

**Policy as Palimpsest: a case study of micro and macro policy and politics  
intersecting in local implementation resulting in unintended consequences**

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## **Abstract**

A palimpsest is a multi-layered text that is reinscribed over time. This article presents policy as analogous to a palimpsest. The analogy highlights change and stasis, policy reinscription and the complexity of judging progress. An ethnographic study of implementation of the UK Sure Start Children's Centres policy demonstrates how a policy-palimpsest is assembled. Asynchronous time zones are evident as pre-modern religious beliefs and traditional social structures are in tension with postmodern performativity and "initiativitis". Perceptions of progress depend on how history is interpreted, how policy is framed and how the future is imagined. A local policy-palimpsest reinscribes policy with unintended consequences.

KEY WORDS Implementation, childcare, time

## **Introduction**

The article begins by defining a palimpsest and explaining the analogy with policy. This is followed by an outline of the UK Sure Start policy set in the context of international neo-liberal shifts towards an active investment state (Levitas, 1998). The phenomenon of "initiativitis" is described before going on to analyse "care work". The next section presents data from an ethnographic case study of how this policy shift was interpreted by local implementers whose implementation practices assembled a local temporary settlement or policy-palimpsest. Following the case, a discussion section analyses these micro practices in terms of their production of a local "temporary policy settlement" (Gale, 1999) or what I call here a policy-palimpsest. The conclusion reached is that what counts as policy progress depends on how history is sliced and interpreted, how policy is framed and how the future is imagined.

The main contribution of the paper is empirical rather than theoretical with the palimpsest presented as a sensitizing device and a concept that might be of practical use. In relation to "policy sociology", Gale (2001:385) utilises Foucauldian "gadgets"

of historiography, archaeology and genealogy, but does not lay claim to a comprehensive adoption of Foucault as theorist:

“My confessions also extend to not being fully attentive to Foucault’s renditions of archaeology and genealogy.... But then Foucault himself provides such licence: *If one or two of these ‘gadgets’ of approach or method that I’ve tried to employ . . . can be of service to you, then I shall be delighted. If you find the need to transform my tools or use others then show me what they are, because it may be of benefit to me.* (Foucault 1980: 65) [Gale’s emphasis]

In this same spirit the palimpsest analogy is offered as a potentially useful “gadget” for recognising the discursive and temporal nature of policy and for drawing together links between policy framing, discourse, interpretivism, poststructuralism and critical policy analysis.

### **Palimpsest: a sensitizing device**

A palimpsest is a multilayered artefact (usually a text) consisting of multiple reinscriptions. To explain why the analogy is useful, it contrasts sharply with a New Public Management view of policy implementation as mainly technical, rational and concerned with “what works” (Coote et al, 2004). It challenges a naïve, functionalist view of social policy and social change whereby change is equated with progress. A social engineering approach to societal progress through policy intervention fits with models referred to by Moran, Rein and Goodin (2006:4) as “high modernist”. The stages model of policy assumes that policy proceeds in phases from conceptualising and refining policy problems then devising policy solutions, through an implementation phase to an end point when policy becomes embedded in practice, policy outcomes are achieved and thus can be evaluated (Burton, 2006). This linear approach reifies policy as singular and bounded. Targets and timetables attached to policy implementation also presume specificity along with a linear trajectory for policy but the palimpsest analogy demonstrates the various ways in which “new” policy overwrites or imbricates existing practice as well as the ways in which policy implementers reproduce or change the meanings of policy.

Historically, palimpsests were parchment scrolls re-used and reinscribed. A palimpsest like the Archimedes scroll changes but paradoxically might be said to stay the same. That is to say, the artefact may be regarded as the same object but the layers reveal varying inscriptions. This alerts us to the challenge of determining whether policies (generally announced by politicians as innovative, as new and improved) might be evaluated as progressive, regressive or as no change - "plus ça change" (Bryson, 2007, Pollitt, 2008, Reedy, 2010). The analogy takes account of both change and stasis, "sensitizing us to the asynchronous time zones of generational change, performance driven policy "quick wins" and deeper, long running, historically sedimented social practices allowing simultaneous consideration of "close-range to long-range perspectives"(Conrad,2004:431) . A palimpsest analogy also indicates what might be buried beneath surface presentations. The palimpsest encourages a re-surfacing of critical interpretations of policy or in James C Scott's phrase "transcripts from below" (Scott, 1998). To issue a caveat, the analogy of a palimpsest is not applicable to all types of policy. Some regulatory policies are unambiguous. Barrett (2004:255) explains:

"For some types of regulatory policy (for example, health and safety), conformance or compliance may be an essential objective. But much public policy is couched in more permissive and discretionary terms; the objective being to permit and encourage innovative courses of action within a framework of procedural rules. Here output targets or performance criteria are harder to specify in advance ..."

