help.
Chapter summary

This chapter has described top-down ways of organising help and has argued that these often lead to help that is controlling, pathologising and confuses people’s sense of self and identity. Disconnection between helper and helpee is a key component of this, partly caused by the transactional nature of relationships and a target-based culture that is often imposed to meet policy or funders’ aims. Within this context, the kinds of open, complex discussions needed to understand individual situations and offer appropriate help cannot happen. Also crucial is the way the needs of the person in the difficult situation are decentred. ‘Need’ is framed as being due to individual failings rather than broader social structures, and ‘help’ therefore becomes about ‘fixing’ or changing individuals. It is difficult for workers not to fall into seeing individuals as being somehow to blame, even if they do not necessarily agree with that framing.

Helpees repeatedly talk about feeling like they need to perform victimhood, helplessness and gratitude (the types of ‘need’ that power can ‘see’), in the process internalising ideas of ‘dependency’ and ‘incompetence’. People are often not seen as equals; rather, there is a clear divide between helpers and helpees and help can often become about ‘rescue’ or ‘punishment’ of helpees, who are seen as either victims or transgressive. Having to ‘expose’ yourself and make yourself vulnerable in a way that makes you feel powerless is another common theme. Underlying most of these forms of help is a wider, political framing of ‘scarcity’ – the idea that there are not enough resources and they therefore have to be strictly rationed and need has to be ‘proved’. This leads to further forced exposure for helpees.

Within these frameworks of help, there is little room for the knowledge of helpees to be taken seriously, and the notion of the helper being the ‘expert’ (and holding the power of ‘expertise’) can be prevalent.

Paula described how the forms of formal help she has encountered have made her feel so ‘bad about [her]self’ that her aim is to ‘get out of the system’ altogether. Though perhaps fulfilling policy-makers’ aims of making people more ‘independent’ of the state, on a different level this reveals the perverseness of a system that ‘helps’ by making feel people so bad about themselves that they don’t want the help anymore. There is space for resistance within these forms of help and interviewees talked about the ways they subvert the system. But these forms of resistance are not available to everyone, and they do not seem to lead to the most desirable outcomes for anyone.

I do not argue that the help delivered in these contexts is without value or merit. My argument is that the problems and ill-effects inherent to top-down, one-sided approaches can undermine the benefits of the help being given. Perhaps ‘power within’ and ‘power to’ are being built, but they are also being undermined - and there is little room for a sense of collective power to be
developed. The acute sensation that there is a personal ‘cost’ to these forms of help, one which does not always feel worth paying, seems to hold true for most of my interviewees even when facing extremely difficult life situations, such as homelessness and asylum struggles.

How then might society organise help differently? The next four chapters will explore the principles and practices of alternative helping arrangements that are being enacted by groups trying to do help in a less top-down, more mutual ways, ways which attempt to collapse the false and damaging binaries (Newman and Tonken 2011) that can undermine dominant forms of help.
Chapter 4: Mutuality

I think to do help in ways that don’t feel judgemental and undermining, you have two choices. Either you do ‘professional’ help really well, or you have a mutual help model. Sometimes the professional model, if it can include time to build relationships, understand where the ‘client’ is coming from and where they want to go, to treat them as if their views matter, feels like the best option … But I think it always comes at a cost … resentment, or just a slight chipping away at someone’s sense that they can do something. They might be grateful, but they are also embarrassed usually … Mutual help is harder, messier, but doesn’t have that same cost. (Celine)

The previous chapter explored how power dynamics inherent in top-down help can undermine that help, making people feel powerless, like they are ‘the problem’ and have little to contribute. These dynamics are exacerbated by target- and impact-driven frameworks and an underlying ethos that people who need to access formal help need to change or improve, which can make relationships between helper and helpee feel unequal, and hamper connection.

There have been challenges to these norms, for instance relational welfare frameworks (Cottam 2014; Stears 2012; Rustin 2013), which aim to mitigate the most disempowering aspects of top-down help by prioritising the relationship between professional and client and taking the time to build connection. I would agree with Celine, however, that while these forms of help to some extent challenge paradigms of ‘expertise’, ‘what works’ and short target-based interventions, they still come at a cost to people’s dignity and sense of self. I suggest the only way to eliminate this cost is to shift the dynamic in which some people ‘help’ and others ‘are helped’, in other words create mutual helping structures. This is the sort of help most of my interviewees talked about when they described their most useful and empowering experiences of help. (There is, of course, a self-selecting aspect to this, as all my interviewees have chosen to be part of groups trying to create less one-sided helping structures.)

My research suggests that these more mutual frameworks can not only significantly and sustainably shift the undermining dynamics of top-down, one-sided help but also bring wider benefits. Mutual help practices can shift people’s sense of their own power – individually and together. Their collective nature means a broader range of perspectives and ideas are considered, so they often generate more effective solutions. Just being involved in a network where you help others as equals whilst being helped yourself can ease anxiety. And sharing experiences and emotions can help people recognise shared, systemic oppressions rather than always seeing themselves as ‘the problem’, or their situation as an isolated case of bad luck – shifting the stigma of ‘need’ and the framework of individual pathology (Newman and Tonkens 2011; Williams 1999).

A quote from a leaflet created by Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, a mutual-support and 86
eviction-resistance group in Barcelona, gets to the heart of what makes these forms of help different:

More often than not those who come to PAH meetings are frightened ... depressed, ashamed and experiencing an overwhelming feeling of culpability. In the PAH you will be able to ... share your story, air your doubts and find answers to them. Listening to other people affected you will realise that there are many people in the same situation as you and, if we act together, we can achieve things that alone would be much harder, if not impossible.

As timebanking movement pioneer Edgar Cahn (2000) points out, mutual support networks also challenge dominant market-based thinking, which devalues the work of caring for and sustaining each other. This reflects a key theme in feminist care literature, particularly ethic of care frameworks (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993), which emphasise care’s socially positive and desirable features, and see it as a perpetual ‘web of connection... so that no one is left alone’ (Gilligan 1982: 62). Less clear in the care literature is what these webs of connection could look like – an area this chapter contributes to.

Of course, mutual support is not new. Chapter 1 explored historical UK precedents, and several interviewees discussed mutual support networks they belonged to outside their more formal groups. Elizabeth, for instance, talked about how childcare and other day-to-day tasks are shared within her immigrant community, while Amber recalled One O’clock Clubs and other forms of collective support for poor working parents on her 1970s’ south London estate: ‘How do you think the poor have survived, if not through mutual support?’

Replacing statutory and voluntary services with mutual support is not straightforward, however. I would suggest this is partly because individualistic and pathologising norms around help and need are so firmly embedded in voluntary and public sector helping culture that people trying to create more mutual forms of help regularly fall back into them. Additional difficulties arise from trying to balance give and take when group members have varied socio-economic backgrounds, with some experiencing severe instability and anxiety in relation to their basic needs and others not.

This chapter explores the experiences of mutual help that emerge from my data, and the value and challenges described. I start by discussing South London Women’s Collective, the organisation I know most closely: first the more top-down ‘relational’ forms of help we enacted and then how more organic ‘mutual’ help emerged. I then look at Homes Before Profit whose approach to help is based on collective action and advocacy and trying to understand structural causes of social issues. My third case study is Hawthorne Square Timebank and its way of destigmatising need through a structure that makes clear everyone both needs and gives help. I have chosen to focus on these three groups as I believe they broadly represent the different approaches to creating
mutual help in place of one-sided services I have encountered. Initially, I look mainly at what works well in each. I then consider some of the challenges, also drawing on learning from other groups.

Centring the control and power of people most affected by social injustice

In 2011, I founded South London Women’s Collective (SLWC) with Celine. We had both worked – in problematic ways – in other helping organisations for many years. We wanted, with this project, to treat people experiencing poverty and structural disadvantage differently from how we had in other organisations: not as victims or children, nor as deviant (Mooney 2008; Wacquant 2008), but in ways that recognised their knowledge and expertise.

Our guiding principles were, first, that need should not be vilified: often people face difficulties because of structural injustices rather than their characters or choices. Second, everyone is competent in some way, and people accessing services are likely to be managing complexities in their lives that more privileged people might struggle with. Third, labels such as ‘worklessness’ obscure the reality that many without paid jobs (especially women) continuously do other kinds of care, administrative and relational work. Fourth, everyone is capable of giving help and everyone needs help at times. And finally, building strong, supportive helping relationships takes time and effort.

We tried to create a gentle process, acknowledging both people’s capacities and the fact that structural injustice had eroded the confidence of many. Our support tools encouraged people to work out for themselves what they needed (rather than getting our ‘diagnosis’); allowed them time and space to decide what they wanted to do; and acknowledged all that they were already managing in their lives (e.g. ‘able-tables’, which helped people think about what they were good at and how to build on that). For some members, this approach seemed effective. One described how the support allowed her to

think outside of the normal things they tell you you’re allowed to do as a poor mother, like be a childcare worker – just because I have kids doesn’t mean I want to work with them, or that I’d be good at it!

Another talked about how it facilitated her setting up her own catering business and substantially changing her circumstances.

However, this type of help was perhaps most useful for those who were already confident and just needed practical support to achieve their goals. When I interviewed the women from SLWC who were experiencing the most entrenched and complex difficulties when they joined and had dropped out (or been banned from) other voluntary sector helping organisations, it was not this formal one-to-one support they focused on as transformative. It was something harder to pin
down: the feel of the space and the emergent forms of mutual support flowing between group members.

This space, I would argue, was collectively created. The initial, explicit ethos that people are not to blame for social issues, and our (imperfect) attempts to involve everyone in decision-making and management seemed to be enough to allow other members to feel like they ‘owned the space’ and could shape it, bringing their own insights and helping skills to the fore. Celine and I had planned to train other members in our ‘professional’ forms of one-to-one support so that they could support newer joiners in the same way. But before we even started this, other members were already creating more effective forms of help – ones which centred the needs of people at the sharp end of inequality. Needs which often go unrecognised.

This resulted in a networked, horizontal form of support based on myriad connections between people, rather than the top-down helper-helpee dynamic that Celine and I had been re-enacting. Elizabeth said what felt transformational for her was the feeling that ‘we all value each other’; the sense that ‘everybody is there to give each other [a] hand’ and to listen and talk when you have personal issues. Paula described how she felt at ‘peace’ in the space and like she ‘didn’t have to feel judged’ or have ‘the obligation to do anything’ she didn’t want to. Becky added:

> We weren’t made to feel like poor people – it didn’t … feel like, oh look, let’s get this bunch of poor people in and see what we can do with them … It doesn’t mean that there wasn’t bumps in the road or things that had to be learnt … But it was a warm comfy space to be in.

Amrine described how being there helped mitigate the ‘stress’ and ‘distance’ that had come between her and her children whilst they were living in a refuge after leaving her abusive husband:

> The spark was broken, child and mother loving relationship was … gone. It had become very strict – ‘we have to do this, we have to do … that … In the morning the case worker is going to come’. All that stress, that used to go away at SLWC … You feel at home … [not like] someone is watching us. And … everyone is interested in the core of what you have to say … everyone is equal when they came there. That gives you that thing which you don’t get anywhere. We felt that spark back again … I can say it’s better than family therapy.

Feeling equal, heard, ‘not watched’ or judged seem to be crucial aspects of what made this form of mutual support effective for people. In addition, having needs seen and met without feeling ashamed or like you were a ‘problem’ seemed important for members. Amrine recalled how on her first visit to SLWC the lifts were broken, and someone ‘cheerfully’ came down to help her with
her buggy: ‘It was never like, sorry, the lift is closed, can you come another time? ... It was “OK, let us take you, let me help you”.’ At other organisations, she had met an attitude of

Oh, you have children? ... we can’t accept you ... Oh, you have buggy? You can’t come in ... People are not accepting me because of all these things. But at SLWC they didn’t just accept me, they helped me to get in with all these things.

Amy, meanwhile, talked about how small things like providing food put people at ease and made them feel ‘welcome’ and accepted, adding: ‘If you didn’t have any food, or any breakfast ... it wasn’t a thing. There was just always food there, so you could come in and have something quietly without feeling weird. Others described how ‘not being told off’ for being late for sessions, and people ‘understanding that if I am late it is because something has happened not because I am bad’, made them feel understood and seen.

Interviewees also talked about helping each other in more material ways. For instance, sharing children’s winter clothes when people were short of them, or taking each other to other support organisations (e.g. ones where you could get food) to reduce shame and fear. These acts of care and generosity could be generative, creating positive cycles of help. Amrine said people being there for her when she first came to SLWC meant that, when she was feeling more okay, she wanted to support others: ‘Today you walked with me, tomorrow, call me and I will walk with you.’ One interviewee who had felt unable to voice her mental struggles, said she became more ‘comfortable [opening] up, and [saying] what I dealing with’ after listening to someone else’s story and realising she was not ‘weird’. Paula described how helping others makes her feel better about herself and reflected on the multi-sided benefit of the approach: ‘You are getting to unload on each other. You are taking this in. But [at the same time] someone is taking the load off you.’

Sometimes, people in complex situations still needed intervention from people with more ‘professional’ helping backgrounds (for instance, help with immigration and asylum procedures). But often complex situations were best engaged with by people with a different type of understanding. Becky described how she was able to effectively support a member who sometimes had quite aggressive verbal outbursts, and had consequently been banned from several other organisations, because ‘I was so used to that sort of thing from growing up, it didn’t faze me, so I could just take her downstairs and really listen’. This calmed the situation sufficiently for the group to later engage in productive conflict resolution with the member.

Of course, divisions and judgements did appear, even in this ‘warm’, ‘non-judgemental’ space. The shared struggles of mothers on low incomes did not create automatic affinity and mutuality. Indeed, at times varied experiences and approaches to caring and motherhood served to entrench difference. We tried to mitigate this by drawing on an approach rooted in US community organising movements called Intentional Peer Support (IPS) (See Chapter 1). At its core, IPS tries
to disrupt people’s tendency to replicate unequal helping dynamics by building awareness of power roles we fall into.

A key tenet of IPS is ‘learning not helping’, recognising that you always start from a ‘position of not knowing’ (Mead 2012) a particular person, or the contexts and narratives influencing their world view. The supporter’s role is not to resolve someone’s problems but to learn about and from them, enabling movement towards a new, shared understanding. This can be a challenging way to give help, perhaps especially in peer support where conventionally peers are supposed to just ‘know’ what the other person is going through. IPS uses specific listening and questioning techniques that help peer supporters engage with curiosity and openness, check their assumptions, form connections and reconnect when things go wrong. The model also requires explicit discussion of power.

Elizabeth described how IPS training helped members build a solidarity-based approach to help:

We learned … if someone is listening to you, walking side by side with you, they don’t have the power over you. They don’t have the voice to say, OK, we are telling [you] to go and do this … And that is something that is so important to me now … Not just putting your voice in, you want to deal with their problem, but just listen first … it’s doing that solidarity thing.

Another interviewee described it as ‘doing training about understanding each other, how to read each other’. This learning about how to understand each other was helpful when situations where people might be tempted to become judgemental occurred. Becky, for instance, recounted a conversation with a newer member about making sure her daughter had a dry nappy on when dropped off at the creche:

At first you think, I have to be the professional and tell her off … but then you think, gosh, she is dealing with it and whatever else crap … it’s just not fair … and then you start to talk about it in a [kinder] way … which I think allowed her to open up … and then you think what can we do to help make that easier … I think that is what we’re about.

The woman in question remembered the episode in a similar way, saying she felt ‘appreciated and cared for’, not ‘punished’ for the situation as she had been at other organisations. She described how Becky and Paula helped by showing her how to change a nappy on her lap. I suggest that what allowed the help to work so well here was, first, Becky’s position as peer, someone who understood that ‘as a parent [you] can feel like you’ve messed up’; second, the mutual helping ethos that had developed, which meant Becky engaged with the other woman as a whole, complex person, and tried to ‘find out things about her situation that I didn’t know’; and third, our regular group training and reflection sessions, framed by the IPS approach, where we
examined what it meant to really support each other as equals and tried to challenge ourselves and each other to do it better.

Almost all members described changing during their time at SLWC. But not in forced ‘behaviour-change’ ways demanded by dominant forms of help (Welfare Conditionality 2018). Paula talked about the change she experienced as a ‘journey’ – being able to ‘express … feelings and stuff that maybe I couldn’t before’: ‘I see things from a different perspective. I can literally say I have come away and I can see this and that that I couldn’t see before.’ She also took a journey into paid work – as a cleaner, then childcare worker, then assistant nursery manager – but felt this was not a result of being made ‘employable’ as defined by the Work Programme, but because she genuinely felt better about herself and so was able to present herself more positively in interviews. (Paula had been unemployed and attending Jobcentre-mandated training and ‘support’ for 10 years before joining SLWC, making clear, I think, how necessary these forms of mutual support were for her.) A number of other interviewees echoed this. For some, an enhanced sense of self also helped protect them from exploitation: ‘Now I know how to say my rights, how to stand up for myself … no boss dares to shout at me’ (Elizabeth).

Crucially, this journeying also applied to people from more privileged and service-provider backgrounds who, I would argue, are equally (if not more) likely to need to reflect on and shift certain assumptions and behaviours. Celine talked about how engaging in these forms of help led her to ‘rethink almost all aspects of my identity’, and Harriet described how much she values the ‘opportunity to change myself and learn … as a group we change ourselves from the inside and we change our understanding of each other’.

The initial way we tried to do help differently at SLWC resembled a relational welfare approach, focusing on building longer-term relationships and allowing people space to think about what they needed. These forms of help, I suggest, improve on the types described in Chapter 3, in that they are less corrosive of people’s sense of self and ‘power within’. However, I would argue that it was the more mutual forms of help that emerged in SLWC which eventually pushed more ‘professional’ forms to the side. The emergent mutual help structure where people felt seen by and tried to see others, found ways to share scant resources and built a feeling of commonality, ultimately created more profound shifts and built power within and collective power in a way that would have been difficult to replicate in even the most thoughtful top-down, one-sided help. I suggest, however, that building this mutual help ‘consciously’ in a way that was overt and reflective about power differentials was crucial to it remaining fairly ‘equal’ and not falling into punitive norms.
Collective action and solidarity

Homes Before Profit is an example of mutual help that focuses on the shared structural causes of problems members are experiencing and on addressing them collectively. Rather than modifying conventional helping structures, as SLWC initially did, it completely eschewed the ‘service-user model’ (Sarah) from the start. Help is done together at meetings and through ‘buddying’ and collective advocacy.

Homes Before Profit does refer members to the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, legal advisors and other mainstream helping services when necessary, and Sarah acknowledged that sometimes people just need someone who is ‘paid to take away that shitty [thing]’. But in general, Homes Before Profit maintains that involving people in their own advocacy, in a collective, supported way, is more empowering, sustainable and effective than one-sided help. For one, it can bring emotional ‘comfort’ and ‘satisfaction’ at a point when people are feeling bad about themselves. Sarah described, for instance, how buoyed one member was when a buddy came with her to a housing appointment, and ‘we were … able to stand up to someone who treated her badly before … to say no, this is wrong’. This approach can also build confidence, she said, allowing people to start to view their problems as wider social issues and to ‘see that they are not the only person facing this’.

She said a model that addresses structural issues is also more effective in the long term than a service approach:

[With those forms of help] the structure, the root causes are still going to happen so that problem might appear for you again. And you go back. And it’s never really being solved or dealt with … [whereas] the collective model can challenge the root causes [like a particular policy at a council] so it won’t [repeat] the cycle.

The transformative potential of this model of help is, I believe, exemplified by the experience of Simran, who had left her husband after a long, abusive marriage with the help of her adult daughter. Initially, she went to a women’s refuge specifically for Asian women, which was also mentioned by another interviewee. Both said that, while staff meant well, budget cuts and an established top-down culture had made it feel quite controlling; an environment where women are expected to do what they are told and staff are reluctant to support them in asking for much from state and council services. Simran found this approach difficult. She felt she had endured enough in her life and was now in a place where she wanted to try and get what she needed for herself.

Sarah talked about how part of Homes Before Profit’s approach is that ‘no one will be as invested in your case as you’. Housing caseworkers and lawyers have limited time and ‘have to follow certain rules’ about what cases they can follow through with. Homes Before Profit’s structure
allows people who want and feel able to fight for themselves and others to do so in a collective, supported way. She described several situations where the group had been able to keep people in their houses when they lawyers had failed to. For Simran, too, the Homes Before Profit approach worked: the council eventually offered her permanent accommodation and she remains actively involved in the group.

A few key things appear to have allowed Simran to engage with the group fruitfully. First, her own determination (and ability) to fight for herself, which seemed to be related to the lack of ‘control’ she had previously experienced over her life: ‘I said to my daughter, I don’t want to live my miserable life whatever I live before at home … So, like now my style is completely different.’ Second, the feeling of equality at Homes Before Profit: ‘Whoever needed help, we are always there … never like say, oh, one people are down and other one up.’ And third, the way the group interacted meant she did not feel afraid or silenced, unlike in the refuge where staff ‘get annoyed if we say something’: ‘in Homes Before Profit we discuss any problem … you feel like there’s nothing to be afraid of’.

In addition, the group’s collective power boosts Simran’s sense of her own power:

When there’s so many in the group then it is going to be more power. And the council will listen. Otherwise, one or two people, they say ‘Oh go away’. Like me and J, we went there, and it was like ‘go go go’ … But the group is something. They know that. Like now the council office, if anybody goes and say ‘oh, we work from Homes Before Profit’ and the people are like ‘whoa!'”

I would argue that for someone who has spent many years feeling controlled and unequal, in the ways Simran talked about, feeling a sense of power together with others, equal to them, and in control of her own ‘fight’ is help that is transformative on many more levels than the material one of obtaining housing.

Sarah talked about how ‘collective action’ and ‘showing we can change things together’ is an important part of Homes Before Profit’s ethos. Importantly for Simran, however, more confrontational actions, which can intimidate people from non-activist backgrounds, are never taken without explicit consent from the person concerned. She recounted, for example, a longer-term member’s response when she said she did not want others to protest over the failure of her housing application, because ‘in India I know what protest means. It means like too much fighting, riot’: ‘She say “it’s up to you, we are not going to force you. If you say we do it, we do it, we are behind you. And if you say if we do it quietly then we do that.”’

This understanding of different perspectives on activism is important. For people from more secure or privileged backgrounds, it can feel exciting. For those from more working-class or ethnic-minority backgrounds, for whom confrontation with authorities can (and historically has)
led to more oppression, the risk-reward calculation can be different. As Noel said, trying to push people into these sorts of tactics is ‘its own sort of oppression’. This idea was reiterated by interviewees from non-white or non-middle-class backgrounds who said they want to be more involved in activism but need time to build up to it, and to feel the collective ‘really has their back’. Homes Before Profit’s gentle approach respects this.

Members acknowledged a ‘slight divide’ within the group – between people who come from ‘maybe a more activist place ... and want to be involved in a project that’s about social justice’, and people whose ‘immediate aim for coming is to get help with their housing problem’. Interestingly, though, the line is quite blurred from the outset, as even those from activist backgrounds are often in precarious situations. Most have to move frequently between rented flats and a number have been on Jobseeker’s Allowance. Meanwhile, those who join with an immediate housing issue

[come maybe with their problem, but then realise that they can get help with that and that they can help others. And that[‘s] kind of the whole point of the group, I think. To build practical solidarity on this local size. (Sarah)

This blurred line appears helpful in eroding the helper-helpee distinction and is enhanced by the fact no one has a claim to expertise about the issues. Sarah talked about how they have built their knowledge of housing law, rights, and root causes of and solutions to problems together.

The idea of ‘learning not helping’ attempted at SLWC finds echoes in Homes Before Profit’s approach. One interviewee said:

[The] thinking is like, if you are involved with other people, you get ideas. Like how they complicate their situation and how they deal with their situation. Then you are more confident ... We can learn from other people. That is always what they say [in Homes Before Profit] ... if you listen to other people you hear more ideas.

Interestingly, just by being in the group and attending meetings, people ‘learn their rights as well as see how they can support other people’ (Sarah). When this works well, it has a generative effect: the more people help each other, the more knowledge, skills and confidence they gain:

It’s happening more and more. There is a group we have where there is five families who are really overcrowded. So – because their cases are really similar – they are able to help each other. And one of them has a friend who speaks Spanish and English, so we are like roping her in. So, all the time there is little links of people helping each other in informal ways. With ... the increased confidence of the group ... we kind of know what we are doing now and that rubs off on other people.
More experienced members support newer ones to help others with their cases so that knowledge, information and capacity are shared. Simran recalled supporting another woman she knew from the refuge in her attempts to get a flat, by going through the forms with her while texting Sarah for advice. For Sarah, this is ‘the most satisfying thing, when you see people helping each other’, and is an example of Homes Before Profit working at its best. Having learnt herself ‘how to give solidarity and mutual support’, she is now able to ‘facilitate solidarity’. Simran, meanwhile, mentioned the pleasure she gets from contributing to other people’s cases; making a difference and feeling ‘respect’ in return. Interviewees also talked about how it can be ‘more fun’ and ‘relaxing’ to deal with someone else’s case than your own, so in this sense supporting someone else (and being supported by others in return) can lift some emotional weight from people.

Sarah explained that not everyone stays intensely involved once their cases are dealt with, but some do, and most people will remain involved on some level:

   The idea is that they do come along, and hopefully if their housing issue is a bit better then they will have a bit more capacity to help out more as well ... There is a couple of people who have got secure housing through the group (who) we haven’t seen them at meetings as much. But they come to the lunch club and they’ve come to actions to support back so they are still part of the network ... if I did a call out now for an action, I’d feel confident we’d get at least 50 people.

According to Sarah, there is not much space for emotional support within Homes Before Profit (they have been thinking about starting an ‘emotional care’ sub-group but have so far lacked capacity). Nonetheless, my interviewees suggested, small gestures of care happen regularly and are crucial. Simran recalled how at her first meeting, other women in the group asked for her phone number and from then on regularly checked in on her through phone messages. She does the same for others. She mentioned repeatedly how important the feeling of togetherness is: ‘knowing if I need support, somebody is behind me ... it’s all like family members’. Homes Before Profit also runs lunch clubs so that people going through difficult times can ‘chat one on one if they feel more comfortable with that ... trying to create different spaces for different [needs]’. As at SLWC, other small gestures of care and welcome are important. Simran recounted how her nerves were eased by the atmosphere at her first meeting:

   They have a table ... And they have a biscuit and fruit over there. Some people eat and drink whatever they want. So, tidy everything. And we are waiting for the last to talk and she talk to everybody very nicely.

Homes Before Profit’s approach to help is most obviously a way of building collective power. Together, they take on unfair systems and policies that play out through individual members’
cases, confronting both visible and hidden power. Their approach also confronts invisible power, however, as sharing problems in the group shows that they are not their ‘fault’ but the result of structural injustices. Realising this, and being supported to challenge these injustices by others in the group, can shift how people see and value themselves, building power within. By learning to navigate the housing system together, they build skills and knowledge individually and collectively. The approach works particularly well for people like Simran, who are looking for a sense of control and collective power.

**Emphasising that everyone is a helper and helpee and collective responsibility**

The next case study, of Hawthorne Square Timebank (HSTB), particularly shows the destigmatising-need aspects of mutual help. For every hour a participant ‘deposits’ in HSTB, they can ‘withdraw’ equivalent support when they themselves are in need, with help ranging from a chat or a walk with someone who is lonely to teaching someone a recipe. In this context, being ‘in need’ is not stigmatising or shameful. It is a normal part of life, as described by A:

> When people join up you do also ask them, is there anything at the moment that you might need help with? But then asking for help is not really the same as being defined as a need because you are not letting it define you, it’s just at the moment I could do with someone to do my garden.

There is a wide range of people involved, ‘all of whom may have an unmet need’:

> they might be retired and lonely ... they might have had a mental health problem, they might have a physical health problem, they might be a refugee or an asylum seeker. Some of the people that this GP actually referred were young professionals, but they were lonely. (Steve)

Key to the approach is making sure ‘it doesn’t feel patronising’ (Laura) or demeaning. Laura explained, for instance, how they deliberately avoid certain ‘stigmatised’ voluntary sector language like ‘befriending’. Even though sometimes ‘what you’re doing ... is like befriending’, she explained, ‘we don’t like to call it that, because then it feels like one of those services where it’s like oh the poor lonely person gets this nice volunteer to “befriend” them’.

Steering clear of standard voluntary sector language and its associations reflects a key principle of timebanks, namely that needing help does not mean there is anything wrong with you, since everyone needs things, and everyone is able to give things.\(^{13}\) Laura explained how Paxton Green’s approach is that ‘everybody has mental health problems at some point in their life, even if it’s just having an off day. Like everyone is up and down’. From my interviews with timebank members, I

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\(^{13}\) Pierre from Odessa Square Timebank explained, similarly, that timebanks deliberately use the language of ‘contribution’ rather than volunteering to avoid the paternalistic associations of the latter.
would argue that the ‘everyone is up and down’ attitude, and the sense that we all struggle and need emotional as well as practical help, and that we all give this help all the time, is more deeply entrenched here than in other organisations. In this way, HSTB goes further than even the two case studies above towards de-pathologising need, and is most aware of how shameful it can feel for people to ask for help.

Laura described how these forms of help can be very new for people. Not just for people who might be used to going to mainstream services, but also for the ‘wealthier’ from the ‘big houses’ near the estate the timebank is based on, who sometimes join: ‘I suppose if you are very well off and of a certain generation, you are used to giving more traditionally, so you write a cheque for Christmas or you do stuff like that. So, it’s a big difference for people.’ She said, though, that people take to it quickly, and soon people from very different backgrounds are ‘doing stuff and at social events here’. She feels it is ‘quite surprising to people to start with … probably more so for the posher people, [who might be thinking] oh these are different people that I don’t usually interact with!” but it’s quite nice’.

Steve described how, at his previous job for a housing association, he often heard the phrase ‘I don’t want to be a bother’. That idea resonated throughout my interviewees’ descriptions of things they feel at mainstream helping organisations (along with anger, fear etc.). Steve went on to argue that the timebank’s structure makes it ‘not weird’ to ask for or offer help, in contrast with, say, neighbours in a block of flats: How would it be received, he asked,

if I knock on your door and I say I really need help painting a wall, it’s too much for me.
I can cut your hair in return. You are probably going to say, who on earth are you?
What are you doing at my door? Go away.

In fact, the sort of activities people do in UK timebanks are rarely very skilled tasks like painting walls and cutting hair (for insurance reasons largely, Laura explains). The point Steve was making, however, is that asking for and giving help should be perfectly normal. HSTB tries to normalise it, and to recreate, wider networks of care and support people might have had when it was more common to live in the community you grew up in, but in a deliberately non-hierarchical way. Steve then described how

with this new social contract, if you’ve said what you can do to help other people … you now have a legitimate reason to ask for help … You are in this network in which it is ok to ask for help from one another … [I call it] the flip. You just turn something upside down. And create a different kind of way people understand one another and how they can interact with one another.

It is not just about taking the shame out of asking for help, he added, but making people feel comfortable offering help. He explained that ‘it’s rare that you find people joining the Timebank 98
because they [just want to get something] ... it’s more like ... they want to do, they want to give, they want to share ... they want to exchange.’ They just need the structure that gives them the ‘legitimacy to act’.

Long-term member Mark described the mutual help system at HSTB as ‘reciprocity’. He was persuaded to join the timebank after a long period of depression and disengagement with anything communal. He had previously felt like he wanted help managing how he was feeling but thought accessing a service would make him feel worse. But then he agreed to paint a bannister for someone in the timebank and earned a credit. He felt good about that, ‘and for the first time for lord knows how long, I actually had a meal cooked for me. Which was unknown frankly’. When I asked him what allowed him to engage with the timebank differently from other services, he replied: ‘it is not a one- way transaction. There is a lot of things that go on that are done to people because somebody knows better. Whereas this is trying to involve the person with whatever capabilities that they have.’ Mark has now been involved with the timebank for 10 years and says it has helped him significantly in managing his depression.

