

Unusual Comparisons: New Area Studies and Caring for the Learning-Disabled in China and England.

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Abstract

The article explores the everyday practice of public service delivery by comparing social care of people with learning disabilities in China and England and what we can learn from insights from the New Area Studies. We address three research questions: How is trust-building influenced by the beliefs and practices of local actors? How are the dilemmas posed by trust building managed by both state and local actors? What is the role of diplomacy in trust building? In section 2, we provide a rationale for our unusual comparison of China and England. In section 3, we summarise our theoretical approach of decentred governance and describe our ethnographic research method. In section 4, we describe the policy contexts of learning disabilities in Southampton and S District, Hangzhou. In section 5, we report our fieldwork on caring for those with learning disabilities. In section 6, we discuss the difference and similarities between the two policy arenas, especially using diplomacy to manage network relations. In section 7, we identify six lessons from the research and we draw the key lessons for practitioners in both countries. We offer the concluding plausible conjecture that local networks in both countries are a mix of hierarchy, markets and networks, and local actors in both networks must find diplomatic ways of managing their encounters with the state.

Keywords: Unlikely Comparisons; China and England; Social Care for the Learning-disabled; Decentred Governance; Policy Network; Local State and NGOs; Mutual Trust-building

1. Unlikely comparisons

We engage in unusual comparisons to learn more about the impact of public policy on the learning disabled in parts of China and England. We explore what can be learnt from unconventional comparative approaches on the quality of life and administration for often excluded citizens. From the point of view of the New Area Studies, this article challenges old-fashioned and constraining research shibboleths. The intention is to better understand and enhance government and administration, to benefit vulnerable populations, effectively represent citizens, and help improve quality of life. The article aligns complementary concepts drawn from non-traditional public policy, public administration, and the New Area Studies.

Historically, political scientists have had a field day criticising Area Studies. Its intellectual agenda often commanded little respect. Seen as an interdisciplinary enterprise studying specific geographical regions, Area Studies specialists were castigated for engaging in ‘narrower and narrower geographic specialization... from world region to country to section of the country’ (Lambert 1990: 714). While practitioners had a detailed knowledge of the history and language of their chosen regions (Bates 1996: 1-2) some claimed area studies failed because it was ‘overly concerned with the description of cultural details and historical specificities at the expense of comparative and generalising research’ (Bates 1997). Others argued area studies was ‘less rigorous [...] eschew[ing] the building of scientific knowledge and the crafting of broader generalisations for mere description and worse, storytelling’ (White 2000, 165). These studies were criticised as idiographic rather than nomothetic; that is, being country or region specific and focusing on the meaning of contingent, unique cultural situations whereas nomothetic studies generalise objective categories. Traditional Area Studies were interpreted as commonly involving language studies, history and cultural studies—relating more to the humanities than the social sciences, and failing to engage with, let alone create theory (Hodgett and James 2018: 3). Over time the separation between Area Studies and Social Science became institutionalised. Today many area specialists are not in

politics departments but in area studies centres, e.g. the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Such institutionalisation illustrates a ‘patterned isolationism’ which marginalizes inquiry that does not ‘fit’ the drive for professionalization and behaviourism within modern political science. These area approaches therefore sit alongside, often functioning outside, mainstream political science disciplines (Collini 2001, 299).

By the 2000s, Area Studies was evolving and rebutting this tired conventional critique. Graham and Kantor (2007, 1) rejected the view that social science was characterised by theory building, mathematics, rigorous methods, falsifiability, replicability and scientific approaches while Area Studies remained descriptive, cultural, historical or contextual. They argued that ‘the best social analysis should incorporate ...different cognitive styles of which the method relying on mathematics, quantitative methods and reproducibility is only one.’ Chalmers and Keehn (1994, 15) ridiculed rational choice theory for ignoring ‘cultural differences between a country such as Japan with a tradition of eight centuries of feudalism, and one with a total absence of feudalism, such as the United States’ claiming that substituting rational choice for culture was a ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’.

At this time theorists began working on the benefits of crossing disciplinary boundaries between the arts and the humanities and the social sciences, breaching well established guardrails about how research in relation to policy should be undertaken (Czarniawska 2010, Davidson 2017). New agendas were being set in both public administration (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, Bevir 2011, Lowndes 2016) and in Area Studies (Clowes and Bromberg 2016, Mielke and Hornidge 2017, Derichs 2017). Researchers started to address the challenge of bringing these divergent lines of thought into conversation with each other (Hodgett and James 2018, Hodgett 2019, Rhodes and Hodgett 2021).

Still, in conventional scenarios, Area Studies remained consigned to the margins of political science. Today, we are way beyond the time to challenge such marginalization. There is much to learn by engaging with area studies. Hodgett and James (2018, 4 and 172) for example propose an agenda for the *New Area Studies* (NAS) of the twenty-first century, which identifies fruitful overlap. Their aim is ‘to understand peoples, cultures and places *comprehensively* and *comparatively*’. Their

ambition is to bring together the global and the local, focussing on the ‘lived experience, *interpretive approaches* and *emotional subjectivities* (Hodgett and James 2018: 7). Adopting a ‘*breadth* of explanation and *depth* of understanding’ (Hodgett and James 2018: 176) they call for ‘*analytic eclecticism*’ in examining life in place (Hodgett and James 2018: 179, all emphases in original). Stressing comparison, breadth, and local lived experience, there is a clear convergence between this reoriented New Area Studies and the decentred approach of interpretive Political Science and its emphasis on comparative intuition (see below).

Traditional Approaches

Most Western discussions of China’s political regime describe the state’s political and policy processes as authoritarian and bureaucratic. Equivalent accounts of the UK describe the state’s political and policy processes as liberal-democratic and pluralist. On size alone, comparing these two countries seems like comparing elephants and ants. However, these umbrella terms cover diverse policy practices in both countries (Heilmann 2008; Kan Ku 2021; Wu 2013, Dauncey 2020). Focusing on high-level abstractions such as representative democracy or authoritarianism are of little help when it comes to exploring the everyday practice of public service delivery and quality of life. In this article, we ask what insights can be generated by focusing on the local policy context (Mertha 2009; Yang Zhenjie 2013), local-level policy networks (Beibei 2008; Fulda, Yanyan and Qinghua 2012), experience of lived life and policy implementation structures (Lema and Ruby 2007; Jiwei and Ho 2016). We explore the everyday practice of public service delivery by comparing social care of people with learning disabilities in selected regions of China and England. We address three research questions: How is trust-building influenced by the beliefs and practices of local actors? How are the dilemmas posed by trust building managed by state and local actors? What is the role of diplomacy in trust building? We offer two *plausible conjectures*: that local networks in both countries are a mix of hierarchy, markets and networks; and that local actors in both networks find ways of managing their encounters with the state. This pragmatic approach operates no matter what the shape of political arrangements.

