

‘They Should have been Looking after People for a Long Time’: Human Giving and Generosity During COVID-19, in Austerity Britain

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic mobilised a multitude of acts of giving and generosity. This article provides a snapshot of giving and generosity among a small sample of individuals in the UK, in a context following years of ungenerous austerity politics. Giving and generous actions played a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of COVID and we report on data collected using in-depth interviews to understand experiences of giving and generosity. We conceptualise giving and generosity as pro-social or other-focused actions that involve sharing of resources, underpinned by a crossing of the hyphen between self and other. This article explores the ways in which participants were mobilised by perceived social and political injustices and thus we offer a different understanding of giving and generosity as micro-activism that is done with a critical eye turned towards the macro context.

Keywords

austerity, COVID-19, generosity, giving, pro-social

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‘Generous sharing of all resources is one concrete way to express love. These resources can be time, attention, material objects, skills, money etc . . . once we embark on love’s path we see how easy it is to give’.

—hooks (2000: 163)

‘In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones’.

—Solnit (2010: 2)

The research on which this article is based was conceived in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. At this time and more intensely than ever, we were thrown into our ‘places’ and into changed relationships with others. Our relational rhythms were varied, stretched, reorganised daily; we became responsible for each other in new ways and could see afresh how we were connected, though we were often spatially disconnected through social distancing and lockdowns. It was in this very significant pandemic context that we chose to explore what we framed as acts of giving and generosity although we acknowledge that the pandemic was also characterised by acts of ungenerosity and withholding. The COVID-19 pandemic mobilised a multitude of acts of giving and generosity and this article provides a snapshot of these through the experiences of a small sample of relatively educationally and class privileged individuals in the UK, in a context following years of austerity politics. We conceptualise giving and generosity as pro-social or other-focused actions that involve sharing of resources, underpinned by a crossing of the hyphen between self and other. This article explores how and why people gave and were generous and their perceptions of the social world in which this took place. We argue that giving and generous actions at the micro level play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of crisis situations but that these practices also occur alongside perceived social and political injustices. In doing so, we offer a different understanding of giving and generosity as a micro-activism that is done with a critical eye turned to the macro context.

Giving, generosity, and pro-social behaviours in a crisis

We see giving and generosity as mobilities between self/selves and other/s, a stepping towards, a beneficial other-focusedness or, as Zaki (2020) says, otherishness. To understand giving and generosity, we draw on the notion of the ‘hyphen’ between self and other, a space that both merges and separates our personal identities, a knotty entanglement that refuses binary opposition (Fine, 1994). In giving and generosity, the hyphen is space that is crossed over with a sharing of material or emotional resources that intends benefit to others. This can happen at and across multiple scales, for example, between individuals, between individuals and a collective, between governments and institutions, governments and individuals. It is important to note that giving and generosity do not preclude receiving and/or mutuality but represent a time bound relational motion, which may or may not provide a return. As will be outlined in the literature below, giving and generosity are overlapping concepts. All definitions of generosity have acts of giving at

their core, for example, Global Generosity Research (2020) defines generosity as all the ways in which people try to benefit others (people, animals, and environments) through various actions from donating money and blood to all acts on any scale involving helping behaviours. In this article, we will use these interlocking terms (giving and generosity) together to describe a wide range of other-focused actions that intend benefit to others. Taking from geographers Barnett and Land (2007), we also see these actions as essentially ordinary and every day, as much the result of others' demands for them, as they are self-initiated actions (Barnett and Land, 2007).

