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Thinking sociologically about kindness

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Thinking sociologically about kindness: puncturing the blasé in the ordinary city

Abstract

This article makes the case for a sociological engagement with kindness. Although virtually ignored by sociologists we tend to know kindness when we see it and to feel its absence keenly. We suggest there are four features of 'ordinary' kindness which render it sociologically relevant: its infrastructural quality; its unobligated character; its micro or inter-personal focus and its atmospheric potential. This latter quality is not the 'maelstrom of affect' associated with urban living but can subtly alter how we feel and what we do. We illustrate these features through a study of everyday help and support. In doing so, we argue that – as much as Simmel's blasé outlook – small acts of kindness are part of how we can understand city living and that, despite the cultural trope of randomness, a sociologically adequate account of kindness needs to recognise the ways in which it is socially embedded and differentiated

Key words: kindness, relationships, emotions, infrastructure, city

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According to Baudelaire (1864:164) – and famously paraphrased by Keyser Söze[i] - 'The loveliest trick of the devil is to persuade you that he does not exist!'. This article aims to persuade that something that is, in certain respects, the inverse of evil *does* exist: a web or infrastructure of low-level, everyday kindness upon which much else depends. In doing so, the article aims to reclaim the concept of kindness as sociologically useful. We argue that the notion of kindness can be distinguished from related concepts that have received greater sociological attention, and highlight – via an empirical study of low level help and support in Glasgow – what it might mean to take it seriously as a social issue. In other words, we suggest both that sociology has something distinctive to offer our understanding of kindness and vice versa. An urban setting might not seem an obvious start point for a sociology of kindness, but it is exactly the city's reputation as a space of indifference that makes it analytically interesting. A final aim of the article is, then, to show how that urban indifference can be breached or punctured by small kindnesses.

Thinking sociologically about being kind: putting 'kin' back in kindness

We begin by looking at why sociology has not had its head turned by kindness, at related concepts it has engaged with and at what an engagement with kindness might add to these. From Durkheim's (1893) solidarity to Sennett's (2012) togetherness, sociologists have long been concerned with supportive social relations. More recent debates about social capital and social networks (Nast and Blokland 2014), community and resilience (Taylor and Addison, 2011) as well as civility, including in the context of migration and ethnicity (Hall, 2015; Anderson, 2011), have continued this sociological engagement. The notion of kindness, however, has not tended to feature in these discussions, perhaps because it hints at a prescriptive morality that social science has been keen to distance itself from (Sayer, 2011).

This lack of sociological engagement with kindness reflects a more general side-lining of the concept in public life, at least in the 'West'. Ballatt and Campling (2011) document how the 'joyousness' of

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kindness was diluted by the growth of post Augustinian Christianity to become increasingly linked to self-sacrifice. With the rise of competitiveness, individualism and consumerism, kindness and related ideas (including Hume's fellow feeling) shifted from the centre of Enlightenment thinking. This relegation was reinforced by the entrenchment of the gendered dualisms of public and private and reason and emotion. Despite an intermittent cultural interest in 'random acts of kindness'[ii]there is, especially in a neoliberal context, a residual sense that being kind is a sign of weakness, a 'civility for losers' (McDermott, 2013).

These cultural shifts may help explain why, for sociologists, kindness lacks the heft of 'solidarity', 'justice' or 'community'. Few sociological texts mention kindness and those that do tend to treat it as a second order concept or as taken-for-granted (something sociologists are usually loathe to do). Gouldner (1960), for instance, references Cicero's observation that there is no more indispensable a duty than returning a kindness, but it is reciprocity that is the concern not kindness *per se*. One notable exception is Cooley's (1915) work on social organisation. For Cooley, competition may be pervasive but our primary human aim is a 'desired place in the thought of others' (1915: 23-24). This, he proposes, is why the self is 'itself altruistic' and kindness can be thought of as *the '*law of right intercourse within a social group' (1915:40). Even in the most transient of interactions, Cooley suggests, a 'sense of kindred' (1915:37) can develop if we open our imaginations to the lives of others.

By comparison with kindness, sociologists have paid a great deal of attention to civility, which shares with kindness a focus on the everyday. For Goffman (1959), civility is a performance of shared morality and a commitment to co-operation and solidarity (Burns, 1992). Kindness is often subsumed under civility in academic research (Davetian, 2009) but also in policy-focused work where it is used interchangeably with civility, politeness and generosity (Griffith et al., 2011). This blurring, however, belies a distinction between the norms and rituals associated with civility and the less

expected quality of kindness reflected, not always helpfully, in the notion of kindness as random or infectious.