In section 2, we provide a rationale for our unusual comparison of China and England. In section 3, we summarise our theoretical approach of decentred

governance and the New Area Studies and describe our ethnographic method. In section 4, we outline the policy contexts of learning disabilities in Southampton and S District, Hangzhou. In section 5, we report fieldwork on caring for those with learning disabilities. In section 6, we discuss the difference and similarities between the two policy arenas. In section 7, we identify lessons learned from the research for practitioners in both countries.

2. Unlikely comparisons

Comparing is intuitive. We do it all the time, consciously and unconsciously, but we do not always do it explicitly or systematically. Our points are that you do not need grand theory before you compare, there are many ways of being systematic other than naturalist nostrums, and that you can usefully compare little and big (Boswell, Corbett and Rhodes 2019). There remain elaborate procedures for selecting cases as part of project design of which the ‘most similar’ and ‘most different’ remain most common. We suggest that for our unusual comparisons the researcher works out what their research is by using *abductive reasoning*.

Abductive reasoning is a: ‘puzzling out process [in which] the researcher tacks continually, constantly, back and forth in an iterative-recursive fashion between what is puzzling and possible explanations for it (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). A puzzle occurs when ‘there is a misfit between experience and expectations.’ The researcher is ‘grappling with the process of sensemaking; of coming up with an interpretation that makes sense of the surprise’. The researcher is on an ‘interpretive dance’ as one discovery leads to another. If deduction reasons from its premises, and induction from its facts, then abduction reasons from its puzzle.

‘Puzzling’ refers to solving a problem or answering a question creatively (Adcock 2014). It involves clever guesswork or a novel experiment. We are drawn to the word because it suggests that puzzling is a process—a logic of discovery—with no clear destination. We change the puzzle to resolve our confusions over the course of a complex comparative project. Through continuous puzzling, we explore and tease out comparisons that surprise and intrigue, that uncover new insights or force readers to confront familiar insights in new ways—hence creative intuition.

We can best uncover puzzles if we make unusual comparisons. We should choose intrinsically interesting cases and look for unlikely juxtapositions. Drawing out unlikely affinities between disparate cases is a sensible way to develop new ideas and uncover new research agendas and questions. The analogy is comparing the elephant and the ant, so we compare the similarities and differences in network governance of policy for people with learning disabilities in England and China. While network governance in China and England may seem beyond meaningful comparison, we follow Bailey (1969), and Boswell, Corbett and Rhodes (2019) who claim that ‘[u]nlikely juxtapositions allow [us] to render ... the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic’. Thus, we discover that authoritarian China has at times effective local responsiveness, while democratic England sometimes experiences unheeding hierarchy. Moreover, local networks in both countries seek ways of managing encounters with the state.

The critique of this strategy of unlikely comparisons is of course that it is impossible to generalise. Yet, as Geertz (1973) argues, ‘small facts speak to large issues.’ We call this strategy making *plausible conjectures*; that is, general statements which are plausible because they rest on good reasons inferred from relevant information. We use abductive reasoning to make conjectures—that is, we move between the literature and emergent findings to detect patterns of broader analytical interest. Such plausible conjectures are our generalisations.

3. Theory and methods

Decentred governance

Managing networks is at the heart of the new public governance and it is underpinned by a shift from hands-on to hands-off steering by the state (Rhodes and Bevir 2010; Rhodes 2017). Hands-off steering refers to working with and through networks or webs of organizations to achieve shared policy objectives. It involves continuously negotiating beliefs and exchanging resources within the agreed rules of the game. It is commonly described as network governance. Bevir and Rhodes (2010) identify two other waves of governance; metagovernance, which refers to

the informal modes of steering used by the state to secure coordination in governance; and decentred governance.

A decentred account of governance shifts attention away from a top-down focus on the intentions of central elites to a bottom-up analysis of the beliefs and practices of citizens, locally based officials and NGOs. It explains shifting patterns of governance by focusing on the actors’ own interpretations of events, not external causes such as a global financial crisis. It explores the diverse ways in which such situated agents alter the boundaries of state and civil society by remaking practices as their beliefs change in response to everyday dilemmas. The notion of dilemma in Bevir and Rhodes (2010: 79) refers mainly to ‘Big-D’ dilemmas that focus on ideational clashes between traditions such as the clash between neoliberalism and state ownership. Boswell et al (2019: 40-41) adds the notion of ‘small-d’ dilemmas that focus on the everyday, the routine and the mundane choices. It is this latter notion we use here.

All patterns of rule arose as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the varied beliefs of situated agents. So, the notion of a monolithic state in control of itself and civil society was always a myth. The myth obscured the reality of diverse state practices that escaped the control of the centre because they arose from the contingent beliefs and actions of diverse actors at the boundary of state and civil society. The state is never monolithic, and it always negotiates with others. Policy arises from interactions within networks of organisations and individuals. Patterns of rule traverse the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The boundaries between state and civil society are always blurred. Trans-national and international links and flows disrupt national borders. In short, state authority is constantly being remade, negotiated, and contested in widely different ways and through varying practices (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: chapter 5). Such decentred analysis leads to bottom-up fieldwork that explores how subordinate actors resist, transform, and thwart the agendas of elites by assimilating them to local traditions and by using local reasoning. This is the stuff of everyday practice.

There are two recurring ‘small-d’ dilemmas in network governance, namely, trust-building, and diplomacy. The network literature commonly views trust as essential for building confidence in others’ intentions and in preventing actors from

opportunistic behaviour (Klijn et al. 2010; Edelenbos and Klijn 2007; Rhodes 2017: 186). Trust refers to positive judgements about other actors. It acts as a mechanism for coping with the different and changing perceptions of the several actors in a network. Also, it fosters mutual understanding and shared goals. Trust increases certainty, reduces transaction costs, creates spaces for innovation, and promotes expertise and knowledge sharing by different policy actors (Klijn et al. 2010). Indeed, trust is a key characteristic of network governance distinguishing it from hierarchies and markets.

To explore how local networks respond to the dilemmas posed by trust, we pose four questions.

1. How is trust building affected by the lived experience, beliefs and practices of local actors and situated communities?
2. How are the dilemmas posed by trust building managed by both state and local actors?
3. How can New Area Studies assist in understanding these processes?

