

Key Dimensions Of Quality In Individualised Lifestyles And Supports

Michael J. Kendrick PhD

May 2008

A paper based on keynote presentation at “FROM PLANNING FOR PEOPLE’S LIVES TO PEOPLE HAVING LIVES” Conference, sponsored by Brothers of Charity in Ennis, County Clare, 28th April 2008, involving 23 Irish disability organisations.

Introduction

Though we are currently awash in talk of how “person centred” services are becoming, it is hard to evaluate whether this is true because of the lack of clarity as to what people might be referring when they make such claims. It is also hard to expect agreement on what the criteria are or should be if no one takes the time to make more explicit what is meant by “quality” in regards to individualisation of lifestyle and supports. Further, if quality is to become less amorphous and more subject to a reasonable degree of accountability, it will require that its ingredients be better named and described. What follows is an attempt to do this, though it has to be recognised that fulfilling the needs and potential of any human being is always going to be more difficult to describe than it may first appear.

Clear Understanding by Supporters of Who the Person Really Is

It is difficult to imagine how a person can be properly supported and assisted to succeed if they are not properly understood by others. Yet, such misunderstandings occur with great regularity in all kinds of settings where supports are offered. Obviously, people can defy easy understanding, so it is likely utopian to expect that somehow people can be completely understood. So, the aim here would be to understand people as well as can humanly be expected under the circumstances. Obviously, this could involve not only the best efforts of supporters, but also whether such supporters utilise and give proper regard to people in the person’s life who already know the person well quite apart from all of the advantages of tapping into the person’s own insights about themselves.

A Long-Term, Enduring and Inspired Commitment to the Person’s Well-Being

It is not very likely that the quality of support for a given person will be of demonstrable merit if the people providing it lack a steadfast commitment to a person’s well-being. This is because so much of what will matter to a person will require something of substance from supporters. This is not merely a matter of the usual technical assets of skills, competencies and knowledge but also qualities that could best be described as moral and attitudinal. First, it speaks to the degree to which the person being supported matters to the person providing assistance and, secondly, whether this commitment and caring is accompanied by a vision for the person’s life that is uplifting and supported by a competent pursuit of their well-being.

The Optimal Address Of Fundamental Personal Needs

If people being supported do not get what they most importantly need in order to have a good

life, then it would be hard to imagine how such a service arrangement could be considered to be of good quality. The failure to meet the needs of a person, particularly those that are fundamental at a given moment in time, will be consequential for that person as might be seen if we failed to get enough nutrition or were unable to pay our rent. These and many other needs in our lives are meaningful because they both bring satisfaction if they are met and bring distress of some kind if they are not. When these needs are being met, they often go unnoticed because the person is doing well. We often only notice the role of needs when they go unmet because of all of the difficulties that ensue. Consequently, it is hard not to recognise the meeting of needs as being a key element in quality of life and supports.

The Optimal Address of Personal Wants

Though wants differ from needs in the fact that the denial of them will not be as consequential as would be the case with not meeting needs, wants also play a role in life and can add much satisfaction to living. Wants are often linked to a person's life interests and passions and can be a pathway for new experiences and opportunities in people's lives. These, in turn, may actually have an impact on meeting a person's underlying needs. So, wants can be a catalyst for expanding one's horizons in life with the satisfactions that can bring. Though an excess of emphasis on wants and their ultimate optional nature may create difficulties in meeting needs, it is possible for needs and wants to be in balance such that quality of life is enhanced.

Assuring Personal Existential Empowerment

Some forms of empowerment tend to alter the relation of a person to others or to systems such that they experience a relative increase in their objective positional power. These external and structural alterations in people's life circumstances can be contrasted with empowerment that comes "from within". This inward sense of free agency is less dependent upon roles and settings and depends much more upon the person's sense of themselves and the potency in their own lives. This is often referred to as "self-efficacy" and it can be assisted by helping a person discover the many ways that they can take charge of their lives in constructive ways. This kind of personal autonomy and its expanded exercise in regards to preferred matters of choice in a person's life is a form of psychological independence, insofar as the person is enabled to act based upon their own personal will, authority and decisions rather than being unduly dependent upon the influence of others — this will have an empowering effect.

Exercising Directive Control over Services

The experience of being hostage to the will of impersonal bureaucracies or prescriptive professionals and functionaries can be very discouraging and debilitating, much as not having such experiences can have an opposite and beneficial effect. This result can be obtained when a person is supported in a key decision-making and personal governance role relative to their individual contact with such services, agencies and systems. Services need not be in dominating roles and those that choose not to can instead offer to a given person the level of control and direction that best ensures that they feel able to provide their own direction to service design and implementation. In doing so, they will make their lives relative to services much more agreeable due to their increased ability to ensure that services are more responsive to their needs and preferences. This is best accomplished when the person is given the supports they will each uniquely need in order to effectively use their heightened personal authority relative to services.