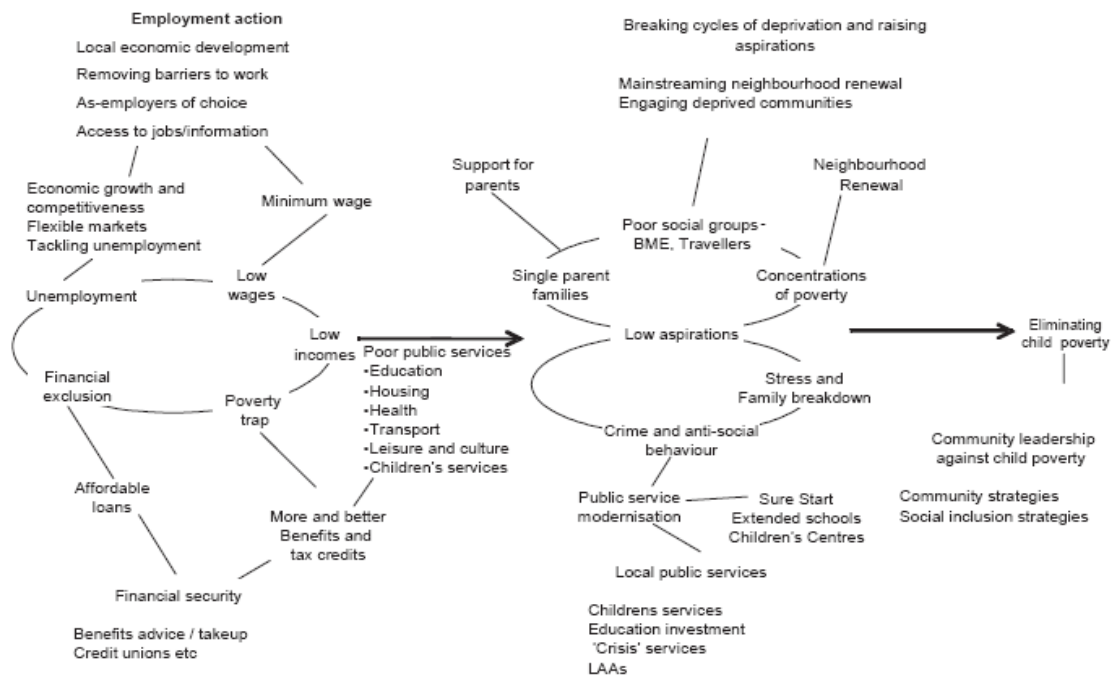
This conception of some public policy as permissive and discretionary with relatively ambiguous output targets and performance criteria carries particular implications for the implementation of such policy, for "joined up government" (6, 2004), for "sensemaking" (Weick,1995) and for "modernisation" agendas (Newman, 2001). The interest here is in those more ambiguous, public policies where debates about value arise and frequently an "implementation gap" (Hill and Hupe, 2002, Newman, 2002, Exworthy and Powell, 2004, Schofield, 2004) emerges. Jones (2001:2) has written about education policy as an "over-determined bricolage" which seems to bear resemblance to a palimpsest. The "argumentative" and/ or cultural turn, (Yanow, 1996, Fischer, 2003), "discourse theory (Fairclough,1992, Skelcher et al, 2005 ) work on organizational sense-making (Weick, 1995) policy sociology (Bacchi,

1999, Ball, 2006, Gale,2001) feminist theory (Bryson, 2007) and policy framing (Young, 1977) all inform the sensitizing device. As these analyses range across social welfare and environmental policies, despite my caveat, the palimpsest analogy translates beyond childcare policy and is applicable to other “protean” policies. To repeat, the primary focus of the paper is empirical. There is not space in this paper to fully engage in theoretical debates about the nature of discourse in relation to historical materialism or critical realism (for some debates see Conrad, 2004, Fitzpatrick,2005,especially chapter 6 and Jessop’s work on ‘cultural political economy’ Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008).

Balbo (2005) has described policy as a patchwork quilt and that model is useful as long as it incorporates temporality and so is conceived as three, not two dimensional. Quilts, like palimpsests, are recyclable artefacts. A two dimensional matrix does reflect the way in which various projects are assembled into programmes and make up policy. Crucially, a focus on temporality enables recognition of the shifting views of history and visions of the future that emerge in implementation processes and become embedded in projects and policy understandings.

### **Sure Start Children’s Centres: a coherent policy?**

At the level of local implementation, extensive translation work may be required to make sense of new policy in relation to existing contradictory social formations (Newman and Clarke, 2009:20). Especially in what Michel and Mahon (2002) term “protean policy”, the question of which projects or programmes align with which set of policies becomes a matter for empirical investigation. This complicated diagram depicts Sure Start, Extended Schools and Children’s Centres as part of UK local government’s contribution to eliminating child poverty.



**Child poverty the local government contribution diagram reproduced from LGA (2003:15)**

Cropper and Goodwin (2007:31) write:” In wicked problems the pathways may be circular – poverty leads to poor health, which in turn feeds back to continuing deprivation.” This diagram frames Sure Start, Extended Schools and Children’s Centres as part of public service modernisation which is depicted as part of Local Government’s contribution to solving the “wicked issue” of child poverty. Cause and effect are difficult to disentangle thus posing the challenge of how to formulate explanations. The palimpsest sensitizes us to the relatively arbitrary nature of defining the content and beginnings and end points for complex policies, especially in complex community based initiatives (Coote et al 2004).

