

Innovative Social Agencies in Europe: Composite Report on Findings from Phase Two of the SOSTRIS project 'Social Strategies in Risk Societies' Including Policy Meetings

The social biography of welfare agencies

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The SOSTRIS project was organised in two phases, the first based on biographies of individuals, the second on case studies of agencies which were innovative in tackling social exclusion. This Report discusses the close affinity which arose between the two stages of the project, and their common delineation of an impetus towards more active and subjectively based forms of welfare. For Phase Two of the project found itself approaching similar questions to those in Phase One concerning the turn to subjective and reflexive resources and the promotion of more active forms of welfare, but this time in relation to the management of professional resources and consideration of the 'biographies' of organisations. While some Policy Meetings, (which were held within each national setting), focused discussion on the application of biographical methods within a particular agency or professional setting, others discussed the implications of such particularised methods for welfare systems as a whole, and applied notions of 'autonomy' and 'risk-taking' to policy making and cultures of public administration. Thus at different stages in the project as a whole 'social strategies' were examined at a range of individual and institutional levels.

This Report on Phase Two draws not only on the national reports which form the main part of this volume, but also on discussions which were held at the concluding meeting of the network in Naples in February 1999. By way of introduction, its first section outlines the approach taken to the selection of agencies, recalls the original framing of the project within contemporary social theory, and the contradictory tensions between discourses in economics and sociology concerning 'the individual', and highlights common analytical strands between Stages One and Two of the project. The second section addresses methodological reflections and findings which arose from our biographical approach to agency studies, and discusses the innovative effectiveness of agencies in terms of actor-network theory, which also has strong affinities with a biographical perspective. The third section is concerned with policy issues. It points to the strong parallels between the case study findings of the first phase of the SOSTRIS project and innovatory developments within professional practice, and the more fluid relations which are emerging between research, policy and practice. The fourth section concludes with discussion the importance of taking the varied nature of welfare and social contexts into account in generalising from and evaluating the findings.

1. Introduction

1.1. Choosing the Agencies

We chose agencies which seemed to be both innovative, and of high quality, in responding to the problems of exclusion and risk which our socio-biographical studies had investigated.

Most of the agencies we studied had an affinity to the approach we had developed in our socio-biographical study. That is, the agencies were interested in rather specific kinds of exclusion and risk, and most often perceived these risks in person-centred or individualised terms. They were committed to developing the 'strategies' and personal resourcefulness of their clients, for example, rather than with the provision of mainly material help, or of merely supportive care.

The SOSTRIS research teams had chosen Agencies for study with these broad affinities in mind. Nevertheless these potential connections between the biographical and agency phases of our research only became elaborated and explicit as our study proceeded.

1.2 The Broader Context of Social Policy in Europe

The perspective of individualised risks and strategies which underlies the SOSTRIS programme is also shaping social policy in many European nations. The ideas of Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, significant theoretical influences on the original design of our investigation, have also contributed to recent political

debates in New Labour in Britain, and across the political spectrum in Germany, and elsewhere. The demand for individualised and 'enabling' policies to deal with problems of social exclusion is the other side of the rejection of 'traditional' social democratic collectivism in some parts of Europe. The concept of 'active welfare' which those associated with SOSTRIS are exploring is one with considerable political currency at the present time, as we have discovered during several of our national policy meetings. We see our comparative research on social agencies and social policies as contributing in both constructive and critical ways to this emerging debate.

We can identify two aspects in the emphasis on the individual in economic and social policy in the past two decades, which are to some degree in conflict with each other. One of these emphasises the need for individual self-reliance, and seeks to restructure the system of economic rewards and incentives to discourage 'dependency' and to insist on self-help from individual citizens. We can think of this as a pervasive '*individualism*', driven mainly by Anglo-Saxon models of 'flexible' and competitive labour markets. The other, more 'social' aspect, focuses on '*individualisation*' rather than on individual interest as its dominant frame of reference. Those identified with this perspective seek to create space for reflexivity, for the recognition of the complexity of life-choices, for the need to develop new forms of cooperation and self-expression. Both these conceptions are influential within the range of social agencies we studied. For example, in Britain, the Foyer project seeks to implement a more behavioural agenda, focusing on tangible outputs, and devoting relatively few resources to the exploration of the complexities of relationships and narratives of its clients. The Bromley By Bow project, which gives considerable emphasis to self-expression through the arts, is at the other end of this spectrum.