Laura was clear that it is not a ‘tit-for-tat reciprocity’ (which has more punitive undertones, related to the notion of building a ‘something-for-something’ welfare culture that practices of ‘conditionality’ are based on, see Chapter 1). This is because you neither have to give back to the same person, nor give back immediately, a structure which allows for the fact people have periods when they are more able and less able to give. Additionally, although the two examples I looked at are built around an hour-for-hour structure, in practice, Steve said, ‘very few people’ keep track of their hours or insist on getting something when in credit. All the members and coordinators I talked to reiterated this. Often people share credits with others (more about this in Chapters 5 and 7), supporting the idea that the framework facilitates a culture of mutual help and longer-term relationships rather than a narrow skills trade. As Steve observed: ‘It’s more a communitarian type of thing ... that you ... feel good to give or feel good to receive. It’s a way for people to connect and become altruistic towards one another.’

In moving from an assumption that everyone can and should look after themselves to thinking about how people can look after each other, the timebank framework demonstrates the ethos of interdependence it actively seeks to build on. Members organise regular group excursions, including out of London, during which ‘we all get involved’, said Rona, a long-term member: ‘we all help each other ... who[ever] can’t do it. Push the wheelchair ... All look out for one another. It’s just such a family. Like a second family.’ Rona also described how she regularly goes to a blind woman’s house ‘to do her typing’ and, in turn, other members look out for her, knowing she has a disability and lives alone. When she hasn’t seen other members for a while, someone will always ‘text me and say Rona, we haven’t seen you for a while – are you all right? And I am like yeah, just busy with the granddaughter’. This constant looking out for each other creates a feeling of 99
something quite profound. Rona said: ‘I don’t know what it is. I don’t know if it’s God around us, protecting us ... It brings out the best in you’. And Jacob explained that for him, ‘it’s not just skills swapping, it’s love’.

The timebank model is relevant to welfare and care literature that looks at reconceptualising ‘exchange’. Sennett (2003) advocates thinking about formal and informal welfare as asymmetrical exchanges. This might, he suggests, help engender mutual ‘respect’ and create more ‘prolonged relationships’ rather than short, sharp ‘transactions’ (221). The idea of creating more prolonged relationships through exchange was raised by Steve when he talked about how timebanking, as practised in the UK, is not just about ‘swapping skills’ but also ‘co-producing communities’, ‘building social networks’ and helping people ‘connect’. He said one priority of the timebank is ‘really layering that sense of community activity in’ rather than facilitating a ‘traditional economic skills swap’.

As with SLWC and Homes Before Profit, little acts of care seem important at the timebank – several interviewees talked about the importance of, for example, food at meetings in making them feel welcome. They also offer mental health awareness training to members so that they can look after one another more fully and avoid judging each other. Rona sees this as ‘very, very important ... Because we are all together as a family, look out for each other as a family and take care of each other.’ Again, the twin ideas that everyone has potential mental health challenges, and everyone is responsible for each other are conveyed.

The idea embedded in the timebank structure that needing help is not bad and everyone can give help de-pathologises need and makes asking for help feel ‘not weird’. It also gives people, in DPG’s words, ‘legitimacy to act’ and offer the help many want to. Although the types of help in timebanking are not urgent, many members are navigating complex emotional and social issues. And, given the timebank’s location on an estate in an area of London with a lot of poverty, members are potentially navigating many practical challenges too. I would argue that the slow building of people’s sense of their own power, capacity and legitimacy as well as the sense of collective ‘love’ interviewees talked about, appear effective in enabling people to engage with those challenges.

**Shared positive aspects of the different case studies**

These case studies (and the other groups studied for this research) share similarities that differentiate them from dominant help. Firstly, the idea that you are ‘part of something’, where you create long-term, in-depth relationships, in contrast to the short-term interventions or courses described in Chapter 3. Interviewees from all groups used the language of ‘second home’

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14 The US timebanking model is slightly different, and more focused on straightforward skill swaps.
and ‘family’, implying a much deeper level of connection and trust than is usual in helping services or workplaces.

Relatedly, all the groups operate within a framework of interdependence: the idea that we all need, affect and are affected by each other. Rather than try and negate this by making independence a goal of help, they all try to work with and deepen their interdependence. Within this framework, there is no division between people who help and are helped. Everyone does both, though to different degrees.

There is a thread of care and disability literature that is critical of the idea of ‘interdependence’ (e.g. Shakespeare 2000; Barnes 2006) on the basis that it could detract from the goal of independence shared by many disabled people, reinforcing power imbalances and oppression. Interestingly, I did not encounter this concern in my interviews, perhaps because the approaches in question allow people a sense of agency and facilitate the development of power within, or because all the groups explicitly try to shift formal power through some form of shared decision-making (see Chapter 6). It could also be because they all seem to have found a way to balance independence and interdependence. As Pierre put it, in timebanks ‘it’s about facilitating people to gain both independence and interdependence in the balance that suits them’. None of the other groups use exactly this language, but it seems to be their default understanding. Notably, none use the language of ‘self-reliance’ or ‘employability’ prominent in mainstream helping organisations’ descriptions of the aims of their help.

The third similarity is that all the groups try to de-pathologise need. Homes Before Profit does this by overtly exploring and trying to address the structural causes of people’s struggles, for instance, and HSTB via a structure where everyone’s role is officially ‘helpee’ and ‘helper’.

All the groups also attempt to see and acknowledge the complexity of people’s lives and do small things to make them feel welcome. Interviewees talked about being able to ‘be yourself’; ‘relax and ... not worry that you are dropping your guard’; and ‘kick off your shoes if you wanted to’ – very different from the guarded, performative ways of acting in mainstream helping organisations described in Chapter 3. One interviewee laughingly concurred that ‘you wouldn’t ever’ act like that in ‘a children’s centre’.

Having their needs recognised has allowed many interviewees from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds to feel like ‘whole people’ (Steve). This, and acknowledging the complex reality of people’s lives through small acts, resonate with debates in feminist care literature about the politics of ‘recognition’. Some scholars (e.g. Honneth 1995) have suggested that pursuit of such goals can displace demands for redistribution or radical change. However, I would argue that, for many of my interviewees, acknowledgement and recognition of their material and emotional needs must come before they are able to make further demands. Many have grown up
absorbing neoliberal messages of individualism and the idea that their problems are their ‘fault’. They see, or saw, the status quo as inevitable, and demanding redistribution as impossible. Only recognition in this sense can begin to undo internalised helplessness and, I would argue, is a prerequisite for material change. Nancy Fraser’s work on rethinking the politics of recognition is useful here, though I would take it further and suggest that rather than trying to conceptualise ‘struggles for recognition so that they can be integrated with struggles for redistribution’ (Fraser 2000:3), we need to try and conceptualise how they are already intrinsically linked.

All these forms of mutual help are also ‘generative’, in that doing them makes people want to do more. However, this effect could be curbed by the fact that some people are facing extremely difficult socio-economic situations and insecurity.

Challenges

Recreating service dynamics

Despite trying to destigmatise need and acknowledge capabilities, none of the groups have managed to consistently shift the ‘helper-helpee’ dynamic. Several interviewees talked about re-enacting learned ‘helper’ roles and ‘rescuing’ people in dire situations – for example, ‘just making that call’ to the housing office for them. Some described feeling pressured by the demands of ‘the system’ to do things for people. Suzy described how, when she started helping people do online benefits forms, she found herself getting irritated with them for being too slow and tried to ‘take over’ and do the form herself – partly because she knew that they might get timed out, but also, she later realised, because she was replicating how she had been ‘helped’:

I feel that the more we come into interaction with these organisations, we can sometimes adopt their mannerisms. Because we see … it becomes like the norm. That is the correct procedure, because that is how they do it, because they are in the real world.

Another interviewee described how she and several other members of her group engaged with B, who had recently fled domestic abuse with her two children. Other members who had experienced similar situations went out of their way to do things for her, like getting clothes and doing grant applications. Eventually, they became overwhelmed by – and at times resentful of – her needs, while B increasingly relied on others to sort things out. One interviewee reflected on this dynamic, with reference to a particular incident:

One day … [B] was asking could we have tuna [sandwiches] for lunch …[as] she couldn’t eat the meat options as they weren’t halal and she didn’t feel filled up by just vegetarian options. And we were annoyed because it was just an extra thing … Then someone said to B, here take a tenner from petty cash and you can sort it. And she was more than happy to and shopped around for a good deal on a tin opener. She then went on to organise
lunches for the rest of term. I remember that being a big moment for us – it made clear that we were causing the ‘rescuer’ and ‘helper’ dynamic not B. At the time, the interviewee described, a member from a similar cultural background flagged that this subtle form of misrecognition was probably unhelpful for B, who had gone from a home situation where she had little control to domestic violence services, where she also had little control. The other members then realised what she in fact needed was space, recognition and permission to take control and people shifted their approach accordingly – sitting with B to do her benefits forms rather than doing them for her, asking her to help prepare course materials and so on. B was keen to do this and, when I interviewed her, talked about how feeling equal and competent at this distressing time was crucial to regaining her sense of self.

Sarah talked similarly about how helper-helpee dynamics can occur at Homes Before Profit. She herself sometimes feels ‘so upset at a terrible situation someone is in’ and ‘just want[s] to fix it for them’ (she noted that this is especially true because, although her situation is not as insecure as most others in the group, she does ‘recognise’ their feelings). In addition, a ‘one-to-one case work dynamic’ can sometimes develop, partly because tasks like writing to the council can get put off until someone with ‘professional’ experience just gets it done. And, Sarah believes, because people can be used to receiving one-to-one help, going somewhere and ‘having forms done for them’. When asked what she personally struggles with most in this working mode, she critiqued her ‘saviour complex’, noting it is not her place to ‘rescue’ people but instead ‘give solidarity’, something she has had to learn how to do.

Homes Before Profit strives to preserve its horizontal approach by continuously urging full member participation, raising this at the start of every meeting and in every organising email:15 ‘We don’t want to be unpaid social workers or lawyers or anything like that’, Sarah said, ‘So, we really emphasise that you come to the meetings. This is where … we can provide the best help’. She acknowledged it is difficult not to become overwhelmed when lots of people need help

15 Each email includes this notification:

Important information about the group and how the group works – We are a group of people affected by housing problems including homelessness, overcrowding, and high rents. We support each other to deal with the problems we face and we take action together for good homes for everyone and against the root causes of poverty. We provide all of our help and support in our regular meetings. By regularly attending our meetings, we can support you with your case and take steps to improve our housing situations. There is a lot of experience and knowledge in the group. Our group relies on people supporting each other and contributing to the group according to their time and ability. We know that together we are stronger. We don’t just want to solve our individual problems, we want to bring about wider social change so that no one suffers from bad housing or other poverty problems or any other injustice.
desperately, especially as some in the group will inevitably become friends, blurring boundaries further. Ultimately, however, she feels she has learned to avoid the saviour role by having ‘good boundaries’:

I can’t take on everyone’s case and rescue them all. And you kind of just see the bigger picture. It’s like a really shit situation, lots of people are really suffering. What we can do is provide support and solidarity and the more you come, the more we can help ... if someone is like well I just want a service. Well this isn’t for you.

They also set expectations at the start of meetings, first dealing with organisational issues: ‘So if someone new was coming, it’s like well this isn’t a support service, this is a group’. She said that in general people might initially be taken aback by it but usually once they understand that ‘it’s by coming to meetings and being involved in other people’s cases we can help you the best’ and that ‘we physically can’t just give them help, the model wouldn’t work’, they tend to accept and appreciate it. She said that it also works better once people start to get to know each other better so they are ‘more confident to give each mutual support’.

This challenge of replicating service dynamics was reflected in the other groups. Connor, for instance, reflected on ‘how easy it is to ... fall into that pattern ... how much harder it is to play that role of ... actually standing with someone to figure out what they do’.

People from ‘professional’ helping backgrounds can also replicate service dynamics when they do not share their own problems. ‘I never really saw them exposing yourselves, sharing your shit, for a long time. So, it was hard to feel like we were on a level’, one interviewee said about the founders of her organisation. Maintaining this position of impassive ‘professional’, the ‘calm, infallible expert’, is a way of retaining power and can lead to inauthentic relationships as described in Chapter 3.

Celine reflected on the challenge for people used to being ‘helpers’:

I ... ended up in a role of ... the one who remained calm ... or fake cheery maybe ... It was compounded by a feeling of 'professional' responsibility which I could never quite shake ... At one level lots of people ... didn’t want to have to think about us having struggles as well. It was just too much with everything going on in their own lives. There was one training exercise when I did share some personal stuff – and it ... caused some anger. Maybe because it was unexpected, people weren’t prepared to have to process anything like that from me.

Meanwhile, Connor reflected:
It’s hard to do vulnerable isn’t it? There is so much we need to be strong for in the world. I find that [for] people who are in positions of care ... [you feel] if you stop doing that and try and be vulnerable for a second then everything will fall apart.

Another interviewee with a counselling background talked about the binary distinction between those with ‘hard’ and ‘easy’ lives within her group. Although she had professional qualifications and relative financial security, her finances were tight, and she struggled with mental health issues. But she did not feel she should share her burdens with the group, and this made others wary.

Nonetheless, several interviewees argued that there is an onus on the person used to having more power to make themselves vulnerable to avoid being ‘undermining of the whole cooperative endeavour’ and ‘compound[ing] perceived differences’ (Connor). Connor described how in youth work it is often not appropriate to share all his issues with the young people he works with. But, ‘when I am having a hard time...if I let a bit of that out and [give them a chance to say] actually I just care for you or I am sorry that is happening in your life...it just helps bring the power more equal again.’ Not doing this, he said, denies the young people the ‘strength that comes with supporting others’, meaning ‘informal hierarchies’ are retained.

Celine recalled how she would sometimes ‘feel resentment’ that others assumed she was fine all the time, and how this changed when she got pregnant: ‘Suddenly lots of people were becoming over-protective ... [which] in hindsight suggests maybe people were looking for a way in.’

The idea of people ‘looking for a way in’ also came up at one of the group research sessions attended by participants from other groups. One said that not being asked for help by the ‘middle-class’ people in her group made her feel like her help was not ‘good enough’.

Jane reiterated how important this is:

[If] we treat it as, this is just my problem, so I need to deal with it, and I have got to hold onto to this, I can’t put this on someone else, it keeps us from recognising that those hard feelings are [a] universal experience to one degree or another. And that if we don’t have a chance to connect those with other people’s parallel feelings, then we continue to suffer alone.

Marianne talked about how one problem with one-sided help is that ‘instead of the burden and the hard work of looking at yourself and your story falling only on the person who’s come there because they’re in a vulnerable position ... everyone should have to do that troublesome work’.

Learning from organisations further afield suggests that seeking to shift group dynamics by first tackling one-to-one dynamics may also be effective. Harriet, who now lives in Washington, DC,
talked about the ‘transformational relationships’ that are built in the community organising she has been involved in there. She described how ‘the relationships are created very intentionally – people are expected to pair off and get away to spend time together on creating them’. She explained that the pairs tend to be created ‘across difference and diversity … that’s where the learning and change comes from … the idea is about creating space for these deep relationships to develop which then allow for understanding of people’s stories’. This approach helps get around the issue that people from more privileged backgrounds feel uncomfortable sharing their problems because they seem less severe than those of others in the group as ‘it’s not about people talking about their problems, but about who they are as people and about both people being changed through that process’. She went on to reflect that this is ‘what usually happens anyway’ (i.e. both people being changed by ‘helping’ relationships), but it’s unacknowledged that the person with power gets transformed and is benefitting from these relationships and work. She feels that this approach ‘genuinely recognises people’s equality and that the people with power need to be open and vulnerable and reveal who they are and – especially – their motivations for their work’. She explained that this can lead to more trust in the group. (The idea of people from a service-provider background needing to reflect on their motivations for doing helping work was also raised by Marianne.)

Daniel and Ruth, who ran a cooperative youth centre for young people with disabilities in the 1970s, discussed a similar approach they used, where a ‘mentor’ and a ‘tutee’ would ‘be responsible for each other, and … do things together you had never done before’. Ruth described how she was paired with a Liverpool fan who wanted to visit the football ground: ‘So we would go there and stay in Pontins or something like that’, she recalled. ‘But it had to be something that you were both new at, so I couldn’t just say well this is how we do it’.

Replicating service dynamics – both by enacting dominant, top-down forms of help and by people used to being service providers not making themselves vulnerable – is a key challenge in trying to enact more mutual help. All my interviewees agreed, however, that it was important to try and do this and that people used to having more power needed to take the lead in ‘exposing’ themselves. I suggest that specific techniques that help shift dynamics, like those described above, could be a key part of this, but that using these techniques needs to be combined with broader, regular reflection in the group about how and why these tensions occur and how to shift ways of thinking so that they don’t keep reoccurring.

Capacity

You want people to talk about their emotions and feelings but … for some people it’s very, very huge [and] if you really provide a huge amount of support to people, then the people who stay are the people who really, really need support because this is where you get it,
and the people who leave are the people who are really exhausted by the people who need support. (Harriet)

Harriet described a paradox of mutual help groups she has belonged to. Although the forms of mutual help described can in some ways be ‘generative’, they can also leave some people feeling drained. All the groups researched had members from diverse backgrounds, and inevitably some faced more significant challenges than others. This could (though did not always) correspond to those with least capacity to deal with others’ issues. As Amy said, ‘some of us ... were able to take a lot on our shoulders, but then it came to a point where we felt emotionally drained’.

Jane reflected on this challenge, in reference to hard limits on support often present in more top-down helping arrangements:

I guess ... the reason why it feels unhuman is they are there to ... keep it boundaried, to stop it from becoming out of control. Like the amount of support, or the amount of feelings that you are going to share ... But [without them] ... our flows [of] support can be really heavy, and you can feel the heaviness ... And so, we want to give each other support in a less boundaried way but like what is the secret to take care of ourselves ... and it not becoming exhausting.

This was true of mutual help models like SLWC and Future Voices where help mainly involved talking, but also ones like Homes Before Profit, where help involved more direct engagement in people’s cases. Elizabeth, for example, found Homes Before Profit brilliant in its initial direct actions to stop her being evicted (at a point where bailiffs were knocking on the door), but the constant requirement to attend meetings and engage with other people’s struggles – while managing two children, applying for refugee status and doing whatever paid work she could get – was overwhelming. It was also too draining learning about housing law, especially when English was not her first language; and too anxiety-inducing to listen to other people’s housing situations when hers was so precarious:

I don’t mind listening to you ... I don’t mind ... helping you with your stuff. But sometimes ... it gets to the point when I just want someone else to just listen to my problem. And take my problem away from me, for me not to even think of it at all.

In another group she was involved in, Elizabeth actively contributed to activities unrelated to her housing issues but found engaging in cases similar to hers too distressing. In addition, as Jane observed, although learning about housing law collectively is in many ways positive, it can be ‘overwhelming for someone at their wits’ end’. Esme, relatedly, said: ‘Although I wish I was in that position to be able to fight more ... I can’t.’
Homes Before Profit has acknowledged this issue and has tried to offer different ways of contributing, for example helping organise family activity days, and maintain an understanding of people’s lives and working schedules, by making clear that ‘you don’t have to come to every meeting, just as long as we can see that you are committed to the group’. The core model, however, involves engaging both with people’s immediate issues and the wider structural causes of their struggles.

As another reflected, the structural aspect also brings challenges. It can be hard when you feel trapped in a difficult situation to be made aware of the weight of forces stacked against you. This is perhaps a key tension. At SLWC, the structure allowed people the option to avoid engaging with macro issues (by not getting involved with relevant research projects), but at the expense of an understanding of problems as shared and systemic. Homes Before Profit’s structure, conversely, encourages members to recognise the societal nature of their problems, which is useful in many ways, but potentially overwhelming for people in the direst circumstances.

How else can this capacity challenge be dealt with? When I asked Simran this question, she said that meditation and other practices helped her gain emotional distance from her own experience, which then allowed her to engage with other people’s housing issues at Homes Before Profit. Harriet and Becky suggested ‘more referrals’ to other agencies, especially for problems that are very specific and perhaps inappropriate for general mutual support, though both acknowledged that this risks people’s sense of self being undermined once again in the ways discussed in Chapter 3. Becky also suggested agreeing clearer limits about what help is on offer:

What we can do is supporting someone in terms of you know you can talk to me, I will support you. Just call me when you need me [and I can give] little suggestions – have you tried this or about this? ... I don’t know how to solve this problem for you, but I can ... make you feel a little bit better if my listening helps that ... but I can’t get you out of this, it’s not my area.

Similarly, Celine suggested that, if individuals feel that flows of support in one relationship are becoming too heavy, they negotiate limits between themselves, even just temporary ones (as opposed to one party ‘setting boundaries’, as is normal in top-down help and can reintroduce unhelpful power dynamics).

Kimberley suggested that one way to avoid some people feeling they are being emotionally drained by others is for them to ‘back away’ and acknowledge they don’t have ‘endless patience’, and trust that ‘someone else can do it just as well as you can’. I would argue that this might help curb ‘rescuer’ dynamics, as discussed above, but does not work if there is no one else to give the help.
I believe this is an important challenge to engage with in order to deepen the ‘generative’ aspects of mutual help, and ensure groups trying to do help differently do not end up developing ‘resentments’ (Amy), and thus potentially replicating the shaming, pathologising ‘scarcity’ approaches described in Chapter 3. However, I would also argue that in the current (and I would argue, politically created) socio-economic context, where inequality is so wide and some people are living lives of extreme insecurity and anxiety, this could be very difficult.

Chapter summary

The three case studies in this chapter have shown the shared premise that everyone both needs and gives help (though they have all taken different approaches to enacting more mutual help). This framing was crucial to interviewees, many of whom talked about solidarity and the importance of people understanding where they were coming from. Several interviewees used the language of ‘standing beside’ and ‘walking alongside’ to describe the feeling. Key to more mutual help was a sense of reciprocity: when things were working as intended, everyone made themselves vulnerable; people reported a greater sense of agency and control, rather than feeling always at the system’s mercy.

Structures of mutual help could, especially when the help is given collectively, allow people to see their struggles within wider structural frameworks, rather than as the fault of individuals. The groups examined all act on these structural causes, though they prioritise this type of action differently. For some, engaging with each other’s emotional needs is paramount; for others, acting collectively to meet a member’s practical needs is the overriding form of ‘care’ enacted. The idea of collective learning is also important, again undermining the idea that some people are ‘expert’ helpers and some people get helped.

Challenges faced included unwitting replication of top-down forms of help, and creeping emergence of learned norms and dominant logic, especially at times of high pressure. In addition, some find it difficult to ‘facilitate solidarity’, as one interviewee put it, rather than just give help. Another key issue is the capacity to take on others’ emotional needs.

I would argue that engaging sustainably with these challenges might involve shifting some of our underlying assumptions – about time, ourselves and power. These assumptions may be externally imposed but have been internalised by many involved in helping organisations (including those trying to do help more horizontally) and need to shift if more mutual forms of help are to be sustainable. Chapter 8 looks at these in more detail.

I would also argue that these forms of mutual help would be difficult to achieve in a top-down helping organisation. They are possible partly because of non-hierarchical structures, which allow everyone to have a say and minimise the power some have over others (leading to inauthentic relationships, as discussed in Chapter 3), and because of an ethos of seeing and valuing different
types of contribution and knowledge more equally, particularly those not usually seen in dominant economic frameworks, or mainstream helping organisations. The next two chapters look at these ideas more closely.
Chapter 5: Valuing different knowledges and contributions more equally

The rough sleeper in a doorway, that person’s a human being. That person’s had a life before. That person has most definitely given a contribution. It’s just unfortunate that through circumstances they find themselves here. Fifteen years ago, you’d have walked over me in the street thinking I was just another drunk but … I think I’ve made a good contribution to my community … you [need to] see the person as a human being, not as a homeless person. (Frank)

Frank has 20 years’ experience of sleeping rough. His insight that someone you might walk past in the street without a second thought is also someone who has contributed in life is pertinent. It challenges the assumption that people who might need to access formal helping services are in some way ‘irresponsible’ and not ‘giving’ to society, assumptions embedded in dominant welfare discourses focused on eliminating ‘dependency’.

Celine argued:

the professional, the expert, the paid worker. Those kinds of contributions are easier to see, value and quantify. I have a friend who does PR for drinks companies, she is seen as 'contributing' even though her work might not be good for society because she’s standing on her own two feet, not using the state or services. But the homeless man who makes his local park prettier with a bit of guerrilla gardening, or someone like my neighbour who looks after a lot of local kids for free. Because they’re on benefits and because their contributions – making their local area a bit nicer, safer, friendlier – are not high status … their contributions are invisible.

Shifting ideas of what counts as a ‘contribution’ and who is seen as a ‘contributor’ is important to all the groups studied, as is questioning the value attributed – within the dominant economic model, and dominant frameworks of help – to different types of contribution. The groups studied see all members as contributors and, where people feel less sure of what they have to offer, make real efforts to draw this out. They also all find ways to value contributions differently from how they are valued in the larger economy, or indeed in mainstream helping organisations. This speaks to the idea of recognising contributions that largely go unseen, and is relevant to some of the alternative frameworks of help discussed in Chapter 1, including feminist arguments that care and relationship work should be valued as social and economic contributions (James 1972; Federici 1975; Wilson 1977; Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998) and ‘new
economy’ frameworks that attempt to rethink what types of ‘work’ we value and how (see e.g., Alperowitz 2011; Bollier and Helfrich 2012).

Chapter 1 also looked at how, over the last 20 years, successive governments have promoted ideas that ostensibly shift hierarchies of contribution, including ‘active citizenship’, ‘mutualism’ and the ‘Big Society’. While these frameworks on the surface appear to be ‘fair’ and reciprocal, they have failed to explicitly redefine how we ‘see’ and value different kinds of contribution; rather, as Newman and Clarke (2009) argue, they ‘ally’ radical ideas with neoliberalism in such a way that maintains a narrative that portrays disadvantaged people as inherently lazy, getting something for nothing and in need of being forced to contribute (and blamed and punished if they do not). This also correlates with narratives of ‘responsibilisation’. The groups studied attempt to encourage and value different contributions in ways that do not assume a latent ‘irresponsibility’ or deviance (Wacquant 2007; Mooney 2008), which needs correcting or punishing, in people who need to access formal help. Laura, for example, described a clear difference between the egalitarian approach of timebanks and the more punitive nature of the ‘Big Society’:

> Whereas timebanking is more of a what shall all we do together kind of ... thing ... I think the Big Society thing felt a bit more like, well, we are going to have less money to give you so what are you all going to do about it? You had better get out there and start clearing the snow.

The latter half of this chapter moves on to rethink and revalue ‘knowledge’ in a similar way. Whose knowledge is valuable, or even considered knowledge? Once again, is it just ‘professional’ or academic knowledge, gained through formal work or education? Or is there a broader way to think about knowledge, one which includes more unseen knowledges? For instance, the knowledge gained by people who have faced challenging situations. As Marianne pointed out, someone who has survived years of rough sleeping probably has a lot of knowledge about basic survival that someone used to more comfortable circumstances does not, as well as knowledge about what is helpful and less helpful in homelessness services, and probably a fair amount of analytic understanding of power and how it plays out in wider society and services specifically.

All the groups looked at try to take these different, less-seen knowledges seriously, in ways that are potentially transformative for both individuals and the group as a whole. In addition, they all make efforts to deprioritise certain forms of knowledge, usually held by people from more economically and educationally privileged backgrounds.

These attempts to see and value a wider range of contributions and knowledges are a key part of creating less top-down, more collaborative forms of help. The last chapter considered how groups covered in this research try to create more mutual forms of help. This involves acknowledging that everyone has needs, not making people ‘lower’ themselves to get help and engaging
everyone in supporting others. These forms of mutual help, however, only make sense in a context where different types of knowledge and contribution are valued more equally, and there is a shift away from the traditional charitable model – where staff are seen as competent people with knowledge and skills to share and clients as lacking and needing to change.

This chapter will examine what it looks like to radically revalue what people know and can do, within these small-scale, on-the-ground projects, and some benefits and challenges of this. I contribute empirical evidence to literature that advocates more ‘invisible’ forms of labour being seen and valued and argues for listening more to the knowledge of people who have been at the sharp end of poverty and helping services (Williams 1999; Mead, Hilton and Curtis 2001; Lister 2004; Newman and Tonkens 2011); and that which attempts to make clear the distinction between radical and status-quo-perpetuating forms of ‘self-help’ (Gregory 2015).

Seeing what people can do rather than what’s ‘wrong’ with them

So when someone joins we don’t go like, oh, what’s wrong with you? … instead of that, we focus on what their assets are. So they are good at speaking Italian, they have a lot of local knowledge, they are very friendly, whatever it is – that is the asset-based approach. Because so many times, if you just said to somebody tell us what [your] assets are … they don’t know do they? Well they might, but especially if you don’t feel very confident you might be like, oh, I am not very good at anything. (Laura)

Laura coordinates a timebank. She says even the best top-down help can feel ‘passive’ and ‘unequal’. But at the timebank, the aim is to draw out of people what they can already do and ascribe value to it. Within this framework, a wide range of things are counted as ‘contributions’ – the website and leaflets state specifically that anything from making a cup of tea or ‘befriending’ someone to putting up curtains all count as ‘contributions’.

There is a dual aspect to this. It is an approach to help that sees everyone as both a ‘giver’ and ‘taker’, helper and helpee, as described in Chapter 4. But underlying that is a more profoundly radical mindset: things that are normally not seen as particularly valuable, such as having a lot of local knowledge and being friendly, as Laura described, are valued in the timebank and seen as useful contributions to the group. It is a mindset that tallies with Frank’s plea above, to see the value of the rough sleeper in the doorway, and demonstrates a different understanding of value from that perpetuated by the dominant socio-economic system. It is also a different value system from that which permeates many helping organisations focused on ‘work-first’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘independence’ agendas.

This approach is not unique to the timebanks. All the organisations I looked at engage in both trying to draw out what people already can and do contribute, and trying to expand the idea of what ‘contribution’ means so that those people who are not ‘successful’ in a mainstream sense of
being ‘independent’ or financially well off, and are used to being denigrated as ‘scroungers’ (Baumberg 2011) or ‘just a mum, who hasn’t really done anything’ (Becky) can have their contributions and abilities recognised (and start to recognise them themselves). The focus is on building power within, so that people feel able to bring what they have to the group, to create mutually helping communities and a sense of collective power, rather than on trying to ‘fix’ people.

For instance, Sarah, one of the founders of Homes Before Profit, emphasised how there is no requirement to have any pre-existing knowledge of housing advice or advocacy when joining – whatever you can bring to a meeting or event is seen as a contribution: ‘whatever your skill or experience level it tries to make that irrelevant and like … look, we can do stuff together’. Homes Before Profit’s approach (discussed in detail in Chapter 4) could be seen as harsh given its emphasis that everyone who wants help must also contribute. But, as with the timebanks, it rests on an underlying belief that everyone has something to contribute from the outset; that people who need help are already capable. As Sarah put it:

We will always try and have tasks for everyone … if you are a mum and maybe you can’t take on some of the more boring admin, but you can come to someone else’s action and support them. So, we are always trying to – the whole point of [Homes Before Profit] is that everyone can be involved in some way.

Similarly, in SLWC and Future Voices, interviewees talked about how one difference from mainstream services was that they were seen as people who could already do things. In Becky’s words:

You didn’t have to have a résumé that had a certain amount of years (of) … working or … experience in this, that and the other. It was … come in, give us your set of skills and we will try help boost you in the other areas where you feel you don’t have skills, or you don’t have confidence. Or just come and give us your skills and teach us. In a way that we don’t know.

As in HSTB, at SLWC skills and contributions that are not particularly measurable are given a value they are not usually accorded in the ‘outside world’ (Kimberley). Amber explained how something she brings to SLWC – the ability to ‘make things feel light-hearted’ and ‘chat to everyone’ – was acknowledged as important from early on. Again, this challenges the hierarchy wherein relational

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16 In Chapter 4, some limitations of Homes Before Profit’s approach were discussed. In particular, that some people with current or past traumatic housing experiences felt emotionally unable to support others’ housing issues. Homes Before Profit is trying to widen the ways to contribute to the group to mitigate this, for instance through helping at family activity days, although their core work still involves everyone contributing to everyone else’s housing (and, increasingly, wider welfare) challenges.
work is seen as less important or valuable than other (usually more obviously economically generative) forms of work. Amber said:

I’m disabled, I have autistic sons ... I can’t commit to definitely coming in certain days or doing certain tasks. But I’m quite good at making the mood feel better when everyone gets tense in collective meetings. If I see a new person walks into the room looking scared, I’ll give them some love. For us ... in the group ... that’s ‘being responsible’ every [bit as] much as doing the bookkeeping ... and why not?... it’s important.

