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## **SHARED ADVERSITY, SHARED UNDERSTANDING: FOSTER CARING WITH A DISABILITY BY JON POWTON (2019)**

### **Introduction**

I am delighted to introduce this inspiring guest blog by Jon Powton. I came across Jon recently when I read an article in the Guardian, a national UK newspaper. He was featured in it about being a foster carer with a disability. Jon talks movingly of becoming disabled; of the adversities, prejudices and discrimination experienced; of the barriers to becoming a foster carer; of being a foster carer – the challenges and rewards; of the care system and politics.

The reality of exclusion of people with disabilities from foster care (and many other aspects of life and work) has gone 'under the radar' for too long. This is a great loss to us all. Jon is doing an excellent job in raising awareness. I hope you enjoy this thought-provoking article and please share.

### **Patrick Tomlinson**



### **Disability and Adversity**

Adversity is a word you hear quite often as a foster carer. It seems to sit hand in glove with the profile of many of the children who come into the care system. The adversity, hardship and horror that some children and even their families may have faced, can leave lifelong scars that few other people can truly relate to.

From most people's perspective adversity applies to us all in some way on occasions in life. We've all experienced low points in our own way. The death of a relative, or a serious injury that has made life difficult for a period - losing a job, the ending of a relationship or financial hardship. There are many reasons, but with time and support those scars do tend to heal, and often we can change our own circumstances to improve things. I suppose one of the main groups who can experience lifelong adversity in a similar way to 'looked after' children are people with disabilities or serious life-limiting illnesses and conditions.

I wasn't born with a disability, I grew up around it, and lived in a house with it all my childhood. My grandfather was confined to a wheelchair and lived with my parents, my siblings and I until his death when I was eleven. He died from complications caused by Muscular Dystrophy. The very same condition that I was diagnosed with six years later. This was a bombshell! It may seem naive considering the circumstances of my childhood, but no one ever thought that me and my brother would have the same condition. So little was known about when I was born back in the 70s. Nobody truly understood how it worked or how it transmitted through DNA.

It led to a hard time for me. Seventeen isn't a good age for anyone at the best of times. I felt anger and bitterness about this dream shattering news, the disappointment about my life goals being taken away and fear of my new future - all suddenly being piled on top of the insanity of being a teenager. It was not an easy time at all. In fact, it was the best part of a decade and a half before I was anywhere close to coming to terms with it, if we do ever actually come to terms with such a thing. Maybe it's more of an acceptance thing in the end, an acceptance of not being able to change it and its inevitable impacts!

Perhaps the hardest part for me was the memories I had of the illness that I'd witnessed first-hand in my Grandfather. The slow creeping decay as the condition develops and chips away at a person's function. The gradual fading away, the lack of dignity that this illness can cause in the end. I know that in some way this will inevitably be my fate. I knew it then, and I know it now, which makes the acceptance part very real and very significant!

I have seen both sides of disability, firstly not having it and being able-bodied, then having it and not being fully able-bodied.

Caring for a life-limiting condition is not the same as caring with a life-limiting condition.

I have perhaps the unique perspective of both points of view. Now I am a foster carer, I'm the person with the condition doing the caring.

Inevitably as expected I became disabled slowly over time in an ever-decreasing spiral of capacity. I trained to be an engineer, and I worked in heavy industry for as long as my condition would allow. The fact that I was eventually 'turfed out on my ear' because I was disabled, I will omit from the tale, mostly because it sounds like sour grapes. I then spent several years trying to get back into work within my original skill set, and ultimately failing because I have a disability. I was often the best candidate in the interview until I mentioned my condition. Funny how things can change...

This was perhaps my first taste of disability adversity - the way employers run away from it and don't see beyond the heightened insurance risk or the perceived lower productivity. I have become gradually aware over time to how these new kinds of adversities creep up on you. For a person with a disability, adversity isn't something that stands alone. It comes with a whole host of other issues that pile additional weight onto it. Discrimination, bigotry, attitudinal prejudice,

bullying and exclusion also play a major part in day-to-day life.

It can present itself in many ways. Some are obviously cruel and intentional, like being laughed at and called names because you walk differently or look different, not being given equal opportunities and so on. Some are unintentional like events that don't have proper disabled access, toilets or parking. There are lots of reasons, many I haven't mentioned.

Society itself has a lot to answer for in the way people with disabilities are treated, especially considering that 1 in 5 people have a disability of some kind. Most people only see disability that is either extreme or obvious. *Most of us don't look like Stephen Hawking, but for some reason are expected too, and that anything less somehow doesn't seem worthy of the title.* Because of their own discomfort around serious disability, people form a negative opinion about it that they apply to the word in all circumstances. Most disability is in fact hidden, for example, diabetes, or a hearing or visual impairment.

I can't tell you how many times I've been told to get out of a disabled parking space because I don't 'look' disabled. I have Muscular Dystrophy, not man flu....

