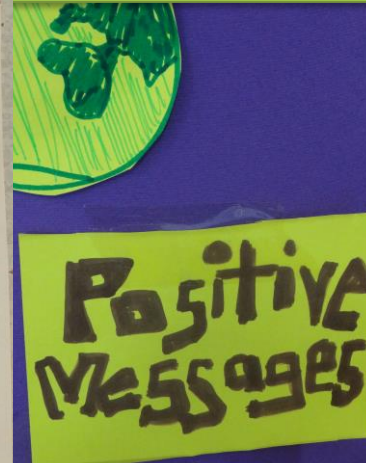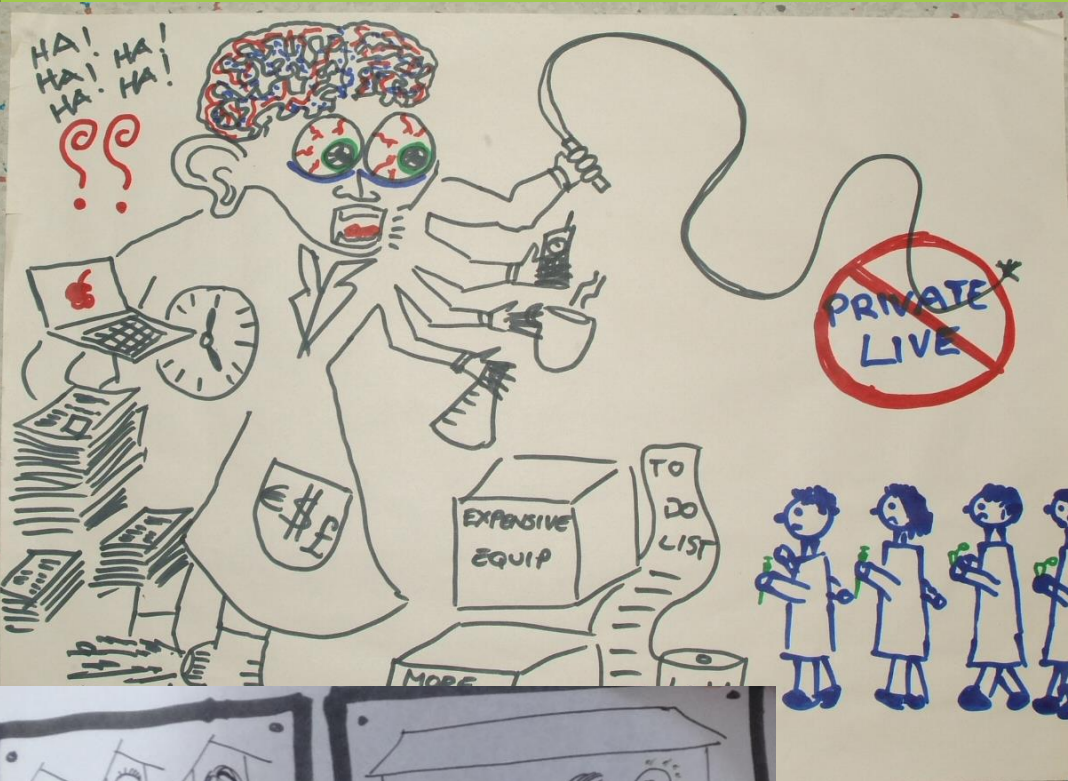# Researcher development: between policies and lived experiences

Attempting a sociological perspective

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Researcher Education and Development Conference 2015

# What does it mean to have a *sociological perspective* on researcher development?

What does it mean to have a *sociological perspective* on researcher development?