In Britain, this choice between '*individualism*' or '*individualisation*' as a framing perspective now cuts through many spheres of social policy. Should social workers be trained to be able to reflect, and respond to situations from their holistic professional understanding, or should they follow digitalised practice-manuals? Does the drive to achieve prescribed attainment standards and succeed in competitive assessments in schools, leave space for the development of the individuality of pupils? Are the interviews which are now becoming a compulsory condition of eligibility for benefits of many kinds, meant to assist clients to reflect on their situation and their capabilities, or are they occasions where they are to be made aware of what they must practically do to continue to be entitled to support? Does 'flexibility' in employment mean working in more open and complex work-environments, with a greater range and change of tasks, or merely doing the same low-skilled work in an interrupted succession of equally indifferent environments? This dilemma seems to be at the heart of contemporary social policy and other policy debates.

1.3. How are our Socio-Biographical and our Agency findings connected?

Our socio-biographical studies have illuminated a number of distinctive forms and circumstances of risk and social exclusion, and the different forms which these take across our sample of European countries and regions. Our intended first volume, *Life Journeys*, will explore distinctive trajectories of exclusion - blocked journeys, journeys of migration, male and female journeys, etc..

We have also explored some of the broader connected differences which continue to characterise nations and distinct parts of nations in Europe. Our second volume *European Nations from a Socio-Biographical Perspective* will seek to develop a holistic view of such structural and cultural aspects of each of our seven nations, from socio-biographical evidence.

The findings of our studies of social agencies provide a third dimension of insight into the structures and processes of risk and social exclusion, often amplifying themes which had already emerged from the first stage of the research. For example, the issues of *gender inequality* which preoccupied many of our sample, both in the 'single parent' category of our research, and in others, also turns out to be a significant issue for many of our social agencies, both implicitly and explicitly. We studied agencies in Sweden and in Greece which specifically took the self-empowerment of women as their goal. The degree of support they were respectively able to mobilise reflected the different 'stages of emancipation' thus far achieved in these different societies. Overall our research shows the deep-rooted and extensive nature of the 'hidden injuries' of gender which still need to be addressed. (contrast with Beck's 'it's nearly accomplished position'?)

Problems derived from *ethnicity*, and from negative reactions to ethnic difference, loomed large in the final phase of the SOSTRIS programme, with the continuing controversy following the murder of Stephen Lawrence in Britain, and the recent tragic dance-hall fire in the Hammerkullen district of Gothenberg. Two of the flagship agencies studied in Britain were concerned specifically with the development and social integration of members of ethnic communities. They reflected in their practice the positive potential for evolving new multi-cultural identities, in both individual and social terms, which were revealed to be significant facts of life in contemporary Britain, side-by-side with many more negative indicators of ethnic disadvantage and injury.

The moral resources located in *religious institutions* which had been revealed to be significant presences in the lives of some of our biographical subjects (e.g. in Sweden and Britain), also emerged as essential to the commitment of two of the social agencies we studied - in Germany and in Britain. The role of the Protestant Church in maintaining an alternative civil society in Communist East Germany can be seen to be continuing this commitment to sustaining community amidst the different kind of social damage which resulted from the impact on the GDR's sudden exposure to the competitive pressures of the market economy. The Bromley By Bow project is similarly engaged in 'reinventing' the meaning of Christian social commitment in a community where both widespread secularisation and the existence of many religious confessions are important facts of life. Its commitment to active community participation is also a challenge to the established churches, which project members regard as being as bureaucratized as state institutions. The transformation and renewal of traditions to create new forms of social action is one of the most important processes which we have identified through our agency studies. In Sweden, a new kind of voluntary agency, designed to support women's entitlements, has been able to draw for inspiration and capability on the typically Swedish social democratic formation of one of its founders. The Camden Refugee Project in London can be viewed as a contemporary incarnation of a dissenting tradition of advocacy of the rights of oppressed peoples which has been continued for over two centuries in different campaigns and movements.