The degree to which gift exchange is altruistic or self-interested has been the focus of some research around human giving. Within this, utilitarian approaches stress rationality and giver reward and an anti-utilitarian view, de-emphasises reciprocity instead accentuating gifts as pure and free (see Komter, 2007). In developing a 'sociology of giving', Berking (1999) argues that despite strong market logics and dictatorial exchange-value systems, human interest in others, goes beyond strategic interactions. Albeit within an individualised system, and in individualised forms, we use our emotional, cognitive, and normative capacities to love, trust, form friendships, to sacrifice, and build solidarity (Berking, 1999). Philosophers have tended to stress the moral and virtuous nature of giving and generosity, focusing more on the giver rather than the giving act (Collett and Morrissey, 2007). Some have linked generosity to altruism (Miller, 2018) though not all agree (Hunt, 1975). Generosity researchers Smith and Davidson (2014) take from philosophical debates about generosity defining it as 'the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly' (p. 4). These gifts may include time, money, attention, aid, encouragement, possessions as well as emotional availability, and the intention of giving is to enhance the well-being of the recipient.

In sociology, where we locate our study, generosity, and giving have been understood through the lens of pro-sociality (as opposed to pro-self/selfishness). Penner et al. (2005) define pro-social behaviours as voluntary with an intention to benefit others, for example, through social and financial assistance, emotional comfort, or physical helping. Such behaviours have downstream effects, for example, Willer (2009) demonstrated that those who gave more in group activities were rewarded with higher status and subsequently gave more to the group again. Research has also found that giving and generosity have an upstream flow, whereby receivers behave more generously and give more with third parties (see Tsvetkova and Macy, 2014). Generosity can decrease with social distance (Baldassarri and Grossman, 2013) but increase with resource abundance across circles/spheres of generosity, that is, self, family, community, and professional levels (Herzog and Price, 2016). Intrinsic states of mind, sociorelational contexts, regional cultural and social status norms also shape giving practices (Herzog and Price, 2016). Researchers have identified the paradox of giving and generosity: that giving (money, time, energy) to enhance the well-being of others, enhances giver well-being (Smith and Davidson, 2014).

During crisis situations such as the pandemic, pro-social actions such as giving and generosity take on a new poignancy as vital resources are harder to access such as food, medication and social connection. Researchers have also found pro-social behaviour in negative situations such as earthquakes and pandemics (Solnit, 2010) and Zaki (2020) calls this catastrophe compassion. Collective identity formation in the face of shared

adverse experiences has been identified as an underlying process to explain cooperation in disaster situations (Drury, 2018). Catastrophe compassion has also been related to empathy that involves understanding, sharing and caring for others' emotional experiences (Zaki, 2020). More generally researchers have found a strong relationship between empathy and pro-social behaviours (Ding and Lu, 2016). A recent study for example found that empathy for those most vulnerable was related to motivations for both mask wearing and social distancing during the pandemic and that inducing empathy in health messaging promoted motivation to comply with measures (Pfattheicher et al., 2020). Our research adds a new dimension to the existing research literature around giving and generosity by considering the political and justice seeking dimensions of micro level giving during the UK pandemic.

Other-focusedness in the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic mobilised a multitude of acts of giving and generosity which will be discussed below. However, it is important to acknowledge that neighbourhood based mutual support, is evident in pre-pandemic contexts see, for example, Walkerdine (2016) and Crean (2018) in relation to working class communities, and for discussions around communities of colour, mutual aid, and black social economies, see Mochama (2020) and Hossein (2019). The extraordinary contributions and sacrifices of NHS staff and other key workers have been well documented (e.g. recently retired nurses returning to work and nursing students in clinical placements, see Jackson et al., 2020) as has the psychological toll on health care workers (Lloyd et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022) and non-healthcare key workers (May et al., 2021). The NHS was also supported by voluntary responders within local communities: 750,000 responders were able to help 100,000 people in the UK (Obe, 2020). These voluntary responders were part of a surge in community support and volunteering that was documented across the globe during the pandemic (Mao et al., 2021; Monbiot, 2020). Giving and receiving during the pandemic within collective formations were also embedded in the activities of Mutual Aid groups, of which over 4000 sprang up across the UK during the early part of the pandemic (Booth, 2020). These played a vital role in the public response to the pandemic, especially for vulnerable and self-isolating people (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021). Mutual Aid actions included grocery shopping and delivery, food parcel deliveries, collection of prescriptions, dog walking, emotional support, combatting loneliness and financial stress (Mahanty and Phillips, 2020; Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). In an international study of donation behaviour, researchers found that individuals were more financially generous in terms of giving to charities, during the pandemic (Fridman et al., 2022).