It is about:

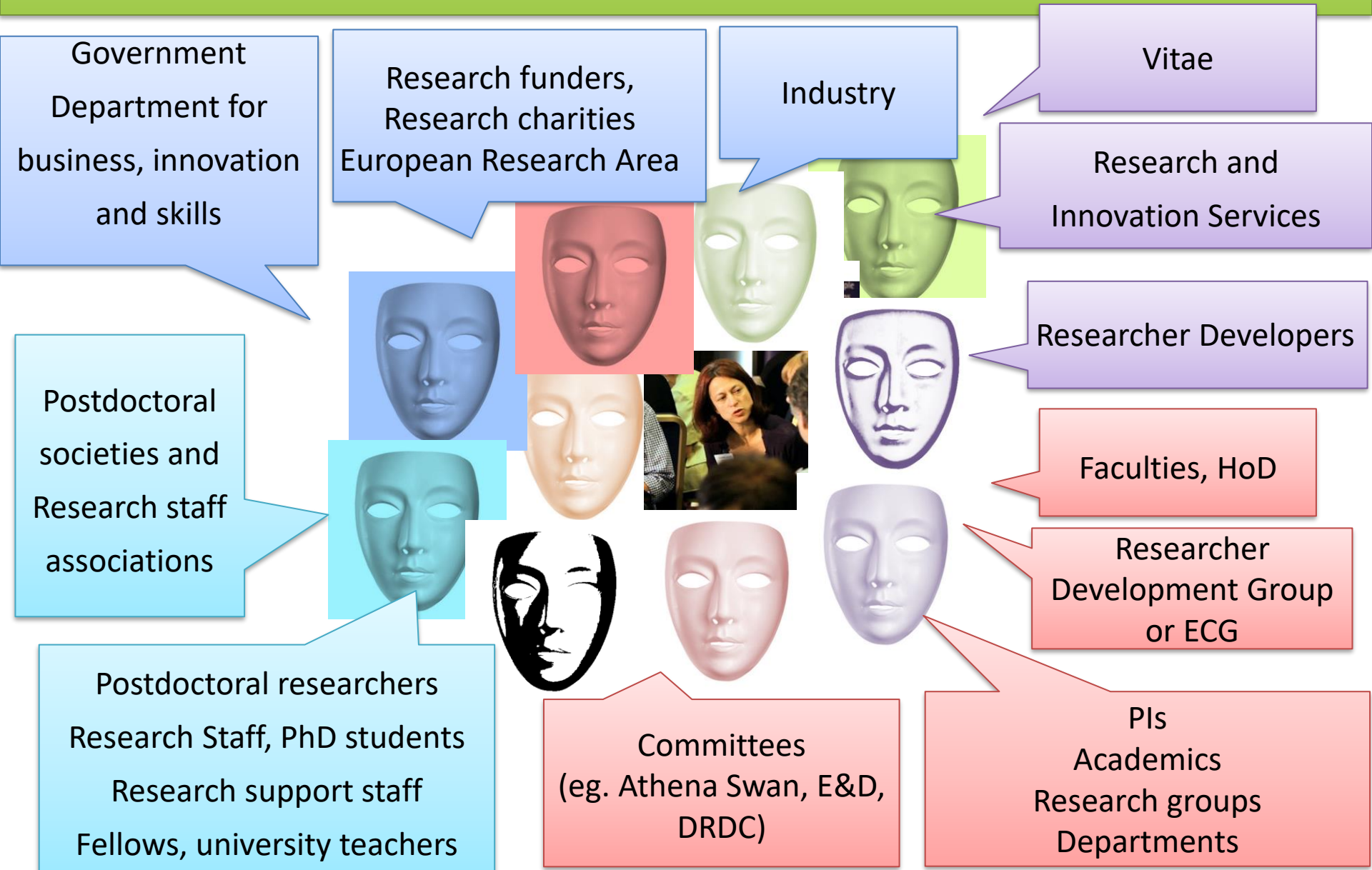- *Taking researcher development* as an **object of analysis**

- **Conceptualising the meanings** of researcher development

- **Understanding the discourse** of researcher development in broader discourses, challenging its meanings and becoming an actor in shaping its direction

- **Reflecting** and **positioning** our role as researcher developer

- Pointing to the obvious and/or unproblematised practices

Research Methodology and Analysis
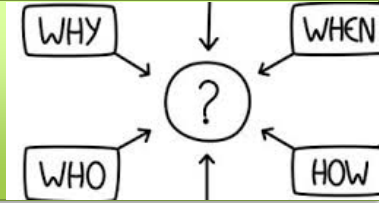
- Researching Higher Education: messiness, wickedity and complexities (Ashwin and Case, 2012)

