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Drugs, hopes and dreams: appreciative inquiry with marginalized young people using drugs and alcohol

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Drugs and alcohol misuse in young people is a major public health problem with substantial levels of morbidity and mortality. Social, economic and cultural factors play a major part in the initiation and maintenance of substance misuse in young people. Many young people who misuse drugs have multiple antecedent and co-occurring mental health problems, unrecognized learning difficulties, family difficulties and deeply entrenched social problems. Given the heterogeneity of the patterns of substance misuse in these young people, and the potential for persistence of serious problems into their adult lives, a range of interventions should be developed to address the risk factors across biological, psychological and social domains. Family/systemic interventions provide the best outcomes for young people with substance misuse, though even the most intensive forms of systemic therapies may fall short of producing enduring changes, especially for marginalized young people and communities. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is one of the most significant innovations in action research in the past decade and a method of producing long-lasting changes to the larger social system. AI is an attempt to generate a collective image of a new and better future by exploring the best of what is and has been. We describe an anecdotal experience of using AI in producing long-lasting changes in a group of marginalized young people in South Africa, who were engaged in drug and alcohol misuse and antisocial behaviour. The principles and practice of AI are described in detail, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for a UK population.

The king of thieves

Let us tell you a story. Several years ago, I (EM) was at a party in South Africa, talking to the local mayor, who was telling me about one of the greatest problems he was facing in his township. There were many

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young people between the ages of 15 and 25 who have left school, were unemployed, and had severe drug and alcohol problems. He was very concerned about these youngsters roaming the streets of the township, terrorizing the populace and causing immense distress to their near and dear ones. I jokingly offered to work with this group on my next visit. He took me up on this offer straight away with a dogged determination. He duly organized for me to run a two-day workshop with these young people on my next trip to South Africa. He suggested that I should involve a local organization working with young people, which I did.

We set up shop in a local community centre, and organized breakfast for the youngsters. As we were waiting for the young people to arrive, I went to the entrance to greet them. One of the first people to arrive was a charismatic Rastafarian who asked me whether I knew him. I shook my head and he replied, 'Oh, I am king of the thieves!' I rather cautiously looked behind me where I had left my bag containing my wallet and passport. He smiled and said, 'Don't worry, if you have any problem come and see me! Oh and by the way these people behind me are my gang of thieves!'

I always carry a pad of post-its with me and I quickly wrote down some of the abilities I had seen in this young man: charisma, an acute sense of observation, leadership, charm, reassurance, fun, hope and sense of humour. I stuck these post-its on his shirt, which he just loved wearing and turned to show his gang. About a hundred and twenty young people arrived to attend the workshop. As the workshop progressed, this young man became my helper and co-leader.

I worked with this group of young people over the next two days using appreciative inquiry principles (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999). These principles encourage us to look for *what works*, to look for the very best of *what is*, and to explore what makes this possible and identify the skills and abilities people have that have not been named or recognized before. With these resources and skills now part of an identity, a future holds more promise. Dreams of a future become energized and exciting. It is a generative and collaborative process where people, in relationship, join to discover abilities and values in these treasured episodes and dream of a future in which we live the values behind the abilities.

So what happened in this workshop?

There was no mention of difficulties or problems, no shaming or calling to account for misdemeanours. There were many interviews

looking for episodes of pride and competence where many abilities were spotted. This was done in pairs of youngsters who had not previously met and they interviewed each other. In the process of naming these abilities, skills and resources, we have asked the youngsters to write them down on coloured post-its and, with the person's permission, to stick the post-its on their shirts. These pairs, with all their post-its displayed on their chests, joined other pairs to make up groups of six or eight. In these larger groups their stories were shared and witnessed, and more abilities were spotted as the stories were told.

With all these newfound abilities they dreamt about their own personal futures in ten or fifteen years' time. The dreams were interviewed in detail as suggested above with what they called 'backward forward planning'. Many of them created individual plans as businessmen, starting up projects and enterprises. One such project that later came to fruition was that of a young man who dreamt he would take tourists on guided tours of the local coloured or black townships to show them the vibrant and lively ambience, compared to the very quiet, sedate white town centre. He would also tell them tales about the culture and history of each group and celebrate their stories of endurance and survival. His forward backward planning was to work in a garage and learn how to fix cars so that he could then buy a very cheap car and fix it so that he would have a vehicle to show people around the town. He would paint the car all sorts of bright colours and make it really jazzy. He also planned to talk to the local council about putting up signs so that people knew what they were looking for and at. Three years later, on a subsequent visit, I (EM) learned that he has fulfilled his dreams: he has established his tourist visits and is off all drugs.