Sure Start was launched following the 1997 Comprehensive Spending Review. This was a “flagship” programme for New Labour, described by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as the “jewel in the crown” of policies to tackle child poverty (Clarke, 2006, Penn, 2007:196). It fitted the modernisation discourse with its emphasis on “new ways of working”. There were assumptions that partnership working could achieve policy coherence or “joined up Government” (6, 2007, Eisenstadt, 2002, Newman, 2001). A range of “policy entrepreneurs” (Williams, 2002) as well as local families

were encouraged to get involved in the governance of Sure Start, giving rise to metaphors around top-down and bottom-up policy making (Taylor, 2003, Schofield and Sausman,2004). However, the bottom-up attempt to ground the governance of Sure Start Local Programmes in their local communities was abandoned in 2005 with a shift back to Local Authority control (Belsky et al, 2007).

Social policy researchers have demonstrated the separate but linked policy elements of “cash and care” (Glendinning and Kemp ,2006). In the UK local authorities have no jurisdiction over personal tax and welfare benefits that are determined nationally. They do, however have responsibility for organising social services and child welfare and, since the 2004 Children Act they have been expected to work in partnership with other agencies including NHS organisations (Belsky et al, 2007).

### **Initiatives**

A report published in 2006 from the national team evaluating Sure Start (NESS) detailed the “Evolving Policy Context for SSLPs” (Sure Start local programmes). It noted that:

“The period between 2001 and 2004 ... has been characterised by a series of major policy developments ... The speed and scale of the changes have simultaneously underlined the centrality of SSLPs ... and at the same time have posed an additional challenge to their implementation. Indeed even the key terminology has evolved: whereas in 1999, the term “Sure Start” was synonymous with local programmes,. ... since the 2002 Spending Review, the term Sure Start now covers the following :

- Early education and child care services (including individual programmes such as SSLPs; Neighbourhood Nurseries; Early Excellence centres) for children up to 14 (and 16 if the child has special educational needs) and their families;
- Out of school services through Extended Schools
- Promoting the integration of services for children to improve outcomes for all children, especially those who are the most disadvantaged.

(NESS report 10, Nov 2005)

Early Excellence Centres preceded Sure Start and the Neighbourhood Nurseries initiative was launched within two years of the first wave of Sure Start local programmes. Subsequently, where these initiatives could demonstrate they met the criteria of Sure Start, they could be re-branded with the Sure Start logo (self-citation) and so policy proceeded by relabeling and re-configuring past initiatives to incorporate them into the “new” programme of Sure Start Children’s Centres. On the one hand Sure Start could be framed in relatively unambiguous terms of its “core offer” comprising family support, child and family health services, a base for childminder services and childcare provision. On the other hand the “permanent revolution” and “hyper-innovation” led to complexity for local implementers. Wincott (2006 : 299) describes a “chaotic set of policy outputs” explaining how Sure Start was not the only childcare initiative emanating from central government. He details how:

“...in the early period of Labour government, hyper-innovation produced a proliferation of ECEC [early childhood and education] "models" and initiatives at a rate of more than one major national program a year. ... At both the local and national levels, the administration of ECEC was also subject to permanent revolution.

Rutter (2006:140) writes as someone involved in the national evaluation of Sure Start (NESS). He argues that the basic problem was that nobody knew what Sure Start was:

“... it makes little sense to ask whether Sure Start ‘works’ or is effective. That is because there is no such thing as Sure Start in the sense of a defined programme with a definable intervention strategy (despite government implying the contrary). Instead, it constitutes a large ‘family’ of programmes that involve as much diversity as commonality .... In what sense can it be claimed that the Sure Start policy is evidence-based?”

This notion of diversity and a ‘family’ of programmes fits with the palimpsest analogy and with Newman and Clarke’s work on ambiguity, assemblages and articulation (2009) and suggests that local implementers would be likely to be facing contradictions and uncertainty. Originally Sure Start was devised as a two-generational family support programme. Subsequently, the issue of childcare rose in



prominence as the programme became increasingly aligned with welfare to work programmes (Glass, 2005) and so the policy-palimpsest became associated with a different set of meanings.

### **Care work, welfare reform and unintended consequences**

Despite the hyper-innovation of policy emanating from central government, this was met by sedimented beliefs that were resistant to change at the local implementation level. Historically the care of young children has been women's work, carried out in the private sphere of the family. Feminists insist that looking after young children along with other forms of "emotional labour" is work. Leach presents a dystopic fear of a society in which childcare is increasingly commodified and parents struggle to combine paid work with caring. (Leach, 1994, reproduced in Hendrick ed. 2005). Tensions between neo-liberal arguments for childcare as a means of moving lone parents (who are mainly women) from welfare into paid work, providing additional flexible labour to employers and saving welfare bills and a redistributive rationale promoting equity and social justice through early childhood education are analysed by Penn (2007) . Bryson ( 2007:102), arguing for "uchronia" (a utopian vision of the time we want) has also described ambivalent attitudes towards working mothers so that progress achieved in the public provision of childcare might be viewed negatively if families do not have adequate family time. The policy assumption underpinning welfare to work policy is that work is equivalent to paid work taking place in the formal economy. Despite this hegemonic policy frame, one implementation report showed that many policy implementers exercised their discretion and ignored the employability target because of their traditional values and beliefs about whether mothers of pre-school aged children ought to be doing paid work (Meadows and Garber, 2004).

