Claiming and Sustaining Space? Sure Start and the Auto/Biographical Imagination

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We focus, in this paper, using in-depth auto/biographical research, on a Sure Start project in a marginalized community, seeking to understand its impact and meaning through the stories of families. Programmes like Sure Start represent contested space: they may be seen as an exercise in social control in relation to the marginal other. But diverse objectives, values and people shape such programmes and the resources they offer can be experienced in different ways. We provide three narratives from parents who were initially deeply suspicious – in a community where public interventions tend to be treated with caution – and yet found meaningful support with difficult problems. The narratives also reveal the potential of Sure Start to create transactional space for popular involvement in planning and running public services. We interviewed diverse professionals about these processes and suggest that an auto/biological imagination lies at the heart of effective professional practice as well as research. We are reminded, in the process, of a shared and fundamental human need to be loved and cared for, particularly at times of distress. There is much to learn from such a project, but progress remains fragile and the lessons, for public policy, are easily lost.

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to grasp the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals ... It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two.

(Wright Mills, 1970: 11–14)

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INTRODUCTION: CONTESTED SPACE

We focus, in this paper, using in-depth auto/biographical research, on a Sure Start project in a marginalized community, seeking to understand its meaning and significance through the narratives of families, in the context of wider life-worlds and histories. A principal aim of Sure Start is to enhance the functioning of children and parents as well as their life prospects. The programme was established in some 600 areas identified as having high levels of deprivation. It is multi-agency, involving diverse professionals working collaboratively to support 'vulnerable' families, with young children under the age of five. The programme is modelled on the American Head Start initiative with the idea that cycles of deprivation can be broken, children helped to go to school better able to learn and parents encouraged to enter the labour market or participate in adult learning and training programmes (NESS, 2005; Eisenstadt, 2002).

Sure Start is one among a number of policies targeted at families in poorer communities. New Children's Centres are being established in the poorest 20% of areas, building on Sure Start: such Centres aim to provide 'integrated services for pre-school children and their families'. There are parenting helplines and diverse family learning initiatives, including basic skills programmes. There are to be 250,000 new childcare places across the country and an Extended Schools initiative. 'Affordable childcare' and changes in educational provision are presented as prime means by which social exclusion can be addressed and poverty reduced. A series of terrible tragedies involving young children – such as the murder of Victoria Climbié – led to the establishment of a new Minister for Children, Young People and Families, coordinating various interventions (Ranson and Rutledge, 2005). The Government, under *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), has called for better coordination between education, health and social work agencies as well as the police to support vulnerable children. Under a new Children's Act there is to be a radical reorganization of children's services to ensure that 'every child has the chance to fulfil their potential by reducing levels of educational failure, ill-health, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, abuse and neglect, crime and anti-social behaviour among children and young people' (DfES, 2003: 6). Underlying such myriad initiatives is anxiety over the state of the family, particularly in poorer communities, which appears pervasive across government (Ranson and Rutledge, 2005).

Sure Start, in many respects, is quintessentially New Labour: combining top-down approaches – target setting and more 'joined up thinking' between services – with bottom-up community participation. And like many New Labour initiatives, it is deeply contested: some see such programmes as overly intrusive and patronizing towards marginalized

families, and as deriving from deficit models of people and communities (Coffield, 1999; Ecclestone, 2004). Family programmes more generally, and professional bureaucracies more widely, are criticized as self-serving, operating to boost professional and bureaucratic power rather than facilitate family well-being (Furedi, 2001). Parents, rather than poverty, or the breakdown of adult solidarities in a more individualized culture, get blamed for diverse social ills. A shift from more 'solidaristic' language – where the aim is to help rather than hassle citizens – towards a more contractarian discourse, in which resources are offered, in contingent ways, has been charted (Dean, 2004). Levitas (1998) has documented a shift, in New Labour rhetoric, from a redistributionist discourse (RED) towards a more socially integrationist (SID) and even moral underclass discourse (MUD). It is suggested that SID and MUD, more than RED, are now the dominant drivers in social and educational policy directed at poorer families.

At another level, Sure Start, according to the programme's national evaluation, despite the resources invested, seems to have had only minimal impact on many families. Researchers have, it seems, yet to find any discernible developmental, behavioural or language differences between children living in Sure Start areas and those living outside. There is also evidence that parents living in Sure Start communities may actually come to feel worse about where they live (NESS, 2005). However, it should be added that the families in the national samples were not necessarily participating in programmes, which could be regarded as a major weakness of the study. At the very least, the fact of parents reporting that they might feel worse is open to different interpretations: it might be because parents are becoming more aware of, or explicit about, a community's difficulties, through participation in a programme. The methodology used in the national study did not allow for any dynamic, sustained and in-depth exploration of underlying meanings.