She talked throughout the interview about how, as a disabled, single mother who needs benefits to survive, she is usually deemed ‘irresponsible’ by the welfare system. Within the dominant welfare narrative, contribution and responsibility are linked, positing that if you are not a contributor (i.e. in formal paid work and not needing any support from the state), you are not responsible. This contrasts with how Amber sees herself: a responsible parent and grandparent, who looks after neighbours and others around her who are struggling. Amber also described how she writes and shares poetry based on the welfare experiences of others in the group, as a form of activism: something the group also considers to be ‘contributing’. This understanding of ‘contribution’ echoes that used in some feminist care literature (e.g. Roseneil 2004; Weeks 2011), where caring for those around you and nurturing social networks is seen as valuable. The fact that Amber’s engagement in activist writing is also valued has echoes of Standing’s (2011) suggestion that learning and democratic participation should be valued as important contributions to society.

The understanding of subtle interpersonal skills and ‘relationship work’ as valuable contributions is apparent in Upsurge as well. Marianne talked, for instance, about a group member who in a mainstream helping organisation might be seen as ‘inefficient’ or not up to the job, in terms of being on top of monitoring paperwork and getting through volumes of casework quickly. But at Upsurge he was highly valued for his ability to keep the workplace feeling ‘light’ and ‘warm’ despite the difficult situations many people coming into it were experiencing. This lighter atmosphere made it easier for others to do their work well and not become too drained. Clearly a crucial contribution, but not one that would fit easily into the target- and value-for-money-based frameworks discussed in the Chapter 1.

A key tenet of Upsurge’s philosophy has always been ‘homeless people are not the problem, they are part of the solution’. This is a common enough sentiment today, but was a new (and contentious) one in the 1990s, when the group started out. The way members of Upsurge talk about self-help contrasts with more punitive versions that have flooded welfare rhetoric since 2010 (Gregory 2015). Rather than a ‘people must be made to do things’ approach, the group’s founders went looking for the things that people at the sharp end were already doing, trying to ‘see’ their contributions and bring them together to build collective power.
Dave was asked to join the network by one of its founders, who had seen the self-help work he had done as part of a resident group at a hostel in east London. He described the environment at the group’s headquarters in the early days:

Don’t matter whether you turned up there once every two or three months or whatever or you turned up every day, you was all on the same footing ... you just felt welcomed, you know what I mean? And if you had an idea you say, well, how about this? Yeah, let’s do it if it was a good idea ... float it round everybody else, see if anybody else wanted to get involved.

Several interviewees (particularly those from timebanks) used the language of asset-based approaches (which have gained ground within services and charities in recent years) to describe their contribution-based frameworks. However, I would argue that there are key differences between these models. First, the groups discussed here start from the premise that people living in poverty are already competent, already contributing and probably juggling things many more privileged people would struggle with. This contrasts with the asset-based model, which sees people using services as having ‘potential’, but not necessarily as being already competent and contributing. And secondly, rather than simply reversing the deficit model for service users, the groups looked at say something more complex – that everyone, including service providers, has strengths and weaknesses. As well as raising the status of contributions of people with less social standing, this approach potentially lowers that of people with more.

Even when an organisation sees people as competent, persuading them to take the same view can take time. One timebank member explained:

Initially the reaction of most people is ‘I have got nothing to give’. And we know that is very far from the truth. It may take them a while, before they have the confidence to realise that they have got something to offer. And that’s all part of the process.

All the groups talked about finding ways to get people to realise that they have things to contribute, but the timebanks had the most deliberate and structured approach to this. Laura talked about how timebank ‘brokers’ go about it:

It’s just really about having a chat with people ... if somebody is retired you might be sort of like ‘What did you used to do for work?’ and just try and have a conversation ... ‘Have you got any hobbies?’ and ‘What sort of stuff do you like doing?’ Rather than like ‘What are your skills?’... some people might be like just nothing, and they might be really closed down. And then we have got this cartoon questionnaire that’s got like generic examples on it. So to start them off ... [or] we would just try and get them to come to group stuff and get to know them more. And then as they relax they might just get more into it.
Rona, who joined HSTB after being forced by sight loss to quit her job in healthcare, explained how being part of the group helped her go from feeling like a ‘burden’ to ‘feeling great’ about herself. When first asked about what she could share, she recalled thinking ‘well, what can I do, I’m half blind!’ But as she started going on trips and talking to other members, she began to think ‘well my boys always loved my cooking’ and decided it was a skill she could share. The timebank brokers supported her and she now runs regular classes for members. She described the impact on her self-esteem:

It felt great! Because you are there in yourself thinking well I can’t do anything ... then the cooking idea came up. And then after a while I got to realise there’s more I can do with the sight problem I’ve got ... You started to feel as if you have got some value to give. And lo and behold somebody is giving you something that you never expected.

Amrine, similarly, described how both she and her 10-year-old son had started to feel ‘useless’ during a difficult period when they were living in a refuge and he was unable to attend school. She described how having their knowledge and skills drawn out of them, making reading games in their first few weeks at SLWC, helped shift their self-view: ‘It was such a nice feeling for me, you are doing something together, joking, laughing. And look you can do that! And I can do that! We both can do something.’

If some people find it hard to recognise what they have to contribute, others who are more used to having their knowledge and skills valued can also struggle to see and acknowledge different contributions. Some interviewees said they had to make an active effort to shift their own frameworks about what was valuable when they moved from more top-down organisations to groups doing more collaborative help. Whilst agreeing intellectually with the principle of recognising and valuing a wider range of contributions, they still took time to believe or feel them viscerally. As Celine said, ‘It took time, but I learnt more and more to appreciate stuff I guess I would not have seen or thought was important before.’

One challenge with using reciprocity to frame a group’s work that did emerge, however, is that people can hold back from full participation because they don’t believe they can contribute. Amy discussed this in relation to a member of her cooperative:

She loved the group she did. It was her little run away, get away, but she could never commit in a way she knew would be beneficial to the group. So her big thing was that she didn’t want to take up the group’s resources, because she could never give back. But ironically she gave in different ways, but never saw ... and also that kind of concept which if you ... take you are expected to give scared people. So it’s almost like we don’t want to give or we don’t want to take because they don’t want to feel indebted ... That is a social experience and they are just reflecting it onto the group.
That this was ‘a social experience’ people were ‘reflecting’ onto SLWC is an important observation, conveying the crucial idea that – even in a context where people are explicitly challenging conventional understandings of contribution – it is very difficult to get away from learned norms around giving and receiving. It also ties into some disability literature which points out that the ethos of ‘contribution’ can cause disabled people to feel even more excluded (Abberley 1996).

What then does ‘contribution’ mean in the groups studied? It appears to mean anything that can enhance the wellbeing of someone else (either in the group or in society more broadly), or improve their skills, or can add to the group’s work. ‘Professional’ skills, the type that are more easily ‘seen’ and have more status in wider society are part of this, but so are things like being good at listening, making the atmosphere pleasant, writing poetry or being politically active. Seeing and acknowledging a wider range of contributions has enhanced the power within of those members who were not used to having their contributions validated, and increased the collective power of the group. Members with more professional skills, who were used to the status that came with those, have sometimes struggled to see other types of skills – the ones people they might previously have regarded as ‘services users’ had – as being as valid, but most have seemed to reflect on and learn from this struggle.

How different types of contribution are rewarded

In a context where different types of contributions are recognised and said to be valued more equally than in mainstream helping organisations and wider society, it also becomes important to reconsider how they are rewarded. Steve, whose role includes helping charities and statutory sector organisations build timebanking into their structures, pointed out that it is not particularly radical to say everyone is a contributor if only the ‘professional’ people get paid, whilst people from service-user backgrounds are ‘asked to co-produce for free’. The groups looked at have varying systems for rewarding members, but all try and ensure they do not replicate the steep hierarchies of reward found in many mainstream helping organisations.

In timebanks, every contribution is rewarded equally, through time credits. One hour of someone’s time is equal to an hour of anyone else’s, whether you are doing ‘accountancy or ironing’ (Laura). Pierre flagged the difference between this and, for example, Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS), another grassroots programme where people swap time and skills via a credit system, but where each skill is valued differently. Although Pierre sees LETS as useful, he argued that the hour-for-hour system creates bigger social shifts by allowing members to ‘feel equally as valuable as anyone else’: ‘I have never heard anyone in the timebank saying they feel less valued. It’s never happened, never, on the basis of time credits.’
Timebanks have limited staff. Most people involved are unpaid ‘members’ and the few staff are paid because they do significantly more work than the others. The management structure for paid staff is fairly flat, and pay is allocated according to seniority and responsibility level. Interestingly, in all these cases the paid staff or ‘facilitators’ also consider themselves ‘members’, reflecting a different dynamic from more mainstream helping organisations.

The transparency of the timebanking system appears to aid contentment by feeling ‘fair’, avoiding the situation Steve sees as a cause of many social conflicts, namely people feeling ‘that some people are getting more’. However, he said it is rare for people to ask how many credits they or others have – suggesting it is not the particulars of these accounts that give members this feeling of equality, but the framework allowing each contribution to be valued equally. This differs from the other groups looked at, who use money to value different contributions horizontally. This is not always done as equally as in the timebanks, but all eschew the conventional, pay-scale approach of mainstream charities and statutory helping services, with a pay-scale for staff, and some people classed purely as ‘beneficiaries’ who do not contribute.

Two of the organisations have a flat-pay policy – everyone is paid the same amount per hour. No one is paid for all their hours, due to both a lack of money and, at least in one case, a belief that giving some time for free helps foster commitment to the group. But there have been attempts to ensure everyone is paid for approximately the same percentage of their time. In Future Voices, they are paid for some ‘admin hours’, some ‘facetime with young people’ hours (a higher percentage than admin hours as the group agreed this work was more draining) and for attending meetings. In SWLC, members are paid for some ‘outreach day’ hours, and some for ‘paid role in office’ hours, but not for attending meetings or for ‘peer support’ time. Kimberley explained how roles in Future Voices are ‘all on the same level’. ‘So, for us’, she continued, ‘I guess cooperatively just literally means anti-hierarchy and, you know, we all value each other exactly the same, which is why we’ve all got you know the same pay.’

The impact of this idea of being equal but different was encapsulated by two interviewees in relation to cleaning, conventionally a low-status activity but, in this system, elevated to something with dignity and value. In several of the groups, regular discussions and training sessions are held about what it means to value different roles equally and why they are trying to do that. Becky described how they

[had that] discussion many times. In order for you to walk around in a nice clean street and all the rest of it, you’ve got the cleaners and they do that job. Without them ... some people wouldn’t be able to work in the offices they do, because it would be a mess, it would stink, it would be disgusting. Whereas people will see cleaners as the bottom.

She explained that these sorts of discussions were important because
people needed to make themselves heard and be able to talk about what they felt about that kind of thing. Especially people like Paula, whose mum was a cleaner so she felt very passionate about what she did and she enjoyed her job, and why shouldn’t she?

Upsurge does not have a flat pay rate but is more equitable than many organisations in terms of pay to frontline staff and management (and also keeps the management team quite small and single-layered). It also tries to spread its money. For example, under New Labour, when there was government commitment to – and funding for – promoting ‘user involvement’, the group ran a ‘grant access scheme’. This directly shared funding with people who had experienced, or were experiencing homelessness, allowing them to start (or maintain) ‘self-help’ and community projects. The organisation saw this as putting its money where its mouth is in terms of its tenet that people who have experienced homelessness have equally valuable contributions to make as ‘professionals’. They also actively try to hire staff who have experienced, or were experiencing homelessness or addiction issues.

For all the groups, the idea that all contributions have ‘equal value’ have brought challenges and some disagreement. Several timebank interviewees referenced hostility to the system from outsiders, with staff reporting regular complaints. Pierre summed up the criticisms:

This is totally wrong, your system. This is not fair. This person spent all their life at university and you say they’re giving their time for free or the same as the person who’s cleaning. That’s completely outrageous – I’ve had these emails.

Laura echoed this: ‘A lot of people come along and tell us what’s wrong … Well, my skill is more valuable than their skill.’ While this view does not seem to be shared by timebank members, Steve pointed out that it might limit who joins.

Some members of SLWC expressed similar anxiety to those challenging the timebank framework. Elizabeth, who is used to earning minimum wage and appreciates the better rate at SLWC, is still uneasy about people who have invested a lot in learning a particular skill being remunerated at the same level as others. She used my PhD research as an example when I interviewed her, asking if it seems right that, after years of studying non-hierarchical structures, I should be paid the same as others who have put less time into understanding these processes.

She also talked about how some members of the group bear more of its emotional weight and more responsibility, and suggested this should be remunerated accordingly. Her stance was reiterated by Marianne, who argued convincingly that those who take on more responsibility should be paid more, not because their contributions are worth more, but because they carry a bigger burden:

It’s like people have just got different skills and different competencies and I don’t think
there is anything else. But there is some hierarchy that is related to responsibility, I guess if you have got more importance ... you’re managing a million-pound budget, it’s a greater risk that you are handling.

In some ways, these challenges reflect how dominant views of what is valuable and what is seen as ‘responsibility’ are. Jane, in a post-analysis reflection session with me, wondered whether this is a question of different amounts of power within, created by a system that tells someone like Elizabeth that her ‘years of experience as a mother surviving and raising children with the odds stacks against her don’t count as much as (my) academic qualifications’, whilst telling someone like Marianne that her ‘professional’ experience is valuable, to the extent that she cannot help but see it as such.

Marianne herself came to a similar conclusion in her interview, questioning her own initial premise that managers handling large budgets had the biggest responsibility – thus justifying their higher pay rate. She reflected that people ‘handling [peer] advocacy [with people going through substance misuse programmes] are also handling the biggest risks, so then that’s a bigger responsibility’.

As well as the challenge of deciding what merits higher pay, prioritising certain roles for payment at all also creates a form of hierarchy in terms of what contributions are most valuable. Steve commented on the difference he sees between this sort of system and the timebank:

I would imagine that ... if someone is coming and giving their time. And the other person coming and giving their time is getting paid, it’s sort of creating a kind of ... er...
Not class system. But there is one part that is subordinate to that in a way. Because ... you’ve applied two value systems, haven’t you?

Notably, in feedback to my initial analysis, some interviewees mused on learnings from the other groups’ approaches. A member of SLWC, for example, was struck by the fact that Future Voices pay people to attend meetings, commenting: ‘Of course, it’s the most important thing ... it’s something people should be paid for, if possible.’ Meanwhile, Becky, on hearing that facetime is prioritised for payment in Future Voices, wondered if that might also have been better for SLWC, allowing people to choose to take on that potentially draining work in exchange for a ‘reward’. Amy disagreed, arguing that this risks making support work feel like a more structured, almost professionalised activity, taking away from the ethos of mutual support. Their responses demonstrate the importance of comparative studies of these practices. Even with radical intent, groups will end up replicating wider social norms about what is ‘valuable’. Comparison allows these to be highlighted and worked through overtly.

Unintentional replication of wider norms came up in other ways too, notably in appraisal of different skills and their relative importance to the organisation. As Amy argued: ‘What
realised is that we can all be equal but, no, our skills aren’t equal.’ Celine, meanwhile, reflected on how she herself could end up seeing her contribution as more ‘important’ than others:

At a conscious or intellectual level I was committed to the idea that the person who is always making everyone tea, or checking on people, was doing work that was equally important as me writing a funding proposal … [and] trying to remember a bit truthfully … I was constantly slipping back into feeling my role was the most important.

Marianne reiterated this idea when she observed how, despite Upsurge’s philosophy that homeless people are part of the solution, there is still ‘a very clear hierarchy’ within the organisation when it comes to valuing contributions:

It’s just something that we can’t handle in society, can we? Like we can’t handle the idea that someone who keeps the streets clean gets the same sort of remuneration as someone who does open heart surgery. We are just not there yet are we?

Getting ‘there’ is something people need to constantly ‘agitate’ for, she said, even in organisations that consider themselves non-hierarchical, otherwise it is easy for unofficial hierarchies to develop, especially as an organisation grows. And once established, shifting these can be difficult, she argued, in part because feeling ‘successful’, or higher than others, can become entwined with someone’s self-esteem, and therefore hard to unravel.

Another way that contributions are valued differently in some groups is demonstrated by Sarah. She explained how she sees Homes Before Profit’s various roles as unequal, considering some – such as admin and childcare – as worse and so not fair to give to people with more problems or vulnerabilities:

I am like oh I don’t think those guys should do it because they have got … kids … they have got … enough … I guess the guys more affected by the housing issue. Like they are dealing with enough shit as it is. Why do they want to do more boring admin.

There is a logic to this, especially in a context of interdependence. Is it in fact fairer if people who are less privileged, or more oppressed, are able to avoid the worse jobs? Again, how do you decide which jobs are worse? For instance, Paula talked about cleaning and admin as roles that give her satisfaction and help her mental health. She could also see that, done well, they bring a lot to the group, giving her a sense of pride. Placing certain jobs in the category of those that should not be done by people with hard lives risks reinforcing the wider societal valuing of these roles, which can be meaningful for people and even essential for facilitating other roles.

Sarah herself later reflected:

Someone recently the other day was like oh no people are more interested in that organising side than you think. So I am like maybe I shouldn’t – I kind of write it off and go
well I will just do it because no one else should be subjected to it ... Maybe I should be more open with those tasks ... there probably are others who’d enjoy doing them.

It seems, from the experiences of the groups covered here, that the principle of valuing different contributions more equally than in other organisations and in society more generally is important both for individuals and the group. However, valuing them exactly equally may be a mirage, and perhaps not even desirable. But groups struggle to find other formulas to reward people for the efforts they put in whilst maintaining a sense of equality and fairness. As Esme asked: ‘How do you ever weigh out ... how can you ever measure peoples “contributions?”’ A question which I think is pertinent, and not one, I think, any of the groups has found a definitive answer to. Whichever method is used, however, I would argue that paying attention to how (and how equally) different contributions are rewarded is a crucial part of trying to create more equal forms of help, despite the discomfort it might cause.

Moving away from linear-progression trajectories

Another way the groups looked at here see ‘contribution’ differently is by acknowledging that there is no clear trajectory/path from being ‘not able’ to being ‘able’. Just as they accept that most people, despite needing some kind of help, are already capable and contributing, they also accept that this is not necessarily consistent or linear. Interviewees experiences have shown that any effective attempt to co-produce services must understand that people have ups and downs and there is no clear line by which you progress from being ‘under the duvet’ to ‘being in a place to “co-produce” your wellbeing by being “active”’ (Pierre). Rather, this can be cyclical and take ‘a period of time, sometimes long’, as Pierre went on to say, and require ‘kind people that listen, care and encourage, and especially not push you’. He used the language of ‘healing’ to describe this process, language with very different connotations to that of behavior change programmes and which gives a useful sense of what is often a slow, open-ended and unpredictable process.

Mark described how slow it can be to get people involved if you want to do it in a way that respects their autonomy:

slowly, slowly – you can’t push them. Because if you push, you will push them away. But you just keep phoning, you just try and be welcoming ... [it] is difficult to establish but can be so damn valuable. And they can pop in and suddenly the situation is turning around. Because they are driving it rather than you trying to drive.

Frank, meanwhile, talked about the first experience of help that did not feel infantalising, controlling and judgemental for him, and which made him feel able to contribute to the organisations, at a drug and alcohol recovery service. At first he was confused:
Day after day ... I’d sit in the shopfront and I’d sit in the office and I’d look over at the office and I’d be saying to myself, ‘Why aren’t them people over there talking to me? Can’t they see I’m in pain, can’t they see I’m suffering?’ I thought, well, you know, and I couldn’t understand why people weren’t fussing about me. I thought, ‘Well, I’m supposed to be the con merchant, but these people here are bigger con merchants than what I’ll ever be’.

He explained that the organisation was very welcoming; he could attend meetings and sessions whenever he wanted (which he did), and the workers’ door was always open if he wanted help. But he still didn’t understand why they weren’t trying to help him.

Months after joining the organisation, he decided to go into the office and chat about his challenges. He felt immediately welcomed and taken seriously. He then developed a plan with some workers to stop drinking in a way that worked for him, and became actively involved in contributing to the organisation, including setting up a service-user group and organising other activities. No one tried to force him down a particular path or made him do things in a particular timeframe. The approach allowed him space and control to make changes both for himself and for and with others.

And things just changed because I realised I had a voice. And it – my stopping drinking, they couldn’t make me stop drinking, that had to come from me ... Not telling me what to do, how to do it, so they ... were completely different. They weren’t telling you what to do, how to do – that had to come from you. That had to come from me. A different way of thinking about it ... A totally different way ... Because you were working together, you were working for things.

Twenty years later he was still involved with the organisation. Mark and Frank’s insights were borne out by the experiences and analysis of almost all my interviewees.

Amy talked about this complex, slow and erratic process towards feeling ‘able’ in the context of a project she and a group of other single mothers (many of whom had been out of formal employment for years) had taken responsibility for but struggled to deliver. This had led to conflicts with group members from more ‘professional’ backgrounds about why they could not do something they had the skills to do (having had training and practice within the organisation):

There’s a lot of it needed more time for people to build the confidence to take on those roles and claim their equality ... I’m talking about the time needed for people to let go of what feels normal ... people had loads of mixed emotions around it, one minute they’d be up for it and then they’d shy away from it ... and it’s different for everyone, depending on what’s happening for them, what they’re coming in with ... some of us weren’t ready, or
we were ready and then something happened, with the kids or with the Jobcentre and we needed more time again.

Amy went on to say that many members of the group had long been given the message – by governments, media and certain services – that they were useless. So they needed more than just being told ‘[you can] be in charge of this now’ to take ownership. She also reflected that taking ownership of something also involves taking ownership of potential failure, and people who have consistently been made to feel like failures in their life may be more fearful about this than more privileged people (for whom failure may be seen as a more positive, learning experience).

The idea she raised, that people need time to ‘claim’ their equality (rather than have it given to them) is important, and reflects the structural aspect of challenging accepted notions of ‘efficiency’ (see Chapter 8). Amy’s observations backed up Taylor’s (2017) argument that building confidence and other personal and social skills is not something that can be done or measured linearly, because it is ‘situation-specific’ and ‘flows, waxes and wanes’.

Harriet talked about how her experience of several different non-hierarchical groups (after having worked largely in top-down charities) has made her acutely aware of how long and difficult the process can be:

For me it has been quite a big learning process about how our system and poverty, really from such a young age affects confidence, self-belief and later in life makes their life so difficult – constantly struggling against those challenges.

All of this puts paid to dominant framings of more mutual forms of help that have come from governments and think tanks over the last two decades. From New Labour’s framing of ‘empowerment’ to Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ to vague notions of co-production and mutualism that have hovered around the public and voluntary sectors for the last six to eight years, the consistent assumption is that people will, moreover should, be ‘empowered’ quickly, and this will be readily demonstrable. As a number of commentators have observed about New Labour’s approach, the more insidious implication of getting people to ‘help themselves’ (Lister 2003; Newman and Clarke 2009) is that if they fail to meet external criteria of employed, independent, ‘active’ citizens in a reasonable time period they can justifiably be punished (Clarke 2008; Widdowson 2008).

This brings us to the challenge of the easy segue from radical revaluation of less-seen contributions to a more punitive, tit-for-tat approach, where recipients of helping services are lazy or undeserving, and must not ‘get something for nothing’ – paradigms many of my interviewees moved fluidly between. John, for instance, who had used services himself, and was struggling financially, talked about his motivations for joining the timebank:
Because it’s about a whole thing of … wanting to contribute, giving back. And raising that it’s so easy to blame other people for our lack of interaction, our lack of work, our lack of contributing. It’s so easy to blame, oh I don’t have this, I don’t have the money, the government is not this. And really I think it’s about looking at ourselves and thinking what do I have? I am seeing a gap here, a community need, a community resource that isn’t here. I have something to offer, let me offer that.

The same, easy merging of these two narratives was visible in Sarah referencing ‘service-user mentality’ several sentences after talking about the need to radically revalue contribution (see Chapter 4); in Jacob saying people lack confidence to change things, but also that they cannot ‘be bothered’ to contribute; and with Pierre arguing that you cannot just ‘activate’ people, you need to understand all the challenges they face while also using a much more punitive tone at times, which replicates ‘cultures of dependency’ narratives:

A person can behave in a way that resembles the label they wear, and more so if it offers them the opportunity to be served by others … The passive service user can therefore become addicted to the service, its professionals and specialists … On the other hand, the principle of timebanking encourages reciprocity, and engaging people to be self-resourcing and tap into their assets and community relationships is a step towards tackling the passivity and disempowerment that perpetuate dependency.

In post-analysis feedback, several interviewees discussed these dual dynamics. One commented on her own group, wondering if franker acknowledgement of ‘capacity’ and that ‘everyone’s contribution was different’ would have been more helpful. Another reflected that, in groups seeking to challenge hierarchies, people may feel unable to discuss the difficulties in trying to co-produce help because they are so wary of falling into destructive blaming narratives. A possible result is that people only mention these challenges in moments of frustration or anger, and come across ‘as accusatory or defensive’. Because people feel uncomfortable discussing them, there can also be a lack of nuanced discussion, she added, ‘So the thinking gets stuck moving back [and] forth between these binary narratives’.

Seeing everyone as contributors does not mean a linear envisaging and enforcing a linear trajectory from ‘needing help’ to ‘contributing’. All of the groups studied, in their practice, have tried to dismantle the binary of able vs. not able, and to think about ableness as more of a continuum or cyclically evolving. They also do not see these things as mutually exclusive but rather start from a position that people can both need help and also contribute at the same time – indeed most people do.
Respecting people’s knowledge and interpretations

Part of valuing people more equally is valuing the knowledge of those without professional qualifications or experience, but with different types of knowledge, gained from surviving challenging life situations. Marianne talked about how ‘involvement does a lot of the work of the homeless sector. I still believe that’s true’. By this she meant that the act of involving people in how the organisation is run, of taking their perspectives and opinions seriously, of recognising their understanding and insights, is in itself transformative for people who are used to being seen as ‘less than’. It makes them feel better about themselves, which, Marianne argued, is a crucial part of helping them overcome the challenges that have led to them being homeless. This idea resonated throughout my research.

The importance of feeling like your knowledge is finally being taken seriously was reiterated by several interviewees who had experienced challenging socio-economic circumstances. Frank, for instance, who spent many years sleeping rough before joining Upsurge, was in tears as he described how ‘the likes of me saying [what we think] … that being taken on board, being taken seriously and what you said counted and mattered … [was] very powerful’, and made him feel ‘ten feet tall’.

The phrase ‘the likes of me’ is evocative and demonstrates the profound sense of powerlessness and worthlessness that people who have been at the sharp end of poverty can face. As Frank became more established in Upsurge, part of his role became to visit hostels across the country training staff and clients in user involvement. He talked about how ‘powerful’ it could be for people who had very little power within, and what a ‘big difference’ it made to how they saw themselves, for ‘somebody to say, “I actually want to hear what you’ve got to say”... just that little exchange ... just ... holding that hand out ... Nine times out of ten they’ll take it, because that’s what they’ve been waiting for’.

Jacob spoke in a similar way about how the group meetings at the timebank, which are facilitated in a gentle, nurturing way ‘help ... people to open up with things ... to feel like they are somebody’. He described how initially some members might ‘feel like they are ... not important ... [or] if they [say] something they might embarrass themselves’.

Jacob is from a similar background to many of the people he works with and understands their hesitancy:

    I used to feel like that years ago myself when I was young. Because I had got information, if some questions come up, I would say something but feeling that I could be wrong ... I used to be ... embarrassed ... in front of everybody. So I know how they are feeling. But of course, the confidence needs to be grown.
To people from a more socially and economically privileged background for whom being asked their views is the norm, and who have been told, by the media, the education system and society in general that their opinions are relevant, the magnitude of having someone ask for and appreciate your views that the interviewees described might seem exaggerated. However, it is something that came through from many of my interviewees – some in terms of themselves, and some in terms of people they have worked with. Crucially, this approach is not just about people feeling better about themselves. It is about getting to better ideas and being able to do more together. It can, however, be slow and difficult work.

Interestingly, however, despite how passionate Frank is about eliciting the knowledge of people who have experienced homelessness, he himself does not seem able to value the opinions of his ‘peers’ as much as that of the ‘professionals’. He talked about his work training both clients and service providers in ‘user involvement’ and reflected on how accolades from the staff were more meaningful to him than from the clients: ‘I don’t seem to … take that – take that compliment as much from my peers as what I do from staff or … yeah. I don’t know what it is’.

The extent to which invisible power can play out, affecting people’s sense of what knowledge is valuable – so much so that Frank just could not value the opinions of people ‘like him’ as much as those of people with a higher social status – is troubling. It was also repeated by several other interviewees who had experience of using services. Amy, for instance, talked about how she and other women from low-income backgrounds in SLWC still need to be told by the founders that they are good at something before they will believe it. And Simran described how at Homes Before Profit, despite newer members like her having gained excellent housing-law knowledge, people ‘prefer to talk to the main people’ (who she then identified as the founder members from more educationally and economically privileged backgrounds). When I asked her why she thinks this is, she replied, ‘because they know more than me … It’s OK. Because they have more faith in them’.

I would argue that this problem is not intractable, however. Some people’s sense of powerlessness might be quite entrenched, and if they see themselves as not having useful knowledge, they might apply that judgement to others they think are like them as well. Shifting this is often just a matter of slow work over time with people, regularly reiterating and demonstrating the value of their knowledge to them. The fact that some interviewees did feel that the knowledge of people ‘like them’ was less valuable is in fact, I would argue, a reason to make even more effort to draw out and demonstrate the value of different knowledges.

Another facet of valuing a wider range of knowledges that several interviewees raised was about going beyond just recognising the ‘lived experience’ and experiential knowledge of people who
have been at the sharp end of poverty and oppression, or as Amrine put it, ‘my natural perspective’. Celine recounted what she learned from another group member about this:

She was saying basically that because she was a poor black single mother, there were lots of organisations wanting her ‘story’ and ‘gritty lived experiences’. But she didn’t define herself as a single black mother. She saw herself more in terms of her interests – reading, writing, art, social issues. Her point was she had a brain, she wasn’t just a ‘person who had been through services’ and she had a range of viewpoints and analysis of a lot of issues – including, but not only, the wider structural issues that affected her. That really made me think. Because it was true. I did sort of see myself as the ‘analysrer’ – I might be white and middle class, I might not have any hard life experience to bring in, but I was good at abstract thinking, that was my role. I understood what she meant, and I agreed with her, but I kept falling into the same habit of seeing her and others as having ‘stories’ whilst I had intellectual analysis. I had to keep reminding myself not to do it.

This tendency to be interested in the ‘stories’ but not the analysis of people who have been at the sharp end of poverty is ubiquitous in top-down forms of help and can easily replicate itself in more collaborative forms. This both fails to really shift hidden power, and at the same time denies the organisation valuable knowledge. As Marianne reflected, ‘people on the sharp end of power often have an understanding of how it works, and the complexities, that people who have not been on the sharp end don’t’. Really valuing people’s knowledge therefore involves valuing their analysis of both particular and macro situations, practices and policies.

When their analysis was taken seriously, it was a real highlight of their cooperative groups for many of my interviewees who had been at the ‘sharp end of power’. Some ways of doing this, discussed by interviewees, were: having shared decision-making structures (see chapter 6); and engaging in activities whereby people do not just ‘share their stories’ but analyse the context and politics of them – e.g. Future Voices using community video as a way to explore and present how members felt about the school system, and Upsurge undertaking peer research into causes of and potential solutions to homelessness.

Frank talked about a particular experience when he was part of a local council’s drug and alcohol service-user group where he felt his understanding and analytical knowledge was really valued. The coordinator of the group (a paid staff member with a ‘professional’ background) had prepared a 100-page document on client involvement for new user-group members and a job spec for a client coordinator and the group’s ‘first job was to go through this spec for client involvement ... and when [the group] had finished with it, it was an eight-page document’. Frank recalled:
Half of the things that academics had put in … [we decided] we don’t need that … it wasn’t workable … We called [the coordinator] in … and said, ‘Right [coordinator name], there’s your document … there’s your specs for the involvement and there’s the specs for your client coordinator’.

He described how the manager took the group’s knowledge as seriously as that of the academics and ended up using their shortened versions. This led to better work and a strengthened sense of collective endeavour and equality.