Contemporary UK childcare policy adopts the gender neutral term "parent" and policy texts rarely demonstrate any awareness of gender inequality. For example, Sure Start Children's Centres Practice Guidance (DfES, 2005:63) suggested that when practitioners may be working in "*some communities*", "*fathers may need to be engaged specifically in their role as **head of the family.***" [my emphasis]. This exposes contradictions in the hegemonic representation of Sure Start Children's Centres as a gender neutral policy or programme. It is a matter of political

interpretation whether the notion of a head of a family is a legitimate subject, or a dangerous, historically anachronistic patriarchal construction. Jessop writes:

*“There are always interstitial, residual, marginal, irrelevant, recalcitrant and plain contradictory elements that escape any attempt to identify, govern, and stabilize a given ... arrangement ...”* (Jessop,2004:163).

The implementers’ resistance to policy was not consciously articulated as resistance but decisions made by those responsible for implementation directly influenced policy outcomes. Rather than being determined by legislation and rational output targets, the policy palimpsest is thus reproduced or re-shaped by unexamined historically derived assumptions and values that influence decisive action. Newman and Clarke (2009:25) write:

“... the rationality of what works is one that takes the politics out of public policy issues by rendering them not the site of contestation over competing values, or between different interests, but making them instead the focus of technical judgements about the efficiency or efficacy of different solutions.”

Here the “technical” employability targets of a modernising welfare to work agenda were not achieved and so the neo-liberal “workfare” effects of the policy were undermined. The policy-palimpsest was reinscribed by these implementers’ deeply held (feminists might say reactionary) traditional values and beliefs about women’s work and childcare responsibilities.

There were six annual rounds or waves of funding allocated to Sure Start Local Programmes by central Government before the policy transmuted to become Sure Start Children’s Centres (Belskey et al, 2007, Clarke, 2006). At this time the Extended Schools initiative was also launched by central Government. This was when I commenced an ethnographic study of childcare policy implementation as it took place in “real time”.

### **A real-time study of implementation practices**

Rather than starting with the presumption of an unambiguous childcare policy, this empirical research was guided by the question “how are the ambiguities, tensions

and contradictions of childcare policy experienced by people responsible for implementation and what do their sense-making practices look like?" I started with the assumption that childcare policy was contradictory, comprising competing frames or discourses and an interest in Weick's work on sense-making (1995). While post hoc positivist policy evaluations freeze frame policy in order to measure outputs and ex ante policy analysis predicts policy effects, ethnography offers the possibility of studying moving policy frames in "real time" (Mosse, 2004, Shore and Wright, 1997). This method can open up the black box of implementation to examine implementation processes, in particular the meaning making practices of policy implementers that shape a policy-palimpsest.

Following ethical approval and guarantees of anonymity, access was granted by a local authority and data was gathered over a period of ten months through observation of a Community Learning Partnership (hereafter CLP). This is a network designed by a local authority as an implementation vehicle for combining the "new" policies of Sure Start Children's Centres and Extended Schools. Strongham is the pseudonym for the tier of a local authority that has responsibility for social services. New Town is the name given to the more local CLP. In non-participant observer capacity, I sampled a variety of opportunities to gather data, including CLP meetings and consultation events. The data set incorporates documents, (n=171), interview transcripts (n=55) from semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the partnership network and people working in related policy areas, policy ephemera (n=5), (see Carter, 2011) and field notes taken from observations of 16 meetings. An ethnographic method should not entail naive empiricism. Qualitative research is essentially a creative endeavour but following Willis and Trondman (2000) the study was theoretically informed. Rather than a recipe or rote adoption of a particular analytical framework (Mason, 2002), I identified relevant themes from an interdisciplinary literature review and combined these, adapting King's (1998) template analysis. Using N-Vivo software enabled analysis to proceed iteratively through identifying pre-defined codes derived from the literature review and combining these with novel codes as new themes emerged. In writing up ethnography, Chenail's (1995) advice is to "let the data be the star".

The policy shift was announced by Central Government with the release of new capital and revenue finance to local authorities and the discursive trope of “progressive”. All communities were now to benefit from Sure Start Children’s Centres but disadvantaged neighbourhoods would receive a greater investment. This entailed a proportionate reduction so that Sure Start Children’s Centres were proportionately less well resourced per head of population than previous rounds of funding for Sure Start (Clarke, 2006). The policy trajectory could be framed nationally as increased investment, whereas Glass (2005) estimates that the policy shift entailed a 30% reduction in spending per child. The local authority that I studied faced the challenge of making sense of the policy shift, getting partners such as schools and NHS colleagues on board to help achieve their CLP strategy, creating projects that met the “core offer” policy criteria and allocating resources swiftly to achieve the target of spending the money by the end of the financial year. Although Strongham was formally the accountable body for Sure Start Children’s Centres, the authority retained an emphasis on localism and nominally devolved budgets to the multi-agency CLPs. The CLP strategy document was explicitly referred to as a “translation” of national policy to suit the local authority context. It contained a list of proposed CLP districts based on statistical mapping using Geographical Information Software (GIS). The document went through several iterations, metaphorically becoming a palimpsest. Strongham was provided with policy guidance by central Government but this arrived late.

