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Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) under COST-ACTION IS1106 – Offender Supervision in Europe

SUPERVISIBLE – Photovoice-Project on Offender Supervision in Europe

1. Purpose of the STSM

The STSM offered the opportunity to Prof. Dr. Christine Graebisch and Prof. Dr. Wendy Fitzgibbon in the field of offender supervision to undertake a pilot study for a later collaborative application for funding by several partners from the European Union. The pilot study includes the innovative method of Photovoice, a technique known from research in the health area as a way to give voice to individuals targeted by an intervention or programme. The method has not been used in research on offender supervision so far. The STSM produced new knowledge about the benefits and limitations of the Photovoice method in the field of offender supervision. Its effective use in research as a new innovative method offered a unique opportunity to undertake participant activity followed by focus groups led by an artist and the two researchers. The cooperation of a partner from the United Kingdom and a partner from Germany promotes an understanding of how far different approaches can examine the experience of offender supervision.

2. Description of the work carried out during the STSM

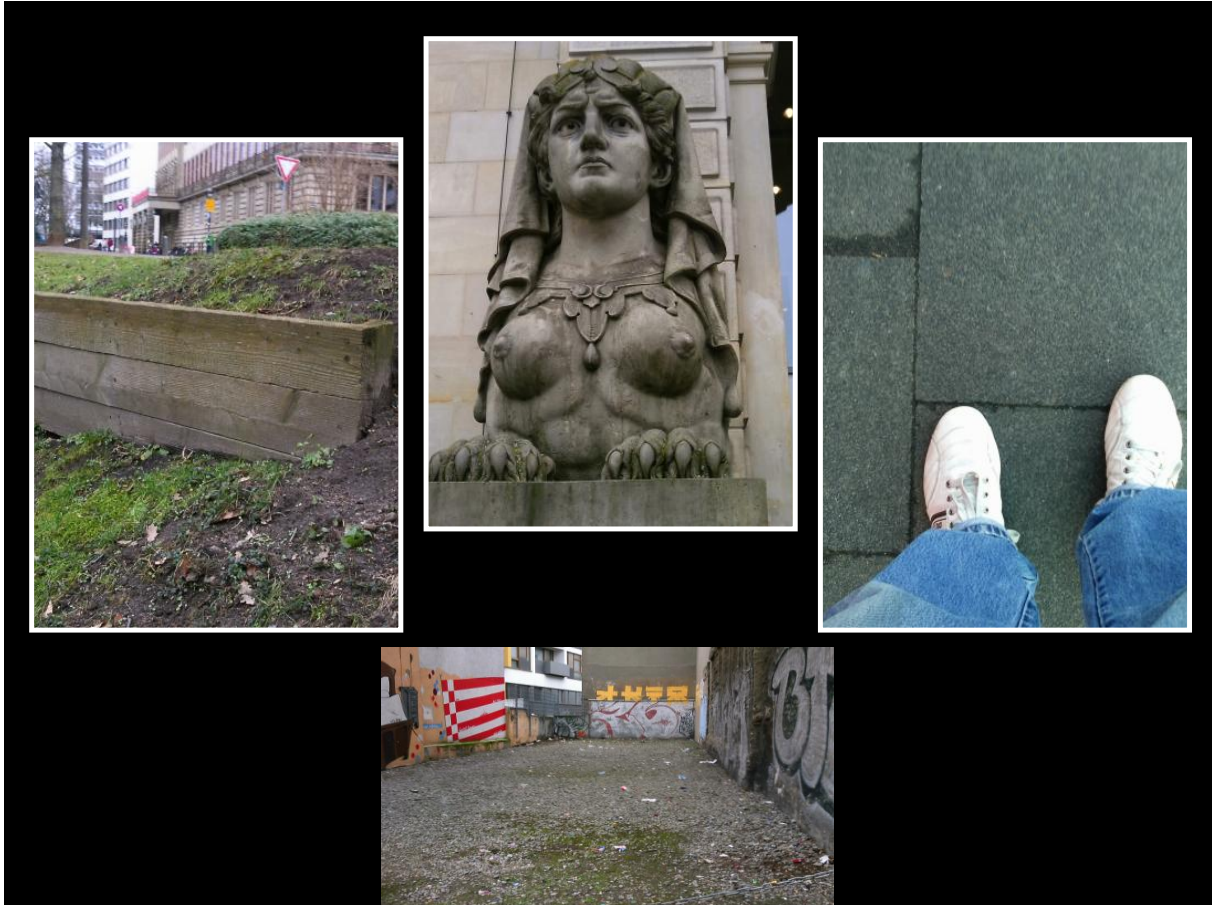
During the British team's visit to Germany four photo sessions comprising of twelve participants took place in three locations, namely an NGO in Bremen, an open prison in Bremen and a half-way house for released prisoners in Hagen where two groups took place one with residents and one with staff members who wanted to use the technique to reflect on their perceptions of what their clients' feel. An innovative aspect of the research was to choose interview partners and places that are not or at least not closely connected to the supervising institutions. This is important, because research on experiencing probation in Germany, as far as it has occurred at all, has always been connected to the probation service in one way or the other. Supervisees have often been asked (and selected) by the probation officers to take part in a study, interviews have taken place in the office of the probation officer and/or a questionnaire has been given back to the research institute by the probation officer. Thus, the rather positive results of the studies with respect to probation as a helpful experience raise methodological questions that were addressed by our pilot study. While this results in different places for the study, such as houses for released prisoners, NGOs of former and current drug users, it was also necessary to use a different methodological approach. Interviews are too much text-orientated for people who are often without qualifications and sometimes illiterate and who often have a history of unsatisfactory experiences in communicate with and within educational as well as criminal justice institutions that strongly rely on textual messages. It was noted that this method captured participants' enthusiasm and enabled trust to be established in a more direct and immediate manner than verbal research methods and especially with written methods such as questionnaires. The method used reflection and verbalisation regarding their experiences of the criminal justice system. They all have experienced being interviewed by the police, the court etc. and they have found a way to deal with it. Photovoice has been successful with marginalised groups in

