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From Confidence in Biographic Narratives to Confidence in Social Policy

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Although using the biographic method was not new for us, we have been experiencing the application of the method during the study of welfare agencies more systematically. This research presents two different approaches.

Firstly, we have analysed the life of a « flagship agency », an agency conceived within the framework of an « innovative » programme and described, by the state and by the local authorities, as a « new » way of dealing with social issues in urban deprived areas. The agency is located in one of these areas in the neighbourhood of Paris. The report reveals the ‘told’ life and the ‘lived’ life of the agency, trying to realise, as far as possible, the idea of analysing an agency as a person. Interviews enable us to understand how the lived life of the agency is constructed by the different positions of the agents involved.

Secondly, we have analysed the behaviour of front-line welfare agents in an ordinary, non-innovative, welfare agency (The Caisse d’allocations familiales in a middle-size city in the centre of France). In this section, we try the opposite idea, that of analysing persons as agencies. Biographic interviews with the agents allow us to understand the agents’ different positions as an outcome of their professional and personal trajectory.

The third section of this report will draw out links between phase one and phase two. Instead of giving a general overview of welfare state and welfare agencies in France first, we will include relevant information in each section, allowing the general overview emerge from the first findings. We will be able to challenge the idea of « innovative » opposed to « traditional » welfare and stress the appropriateness of the biographical method in the study of welfare agencies. Finally, we will formulate a policy statement.

Section One - Agencies as Persons

If people have the right to remain anonymous in our research, so do the agencies. We will therefore give it a name, calling it « the project ». The project is located in a community of some 10,000 residents (we will call it « the place ») in a city of some 100,000 inhabitants (we will call it « the town »), in the suburbs of Paris.

The research work consisted of a phase of participative observation in the agency over a three month period, including the collection of all accessible documents, and followed by 32 recorded interviews with agents, politicians, decision-makers and users of the agency. For comparative purposes, we conducted two interviews and collected documents from another « project » which was created within the same innovative scheme in another city. Two

researchers have been involved in the fieldwork and two more in the exploitation of the data.

1.1. National and local contexts

The creation and development of innovative agencies like the project is one among other outcomes of a large government project of reforming and modernising the state. The idea is rooted in history, as far back as Colbert's attempts in the 17th century. There have also been strong developments in the 20th century, before and after the war. The state has begun to take a new form since the process of « decentralisation » started in 1982. Reforming the state is a permanent task stated on the political agenda and has been linked, during the past 15 years, to three issues: the issue of local government; the issue of urban policy and urban deprived areas; and the issue of public services in the context of European integration (the most recent official report is the Picard Report). It also included, of course, the general project of reshaping the welfare state. In sociological terms, the central state does not want to be anymore protecting state; it perceives itself and wants to be a « leading state » (*un Etat animateur*, see J. Donzelot).

How can the state respond to « the social issues » in urban deprived areas? The first response has been the rehabilitation of the buildings (the first schemes for rehabilitation in social housing started in 1976). The second response has been the funding and implementation of new programs, like the minimum income program, or new leisure and culture schemes. The third, which is currently being implemented, is to reinforce the presence of public services within deprived areas (not only urban; this policy is also applicable in isolated rural areas). The birth of the project is an example of this particular response, which has taken the form of a national scheme to which cities could apply for funding. The project has been created in 1997 and received 500,000 F (roughly 75,000 Euros).

The project is designed to offer services at a local level, in the community, in « the place », which previously had only been available in the city centre, in « the town ». What kind of services are being offered in such an agency? They are services which usually are delivered by the town council: civil status, passports, housing service, school and nursery registration, consultation with social workers, leisure and culture. There are also other public services, like post office, employment office, family allowance counter, electricity, gas and public telephone services, etc. There are no limits as the aim of the agency is to involve as many partners as possible in the project. The framework is not rigid.

We will see later that the project has been designed to offer information about the services rather than the services themselves. First, we give an overview of the political context of the town which is important because the project is managed by the town council. The town has been, for a very long time, a communist town of the « red belt » of Paris. It has also been, for a long time, a « rebel town », because successive mayors have rebelled against the communist party, have been deviant, not followed « the line ». The local elections, in 1995, have not been very good for the communist group. The communists still rule the council, but had to form alliances with the greens and the socialists. The mayor's response to this negative outcome has been the launching of a new project of local democracy, a project designed to encourage residents participate in the life of the town, through community

groups organised around discussions and making proposals. The national project was therefore an opportunity to get some funding and to demonstrate the mayor's concern for the daily life of his/her electorate. The community, « the place », has been chosen among others because its considerable distance from the centre. People have to take a bus in order to reach the public services in the centre. Although it is not the most deprived area of the town, it has a reputation of being unsafe.

This bad reputation has been put forward by the agents of the town and of other public services who were asked to work in the project half-a-day to a day every week. As stated by one interviewee, they were going backwards. Actually, as stated by many interviewees, the financial opportunity arrived suddenly and while the politicians were ready to take it, neither the agents, nor the residents were prepared. The project has been implemented « *inside out* », « *the wrong way round* ».

1.2. The symbolic content of the told life

In biographical terms, it could be said that the project is a baby born before being conceived. Some interviewees (mainly women) actually call the project « *the baby* ». By following this symbolic label, we can show the difficult life of this baby. First, the birth place: it has « *a heavy past* ». The project is located in a building on the main square of the place. This square has a long story, being the square used for political meetings. In 1992, after a meeting a young person has been killed in the square by a shop-keeper. It can be argued that the place has been chosen, amongst the different communities, because of this traumatic event. The aim of the project was « *to bring the place back to life* ».

It can also be said that the baby filled a gap, replacing the shop keepers who have left, one after the other, not only because of the traumatic event but because of the new, large, supermarkets settling not very far from the place. The lack of shops was experienced by the residents as a form of abandonment, of death. The project (and also a community centre) has been introduced to counter the feelings of emptiness in the middle of the place, in the central square of the community.

The baby arrives after a death, after abandonment; and as the research also shows, the project arrives in a cradle already occupied. The office itself, where the project is based, was previously the office of another agent of the town in charge of the rehabilitation programme within the urban policy framework. This agent had been very much involved in the community through participative projects involving the residents of the place. She then had to quit for a while, because of having a baby. Returning from her leave she finds herself again in charge of the town's urban policy, therefore in charge of managing the project (from her office in town), which she does not appreciate: « *When they put the baby in my arms, I screamed* ». Later on in the interview, she will call the baby « *a big mammoth* ». In fact, like most of the interviewees, she thinks that the project has not been conceived as it should have been. If she had been there, the project could have been « *a Christmas package* », i.e. a combination of services together with a platform for launching and managing projects developed by the residents themselves. The kind of projects she is interested in.

However, there is another interpretation. A different agent of the town thinks that this agent

is only jealous. He recalls that it has been suggested that the project could be managed not by the service of urban policy but by another service. But the agent refused: « *You know how it is. You have a baby, and then it is given to somebody else* ». There is one more (and different) interpretation. If the « *Christmas package* » cannot be delivered, it is because the politicians do not want it. The participative approach taken by this agent is embarrassing for the town council, because the residents are putting pressure on the politicians in order to realise their projects. Politicians are very pleased to be able to replace this participative project approach while she is away.

The final truth cannot emerge from the interviews. But comparing these interviews with the one realised in another town, where an agency similar to the project has been created, one is amazed to discover a completely different life story. There, the agency is also called « *the baby* » by the person responsible for it. This person is also replacing another agent : « *I had to take charge of the baby and give him a soul* ». When she meets the person who has conceived the baby, she is very happy because this person tells her: « *you have been a good supportive mom* » (« *mère-porteuse* »).