The continuing domination of society in Greece by ties of *family and political clientelism* which we saw constraining the options of our Greek biographical subjects, is also reflected in the weakness of its voluntary or NGO sector. New social agencies were found to occupy an exceptionally precarious position in Greece, with poorer chances of survival and development than in the other nations we studied. Whereas, by contrast, in Italy, the emergence of an agency committed to what in Britain would now be called 'capacity building' turns out to be just what the new post-Tangentopoli political system was looking for, in its attempts to find more self-active ways of assisting the development of the South. The founders of this agency were able after only three years to translate what they had learned and achieved in the Naples into new national legislation and a major funded programme to support the 'insertion' of the unemployed into employment or self-employment. The *'combined and uneven'* pattern of the traditional and the post-modern which our Italian biographical studies revealed in the South were thus reflected in the character of a successful flagship agency. Giving a new dynamic to 'the family' or to craft skills was a recurrent theme in the Italian case studies as well as in this agency study (see the case of Rita in *SOSTRIS Working Paper 2: the Early Retired*).

We found the concepts of *manifest and latent* function invaluable in analysing social agencies. Our Italian team noted that the project they studied for mentoring the unemployed young provided, as its manifest purpose, scope for a team of young project-workers to develop ways of working quite unusual within the Italian public welfare system. But its latent function, located in the strategic purpose of its two founder members and leaders, was to serve as an 'observatory' or test-bed for a programme that could be potentially applied on a much larger scale. Such building of political careers on a local project is also part of 'traditional' culture in Italy. After three years, the latent function emerged as the dominant one, the local programme was closed, and the founders moved on to implement their conception at a nation-wide level. The two purposes were nevertheless synergistic. Many of the junior staff trained within this project will find work in the larger national programmes, and the South will benefit more from the larger-scale of funding made available than it could possibly have done from a single demonstration programme. This case exemplifies a common combination in experimental social programmes of manifest goals of local service-delivery with the latent function as a 'research and development' agency for national social policy-makers.

2. Reflections on Methodology

2.1 Socio-Biographical Methods and the Study of Social Agencies

Social agencies are not, of course, individuals, and methods designed for the study of individual life-histories are not directly transferable to the study of organisations, even of small ones.

Nevertheless, we found that our socio-biographical methodology provided useful guiding principles for our study of agencies. We were, in all cases, studying relatively new organisations, which had been visibly shaped by the work of their individual founders and of small teams of leading members. Interviews with these individuals was our most important source of information. Understanding the links between the qualities of an agency, and the personal history, goals, and values of its founders, was fundamental to our study. In a sense these agencies, at least in their early stages of existence, can be seen as outcomes or products of the biographies of their leading members. Often there seemed to be a 'common logic' between the formative experiences of the leading figures, usually against oppressive regimes, and sometimes resulting in imprisonment, and the issues to which they now addressed themselves (for striking examples see Reports on the Refugee Education Project and Bromley By Bow in Britain, on Spain, on Italy). This confluence created a 'rich and fluid field', as the Spanish researchers put it.

Our socio-biographical method requires us to attend to particulars, and to develop an understanding of individuals through each detail of their narrative. Our interest is in moving by inference from the individual case, to what we can learn from it about a wider contextual situation, which the individual's experience illuminates for us. We thus learn about the interface, or lack of it, between institutions, through individuals' experience in crossing from one institution to another (universities and employment, for example). Or about the differences in the social support available to individuals experiencing certain life-transitions (e.g. of early retirement or migration), by comparing what happens to individuals who retain certain resources (family networks, for example) with the experiences of those who don't. Our method requires attention to contradictions and silences in narratives, as well as to what is explicitly described in them.

We sought to follow a similar method in exploring our 'agency narratives'. For example, the pressures experienced by inadequately paid and poorly paid front-line staff (concierges) in the East London Foyer project, indicated to us that some aspects of the defined task of this agency had not been adequately understood by its founders and managers. If the emotional and social needs of the homeless young tenants of the Foyer were unrecognised, we inferred, they would impact distressingly on the staff who had the most direct contact with them. This is how we interpreted the stresses experienced by the front-line staff, and the difficulties this brought. (This became recognised as the agency developed, and reparative action was taken.)

On the other hand, the exceptional success of the Bromley By Bow Project in gaining the sponsorship and support of major businesses and public figures, whilst admirable, also suggested reasons for caution about the broader prospects for transferability of such a model. It is hard to see agencies in the majority of deprived neighbourhoods in Britain achieving anything like the level of attention and sponsorship which the Bromley By Bow project has received. The analytic issue here may be to distinguish those qualities which could and should become positive examples for other projects, from those exceptionally favourable circumstances which are unlikely to prove generalisable.

