



The Complexity of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

By Greg Fisher

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Naturally, I am ultimately responsible for the content of the paper, and all of the opinions it contains.

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Section 1 What is Complexity Theory?	5
Section 2 The Implications of Complexity Theory for Severe and Multiple Disadvantage	8
1. The Interconnectedness of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage	8
2. The Social Nature of People	10
3. Idiosyncrasies Matter	12
4. Contingencies Matter	13
5. Patterns and Change Coexist	14
Section 3 So What?	15
1. Recognising the Uniqueness of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage	15
2. The Devolution of Support Services	15
3. Experimentation, Piloting and Peer-to-Peer Learning	17
4. The Development of a National Personal Support Worker Community	17
5. Continuous Sense-Making	17
6. Recruitment and Training of Personal support workers	18
Section 4 Conclusion	19
References	20

Executive Summary

The aim of this paper is to understand some of the complex personal and system dynamics that shape severe and multiple disadvantage. It focuses on the implications of complexity theory for the support people receive, and a number of recommendations are made with the aim of providing better support.

For the purposes of this paper, *severe and multiple disadvantage* is defined as “the coincidence of homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems, cycles of violence and abuse, and chronic poverty.” [*Severe and Multiple Disadvantage – A Review of Key Texts*, p3].

*Complexity theory*¹ is the study of systems containing potentially large numbers of unique parts, which interact with and adapt to each other over time. Such systems are known as *complex systems* and their study has revolutionised parts of the natural and social sciences over the past 30 years or so.

This paper revisits the existing literature on severe and multiple disadvantage through the lens of complexity theory, drawing also on interviews with field experts and project visits. Its structure is designed to go from the abstract to the more concrete:

Section 1 of this paper describes complexity theory and sets out nine concepts from this field, written in plain English, which are most relevant to people facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

Section 2 argues that a mind-set determined by outmoded social and economic theory frames the domain of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. If a problem space is complex and this old mind-set is used to make sense of it then the problem will be poorly understood and solutions will be misguided.

Five key implications of complexity theory for the field of severe and multiple disadvantage are set out:

1. *The Interconnectedness of Complex Needs*. People’s disadvantages and support needs should be thought of in an integrated, holistic way, not as independent.
2. *The Social Nature of People*. Western thought is biased toward thinking of people as isolated entities whereas, in fact, we are fundamentally social in nature. Most disadvantages emerge within a social context which enables this emergence.
3. *Idiosyncrasies Matter*. When looked at closely enough, every person is unique. This point is invariably overlooked in top-down support systems.
4. *Contingencies Matter*. The world evolves and some future events are possible but not certain. Support provision for those facing severe and multiple disadvantage must be agile, and services readily available to cater for multiple potential futures.
5. *Patterns and Change Coexist*. The world is not random – patterns exist and the recognition of these patterns is essential; however, existing patterns evolve and new patterns emerge, unpredictably.

Section 3 focuses on the ‘so what?’ question. Six recommendations are made:

1. *Recognising the Uniqueness of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage*. The discussions in sections 1 and 2 of this paper lead us to conclude that severe and multiple disadvantage must be treated as a different sort of challenge to that presented by single support needs.
2. *The Case for Devolution*. The most important recommendation of this paper is that support services for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage must be substantially devolved. Support ought to be led by “personal support workers” who work in partnership with those being supported in order to build an “enabling environment”. Funding would be taken from existing support budgets, making this recommendation budget-neutral.
3. *Experimentation, Piloting and Peer-to-Peer Learning*. Complexity theory teaches us that often we cannot be certain of the outcomes of policy interventions. Personal support workers need to experiment, pilot and develop learning platforms to help create a community of practice.
4. *The Development of a National Personal Support Worker Community*. Some of the funding for personal support workers should be used to establish a national body which would help build a learning community. Importantly, this body would not be ‘top-down’ – its role would be one of supporting and enabling local staff.
5. *Continuous Sense-Making*. Social systems evolve continuously and the nature of the challenges facing people will also evolve. This is true at the individual, local, national, and international levels. Resources will need to be devoted to continuously understanding this challenge, with the ultimate aim of helping personal support workers.
6. *Recruitment and Training of Personal Support Workers*. Being a personal support worker is a difficult job. As the community grows, people would initially have to be recruited with the right, pre-existing set of skills. Subsequently, a national body could develop appropriate training courses, incorporating the type of thinking articulated in this paper.

Section 4 briefly concludes.

The tragic paradox of severe and multiple disadvantage is summed up by IPPR as a classic example of the ‘inverse care law’, which states that the greater a person’s needs, the less likely they will be to receive support (see *Meeting Complex Needs: The Future of Social Care*). We argue that this problem exists because the support system is wholly unsuited to people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. This paper is an attempt to re-think why this is happening, making use of the new field of complexity theory.

¹ Sometimes this field is referred to as ‘the complexity sciences’.

Section 1

What is Complexity Theory?

“The next century will be about complexity.”

Prof. Stephen Hawking, January 2000

In this section we briefly discuss the subject of complexity theory (which is the study of complex systems). We focus on the concepts in complexity theory which are particularly relevant for the field of severe and multiple disadvantage.

Complex systems are systems made up of parts which *interact* with each other and also *adapt* to each others' changes. The key constituents of complex systems are (i) the *parts*, which might be numerous and each unique; and (ii) the *relationships* between these parts.

Broadly speaking, this emphasis on relationships distinguishes complexity theory from most of the science practiced over the past 200 years or so. A great deal of traditional science has focused on the parts of such systems and not on the relationships between them. This is also true of a lot of the social sciences e.g. in economics there is a heavy emphasis on individual 'agents', their preferences and endowments, rather than the relationships between them.

Given the above description of complex systems, it should not be surprising that complexity scientists take an interest in a wide range of academic disciplines:

- Atoms can be thought of as complex systems of sub-atomic particles;
- Chemicals can be thought of as complex systems of atoms;
- Long-chained chemicals can be thought of as complex systems of simpler chemicals; and so on, through to
- Organisms which can be thought of as complex systems of organs; and
- Societies, which can be thought of as complex systems of people.

Indeed, complexity theory is having a profound effect on a wide variety of fields, and many people who understand it expect this to continue (including Stephen Hawking). All of this points to the importance, and potential contribution, of this field in the future.

Some Principles from Complexity Theory

There are many sides to complexity theory. One branch is non-linear mathematics; another branch is computational, involving sometimes extraordinarily sophisticated computer models that mimic real world complex systems; and yet another branch is conceptual and qualitative, making use of principles and concepts in the field. Here we will focus more on the conceptual parts of the field but it is worth appreciating that there is an enormous formal and scientific literature also.

The nine concepts below should be viewed as a sub-set of a much wider portfolio. These were chosen because they are

particularly relevant for understanding severe and multiple disadvantage. In a sense, these represent the 'complexity lens' through which we will look at this problem.