Reflecting on his relationship with this manager, Frank said: ‘[c]ollaborating all along as equals, as equals. With M, you’re always equal’. When I asked him what specific things she did, he replied: ‘If I knew that … I’d bottle it and sell it’. His answer reveals something about the challenges of valuing different knowledges equally. ‘With M, you’re always equal’, he said, but he seemed to regard this as something distinct to her and her personality and not necessarily replicable. This resonated with what other interviewees said: unless equality of knowledge is built into the structure, equal valuing of knowledge will always come down to particular individuals. The problem with this, as Marianne argued, is that in top-down set-ups, where ‘participation’ is invited but people at the top have the actual decision-making power, it is easy for them to (often unwittingly) not ‘hear’ opinions that do not accord with their own, or do not fit with their world views. Or to mentally ‘dismiss’ the person whose views they see as somehow less valuable than theirs. I would argue that formal shared decision-making structures, which make it much harder (although not impossible) for those used to having more power to ‘not hear’ views they do not agree with, are therefore crucial for shifting this and making sure different knowledges are really taken into account (see Chapter 6).

Seeing, drawing out and amplifying types of knowledge that are not often seen and valued is key to how the groups studied build more equal forms of help. These knowledges include the experiential knowledge of people who have been at the sharp end of social injustice, as well as their analytical knowledge. Engaging with these can be personally transformative for those people whose knowledge is not normally seen or taken seriously, shifting their sense of power within. It can also shift oppressive power dynamics in terms of how the organisation is run. Bringing a wider range of knowledges to bear on decision-making can lead to better ideas and greater ownership (as discussed in Chapter 6) and the understanding that a wide range of knowledges are useful is key to collaborative decision-making (again, see chapter 6).

Shifting accepted patterns of who learns from whom

I’ve been volunteering and working as a youth worker for three years now and some people who have been working for the company have only been doing it for about a year and a half so they’re like, whilst they’re older than me, they’re still often looking to me for
help which I still find really strange and it’s something that I’m challenging myself on … In my head, I’m like, ‘But I’m younger than you. How are you learning from me?’ Because I’ve been brought up with this like hierarchical, because you’re older, you have authority, I learn from you, it’s so weird to remember that actually no, every day I’m learning from an 8-year-old … so why couldn’t it be the same for me and my colleagues? (Kimberley)

As part of shifting hierarchies of knowledge, the groups studied have all approached the question of ‘who learns from whom’ differently from mainstream helping organisations, where people from less privileged backgrounds are usually firmly in the position of learners: learning how to parent better, learning social skills, learning how to be ‘employable’. They have tried to create a sense of everyone having things to teach and to learn. Kimberley’s feelings about her group’s attempts to do this were echoed across the groups. It was something people found difficult to get used to, as it did not fit with accepted norms about who should have ‘authority’, but also something that most valued and felt made sense once they got used to the different logic.

One way some groups have shifted established patterns of who learns from whom is through their approach to courses and training. Two interviewees talked about how SLWC’s courses on supporting your child at school felt very different from those at children’s centres, because they focused on bringing in everyone’s knowledge and experiences, not just that of the primary school teacher facilitating the course. Becky described how, ‘we all … learnt something from each other … It was gradually bringing people in, teaching them a few things and saying … do you mind showing us a few things that we might not know’. And Elizabeth talked about how ‘I do so many courses but there’s a difference from those courses than here … we all support … each other. it was a course … where we all share our skills equally.’

Frank described the ‘speakouts’ run by Upsurge in the late 1990s where policy-makers, service providers and people who had experienced homelessness came together to think about solutions. In contrast to the usual format of events in the sector at the time, however, it was the people who had experienced homelessness who came up with the ideas for the workshops and facilitated them (as opposed to the ‘professionals’ running the workshops and potentially asking for thoughts from people who had experienced the issues). At the time, this was ‘something completely different, you hadn’t seen it before’. Given that the professionals in this situation were the ones used to having more visible and hidden power, as well as probably more power within, this shift in who was facilitating and who was participating went a long way towards creating more equal relationships, ones that then led to productive collaboration.

In most of the groups, however, this sense of collaborative learning has not always been easy to maintain. Kimberley, for instance, who (above) spoke avidly about being listened to and learned
from by older people from more privileged backgrounds within her cooperative, still expressed some hesitancy about the extent to which it was actually happening:

But then again, some other people, so like L and T and stuff, have worked with cooperatives before so is it similar? Is it not? Like T was there when the company was being set up. She was part of setting the company up so it’s sort of like actually are they learning that from me? I feel like they are, but are they?

It is likely that this hesitancy about whether they were ‘actually’ learning from her is partly due to her learned sense that she has nothing valuable to teach and perhaps also due to learned dynamics playing out. I would argue that it is difficult to really get past the ingrained idea that some people (normally those with more privileged backgrounds and education) give knowledge while others need to learn from them.

The difficulty of shifting who learns from whom in a broader sense also came up in another group. One interviewee, who had experience of homelessness and alcoholism and was now working at the organisation reflected on how, although while everyone in the organisation is meant to be equal, and one of the organisation’s mottos is ‘there is no them and us, only us’, the knowledge of those who had experienced ‘breakdowns’ – for example, the importance of not pushing yourself too hard – is not valued. He pointed to some members from middle-class, service-provider backgrounds: ‘You can see someone like X, always so stressed ... sometimes, we could probably give them some useful advice about how to work. But our knowledge about those things isn’t valued. We need to learn to work like them.’ The implied understanding in the group is that people from ‘service-user’ backgrounds need to become more like people from more middle-class backgrounds, namely by learning the ‘good’ habits of working hard.

Who teaches and who learns is an important question in any attempt to create help and helping relationships. The groups looked at upend conventional norms about this by starting from the position that everyone has things to teach and to learn, and demonstrating this, for instance, in how courses are organised (knowledge-sharing rather than knowledge-imparting) or who leads workshops. There are challenges, however, to maintaining this sense of two-way learning, especially when it comes to less tangible things like ‘ways of working’: areas where the invisible power that shapes what is seen as ‘normal’ and ‘acceptable’ favours particular norms (usually those that are more common to people from a more socio-economically privileged background).

Chapter summary

Rethinking how different knowledges and contributions are valued is key to creating forms of help that are not top-down or one-sided. Working in this way immediately shifts the idea that people who need to access formal helping services, or who are struggling in some way, are themselves ‘the problem’ and have little to give. Instead, it conveys the idea that people who are not 132
normally given status are already competent and able, as well as making important but less visible types of labour and knowledges more visible.

All the groups studied have made active efforts to shift dominant ideas about whose knowledge and contributions are important. A few key aspects to this were discussed. Firstly, really trying to ‘see’ different contributions, ones that are not usually valued in mainstream society, and deliberately finding ways to draw these out and challenge assumptions about what counts as a ‘contribution’. Interviewees from all of the groups made clear that it is not enough just to say that less obvious contributions are as valuable as ‘professional’ skills, it has to be demonstrated by how contributions are rewarded. The groups studied do this in different ways, some more overtly ‘equal’ than others but all a significant shift from most top-down helping organisations.

As well as valuing different contributions more equally, all the groups have made efforts to recognise and incorporate different types of knowledge – not just that gained from professional qualifications or paid work. This means not just mining people who have been at the sharp end of poverty for ‘gritty’ stories, but eliciting analysis from them as well, including on broader political issues. It also involves shifting dominant frameworks of who learns from whom (i.e. structuring activities so that people without professional qualifications are sometimes teaching those with such qualifications, rather than knowledge-sharing always being top-down).

A number of shared challenges also came up across the different groups, such as the difficulty of working out how to value different contributions and stopping higher status or power accumulating in certain contributions and roles. It was also apparent that it could be extremely difficult to counteract the pervasive social structures and discourses around ‘cultures of dependency’ and some interviewees at times slipped into this language to explain difficulties in maintaining levels of contribution. In terms of shifting hierarchies of knowledge, the main challenges are: tokenism (even if not deliberate); making sure views that challenge the mainstream are really ‘heard’; and shifting embedded norms of who learns from whom. Some other ways of working that the groups practice which help mediate these challenges (such as how they allow people to ‘take the lead’ without becoming the ‘leader’ and non-punitive approaches to accountability) are discussed in Chapter 7.

As in the previous chapter, I would argue that some challenges could be overcome by building new forms of social relations, which in turn need wider shifts in certain embedded frameworks.
Chapter 6: Collective decision-making

Collective decision-making, whereby no one is ‘in charge’ and decision-making is shared, is a defining part of trying to create more equal forms of help for the groups involved in this research.

The three previous chapters detail the impacts of hierarchy on helping relationships and look at how help can be done more mutually, and different contributions and knowledges valued more equally. Many of the benefits of these approaches are dependent on shared decision-making structures, which allow people in vulnerable positions to be more open and honest and hide less, as they have more formal power and do not have the same fears of being punished for perceived transgressions as they do in top-down structures. By the same token, all the attempts to create more mutual help, where different contributions and knowledges are valued more equally are (to different degrees) frustrated by informal hierarchies that continue to play out. As several of my interviewees have observed (see, for example, page 1), and from my own analysis, in order to mitigate these, it is helpful to recalibrate power in formal, objective ways. So that people feel ‘officially’ equal.

In organisations trying to create mutual care, sharing decision-making is also crucial from, as Marianne put it, a ‘rights-based perspective’. If, in principle, need is not seen as negative, everyone is seen as a helpee and helper, teacher and learner, then it seems logical to include more people in decision-making (Beech and Page 2015; Gregory 2015). This could be done through ‘consultation’ and ‘participation’ within a top-down structure but, as some interviewees described in Chapter 5, these practices can become futile, disingenuous even, if those consulted are not actually listened to, or their opinions not taken seriously. Formal collective decision-making systems do not completely mitigate this risk but do create a structure that forces deeper engagement with ‘marginalised’ voices and perspectives (Hunter and Lakey 2013).

Collective decision-making can be transformative for individuals not used to having their views heard and validated. At a collective level, it can produce better decisions and more interesting ideas as well as increasing people’s sense of ownership over the group and its decisions. It also challenges the valorisation of individual ‘experts’ as ultimate sources of knowledge and underscores the importance of engaging with multiple knowledges.

At their best, collective decision-making practices, which are often slow by nature, challenge narratives of ‘efficiency’ as an ultimate good. This slowness can be a challenge in itself, however, leading to people feeling drained and frustrated and limiting participation in democratic processes, especially of those with limited spare time and capacity. Other challenges of trying to share decision-making include ensuring processes are truly inclusive, balancing decision-making power and countering external expectations and norms.
The detailed, empirical evidence of the benefits and challenges of collective decision-making processes presented in this chapter contributes to the growing body of social movement literature (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2011; Smith and Glidden 2012) around this issue, in particular that directly examining the effect of socio-economic divisions on whose views are heard and valued (e.g. Leondar-Wright 2014). It also contributes to discussions in welfare literature about what social movements practising ‘direct democracy’ can teach us about creating new conceptions and practices of welfare (e.g. Ferguson, Lavalette and Mooney 2002; Newman and Clarke 2015).

In this chapter, I start by describing the different models of shared decision-making used by the groups studied. I then explore some of the benefits in more detail, before moving on to the challenges and potential ways to engage with them. I conclude by looking at lessons from models of shared decision-making and leadership from further afield and of a larger scale.

Different collective decision-making structures

Below, I outline three (broad) types of collective decision-making structure encountered in this research. All explicitly reject top-down structures in terms of who has the visible power to decide on priorities and activities, and engage with hidden and invisible power – trying to ensure people with the least overt power are heard. They thus all go significantly beyond mainstream models of ‘participation’ and ‘involvement’, which tend only to tweak established hierarchical structures, for example by adding a (carefully chosen) service user to the board of trustees, or requiring management teams to consult with service users, but with no requirement that their views are taken into account.

Formal collective decision-making structures

Future Voices and SLWC have, in theory, fully shared decision-making structures where everyone’s opinion or vote carries equal weight. These groups hold regular shared decision-making forums, and alternate between consensus decision-making and majority voting. Decisions made collectively include: day-to-day decisions (e.g. how to run particular activities); operational decisions (e.g. how the travel expenses policy should work); and strategic decisions (e.g. what funding to apply for, or what the group’s principles should be). New joiners are given the opportunity to progress to full cooperative members if they agree to take on certain responsibilities.

Interviewees describe how at SLWC, the ‘spirit of consensus’ endures even when majority voting is used over consensus decision-making. Kimberley said something similar about Future Voices’ efforts to ensure minority voices are heard:

It’d be so easy to be like, OK, if the majority of the people agree then we’ll do it that way. But then obviously, there’s the ethics of why are we out-ruling the minority? The minority
matter so if this one person says no, this whole conversation has to happen again until we all agree.

Not all decisions are made in the group, however. A number of day-to-day practical decisions are made by people ‘in charge’ of certain areas (see Chapter 7). However, they remain accountable to the group. Although in these groups, formally, power is widely shared, sometimes hidden power features strongly, as well as simple ‘confusion’ about how to really enact shared decision-making. One interviewee recalled:

The co-founders were constantly trying to reassure people, you have power to say yes or no. And I think there was confusion at times where the co-founder would make a distinctive decision and then it wasn’t a decision, or then it was like let’s share the decision. I think all of us, every single member – co-founders included – at points were fuzzy and confused about who should say what when ... and who had the power.

This dynamic is discussed further in the section on challenges below.

Informal collective decision-making structures

I also observed a more ‘informal’ type of democratic structure, notably in Homes Before Profit and Upsurge.

Homes Before Profit focuses on housing and homelessness and was started by a combination of people experiencing the issues directly and activists. Although the general philosophy of both is that decision-making should be done largely collectively and accountability is to the larger group, the organisation does not have the deliberate decision-making structures of Future Voices and SLWC, nor their formalised processes for becoming a full decision-making member.

These groups tend to focus on creating mutual help and peer support, and not being a ‘service’, and the tendency towards shared decision-making stems from that idea of equality and collectivity: if everyone is considered a contributor and everyone’s knowledge valid, then the group would logically want everyone to be part of decision-making.

At Homes Before Profit, decision-making is quite informal:

[the] whole idea is to get lots of different ideas, the more people the better ... So I guess we don’t call it consensus or anything, but if it’s ... a big issue affecting the group, you like raising it at the group, in the meeting. (Sarah)

Similarly, Marianne said there are no formalised processes at Upsurge:

It’s more influencing, nudging, arguing, fighting. I mean you could call it consensus, and we did consensus sort of stuff ... but you could [never be] absolutely certain that everyone
backed a particular way of working ... I think a lot of it was about those discussions that we would have and then ... keeping them in mind and pushing them through.

Examples of decisions made collectively include day-to-day decisions around meeting times/places and childcare; decisions about what actions the group should take to support members or what projects should be run; and wider decisions about shared principles and ways of working.

Although accountability is to the wider group, individuals and smaller groups take the lead on certain day-to-day issues. I would argue that in some ways this more informal approach to shared decision-making is more inclusive and easier for people to participate in. On the other hand, without the checks and balances of Future Voices’ and SLWCs’ more formalised decision-making structures, it is possible that hidden power could come into play more. As Marianne described, although ‘we did do it mainly by consensus’, there were also ‘a couple of disgruntled voices’ at Upsurge that did not get listened to. Interviews with other Upsurge members made clear just how ‘disgruntled’ these voices became when a lot was at stake – specifically when the group was deciding whether to continue along a more ‘professionalised’ road or return to its more informal roots – and how some long-term members slowly backed away from taking on tasks as a result of feeling unheard. Sarah raised the issue that sometimes founders, or people with the most hidden power in a group, can be unclear themselves about how much power others have. She talked about the necessity of creating ownership in order for people to participate actively, but went on to say:

I have thought a couple of times, whilst kind of saying that we want people to have ownership of the group, if someone came and said, well, actually I think we should do it in this way [e.g. change the structure of meetings] I feel a protectiveness of like these are our principles, this is how it works ... you can’t just come along and change it.

Overall, I would suggest this structure works best in the sorts of contexts described above, where the group is co-founded by a combination of people affected by oppressive issues and people who are not, and where the latter are from a more activist rather than practitioner background, thus having an ethos, language and practice around collective working and decision-making that can help mitigate unhelpful power dynamics.

Organisations with a more mainstream charity structure at strategic level, but which allow for a large degree of collaboration between all members in deciding activities etc.

This structure was mainly seen in timebanks, where trustees have ultimate control and are responsible for strategic decision-making while a few paid staff do much of the operational work. However, all decisions about what activities will be carried out, where and when, are made collectively by members, who also take the lead in implementation, with staff support. All
members are welcome at meetings where activities are decided and their views followed as far as is allowable within the organisation’s remit:

Everyone makes the decisions. But obviously not everybody, because it’s not death by committee. You can’t [ask] every single person every time you want to do something. So we also have this thing that whoever is here ... it’s action based so it’s not just chatting about stuff, it’s like so what shall we do? (Laura)

Rather than a consensus approach, decisions are reached by majority voting. But because there is so much flexibility within the timebank model, multiple opinions can be accommodated. As Mark explained: ‘if there’s support for an idea from a few people, it can go ahead’.

Part of the aim, said Jacob, is for members to feel like ‘they are the producers ... the directors ... the curators’ and the staff are ‘just there to help’. Most of my timebank interviewees seemed happy with the model and felt they had a lot of control over what the timebank did. The fact that staff, and many trustees, tend to be from more working-class backgrounds and part of the community the organisation serves may help explain how a sense of equality is maintained, without as much effort to control how power plays out. The fact that staff are also members of the timebank potentially contributes to this. But it is possible that conflicts are also more suppressed because members do not have the same level of strategic power as in the other groups. Several timebank members said they regularly agree and re-check a code for working together within the group, which includes mutual listening and making space for each other’s views. But, as Laura and Mark explained, ‘political’ arguments are generally discouraged as they can make the atmosphere unpleasant. This focus on keeping the atmosphere pleasant might, I argue, make it harder to raise issues about how power plays out in decision-making.

Above, I have outlined three broad approaches to sharing decision-making. These are not static. Some groups have moved between different models over time, and maintaining fluidity seems important for shifting with circumstances. My analysis also suggests that groups with similar formal structures can have different levels of internal equality, depending on how informal (hidden and invisible) power plays out. It also seems important for people to feel clear about how much power they have: when this is opaque or deceptive, tensions and disillusionment can emerge. This is less severe in the timebanks, where it is clear which decisions are and are not open to the group, than in groups where people are told they have more power but sometimes do not feel it. It is also possible, however, that the timebanks’ more limited decision-making power constrains people’s ability to voice dissenting views.
The benefits of collective decision-making

Shifting people’s sense of self

One of the clearest benefits of sharing leadership and decision-making is that people unused to having influence and power in formal decision-making processes feel like their knowledge is more equal to others’, shifting their self-view.

Amrine recalled the experience of being involved in collective decision-making after years of feeling controlled, first by her abusive partner, and subsequently at a women’s refuge:

At first I was like a mouse, never wanting to raise my voice. But everyone kept encouraging me...and then slowly, slowly I found my voice. Sometimes we would just decide small decisions together – what shall we have for lunch. But even this was something ... When you go to another group, even if there is lunch they don't ask you what you like ... But at X group we saw what does everybody need and ... that was taken seriously ... But the best part, everyone was interested in what is the core of what you want to say. It’s not like everywhere.

Paula described how collective decision-making structures ‘make everybody feel that they ... had something to contribute ... we are going to take your point, and your point, and your point ... you are all valid’.

In Chapter 5, interviewees talked about how just being asked your opinion and having it taken seriously and carry weight can have a positive effect. This is heightened when your opinion has actual, formal power – when it is not up to someone higher up to decide whether they will ‘hear’ you.

To understand the significance and transformative impacts of these practices, it is important to appreciate how difficult it is for people who have experienced oppression to offer an opinion, especially if it runs counter to the views of people with more power (both visible and hidden). Amy described the silencing impact of a lifetime of oppression:

Whether it was the magnitude of the political structure you are up against, or whether it was something smaller as in you’ve never been able to talk the way you want, we were all quite silenced ... Like the school system, how teachers look to you, how they talk to you.

This, she explained, stops people from speaking up for fear of exposing themselves to further criticism and judgement, pointing to members’ nervousness around promoting a piece of participatory research they had undertaken challenging welfare practices as an example:

No one wanted to sit in front of the camera, no one wanted to be on the radio. No one actually wanted their voice, their story to be there in that way because it was very
intimidating ... and it was also ... exposing. It was kind of like ‘I don’t want it relating to me’.

Amy’s observations exemplified how unseen social forces and norms could lead to an ‘internalisation of powerlessness’ (Gaventa 2007:16) to the extent that members from less privileged backgrounds still saw some forms of domination over them as ‘natural’ and ‘right’ despite having done research that exposed the structural injustices they and others in similar positions were experiencing. ‘Even after we talked about it with each other’, she explained, ‘and acknowledged things weren’t right, we didn’t feel comfortable talking about it in the wider world’.

Amy explained that now, several years after producing the research, she and other members feel more comfortable publicising the findings – because of the shift in their sense of self that has come from years of being involved in shared decision-making processes within the cooperative:

A lot of women in our own personal lives had experiences from various avenues of being dominated over [or] controlled. So we really tried to find ways to shift the unequal power ... to create an equal playing field, that no one had to right to say no. Everyone had the right to be equal ... Encouraging people to talk ... you had space to talk.

She felt that she and her peers needed several years of being encouraged to share their views and having their opinions taken seriously and acted upon in this ‘safe’, nurturing environment before ‘making the jump to speaking to the wider world’. Amy and Becky argued that years of speaking and feeling heard in this environment was also what allowed some members to become involved in activism around social housing – an issue that affected many members profoundly but which few had initially felt comfortable ‘going out and shouting about’. Collective decision-making, then, can help develop power within, the sense of your own capability and capacity, but also the sense of your own right to exist as an equal in society and of the validity of your own thoughts and experiences. In the examples above, this has allowed for a more collective sense of power to develop – one that challenges the status quo at a wider, structural level.

Being involved in collective decision-making can also bring more unexpected benefits. For example, Paula explained how having a say in running her cooperative group helped her feel more comfortable about her body. When she joined the group, she had been uneasy about her appearance to the extent she had insisted on having a table in front of her at all times when seated. But over the years, having her opinions listened to and valued helped her relinquish that anxiety. Several years after leaving the group, she said:

I do love myself ... I don’t want to do anything else to my body. I am happy ... The group actually gave me that love about myself ... [Because] I kept being told ... oh no one has ever said it that way ... You have a valid point ... I do have a valid point, I do.
Again, being given formal, visible power allowed Paula to develop enough power within to overcome the forces of invisible power (from the media etc.) about what her body should look like and what made her ‘valid’.

Sharing decision-making can also shift how people more used to formal decision-making power, and their outlooks being dominant, see themselves, forcing them to confront their own privilege and question the certainty of their opinions and voice. This can be extremely challenging and uncomfortable, but the interviewees from service-provider backgrounds who discussed it seemed to find it personally beneficial:

At times I have felt resentful and sorry for myself, feeling like ... other people were getting space at my expense. Ultimately, though, working non-hierarchically, and being forced to hear other people and question views and assumptions I had always taken for granted ... changed my thinking in ways that I know will be very important for the rest of my life.

(Celine)

Interestingly, interviewees from more economically and educationally privileged backgrounds – most likely used to having more decision-making power in organisations they had been involved with – initially talked extensively about the advantages of sharing power for others and the group, but not themselves. Only when I asked the question specifically did they reflect on it and several noted that they had not thought about it before, rather seeing power-sharing as something they did for others, or out of a sense of social justice.

Shifting how we understand and relate to each other

Sharing decision-making can boost the authenticity of helping relationships as less hierarchical, power-conscious formal structures make ‘formal’ equality a reality. One interviewee talked about how many women in the group were not entirely honest with us founders at the outset, before we’d fully implemented non-hierarchical decision-making. Some gave fake names, as they were used to doing in children’s centres. Often, we would have a ‘helping’ conversation we thought was heartfelt, but in which people were just saying what they thought we wanted to hear.

Another interviewee raised this from the perspective of someone used to using mainstream services, explaining that to survive ‘in the system’ you need to present certain facets of your world and conceal others. As one interviewee put it: ‘It’s hard to know what might get you in trouble with the home office, the housing office, the taxman. You have to be careful.’
This only shifted once formal non-hierarchical processes had been embedded in the group, and people became less fearful of saying what they meant, allowing for franker exchanges.

One interviewee from a service-provider background said:

oftentimes we knew things were becoming more equal not because helping relationships became more pleasant, but because they became more fraught ... People felt more able to get angry at times, or say they were not happy with the type of help they were receiving.

This contrasts with some examples in Chapter 3 where interviewees talked about having to stifle their emotions, particularly anger, when receiving help. Of course, this can also be problematic if the anger leads to conflict that the group is unable to engage with productively.\(^{17}\)

Jane, from a service-provider background, talked about how shared decision-making gives her insights into the lives and perspectives of people from different backgrounds that she would not have got from working with them as ‘clients’. She talked about the privilege of being able to better understand lives very different from her own, ‘and not just to hear their stories, but their thoughts, their opinions on a wider range of issues, because you’re actually sitting discussing how to run the organisation together’. Collective decision-making structures also allow people from service-provider backgrounds to ‘be part of things, not in a weird unequal relationship which pretended to be equal but wasn’t really’, said Harriet, who went on to talk about how being part of these forms of decision-making has allowed her to experience ‘all those feelings I associate with having a community’.

Another benefit of shared decision-making for people used to being in service-provider roles in more hierarchal organisations, she said, is freedom from the stress from the relationship of trying to control ‘subordinates’ – the emotional labour of managing others while keeping yourself in check, the lack of feeling of friendship with others ... the awkwardness of the relationship. In contrast to camaraderie, warmth, affection ... love.

She acknowledged, however, that these different ways of viewing and interacting with each other are what happens ‘in an ideal world’ and that the reality is often much messier, with constant shifting back and forth between camaraderie and unwitting replication of top-down helper-helpee dynamics.

\(^{17}\) Creating ‘safety’ in a non-hierarchical way is complex and potentially fraught (see Chapter 7).
More ideas, better decisions and a different way of thinking about knowledge

Most interviewees agreed that sharing leadership and decision-making often generates better ideas and decisions – as well as ones that feel more jointly owned. Dave explained how important bringing together different knowledges is to creating innovative projects:

Together … you share ideas, you know what I mean? I might have an idea, you might have a different one. Together we … might be able to form that into better ideas … So I’ll nick that, you can nick what you want of mine … that’s how these projects built up.

Marianne went further, describing an experience with a local authority and a schoolchild rep that ‘made me think that there are no people who shouldn’t be involved and engaged in [decision-making]’:

They had this kind of rep system and then there was the littlest one … he must have been about six … I was asking what sort of ideas do your classes come up with and [he] said … well we’d like to move our maths lesson into the morning, because when you get into school in the morning you are really awake and maths is really hard and now they have got it after lunch and after lunch we all feel like having a nap … Children with profound disability … pushing the staff … to think about [what is] … good or not good.

Involving everyone meaningfully in decision making is not just about making things nice for people, she went on to say, but is actually ‘the … best way to facilitate organisations that work with people’.

Amrine reiterated this idea, describing the shift in her views on collective decision-making:

First I was like oh my god, what is this they are doing? I thought how can this work? Who is the boss? … Who is going to give orders? I felt like … they are crazy, they are listening to everyone … But when I understood it everything made sense … We are not knowing anything about what is going on … but when we decide things together … it breaks those lines … It’s a very good way.

And Becky reflected that there ‘was no way we could have gotten through’ really challenging situations in the group without trying to ‘get everybody’s feedback on board’ and ‘taking that time’.

Dave argued that some forms of user involvement replicate the ‘expert’ paradigm by positioning service users who get involved as ‘experts’. But, he argued, ‘I’m no expert … no one’s an expert. If they were you wouldn’t still have homelessness … you don’t know everything, he don’t know everything, I don’t know everything, you’ve got to pull it all together’. Collective decision-making helps stop groups trying to do help less hierarchically from getting stuck in the ‘user-expert’ paradigm.
Paula described how collective decision-making structures force people to ‘step down from that high horse’ and accept that both sides ‘may not be 100 percent right but also have really valid points’, and how eventually you get to a point where you acknowledge that ‘I can easily see this, and you can’t. But you can see that and I can’t’. Becky expressed a similar idea when she talked about how getting into the habit of everyone throwing ideas into the collective pot – some being accepted, some being built on, some being transformed, and some being rejected as not right for that particular situation – creates a shift from thinking of ideas as ‘your own individual thing which you hold onto’ to things you want to share, and have others ‘turn about’. This can reinforce the sense of joint ownership of decisions, as discussed below.

Creating more ownership

Engaging everyone in decision-making and leadership gives people a greater sense of ownership of the group. Jane reflected on her experience of decision-making in a top-town youth charity and a youthwork cooperative. At the charity, a decision about moving premises made by senior management only led to conflict and detachment. In the youthwork cooperative, in contrast, ‘everyone is part of’ such decisions, usually leading to much more positive outcomes:

Because even when it seems like there are no good options, with all these different people in a room together, thinking about it together, you can sometimes get to somewhere new … And even if we didn’t at least we’d be more understanding of the different positions, instead of taking these stands at opposite ends … And the difference in how much you feel part of it and you want to then do things for the group is so different when you are part of that decision-making structure.

Samir was adamant that being ‘immediately involved in … decision-making’ is critical to people feeling like a project is ‘their own’ and having a ‘passion’ for it.

Amy discussed a participatory budgeting process in her group that provided exactly these types of benefits: when a decision about what percentage of hours worked people should get paid for was made collectively, there was less subsequent conflict despite the process being long and stressful. People, she said, seemed happier, even if they were being paid for a smaller percentage of their hours than in a previous project.

 Kimberley, meanwhile, described how working together on budgets and other strategic issues with young people at Future Voices made them more accepting of limitations on activities while also building trust:

When you’re so open with things like that, they realise yeah, they don’t have a lot of funding, that’s why we haven’t got a PlayStation … so it’s nice for them to be able to see
through us because we’re expecting to see through them and we’re expecting to trust them.\textsuperscript{18}

It is worth noting that my interviewees did not all regard having decision-making power as essential. Indeed, some talked about the benefits of not having much power in certain circumstances. Dave, for example, said he was ‘fine’ when Upsurge moved from being a fully democratic organisation to one with a leader, because he no longer had the responsibility of engaging in certain complex issues. Notably, however, his involvement with the organisation declined steeply after this change, as he felt what they did no longer ‘represented’ him. Jane similarly said that in some ways she preferred working at a top-down youth organisation than a cooperative youth group because she did not have to worry about broader organisational issues. However, she also said she cares less about this organisation than the cooperative group and tends to just ‘do [her] job and go home’.

It seems that less decision-making power can bring benefits to people, but at the cost of a sense of ownership and engagement.

Thinking differently about time and ‘slowness’

Collective decision-making, and trying to ensure everyone’s voice is heard, is often slower than hierarchical decision-making. This brought challenges initially in some of the groups looked at, but once people were committed to the merits and logic of shared decision-making, the slowness did not appear to be a concern and for most interviewees led to a shift in thinking about what is a valuable use of time.

One issue associated with slowness is that it can exacerbate socio-economic differences within the group: those with more time, flexibility and fewer demands (often those with more privilege) are usually the ones able to engage more fully in these processes. There is a certain ‘luxury’, said one interviewee, in having that time. Others said they didn’t always have the ‘headspace’ (Becky) to engage in extended strategy processes, when they were having to think, for example, about ‘four kids, two jobs, and how to get the housing association to sort out the mould’.

She did acknowledge, however, that ‘that sort of thing is hard to do however you try and do it. Because it takes time, it takes a lot of brain space’.

Still others made the point that when people have unmet basic needs, taking part in lengthy decision-making is often not a priority:

\textsuperscript{18}Future Voices also make a point of not sharing young people’s information with outside agencies, in contrast to the ‘exposing’ behaviours of many top-down helping organisations (Chapter 3). If funders ‘want a list of young people’s names and addresses, we won’t do it because we don’t feel comfortable knowing that people have access to that when the young people aren’t happy for it and things like that’ (Kimberley).
The hardest thing in the world is getting people to get involved in stuff like that ... if they’re in hostels they’re only interested in the fucking sausages or maintenance. If they’re in supported housing they’re only interested in moving on to a decent place because they’ve only got a couple of years in that ... They don’t want to sit in fucking meetings ... only mugs like me. (Dave)

One interviewee argued that to build a viable movement, require organisers to accept that ‘capitalism works quickly’ and to find ways of moving faster, at least until wider norms shift. However, most interviewees accepted that shared decision-making is inevitably slow and were focused on how to help people new to these processes, and overstretched in the rest of their lives, feel they were important.

