

Beyond the Ghost Town? The “promising practices” of community based initiatives in Coventry

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Abstract: This article explores two major themes from a structure-agency perspective. First it focuses centrally on how access to the labour market has been influenced by divisions and identities, which it seeks to examine concretely through the case study of Coventry, a city that has undergone a rapid change from a manufacturing to a post-industrial city in the last two decades. Initially the remit of the Warwick University Sequel research team was to focus on class and gender, but given the multicultural character of the city we added “race” and ethnicity, and in practice could not ignore the messages in relation to age, health and disability that were coming through our research. Rather than seek to resolve long standing debates about how class, gender, race, age, etc. relate together and which are most significant, we have simply (1) emphasized the role of class relations because there are now in danger of being overlooked, (2) taken an integrated and holistic approach by adopting biographical methods which show how these play out in the lives of real people. Hopefully, this enables to follow C. Wright Mills (1959) and link “biography and history overall”, at least at the level of the city, the major influences examined over time are structural in their effects.

Keywords: labour market, ethnicity, class, biography

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Introduction: key themes

This article explores two major themes from a structure-agency perspective. First it focuses centrally on how access to the labour market has been influenced by divisions and identities, which it seeks to examine concretely through the case study of Coventry, a city that has undergone a rapid change from a manufacturing to a post-industrial city in the last two decades. Initially the remit of the Warwick University Sequel research team was to focus on class and gender, but given the multicultural character of the city we added “race” and ethnicity, and in practice could not ignore the messages in relation to age, health and disability that were coming through our research. Rather than seek to resolve long standing debates about how class, gender, race, age, etc. relate together and which are most significant, we have simply (1) emphasized the role of class relations because there are now in danger of being overlooked, (2) taken an integrated and holistic approach by adopting biographical methods which show how these play out in the lives of real people. Hopefully, this enables to follow C. Wright Mills (1959) and link “biography and history overall”, at least at the level of the city, the major influences examined over time are structural in their effects. Human agency operates in one of two ways. Individuals and collectivities can seek to challenge or alter the structures in which they operate or else they can seek to influence outcomes within them. For example, in Coventry the Peugeot workers voted not to take strike action to try to prevent the firm closing the plant, and this means that the agency of the workers involved will now involve adapting to these realities.

This connects to our second major theme, the transformative potential of community based initiatives which have sought to pick up the human pieces of these all too familiar “life events” in the history of city. We shall be arguing that on the whole the efforts of Coventry people have taken accommodative route, in a period when labour and the trade union movement experienced significant defeats under Thatcherism in its ability to resist change and influence wider structures. At national level the politics of New Labour have been shaped by this “new realism” and this has certainly been true at local level, and is reflected in the way that initiatives tend to work within the remit of the dominant emphasis on improving employability and the welfare to work approach. However, this does not

mean that they do not make a real difference in enabling people to improve their situation in the labour market and lives in general, nor that the implications of what they do can potentially provide a challenge to the dominant policies. The tensions between what initiatives feel they have no choice to do, and what they feel could *really* make a difference, provides in our view the potential for devising more appropriate social policies for the labour market. In looking at whether the initiatives have made a difference we utilized qualitative evidence, drawing on the “wisdom” of agency workers and unemployed users, and the criteria they thought important, rather than just official goals. This is in contrast to traditional quantitative evaluation approaches which seek to estimate impact primarily on sustained job placement, subtracting “deadweight”, as estimate of who would have got jobs anyway, due to prevailing labour market conditions. We have two objections, first it does not view the relation between environments and interventions in a holistic, interactive way. Second, job placement does not take account of progress made which falls short of achieving a job. This is sometimes called «distance travelled» which can be measured in various ways, in terms of defined employability criteria or «soft outcomes» (Dewson et al., 2000). However, we feel that this can reduce human developmental qualities to human capital. Traditional measures in terms of job placement also fail to make any assessment of whether any benefit to the individual occurred as a result of job placement. Our biographical approach focuses on what unemployed people themselves thought about the progress they made and what made a difference. We also extend the biographical approach to include the agency workers, as there is evidence that, contrary to the mechanistic approach to “what works”, who makes an intervention may have some bearing on outcomes. We discuss these evaluation issues in more detail elsewhere (Carpenter and Merrill, 2006).

We define CBIs as outreach schemes based on voluntary participation aimed at enhancing the supply side employability of disadvantaged people, and sometimes linking to employers, operating outside the official structures of the job centre and agencies like Jobcentre Plus. Typically they will be funded to do this through subcontracts from the employment service, and also through a bewildering variety of funding streams such as the European Social Fund, Learning and Skills Council (LSC), New Deal

for Communities (NDC) and Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF). We looked at a range of initiatives in the statutory (local government) and voluntary sector, though did not look at private sector initiatives.

Our analysis starts with the broader structural context in Coventry within which initiatives were operating, then moves downwards to examine our sample of initiatives themselves, how they went about their work, what agency workers thought were the achievements and problems, and also how the initiatives were perceived by the recipients themselves (insert some figures on initiatives, numbers of agency workers and clients interviewed). We also draw on additional Coventry research conducted by the Coventry Partnership Community Research and Evaluation Service (CRES).

Beyond the ghost town: the changing Coventry economy

In 1953 a sociological text described Coventry as the “most industrial city in Europe”:

Coventry is essentially a city of factory workers. The engineering industries (cars, cycles, aircraft, general and electrical engineering, general ironfounding and miscellaneous metals), absorb over 60 % of the employed population of Coventry. The remainder are employed by the City Corporation (11%), in coal mining (6%), and in the textile, building, retail and distributive trades (Kuper, 1953, p. 31).