Ethical Partnering with Service Users, i.e. “Right Relationship”

The character of the relationship between services and the person served may include dimensions that go solely beyond the question of power. In particular is the question of whether the relationship between the person and the service is essentially an ethical and honourable one. This normally means that the service user has every reason to trust the service provider to behave ethically and vice versa. When such conditions have been created between the service user and the service provider, it means that the service is an honourable and trustworthy asset in the person's life, thereby making it much more likely that together they will make progress with whatever is attempted in the name of service.

The Quality of “Imagining Better”

So much of what constitutes advances in a person's life often begin with the exploration of what is truly possible for them in life. This often will require the person being able to picture what a “good life” might be for them and to test and evolve that vision against their own level of confidence and comfort with the prospects that emerge from the discussions and reflections that accompanied such explorations. The stimulating of this capacity to “imagine better” is typically gradual and incremental and can mean that the person travels a great deal in their thinking and perspectives given their starting point. The bigger the sense of possibility that is generated then the greater the eventual capacity to follow through on such imagining or dreaming providing that the person is well supported in the process.

The Development of Personal Lifestyle Interests

The typical by-product of various processes of “imagining better” is that the person expands their sense of possibilities and eventually finds ways to translate these into practical new developments and expansions of their lifestyles in the community. This process of “getting a life” is very critical to a person finding or developing a satisfying personal lifestyle for themselves. Much of this can be an ongoing process insofar as the person's interests may evolve through time as some interests may take hold while others fade away. This process of “life tasting” is, by its nature, a matter of trial and error, but it can result in the person having a stronger sense of their life interests and passions providing that the person is helped to sustain the effort.

Support for the Person to “Find Themselves”

Personal identity is not entirely a “fixed” matter for all time, as personhood is always emerging in new and unexpected ways from deeper sources that are not always apparent, even to the people themselves. Though it may seem strange to many people, it is quite possible for people to be unsure of who they actually are or may want to be and at times it may even be true that the person “loses” themselves for a time. Consequently, it may occur that a person may benefit from support in terms of connecting with themselves in a more certain way such that the person believes they are better anchored in their true identity and more comfortable and satisfied with their lives. The precise character of this entwinement between the person's life and their identity may not always be properly balanced and so the person may need to make adjustments in their life that are more faithful to their needs and identity.

Escaping Socially Devalued Roles and Treatment, i.e. the Acquisition of Valued Roles

Though it is distressing to contemplate, all societies have tendencies to devalue some of their members and this will normally result in the placing of such persons into devalued social

roles. With such roles will come the poor treatment of that group by the more valued and usually dominant majority. Such groups have historically included groups such as gypsies, lepers, foreigners, people of different appearance, language or customs and so on. These conditions of the poor treatment of devalued persons and groups can be changed and relieved through support for such persons to acquire valued social roles. Valued roles are essential pathways to obtaining a “good life” in the community, as they provide for people the means by which community life can be accessed.

Personal Growth and Development

Most people would have examples of times in their own lives when they believed that they were stagnating and in need of personal growth. This need to grow and develop can manifest in many ways, such as boredom, dissatisfaction, yearning for other things and whatnot. Whatever the manifestation, it is important to recognise that not growing can bring a sense of disappointment with life and a sense that life could be better. Consequently, it is important to support people to find the ways that may be available to them in their lives to create conditions that favour their growth and development in whatever life domains are at issue for them at a given period in their life. If this is done, it offers the person a chance for a more fulfilling life.

The Safeguarding of Individual Vulnerabilities

Many people will refer to various groups in society as being “vulnerable people” though this idea can be misleading, as all people are able to be wounded. In other words, there are no invulnerable people. There are, however, plenty of people who are forced to live lives that are characterised by enhanced vulnerability. Should these vulnerabilities not be managed by means of the creation of offsetting safeguards, it is quite possible that these vulnerabilities will end up as the source of many wounding experiences. Fortunately, vulnerabilities can often be recognised and addressed in advance with a view to reducing or managing such vulnerabilities so that they are offset by intentional safeguards.

The Supported Use of Natural Supports in Meeting Personal Needs

There are vast resources in the realm of what many people call “natural resources”. These resources are, in theory, all of what community or civil society have by way of support for meeting the needs of people. These resources massively exceed what is available solely from formal human services, but only if they are properly tapped into and mobilised. Though it is often the case that such resources are offered freely without asking, it is not always so. Consequently, assistance and support may be required to link people to such resources and ensure that these produce the benefits that are hoped for. For instance, many jobs in the economy are obtained through means that are largely mediated by relationships far more than through formal hiring processes per se.

The Adaptive Use of Generic Resources

A key sub-set of the resources that communities offer is found in what are often called “generic resources”. These are organisations in the community that offer services or opportunities for all citizens of the community who are interested in their use. This is in contrast to resources that are targeted at only one sub-group in society. These are called “categoric resources”, given their reserved use for a category of people. Generic resources are typically “proven” resources in the sense that they normally have a long track record of meeting the needs of all kinds of people. So,

to be able to draw upon such successful resources can be quite enhancing for people who want to take advantage of all of the benefits these can have. As with natural supports, these resources are not always automatically available, unless they are carefully used and sufficient planning and thought are given to ensuring that their promise is realised.