I've recently become involved in a project to examine why more people with disabilities are not actively recruited to be foster carers, and why people with disabilities often don't engage with employers or events. This has allowed me to highlight some of the key issues around disability and the lack of proactive inclusion for disabled people in mainstream society. It is illegal in the UK to discriminate against gender, race, sexual orientation, religious denomination, disability etc., etc. We are all aware of the politically correct version of how it should be. We are unfortunately also all very aware of how things far too often play out in reality.

It is perhaps better to phrase it as,

*'Not being excluded isn't the same as being included'*

As no one actively telling you can't do a thing, is not the same as someone actively engaging with you and telling you that you can. Albeit similar in terminology, in practice the differences are huge. As I said, I personally know what it is like to apply for dozens of jobs and be the lead candidate right up to the point I mention my disability. I know how it feels to be laughed at on the street. I know what it's like to not be able to attend events because it's on the third floor with no lift. This has given me the ability and the right to speak out about it from first-hand experience. I know what it's like to be a foster carer with a disability and be told I shouldn't be one!

Society doesn't engage with disability because historically, all the way back to antiquity a person's value is judged on their productivity. Even now, how many companies have a 'piece work' production mentality, where the more you do, the more you earn. It's called the pay packet society. This ethos is carried to this day into mainstream society. Perhaps in many, it's a subconscious thing, but in my experience often it's not. It filters down through generations

where disabled in real terms becomes a label that seems to mean lesser than abled. This paints all disabled people as incapable of anything and everything, in complete ignorance of their actual skill set!

This is the reason most employers don't want us. This combined with the obvious insurance factors, the health and safety aspects or the provision of support they need to put in place to facilitate disabled people in the workplace. Great word facilitate, great in hyperbole, not so good in reality.

How many disabled people's CV's are '**Kept on File for further positions**'... We all know what it means. It means '**Not good enough**', but it's just impossible to prove, so why challenge it.... I see very little facilitating in the wider world at a pace that meets the needs of disabled people. Let's face it, realistically as an employer why give yourself the hassle of employing Mike, when you can employ Bob who doesn't have a disability? Well, perhaps with a little more insight into disability, employers would see the hidden skill sets disabled people possess. Such as, the constant ability to adapt, the drive to overcome challenges, the determination to prove themselves equal, the compassion for others, the pride at being productive and of value, the loyalty they show to the companies who give them equal opportunities. The strength of character and all the things you're all going to list that I forgot. We don't live in the 1870s. This is 21st Century Britain, A former superpower, a former ruler of most of the known world, a former industrial powerhouse, former a lot of things. Surely our great past should have given everyone enough intellect and skill to quickly find a way into the future where this country leads the way in getting the most out of everyone's ability, even those who can't climb stairs or lift heavy things. How much better off would we all be if we stopped writing 20% of the population off before finding out where their value is?

It would be remiss of me not to talk about fear, the fear people have of disability. I have met people who have asked me if they can catch it, today in the 21st century, CAN I CATCH IT....seriously, if that is still a thought that people have then not enough inclusion is going on. I have two children living with me who have been with me for eight years, from being very small children. They don't even often see disability or notice it in people that often. They have become so included in disabled being normal that they just see people as people. They have no fear of a person with a learning disability, facial disfigurement or a person in a wheelchair. To them, like it should be to us all, disability is normal life, and disabled people are not to fear or mock, they are to help and involve. This is what inclusion brings - natural equality and compassion.

No-one chooses to be disabled, no child's first choice is to be fostered.

I do understand fear of disability. Even as a person with one I still have it; I quite honestly find very severe disability a little unnerving. This is purely because I feel vulnerable, and is a failing in myself, that I try to overcome. For example, I was once pushed over and injured by someone with a very profound learning disability, not deliberately I must add, but due to my own lack of balance and my condition, I couldn't prevent it. This was enough perhaps understandably, to

create unease in me around people with those issues, I struggle with their unpredictability. For most, it's their own lack of exposure to disability as children that plays into their lack of understanding and unease around it. It is and always will be human nature to fear what we do not understand. Some people just don't want to get over it, they just can't deal with it, and look at people with a disability like I look at spiders. Though if we endeavoured to bring disability to people more often and earlier, not just when the Paralympics is on, perhaps we can fuel acceptance in new generations. I will however never accept spiders.

The question as to why disabled people don't engage is tricky. Like everyone who judges disability as a thing, we also critically judge ourselves, I know I do. We can and do create some of our own problems and build upon our own reluctance to have another go at things in the face of more ridicule or further rejection. We can also have an elevated sense of entitlement on occasions where we all think the world owes us special treatment. Some people with disabilities have this as a permanent personality trait. The vast majority do not, for me it comes and goes. It would be ridiculous to say that I do not have my own fears of myself, and of my limitations and of my future. I suppose I do on occasions allow them to impact me negatively. The key bit of that is 'on occasions' not permanently and I constantly try to rise above it, but I accept it is harder for some than it is for me. These fears make me reluctant to engage too, and I battle with myself to do so. I think the battle is the war I need to win in myself to change things. So, I push aside the fears and anxiety as best I can, and throw myself headfirst at life and the role I now have. Win or lose I am determined to try because the children I care for are more important than I am. They are what matters most to me, not my limitations. I do it for them and want to change the world for them. Like anyone who sees themselves as a parent, foster parent or otherwise we all want the best for our kids!