Interconnectedness

The relationships in complex systems – mentioned above – mean that interconnectedness is a key feature of these systems. For social systems we can think of whole societies as networks of overlapping local networks.

Such systems can exhibit networked behaviour, which means that if we interfere with the system at one point, it might trigger changes (often unexpectedly) in far-flung corners of the same system. Moreover, changes in one part of the network might cascade across the *whole* system.

Interconnectedness can also lead to *non-linear* changes. This is when a small change to one part of the system can have disproportionately large effects on the whole system, or vice versa.

Feedback

In its simplest sense, feedback refers to the reaction of one part of the system to another part in such a way that this reaction affects the instigating part. Think of a loop connecting two parts.

More generally, feedback comes in two forms. *Negative feedback* is associated with the regulation of systems, a classic example being a thermostat (heating up when cold and cooling down when warm). *Positive feedback* is associated with amplification: when some factor is increased, this prompts some other factor to contribute to the initial increase e.g. a microphone next to a speaker. Positive feedback can also see a decrease of something after an initial decrease e.g. trend followers in the stock markets might sell after seeing a decline in some stock price, thereby contributing to a further fall in price.

It is important to emphasise here that 'positive' and 'negative' should not be viewed as value statements. We are using these terms in their technical sense: there are good and bad positive feedback effects and good and bad negative feedback effects.

Co-Evolution

We are all familiar with the idea of evolution, where a species adapts to its environment over successive generations. Co-evolution is where the parts of a system persistently *evolve relative to each other* rather than relative to some external environment.

The most obvious example of co-evolution is the adaptation of predator and prey species. An adaptation by the prey (e.g. better camouflage) might be followed by an improvement in the predator's eyesight, which might trigger a further improvement in the prey's camouflage, etc. A human example would be warfare, where two armies continuously adapt to each other, evolving their strategies in response to each other. This is also true of people in their everyday lives: we adapt to others who adapt to us, and so on.

Emergence

Some view this concept as the most important in complexity theory because it implicitly refutes the traditional scientific emphasis on cause and effect relationships.

The classic definition of emergence is that it is about phenomena which arise in complex systems in such a way that these phenomena are not explainable by (or 'reducible' to) the parts of the system. The idea is that things emerge due to the interaction of the parts of the system.

An example of emergence concerns the properties of water. We understand hydrogen and oxygen, both being gasses at room temperature. We also understand how these atoms bond together. However, the property of 'wetness' arises from the nature of the two atoms and how they interact with each other. 'Wetness' is not *caused* by either atom, it is an emergent property of the two together.

In social systems, language and moral values can be viewed as emergent properties. We discuss these further below.

Self-Organisation / The Emergence of Patterns

One of the more curious features of complex systems is their capacity to self-organise. This means that such systems can exhibit patterns of behaviour which emerge spontaneously i.e. without any external controller. And this behaviour resembles organisation.

An example of such emergence in social systems concerns norms of behaviour. No external authority fixes norms in social systems – they emerge from the interaction of people in societies.

We also see self-organisation in many natural systems e.g. the swarming behaviour of fish, or the seemingly disciplined behaviour of ant colonies.

Continuous Evolution

For many years, natural scientists have sought fundamental laws of the universe which are the same across time e.g. Einstein's $E = MC^2$. This ambition has spilled over in to the social sciences, including psychology and economics: researchers have sought underlying (time-invariant) laws of people and economies.

Complexity theory emphasises the idea that complex systems have patterns of relationships *which vary over time*. This means there are few, if any, fundamental laws of human nature. Instead, social systems are more about tendencies of behaviour (including ethics) and heuristics (how we make judgements, such as rules of thumb, stereotyping and educated guesses).

Importantly, this is not only significant at the system-wide level – it means that we as individuals continuously try to make sense of an evolving world. We also adapt – and contribute – to that evolution.

Localised Information

A feature of complex systems – which often seems obvious – is that information is very much local. We have to drill down very deeply to understand such systems. We can contrast this with old-school approaches which use models that assume everybody is the same (what economists call a 'representative agent').

This old approach fails to account for the idiosyncrasies in parts of the system, including individuals in a society. Moreover, a lot of this local information is tacit and / or unquantifiable.

The problem this creates is when decision-making is top-down. Many readers will be familiar with situations where some strategy or policy has been 'cascaded downwards' from a senior management team, where the strategy doesn't really fit the circumstances on the ground. Typically this is the result of top-down policy formation process which fails to account for local circumstances / idiosyncrasies.

Coarse-Grained Cognition

Localised information means that reality is very detailed, or *fine-grained*. By contrast, the complexity scientist (and Nobel-prize winning physicist), Murray Gell-Mann, has pointed out that human thinking is *coarse-grained* by comparison. If we contrast our perception of social systems with the nitty-gritty detail of reality, we see that this perception is relatively crude.

The emphasis of this principle is on human internal modelling capabilities i.e. our ability to hold information in our minds in order to understand the world. These cognitive capacities are limited relative to the information available about our world.

This contrast between our coarse-grained cognition and a fine-grained reality can surprise people. Indeed, sometimes it leads to discomfort since it raises our awareness of our limitations. A detailed discussion of this subject is beyond the scope of this text but it worth noting here that there are many ways we try to bridge the gap. Abstract theories and political ideologies are two examples. Moreover, an important message implicit in this principle is one of humility.

This point, in addition to the previous two, leads many complexity scientists to advocate a devolved approach to governance and politics. Decision-making has to be closer to the 'action' rather than organisationally and geographically remote. This point is discussed in more detail in Section 3.

Path-Dependence

This principle can be summarised by two statements, one backward looking and the other forward-looking: 'history matters' and 'the future depends on where you are today'. We might also say that adaptation today occurs in the context of history.

Path-dependence gets us away from the idea, prevalent in a lot of social science, that people make decisions today regardless of their past. In orthodox economics, for example, people are seen

as having certain (fixed) preferences in the present and they act only on those preferences.

For readers unfamiliar with this principle, it will probably make more sense in the proceeding discussions. For now, it might be useful to relate the principle to ourselves: decisions we make today depend on who we are and how we frame the world around us. These in turn result from of histories: our parents, our teachers, subjects we have studied, our experiences in life, our friends, our partners, etc.

This principle is important in this paper for two reasons. First, understanding the characters of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage will require understanding their past e.g. an individual might exhibit certain behaviours which result from a history of abuse or trauma.

The second reason concerns public policy. Policies today are heavily influenced by the pre-existing approach to social science. In addition, policy decisions made today will get 'locked in', or embedded, in to the future. This means the net impact over time of policy decisions (good or bad) made today can be enormous.

Section 2

The Implications of Complexity Theory for Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

This section spells out five broad implications of a complexity science approach for the field of severe and multiple disadvantage (SMD). It will draw on the principles mentioned in Section 1.