- **Ethnographic approach in own institution**:

"the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a natural access, is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants...uses the experiences, knowledge and access to empirical material for research purpose" Alvesson (2003)

- Enriched by **semi- structured interviews** of postdoctoral researchers, research fellows and academics (n=23)

- Analysis using concepts from **Bourdieu's tool kit** (eg. **field, capital and habitus)**

*"offers a particular way of **theorizing the rules, narratives and self-held truths** of social phenomena and of educational policy as a specific object of analysis."* (Thompson 2005)

Researcher development: discourse by positioned agents

Government Department for business, innovation and skills

Research funders, Research charities European Research Area

Industry

Vitae

Research and Innovation Services

Researcher Developers

Postdoctoral societies and Research staff associations

Faculties, HoD

Researcher Development Group or ECG

Postdoctoral researchers
Research Staff, PhD students
Research support staff
Fellows, university teachers

Committees
(eg. Athena Swan, E&D, DRDC)

PIs
Academics
Research groups
Departments

Symbolic violence

- <u>Invisibility</u> of researchers as full members of the academic enterprise:
    - Not incorporated in the *academic* sections on university website
    - Either not visible on webpages or visible <u>under</u> their PIs
    - Experience, interest and expertise not displayed (or limited)
    - No names on the doors
    - Indifferentiation among researchers (who's who?)- flat hierarchy or symbolic violence?

- Limiting activities other than research activities

- Fellowships as a symbol of the *unattainable*
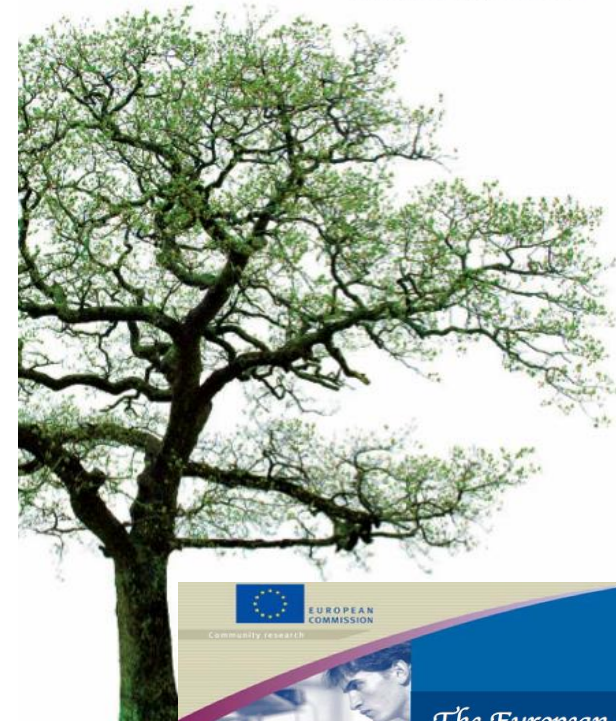
Articulating researcher development

- Still perceived by academics as a separate box, another *thing* done by others

- Considered as something to do when everything else is done

- Still very little consideration of the job market outside of academia

- Not considering it as an element of academic culture

- Responding to policy drivers and demands from funders

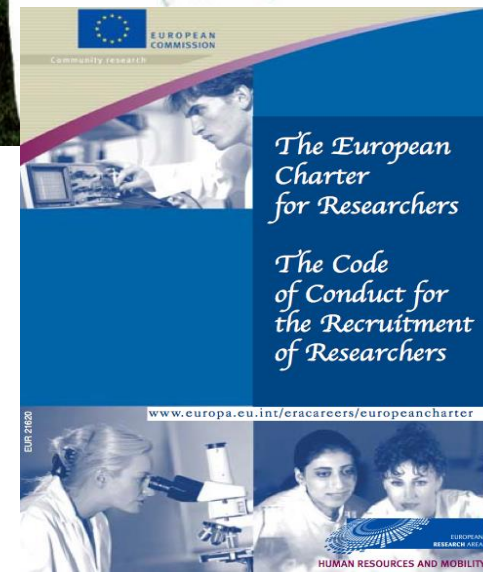- Limited description* of the "knowledge worker"