In Britain, the mode of transmission and reproduction envisaged for projects of this kind is by the diffusion and inspiration of further 'social entrepreneurship'. In Italy, the founders of the mentoring project decided to terminate their local programme, and instead to win support for implementing it on a national scale, through the government in Rome. Just as our biographical cases enable us to ponder the representativeness of individual careers, and the examples of viable and non-viable life-strategies they offer, so our agency studies provide us with a diversity of options to reflect on from the point of view of social policy.

2.2 Actor-Network Theory and 'Effective Action'

The first phase of our study was shaped theoretically by perspectives derived in part from the writings of Beck and Giddens, and methodologically by work in the socio-biographical tradition, especially that of Rosenthal and the German school. The reflexivity which the former social theorists held to be an emergent quality of life in late modern society became in our study a useful way of thinking about individual life-strategies, and how successful they were likely to be in overcoming situations of risk and exclusion. Many of our social agencies were explicitly or implicitly committed to enabling clients to become more reflexive about their life situation and its opportunities and constraints. How far they were in practice able to do so became for us one index of their likely success as new kinds of social agency.

The potential for reflexive thought is one dimension which links our analysis of the lives of individuals at risk, and the analysis of agencies set up to make a difference to these. Others are the need to recognise the complexity of 'scripts' and agendas which are interweaved in the narratives told both by individuals and agency entrepreneurs. A useful theoretical resource for thinking about the latter is the 'actor network theory' of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (1981). This theoretical frame was developed to analyse and explain the outcome of competition between scientific and technological programmes, to achieve intellectual and practical influence. Latour and his colleagues noted the way in which successful programmes succeeded in extending the scope and influence of their conceptual systems, were able to win supporters or allies in adjacent fields, and were able to call on material resources (investment in research or its application) or regulatory support (for example, in legislation). A classical account within this perspective is the analysis by Latour and Woolgar (Latour 1988; Latour and Woolgar 1986) of the research programme of Louis Pasteur, discovering bacteria in the laboratory, demonstrating the relevance of bacterial infection outside the laboratory, in farm animals, persuading governments and farmers of the relevance of immunisation, establishing a regulatory regime which would enable the outcomes of infection and immunisation to be monitored, etc.. The bacteria or 'germ', at one time entirely unknown, has subsequently been the basis for the restructuring of many fields of life of advanced society, in public health, medicine, and everyday behaviour. The diffusion through society of the understanding of the significance of the 'unconscious', most influentially formulated in Freud's consulting room, is another example which can be understood within this framework of the influence of a particular research programme over a much larger social and cultural field (Rustin 1997). T.S. Kuhn's concept of the 'normal science' undertaken within a scientific paradigm, as its puzzle-solving activities proceed and extend, provided the core of an understanding of the social and cultural resources which are necessary as inputs to this process, which can be compared with the advance of a particular eco-system within its larger environment.

Actor-network theory provides a framework in which the competition between social agencies can also be sociologically understood. In this field, a new idea has to find supporters, or an existing idea to demonstrate its application to a new field. Metaphors are important to this process, since a powerful metaphor, (Black 1962,) can enable the understanding of the relations and interconnections achieved in one field to be transferred in a holistic way to another, even if it initially seems distant from it. The concept of 'social enterprise' (see British Report on Bromley By Bow), becoming influential in the theory of new social agencies, is such a metaphor, since it transfers into the 'social' sector a set of presuppositions (about the necessity for initiative, flexibility, investment of resources, competitiveness) hitherto mostly thought of in connection with the market economy. Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' allowed a similar metaphorical and analogous extension to be made between the properties of surpluses from material production which could be stored and reinvested for profit, and the ideas of stored and investible surpluses of cultural assets. The linked concept of 'social capital' is in fact important in the new field of discourse of 'social enterprises'.

This model enable us to analyse the process of development of our 'flagship agencies' in terms of the various inputs they are able to process and transform, in order to establish a competitive advantage for themselves. In the case of the Camden Refugee Education Project, the key resources were the moral and political commitments of its founders, which were resonant within its particular community of supporters. The earlier experience of refugee status of some of its founders provided a resource which could be brought to bear on understanding the problems of more recent refugees. There was a basis for multiple identification, for example in understanding the situation of refugees (like several in our socio-biographical research) who found that the professional competence and qualification which they had acquired in their country of origin were not readily recognised or made use of in Britain. These connections in experience were one reason why this project was able to win such a high sense of inclusion and participation from its clients. But it was able to find other resources too, in links with established social agencies (e.g. within a

prominent NHS institution, a medical foundation with great victims of torture, and a successful North London comprehensive school) where there were strands of idealistic commitment which could be linked to this particularly needy client group.