The contrast with the present day could not be greater. In the intervening period between the post-war boom and the departure of Peugeot, the Coventry labour market has become more diversified so it is less possible to identify a typical worker but nowadays is more likely to be a public service or supermarket worker. Just to give a few snapshot details, in August 2004, 26 % of workers were in the public sector, Coventry City Council, the NHS and Coventry University being the three largest employers. Distribution (retail and hospitality) and manufacturing, were both around 20 % of the workforce. The most salient point is the city now is a tight labour market, in which though registered employment was down to 3.9 while 21.7 % of the 16-65 working age population remained economically inactive. The main reasons being perceived are caring

responsibilities, health and disability, or full-time study. Vacancies in October 2004 were nearly 4,000, the majority in sales and “elementary” occupations (Coventry City Council, 2004). Since our research, Coventry like other districts in Britain has experienced an influx of migrants from EU accession countries, attracted to fill these vacancies that do not seem to have tempted established Coventry residents.

Coventry is thus a city that has undergone dramatic changes since the mid-1970s from a manufacturing to an increasingly services based city, posing significant problems of social adjustment. The economic and political crises of the 1970s and early 1980s dealt a severe blow to the employment and prosperity of the city, and another recession in the early 1990s further accelerated the decline in manufacturing. Since the mid-1990s the city has undoubtedly experienced a substantial recovery. Though much of this has been due to the general boom in the economy, and the fact that Coventry has good transport connections to south east economy, the city leadership have been proactive in promoting inward investment, with some success. Coventry is no longer the “ghost town” of the famous “Specials” song, but not everyone has benefited equally. The factory jobs that gave unskilled men of a previous era high paid if alienated jobs have disappeared. Much of the expansion of the economy has been low wage and “flexible” retail employment, particularly around the Ricoh arena in the north of the city, centred on a stadium, casino and Tesco superstore.

One way of conceptualising this is by seeing cities and regions as potentially having increased agency *within* the structures of neoliberal globalisation, to the extent that, as Jessop (1995) claims, the nation-state has been “hollowed out” and power passed above, sideways and below to other political and economic actors. Undoubtedly there are signs that cities do compete for business investment, European funds, and national government resources. Coventry for example has along with other cities chased without success in recent years the new national stadium and a super-casino. Also there has been the development of labyrinthine partnership structures to produce a coordinated system. In Coventry there are 3 such overlapping organisations, the most significant being the Coventry Partnership, which has statutory status as the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP).

This hollowing out is also associated with a declining belief among political elites at least that the central state can ensure full employment and protect people against the workings of a global economy, and that prosperity is best ensured by an open economy that attracts global investors. Jessop's Marxist functionalist argument is also that the role of the state in social policy necessarily shifts from protection associated with Keynesianism down a neoliberal road that leads increasingly to forced integration of the unemployed into the labour market. This is also consistent with an emphasis on employability and local discretion and partnering between statutory, private and voluntary sectors to promote the most appropriate forms of local adaptability (Peck and Theodore, 1999).

Though there are trends in both directions it is first possible to exaggerate the extent of decline in the nation-state or shift to workfare in social policy. While there have been steps to decentralise responsibility to local actors, including voluntary and community organisations, and retain control through targeting methods and performance management systems. Similar though there are shifts to increasing compulsion, the desire and need to retain the cooperation of the groups targeted means that some degree of discretion to local actors and commitment to the welfare of the groups concerned has been retained. Therefore the «“new localism”, as this shift has been called, involves complex and relatively uncertain modes of governance, that are riven with tensions and contradictions» (Roberts and Devine, 2003; Williams, 2004).

This is in outline the context in which we examined the activities of a sample of leading CBIs in Coventry to enhance the opportunities of local unemployed people, in a situation where the city was recovering from the “ghost town” experience, in which labour markets were increasing “tight”, but where there were significant areas of poverty, unemployment and inactivity in the city. By April 2006 there had been a rise in unemployment, which appears to have impacted more among younger than older workers with those under 24 years accounting for 30 % of the Job Seeker Allowance (JSA) count. It has been suggested this may be due to increased competition between age-groups due to the continued decline in manufacturing and availability of experienced labour. Nevertheless the JSA rate of 3.3% in April 2006, up from 2.7 % the previous April, was still one of the lowest in the city's recent history (Coventry City Council, 2006).

Overall, compared to other cities, Coventry has been modestly successful. According to the English Indices of Deprivation, Coventry ranked as 63rd worst out of 534 local authority areas in 2004, an improvement on 2000 when it ranked 50th. However it was in 2004 ranked the 25th worst in terms of income deprivation² and 23rd worst in terms of employment deprivation³ domains. However these are relatively marginal differences, although Coventry does not have the high concentrations of areas deprivation to be found in nearby Birmingham, and in North East and North West England (ODPM, 2004).