The agent currently in charge of the project, who works at the place every day, admits in her interview, that she has had a difficult life. She has been depressed, close to committing suicide. The responsibility she has been given when returning to work, has been a challenge for her. Obviously she is not such a « *strong personality* » as the previous mother (quoted in the researcher's notebook). One has to smile when reading the local newspaper saying that the person responsible for the project is « *like the project itself, luminous* ».

This symbolic story tells much about the implementation of the project. Even the baptism reflects this: several interviewees, among them residents involved in local groups, regret not having been invited as the baptism was restricted to the politicians and « *the big heads* ». It is therefore not astonishing that the daily life of the project has not been until now very harmonious. A clear symptom of this is the computer network breaking down every time the agent of the housing service wants to connect with the town. To understand this daily life, however, we have to analyse the position of the different agents. It appears that each agent working at the project is keeping within their specialism. As stated by one agent: « *every one is sitting on his eggs* ». This analysis will not pursue the most radical view expressed by one agent who insists « *this massacre must be stopped* ». On the contrary, it will lead to an understanding of each position.

1.2. Agents and institutions in the lived life of the project

We shall first review the position of the different agents and services requested. Let's start with the services opposed to the project. In the town council, the civil status service as well as the housing service are clearly against the project. The agents were not willing to move, neither was the executive. They have been forced to. Both of the services can provide evidence showing that their work load in town is very heavy and the productivity at the project (that is the number of services given per agent, the number of cases per hour) is too low to justify moving persons and files out of the town. Both of the services will try to slow down their participation as much as possible. The employment service (it is a state service)

can give the same evidence. They have a huge workload. They do not need to come closer to the residents, because the residents come to them (they are always too numerous).

Other services have a neutral position. They do not support the project, but cope with it. The social workers of the town are already used to meeting their clients in the place. They use the project as an office to make appointments with their clients. It has been confusing for a while, because some of the clients have tried to exploit the opportunity of being allocated a new social worker. The positive side is the fact that they have met new clients, unknown of them. The agents of the family allowance counter had already an office in the place within five minutes walk of the project. Therefore, they only had to transfer their work into the project. Nothing has changed, neither for the agents, nor for the clients.

Sometimes, because the project is located on the main square, a client will notice a social worker sitting at his desk, and will drop in to say hello and share news. Sometimes, because an agent sees a client walking in the square, he will go outside to give him/her information. As stated by a social worker, « *it is said to be innovative, but it is not* »; as stated by another one « *the scenery has changed, but the play remains the same* ». Actually, this is not totally true. There is a debate, among services participating in the project, about whether the project is or is not a favourable place for social action. One agent, who is also a member of the local tenant's association, thinks that the project, although closer to the community than the town, will not be permitted to meet and help residents with serious difficulties, who remain hidden in their flats. The same person, and other agents, also think that it is more difficult to drop into the project and ask for social support compared to the previous social services office, because they might be seen by other members of the community. In contrast, several agents think it is easier to drop into the project than to go to social services, because there are different services, not only social. A person may appear to drop in for some general information while it is an opportunity to have contact with a social worker.

The visibility of social problems appears as an important issue symbolised by the following anecdote: a young woman is lying on the floor at the front door of the project. The agent responsible for the project requests advice and help from the social worker. The social worker talks to the woman, already known to her, and checks once more that this woman does not want to be taken care of, does not accept to be taken to the hospital. But something must be done, the agent responsible for the project believes. The ambulance service is called, the woman is taken to the hospital, a few hours later she will run away from it.. This anecdote confirms the social worker's diagnosis suggesting that the project is not a place fit to undertake « hard » social work. But it shows that the project provides the 'scenery' where different ideas and strategies about social exclusion can be confronted.

However, several services do support the project. The childhood and education service (in charge of school and nursery registration, canteens, leisure activities and holiday schemes) is the only town service where volunteers have been prepared to come and work in the project. The service meets the needs of the residents who have to register the children at the beginning of school term in September and before the holidays. The service is more intensely used in these periods and eases the work of the central office in town.

The youth service is also happy with the implementation of the project. For the youth workers who have their own office in the community, the project (as well as the community centre, mainly devoted to training programmes) provides support for them in the community. Youth workers often feel uneasy, when being challenged by the young people themselves or by the residents complaining about young people committing vandalism or making residents feel insecure by meeting in the square and « occupy » the streets. When the project was born, the agents of the street-police used to come to the project, having coffee with the agents. For members of the tenant's association, mostly women, who themselves meet every morning and have coffee together, it is clear that police agents are exchanging information with the agents of the project. This is dangerous, they think, because in the eyes of the residents the purpose of the project can be seen as a means of social control or even repression.

This insight turns out to be very accurate, showing the empirical process of insecurity. The young people hanging around the project become provocative when the police agents are inside. Once, they destroyed a billboard at the front door and an altercation took place between the young people and the police. The agent responsible for the project asks the police not to come to the project. The youth workers supported this strategy and asked the « elder brothers » who trust the youth workers a little, to prevent the young people from attacking the project. The youth workers proudly explain that, thanks to them, the project is respected by the youngsters as an organisation that is useful for the community, useful for the parents. The reality might be slightly different. According to an agent, the door and billboards are broken every two weeks. However, the youth service and the project are actually supporting each other.

Among public services participating in the project, there are also the electricity and gas supply services (EDF, it is a national company, in the process of being privatised) and the post office. EDF has an agent coming every week to the project, available to give information and respond to enquiries or registration requests. The EDF's hope is to lower the number of unpaid bills and claims. For EDF, as well as the post office, being present in deprived or deserted areas, means showing their social usefulness, which is a great challenge in the context of the European Union's threat to the concept of public services. As stated by an agent responsible for the post office, « *the postal service cannot be absent from the social housing areas* ». And it is a fact that the post office is the most popular bank (post bank) for people with low income in France. The post office service has no agent but instead provides an automatic counter, which facilitates access to information, purchase of stamps and envelopes, and has a mailbox service. The implementation of this service reveals the lack of a clear strategy in the project. Firstly, the mailbox, which is usually emptied every day, has been emptied only once a week during holiday time because the opening hours were reduced and the project was closed when the post office agent came to collect the mail. Secondly, selling stamps in the project is probably useful, but one of the few shopkeepers remaining in the place (selling tobacco, stamps, envelopes, photocopies, newspapers) is missing these clients. In contrast the argument for not providing access to a photocopier in the project (which could also be useful, when compiling a file) is to help this shopkeeper.

The issue of money limits the project's action considerably. For example, town council services as well as public services have strict rules about the handling of money, checks,

credit cards, etc. In fact, one cannot make any payments in the project. You cannot pay your electricity bill, rent, canteen, passport fee, etc. Consequently, the services are very often delayed. You can go to the project to get information, prepare or file an application, but generally you must wait longer than if you go to the town centre; in fact, for some services you must anyway go to the town centre eventually in order to pay or sign documents. Solutions could be found (and have been, elsewhere). But the town council uses the security argument against making payments in the project and transporting the money. The fear of robbery or forging identity papers is fuelled by the negative reputation of the community.

Despite this considerable limitation to the project's activities, and the resistance from several partners, the overall assessment of the project is far from being negative. In general interviewees' opinions indicate that the project is evidence of the town council's sincere attempt to meet the needs of the residents in this community. Members of the local tenants association appreciate the implementation of the project even though they deplore not having been informed or been invited to participate in the implementation of the project. They criticise the opening hours: the project opens at 10am in the morning and, in their opinion, should open at 9am because the mothers, coming back from taking kids to school, could drop in easily at this time (and we shall notice that the other « project » opens at 9am).