Furthermore, in analysing the lived experience of Sure Start, a range of influences and social actors might be in play. There may be many agendas in the space represented by such initiatives, including diverse professionals, who may bring their own distinct values and practices into relationships. They may seek to work in highly collaborative and dialogical ways with parents, for instance, believing that parents have much to offer, rather than conceiving people in terms of what they may lack. They may even, in some instances, exploit government rhetoric – on the importance of strengthening community capacity building, or to improve service delivery, via partnership arrangements – to justify experiments with new forms of sustainable local development (Home Office, 2004). They may create, whatever pressures to the contrary, participatory approaches to project management, however time consuming and pressing the need to deliver

more immediate, preferably measurable results. If parents are initially invited into Sure Start on others' terms, some parents at least might be enabled to claim space and resources for themselves, individually and collectively. Moreover, New Labour rhetoric can also be contradictory: crying out for and supporting experimentation with more personalized approaches, alongside a mania for control or a discourse of moral deficiency (Apitzsch *et al.*, 2004).

To what extent, then, do deficit models drive such programmes in reality, or is the situation on the ground more complex? Does Sure Start represent a form of social control and discipline in Foucault's sense (Foucault, 1977; 1988), getting people to think and feel in the 'right' way, rather than encouraging parents to think for themselves and even, perhaps, question dominant agendas? Are there competing agendas in play and struggles over what Sure Start represents? Might some parents, in particular programmes, be encouraged to question service providers and provision, and become more active citizens, in the process, rather than simply 'consumers' of services? And fundamentally, perhaps, what forms of support can best enable vulnerable families to seek and find appropriate help, in the first place, given the evidence of suspicion and resistance in many poorer communities (Ranson and Rutledge, 2005)?

AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Our study is unique – at least in relation to Sure Start – in its longitudinal, auto/biographical, in-depth design. It is quite different, for instance, from the design features and methodological assumptions of the national evaluation. Some differences are obvious. Our research focused on one community, although we draw on similar research among families in other marginalized communities (West, 2006). Our opportunistic sample of over 60 parents is small compared to the 16,502 families living in Sure Start areas involved in the national study, as well as the 2610 families living in 50 comparison communities that were shortly to have a Sure Start project (NESS, 2005). But we spent many hours with individual families (as well as staff), and the auto/biographical design of our research enabled us to explore the meaning of experience, narratively, in depth and over time, in ways that other kinds of research barely get near. We spent time, too, visiting a range of courses and meetings – formal and informal – across five years.

We worked with particular families over seven research cycles, from the project's inception until late 2005. Some parents withdrew after one or more interviews, for a range of reasons, while others remained suspicious, but a core of families (10) stayed with us over the entire project and new

ones were recruited. Our methodology is grounded in a commitment to working collaboratively with people, to understand experience, subjectively, from their perspectives. This derives, in part, from feminist research but also from the social constructivist idea – reaching back to symbolic interactionism, the Chicago School as well as Wright Mills – that the social world is not simply internalized but is actively experienced and given meaning to, which, can sometimes help change it (Chamberlayne *et al.*, 2004). There was little space in the national study for parents to develop their stories or interrogate their meaning, over time.

We began by asking parents to share, in concrete terms, specific experiences of the programme: of encounters with particular people or courses and how helpful or otherwise these may have been. We asked them to describe personal histories as well as experiences of living in the area; and we explored changing relationships in families, with children or a partner, as a result of particular interventions. As the research evolved, and relationships strengthened, we revisited these issues in what became a dynamic and iterative process, testing and retesting hypotheses, over time, as well as examining the process of the research itself, and the extent to which people felt able to tell stories in more open and honest ways. Some of our collaborators became more confident and increasingly curious in relation to their own lives: it was unusual, they would say, for anyone to be interested and to really listen, which, in turn, evoked greater personal interest in the forces at work in family and community life.

Rapport lies at the heart of such a creative process, building on the traditions of feminist epistemology (Fine, 1992; Hartsock, 1987). This partly depends on our capacity, as researchers, to feel, identify and empathize with our research subjects. It includes an ability, in the researchers, to contain any anxieties generated in the process and to maintain an open, reflexive stance towards material (rather than appearing judgemental) and to feed back what has been said, and interpretations, in manageable forms, paralleling processes in psychotherapeutic contexts. We sought to create, in the language of Donald Winnicott (1971), a good enough transitional or facilitating space, in which people's anxieties could diminish and curiosity towards experience, and the capacity to think about it, strengthen. However, if there are parallels between research and therapy, we were anxious to maintain, as much as possible, clear boundaries: by respecting people's defences, for instance, remembering, always, that research offers no long-term structure of support. Research is not therapy, either, however therapeutic the research can prove (Hunt and West, in press).

The process worked well on occasions and people felt encouraged to tell stories and to work with us in interpreting them. We believe, as Jerome Bruner (1990) observed, that people will naturally narrativize their experience of the world, if given space and encouragement to do so, yet

most conventional interviews expect respondents to answer questions in the categorical form required in formal exchanges rather than the narratives of natural conversation. Natural conversations developed but we constantly asked how parents and staff were experiencing the process, and the extent to which we, and differences of power and status – as university researchers working with some highly vulnerable people – might shape the story telling.