Although not the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that the pandemic also produced and exacerbated tensions within and between communities and individuals as well as existing structural inequalities. Pro-self actions such as panic buying (Arafat et al., 2020), stockpiling (Dinić and Bodroža, 2020) and hoarding (Tse et al., 2022) sometimes took valuable and basic resources away from vulnerable people. Racism through the overpolicing of racially minoritized groups during the pandemic has also been documented (Harris et al., 2022) as well as a steep rise in anti-Asian hate crimes during the first months of the pandemic (Menendez, 2020). Data analysed from

the Understanding Society study showed lower levels of community cohesion in June 2020 than in any other measured pre-pandemic period – particularly among deprived communities, those with lower skills and certain ethnic minorities. The authors attribute this to pressure on social resources (Borkowska and James, 2021). It is also worth noting that when COVID-19 entered the UK in spring 2020, the nation had only recently voted to leave the European Union in 2016, an act that was partly motivated by opposition to resource sharing with migrants (Virdee and McGeever, 2017).

The political and economic context of the pandemic

Prior to COVID, there had been more than a decade of radical economic and political measures that had shrunk our welfare and social states (Cummins, 2018) and health system (Stuckler et al., 2017), described by Koch (2021) as the most significant cuts in the post war period. From the time of the Thatcher Government onwards (1979–1990), various forms of localism have been evoked as rationales to decouple the state and individuals (Dagdeviren et al., 2018) and ‘plug the gaps’ in state provision. During the 2010 Conservative-LibDem Coalition, localism appeared in the rhetoric of ‘Big Society’ that envisaged power devolving to local communities and individuals (Williams et al., 2014). Featherstone et al. (2012) argue that ‘austerity localism’ has replaced ‘Big Society’ localism and research has shown that demonstrated that individualised and localised responsibility puts uneven weight on poorer communities, damaging and disempowering those communities most affected by cuts and welfare reform (Stenning and Hall, 2018).

Local giving was already established and, arguably, stretched. As the state has withdrawn, third and voluntary sector organisations, with supporting services and services ‘of last resort’ – for example, foodbanks, and advice centres – have become more important and in some cases transformed into primary services but without resources (Dagdeviren et al., 2018). Public and voluntary sector workers report that demand for services far exceeds supply with services ‘plugging gaps’ and ‘putting out fires’ (Koch, 2021: 252). This did not go unnoticed during the pandemic: with some Mutual Aid groups closely aligned with activism and expression of dissent against the government’s past and present (Chevé, 2022; Mould et al., 2022).

Material inequalities related to occupation, housing, poverty and unemployment link to individuals’ and group’s health and disease (Phelan and Link, 2015). It is therefore no surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic proliferated and intensified existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. As evidence given to the ongoing UK COVID Inquiry outlined ‘the UK entered the pandemic with its public services depleted, health improvement stalled, health inequalities increased and health among the poorest people in a state of decline’ (Marmot and Bambra, 2023: 29). The pandemic disproportionately impacted on people already experiencing poor health and/or poverty (see, for example, Andrew et al., 2020; Holt and Murray, 2022; Power et al., 2020), among whom black and minority ethnic groups were disproportionately represented (Meghji and Niang, 2022; Nazroo and Becares, 2021). BAME British people were 1.2 times more likely than White British people to lose income during the first wave of the pandemic due to working in shutdown sectors (Hu, 2020), and Black people were four times more likely to die of COVID than White people with all ‘ethnic minority’ census groups more likely to die (Public Health

England, 2020). The pandemic lockdowns also had uneven impacts on incomes and employment (Platt and Warwick, 2020) and experiences of domestic abuse (Women's Aid, 2020). COVID, therefore, presented a context for giving and generosity in which there was a proliferation of human need caused by a withholding and irresponsibly inactive state (Frowde et al., 2020), which continued to lack generosity towards those in care homes (Amnesty International, 2020), those in the medical profession (British Medical Association, 2022) and for those who had lost work in the pandemic (Wright et al., 2022) to cite only a few examples. The detrimental impact of government policies on vulnerable and marginalised groups can also be found through evidence given to The People's COVID Inquiry (2021), for example, in relation to disabled people, migrants, children, and young people as well as those groups mentioned above.