On the second day of the workshop we had a day of dreaming about these youngsters' hopes for their communities. They had in fact invited a number of important community members and leaders to this day to witness the changes and seek support from them to materialize their dreams. This brought out the most amazing projects of altruistic thoughtfulness and care.

The young group of thieves (having been given lots of abilities for social skills, ingenuity, charm and networking!) decided that they wanted to run a social/life-skills group for youngsters coming out of school to help them get jobs and have a future. This group invited me to help them think through what their forward backward planning would be, their hopes for the course, their curriculum and who they needed to help run the course. After the two-day workshop they

visited a number of stores (which they had previously stolen from to support their habits) and asked whether they would support such a course by offering work experience and also helping the children with their interview technique. They requested lots of job application forms from local shops to help practise filling them in. They also thought about dress, speaking skills, non-verbal behaviour and so on so that the young people felt confident and relaxed about being interviewed. This group did very well and handed over their enterprise to others after a couple of years, and went on to more income-generating projects.

Another group wanted to create and build a community sports centre. They negotiated with a local farmer to rent, at a peppercorn amount, a piece of land. They sought the help of their mothers and friends to make bricks for the building, and borrowed tractors and other machinery from local businesspeople to level the field to make a football pitch. They are still in the process of building the hall but have great hopes of finishing it and running soup kitchens for the elderly.

Before we embark on a discussion as to why the workshop was successful, let us introduce you to some of the ideas that informed and inspired our work, and some of the key principles involved in conducting appreciative inquiry with marginalized young people.

Ideas that inspired us

Social construction of the human brain

The mind–brain relationship has vexed philosophers and scientists for centuries and continues to be the subject of controversy. Even though mindbrain dualism has a long and venerable history in Western philosophic tradition, most neuroscientists and clinicians in the post-Cartesian era have adopted a heuristic position: they regard the mind as the activity of the brain and all mental phenomena as arising from the brain. Postmodernist thinkers may derive immense pleasure from the fact that contemporary neuroscientists are simply echoing the eloquent thoughts of the father of modern medicine, who stated way back in fifth century BC that ‘Men (*sic*) ought to know that from the brain, and from the brain only, arise our pleasures, joys, laughter and jests, as well as our sorrows, pains, griefs and tears’ (Hippocrates, quoted in Kandel *et al.*, 2000). The brain is perhaps one of the most beautiful organs in the human body, sculpted by waves of evolution that span millions of years. It is made up of 100 billion nerve cells - about the same as the number of

trees in the Amazon rainforest. Each cell is connected to around 10,000 others, so that the total number of connections in your brain is the same as the number of leaves in the rainforest – about 1000 trillion. The complexity of human behaviour is explained by the intricate connections formed between the neurons. Apparently, when we learn something new, new arborizations are formed in the smaller branches of the nerve cells – new branches sprout in our brain tree. One could argue that when we speak to someone we change their anatomy! The human brain has the unique ability to plan ahead, solve problems, delay gratification, empathize, write poetry and dream the most impossible dreams, abilities that made us one of the most adaptable species on the planet and enabled us to dominate it. These are certainly not random ramblings of modern-day phrenologists – new neuro-imaging techniques permit us to see the human brain in action – to identify specific regions of the brain associated with particular modes of thinking and feeling.

Moreover, research in neurosciences over the past few decades has conclusively demonstrated that mental experiences can affect the function and structure of the human brain (Andreasen *et al.*, 1992). Leon Eisenberg, the veteran child psychiatrist, proclaimed rather audaciously that the ‘human brain is socially constructed: major brain pathways are specified in the genome; detailed connections are fashioned by, and consequently reflect, socially mediated experience in the world’ (Eisenberg, 1995). Early childhood experiences sculpt the human brain.