Several agents, who also live in the community, think the residents are satisfied and believe that the reputation of the community will improve because they can show that the area is not unsafe. « *At least we have this* », says a members of the community centre who lives here. « *The atmosphere was aggressive and became peaceful* » states the person responsible for the local newspaper. « *Of course, it is an instrument to confine the residents in their place* », states ironically another agent of the community centre. But an executive of the town council explains that this argument is precisely the reason why the mayor did not want to implement an annex-town hall (as other cities have done) : he wanted the project to be a go-between the public services and the population. If the politicians are also satisfied, it is because the project « *allows to show that we are present* ». For the executives of the town, it is also a tool to undertake the modernisation of the local administration. Instead of keeping within their specialism, the agents in the administration and the public services have the opportunity to meet and understand each other. Training sessions are organised by the town in order to develop a common culture of public services. In comparison with the other « project », the training sessions are devoted to intercultural knowledge, including meetings in the community with members of the different ethnic groups.

Another positive response and common feature in the assessment is the 'beauty' of the project building, the fact that it is new, well designed and furnished. It is not a poor place for poor people. But again, there is dualism in the criticism. Some agents think the project is not intimate enough. The architectural design does not allow to undertake « hard » social work, because it does not offer enough room for private conversations. Other agents or partners think that the project is not open enough towards the community and that the architectural design does not allow for organising meetings and activities, which involve groups active in the community.

1.3. Conclusion - dualism and its solution

The obviously difficult life of the baby can be analysed, after having understood the different positions, as the result of conflicts between different strategies linked to the different life-stories of the project. We have seen that the origin of the baby could be located in the traumatic event of a young person being killed by a shopkeeper on the main square of the place. It could be viewed as an attempt by the state to set up projects with the aim of responding to urban issues. Most likely, the intentional framework of the strategy appears to centre around administrative issues, a request for change, become open, open its doors, go out and meet the needs of the community. It also appears to centre on the community, which is seen to be deprived, unsafe, in need of welfare as well as active participation. Both are linked. If you start from the traumatic event and the local political issue, you frame the project as an experiment of modernisation of public services, within the dynamics of the local political life. If you start from the state offer, you frame the project as an attempt to offer a social answer to an urban issue. As stated by a national survey conducted by a consulting group, « *The « projects » constitute a system at the interface between two aims: modernising the public services and meeting the needs of deprived areas. It is obvious that the projects can hardly handle both of these aims and have to give priority to one or the other. This double approach appears to create tensions rather than offering a strategic line and coherence to the project* ». And the project that we have studied is explicitly quoted as « *hesitating* » between the two approaches.

The strategies of the different partners are subsequently not convergent but permanently confronting each other. Pragmatism and specialism, for instance, confront the strategy of modernisation as well as the strategy for social action. The project's core problem, whatever the different strategies and positions, is the obvious lack of knowledge about the needs of residents. For example, a short and very deceiving telephone survey reveals a community that is diverse and divided like any other communities. A good example of this division is the interpretation of the most recent architectural change: the area was divided into two parts, represented by a wall; now an arch has been built, enabling residents to walk from one side to the other side of the area. Is the arch a pathway or a boarder? Interpretations diverge but converge on one point: it is an unsafe area because day and night it is occupied by young people.

The solution to the different approaches, in terms of interpretations, positions, strategies, is, as in the example of the arch, the concrete, physical occupation of an empty place. The project has occupied the place of a previous office, devoted to the management of the urban process of rehabilitation. But the office itself has occupied an empty place, the emptiness created by the departure of the shopkeepers. Much of the collated information converges towards the view that the project, in its form of public service as well as in its form of social action, can physically occupy the place. But, symbolically, it remains a weak replacement for what has been lost, i.e. the commercial, buying and selling activity. The strongest criticism against the project is from one agent involved in another project that was not realised. The latter project aimed at supporting the baker, one of the two shopkeepers remaining in the community. This agent believes that instead of creating the project the baker shop should have received funds for building a new oven, and that the transport service should have been pressurised to maintain the bus service between the place and the town. But the strongest

hope of the residents is the opening of a coffee shop (bar and fast food) in order to fill this long-standing emptiness. In our opinion, the demand for a « normal », « ordinary », « anonymous » urban environment is also a demand for a « normal », « ordinary », « anonymous » sociability which challenges and denies the value of social-centred as well as public service-centred approach of deprived areas. In both approaches, indeed, the residents are labelled as deserving a discriminative although affirmative action.

In concluding we are reaching the limits in the analysis of an agency as a person. Certainly, the baby is to grow and will have problems because its parents, agents and politicians, have conflicting education plans for him. And they have not been able, until now, to negotiate effectively. But we shall not forget what these parents have in common. They are professionally involved, not personally. They get paid for implementing projects oriented toward the common welfare of the community, but they are allowed to defend their private interests. In that sense it is not legitimate to criticise the political aims of the politicians and accuse them of using the project as an instrument of power. One can criticise in the same way the partners who have asked the residents to forget their own personal interests, to be personally involved in the project, and more widely in the creation of a common wealth. In that sense citizenship, a slogan flourishing in the discourse of the state as well as of local authorities, denies the structural inequality between those who are professionally in charge of implementing programmes and those who are asked to participate and be grateful. The conflicting nature of interactions between politicians, executives, agents, can be easily understood as the outcome of different positions and also cultural and political backgrounds. But the solution is not to be found in this material. It arises from a confrontation with the personal interests and life of the residents.

Section 2 Agents as institutions

We will now study from a biographical point of view the behaviour of agents sitting at the window of an ordinary family allowance counter (Caisse d'allocations familiales (CAF)). The research work has included a phase of 6 months of observation beside the windows, followed by 25 interviews with agents and executives of the CAF. Two researchers have been involved in the survey. First, we provide the national and local context; secondly summarise the outcomes of the research showing that the behaviour of the agents can be explained by looking at their personal and professional trajectories. The link between the biographies of the agents and the biographies of the clients will then appear in its experienced and structural difference.

2.1. National and local context

The Caisse nationale d'allocations familiales (CNAF) is a national body in charge of the implementation of the family policy. It's a mixed welfare agency, the board is composed, at the national as well as at the local level, of members appointed by the state, by the unions of employers and employees, and by the « family associations » which represents users. The employers are dominant at the national as well as local level due to their alliance with some employees unions and a large part of the « family associations ». But their power is restricted to issues of training, research, management and social work. The main activity of the body

delivering benefits is in the hands of the state, which has the power to decide the level and conditions of the benefits that users are entitled to claim in the different CAF, one in each county (« département »).

In its history, from the 19th century up to now, the visible function of the family policy has been and still is to encourage increase in the birth-rate, a concern rooted in French history in particular France's desire of power over other nations. Nationalism was linked to the ideology of the family, i.e. the concern for a traditional, gendered division of labour (see Messu, Murard, Pitrou). Its latent function was and still is to ease the burden of poverty among the working class. Until the 50's family benefits represented 50% of the whole social security expenditure and 50% of the income of working class families (see Friot, Hatzfeld). Its role was then reduced by the increase of other benefits (health, pensions). However, the CAF is still the most important and crucial institution for the poor. It is the bank of the poor. Since the middle of the 70's, a large number of new benefits have been created, aimed at responding to the « new » precariousness, poverty, social exclusion. There is still the old, universal family allowance for parents with two children or more. But it represents not more than 50% of the whole CNAF expenditure. The other 50% is related to the delivery of 25 different benefits granted under certain conditions to specific population categories. Among them, there are not only family benefits but also housing benefits, minimum income, benefits for disabled persons, etc. Because the system is very complex, the role of the agents, as we shall see, is very important.

