CHAPTER 3

How Social Value Works

Abstract The coronavirus pandemic forced governments to temporarily sacrifice economic prosperity for the health and well-being of their citizens. The lock-down had all the more impact in developed countries because so much economic activity has come to take the form of face-to-face services. People responded by being far more cautious about their interactions with others; they self-enforced a new set of rules, which in turn have shaped each other’s behaviour, very quickly becoming a new norm (David Halpern, Head of the ‘Nudge Unit’ for Behavioural Psychology, on BBC Radio 4, ‘Start the Week’, 27 April, 2020).

Keywords Pandemic • Lock-down • Literature • Psychoanalysis

The lock-down during the pandemic was a rare example of well-being trumping economic gain in the everyday process of public life. Even where family and community interactions have resisted market penetration, it is rare for political leaderships to give priority to social value. The only clear exception to this rule is the Kingdom of Bhutan in the Himalayas; there, the official goal of government is to maximise ‘Gross National Happiness’ (a synonym for ‘well-being’ in Layard 2005) rather than Gross National Product (GNP). Even if this is largely a rationalisation for preserving an
archaic hierarchy, based on early Buddhist tradition, it is still an interesting principle, which might be a precedent for other societies.

Although the recent conversion of service organisations in the UK to the idea of social value has been sudden and perhaps quite woolly and unconvincing, it does signify a recognition that conventional economic analysis has failed to capture the most significant features of the transformation of advanced societies. If economic growth becomes less feasible and desirable in the face of global warming and the sustainability crisis, then humanity needs some dimension on which to progress, if life is not to become no more than a struggle against losing ground.

The qualitative evaluations which were pioneered by the well-being researchers now invite exploration of the processes of social interaction through which gains and losses in SWB occur. Not only social psychology (the discipline which originally gave us ways to measure well-being) but also education, mental health and social work all use relationships as the medium for their professional tasks, and can therefore be seen as dealing in social value (Jordan 2007, 2008).

In this chapter, I shall explore how these processes were understood before the advent of SWB research made this whole topic a focus for public policy. It would not be a gross oversimplification to say that emotions and relationships were seldom seen as subjects for the scientific studies which conferred status and commanded large research funding. Psychiatry as a branch of medicine was rather low on the ladder of prestige, and many mental hospital facilities were archaic, isolated and redolent with stigma for their inmates (Goffman 1967), and to some extent for their staff also.

Although these features were reduced to some extent by the movement of long-term patients into smaller units, and the greater availability of outpatient treatments of many kinds, as well as a variety of therapists in private practice, much of this stigma persists. One irony of the history of psychiatry has been that Sigmund Freud’s theories and insights, by far the best known outside the specialist medical field, have given rise to a limited number of therapists trained in this tradition, but have enormously influenced the arts – literature, the theatre and even the visual arts – over the past 100 or so years.

I shall argue that ideas of well-being and social value permeate these arts, and most explicitly literature, where the processes through which relationships either enhance or undermine the flourishing of the characters can be so vividly and profoundly explored and illustrated. The relevance of
literary studies for the analysis of SWB and social value has hitherto been a neglected opportunity.

Research on SWB by economists deals in comparisons between categories such as occupations, incomes, age groups, neighbourhoods and educational attainments, but practitioners such as doctors, teachers and social workers need to be able to understand – and, if possible, intervene in – the processes by which some people accumulate social value, and others waste or squander it. This book is intended to inform, and perhaps improve, their practice.

The novel as a literary form flourished in the nineteenth century, as a way of exploring how human relationships created an arena for the development of personalities, either fulfilling their potentials or squandering them, and allowing a few of those who seemed to be heading down the latter path to be redeemed by love or friendship, while some of the former were destroyed in such processes. Whereas the economic research gives few clues about how some societies foster and promote relationships that increase well-being while others do not, these microcosms of their societies do, at their best, enable their readers to make connections between the personal and the political levels – the supreme example perhaps being Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace (1874–6).

Novels are much better at demonstrating the complexity and fragility of human relationships than they are at showing how policies might allow them to flourish. However, the challenge to governments posed by SWB statistics is made much clearer by these insights; there is no room for unsubstantiated optimism in any attempt to influence social value through public policy.

Above all, relationships are embedded in an all-embracing context of power which, even when it is obvious in retrospect, at the time is veiled and obscured by ideology and rhetoric. Mutual aid and sympathy, as well as romantic love and intimacy, are parts of the natural order; yet they are often marginalised and devalued by their political context.

**Intimate and Civic Relationships**

In the nineteenth century, both British and French novels, and later Russian ones, transcended the scope of their antecedents in the previous one – such as Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740) and Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749), in which usually naïve young country people’s adventures among knowing and corrupt city dwellers supplied comedy before
their eventual successful transition into the urban scene – by illustrating the complexities of romantic and civic relationships as the class system evolved in conditions of gradual urbanisation and industrialisation.