The state often plays the role of network manager. It facilitates network governance by introducing regulatory rules. Diplomacy refers to these efforts to achieve consensus and avoid conflict (Klijn et al. 1997: 130-13; Rhodes 2017: 187-9). Diplomacy emphasizes the need for shared beliefs for consistent actions at the operational level. It relies on continuous negotiation and persuasion to create explicit understandings of mutual intentions and requirements. We pose a fourth research question:

4. What is the role of diplomacy in trust building?

Ethnographic fieldwork

This comparative research was based on two policy arenas and two research sites. We chose China's Hangzhou, in Zhejiang Province, and compared it with Southampton in England because they were equivalent in government function and scale. People with learning disabilities were the responsibility of both authorities.

The constituent nations of the UK have different local government systems, so we talk of English, not British, local government.

Our ethnographic fieldwork asked local authority and community organizations ‘how do things work around here?’ Ethnography is a broad ecumenical church united around the idea of meaning. Interpretive ethnography stresses the importance of meanings in the study of human life and is a way of retrieving meaning; that is, beliefs and practices. It is about recovering and recounting complex specificity in context irrespective of the methods used to collect the data. It asks, ‘how people give their life meaning’ and deploys an *ethnographic sensibility* that requires paying ‘attention to the conditions and experiences of life as actually lived’ (McGranahan 2018). The aim is to ‘glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality’ (Schatz 2009: 5-6). It requires a willingness ‘to accept new questions about unknown situations and to see beyond where one could have ever conceived of looking before’. It is about ‘being part of another way of living, interacting, thinking and relating’ (Pader 2006: 174). To use an everyday phrase, an ethnographic sensibility is about sitting where the other person is sat (Fleming and Rhodes 2023).

We practiced ‘hit-and-run ethnography’; that is, fieldwork that involved repeated, short bursts of intensive observation as researchers move in-and-out of the field (Rhodes 2017 and 2022). This paper focuses on fieldwork on the care of the learning disabled.

The article has four sources of data.

- 1). Observation of Public Meetings and Events: How did actors conduct themselves in public meetings and events?
- 2). Helicopter and Elite Interviews: Helicopter interviews with journalists and other experts. Informal semi-structured interviews to frame the history and highlights in policy arenas.
- 3). Shadowing: Five people in five organizations.
- 4). Documentation: Official documents on community organization, development and participation in local democracy.

The specific numbers of interviews and hours of observation are shown in Table 1. The names, locations and working venues of participants have been anonymised, as have names of specific research sites. Official documents on NGO development and participation in local democracy for service provision were available for both sites.

Table 1 Fieldwork Summary

Site	Duration	Site visits	Elite Interviews (average times)	Meeting and Event Observation (times and total hours)	Participant Observation (frequency and total hours)	Total Fieldwork hours
England	16th April 2018-20th September 2018 June 2019-August 2019	5 sites including events organized by Man-ability, Southampton Voluntary Group and Southampton City Council	30mins to 1.5 hours per interview; 16 times	5 Meetings and 4 events, 18 hours in total	Shadowing 3 times a week, 2-3 hours each time for 2 organisations. Totalling 110 hours	108.5
China	19th January 2019-31st May 2019	3 sites including Community Working and Healing Station, NGO offices social care for people with learning disabilities.	30 mins to 2 hours per interview; 18 times	4 meetings and 6 events, 29 hours in total	Community Working and Healing Centres, weekly brut healing art courses and healing art festival. Totalling 20 hours	85
Total hours	8 sites and 229 hours	8 sites	52 hours	47 hours	130 hours	193.5

The interview transcripts and fieldwork notebooks were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The themes are summarised in Table 2, which

provides the subheadings used in the section on 'Findings'. The names, locations and working venues of all the fieldwork participants were anonymised.

Table 2 Themes

Themes	Social Care for Learning-disabled people in England	Social Care for Learning-disabled people in China
1. Discretion and Resistance	Small and improvised discretionary power	Negotiable and improvised discretionary power
	The common fate: over regulation and routinized burden	
2. Seeking Negotiating Capital outside the State	Building negotiating capital locally	Building negotiating capital locally and nationally
3. The Everyday Maker of Local Practices	A mixture of partly political lobbying actor and non-political parental activism	Partly political parental activism
	Similarity: parental activism's informal power	

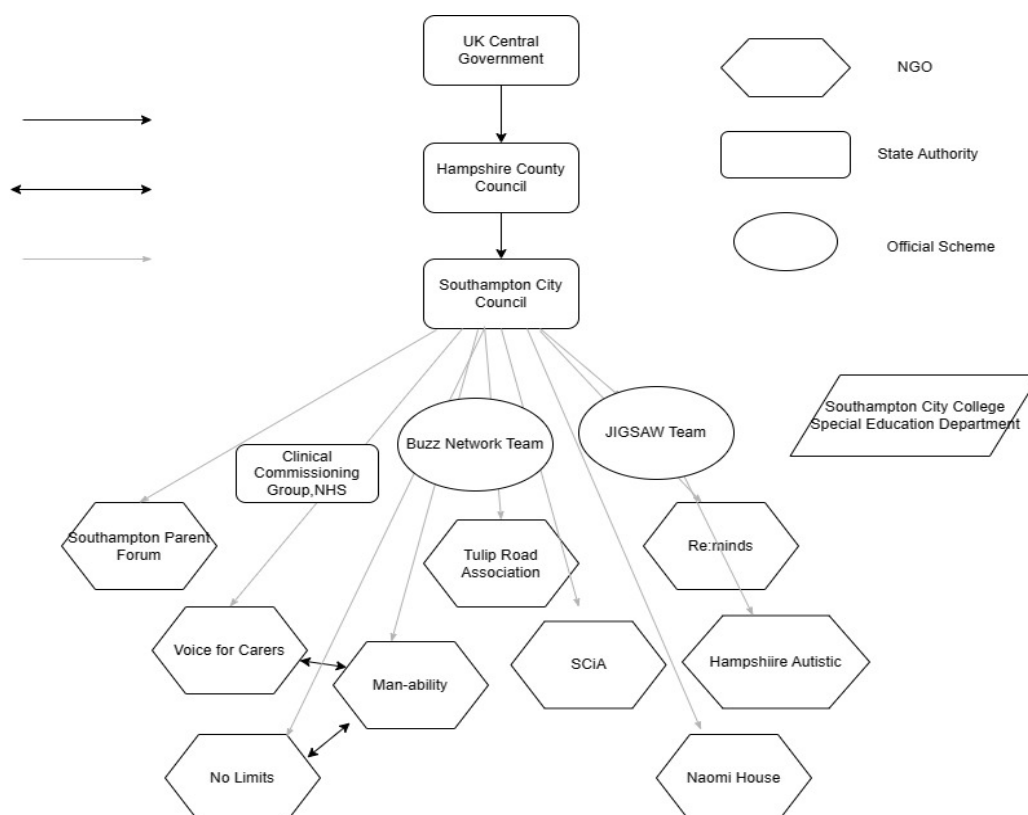
The Policy Context of Social Care for the Learning-Disabled

City of Southampton, England

In contrast to other community groups' segregation from society, disabled people's demands for social inclusion derived from their basic right to work as independent individuals. Existing barriers to work for disabled people and their marginalized status in the job market were the major contributing factor to their exclusion (Barnes and Mercer 2005, Dauncey 2020). Redley (2009) explored life for people with learning disabilities considering whether their social inclusion was promoted by emphasizing equalities in the workplace and customizing personal welfare services. This research suggests that these aspirations were not realised.