#### Ambiguity and pre-emptive policy implementation

The CLP consultation document produced by the local authority stated that there was “no blue print”- i.e. no set template or formula was available for implementers to understand how they were supposed to move from Sure Start local programmes to Children’s Centres and Extended Schools or CLPs. Guidance that did exist was described by one official as “not a fat lot of help”. A manager told me:

“Generally I’ve found that you have to be very proactive about these things. You don’t have to wait for guidance to come along. If you can see sort of challenges and opportunities, you can take them. And just because something’s written in legislation, doesn’t actually mean that people will give it

any priority sort of over other initiatives. It does help a little bit but not as much as you'd think it would.”

Lacking definitive, authoritative policy guidance, this policy implementer was faced with making decisions in uncertain conditions and so pre-emptive practices co-authored the local policy-palimpsest. Legislative changes are not necessarily required to support policy change and when legislation is changed, it may still require interpretation as another manager explained:

“What we get coming down are drafts and paper exercises telling us the broad outline of what needs to be done. And I'm not critical of that 'cos sometimes that's the way it can be done. But basically within that they have to almost interpret, like case law, y'know at ground level and decide. And it's a bit like with the private providers [of childcare services]. We've been told broadly to work with them if there's enough there. But we're not told how”

The particular CLP network I gained access to already had an established Sure Start programme that quickly became rebranded as a Sure Start Children's Centre. I was interested in how the modest additional resources (approximately £100,000) attached to the partnership network would be allocated when policy goals had apparently already been achieved. Time and money are traditionally regarded as fixed resources but I go on to show how these resources were negotiated creatively.

#### An oxymoron

Sure Start local programmes had been designed to target disadvantaged areas but the policy shift from Sure Start to Children's Centres was framed by central Government as “progressive universalism” and aligned with the umbrella policy Every Child Matters (DfES,2003). The oxymoron permitted an and / or interpretation of a universal policy with redistributive elements – every child matters except also some may matter more than others. At one meeting of OldTown CLP, a Headteacher put forward his view that “we are supposed to be inclusive. This is for children who come to school having had breakfast, who get dropped off by car as well as the others”. Here child poverty or issues of class were not recognised as being in the local policy frame although other CLP members seemed to feel that their duty was to

those in most need and so there were unresolved tensions between targeted services and universalism.

#### Quick wins, retro-fits and performativity

Prior to the shift to Sure Start Children's Centres, the local authority had already developed some district Sure Start centres over the previous six years. A new strategy was required for the policy shift and this phase was framed as "year one" of a "new" strategy. One Sure Start Children's Centre Manager explained how he was under pressure to innovate which risked reinvention:

What's tending to happen is they're arriving and they say "what can we do new?" so instead of valuing what's going on they want to make an impact and their definition of an impact is "prove you're doing something valuable and new."

One version of the draft CLP strategy referred to "emerging opportunities with partners":

"A number of opportunities for creation of ... Extended Schools and Children's Centres led by health are presenting themselves. These opportunities arising in [X Town and Y Town] present a pathfinder option, to build a small number of "test bed" Children's Centres and Extended Schools."

The passive sentence construction in the strategy document that has no subject or agent ("opportunities that present themselves") belies the notion of policy as agentic, purposeful and teleological pointing toward a more contingent and historically grounded notion of planning (Greener,2002). The "opportunities that present themselves" are existing planned capital investments by the NHS (originally outside of the Sure Start Children's Centre policy) that the local authority is marrying up with its own agenda and drawing into its local policy palimpsest. Where already existing initiatives can meet the requirements of the policy core offer, they can be designated as Children's Centres and Extended Schools. Andy referred to "quick wins":

"...there are some quick wins. At the same time as this [CLP strategy development] has been going on, the Primary Care Trust in the X Town area has been looking to build by a GP clinic. And what we've done in two of them

is to put some money up front with the Primary Care Trust to create a children's centre out of a GP clinic. "

In the area where I observed CLP meetings, the local Sure Start became designated as a Sure Start Children's Centre. This was also referred to as a "quick win". In this case policy's arrow pointed backwards, as an official explained to me "So it's in reverse". The building remained the same but revenue funding was significantly reduced and one retrospective narrative explanation was that Sure Start had always been planned as a pilot programme whereas Sure Start Children's Centres were now "mainstream". Others, however, disagreed and felt that promises of long term, sustained investment had been broken. A voluntary sector manager, told me: "it was going to be long term funding... It was ten years, it was ten years. I have in my file; I can put my hand on it now, a ten year budget projection." I asked "So that felt like a promise?" and she replied "Oh it was ten; this was the way the future was going to be with Sure Start." A civil servant told me how she took the Sure Start evaluation findings with a "pinch of salt":

The NESS evaluation of Sure Start is difficult - knowing that Sure Start was based on Head Start which proved its value twenty years on. I took it with a pinch of salt and wasn't surprised at the negative findings. You can't change communities overnight. It takes almost a generation."

This reference to social change and longitudinal evaluation illustrates the complexity of attempting to hold still "society" in order to study it. Developments were framed as positive by those who viewed the policy shift as pre-planned and progressive but negatively by those who recalled historical policy commitments and felt that promises had been broken.