One group member explained how she initially found the length of time it could take to hear everyone’s opinions exhausting and frustrating, especially as a single mother with a full-time cleaning job. After a period away from the group (and in a work environment where different opinions were not heard), she shifted her views:

Now I am away from it I can actually see ... why we had them ... why you have to give time for it ... Because the goal was ... [for] everyone to have that opportunity ... to feel more valued ... If I am not happy with this we can discuss it ... Where I work (now) there is like a hierarchy and I am at the bottom of the food chain. So, I just have to follow what she tells me. No ‘can we discuss this, can we discuss that?’

She felt that although these processes can feel longwinded at first, ‘If you put your heart and soul in it your state of mind will be like no it’s not long. Because everyone needs to have a turn’.

Samir argued that, in the right context the slowness can be seen as ‘revolutionary’, the opposite of a type of brutal efficiency. He talked about long meetings in a group he was involved in, sometimes two days long and going into the night:

Sometimes we were critical of it. But at the same time we valued very much ... the fact that we could have these debates. It was ... so fundamental as well to what we were doing, that we were sort of creating an alternative in how we were organising that it wasn’t a problem.

Samir’s phrasing is reminiscent of Gregory’s (2015) idea about using different theories of ‘time’ to reframe this type of work (see Chapters 2 and 8).

Sharing decision-making, then, can have multiple benefits, both for individuals and groups. For people not used to their opinions having real influence, it can significantly shift their sense of self and give them confidence to voice opinions, including ones counter to mainstream norms.

For
people more used to being listened to, being forced to hear things they might not otherwise hear helped them challenge their own views. Almost all interviewees agreed that sharing decision-making leads to better ideas and a greater sense of collective ownership of them. It also shifts entrenched narratives about knowledge. I would argue that the benefits of shared leadership and decision-making are particularly pronounced in those groups with marked differences between members’ levels of privilege. This is also true for the challenges described in the next section – they can feel more severe, at times intractable, for groups containing a wide socio-economic demographic.

**Challenges and potential ways to engage with them**

I’ve seen it done so many times. I still do it 20 years on. If sharing power doesn’t feel uncomfortable, if you’re not riddled with self-doubt and wanting to tear your eyes out, if you’re not going through your own development process and rethinking what you thought you knew, you’re not doing it right. (Marianne)

This quote encapsulates how difficult it can be to share leadership and decision-making. Simply ‘allowing’ participation in decision-making does not by any means guarantee a democratic process. As GO describes, decision-making continues to be affected by ‘all this stuff about class gender and privilege and white supremacy and all the ways in which our culture has encoded this fucked up legacy’.

This can become especially prevalent as the group grows or people start to feel under pressure (outside or inside the group) and it is easy to revert to hierarchical decision-making. Amy described how, as her group got bigger, ‘people felt we tried to go back to what is familiar … which is hierarchy’. Her analysis is reminiscent of an idea raised in literature about developing horizontal ways of running occupied factories in Argentina. Sitrin (2007: 108) quotes an interviewee talking about how, despite their best efforts to organise cooperatively, it was difficult to overcome ‘the enduring memory of verticality, of representation, of delegation, that plays out almost unconsciously’ from when the factories were managed in a standard hierarchical way.

Hidden power can play out in a number of ways, affecting, for instance, who can attend meetings. Often members with ‘a young family … children to look after’, (Edna) more caring responsibilities (and without the means to pay for childcare or other support), or whose paid work is more insecure, unpredictable and inflexible (meaning they can’t easily schedule time off) are less able to attend. As discussed above, these sorts of decision-making processes can also be long and require intense emotional and physical energy, perhaps making it easier for people facing fewer other challenges to participate.

There could also be less obvious reasons for people not engaging in collective decision-making, namely invisible power dynamics – and how that makes people see themselves and their potential
contributions. It has sometimes been difficult for groups to recognise these, although most have tried to be alert to them:

> When that started happening more and more with us [we needed to ask] why are people not turning up? What is the real reason rather than they can’t make it for whatever reason? ... Is it because they feel like there is no point? Because they feel like they don’t have a voice? Is it because they feel insecure about turning up and talking in front of everybody? (Amy)

Edna talked about how at HSTB

> some older women ... don’t necessarily want to express their opinion. [This could be] because either they don’t have one, which is highly unlikely. Or they are just sort of scared or shy ... or possibly afraid of making a fool of themselves by saying something wrong.

She observed that it is usually members with less formal education who feel this way. HSTB has a ‘large catchment area’, she said, and the more educationally and economically privileged members ‘have no problems talking’. This dynamic is familiar to the other groups studied. Often it is those with professional backgrounds, or more experience speaking in groups who speak more. They can also subtly take control of processes, pushing views most forcefully, tacitly agreeing things with a glance, or unconsciously emphasising their own arguments in meeting minutes. It can be difficult to counteract these dynamics because, as one interviewee from a ‘professional’ background said, ‘professional people having control felt so familiar and ingrained, that no one would notice it was happening’. When it was noticed, however, it left people feeling resentful of or, worse, resigned to the fact that despite them being told they had control, ‘our agenda in fact took precedence’. She stressed that she and the others from professional backgrounds did not mean to do this, and were often unaware that they were, but said more vigilance was needed.

Gaventa’s (2007) conception of spaces – who creates them and invites others into them and, therefore, who has the confidence to speak in them – is perhaps relevant here as it demonstrates how the power to speak is also to some extent situational. Sarah for example, who calls her background ‘working class’ but says she is now ‘middle class’, described the intimidating experience of attending Climate Camp meetings at university: ‘all these middle-class people, they just seemed so confident in what they were saying, and I didn’t have that’. In her housing action group, however, where most members are from working-class backgrounds, without university degrees or activism experience, she feels very confident and has to actively keep herself from taking over.

Lack of confidence could also lead to people feeling they do not have the numeracy or information-processing skills to engage in collective budgeting and allocating resources.

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activities are central to decision-making in some of the groups – particularly those trying to make wider strategic decisions collectively – and the nervousness of those with less formal education could mean the ‘usual suspects’ (Harriet) dominating.

Cultural differences and norms can also affect participation. Edna made the contentious statement that ‘inevitably it was only sort of – let’s be racist – white people turning up. Not many black people turn up’ to decision-making meetings. In post-analysis feedback, I raised this idea with Amy (from a Caribbean background) who thought that if less non-white people were turning up to decision-making, there might be a complex reason for it:

it’s like they want us to share, they want you to talk, but if you don’t make people feel comfortable and wanted to talk, and to get that right is very difficult. And to get it right across a bunch of different cultures and different personalities and different experiences, it’s hard. And the majority of the people [in these spaces] are from similar backgrounds so they get each other. And then when you talk about people from my background, you don’t get it a lot. Because you are all there talking to each other about it, you think you get it.

These ‘cultural differences’ could play out across class and race lines. One interviewee recalled being invited by a large charity to join the steering group for a new programme about women and in-work poverty as the ‘user voice’. She said it ‘didn’t feel equal at all’. The meeting was at the Park Lane Hotel, something that struck her as insensitive for a project on poverty and where she immediately felt uncomfortable as ‘there were all these high-up people there’. And, despite having travelled a long way, she was not offered any refreshments. She did not go to further meetings, but the organisation included her initial attendance as evidence they had included people with experience of the issue in decision-making.

This is perhaps an extreme example, but the fact that NGO workers ostensibly committed to empowering women living on low incomes were oblivious to the dynamics shows how easy they are to overlook. More subtle forms of this occur even in groups where inclusivity is a priority.

Also important in terms of cultural norms and difference is thinking about what ways of speaking are ‘acceptable’, and how these get reinforced. Leondar-Wright (2014), for instance, argues that working-class speech patterns are less turn-taking and more dialogic than middle-class ones. I asked several of my interviewees their opinions of this analysis and the general response was that it had some truth, but lacked nuance (as there is a wide range of working-class cultures and people). However, most agreed with Leondar-Wright that the ways in which conflict is often guarded against through ground rules in activist spaces – i.e. by making sure everyone speaks ‘nicely’ to each other – can perpetuate oppressions. Esme talked about expressing anger in a group meeting (about what she felt were unequal power structures):
Someone said to me like oh you speak loud [unclear]. I said you know what, I am getting really fed up and frustrated now ... this is the way I speak ... I have got a loud voice. If you come to my country, everybody speaks loud ... But [in the group], you have to watch your tone, how you speak to people because they say that you’re aggressive or something like that ... If you say equal opportunity, this is like I am coming from a different background ... I might say oh this person is so quiet [unclear]. But I understand this is the way you are, so why can’t you understand this is me?

The idea of anger and other emotional responses being suppressed by meeting norms was reiterated by two other (non-white, non-middle-class) interviewees. One talked about how she started crying in a meeting, but the (middle-class) member whose turn it was to speak next just got up and continued. This seemed to leave the interviewee feeling that her tears, her pain, her upset were ignored or unheard. During our discussion, we decided that, to be heard, people sometimes need to speak in that emotional way (especially people who feel powerless and like they cannot convey their upset more neutrally). Esme reinforced this idea, describing how the times she is ‘most passionate’ about speaking up in her group are ‘when people disrespect people or hurt people’, but she has found that her ‘pitch’ and words can come across as ‘aggressive’, and has ‘learned that in order for me to not get myself in trouble [I need to] be quiet’.

Even within a context of shared visible power, then, insidious power dynamics can lead to covert replication of hierarchical structures and interactions. Some of these challenges can be addressed through practical changes in procedures and ways of working, some are more complex and require thorough reflection by group members on why they act in certain ways and how to shift them. Potential ways to engage with the challenges are discussed below.

Engaging with the challenges

Some straightforward ways to engage with the challenges described above emerged in interviews. For some groups, online and mobile decision-making, for example via WhatsApp groups, has helped deal with the problem of meeting attendance. Elizabeth explained how it helps ensure

we are sharing the power – because I didn’t come to that meeting, you can’t make that decision behind my back without concern ... Put the questions out ... say OK, that’s how you reply to this, then we all make a decision about it. Even though we are not there, we still have this connection.

Technology has brought its own challenges, however, as some people struggle with literacy or internet access. Nuance and complexity can also be lost in online decision-making without more complex tools, which can themselves be a barrier. However, the attempt is still important in shifting whose views are seen as important and how important people feel their contributions.
are. As Elizabeth said: ‘At least you were not left out. You were not feeling like nobody is concerning about you or you are not involved in the thoughts of what is happening.’

Most groups studied also created working-group structures once they grew to a point where involving everyone in all decision-making was unfeasible. For example, Marianne mentioned Upsurge’s peers’ forum, general volunteers’ forum and HR forum: ‘things that came in after ... we grew really quick’. The working-group structures involve small groups of people taking the lead on certain areas or projects in which they have interest or knowledge, managing that area and making day-to-day decisions about it. Samir said, in his experience, this model gives people a way to ‘be part of things’ and start to ‘find their place’ in the collective identity, without needing to commit time and headspace to participate regularly in lengthy whole-group meetings. It also helps ensure more even workloads, because if there are only large collective meetings, and only a few people regularly attend, they tend to end up taking on all the tasks (see Chapter 7).

This model can, however, end up giving more power – both visible and hidden – to those who already have the most. Noel recounted his experience at a renters’ union, where each branch chooses a representative to attend joint group meetings via a shared decision-making process. The representatives, said Noel, tend to be those from the most privileged backgrounds, since they have the confidence, time and emotional and mental space to attend wider group meetings, and are more used to travelling around London. Noel said it might be more democratic not to have a central decision-making group, even though it would be longer and messier. He described how a coordinator of a more established renters’ union in the US told him they had given up on such a working-group structure as they could not find a way to make it democratic. Learning from the attempts to build municipal democracy in Rojava might be useful here. Decision-making structures there are multi-layered, with local councils sending delegates to regional ones and regional councils sending delegates to national ones. But the delegates are all elected (and need to be regularly re-elected) by each council, ensuring they are accountable to the wider membership. In addition, they try to keep as many decisions as possible at the local level. Only those that really have to be are passed further up. It is of course not a perfect system, but it does help ensure ‘power flows from the bottom up’ (Biehl 2016).

Some groups use formal space-sharing techniques, perhaps more familiar to activist spaces, to increase the probability that, once at the meeting, people with less confidence feel able to share their opinions. For example, ‘things like go rounds and everyone says one thing that they think’. Giving everyone a set number of paperclips, one of which they have to give up every time they speak and using hand gestures to signal agreement (rather than speaking) were also mentioned. Some interviewees felt, however, that these sorts of tools were ‘not necessary because we’re all adults’.
This challenge is raised by Hardt and Negri (2011) in their analysis of consensus decision-making processes in the Occupy movement (and how they failed to be inclusive of people not from white middle-class backgrounds). Land and King’s (2014) analysis of the transition of a traditional top-down charity to a non-hierarchical structure also suggests people used to feeling punished, constrained and infantilised by a range of helping services will resist using discussion tools they feel imply people cannot control themselves. People used to having less status in wider society can also feel less comfortable being ‘silly’. Some of the groups studied have found ways around this, adapting some of the tools so that they feel more comfortable, ‘for instance using a thumbs-up sign instead of hand-waving, even putting up our hands ... writing things on a paper and giving it to the facilitator’.19

A number of interviewees suggested it could also be helpful to organise meetings in ways that do not favour those most comfortable speaking out, for instance including pair and small-group discussion. Sarah described how ‘breaking into small groups really early on has been the thing’.

Other techniques tried include: collective learning of basic maths (for budgeting), using multi-sensory techniques; basic literacy training; people going through previous meeting minutes in pairs ahead of a meeting so they feel confidently informed; and using interactive training to convey any complex theoretical ideas necessary for the decision-making.

One interviewee who struggles with literacy suggested that simply writing each point decided on a flipchart would help her participate by making it clear if she has missed part of the discussion. This small practical thing might only be useful for a few people. However, it signals the potential gains from small changes, and that people, especially those most often excluded from decision-making, need to be asked what works for them.

Things that make it harder for those who usually have more hidden power to speak can be useful. For instance, Sarah said she sometimes tries to speak in Spanish, which is the first language of many Homes Before Profit members, and the fact that Sarah is not confident in it immediately shifts the power balance in the group.

Gently trying to draw people out and encourage them also helps increase group voices. As Jacob said, ‘sometimes it’s about being able to pick up on [people not being confident] and invite them in so to speak’. His other tactic is holding small meetings first, to allow people to practice contributing and ‘improve their feelings of confidence’. He reiterated the importance of being

19 It is, however, important not to generalise too much. As one interviewee pointed out, not all people with higher ‘social status’ would be comfortable with ‘silly’ hand signals. Harriet, meanwhile, said that in the US, hand signals are common in decision-making amongst black working-class groups due to their long history in the civil rights movement.
clear with people that their opinions are crucial, ‘because without them, what they are bringing up, [the work of the organisation] can’t happen’.

Other ways to make sure speaking time is shared more equally raised by interviewees included: training on listening skills, awareness of group and class dynamics and reflection on one’s own behaviour in a group:

We did exercises in the room ... when we had ... group meetings. How to give each other space to speak. We did ... a lot of practical things. And to self-reflect. Also taking time out to just think about what we could have done better what we could have said better. (Harriet)

One interviewee mentioned games allowing participants to viscerally experience feeling unheard as particularly useful. Several participants from more privileged backgrounds talked about trying to hold back from saying the things they wanted to, aware that their perspectives and opinions are likely already well represented. Again, learning from Rojava and the Occupy movement might be useful here. In both contexts, attempts are made to prioritise people from the most marginalised and least ‘heard’ backgrounds when deciding speaking order in a group (Sitlin and Azzellini 2014; Knapp, Flach and Ayboyga 2016).

These practices echo what Leondar-Wright (2014) suggests about not relying on tools to shift a group’s power dynamics, as it means you are not addressing underlying issues. Instead, trying to recalibrate power within – diminishing the sense of those with more power that they have something important to say, and boosting it for those with less – seems important.

A few interviewees found that rotating meeting roles helped avoid concentrating power. Role rotation is slightly controversial, however, because it can end up being either tokenistic or stressful for group members not confident facilitating or taking notes. (One way around this has been for two people to do notes together, using a template).

Timebanks take a different approach, using a staff member to facilitate as a neutral arbiter. Steve explained this is to prevent ‘negative ownership’ and ensure the discussion stays civil:

Will a volunteer remain neutral? ... I don’t know ... And ... are they going to be making sure they are including that person as much as the other people who they really like and get along with? Is that going to become cliquey? I think it would. Because people sort of naturally grind on each other. Whereas if you have got the paid person, and they are good at their job, they will remain neutral, friendly ... treat everyone equally.

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20 Admittedly, this could lead to conflict in deciding which voices are the most marginalised.
I would argue that, while this practice concentrates power in the hands of a few people and is therefore not ideal, there is an argument for it in a context where some people have more time and resources than others. Several interviewees agreed.

In Chapter 4, I discussed how important small things – like having food available – are to people feeling ‘welcomed’. This is true also for decision-making forums. As Amy said, if your life is very stressful and money and time are short, having breakfast at a meeting immediately makes participation easier. She also said it makes the space more ‘homey’, and therefore more comfortable for people unused to formal meeting environments (or with bad associations from, for instance, social services meetings). Edna talked about how at timebanks our food is a great social breakdown. People talk about it and then start talking to each other. And hopefully it gives them confidence to express their own opinions. In more formal settings, yeah absolutely. If we didn’t have tea and cake … it wouldn’t work.

An area where few interviewees knew how to move forward was expression of anger. A number recognised that ‘if people feel really unheard, and like there’s no other way to get their voices heard, then of course it’s going to come out as anger’. Others, such as Jane, acknowledged that groups need ways to engage with intense emotions productively to avoid harmful conflict. Many said they did not feel confident about this and it might be an area where groups trying to enact more horizontal forms of help need skill development. (Several said they would be slower to shut down more ‘emotional’ contributions to meetings if they felt confident the group had these skills.)

How groups can build on these skills merits further investigation, especially in a context where many people will already feel emotionally drained by life circumstances. Jane described how at one point in Future Voices, people were just too exhausted to engage in conflict and ended up ‘skimming the surface of the complicated issues … sticking to the superficial … not delving into the problems’. This period of, as she described it, ‘dangerous lack of energy’ preceded some difficult developments (where they were forced to contemplate ending the group entirely) and illustrates the dangers of groups feeling unable to engage with conflicts arising from shared decision-making.

So a range of hidden and invisible power issues came up in the groups looked at when trying to do shared decision-making. Some were more obvious to group members, and some took time to be noticed – particularly those like ‘cultural differences’, which can be difficult to see or articulate, and which challenge standard ‘good group-behaviour’ norms.

21 It is worth noting, however, that informality does not always make people feel more comfortable and the complex and multiple cultural issues that affect this.
Other issues affecting participation in decision-making bothered some interviewees, but not others. Key among these was the difference in confidence people felt depending on how long and to what extent they had been involved in the group – as this affected the amount of knowledge they might have about what was being discussed. Becky reflected:

So we always saw you [the founders] as – not above us in that kind of you look down on us kind of way – but it was your thing, you started it, you created it. So we kind of looked up to you and looked towards you for guidance and leadership in meetings to some extent. But as it went on we all found our own voices and realised that we could all say what we wanted.

Samir discussed the discomfort of feeling you have to participate when new to a group, ‘like you are forced to give an opinion on something you had no idea on’. He mentioned some things his group does to mitigate this, including

[making] more of a conscious effort ... when someone is new to be very clear and be like, look, if you want and you have an opinion on this [then give it] ... but also don’t feel like you have to give an opinion on something, because you don’t need to.

He also said he thinks it is not necessarily bad for members with ‘very little experience’ to be ‘learning’ in the meetings, and that it ‘can be a bit silly’ if it is your first day in there, and then you will be debating something and you have got no context of. And it will be like what do you think?...Unless you have the confidence to be like well I am not going to give an opinion on this because I haven’t got the context...

He thinks the most practical approach is to recognise it and share responsibilities, as well as ‘change regularly’ who is positioned to gain the knowledge:

People who have been there for longer, people that have more knowledge, become reference points and their opinion matters more. That could be one of the problems if you like. But I don’t see it much as a problem because it’s inevitable.

Harriet talked about how in a non-hierarchical anti-racism group in the US, which she is part of, an acceptance that people who have been there longer and are more informed about the issues will have slightly more weight has recently become the norm. Overall, I agree with these interviewees’ analysis. However, I feel that constant reflection is needed to ensure newer people have the chance to gain the knowledge and extra power, and that this power does not become entrenched in a few ‘older’ members.
Chapter summary

Overall, sharing decision-making has myriad benefits. It can help people develop the power within needed to be able to express their views, both within a small group and more broadly. For those already confident in their views, being challenged by people not normally in a position to do so can be useful – forcing them to reconsider their perspectives and acknowledge different knowledges. Shared decision-making can shift relationships between people from fear to trust, allowing for more honest and authentic ‘help’. It can also lead to better ideas, as multiple knowledges are brought together. An ethos of collective decision-making can also challenge norms of ‘efficiency’ as an ultimate good.

However, top-down dynamics are easily replicated even when visible power is equal, heightening the hidden and invisible power of those who already have the most economic and social privilege. All the groups studied have attempted to lessen these unequal power dynamics, although complexities and questions have arisen even from these attempts. The most difficult to shift have been dynamics connected with ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ ways of speaking, partly, I would argue, because of fears of conflict and lack of understanding about ways to engage with it productively.

This chapter is relevant to literature about non-hierarchical decision-making in activist groups, particularly how it can exclude people from non-white and less educationally and economically privileged backgrounds (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2011).
Chapter 7: Shared leadership and accountability structures

The previous three chapters have explored crucial aspects of non-hierarchical forms of help: creating mutuality; valuing different knowledges and contributions more equally; and sharing decision-making. To get a more rigorous understanding of how these collective, non-hierarchical practices can be maintained day to day, it is useful to understand how the groups studied create leadership and accountability in ways that do not inadvertently perpetuate hierarchies of knowledge and status or rely on ‘blame or shame’ (Becky) in order to get things done. This chapter looks at how the groups attempt to create structures of leadership and accountability without reverting to hierarchical norms.

A common misconception about non-hierarchical organisations is that there is no or little ‘leadership’, which means that nothing gets done and there is no accountability. There is also a well-known argument that groups attempting to avoid the oppressions related to hierarchical structures can create a different form of ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ where those who already have power are able to deepen it by taking on the most powerful roles and exercising power behind the scenes (Freeman 1972).

Some responses in the literature to Freeman’s argument are discussed in Chapter 1. In this chapter, however, I demonstrate that, as Samir argued, ‘you can have horizontal[ity] and openness and active participatory democracy with structures’. Many of my interviewees were at pains to emphasise that their groups in fact have quite complex structures. Although they may have started out with everyone being a part of everything and no one in charge of any specific area, this shifted as they developed. A concept articulated by Ella Baker, an American civil rights movement activist, of creating ‘leaderful-ness ... in the same breath’ as leaderlessness (Baker 1930, quoted in Payne 1989) is perhaps more appropriate in this context than the idea of structurelessness. This chapter contributes empirical evidence regarding what ‘leaderfulness’ could look like in practice.

It also contributes to care literature related to accountability. Some scholars ask, for instance, if caring for each other is acknowledged as a ‘responsible’ activity, should it be enforced and monitored by the state? Kittay (1998: 144) argues that it should not but Deacon and Williams (2004) argue that perhaps it should – whilst worrying that this then evokes a moralistic ‘communitarianism’ (11) like that encouraged under New Labour. In terms of caring practices within small, prefigurative groups, this question is very relevant. If groups say they value interdependence, to what extent should this be enforced? Hoggett (2001) questions if and how the idea of responsibility links to agency. How responsible are people for their actions? Similarly,
the groups studied grapple with questions about whether members can always be said to be ‘rational actors’ and thus to what extent they can or should be held accountable for actions such as not completing tasks or creating an environment that might feel unsafe for others.

Creating leaderfulness

All the groups have tried to divide roles in ways that allow people to use their skills, knowledge and interests to benefit the group, whilst ensuring that no one accumulates significantly more status, power or resources than others by being in charge of pivotal areas for a long time. This has involved a fluid form of leadership in all the groups, which Amy explained as ‘not what you are – no one’s the leader, but something that you take on for a while, [in a certain area] and then you step back again’. It could either be an individual taking the lead, or several people in a working group. As part of the democratic structures, people taking the lead in certain areas are still accountable to the wider group in terms of adhering to the group’s priorities. Several groups use a circular, flat peer-supervision system to support each other to meet work goals.22

The benefits of this approach are that people can use their knowledge and skills for the good of the group, without reverting to a top-down structure. It also means that there are ways to divide responsibility – and to acknowledge the specific knowledge that people will have about certain things – without letting it give someone higher status.

Elizabeth, who joined her group several years after it started, when the structures were already set up, described how ‘leadership’ in the group looked to her initially:

They’re working with me not telling me what to do ... [and] when I begin to watch what everybody’s doing I kind of figured out that everyone has a lead on something that they’re doing. Like Amy is in lead of all the creative stuff because she has that experience, she has that talent to do it. And when she’s doing it, I feel like she’s in lead on it. And if she needs help she ask if we can help and we do and also I can ... learn something from her.

She went on to describe how, although it took her time to feel ‘equal ... and confident’, the approach to leadership felt like

equal power sharing ... the fact is that we’re working together. Working as equals. Doesn’t mean you have that skill that you’re going to hide it to yourself. You kind of share that skill, share the learning, share the equipment. Training each other to be equal. That kind of sharing, that kind of power.

Samir described a similar approach in groups he has been part of:

22 Upsurge in its current incarnation is slightly different from the other groups in this regard, with a more hierarchical line-management structure, still relatively flat compared to most top-down organisations.
[There was] a definite conscious effort to keep rotating roles and sharing around the knowledge. So, if people hadn’t been to certain type of meetings, it would be OK maybe it would be good for you to go to that meeting with someone who has been there more. You take on more responsibilities as you get more knowledge … one person would sort of take the lead in groups, so the new people could go underneath them to learn.

Homes Before Profit tries to work in a similar way. They started off with ‘five or six organisers’ who facilitated the meetings, the running of the organisation, and kept an eye on how individual cases were progressing. But, for them, ‘mutual support means building that capacity’. So the original organisers constantly tried working in ways that encouraged this: demonstrating particular roles and informally sharing knowledge about how to do them, and then stepping back and allowing others to take the lead. Sarah described how newer members have gradually taken the lead in facilitating some groups:

So quite a lot in meetings at the moment with the Spanish speakers … they just all self-facilitate and provide support and they knew what was going on … they were just explaining everything to each other and I didn’t really need to do anything … it’s really quite moving … and wonderful. Because this is exactly what we want to happen.

She also related how another member of the group took the lead on supporting a newer member with her housing application and bidding process. Initially, Sarah gave her tips and answered queries via phone messages. But after a while, ‘I got these couple of WhatsApp messages and … I was like oh S has got it under control and she knows what to do’. She explained how S being able to take the lead on some cases, and others being able to lead sub-groups at meetings means ‘more of us can support each other, then we are bigger and we are being more effective and we are able to … do more’.

Homes Before Profit also tries to facilitate people with less economic and educational privilege taking the lead on ‘professional’ skills: for instance, through workshops that help members learn about specific aspects of housing and immigration; and through ‘office days’, where a group of members sit working on letters to the council together so that those who are more confident in this type of advocacy can share skills with others.

Rona and Mark similarly described how timebanks also prioritise facilitating and supporting different members to ‘take the responsibility’ for a new project. Interestingly, ‘responsibility’ in this sense – as in having responsibility for ensuring certain things get done – does not seem to feel threatening or punitive to interviewees. In fact, for some, it can be helpful for their sense of self:

I think it is important to have a little bit of responsibility. Because [people] in their 50s like me you know, so we ain’t got no children growing. So it is nice to have a bit responsibility and do things there … it gives (people) the ability to go out there and try
things themselves and get people together as well. And it’s keeping them active as well, in the mind. (Rona)

Facilitating people to take the lead can be more complex, however. Amy reflected on challenges such as people ‘not really believing that people like us have a right to be in charge of these things’ and also worrying that if they take the lead and ‘ownership’, they will be responsible for any failures in that area. She explained that if you are used to being told that you are a failure by society, and to having your failures magnified and punished rather than lauded as learning experiences, you will be less likely to want to risk taking the lead and ‘failing’. She suggested that time, encouragement and consciously enacting formal equality within the group can gradually lessen this feeling.

In addition, problems arise due to the groups’ limited resources and the fact that sharing these skills can often be extremely time consuming. Becky described how in her group this has led to ‘a hierarchy starting to come in’, as it feels like there are particular areas which are important for running the group that are not ‘at everybody’s level’. Sometimes, if members with less educational privilege want to learn them, they feel bad about ‘bothering’ the person with the skills. This could partly reflect internalised notions of their ‘place’ in a group or society. Amrine, for instance, described how she ‘wanted to learn more about writing funding applications’ but decided it would be wrong to ask to be shown as the people who led on this were ‘so busy … and I don’t it even know basic typing … So [it’s] better they do it’.

This situation frustrates people from the more privileged backgrounds as well, as they feel it undermines their attempts to create equality. Noel recalled how, in the eviction resistance group he belonged to, he was encouraged to take the lead on accompanying people to official meetings, for instance with housing officers. He felt this role gave him undue importance, but fell into it because he had the confidence, negotiating skills and background to do it easily. Similarly, in the renters’ union he is currently part of, he has been asked to take the lead on communications, a role that carries a certain power in the group. He said he would be happy to help in this area but would prefer someone from a less economically and educationally privileged background took the lead rather than the ‘white middle-class guy’.

Kimberley talked about how one person in Future Voices from a more economically and educationally privileged background manages the finances, because it’s ‘easy for them; they’re used to it’. She confessed: ‘I don’t ask very many questions about the money. I guess I didn’t realise how much trust I put into her.’ She described how everyone in the cooperative has access to the finances if they want to look at them and ‘if we ever have any questions, I know that I can go and ask’. When I asked if she feels group members would be able to understand the finances she said:
sort of ... and even if we don’t [understand], we trust someone else to or they know they can ask the questions to get to that level of understanding ... I’ve accepted [it] and I think a lot of the other colleagues accept [it] as well.

In post-analysis discussions, I asked several other interviewees what they thought of this set-up and how it would work in their groups, to gain more understanding of how particular contexts and group dynamics affect these practices. Celine reflected on whether she feels Future Voices’ approach would work at SLWC:

I think ... that there isn’t that same love and trust for each other in our group as there is in Future Voices, and the trust helps. But to be honest, X who does the books at [Future Voices] is a bit like me – a nice, middle-class charity worker. I think I could have kept all the finance matters at SLWC to myself and done them myself and I think most people would have been OK with that. Because it’s what they’re used to, the nice middle-class person does that stuff, they would have accepted that. Where it got weird, and maybe contentious, for people, was when people trained up in finance or whatever saw their ‘peers’ taking on those roles as well, and having that ‘power’. But if we didn’t do that we would just have been saying, stay in your place, finances are just for certain people. Which I don’t think is what [Future Voices] are doing – their situation is different. But for us doing that would have been ... giving up on the idea of really sharing power.

I agree with Celine that the amount of trust in a group is important in terms of whether people feel more comfortable with one person retaining this role, and this is why it worked for Future Voices. But perhaps Kimberley’s assertion that she has ‘accepted’ the situation is more complicated than it first appears. She went on to say that she dislikes getting involved with funding bids and then mentioned ‘you have to use certain types of complicated language’, which suggests a fear or shame related to not having certain types of skills or knowledge that might be taken for granted amongst the more educationally privileged members of the group. This seemed true for a number of interviewees. There seemed to be little overt conflict related to this potential hierarchy of roles developing in the groups. Rather, most members from less privileged backgrounds seemed to concede it was better that those with more education or ‘professional’ experience do them, reflecting, I suggest, how invisible power plays out, making people feel that certain roles are not for people like them.