A vast array of stimuli and experiences are likely to affect brain development throughout a host of sensitive periods that await discovery. For example, chronic neglect and maltreatment in early childhood can impair brain development, particularly involving areas of the brain concerned with memory, learning, anxiety and impulse control. There is a higher risk of development of substance use in children exposed to neglect and maltreatment in childhood (De Bellis, 2005). The impact of stressful events is particularly important during the first few years of life, though environmental insults can make an impact throughout the lifespan. However, there are particular stages of development when experience exerts either a maximal (sensitive period) or essential (critical period) effect (Teicher *et al.*, 2006).

It has been shown that new neurons are born throughout adulthood in certain parts of the brain such as the hippocampus, an important brain region concerned with learning and memory – a significant overturn of a long-held scientific theory that the human nervous system is fixed at birth and incapable of regeneration

(Eriksson *et al.*, 1998). New cell birth in the hippocampus can be influenced by several environmental factors and stimuli, and it has been shown that stressful experiences, including both physical and psychosocial stress, suppress the formation of cells in a number of mammalian species (Gould *et al.*, 1999, 2000). There is empirical evidence to show that treatment with antidepressants increases the formation of new cells in the hippocampus by increasing brain growth factors (Carlson *et al.*, 2006).

What are the implications of these findings of brain cell resilience and plasticity? The 'consciousness revolution' of the 1970s represents, argues Nobel Laureate Roger Sperry, a profound conceptual shift to a different form of causal determinism. 'According to the new mentalist paradigm, mind can no longer be considered the opposite of matter. Mental phenomena, this paradigm contends, must be recognized as being at the top of the brain's causal control hierarchy whereby, after millenniums of evolution, the mind has been given primacy over bio-evolutionary (Darwinian) controls that determine what human systems are and can become' (Sperry, 1987). Materialist and behaviourist doctrines have proposed that everything is governed from below upward through micro-determinist stimuli and physiochemical forces. The new neuroscientific view however gives subjective mental phenomena a causal role in brain processing and offers a profound paradigm shift in the very nature of the concept of objective reality. 'Future reality, in this view, is permeable, emergent, and open to the mind's causal influence; that is, reality is conditioned, reconstructed, and often profoundly created through our anticipatory images, values, plans, intentions, beliefs, and the like' (Sperry, 1987). Macro-determinism or the theory of downward causation is a scheme, asserts Sperry, that idealizes ideas and ideals over chemical interactions, the traffic of nerve impulses and DNA. 'It is a brain model in which conscious, mental, and psychic forces are recognized as the crowning achievement of some 500 million years or more of evolution' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987, p. 149). We are no longer just a product of our heredity and environment: our will, our acts, aspirations and hopes can change the world around us and the very structure of the brain cells with which we think.

Social construction of time: 'now in the future'

We are intrigued by the notion that it is the stories of the future that create the present more than the stories of the past. Heidegger (1962)

came up with the brilliant formulation that it is our nature not only to be thrown into existence but to always be ahead of ourselves in the world, to be engaged in the unfolding of projected realities. All action, according to Heidegger, has the nature of a project: much like a movie projection on a screen, human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation that brings the future powerfully into the present as a causal agent. The image of the future not only acts as a barometer but also actively promotes cognition and choice, and in effect becomes self-fulfilling because it is self-propelling.

John Dewey (Tiles, 1988) inspired us to develop a few metaphors about the future. Imagine a person in a field standing ready with a bow and arrow taking aim, ready to reach a target. Imagine the other end of the field with a large circular target. There are red and white circles painted on the target. At the centre of the target is the smallest circle, the 'bull's-eye'. This is the circle that the person with the bow and arrow is focused upon. Everything that the person does is designed to reach that target. Reaching the target is a hoped-for achievement in the future. However, that future achievement is literally forming everything that the person with the bow and arrow does in the present. The actions that the archer is taking, the way she takes aim, how tightly she draws the bow, how she judges the wind and the way it might affect the path of the arrow – these are all parts of the future achievement. So, we would say that the future is not 'out there' but literally forming us in the present, in the here and now. We might then say that our actions in the present, rather than being formed out of the past, are literally formed by the imagined futures that we cherish.

Dewey's metaphor of building a house inspired us to develop another perspective for imagining the future. In this perspective we use the story of the future as a launch pad to explore fully what is involved in creating that future; so, rather than talking about the house that we are going to build, imagine that we are already living in the house that we built. So we bring 'the end-into-view' (Tiles, 1988). We do this in enormous detail; the greater the detail the easier it is to see how it was created. Once we have done this we can look back in time from the house we are already occupying to describe, through this 'backlighting process' (Morson, 1994), the variety of things that we did to be able to be living in the house that we built. This includes describing the obstacles we encountered on the way, and, since we are living in the house that we built, how we overcame those obstacles. Instead of seeing them as obstacles, they become landmarks of achievement and celebration along the road to the house that we built.