Unbearable *lightness* of "research independence"

- The notion of <u>transition towards research independence</u> is not formally stated

- **Principle 4** "The importance of researchers**' personal and career development,** and lifelong learning, is clearly recognised and promoted at all stages of their career"

- **Principle 5.1** "Researchers are employed to advance knowledge and should exercise and **develop increased capacity for <u>independent, honest and critical thought</u>** throughout their careers. "

"they can enjoy the right to be recognised and listed and/or quoted, in the context of their actual contributions, as co-authors of papers, patents, etc, or **to publish their own research results independently from their supervisor(s).**" (p.22)

The Concordat
to Support the Career Development of Researchers

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Community research

The European Charter for Researchers

The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers

www.europa.eu.int/eracareers/europeancharter

EUR 21620

EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA

HUMAN RESOURCES AND MOBILITY

4 X

Tension between agency and structural expectations

"But yet you need to _belong to a tree_. So if you look at the very successful scientists – because that's something, I say "what am I doing that is not correct", so who are the successful youngy's that are getting the positions then, you know, such and such. You can trace all of them to one tree, so _it's just branches out from a tree_, and then you go back and there's just the...whoever, you know, _it's like a family_ of....In a way now, I think it makes sense and it's important that you _trust_ people that you've _trained_ and _they are going to help you_ in research because times are hard. So I wish they would say that on the applications, and say you need to have _pedigree_, you need to come from a lab that will support you no matter what..."

M. yrou Torratna alia

Metaphor describing agency

" I think I'm not a branch but I am...what do you call it when you cut....so you have a tree and then the tree is doing such and such, and then you cut a branch from off the tree and you stick it and you make it grow.... a graft, **a graft on a tree**, because I think I can improve. I mean his work is amazing, it's flawless and he's one of the best chemists, one of the top chemists, **but I can bring a different aspect to his work**. So I feel I am a part of his team **but I'm a completely new part of it**, and he is a bit excited about it I think..."
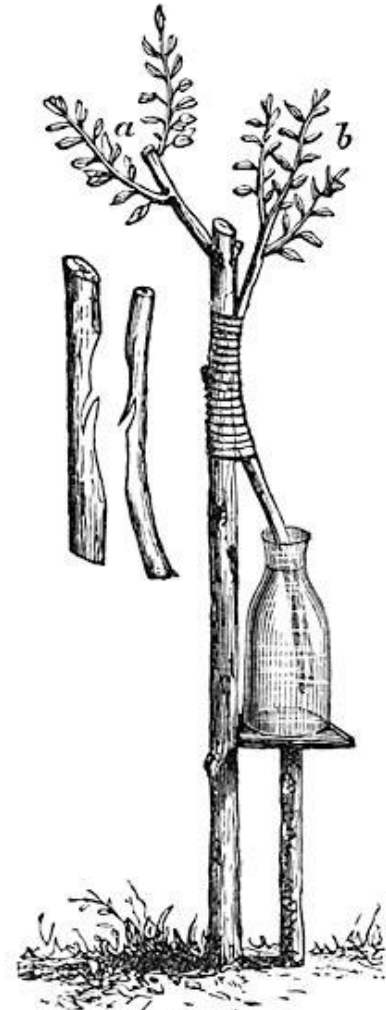
Fig. 5. — Greffe en approche.

Elements for transition towards researcher independence

- ✓ Being left alone
- ✓ Having a PI who was 'hands off'
- ✓ Trying things out without discussing them
- ✓ Being given 'permission'
- ✓ Exploring putting ideas forward
- ✓ Experiencing independence and building an identity as an independent researcher
- ✓ Confusion between autonomy and independence