As noted above, there have been a variety of forms of engagement with kindness within popular culture[iii] and, in the last couple of years, it has reappeared in the discipline, particularly in North America, albeit in subdued fashion – embedded in calls for a 'positive sociology' (Yogan, 2015) and a sociology of morality (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2010) or altruism (Jeffries, 2014).

A more recent – and perhaps more useful - deployment of the term within UK sociology can be found in Hall and Smith's (2015) engagement with Thrift's (2005:145) idea of an 'infrastructure of kindness'. In the context of the city, Thrift sees kindness as being dependent on 'lighter touch forms of sociality' but also exceeding the human, as built into the space of cities (see also Amin, 2006). Based on research on street cleaners and outreach workers, Hall and Smith sought to extend Thrift's thinking on repair from the physical to the social. We return to the embedded, environmental nature of kindness below when we challenge Thrift's (2005: 138) positioning of the city as a site of 'emotional knots'. All these writers provide fascinating glimpses into how to begin to think about kindness in the context of city living; but what is understood by kindness remains underdeveloped.

Sociology is not alone in this neglect of kindness. As noted, since Hume, philosophy has also moved away from such concerns and had more to say about related concepts – duty and altruism - than kindness *per se* (though see Hamrick, 2002), while psychology's renewed interest in the subject has been within the context of a wellbeing agenda (Fredrickson, 2001). Ballatt and Campling (2011:12), writing about health care, however, have framed kindness as a *way* of offering help which involves 'solidarity with human need' (Gallagher, 2012).

This understanding is much closer to the etymological roots of kindness: what we share, our lineage, our 'kyn'. Kindness then, is not just about doing nice things but about recognising our shared humanity and interdependency and, as such, it resonates with Cooley's framing. Kindness usefully

draws our attention to the moments when we extend recognition beyond those we normally acknowledge as kin or kin-like.

Below we draw on empirical data from the Liveable Lives study to develop a sociological understanding of kindness. This analysis adds to Hall and Smith's (2015) work by focusing on kindness in ordinary interactions rather than by public employees and to Thrift's (2005: 147) notion of the 'affective localities' of cities through grounding these in specific social and material environments. Also, unlike both these authors, we have a particular focus on the act of *noticing*. By this, we mean both the noticing of need, which the enactment of kindness involves, but also the significance – and difficulty – of *noticing that noticing*. There is a paradox here: at some level, kindness involves an awareness of others; and yet it often occurs at so low a level that it is barely visible, even to those directly involved.

While the Devil may do his best work unannounced, kindness, by contrast, may be strengthened by being brought into the light. Through recognising – individually and collectively – the inter-dependencies involved in small acts and relationships of help and support, we may help to (re)create the conditions that render them possible in the first place.

Spraying water on the web: researching the unnoticed

The Liveable Lives project was a large-scale qualitative study of low-level help and support, based in three areas in and around Glasgow[iv] (Anderson et al, 2015; 2015a).[v] The study was not directly conceived as an investigation of kindness though the concept was implicit in its focus: very small acts of help and support involving people we know less well (rather than relationships involving those closest to us[vi]) and/or situations in which we may see ourselves as having greater choice about whether or not to give or receive such help. At the outset a precise vocabulary for these acts and relationships eluded both funders and the research team. As the study developed, we explored the

utility of related concepts, such as altruism, reciprocity and community, but none seemed adequately to speak to the nuances emerging from the data, particularly the unexpected and affective character of some interactions. In preliminary focus groups, we found that some participants volunteered the term kindness while others saw it as limiting or unhelpfully moralistic. The everyday familiarity of the concept – the fact that, to paraphrase Phillips and Taylor (2009), we tend to know it when we see it – as well as the way it was employed to describe non kin practices suggested it might have some analytical purchase. As the study progressed, we deepened our understanding of what a sociological framing of this lay concept might look like.

The 'low intensity' nature of the acts and relationships we were concerned with meant they were often hidden in plain sight: their absence might not be immediately noticed nor lead to strong repercussions and yet they play a significant role in everyday life. A useful metaphor here is the spider's web – a structure which combines fragility with flexibility and strength and is almost invisible to the naked eye until revealed by, for instance, by a sharp frost or dew. Making visible everyday help and support through research, we suggest, is akin to spraying water on such a web.

Glasgow was chosen as a research site because it shared much with other post-industrial urban settings in the UK but also because it has a distinctive sense of place and its own identity. Drawing on a range of ethnographic tools[vii], the project adopted a multimethod approach, the analytical aim of which was to access different dimensions of everyday help and support. Six focus groups[viii] held at the start of the research focused on the language of everyday help and support and, as noted, included discussion about kindness and other terms. But at the heart of the project was a series of individual interviews with 44 core participants[ix], a sample that was managed iteratively and drew on a variety of recruitment approaches, including household screening and networking, to maximize diversity.