Themes were developed, inductively, while also treating these as problematic. Stories can be partial, defensive and even illusory, born, for instance, out of unconscious anxiety about the self's capacity to cope with particular experience (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; West, 1996). Interviews were taped and fully transcribed, using oral history conventions. Parents were asked, as described, to read transcripts, identify themes and reflect on the whole process, including how easy it was to talk to us. We devised a pro-forma, derived from earlier studies and drawing on the work of other researchers, to analyse the process, including our own responses in what we term the counter-transference (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; West, 2001). (Transference refers to how significant others, including researchers, can come to represent, to greater and lesser extents, often unconsciously, powerful others from a person's past – such as an authority figure – while the counter-transference is concerned with what this induces, in turn, in the other.) Each pro-forma consisted of standard biographical data, emerging themes and reference to relevant literatures. Field notes and diary material were incorporated while we completed a proforma separately, for every participant, and then compared and contrasted our material, to build rigour and differing perspectives into the analytical process. We then used our in-depth understanding of individual cases to explore patterns across the whole sample.

We sought, in effect, to identify the overall form, or gestalt, of individual lives, drawing on the theoretical work of Fritz Schutze (1992) and the German biographical-interpretative school as well as psychodynamics and phenomenology (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The approach contrasts with conventional code and retrieve methods in computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, or even grounded theory, where data are disaggregated, often prematurely, and then reaggregated with data from different cases, bringing the danger of losing the nuance, specificity and potential interconnectedness of experience and meaning across individual lives.

A place called Millmead

Sure Start Millmead was a 'first wave' project, beginning in 2000. Millmead is a predominantly public housing estate in Margate, on the Isle of Thanet, with a population of just over 4000 people. Some parents as well as policy

makers described the area as a 'sink estate' where 'problem' families had been 'dumped' from all over the region. 'Problem families' we were told, by the Housing Directorate, had been concentrated in the estate, from all over, as a matter of deliberate policy. The extent of poverty is considerable while unemployment, for many, is long-term. Those in paid work tend to be in low-paid, low-skilled employment. Women increasingly are more likely to be employed than men, but in part-time, poorly paid jobs in the service sector. Between 1991 and 1996 unemployment rose from 13.5% to 16%, while in 1997, 75% of households were in receipt of housing benefits. A high number of households (923), in 2002, were in receipt of income support, while 138 children under four lived in families on low incomes, and similar numbers of children were in single parent households, receiving housing benefit. Parts of Millmead (the area straddles a number of local government wards), as measured by national indices of deprivation, ranked 194th (with one being the most deprived) out of a total of 8414 English wards. The politics of the area, and Thanet in general, have been described as fractious and atomistic while the extent of alienation from conventional politics is considerable. At the beginning of the 1990s, Millmead was described as having the 'worst reputation of any area of Thanet' (West and Wenham, 2003; West and Carlson, 2004; Buck *et al.*, 1990).

Schooling reflects the sense of marginalization and social instability. Northdown Primary School serves many children on the estate and was 'performing' badly at the time in Standard Attainment Tests (SAT), with more than 80% of pupils at level 1, 2 or 3 of what is termed the special needs code of practice, or who have a statement (Wallace, 2000). High mobility levels and the family poverty of local and transient pupils were seen to 'combine' to make Northdown, effectively, a 'special school'. The rapid and casual movement of children in and out of Northdown, in the words of the then head teacher, meant that 'there's no finish in the same way there's no formal start . . . they just come and they just go'. Behaviour and anti-bullying policies – a 'vital handrail for these children in an unstable world' – had to be constantly revisited, as new children were absorbed. Planning and target setting were hard, and 'notions of shared history', fragile (Wallace, 2000). Millmead, in its marginalization, can be seen as representative of one important dimension of contemporary, increasingly unequal, neo-liberal England.

SURE START: A SUSTAINING SPACE?

We want, at this stage, to introduce particular parents. Heidi, a young mother, got involved in Sure Start Millmead in different ways: she attended parent support sessions, a playgroup (with the children) and adult

classes. She, and her partner Joe, were approached by a community worker, on our behalf, and asked to participate in the study. They were understandably cautious about seeing us, although agreeing to do so. We explained how the local Sure Start project commissioned the study, because they wished to understand the project from the perspectives of parents like themselves. We wanted, we said, to explore their interactions with particular staff and services, and the significance and meaning of these in the context of their lives. We described how we would like to chronicle any changes in how they perceived Sure Start, given possible suspicion in the area towards public bodies and their agendas (West and Wenham, 2003; Buck *et al.*, 1990).

Joe drifted in and out of the first interview, making a great deal of noise, on occasions, with a drill he was using to mount a wall cupboard. He was sceptical as to whether Sure Start concerned him, but listened, at times, to what was said. Heidi was initially reticent about talking, but eventually said she would like to share her experiences, because Sure Start was important. She and Joe had known each other since childhood, she began. They moved into Millmead two years before because they 'just wanted to get out of it to get away from family'. Heidi spoke of extended family problems and how some members of her family disliked their relationship. They felt 'hassled' and 'just wanted to get away and have a fresh start'.