Since the middle of the 70's, the CNAF, at the national level, and the CAF, at a local level, have undertaken a large modernisation process. Two different guidelines have oriented this modernisation and revealed themselves as being difficult to handle together. The first concern about modernisation is caused by the fear that the global modernisation process would end in the disappearance of the body. The decision makers in the CNAF thought that the famous crisis of the welfare state might well fall on their heads, mainly because the family policy was seen by the socialist party, taking power, as a conservative, Right dominated policy. The programme of François Mitterand in 1981 included a « funding by taxation » of the family policy, and as a result the death of the CNAF as an independent body. Actually, almost nothing happened until the end of the 80's when a small amount of « funding by taxation » has been introduced in the system without changing its institutional organisation. In the mean time, however, the CNAF has shown its ability to modernise itself, a large investment in computers allowing to « produce » roughly twice the same number of outputs (case files processed) with the same number of agents. The productive modernisation process was also an ideological one. The CNAF has shown its modern attitude toward family issues, notably by being neutral toward the issue of women's labour, supporting women who wanted to work as well as those who remained in a traditional role, and neutral toward the different family models, supporting one parent families, or step-families, as well as traditional ones.

The second guideline for modernisation is rooted in the very ancient catholic-social culture of the body, the concern for social issues, evident by the fact that for decades the CNAF has been the organisation funding the mainstream research on poverty issues. It is why, at the end of the 80's, when the minimum income was created, the CNAF committed itself to its

administrative and financial implementation. It meant 1,500,000 new cases. But also a relationship with new users to the agents, notably among the 750,000 lone persons who did not have a record with the CNAF. Many of these people were in difficulties and unable to take charge of their files and approached CAF. The issue of reception, of dealing directly or indirectly with the users, became a very important issue before and after implementing the minimum income; it became the impetus for modernisation of the communication technologies. The actual architectural space of the different CAF offices has been re-designed in order to facilitate the communication and new technologies. New procedures have been implemented like the use of the « minitel », personalised relationships between the agent and the user, extension of telephone use for personal calls, administration of surveys aimed at measuring the quality of the services, etc. Each CAF has decided, at a local level, how to cope with the needs of the users. The CNAF has implemented training programmes, and supported the most innovative projects, notably the funding of research about the process.

The main outcomes of this research shows the difficulty of handling the process of modernising the « production », alongside the process of meeting the needs of the users. Modernising the production is a process comparable to that in insurance companies and banks, implementing an entrepreneurial culture. This is evident in the discourse and in the manners of some executives, who are often recruited from the traditional networks of the CNAF. While the process of meeting the needs is based on the old culture of welfare, the CAF is expected to develop skills and procedures, which in the past were common in the small sector of social work. The agents at the desks, as we shall see, are sitting between these two processes, on the one hand being asked to produce a greater number of case files and on the other to understand and respond to the needs of the users.

The research that we have undertaken is based in a middle-sized city in the centre of France. It is not a CAF dealing with a population with extreme problems. It is not a region of traditional industry, but a region with a rural background and a declining small-sized industry. The director of the CAF, a woman, agreed with conducting the research. Her only concern was not to disturb the agents. The CAF were late in delivering services because of the research the CAF was obliged to close for one week to catch up with their records.

2.2. Agents' concern about users' burden

What happens if instead of sending an application by mail, a user comes to the desk? What is the impact of the voice, of the body being present instead of the file? Normally, this voice, this body does not have any effect upon the procedure, upon the rule. And in fact, sometimes nothing happens. But often, something does happen: the delay is shortened, the procedure simplified, the user is given an advance, gets access to new rights, obtains a favourable interpretation of the rule.

This event (something happens) is not simply the outcome of the fact that both agents and users belong to human kind. Certain agents feel and show more empathy toward users or toward certain categories of users. On the other hand, empathy is not only the effect of the user being present, with the body, the voice (face). The same agents feel and show this

empathetic attitude when processing the files. Certainly the body, the voice, can stimulate the empathetic attitude, even against the will of the agent. However, if the user is not present this attitude is not created or the agent is immune to it because of identifying with the rule and not with the user. Therefore some agents will be more empathetic when at the desk or on the phone rather than when processing the files, while for other agents it will make no difference.

The origin and explanation of this varying aptitude can be found in the organisational system or in the culture. But we, in our part, have found it in the biography, in the past and present life of the agents. To provide evidence, it is necessary that agents are willing to tell their life. But when agents are interviewed in a professional setting, even if the interviewer has an empathetic attitude, even if he shows interest for the biographical details of the interviewee, the told life is mainly the professional life. Likewise the told life of the users, if they are interviewed in the context of social services, fits the social services frame (Katuzewski and Ogien, 1981). And likewise the told life of researchers, when interviewed in the frame of their institutions, is mainly an intellectual one (Cahiers du Changement Social, 1997). The biographical content is produced by the frame of its wording, work place, work time, work demands.

When asking agents to recall their careers, they mention their studies, in relation to their family and social milieu, and their position in the labour market, in relation to their residential journeys and their success in the 'marriage' market. In these cases, the professional biography carries parents, accommodations, partners, children and significant others, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the agent's will to protect her/his private life, but also depending on his/her reflexivity. If the agent feels that events in the private life should be mentioned in order to explain the professional life or alternatively that a barrier must separate the professional from the private life.

There is a strong relationship between the empathetic attitude of the agent toward the users and the strategy of her narrative, the way she includes or excludes events in the private life. In the life story of the agents, the CAF has a greater or lesser importance, but anyhow doesn't occupy the whole life. The attitude of the agents in the CAF depends on events outside the CAF, in the « real life », namely within the family. It also depends on the journey through which the agent constructs the family and the professional career, leading to the current position. In this position the agent encounters, in the files, or on the phone or at the desk, users who more or less reflect some of his/her own experience or possible experiences. The empathetic attitude is not a mysterious aptitude, it is the subjective side of an objective closeness, consciously felt and changed into will, passively accepted, as a cross to carry, or rejected more or less violently.

It is time now to provide some examples. This is difficult because agents can identify themselves and may feel that the outcome of the research is a sort of assessment of their work. The biographical interpretation suggests: here is what you are (in your professional life) and here is why you are like this (because of your social and family trajectory, because of the events in your private life). Such a mirror reflects a strong image, positive or negative, of agents who have not been asking for this, who have accepted being observed at work and

to answer questions without knowing what would come out of it. Such revelations cannot have a positive effect. Instead of describing the different positions and the different narratives, we shall therefore typify them, we will describe two different and opposite types of the empathetic attitude, a subjective closeness with the users linked to an objective one, a subjective distance to the users linked to an objective one.

2.2.1. Closeness type

The first type is the one of an objective closeness to the users, conscious and changed into a subjective closeness, an empathetic attitude. It is a closeness to working class experience and culture. The agent identifies himself and identifies the users as belonging to the same milieu. He knows from inside what it means. He doesn't imagine it to be a homogeneous milieu, he knows the various differences, inequalities, conflicts between men and women, between the more and less educated, between the workshop or the factory and the shop or the store, between those with a stable family life and the others. He also knows the aspiration of moving through it.

The agent knows that his position, as an employee in the CAF, locates him in the best, least precarious part of the working class. He can see it as a continuous web of different and unequal positions, from his own one, at the top, to the position of the homeless at the bottom, this homeless person deserving as much respect as himself, and also as the other users who do not belong to the working class milieu. When speaking about these other users, the agent shows her/his empathy toward those who are not included in the « we ». These isolated cases reinforce an analysis enabling the agent to protect the users against feelings of guilt. The agent rejects accusations against the users: the laziness (not serious because the problem is mass unemployment), the cheating (the scarce examples are the fact of users who anyhow are in deprived conditions), and the aggressiveness against the agents (it is in fact a rebellion against injustice). As an agent says: « *It happens that we are cheated, but those who cheat, let me tell you, they are not well-off persons* ».