Each Liveable Lives study participant was interviewed twice, either side of a log-keeping exercise (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). In the first interview, as well as being asked to share biographical stories, participants were introduced to the log[x] (and invited to choose a paper notebook, digital recorder, camera or phone text or some combination of these) as a tool for capturing interactions that happened (or failed to happen) that they regarded as everyday help and support. The second interview, 10-14 days later, was centred on the log, and involved participant and researcher each selecting a couple of entries to explore in detail.

This work of 'noticing the unnoticed' was not without ambivalence and complications. Some participants worried that they had not recorded 'the right kind of thing' or that entries spoke to how 'boring' their lives were. While we cannot tell the extent to which people filtered out examples on this basis, their reflections on the process were, in themselves, illuminating of beliefs and practices Spowart and Nairn, 2014). In total, 41 logs were completed:[xi] 34 written-only logs, one drawing-only, two written with drawings, two phone-text logs and two audio logs. All but one participant found instances to record and in total, some 500 instances of everyday help and support were noted. All the data were entered into NVivo 10 and coded thematically.

The diversity of the study, noted above, was important in beginning to explore the social embeddedness of kindness and echoes an emerging concern to understand the prevalence and patterning of pro-social behaviours (Habibis et al, 2016). We argue here, however, for a necessary step back to conceptualise more fully what we mean by kindness before we attempt to measure its differentiation. We begin this conceptual work below by first drawing on the qualitative dataset, sketching out what might be distinctive about kindness before illustrating, through one case, how these features are differentially embedded.

Conceptualising kindness: four general features

A first feature of everyday kindness – already hinted at above – is that it balances the prosaic and small-scale with the deeply significant, both in the context of individual lives and wider social relations. Put another way, the acts and emotions associated with such acts have a background or infrastructural quality, little noticed and yet also fundamental. Like the pavements we walk on and the electricity we use, these low-profile acts and relationships – lifts to work, bins put out, children cared for or asked after – enable other things to happen. Indeed, sometimes they enable whole lives or ways of life to be sustained. There is a considerable amount written about how material infrastructures shape the relational and vice versa (Star, 2002); indeed, as Amin (2014:138) notes, infrastructure now tends to be conceptualized as a 'sociotechnical assemblage'. The notion that relationships themselves have infrastructural qualities is less developed (Simone, 2004) but underpins the analysis presented here.

Of the 500 or so log entries, around seven in every ten related to practical help and support[xii] perhaps reflecting the fact that these were easier to identify as discrete acts. They encompassed everything from small-scale financial support, physical effort (lifting, fixing) to provision of advice. Explicit references to emotional support were less common but still featured and the emotional content of practical acts was also apparent (Brownlie, 2014): "Took parcel in for neighbour & had a chat with her" (Edith, 70-79, Bearsden).

A second feature of kindness is that it involves recognising need and deliberately but *voluntarily* responding to it: if it is experienced as a duty (on either side) it may fail to be, or stop being, seen as kindness.

> Paid money into Flatmate's account to improve his bank balance so his parents didn't find out how much he had spent. (Harry, 20-29, Hillhead)

> Helped a lady friend paint some of her house as she had a stroke so that it would cheer her up a bit. (Gregor, 30-39, Maryhill)

Kind acts tend, then, to be unobligated and, while not necessarily completely unexpected - as in the case of random acts – neither are they expected in the way that acts of civility might be.

The logs, focus groups and interviews also pointed to these small acts of everyday help and support having an animating quality: a sense that when they are noticed, at the time or retrospectively, they can be productive of more than the particular act. This 'spilling over' quality could be read as a third feature of kindness and, while not as dramatic as the animation implied by Durkheim's (1912)effervescence or Collins'(2004) ritual chains, in its muted way it is just as significant. This quality is described below in an account of an act of kindness by a stranger but it was also present in acts that happened between people known to one another, as is the case for Leonard and Jean later in the article.

> *M4: At the weekend, I pulled up [at] a pay and display parking area, and a woman walked quite a bit to me and said, "D'you want my parking ticket?". I said, "Oh, that's really kind of you". […] but, you know, it was an act of kindness that went through a chain […]. No. I mean I was it's inspiring. A bit inspiring. I thought "Every time .. I'm gonnae make sure I do that as well, if there's time left on my ticket". […] Ah, so it's a .. it's a great thing to receive. […] It really does make you feel warm inside.