society and aids their empowerment and this was supported by our findings during our pilot study. The method helped to deal with problems of access to the group of offenders under supervision who are usually not easy to reach.

The offenders under supervision were handed a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of their life under supervision of the criminal justice system for half to one hour. The artist and researchers gave a brief introduction to the task and the artist explained the possibilities of creatively using the camera and avoiding identifiable images. An interpreter was used but many of the participants could understand some English, however everything was translated to ensure everybody could participate equally. On their return they were offered lunch, self-selected from a menu. This successfully bridged the time until their photos were available to be projected onto the wall of the room. After this has been done, all the participants were asked to discuss their photos collectively. The focus group reflected on their experiences of supervision by the criminal justice system and their lives in general. The photo-groups were moderated by the artist and the discussion was translated for the British researcher and the British artist. The photo group session was recorded and will be transcribed by the German colleagues for later use.

3. Description of the main results obtained

The images and the group discussions were a highly effective method of enabling participants to share their experiences, their difficulties and their aspirations. The artist and researchers quickly build an intimate and trustful atmosphere where participants could honestly reveal their journey through the criminal justice system and their feelings about the effectiveness of their supervision. The staff who participated also reveal a high degree of insight into their clients situations and emotions. In order to illustrate this we are including a couple of the powerful images they created. These will be utilised more fully when the transcriptions have been analysed.



4. Future collaboration with the host institution

We anticipate that further collaboration will occur. The success of the pilot study has reinforced to the researchers and the artist that this is a highly successful method of engaging clients and enabling them to creatively and imaginatively reflect on their experiences and identify effective practice. The host institution anticipates that there will be an application for a European grant to support future work in this area with London Metropolitan University.

5. Foreseen publications/articles resulting from the STSM

It is envisaged that the transcriptions will be jointly analysed and used to provide insightful observations of the images in order to reflect on the participants' experiences of supervision. These observations will then be written up and used to underpin an academic article. The images and some excerpts will be used for the exhibition to be held in Brussels at the end of the COST collaboration. They also will be used for a public awareness leaflet supported by the Howard League for Penal Reform. This leaflet will be circulated in both countries.