The local policy network in Southampton was hierarchical, offering indirect control through NGOs as frontier agents. Both the Short Break¹ and JIGSAW schemes² (established by Southampton City Council for children with special educational needs or learning disabilities) worked with the Clinical Care Group (CCG) of the National Health Service (NHS). Both schemes were based on a local service network involving 30 providers (Figure 1). Five providers were supported by Southampton City Council, and three umbrella organizations worked within this sector.

Figure 1 Network Governance Map in Social Care for People with Learning Disabilities



Of the service providers, the Buzz Network and Southampton Parent Forum are the two leading organizations, the latter worked together with the Tulip Road Association to organize information events and consultation with parents. The activity coordinator, Clair Pritchard, is also the coordinator of the Southampton Parents and Carers Forum. The Tulip Road Association, Southampton Man-ability and Voice for Carers are three main external bodies, the latter two of which work more independently. Together, these local charity organizations are involved in one-to-one support, personal budgeting, play schemes and community-based activities.

There were two significant policy changes during our field studies in Southampton. The first related to the eligibility criteria for children and young people with learning disabilities. The criteria had been in place for 10 years, but new rules changed beneficiary groups and upgraded services for three of the four upper-level categories below based on needs:

Low - *mainstream services*

Medium - *enhanced or adapted mainstream services*

Substantial - *support from targeted services.*

Critical - *joined-up support from Jigsaw team for specialist support.*

The most obvious policy change occurred in the low needs group, with the aim of raising their awareness and use of local services. The medium needs group received a Short Breaks Plus card, which provided booking rights to a wider range of grant funded services but removed their personal budgets. Commissioned services and personal budgets remained in place for critical and substantial needs groups. In specific terms, the medium, substantial and critical groups were reassessed to receive a greater proportion of the upgraded service packages. Out of a total of 1,350 medium level service users, 850 received enhanced provision.

The second policy change was to offer respite services for people with learning-disabilities. After consultation, the Kentish Road Respite Centre reopened. Southampton City Council ran five rounds of consultations with six mothers taking care of children with learning or behavioural disabilities. Debora Jacques and Amy Marks were service directors for the Short Break organisation. They were present at the consultation meeting and offered explanations relating to the service provision changes. One mother, Maria, has a child with autism, and expressed disappointment:

Maria (Mother of a child with learning disabilities): *We had one to one support and play schemes before, and one of the other family members could accompany my child during the activity. Since he has autistic problems, if we were only given a personal budget to support my child when I take a short break, it*

wouldn't be acceptable for him. He can't accept strangers playing with him or taking him to the cinema.

The policy rearrangements were considered controversial by service users and providers, as subsidy levels were diminished for users with critical and substantial levels of need, and the total number of users who qualified for service was reduced. The local policy network features various NGOs as agents of local government. As we have seen, the hierarchical governance process presents an invisible hand that indirectly controls and maneuvers delivery.

Apart from government-funded schemes, NGOs continued to strive to build their influence. For example, Man-ability did trials to develop clients' inclusive abilities, such as starting a café, and a gardening group. Their Southampton chief executive, Blake Fielker, set targets of financial independence and collaboration with the council.

Fielker: We're running a cafe which doesn't generate a steady profit. It really is all about giving people the sort of work skills that they need. We don't charge, but eventually we want to. We've applied to the lottery so that we can have some money to develop more things, like the cafe, maybe a gardening group, maybe a car wash group. I'm thinking about how we can engage people, and then we're working to our own agenda rather than the council's...

S District, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China

In China, group support for people with learning disabilities comes mainly from two sources—the government system, and self-reliant mothers of children with learning disabilities. The local policy network comprises a mixture of hierarchical governance and self-organized network governance. In the government supported system, there are alliances at different administration levels that run in parallel with each level of government. There is an independent official unit known as a Caring and Working Station in each street. Disabled Alliance is a separate official charity group which is not an internal department of government. Its function is to issue subsidies for disabled people, enhance the employment prospects of disabled groups, organize different leisure activities for disabled groups and families and inspect the NGOs that deliver services.