It is at this point I must sing, (***If somewhat reluctantly as I'm not here to plug***) the praises of the fostering agency I work with, the National Fostering Agency (NFA). After engaging with me about disability and disability recruitment into fostering – NFA changed their training venue in my hometown because it had no disabled access. This was entirely of their own doing when they realised the situation, and they actively engaged with me to find a more suitable location. This follows on

from the amazing support they have given me from the very first conversation I had with them when I wanted to foster!

It's proactive engagement like this that feeds into a better future for everyone. The children who need safe, happy homes; disabled people who feel valued and relevant; and the staff who gain insight and experience around disability and its issues, which helps them have a more inclusive and positive view of disability to carry forward throughout their careers.

I was asked when writing this to show some ways in which I have met the challenges I have listed, and that has proven difficult to answer. To be honest, I don't have a strategy as such, I try to face things head-on. I do have a sense of humour, but I feel the same hurt and anger as any other disabled person when I get mocked in the street or judged as incapable. Shouting and screaming isn't the answer, I tried it, and it doesn't work, but neither is hiding away a solution. I just get on with it. I try to be the best and most engaging person I can be, and change people's view of disability one person at a time. I hope that's enough. It'll take more than me to change the world, but I can change my bit of it. I still get annoyed on occasions and tell people they are being stupid and ignorant, but only after I try reason and common sense. Some people are just too moronic to recognise it. I have a low tolerance threshold for stupid, sorry.

I do try to show people that a condition or a limitation isn't a definition. I'm not defined by my Muscular Dystrophy, I'm affected by it.

It may seem ridiculous to some, but my condition gave me some things back for all it took away. It gave me compassion, mental strength, and a dogged determination to be seen as the same. Not to mention an understanding of 'adversity' that I can use to relate to the children whom I care for. Like them, I know what it's like to suffer at the hands of others. Those experiences gave me the strength to overcome it and that's what I need to give them.

Adversity is not a disabled dance troupe, nor is it owned by the disabled, though perhaps they do have a stake on the longevity of how they experience it. Adversity is suffering, it's pain, it's depression, fear, shame, it is turmoil and it hurts like hell. Exclusion isn't the solution. Tolerance is a skill that must be learned by us all, me included. Exposure to the things we fear and lack understanding of is the only way to learn about them and overcome them. But I suppose there is little point in me preaching to the converted. So, I suggest if you are a disabled person reading this, go and engage, challenge misconceptions, challenge bigotry with intellect. Go and do the show and tell at school, openly talk about it, you are the expert on the true meaning of disability. Sow the seeds of future acceptance by challenging the current ignorance!

### **Becoming a Foster Carer**

If you want to find true value and acceptance, then perhaps go and foster and use the skills you have that no one else recognises. I have seen first-hand what it feels like to see children accept and inherently promote disability as normal. It's an amazing thing to see, and it's an amazing skill to give them, to not be afraid and to overcome what life throws at them, not just with resolve and determination but with pride in themselves.

I foster because of my abilities, not my disabilities.

But I recognise that I have gained some unique skills and reference points about life because of the experiences disability has forced upon me. It is the emotional competencies of a foster carer that are most important. Disability only comes into it if it seriously affects the job demands. I have just tried to find the silver lining on my cloud.

I would expect many people who read this to think, 'That's not for me, I can't do that, I don't want to lose my benefits, I don't want to look after crazy damaged kids.... etc., etc.' This is the point where I need to set straight some of the misconceptions people have about kids in care. The children and young people in care don't have the skills that you have. They don't have the ability to process life in the way you do, why would they, nobody ever taught them how. They don't have the benefits of the upbringing you had from your parents, or the strengths you found in the life you may have had to forge for yourself. They are victims, they are not the cause of their situation. It was caused by all of us, all the people in society who turn a blind eye to the failings in ourselves and the systems we put in place.

Poverty and lack of social mobility, poor education, substance abuse, lack of options and inequality. These are the problems that create the situations that usually bring children into care.

And yes, some people just are not fit to be parents through their own failures, but that itself always has a deeper routed cause often based in the above!

The children I have met in the course of my fostering career have been varied and different. Some have bigger things to resolve and deal with than others, but they are all affected by the failures of others. They are affected by the same stigmas and attitudinal prejudices that we as disabled people face. Many resonate with the same fears, angers and self-loathing that I had. Most importantly though, they do have the ability to heal, they just need our help to do it. Some of the most amazing and most surprising people I have ever met are looked after children. They are not bad. Some have just experience bad things that they have normalised. Some have experienced things that would break us. They have not only lived it for years, they have somehow survived it.

I agree fostering is not for everyone, but that's not to a person's detriment. It takes courage to admit you can't handle it, but I believe it takes more courage to try. It takes more to give yourself to it, to make any difference you can to these children no matter how small, no matter how ungrateful they appear at the time. In the end, it's valuable, one day they will recognise that value and maybe that little bit of horror you changed will help break a cycle for the next generation. Their children won't be victims like they were, because of the skills you gave them.