Joe came and sat down, while Sally, the youngest child, came to sit on Linden's knee. She was fascinated by the tape recorder. Joe spoke of his childhood with a lone parent, living a traveller-style existence without a permanent home. He was 'abandoned' in Kent as a child, with the other parent, he said, someone he did not know. He ended up in a residential home, followed by periods in foster care:

> It's what happened to us as kids and it is difficult for those who have felt pain, to let others in as, people have got scars and that is one thing which they won't get rid of. It takes a long time to build confidence up ... I was put in care when I was 14; I went to a Children's home and then went to foster parents into a bed-sit. The bed-sit didn't go down very well. So, basically I ended up on the streets sleeping rough.

Heidi shared related experiences:

> My dad didn't want me; he only wanted my sister and my brother, not me. So they left me in hospital and I've been with my aunt and uncle when I was three. Then I've been in another children's home then foster homes, then I stayed at my godmother's house and then in other people's homes and I said 'that's it when I'm old I am going to settle down and have kids of my own, I don't want them to go the same way, what I've been through' ... It is hard

to explain to someone about what happened to me when I was a baby. Because I still haven't got over it, why my parents left me.

The material poured out as Heidi described being moved from one family to another, like Joe. She cried and we asked if she wanted to stop the interview, but she insisted on continuing. She had never been able to talk to anyone about her life history before, she stated. It was hard to explain, and she did 'not really understand myself why the things that had happened had happened, and not knowing how or where to start'.

She recently began a new parenting course and she told us: '[this] gave me more confidence to know what to do with my two children. At the end of it all I got this certificate. So I was really happy and pleased about it.' But her troubles, she said, were 'big', and she struggled with them all the time: 'basically we haven't got no family to help us, we're just basically on our own and that's it. At least we've done something good for a change. At least no one can slag us down at the end of the day ... I don't want them to go the same way, what I've been through.'

Joe said that he wanted to work because 'the thing is I want to get a job and I've got no qualifications. Without qualifications you're just nothing but a shit kicker basically. That's the way people see you.' But a training centre told him he needed maths to get into college and he was scared of failure. Schooling, especially maths, represented unhappy territory. Heidi told us, in turn, how she suffered from mental health problems and began to talk about being upset with her children, 'when they laugh at me': 'That literally upset me because I was trying my hardest when I'm not well, I'm trying my best to tell them off and say "don't do this".'

Sure Start was at first very threatening, they both said: afraid, as they were, that people might be 'checking' on them and 'that was going through our heads all the time'. They were frightened of the children being put in care, of patterns being repeated, over time. Heidi told us they had to:

> make sure we're looking after them properly, feeding them properly, things like that ... To see if they are well looked after, washed and cleaned with clean clothes on their backs every day of the week. Making sure we've got food in the cupboards and food in the freezers ... basically, it's what happened to us as kids. That's what most of the problems are, people have got scars and that is one thing which they won't get rid of.

Heidi, however, slowly became more trusting of her community worker and other Sure Start staff, as well as of some of the mothers she met:

> They are more like mums to me. Like I've never had in my life. It feels more a part of my family as well as a friend ... they feel like I am part of their family as well. Because I go to family group ... and I meet with other mothers there.

She began to feel part of a new family, which included taking the children to a Toy Library and finding 'confidence to mix with other mothers', while Robbie began to play with other children:

> sometimes he's too shy and he won't do nothing. He always likes to be with me all the time. I say to him 'Why don't you go and play with the toys that are on the floor?' He goes and plays with the toys and mixes with the other children, he plays with the toys and does colouring in with them, he makes friends with the other children.

Their relationship to Sure Start shifted, however contingently – as did the research relationship – from initial suspicion to some trust. We told Heidi and Joe how much we appreciated their time and willingness to share their stories. We asked how they felt about the process. They said that it was 'helpful and nice to be able to share things'. We felt humility in the light of what they said – and explained this to them – not the least our admiration at their resilience as a family, against a history of abandonment and poverty. We explained that we would send a transcript, in due course, which we would like them to read and amend in any way they wished. We asked if we could arrange some follow-up interviews to see how the situation had evolved. We arranged a second interview six months later.

Heidi, especially, seemed pleased to see us second time round. There had been positive feedback from the community worker about how the two of them found the first interview: it was easy to talk to us, because we listened, she reported them as saying. They agreed, had read the transcript and 'liked having it all down', and it led them to reflect further on their life histories. Heidi talked more about what she called her 'psychological issues'. These prevented her from cooking, among other things, she said. There were too many 'unpleasant memories' in which her confidence 'had been destroyed'. Joe did the cooking and was helping her make certain dishes: 'eventually I will get there, one day'. Joe insisted, forcefully, that Sure Start was 'mainly for women there you see, so I wouldn't really get involved in that ... I can cope with near enough anything personally. I can deal with almost anything.' He was more distant, at times, in the interview, suspicious even, although contributing extensively too. Heidi finished by telling us that she felt happier with the children because she had 'started putting my foot down on them, saying right "you have got to listen to me, not me listening to you" ... I am more relieved that they are starting to listen to me now.'