The implications discussed here are:

1. The Interconnectedness of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage
2. The Social Nature of People
3. Idiosyncrasies Matter
4. Contingencies Matter
5. Patterns and Change Coexist

The first of these implications, which will be most familiar to many readers, focuses on the complex, interconnectedness of the needs of many people facing severe and multiple disadvantage, and is intended to move us beyond the 'pie chart' view of people's support needs. The second implication focuses on the inherently social nature of being human, and how disadvantages must be viewed in their social contexts.

The third and fourth implications emphasise two important points about people in general, and those facing severe and multiple disadvantage in particular: that idiosyncrasies are more important than old model thinking leads us to believe; and, likewise, that circumstances and potential future events are critical when supporting people facing huge challenges.

After discussing these four points, the domain of severe and multiple disadvantage might look depressingly intractable, which might lead us to conclude nothing can be done to improve lives. The fifth implication reconstructs the 'problem space', noting that identifiable patterns concerning severe and multiple disadvantage can help to guide resources. This last point is also a prelude to our discussion in Section 3, which concerns the more practical question of *what should we do?*

1 Interconnectedness of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

As mentioned in Section 1, the old way of thinking typically seeks to understand whole systems by breaking them down in to discrete parts, which are then studied. This is known as a 'reductionist strategy' for understanding interconnected systems: the whole is viewed as the sum of the parts.

This mind-set leads to a 'pie-chart' approach to understanding needs, an approach which is reflected in the siloed nature of support services. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) deals with unemployment, local authorities deal with housing, psychologists in the NHS deal with psychological problems, and so on.

A complexity theory perspective leads us to understand that an individual's support needs might be interdependent in subtle and complex ways. To cite the most commonly understood example, an individual with a mental health problem might take illicit drugs as a way of coping with that problem. The short term 'fix' might help but this might perpetuate or even worsen a mental health problem in the medium to longer term. And over time it will become impossible to unravel these and ascribe clear lines of cause and effect: has the drug habit created a mental health problem or are the drugs simply a coping mechanism for mental ill-health?

This example, where mental health and drugs 'interfere' with each other, also relates to the principle of *feedback*: if the person's mental health worsens then this would be an example of an amplifying (and here detrimental) feedback effect.

Another example might be where someone has been prescribed methadone to overcome a heroin addiction. Methadone can impair cognition, which for someone facing multiple challenges might make it more difficult for him or her to deal with them. This might also lead to a dependency on methadone.

Interconnectedness therefore is not about finding some causal history of a person's needs e.g. a narrative like 'Alex was abused as a child, which caused him to leave home and become homeless; and this trauma led to him turning to drugs to cope with a related mental health problem'. History matters, of

course, but here interconnectedness is about how different support needs are interdependent *today* ‘within’ one person.

This emphasis on interconnectedness borrows from various strands of complexity theory. Notably, *network theory* is entirely about the interconnectivity of systems, so this field can help us make sense of these issues e.g. how small changes in an individual’s environment can lead to catastrophic failure or extreme success. There is now a large literature dealing with networks, which readers who want to know more can access e.g. at the time of writing Wikipedia provided a good overview of the subject².

This point about interconnectedness has been identified in several empirical studies of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. For example, the report *Tackling homelessness and exclusion: Understanding complex lives*, which summarised evidence provided by four primary research projects, noted “the coincidence of homelessness with three other aspects of SMD – a history of institutional support, substance misuse and street activities such as begging” [as noted in *Severe and Multiple Disadvantage: A Review of Key Texts*, p7].

Similarly, a report recently published by the LankellyChase Foundation stated:

“...each year, over a quarter of a million people in England have contact with at least two out of three of the homelessness, substance misuse and/or criminal justice systems, and at least 58,000 people have contact with all three.”

[*Hard Edges – Mapping Severe and Multiple Disadvantage*, p6.]

And while these two reports pointed to correlation, it is reasonable to assume that for many individuals these problems were in fact linked.

Another example pointing to the interconnectedness of support needs was the paper *What can service providers do to improve access to services for people with multiple and complex needs?* This emphasised the importance of taking a *holistic* approach to a client’s problems because of the potential (and often likely) connections between needs.

Yet another report, *Better Outcomes for the Most Excluded*, used the same term *holistic* for the same reason: complex needs require a ‘whole person’ view of support needs, not a ‘pie-chart’ approach which is blind to the relationships between needs. Furthermore, and at the risk of exhausting the point, *Meeting Complex Needs: The Future of Social Care* made the same recommendation: the *treatment of whole need*.

When we appreciate the complexity of even a single person’s support needs we start to understand the tension between a modularised support system and the support needs of individuals facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

A crucial part of this tension concerns how *responsibility* and *accountability* are distributed throughout the support system. Most public institutions are responsible for satisfying single support needs. For example, the DWP can arrange for income support but it does not provide drug rehabilitation services for people who cannot get a job because of some addiction. This reflects how individual departments have neither the responsibility nor the requisite authority to think and act holistically.

We might refer to this as a *crisis of responsibility*. It is related to IPPR’s report *Meeting Complex Needs: The Future of Social Care*, which highlighted a classic concept first put forward by Julian Hart Tudor in the 1970s: the inverse care law³. This ‘law’ states that the greater a person’s needs, the less likely they will be to receive the support they need.

To reinforce the theoretical arguments in this section, let us look at a real-life example of somebody facing severe and multiple disadvantage. In *Turning the Tide*, Ahmed’s life was used as a running example.

Ahmed had become an alcoholic following the unexpected deaths of his wife and mother:

“Ahmed ... was drinking heavily and sleeping rough near the shops. He regularly became so drunk that shopkeepers would call 999, leading to daily ambulance and police visits.

Concerned, the health service raised Ahmed’s name with the multiple needs service. This had been commissioned with the support of MEAM [Making Every Adult Matter] to better coordinate existing local service responses. Although it had just two staff, it was well supported strategically and turnout at its monthly multi-agency meetings was good. Many attendees knew Ahmed but each had a reason why they couldn’t work with him.

A plan was discussed. The multiple needs coordinator, Charles, began to visit Ahmed every day, immediately reducing emergency call outs. It took two weeks of daily visits before Ahmed spoke, and told Charles about his problems.

Charles brokered a deal where the hostel would accept Ahmed if social services provided an hour of support every morning to help with self-care. He accompanied Ahmed to the social care assessment, helped him settle at the hostel, and introduced him to the alcohol team. Three months later, Ahmed has reduced his drinking and is looking to move in to shared accommodation. In 12 weeks he has needed just one ambulance and has not been seen by the police. He says that without Charles he would still be on the street.”

[*Turning the Tide*, p9]

Ahmed’s story is typical of examples cited in many reports concerned with severe and multiple disadvantage. Fragmented support services meant there was a collective action failure:

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_theory

³ It is better to think of this as a tendency, since it will not hold for everybody, all of the time.

each individual service provider “had a reason why they couldn’t work with him”, and a coordinated plan which suited Ahmed’s circumstances was required. The MEAM-funded individual, Charles, saw this and was able to coordinate an integrated approach to help him. Here, Charles played the role of a personal support worker, which is described further below.