I realise the thought of losing benefits is always a big issue to disabled people, and everyone thinks they are going to end up on the streets selling the 'The Big Issue' newspaper. It's just not the case. Fostering is hard, it can be thankless, and it is often emotionally draining. To many, disabled or not, it has little appeal. The UK government recognises this obvious fact and have tried in many ways to make doing it viable and rewarding. This is why fostering falls into a special category called 'home-based therapeutic care'. This means that disability benefits are not affected by being a foster carer, you can foster and still claim what you claim. There may also be significant tax breaks. Wherever you are, I would always recommend you get independent professional advice. You may find out that your financial worries about fostering



are unfounded.

Over the years people have said to me that fostering is easy money, or money for nothing, and have questioned how hard can it be? *The answer is,*

*it's absolutely hard enough to be massively under-subscribed. Hard enough to break your heart on occasions.*

It is in no way like looking after your own birth children. Imagine the hardest parts of raising your own children, then times it by sexual abuse, starvation, neglect, attempted murder, physical abuse, foetal drug and alcohol addiction, psychological abuse, torture and sexual exploitation or trafficking.

Do you think children without problems come into care? That they are in care because they have not experienced one or many of the above, and it's just a holiday. No child comes into care because their home life is good.

### **The Challenge and Reward of Being a Foster Carer**



To those who criticise foster carers, and there are many who do, or those who question a fostering agency's business model's morality, saying it is wrong to profit from fostering - I don't know, I don't run the business. Personally, I would suggest no more so than it is to profit from being a Physiotherapist or a Dentist working in private practice. Is it wrong to run a profitable business in the human services? Or is the profit the reason the businesses are successful? Surely if the

outcomes for children are good, then the cost is worth it. In England, there are many Local Authority Children Services in crisis or struggling. You don't tend to find it with tier one independent agencies.... just a thought. Isn't the private sector driven to do better, to succeed? Surely the motivation for any business to work is its ability to provide the best service and be better than its competitors!

It is easy to say it's easy, easy to belittle by those who don't do it and don't understand its realities. I would suggest if it's so easy then please go and give it a go for a year. I won't even say I told you so, when you realise just how spectacularly you are wrong!

Be warned though, to any of you who think fostering is just some sort of path to easy money or some sort of job for old rope. You will very quickly find yourself wrong and it's probably not for you. It's not a job for anyone without huge commitment, dedication and perseverance. It is a professional and difficult role, for which you must be trained. The very best is expected and

demanding of you and it's 24/7/365. It takes great mental strength, drive and determination to succeed to do it well. Fostering is a Job that very quickly becomes a vocation for those who love it. Vocation or not we are professionals, who play a major role in the rehabilitation of children's well-being. We are at the vanguard of caring for and slowly fixing those who society disavowed, abused and mistreated. Nobody has ever remained a foster carer for the money. Any that set out with that in mind will not last. But it is impossible to do it without money - self-esteem doesn't pay the mortgage, the rent or the gas bill. Moral high ground doesn't put food on the table or allow me to clothe, feed, transport, take on holiday, pay for school dinners, trips, toys, Christmas, birthdays etc. No fostering allowance pays for the love and care and attention I give my children, that's free and always has been. The fostering allowance merely facilitates the provision of a home for them to live in and the required necessities to allow a normal life for the children.

To the disabled person, if you do consider it, you should not expect special treatment because you have a disability. You will be (and rightly so) assessed like everyone else and surely that's a good thing. You will succeed or fail based on your ability to meet the needs of a child, not your disability. If you fail, then that's because you cannot meet those needs. Be realistic and be prepared to be treated like everyone else. A lot of able-bodied people can't meet the needs of a child either. Hand on heart it's the most rewarding thing I have ever done. It actually matters. It's worth it and it changes lives. To me, it is a privilege to be able to look after other people's children and change their futures for the better. So, if you believe you can do it, find out. Currently, in the UK there is a need for 10,000 foster homes. There are 13,000,000 people with disabilities. 0.07% of the disabled community who could solve the national tragedy of foster care shortage. Less than one-tenth of one percent! There are also big foster care shortages in many other countries, such as the USA. The same principle applies.

Fostering has given me a purpose beyond myself, it has given me back a sense of self-worth that the world tried to beat out of me. It has made me a better person and I am stronger because of it. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to challenge themselves and rise above the stereotypes and labels society wants to put on you. But most importantly, help give a future to these children and young people.

## Reference

Frances Ryan (2019) Being a foster carer is the best thing that I've done with my life, in *The Guardian*

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/15/foster-carer-best-thing-disabled-people-shortage>

**See Jon Powton LinkedIn Profile** for links to relevant articles, etc.

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## THOUGHTS ON THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABUSE OF CHILDREN (2014)

This is a huge subject and I am just going to make a few comments about my experience. Though these experiences may to some extent seem random, I think they are also connected by a theme. My first experience of work with children who had suffered abuse and neglect was in 1985. I was shocked to see how their early lives had so terrorized and deprived them of the experiences essential for healthy development.