The same analytic procedures enable institutional weaknesses as well as strengths to be identified. The Greek project instituted to work for the social 'inclusion' of gypsy street children not only experienced the general disadvantages of a weak 'third sector' in Greece, but was also going against the grain of the voluntarist culture that exists there. Helping gypsies brings few votes, or political rewards; it does not mobilise confessional charity; it is dissociated from family and neighbourhood networks. One might also hypothesise conflictual tendencies within the gypsy community itself. While lack of schooling for children is a source of serious disadvantage, the gypsy community fears that its distinctive identity will be compromised by the educational integration of its children, and is probably ambivalent about programmes of inclusion.

Successful social enterprise turns out to depend not merely on the qualities of energetic and imaginative founders and leaders, but also on the networks of interest and resource with which their ideas intersect. Connecting with and mobilising such resources ('networking', as it is now popularly called) is the essence of survival and success in this kind of competitive 'market'. It follows that there can be no general blueprint or model of success for such agencies. The innovative is by definition without precedent, or anyway without a complete precedent. What seems to follow, in terms of identifying the conditions for development of such agencies, is an approach to 'capacity-building', and to 'learning from experience', which will need its own structures of support to foster. As our studies of these agencies made clear, a capacity for reflexivity, built in this case into an institutional process rather than a personal biography, is as important to the chances of successful development of social agencies as it is to the evolution of successful life-strategies by individuals.

3 Policy Issues

We were repeatedly surprised by the resonance between our biographical case study findings and the methods of work of the agencies we chose to study. They were of course responding to the same problems of society that the biographies were revealing, and they were part of a new field of social organisations concerned with the positive development of social capital. For a while it seemed to us that the social understanding and practice of the agencies were ahead of us, and that all our research could do would be to provide authentication of what they were already doing. On the other hand they all had developmental plans for which they needed support, and were keen for us to collaborate further: to help with more in-depth diagnosis of individual problems, to provide training, to develop instruments of evaluation for holistic, person-centred work. The complementarity of approaches is illustrated in the list of suggestions for follow-on projects which arose from Phase 2 of the SOSTRIS project:

Paris, France - a proposal to use biographical methods in a pilot project training CAF (Caisse d'Allocation Familiale) staff to explore the way their own pasts impact on their attitudes and practices with clients, with a view to developing a national training programme.

Naples, Italy - a proposal to use focus group and in-depth biographical interviews with young people in order to explore the deeper personal dynamics which 'block' full engagement in a Law 44 (self employment) project

London, Britain - a request to assist the flagship agency in mapping ripple effects of individual change on families and networks, and to devise qualitative instruments of evaluation in holistic work.

Athens, Greece - a proposal from a women's rights agency to undertake biographic work with women returners, in order to understand what kind of interventions can be most effective.

Gothenburg, Sweden - a proposal to use biographical methods to study women's responses to structural unemployment and processes of rehabilitation, and to advance the new politics of identity and moral agency in social policy in Sweden.

Halle, Germany - a proposal to use biographical methods in assessing selection mechanisms for social programmes directed at unqualified youth, in order to produce more biographically informed matching of programmes and participants, and improve biographical sensitivity in work with young people.

Barcelona, Spain - a proposal to contribute to formative debates on local welfare (with the

Barcelona Assessment Committee of Welfare) by means of translated SOSTRIS materials, and to organise a programme of discussions with academics and policy makers on the links between biographical methods, social science and social policy.

Features of the agencies' work which paralleled our case study conclusions included (i) making individuals more the authors of their own lives, (ii) using existing resources, (iii) allowing 'space' for reflective and autonomous action at all levels of the organisation, and (iv) working in a coordinated manner of 'co-production'.