Although Jane Austen’s heroines are mostly based, as she herself was, in rural districts, their suitors are often city-dwellers in the professions or armed services, and the plots of the novels centre around relationships which are as much educational (of the emotions and the morals, under conditions of inequality, separation and various forms of adversity) as they are romantic. The overall impetus of their narratives tends towards an improvement in social relations between the classes and the sexes, in which women and the church play leading roles, albeit usually low-key and modest ones.

This is often achieved through claims of social value by middle-class women or impoverished families in relation to wealthy and well-born characters. Social value is derived from their capacities to sustain witty and agile interactions as well as intimate and affectionate ones.

In Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the central characters reflect the emerging tensions in relationships between the landed aristocracy and the growing educated middle class. Fitzwilliam Darcy is explicitly self-critical and conflicted over his overwhelming attraction to Elizabeth Bennet, a young woman from a family with little property; she herself is in denial about hers to him, because she interprets all his behaviour as reflecting a sense of social superiority. It is only when each can value the other as a person, unencumbered by these class-biased perceptions, that their mutual love can flourish.

A more extreme example of the political context for social value is *Mansfield Park* (1814), in which the tact and humility of the central character, the humbly born Fanny Price, and her socially responsible (eventual) clergyman husband, Edmund Bertram, is contrasted with the self-indulgent and extravagant behaviour of her rich cousins and their friends, into whose household she moves as an exploited care assistant. Here there is no ambiguity about the ways in which wealth and privilege can distort the potential social value of relationships.

In the world of Charles Dickens’ novels, a much wider range of rural and urban characters, from the rootless street-urchins of *Oliver Twist* (1837–8) to the emotionally frozen aristocrats Lord and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* (1852–3), inhabit a complex society in the process of rapid economic transformation. Here again, the heroine of the latter, Esther Summerson, conducts herself with exemplary virtue through the labyrinth
of suffering, folly and poverty that she encounters, eventually finding a loving relationship with the virtuous doctor Allan Woodcourt. She is a kind of model of the social workers who emerged from the cities’ middle classes in the final quarter of the century (Jordan 1976, ch. 6).

It was a mark of the more pessimistic climate of the later years of that century that few such characters are to be found in the defining novels of that age. For instance, in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1894), the eponymous orphan sets out on a search for self-improvement through education, only to contract an impulsive marriage to the earthier Arabella, then leave her and start a relationship with his cousin, Sue. The nightmare death of their children is the prelude to his reunion with Arabella, as Jude abandons his early ideals. Hardy used these relationships to explore the passing of an age of unreflective peasant matrimony, often drunken and careless, to one in which every thought and action is ambiguous and fraught. In his preface to the 1912 edition of the novel, Hardy questioned the whole moral basis for the institution of marriage, and argued for the availability of instant divorce.

In art, too, the social value of obscure peasants and their environments was celebrated in Gauguin and Van Gogh’s paintings in Brittany and Flanders, and then of ‘primitive’ Polynesians in Tahiti. They are portrayed as having natural qualities and customs which are of at least equal value to those of the Western bourgeoisie.

These ambiguities and ambivalences became even more marked in the literature of the twentieth century. In D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1914), Paul is constantly unable to shake off the sense of a struggle between the flesh and the spirit; unlike his uncomplicated miner father, he was acutely aware of the risks of hurting a woman. Men like him ‘preferred to suffer the miseries of celibacy, rather than risk the other person’ (p. 341).

So, on the cusp of the transformation in economies and societies that was to take place during and immediately after the First World War, English literature reflected a shift in consciousness within relationships of intimacy, both denying them the easy pleasures of the eighteenth-century romps, and anticipating the much more stormy and violent expression of these conflicts in the twentieth century.

These were often more preoccupied with issues of totalitarian politics (in the lead-up to the Second World War), as in George Orwell, and the complexities of identity and class, as in the post-war novels *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Alan Sillitoe, 1958, and *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Barry Hines, 1968, which were both made into memorable films. But the
enduring contribution of the earlier traditions of the literary form had meanwhile influenced the intellectual development of the whole century.

SOCIETY AND PSYCHOLOGY

If we are to understand how social value is created, distributed and destroyed, it is vital to base this on a reliable analysis of the complexities of relationships. In the period after the mid-nineteenth century, the novel supplied an ideal vehicle for this process; it would have been just as valid to illustrate this in those of Flaubert and Zola, or Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, as in their English contemporaries.

But it was in Austria and Germany that these complexities were analysed and theorised in the most sophisticated, academic way. Sigmund Freud became the leading figure in a movement which aimed to produce a scientific theory of the workings of the mind and of emotional experiences, and he carried this analysis over into a grand narrative about the history of social institutions as systems of social control. In Civilization and Its Discontents (1929), he set out to develop an account of how this sophisticated construction was ‘built on renunciations of instinctual gratifications…. (T)he existence of civilisation presupposes the non-gratification (suppression, repression or something else?) of powerful instinctual urgencies’ (pp. 43–8).