In this type, the empathetic attitude is at its best, protecting all users and situations, as shown during conversations on the phone or at the desk, and also in processing case files: « *When you take a file, there is somebody in it. It is like being in communication with the person through its file* ». The agent links consciously his private life, past and present, to his professional life. To explain the connection he makes with the users, he picks out facts of his own life and facts of user's life. He shows simple facts, without judgement, either positive or negative, even if these facts relate to difficult or traumatic events that will be, in other narratives, expressed in a very emotional manner. The agent knows that the users want the life events to be narrated without sentiment, that is not to say without sensitivity but without sophistication, without « making a fuss » (*faire des manières*).

Of course, this first type uncovers various positions. One agent, for instance, belongs to a working class family of higher status (the father is a manual worker in a large state company) from which he inherited the idea of not asking for welfare: « *My parents were ashamed, they didn't come to the CAF* ». However the agent is able to understand the users who indeed come and he has the same attitude toward these users (« *I do not want to intrude*

into people's life ») and toward himself (« *I don't show them when I am worried, it must not splash over into my work* »). Not making a fuss: it is also visible in the clothing. « *To work in the administration, you need a good wardrobe, because there is a competition for elegance* » (it should be mentioned here that the agents are almost 100% women and executives mainly men). Clothing reflects not only the origin and the status but also the relationship between what you are (and have been) and what you want to be. Agents who belong to this first type identify each other because they do participate in the competition, wear « *simple* », « *ordinary* », « *rustic* » clothes, while agents at the other pole wear « *sophisticated* », « *affected* », « *chic* » clothes (quoted from the researcher's notebook). They also recognise those with a more comprehensive and sensitive approach toward users.

This type considers it opportune to become an agent of the CAF. Instead of becoming a blue collar worker like the parents, he became a white collar worker. Working at the CAF is increasing one's standing, especially because of the relational dimension of the work, and the empathetic attitude is a way of assuming this debt. The interviews show an ability for listening to users and a commitment that could appear to be a model of social work. In this type, there may be an aspiration of being a social worker. When looking at the studies and professional trajectories, there is often just a slight difference between the agents' and social workers' careers. Certainly among social workers there are persons coming from a working class milieu, although to a lesser extent; but their trajectories have been marked by a more important upward mobility. Consequently, the empathetic attitude, that certainly exists, is different, because the objective distance is greater. The empathy is impregnated with psychology, with the « *culture of psychology* » (Castel et Lecerf, 1980), that is a sophisticated way of interpreting the users' life as an exotic thing.

Obviously, belonging to the working class milieu and culture does not guarantee people wanting to apply an empathetic aptitude. In many cases the opposite is true. Agents will ask not to remain at the desk, will ask for bureaucratic work with no contact to the users. The agent feels anxious (« *I am very anxious, I pretend to be ironic or to have a sense of humour in order to hide it* ») or depressed (« *It is difficult for me to meet people who cry daily. When you stand a little on their side...* »). What appears in the biographical narrative of these agents is a thread of distance from the original milieu. There was different professional aspiration, but the agent had to resign to his position at the CAF. Or, there was an opportunity for upward mobility within the CAF, but the agent had given up, because the personal cost was too high: for instance, the partner had been promoted and the agent had to bear the consequences (anxiety of the partner, request for affective support, etc.). The current position in the CAF is therefore less valued. There is an aspiration toward a better position (than in the milieu of origin), a feeling of being worth something better (than what the agent has), consequently the agent cannot identify with the users. But he cannot have what he longs for, he must give up what he is capable of, and therefore cannot identify with the middle class. As quoted succinctly by an agent: « *One feels misunderstood by both sides* ».

2.2.2. Distance type

The second type, in contrast, has a subjective and objective distance between the agent and the users. We can identify three different cases. In the first case, the agent's origin is in the

lower or upper middle-class, a position, which is experienced as downward mobility. In the second one, the agent has married a partner belonging to the lower or upper middle-class and the position is experienced as flimsy. In the third one the agent has children who graduated at university and gained (or ready to gain) access to lower or upper middle class, and the agent is placing himself in this group by proxy.

The subjective distance can be expressed in the form of scorn or distrust toward the users as a whole, or toward certain categories of users. The users benefiting from the minimum income, and the foreigners, or users of a foreign origin, are the most frequent targets. But the subjective distance can also be expressed in a positive manner, through an empathetic attitude toward different categories of users: for instance ill persons, disabled, people having had an accident, kind homeless people, young people in the street, lower middle class families, etc. This type tends to have a system of categorisation of users: those who cheat against those who are honest; those who are into the culture of welfare against those who try to come out; those who rebel against those who understand; those who assume their responsibilities as parents against those who don't, the victims against those who take responsibility for their difficulties, those who suffer against those who claim benefits, in short the deserving poor against the others.

As we shall see, these judgements can be explained by the biography. In parallel, however, the work itself and orders from the executives have effect on the judgement. As quoted by an agent, working at the CAF has made him « *more sensitive* ». The effect of the organisational input is however different in the first type, where the issue is to encourage or discourage an empathetic attitude that already exists. In the second type, where the issue is to encourage or discourage the expression of the distance. In the second type, the agents have inherited a condemnation of the culture of welfare: « *I have been taught to cope by myself, and this is why I say to the people: you have to cope by yourself* ». When this agent is becoming « *more sensitive* », he feels that he is making a concession; when giving a benefit in advance, for instance, the agent feels he is doing « *a good deed* ». The price to pay for the good deed is the scorn toward the users: « *People ask stupid questions, they don't understand the answers, I didn't believe they had so little intelligence* ».

The good deed will be in prioritising users whose situation is close to the situations experienced by the agent himself. Lets look at an agent whose position in the CAF is experienced as downward mobility. The agent's father is an executive, mother is an employee, the partner is a worker without hope of being promoted. The downward mobility is associated with an abandonment of studies, itself linked to the divorce of the parents. The agent rejects the users as a whole, with passionate feelings against foreigners, single parents, accused of giving birth to children in order to get the single parent's benefit, and against users who continuously change partners. This agent cannot bear sitting at the desk: « *There are people who are less than anything, and us, we are at the bottom at the scale, we are at their disposal* ». The agent shows an empathetic attitude toward users described as « *kind and polite* », innocent victims, deserted women with their children.

Let's see now the case of agents whose position has been acquired by marriage. The 'marriage market' has enabled some agents to be upwardly mobile, but the cost might be

very heavy: loss of autonomy (a divorce would mean a dramatic downward mobility), necessity to sacrifice her own career to the partner's, its time, to follow the hazards of this career (for instance a residential mobility, together with the loss of family and network relationships). Let's listen to the following slip of the tongue: « *My husband, I gained him...euh, I met him when he was earning a low wage* ». The slip expresses the profit realised on the marriage market; but also the role of the agent in increasing this social capital (initially he was a technician, then the husband became an executive). The more costly and flimsy the acquired position, the more urgent it is to emphasise the distance from the user. As stated by an agent, there is no common point between the users and the people met in his social network: « *Although I am searching, I can't find anybody in my network comparable with these people, people who need...* ». Financial difficulties, therefore, cannot be understood: « *Financial poverty doesn't touch me, because one never knows if it is true* ». Another agent, more firmly settled in the middle class, shows his/her empathy with users of the same milieu: « *These are families, I wouldn't say « bourgeois » but middle class, who are paying taxes and are not entitled to any benefit. Sometimes you stand in the same place of the user, you are in the same category. Me, personally, I am entitled to no benefit, both of us are wage earners (she mentions her husband), middle range wages, well, I can understand them because sometimes, myself, I rebel, why am I not entitled?* ».