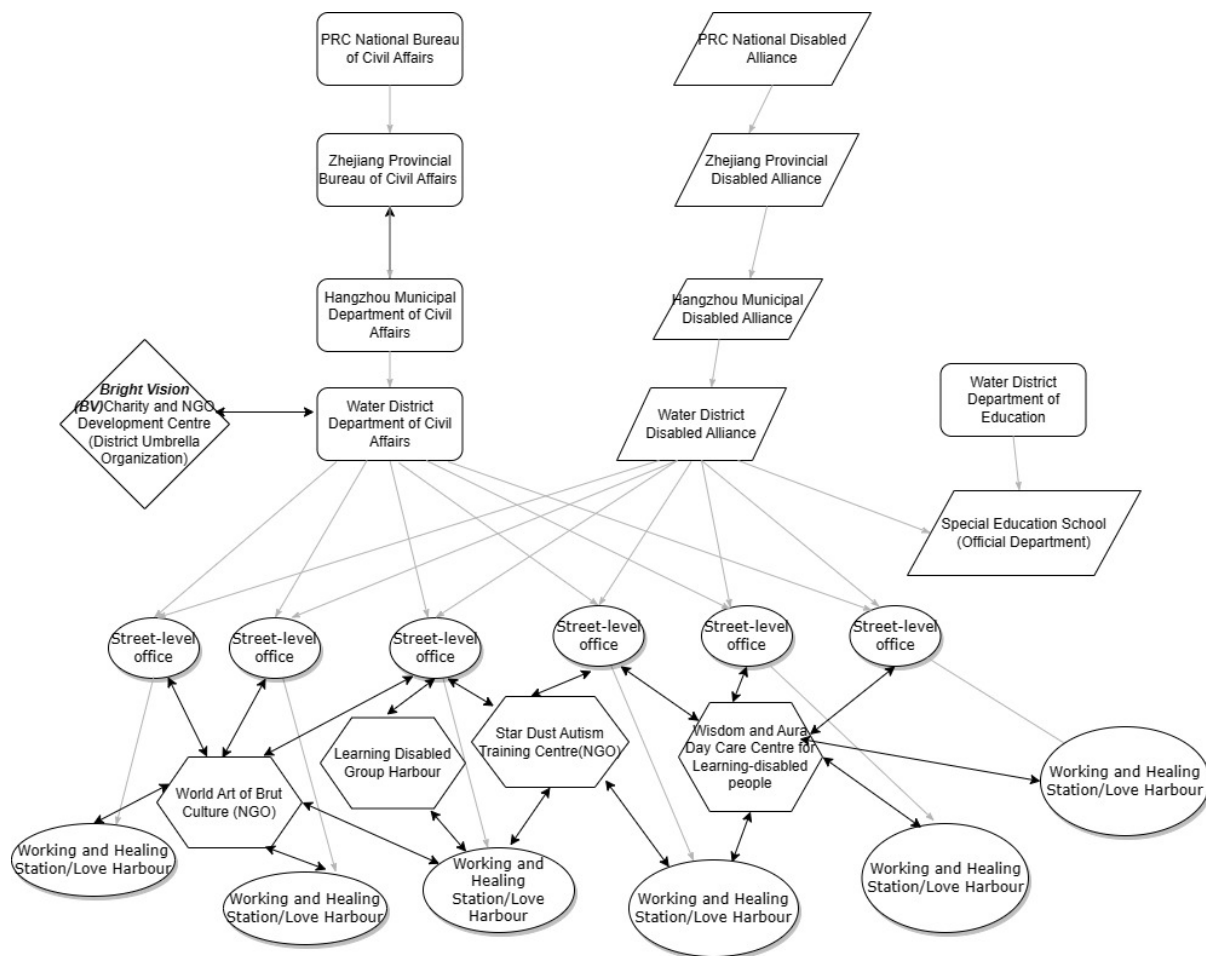


Figure 2 Network Map of Social Care for people with learning disabilities in S District, Hangzhou

The NGOs we contacted fell into two groups – day care or autism training centres and special education schools providing art training courses for the Caring and Working Stations or Reducing Help. The local policy network map is shown in Figure 2.

The cost of collaborating with external bodies varies between local government offices, but whatever the minimum cost, the convenience of cultivating a dependent relationship with between internal and external actors is appealing. Teaching students with learning disabilities to become qualified workers seeking employment is the main aim, and Meng Shaoyou, vice president of the District Disabled Alliance, discussed the senior level disabled alliances’ policy targets for enhancing the learning-disabled group’s employability:

Meng (Vice President of Water District Disabled Alliance): *The District Disabled Alliance tries to offer the co-production of professional training with Starbucks, the Shangri-La Hotel and other charity organizations like the Wise Tree Coffee Shop. The annual commitment of each district is initiated by the deputy mayor in charge of coordination with disabled groups. The commitment encompasses an anticipated employability rate and a long-term prognosis for people with learning disabilities. Our role in the development of charity organizations is to offer general guidance and encourage organizations to promote employability and opportunities for professional training.*

Employability training is another measure that the Disabled Alliance takes to increase the possibility for people with learning disabilities to join the job market:

Meng: *We have some supplementary employability training institutions like Wise Tree. A few members can ultimately become part of normal society.*

Although NGOs for people with learning disabilities in England are aware of the necessity to become more independent and to find different ways of building their strengths, they also know that reducing resource dependence on local government is impossible. In China, other than free venues provided by governments at district level, there are no additional resources for NGO service provision or development, and the existing NGOs maintain service provision by other means, keeping a high degree of resource independence. Compared with the local policy network in Southampton, the resource dependence of NGOs on the local authority in S District was less, creating innovative spaces for service delivery through self-organized networks. Looking at how networks function in China and England, and how local NGOs made provision for learning disabled people is of foremost interest to New Area Studies (NAS). While Traditional Area Studies (TAS) focused on a narrow interpretation of place, usually a single region, New Area Studies (Hodgett and James 2018) promoted *broad and deep* research at *multiple levels, contrasting experience* across inter regions (Hodgett 2019). In this instance the research site is not the conventional place of TAS but the network (Desmond 2014). While earlier iterations of area studies (TAS) concentrated on historical concepts (European or American notions of civilization, colonization, and security interests), recent emendations (the NAS) promote decentred and multcentred approaches,

decolonization and deconstruction (Gerlach et. al. 2020). This novel intellectual agenda brings together expertise from the humanities and the social sciences, offering insights from a broader range of data. We examine what this altered approach can reveal about contextualized policy challenges and professional ‘Ignore-ance’ (Sadan, 2020).

4. Findings

Trust

Southampton City Council found itself confronted by the same dilemmas about its lack of discretionary power, over-regulation, and risk-averse policies as its counterpart in China. To achieve service equality for the families of children with learning disabilities, the council could only change its financial structure, having no extra money. This was not what either service providers or users wanted. Meanwhile, for NGOs as service providers, money saving, and the burden of paperwork on risk and impact suggests that mutual trust was not sufficient to reduce the costs of cooperation. The decision of the Service Manager for People with Learning Disabilities and Mental Health problems at SCiA³ Southampton (Becky Owen) to leave the council (to work for an NGO) illustrates the issue. Owen detailed problems with trust-building between the council and its service providers. These included lack of accountability and responsibility, and peremptory termination of services. The experience and the exercise of state power caused her to feel isolated and devoid of professional support. Government’s continual prioritisation of security and financial issues before the needs of service recipients challenged her personal priorities and local community expectations. Moving to work in the third sector reflected her “*need... to ...to get back to ...core values of why I came into the job in the first place.*” The distrust between the state and NGOs is evident in every site where charities have ineffective communication with local authorities. Local consultations concerning social care for people with learning disabilities frequently ignored service users and providers. Often NGOs stood firmly with service users and carers against demands of the local authority. The consultations over the proposed closure of Kentish Road Respite Centre (KRRC/KR) were a good illustration.

Activist approaches were taken by NGOs during meetings. For example, three girls wearing white curly wigs to resemble a local Councillor walked from the outer circle of seats in the council chamber to the centre. Smiling politely, they threw fake banknotes campaigners printed into the air shouting: “*Look, this is your money, the money that you’re caring about!*” On one side the notes said:

Westwood Ward Labour Councillor Parke is determined to close down Kensington Road Respite Centre, a vital part in our lives of local disabled community. We say no to cuts against the vulnerable!