This account used metaphors from anthropology and history to explain these processes: ‘Culture behaves towards sexuality…like a tribe or section of a population which has gained the upper hand and is exploiting the rest to its own advantage. Fear of revolt among the rest then becomes a motive for even stricter regulations. A high-water mark in this type of development has been reached in our Western European civilisation…(which) obtains a mastery over dangerous love of aggression in individuals by enfeebling and disarming it and setting up an institution within their minds to keep watch over it like a garrison in a conquered city’ (pp. 48, 57).

There is a bitter irony, of course, in the fact that Freud wrote this only a few years before the rise of the Nazi dictatorship in Germany and Austria, from which he fled to England. Far from the inhibition of primitive instincts and drives, this was in many ways their brutal expression, and the Second World War and the Holocaust carried these to their most apocalyptic extremes. It was not inhibition which turned out to be the enemy, but the lack of it.
Conclusions

Nineteenth-century literature had illustrated how relationships were hazardous; people risked humiliation or destruction for the sake of love and fulfilment. But the politics of race reverted to the tribal competition between groups which characterised our early history, and on a massive scale, with deadly weapons. It was the nation which needed to be civilised as much as – or more than – the individual.

In the years after that war, the concept of welfare – as in the welfare state as a set of rights for citizens of a nation – largely displaced the notion that personal relationships characterised the culture or civilisation of a society. It was the expression of the democratic system which had defeated the totalitarianism of the Nazis, and stood against that of Stalinism, and it was individual freedom which was generalised outwards into the liberal, pluralistic polity.

If well-being was mentioned at all, it was expressed in the hybrid idea of ‘health-and-well-being’, in which the dominant element was the health services which, in the UK and in Europe, were developed as a massive improvement to the length, as well as the quality, of the lives of citizens. Well-being did not become a key concept for public services for another 40 or more years.

But in recent years, power-holders have once again become much more capable of masking their capacities to distort the distribution of social value, through both economic and political processes. When the coronavirus pandemic struck, governments which had been for years implementing austerity, public spending cuts and the coercion of poor people suddenly found the means to spend on benefits for all, health and social care.

So the question is what will happen once the crisis is over. Will the ways in which people have been revalued during the pandemic – nurses, care assistants, shop-workers and public transport employees, for example – and in which the general public have revealed themselves as neighbourly, helpful and demonstrating empathy and mutuality disappear and will things revert to their previous order?

In a wide-ranging discussion on YouTube (‘The Flip’, Spanner Films, 24 May, 2020), Caroline Lucas (Green Party MP), George Monbiot (writer on environmental issues) and Faisa Shaheen (trades unionist) discussed how the positive aspects of the crisis could be retained in its aftermath. Instead of allowing a tiny minority of the super-rich and political
oligarchs (‘psychopaths’, as Monbiot called them) to control societies, the chance was there for myths to be dispelled, a Universal Basic Income scheme adopted, the real threat of climate change tackled, and social solidarities reconstructed.

The nature and consequences of social value-laden transactions, between individuals, classes and communities, have been at the heart of the literature, art and history of war and peace in the past three centuries. This book will explore whether the explicit theorising and empirical analysis of all of these in terms of this concept can influence future policy and politics.

REFERENCES

Austen, J. (1813). Pride and Prejudice. London: Penguin Books (1965).
Austen, J. (1814). Mansfield Park. London: Penguin Books (1966).
Dickens, C. (1837–8). Oliver Twist. London: Chapman and Hall (1911).
Dickens, C. (1852–3). Bleak House. London: Chapman and Hall (1911).
Fielding, H. (1749). Tom Jones, a Foundling. London: Penguin Classics (1980).
Freud, S. (1929). Civilisation and Its Discontents. In Civilisation, War and Death: Psycho-analytical Epitomes, No. 4. London: Hogarth Press (1939).
Goffman, E. (1967). On Face Work: An Analysis of the Ritual Elements in Interaction. In Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behaviour (pp. 1–46). New York: Doubleday Anchor.
Hardy, T. (1894). Jude the Obscure. London: Macmillan.
Hines, B. (1968). A Kestrel for a Knave. London: Penguin.
Jordan, B. (1976). Freedom and the Welfare State. Abingdon: Routledge and Kegan Paul (Republished, 2019).
Jordan, B. (2007). Social Value in Services for Children. Journal of Children’s Services, 5, 53–70.
Jordan, B. (2008). Welfare and Well-Being; Social Value in Public Policy. Bristol: Policy Press.
Lawrence, D. H. (1914). Sons and Lovers. London: Penguin (1974).
Layard, R. (2005). Happiness: Lessons from a New Science. London: Allen Lane.
Richardson, S. (1740). Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded. London: Penguin Classics (1981).
Sillitoe, A. (1958). Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. London: W.H. Allen Ltd.
Tolstoy, L. (1874–6). War and Peace. London: Penguin Classics (1979).