> […]

> *M4: But it's thoughtful and it's .. They feel, well, they probably feel good. You feel good. And it's…they didn't have to do it.

The logs did also surface 'hot' emotions of feeling let down or inadequacy – feelings intensified in a neoliberal context but with deeper cultural roots (Hoggett, Wilkinson and Beedell, 2013). However, background emotions associated with everyday helping - trust, satisfaction and security – were

equally (if not more) in evidence, albeit harder to articulate. These more muted emotions do not resonate with the accounts of city living constituted in recent theorising - a space of global flows and connections culminating in a high intensity affective landscape, a 'roiling maelstrom of affect' (Thrift, 2004: 57). In part, this is because of their low intensity but it is also because they are often more positive than the emotions that catch the eye of urban theorists.

> Worked most of day clearing communal garden at home - felt good making place better without telling others – wee surprise for neighbours. (Adrian, 40-49, Hillhead)

From Simmel's account of the metropolitan blasé attitude onwards, the idea of urban living as the antithesis of benign attentiveness is well established. For Simmel (1971:387), the urban dweller adopts a blasé outlook which involves an 'indifference toward the distinction between things'. This outlook is a 'hidden aversion' (Simmel, 1950:416) which saves us from behaving more antagonistically. While there is also an important strand of work acknowledging the city as a site of resistance (Harvey, 2012), cities have tended to be understood pessimistically, to 'hum with [the] fear and anxiety' (Amin, 2006: 1011). The city of urban theorists is not the more 'ordinary city'[xiii] that emerges from accounts of bins being put out and lifts to work offered. This sphere of social life is neither about enchantment (Bennett, 2001) nor disenchantment, but rather what happens in the space in-between, where what is of interest is 'what attaches us in the ordinary *qua* ordinary' (von Rautenfeld, 2002). We do not present evidence here of a infrastructure of kindness underpinning the lived experience of a whole city – no city is a kind place in all quarters, all of the time any more than it is uniformly a space of indifference. The point is to understand more of how kindness and the blasé, collectivity and division, come to co-exist in the ordinary city.

A fourth feature of everyday kindness highlighted by the logs is that, unlike other concepts such as solidarity and community, which have come to be linked to an aggregate or collective quality, kind

acts are typically associated with the other end of the relational spectrum – with the interpersonal. And yet to think of such acts as kindness is to remind us there is also a link to collective identity because of the two related meanings of 'kind' as both adjective and noun: signalling attentiveness to others and a type or category. To be kind in the first sense is, as noted earlier, to recognise others; kind in the latter sense is an affirmation of difference – this kind rather than another. The work of kindness may often be easiest with our 'kin' but, however fleetingly, it is also constitutive in that it turns other kinds into kin. In other words, it is based on the interpersonal but can challenge fixed categories of belonging or solidarity. Kindness encourages a focus on the nature of the relationships which take place within broader dimensions of belonging and allegiance and which are shaped, but also act back upon, these dimensions.

We are suggesting, then, that kindness involves low level, unobligated, interpersonal acts and relationships which have direct practical but also affective or atmospheric consequences that are subtly transformative of the relationships in which they occur. We argue that these features render kindness sociologically relevant, but also that kindness might offer something distinct from related concepts. This is not to suggest that the idea of kindness does not provoke ambivalence in participants (as well as researchers), hinting too strongly, for some, at 'good deeds' or a moral effort:

> It's just basically people *do* it. They don't expect anything back. What [kindness is] saying to me is, it's like saying, "Oh, I've done this. I've done that. I've done that", but really it's just a thing you *dae*. (Male, focus group, Maryhill)

Moreover, kindness is an unstable entity which merges in to other concepts and can flow from them. Civility, such as in the extract below, for instance, can be read as a form of kindness in itself, akin to Amin's (2006:1009) urban 'habit of solidarity' based on recognition. It can also, however, be seen as a precursor for more significant forms of interaction: in other words, by acknowledging our

neighbours in the street, we start to create the conditions in which low level help and support can happen.

> *F6: You meet somebody in the street, and even just saying "Hello" could make a
>
> difference.(Female, focus group, Bearsden)

Not so random acts: Towards a sociologically adequate account of kindness

In the previous section, we explored what the concept of everyday kindness might have to offer to sociology. In this section, we turn that around and ask what a sociologically adequate account of kindness might look like.