On the other side, there was an introduction to the respite centre with expressions of opposition to its closure. Activism was a reaction to the local authority’s attempts to undermine creative policy management and local service delivery.

Owen remarked: *Let’s be honest...they are risk averse. For every project, they do impact assessments and risk assessments. The assessments are humungous. They are worried about publicity impact. If something is radical, it involves risk. If you’re risk-averse, that’s a challenge.*

A more positive judgement on interaction with Southampton City Council came from Bill Evans, senior director of Voice for Carers

Evans: *Southampton City Council does really well in maintaining their relationships with us. The commissioner is excellent. We have a really open dialogue with her. She is very helpful and that’s important. When we’ve gone to cluster meetings, representatives from the council have been there. I think we are very good at keeping their eyes on what’s going on in terms of acting as gatekeepers.*

Voice for Carers worked in collaboration with the Council to obtain funding and additional support from them the NHS’s Clinical Care Group (CCG) and social workers. In sum, governmental regulation of NGOs was invisible in daily life but came into play at critical moments.

In China, discretionary powers are similar in that they are also improvised, but the process is more negotiable between district governments and local NGOs than in England. The other parallel is governmental over-regulation of NGOs. Gu Limei, the

manager of ZY Working and Caring Station in S District, is a street-level social worker. Discussing the working and care centre members' holiday outing activities and looking for solutions to their problem of insurance for meetings she commented:

Gu Li Mei: *Hmmm, all right, you two can check the possible way to get the insurance done and we can confirm the specific activity venues and forms later. Some of the other activity plan details should also be ready for our final decision in due time. The safety of our members is the first priority.*

Miss Shen, the public relations manager of WABC⁴ and Mrs. Yang nodded and smiled. Mrs. Gu stressed the importance of safety issues inside the station:

Gu Li Mei: *Our station is the most advanced facility and the best station in this city and one of the best in the country. We have been visited several times by officials from central government, some of whom are really clever and talented.... Every time the WABC staff come to do the training, I must accompany them and help the instructors to complete their teaching tasks. The learning-disabled people will only listen to me. If I were not sitting beside them or walking with them, they are likely to misbehave themselves and make trouble. For instance, some learning-disabled people occasionally stood up and ran inside the classroom. Some even ran out to the road and there has been a couple of traffic accidents and injuries.*

Guaranteeing safety and avoiding potential risks in the working and caring station as well as in collaborative courses with NGOs is a core task, as an outstanding station, ZY is accountable for official checks from different levels of government. Discretion is seldom seen in practice, as staff invest energy and time in risk control and routine tasks.

The second focus from the local authorities' perspective is the performance effect of the activities they got involved with and the good reputation that NGOs can bring.

A volunteer, Huang Xiao Lin oversaw several Brut Art Healing projects for children with learning disabilities. He was alienated from local government believing it was only interested in a good public image:

Huang: *They only care about the performance effect, not the actual benefit to the children. The district government and Disabled Alliance rely on me to organize this event because I have ...connections with Harvard University and ...professional organizations. This can add value and points when this district government competes with other district-level governments.*

You can see the display area. There are many shops with nobody inside, but the government still mandates the layout and insists on the existence of the empty shops.

When we drew his attention to the art festival:

Huang responded: *The government are indifferent about specific activities and projects. [They]prefer the retail market, which is nonsense and would not trigger any interactions associated with us. ...This ...has been embedded in the administration system for a long time, they tend to invest money into it. The government always prefers icing the cake rather than providing prompt and appropriate help.*

Again, divergence in the aims of activities for people with learning disabilities between NGOs and local authorities created distrust between them.

Diplomacy

As well as communication skills, NGOs need to gain negotiating capital to improve dealings with local government. NGOs in England and China need to gain negotiating capital locally, while NGOs in China must also acquire it nationally. Both sides maintain close connections with local service users, which enhances knowledge of public service delivery; it becomes a source for volunteers, funding, and support. If opinions differ, NGOs must convince local governments of the best practical action plan. If there arises a shortage of volunteers or supporters for development, these wider connections can back up NGOs.

As a locally based charitable organization for people with learning disabilities, Manability knows its customers well and takes the opportunities to voice clients' needs by sitting on committees across the city. For instance, the discussion about closing or preserving the KRRC continued at various council meetings for a year. Every time

we attended council meetings, cabinet meetings and overview and scrutiny management meetings, the same group was present. It consisted of NGOs for service provision and opinion representation, service users and carers seeking opportunities to speak against the closure arranged by the Democratic Officers.⁵ Prior to meetings, these campaigners prepared themselves for effective communication with the council lobbying to make it more responsive to their needs. Council meetings with NGOs (as service providers and representatives for service users) became battlefields over:

Availability and provision of other facilities?

Whether replacements were permanent?

Who will get priority?

How to guarantee places are enough and available to affected groups?

As Labour Party Councillor Parke continued to insist on closure of KRRC, Fielker from Man-ability and other campaigners built an alliance with Conservative Party councillors, and a Putting People First representative for the long-term battle. During a coffee break with the campaign alliance after a council meeting Fielker and the councillors discussed strategies. Such activism is a typical form of resistance against the resource holder. It keeps the city council alert to the existence of differing public opinion and the work of NGOs.

Fielker, Man-ability: *[W]e support people in voicing their views and [to]think about links with the council. We try to sit on committees and forums. My role is to link with the Learning Disability Partnership Board. There's been a steering group for direct payment and it's good to be involved in such things because we can ... bring voice to what is a fairly marginalized group of people. When you're talking about people with learning disabilities, perhaps there are two thousand in Southampton, and not all of them are known to social services. So of course ... when budgets have been decided, it's often not very much. There is a small proportion of people taking a large part of the budget, so we have to put our argument across.*

The everyday practices are never one-size-fits-all, so disputes can arise if the rules of governance do not provide person-specific solutions or if different groups offer divergent opinions. In social care for people with learning disabilities, it is usually service providing NGOs that make the most effective decisions. It is how they build their influence and reputation locally (Bailey 1969: 59-61 and 53-5). Man-ability voices its clients’ needs, while the Tulip Road Association takes on the council for their client group. A major role for both is monitoring impacts emanating from local government upon their client groups and advocating to improve outcomes.

Our research demonstrates that although English NGOs feel unable to cross the line by saying anything negative about the council, they still stick to a nuanced principle of acting as a critical partner. NGOs challenge councils when they feel it necessary.