Personal Membership in Community Groups

A distinct advantage within community life can be obtained by people who believe or find themselves to be “on the outside looking in” by obtaining and holding onto the role of community group membership. To truly belong, one often needs to be in the role of member, as it bestows upon the person the chance to be part of “us” or “we” rather than to be solely an isolated “I”. From belonging will come many other benefits, not the least of which is to enjoy not only what that community group has to offer, but also the solidarity, support and affiliation that comes with membership. A further irreplaceable advantage that comes with community group membership is the ability to make a variety of new connections to the broader life of community through the networks that naturally arise through such involvements.

The Range and Satisfaction of Personal Relationships

Simply being physically in the community cannot normally be counted on by itself to ensure that one is connected to people, particularly in meaningful and personal ways. This kind of contact can only occur through relationships and these crucial personal relationships may be absent for many people. This is why it is important to see that the acquisition and development of a range of suitably satisfying personal relationships can add considerable value and contentment to a person’s life, particularly in contrast to a lonely life without relationships. This is not meant to suggest that all relationships are necessarily equally fulfilling nor that compatibility amongst people is automatic or assured. Rather, it means that many relationships can be satisfying and it is important to support people to make and sustain the relationships that work well for them.

Creating a Real Home of One’s Own

Though it is possible to obtain shelter from the elements, there may be a great gulf of difference between this and what most people would understand to be a “real” home of one’s own. One can have a place to live, but that place may not be one’s home. In a sense, one can become part of a group that is best described as the sheltered homeless if the place one lives is not a “real” home. Of course, what is meant by a “home of one’s own” will necessarily have many personal dimensions to it but, even with these, they may well be part of a larger sense of “home” shared by most people in the culture. Homes can be created around and with the person concerned such that their sense of what is a desirable and ideal home is incorporated into how that home is formed and shaped such that it meets one’s needs in life more optimally.

The Flexibility and Responsiveness of Support Arrangements

A notable character of life is its volatility and turbulence and therefore the need to preserve the flexibility and responsiveness to emerging developments that will make it possible to adapt to whatever comes one’s way. The same holds true for the character of services. They need to be as equally flexible and responsive if they are to remain properly attenuated to what people need at a given moment. Since these needs can vary, as can the contexts for meeting these needs, services are more likely to be useful and effective if they are nimble and quick to respond to changes as they arise. Should services not be able to do this, it can be expected that the person

concerned will have responses to their needs from services that are out of sync with what is actually required. So, it is important to recognise the role that responsiveness and flexibility in services can play in improving the quality of life of people.

Intentional Limitations on Bureaucratic Invasiveness

Not all forms of bureaucracy that may enter into people's lives from and alongside services are going to take on an invasive or offensively bureaucratic nature. Nonetheless, such unpleasant and burdensome bureaucracies do exist and this may frustrate and tax people's patience. For this reason, it is useful to see the merit of carefully designing the way service-related bureaucracy plays out in people and try to eliminate or minimise the "people unfriendly" components of it and to enhance the friendlier aspects. Bureaucracy need not be inevitably burdensome, so it is very helpful when conscientious services shape their bureaucracies to be a more agreeable experience for those people who rely on services.

Support for the Person to Recognise and Avoid Self-Destructive Outcomes

Though it seems possible for many people to easily avoid conduct that is self-destructive, this does not appear to be the case with all people. Some individuals may struggle greatly with tendencies towards self-destructive conduct for many years and may still fail to succeed unless they can get the necessary support to prevail that will work best for them. Should this support be needed by such a person, it is important for there to be careful consideration of how best to provide such support, particularly in instances where the person may be resistant to it. Though it can be a challenge to get this right, it may be crucial to whether a person can succeed in their life.

Finding Meaning in Life

Though it could be subsumed under the broader category of meeting personal fundamental needs, it is obvious that for many people their lives need to make sense for them. In some instances, this could mean the pursuit of specific religious or philosophical directions and for others an outright rejection of these in favour of other possible pathways to make meaning and sense out of life. The key may not be found in a specific approach to answering these questions but rather that the person be seen as having such a need and the recognition that possibly unique responses to this need can be fashioned. To ignore a person's need to find meaning in life such that they have a sense of purpose in their lives may not be a task that ever ends in a person's life, so it is important to try to engage it as effectively as is possible as an existential reality.

Conclusion

What is offered here are potential key dimensions of the quality of life and support for people in individualised support arrangements. Some of these dimensions could conceivably have been combined into fewer categories or been expanded into yet more dimensions. However, the purpose here is to stimulate further thinking on what is meant by "quality" in these apparently proliferating individualised arrangements such that we can begin to assess what is or is not working in the real lives of people. For this, we need starting points if we are ever to get to a point of a meaningful consensus that would enable us to do a better job with quality.