Almost by definition, such an account would run counter to the discourse of 'random acts of kindness' that often takes the place of critical engagement with the issue and seems to exert an especially strong hold over the public imagination. Even among research participants, instances of kindness involving strangers – although relatively rare - seemed to have particular symbolic significance:

> 21/2 £5 found in street. Passed on to cold + wet homeless fella at tube station. (Balbir, 50-
>
> 59, Bearsden)

This might be because the unexpected and unobligated nature of kindness that we have highlighted is at its most stark in such interactions or because, unlike the language of love or duty or care which exists for what known others do for us, we have no language to capture equivalent 'random' acts by strangers. Whatever the reason, we suggest that a sociologically-adequate account would, instead, offer the prospect of a socially embedded and differentiated understanding of how low level kindness is practiced and experienced.

How might such differentiation manifest itself? First, the specific acts and relationships that constitute or might be considered as kindness may vary across social context. In the Liveable Lives project, for instance, many of the examples from Maryhill participants involved small-scale loans, sharing of food or accommodation and had a 'getting through' quality which was much less evident in middle class Bearsden (though there were significant class differences *within* this area too).Moreover, in some contexts, kindness can be seen as morally problematic. It does not automatically lead to social 'goods', not just because the activity itself may be 'anti-social' in some ways – sharing of stolen goods for instance - but because even 'good' acts can have dark or unintended outcomes including affective risks. Because of the risks linked to being dependent, for example, we can come to feel 'undone' by kindness.

This points to a further way in which kindness can be differentiated – namely through our experiences of it. Some people – and some types of people - may experience or exhibit more or less kindness than others, or at least practice or experience it in different ways. The *absence* of kindness is also patterned. Some people have their needs recognised, while others do not, at least in some circumstances. As such, kindness can have an exclusionary quality: even in extending our notion of kindness of whom is 'deserving' of 'kin-ness', we are marking others as undeserving.

But unpacking kindness is a complex business – not easily reducible to simple patterning across basic socio-demographic categories. It is shaped, enabled and constrained by a host of interlocking biographical, relational and material factors and each of these layers can be usefully identified and analysed. In practice, of course, these various dimensions overlap – for example, most biographical accounts involve intimate relationships of various kinds, and both individual experiences and relationships unfold against the backdrop of particular communities and settings. Nevertheless, the process of teasing out these different readings – however artificially

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separate – acts as an analytical brake, helping us to slow read and not jump to premature assumptions about what is going on.

This multi-dimensional and socially embedded perspective can be pursued through breadth or depth of analysis. Large-scale, cross-sectional quantitative studies of pro-social (rather than anti-social) behaviour are relatively rare (thought see Habibis et al, 2016) and our own study was wholly qualitative in character. Of course, qualitative research can also do such work of differentiation and with a relatively large, purposively-selected sample, the Liveable Lives study does afford possibilities for such an approach. However, to inform the conceptual 'step back' that we argued for earlier, we have chosen to go deep and narrow – starting not only with a particular case but with a single instance of help and support. By working outwards from that singular start point, we illustrate the deeply embedded character of kindness as a social phenomenon – a complexity at odds both with the discourse of randomness and with the apparently mundane character of the interactions in question.

A story from the stairwell: delivering the Saturday paper

The following log entries are from Leonard, a retired manual worker, now in his seventies and living on his own in traditional 'tenement' housing in Hillhead. His entries refer to his practice of delivering a newspaper to his older neighbour, Jean, every Saturday.

Log Entry 1

SAT 29

7.30 AM

GO FOR NEWSPAPERS FOR JEAN (84) (FLAT 5) […] SHE LEAVES THE MONEY FOR THE PAPERS OUTSIDE HER FRONT DOOR. THIS GIVES ME A CHECK THAT SHE IS ALL RIGHT

Log Entry 8

SAT 5

GO FOR JEAN'S NEWSPAPERS 8:00AM

(Leonard, 70-79, Hillhead)

Having lived in the tenement for more than a decade, Leonard knows Jean through passing contact on the stairwell – 'we always had a wee blether'. The newspaper arrangement grew out of such contingent interaction:

> She was trying to struggle down the wee stairs at the door […]. And I said, 'Oh that's rubbish
> […] I'll go, 'cause I'm going there myself and I'll just drop yours in.' That was it, no problem.
> (Leonard, 70-79, Hillhead)

The negotiation involved here is very low key - so much so that Leonard cannot actually recall how Jean then came to leave money on a table outside her flat for him to buy the newspaper.

> I: How did you go from this to…… to nine months later?

> Leonard: No idea, she just left the money and that was it. (Leonard, 70-79, Hillhead)

Kindness can take the form of things *not* explicitly said or done. The vagueness that Leonard shows in relation to the money arrangements above helps achieve the kindness and as such speaks to the significance of the unobtrusive rather than obtrusive proximity of city living (Bauman, 2007).