In China, NGOs for people with learning disabilities have built negotiating capital both locally and nationally. Although the Reducing Help Day Care Centre was offered a free venue and official policy information from the District Disabled Alliance, the centre looked to develop negotiating capital at higher levels by setting up networks across administrative levels and through the charity industry.

Zhao Yi, Day Care Centre: *We have a wide range of volunteer groups across different government levels from provincial female leaders to district leaders. The Sunshine Mother volunteer team consists of the Vice President of the Provincial Political Negotiation Association as well as many other provincial female leaders and municipal government female leaders. They come to join our activities on a regular basis. We have a volunteer team from the municipal branch of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, four universities based in the city and the First Affiliated Hospital of the Ocean Province Medical University. The chief doctor of the urology department of the First Affiliated Hospital of Ocean Province Medical University also has a child with autism, so she is keen on volunteering here.*

As the leader and initiator of Reducing Help, Mrs. Ning oversees diplomatic events, including the annual training sessions organized by Shenzhen Charity College, visiting training courses run by the Kennedy School of Government Harvard, the River City Marathon Competition, and the Award Ceremony for the Most Beautiful

River City residents. These national and cross-regional diplomatic events were seen to impress a wider audience nationally or internationally.

In England, street-level dialogues are a small part of council officers’ and politicians’ everyday lives. The demands of implementation and adjudicating between the preferences of different participants are the stage at which officers and politicians play small roles. The fragmented views and interests of lobby groups challenge the politicians’ diplomatic and communication skills.

For example, when closing the KRRC, Southampton City Council was refusing to provide respite service to ease the council’s financial burden. Campaigners nonetheless refused to accept this situation complaining that there was no practical transition plan in place. Pressure applied to the cabinet member for Adult Care and Housing indicated:

Lunar, *The hardest thing about my role is not so much KR, because it didn't happen under my watch. But the decision to close the residential care centre was ...different. ...I am under the scrutiny of the full council. ...[W]e had deputation from the public, we had petitions and a lot of questions that were really tough.*

To achieve consensus among service users when restructuring Short Breaks and the Personal Budget, the city council was accountable for alleviating inequality among different levels of families and ran consultations.

Julia, Southampton City Council: *The city council works hand-in-hand with the parent forum, Tulip Road Association and other charity organizations and schools. Southampton Parent Carer Forum ... comprises parents whose children have needed special care. ...Eight parent representatives discuss special needs regularly and ...meet council staff to convince ...their opinions.*

In China, local government does not handle political interests but undertakes administration, meaning that diplomacy and communication skills are at a premium for NGOs.

In S District, the governmental over-regulation of financial auditing was caused by a severe case of NGOs misusing government funding. Yan Ling described this case.

Yan Ling, Chief of S District NGO Development Foundation: *There was an NGO doing after-school casual sessions in our district which had signed [a] contract with the ...Bureau of Education for two years. However, after a year ... this NGO did not continue its work ...and ...disappeared. We hadn't been cheated before, so we gave all the funding to this NGO at the initial stage.*

This case affected local government, which designed a three-stage check of governmental contracts. The auditing aimed to prevent the NGOs from deviating from plans and reasserted the state's attempts to save money while guaranteeing quality of service. Now, NGOs must conform to audits and convince local government of their performance and financial integrity.

5. Shared dilemmas, common lessons

This section summarises the differences and similarities in local network governance by comparing research sites in China and England. It identifies six lessons.

Differences and Similarities

Three differences in resources

Available resources and distribution are different in England and China. The British government implemented a policy of austerity for ten years across many policy arenas, and public funding for social care shrank. For local government and NGOs, in England, austerity appeared insoluble. Even though the overall amount of governmental funding was enormous in China (West and Wong, 1995), the funding for individual NGOs was insufficient. Thus, NGOs sought resources by maximising specific strengths. Building strengths is a less well-established practice in China compared with England, and the contrast between the countries lies in using social entrepreneurship to replace government funding.

Firstly, government funding is important for NGOs in China not only for the level of resources but also because it is a symbol of the NGO's official reputation. Money is a tangible and an intangible resource, the amounts involved prove less important.

Secondly, the novel transformation of NGOs from government service to social entrepreneurship takes place on a much smaller scale in China than in England. So,

when government policies are hard to cope with, or when financial support is limited, English NGOs rely on themselves and choose to work independently from government. Due to the diversity of local states, NGOs in China can choose to work with different local governments when looking for contracts. While in China, government funding for social care for people with learning disabilities remains enormous. Nonetheless, some NGOs continue to explore the social entrepreneur model used by English NGOs. For social care for people with learning disabilities, public funding goes directly into the personal bank accounts of care recipients, while NGOs only receive funds for venues. The distribution of resources depends on the official ranking of the NGOs' annual performance and its local social impact as well as on public relations management.

Two similarities and two differences in trust

Trust-building is a problem common to both countries because standing up to state power is difficult for all NGOs. Trust building is more secure in China than in England, where most NGOs are unwilling to take part in government or public meetings perceived as useless in practice. Consultations and dialogue with local NGOs in England become one-sided—from the point of view of the state. In contrast, in China, some NGOs built mutual trust through everyday communication, facilitating consensus-building and coordination.

However, all NGOs tread carefully when facing power, meaning that contractors can be critical friends in private but not criticize government publicly. Mutual trust is negatively affected in both England and China by the improvised exercise of discretionary power by the state (and its regulatory regimes to control security and financial risks). However, there are differences between the countries. In China, negotiable discretionary power renders governmental regulations on NGO service provision more flexible and allows room for local innovations. In England, improvised discretionary power corrodes the NGOs' trust in local government and allows NGOs little or no flexibility. There is constant, regular and instant information exchange to ratify and check NGOs' performance and activities.

6. Conclusions

Theoretically, we argue that decentred analysis provides a nuanced account of public service delivery in localities. We demonstrate that NGOs can and do exercise local discretion. In both countries, although voluntary organisations live in the shadow of state hierarchy, they have discretion. Our findings indicate that third sector actors have more space for engagement with the state in 'authoritarian' China than in 'liberal democratic' England. In our Chinese study due to the more inclusive local policy network, NGOs were seen as more representative of their clients than English counterparts. Yet, there were common grounds between the NGOs in China and England in the ways that they faced the state. The individual actors in community NGOs in both countries responded similarly to state overregulation and unreasonable demands. Both resisted intervention by arguing that they have greater professional knowledge and experience of the practicalities of everyday service delivery and deeper knowledge of the quality-of-life challenges for their clients.