Methods

Researching during the pandemic raised new complexities that many of us had not encountered before both in lockdown and subsequent socially distanced contexts. The importance of documenting the current moment (or continuing with existing/planned student or staff projects), coupled with restrictions on movement and face to face contact, created new research scenarios and new ethical issues, for example, around the safety of online platforms (Lobe et al., 2020). We gained a small grant through one of the COVID specific research funds that proliferated at the start of the pandemic (BA/Leverhulme) on the basis of a multi method, longitudinal project. Due to lack of participation in our original story-based research design in which we intended to explore experiences of receiving, we shifted to interviews that focused on experiences of both giving and receiving during the pandemic. This article is based on findings from those interviews. To understand accumulated micro-giving and larger scale mobilities of giving and generosity, we conducted exploratory mapping exercises to produce data on 'giving flows' using three case studies.

We advertised for the interviews through social and professional networks including the Voluntary Studies Network and recruited nine participants. We collected demographic information from 8/9 participants (one person did not complete the form) through the use of an anonymised Qualtrics survey. Our participants were aged between 37 and 66 years. Self-defined ethnic identities included: Irish, British Indian, Indian, British Pakistani, Jewish and White European, White Scottish and White British. Our sample were all graduates with four participants educated to post graduate level. Two participants said they had disabilities and seven identified as female and one as male. Six participants identified as heterosexual and one as queer/bisexual. The participants resided mainly in London, the South East and South West of the UK although one person resided in Scotland and another in Yorkshire/Humberside. Seven of the participants considered themselves to be middle class though five of them had grown up in what they identified as working class or lower middle class families. In summary, participants tended to be older, female, heterosexual, middle class, from the south of England, educated to graduate level and above and had a range of ethnic identities beyond White British. The relative

educational and class privileges of our small sample means that our findings provide a specific and limited view of the topic under exploration nonetheless valuable given the extraordinary times in which they spoke to us. We would also add that privilege and penalty operate in complex intersectional (Collins and Bilge, 2020) ways that were not explored in our research and are therefore not discernible from the information provided in our demographic information form.

We used a flexible, semi structured interview process using Zoom that explored definitions of generosity and giving, experiences of generosity and giving (as givers and receivers) before and during the pandemic, observations of generosity and giving in others, perceptions of state generosity and post-pandemic futures. Interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and were conversational in style, with a focus on rapport building and empathic responsiveness in keeping with feminist methodologies which centre relationships in research (Hesse-Biber, 2014). One interview was conducted by email and produced less data than the face-to-face interviews. The data co-produced in the Zoom interviews reflected a particular moment in time and a dynamic interaction (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) between the White, middle class, cis female, older interviewer (who shared many of the socio demographic characteristics listed above) and each of the participants as we came together to make sense of this topic.

Interviews were transcribed and copies were sent to participants for checking if they opted for this. Transcripts were then anonymised in preparation for data sharing in the UK Data Archive. We conducted a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) using NVIVO which through a continuous process of ‘bending back on oneself’ (p. 596) required us to reflexively question the assumptions we carried into our data analysis as we developed analytical themes through the work of coding. Reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges that themes are a product of our subjectivities, theoretical assumptions, our analytical skills and the data themselves (Braun and Clarke, 2019). We need to acknowledge here how the data set was created in various ways: through the questions we asked, the responses we had in the interview and subsequently by our analysis which was inevitably shaped by our sensitivities and interest in, for example, the movements of the relational, personal interdependencies and the inequalities that divide us.

