

'Code of the street, how we should re-interpret morality'

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Overview

In a lecture which used both personal biography and professional experience, David Gustave argued that marginalised young people, though they are often criticised, seek the same kinds of fulfilment as the population at large. In his role as educational motivator at Kids Company, he helps them do this.

Summary

Describing this lecture as his own perspective which could not be verified, David invited participants to use their imagination to reflect on what possibilities for young people were raised by his descriptions. He highlighted that many young people with whom he worked often described themselves as soldiers, reflecting this perspective of belonging and function. The language they use to describe their own forms of organisation also have military connotations - for example army, regiment, and battalion. In turn this implies that their street corners and neighbourhoods are like micro nations and their behaviours micro nationalisms. A key feature of David's continuing enquiry is: why should this be the case?

He began with his own biography. He was born 43 years ago to a West Indian father and an Irish mother, living with five other siblings in what he described as a rodent infested single roomed hovel. He was a mixed raced boy living in a predominantly white area going to school in a predominantly black area, travelling between two worlds. His father was an alcoholic and his mother a compulsive eater. He himself suffered physical and emotional abuse causing him to retreat into his imagination - a safe space - at about the age of seven, finding succour in books. He never let anyone know that he was 'smart' or had that type of intelligence. For the next fifteen years he lived a dual existence. At home he would take abuse from his family and then go out onto the street and exercise power, control and terror. Being intelligent and violent encouraged sociopathic behaviour, enabling him to get what he thought he wanted.

Leaving home at fifteen he moved onto a council estate with a friend and became engaged in "nefarious" activity. He married at 19, settled down, but was not a nice person to live with - wanting power and control over his partner. At age 29, a series of revelations led him back to study, eventually winning a scholarship to Oxford where he read History and then studied to become a barrister. At Oxford he was the only person of his ethnicity in the whole of the one thousand population of the history school. There were nine West Indian male undergraduates in the whole of the University, of whom only four came from state schools. His experience there overlapped with that in London where he was frequently stopped and questioned.

During this period he wanted to understand his own motivations and where the other intelligent people with 'spark' from his own background were. Having learned his own 'code' from others, he knew it could not only be him reflecting on such issues. He had seen young

people on the street act with a great deal of intelligent flexibility and perpetual innovation in negotiating difficult circumstances.

Despite wishing to rebel, he found himself accepted by and accepting of the people and ideas which formed the daily routine of this experience. He found himself fitting in, even though he resisted this idea. He began to ask 'why?'

He then spent some time working on a street initiative in Peckham, London (where he was brought up) and tried, he now realises mistakenly, to encourage others to see the world as he did. The failure of this approach caused a period of introspective reflection during which time he began to work at Kids Company and realised that he was driven by the desire for status.

Kids Company

Kids Company¹ was founded in 1996 by Camilla Batmanghelidjh to provide practical, emotional and educational support for vulnerable inner city children in London. Currently they work with approximately 14,000 young people. David said that at Kids Company, the guiding principle is 'love is all it takes'. He believes that most of the deficiencies which people say are in our young people come from insufficient love and care. Providing this encourages the resilience and self belief necessary for the possibility of a fulfilled and happy life. The idea of fulfilment coming from connectedness to others is a difficult lesson to learn in these circumstances. For the young people, existence proves that they are strong and able to survive and therefore do not need anyone else – rather they must defend themselves against others.

Kids Company uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs to guide their support for young people. First of all they consolidate a young person's physical world – shelter, food, education. This is accompanied by unconditional love, physical touch, creativity and physical exercise. This struck David as being exactly the same as an Oxford College. You were fed and housed and experienced intimacy with your cohort and pastoral care so that you could flourish creatively, intellectually, personally. Could this be like a family, a unit, like an army to which young people could belong?