In all the groups studied, people do oversee particular areas of work and have responsibility for them. But leadership occurs in a way that minimises the possibility of power becoming entrenched in particular people and helps to shift structural inequality by making it more likely that people who do not normally have the opportunity to gain certain ‘marketable’ skills have that chance. The downside to rotating leadership and roles in these ways, of course, is that it can be
more difficult for someone to build up a large amount of skill or knowledge in a certain area, with perhaps negative consequences for the group achieving some goals. Nonetheless, I would argue the benefits of this system in terms of ‘preventing ... accumulation of power [and] ... building and sustaining [an] idea of a community of negotiation and mutual respect’ (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010) makes it something that groups trying to create non-hierarchical forms of care should adopt.

Making sure things get done (creating accountability)

We’re always ... checking up on each other, as a group, making sure this, this and the other is done ... but it’s not about ‘you didn’t do this’, it’s usually ‘how can we help you feel able to do it, where can the group support?’ (Amy)

I am not going to force you because what’s the point? Neither of us are going to gain anything from that situation. So, yeah, with Future Voices there’s always that option to say no and it’s not – nothing is ever forced or monitored or – I mean, things are monitored but not in that way. (Kimberley)

The quotes above capture the general approach to creating accountability in the groups studied. (I use the term narrowly, to mean some sort of checking system to ensure work gets done.) All are clear that they do not want to do ‘accountability’ in a way that makes people feel ashamed or punished, and most start from the perspective that ‘people are generally decent, they’ll do what they can’ (Laura). If things are not done, they try to understand that there are likely multiple reasons for this (rather than assuming people are lazy or incompetent).

This approach to accountability, where the group checks in on what people have managed to do, but does not penalise them for not doing it (and tries to support them where possible) seems a sensible approach for organisations where many people might not feel able – for emotional and practical reasons – to do as much as they want. It also fits with the spirit of interdependence that all of the groups work within. In addition, several interviewees described an approach to ‘work’ that is about collective responsibility and helping each other rather than individual achievement:

I hated filling in things and writing in things, so when I needed help with my CV and stuff like that ... you will put it down in different ways that I couldn’t ... With you I knew I could always help you untangle your headphones or something else like that that you found hard ... or if I felt like today I can’t tidy up, I’m too tired, and J has energy but can’t see what needs to be done. Then I can sit there and tell J, this thing and this thing, and I can feed [J’s son] so she doesn’t need to. (Paula)

Becky talked about it in terms of
us[ing] our own skills to help where other weaknesses were ... but not in a way that was ... degrading or demeaning and learning to work with each other... together, rather than against each other. And incorporate each other’s ideas and learning ... how some people felt more comfortable doing certain ... things more than others.

She also talked about ‘understanding and valuing’ what someone else needs to work – ‘somewhere tidy or whatever’ – and trying to make that easier for them:

Just little things ... I can see you are doing a lot, do you want some [help] ... or not even saying anything ... just washing up the cups ... so the person comes in the morning doesn’t have to come in to the place being like crumbs everywhere ... [making people feel like] ... they aren’t on their own. There was somebody else willing to help.

Accountability understood in this way is part of a wider idea of collective responsibility – both for ensuring that work gets done and for each other’s welfare.

Another key practice – ‘checking in’ – allows people to acknowledge and be open about their ups and downs, thereby normalising the idea:

We very very regularly, almost to a fault do [a] go-round at meetings – how are you feeling in terms of capacity? What is your next few months looking like? – Like everyone wears their vulnerabilities on their sleeve as ... we should in an alternative system of doing things ... we are not there like through thick and thin to perform and be efficient. [Sometimes] ... It’s like ‘I feel awful or I am having a really bad mental health crisis’. Or ‘someone in my family is going through a hard time or is really sick’. (Jane)

These sort of check-ins are also useful for people to understand the wider context of other people’s lives, and the conditions that shape them, thereby enabling care and compassion and a willingness to be flexible (some of the things that are shut down by dominant models of help).

Marianne argued that really embedding this understanding that people have ups and downs is crucial for organisations trying to create collective forms of help. You can work with it by developing processes that allow people to take over temporarily for others, but in ways that do not overtire them or shame the person having the ‘down’ period.

Not taking a disciplinary approach to accountability can mean better output in the long run. Two members of one group – used to having their time needs overlooked by various statutory agencies and in their low-paid, insecure jobs – said how much they appreciated having those needs taken seriously, and how this increased their commitment to the group. One reflected how not being penalised for missing certain timing and other targets on a project made her feel ‘better and stronger, now because the group was so flexible for me, now I want to do everything for the group’. Another described how
[my] brain was not stressing ... I get it done, but it’s not a rush. [In most workplaces it feels like] your boss is coming, you’ve got to run ... he’s coming! ... You don’t feel free. Here is not like that though ... It gave me time to do my work. And so if I make a mistake I go back and I correct it in the right time.

Esme echoed this sentiment, describing how being treated with consideration in a way that makes you feel seen, makes you want to do more ‘even if you weren’t feeling well you just still wanted to be there to make the effort’.

Several interviewees admitted that sometimes they do develop resentments towards people they perceive to be ‘carrying less’ load in a group, even at the same time as understanding why this is true for some people. As one described:

I think that became quite tiring or frustrating to some people in the sense that they felt they were doing so much more than others. And then that then looked to other people like they were doing more or were allowed to do more. Which wasn’t the case. It was a case of people taking on workloads from other people, that maybe didn’t feel comfortable or couldn’t manage or just didn’t ... initially want those but took them because they felt they had to or because there was a need to.

Both Jane and Pierre described how some distance can be helpful in these situations. In Future Voices, Jane said members are able to be ‘careful’ and ‘gentle’ and give each other the benefit of the doubt, precisely because they spend only limited time together. She contrasted this with her experiences in SLWC (of which she was also briefly a member) where members meet more frequently and relationships are more intense. In this setting, she said, it is harder to maintain this ‘carefulness’ and to refrain from assumptions and judgments about others. She acknowledged, however, the difficult balancing act of creating relationships where people feel close enough to share their situations, but not so close that they assume they know everything about each other’s lives.

A number of interviewees talked about how something as small as being thanked or being acknowledged can be important for lifting people out of the weariness that can sometimes set in. Becky described how important it is to ‘be valued for your time ... we all need that’. She clarified that ‘I don’t necessarily [mean] sitting there and going “well you are just amazing, you are great” ... Just thank you. Sometimes it’s thank you.’ Sarah similarly described how, if she is ‘doing a lot’ and feeling ‘drained’, then a ‘recognition’ of that can be helpful.

Even more powerful and re-energising can be celebrating ‘small wins’ collectively as Laura described happening at the timebanks. Becky suggested making time at meetings to reflect on things that have gone well and saying, ‘Well done us ... maybe a checklist. This has been
completed. It doesn’t need to say by who. That’s irrelevant to some extent … [but just] well done guys. Right. Now we continue with the meeting’.

Another challenge of acknowledging and giving space to people’s needs and down periods is the emotional toll for some group members. Jane reflected on how being frank with each other about what they could contribute at any one time helped her group build bonds of care. It could also feel exhausting and dispiriting at points:

At the moment, often the go rounds are really depressing. It’s like how are you doing? I am tired I am knackered. But I am happy to be here. Is like generally how they go. And the debrief at the end is normally like, oh, that went much better than I thought and I am feeling really energised … but … by the time of the next meeting [the same thing repeats] … And … There is a very good reason why people have energy drains right now. But when those become drains for everyone. So one person consistently not coming in, not able to come, not being able to participate like … Becomes like a weight I think for everyone to bear… sucks a lot of the energy they do have out.

I would argue that it is important not to underestimate the work involved in absorbing other people’s lack of energy and this needs to be factored in when thinking about ‘capacity’ in groups like the ones studied. Not least because, as Jane said, if you are working in an organisation where you feel a real sense of ownership and you have shared responsibility, ‘the anxiety’ is ‘less contained’ than in other types of work, ‘it weighs on you in a different way’. Kimberley observed relatedly that, because in these forms of organising people are constantly negotiating, discussing, checking with each other, ‘you’re constantly having to be in the right mind space to speak to people’, you can end up feeling exhausted more easily than in other environments, ‘your brain just doesn’t know where to sit in your head’.

When some people have less capacity and things start to move more slowly, it is a challenge for those with more confidence not to ‘take over’. As one interviewee observed: ‘It’s a new skill for some people, learning to stand back’. And Sarah worries that it is difficult to stop activists from more privileged backgrounds ‘swooping in’. She wondered, however, if this is necessarily a bad thing:

A while ago someone else who is no longer in the group was saying we need some more activists to come along and … that idea didn’t appeal to me because … I guess that saviour or rescue dynamic … But I have kind of come to think that this isn’t so bad recently. And if we had a couple more people who had activist skills to run the group. But I guess their role is not to be activist, it’s to facilitate other people’s participation.

She later admitted though that if they are not careful, this could lead to a ‘service’ dynamic unwittingly emerging. Jane similarly observed: ‘it’s easy to step in and try to protect people from
work and then end up taking a lot of the power because of the privileges that I have’. Harriet, meanwhile, cautioned that the ‘stepping-in’ approach can just lead to people who already have power gaining more ‘CV points’ and social capital from the work they do in these groups.

The timebanks seem to incur less resentment about some people doing more than others and least of the feeling of being drained by other people’s lack of capacity. All timebank interviewees said that people rarely ‘count’ their time credits – and are often willing to share credits with other members without enough to go on a group trip, for example. Perhaps this is because acknowledgement, through gaining a time credit, is built into the structure of the timebank. Or perhaps because people have much more freedom in deciding what they want to offer the group than in the other groups, and so perhaps are more energised to do that, even when things are difficult. Crucial to the timebank philosophy is that no one is obliged to do anything and that the coordinators do not step in if a project starts but doesn’t take off, or if it goes more slowly than planned. Pierre talked about a food-recycling and meal-sharing scheme run by some members:

So the Food Cycle ... you don’t have to commit – you sign up and there’s an online system, you sign up to be there this Saturday. And there’s a team, there’s a hub leader, there is a cooking team, a hosting team and a serving team, and they manage it ... There can be five, there can be 25, it’s impossible to tell who’s going to come ... No one’s obliged ... The [only] obligation is to be nice to each other, respect one another, not to abuse one another.

From the timebank perspective, the purpose of its work is strengthening the network of mutual aid – developing the sense of reciprocity and fellowship by helping people meet each other’s needs and feel better about themselves. Within this framework, the ‘no obligation’ approach is effective, though it can sometimes be difficult to explain to funders – as A explained, it can seem to them like ‘nothing much is happening’.

Alex explained how in his radio cooperative they reject a ‘business planning’ approach – by which he means an outlook that sees growth as the default desired outcome – and do not have funding targets. New members are explicitly told that the cooperative is not ambitious about expansion and that no one is penalised if they don’t do the tasks they said they would. This works well, but in part because the work is not ‘urgent’. The cooperative helps young people develop crucial skills and confidence but lacks the same compulsion to get as much done as quickly as possible as, for example, Homes Before Profit. While Homes Before Profit is also free of funding targets, it still struggles with capacity since its primary work – dealing with often desperate housing situations – cannot just be dropped if people do not want, or are unable to finish it.
As Amy explained, the challenge of maintaining the ‘integrity’ of an organisation – for example by being understanding when people can’t get their assigned tasks done – while also meeting what ‘funding dictate[s]’ can feel intractable, and ‘just get[ing] the job done’, whoever does it, can sometimes feel like the priority.

There is also the question of whether leaving people to determine their own pace and participation level entirely is desirable. For example, when I described the approach of the timebanks and Alex’s radio station – ‘unambitious’ and relaxed about failure – to some interviewees, they wondered about the emotional impact of ‘failing’ to make a project happen on people who were already used to being made to feel like failures. And a number of interviewees described positive experiences of being ‘pushed’, which allowed them to overcome internalised ideas of their own worthlessness and feel ‘proud of what I could do’. The key to not making this ‘pushing’ punitive, and making it feel more like helpful encouraging, one interviewee suggested, is making sure you are only doing it in the context of quite a developed relationship where vulnerability and help have been shared on both sides, so that the relationship feels somewhat equal, as well as reflecting continuously on one’s own motivations for doing it.

Ultimately, several interviewees felt that in the current socio-economic context, where some group members have had their sense of self ground down and are dealing with numerous insecurities and anxieties, groups such as the ones studied might need to have a paid coordinator, or several, to take on the tasks that other members end up not being able to do. Jane reflected that this is not ‘ideal’ but perhaps more ‘realistic’ and ‘honest’. Another interviewee suggested that perhaps her group would function better if there was an acknowledged, and adequately compensated ‘core group’ holding things together, to allow room for the instability in some members’ lives.

Noel described his experience as secretary of a renters’ union. The structure involves several local branches, which operate semi-independently but also have some centralised processes. He feels that the one branch that has a paid full-time coordinator to manage and facilitate decision-making and democratic processes is the most inclusive. The branches that do not have this tend to be dominated by the white middle-class members who are in slightly precarious housing situations, rather than the members who are in much more desperate ones. Samir said he used to feel uncomfortable about having specific ‘coordinators’ in a non-hierarchical group. But, ‘seeing how difficult it [is] to keep things going long term just based on the goodwill of people’, he would now ‘engage much more’ with the idea. I argue that relying on the long-term ‘goodwill of people’ can also create resentment among some members of the group. This can end up replicating top-down dynamics as people who are seen to be doing less feel they have to be grateful to others who are doing more without reward. One interviewee recalled how
when our group doubled in size, I remember just having headaches the whole time and feeling resentful that this was taking up so much of my life and getting really annoyed with people ... which just reinforced the usual hierarchies between ‘professional’ and ‘non-professional’ members of the group. At times we felt so frustrated that we ended up doing the stop-being-lazy-and-play-your-part thing – more than we would have liked. It wasn’t helpful for anyone.

Samir suggested that making people comfortable with the idea of a coordinator is partly about assuaging fears that ‘these people would have too much power. And that they would be making decisions on top of other people. But (rather than) avoiding it completely ... it’s [about] designing a system so that all the controls are in place.’ I would agree that putting these controls into place as well as reflecting regularly together on how they are working is a way of incorporating paid coordinator roles whilst maintaining the non-hierarchical ethos of the groups. Amy suggested that an appropriate person for this sort of role would need to be ‘someone ... who has the competence and skills to actually just get the job done well and still hold the integrity of feeling equal and caring for everyone and not using it to up their own status’.

In the groups studied, there is no formal distinction between people ‘running’ the organisation and people ‘using’ it: everyone does both. All of the groups operate on the understanding that, especially when people are facing numerous difficulties in their lives, their ability to ‘contribute’ can be cyclical. So, it has been necessary for them to find ways to ensure the essential part of the work does get done without penalising people. They do this partly through an ethos of collective responsibility as well as generosity towards each other. They also put processes in place to gauge regularly where people are at in their lives and how much they can and cannot do. Sometimes resentments do occur, as well as unintentional ‘power grabbing’ (Harriet) by those who have more capacity to take on tasks. On the whole, though, groups find a way to reflect on and engage with these productively. More difficult to overcome are demands from funders that organisations meet goals, as well as some people’s sense of themselves as failures, which some interviewees were wary about reinforcing. Given the wider socio-political context, a viable potential solution could be to have one or more people who are paid or otherwise rewarded to make sure everything gets done.

Who has the keys?

The keys ... there was a few ... Issues around that ... It was about a practicality ... Can you get here at this time and oversee the space or lock up on a regular basis ... so you would need keys. But with that comes a particular responsibility ... and then it became about a power thing ... because some people started to feel less included. (Becky)
It was the longest process … literally I remember I was talking a lot about keys and the idea of who’s even holding the keys and these massive, hour-long conversations happened. (Kimberley)

A common struggle and dilemma in many of the groups looked at is: should those who take on more responsibility have power and authority within the group? Or, as one interviewee described it, the ‘who has the keys?’ dilemma. Many people want to have keys to a group’s premises, with the freedom and power this brings, but also disagree about whether having keys should come with additional responsibilities (like opening or locking up and setting up for training sessions). Interestingly, this dilemma comes up in the literature in a very different context – within the cooperative factories of the horizontalidad movement in Argentina – demonstrating, perhaps, its ubiquity as a symbolic dilemma in non-hierarchical groups.

Samir described the practical difficulties and resentments if people who are not very involved in carrying out decisions are equally involved in making them:

obviously [you are not going to] have it completely open so that anybody at any time can make a decision … so already you are accepting that you are making some sort of limitations. So, it’s just where do you draw that line? Drawing it and being happy with it.

Others disagreed. Amy talked about how in her organisation, after a period of time, ‘participants’ are asked if they want to become full members and if they do they are asked to sign a form saying they will open or lock up one day a week, commit to attending a certain number of meetings, and spend several hours a month supporting new joiners in return for full strategic decision-making power. Those who do not want to sign up to this are given decision-making power in the areas they work in (through working groups that report back to the main group) and are welcome to participate in organisation-wide strategic meetings, but do not have full decision-making power in these.

Amy felt that this ‘ended up enacting a conservative approach’ as it led to some people feeling angry and resentful that they lack a full say in decisions about an organisation they care about, but cannot commit the required time to – especially as, from their perspective, this is largely due to childcare responsibilities and paid work situations where their hours are not fixed and they are at the mercy of employers and agencies:

In the morning I clean at the school … then I go to the nursery and do the paperwork. Who else is going to feed my kids? I love [the cooperative] … [but] I can’t be on this and that working group, I can’t help out all the time, I can’t come to all meetings. So that means I don’t get a say? (Paula)
Kimberley discussed the model in Future Voices where youth workers and young people who want to participate in running the group are given the opportunity to become official cooperative members. The extra responsibility they are expected to undertake is not particularly time consuming (attending cooperative meetings once a month) but it does come with the formal weight of being an official cooperative member. Those who choose not to take on this responsibility are still welcome at meetings but cannot vote on some issues where the cooperative members have legal responsibility.

This system seems to work well and avoid resentments, perhaps because the need for members to sign up to certain responsibilities does not feel arbitrary, or like a value judgement, but a practical and legal necessity. The legal requirements and need for cooperative members’ views to be crucial to certain decisions is balanced by a generous-spirited and open approach to including views of other group members (‘volunteers’ in their terminology) wherever possible.

Jane explained why she thinks it is fair and practical that those people who are ‘able to put in the most time are the people who have the biggest weight’. At Future Voices, this approach gives everyone the space they need to step up and step back at different times. The weight of power, she explained,

> is fairly well spread between people of different ages, people who have been here for different lengths of time ... like someone signed off for the moment because they are really sick and overworked and anxious, so he definitely has less power in the room at the moment. But that’s good.

She did, however, question whether she is ‘just doing a knee-jerk [response] because I am one of the people at the moment who probably holds most of the power’, and suggested she maybe needed to ‘think a bit more critically about it afterwards’. At a follow-up interview she observed that ‘it is often the more privileged people who have more capacity’ because they have more help with childcare or jobs that offer ‘flexibility ... not working crazy hours’, and started to wonder if the approach does in fact reinforce power and privilege.

Samir argued that it is ‘really good to challenge the dynamics, [of] who is excluded. But ... if you end up destroying the organisation in the search of including everybody ... well that’s not going to benefit anyone either’. I would agree that some level of ‘exclusion’ is necessary, although working out how to do this in a way that does not further marginalise people who have less power in wider society is something that needs to be studied further.

**Enforcing rules**

Tyranny of structurelessness (Freeman 1972) arguments assume a ‘lawless’ space where people are at risk because rules are not enforced or there are no rules at all. The fear of this sort of
situation is one thing that can make people wary of non-hierarchical structures. I therefore believe it is important to look at how the groups studied enforce rules in a way that does not ‘police’ people but does try and ensure everyone feels safe and valued.

All the groups share agreements about what behaviours are considered acceptable in the group and what could be considered threatening or abusive. For the most part, these have been devised collectively, though some draw from standard voluntary sector policies. Given that all of the groups have some members who are facing extreme challenges in their lives, and have endured multiple oppressions, it is perhaps unsurprising that all at some point have encountered situations where a member has made a complaint about another member acting in a way that could be seen as threatening or abusive to other members. Jane talked about how the temptation in these situations is to ban people from the group, or to implement a top-down disciplinary system that deals with the matter swiftly and without messiness. However, she and other interviewees argued that this would be counter to the ethos of trying to hear and value all perspectives and include people who may have been most marginalised (often those who are banned from or punished at other helping organisations).

Interviewees described different approaches to doing this in practice. One group has a multi-layered procedure, which involves accuser and accused writing out their ‘stories’ about the event (with support from another group member if they want). They then present these to a panel of other group members and have a chance to respond to each other; then together, all participants in the process decide on a way forward. Several interviewees discussed how this process worked in practice in a situation where one member was accused of shouting and swearing at several others. One said that although the procedure could do with improvement and learning from implementation, overall, she felt it represents the group’s ethos that ‘everyone must be heard’:

The best part was it’s not ‘you are wrong or you are wrong’ ... [but] ‘it happened, it shouldn’t have happened and how is it not going to happen again?’ So we were on the positive side and moving towards something instead of just [saying] ‘you are wrong’, like other people do. Like with the social services, they just say ‘you are wrong, you are wrong’. Ok ... I understand I am wrong, now what?

The person who was accused had a similar reaction, commenting on how much she appreciated being supported to reflect on and present her story and being made part of the process rather than just the subject of it.

Members of Future Voices discussed how they do not have a structured non-hierarchical process for dealing with these sorts of conflicts, but engage with them according to a general ethos of not just ‘using authority’ to ‘enforce rules’ but rather think about ‘safety’ and following rules as a ‘negotiation’. Kimberley explained how ‘it’s a lot easier ... to tell people to do something that’s on
paper’, but if there is a ‘rigid routine where it’s like, “You can’t do that, you can only do this, oh, blah, blah”, it sort of becomes fake. Whereas if ... it becomes a conversation ... it just creates a [real] sense of security’. She linked it to power: ‘we talk a lot about like owning our privileges and what comes with power and often safety links into that conversation’ in terms of who has the right to be heard and decide what happens.

Jane described what she might try and convey in a situation where a young person has potentially endangered someone else, a conversation she said she has had ‘so many times’:

[I try to convey] So we are not punishing you and I ... have a lot of empathy and a lot of the behaviours that you are expressing ... and I really want to talk ... about them with you. [But] I can’t have you at [the] club if you put other people ... in danger. It’s not like what we want, but it’s just not possible. So we need to know that you are not going to put people at risk again in order for you to come back. And we would shake on it.

She cautioned, however, that it is essential that enough time and space is given to having these conversations, allowing people who may be accused of unacceptable behaviour to feel heard and thus willing to come to an agreement on a way forward. She recounted a situation where there was not enough time for this and in the interests of not unduly punishing or banning someone who had been accused of bullying, the group ended up with a situation where the person who had felt bullied felt unsafe returning to the group.

Another safety-related issue that arose is how to balance statutory norms and legal duties, for example child-protection policies and practices, with a collective leadership ethos. One interviewee recalled the distress and confusion of members of her group when grappling with a situation in which one member was caring for her daughter in a way others felt could be harmful to the child. The standard procedure would be to inform relevant authorities. But group members felt that going behind their fellow member’s back would undermine the shared equality-based ethos of the group. They felt it would be better to discuss the situation with the woman concerned and decide next steps together. One interviewee described the dilemma in a post-analysis reflection:

If we thought the child was in immediate serious danger [I] think we would have gone to social services. I guess it was that sense that it could get worse if [the mother’s] stress worsened, but it was never quite there, never quite at the point of immediate danger, so we didn’t know what to do. We knew the young mother to be an extremely loving mother, who worked hard to do the best for her children, but was under a lot of pressure in her life, and dealing with difficult things, and those pressures were being played out around and occasionally at the children. She would get quite angry and frustrated at her children. She had been benefitting from being part of the group and was finding ways to
try and deal with her issues and we didn’t want to destroy that, as well as her children, by starting a process that would increase stress.

Several members of the group ended up discussing the situation with the woman, and helping her work out a plan to get the support she needed to ‘address her anger and flip-outs’, which they ‘hoped would generally make her feel better and therefore make it easier dealing with the pressures of caring for the kids’. In the end, social services were not involved. But the interviewee recalled how ‘emotionally difficult’ the situation was for group members, how much they ‘agonised’ over it, how difficult it was to ‘broach the subject’ with this particular member and how ‘defensive she got at any mention of her parenting’. She went on to say: ‘I do think that [such situations] really test the model to its limits and we are still to this day not sure we got it exactly right.’

Pierre explained that these sorts of dilemmas are aggravated by the fact that the relationships in these collaborative forms of help are different from typical service-provider–service-user or colleague relationships. They are a mix of both those things, as well as having elements of ‘friendships’ or ‘family’-like relationships, i.e. the close emotional attachments that many interviewees mentioned. It can be difficult to know, therefore, in what capacity you are acting, and this perhaps affects what your legal as well as ethical obligations are.

Interviewees also talked about other breaches of rules that sometimes occurred, which were less serious but could cause conflict. One interviewee described how some people ‘did end up needing to take more resources because they felt they needed more’. She mentioned her frustration at somebody claiming payment for hours of work she was later shown not to have done. Another described a member who slightly breached the organisation’s childcare rules in order to gain a little time for herself.

What is perhaps tricky about these smaller incidences of rule-breaking is that, whereas in conventional top-down organisations people might be punished or banned, this isn’t a straightforward option in environments that are trying not to be punitive and where, as one interviewee described, it is accepted that some people have difficult lives and might sometimes do things to survive (which it is difficult to blame them for). One interviewee admitted that when these sorts of incidents do happen, she finds herself wanting to take action against people she does not get on with on a personal level and less so against those she does get on with:

It almost came to who I liked and who I didn’t. And that's a trade-off of emotions ... I was more understanding to [some people] taking and it wasn't because their needs were any greater than anyone else’s ... But because I got ... more emotional gratification [from] the way they were the way, they made me smile. Little things. Whereas there would be one or two others I can think of which I didn’t give that grace ... [having] your needs met
should not be based on ... whether I like you. And that's what it came down to. I don't believe it's fair.

One group described some success in engaging with these issues through a ‘shared-problem’ approach. Rather than blaming someone for a perceived transgression of the group’s norms, this approach treats the behaviour as something that affects everyone, and that everyone (or at least the person accused and several representatives of the wider group) should take responsibility for. It also focuses on creating a shared vision for the group in the particular area being discussed and plotting a path for everyone to move together towards this. This approach seems to minimise blaming and shaming behaviours. By keeping the person or people accused involved in decisions about what should happen, it also maintains the shared decision-making ethos. For example, when a member of one group left her children in the group’s space and went shopping, which was against the agreement that parents need to stay in the building with their children, she sat with two other members to discuss the impact on other group members of suddenly having additional children in the space. The members were careful to point out all the ways she was a valued and important part of the group and she was given time to explain why she had needed to leave them. They eventually concluded that the group’s policy did not meet some members’ needs. The group then discussed different options together and decided that – in exceptional circumstances and for short periods – members could formally request another member to be responsible for their children.

Interestingly, Paula feels that it is precisely because people feel so safe in these sorts of non-hierarchical spaces that difficult behaviour sometimes occurs:

Sometimes there were times people would have outbursts and stuff like that. And ... people are entitled to have that, because sometimes that’s maybe the only...safe environment they can have that outburst, it’s important for the group [to ask] what has happened to make you feel like that? And because this has happened, and you can’t have an outburst at this scenario, whatever happens next is going to trigger it.

Several other interviewees also suggested that because people in these groups feel like ‘family’ and care so much about each other and the group, conflicts can become more messy as people feel more hurt and fear (of losing what they have) than they might do in a more distanced environment. This recalls Harriet’s analysis in Chapter 3 of why lack of capacity can become a problem in mutual helping spaces – partly because people feel so safe in those spaces, they expose their most vulnerable sides, and get most upset.

Creating safer spaces without punishing and shaming

Ensuring people feel safe goes beyond just ensuring people do not overtly break rules. It also encompasses ensuring that people feel valued and not ‘less than’ because of some aspect of their
identity. Again, in dominant models of help, staff and clients are subject to an equality and diversity policy, which regulates these aspects of behaviour. And again, given the commitment of the groups studied to valuing different knowledges more equally and making decisions in a collaborative rather than top-down way, it makes sense that most of them seem to take more deliberative, and sometimes more uncomfortable approaches to addressing issues concerning equality, diversity and respect for people’s different identities.

The most fundamental ‘difference’ the groups studied are trying to overcome in their structures and ethos is that between helper and helpee. However, within the groups a number of different ‘micro-hierarchies’ are also apparent.

Marianne described how the ‘older contingent’ of Upsurge members largely comprises older white men. The changing nature of homelessness in London, however, has led to more women, Eastern European immigrants and people from other ethnic groups joining in recent years. This has led to some tensions, due to what she described as ‘misconceptions’ among the older white men about the newer members regarding housing rights and access. There is also wariness about transgender people:

“I remember someone going on [in a training on diversity] about trans people having unisex toilets, saying there were problems with transgender people. And what it did was ... it exposed how much work we actually had to do in order to get the organisation functioning in order where they embraced difference. (Marianne)

Similar dynamics have occurred in SLWC. Ethnicity and race have played into this, but in complex ways. For instance, some of the most oppressive power dynamics have been perpetuated by people who are not white but grew up in the UK, towards people of similar ethnic descent who grew up outside the UK. This has then looped back as some of these newer immigrants, many of whom do not have recourse to public funds, and get all their income from work (both formal and informal), have sometimes used derogatory language to describe people ‘on benefits’, including some older members. Amy described how several years in, ‘mini alliances’ started being formed, between members, with people

starting to look at familiarities within each other whether it’s a case of you are my buddy or we are similar because you get my jokes. Or you are similar and ... then it became a bit like clan mentality ... a bit bullyish at times.

Noel, meanwhile, described the complexity of how these micro-hierarchies have played out in Project 52, with people being ‘both victims and perpetrators at the same time’:

It’s not as though it’s just like there is a conflict between this community and that community. There is ... the middle-aged Jamaican man who is deeply, deeply homophobic
and has spent his whole life dealing with racism. Or like the teenage white girl who is like constantly doing some like fucked up cultural appropriation shit with like various black cultures on the estate. And is still a victim of sexual violence in a quite regular way from different men on the estate. And these are just the ongoing things that are happening all the time there.

Most of the groups address these challenges in ways that encourage what Noel framed as ‘radical’ rather than ‘liberal’ forms of change. In his understanding, a liberal approach tries ‘not to see difference’, whereas a radical one explores fundamental differences and tries to make linkages between different oppressions. He believes this is more sustainable, as when each new conflict comes up it is easier to resolve, because you have addressed the fundamental issues already. He admitted, however, that in order for the radical approach to work, you need to ‘have people that will push that in a delicate enough way that it doesn’t fuck up that basic balance of, hey, we are all working together’.

Marianne described how she approached building a more ‘inclusive environment’ at Upsurge without saying, well, this is what you are allowed to say and this is not what you are allowed to say, and knowing that the only way to do it was to get people to see for themselves how important it was for the organisation to have an approach to difference that meant that people felt welcomed and supported and looked after.

She described doing

lots of challenging people … [but] also lots of … just encouraging conversation … making a point of getting people to talk about it all the time and just kind of questioning people [saying things like] ‘Most of homelessness is dominated by white men between the ages of 27 to 40. Really, we could probably just be white men, you know, maybe we should just do that. Do you think that’s a good thing to do?’

Crucially, she does not just challenge other people but exposes herself as well, doing ‘lots of calling myself out and saying, I don’t know, does anyone else think that’s a bit racist?’ She explained that her aim is not just to create a good equality and diversity policy, but to engage the group in ‘think[ing] about why we cared about being diverse … And then how we were going to change what we had, which wasn’t diverse’. She feels this approach has had some success as ‘now seeing the new project and training … It looks like a much broader group of people with different experiences, different ages, different ethnicities, just different’.

Noel, who has experience of more middle-class activist groups and more demographically mixed groups (such as several eviction resistance groups) feels torn about the benefits and costs of importing anti-oppressive practices from the activist spaces into the more mixed groups. On the
one hand, he said, he favours organising approaches that help ensure no one feels threatened, intimidated or oppressed. On the other, policing ‘unsafe’ things people say and do can in itself be intimidating and shaming. Kimberley talked about the benefits of the anti-oppressive approach in Future Voices, where the more ‘middle-class’ founders of her youth work cooperative constantly challenge members and young people about potentially derogatory language and assumptions. For her, this is very important for her own development and understanding and I would argue that this sort of overt challenging is crucial to meaningfully shift micro-hierarchies.