Because of abuse and neglect, a 12-year-old child might have the functioning level of an infant. He may not even have reached the level of emotional or neural integration normally achieved in the first 1 – 1.5 years. These children's development had literally been frozen. Their emotions were also highly dysregulated, and they can fall into an overwhelming panic or violent rage in an instant. At the other extreme - still watchfulness, emotional detachment and withdrawal may be the predominant mode of functioning. One thing that surprised me at the time was the fact that children like this existed, as I had no idea. It was and still may be a human problem that is hidden away. I knew about various disabilities and their consequences, and there was plenty of media coverage – but nothing on these children traumatized by those who were supposed to protect them.

The single most significant predictor that an individual will end up in the mental health system is a history of childhood trauma, and the more severe and prolonged the trauma, the more severe are the psychological and physical health consequences. (Kezelman and Stavropoulos, 2012)

It has been said that the dynamics of abuse are secrecy and denial. Kezelman and Stavropoulos (2012) refer to the 'culture of silence that continues to surround child abuse'. They explain why this may be so,

The many constraints which still militate against open discussion of child abuse compound recognition and addressing of violations the scale and magnitude of which, were they to be acknowledged and confronted, would both raise questions of complicity and comprise grounds for deep national shame.

I recently read that it was published in the 1950s that one in a million women had probably experienced incest as a child. Apparently, the text where this was stated was still widely used in the training of psychiatrists in the 1980s. Some researchers these days put the incidence of child abuse within families as closer to one in four. Why is there such a huge difference in 50 years? Is child abuse on a huge increase or is it just being reported more, or both? We also know very well the historical controversies that have existed in the relational sciences, as to whether reports of child abuse by adults in treatment are real or phantasy.

Professor Middleton comments that *'[i]t is hard to find a comparable example in society where something so damaging to so many could exist undisturbed for decades under the gaze of those professional bodies who would be assumed to have*

*qualifications and motivations to bring clarity and to be at the forefront of addressing such a pervasive threat to the mental and physical health of fellow citizens'. (ibid).*

On the one hand, it seems that progress is made in the exposure of child abuse. But it doesn't seem that it is becoming any less common. Some westernized countries may have been ahead in terms of surfacing the problem. I was in India 7-8 years ago and sexual abuse was just beginning to be talked about in the media. Since then there has also been a big movement to expose the violence towards women in India. I gave a talk to 100 or so social work students at an Indian University. During the talk, I referred to a child I worked with who had a severe panic attack when I made a simple request, like asking him to finish his breakfast. It turned out his mother had made a similar request and then hit him so hard on the head with a stick that he needed hospitalization. One of the students stood up and said she didn't see why being hit caused the boy such problems in the future. She added 'we've all had a good beating' to which everyone laughed.

I explained that the beating, while some would argue is never good for a child, might also depend on the context to determine how much damage is done. For example, if the culture is one where hitting children is common, at least the child feels this is normal - my friends also get hit. Another factor might be whether the 'disciplining' action takes place in what is a generally loving family environment – where the parents are concerned for their child. Or is it part of a more neglectful environment? Are the parents' actions more based on their own difficulties rather than the child's needs? The severity is another factor – violence that requires medical treatment cannot be right under any circumstances. While physical discipline might be considered by some to be ok within a cultural context, I don't think that anyone would argue that sexual abuse is.

Maybe because it simply isn't ok – discussing sexual abuse tends to become difficult. Besides abhorrence towards the abuser, few other views are expressed. Sex offenders are routinely hated and despised. They are often portrayed as evil. I remember visiting a sex offender in prison. On the way to the prison, the taxi driver was keen to know why I was making a prison visit. When I alluded to the reason, the conversation immediately ended. After the visit, I was wondering why the prisoner I visited came into the room, after the other prisoners. He sat on his own, wore a colored band and left before the others. I realized it was probably for his own safety. Having anything to do with sex offenders or even children and young people who have been abused, can be uncomfortable and one's motives might be questioned. This is highlighted by the difficulty that can be involved in having a conversation on the subject with someone who has been abused. Too much interest might be felt to be intrusive and voyeuristic. Too little might feel like turning a blind eye.

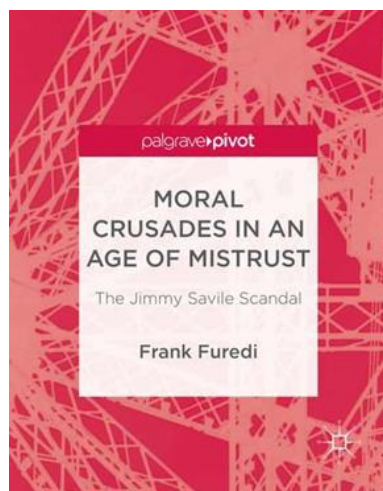
Recent sexual abuse scandals in the UK involving, dead or elderly celebrities have caused an outrage. Some of the most popular family entertainers, it turns out had been abusing children. The outrage has been towards the individual perpetrators, followed by the organizations that failed to be sufficiently protective or even colluded. It is as if the moral outrage about abuse can be vented towards these cases, but we can't have a rational discussion about what is happening

in our own neighborhoods. A few years ago, when I was opening a new children's home in a residential neighborhood, we met each neighbor, so we could build a positive relationship. One neighbor could not let go of the question, 'but have these children been sexually abused?' He was fearful of this, as if the neighborhood would be threatened and at-risk by having an abused child living among them.

