

Where's our humanity?

Consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Sebastian Kraemer challenges assumptions and prejudices about claimants.

You walk down the road on your way to work and you see the curtains drawn in their house. You know they could work, but they choose not to. And just as maddening is the fact that they seem to get away with it.

Last year, David Cameron wrote these words in the *Sun*, the most widely read daily paper in Britain. But his sentiments will strike a chord, perhaps even with readers of this publication. How can one not feel indignant at the idea of lazy people wasting their lives at public expense? The *Sun* reports:

We live very nicely on benefits and we wouldn't want to change our lifestyle. We also like Chris staying at home because if he got a job our benefits would be cut. Why would we want that to happen?... I get to spend loads of time with the kids and I wouldn't want that to change.

They have a 32-inch plasma TV, a computer, an Xbox and a Panasonic sound system, adds the journalist Jenna Sloan.

This, apparently, is a typical 'shameless' benefit claimant. (Maybe he is doing a good job as a parent. How would we know from this report?). While the tabloid press would have us believe that all claimants are fraudulent and live in the lap of luxury, in fact such cases are rare. Benefit fraud is at an all time low, and half of all claimants are sick, disabled or mentally ill,¹ Many more face major barriers to work – including the sort of prejudices outlined above – and are doing the best they can to care for themselves and their children on totally inadequate incomes.

Look harder behind the curtains and you will find some other people, quite different from Chris and his family. They may be struggling to cope at all. Knowing this might make it harder to hold onto the stereotype of a scrounger. Yet resentment persists. Here is a comment on Ms Sloan's article on the *Sun* website:

Makes me laugh. Even alcoholics who sit on the beach all day drinking are classed as DISABLED. Why pay alcoholics money when all they do is spend it on booze? Give them food vouchers instead and make them get sober. Trouble is most of them are happy.

Is the person who made this comment envious of the drinker? Few people wonder why there are so many people on benefits, the vast majority of them poor, or even know that Britain has more people in poverty – and greater income inequality – than almost all other major European countries. (Spain, Greece and Portugal are the exceptions²).

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-13309755>

² <http://www.poverty.org.uk/e02/index.shtml>

Facts are not what this is about. If you have managed to get by, especially without privilege or much support from parents in your childhood, you may feel little sympathy for people who seem unable to look after themselves (and who, by the way, often have the same dismal view of *themselves* as their tormentors. Shame is more common than shamelessness.)

Let us turn back the clock to when the targets of the *Sun's* anonymous commentator were born. Apart from a minority damaged at birth, these people started off just like you did: healthy, attractive and optimistic, ready to trust someone to love and look after them, to talk and sing to them, feed them, change them when they were cold or wet, and to hold them when they were tired, frightened or angry. For the most deprived individuals their lives started to diverge from yours right there. The looking after did not work well enough. Perhaps it was irritable, inconsistent, miserable or - relatively rarely - downright cruel.

It important to emphasise two things here. Firstly, even wealthy and well-connected people can struggle as parents, and alcoholism is by no means confined to those living in poverty. However trying to survive on a low income invariably makes everything – including parenting – worse. Secondly, parents who abuse or neglect their children almost always feel love for them, but it is undermined by their own bad experiences, especially as tiny children themselves. The care of infants is the most subtle yet vital task and, without detailed knowledge of the circumstances, none of us is entitled to judge others' efforts as inferior.

The human brain at birth is not fully grown, so the ups and downs of our first months and years of life actually mould it and programme the way we think about the world, especially about being loved and looked after. If you can hold it there and imagine a baby who is desolate because no one comes when he cries, or is petrified because when they do, they shout at him, do you still feel the same twinge of self-righteousness about that child fully grown, now getting his love out of a bottle?

Those who are most indignant about 'scroungers' often feel they have had just as bad a life, but have overcome their disadvantages by sheer determination. "If I can triumph over childhood adversity, then why can't he?" The answer is that many of the most vulnerable individuals had their willpower knocked out of them before they could make use of it, which is worse than bad luck, and – through fear or ignorance – they missed opportunities to make things better for themselves, which is tragic. When we can collectively accept that there are people among us who have both failed and been failed, then we can contemplate a better society in which the strong support the weak rather than despise them. Which kind of society would you prefer to live in?

For Child Poverty Action Group www.cpag.org.uk

November 2011