- ✓ Assumptions about raw talent
- ✓ Keeping results close

CAUTION KEEP HANDS OFF

Paradox about research independence
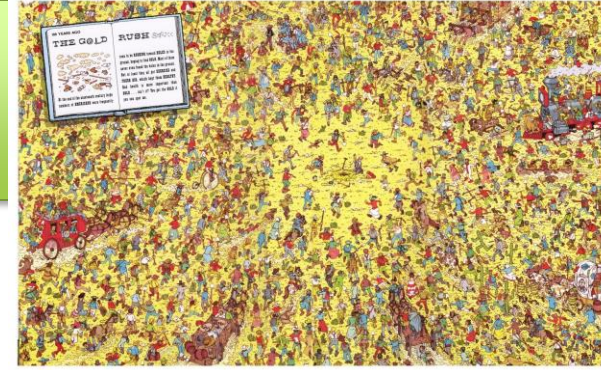
"politics are politics and they are very <u>convoluted</u>. So there are <u>layers on top of layers on top of layers</u>, and I guess that's what I've learnt, you know, things that look like they are like something, they are completely different to what you think they are. And people never tell the truth" *"you have to read in between the lines..."*	**"***I guess I'm in the wrong...not knowing what politics is about...a naïve way of thinking about development as a scientist. I develop much too far my knowledge and very little my political skills I guess...***"**
"So one of the things that I was told several times is <u>that I needed to socialise much more with the people</u>, you know, because it's important. But I just barely had time to be honest with the careers that we have. "	*"So what I've learnt in my career is that you need an awful lot of politics for science, and that we didn't know. You need to be...it's not the best that wins, it's...I don't know how to say it, it's someone that is often not the best <u>person but that person seems to be OK with everyone</u> "*

Unchallenged practices

- **Having to let go** of 'your own' research when transiting towards research independence

- Supportive but up to a certain point

- Being threatened if choosing to continue on same topic

" *So basically he said* "**either you come with me or you will never work on this field ever again, I'll just make sure that...you're done, you can't work on this, this is mine**". *And I remember some days he would be a bit upset and he would say it like that, and other days when he was a bit more relaxed he'd say "it's not good for you neither to work on this field, you must..." and I was just like "what do you mean, this is what I've trained for". So when I was writing....because I wanted....because he said "look, you are going to be left with nothing if I leave because I hold your contract, so if I leave I can actually take it and you would be left with nothing so you had better come with me". So I said "well I'm going to apply for things on my own and try...you know, trying to make it real easy doing that year and a half". And he was like "but what can you do, do you have to do something different".*

Structural enablers: being able to apply for funding

- BBSRC 'vision for postdoctoral researchers':
  *"Postdoctoral researchers should be **empowered through independence**, and able to make well-informed decisions about their future career progression from an early stage"*
  (30th January 2015)

- *Faculty of Engineering Faculty Executive board*
  *"We wish all independent researchers **and those working towards independence** to be able to apply for research grants. Within the rules, we will do what we can to enable this….*
  *If you are a researcher who is either funded externally (e.g. on a grant) or your post is below Grade 8, and **you have made a substantial intellectual contribution to a grant application, you can be named as a Researcher Co-investigator**."*
  (21st January 2015)

Structural impediments

At funders' level

Complexities of eligibility criteria

At institutional level

"So the University of ...**forbid me to apply for money myself**...they worked out that because of the law, if I would have worked for them for more than 5 years, they would have to give me a permanent job so they forbid me to apply... When I say forbid me, they refused to give me support. In practice it is the same thing...They refused to sign up the papers when we applied for grants...so we had to write with my PI grants which I'd be named but I still had to apply for the job for which I wrote the grant for."

"just being named as a Postdoc"

"HR even lied.... It was mostly down to a certain number of people that decided that how it should be and mistaken their wills with the Law "
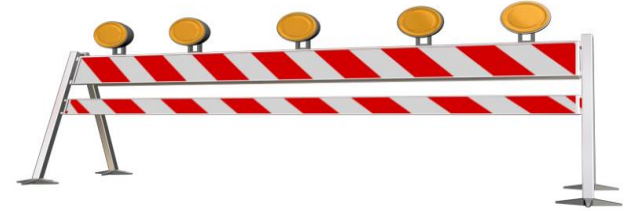
Conclusion

- Considering a sociological perspective on researcher development to understand the habitus of agents

- Suggest a move beyond a normative view of evaluation (eg. What works?)

- Being prepared to play a role in shaping the *rules of the game*

- Can this help us consider the kind of researcher development to establish and the kind of researcher developer we want to be?