More significant perhaps are the area-based differences within the city, as inequalities appear to widening between the 31 “priority” neighbourhoods and the more affluent remainder. There are also differences between “deprived” priority areas such as Hillfields and Foleshill which are inner city areas with a number of poor residents, many of whom are members of ethnic minority groups (results of 2001 census) and outlying estates such as Wood End, Willenhall and Canley which are predominantly white. The Coventry Partnership Community Research and Evaluation Service (CRES) has since 2002 researched these area based differences in detail. The basic dynamics of change are that manufacturing jobs have largely migrated away from working class areas, and comparable jobs have not replaced them. A predominantly white estate like Stoke Aldermoor was built around a Humber car factory that has long since closed down. Similarly, Canley on the south of the city, for the Morris Engines plant of which there is now no trace. The latter is situated in the south west of the city where there are plenty of middle class jobs, but a dearth of well paid manual jobs (CRES, 2005). These area based symptoms are part of national and global political-economic structural dynamics which impact most on the most vulnerable and least qualified members of the working classes, and which may not always be amenable to area-based initiatives (ABIs) (Lupton, 2003). Many of the community-based

² Numbers of adults and children living on means-tested benefits, Working Families and Disabled Person’s Tax Credits, and National Asylum Seeker (NASS) supported asylum seekers.

³ Numbers on JSA, Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance claimants and participants in New Deal for Employment schemes.

approaches examined in this essay were linked to ABIs of one kind or another.

In Table 1 below, the findings of 2004 CRES household survey of a sample of residents across the city illustrates the extent of employment and other inequalities associated with Coventry as post-industrial city.

Tab. 1: Divided Coventry 2004: Illustrations on Employment and related issues

Priority	Neighbourhoods %	“Rest of city” %
In full-time paid work	40.4	46.6
In part-time paid work	12.0	14.4
Self employed	1.3	4.7
Managerial and professional	13.0	24.0
Process, Plant and machine operatives	14.4	8.1
Elementary occupations	20.4	9.5
No academic qualifications	53.8	38.7
Registered unemployed or seeking work	8.5	1.5
At home/not seeking work	16.0	10.6
Long term sick or disabled	7.2	3.6
Working age households with no-one in paid work	26.5	14.4
Very satisfied with neighbourhood as place to live	17.5	32.4
Sense of a lot of choice and control over one’s life	28.9	50.3
Worried about being able to make ends meet	22.4	10.6

Source: Quality of Life Household Survey (CRES, 2005).

These findings triangulate with official figures. To take some examples, while we saw that the city JSA rate was 3.3 % in April 2006 in Foleshill, an ethnically diverse priority neighbourhood it was 7 %, and in nearby Hillfields (Hillfields) 5.6 %, whereas for more prosperous areas like Earlsdon it was 1.2 % and Cheylesmore 1.9 % (Coventry City Council, 2006). Among some groups such as Pakistani/Bangladeshi people, local

JobCentre Plus figures for the Ricoh Arena development estimated rates of around 15 % ILO unemployment.

The CRES 2004 survey also asked respondents not in work about the barriers that they had experienced in getting the type of work they wanted. Across the city age, being too old or young, emerged as the most significant issue (29 %), followed by child care responsibilities and illness or disability, qualifications or lack of availability of jobs. However age was less significant, and childcare and health, followed by a perceived lack of available jobs, for those living in priority neighbourhoods (CRES, 2005).

The transformative potential of community based initiatives (CBIs)

“We’re not the job centre”: “agency workers”, ethics of care, empowerment and social justice

In order to explore the effect that community based initiatives had on either helping people within structures or to overcome the disadvantage, discrimination, subordination and oppression associated with them, we utilized a “realist” framework, drawn from Bhaskar. This sees the outcome of any social process as relatively open, leading to continuity of change. We were therefore not just interested in the specifics of whether people got qualifications, jobs etc but the extent to which it opened in terms of outcomes related to social relations such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Our argument is that at present the initiatives are largely, but not wholly concerned with reproduction, but there are aspects of their approach that could have transformative effects if wider policy frameworks made it more possible.

The five major and one or two smaller initiatives we investigated were examples of a growing number that had largely emerged in the city since the mid-1990s. Some were voluntary sector, some public operating within the Regeneration Division of the City Council. They all sought in one way or another to work in flexible and non-bureaucratic ways to engage disadvantaged people, particularly those who defined as “hard-to-reach”, and provide intensive support, often of an individualised kind, to acquire or enhance personal, social and substantive skills, encouraging and assisting job search, and fostering integration to the local labour market. However,

voluntarism was seen as a key element to an empowering approach which allowed “clients”⁴ to decide what was in their best interest. This was a value commitment, but also seen as a marketing necessity, as reputation and word of mouth were often seen as the best method of recruitment. Significantly, one of the key means by which the initiatives promoted themselves to unemployed or economically inactive people, was that as agency workers said time and again said: «We’re not the job centre».

The aim typically was to identify and address a range of issues that might be affecting people’s access to the labour market, but also the general quality of their life. Confidence building through a “STEPS” programme or similar often formed a core area of work. Agency workers sought to identify a wide range of issues, health, childcare, debt or whatever, that could if addressed improve employability, but generally address a person’s needs. Although providing access to employment was seen as central, they claimed to have a general commitment to addressing whatever problematic issues arose. Examples were cited. One agency cited as a “success” a man who had been made redundant and deteriorated so far he had maggots in his clothes, whom they helped back to personal and social functioning.

Despite this common “core” approach, there was considerable diversity in the initiatives. Some like the general and mental health employment projects in Canley were specific projects financed by a Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) in the case of the two Canley projects, or the European Social Fund (ESF) as in the case of the two Canley projects and the Community Based Economic Development (CBED). Others were organisations like the Client Support and Research Unit (CSRU) in the public sector with a spread of funds, and the voluntary based Willenhall Education, Employment and Training Centre (WEETC), Working Actively to Change Hillfields (WATCH) and Foleshill Women’s Training (FWT). The voluntary organisations were closely linked to their disadvantaged locality, but did not always restrict their activities to it. The Muslim Resource Centre (MRC) was based in Foleshill but had a city-wide remit. Although voluntary organisations had some time-limited core-funding, most if not all of the employment related activities were governed by

⁴ We use this as the discourse most often used by agency workers, involving a focus on the individual and the voluntary, service-focused character of the encounters.

conditional contracts. Some, for example, were required to deliver qualifications for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and place people in jobs within 13 weeks for the Job Centre, and sometimes having to meet contrasting targets for the same group of clients. The initiatives, therefore, while having some discretion in how they accessed “hard-to-reach” local people were in most instances required to meet quantitative targets. During the period of the research, a mental health employment worker in Canley lost her job as the NRF contract came to an end, and a section of the CSRU folded because it failed to reach demanding job centre targets.