3.1 Authorship

Several welfare systems are now seeking to combine social protection with the promotion of more active forms of citizenship, a process of 'dynamising' from below. In Britain's New Deal policies, benefits are increasingly tied to the acquisition of competences and the willingness of clients to activate themselves. Concepts such as 'best value' in local government specifically aim at recognising hidden community resources and at 'capacity building'. In Germany new 'case-centred' methods are being much discussed and used to put clients themselves 'in control' of their benefits, to make benefits operate as 'a trampoline'. In Campania in Italy, new unconditional 'loans of honour' are being given both to promote self-employment and to strengthen 'relational goods' through the networking of intermediate organisations. The need to influence wider cultures as much as individual behaviour, which is an explicit aim in the Italian project, is, however, far from a comprehensive goal in welfare systems. British social policy thinking is edging towards it in concepts such as 'best value' and the new emphasis on 'social capital'. The SOSTRIS case study research highlights the wide range of informal resources which may help or hinder 'the authoring' of lives, and the complex personal and familial dynamics which may impede individual development and the making of difficult transitions (as in cases of extreme gender conflict, or as a result of de-industrialisation - see *SOSTRIS Working Papers 2, 3 and 6*), and the difficulties of making realistic adjustments between individual aspirations and available resources and opportunities (see *SOSTRIS Working Papers 5 and 7*). The German Report, emphasises that in the East German context, it is not just a question of 'activation', but rather of orientation. Our researchers agreed that those in poverty are often so 'actively' piecing their lives together that they cannot think 'strategically' about their resources and opportunities. If welfare systems are to be redesigned to promote 'activity' and 'authorship', they clearly need to address and mediate such complexities.

3.2 Using Existing Resources

Activating welfare is often a case of recognising and appreciating hidden social capital or invisible '*civisme*', and using them more strategically. In many senses the quest of these innovatory social agencies was to motivate by restoring meaningfulness, often reviving 'hospitality', as Schwarz (1997) so convincingly advocates. The reports illustrate the diversity of such 'existing resources'. The Spanish agencies under study sought to support collective resources of 'proximity' and 'interdependence' within the daily life of the community, as a means of strengthening 'reciprocity', 'identity' and a sense of 'usefulness', and avoiding urban alienation. In the French case the orientation was to the fuller use of existing professional resources by encouraging decision-makers to value and 'know' their staff, to appreciate the biographical resources they bring to their work and to give them 'space' to act on their knowledge and understanding of clients. The British reports on the Refugee Education Project and Bromley By Bow project both show the activation of what are often stifled resources, the creativity and energy of migrant communities, and the desire of mentally ill people to contribute to a community if only they are accepted. The Italian agency, as stated above, was oriented to strengthening a culture of networking. In Italy generally there is confidence in 'recrafting' traditional resources in 'modern' terms (Chamberlayne and Spano 1999). The importance of the 'imaginary of the family' in strengthening the resolve of single parents to achieve stability for their children was a striking theme - the implicit traditionalism of the 'imaginary' often being in marked contrast with the 'newness' of the family forms which were being pioneered (see the Spanish case of Carolina and the British case of Janette in *SOSTRIS Working Paper 3*).

3.3 Giving 'Space'

Giving space to individuals to be reflective and make personal adjustments, to allow staff and volunteers space to act autonomously on the basis of their experience and personal initiative, to give managers space

to voice and contain their anxieties, to persuade governments to take the risk of allowing subordinate bodies to exercise their creativity - all these were strong themes in our research. The idea of the need for a 'moratorium' or 'space' as a structuring principle of (post-)modern societies arose at the very start of the SOSTRIS project in the case studies of unemployed graduates and early retired people (*SOSTRIS Working Papers 2 and 7*). In both cases the making of personal transitions within a 'de-standardised' society clearly required a great deal of reflection and 'biographical work'. But the concept re-appeared and developed at every subsequent stage of the research, including the agency studies. The British report on Bromley By Bow explains the centrality in that project's work of allowing participants and staff to 'work through' their own experience of operating inclusively across social divides, breaking from the local internecine 'rip-off' culture of survival, and, having established key principles in the work, of allowing individuals to 'dance either side of the line', in order to maximise their personal creativity. At the British policy meeting, which was conducted at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), there was animated discussion about the challenge to central government of loosening central control and regulation, of taking risks and allowing 'messiness'. In this keynote speech at the meeting, Professor Andrew Cooper defined the role of government as 'not to provide programmes, or solutions, but *conditions* in which creative and disruptive activity directed at positive change can be stimulated and guided' (p8). In direct opposition to this, 'the audit and regulation explosion which we have witnessed here in Britain is something of a sign of desperation - an increasingly frantic attempt to maintain control over complex and accelerating social processes which increasingly tend to outstrip the reach of administrators, managers and politicians' (p5).