NGOs deployed similar strategies in different guises and to different extents when repelling the state. The first and primary strategy is to resist over-regulation in non-public forums, which helps to protect the local states' public image and its symbolic standing. NGOs conformed with regular safety checks with patience and contributed positively to the local state's performance. In Southampton City Council, however, fiscal austerity suppressed care providers' appetite for taking part in the government-led networks. Here too NGOs sought the accessibility to day-to-day communication with the government although some forms failed. The government policy network comprised a mixed cluster of inactive and non-negotiating policy actors who don't have either mutual trust or a consensus with government, although some long-term supportive contractors worked collaboratively with government. In contrast, interactions between officials and prominent NGOs in China try hard to establish a regular consultative routine with government even when they do not receive much government financial support.

The second strategy of the weak is making efforts to build a self-organized network independently and silently. Most service providers try to avoid government-centred networks, but the outcome varies. Exclusive policy networks do exist in China, but the learning disabilities network was run by a minority group of state-society actors.

Even though the daily provision of services was dogged with overregulation and red tape from local authorities, NGOs succeeded in extracting resources while minimising dependence by adopting a commercial model.

As this study has shown, the strengths of decentred fieldwork are threefold. First, a bottom-up ethnographic approach provides an in-depth idiographic analysis that identifies complex specificities in context. Second, the unlikely comparison of these two countries leads to a surprising conclusion: there is more local diversity than the contrasting political and public administration contexts would suggest. Third, it moves beyond formal organisation to put the people back into networks and to identify agency in even the most hierarchical of structures. There are many voices in learning disabilities services. Bottom-up research allows us to hear these normally silent voices.

In both countries, we find NGOs do not attempt to openly resist policies. Their everyday practices resist state power but clandestinely. They are non-elite actors who adopt a non-compliant mode of engagement. Often local state actors in ‘authoritarian’ China were superior listeners than their counterparts in ‘democratic’ England. Local actors in China were better at practicing the art of ‘it isn’t what you say, it’s the way that you say it’. They did not have a big stick, but by speaking quietly their negotiations impacted further than their English counterparts.

Apart from the substantive findings of the fieldwork, this article also demonstrates the practical potential of idiographic studies. First, findings enable us to identify six main lessons for local authorities, NGOs and market organizations. First, establishing self-organized networks is difficult, as social care for people with learning disabilities demands enormous resources and, for private providers, little profit. Second, government funding is important as an intangible resource that symbolizes mutual trust relationships between policy actors. Public service providers such as NGOs and market organizations can weigh the benefit and cost of government funding and make individual decisions on a case-by-case basis. Third, sustainable networks are facilitated by mutual understanding and trust in continuous, authentic interactions. Fourth, building strength by transforming into social entrepreneurs is the best strategy for long-term development of NGOs. Fifth, diplomatic skills are essential for building trust and maintaining consensus in public

service delivery. Finally, improvised discretionary power by local authorities corrodes mutual trust, while negotiating that power acts as an incentive to cooperate. Over-regulation and red tape push non-government actors away from the policy network. In short, there were significant practical payoffs from our unusual comparisons.

The New Area Studies calls for ‘*breadth* of explanation and *depth* of understanding’ (Hodgett and James 2018). This case study shows that comparative research at the local, micro-level is feasible, providing insights and depth. We get a portrait of the everyday life of street level actors. As important, we can and do draw lessons that apply beyond the specific networks. They are not generalisations in the naturalist sense; they are not law-like. But they are plausible conjectures that we can explore in other sites and networks. These observations are consistent with the call of the New Area Studies and for novel interpretivist approaches (Derich and Shaffer 2025), social conjectures (Houben 2020), greater reflexivity, and exploring new knowledge bases, acknowledging novel approaches from indigenous communities, or revealing insights from philosophies like Ubuntu (Hodgett and James 2026 forthcoming).⁶

This comparative local study produced plausible conjectures about service delivery in countries as different as England and China. We conclude that local actors can resist the state, even in authoritarian China, because of professional knowledge and experience of the practicalities of everyday service delivery. We deliver counterintuitive findings by making unlikely comparisons. Political Science scepticism about Area Studies is once again found wanting because our unusual comparison enables small facts to speak to larger issues for the benefit of lived lives of vulnerable populations and administrative practice. Collaboration between the New Public Governance (Rhodes 2025) and the New Area Studies breaks down implausible yet recalcitrant disciplinary barriers, offers impactful, useful insights, and significantly, provides greater hope of achieving more effective research methodologies into the lives of peoples and places often forgotten.



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Notes

¹ Kentish Road Respite Centre provided respite services for children or adults with learning-disabled people. It served the parents or carers for this group as a communal venue. The centre belongs to Southampton City Council. It ‘[p]rovide[s] children and young people with disabilities or additional needs an opportunity to spend time away from their parents, engage in fun activities and enjoy time with their friends. They offer parents and carers a break from their caring responsibilities and time to spend with other family members or to catch up on other daily tasks.’ <https://sid.southampton.gov.uk/kb5/southampton/directory/service.page?id=0ovhp5ztIRo&localofferchannel=0>

² ‘Children with Disabilities Team’ is a specialist and statutory multi-agency health and social care service that undertakes assessments and provides services at the complex level of needs. The team supports disabled children, young people and their families whose main need for service arises from their disability or their intrinsic condition, and where these conditions have a complex impact on the quality of the child’s life or/and the lives of their families.’ <https://sid.southampton.gov.uk/kb5/southampton/directory/service.page?id=nStqYS7rVXQ>

³ Social Care in Action—voluntary organisation in Southampton offering home care, specialist care and day care see <https://sciagroup.co.uk/> (accessed 21st October 2025).

⁴ WABC is World of Art Brut Culture, an NGO initially established in Shanghai, China in 2010 which has 10 branches across China. WABC runs a series of *brut art* exhibition and education programmes that involve people with learning disabilities with local governments. Brut culture and art refer to ‘raw art’ which has little polish or refinement and is based on the artists’ instinct.

⁵ Democratic Service Officers are responsible for arranging council responses to communities and citizens. In council meetings and at panels, committees or scrutiny meetings, a democratic service officer is present to organize the meetings, including citizens’ speaking order and time length. See a full description of the role of the democratic service officer at: <https://www.lgcareerswales.org.uk/careers-a-z-en/d/democratic-services-officer.aspx>.

⁶ Ubuntu is “a concept in which your sense of self is shaped by your relationships with other people. It’s a way of living that begins with the premise that “I am” only because “we are.” Paulsen, Steve (2020) ‘I Am Because We Are’: The African Philosophy of Ubuntu see <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/i-am-because-we-are-african-philosophy-ubuntu> (accessed 21st October 2025).