> I say I've been there what, 15 years, I've never chapped [knocked] at anybody's door […].
> The ones that I meet, I always meet them in passing, you know. (Leonard, 70-79, Hillhead)

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What, then, does it mean to read this interaction sociologically? We look first to the relational. The notion of 'in passing' resonates with Hall's (2015) 'loose infrastructure'; however, here it is the relationship and its interaction that constitutes an infrastructure. Relationships, then, are not simply the 'cabling' along which particular types of 'resources' flow: resources such as kind acts are central to how relationships are constituted, transformed and sometimes eroded. These developments happen in different ways across the lifecourse.

> When I was married, God Almighty, my wife was the greatest one for getting me involved in things […], Mrs So and So down the street […]. And it wasnae wee jobs, you know […]a bit o' plumbing to be done […]. You'd think "God, you're gonnae have to stop this" (Leonard, 70-79, Hillhead)

Volunteering kindness or *being volunteered* is made sense of through relationships and particular biographies and, relatedly, beliefs about the 'kind' of person we are: 'just part of me, it's the way I think' (Leonard). As with place narratives, these are not straightforward reflections of 'how things are' but they have real consequences. In fact, there have been times in Leonard's life, particularly before his retirement, when, as noted above, he felt too busy to be kind. Throughout the Liveable Lives study, there are accounts of participants' social worlds widening (or contracting) as they, for example, become parents or are bereaved, pointing to both age and lifecourse as shaping the potential to give and receive kindness

Relationships have infrastructural qualities, but material infrastructures also shape relationships (and indeed wellbeing within neighbourhoods, see Elliott et al, 2014) and hence the potential for kindness. The character of the residential buildings in Hillhead, with shared access points and responsibility for the maintenance of the back green and stairwell, combine with the highly local character of day-to-day lives, such as Leonard's, to create multiple opportunities for contingent social interaction. Those who moved to other areas of the city noted the loss of such chance encounters.

There was definitely a difference between living in flats […] where you would bump into people on the stairs all the time, and here, where we're on a main road, and we've got big, high hedges, and so you can go months without seeing your neighbours. (Joanne, 40-49, Bearsden)

But not all residents have the same experience of tenement living. Some found the interaction within communal stairs to be limited by the very different rhythms and concerns of the students, young professionals and older residents: 'I can't say that there's a great amount of interaction in these closes […] although I've only been here since 2010, I'm regarded as one of the older residents' (Morag, 60–69, Hillhead). Others actively avoided stairwell interactions because of the obligations they might bring.

But when you go to put out your bin, the stuff in the bin, Margaret's door is there, and she must have a very big keyhole, because invariably the door opens and out comes Margaret, and I just want to put my stuff in the bin you know [laughs]. It's, it's complicated, other people (Elizabeth, 70-79, Hillhead)

It is also notable that Leonard and Jean are older residents in a neighbourhood undergoing studentification (Smith, 2008) – 'it's an awful lot of students, you know, and so you just don't really get to know them' (Leonard). While students describe being part of a student community, this sense of connection is not easily extended to others in Hillhead.

Well, we're the only students in our building. We live on the top floor, and most people just keep themselves to themselves […] some families in the building […] kind of distance themselves from us because we're students and, I don't know, they maybe just don't think we're very alike. (Male, focus group, Hillhead)

Where I was in Queen's Cross you felt more part of the community, like if you go to a neighbour. Like where I live now, I wouldn't think about going and asking my neighbour if I needed milk or sugar, because I feel... emotionally I don't connect wi' my neighbours. They're no interested in me because they're […] no offence: they're students. They like drinking. They like having parties. I've got kids. I like other mums to kinda mix with. (Female, focus group, Hillhead)

Even with neighbours of Leonard's own age, however, there is no certainty of kin-like recognition, especially for those 'with problems' or who are felt to cause problems for others.

It used to be very quiet, and this Bill came in […] how Bill got in, I don't know. Why's this man here? We couldn't see the sense of it. Like the only thing we could work out is maybe they've got to take so many problem people. (Leonard, 70-79, Hillhead)

Other research participants also describe how social divisions in our everyday lives – including religion and ethnicity - shape apparently banal encounters and the possibilities for recognition (Coates, 2015; Hall, 2015).