2 The Social Nature of People

Above we considered individuals as if they existed in isolation. In this section, we take a step back and consider individuals facing severe and multiple disadvantage in the context of other people.

By ‘other people’ we refer to families, friends, strangers, law enforcement personnel, support workers, and every person an individual might interact with (directly or indirectly). In addition, when we refer to ‘social context’, we include in this all of the regulations, laws and policies which both constrain and enable people facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

The point being made in this section is that people’s social contexts play a fundamental role in the emergence of their character, including their decision-making and general behaviour. But this is not to deny the role of genetics – the point is more one of emphasis. This argument was captured well by the psychologist Bruce Hood, who stated that genetics bias our characters and behaviours in particular ways but social conditioning can negate or ‘overwrite’ these biases⁴.

Weak Social Constructivism

At the system-wide level, the language people adopt, the concepts we use to make sense of the world, the norms we live by, our values, and in fact our self-identities all emerge through interaction. Indeed, the concept of *emergence* within complexity theory helps us to understand how an intricate web of localised interactions over time can lead to system-wide phenomena like languages, values and norms arising purely endogenously. As individuals we both learn and perpetuate these emergent phenomena.

The idea of social construction was articulated well by Kenneth Gergen, President of the Taos Institute and one of the leading thinkers in this field:

“Look, here I am speaking: talk, talk, talk. Where is it all coming from? It’s easy enough to see it coming from somewhere in my head, as if I am originating these words ‘in here’. But that’s a kind of optical illusion. Yes, the words are emitted from my mouth, as a single, biological individual, acting in this moment. But there’s not one word from my mouth that has not come from some past conversation or relationship. It is not precisely me who is speaking. My words are the outcome of a thousand conversations of which I have been a part. Every word has its origins, for me, in those conversations. Those relationships were required to make me meaningful in the first place.”

Now extend that idea for a moment. Take the gestures of my hands. These are intelligible movements for you. It makes sense to you that I move in this way. Now consider the way I’m standing, and my gaze – where is that directed? And the modulation of my voice. Where does this all come from?...

All these actions are imported from somewhere else, from previous relationships. None of them originated in my head. I didn’t make up these movements. In a sense they are like language – born in the process of social coordination. And the same may be said about what I’m wearing, the styles, the colours, and so on.”

[*InterAction, The Journal of Solution Focus in Organisations, Vol 5*]

Examples

Before we link this ‘social nature’ point more firmly to people facing severe and multiple disadvantage, let us focus on some real examples of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. We mentioned Ahmed above, highlighted in *Turning the Tide*: recall that his life ‘fell apart’ after the sudden death of his mother. This was followed by alcoholism, job loss, and homelessness.

We can see that Ahmed’s problems originated in a sudden change in his social context. Grief was an important part of this but if we had thought of Ahmed as an isolated individual, we would not have made sufficient sense of his situation. We might have deduced that alcoholism was the ultimate ‘cause’ and everything else ‘effect’, in which case treatment for alcoholism would be prescribed. But this would miss the roots of Ahmed’s trauma: the abrupt change in his social context.

A second example was also highlighted in *Turning the Tide*:

“Sexually abused as a child, [Lucy] was placed in local authority care. Her trauma led to depression and severe anxiety and she got into difficulties at school because of her behaviour. She left with no qualifications... as a teenager she started using drugs and drinking heavily to ‘blank out’ her bad memories. By the time she left care she was using heroin and crack [cocaine].”

[*Turning the Tide, p5*]

Here we see how Lucy’s social context was important in at least two ways. First was the tragedy of her abuse; and, second, tensions at school. Lucy’s story went further in *Turning the Tide*, which included her finding it difficult to maintain constructive relationships.

It is tempting to consider Lucy’s story as a narrative of sequenced causes and effects, starting with abuse. This is a useful perspective but we must also consider Lucy’s circumstances in the context of her (mostly antagonistic) relationships. Lucy’s story progressed in the following way:

⁴ See Bruce Hood’s book *The Domesticated Brain: A Pelican Introduction*.

“Jane, [a] link worker, met Lucy at her refuge. She spent several hours getting to know her, finding out what help she might need. At first Lucy didn’t want to talk, but she opened up eventually. She told Jane how she felt that her problems were related to the “bad things” in her past, which no one had ever helped her deal with.

Jane and Lucy agreed to a plan to create some stability and give Lucy ‘headspace’. Jane helped her sort out her benefits so she could get accommodation with support. Jane went with Lucy to a GP who arranged for counselling alongside a course of antidepressants.”

[*Turning the Tide*, p8]

We see here an essential point in the context of the social nature of people: the importance of individuals who can form *consistent and trusted relationships* with people whose lives are extremely challenging. This stands in sharp contrast to support services which can be *impersonal and transactional*. Furthermore, Lucy’s link worker enabled Lucy to stabilise her life sufficiently and she represented Lucy in interactions with various support services (Lucy’s GP had previously banned her from the surgery). Lucy was then able to foster more constructive relationships with other people.

We can also look at Lucy in other people’s social contexts. The changes described above meant Lucy moved from being an angry, negative and sometimes violent force in others’ lives to a more constructive force. *Turning the Tide* noted that Lucy had started to talk about ‘giving something back’ in light of the support she had received, and had reached out to her grandmother with whom she had lost contact.

A third example of someone facing severe and multiple disadvantage is taken from *The politics of disadvantage*:

“One former homeless worker told the story of ‘Peter’ who he had helped move off the streets and into a flat, but who became suicidal because he couldn’t adapt to life away from the daily habits and friendships built up over years of life on the streets:

‘We moved him on and stuck him in a flat and he was suicidal... what actually works is someone finding purpose in life and relationships, but these are long-term goals and they’re just not as easily understood in policy terms.’ “

[*The politics of disadvantage*, p31]

This third example shows how our social nature makes ‘solutions’ to severe and multiple disadvantage often difficult to find and implement. In this example, Peter was given accommodation but this distanced him from relationships that were important to him. His material problems were mitigated but at the cost of relationships with friends. Moreover, this example sheds light on *purpose* and *meaning* in our lives – both ambiguous but important concepts – which also emerge from social relationships.

The phrase in the text above, “they’re just not easily understood in policy terms”; is worth emphasising. In fact, such things can be understood better but this requires a fundamental change in how we understand the lives of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

Social Context and Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

So far in this section we have discussed the idea that social contexts play an important role in *who we are* and *how we think*, and we have looked at three examples. For the remainder of the section we focus on why this perspective matters for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. There are two broad reasons:

- (i) when *making sense* of a person’s situation and support needs; and
- (ii) when thinking about *what to do* to overcome any disadvantages an individual might face.