The importance of space in the recognition and appreciating of biographical resources at managerial, staff and client levels is a key theme emerging from the French agency study. The point was also made in discussion that 'empathy' or 'compassion' are not enough. Clients will not have a sense that they are really 'listened to' unless staff have the 'space' to reflect and act on what they learn, nor will staff 'really listen' unless they know they can use what they learn.

The Italian team reported on the great success of a project in which agents were free to act on information which they collected.

3.4 Co-production

A challenge facing all social agencies concerned the difficulty of achieving flexible coordination of services within bureaucratised systems of welfare. The need for cooperative and flexible responses arises in any case from differentiated, person-centred work, and all the more from a more probing approach which distinguishes deeper-seated or 'actual' problems from 'presenting' problems, as is the hallmark of a biographical approach. All the agencies were concerned to avoid bureaucratising hierarchies within their own organisation, and generally speaking their 'outside' position seemed an advantage in accessing and mediating between public services.

It is not clear whether the problems are worse in Britain or whether the relative newness of 'the mixed economy of welfare' demands a particular emphasis on flexible networking and 'joined-up-government', which is a slogan of the New Labour regime. All three agency studies within the British report indicate that rigidities are endemic, however, even for agencies enjoying the relative benefits of being outsiders. The Bromley By Bow report suggests that it was the frustration of trying to be innovative within the public sector context which pushed the project to focus on a new interface with the business sphere. That project has fought hard to assert the wider involvement and recognition of volunteers against the professional closure which operates around such concepts as 'confidentiality'. Making workable partnership arrangements concerning both finance and a proper sharing of responsibility concerning vulnerable young people (against the tendency of public sector services to 'off-load' its commitments), consumed much of the energy of the management and board members of the Foyer project. The Refugee project was mainly concerned with promoting liaison and partnership working between schools and other services.

It may well be that innovation and flexible networking are most difficult to achieve in the more bureaucratised 'northern European' systems. The Hammerkullen fire in Gothenburg exposed the paralysis of the Swedish welfare system in facing the challenges of multi-culturalism and racism. The response of young people to that collective trauma, their networking across cultural boundaries, has begun to create new relationships between authorities and the community, a new space for a more active civil society, which has previously seemed a threat to the Swedish polity. In the French research too, the emphasis has

been on creating warmer and more personalised relationships between professionals and clients, to cut across the inhibiting divide whereby the professional's personal life is 'private', while the client's must be disclosed.

The Bauhof project in Halle is perhaps a rather unusual and positive example of 'co-production' between East and West German civic cultures, in a context in which the culture and social relations of the former GDR are often disparaged, as well as between different professional orientations. It showed the authority of East German leaders in the newer context of the Spanish welfare state, practitioners were wary of what they felt was a growing gap between themselves and policy-makers, despite their common political and normative commitment. They feared that innovation could become instrumentalised, and that they themselves might be treated as technicians. The policy-makers, for their part, were sensitive to the accusation of becoming politically removed from the grassroots - which was one reason why they seized with enthusiasm on biographical material, as a means of understanding the changing realities of everyday life. In Italy a major challenge facing welfare agencies is to find ways of combining the greater flexibility of the third sector with the better resourcing of the public sector.

Co-production might seem to contradict the allowing of 'space'. The Italian report shows unintended positive consequence of the key figures' absorption in 'higher politics' allowing greater autonomy to the front line staff. Both sets of actors were operating with a commitment to common goals, however, in a framework of mutually respected space.

3.4 Fluidity between Research, Policy and Practice

In contrast with the scepticism with which intensive case studies are often received by social scientists, the SOSTRIS case study material has proved a useful tool of communication in discussions with both practitioners and policy makers. Unlike social scientists, policy makers are used to 'thinking' with case studies, and switching between particular and more general levels of analysis, between heartfelt identification and more objective distancing. Indeed the 'Just like me!' identificatory response with the individual case is a key factor in motivation as well as in illuminating and testing a general principle. Case studies are ubiquitous in law, the media, and constituency and advocacy work. They are also, together with the personal narratives of success and failure, the hallmark of business entrepreneurs and politicians, while singularly absent from the faceless domain of public administration, with its stamp of blue-book positivism.