Social construction of reality and morality of language

The word *language* comes from the Latin noun *lingua*, which means 'tongue', and, in prior usage, referred mainly to speech. By extension, however, language is now used to refer to any conventional system of symbols used in communication. We are fascinated and challenged by the creative power and possibilities of language. We see language not only as describing but also as *creating* and *doing* (Dewey, 1910). Speaking from this position we would say that the language we use creates our worlds and our bodyhoods. Language has the power to move us to laughter, to bring us to tears, to lead us to feel with others in their lives. We literally live in language; we construct the world through language so that the questions we ask determine the world we create with another. These questions and words have the gift of creating magnificent and wondrous worlds or worlds that become full of shame and guilt and pathological prisons. We have learned from neuroscience that language changes the very anatomy of our brain cells.

Dewey talks about identity being an active process of identifying abilities and skills as they emerge in conversation or interaction (Cronen, 1999). Through our relationships and the language we use, our identities are created. For example, our identities are created through the stories that others have about us (Pearce, 1989; Kearney 1996). We literally exist in the worlds of others. We get to know ourselves, as Paul Ricoeur has it, through the detour of the other (Kearney, 1996). As Humberto Maturana says, 'We exist in language. . . . Language is grooming. . . . It creates our bodyhoods' (Maturana, 1985).

Arising from this perspective we consider that the language we choose to use, as professionals and as people, is an ethical and aesthetic issue. We become morally responsible for the way we respond to others' utterances and actions as well as the way we describe people and how we relate to them. We have an ethical and moral responsibility to create people in appreciative, growth-giving ways. This is particularly true for children and young people where opportunities for interaction have been fewer, with fewer identity stories being created; for this particular group of youngsters their identity stories are on the whole quite negative. Thus attention to language becomes very important if we are to give them an opportunity to live a different sort of life. When wondrous worlds are created with young people this offers them opportunities they may never have dreamed of before.

Effects of appreciation

Appreciation is a 'poetic process that fosters a fresh perception of ordinary life. Unlike the evaluating stance of problem solving, which is based on the assumption of deficiency, appreciation refers to an affirmative valuing of experience based on belief, trust, and conviction' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). As the poet P. B. Shelly suggests, appreciation 'makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world. . . . It exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful. . . . It strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare and naked sleeping beauty, which is in the spirit of its forms' (Shelly and Reiman, 2002, p. 288) Appreciation draws our eyes towards life-giving elements in our environment, excites our curiosity, generates passion and provides inspiration to the envisioning mind. 'In this sense, the ultimate generative power for the construction of new values and images is the appreciation of that which has value' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Perhaps no one has expressed this more vividly than the great artist Vincent van Gogh, who, in a letter to his brother Theo, spelled out the quintessential relationship between appreciation and the emergence of new values:

I should like to paint a portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings, because it is in his nature. He'll be a fine man. I want to put into my picture of appreciation, the love I have for him. So I paint him as he is, as faithfully as I can. But the picture is not finished yet. To finish it, I am now the arbitrary colourist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair; I come even to use orange tones, chromes, and pale lemon yellow. Behind the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive – and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky.

(Van Gogh, 2003, p. 129)

The consequences of positive affirmation and appreciation have been validated in a number of experiments in psychology, teaching, sports coaching, organizational development and many other fields. Well known is the Pygmalion effect where teachers were told that half of the class were very bright and the other half were not. This bore no relationship to their ability: the children had been randomly allocated to the groupings. The teachers behaved as if it were a truth, with the result that the same behaviour from a bright child was praised and

enthusiastically received while it was ignored or punished for the less bright child. The so-called bright children got brighter and the less bright children deteriorated. Over the past few decades a substantial body of empirical evidence has emerged to attest the theoretical and practical importance of the Pygmalion effect (Jussim, 1986).