Let us look at these more closely.

- (i) Making sense of disadvantage

It should be obvious from the above examples and discussions that understanding the historical and current social context of someone facing severe and multiple disadvantage is essential.

In fact, all of the real-life examples of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage mentioned in the research reports studied for this paper appear to have had their origins in relationships. Of course, the work undertaken to write this paper did not include primary research so these examples are second and third-hand. We are reliant on the interpretations of those involved and any further interpretation of case notes.

We can contrast this ‘social nature’ view of people with the type of thinking used in the example of Peter above. Peter’s material needs were met but he became estranged from his friends. This thinking is sometimes referred to as ‘top-down’ and was alluded to in *Better Outcomes for the Most Excluded*, which made the following point:

“An advantage of [a] ‘top down’ approach is that it enables us to recommend evidence-based treatment strategies. A disadvantage is that the richness of evidence in the medical and psychological domain can dominate the findings, since less empirical research has been conducted in to the social aspects of adults facing chronic exclusion, the structures which exclude them and the societies which sustain these.”

[*Better Outcomes for the Most Excluded*, p7]

This observation lies at the heart of this paper. Public policy concerned with people facing severe and multiple disadvantage is heavily influenced by this classic top-down approach in social science which largely ignores the social nature of disadvantage.

Of course, the argument here is not that all problems in people’s lives are caused by relationships. For example, contracting cancer is not a ‘socially constructed phenomenon’. Rather, we are emphasising that the social nature of many problems is often underplayed. Even in the case of cancer, what we make it mean and how we then respond are socially constructed.

- (ii) How to support (and how not to support) people facing severe and multiple disadvantage

In what follows we will highlight three key points which emerge from the above discussions before considering what they mean for support.

The first and perhaps the most important point is that any support worker interacting with someone facing severe and multiple disadvantage *becomes a part of that person's social context* even if that interaction was a one-off.

A second, related point is the interpersonal challenge faced by support workers interacting with people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. Some people with complex needs can come across as aggressive or abusive. Some can come across as having a victim complex. Others will feel helpless and fully detached from the world. And so on. Most of us would probably avoid engaging with them, and it would be understandable if untrained support workers wanted to 'get them off their desk' as soon as possible.

This challenge has been noted in several reports. For example, the report *Complex Responses: understanding poor frontline responses to adults with multiple needs* noted:

“Inter-personal factors involve both the behaviour of clients facing severe and multiple disadvantage, the professionals providing services and the relationship between the two. The stigma attached to some disadvantages such as homelessness and mental health issues can result in stereotyping and negative attitudes towards clients. These problems might be compounded by problematic behaviour, such as aggression or distressing behaviour, including self-harm.”

*[Severe and Multiple Disadvantage:
A Review of Key Texts, p11]*

A third point is that those responsible for support must have the requisite approach / framing (through training or simply as a talent) to understand the often deep significance of a person's social history and current context. This would enable them to build a fuller picture of someone's life and the disadvantages they face. We might think of support workers looking through the right lens to help them understand what is going on.

These three points lead us to a clear conclusion, which fits with a lot of 'on the ground' evidence: the model of the 'link worker' is an important way of dealing with many of the potential problems highlighted in this section. Such workers need to be carefully recruited, appropriately paid, and well trained so they can handle the complexities and difficulties of the job.

The reader should note that while the term 'link worker' is used a lot in this field, for the remainder of this paper we will refer to "personal support workers" instead. This is to clarify that the work required of these people is more than linking people facing severe and multiple disadvantage to existing support services. It is also about getting alongside and working with individuals over a sustained period of time, to build an environment which enables people facing severe and multiple disadvantage to improve their lives.

3 Idiosyncrasies Matter

When looked at closely enough, everyone is unique. Consistent with this, an important emphasis in complexity theory is to respect the varied nature of reality.

By contrast, the old mind-set leads us to seek out universal 'truths'. This typically produces a broadly homogenous view of people because all individuals are seen as embodying a set of underlying 'laws'. Uniqueness is ignored, glossed over, or 'averaged out' as researchers and policy makers default to 'representative agent' models.

In this section we will discuss how a complex systems approach moves us to place greater emphasis on idiosyncrasies, and what this means for support delivery. There are two points worth noting up front.

First, as noted in Section 1, information is localised in complex systems. We must drill down in to the 'nitty-gritty' of such systems to appreciate them fully. If we look closely and honestly at different individuals, they will differ. It is a matter of looking in a fine-grained way, as befits reality.

Second, there is an argument, which arises from the work of W. Brian Arthur (e.g. Arthur (1992) and Arthur (1994)) and Bernard Lietaer (e.g. Lietaer et al (2010)) that the variation observed in many complex systems is not merely an interesting *feature* of many of them, it is in fact an *outcome* of such systems because it aids the whole system's survival.

To understand this point about idiosyncrasies better, and in the context of people, we can again look at social context. Specifically, we move beyond seeing people in isolation: they exist in complex social systems, in a continuous 'dance' of interaction, learning, and adaptation. Moreover, as mentioned previously, the principle of *co-evolution* means that individuals are continuously and simultaneously influencing each other in a sea of interaction, over time.

This social co-evolution means that even if we take two precisely identical people at a point in time, their interactions will immediately take them in different directions and they will become different people. They will become unique individuals.

At this point we should emphasise that when we look at the world at this fine level of detail, it can appear haltingly complicated. This is a reasonable point but we note two things. First, this is not a flaw of complexity theory; it is simply the way it is. Second, and more constructively, reality is not only about idiosyncratic features, it is also about common features and persisting relationships between parts of systems. We refer to these two things as 'patterns'.

Complexity theory leads us to appreciate patterns and pattern recognition as an intrinsic way of making sense of the world. It makes an otherwise intractable world more – though not fully – understandable. This is discussed further in the fifth implication below.

Now, we must consider the critique that this is all empirically obvious. Of course the world is idiosyncratic. Our response is the same: policy concerned with people facing severe and multiple disadvantage scarcely registers idiosyncrasy because the old mind-set handles uniqueness poorly. Homogeneity is either assumed to be true or it is viewed as a reasonable approximation.

What then for support provided to people facing severe and multiple disadvantage?

This emphasis on idiosyncrasies points us to “individualized case management” (*Better Outcomes for the Most Excluded*, p35) and a “personalisation” approach, which accommodates uniqueness. It should be clear that this fits well with the notion of personal support workers who have control over personal budgets. These workers are well placed to provide such tailored support.

A further recommendation is that personal support workers must form a partnership with their ‘clients’ in evaluating support needs and when considering support scenarios. This point is made in *Meeting Complex Needs: The Future of Social Care*, among other research reports, as one of four broad principles:

“User Empowerment: Users of social care services need to be recognized as equals and co-producers in their own care...”