In the context of a wide impulse to activate and de-bureaucratise social policy, biographical methods offer a fitting research tool, an inscription device which captures both personal and social dynamics, and which is helpful in thinking about both individual and collective strategies. Case studies also promote a wider temporal view, reminding us of the interplay between past, present and future perspectives. As a judge in Naples commented in a discussion of case study materials, juvenile sentencing can be much more purposeful and meaningful if placed if it is based on an understanding of a young person's trajectory. Provision for homeless young people with multiple needs can be more effectively decided on the basis of knowledge of the dynamic of the person's life so far. Biographical methods can generate exactly the 'It's me!' form of identification which motivates decisive action, in contrast with distancing and depersonalising effect of an administrative case history as used in medical or criminological work. They can also provide new instruments of research which are necessary for purposes of evaluating holistic work, charting the subtle processes of personal and social change.

The SOSTRIS policy meetings have thus shown that biographical methods both express and promote a new fluidity between research, policy and practice. This new fluidity has been greatly enhanced by the political shifts from the right to the centre left which have taken place throughout Europe in the late 1990s, which have drawn greater attention to human and social capital, and by a cultural and biographical turn across the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al 1999; Rustin in Chamberlayne et al forthcoming, and in methodological annexe to *SOSTRIS Working Paper 6*). As this report discussed earlier, thinking of organisations, procedures and professional lives in 'biographical' terms is a dynamic process which emphasises the importance of reflexivity, dialogue, 'space', which promotes creativity, interaction, and consideration of time perspectives, and which draws attention to the multiplicity of voices and scripts, and to latent as well as manifest procedures and meanings.

Political Contexts

Issues of context become vital in any process of evaluating the common threads in innovatory work across Europe which our agency studies revealed. That contradictory impulses may be at work within the general shift towards activating social policy is highlighted in debates which are raging in Germany concerning definitions of “the future of ‘work’”. As has also already been pointed out, the British government’s behavioural approach to activating welfare clients is the opposite of a biographically sensitive perspective (see also Kraemer 1966). This immediately poses the danger of bureaucratic incorporation, a process whereby superficial features of a biographical approach are adopted for purposes of social control and the individualising of responsibility, rather than using biographies to illumine collective situations and achieve social empowerment.

It may also be that ‘innovation’ is easier to achieve and more visible in the ‘newer’ southern welfare states than in the ‘older’ regimes in northern Europe. This may also be true of smaller, ‘younger’ projects in the North, as compared with established public services - a catalysing, experimental role has always been a feature of the voluntary sector in Britain. Perhaps it is also important to distinguish whether the innovatory projects we have profiled are seeking to establish forms of intervention which will replace established services, complement them, or which provide something ‘different’ and separate’. In Britain there is a danger that celebrating the sponsored success of the third sector will provide the government with a ‘figleaf for neglect’, behind which the neglect, underfunding and demoralisation of mainstream public services continues.ⁱⁱ The government’s Social Exclusion Unit argues that it is necessary first to establish successful models of work as a first step. In Barcelona, by contrast, innovation in neighbourhood work is taking place within the context of a wider and proactive discussion of networking in welfare design, and a determination to forestall the urban alienation which is so widespread in northern welfare systems. The Italian report illustrates the way in which a context of rapid and proactive reform, as in Southern Italy, can enable an innovative local project to lead to rapid legislative change. In Sweden, by contrast, the idea of basing welfare in a more active civil society is a new and challenging idea, which is gaining some ground, both because of the degree of challenge and crisis and the effectiveness of some experimental projects. In Greece the innovative projects remain marginalised, marooned in the continuing context of patriarchy and cultural homogeneity.

A second major distinction between innovative agencies which are tackling social exclusion could be whether they are addressing positive or negative individualisation - the risks taken positively for emancipatory purposes or those endured as a result of a process of social decomposition, such as the loss of old solidarities and social infrastructures through regional deindustrialisation, the loss of the labour market as the major rite of passage for achieving adulthood, or a national policy of early retirement, presented as a ‘solution’, while individualising and masking the pain and illness which that policy entails.

Some of these questions point the need for further research. They also highlight not just the contrasting nature of different welfare contexts, but how rapidly each may be changing, for better or worse. Despite contrasts between welfare settings within Europe, there is immense scope reciprocal learning, and evidence of a strong elements of a common project in achieving more biographically attuned forms of welfare, more supportive to individual strategies, more enhancing of social capital for the collective good.

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Notes

i. W.G. Runciman's *Treatise on Social Theory*, Vol. 1, 2, and 3, is the most ambitious attempt to extend evolutionary ideas to the sphere of social competition.

ii A term used by Titmuss concerning community care policies in the early 1970s