There's a lady in here [sheltered housing] for instance who…she looks for help, but she won't let the Pakistanis help her across that road. (Archie, 70-79, Maryhill)

I wear it when I go to the temple, when I'm going out. But on a day to day basis […].I feel the tension when I do have the turban on. (Balbir, 50-59, Bearsden)

Recent research also suggests gender and generation might be significant – specifically, women[xiv] and younger generations are more likely to report being kind, though the latter are less likely to perceive others as kind, pointing perhaps to their experience of living in an increasingly individualised and polarised society (Habibis et al, 2016). Calls for a kinder Britain and politics are being made in a similar social context.[xv]

At the same time, local narratives also matter. Leonard's account is embedded in a strong narrative of Glasgow as 'the friendly city' – one drawn on in municipal public relations campaigns from 'Glasgow's miles better', to the 'friendly city' and, most recently, 'people make Glasgow'. This reinforces a particular understanding of what it means to be Glaswegian and gives people licence to interact in particular ways with others they do not know, or know only slightly.

> In Glasgow they seem to - it's a way of life for them, you know? It's just that's it, it's everybody's kind of got to talk, or get involved in it. (Leonard, 70-79, Hillhead)

But it is a narrative that also has the potential to exclude –'So – yeah – it's friendly if you're white, working-class, probably Protestant, and if you definitely don't sound English. […] within *that* group – yes – it is very friendly' (Sarah, 30-39, Hillhead). Others, too, touch on the limits of friendliness:

> The support has come from […] foreigners who are in the same situation that I am in and they kind of don't have, don't have nobody so, you know, and I have nobody. (Ana, 40-49, Maryhill)

On closer inspection, even Leonard's narrative about Glasgow is more complicated than it first seems. It is, in fact, area-specific and speaks to the ambivalent relationships he has with the area where he was born (Maryhill), other working class areas he knows well (such as the East End of Glasgow) and the area to which he moved (Hillhead); and possibly to a trade-off between homogeneity/community and diversity/openness. For Leonard, Maryhill is unpredictable – 'it's like poking a bear with a sharp stick sometimes'. Yet, at the same time, he sees Hillhead as less sociable: 'and I get on the bus, and I can see the difference […] when you get into the East End, everybody's talking to one another'. Everyday practices of kindness are, then, shaped by the material contexts of the city but also by such imaginings about different city spaces. These are the 'imagined commons of shared affects and assets' that Amin (2014: 139) suggests are meant to flatten out the differences of the everyday city but which of course are always filtered through our own (classed) biographies.

The unevenness of kindness (real or imagined) is linked, then, to divisions including sectarianism , nationalism, class, ethnicity, age and gender as well as other, often cumulative, differences such as those based on finances and health.

> if you're young, fit, you've got a car, lots of money and all these kinds of things people…there's a different range of things that people can ask you to help with, the less you have the less people perceive that you…you know the different things that they might be asking you for. In the past I've been asked to do all sorts of things but there you go (Ivan, 60-69, Maryhill).

The potential for 'prosaic spaces of civic inculcation' (Amin, 2006:1020) to challenge such divisions has been recognised for some time (Oldenberg, 2000). Hall (2015) has explored how the street can provide 'platforms of civility' while Anderson (2011) has written of the 'cosmopolitan canopies' which protect, albeit not completely, against racial incivilities. Study participants, including Leonard, reflected on loose and more structured 'belongings', to particular streets, clubs, coffee shops or local stores. However, even apparently prosaic spaces are not equally accessible to all. The following extract is from a young woman who had moved to Leonard's area from a less affluent part of the city.

> I cannae afford to go into half the cafes in Byres Road, you know? It's just far too expensive. So I'd rather go back up to Maryhill and I walk through to Partick, you know, because there's […] normal cafes there. Instead o' having a roll and sausage, you know, it's ciabatta rolls, and ciabatta this, you know? I like all that kinda food as well, but it's just so expensive sometimes, you know? And just being able to sit in [a] cafe and pass the time o' day wi' somebody, you know, just to chat and ask somebody how they are. (Female, focus group, Hillhead)

A close reading of Leonard's account illustrates both the general features of kindness argued for earlier in the article and the need for these to be socially embedded. Unlike altruism, kindness speaks to the *smallness* of the act of delivering a newspaper and its jointly created dimensions; and while Leonard may well gain from the interaction (mutuality) and be acting out of an expectation of diffuse reciprocity (that somewhere down the line he too may experience — or have experienced – similar kindnesses), neither of these framings seem to exhaust the meaning of his interaction with Jean. Also running through the above is the muted affective quality linked to the puncturing of indifference (in an unobligated way). This is present in the interaction itself: 'It was, I don't know, making me feel better that she felt better.' (Leonard). But it is also there in a more diffuse way that leaves Leonard feeling connected. Although difficult to put into words, it is this sensibility – such as the giving of a parking ticket or the picking up of a newspaper - that cuts through the 'flat and grey' (Simmel, 1950: 414): 'The more you can help, the more […] the whole comes into a way of working where […] it makes things easier for people'(Leonard). These features of kindness, however, are filtered, as in Leonard's case, through biographical, relational, socio-economic and spatial lenses. Together these help to explain the unevenness in the giving and receiving of kindness that belies the sense most of us have of ourselves as kind people[xvi].