The voluntaristic principle was seen as key to empowering people to get jobs:

There is never any pressure on anybody to do anything they don't want to do. It is giving the choice...Because it's opening up opportunities, it's giving people the choice to you know if they want to take part in something (Female Canley employment worker)

Agency workers reported that clients that were “sent along” from the jobcentre were often the hardest to help.

There was thus sometimes a disparity between what they were required to meet as part of their targets, and what they regarded as their “real” work. This is summed up in the following quotation from an agency worker:

We should look at the clients as people as a whole. They might not get that job right now but we have moved them forward, we really have made a difference in their life and now they are able to go into a job a little bit later. We cannot be too rigid on the targets. We have to look at what people are good at. Look at the distance they have travelled – the difference it has made in their lives. We should be recognised for that as well (female project worker).

For a FWT worker it was a success to get isolated south Asian or refugee women who may be subject to patriarchal controls, out of their homes and on to language or computer courses. Their motivation may be in the first case be to learn language and other skills to enable them to keep up with their children in school. From this employment might then become an option in the future. In order to overcome barriers, organisations like WEETC and FWT provided their own nurseries for children of women undertaking courses.

There were clear views among the around 20 agency workers we interviewed about the benefits and problems of the system they were operating in. While there was conditional commitment to the supply-side approach and the potential value of employment there was also acute criticisms of its deficiencies. Some agency workers argued that employment was not necessarily the right outcome for everyone. A CBED worker gave the example of a man who had been enabled to be active in his local “priority” neighbourhood and had made a real difference. This provided by the basis from which he gained unemployment as night watchman, which in the view of the worker, involved retrogression for both the individual and the community. Agency workers complained of the effects of short-term horizons as well as funding, and the expectation of quick results with clients who faced considerable barriers. Very few were able to know how people fared when they gained employment and whether people reached dead ends or used jobs as stepping stones to advancement. Quite a few agency workers criticized the quality of jobs available to people at the lower end of the labour market. These were not just low paid but insecure and this made it something of a gamble for people to leave the relative security of state benefits, as a CSRU advisor pointed out. These uncertainties and concerns reinforced the voluntaristic approach, and the view that it was “up to the person to decide”.

Some agencies had started to link up with employers. WATCH for example had formed close connections with a local employment agency and with Peugeot in happier days in 2003 when it had been recruiting for its night shift. There was evidence of collaboration between agency workers. Organisations were members of the local Recruitment Network which provided a database of local jobs and client CVs. One of the Canley projects had developed a training scheme linked to a guaranteed interview with the University of Warwick, a nearby employer. This has subsequently been emulated elsewhere in the city in a scheme developed for lone parents linked to Barclays Bank.

One feature of the current fashion for pragmatic “what works” approaches is that they abstract the intervention from a situated and holistic analysis of the social contexts in which they occur. In the realistic evaluation framework (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) the people involved, their motivations and the quality of their interactions and how they are perceived

by those receiving them are all relevant issues. To this end we were interested in agency workers and clients themselves as real people, both with their own sometimes overlapping biographies, and whether this made any difference.

As far as the agency workers were concerned, while they had very varied personal journeys or pathways into work with unemployed people, some patterns emerged. First there were those who, sometimes from a graduate background had sought the work out:

I always wanted to go into something that was community-based and people-based (Female agency worker, CSRU).

As well as those “professionals” with a primary motivation in this direction, there were also who were seeking to escape the bureaucratic restrictions and limitations that had experienced working either in mainstream Council Posts or the job centre. Another woman working for CSRU had been in management and had become stressed and disillusioned, and this work represented a new direction in her life. In these instances the desire to work in this area came from a critique of traditional approaches, or what they had previously been doing, which they also experienced as a brake on their own personal creativity.

Some agency staff particularly in the voluntary sector came from the same backgrounds as the clients, and may even have progressed to the posts through agency training courses. They tended to emphasize two things: first empathy derived from having identities and experiences in common, and second that they represented role models, that “I have done it myself” even though it was difficult. For example a FWT worker stated:

We are women and we can help other women and say look it’s not that bad you can do it. We understand each other, we don’t shrug them off, we understand the reality of what happens (Female agency worker, FWT).

One male WATCH agency worker we interviewed, for example, had been a refugee himself from the Balkans, and refugees were one of the main client groups. This gave him considerable credibility, as well as contacts, language skills and cultural knowledge.

One of the striking features of many initiatives, in both public and private sectors, seemed to be the role played by charismatic and strongly motivated individuals in getting them under way and sustaining them:

It is more than a job, it becomes part of your life you know, and that's how the team think (Female manager, voluntary sector)

This had many positives, but could also seem to have high cost to them as individuals and could also leave something of a vacuum behind if they moved on to other things, as one or two did during the course of our research.