[*Meeting Complex Needs: The Future of Social Care*, p iii]

It should be obvious that the people facing severe and multiple disadvantage have the best information about themselves, and this wealth of information needs to be drawn in to any evaluation. Much of this information is tacit and therefore not easily captured quantitatively. This is not to argue that ‘clients’ should make all of the decisions: personal support workers can provide a less subjective view of a client’s situation, as well as relevant expertise and capabilities.

4 Contingencies Matter

A *Contingency* is defined here as:

“A future event or circumstance which is possible but cannot be predicted with certainty.”

[*The Oxford Dictionary*]

Readers might have already inferred from the preceding discussion of idiosyncrasies how contingencies correspond to complex systems. To be clear, the significance of contingency comes from the principle mentioned in Section 1, *continuous evolution*. The nature of this evolution in complex systems means the future is *uncertain*, which has important implications if we are to provide for potential events and circumstances.

In simple terms, the lives of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage are often *complex*, even *chaotic*, and this makes the anticipation of support needs fraught with difficulty.

What does this mean for the provision of support services? It means that the value of particular support services (to the client) will vary over time. For example, an individual might have

no desire to overcome a drug addiction today but this might change over subsequent weeks or months: a support worker will probably have to wait because rehabilitation success depends on motivation. A personal support worker cannot force a client to want something.

This point was articulated well in *Better Outcomes for the Most Excluded*:

“In the arena of chronic exclusion, several people commented on the importance of being able to respond to a window of opportunity, to catch people at the right time, when they have some motivation to seek and use the help available.”

[*Better Outcomes for the Most Excluded*, p54]

Motivations can change as fast as circumstances, which is probably truer of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage than people with single support needs.

The recognition of contingencies leads to an emphasis on *agility* in the delivery of support services. The report *What do those with multiple and complex needs want from health, social care and voluntary sector services?* found:

“... that SMD service users want simple, quick access to services at the time they are needed...”

[*Severe and Multiple Disadvantage: A Review of Key Texts*, p13]

This was further emphasised in another report, *What can service providers do to improve access to services for people with multiple and complex needs?*:

“Measures necessary for ‘getting in’ include... an immediate response from services and fast referral... [and] flexible access to services.”

[*Severe and Multiple Disadvantage: A Review of Key Texts*, p14]

Here we can again contrast the complexity science perspective with the old mind-set, and the nature of support provision which follows from each.

The old mind-set typically involves an assumption that the system being analysed is predictable, at least in principle: we should be able to identify the laws which drive these systems, allowing us to predict outcomes. Support services that incorporate this framing will seek to predict demand ahead of time so they can meet it with future supply.

This old framing leads to support services that lack agility since contingencies are irrelevant when future demand is assumed to be predictable. Consider, for example, this extract from *The politics of disadvantage*, which is a quote from an individual facing severe and multiple disadvantage:

“You try and seek the help...but by the time everything gets going it’s gone down the line and I might be in a completely different mind frame...”

[*The politics of disadvantage*, p32]

In order to be highly agile, support workers need to be given the authority and room to make *discretionary decisions* 'on the spot'. Excessive reliance on control and predictability leads to *rule-based approaches* that are inflexible by nature. Rules work well in predictable situations but people facing severe and multiple disadvantage are at the other end of the spectrum.

At a more aggregated level, however, combining budgets might make sense provided support provision remains agile. Support services can be thought of more like insurance payments rather than regular payments: changing circumstances will lead to 'lumpy' service needs, which could be smoothed out if funds were combined.

5 Patterns and Change Coexist

The implications of complexity theory discussed so far might lead us to think that supporting people facing severe and multiple disadvantage is a wholly intractable problem. Support needs are interconnected, social history and current context are important, people are ultimately unique, and contingencies matter.

In this section, we will be more constructive and show how a complexity approach can help us make sense of the world through *patterns*. At the heart of this implication is the idea that complex systems exhibit patterns of behaviour, which we might view as 'structure' within an otherwise evolving system. Such systems are not fully impossible to understand because they do not behave randomly⁵.

By patterns, we typically refer to two general types: first, systematic behaviour e.g. moral values which guide how a person tends to behave in particular circumstances; and, second, structured relationships e.g. friendship networks. We might think of systematic behaviour as patterns over time (things which repeat themselves) and structured relationships as patterns over space (a network existing in the present).

In addition to perpetuating existing – and forming new – patterns of behaviour, people also have the ability to recognise patterns. This is an essential skill if we are to navigate our way through complex social systems⁶. Indeed, without this skill our ancestors could not have survived over millions of years of evolution because they would not have been able to make sense of their world and adapt to change.

The patterns we see in social systems are impermanent. They are not time-invariant laws. So, while pattern recognition is a useful skill, another important feature of complex systems is that new patterns are continuously emerging and existing patterns changing.

To illustrate this point more clearly, let us consider language. If we attempt to read books written in English in (say) the 17th Century, we will notice how the nature of English has changed. Much of it will be intelligible but it will not flow as comfortably as text written recently. For example, consider the following quote, which is from Francis Bacon:

"The perpetuity by generation is common to beasts; but memory, merit, and noble works, are proper to men."

[*Essays*, Francis Bacon, published in 1601]

We have some understanding of Bacon's words but the nature of English has changed in the 400 years since he published his *Essays*. The patterns inherent in the English language remain largely intact e.g. the use of verbs, adjectives and nouns in sentences, but the details e.g. the actual nouns and verbs, and the syntax, have evolved.

An important category of systematic behaviour for this paper is 'values'. Some people value being fit and slim; others do not. A thorough discussion of the *emergence* of values within groups is beyond the scope of this paper but it is worthwhile noting that values emerge and perpetuate within groups of people, leading to common systematic behaviour e.g. groups of people in the same religion.

This point is extremely important when working with a person facing severe and multiple disadvantage. Consider, for example, someone who is part of a group of drug users. People in such groups in effect 'give permission' to each other to continue this behaviour; and, most likely, narratives will emerge within the group to legitimise such action.

Put another way, people in such groups jointly 'value' drug use, and the sharing of this value can make people in such groups impervious to alternative values and behaviour. The same can be said of obesity and alcohol abuse: often people with such traits exist in groups of friends and family who exhibit the same behaviour.

What does all of this mean for support services for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage? First, as we shall discuss further in Section 3 of this paper, pattern recognition is a fundamental process when making sense of someone's life, including an appreciation of their values and their friendship networks.

Second, an important element of supporting people facing severe and multiple disadvantage is to catalyse new, constructive patterns of behaviour e.g. breaking a drug habit and shifting to a healthy lifestyle. This might involve helping those being supported to develop new narratives about their lives: essentially, a change in their identity.

⁵ It is worth noting that this approach is broadly compatible with Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory e.g. Giddens (1984).

⁶ For a more detailed discussion, see the blog article "Patterns Amid Complexity" at <http://www.synthesisips.net/blog/patterns-amid-complexity/>.

Section 3

So What?