Ethical approval for the research was given through the ethics committee at our university. The research was submitted as high risk and underwent various amendments as we developed our research design and underwent lengthy institutional ethical processes. Beyond ethical issues relating to gaining informed consent through the use of a participant information sheet and consent form, confidentiality and anonymity processes, data security and future data use through data depositing, we were alert to the emotional context of the pandemic. We tried to address this through signposting support information on the participant information sheets as well as remaining attentive to participants’ feelings during the interviews and in subsequent communications.

In the following sections, we report on our findings. We will describe the ways participants shared resources in the pandemic and consider the ways in which these other-focused actions were justice-oriented, political and highly critical of the macropolitical current context and recent past.

Sharing resources in the pandemic

As stated in the introduction, giving and generosity involve a sharing of resources and our participants had resources to share and engaged in mutually beneficial processes of giving and receiving. The ordinary and everyday nature of acts of generosity and giving (and receiving) are notable in the data (Barnett and Land, 2007) as are the local parameters of much of what participants did (though not exclusively). When participants were asked about their observations of others' generosity and giving during the pandemic, they reported a range of giving activities undertaken by others such as: volunteering at food banks, emotional support, making scrubs, sharing scientific information, raising funds and viewing multiple offers of help and assistance on social media:

I think there was a Muslim man, I think he was down south, and he was fasting, and during Ramadan he did a walk as well. He raised loads of money as well, and that was wonderful to hear about.

Acts of generosity and giving by our participants during the pandemic could be divided into practical (e.g. donating money to charities and people living rough, delivering food, volunteering in charities and food banks) and emotional (e.g. listening, counselling, checking-in with friends, colleagues, students, and thanking people with gifts). Giving occurred in various spatial locations (e.g. close family networks), micro local contexts (e.g. giving to people on a street), through Mutual Aid and other community organisations, and through existing and pandemic related charities at various scales. Often participants were engaging in multiple forms of giving. For example, one participant donated money to charities as well as delivering food to families and checking in on people. Another baked cakes as gifts, checked in on neighbours as well as linking isolated older people on her street.

Emotional support ranged from checking in with people, to counselling people and doing more listening or just 'being there for people who are in one kind of crisis or another'. This included at work with colleagues or with people in the local area or people in family and social networks:

I think I was doing a lot more listening and although I try not to counsel . . . I was spending a lot more time being empathetic and also trying to explain why people might be feeling the way that they're feeling, particularly the loss . . . I think the giving was in the listening, and to friends who are volunteering.

It was also the case that the pandemic intensified rather than initiated resource sharing through giving and generosity for our participants. Pre-pandemic, many participants had volunteered formally and informally, for example, doing reading in schools, offering counselling, setting up community support for marginalised women and charity donation. To a lesser extent, they had also been the recipients of giving and generosity from others during the pandemic, for example, being checked in on, emotional support, receiving gifts on birthdays or religious festivals:

. . . friends who live nearby have, like have done shopping for me, cooked for me, checked on me to see how I'm doing . . . one of the things that was actually again nice, that I really appreciated that meant a lot was students kind of sending me like encouraging messages after class sessions.

The embeddedness of giving in participants' lives and identities pre-pandemic is an interesting finding in terms of considering pro-social behaviour outside of crises or emergency situations. It suggests that some people may maintain broader collective identities over the life course, rather than developing them in the context of a shared collective experience which may be difficult to maintain once the crises have ended. Formal volunteering research supports this showing that although volunteering behaviour is affected by resources and time use arrangements (e.g. volunteering increasing when children becoming of school age), it remains relatively stable over the life cycle perhaps as a result of positive experiences with volunteering, early internalisation of pro-social values, identity changes and simply understanding more about what is needed (Lancee and Radl, 2014).