The greatest value of the Pygmalion research is that it provides unequivocal empirical evidence for the close relationship between positive image and positive action, and of the transactional basis of the human self. 'To understand the self as a symbolic social creation is to recognize that human beings are essentially modifiable, are open to new development, and are products of the human imagination and mind. We are each made and imagined in the eyes of one another' (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999).

Children especially thrive and learn faster when they feel valued and seen. Empirical research in Chicago showed that schools participating in the Imagine Chicago project, which was an Appreciative Community project, showed considerable improvement in the three Rs, and school attendance went up when the children were seen, heard and affirmed (Browne, 1998, personal communication). Thus looking for what works, spotting abilities and strengths, nurturing the discovered strengths and visualizing wondrous worlds can bring about significant changes in the lives of children.

What is the responsibility of the therapist? We would argue that we have a unique opportunity to help create new realities for young people, by rekindling their ability to hope and dream – qualities that makes us distinctly human. By taking a stance of appreciative cognition, we can create new values and new ways of seeing the world through the very act of valuing.

The practice

Use of appreciative language/appreciative inquiry

The traditional approach to change management tends to follow the medical model: to examine the problem in detail, arrive at a diagnosis and prescribe a course of treatment. Sensible though this may seem, there is an inherent problem with the above approach: talking about problems often creates more problems and has the potential to amplify the existing ones. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 1990) offers an alternate approach to managing organizational change within larger systems. Rather than focusing on failures and frustra-

tions, it tends to explore and appreciate success, rekindle the ability to hope and dream for a different future, and help people to materialize their hopes and aspirations through large system changes. Appreciative inquiry (or inquiring appreciatively) has many dimensions, which grow from this understanding of the formative, creative power of language. Central to these dimensions is a focus on experiences of affirmation, pride, best practice, appreciation and confirmation. Life-affirming practice arises from these commitments. They generate new possibilities for cooperation and commitment to shared dreams.

Appreciative questions can be liberating and create enriched relationships

Children's abilities often go unnoticed, as the expectation is that children will behave well; their good behaviour is taken for granted and rarely brought forth in language by commenting on it. However, as soon as they behave badly the behaviour is commented on with high emotion and a negative identity is created that will also be acted into in the future. In the questioning methods we use, we have found that it is especially useful to highlight the abilities that people demonstrate in affirmative experiences and work. This approach to questioning and ability spotting is generative, since it evokes positivist experiences and appreciation that give people hope and possibilities for the future.

Dream talk

In the practice of appreciative inquiry we engage in lots of dream talk. Dream talk takes us into a different language game (Wittgenstein, 1963) and gives a different way forward and a different way of relating.

Future questions are totally open and totally unrestricted . . . they allow clients to construct possible future worlds by exploring the temporal horizon . . . they probe that . . . ability to project . . . into an unrestricted future and help . . . to see that the future can be reinvented.

(Boscolo and Bertrando, 1996, p. 131)

The dreams of our questions are future orientated. Our practice has long been focused on the possibilities that future questions and future stories create. Dream talk engages with the life-giving, energy-creating dimensions of living (Lang and McAdam, 1997). If children have ideas and dreams for the future, their motivation is greater in the present. The metaphor of dreams is so useful as dreams can change, they are often fragmentary and do not have to come true, but if they

do it is wonderful. In this dream talk we connect with the imaginary abilities of children and their families since, in the world of the imagination, everything becomes possible. Hurts are healed, traumas are transformed, conflicts are resolved, and the unthinkable and the impossible become open and real. In this workshop the energy created through the dreaming process was immense, as the young people began to see, even with no extra resources, that they could change their lives and begin to live in a way that fitted their reactivated values more closely.

Ability spotting

How do we go about spotting abilities? We have to engage in an active process of ability spotting as people recount the stories they have lived. Our questioning is aimed at appreciating and putting into language people's abilities, skills, resources and values. So while interviewing, we keep questioning the *details* of the stories people tell, listening for, identifying and spotting people's abilities as they emerge in the conversation. By ability spotting, skills that have never been recognized and valued before become part of a person's identity and new resources for the future. They begin, for example, to see themselves as someone who is helpful or who is good at networking or is creative or resourceful. The identified ability grows as people act according to the named ability; it becomes one of their values, which will influence the way they behave. Thus, as in the example of the king of thieves, spotting his abilities and resources opened up opportunities for him to behave in a role of leadership and creativity and no longer as the king of thieves but as the co-leader of a workshop. He grew into this identity through the abilities that were spotted. The sticky labels became part of his identity. These abilities thus become resources that may be used in other contexts. They become part of a new emerging 'we-identity' that the person will then more likely act into, as did our king. Naming someone's values, as they emerge through the stories they tell of things they have participated in, creates the energy for new, moral action. We unpack or explore the grammar of the abilities to see what other abilities are hidden in the more obvious ability. It is in the detail that we see and experience the abilities more clearly. They are there for all to see and experience. The process is in some way akin to that of a sculptor who releases the form from that which was already 'hidden' in the block of stones.