Section 1 of this paper briefly described some of the concepts in the field of complexity theory; and Section 2 attempted to draw out some of the implications of this field for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. This has laid the ground for the implementation of these ideas, which is the subject of this section.

Before proceeding, it is important to emphasise that two of the implications discussed in Section 2 – idiosyncrasies and contingency – make it difficult to generalise about *what to do* in complex systems. People are ultimately unique and circumstances vary, so how can we make general statements about people facing severe and multiple disadvantage? Fortunately, there are a number of points worth making. Here we look at six.

1 Recognising the Uniqueness of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

People's needs are often treated like a pie-chart, with discrete services provided in isolation from others. This organises support services into silos, where each support provider specialises in one need (such as drug rehabilitation or housing support). This model suits those with single support needs best.

It should be clear by now that pie-charts are a poor metaphor for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. As discussed in the previous section, their lives are probably best described as complex: their needs are likely to be interconnected; often their histories mean they face psychological problems; their characters will be embedded in some complex social context; and their support needs are likely to be ultimately unique and evolving.

Therefore, the challenge of providing support for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage is fundamentally different to the challenge of providing support to people with simple and single needs⁷. This is our starting point.

Of course, this raises many questions about implementation. We propose that resources are redirected such that a separate support system for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage would be budget-neutral. In general, however, the

likely overall impact will depend on the economies of scale and scope in the care system versus the efficiency gains from specialisation. Consider, for example, Ahmed's case above: prior to the intervention of a link worker, there were "daily ambulance and police visits", which afterwards reduced to one ambulance in 12 weeks.

2 The Devolution of Support Services

In terms of re-thinking the deployment of resources, by far the most important recommendation of this paper is about the devolution of support services to personal support workers.

In Section 2 we discussed a number of recommendations concerning these people. They would be a single point of contact for those facing severe and multiple disadvantage; they would manage personal budgets; and they would organise tailored support in partnership with the 'client'.

Complexity and Devolution

Before developing this point further, it would be useful to first explore the relationship between complexity science and devolution. We can do this briefly since we have seen many of the arguments already. Notably, in discussing idiosyncrasies we saw that information within and about complex systems is located at the 'local' level and it is often tacit. General observations about the constituents of the system are still possible (e.g. 'most people in the UK speak English'), however, the prevalence of uniqueness in complex systems means that such generalisations might be insufficient for many tasks e.g. *how do I help this unique person facing a specific set of support needs now?*

In this paper we have also looked at the tension between the *fine-grained*, idiosyncratic and evolving nature of reality and *coarse-grained* thinking. It is this tension which leads many people in the complexity field to favour devolved decision-making processes. We are focused here on people facing severe and multiple disadvantage but this same tension can be seen across many domains in public policy.

⁷ Put in more concrete terms, the challenge of someone identified as having four support needs will be different to four people with an equivalent set of single support needs.

The devolution point is clearly not unique to complexity theory: many people have called for devolution of authority and responsibility in UK governance, and David Cameron's *Big Society* agenda was partly about this. So too is the general focus on 'localism', including the Localism Act 2011, the election of local Police and Crime Commissioners in 2012 and the Greater Manchester Agreement of 2014.

More recently, the government published a report written by the Service Transformation Challenge Panel, set up in April 2014 to address issues concerning the delivery of public services. The Report promoted the following, which is consistent with a number of themes in this paper:

"A new person centred approach to help specific groups and individuals with multiple and complex needs. Services should be designed around the needs of the person to deliver better outcomes. Local agencies should be incentivised, through place-based budgeting, pooled budgets or other means, to work together more effectively to achieve this. Government should commit now to doing the work needed to enable the next spending review to put this approach into practice."

[Bolder, Braver and Better: why we need local deals to save public services, p5; emphasis in the original text]

Consistent with this, the March 2015 Budget report announced that the government was:

"...exploring the cost-effectiveness of options to integrate spending around some of the most vulnerable groups of people... [in part] because of a failure to support troubled individuals struggling with homelessness, addiction and mental health problems including through social investment."

[Budget March 2015, p29-30]

These reports are encouraging. However, it remains to be seen how far national government is actually willing to relinquish authority and responsibility from national institutions.

It is important to note that these arguments for the devolution of authority and responsibility are not the same as arguing for some form of extreme localism where national and regional government are eliminated. A detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper but what authority and responsibility should lie at which 'tier' of government is a challenging question. In any case, thinking of social systems as complex puts us on firmer footing for conducting future work in the area of collective action and public policy.

Devolution in Severe and Multiple Disadvantage Support

In light of this broader emphasis on devolution, it would be preferable for any devolution of severe and multiple disadvantage support services to be within a broader process of devolution in political authority and responsibility across the UK.

However, for the remainder of this section we focus narrowly on devolution within severe and multiple disadvantage support.

In terms of the practicalities of devolving support, there are at least three options open to the national government. Let us again assume that these three options are budget-neutral, with severe and multiple disadvantage-specific funding coming from a pro rata reduction in other services.

The three options are:

- (i) Set up a new community of personal support workers from scratch and allow this community to be run independently of local authorities. Personal support workers would be able to buy services as they see fit. There are many ways in which this might happen e.g. this community could be run independently from the government in much the same way the Bank of England is; or it could come directly under a Secretary of State.
- (ii) Set up funding arrangements for personal support workers in a way similar to the arrangements of the Troubled Families Programme⁸. Here, the national government has provided a ring-fenced amount of money for local authorities, which are tasked with execution (alongside their statutory responsibilities).
- (iii) Provide an equivalent sum of money to local authorities but allow them to pool these funds with other nationally provided funds. Local authorities would then be free to allocate funds to a personal support worker community from this funding pool.

This paper remains agnostic about which of these options is preferable. A much deeper review would be required in order to make confident assertions.

However, it is possible that different options might suit different local authorities e.g. one county council might do an excellent job with arrangement (iii) while another might shirk their responsibilities to what is generally viewed as an unpopular group (option (ii) might then work better for this authority).

The recommendation, therefore, is that various options should be piloted in different local authorities to evaluate which, if any, was better, and which options suited which authorities. This experimentalism would be consistent with a number of the principles set out in this paper (it is in fact dealt with in the next sub-section).

If only one system were chosen, it is clear that one challenge would be to design clear and appropriate lines of accountability, especially given that – at least initially – there would be local implementation of nationally provided resources.

Again, a deeper review of this domain would be required in order to develop ideas about how this is done effectively. One thing to bear in mind, however, when thinking about accountability is that clear lines of accountability already exist in the current

system, in which (according to HM Treasury) there is a “failure to support” people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. This implies that the accountability processes in the current system have themselves failed.

3 Experimentation, Piloting and Peer-to-Peer Learning

There is already a body of evidence and literature pointing to what seems to work in the field of severe and multiple disadvantage. In addition, there are a number of experienced link workers (who have worked on ad hoc projects) and a number of organisations devoted to this cause (including the LankellyChase Foundation). So the national personal support worker community already has strong foundations for future growth.