She went on to elaborate the importance of contact with other mothers and workers as well as her feelings of achievement in a number of classes. The social contact had been crucial. We thanked them again and asked what they felt about the process, this time. They said it was 'good' and we told them we would send the second transcript and asked if it might be

possible to arrange a third interview. In the meantime, they moved house outside the Sure Start area and it became difficult to organize the interview. They telephoned us and said they would like to see us, but, for a number of reasons, a third interview never took place. The children were approaching five and would no longer be of Sure Start age, and they wanted to know if we could contact another Sure Start project and we gave details. They were worried at being isolated once more.

Heidi and Joe made a big impression on both of us. We sat in the car quietly after both interviews and relived the material. We felt a mix of humility and admiration, given their resilience, but also concern for them and their future. We mused about how much we had to learn from them – about coping with distressing personal histories, for instance – and contrasted their resilience with deficit models of families and communities (Ecclestone, 2004). We shared aspects of our own family histories and feelings of failure and inadequacy as parents. Linden had been preoccupied with a public career and there was a corresponding neglect of children and family life. A painful divorce followed, and the feelings of abandonment came to the surface again, in listening to Joe and Heidi and their stories. Memories of childhood were evoked too, and we decided to record this material in field notes, as a way of embodying the auto/biographical process. Childhood had been difficult – nothing in comparison to Heidi and Joe – but difficult nonetheless, for both of us. Relationships between parents were fraught, at times, and we each felt responsible and wanted to make things better. We wrote extensively about these auto/biographical dimensions of researching other's lives: how we use other's stories to make sense of our own, and vice versa (Stanley, 1992). And how the other's story may provoke strong, even disturbing feelings in researchers (West, 2001). Yet this aspect of research is often absent from the text, while processes of interpretation are represented as largely disembodied, one-directional affairs, under the gaze of objectivism.

Joe and Heidi were far from alone in telling such stories. The meaning of Sure Start changed for many of the parents we talked to, especially women, from an uncertain, even threatening space, to a more sustaining one. Parents were frequently suspicious: 'was this social workers checking up on us?' Yet most of our sample came to see the project, over time, as a resource – as a kind of sustaining space – although some parents in the area continued to resist involvement. Tom Schuller *et al.* (2006), in researching the wider benefits of learning and using, at least in part, biographical interviews, noted the 'sustaining' effect of participation in parenting programmes and adult learning for many mothers. They observed how taking part in educational programmes enabled parents to maintain a sense of personal identity whilst bringing up small children. There was physical relief at getting out of the house, at having a temporal structure to the week, and having access to adult conversations. These

processes were not to be judged simply in individualistic terms: time and again understanding that other parents had difficulties controlling their children, or with their own irritation and anger, provided a sense of relief and helped build self-confidence as well as mutual support. In small, but significant ways, the social fabric was being strengthened and the lives of specific families improved.

For the overwhelming majority of our parents, in fact, the project represented 'a lifeline', which helped women, especially (this is largely gendered space), cope with isolation or even depression (a recurrent theme). Most of the families we talked to had moved into the area, sometimes during a period of family breakdown or other difficulty. There was little or no sense of shared communal space where people might comfortably meet, other than fleeting encounters at the school gate. New relationships mattered greatly in such an atomistic context: whether with key workers or other parents. As did going to 'fun activities' like day trips to the seaside, Easter egg hunts, Christmas and Halloween parties, and play days. Or quiz nights, keep-fit classes and diverse adult education programmes, with childcare facilities. Parent and toddler groups were important too, although some initiatives struggled to recruit. Sure Start, for those involved, became 'like a good family really', in its own right, with space for self as well as children. But Sure Start could also evoke mixed feelings: there were arguments about priorities and tensions between families from different parts of the estate. Specific families from particular streets were deemed rough and 'a problem' by others. Some parents did not want to mix with the 'others' and there were tensions in certain groups. This was no simple, unproblematic weaving of a social fabric.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Mandy, another parent, talked to us over two years. There was trouble on the estate, she told us, including drug dealing, 'but if you keep yourself to yourself or have your own circle of friends you don't get involved with it'. Mandy was a single parent, with two children, aged two and five. She had known many losses in her life: of a mother when she was young, and of one of her children, shortly after birth, as well as her marriage: 'at the time I didn't feel like I could turn to anyone … So I felt very isolated … carrying, as it were, the loss for everyone in some sense, including the little ones'.

Over a year, she said, 'I have sort of suddenly started talking about it more openly. I can talk about it without it hurting anymore.' The oldest child was two and a half when Mandy and her husband separated and her son felt it 'badly'.

> He became very hard to handle, very abusive, the only way I could get around it was actually having him in my bed at night and that seemed to calm him down a lot. He actually only went back in his own bedroom when she went in her bedroom as well. So they are now both in a bedroom together and they won't go to bed unless the other one is there. But he did react badly to start with. He couldn't understand why Daddy had left this house. He withdrew into himself partly.

