

## Book Review

### Book Title

Radical help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state, by Hilary Cottam. London: Virago. ISBN: 978-0349009070

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Rarely does a book about the modern ills of the welfare state excite to this degree. Cottam's accessibly written analysis of the lack of fit between Beveridge's plan for a welfare state that responded to discrete problems with specific 'neutral, depersonalised transactions' for health, income, housing and education designed to 'level opportunity and combat poverty' (p. 45) and today's chronic health conditions, persistent and elevated rates of inequality in relation to income, housing and education. Instead, Cottam argues, we need a welfare state that focuses on the relationships of kindness and care between people, and between institutions and people. Today's problems, she says, need 'collaboration, we need to be part of the change and we need systems that include all of us' (p. 46). Participation must be easy, intuitive and natural. Through a series of 'Experiments' covering major issues such as 'family life', 'growing up', 'good work', 'good health' and 'ageing well', all based on the principle of giving people the support and resources to take power into their own hands and 'build their own way out' (p. 62), Cottam convincingly argues that there is a different way to do welfare. The way to establish collaborative solutions is termed a Design Process, with four broad areas of work: framing the problem or opportunity, idea generation, prototyping and launch, and replication. Not all the experiments go to plan. When a highly popular young people's 'experiment' helping them find employment networks and skills, and along the way improved confidence and capability, was presented to local authority leaders and referring partner agencies, they walked out, alarmed that young people they were responsible for were associating with others not their

own age, and doing things unsupervised in other parts of the city. The young people were perceived to be at risk. Challenging the rules of established practices in regard to risk and safeguarding was a step too far. Cottam describes this as a bruising experience but also one from which she learned to bring the 'same ethos and values closer to existing systems' (p. 106). This is an important lesson for all those who seek reform or revolution in ways of doing welfare in the UK. To me the parallels with social pedagogy are clear. Both are relationally and collaboratively focused, aimed at working with and developing people's own skills and capabilities, emphasise reflection as a key skill for learning, and challenge institutionalised ways of doing things. For residential care, it would pay dividends to try out Cottam's methods. The prize is great indeed. Cottam concludes 'a relational way of working, thinking and designing is one that creates possibility for change, one that creates abundance ... it is through creating a welfare system for this century, through sharing and working with one another that we find ourselves and we make a good life' (p. 277).

### **About the author**

Claire Cameron is Professor of Social Pedagogy, Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, UCL, London. She researches looked after children's lives, the education of children in care, children's workforce, and related issues.