Finally, let's look at a middle class position experienced as a result of the position achieved by the children. The agent knows too well the experienced life of the users and he carefully makes fun and distances himself from it, labelling various categories of users, those who cheat, those who work in the black economy, those who come to the desks like they go to horse races to bet, or those who come, although they have comfortable incomes. Stressing the fact that poverty is spreading, the agent gives the case of parents who miss the money to pay the studies of their children. But he does not link it with his own situation, expressed elsewhere in the interview, about his daughter, having undertaken graduate courses but remaining unemployed.

The common characteristic of agents in this type is the definition of a strict barrier between public and private, between what can be said and what has to be concealed. It is also the difference between what can be done and what cannot be done, what must be separated and what can be mixed. We can understand this question by looking at the relationship between colleagues, whose rule is that you can have discussions with colleagues « *without getting involved in the life of one or the other* ». It is not always the case, but, in contrast, agents describe working at the desk as unbearable, where users speak about their lives. As an agent said, « *Some of them are not embarrassed at all, they tell things that we are not supposed to know. It is neither our job nor our role to listen to them, it is the role of social workers* ». Another agent, who has just left the desk and returned to case files, says: « *I am drunk of silence* » meaning she was drunk of noise. **[edit note: expression unclear, do you mean 'drown' rather than drunk?]** As her colleagues underlines: « *I draw a line between private life and work. We are not social workers. We do our best, but if we have problems at home, we might go crazy sometimes* ».

Curiously, when requesting the agent to give an example of being oppressed by users who tell everything about their private life, the agent provides an example of the contrary. She

talks about users being stressed by being asked to talk about their life and rebel against it, saying: « *I have to start again with my smooth talk...I have to tell my life again* ». The paradox can be explained by the fact that the agent needs to engage in certain « *smooth talk* », i.e. biographical events, in order to process the case, and then accepts or not to hear some other « *smooth talk* ». But these words are not only words, they are like actions allowing a normative judgement. Eventually, all agents confess that you cannot make a living on the low level of the benefits, but do not acknowledge the consequences. The precariousness of family life, for instance, users changing partners, is not linked to the precariousness of income. Family, partner, children, should remain on one side of the barrier. Money, job, housing on the other side. Sensitivity on one side with love, feelings for the partner and children, and on the other side material issues, money. If one loves, one doesn't calculate. If one calculates, one doesn't love.

But obviously, it is not how life is for users. The culture of agents and the culture of users diverge obviously on this point. The CAF, however, is precisely a welfare institution linking the affective and the material life. Does it mean that these agents work against the institution? Certainly not. But they do not accept the CAF's role of a 'bank' for the poor, as an institution in charge of poverty. In that sense, the structural division in the history of the institution, which we have stressed in the beginning, can be found in the lived life of the agents.

Before showing biographical differences with the users, let's quote the fieldwork book of the researcher: « *between colleagues, and with the researcher, agents don't speak spontaneously about the users* ». They speak spontaneously about work, about the cases waiting to be processed, about colleagues, but not about the users. The users are not at the centre of the conversations and conflicts. The relationship to the client, whether empathetic or not, is experienced in isolation, alone.

2.3. The difference between agents' and users' lives

One of the most outstanding outcomes of the biographical work with users is the following: if you interview them in the context of the social services where they come for benefits, you get a narrative about the benefits, the relationship at the desk, the role of benefits in the budget, etc. But if you interview in the home, in a more personal environment and the interviewee stays with the biographical work, then the benefits, the desks, and even the budget, the financial issues, occupy a minor space in the narrative. In short, the agents are more interested in their work than in users, the users being a secondary aspect in the work. The users, more interested in their own life than in welfare, the welfare being a secondary aspect in the life story.

Nevertheless, there is a difference. We have seen that agents speak extensively about the users when they are interviewed. But in the group, between colleagues, they don't. In contrast, welfare, desks, agents, and more generally financial issues are important subjects of conversations for users, mostly women, when they are in their peer groups, notably in community neighbourhoods.

If welfare and benefits range second in the narrative, what do we find in the first place? The history of the family, a history which, appears clearly in the agent's narrative when the empathetic attitude is pronounced. If the family is in the first place, especially where life is more precarious, this has also to do with the fact that there is nothing else to narrate. There is no social or professional status to hide behind. The private life is the only wealth of many users. This is not to say that work or jobs are absent from the lived life. But they are precarious or temporary jobs, domestic or performer jobs, experienced as jobs for money, not as a status to be advanced in the told life. When it exists, work is at the second place, for the same reason as the benefits are.

It is not surprising that these life stories reflect a downward curve with several breaking points. If welfare benefits do not appear much in the story, other figures of the institution are present, symbols of the breaking and turning points, like the judge in relation to the divorce, debts, penal affairs; the police, the prison, the social worker responsible for the children being put in foster care, the practitioner of the body and the soul, the hospital, etc. But the display of these life stories does not look like the display of a private life with its sophistication, stylisation. It is more like the display of the public part of something more private, the field of feelings and sensations, what happens to the body, a field that cannot be spoken about without trusting the interviewer. Through the trust appears the real private field of the people who are not rich enough to have a public life. Here one talks about what should be concealed, about what should not be done, in the relationship with parents, partners, children, in the relationship with oneself. It is about violence, physical and symbolic, about love, giving and receiving, about hazard and unhappiness, about faults and shame, alcohol and drugs, about the body and the belly, being there for oneself and for others, about clothes and faces, food and pleasure, etc.

If we understand this, we can expose the misunderstanding between the agents and the users. The first misunderstanding: when displaying the events of their life story, the users are not displaying shamelessly their private life; they are talking without putting a gloss over their life, because they do not have a public life, a professional status, to hide behind. The misunderstanding is often stronger where women talk to women, the speaker believing things are obvious to the listener. Unfortunately it is not always the case.

The second misunderstanding: in the process of applying for a benefit, the money is an issue to the point that the benefit is considered to be a salary. How could it be different? But the key issue is one step further; it is the issue of dignity. This is what happens; a user gives up the benefit and walks out, furious about giving it up, which is a matter of dignity. This is why it happens: the user continues applying for a benefit even if it is obvious that he will not receive it, because he feels it is the dignity rather than the benefit that is refused. The claimant then tries to show his sincerity by displaying the most private, the most intimate pieces of his life. Obviously the request for money and the request for dignity are mixed. It is precisely this mixing, as we have seen, that agents cannot bear.

When presenting the users' point of view, one discovers how difficult it is for them to bear the feeling of pity that agents will often show when users have no answer to the questions. As a user said: « *You try to explain yourself and you say to yourself: they are going to*

understand that I am the one who supports the family, they are going to think that they have to help me. But no! They sympathise! We live in a society of pity. They feel pity. And the parents, it is the same, they sympathise with the children, and it is why Jacques (her former partner) has become a monster, and it is why Pierre (her current partner) is a poor fellow ». Pity reveals itself in its difference to empathy. Pity is the outcome of both these misunderstandings: the user is seen as somebody who displays with pleasure his private life in order to obtain a benefit and as somebody who deserves a benefit because his private life is miserable. Consequently the dignity is the price to pay for the benefit. Obviously, it is perverse: the user's life has a financial value, assessed by the level of the benefit, the level of the benefit is the value attached to the user.