Mandy thought her son's speech difficulties began at this time. He was always being taunted, she said, and called 'a wimp' because he would cry at the slightest thing. And he struggled to speak.
 Sure Start became important:

> They were ... there to encourage and to help as opposed to telling you what to do. They give you advice rather than orders, which I found health visitors to be very austere and hard to actually talk to. They more or less, I felt like you had to do what they told you because it was in your best interests and the children's. Whereas Sure Start was whether you do it or not it is not a problem. We will still come and visit you. It, we don't care whether you listen to us, we are just there if you want to talk ... After the first meeting it was like OK this group is there to help me, not to badger me. And they have done.

Mandy began to see 'a Sure Start counsellor' on a weekly basis.

> At the time she was helping me through my pregnancy ... because I was on my own and she helped me come to terms with losing my other daughter, and she just made things easier. Sure Start as a whole made things a lot easier for me and if they hadn't of been around I don't know where I would be right now, whether I would actually be here or whether the children would actually be here I don't know.

 The counsellor was 'a rock', enabling her to be more open and to engage with the trauma of loss in her life. Mandy also participated in Sure Start courses. She studied Children's Behaviour and hoped she might find some work, because of Sure Start. Moreover, the programme helped with her son's speech problem:

> I noticed that words were coming out wrong, they were, they sounded different, they sounded very strange. He would say, it was silly things like, he would say wing instead of swing, or he would misinterpret what was said to him and he still says some of them, like saying lello instead of yellow and the words weren't there. He wasn't putting the letters together properly and he couldn't string a sentence together and the health visitor had told me he should be speaking sentences by now and it just sort of worried me slightly. And she referred me to the baby hospital and he went down there for eight sessions.

But she didn't like the experience there. She was ignored:

> To me his speech problem was more feeling the words, not knowing whether a teddy bear is under a chair, on a chair or flying in the air ... I felt them very unapproachable and then I was told that he had developmental problems ... I think it was the two and a half years they have check a motor check, motor skills and they told me that his fine motor skills were lacking because he couldn't hold a pair of scissors and he couldn't draw a straight line. When there was a line on a piece of paper he couldn't quite follow it. He was more interested in doing his own thing, like squiggling on a piece of paper and they said that was a problem.

She felt isolated, ignored and turned to a Sure Start Health Visitor:

> and they put him on a speech programme ... so he actually had it alongside the school rather than actually having it from a separate body ... So yet again Sure Start came to the rescue. They were absolutely brilliant. They made me realise that there wasn't a problem and even if he did have a slight speech defect it actually wasn't going to affect him as I thought because everyone had told me there was this speech problem I automatically assumed it was something major and it wasn't. It was just the fact that he couldn't pronounce his words properly.

She felt vindicated and understood. Sure Start, she said, gave you time, which other professionals did not:

> they also bring the children in as well. They explain it to the children as well as to you, which makes a big difference because the professional doctors and the nurses ... they just haven't got the time to sit there and do that ... So they actually explained where the situation had come up from and it had arisen from all the little traumas he has had in his own little life. He just sort of regressed himself and he had gone backwards rather than coming forwards in his speech ... that wasn't explained to me at the time. So they just had the time to sit down and go through everything with me. They explained the whole situation. The reason why he wouldn't talk properly wasn't the fact that he was lazy or anything. It was just the fact that he had got so much going on in his mind that forming words were not important and being able to cut in a straight line or to be able to draw a straight line, they weren't important to him at the time, whereas now drawing a straight line for him is quite important. They just made me see that. So they took the stress off me and I took it off him. I took the pressure off him so.

BECOMING ACTIVISTS/CLAIMING SPACE

Sure Start Millmead was committed to a bottom-up approach to the development of services, grounded in genuine partnership. The aim was to

work collaboratively and celebrate parents' skills and strengths rather than their weaknesses, we were told. This may have been rhetoric, but parent focus groups were quickly established and informal training days organized to build confidence to enable parents to become active in the running of the programme. There was attention to detail as parents were included and supported in interview panels, on the management board, in running crèche and nursery programmes. The attention to detail, and giving time and support, mattered greatly in the development of the programme.

Not everything worked well and only a small number of parents were active, at first, as suspicions ran deep, against a history of quick-fix initiatives on the estate (West and Wenham, 2003). 'Margaret' became an activist, albeit reluctantly. She too was fighting depression and struggled in an abusive relationship, she told us. Going to Sure Start meetings was a major step. She was surprised to find that 'you did have an input and I felt involved, so ... I just felt safe and relaxed'. Her sense of trust of particular staff was central, in her story, in enabling her to take some risks. She felt 'cared for and understood'.

Margaret joined the management board and more parents got involved. It was, at first, as she put it, 'completely alien'. The parents huddled together in a corner, trying to understand the language and rituals of professionals and local politicians alike. Representatives from various agencies would change from meeting to meeting, making it difficult for relationships and dialogue to be built. 'The suits', as the parents put it, seemed intent on pursuing their own institutional agendas:

> For the first couple of times I was really nervous, but now it doesn't faze me, at first I used to sit in the background ... it actually made a big difference that I knew they could trust me to do something and I wasn't going to make a big cock up of it.