In some areas of Strongham physical buildings were not readily available and the reduced capital resources were insufficient to build stand alone Children's Centres. Projects such as out of school care and parenting programmes were rapidly assembled with schools and nurseries in clusters to meet central government's policy criteria. This meant that instrumental policy implementation targets could be achieved – the local authority had successfully "delivered". These "campus models" Children's Centres were designated using the term "virtual" – a postmodern sounding phrase for what could be described as a performative process (Ball, 2006).

### A menu as a decision making heuristic

In addition to the designated CLP money allocated by Strongham to New Town CLP, more resources appeared. The teenage pregnancy budget at Strongham had an underspend so CLPs were encouraged to set up projects that would contribute to reducing teenage conception rates – another centralised strategy entering the CLP palimpsest. A menu of different educational sex and relationships projects was put before the CLP Management Action Group for them to make their selection. Options ranged from an educational visit to a condom factory to a residential project for young single parents. This menu functioned as a heuristic – a policy framing device to reduce complexity and a means of speeding up decision making. The projects were packaged up ready for purchase so that the CLP did not need to spend time considering how they would plan and manage the projects – this work had been done for them. However, choice was constrained as a Catholic headteacher said she could not agree to her pupils visiting a condom factory. Religious values thus directly affected decision making. In interview the teacher explained to me how “of course every child matters – they are all made in God’s image.” This indicates that there may not be straightforward agreement on what counts as evidence based policy and practice. Traditional values (apparently timeless for believers) disrupted the modernisation agenda as the policy-palimpsest shifted and re-shaped.

### Discursive negotiation in workshops

Ritual practices of “work-shopping” were where discursive claims about policy were negotiated and the “buy-in” metaphor was used in practice to articulate and assemble alliances:

“If you remember, we have been under serious pressure to spend money within this financial year and we all agreed that this project would be a way of bringing the community together and getting agencies to buy in. “(Sure Start Manager).

I encountered discursive negotiation (Skelcher et al 2005) going on in national and local policy arenas with a range of projects variously aligned with a community safety initiative, family learning or framed with the ambiguous policy label “social inclusion”.



Sometimes change was experienced by policy implementers as stasis, as no progress, “plus ca change”, reinventing the wheel or “here we go again”. I joined in a workshop that was organised as part of a consultation process by Strongham on their emerging CLP strategy. Facilitators requested that participants produce their own version of the “opportunities and challenges” presented by the CLP strategy using brown paper and coloured pens. One group produced a representation of a snakes and ladders game, explaining that “when we get to square one hundred at the end, the government will change its mind again and we’ll be back down to square one.” The apparently playful workshop thus undermined the case for change put forward by managers at Strongham and served to parody policy.

In interview a Headteacher translated the CLP strategy using the discursive frame of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003)

“I don’t think there’s anything that they’ve come up with that’s new, I always thought it was quite amusing when they said y’know our new agenda is ‘Every Child Matters’ and my reply was ‘they always have done’ and they haven’t come up with anything new.”

These sceptical responses to announcements of new policy contradict optimistic “can-do” rhetoric which equates change with progress. At another district CLP consultation meeting, Strongham had taken the opportunity to “piggy-back” their consultation onto a pre-planned community safety partnership event. Youth workers looking for resources to supplement their work interpreted the CLP strategy as an opportunity. They reframed the CLP strategy as a crime prevention initiative with out of school activities for young people translated as diversionary, crime prevention activities. The protean palimpsest of policy was continuously being reworked and reinscribed within the enabling and constraining parameters of the CLP strategy.

#### An apocryphal tale

The ethnographic study showed that as well as the modern technocratic use of statistics and Geographic Information Software, (G.I.S.) policy implementation also relied on the invention and circulation of apparently less modern tools of myth. One way in which the policy paradox of investing in projects associated with Children’s Centres and Extended Schools at a time when more traditional modes of delivering

welfare such as social services were being rationalised, was resolved, not through “evidence” but through the circulation of an apocryphal tale. The story was of a parent, identified as in need of a parenting programme. This service is offered to her by different agencies – by her health visitor, a community worker and a youth justice agency. In one version of the story she is expected to attend a parenting programme in the morning delivered by one of these organisations then a different organisation expects her to attend the same day for a similar intervention in the afternoon. A youth work manager told me:

“And I’ve certainly come across anecdotally someone who was given two appointments in one day and they were both parenting groups and she turned up and she never went back”

The anecdote was myth-like, rarely told with much detail and missing any historical reference to when exactly this event occurred. It was narrated with a conviction that if only such duplication could be avoided, by means of collaboration between agencies, resources would be released into “the system” to better aid families in the future. I was told the apocryphal tale by at least three separate interviewees. I am not suggesting that the story was false. My interpretation of the function of the myth is that it prevented critical consideration of the proportionate reduction in spending, which is a policy decision that is largely outside the control of local implementers. Several implementers “bought into” the modernisation discourse and internalised their responsibility for inefficient duplication. They pragmatically accepted the rationing of resources allocated by central government along with the narrative of waste. This compliant “can-do” implementation practice did not question the direction of the palimpsest and did not excavate beneath the surface of the policy shift but allowed implementers to maintain an illusion of progress.