In response, I focused on the fact that the children we were looking after, all had needs due to their difficult childhoods. Our job was to meet those needs, so that they could develop and prosper. The neighbor kept persisting with his question. In the end, I said that according to the statistics maybe 1 in 10 of the children in this neighborhood were abused. After that, he abruptly dropped the whole issue.

Thinking about the conversations with the neighbor and taxi driver, I am struck by the fact that I just allowed the conversations to end. I could have asked them their views on what I had said. Maybe the underlying feelings, such as anxiety, fear and hostility led me to rather not talk and therefore collude in a small way. One of the inferences for anyone who is close to sexual abuse, whether personally or professionally, is that they may be complicit with the abuse. Therefore, anyone who talks about it, rather than to just utter disgust towards a perpetrator runs the risk of being judged in a similar way. It is common in working with traumatized children, to be treated as if one is an 'abuser'.

What I am suggesting with the examples above, is that the problem of abuse gets projected in an extreme way and this is part of the denial dynamic. I have come across many worthy organisations who aim to tackle the problem of abuse by focusing on the pedophile, 'lurking on the street corner'. The emphasis on stranger danger continues, though evidence suggests that the most likely threat to a child is someone close to them, especially a parent. We educate young children on how to avoid being lured by a stranger. Do we educate children on what to do if someone in the family is abusive? Maybe this reality just touches upon too many taboos and challenges the idealization of the family that is prevalent in many cultures.



The sociologist Frank Furedi wrote the book 'Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust: The Jimmy Savile Scandal', in response to the scandal of the deceased UK TV celebrity Jimmy Savile and the retrospective discovery of his serial abuse of children.

My understanding of Furedi's argument is that the erosion of our trust in authorities leads to a high level of uncertainty, which makes us feel anxious. We then project some of our anxiety onto children, who are increasingly perceived to be vulnerable and 'at risk'. Interestingly, numerous countries have gone through the same process in the last few years. Erosion of trust; exposure of corrupt politicians, church, bankers, etc.; media exposure of scandal in relation to child abuse; as the moral panic

grows, there are then 'witch-hunts'; discovery of institutional abuse; national outcry and government inquiry; followed by recommendations on how to better protect children.

These are necessary and appropriate concerns. However, as Furedi argues our difficulty in really thinking about rather than reacting to the issues involved, leads to some very unhelpful and destructive actions. It also undermines the potential to make real progress. A slight illustration of a moral panic was when a pediatrician in Wales had bricks thrown through his living room window by angry neighbors. Someone had referred to him as a pediatrician, which was mistaken to mean pedophile!

Wrongful arrests are on the more serious side of things. I know of one service for children that was closed, due to the wrongful accusation of a link with a pedophile ring. The sensationalized media headlines were followed by the withdrawal of children from the service. Two years later, after the service had closed, children unnecessarily removed, staff wrongly arrested, and careers ruined, the Judge concluded the trial by praising the work of the service.

How do we know, when denial is appropriate and when it is a cover-up? Conspiracists might argue that Judges, Police, Politicians, Churches have a lot invested in supporting denial. This dilemma and lack of trust is exactly what Furedi suggests makes this such an important and difficult problem.

Ultimately, what we want is no children suffering abuse and the potentially devastating consequences. How will this be achieved unless we become more able to have rational discussions about the problem? How do we become more capable to think about this difficult subject and what it means?

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## Comments

### Sean Ferrer, Director - Strategic Marketing, England

Patrick, you have written a highly thought-provoking, and courageous piece here. I use the word courageous, because the fashion these days is to portray all sex offenders as incarnate evil, so abhorrent that the mere mention of the label provokes a raft of negative commentary. The fact that you have not engaged in the standpoint is to be commended.

Neither you, nor I, condone such offences, but I feel we both recognise that progress in our understanding of the phenomenon of sexual offences, especially against children, is continuously impeded when it is drowned out by a collective wail of disgust. Moreover, anyone who fails to express his or her own disgust when exploring the topic risks being branded in some way complicit, or supportive of such damaging behaviour.