But it can also be alienating and shaming for some people if it is done from a moral-high-ground position by people with more socio-economic privilege who do not address their own biases. Kimberley acknowledged the barrier it creates between the group members and local youth workers from a more working-class background, and the more middle-class founders. As Noel argued, although in general he thinks ‘keeping a safe space is fundamentally a really good idea’ he also thinks it can end up ‘being more exclusionary than it’s intended in a situation of overlapping, intersecting issues’. If done in a way that relies on enforcing multiple ‘labelling’ behavioural codes and norms, it can ‘add up to’ something that feels ‘convoluted and impenetrable’. If people have acted in ways at odds with group norms, he feels it is important to remember that they are also subject to external norms, and so ‘will act in ways that are not great sometimes. And if you keep labelling, blaming or banning people for that, you build a culture where not much productive stuff can happen’:

We have to be much more selective about what we call out and how we call it out. What the processes are once something has happened. Because if we try to institute any blanket policy, like we would just exclude the entire community. Everybody instantly would no longer be welcome. And then what is it safe for? Like is this safe space policy for some relatively middle-class like … slightly radical youth workers to come and hang out in a space in the middle of an estate?

This resonates with Ishkanian and Saavedra’s (2019) argument that class is the most neglected element in intersectional ‘micro-politics’ and that the use of ‘a lot of Gender Studies speak and terminology’ (as described by one of their interviewees) can end up being exclusionary to ‘working class people’ (16). Noel’s concern that by continually ‘calling out’ in Project 52, he would end up not being able to engage in the work effectively echoes wider concerns of people seeking to remain engaged in working with others who share similar aims and goals rather than ‘retreating into privilege and isolation’ (Moss and Maddrell 2017: 619, cited in Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019: 20).

I suggest that Marianne – from a white middle-class background – challenging herself as well as others, and trying to have conversations rather than impose rules is important in terms of
ensuring that attempts to not be oppressive do not end up with those who are already more socially and economically privileged shaming others. Several other interviewees reiterated the importance of people from more privileged backgrounds trying to recognise their own prejudices and perpetuation of oppressions. One interviewee, from a less economically privileged background, recalled how she was pulled up for using the word ‘tramp’ by a more middle-class member of her group. At first, she resisted changing her language, but through discussion decided that it was important. She also pulled the other group member up on their use of language that could be seen as offensive to people with learning disabilities (this interviewee’s son is autistic). Other interviewees pointed out the subtly pejorative language people from more privileged backgrounds sometimes use about people on lower incomes. Kimberley noted that Future Voices’ ‘equality’ policies work best when the ‘middle-class’ founders not only challenge others on their seemingly pejorative language, but when there is an environment in which others feel able either to push back against accusations they feel are unfair, or to challenge the ‘middle-class’ people in return.

Noel also pointed out that it is useful to recognise that people who feel stigmatised or shamed in terms of their own identities (for instance, single mothers or people from ethnic minority backgrounds) might sometimes use what feels like pejorative language about other groups in order to draw attention away from their own ‘otherness’. He added that it can be useful to try to understand ways in which people who have been marginalised might feel powerless, and help them link that feeling to other marginalised groups’ powerlessness, though he acknowledged it can be difficult to find the thing that will ‘make the link’ for people.

Perhaps one way of doing this is by addressing these issues and even sharing experiences of oppression in training that all members have to undertake. Done well, this can lead to people feeling like their perceptions have expanded and they have helped to do that for others, which helps build collective power rather than reinforcing oppressive power or undermining power within. Harriet described how, in the groups she has been involved in,

[what] really helped to bond us was training around trying to understand different people’s perspectives, their different stories and narratives and understand when you are pissed off with them about something they’ve got a different story to you about what’s happened. So I think a lot of those things are really important ... it is very diverse as an organisation, people coming in who are Muslims, Christians, atheists, black, brown, white people come into contact with people who are very different from them and they might have had prejudices about them before and those prejudices are being challenged by the actual reality of people. It is the same thing with class. So we are all really learning and chang[ing] our ways of thinking ... quite a few people said that was one of the things that people came back for.
I argue that this sort of structured, experiential training, where people go quite deeply into challenging their own understandings is an important part of dispersing micro-hierarchies. But several interviewees warned that it only works well in situations where group members have already built some trust and sense of equality, and where they have a shared commitment to the group or its goals, which makes it worthwhile.

Others said that something as simple as challenging people on their language one to one, or in small groups, rather than in the wider group, could help minimise shaming dynamics. More public interventions can feel ‘very attacking’, said Samir, ‘and of course you are going to get very defensive in that scenario if you feel ganged up on’. One interviewee described this as ‘calling in rather than calling out’. Noel feels that if you challenge people in these ways, from a perspective of not feeling like you are ‘better’ than them, then ‘change does often happen through repetition and reiteration’. He argued that making the space just to keep having those conversations ‘with different one-to-one or different configurations of people’ is extremely important.

I suggest that what my interviewees are doing is similar to what Ishkanian and Saavedra (2019) term ‘intersectional prefiguration’ (1) Although applauding non-hierarchical groups for attempting it, and reiterating the importance of it, they also feel it ‘produces its own hierarchies and forms of disciplinary power’ (Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019: 4, referencing Foucault 1991). This tallies with my findings and I agree with them that the way to move beyond this is through indicating ‘continuous and iterative action’, and reflection with all members being willing to have the ‘uncomfortable conversations’ (Gökariksel and Smith 2017: 640 cited in Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019: 2-3) which allow them to continue working together towards shared goals.

**Chapter summary**

At one point, there wasn’t enough structure and I think some people felt like they were floating in space. (Amy)

If you create this structure then it’s going to enable people to come in and know what to do, how to do it. Then feel part of it. (Samir)

Enacting non-hierarchical forms of help requires structures to help things get done and make people feel safe. In this chapter, I have outlined some of the ways the groups I have looked at try to do this. These structures are, due to the non-hierarchical, egalitarian values of all the groups studied, different from those used in mainstream forms of help.

By redefining and having realistic expectations about how much members can ‘contribute’ or ‘carry weight’, all the groups have at least partly eschewed the need to discipline members in top-down ways for ‘not pulling their weight’ or completing tasks: rather, work is organised with the idea that we all have ‘ups and downs’ in mind. They all try to ‘check’ things are getting done and
support people to carry out their roles in a way that does not feel accusatory or punishing. They also have a tendency to take some collective responsibility for each other’s work. This approach acknowledges the complexity of people’s lives and helps build a sense of collective power.

They have also found ways to respond to offensive or threatening language, ideas and sometimes actions collaboratively through questioning and reflecting on each other’s perspectives, rather than immediately shaming or imposing punishment on perpetrators. This can be uncomfortable, and I argue that these practices need further development to make sure people who are on the receiving end of bullying behaviours feel safe and comfortable. But ultimately, I believe these approaches are useful as they avoid slipping into decontextualized policing of interactions, which can lead to the shaming and exclusion of some individuals without them being given opportunity reflect on and shift their perspectives and without giving the group a chance to think about how their ways of working or thinking could be contributing to the problem.

And the groups come across challenges in using these structures. However, these emergent forms of creating systems, accountability and safety that seek to deepen understanding of each other’s perspectives across differences have led to more expansive and sustainable practices of managing conflict and building equality, in which people are better able to see their own and other’s interests, oppressions and concerns intersect and link. While needing further development, these structures offer an important alternative to the values and practices of mainstream services.
Chapter 8: Discussion

The previous chapters have discussed the components I have identified as necessary for creating less top-down forms of help: building mutuality; redefining ‘valuable’ contributions and knowledge; and sharing decision-making. While all the groups studied have had some success implementing these, they have all also faced challenges. I argue in this chapter that making these practices sustainable requires shifting several underlying rationalities that currently structure society and thus shape how dominant practices of help and welfare are carried out. These rationalities are often externally imposed (e.g. by politicians, the media and funders) and, to some extent, members of the groups studied were aware of them and have tried to consciously oppose them. But they also sometimes end up re-enacting them. I would argue that as long as these rationalities remain dominant, it will be difficult for groups trying to create more collaborative forms of help to completely avoid them, both for practical reasons (e.g. funders’ demands) and in terms of the messages that group members are exposed to and inevitably absorb to some extent (Garrett 2013).

The first of these is the assumption that efficiency is inherently good, and that it should be a key criterion in determining which forms of help are more and less useful. This is related to outcome- and target-driven frameworks and understandings of change and ‘progress’ as linear. Alternative starting points that I think would be more useful in creating less top-down help are ones that understand ‘process’ as just as, or more important than outcomes (Gregory 2015) and incorporate a more complex understanding of ‘time’ and its role in transformation.

The second rationality that, I argue, needs to shift is the one that help and need are characteristics of the individual. Understanding needs as collective makes decision-making and resource-sharing less fraught. This, as one interviewee put it, might encourage notions of ‘collective citizenry’ otherwise erased by an ideology that portrays people as ‘individual consumers’.

Finally, I challenge the rationale – still implicitly dominant in mainstream helping organisations – that ‘power’ is neutral (and that helping organisations therefore do not need to engage overtly with it or actively challenge entrenched power inequalities). I suggest instead that it is crucial to: acknowledge that complex power dynamics are inevitable in any helping interaction (along lines of class, race, immigration status, gender, status etc.); see reflection on and engagement with power as intrinsic to help; and make strategies for minimising oppressive power and generating collective power core to frameworks of formal help. This would help move beyond superficial ideas of ‘empowerment’ as an apolitical process.
In this chapter, I present reflections on what is problematic about these dominant rationalities and suggestions for shifting them.

**Shifting frameworks of ‘time’ and ‘efficiency’**

Four years after my organisation started, we wrote to our main funder asking to return £30,000. The stipulations of this funding, such as the number of people we needed to work with and the nature of the predetermined outcomes we had to achieve, felt increasingly unworkable within our cooperative ethos. Instead, we decided to downsize and restructure.

At the time we considered this our failure. Why could we not be ‘efficient’ like the funder’s other grantees? Why were our processes so slow? Why did progress always feel circular and iterative, rather than linear and predictable? My research shows none of this was our issue alone, however. Almost all interviewees gave examples of how, when trying to build more horizontal forms of help, certain key processes were slow:

> Working with people as infinitely complicated humans. Not just pretending to be efficient workers, to get to the goal. We bring our humanity with us to work. And we bring our kids with us to work. And we bring our pain with us to work. And we bring our like ... joys with us to work. And like a lot more love than you are allowed to have in a professional context. All of those things that are exciting about being human, we get to bring them to our work. But also that can make the day-to-day really exhausting and draining and ‘inefficient’. And you find it hard to get momentum and get things done. You can’t do it at capitalist speed. Or Jobcentre speed. (Jane)

In ‘Uses of the Erotic’, Audre Lorde (1984: 55) argues that:

> The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need ... Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love.

She calls instead for ways of working that allow space for ‘life appeal’. What Jane described – bringing ‘our humanity’, ‘our pain’, ‘our joys’ and ‘love’ to work – tallies with the approach to work that Lorde is advocating. But, as Jane said, this is very difficult to sustain when the outside world works at ‘capitalist’ and ‘Jobcentre speed’.

Capitalist and Jobcentre speed is neat shorthand for the importation of market-based logics into the public and voluntary sectors. These were part of the neoliberal shift that took place under Thatcher and continued under subsequent governments (Williams 1999, Gregory 2015). Within this framework, ‘efficiency’ and ‘value for money’ are seen as the determinants of good help (Lewis 1999). Slow, longer-term relationship-based help is downgraded and short-term,
'measurable' interventions (de St Croix 2016) that maximise the outputs and outcomes obtained relative to inputs are prioritised.

On the surface, this seems like a rational approach, so much so that even people trying to implement collaborative forms of welfare find it difficult to disengage from them:

People, including myself, are almost always apologetic about the time it takes, how slow it is to do things by consensus or in a participatory way, even people who absolutely believe it is the most effective approach, which shows how much we are locked into that way of thinking – the way of thinking that says that slowness is bad or the same as inefficiency. (Celine)

Even interviewees who gave the most astute analyses of the misguided valorising of ‘efficiency’ and ‘productivity’ sometimes fall into the trap themselves. Amy, for instance, who in Chapter 4 described the benefits of being allowed time and space ‘to think’ and build relationships at SLWC, later suggested that the group would be more ‘productive’ if it did not have a permanent space so people would have to work more efficiently, rather than taking time to chat or do other things whilst there.

Challenging these ideas about efficiency and productivity is, I suggest, essential for creating less top-down forms of help. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how non-judgemental forms of help, where everyone is seen as a helper and helpee and a teacher and a learner take time to achieve ‘results’. Often, processes are non-linear and outcomes hard to specify.

For instance, the not-pushing approach: allowing the more vulnerable person to be in the ‘driving seat’, as described by Mark, and ‘not telling [them] what to do’ (This is related to a broader understanding of how complicated people’s lives can be if they are facing various forms of structural disadvantage – and making space for this, rather than penalising them further for it. Or, as Jane described it, ‘doing things in a more human way ... and ... working really, really, flexibly ... because it’s not efficient and it’s not easy and everything doesn’t just work out brilliantly and everyone is not just professional and ready’.

The idea that working in these ways is slow and not easy was reiterated by Pierre who worries that ‘social innovation’ organisations like Nesta (whose attempts to replicate his timebank he has resisted) fail to account for on-the-ground realities in their promotion of more collaborative forms of help, presenting it as quick, simple and easily measurable. He used the analogy of mud to describe the difference between their approaches: ‘The mud, it’s messy, it slows you down, but you can slip on it ... I can go from there to there and slip on the mud. And okay, I’ll be muddy, but I’ll get there, because I’ll slip on it.’
He believes people who present neat framings of, for instance, co-production have never ‘slipped on the mud’, and also expressed frustration with ‘how-to’ guides to co-production that assume a straight road from A to B. Instead, he would like to see a book about ‘messy co-production’: ‘I think if you write something like this, you will upset the brigade [of social innovation organisations] but there will be a lot of people saying, “Yeah, I agree with you”.’

Refusing to prioritise efficiency has shaped the timebank’s conception of value, said Pierre, giving an example: if someone wants a jumper and it will take ‘Lucy’ three months to make it, and someone else two days, out in the world people would typically choose the faster person. But in the timebank, they realise they are also getting Lucy’s ‘love’, ‘personality’ and ‘conversation’:

When Lucy makes something, it may take longer ... but, you know, it’s OK. It’ll take that long. That’s fine, because it’s Lucy doing it ... [and] the beauty for Lucy is that she is valued regardless of how long it takes.

Marianne, who has 25 years’ experience facilitating democratic forms of user involvement, also criticised the promotion of simplistic models of less top-down help. Reflecting on two projects advanced by the type of ‘social innovation’ organisation Pierre referenced and by a funder keen on co-production, she said their ‘utterly false’ promise of ‘quick resolution both belittles people’s problems and perpetuates endemic issues like short-term funding’.

Marianne linked this mentality to the correlation between increased government and funder interest in peer support since 2010 and dramatic funding cuts for drug and alcohol services:

They are seeing peer support as a way to make things run more ‘efficiently’ rather than something that has value in itself – and takes more time, resources and energy than conventional services, not less, if you want to do it well.

Building understanding across difference is another area where trying to do things quickly, or by timetable, appears to fail. Unpredictable complexities emerge and engaging with these meaningfully requires time and space. One interviewee recalled such an attempt at a timebank where she previously worked in North London:

A lot of the native English people who had been there donkey’s years were getting very elderly so needed more support to live at home, and there was younger Somali immigrants that had physical capability to help, so [the council] thought, great, bring them together. But it’s one of those things that’s all very well in theory, isn’t it? It’s not just a quick thing ... it’s a lot to ask because a lot of those women have got enough problems of their own really, without having to go and look after some random old person ... who might be a bit racist.
In the end, she said, some of the Somali women invited some of the older white women to join their women’s groups:

I think they still do stuff around food sharing ... So learning each other’s cooking and sharing food together. And warming each other up. Warming up to each other. They understand what it is so they have lots of open events that everyone can come to ... But it is a slow process.

Marianne, recalling the long process Upsurge went through to create a meaningful equality and diversity policy that better reflected London’s changing homeless demographic (see Chapter 7), said there was ‘lots of backwards and forwarding and doing things wrong and a real need for humility’. This feels key to understanding the iterative nature of collaborative help, which cannot be linear and target-driven.

It can also be unpredictable. Homes Before Profit’s support network developed slowly, since people needed time to ‘rub together’, said Sarah. The idea of ‘getting there’ itself may be misplaced, reflected Celine, who said there are always ‘stops and starts, set-backs and changes’ when developing collective forms of help:

We had thought when we started out that it would take two to three years to embed our non-hierarchical ways of working and supporting each other, I reckon eight to 10 would have been a better estimate. Or maybe it is not something that can be ‘embedded’ or ‘achieved’, but something you have to keep doing, like brushing your teeth.

Holloway (2014) describes how Zapatista administration centres are called caracoles – meaning snails – in recognition of the fact that shifting to these mutual, non-hierarchical ways of looking after each other takes time. I asked my interviewees if this framing of a ‘snail’s pace’ would have been helpful for them. One said such an approach would have ‘changed everything’ in her group, negating the ‘constant racing, anxious feeling’ and allowing the space ‘to absorb the learning’.

DPG said ‘what you are achieving is slower but it’s actually more sustainable’. He works with voluntary sector managers to embed timebanking principles into their organisations and says they rarely realise the magnitude of cultural shift needed; that these principles cannot be bolted onto existing structures because they entail an entirely different framework of time and value. Sarah from Homes Before Profit, which often has members in housing crises, described how they have periods where a few more confident activists ‘swoop in’, allowing some tasks to get done more quickly, which feels useful in the short term. But, she feels, ultimately this means the work is less effective: ‘We really believe that the group idea is better, even if it takes longer to get there.’

That these slower ways of working can produce better long-term results is reinforced by research on partnerships between the NHS and small-scale cooperatives and other non-hierarchical organisations (Hallam and Henthorne 1999). Though in some ways slower, the cooperatives’
approach was deemed more sustainable because it put greater value on people and their development, as well as allowing more ideas and opinions to be heard, leading to better decision-making and greater ownership of decisions.

Marianne and Harriet both talked about how valuing process as much as outcomes is key to such changes. But both admit that funders and commissioning bodies would need to accept this shift for it to be meaningful for most organisations. Harriet talked about a cooperative youth group she was part of where the process-over-outcome mentality was dominant: ‘[It was] so different’, she said,

people used to joke how long meetings went on, but they were also really fun, and people laughed and joked. It was just a place imbued with love, process over outcome (but the outcomes were invariably amazing) and focus on people's wellbeing.

But she acknowledged that this was only possible because ‘they had no funding targets!’.

Marianne reiterated the point about how these ways of working are incompatible with dominant funding structures:

I think working in this way takes a longer time ... you have got to have the capability of getting things wrong and then picking them back up again, and I don’t think that works in a payment-by-results sort of full marketised way of delivering services.

She later suggested that some organisations can tread a middle ground, by agreeing with funders that more collaborative, horizontal working, should be an outcome in a payment-by-results contract. But the organisation would need to be ‘strong enough ... [to] say this is one of our outcomes and this is how we will measure it and this is why we think it is important’. She confessed she has not often seen this work.

Valuing process as much as outcome, and efficacy over efficiency, does not mean projects cannot be evaluated. Rather, that more qualitative, in-depth methods might be useful. De St Croix (2016: 3) observes that these are regarded as an indulgence in market-based systems, since ‘they cannot be compared or monetised’, meaning ‘only those practices ... amenable to measurement are seen as “good investments”.’ However, in a framework not dominated by norms of efficiency such methods could have a bigger place. Ultimately, though, as several interviewees argued, there needs to be acceptance that some of the most valuable aspects of help such as ‘care and attention’, ‘feeling seen’ and ‘being a part of something bigger than yourself’ are not necessarily easily measurable.

Jane reflected that ‘It’s really difficult to work with people as humans rather than as efficient machines. Which is how everyone else is doing stuff’. Interviewees described the ways they try and create more ‘human’ forms of help, ones that do not see efficiency as an ultimate good,
acknowledge the complexity of people’s lives and understand the slow and subtle shifts that are often needed for people to feel more okay about themselves and build affinity with others. Working in these ways within dominant framings of time can be challenging, however, and ultimately unworkable, especially if groups are reliant on grant funding or if their members have to interact with other mainstream organisations, such as Jobcentre Plus. I suggest, therefore, that a shift within the statutory and voluntary sectors away from efficiency towards ‘process time’ (Gregory 2016) is needed to make these ways of working sustainable. As Suzy said: ‘I think if the whole of the rest of London, UK, the world was going at a cooperative speed it would be a lot easier.’

Creating a collective subject

The idea of people as individual consumers basically erases and excises any sense of collective citizenry, let alone collective citizen power where we can all change stuff. We have to create new relations, new ways of being with each other. (Paul)

All the groups studied reject dominant notions of help that see people as ‘rationalistic, calculating and atomized’ (Newman and Tonkens 2011), responsible for their own problems and needs and for fixing them (Wright 2012). Instead, they view individual problems as related to wider social structures and responsibility for addressing them as collective.

Interviewees described the transformative feeling of ‘collectivity’ or ‘togetherness’; one called it ‘creating an us’. Rona said in the timebanks it sometimes feels like ‘we all just look after each other, I can’t explain it, it’s like God is watching over us’. Becky tried to explain the difference between feeling like a group of people and a ‘collective’:

You can get any group of people off the street and put them together and make them do a poster or ... whatever. And then they will go away and that’s it. But we were trying to work together ... There wasn’t just SLWC and these different people [in it]. We were the SLWC. Whether it be in our own lives, or externally and help other people. It was about us sort of coming together and being one. So we were SLWC as one. We always talked to ourselves as SLWC. There was individuality within it. But together when we talked about it, it was as a whole. And I think that kind of separates it from being a group.

However, as with doctrines of efficiency, interviewees discussed how easy it is to slip back into individuality within SLWC as it is ‘the normal thing’, and how a period of collective achievement has often ended with people retreating to ‘our own little projects’ and ‘singing) our little praises on our own’. Sometimes the issues members are facing in their own lives are so overwhelming that the focus becomes helping individuals through them, which can then lead to conflicts, especially in situations where resources are strained:
We were really good at helping individuals I think ... but to keep moving forward as a collective, we were too interested in our own individual stories ... [so] we sometimes moved disjointedly ... Little things like the niggly arguments over who is getting [what] ... how much travel is being paid out to someone ... could disjoint ... the one big great force. (Amy)

Strengthening the sense of a collective subject and shared responsibility for each other’s needs is crucial for being able to share power, status and resources generously and unresentfully, especially when group members are from diverse backgrounds and may initially feel uncomfortable sharing with people who seem ‘different’. It is also crucial for making decisions together (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010). Without it, shared decision-making, especially consensus decision-making, can come to represent, in Paul’s words, ‘the worst aspects of neoliberalism’ because it can encourage an individualist mindset where ‘everybody just holds their own ... beliefs’.

How then can it be strengthened? For some interviewees, framings of interdependence have helped overcome a default tendency to see ‘independence’ as a key objective. One interviewee described how she had always thought of herself as ‘very independent’ but, through discussions in her group, had realised she was confusing independence with appreciation of solitude. To her, interdependence came to mean ‘something quite strong like a woven web that can hold things up’. Acknowledging interdependence and building on it can also reduce inequality as it is most often women (and more so lower-income women who have less opportunity to outsource care work) who have to make choices based on others’ needs (Gilligan 1982). Such theoretical frameworks can, however, be difficult to hold on to in the face of dominant individualistic ones.

Paul argued that a shift ‘from ego to love and compassion’ is required for creating a collective subject, and that individual experiences connecting people to a bigger whole – from consuming illicit substances to ‘bodily wisdom practices’ – are also important to creating a feeling of an ‘us’, something echoed by several other interviewees. He described this as a more ‘fluid’ approach to engaging with others:

[It] means much more readiness to be open to where others are coming from. To the work that people are putting in. To the fact that people are in difficult ... circumstances. And certainly practical things like, you know, people meditating together ... Broadly speaking the bodily side of things, or spiritual side of things ... is all about actually getting back into our bodies. Because we feel all the reactions and the tensions that we have in those bodies.

His analysis is reminiscent of the premise of acid communism (Fisher 2009; 2018) as described in Chapter 1: the idea that we are so accustomed to seeing ourselves as individual subjects that
need to experience collectivity viscerally to shift this. Fisher points to the idea of ‘collective joy’ as articulated by feminist theorists such as Ehrenreich and Segal as one potential way to do this (See Chapter 1).

This resonates with what many of my interviewees said about having fun together as crucial for developing a sense of an ‘us’ and of equality. Some talked about the importance of having parties and dancing together, others about ‘making and sharing a warm meal together’ or doing fun icebreakers regularly. One mentioned ‘days where we all come in in our pyjamas and watch films and play some games’. Several interviewees acknowledged the difficulty of making space for fun amid so many pressing demands, but even they said it should be prioritised. Two interviewees from a group that had experienced significant conflict and downsizing believed a decline in the time spent ‘having fun together’ had increased the problems.

Several interviewees felt the sense of an ‘us’ was enhanced by having (or creating) a clear oppressor, a ‘them’ who threatens all group members. Noel, for example, said that in his eviction resistance group, a clear sense of the bailiffs and council as the enemy helped people bond quickly. Some, however, see this ‘othering’ as contrary to their principles of valuing different people and perspectives, and instead talked about framing the system or particular ways of thinking as the enemy. Harriet suggested, instead of identifying someone who is ‘different’ to bond the group, actively trying to ‘build commonality’ by consciously trying to identify the things people have in common (she cautioned, however, that care needs to be taken to ensure people identify these things together, rather than having assumptions about what they have in common imposed).

Connor also suggested that people sharing their oppressions, however big or small, can help create a more visceral sense of trust and shared identity. Several other interviewees agreed, although some felt those from more privileged backgrounds must take care to recognise the difference in oppression levels. Noel argued that it is important for more privileged people to reflect on what oppression or powerlessness has felt like to them, how destabilising it can be and how ‘betrayed’ you can feel. He argued that this can help build bonds of solidarity and empathy by providing a glimpse into the worlds of people facing repeated oppression and creating understanding about why people might act in ways otherwise unfathomable to those with less experience of oppression.

Overall, experiential, not just theoretical approaches appear crucial for creating a collective subject. But perhaps it would also be helpful to find new language to describe these relationships. Many interviewees used the language of ‘family’ to convey a closeness beyond collegiate relationships. But this could also be problematic. Amy recalled why her group pushed back against such language:
We became too familiar with each other, dumping our shit on each other and acting out where we would usually hold it down ... there were moments where we became so involved or invested in each other’s circumstances that it became very emotionally draining ... I always wonder if it was the lack of experiencing community spirit relationships that we got confused and saw it as family-based relationships instead?

Let's return to the idea of 'recognition', this time as articulated by members of a cooperative factory in Argentina:

We make new bonds [by] thinking about people in new ways; seeing each other as equals, whether some of us are more or less marginalized, or have been torn apart by the system ...

Something that is born from human need – the need to recognize others, to feel like I am recognized ... to recover our dignity. (Sitrin 2007: 159)

Perhaps recognition is a prerequisite not only of mutuality (as discussed in Chapter 4) but also of moving to seeing someone else’s need as part of your own:

We share in the struggle, we share hunger, misery, a plate of food. Whenever someone comes to an assembly for the first time ... they immediately find that there is someone in a march who's brought a piece of bread or a mate, and says, ‘Come, sit down at my side and we'll drink this together’ ... Sometimes I can't afford to pay for my vices ... And then a companero, who has a cig, and he offers me some of it, and we smoke it together. This is something that this shitty system tries to make invisible. It tries to make us forget that our companeros will share. They teach us to buy our Phillip Morris and smoke by ourselves, and everyone else can go to hell ... a small detail ... but it's really not small. (Ibid.: 170)

Ideals of the individual subject making 'the right choices' and helping themselves are so dominant in welfare rhetoric and norms that it is difficult even for people committed to notions of collective help to avoid reverting to them. Interviewees suggested a number of ways of creating a stronger sense of a collective subject, in visceral not just intellectual ways. I would argue that, ultimately, for these collective forms of help to be sustainable, we need to develop a sense of needs as shared, which involves a constant and conscious unlearning of some ways of thinking that ‘this … system’ has taught us. However, I would also caution that some frameworks of shared needs and ‘collective responsibility’ have their own oppressive potential. They can cause some people – most likely those at the bottom of whatever overt or hidden system of hierarchies operates in the group – to feel like they have no individual agency or right to make decisions for their own well-being. Avoiding this, I contend, involves constantly working to recognise how power plays out in the group, discussing it explicitly and actively trying to equalise it. This is explored further in the section below.
Making engagement with power core to frameworks of help

My interviewees’ insights suggest that effectively mitigating the damaging aspects of top-down help requires being aware of and acknowledging how oppressive power plays out – on both a macro and micro level – and working to change it. This means sharing formal power more equally through shared decision-making; trying to equalise hidden power by valuing different contributions and knowledges more equally; and not stigmatising people who need to access formal help, as discussed in the previous chapters. It also means being attentive to the way hidden and invisible power continue play out and looking for ways to build collective power as well as the internal power of those most marginalised. As Noel argued, this type of collective organising

... lives and dies on the basis of people’s relationships and ways of engaging with each other being able to transcend hierarchy and ingrained power dynamics ... without getting into that interpersonal level, we are missing a major piece of the puzzle.

Aside from depoliticised notions of empowerment, most top-down helping organisations tend not to engage explicitly with hidden and invisible power: neither discussing it overtly nor actively trying to notice and shift it (see Chapter 1). The way my interviewees talked about power shows how it morphs in different contexts, making it difficult to see and contest. As Harriet said: ‘I don’t think it’s insuperable ... but I think it’s difficult. because it is our whole society ... it’s so subtle – the invisible power messages people have heard and taken in subconsciously.’

But if helping organisations do not strive to name and be explicit about power, they will keep embedding helping relationships in unhelpful power norms. I would agree with Bookchin’s (1987: 51) argument that in terms of equalising power ‘there is no substitute for consciousness’. His partner, Janet Biehl (Biehl and Omrani 2016) later observes about the democratic experiment in Rojava based on Bookchin’s theories:

People must be committed to the ideas and the process and to making it work, and they must remain vigilant. If people are not committed, if they are neglectful, then by default, in the course of things, power will begin flowing from the top-down.

Most of the groups studied have tried to engage in this constant awareness and reflection – both in structured sessions and in day-to-day conversations. Celine talked about how

... we are always putting ... individual experiences in the wider context of oppression ... that constant to and fro-ing is very important ... these conversations, the language used, the thought we put into things, has become a habit and I would notice the difference suddenly with conversations with people from other organisations.

Similarly, at Future Voices:
It is always a conversation that we have, it’s always, you know, power struggle and, you know, having money and not having money, being white and not being white. It’s the sort of conversations that people don’t want to have because they don’t want to be offensive or whatever and we’re having these conversations and making sure that we aren’t being offensive. (Kimberley)

Kimberley acknowledged there are questions about the approach of the more privileged people ‘pushing power onto’ others, but she feels Future Voices’ explicit and jokey approach makes it more effective: ‘The fact that we can banter about it … just pulls the power away a little bit more.’ Taking this sort of explicit approach to power is difficult, however, partly because constant reflection can be exhausting and time consuming, and feel like a diversion from the group’s other activities. It can also become very uncomfortable:

There … [is] a time … where those discussions … about how to challenge power and privilege … can be really nourishing and empowering and exciting and inspiring when you’ve GOT energy and you’ve got a good crew together and a good depth of engagement. And when there is a bit of an energy drain … they can become like really destructive. (Jane)

I would argue that despite the risk of upset, these conscious efforts to examine power inequalities together are essential. Perhaps what Jane termed as ‘destructive’ could also reflect a discomfort that she, as someone from a more educationally and economically privileged background, is not used to feeling. As Marianne argued, ‘if it feels uncomfortable, you’re probably doing something right’. This perhaps tallies with Sara Ahmed’s (2010: 50) idea of feminist killjoys, and the necessity of highlighting inequality even if it makes people uncomfortable.