#### A ghost from the past

At several meetings of the CLP, the ghost of the dead child Victoria Climbié (whose death led to the Lord Laming Inquiry, 2003) was invoked. Victoria’s ghostly presence, ritually invoked in speeches and presentations was accompanied by various rhetorical statements about the need for policy change to ensure that this

tragic child abuse would “never again” happen. This elicited an emotion of pathos in the audience, which meant that policy actors empathised with the speaker’s point of view and “bought in” to the speakers’ proposals concerning the need for a CLP strategy. The ghost functioned as an affective enrolment device (Balogun et al, 2004) . The version of the policy palimpsest that this rhetorical practice assembled was articulated using the policy frame “Every Child Matters”. In this instance, welfare to work was off the agenda, outside of the child protection policy frame. Emotion short circuited any calls for rational evidence. There was no questioning or critique of the CLP strategic direction.

#### An elastic policy-project

In many meetings of Old Town CLP I witnessed a frenetic pace of activity aimed at achieving “year one” implementation targets which short term focus contrasted sharply with rhetorically stated ambitions to secure improvements for future generations. One project did manage to stretch beyond this narrow financial year end target as a locally devised community based circus project became discursively aligned with the 2012 Olympics. Ambiguity was managed through creating this strategically vague elastic-policy-project that could be translated to achieve discursive articulation with a variety of policies meaningful to the various actors involved in implementation. This particular project entailed community artists working with children and their families to perform in a ringed theatre circus space. The project was promoted as designed to generate humanistic feelings of community belonging, excitement, hope and optimism. As well as affecting hearts and minds with a vision of communitarian utopia, the project was also capable of achieving instrumental policy goals as targets for reaching out to “engage” with families could be readily achieved by inviting them to participate in the fun activity. Instrumental rationality and a much more humanistic, creative vision were intertwined. In excited discussions the five circles of the Olympics logo became symbolically aligned with the five outcome measures of Every Child Matters and a five-ringed circus to produce a locally unique version of the policy palimpsest. Every Child Matters was translated by a further education college partner at the circus meeting into “Every Learner Matters”. The elastic-policy-project of the community circus functioned as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer, 1989) allowing implementers again to shift the palimpsest drawing a communitarian discourse (Schofield, 2002) into the frame.

A project manager who had a boundary spanning role (Balogun et al, 2005) within the CLP had access to a Sure Start Children's Centre budget, the CLP budget and was directly employed by Strongham. This enabled her to juggle resources by deciding which budget would account for her time spent on the circus project. These hidden policy practices would not be visible by looking for pre-defined policy outcomes but scraping away the policy palimpsest to look at implementation in practice reveals how unintended consequences occur in particular times and spaces.

### **Discussion: assemblages, articulation and temporary policy settlements.**

Policy is often designed to be strategically vague in order to appeal to a broad coalition, articulating and assembling a range of values and discourses (Stone, 2002). Whilst the stages model of the policy process splits technical administration from the political sphere, we have seen how values and politics re-emerge in implementation (Fox and Miller, 1993). Long before Thatcherism and then New Labour sought to expunge ideology from their policy discourses, academic work had problematised the fact-value distinction and made connections between the empirical present tense "is" and the imperative and normative future tense "ought" (Young, 1977). Childcare in particular is a highly value-laden policy area (Michel and Mahon, 2002) influenced by a modern neo-liberal discourse of welfare to work, by older notions of deserving and undeserving poor families; with traditional understandings of care as primarily women's responsibility buried deep below the hegemonic discourse of a modern gender neutral policy frame. Depending on whether and how progress or reform are conceptualised, childcare policy might be interpreted or framed by Marxists as a regressive, neo-liberal shift in the direction of workfare (Peck, 1998) by right wing analysts as social control of the dangerous underclass (Murray, 2001) by radical feminists as the commodification of care, by liberal feminists as a policy that helps women in particular to achieve equality in the labour market and so on. The national childcare strategy cross references a variety of initiatives and this is why the analogy of a palimpsest useful for understanding how implementers are faced with trying to make sense of and "join up" policy. Policy reaches them as a series of awkwardly aligned imperatives from central Government departments with complex funding regimes and challenging timetables. Despite a

raft of targets and performance indicators attempting to steer policy direction, policy guidance to implementers is not definitive but contains gaps and contradictions.

“Temporary policy settlements” is the term Gale (1999) uses to describe how discursive policy practices can achieve a temporary stasis. Gale explains the difficulty of framing a policy field:

“What the policy analyst is looking for, what is regarded as ‘the policy’ and/or as ‘policy making’, necessarily frames where and how data about policy will be found/produced.” (2001:383)

This table is a schematic representation and my analysis of the particular policy-palimpsest I found in the case study. The micro-implementation practices column represents the ethnographic observations.