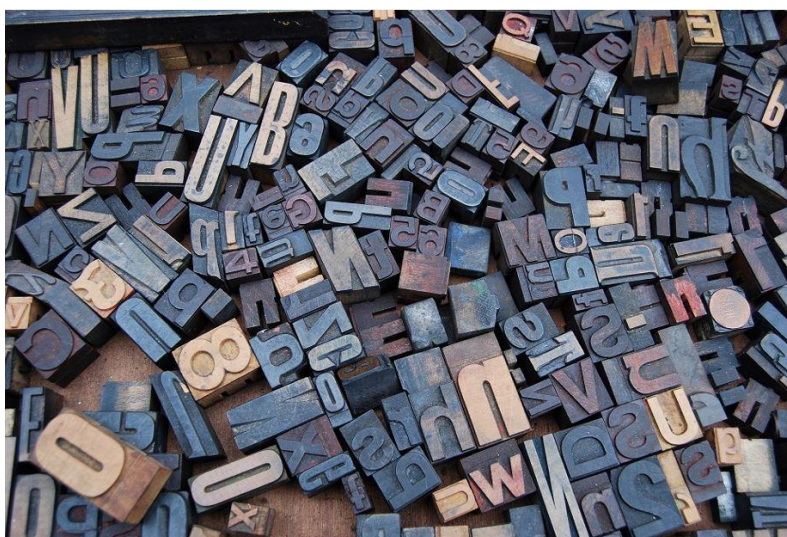


**Jonny Matthew, Consultant Social Worker and Criminologist, Wales**

Good stuff, Patrick - very thought-provoking! Your comments about those who help being in some way viewed suspiciously, is very true. After many years of working with harmful sexual behaviour in teenagers, I've experienced this many times. Worse still, at times, I've colluded with this suspicion by moderating my own comments in line with what I perceive to be the likely stance of skeptical others. I guess part of this is the desire to avoid "freaking out" the uninitiated!

Sean's point about the prevalence of sexual interest in children is perhaps the next taboo for society to assimilate. The thorny issue of sex offenders as victims with reactive behaviours is another. Not that this is permissive or excusing in any way. Neither is it remotely suggesting that all victims do or may become perpetrators - that would be ridiculous. But we do have to face the fact that those who commit sexual crimes were very often victims themselves - meta-analytic research is really clear on this.

**COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, COMPLEXITY AND WORD CLOUDS  
BY MARK WADDINGTON (2017)**



Amador-Loureiro [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com)

**Introduction**

I am delighted to introduce a guest blog by Mark Waddington, who is an organizational consultant based in the UK. He is researching for a PhD in collaboration and complexity. In working with Mark, I have learnt much from his perspective on issues, such as communication, collaboration and complexity. He has provided much 'food for thought' and exploration.

It is well-known that communication happens at many levels. The psychologist Albert Mehrabian (1972) claimed through his research that only 7% of communication is through words, 38% through verbal affect and 55% through body language. The detail of these findings has been elaborated during the last 50 years, but the general point remains the same. The

actual words we use are significant but not as much as other aspects of communication. This also means that a significant part of communication is unconscious. Much of our verbal affect and body language happens beyond our awareness. A simple exercise of listening to a recording or watching a video of oneself, can be a disturbing experience! As psychoanalysis has shown us, even the words we consciously choose are also influenced by less conscious factors. The 'slip of the tongue' is universally understood.

So, on the one hand, the subject of communication is well researched, as is collaboration and complexity – in groups, organizations and societies. However, what is striking is how much, despite the vast research we tend to not pay enough attention, individually and collectively. Maybe, sometimes it is too challenging and potentially painful. Awareness leads to change, and human change is usually a slow process. The study of language can be revealing of what is happening, in ways we are often unaware of. As Mark says, it really is worth checking out what words get used and those that don't.

Mark Waddington's focus is on inter-agency collaboration. These relationships within and across organizations, and sometimes across communities and societies, can be full of anxieties and tensions, which easily lead to conflict. Mark provides a way of looking at what is happening in these relationships, using word clouds. The word clouds in themselves are fascinating. More importantly, they draw attention to ways in which we might improve our awareness and effectiveness, in those most challenging and complex situations.

I hope that you will find the series of articles interesting and useful – thank you Mark!

### Patrick Tomlinson



**The Sorites Paradox** - *Reflections on my first year working as a consultant in the human services.*

The Sorites paradox, or the paradox of the heap, has been puzzling us for nearly 2500 years. It describes a scenario in which a heap of grain is repeatedly diminished, one grain at a time. When there are thousands of grains, the loss of one more does not stop us seeing a 'heap', but there will come a point where the heap comprises just one grain. At this point, most folk would agree there's no heap.

The problem is that technically the same heap remains. We could sort this and define 'heap' at a minimum of 1000 grains, but 999 is pretty much the same. Usually, this vagueness is not a problem – we can all have different ideas about what a heap might be, and get by with a bit of common sense. However, if you ask the same question about baldness the territory starts



getting trickier. Here issues of sensitivity begin to make thinking a little more complicated. The question of how many hairs might be lost before the thing called baldness happens is not just about counting – it is entangled with potentially complicated issues around appearance, identity and age. The worldwide hair loss industry reportedly turns over more than £1.5bn pa. By the time you arrive in more anxious territory, such as, thinking about complex and vulnerable young people, it is much harder to be confident we understand each other or, that we might reach an agreement about what is happening or what might help. Somehow this problem of vagueness can permeate thinking in ways that paralyse progress. Anxiety can drive a frame of mind, hoping ‘somebody does something’, alongside a sense that decision making lies elsewhere in a professional network. The vagueness allows everyone to be a little unclear what the problem is, or indeed what should be done and by whom.