'They' were some of the staff as well as other parents. Margaret felt encouraged, among others, by the Chair and Director of the project to be 'a bit of a nuisance' in relation to designing a new Sure Start building. Over time, she and others were more able to 'argue our own corner' and more confident in using committee language. There was an especially fraught meeting in which representatives of a local neighbourhood centre accused Sure Start, as a Government project, of grabbing too much power. It was, the parents told us, one of the worst meetings they attended and they almost left when accused of being Sure Start 'poodles'. Yet they felt motivated to continue with the battle over the design and priorities for a new building. They were learning to be community activists for the first time in their lives.

Margaret described how she challenged some professionals in a meeting over child protection policies and the treatment of some local families:

> I was very nervous about saying it; I got it out the way and thought it wasn't too bad ... It was about the child protection ... I knew I wanted to say it but would it come out properly, and it did so I was happy. It was a big step for me.

Most in the room would not have understood the biographical significance of her intervention. For Margaret, in the totality of her life, it represented a stage towards embracing a new, more complex identity from simply 'being a mum, stuck at home'. This was no easy, linear progression and there was a continuing tension between being that 'ordinary mum' and a community activist. She frequently wanted to 'run away', not the least because of troubling issues being raised about her relationship with a new partner and whether she wanted this to continue. It was easier, in some respects, 'to bury your head in the sand'. Progression, of a biographical kind, can be riddled with anxiety. We asked Margaret and other parents, over the period of the study, about the factors enabling them to take such risks, and to keep on keeping on. The role and personalities of particular workers were said to be essential. The Director, we were told, was supportive yet challenging, 'like a good parent really'. She and others gave time and support, one parent said, to help them learn, in an informal sense, including: 'yes, the habits of running things: of listening, how to make a case, to be open to others and their views and to feel it was legitimate to be there, doing such things'.

If these processes were fragile, Sure Start nonetheless enabled some nervous, diffident, often self-disparaging parents to challenge, collectively, others' agendas and take on new roles, as well as find individual sustenance and creative space. If local people initially entered the space on others' terms, some, at least, had made it more their own (Coare and Johnston, 2003). They had begun to learn, however provisionally, a new grammar of community activism. Space was being created for what Zygmund Bauman calls the agora: a transactional place in which people can start to translate private problems into a more collective language of public issues and potential solutions, and where ways forward can be sought and negotiated and the social fabric strengthened (Bauman, 2000). A key question remains as to how such processes are best established, sustained, understood and theorized, which takes us into the territory of the auto/biographical imagination in professional practices as well as research.

CLAIMING SPACE AND THE AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL IMAGINATION

Sure Start Millmead, we suggest, nourished and challenged many parents, individually and collectively. Whatever the pressures on particular

workers and their associated anxieties about meeting targets and the short-term nature of contracts – as well as fears about their capacity to cope – parents frequently felt valued, encouraged and supported. There was intense initial suspicion of Sure Start, partly a result of the collective history of the estate and pervasive suspicion of public bodies and their agendas. And partly, this was a dimension of individual biographies and the interaction of public policy and intimate experience: the fridge had to be filled, Heidi told us, urgently, whether they could afford to or not, because the children, quite simply, might be taken away, as she had been as a child. The time and quality of attention given to parents like Heidi would have been difficult in mainstream services, given pressures on staff. Heidi, Mandy and Margaret felt, on the whole, listened to and respected, rather than blamed, although not every parent was positive about every intervention. Parents like Mandy and Heidi were able, via counselling, to begin to face the roots of depression and disturbance, while programmes of adult learning sustained them at difficult moments. None of these processes was irreversible, or easily expressed in measurable outcomes, but was no less important for that.

Sure Start, as in Margaret's narrative, did help to strengthen the social fabric by creating some transactional space in which dominant agendas could be challenged and a new, more localized form of politics could find expression. The process was small scale, barely discernible at times, but biographically important to a mother like her. There were different assumptions at work, on the ground, to 'MUD' or deficit models: the resources offered by government were being exploited for radical, bottom-up community development purposes, however tentative and provisional. Engaging and supporting parents, for instance, at every stage, in the governance and development of the programme – treating people as citizens rather than consumers – was a core, lived value in Sure Start Millmead, at least in the early stages. Auto/biographical research can illuminate these dynamic, multifaceted, institutional and micro-level interactions, in fine detail, in ways that other methods may get nowhere near.

