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FORMAL INDIVIDUALISATION SYSTEMS: THEIR POTENTIAL & LIMITATIONS

In this article, Michael Kendrick explores what is meant by "individualisation" and how the operation of the wider service system limits the application and potential of individualised service responses. Michael also argues that these systems and responses are profoundly dependent on the qualities of the people using them.

The term "individualisation" is seemingly straightforward, but in fact its use may reveal many widely differing assumptions, goals, values, and theories. Furthermore, not every action taken in the name of Individualisation can be assumed to lead to individual benefits despite the appeal of doing so. Consequently, it is very important to be as clear and definitive as possible when we refer to what constitutes a desirable and beneficial form of individualisation, and what does not.

A good starting point would be to recognise that the various planning, funding, and service negotiation processes that are established in the name of individualisation may well lead to something quite unhelpful to the recipient. This is because the presence of a process, even a well-intentioned one, does not guarantee anything other than its existence. All of these processes are profoundly dependent on the qualities of the people using them, to say nothing of the wider social environment or resources.

This can be seen more clearly when one considers the extent to which personalised planning is dependent on the ability to actually implement the plans. Planning for things that are hoped for, but actually are not going to happen, has great inherent limitations. Nevertheless, all individualised planning systems will only be able to translate goals into results if the goals can be negotiated into existence with the many parties who might need to be relied upon. Virtuous intentions are commendable but do not guarantee quality results. This is particularly true when one considers that in most service bureaucracies, individualised planning is not usually well linked to resources or to implementive authority. It is also important to appreciate that the actual personal experience of individualisation may be one of harm, through the bureaucratic installation of individualisation measures such as standardised and compulsory individualised planning, service negotiation, service packages and so on.

When one considers that unique and specialised personal needs will require specific responses, and that most service systems have only a very limited set of offerings, then it will be seen that there is a crucial gap. This gap will only be realistically filled when there is a (prior) measure of investment in the personalised option. It has to be taken into account that the individualisation of support will be problematic if the services available are essentially irrelevant or unhelpful to the person's need. Equally, the assumption that an individualisation system and technologies will drive innovation and service reform is undermined by the fact that so many systems and technologies have become tools for streaming the service recipient into status quo options. Achieving a true personalisation of service is always subject to what is actually feasible or available at a given time. We cannot assume that creative options will spring into existence just because they are asked for or needed.

The capacity of individuals to imagine, pursue or negotiate positive arrangements is subject to any number of limitations and will vary widely. Service users and families who are astute about systems will benefit disproportionately from laissez-faire individualisation schemes, while those who are less astute about systems will benefit less. This observation also applies to those who support the prime user of the individualisation system. Those persons who have access to talented and committed assistance have an advantage that cannot be assumed to be universally available. For instance, a person who is fortunate enough to be in an environment that has positive values and attitudes, administrative flexibility and a visionary climate of innovation, will have a different experience of their individualisation system from that of a person using the same system in a less beneficial environment.

Achieving increased personalisation of support may also come at the cost of increased overall difficulty for all parties, simply because it will intensify the complexity of issues that need to be well managed by service recipient and service provider alike. Typically, an increased personalisation of support will require that the supporter simultaneously does many things well, whereas a standardised system is simpler and less demanding to implement, even if the outcomes are not very beneficial.

Individualisation will usually mean that the service user acquires more choices as well as more involvement in making them. While this may have positive aspects, it is also true that many individuals can flounder when an expanded array of choices is not accompanied by expanded supports that are appropriate to the new possibilities. Expanded choices and a new autonomy will often exacerbate inherent dilemmas such as: being able to discern the best balance of needs and wants; avoiding the destructive uses of choice; managing new responsibilities; or defining one's best interest.

In terms of cost, effective individualisation is not necessarily more costly, but can become so if the options that are taken up are not highly relevant to the person's needs. This is because a mis-fit between the person's needs and the person's support is a waste of scarce resources. At the outset, individualised funding schemes are often invested with panacea-like hopes but, in the end, they are just a financing method. The most critical variable is the human environment in which the funds flow, rather than the funds themselves.

It is always going to be the case that formal individualisation systems will fall short of expectations, because they can never escape the inherent limits accompanying all systems devised by humans. Consequently, a better way of viewing them is that they are either relatively better or relatively worse than other comparable systems. Furthermore, it is useful to recognise that it is possible to consciously build intentional safeguards that will enhance the strengths and lessen the limitations of such systems. For instance, in those individualisation systems that heavily rely on the service recipient taking the lead as a co-participant in the process, it strengthens such person's hand if the system routinely grants to the person some useful power or "official" role. Examples would include: being able to plan in whatever way that most suits the person, the power to use or refuse options that are offered, and to be recognised as being able to negotiate any matters of concern held by the person or their allies. The presence of such safeguards may enable service recipients to experience individualisation systems as being able to be modified through their own efforts. This does not mean that intentional safeguards are sufficient, but simply that they might render the system to be more responsive or, proportionately, more beneficial.

When there is a spirit of deep respect for one's person then the possibilities of "person centeredness" grow dramatically. If such a spirit is present then it will suffuse all interactions with that person. It is people, one at a time, who either see and respond to our personhood or do not. Curiously, many formal systems of individualisation so overly-emphasise the people that it is almost to the point where each person is "atomised" or socially-disconnected. In the name of "focusing on the person", the people in that person's life who most and love and respect them are ignored in favour of concentrating on the formal services. If, on the other hand, one appreciates that it is the quality of the people in our life that is the foundation for authentic individualisation, then one can see formal individualisation arrangements as being only as good as the people that they bring into a person's life.

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