Witnessing and attesting

This process of witnessing and participating in the emergence of a new we-identity is important, as it is a public statement of a different role with changing responsibilities and moral orders. This creates openings for people, which are novel and exciting. Witnessing a marriage, the move from two single people to a couple and all that it entails, is an attestation of a commitment with an expectation that behaviour will change accordingly. In the same way, this youngster attested in front of his gang of thieves and to local residents that he would act in a different, responsible way, according to the new abilities brought forth (Ricoeur, in Kearny, 1966).

Drug and alcohol misuse: a systemic perspective

Substance use does not occur in a vacuum. Even though it is an individual behaviour, it is inextricably linked to and coloured by the socio-cultural matrix from which it arises. In vulnerable individuals, substance misuse is produced by the interaction of drugs themselves with genetic, environmental, behavioural, psychosocial and cultural factors (Mirza and Mirza, 2008). A description of the complex mechanisms by which risk and protective factors mediate and modulate the development of substance misuse is beyond the scope of this article; interested readers may refer to excellent reviews or textbooks (Hawkins *et al.*, 1992; Swadi, 1999). However, one cannot escape an unbearable reality. Many young people presenting with drug and alcohol problems have difficulties that far transcend education, social needs, health or crime. They struggle to trust people or develop normal relationships, cannot judge or weigh alternative courses of action and are easily subverted by the unscrupulous. Many come from families where the parents have no interests or hopes for their future, perhaps through cycles of disadvantages and blighted futures. Many have dropped out of school altogether and have engaged in a career of crime. Others (especially girls) have been abused or are currently being abused, are deeply mistrustful and self-harming. Some are on the brink of prostitution or are being exploited already. Many of these young people come from broken homes and/or are in care. Many are exposed to generations of adversity and live in inner-city anomic ghettos that breed a sense of hopelessness and loss of hopes and dreams – quintessential qualities that make us distinctly human. Some of these young people are often lured into the lucrative markets of drug dealing that offer instant rushes.

Discussion

Why was the project so successful? We have asked ourselves, what was it we did? Our thoughts are that we gave a group of young people who had never felt valued or appreciated a sense of being valued, appreciated and listened to, the experience of being seen as skilled people who could contribute to society. In the words of one youngster, when asked how he had enjoyed the two days he said, 'These two days are the best in my life.' Surprised by his response, I asked 'Why?' He told me that up until now he was consumed by the problems of the present – they had strangled and paralysed him, but by dreaming about the future he knew how to get on with his present life. He had a plan of action. It did not feel overwhelming and he was looking forward to it with excitement.

We did not focus on their pathology how and which drugs they had been using or how much alcohol they were drinking. We just brought out the stories in their lives, which were stories of competence and success. We focused on these and spotted their abilities and skills. By being present for them, believing in their potential through dreaming with them and taking them seriously, we created a space for them to move into new identities. It was important too to include members of the community who could witness their transformation and treat them accordingly, believing in them. They were treated as competent and trustworthy. The peer group were able to help convince their families and other adults in the community that things were going to be different. Many of them shared their dreams with their families, which allowed their future dreams to create and in many ways determine their current behaviour. The participation of family and important people from the network in the co-creation of these new identities was very important, so as to have meaningful witnesses, validating these new and changed stories. With the parents and network we reiterated that the future creates the present, and the present creates the future; young people have become very aware of this so they should not be blamed or shamed for the present. They started relating to each other in different ways in sessions, so that youngsters were not dragged back into their old identity. They begin to relate to each other as competent young people with a desire to live a healthy and productive future.