David described how it took a while for young people to accept his integrity. For the first two and a half years, they thought he was a "sell out" or weird, a fake with no integrity. During this time, he was more self critical than the young people could imagine, although the Kids Company rule is that this is not discussed because the work is not about you – it is about the young people. He highlighted that this aspect of the work is transformative, since living in the service of others requires one's focus to be outward rather than inward, engaged rather than aloof, about others rather than about self. In this perspective the transformative possibility of a relationship comes alive. It has the power to transform both young person and mentor.

He suggested that while this is difficult to explain it is important to understand, because it is through these moments of connection that young people learn resilience and what it means not to be rejected. A great deal of effort goes into creating the conditions which make such moments possible. David spoke of training for (and running) marathons with young people.

¹ www.kidsco.org.uk

He also discussed how he makes himself available for rejection by the young people with whom he works as ways of preparing for these moments.

Staff at Kids Company have therapeutic supervision every week as a way of preparing them for such fresh relationships so that they can be present enough to allow such transformation to occur. More often than not, he suggested, organisations pay superficial attention to what is going on psychologically for staff, missing this opportunity for change. For David this has meant being able to give expression to the frustrated child from whom he had been previously trying to escape, develop beyond it and bring it into the service of others.

His reading of a range of philosophical works while at university made sense to his experience as a frustrated child, especially the need for belonging and connection and feelings which lay outside one's self. He believes that this also inspires most of the young people with whom Kids Company works to improve their own lives, to imagine and then realise a different life for themselves. He went on to argue that far from lacking a moral code, the code of the street can be understood in these terms.

Building upon Benedict Anderson's ideas in the book "*Imagined Communities*", he argued that the nation is an imagined community, socially and culturally constructed. Through the imagination people are held together by an expressed identity of nationality and they will never meet most other members of this community. This gives rise to the possibility that sub cultures and antithetical communities can arise within the nation through the style by which they are imagined. In gang culture, as in other more mainstream communities, this is often imagined as a deep non-hierarchical comradeship. These inventions are powerful and people are often ready to die for them. For example, the self sacrificing love held for the nation has caused many people to lay down their lives in wars. It is also found in poetry, prose, language and music. Young people are often thought of in relation to these latter two. Youth culture often embodies these too, establishing these differences in language, music and territory as points of rejection of others. One can see youth gang behaviour in this light, explaining why gang members refer to themselves as soldiers in adversity with others who do not share in their imagined community and its manifestations.

At Kids Company, part of the task is to re-parent children, so that they experience the love, care and acceptance which they often miss out on in childhood. This can make it possible for children to develop new and more constructive relationships with themselves and others. He said that this experience suggests a narrative which competes with that often found in the press about young people. He said that many marginalised young people, despite the risks and cultural pressures to which they are subjected, develop strategies by which they not only survive, but often excel. Very little is known about this resilience and perseverance, nor is much attention paid to how individuals manage to do this and whether this might be of help to others. This is an important part of the work at Kids Company and listening to young people yields many suggestions about what they need to make their lives whole.

For example Britain does not perform well in key international comparisons about the flourishing of children and young people. This has caused some key commentators to suggest that there is a malaise at the heart of British society amounting to an antipathy towards children and young people in general. From where does this stem and how can it be addressed?

David suggested that social science offers a range of theories to explain such entrenched antipathy:

Critical medical anthropology suggests that violence in society is largely the result of embedded inequality through which the gap between rich and poor is widening. Violence, for example, then is viewed as a response to the limitations imposed by the structural limitations of the institutions of class society.

He suggested this was a strong perspective in "*The Spirit Level*" a recent book by Wilkinson and Pickett who suggest that symptoms include more violence, obesity, inequality, addiction, anxiety and consumerist behaviour in less equal societies. Policy implications include narrowing gaps in income and wealth

Structuralists favour explanations which focus on political economy, class structure, employment and economic opportunity and social geography. Individuals are seen as products of their environment, and changes in individual behaviour are insufficient to shift these parameters as they are beyond the control of individuals. Behaviour will change when the degree of structural inequality changes.