Learning to become an activist is about being perceived, and perceiving self, in a new light, rather than simply acquiring new skills. Moving from being 'simply a mum', to a community activist – and learning to talk back to power – evoked deep anxieties over the entire process and the capacity to cope in a life like Margaret's. Such risk taking – in informal as well as more formal contexts for learning – can evoke potentially crippling anxiety. Drawing on psychodynamic insights, Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg (Salzberger-Wittenberg *et al.*, 1999) notes that even very confident people can feel helpless and overcome in demanding situations, such as entering a new course in higher or adult education. Such moments may link back

to earlier feelings of inadequacy or failure, as past and present elide. Melanie Klein (1998) termed this 'memory in feeling', expressed in bodily and emotional states, rather than conscious thought. Such embodied memory can be especially intense for those 'taught', from earliest times, that they are of little consequence, are inadequate or authority cannot be trusted (Salzberger-Wittenberg *et al.*, 1999). A range of psychological defences may come into play, including withdrawal and denial of needs (that something may be important or desirable). There were clear glimpses of defensiveness in many parents' narratives: Margaret, at times, like other parents, wanted to run away, but she stayed put, mainly because she felt wanted and cared for: Sure Start served as a kind of surrogate family, in its own right, in a very real sense.

We talked, in-depth, to the community, social, health and education workers involved. They could feel beleaguered by targets and 'short-termism', and the pressures from Sure Start central units for speedy results and 'robust' evidence. Reductions in smoking and/or increases in breastfeeding, rather than subtle biographical transformation, preoccupied those on high. The professionals noted, in reflecting with us, how frequently they drew on their own experiences of marginality, and even abuse, to connect more empathically with the other. A kind of auto/biographical awareness lay at the heart of good professional practice, as they perceived it, except such connections only came clear, or at least explicit, through the research itself. Some community workers were recruited from the estate and shared similar experiences to the families they worked with: the difference being that they were more able to keep their heads above the water because of supportive others and confidence born of particular achievement in their lives. Yet in their professional work, they were aware of a continuing need for support – when working with broken families or abuse, for instance – which was available but could also be insufficient, sometimes, because of the pressure on the programme. Supervision might be sporadic while opportunities for sustained case-based, reflective learning in the workplace, for instance, were limited. The pressure to deliver results and the insecurity surrounding the programme's survival meant that staff sometimes felt guilty at taking time for their own development: they should be 'out there, doing things'.

If Sure Start might have acted as a conduit for a disciplinary, normalizing gaze – 'you are to blame for your lot in life and are lacking in skills and even morality' – the evidence suggests that in day-to-day encounters between diverse staff and diverse parents the gaze was more attentive, caring and non-judgemental, than disciplinary in Foucault's sense. There was also a kind of practical wisdom in play – grounded in sympathetic knowledge of parents' circumstances – in the context of difficult family

histories and poverty, for instance, that tended to eschew judgementalism. It was a product of a shared sense of humanity and vulnerability. There was a desire to make space to hear parents and children for who they were in and to themselves, in all their complexity, rather than to allocate labels or the stain of deficit models (Veck, 2006). Similar sensitivities and basic solidarity can find expression in research, via deeper forms of listening, collaborative interpretation as well as auto/biographical sensibilities. There is of course an ethical danger in such research of imperialist seduction, in which the other is made to feel important, yet, ultimately, this is for the researcher's ends rather than of benefit to the researched. Except parents told us, time and again, that being listened to and respected, and feeling that their stories were validated, were important in struggles to keep on keeping on. On the other hand, research of this kind can be troubling, given the disturbance of certain lives, and we worried about what was being opened up, without long-term support. Auto/biographical research takes us into necessary but also ethically difficult territory.

There is a different concern, by way of conclusion, that the experiment in new forms of localism in a community like Millmead – nurtured by key staff, and grounded in their auto/biographical sensitivities – may be under threat from recent legislation on the management of children's services as well as constraints of public expenditure. There is grave danger that local parental involvement and the potential for genuine partnerships will diminish as large-scale public bureaucracies, like education, manage services more directly, with little experience of working with local communities in more dialogical ways. The possibility for managing public resources in a new, more popular and devolved manner may be lost (Glass, 2005). Resources in Millmead are also stretched as the project area is extended and workers take on new responsibilities. Space is being lost as well as gained, lessons forgotten as well as learned.

Moreover, not all Sure Start programmes may function as in Millmead, or be shaped by the same values or auto/biographical imagination. Programmes vary and there is no 'common curriculum' (NESS, 2005). In the final resort, we are talking about one project in one community, which was very fragile. Even in Millmead, some parents came nowhere near, while others left, as children reached five, because, in the early stages, a bureaucratic boundary was drawn and the door closed. This represented a loss and a waste in struggles for wider community regeneration. The need for sustained relationships and long-term investment in community capacity building is easily sacrificed on the altar of short-termism, the demands of electoral cycles or narrow bureaucratic definitions of who to work with and when (Glass, 2005). While government may recognize, rhetorically, the interdependence of the individual, family and community

triadic relationship, little attention is paid to the need for attentive, sustained and reflexive care, grounded in awareness of shared vulnerability and human interdependence (Ranson and Rutledge, 2005; Dean, 2004). In the spirit of C. Wright Mills (1970), the auto/biographical imagination, however, takes us firmly towards such awareness, not least of a shared need to be loved and looked after when times are hard and lives riddled with anxiety.

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