This is not to suggest there was a fundamental difference between charismatic leaders and agency staff in general. One of the strongest motivations was a personal desire to have an impact, and the pleasure this caused. As one employment advisor from an unemployed background herself put it:

I love what I am doing because I can see the impact I am having on people. My reward is when somebody phones me up and say I have got a job because of you. I cry and get butterflies, you know it just makes me feel you know you couldn't pay for that feel good factor because you know you have that positive impact on somebody else's life (Agency worker, Canley).

The caring concerns were to varying degrees also combined with a concern to empower people and create a collective and institutional means of support often defined as "the community" as well as personal help. As an Asian woman homeworking officer expressed this common theme:

There is a great sense of community achievement in there. When I first took this job on, there were very few community processes and structures that you could get people involved into. So a personal achievement is that you are actually empowering women perhaps on many different levels (Female Asian homeworking officer).

These concerns were also often combined with a keen sense of social justice, sometimes linked also to the agency worker's own biography. As one put it in relation to the situation of refugees he was working within the city.

I left Ireland many years ago as an economic migrant so I have done it myself but to leave and leave all your friends and family and leave your kids behind and to go to a different place and be placed in a situation where people are hostile – where the media and the whole world seem to be against you and put you all in this sort of category. (Male agency worker, WATCH).

It was often recognized that the changes brought about were relatively small, and while there was strong commitment for helping people into employment, this was placed in a broader context:

Personally, I have always favoured the idea that people should get a job that not only pays a wage but it's going to enhance their lives and lead to them becoming more proactive and confident citizens if you like, (male CBED worker).

The rigidities of the benefits system and particularly the high rates of marginal tax as beyond the small earnings limits benefit is lost pound for pound:

Reform of the benefits system so that you are allowed to keep more of your earnings and stay on benefits. The biggest jump you have to make is out of unemployment and into employment and self employment. If you have got children and housing benefit you have got a huge hump to make in terms of income to replace all of that. (female CBED worker)

Although there were significant numbers of men working within this sector, a considerable numbers of agency workers were women, and not just those linked to women's employment projects like FWT and New Opportunities for Women (NOW) (part of CBED). Women were often in the leading positions and we think this, without making "essentialist" assumptions, made a difference in terms of the culture and approach of organisations and initiatives. In other words, drawing on distinctions made by Gilligan (1982) we found a strong "ethic of care". However, in contrast to the findings of her classic study we found that it was often combined with other ethics or discourses. The two main were those of "individual empowerment" and "collective social justice" which were different ways of ensuring that "care" did not lead to dependency. These different discourses did not exist in separate compartments, but received different degrees of emphasis. Those who also emphasized collective social justice alongside individual empowerment were also most likely to experience dilemmas in

integrating unemployed people into low paid or “poor work” (i.e., work that is not just low paid, but may also be insecure, unpleasant, hazardous, not developing skills, etc).

In general terms the initiatives arose from and contributed further to the adaptation of the city to the changed circumstances, with a strong value emphasis on creating “local jobs for local people”. Whether justified or not, there was a widespread concern that on their own regeneration initiatives in the 1980s did not deliver these. The City Council had adopted a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target with central government on creating local employment which was met and established a framework for further development. Thus since the 1990s there had been the growth of what might therefore be called a “local employment alliance” involving the voluntary sector, public and private providers in the Council and agencies such as Job Centre Plus, and local politicians. This fitted into part of a substantial growth in community activism and “new social movements” issues of gender, race, disability, the environment and sexuality. This had grown independently, but the politics of the 1990s onwards had created a space for a broader range of equality issues to be raised. This growth of a more fragmented “community politics” in the context of a “post-industrial” and “post-Thatcherite” city, to a degree compensated for the decline in the traditional politics of the “social democratic” industrial city, associated with the loss of trade union influence and decay in the power of the Labour Party, which by May 2006 had lost political control over the city.

Disrupted biographies and unemployed journeys

We undertook around 50 tape-recorded interviews with unemployed users of CBIs in Coventry, all of which were transcribed and analysed using NVivo. We were interested in their individual narratives or employment and unemployment “journeys”, and how these connected to broader transformations in the city, of “biography and history”. We are aware that we have space here to give brief and inadequate portraits of complex and many-faceted lives.

Without wanting to over-generalise, the men in our study tended to have some experiences in common. One of these, whether they had qualifications or not, was an unhappy time at school, and another was strong currents of emotions about their experiences:

Like I say I was anti-establishment from about 9 years ole. I hated school...Teachers used to hate me (Dave⁵ age 36, WATCH).

Dave had a “fractured” biography which casts a long shadow, having been in the care of social services from 11-18, and a disrupted employment record. He contrasts this with his brother’s better fortune in the labour market, who was able to ride the crest of the wave of the new post-industrial finance and computers. He had done door work, and got into drugs, and had spells of homelessness. The success of his brother despite a similar background heightened his sense of personal failure.

Jim’s misfortune was contrasted with his father’s good luck in a different era:

He was a toolmaker and surface grinder. 29 years at GEC (Coventry electrical company) and the rest of his time was spent at 2 other companies after he finished at GEC in the ‘50s...

So it’s ideal if you can work it like that (Jim, age 58, WEETC).

Curtis, (age 36, WATCH) a second generation African-Caribbean man, with a mother who was a nurse and a father employed in the Post Office, seemingly left school without any formal qualifications. He preferred not to talk about it, focusing more on his City and Guilds levels 1 and 2 in painting and decorating. He had clearly had experience of a number of employment schemes having previously done landscape gardening as part of the “community programme”. By contrast, refugees and asylum seekers we interviewed were often highly qualified:

I was student in Afghanistan. And this time started...Started like revolution in 1978, yeah...The government sent me in Russia for high education...I finished that education in 1986. Got my master’s degree in history (Nasser, age 49, WEETC).