<b>Problem frame</b>	<b>Macro / meso policy solutions</b>	<b>Micro implementation practices</b>	<b>Time frame</b>
Persistent social immobility  Child poverty  (class)	Provision of “affordable” childcare Tax credits /welfare to work Sure Start Children’s Centres to give children the best start in life Extended Schools to enhance educational attainment through out of school provision Every Child Matters	Initiativitis Framing of problem and solution as “Generational change” Negotiation of temporary policy settlements Community Learning Partnership as a policy “delivery vehicle”	Target to abolish child poverty by 2010  Contemporary recognition of entrenched social immobility
Vulnerable children in need of state protection (e.g. Victoria Climbié)	Children’s Trusts & partnership multi-agency working Every Child Matters	Narratives framing “never again” Victoria’s ghost invoked as an affective enrolment device Trope of oxymoron – “targeted universalism”	Children’s Trusts established in 2003 Death of Victoria 2000
Anti-social behaviour (social control)	Community safety strategies Every Child Matters	discursive negotiation	Long history of social control of the undeserving poor
Teenage pregnancy	Every Child Matters Sure Start Plus, teenage pregnancy strategy	visit to a condom factory deselected from menu of projects	<b>Pre-modern persistent religious beliefs</b>
Women’s inequality / <b>Sexual division of labour (patriarchy)</b>	Fathers as head of the family Childcare as a public policy issue National Childcare strategy published 1998	Silencing of contentious issues, forgetting of history & the Women’s Movement Childcare off the local CLP agenda	Long duree / inordinate time
All of the above.	Every Child Matters Community Learning Partnerships to deliver Sure Start Children’s Centres & Extended Schools and achieve year 1 target implementation targets 2006/7 Communitarian discourse	“quick wins”, “work-shopping” Retro-fit practices (re-badge the old to make it new) Prescient policy-making (second-guessing ) Elastic-policy-product oriented to utopian vision Buy-in metaphor	“Early days” “year one” Generational change Unspecified future utopian/dystopian visions Plus ca change / stasis 2012 Olympics

Highlighted in bold are three long running macro social “structures” – class, patriarchy and religion that are in sharp contrast to hypermodern (Pollitt 2008) initiatives and quick fix micro-implementation practices. The idea of structure has obvious sociological resonances and the concept has been deconstructed by post-structuralists (Bryson,2007, Fitzpatrick,2005) with the notion under threat of extinction from some postmodern relativists. The debate about agency and structure will no doubt endure but using the analogy of a palimpsest as an analytical sensitizing device I have sought to demonstrate how central Government policy both constrained and enabled local effects and how in turn local practices, actions and decisions affected policy outcomes. Whilst some policy interpreters embraced change, others viewed this cynically as no progress, as “here we go again” so change and stasis were both in evidence. The “how” (the devil of the detail) defined the scope of implementers’ discretion over policy. Greener (2002:615) uses actor network theory to show how “some networks are more durable stable than others and there is a “sliding scale of durability”. As I write the Sure Start brand appears durable but in some cases the brand may be masking marked reductions in funding with a recent OECD (2011) report warning that budget cuts are likely to increase rates of child poverty. The case study, viewed through the conceptual lens of a palimpsest, demonstrates how micro and macro, myth, discourse and money interrelate (Jessop and Osterlinck, 2008). We saw how pre-modern belief systems affected the course of policy implementation when Catholicism constrained the sex and relationships menu and how a ghost from the past was invoked to enrol hearts

and minds. Local policy implementers spent money and made decisions but these were affected by more than ‘these actors here present’ (Mutch, 2002: 487). The material constraints of reduced resources were discursively re-framed using a duplication-inefficiency myth or by re-framing the policy shift as the “mainstreaming” of a pilot programme. The apparently fixed resources of time and money were also creatively juggled by moving money between different budgets and designing a circus project, engaging utopian imaginations to take place beyond financial year end and carry forward feelings of hope and optimism into an unspecified future. Quick fix retro-fit practices performed implementation so that a sense of progress was discursively constructed and instrumental targets were achieved. While the NESS evaluation implementation report demonstrated how outcomes were significantly influenced by ideas about women’s work and care, the welfare to work employability discourse, remained off the CLP’s agenda as childcare provision was already in existence at the Sure Start Children’s Centre.

If “what matters is what works” then it is important to ask “how” policy works in practice and to develop *process* research questions about policy implementation. Although I have evaded the positivist responsibility to specify what “it”, childcare policy, is, I have done so in order to reveal the contingency of temporary policy settlements and to show how what counts as evidence or as policy can be dependent upon interpretation and discursive negotiation. Implementers’ interpretations of “new” policy, combined with their existing ritualized practices and creative use of an elastic policy-project, weave imaginative visions of the future and sedimented historical beliefs into a unique local policy settlement. This illustrates the limitations of reading off policy outcomes from stated policy intentions as expressed in official documents or carrying out quantitative post-hoc evaluations that begin with a presumption of a coherent policy. The ethnography reveals a less reified, more complicated and much less settled policy formation or palimpsest. Implementation practices re-brand and re-badge the old at the same time as ushering in the new. The palimpsest analogy draws our attention to this paradox of change and stasis, structure and agency, the complex inter-relationship of culture and materialism and the ways in which these are influenced by asynchronous time zones. Following Glass (2005) and as recognised by many of the implementers in this study, I assert

that the proportionately reduced resources now going into Children's Centres compared to the original Sure Start local programmes will impact on the level and quality of preventative services they are able to provide. Time will tell whether the narrative of progressive universalism can be sustained. The palimpsest analogy insists that perceptions of progress depend on defining beginning and end points, on how history is interpreted, how policy is framed and how the future is imagined.



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