Culturalists emphasise beliefs, values and socialisation. Cultural explanations of behaviour focus on the moral codes which prevail in families, groups and communities. Being trapped in a culture of poverty helps to explain aspects of criminal and immoral behaviour. To change this needs cultural change. For example, spending more on schools will make little difference to educational performance, if the culture of the home and the neighbourhood does not value or support education. Changes to culture at home and in the community are difficult (or impossible) for the state to deliver.

More sophisticated approaches synthesise these different perspectives into tools more able to explain the complexity of the situations they try to address. For example different rates of teenage pregnancy among poor and more affluent girls can be more fully understood if one sees that pregnancy is not viewed by poor girls as an impediment to their future (as they do not often see the possibility of career advancement) whereas more affluent girls may see pregnancy at an early age as an impediment to their career ambitions.

Similarly, educational initiatives among black Afro-Caribbean males are likely to be more effective if they understand the sensibilities of this group towards education rather than the sensibilities of those who would promote it.

He went on to ask whether the situation is as bad as it seems. Is the situation Hobbesian? Is it a war of all against all? Are the lives of marginalised young people destined to be nasty brutish and short? Or is there hope?

He argued that while most interpretations of Hobbes emphasise this dimension of enmity, Hobbes himself also suggested that the first law of nature is for humans to seek peace. It is only in the face of fear that humans are in a perpetual state of readiness for war and to defend and protect. This helps to explain the behaviour of marginalised young people. This constant readiness to fight precludes the possibility of relaxation. According to Hobbes, in the state of nature there is no common power and therefore no law. Many young people see themselves as being in this space. They are outsiders and therefore outside the law engaged in behaviour necessary for survival. No law implies no justice and provides a rationale – the natural law of liberty – for doing whatever you want to protect yourself.

Hobbes argued that a combination of self knowledge and opportunity for introspection together with knowledge (especially science) would help to overcome this. 97% of those who come to Kids Company self refer. David said that Hobbes would easily recognise them as people who were seeking peace. David also said that while they would have such

conversations at Kids Company, the young people would also have the state of readiness for war/survivalist mindset at the fore as soon they went back onto the streets. He suggested this was a coherent response, borne out of different circumstances. War and peace are not seen as opposites, but as a rational individual response within a collective rationality that supposes everyone will act the same way. Their experience suggests that the world is nasty and ready to do them down. To be the first person to give up this state of readiness for war might be foolish if no-one else follows. Where individual and collective rationalities diverge, it may require a shift in collective rationality in order to shift individual rationality. The goal here, for both individual and collective rationality, should be peace without fear – which would dispense with the need for readiness for war.

The young people with whom he works at Kids Company are looking for this. They want to connect, they want to love, they want to express and need to find their own way to do this, coherent with their experience and circumstances. To help young people do this requires understanding through engagement rather than presupposition or assumption. The task is to help young people develop their own narratives in order to have the possibility of becoming whole.

He closed by reading a poem by Rumi entitled *Unfold your own Myth*, which expresses important aspects of this work for him.

Unfold your own myth

Who gets up early to discover the moment light begins?
Who finds us here circling, bewildered, like atoms?
Who comes to a spring thirsty
and sees the moon reflected in it?
Who, like Jacob, blind with grief and age,
smells the shirt of his son and can see again?
Who lets a bucket down
and brings up a flowing prophet?
Or like Moses goes for fire
and finds what burns inside the sunrise?

Jesus slips into a house to escape enemies,
and opens a door to the other world.
Solomon cuts open a fish, and there's a gold ring.
Omar storms in to kill the prophet
and leaves with blessings.
Chase a deer and end up everywhere!
An oyster opens his mouth to swallow one drop.
Now there's a pearl.

A vagrant wanders empty ruins
Suddenly he's wealthy.

But don't be satisfied with stories,
how things have gone with others.
Unfold your own myth,
without complicated explanation,
so everyone will understand the passage,
We have opened you. . .

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.