Conclusion

Through an empirical exploration of everyday help and support in the context of the city, we explored what the concept of kindness might have to offer to sociology but also what a sociologically informed – and socially embedded – account of kindness might look like. It is clear that kindness is a porous concept, not easily cordoned off from other terms. It is also complicated: we are ambivalent about it and it can involve outcomes that are not wholly positive. While we may know it when we see it, we often do not see it without actively looking. Moreover, kindness is unstable, and may shift into ways of relating that are better captured by familiar vocabulary of obligation, mutuality or

reciprocity. As such, kindness can perhaps be easier to recognise in our interactions with strangers where there is no other language to describe what has taken place. Nevertheless we argue that the concept also has analytical purchase. Rooted in small acts of recognition, it allows for a concerted focus on the (apparently) insignificant; and on microprocesses which, because they are unobligated, have an atmospheric quality which shapes not just the relationship in which they are embedded but our wider social sensibility.

These features are not experienced uniformly but socially embedded and differentiated, and an adequate sociological account of kindness needs to understand this unevenness. However, the sheer ubiquity of everyday acts of low-level help and support means it is time to rethink the conflation of the blasé attitude with the urban *and* to ground some of the grand claims about the affective relations of the city in ordinary interactions. Kindness challenges sociology's preoccupation with indifference but also its concern with the big turbulent emotions of urban social relations. Sennett has commented that a city is not 'just a place to live, to shop, and to go out and have kids play. It's a place that implicates how one derives one's ethics, how one develops a sense of justice' (Sennett, 1989: 83, cited in Fyfe et al, 2006:861). Thinking about city living in terms of everyday kindness reasserts the connection between the two: it is through paying close attention to where we live, shop and play that the micro-practices that create abstract ethical relations are revealed. This is the dual emphasis on infrastructure that we have worked with in this article – kindness is embedded in material infrastructures but constitutes a social infrastructure in its own right, creating bedrocks upon which other things can be built. This in itself does not make the city a secretly kind space for all people all of the time, nor does it mean kindness is always an unquestionable good; but as sociologists we can usefully engage with the places, spaces, relationships and times (historical, biographical, and life course) where everyday kindness happens and, in doing so, reveal it to be at the same time more sociologically relevant and less random than we might otherwise think.

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[i] A character in the film *The Usual Suspects*

ii The appeal of this phrase can be seen in its use on bumper stickers, multiple websites and 'Random Kindness Days'.

iii See, for example, http://www.ukkindnessmovement.org/UK%20kindness%20organisations.htm and https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/

iv Bearsden, a relatively affluent suburban environment; Hillhead consisting predominantly of tenement housing, with a large student and young professional population; Maryhill, a largely working class area, with relatively high levels of unemployment and other markers of deprivation.

v The research ran between 2013 and 2015 and was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

vi Though the interplay between the two realms, and the relevance of biographical and life course to help and support means that it is difficult to separate out these relations.

vii Including walking interviews with local stakeholders, observation of community spaces and a review of local histories. .

viii A naturally occurring and structured group took place in each area. The former included community groups, the latter were constituted through household recruitment and screening.

ix In a number of cases we also conducted interviews with secondary participants and drew on telephone follow-up interviews.

x The log instructions asked people to recount acts of help and support, one off or ongoing, involving people known or unknown, face to face or mediated. In the first interview, the researcher explored what participants understood by such acts, drawing on focus group terms such as 'doing a favour' but did not explicitly frame the acts as kindness.

xi Three participants did not complete the log: two due to ill health and one to losing a camera.

xii Relatedly, the vast majority of log entries are local and non-virtual.

xiii Amin and Graham's (1997) ordinary city, like Hall's 'ordinary streets' (2015:858), is ordinary because it rejects the global hierarchy that positions some cities as less important. The city here is ordinary because it is the site of mundane acts.

xiv There is a need, however, to look beyond feminised scripts: men may well be 'kind' but not name or acknowledge their acts as such either to themselves or others.

xv See http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-to-pledge-to-put-kindness-back-into-british-politics-in-labour-party-conference-speech-a6670951.html

xvi Habibis et al, 2016in their Australian survey of kindness noted that 96% of their respondents saw themselves as kind.