Resource sharing as justice

Participants were mobilised by a sense of (in)justice in their accounts of their own and others' giving and generosity. This could also be described as 'political giving' or 'redistributive giving' whereby rather than blaming individuals or constructing them as weak or helpless, or in need of charity, attention is drawn to society, the state and social obligations. In a sense this was a form of micro-activism that was conducted with others and sometimes alone. Reciprocity and notions of fairness played a role in motivating this and some participants mentioned 'giving back' after receiving help at a previous time ' . . . you're going to kind of respond to that generosity you've received by being generous yourself' or ' . . . if someone's been through a situation and they see somebody else in that situation they relate to that and they want to almost do something about that'.

Recognition of the privilege of resources or one's 'blessings' was also identified as a reason for sharing those resources and the greater the wealth, the greater the expectation for sharing some of it. Confirming Herzog and Price's (2016) finding that generosity and giving can be resource dependent, participants recognised the role of resources in giving and generosity, that is, that it is harder to give and be generous when you have less. Perhaps this is especially the case in austerity Britain:

Of course, the interesting part about that is that those that have maybe more or in abundance tend to be the ones that are able to give generally . . . I think sometimes the giving, the volunteering, that has a slant of it's okay for you, you can do that, you have the time.

Things are going to pop up and things are going to pop up that you don't have the ability to do anything about. It's not that you don't care and it's not that you don't have that empathy and it's not that you don't have that generosity, it's about ability.

For some participants giving was articulated as a ‘responsibility’ and furthermore to not give was seen as an absence of care demonstrating the interlinking of concepts such as justice and care for others:

The ones that frustrate me are you have the ability, you have the opportunity, you had the resource, you had everything. The element that was missing was the care. Everything else in that perfect storm was there, but you just didn’t care.

When asked about the opposite of generosity and giving, participants used negative words such as ‘clinging’, ‘ignoring or taking’, ‘hoarding’, ‘closed-mindedness’, ‘tight’, ‘cruelty’ and ‘self-centredness’. Being closed off to others’ experiences and needs and failing to act for another were framed as highly problematic and unjust:

All I can think of is Ebenezer Scrooge [laughter], you know. That’s the image which I’m seeing. I’m just trying to put some words to it. I guess it’s just somebody who doesn’t think beyond themselves and just goes on with life without that empathy of giving, you know.

Although these comments were made in relation to individuals, they also resonate with the context of the withholding state in which participants were performing their acts of giving.

Resource sharing as critical and political

As we have shown above, participants’ giving practices seemed to intensify during the pandemic and seemed to be strongly linked to perceptions of the macropolitical that were highly critical including those relating to the austerity and its pre-pandemic impacts on the NHS. It appeared that these views strengthened participants’ sense of duty to give and be generous given the perceived failures in the state. Giving was not framed in virtuous terms by participants rather as simply necessary given local and broader realities. One participant talked about the NHS being ‘on its knees’ before the pandemic and another talked about ‘these desperate people that have been suffering from terrible, terrible reductions in everything. That’s what that awful word austerity meant’. Another said,

I don’t have a great deal of faith in the Government and that was before the pandemic, the way people are marginalised . . . I’ve worked in the third sector and councils for the majority of my adult life and work and I have never seen money put in. It’s a really funny thing, there’s no money put in, there’s always money taken out and actually that doesn’t really feel like the right way it should be going when people are suffering.

Our participants cited multiple instances of lack of generosity and withholding rather than giving by the government during the pandemic. The government was described as ‘not taking care people’, of ‘having mercenary desires to capitalising on every opportunity’ in relation to contracts, and, importantly, as ‘having no empathy’. The school meals scandal, in which footballer Marcus Rashford successfully influenced the government to extend a food voucher scheme for children in receipt of free school meals into the summer of 2020, was described as ‘disgusting to be shamed into action, to be shamed by a footballer into doing the right thing’. It was difficult for any of the participants to identify

ways in which the government had been generous or giving during the pandemic. The furlough scheme was mentioned by a few participants as a surprising initiative that quickly became a disappointing one.