How do stories and dreams transform the structure and functions of nerve cells and change the futures of human beings? A substantial body of scientific evidence has clearly demonstrated that cognitive and psycho-physiological responses to placebos might be mediated

through more than fifty different neuropeptide molecular messengers linking the endocrine, autonomic and central nervous systems (White *et al.*, 1985). While the complex mind–body pathways are far from being fully understood or resolved, there is however one area of clear consensus: positive changes in anticipatory reality through suggestion and belief play a central role in all placebo responses (Cooperrider, 1990). Similarly, a host of diseases, especially various forms of cancer, are associated with chronic and persistent negative images, expressed and embodied in feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. As exemplified by an eminent physician from Yale University, ‘cancer is despair experienced at the cellular level’ (Siegel, 1990).

On the other hand, the evidence indicates that positive affect generates superior recall or access to pleasant memories (Isen *et al.*, 1978); helps create a heightened sense of optimism towards the future (Isen and Shaker, 1982); cues a person to think about positive things (Rosenhan *et al.*, 1981); and, as a result, predisposes people towards acts that would likely support continued positive affect, such as the prosocial action of helping others (Cunningham *et al.*, 1980; Isen and Levin, 1972; Isen *et al.*, 1978). David McClelland from Harvard University proposed an intriguing extension of this line of thought. In a seminal experimental study he demonstrated a clear correlation between positive imagery, positive affect, prosocial action and improved immune functioning (McClelland, 1975). Students watching a film about Mother Theresa, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, attending to the sick and dying poor in Calcutta resulted in increases in salivary immunoglobulin A (IgA a measure of defence against respiratory infection and viral disease). It should be emphasized that these findings are still somewhat controversial and that we are clearly in our infancy when it comes to understanding the role of positive emotion and stories as it relates to individual and collective well-being. However, these studies represent a significant paradigm shift across a range of disciplines and the chasm between biological and psychosocial disciplines is fast disappearing. This vital shift in the spirit of our times is best exemplified by Brendan O’Regan’s observation.

We will no longer be focused on only the reduction of symptoms or the removal of something negative, and instead begin to understand health and well-being as the presence of something positive. Psycho-neuro-immunology may well be the first step in the development of what might be called an affirmative science . . . a science for humankind.

(O’ Regan, 1983)

So what does this mean to the field of drug and alcohol misuse? Substance misuse is best conceptualized as a public health problem with a substantial level of morbidity and mortality. It goes without saying that any successful intervention for substance misuse should address the multiple risk and protective factors, both biological and psychosocial. A host of randomized, controlled studies have shown that family/systemic therapies provide the best outcomes for young people engaged in drug and alcohol misuse (Stanton and Shadish, 1997; Vaughn and Howard, 2004; Waldron and Turner, 2008). However, almost all of the established interventions, from single-session motivational interviewing to the most labour-intensive multi-dimensional family therapy, do not aim to bring about large system changes and may fall short of producing enduring changes, especially for marginalized young people and communities. If young people continue to experience poverty and marginalization, the effects of psychosocial interventions could be limited. History reminds us that even in the most medical of illnesses such as tuberculosis, improvements in standard of living and quality of life of people – ‘non-specific determinants’ of disease – were the most important variable in predicting outcomes. Unfortunately tuberculosis remains a major public health problem in most developing countries despite the fact that the causative organism was discovered more than a hundred years ago and highly effective drugs and vaccines are available. It is highly unlikely that substance misuse will have a different history from that of tuberculosis. It would be interesting to know whether a combination of the existing psychosocial interventions and appreciative inquiry approach to address the large system issues would bring about significant, long-term benefits.

The second author (KAHM) worked for many years in an inner-city London borough with extreme pockets of deprivation and poverty, a borough where crack houses enslave young people, hundreds of young children roam the streets as they have no school places, and there is widespread apathy and loss of hope among parents and young people. Using the idea that ‘every problem is a frustrated dream’ (Lang and McAdam, 1999) he has not lost hope and is dreaming the dream of engaging in an Imagine Lambeth project. This, he feels, might be a more successful way forward, remembering that even though we have to address the individual behaviour, substance misuse is often just one of the problems, and addressing the large system issues is equally if not more important. An Imagine Lambeth project would empower the local community and these

young people to believe in their abilities, to look at what they are good at and proud of, and then to enable them to dream about and create a future for themselves and the community.

Our story does not possess the rigours of a clinical trial. It is perhaps an anecdote at best. But it is an anecdote about a process that changed the some lives forever.

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