Under the old mind-set, how people react to policy interventions ought to be knowable, at least in principle. It follows that, if some policy intervention fails, then it is the fault of the policy maker for not having ‘done their homework’ well enough. Often a blame game then starts.

We must admit to ourselves that we cannot know beforehand precisely how individuals and groups will react to some policy intervention.

This means that personal support workers must *experiment*, to some degree, to see what works and what does not. Clearly, however, there are costs to failures – especially when supporting people with complex lives – but the benefit is working out what works and what does not. The challenge is for personal support workers to get the balance right, on the ground.

Experimentation through *pilot programmes* helps build confidence in whether new and different approaches work or not. However, this needs to be complemented with learning if the whole community is to benefit from it. The recommendation here is not that a national institution becomes a ‘learning intermediary’; rather, it should develop a robust *peer-to-peer platform*, allowing a cross-fertilisation of learning among personal support workers.

It is important to ensure, however, that we do not fall foul of universalism here, which is a part of the old mind-set. Idiosyncrasies mean that what works for one person facing severe and multiple disadvantage might not work for another. We come back to patterns and also common sense: personal support workers might be aware of what has worked elsewhere and in the past (a type of pattern) but such learning needs to be applied carefully and creatively, in the context of someone’s unique circumstances. For example, a particular drug rehabilitation programme might have worked well for many people; but some ‘client’ might not be ready and motivated for this service right now. A personal support worker would have to make a judgment call.

4 The Development of a National Personal Support Worker Community

Providing funds to teams of personal support workers at the local level would be an important and constructive step. However, there is a good case for using some of the nationally-provided funds to set up relevant institutions to allow the personal support worker community to cohere as a profession and to create political representation, especially at the national level. A national body could also help to develop training programmes and professional standards.

Being prescriptive in this paper about what such national institutions look like would be inappropriate. It would be preferable to allow such institutions to emerge organically according to the bottom-up needs of personal support workers. This includes the choice of who heads any national body.

Over time, a *community of practice*⁹ could evolve into a profession with appropriate qualifications, ethics and standards. Again, this should not be pre-empted; it should emerge organically according to need.

5 Continuous Sense-Making

Here, sense-making is defined as the combination of pattern-recognition and the testing of hypotheses, which together help us develop a reasonable understanding of the world. People do this every day by observing patterns around them and selecting (often sub-consciously) those which seem to help them understand situations. Scientists do this in a formal way by developing hypotheses which are then tested against empirical evidence.

For the personal support worker community, sense-making needs to be done continuously and at multiple levels: individual, local, regional, national, and international.

Personal support workers have to make sense of the complex lives of individuals facing severe and multiple disadvantage *in conjunction with those individuals*, as discussed in Section 2. Existing link workers already do this through the evaluations they make. It is important, however, that personal support workers continue to do this and to offer tailored support services as circumstances change.

Sense-making also has to be done at the local level because relevant patterns often involve the (geographic) locale. This can include the anticipation of potential future patterns i.e. being aware of contingencies. For example, if a town’s employment was heavily reliant on a particular company (or industry), and that company were to go bankrupt, then a good local evaluation of support needs would consider the increased likelihood of some of the resulting unemployed people subsequently facing severe and multiple disadvantage. Such a local sense-making process

9 See for example <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/partnerships--development/historic-programmes/improving-frontline-responses/communities-of-practice/>

would help to enable the personal support workers in that area, including the allocation of resources.

There might also be patterns relevant for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage at the regional, national, and even international levels. For example, an increase in alcoholism among British people might be correlated with more people 'slipping in to a life' where they faced severe and multiple disadvantage. Alcoholics are more prone to become (and remain) unemployed and there is likely to be a correlation with mental health. An example of a relevant international pattern would be a global recession, which would create a mass unemployment problem.

A good illustration of national sense-making was the report *What do those with multiple and complex needs want from health, social care and voluntary sector services?*:

"[This] paper finds that SMD service users want simple, quick access to services at the time they are needed; respect from staff; staff behaviour that is culturally sensitive, equal, fair and non-judgemental; and consistent and positive relationships with staff offering long-term support. On a structural level, users express a desire for effective joint working and communication between services; information about the services available, their remit and how to access them; a flexible approach to each client, as what works for one client may not work for another; support with the practicalities of everyday life; peer support; and involvement in decision making."

[Severe and Multiple Disadvantage: A Review of Key Texts p13]

Another example of the articulation of observed patterns was *Tackling homelessness and exclusion*, which, as mentioned earlier, noted the "coincidence of homelessness, a history of institutional care, substance misuse and street activities such as begging." *[Severe and Multiple Disadvantage – A Review of Key Texts p7]*.

As a final note, our emphasis on devolution does not mean we should lose sight of the need to make sense of patterns at levels other than the individual. Patterns can emerge at different levels in complex systems and these can influence individual actors. With this in mind, one role of a national representative body would be to conduct a national sense-making exercise specific to people facing severe and multiple disadvantage e.g. an annual report. It is important also not to lose sight of the fact that the rationale of all of this work would be to help and enable personal support workers on the ground.

6 Recruitment and Training of Personal support workers

Several of the people interviewed for this paper felt that the job of link workers was so challenging that it might not be possible to train most people to be personal support workers. They felt that it was more important to recruit people who already had a particular set of skills, including interpersonal skills, 'thick skin', a natural capacity for empathy, a common sense approach, and perseverance. This set of skills stands in contrast to, for example, a deep understanding of the psychoanalysis literature.

It is for this reason that a growing personal support worker community would first have to recruit people with pre-existing relevant skills and experience. Subsequently, it would be important for a national representative body to take a lead in developing appropriate training courses. Ideally this would incorporate the type of thinking in sections 1 and 2.

This fits well with a running theme of this paper: a substantial amount of training in various professions (including management and support workers) follows an old mind-set way of thinking. This is not to say that all of this training is useless; the argument here is that it could be substantially improved with a more 'complex' appreciation of the world (including the five implications set out in Section 2).

Section 4

Conclusion

Several of the world's greatest philosophers and spiritual leaders have made the same point but Mahatma Gandhi probably said it most eloquently:

“A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.”

It is an unfortunate truth that we are largely failing some of those most in need of support in British society, those facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

However, this failure appears not to be about intentions or resources. It is more about the old mind-set and the institutions and systems it produces, which are not relevant to this domain. It is tempting to point to a failure of efficacy, which would lead us to conclude that we should carry on as we are but simply do better. This will not do because the problem appears to be more fundamental. It is about how we think about, or frame, the challenges of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

In this paper we have tried to go beyond a mere critique of the old mind-set and the current support system. We have also offered a new, constructive way of thinking about the problem, drawing on a new science which better frames how complex social systems work. How we as a country support people facing severe and multiple disadvantage must be built on the foundations of this better understanding.

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