As I consider my experience, as a consultant and doctoral researcher, working with professional networks. I am struck by the stubborn persistence of vagueness. In my view, there is an alternative, which often lies in a leadership model that affirms differing and sometimes contradictory viewpoints across a group’s membership. Often this affirmation can be achieved through relatively straightforward questions and a determination to take the time to establish all views. The ensuing clarity may well bring its own discomfort, but also the prospect of a collective confidence as to how the land lies.



### Sorites II - Paradox or Polarisation?

The lovely thing about the Sorites paradox is that it tells a story that helps disagreements make sense. A group of people is likely to contain a group of viewpoints and there’s a fair chance that some will be in contradiction. The big question is whether these contradictions can be helpful. Let’s assume these people have become a group to sort out a problem, even if one contradiction might be that they do not agree exactly what the problem is. The group can deal with

contradictory viewpoints in various ways.

A **Polarised Position**, where two or more group members with differing viewpoints behave as though their viewpoint is most compelling and compete for supremacy.

A **Paradoxical Position**, where contradictory viewpoints are accepted as a paradox by a group who will then puzzle together as to how best to achieve resolution.

Of course, it is also an option not to acknowledge contradictions at all. They could be **Passed Over** for a variety of reasons:

- Group members might be so keen to fit in that they will only display behaviours and thoughts that they imagine will be acceptable to the group.
- Membership of the group might presuppose a common viewpoint and be exclusive of differing views.

The task of the leader is to steer the group between these positions and set a course that maximises progress toward a resolution of the group's problem. There are strengths and vulnerabilities associated with each of these positions:

A supreme group member in the **Polarised Position** might be experienced as Charismatic and Inspiring or as Autocratic and Repressive.

The **Paradoxical Position** might be experienced as inclusive and enabling, or creating a chaotic talking shop where nothing is ever decided.

The **Passed Over Position** provides an uncluttered environment for decision-making but also the space for miscommunication or even dysfunction that could be experienced as sabotage. [Simone Weil](#) (1970) famously stated, "When a contradiction is impossible to resolve except by a lie, then we know that it is really a door". Leadership is all about operationalising this statement rather than going mad!

Success in this enterprise is very much tied up with the ways in which people talk and think together. My research examines discourse in complex collaborative networks, and I believe it is possible to improve the chances of a good outcome, through observation and understanding of the ways that organisations talk to themselves and each other.

### Sorites III - Doing Things Differently

My last two postings describe how when people work together, the [phenomenon of vagueness](#) generates contradictory views, and how leaders can help a group [navigate these tensions](#).

When a contradiction is, "impossible to resolve except by a lie", we're describing a stuck situation where the words we have available, appear not to have the capacity to help us move on. So, when Simone Weil goes on to say, "we know that it is really a door", she makes something clear about those words that will need to change if things are to turn out differently.

Words are the fundamental tools used when people talk and think together, though there are many other ingredients - eye-contact, intonation, speed of delivery, etc. This posting is about the words, especially in the context of organizations. It really is worth checking out what words get used within an organisation, and those that don't. My research and consultancy roles have allowed me to observe the language being used in different settings and it is striking how much it varies. Let me show you why this matters.

Here are two, word clouds taken from collaborative and oppositional discussions. One is a











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### A TAXI DRIVER'S TIMELY COMMENT ON BRAIN PLASTICITY (2014)



Since I started writing blogs a few months ago I have realized that there are some things worth writing about that may just be like a mini-blog – of which this is one.

I was recently travelling by taxi to give a talk in Sydney on childhood trauma and recovery from it. I'm never certain exactly how I will start off a talk and usually just see whatever occurs at the time. The taxi driver was a man in his mid-20s from Nepal who had been living in Australia for 3-4 years. During the two weeks I was in Australia – I heard some fascinating stories and interesting views of many taxi drivers, from Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan, Iran, Greece and Turkey among others. Occasionally we sat in silence for most of a journey, but generally, a conversation ensued.

The Nepalese driver and I were talking about different weather climates. How it could be very hot during Sydney summers, cold but not too cold in the winter. He said that Nepal had a moderate climate, warm most of the year-round. I mentioned Ireland, maybe unfairly, where I said they have a few warm sunny days a year and it rains a lot of the time. I had recently been told by an Irish friend that it had been raining every day for 2 months! However, I said people get used to what is normal for them and probably don't mind so much.

Just before I got out of the car the taxi driver said, 'the human being is like rubber'. An excellent and timely observation on the plasticity of the human brain, which I would soon be talking about - in relation to the potential for recovery from trauma. Possibly, it was also a reflection on how immigrants might adjust to their new environments. It also showed me that just by listening and paying attention, we can be provided with insights and gifts when we least expect them! Maybe those are the best kind of gifts. His comment definitely helped get my talk off to a good start.

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LinkedIn Discussion Group: Therapeutic Residential and Foster Care for Traumatized Children

LinkedIn Discussion Group: Staff Recruitment and Development (for People and Organizations)