A number of the middle-aged men who had grown up in Coventry had experienced spells of unemployment during their lives, having been made redundant several times. Bill was at Leyland cars, then in the 1980s shifted to GEC but that ended after a couple of years:

⁵ All names are fictitious.

Oh yes I have had windows of unemployment. During those times I have either been out short term or longer period of times when I have been doing some work training to get my skills updated (Bill, age 58, WEETC)

These individual thumbnail sketches show how a combination of personal troubles linked to a vulnerable social position, age, health, ethnicity, local economic change and distant politics disrupt some men's lives and affect their purchase in the labour market. Some men connected these elements together:

I had worked at various major manufacturers in Coventry until 1991 when I was at the Jaguar and was made redundant. Since then I have not managed to gain proper employment., Yes I was made redundant with 7,500 others. Well the week I was made redundant, this city lost 28,000 engineering jobs. 28,000 went and Courtaulds closed and factories closed – it was the proverbial ghost town (Bernard, aged 53, WATCH).

There were other examples of how individual biographies and the wider narrative of the shift from industrialism to post-industrialism had intersected. For example, the older Pakistani man we interviewed who was a client of the Muslim Resource Centre. One had worked for Courtaulds before it had closed down, and had not worked since, being in receipt of Incapacity Benefit as a result of long term depression and anxiety.

One way of understanding these experiences is via Bury's (1988) concept of "biographical disruption", devised to account for the impact of disability on people's lives. This certainly applied to some of the men in our study. For example, Michael is a second generation African-Caribbean man (age 35, WATCH) who at 19 years had been the victim of a serious car accident. He was in hospital for 2 years, and had spent the last 8 years on Incapacity Benefit. However, we think that the concept has wider applicability. For many of the older men, despite tendencies to instability, unemployment did disrupt their previous expected male lifetime career model. However for the younger men, the difficulty was in terms of gaining a foothold in the labour market to establish such a biography. For refugees and asylum seekers the effect of political events in disrupting biographies is apparent enough. There was no sign among the men we interviewed of a "culture of worklessness" where unemployment was "normal". Rather their

circumstances which they experienced made it difficult to construct a male employment biography.

As far as women are concerned, patriarchal structures and attitudes do not necessarily make unemployment or economic inactivity “biographically disruptive”, though they can be. On the whole the women clients were younger than the men, though we do not know who representative this is of Coventry initiatives as a whole. If there was a common theme among the diverse group of women we interviewed, it was often an expressed lack of confidence in their own abilities. Debby had a fragmented employment career working in a string of low paid supermarket or equivalent jobs, had two children and lived on a run-down housing estate known locally as “doss city”. Conforming to a more widespread pattern, she did well educationally up to her teenage years, gaining 10 GCSEs, but failed to get any A levels:

Got into boys, unfortunately. I didn’t revise as much as I should. I did take Sociology and English literature and then I left school (Debby, age 28 WEETC).

Other white women had established more of an employment career from disadvantaged class backgrounds seeking to advance in traditional and expanding female areas such as nursing, catering and clerical work. Jenny went to college and got more “O levels”, did a pre-nursing course.

...and then I went on to do my SEN (state enrolled) nurse training and passed that, but then I left to have the children and have never gone back (Jenny, age 45, WEETC).

Subsequently Jenny re-entered the labour market full-time and worked her way up to being supervisor and head cook in a canteen. Since her husband is profoundly deaf they had taken the decision that she would be the main breadwinner. At the time of the interview she was exploring the possibility of taking a refresher course to re-enter nursing as a career.

One white woman we interviewed was well qualified but experienced the effects of a life where others made decisions for her. She left school “before I finished my exams” to go into banking:

It was my mum saying go on that will be a good job...She didn’t even give me time to really think about what I wanted to do (Marie, age 42, WEETC)

Then marriage and kids came along, and a husband who was “yes, very old fashioned...he didn’t want me to work, the family didn’t”. However she was told about the local bank needing someone “desperately” and got back in, and had a varied career in banking, the local casino, which had been disrupted by a serious back injury. At the time of the interview, Marie was in receipt of Incapacity Benefit, had divorced her husband, and was sharing custody of the children. The sense of a life lived largely according to other people’s requirements came across also in the account of Joan (age 48, CSRU), an African-Caribbean woman who had a succession of low paid jobs constructed around children and her husband’s shift-work. She had found it increasingly difficult to combine the two, as a result of family tensions. She decided after her father’s death that she “needed a break” to create some autonomy for herself, and had not worked for the 2 years prior to our interview with her.

The Asian women we interviewed had in the main proceeded on the assumption that marriage and children would form the main bedrock to their lives. For some women from more traditional backgrounds, the idea of *having* to work seemed undesirable and even demeaning for a married woman. However a number of Asian women we spoke to became disillusioned when the reality did not live up to expectations, like Shirin, a muslim woman born in the UK who endured abuse from her husband, and discovered he had another wife and two children:

I wanted children, he wouldn’t let me have children. That was the turning point. That’s when I decided to get out and start doing something for myself...He wouldn’t let me work and he wouldn’t let me go out only to go to my parent’s house (Shirin, FWT).

Despite the stigma in the community attached to it, she had separated from here husband. The interviews conducted with Asian women showed considerable diversity, depending on age and generation, and . Some of the older women had worked in Coventry’s industrial economy, like Baljeet, age 66 (FWT) who had checked the work of women assembling TV sets for GEC. First generation women mentioned the educational and language barriers they faced, and the fact that in India or Pakistani, usually only boys went to school.