Harriet suggested another approach learned from her experiences of anti-racism organising in the US, whereby people with more privilege ‘do the work on themselves’ without those who are more oppressed having to put the work into ‘educating’. Some of my other interviewees were less certain about this approach when I asked them about it. Sarah said it can create an ‘odd dynamic’ of the more privileged people talking amongst themselves and Amy feared it could lead to more division and questions about how white people can understand the black experience without black people in the room. Harriet acknowledged that some black activists who her group works in solidarity with have questioned the approach, suggesting it allows privileged white people to remain in spaces that are comfortable for them. I suggest, however, that the approach does perhaps have a place as part of the anti-oppressive work of the group, as long as more engaged forms happen as well.

Amy said a better approach for her would be people being upfront about their economic privilege: ‘Tell me about your childhood … if you had a pony growing up, I want to hear it’. The
point is not to judge people, but to ‘demystify’ those with more ‘social capital’ or ‘success’, making its origins clear (Bourdieu 1989) and thus shifting power and helping drive ‘equality’: ‘To be fair I am not going to hate someone because they get to go skiing once a year ... But you assume they look down on you. When actually they probably don’t’, she said – better to look for the ‘common ground, as in equality and fairness and justice for all’.

I think this approach, of being upfront about the hierarchies that do exist between people – in finances, status, confidence, opportunities, life expectations – naming them, and making space for anger about them is an integral part of really addressing power differentials. For groups trying to create a sense of commonality and an ‘us’, however, it can be difficult to get the balance right between acknowledging these differences and letting them define the group; between productive and destructive anger. Upsurge’s ‘speakout’ model is a good example of doing it well:

You’ve got to remember when you bring all these people together in the beginning ... they’ve got to have someone to shout at ... it’s got to be a level playing field otherwise it doesn’t work ... But [to do this] you need to create a them and us situation. You know, come and ask your questions about hostels to so and so, government person responsible ... But the goal is to work towards the us. (Dave)

Allowing space for those struggling with homelessness to openly and directly express their anger helped the group as a whole move past these divisions. Over time, speakouts evolved into citizens’ juries. The key was to confront, not suppress the injustices and inequalities dividing people, and build connections and communities to overcome them.

A member of another group that had also used the citizen’s jury approach also talked about the potential gains of finding ‘common ground’ through initial confrontation:

When we had someone who is in that job or that role of power and you can ask the questions you want. Like rational questions. And get an answer ... [then] when you have everyone talking about what they are going through – you can kind of find common ground to move forward. And I think if we developed the conversation and kept talking, I believe – I do actually believe – if we pushed it enough we could have made slight changes elsewhere .... the more people talk about it, [the] more people ... find like connections.

An unexpected and perhaps more complex challenge I encountered in this research was that sometimes members with least visible and hidden power outside the collective find it most difficult to share power inside it. One interviewee, in her post-analysis feedback, described how her organisation engaged with this by consciously trying to move away from the idea of power as ‘zero-sum’ (Chambers 2006):
Thinking about power as something you share, like a chocolate cake, sets up an uncomfortable feeling that you are going to lose out: the more you share power with others the less there is for you. If you are someone who has an abundance of power in life generally – stable home life, nice CV, options and real choices – then perhaps this doesn’t seem difficult. But for most people the sense of having power, influence, indeed any control over what is happening around them, is a rarity. And understandably, there is reluctance to share it or give any of it away.

She went on to describe how the group arrived at a better metaphor than a cake – an infinitely elastic balloon that grows the more people there are to blow it up: ‘Perhaps some of the conflicts and tensions we experienced, particularly as we invited more people to join us, would have been less intense if we had come to the balloon metaphor earlier.’

The assumption that power is not zero-sum and the idea of creating more by building collective power together is perhaps a useful way for helping organisations to engage with it. It could potentially help mitigate some of the different levels of micro-hierarchies that otherwise tend to assert themselves. It is important, however, to ensure this idea of collective power does not become coopted into a feel-good idea of uncontentious power-sharing, which does not in fact challenge the existing hierarchies.

Constant ‘consciousness’ of how power in all its forms plays out is integral to making more horizontal forms of help sustainable. Chapter 3 highlighted some ways in which power differentials can negatively affect even the most well-intentioned help. The groups studied have tried to mitigate these by having non-hierarchical structures, but as Harriet said, ‘power is everywhere’ and often ‘invisible’. Normalising the idea of engagement with power in its less visible forms is key to really shifting the unhelpful effects on help of power inequalities.

Chapter summary

I suggest in this chapter that certain key tenets of creating less top-down forms of help will always become stuck unless some dominant rationales shift.

This means acknowledging that more mutual forms of help can take longer to have an ‘impact’ or demonstrate ‘change’ than more top-down forms, and that although shifts might not be linear, this does not make them ineffective – indeed they could be more sustainable. It also involves shifting away from the idea that help should be about individual change, towards the idea that needs (and resources) are shared, involving the building of a collective sensibility. The final aspect is engaging firmly and explicitly with power, specifically accepting that unequal power dynamics will inevitably play out within helping relationships and need to be regularly reflected on and addressed.
The groups I looked at are developing interesting ways of moving away from these rationales but have not yet formulated coherent alternatives. I would argue that more research is needed, both theoretical and empirical, to understand how these assumptions could be shifted, both on a small scale, within helping organisations, and in terms of broader frameworks of help and welfare.
Chapter 9: Conclusion

The aim of this project was to put together a detailed, granular account of the practices of small-scale groups attempting to enact help in a way that does not blame or shame people for their needs and that try to share power and resources equitably. Through a process of semi-structured interviews carried out with 30 people who are actively involved with organisations trying to do help differently, and one group session, I sought to gather practical knowledge that could enhance the work of alternative small-scale practices of welfare and contribute to key theoretical and policy debates about what radically reconceived welfare could look like. I built up a granular picture of six groups in detail, though many of the interviewees were involved in more than one group, so many of the reflections and practices are likely to apply to a wider range of groups.

I began by arguing that mainstream forms of help within the voluntary and statutory sectors often replicate in their structures the oppressions they are trying to address. Chapter 3 describes some of my interviewees’ experiences of these types of help and argues that, although some people might benefit from them, this type of help almost always comes at a cost – especially to people’s sense of self. Interviewees described how formal helping institutions leave them feeling that there is something wrong with them, that they needed to change themselves for their situation to improve. This leads to forms of help that can feel ‘infantilising’ and ‘controlling’.

Interviewees also discussed the clear division set up between helper and helpee, which often makes them feel wary of speaking honestly about their circumstances and ambitions and that their own ideas and understanding – their knowledge – is not valued. Disconnection between helper and helpee was a prominent theme, caused partly by the transactional nature of relationships and a target-based culture in most mainstream statutory and voluntary sector helping organisations, which is often imposed to meet policy or funders’ aims.

People spoke repeatedly about feeling like they need to perform victimhood, helplessness and gratitude (the types of need that power can ‘see’), which often confuses their sense of self and can make some people feel more ‘helpless’ than they are. Having to ‘expose’ yourself and ‘make yourself vulnerable’ in a way that makes you feel powerless is another common theme. There is space for small acts of resistance within mainstream forms of help and some interviewees from both service-user and provider backgrounds revealed how they ‘play the system back at itself’. But these forms of resistance are not available to everyone, and they do not seem to lead to the most desirable outcomes for anyone.

I argue that the problem is not that workers in these services are uncaring or lacking competence. Many interviewees felt the ones they had come into contact with were well-intentioned and skilled. Rather, the problem is that dominant ideas about help, who needs it and how it should be
carried out, affect how people do help. These dominant ideas have, for many years, been pathologising, framing the individual as both the cause of and solution to social issues. Chapter 1 looks at how pejorative ideas about people living in poverty have a long history, even during the period just after the founding of the welfare state, when solidarity-based understandings of help were more prominent. The advent of neoliberal economics in the late 1970s helped create more overtly punitive framings in the 1980s and 1990s, including ‘underclass’ narratives and increased suspicion of both the people claiming social security benefits and using formal helping services and those working in them. The New Labour era brought seemingly empowering framings of ‘choice’ and ‘active citizenship’, but these were suffused with threatening undertones for those who failed to be ‘empowered’. These more punitive aspects of rhetoric and practice were taken on and furthered by the subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments and now the idea that ‘personal responsibility’ pushing people to make the ‘right’ choices and eliminating ‘dependency’ has become embedded in dominant understandings and practices of help.

What then, are different ways of seeing and structuring help? Chapters 4 to 7 argue for three essential (and interlinked) aspects to this. My research has identified three areas that are crucial to new, emergent forms of doing help, ones that confront the problems with current top-down models and have transformative potential. These are: embedding the principles of ‘mutual help’ into their organisational practise; rethinking how we value different types of ‘contribution’ and knowledges; and developing conscious structures that enable decision-making to be shared as widely as possible. Chapters 4 to 7 detail how each group that participated in the research has conceived and enacted each of these, the associated benefits and challenges and how they are inextricably interlinked.

Although each group has approached mutual help differently, crucially they all shared the same starting premise: that everyone both needs and gives help. This shift in understanding resets people’s traditional place and position as it means that, immediately, everyone is seen as having vulnerabilities and everyone is seen as capable of engaging with these. It also acknowledges that ‘transformation’ (Marianne; Harriet) is something everyone needs to be engaged in. My findings demonstrate how mutual help can allow people to feel more ‘seen’ than in one-sided helping models, more like their needs are being recognised.

The ideas of collective learning and ‘learning together’ through helping each other are also important – again reinforcing the idea that no one is an ‘expert’ and people gain both from being helped and from helping. The approaches to mutual help studied also acknowledge the analytical capabilities of people experiencing difficult situations by encouraging people to learn about the technical aspects of their situations (e.g. about housing law) and then, with others, work out ways forward based on this. These forms of mutual help can lead to a generative effect: doing it makes people feel better about themselves, giving them the capacity to do more, especially because 197
they feel secure that their own needs are seen so they don’t need to spend energy ‘performing’ them. Mutual help – particularly forms where people help each other at the same time – can allow people to recognise wider, structural causes of their problems, rather than seeing themselves as being at fault. This can increase their power within and also help generate a collective power, to try and change the structural issues. Finally, mutual help in these groups is seen as continuous activity, not a one-off intervention. Although some individuals only joined short term, the models at these groups’ core rely on continued engagement from participants even after immediate issues have been addressed. Help in this context is not something bad that needs to be curtailed, but a normal and ongoing activity.

Part of what allows the shift from siloed roles of helper and helpee to the (mutual-help) idea that everyone is both a helpee and helper to occur is the way in which these groups view what people know and can contribute. I therefore explore in Chapter 5 how the groups studied ‘see’ contributions that are not always recognised (often those of people with less socio-economic privilege) and make space for knowledge gained outside of formal or ‘professional’ settings. Working in these ways allows them, through their daily practices, to challenge wider narratives about mental health and ableism and gendered ideas about what work and knowledge is valuable. This is a shift from dominant models of help where the workers are seen as competent people and the clients are seen as needing to improve. In the groups studied, everyone is seen as already contributing and as competent in some ways (and less so in others), as well as having valuable knowledge (including analytical knowledge). In these ways, the groups studied work ‘interdependently’, acknowledging that we all bring different capacities and skills and we all need what each other brings. The groups also, however, are more nuanced in their understanding of ‘contribution’ than is true of many forms of ‘self-help’ and ‘co-production’ that take place in mainstream helping organisations. For instance, quite a few interviewees challenged the idea that people can be ‘activated’ and that there is a linear progression from being ‘under the duvet’ to being able to “co-produce” your wellbeing (Pierre). Rather, they try and acknowledge the extent of the challenges that some people have faced, and the effects of these on their sense of self, and therefore see ‘contribution’ as more cyclical – accepting that people can go up and down in their ability to contribute.

All the groups looked at structure their decision-making collaboratively to some extent, as I look at in Chapter 6. I agree with Marianne that this is the most ‘sensible’ way of organising within a framework where people are trying to act like equals and value everyone’s knowledge. The benefits are myriad. They can be subtle, in terms of slight shifts in how people value themselves. For instance, interviewees from less socio-economically privileged backgrounds talked about how having real, visible power in decision-making in their organisations has helped them to value their own ideas more. Whereas more privileged interviewees revealed that it has forced them to
challenge their own certainties more, in a way they have eventually found helpful. It has also shifted relationships between people, allowing them to be more authentic and informed about each other (because people feel safer being honest as no one has ‘official’ power over them). Almost all interviewees felt that making decisions together has led to better outcomes and more ownership, which I had initially expected. However, unexpectedly, for some interviewees it has also shifted their conceptions of ‘knowledge’ as the framework and process of collective decision-making in itself challenges the idea that one person is an ‘expert’ and promotes a type of knowledge that involves everyone ‘turning over’ each other’s ideas and accepting that ‘you can see what I can’t see’. Collective decision-making also challenges paradigms of ‘efficiency’ as although many interviewees initially found the processes slow and frustrating, most eventually decided that the slowness was necessary and started to just go along with it. One even talked about accepting and enacting these slow processes as ‘revolutionary’.

Chapter 7 engages with the ‘tyranny of structureless’ argument and looks at how the groups studied create order, systems, safety and accountability without reverting to top-down, punitive norms. It finds that they have all managed to develop systems that allow work to get done, and people to make use of their particular knowledge and experiences, but without being disciplinary. They also manage to find ways to allow people to feel (largely) safe through an approach that is collaborative and allows everyone to have a voice and question and reflect on their own and each other’s perspectives. There was also some reticence about having more structures from some interviewees, due to a fear that it might undermine equality. I argue, however, that in groups where there is a lot of inequality in terms of finances, social status, education and access to opportunities, not implementing (considered and fair) structures could lead to informal hierarchies dominating the groups. I also believe some structures are necessary for people who have experienced multiple forms of insecurity to feel safe. I think that this is an area where the groups studied have much to share with other organisations in the helping sector, but also that the practices need further development and refining (through cycles of action and reflection by groups on the ground).

Of course, all these practices come up against challenges. These are largely to do with groups not having enough time and capacity to do the work they want to do; hidden power playing out (in terms of whose views and contributions are really heard and valued and in terms of subtle dynamics in interactions); and a difficulty overcoming individualistic ideas of help and need. In Chapter 8, I argue that it would help these groups become ‘unstuck’ if several externally imposed rationales were transformed (both in terms of external frameworks that the groups are subject to and operating within, and within the groups themselves, as interviewees seem to at times revert back to the dominant narratives, despite consciously rejecting them).
The first is acknowledging that these forms of help can take longer to have an ‘impact’ or demonstrate ‘change’ than more top-down forms, and that shifts might not be linear. But this does not make them ineffective – indeed they can be more sustainable (moving towards a framework of ‘cooperative time’, as Jane framed it). Secondly, I argue that there is a need to consciously shift away from the idea that help should be about individual change, towards the idea that needs (and resources) are shared, involving the building of a ‘collective sensibility’. The groups studied do have this knowledge intellectually, but sometimes struggle to maintain it viscerally. Finally, I argue that any idea that power can be neutral needs to be firmly expunged. Engaging continuously and explicitly with power, specifically the unequal power dynamics that inevitably play out within helping relationships, needs to be seen as a crucial part of help, and discomfort needs to be accepted and even framed as positive, as it conveys, hopefully, that the status quo is being disrupted. The groups studied are developing interesting ways of embedding these approaches in their work, but I argue that more research – both theoretical and empirical – is needed to develop approaches that can be more widely used.

What wider learning can be drawn from these practices and framings?

There are several ways in which learning from these groups can be useful more widely. Firstly, for other groups trying to create less top-down forms of help, the insights into day-to-day practices, challenges and how they can be engaged with is of direct practical relevance – particularly in terms of trying to create more capacity and trying to make sure people don’t keep falling back into ‘learned’ power roles, as these are areas groups regularly said they struggle with. More widely within the third and statutory sectors, for organisations trying to move towards more collaborative forms of working, such as co-production, there is value, I think, in terms of learning about structures and practices that can take them beyond superficial forms of ‘empowerment’, ‘involvement’ or ‘relational welfare towards approaches which fundamentally challenge structural inequality and resist dominant punitive narratives’. I suggest that there is an appetite for this sort of knowledge in the wider voluntary and statutory sectors currently (See Chapter 1).

In trying to draw out practices that might be transferable and helpful for other groups trying to create mutual help, however, it is perhaps helpful to resist the temptation to become the expert. As one interviewee warned:

Positive practices of mutual help are not solved through ... a special formula that can be rolled out across the nation in a hierarchical way. It is a delicate relationship of trust ever changing, needing continuous conversation, listening and empowered action to solve joint matters together.
Laura pointed out similarly that timebanks may have a basic model that they use, but there is no ‘formula’ for mutual help that can just be implemented in different places. It works through people coming together and the tiny interactions, exchanges and incremental shifts in their understanding of themselves and each other. Laura also described a particular ‘bugbear’ of hers – all the co-production forums and networks where ‘professionals’ are invited to share knowledge about co-production with each other:

> Because co-production is supposed to be everybody is equal and all contributions are equally valid. Like that’s my understanding of it. But then you’ve almost mythologised it into this really complicated thing that only a certain type of person can do. Then it’s kind of the opposite effect of what you were going for.

It is a useful warning. She went on to lament that none of the ‘members’, the people she sees as ‘doing co-production’ are ever at these forums about co-production that she has been to. It makes her worry that the whole notion of valuing different contributions more equally is being undermined. ‘Ask them [the members]’, she said, ‘they’re the ones actually doing it’.

This resonates with the experience of some other interviewees. Several (e.g. Pierre) agree with Laura that it is difficult to get the people from non-middle-class backgrounds ‘seen’ as the protagonists – rather, they are still framed as the subjects, the people who co-production principles are applied to by professionals. This is made harder for my interviewees, who want to shift it, by the fact that there is a lot of high-profile work in the sector where this ‘middle-class person goes and hangs out on an estate and develops a project with some young black people – it’s all about them drawing attention to themselves, like an urban safari’ (Amy). But, I argue, it is also due to the fact that those of us from more educationally and professionally privileged backgrounds all replicate these norms, even if inadvertently, portraying ourselves as the professionals who are ‘doing’ the co-producing, ‘doing’ the working as equals. I would argue, therefore, that care needs to be taken in how I share and present this research, to ensure I am not replicating the paradigm of being a ‘professional expert’ regarding a way of organising that by its nature challenges dominant paradigms of ‘expertise’ and ‘professionalism’.

It is perhaps also worth remembering that these forms of collaborative help will not work for all people at all times. As Elizabeth said, ‘sometimes I just need someone to take the problem away from me’. And Pierre argued that we cannot dismiss the fact that there are people who have genuine ailments – physical and/or mental – of a clinical nature and these may be so serious or overwhelming that they will need a service to help them for an unknown duration. Is this perhaps where the aspiration of co-production ends? In addition, sometimes people might need a very specialised type of one-off help that it is easier just to ask someone with that knowledge for. The general consensus amongst my interviewees was, as mentioned above, that these forms of
help, even though they may bring benefits, always have a ‘cost’. Several reflected that it depends on each person, where they’re at at the time and the severity of their situation, whether the cost is worth paying. Where this research can be helpful, however, is in terms of the learning that practitioners in mainstream services can use to lessen the cost of these top-down forms of help.

Some suggestions for this from interviewees are: being aware of power differentials and thinking about ways to mitigate them (for instance, sharing something small about their own life with the client and asking curious, open questions rather than assuming); making the client feel less humiliated by treating the helping relationship as two-way learning, and acknowledging that you are learning from the client, and their worldviews and experiences as well; taking the time, as far as is possible, to really listen and learn people’s perspectives, allowing them to define what they need and resisting ‘taking control’; respecting the client’s intelligence and supporting them to learn more about the technical aspects of their situation if they want to (for instance, by pointing them to useful resources) and to bring this knowledge and their analysis into discussions about what help would work best for them. One interviewee summed it up as ‘seeing the person in the whole … who has a lot to offer, not just seeing them as the thing they’re there to be helped with, that’s not all of them’.

How can these findings contribute to wider framings of help and welfare?

As discussed in Chapter 1, the left has been complicit in market-based, punitive, individualised discourses about welfare and help for over 20 years (Taylor-Gooby 2013). And although some residual ideas of collectivity and redistribution from the post-war welfare state are useful to reclaim, it is not desirable to return to that model – with its patriarchal, imperialist and paternalistic undertones – wholesale, even if it were possible. A central task for progressive strategy is therefore to build a new framework of welfare that will help build solidarity and shift public discourse in order to make inclusive and generous policy possible. Are there, then, key concepts from the practices of these groups that can help create these new frameworks? I would argue that there are – ones that contribute grounded, empirical insights to some of the alternative conceptions of dependency, responsibility and agency discussed in Chapter 1.

There is a strong strain of feminist care literature that argues against the demonising of dependence and contends that we should acknowledge that we are inevitably interdependent. We all need help and support to survive and thrive, not just people who, often due to less fortunate socio-economic circumstances, need to access formal helping services. However, there is limited empirical research into what approaches to help acknowledge, celebrate and seek to build on interdependence and what the understandings gained from these practices can contribute to wider framings and policy. This is a key area that my research contributes to.
particular, the findings speak to how we can build an understanding of needs – both practical and emotional – as shared rather than individual, and responsibility for meeting them as collective. One interviewee described it as ‘complementing and compensating’ for each other, a way of being collectively that doesn’t require us always to be ‘strong’ or ‘resilient’ by ourselves, but allows to have weaknesses and vulnerabilities, places where we can – and often need to – let others in to help deal with our problems and ‘hold us up’. The forms of help looked at actively try to deepen and build this sort of connectivity, rather than encourage independence and self-reliance. This understanding could contribute to building a framework of welfare and help based on solidarity and looking after each other, challenging dominant notions that it is even desirable, let alone possible, to ‘go it alone’ (Donoghue 2019). The empirical detail in this research is important for helping developing the sociological imagination and alternative visions of help.

It challenges dominant notions of help built on engineering and measuring ‘behaviour change’ in individuals, and on the twin notions that it is ‘poor people’ who need changing, rather than systems or institutions, and that the market (service user as client or consumer) is the best mechanism for improving public services. Instead, it sets up a framework whereby doing help involves developing collective awareness of the structural issues that disempower and marginalise some people and where everyone is seen as needing to engage in the ‘difficult work of transformation’ (Marianne). It builds a picture of dependency and needing help as something continuous and ongoing, a continuous cycle of give and take – not something that some people do and others receive, and not something to be limited, avoided or stigmatised.

The insights gained from the groups studied also expose the false juxtaposition of dependence and agency in the dominant frameworks – by demonstrating how both always occur together – and challenge reductionist notions of what it means to be responsible and ‘active’ in wider society (i.e. ones that limit this to financial independence gained through formal paid work). It is important to gain a better, grounded understanding of how to think about and enact both dependence and agency together as some of the pressing societal challenges that we face, such as population aging, equitable distribution of care and the climate crisis, will need an approach that can envision us all as both actively engaged in change, as well as at certain times in need of help and support.

This research could also help develop leftist conceptions of what agency means, something, as Wright (2012) argues, that until fairly recently has been neglected in the literature. My findings reiterate Hoggett’s (2001) understanding of people as not necessarily always ‘rational subjects’, but rather acting out of a range of different, complex motivations, which are not necessarily conscious. This demonstrates the lack of utility or fairness of approaches to help that punish people for making certain choices or assume that they just need to be taught to make the ‘right’ ones. Analysis of the groups’ practices makes clear, instead, the benefits of asymmetrical
reciprocity (Young 1997; Sennett 2003) and a non-punitve approach to ‘responsibility’ and ‘accountability’, whereby it is accepted that people are decent and will do what they can, and that when they cannot, they should not be denied support or resources, thus challenging punitive ‘something-for-something’ approaches to welfare that tend to put an inflexible measure of ‘contribution’ front and centre.

The experiences of interviewees in this research also illuminate the role of ‘agency’ as democratic power and show how creating frameworks to ‘empower’ people who have been on the sharp end of inequality or to feel better about themselves and contribute (in the widest sense of the word) as fully as they can requires a shift in actual structural power – for instance through collectivising decision-making and valuing different contributions more equally. This framing – in which deepened interdependence is complemented by shifting frameworks of value and increasing agency - also engages with a tension in the care literature, which worries that some forms of dependence can be oppressive and controlling, and helps build a picture of what ‘flourishing’ interdependence (Kittay 2011:54) and relational autonomy could look like in practice.

Directions for further research

This research has opened up many further questions about how to create and embed forms of help that are mutual, non-hierarchical and non-punitve. I therefore suggest several ideas for where further research could be helpful.

One area that came up repeatedly in my analysis relates to interviewees’ backgrounds and how these affect their ability or inability to engage with these forms of help. Several interviewees commented that some people in their group took to these forms of organising easily whilst others needed a longer time to feel comfortable with or see the value in them. My data includes a significant amount of information about interviewees’ biographies and also what each of them has found hardest and easiest about enacting these alternative forms of help (as it was a specific area in my topic guide). I think more in-depth analysis of this (bolstered by additional empirical research) could produce valuable knowledge about how to make these forms of help more workable for everyone.

The notion that these forms of collaborative help can be generative came up repeatedly throughout this research. This is something I had not considered before and I think is particularly pertinent given that the dominant narratives still operate according to an ethos of ‘scarcity’, which both limits the amount of help people can get and justifies shaming dynamics such as ‘proving need’. Unfortunately, the generative aspects of the more collective forms of help were not constant. Therefore, there is a need for research that examines exactly which aspects of the practices are generative and explores how to enhance them. This, I suggest, could be done both through the empirical study of groups enacting these practices, and more investigation of the
concept of ‘generativeness’ as it is applied in ‘solidarity economy’ frameworks (e.g. Bollier and Helfrich 2012), looking at how these ideas could be applied to the sorts of groups studied in this research.

Finally, I think there is room for research that engages in depth with the apparent tension between individual and collective needs and how to balance them. There are emerging frameworks that could prove useful for this, particularly ones that point out that individual and collective needs do not need to be separate. In fact, they are rarely so. Newman (2015), for instance, discussing the individualistic way ‘aspiration’ is currently used in social-policy speak, argues that

People do not hold simple identities but can work between different – and sometimes seemingly incompatible – beliefs and attachments. They can ‘aspire’ for a better economic future for their children – a ‘step on the ladder’ – while also ‘hoping’ for social or political change [on a collective level].

Recent work by several theorists from working-class backgrounds (e.g. Exley 2019; Hunter 2019) provides useful insights into what facilitating better economic circumstances for individuals whilst retaining a collective sensibility could look like in terms of policy and practice. Applying these frameworks to the empirical study of groups trying to create help non-hierarchically could help these groups find a way through the frustrations.

This thesis has examined forms of help that challenge dominant notions of what help should look like and aim for as well as who needs to be helped. Its key findings have been that help that is top-down and one-sided, no matter how skilled or well-intentioned, always comes at a cost. Mutual, multi-sided forms of help, where what everyone brings is valued more equally, everyone is seen as needing help and where structural power is shared, can avoid some of these costs and ultimately be more sustainable. In both academic and policy discourses, a strong argument has been made that the left needs to reconceptualise welfare and help in ways that challenge dominant individualistic and punitive understandings. This research makes a grounded, empirical contribution to the development of these new understandings.
References


Freeman, J. (1972). *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*. Words for Women, Glebe, N.S.W.


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Appendices

Appendix 1: Topic guide

Introduction

• Introduction to organisation
  (prompts: what does it do? When was it founded? Key principles and values?
  Any particular ways of working?)

• Interviewee background
  (prompts: how/when got involved with org? role in org? role shifted over time? What
  initially attracted you to org? previous experience of ‘helping’ organisations as a ‘user’ or
  ‘provider’?)

Practices

• Leadership and decision-making
  (prompts: who is involved in making different types of decisions? what - formal and
  informal - processes are used? How is ‘leadership’ thought about?
  
• Resources, roles and responsibilities
  (prompts: do people have fixed roles?/do they shift? How are different
  jobs/tasks rated/valued?. How are resources divided)?

• Building relationships
  (prompts: What sorts of relationships do you aim for with each other? How equal do the
  relationships feel? What helps/hinders this? What are the ways that people are
  supported, in the org? Who does this?
  
• Knowledge and contribution
  (Prompts: What things are seen as ‘contributions’? What counts as ‘knowledge’?)

• Rules and safety
  (prompts: How are views and behaviour that seems to violate the group’s rules principles
  handled)

• Any other practices you think are important to mention

• Joys and struggles of trying to carry out principles and values in practice
  (prompts: on a group level and for you personally? any processes used to reflect on and
  engage with these?)

Reflection

• On organisation’s principles/ frameworks
• On moving forward and sharing organisation’s learning (prompts: what might help overcome some of the struggles you’ve identified? What are your aspirations for the org? What do you feel, if anything, that your org’s experiences/journey has to offer other orgs – in terms of small-scale enactments of ‘welfare’ and in terms of wider ways of thinking about ‘welfare’)

• On interview (prompts: how did you find it, anything else to add, how are you feeling now, what would you like to see being done with this research)
Appendix 2: Interview tools

Timeline tool

Spectrum line tool (for evaluating practices)

Tool to help think about conflicts and how group’s principles work in practice
Appendix 3: Human Research Ethics Committee Proforma

From: Dr Louise Westmarland  
Chair, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee  
Email: louise.westmarland@open.ac.uk  
Extension: 623063, 633460

To: Kian Nithalath, FASS

Project title: 'Moving beyond mainstream discourses of ‘dependency’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘help’: an exploration of collaborative/horizontal forms of “welfare”'

Memorandum

HREC Ref: HREC 2016 23/9 Nithalath
AMS Ref: AM-1550
Submitted: 19/07/16
Decision date: 21/10/16

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Please note the following:

1. You are responsible for notifying the HREC immediately of any information received by you, or of which you become aware which would cast doubt on, or alter, any information contained in the original application, or a later amendment, which would raise questions about the safety and/or continued conduct of the research.

2. It is essential that any proposed amendments to the research are sent to the HREC for review, so they can be recorded and a favourable opinion given prior to the any changes being implemented (except only in cases of emergency when the welfare of the participant or researcher may be affected).

3. You are authorized to present this memorandum to outside bodies such as NHS Research Ethics Committees in support of any application for further research clearance. Also, where there is an external ethics review, a copy of the application and outcome should be sent to the HREC.

4. OU research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of grant awarding bodies and their frameworks for research ethics.

5. At the conclusion of your project, by the date stated in your application, you are required to provide the Committee with a final report to reflect how the project has progressed, and importantly whether any ethical issues arose and how they were dealt with. A copy of the final report template can be found on the research ethics website – http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/human-research-ethics-full-waiver-process-and-proforma/final-report.

Kind regards,
Dr Louise Westmarland  
Chair OU HREC http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/
## Appendix 4: Informed consent form

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<td>1.</td>
<td>I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the information sheet.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>I have had time to think about the information and been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project. I am happy with the answers received.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>I voluntarily agree to participate in an in-depth individual interview</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I voluntarily agree to participate in a group discussion.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>I understand it is my choice whether or not to participate in the project. I understand I can leave at any time by telling the researcher and that I do not have to give reasons. I understand that I can ask for any information I have given to be destroyed (until the point of publication).</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>I give my permission for the interview/group session to be audio-recorded. I understand that the audio-recordings will be kept until the end of the project and then destroyed.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>I understand that audio recordings will be written up into transcripts, with identifying information removed. These transcripts will be archived at the end of the project and kept for 10 years. They will be available to other researchers during this time. Participant confidentiality will be maintained</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question or discuss any topic that I do not want to talk about.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>I understand that if the researcher has concerns about my safety or the safety of any child they will raise this with me during the interview or interaction. They may suggest I get in touch with a local support services, or perhaps link me in to support services if I want. Only in very rare cases (specifically when it seems a child may be at serious risk and the researcher does not feel that the necessary steps have been taken to get support) may they have a moral duty to directly inform the relevant agencies I understand that if I am talking about a situation that the researcher may have to disclose, the researcher will make me aware of this and tell me what could happen if I continue to talk about it.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>I agree to my contact details being held by the research team and understand that the research team will contact me directly in the ways I have given them to communicate with me. I understand that these contact details will be kept confidential and will not be shared.</td>
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| 14. | I understand that it is my choice whether or not to disclose any illegal activities that I may have been involved in. If I do, I understand that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The researcher will try to honour the
confidentiality protocols. But she may have to disclose the information to the relevant authorities. So confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in these cases.

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