However, it can be said that the user, in telling his life, is offering his own empathy, offering a window, which exposes further his difficulties. The agent's ability to respond is therefore crucial. When the agent responds with an empathetic attitude, the behaviour of the user changes. The agent is astonished how a user, described as aggressive and feared by other agents, reveals himself as being so different to his bad reputation. In other words, the relationship at the desk is very malleable and its orientation changes as soon as one of the actors touches on what the other considers as untouchable.

Section 3 - From biographies to social policies

3.1. Policy findings and meetings

In section one and two, we have seen the flimsiness of the concept of « innovation ». There is a lot of « traditional » practice and thinking in « the project » and a lot of « innovative » practice and thinking in the CAF. The use of biographical methods combined with observation has allowed us to understand the different positions of all members. These positions are often described by agents in a moral, normative way, as « good » or « bad ». The judgement of « good » and « bad » refers to different aims of the institutions. In both of our case studies, the agency has two different aims, two different life stories, and therefore the assessments are reversed depending on whether one refers to one or the other of these aims.

If there are adverse aims, it means there are struggles. The struggles we have been dealing with are of great importance for the future of the agencies. The concern for the concrete, experienced life of the users depends on the outcomes of the daily choices, of the practice and thinking of the agents. The cases of these agencies can also be linked to the general future of the welfare state in France. Without being conscious of it, we have chosen agencies that reveal two acute problems of the French welfare state. Firstly, the general problem of the relationship between the state and the citizens, the need for modernising the state to meet the real needs. Secondly, the problem of a welfare state that is predominantly oriented toward the delivery of benefits and categorising of clients, compared with other European countries. However, the individuals' situations show the need for linking benefits and care, as well as the need to challenge the delivery of benefits without impeding personal freedom and individual choices.

A turning point has already occurred in the different sectors of welfare action. The process of modernisation, reviewed in the example of the CAF, can also be noticed elsewhere in the social security system and in the state, even though there is a difference in the speed and efficiency of implementation. It is likely that there is a general process of individualisation in the treatment of social issues, in many sectors of welfare, with many « innovations », notably in deprived areas or for deprived groups, concerning issues of justice and delinquency, of schooling and learning, of youth work and youth training, of police, of public transportation, etc. In that sense, the struggle between different aims reveals that the turning point remains unclear, that the process of modernisation does not mean the same thing for everybody and does not require the application of the same means and resources.

At first, the struggle can be interpreted, in our opinion, as a political issue: who will benefit from the implementation of such welfare oriented action? Traditionally, the general frame of welfare action was a political concern undertaken by the central government, but the concrete implementation and management of welfare agencies was not a political issue, its ideological content was very weak, it was an issue of low importance, left to politicians of lower standing, at the national as well as the local level (for evidence of this, see Curapp). But the issue of social exclusion has become crucial, at a national as well as at the local

level, notably because of the « decentralisation » process. Politicians have been very deeply involved in concrete social action and management of the agencies.

Behind the political issue, we find a very important and diffuse process of a cultural nature. The politicians are becoming social workers, they are learning about social work issues alongside millions of civil servants and welfare agents confronted with social exclusion. This is not to say, of course, that politicians are not concerned with being re-elected. Of course, they are. This is why the temporality of the agencies is repeatedly perturbed by the political temporality, i.e. the elections. But beside this dynamics, the knowledge about welfare issues, about social exclusion, and the concern for it, is growing among the politicians as well as the administrative sector. Also, for other reasons, in the business sector. We believe this process is not specifically French but European.

In this process, the concrete, experienced life of the users is still very far from the main concern. The mainstream of this new culture still approaches the life of the users through categorisations. Occasionally, when interested in individual cases, through very poor and often stigmatising case studies, transmitted by social workers (For an example, about the way individual life stories are taken into account by welfare agencies, see the case of Minimum income's commissions in Astier, 1997). It is and remains a « top-down » process. One cannot reasonably hope for the implementation of a process of active welfare by replacing suddenly the top-down approach by a comprehensive, biographically based, bottom-up approach. The political interests as well as the interests of the agencies themselves are too crucial, create too much anxiety among the leaders to allow openness to such a different approach.

But the doors are not closed, as we have experienced in our policy meetings. When we have explained the outcomes of our research about the CAF, in different meetings, we have encountered the concern of the executives of the different CAF in France. They have been very much interested in the biographical approach of the agent's practice and thinking. Because they are confronted every day, in their agencies, with the effects of social exclusion upon the agents and confronted by the fact that many agents do not want to be « on the front line », and complain about the users, etc. After these meetings, the CNAF has been calling us in as experts and advice on what had to be done in terms of training to a group of directors of seven different CAF. It was the opportunity to try the bottom-up method. We told them: « You have called us as experts, and we certainly think that we know better than you what is going on in the CAF. But this is not true. You are the experts, you know much better than us what is going on in the CAF, because you are there every day and we have been there only for a short time ». This idea was new for them and we continued: « Your position toward your agents is the same as our position toward you. You think you know what the agents do and think, but this is not true. They are the experts ». This idea was also new for them. And eventually we said: « The agents are in the same position toward the users as you are toward the agents. The agents think they know everything about the clients, but this is not true either. The users are the experts ».

A process of learning from each other can therefore begin. The CNAF has decided to launch a national call for research in six different CAF in order to check that the results of our

research can be generalised and validated at a national level. They have asked us to take charge of the scientific assessment of the proposals. In parallel, a working group is undertaking a consultation in the six CAF in order to involve the agents in the process of research. The group also elaborates on a project, which aims to change the work practices and facilitates the front line work with the users. When this working group comes to a CAF, the executives who are members of the group, explain clearly their project. To mobilise the agents they designate the agents as the experts, supporting them, acknowledging how important and valuable the front line work is.

It is too early to speculate about the outcome of this process which is just beginning (the call will be launched at spring 1999, and the outcomes will be known in February 2000). There will probably be a national training scheme for agents, and may be several changes in the organisation of work which will be acknowledged at a local level. Several difficulties will obviously occur in the process. It will be difficult to use the biographical method with the agents, as we have seen in section two. The solution might be to go beyond the use of biographical approach with the agents, toward the biographical approach with users, to encourage the bottom-up process. We could, for instance, use the biographies of users, coming from phase 1, in order to facilitate the collaboration with the agents. But there is a strong resistance, from the executives, to the idea of a user-centred approach. They have ordered that the process shall be restricted to the issue of agents in relation to their agency.

During these meetings, we have also been asked to do research work by another national agency, the Sonacotra. This agency, created in 1954, has built and managed hundreds of Foyers devoted to the housing of single migrant workers. The foyers are seriously concerned about the growing and ageing population experiencing severe poverty which can lead to violence, self-destructiveness, and permanent conflicts between the agents and the residents of the foyers. The process of modernisation, also very pronounced in this agency, has been until now unable to respond to this violence. We are just starting research in six different foyers including observation and biographic interviews with the agents. The aim is to identify « critical relationships » between agents and users, to assess the skills of the agents in dealing with these situations, and to implement a national training programme. Here too, the use of the biographical method shows itself to be fruitful, but it is not always possible to implement it in a manifest and formal manner. The biographical contents have to be identified when possible through the observation. An agent cannot be requested or ordered to tell his life.

In conclusion this takes us to the radical difference between socially excluded persons and agents. A totally excluded person is a person who can be requested and ordered to tell his life and to change it. And it is also a person who does not have the means or the idea to protect his private life, his life story. The value of a life story, of a private life, is the value of the person itself and is assessed by the global market of social capital. This is why the researcher has the ability and duty to attach the highest value to the life of excluded persons which is what we have always tried to do. Consequently, the researcher may sometimes find herself/himself in contradiction and conflict with agencies and agents who have different pressures and aims. To implement biographical approaches requires alliances with agents and agencies able to support the comprehensive bottom-up approach of welfare. The culture of the agents

and agencies is impregnated by the idea that users develop a « culture of welfare » (« assistant » in French) and this idea operates as a barrier between the two worlds, impeding the identification of the needs and subsequently the response to the needs. The biographic method is probably the best way to de-construct the barrier, to give access to the universal meaning of the life of socially excluded persons. But at the same time, the implementation of the biographical approach requires that this barrier has already been removed or at least pierced sufficiently to see the light on the other side instead of the darkness of a hopeless and infinite question.