The negotiation of a dual identity or biography as a worker and as a mother/wife came across in many of the narratives, mediated by culture and material circumstances. In many cases, women seem to have *ultimately* made real choices within strongly constrained structures, and this can, as in the case of Joan, and some of the Asian women interviewed, involve rejection of an employment identity. However, rather than as seeing these decisions as “preferences” or lifestyle choices, as the work of Hakim (2005) seems to suggest, the women we interviewed were often hemmed in by poverty, ill-health, community proscriptions and patriarchal impositions. Against these, they therefore had to *struggle* to make choices. Hakim’s notions of types of women according to their orientation to the labour market and child-bearing, does not seem to fully take account of the twists and turns that are revealed by narrative accounts.

Client perceptions of Coventry community based initiatives (CBIs)

Many of the men we interviewed had heard about the initiatives from friends, had dropped in, or responded to newspaper advertisements. A number like Nasser (aged 49, WEETC) found the fact that training was based in their local community “a hundred yards” from where he lived. Asylum seekers and refugees particularly accessed agencies through their community networks.

Overall, there was strong criticism by men of official employment services. Our research cannot assess whether this is fair or not but has identified such perceptions as a fundamental underlying reality. Thus Mohammed (age 32, WATCH) was not alone in contrasting the CBI with the job centre:

Because I was going to the job centre but I wasn’t getting anything. Even err I am talking 6 or 7 years ago and even now when I go down there I get nothing. I don’t know someone told me about the WATCH centre and I thought I would go and look them up and get CV made up and something like that.

This was in fact a recurrent theme, and the recent shift towards a “self-service” model had not pleased everyone:

Okay everybody has got the attitude oh it can be done with computers, you don’t need client contact...You used to have the instant rapport with a physical person...You know

they can test out far better in person than over the phone...Because the job centre staff are set a target of so many people to get jobs and so many people into permanent employment a day (Bill, age 39, CSRU).

Down the job centre you feel they are not really taking an interest in what you want to do. It's the job they are doing. But here its umm I think that they are more involved her and I think with the job centre what it is its probably time (Michael, age 35, WATCH).

The job centre have rules and regulations and that's it (Dave, age 36, WATCH).

Yes, that's all the job centre, that's what it's all about – it's actually a way of regulating the labour market, yes keeping the wages down (Bernard, age 53, WATCH).

Bernard was also critical of New Deal 25+ scheme that in his experience involved a placement that exploited his skills and didn't lead to a permanent job:

I got £15 a week on top of the dole...There was never ever a chance of job there, so a total waste of time. I did it to keep my hand in.

Younger clients similarly criticised Connexions, the youth employment service seen as one young man put it, concerned primarily with getting "bums on seats" to meet their targets. In summary the men interviewed variously found the official employment services distant, uninvolved, lacking time, concerned with government targets or with "hidden agendas" that they were not in the clients interest. As one client put it, "they administer the unemployed".

They contrasted with their experience of initiatives, which were felt to be accessible, gave them time and attention. Above all they treated them as "people" and "more than a number" or someone to be pressured into taking a job. In many instances it was the range of practical services offered that were appreciated, such as developing a CV, filling in forms, assisting in job search, and interview techniques. As well as this, however, it was clear that the close relationships established with staff made a difference to them. In addition regular and patterned contact with the initiative provided "structure" and social engagement that was helping to turn lives around. We found that a substantial number of the men had engaged in voluntary work as a means of socially engaging and enhancing their skills. One

consequence was that their communities had respectively become dependent on this, involving a potential loss should they get jobs. This supports arguments that more efforts should be made to recognize the validity of unpaid community work by more flexible benefits regulations, and to provide pathways into the social economy through intermediate labour markets and similar schemes [reference to New Start articles]. A range of outcomes need to be seen as valid, not just qualifications and job placement numbers.

Rather than producing sudden change or performing miracles, then, the initiatives seemed to be slowly building or rebuilding confidence, skills, improving health, dealing with debt etc. A number of the male clients talked in this regard of the benefits of establishing a long run relationship with agencies, seeing that this would enable them to get low paid jobs initially but in the longer run to move up the jobs ladder. There are legitimate concerns that this might lead to long term dependency through “churning” and project tourism. Our research methods did not enable us to assess this issue, except that agency workers were aware of and sought to counter the problem. The biographical research also revealed that a sizeable number of the men interviewed had multiple problems making it difficult to access the labour market, except as a longer term project. This dovetails with findings from other qualitative research, for example, by Dean et al. (2003), and has implications for welfare-to-work policies and funding regimes that primarily assume that clients are virtually “job ready”.

There were some muted criticisms. For example, some older men who had been skilled workers in the “old” Coventry economy, thought the initiatives were primarily aimed at enabling people to secure low paid “first rung” positions in Coventry’s “new” economy, than providing the means by which they could acquire positions equivalent to those they had lost. Some of the younger clients felt that the training and services were too general, and they wanted specific training such as in fork lift truck driving, heavy goods vehicle (HGV) training, and Health and Safety hygiene, and agency workers were aware of some of these issues. The costs of training in some of these areas were seen as a barrier by some clients.