Overall, our participants clearly expected the state care for its citizens during the crisis and thought it had failed to do so. Notions of duty, and what one participant called ‘social thinking’ were seen as failed responsibilities of the Johnson government:

I think actually it’s their duty, they should have been looking after people for a long time, this shouldn’t be a case of, well done you, you’ve managed to help people, that’s your job.

It’s so sad because that’s what the role of a government is, especially if you look at other countries, who are much poorer than us, who our government consider as third world countries, who have helped their people.

It was also noted that during times when services and organisations had been shut down and people were desperate, it was voluntary organisations rather than government that were filling the material gaps. This was positioned by the participant below as humiliating as people were forced into receiving ‘charity’ rather than appropriate state support:

I know families who had no money and when I was ringing them up, it was really sad to ask them a question like, ‘Have you got food?’ It’s so hard to ask somebody like that, because, you know, you have to consider people’s dignity. You know, and the women I spoke to, they didn’t want to say that they wanted a food parcel from a charity, or like kids who don’t have clothes and shoes, and then, you know, having to speak to them about it, that you can have these from a voluntary organisation – not the government, a voluntary organisation.

When asked about the role of giving and generosity in a post-pandemic world, these complexities were clearly apparent. Participants wanted to see more giving and generosity at multiple scales. Some participants expressed hope about the future of giving and generosity at a personal level or around volunteering practices:

Even if it’s the smallest thing, that’s what I do, and I want to continue, especially my letter writing. I think people will, because they’ve seen how it makes them feel. I think people will. I think the majority of people who I have interaction with will continue. I think so. There will be a few who won’t, but that’s okay, that’s okay. I think in general people will continue.

So, I think that’s going to be an interesting conversation that comes out around giving and volunteering because a lot of people just aren’t going to go for it, they’re not going to go for the volunteering processes that have existed before COVID and they won’t want to jump through the hoops and they’ll just say, well why can’t I just go and knock on my neighbour’s door and I think that’s an amazingly good thing to breed actually.

Overall optimism at the macro political level was hard to identify in the data as one participant said, the ‘government hadn’t learned anything from [COVID] or put anything in place’. It was also clear that a generous and giving society at multiple scales would be

one that needed huge changes and investment in humans such as ‘a fully functioning welfare state’, funding for psychological services to deal with the aftermath of the pandemic. Indeed, one participant described this as a ‘radical reorganisation of the systems and structures that we currently have in place’. The quote below resonates with radical conceptualisations of mutual aid suggested by Mould et al. (2022) in which society undergoes dramatic reorganisation to benefit the marginalised and oppressed:

If we want to build a society that enables generosity actually you have to think about how you create a society in which people have the resources to be generous . . . So I guess for me the question is like how do you build a society in which actually the tendency of human beings to care for one another generously is – that we make space for that, that we encourage that.

Conclusion

In exploring the multiple ways in which people gave and were generous to each other during the pandemic, our participants revealed that COVID had intensified rather than initiated their resource sharing through giving and generosity. Participants gave with a critical mind-set in relation to the macro political context in which the pandemic played out, seeing the government as uncaring, ungenerous and failing in multiple duties of care. Other-focusedness was not mirrored at a state level and this jarring between actors at different levels underlines again how we were not ‘all in it together’. Our framing of giving and generosity as critical, political and justice-oriented offers a different way of understanding why people share resources in a crisis.

The participants in our research were unsure as to whether compassionate behaviour would outlive the crisis, especially in the context of a withholding state, but their contribution through giving and generosity to the people around them should be acknowledged as a fundamental resistance to self-focusedness that is modelled by the neo liberal state. Even when they were acting alone, participants retained a critical mind-set that was partly motivated by a politicised sense of duty. This small qualitative study raises further questions about how state actions inhibit or encourage pro-sociality. The latter will be particularly important in contexts such as the NHS where the state actively works against and has exploited the giving and generosity of staff through withdrawing resources over many years. In conclusion, the other-focusedness of giving and generosity can make the world a better place but at a macro level cannot solve the bigger social problems that are created by policies such as austerity that continue to ungenerously withhold vital resources and opportunities from those most marginalised.

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