3.2. Policy statements

Summing up the outcomes of the research, we can make a policy statement. The policy statement will be the answer to the following question: how to create or/and reinforce the trust between users and agents, agents and executives, executives and policy makers, policy makers and politicians? Indeed trust is the common feature of a comprehensive and sensitive approach in social sciences as well as in social work. But the question might be more important than the answer. Is the reinforcement of trust the aim of welfare policies at the different levels, European, national, local? Certainly the European union, in its programmes, is the political body most clearly committed to the implementation of policies based on the knowledge and practice of the users. As we have seen, it is far from being implemented at the national and local level. In fact the European programmes try to make alliances with small groups at a local level, involved in participative actions with users. They are trying to reach the ‘bottom’ of society above the ‘heads’ of national and local bodies. In the dynamics of welfare, other alliances can be identified: for instance, a local authority will make alliances at national level to overcome obstacles posed by another local authority. This reality can be easily interpreted: there is no bottom-up approach in welfare, starting from the needs and aspirations of the populations to authorities at different levels. Neither is there a fluid implementation of welfare policies, which starts at the top and is implemented downwards. Instead, there is a permanent struggle.

Everybody is somehow a victim of this permanent struggle. However, the more dominated a person is, the more she/he become victims. Actually the strongest enemies of trust can be identified in the feelings expressed by those who dominate the dominated, at each level of the organisation of welfare: they are called scorn, fear and pity. Scorn, fear and pity are three different reactions and strategies toward others when feeling threatened. They represent the bottom of the scale, when the stigma carried by excluded persons threatens to contaminate others. And even at the bottom, don’t forget, the excluded themselves are always able to find someone who is more excluded transferring the stigma to them. To be the subject of scorn creates hate (I hate them), to be subject of fear creates cynicism (I can play with this fear), to be subject of pity creates despair (they definitely don’t understand). The traditional answer to that kind of diagnosis is education: more knowledge at all levels. And indeed misunderstandings, as we have seen, are the basis of these perverse attitudes. But knowledge is not an answer in itself. What knowledge? For what purpose? Transmitted by whom? In which conditions? The traditional content of knowledge (science, more or less « pure »), its purpose (as a basis for competition), its owners (teachers and trainers) and its conditions (educational institutions) fit perfectly into the hierarchical chain of separated levels, enabling

some individuals, who are driven by the will to know, to change position.

Therefore our policy statements are all oriented toward reforming the welfare system by facilitating exchange of knowledge. However, one should not have an idealistic or utopian view of the dominated as experts. They also need to be willing to access the official and legitimate culture. But the owners of this legitimate, official culture also need and should be willing to access the knowledge and practices of the dominated. What are the conditions of such reforms? What are the conditions for implementing confidence at all levels?

1. It needs to be officially stated at all levels that welfare services and benefits are not alms given to the poor by charitable bodies of the modern world. They are rights strongly linked to citizenship. Of course these rights have a cost. But welfare services and benefits are the cost to pay for the so-called modernisation of economics. Welfare services and benefits have insured the change from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy. Its task is not final yet: it has to insure the change from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. It is the first step to regain trust.

2. Therefore people who receive welfare should by no means be suspected and accused in official and informal discourses, of being happy to be on the dole or on welfare, to be impregnated by the so-called « culture of welfare », to reject work and prefer remaining in welfare. The authors of such discourse should be encouraged to experience living on the minimum income. No trust can be gained on the basis of such discourse. Instead the « big heads » should reveal their open secret, the fact that they do not know how to reform the welfare state, that they need the knowledge and help of those who are under their power.

3. Like the stigma's contamination, the confidence's contamination of trust can operate only gradually. **[edit note: unclear to me what this means does it means confidence needs to be build slowly, grows slowly?]** At each level, executives should ask agents to cooperate with them. Their work should be valued. This is especially crucial for front line agents, whose skills and abilities should be systematically used by the executive as the basis for organisational changes, which would help the executive to provide advice to policy makers and politicians. This strategy should obviously be visible in the training processes. Acknowledging the fact that the issue of exclusion is a concern for all agents at the intermediary level, there is no reason why agents employed by the state or the local authority should receive training that is different from the training of agents operating in the social security's services, itself different from the training of the social workers. At least there should be some common basis. The core content of this training should be: how to learn from the user. How to teach the executives. In the former education as well as in-service training, future agents should not be treated as persons solely capable of receiving orders but as people responsible for the development of trust at the bottom of society. Their communication skills, working with users and colleagues, should be developed as much as their skills in law and administration matters. In many cases the induction as well as in-service training should not remain in the hands of the administration or welfare bodies, but should be organised within the universities with involvement of the administration and the bodies.

4. At the level of users, services and benefits should not be conditional but instead be delivered as means of survival until their situation improves. It is legitimate if the authorities, at all levels and in all countries, want to maintain the incentive to work and for this reason keep the benefits at a low level. It is also consistent for this reason that this income should be unconditional, without pressure on the users. It should be high enough to position the users above the poverty line. The aim of active welfare, is to find a solution to a problem that has first to be defined and understood, which takes time and requires skills that cannot develop because of the pressure on resources, procedures and assessments. Individualistic approaches of socially excluded persons do not impede upon collective (community) action. And such action does not legitimate the tendency toward an individualistic and conditional delivery of services and benefits, which only reinforces distrust between users and agents.

5. To understand and define the problem requires the participation of the users. The biographic approach can be of great help here, as well as the use of other methods such as interviews, participative observation, surveys, etc. To achieve this task, it is necessary to bridge the gap between welfare agencies and researchers, a gap especially large in the French context. Scholars should be trained to study social issues, which is rare, and welfare agents should be trained to make use of social sciences; this is already officially happening, but not in reality. In fact, welfare agents only learn abstract pieces of social sciences, and, informally, learn that they are not intelligent enough to become social scientists. Such a situation has been disastrous among social workers, whose attitude toward social science is made up of fascination and hate. Social workers are experts on the 'users', but not as expert as the users themselves. It will take a long time before they can cooperate with them. Incentives have to be found in order to develop both kinds of cooperations.

In conclusion, we are conscious about the fact that policy making is a very delicate affair, and it is why our policy statement has remained imprecise. This position has the advantage of allowing the daily work to proceed without the demand for a radical change. It allows to rely on the multiplicity of small experiences and actions, to rely on the improvement in the culture of commitment and involvement toward social issues in general and the issue of social exclusion in particular. The reader of this statement might think that the problem of reinforcing trust at all levels is not specific to social issues. It indeed is not and it is exactly the way to modernise welfare: de-specialise it, have it everywhere in society. And also think about welfare problems as a reflection of society as a whole. The huge loss of time and energy in managing the welfare system has obviously different origins in the different member states: you can waste your time and energy in fundraising, and/or waste your time and energy in rivalry and bureaucratic procedures. But in all member states, reforming the welfare system is saving time and energy when it can work more efficiently.

If we were asked to give a general assessment of welfare, we would tell the following short story: a man is taking his dog out, and the dog is running to catch a duck standing on the bank of a lake. The man wants to stop the dog and throws its lead at him (the only weapon at his disposal). The lead hits the duck and the duck falls in the lake. Let's hit the dog instead.

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