Women’s experience of initiatives sometimes also drew negative comparisons with the job centre. Additionally whereas the white men seem to have in many instances “stumbled” on the CBI, white women clients

seemed more often, in various ways, to have sought it out in a purposeful way, though still sometimes hesitantly. These are however tentative conclusions based on a sample of initiatives in just one city. For example, as Brenda (age 36) a participant in the New Opportunities for Women (NOW/CSRU) programme, put it:

By then I was 36 and thinking oh gosh what am I going to be you know what can I do now. What schemes can I get on actually in the January I did see, there was a big write up in the paper about this course for women.

However it was only a result of her mandatory job centre review that she received the leaflet and went along to CSRU and eventually signed up for the course, and at the time of the interview in 2004, “I am really loving it”. For her it offered practical skills and “it wasn’t about pushing you into a job” regardless of your wishes:

I think it’s very, very dispiriting really. I mean some staff are very helpful but...I think it’s because of their targets and things...they want to get through things quickly (Brenda age 36, NOW).

Apart from this, many of the features that men appreciated were similar, such as help with CVs, filling in application forms, interview techniques, etc. The NOW programme also sought to pick up issues through counselling to deal with debt, personal relationships, and provided assertiveness training to build confidence. One of the most important features of NOW’s approach was in helping women to identify the skills they already had, including the practical, social and interpersonal skills they had acquired through their informal family or community work. In this respect, while initiatives helped white men to learn new skills to make them “fit” for the new economy, for example by developing presentational skills linked to CVs and interview techniques, or by encouraging them to undertake voluntary work, CBIs sought to build women’s confidence by showing them that they already had substantial grounding in them. As with the men, the quality of the relationship with staff, the fact that as Nasreen (CSRU) put it “they’re very kind, very nice people”.

Asian women in our study accessed FWT most often through word of mouth. It was clear that for the most disadvantaged women community

barriers existed to participating in training schemes in the public sphere. FWT was seeking to overcome this by walking a balancing act of trying to empower women at the same time as being “sensitive” to community values. Traditionally minded Asian men were reassured, it was claimed, by the fact that it was a community-based women only organisation.

Conclusion: Transformative potential of promising practices versus enforced integration in “poor work”?

These were small scale case studies in one city and we are mindful of the need for caution in drawing generalizations, especially since we talked to those accessing initiatives, rather than those who may have voted with their feet. However, it was clear to us that such initiatives were much appreciated by those we interviewed, supporting the claims made by agency workers. There were many small ways in which, though not dramatically, it seemed apparent that they were helping to transform the lives of the people who came into contact with them. First they were operating in holistic ways that were identifying addressing the broad needs of clients, not just narrowly focusing on equipping them for the labour market. Second, though qualifications and employment, linked to meeting their targets, was one necessary goal, it did not in either agency workers or clients eyes seem to define the scope of what was done. Employment was seen as a positive outcome for many, but not necessarily all. Third, the way that they were operating seemed a major reason for the successes made. This derived from the clear values or combined ethics of care, empowerment and social justice, as well as simply providing time for people and being “nice”. This was partly though not wholly linked to the “feminine” culture of initiatives, but fundamentally it derived from “thoughtful commitment” that combined humanistic values and planned “goal oriented” strategies.

The limitations of initiatives, often perceived all too clearly by agency workers, were the need to work within a supply side system which:

- (i) expected quick results, did not sanction longer routes to employment;

(ii) provide little possibility for support once what was defined as “sustainable” employment was achieved;

(iii) operated an “all or nothing” benefits system that expected unemployed people to risk the relative security of benefits for insecure employment and limited material advantages.

Agency workers and sometimes their clients were also only too aware of the structural effects of class, gender, “race” and disability. Additionally, in many accounts of clients and agency workers the impact of a global economy, and of a state that through its employment services was seeking to compel people into work, were also identified as negative forces, compounded by discriminatory practices of employers. If initiatives are to have broader transformative effects, then these of course must also be tackled, whereas current policies downplay structures and exaggerate the potential for agency, even though it is backed up by increasing compulsion.

We believe that our approach, comparing and contrasting the views of agency workers and clients, and looking at the role of structure and agency through biographical methods, illustrates some of the complexities involved and how a balanced and differentiated set of policy responses might be more appropriate. Giving space to the voices of clients and agency workers in this regard also generates considerable numbers of insights and wisdom that could be utilised to devise a better system. While this does not tell us in a mechanical way “what works”, on the whole people are motivated to enter the labour market, even when the economic advantages are marginal, though this is mediated by their perceptions of personal and community barriers, and their own life agendas.

As well as what initiatives were doing, the way that they were doing it provides the key to why they seem, if these accounts are to be believed, to be more successful than mainstream services. The social relationships involved seem therefore to be fundamental, supportive but democratic, encouraging but respectful of people’s choices, focused on employment but taking account of wider issues and needs. These could provide the germ for a reformed welfare-to-work system along the lines that we have suggested here. This could work in complementary ways to the existing system of employment services, though no doubt more could be done to humanise the system. The danger of shifting provision to CBIs, as appears to be increasingly mooted, is that if it is not done with care it could undermine

their positive features and particularly their democratic and flexible relationships, reproducing the bureaucratic and target driven rigidities of mainstream services. However, an opportunity does exist for a more phased delegation of responsibilities to local communities, so long as not all the responsibilities are dumped upon them and government takes demand-side greater responsibilities. What is promising about the practices we have examined cannot be isolated from the way they have done it. What constrains rather than enables is the broader policy and funding contexts in which they operate, and particularly government attempts to solve the problem of poverty primarily by integrating people into paid work rather than tackling structural inequality. There is thus a parallel need, alongside a shift to a “new localism” to improve base-level jobs, their rewards, prospects rather than just find better ways of forcing people into them.

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