

# The Icarus Project: Report on Luxemburg Seminar of March 1999 \*\*

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The Icarus Project is an international comparative study of how health and social services recognise and respond to the psychosocial needs of children of mentally ill parents; the study takes its name from the Greek myth of Daedulus and Icarus, with Icarus being seen as a victim of his father's delusional system. The project was conceived and co-ordinated by the Centre for Comparative Social Work studies at Brunel University. The seminar which took place in Luxembourg from March 19 to 21, 1999, was attended by researchers from the twelve participating European countries (England, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland and Sweden) as well as by a researcher from the State of Victoria in Australia. Data gathering for the project's main report has now finished, and at the Luxembourg seminar delegates worked on the preliminary data analysis and agreed a framework for the final report. This final report is due to be completed in January 2000.

Without exception, recent policy developments in the participating countries have made it increasingly likely that children will continue to live with mentally ill parents: the policy trend in adult mental health services is for less frequent and shorter periods of inpatient treatment, while in child welfare and protection the general belief is that, as far as possible, children should be cared for within their own families as opposed to being taken into some alternative care system. The working hypothesis of the Icarus Project, however, was that the needs of these children might not always be clearly addressed because, despite the rhetoric of inter-agency and inter-professional collaboration in child welfare, adult mental health services and child welfare services tend to operate as distinctly separate systems and effective liaison between them cannot be taken for granted.

The methodology which has been used in this research was qualitative; teams of professionals from adult psychiatry and child welfare (and in

some countries child psychiatry) were brought together in the participating countries for focus group discussions of a case study/vignette, which tracked the difficulties being experienced by one family over three chronological stages. Essentially, the researchers used this group discussion to elicit the views of the professional teams as to how, in their respective countries, the service systems and professionals would help the children described in the vignette. Transcripts were made of the taped discussions and these transcripts are currently being analysed by the Centre for Comparative Social Work Studies and the Practice Development Unit of the NSPCC.

While the methodology involved the use of group discussion with professionals from relevant service systems, it should be noted that it was not of the "hit and run" variety commonly to be found in social research; instead, the philosophy of Icarus was one of ongoing collaborative inquiry, with the professionals being drawn back into the research process and encouraged to reflect on the preliminary data analysis and to identify factors which might facilitate best practice in this area. The large number of participating countries made it difficult to do total comparisons when follow-up groups were being held with the professional teams, so to overcome this problem countries were twinned. Follow-up groups, therefore, simply involved individual countries comparing their own responses with those of one other country. Ireland, for example, was twinned with Sweden so that, when the Irish researchers reconvened the professional teams, this second round of group meetings consisted of a detailed comparison of the Irish with the Swedish responses to the vignette. In addition to the researchers, the Luxembourg seminar was also attended by representatives of participating professionals, from many of the countries involved so that, again, these professionals were able to contribute to the overall analysis of the data as well as meeting directly with colleagues from their twin countries. As a result of

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the Luxembourg seminar, plans have been made by a number of the twinned countries to have further meetings in order to look in more detail at points of similarity and dissimilarity in the handling of these child welfare issues.

It would be premature at this stage to attempt a definitive summary of the final Icarus report, but the following are some of the themes which have emerged as central to understanding the differing ways in which countries respond to the needs of children of mentally ill parents:

- differing cultural values as to the legitimacy of state intervention into family life;
- differing conclusions as to the value of, or need for, mandatory reporting systems for child abuse;
- resourcing of child welfare and adult mental health services;
- conflicting views as to what constitutes professional confidentiality and the importance of this as an ethical issue;
- the use of formal management systems in an attempt to ensure that children of mentally ill parents are recognised as a client group with specific needs;
- the identification of one professional group - for instance, GPs- as being well placed to co-ordinate work in this complex arena;
- the recognition of the importance of fostering an informal culture of good relations between different professions and service systems, as opposed to having an excessive reliance on legal and bureaucratic guidelines and regulations.

The Luxembourg seminar confirmed the value of international comparative research of this kind, and the experience was useful and enjoyable for all who attended. A common view which emerged from the detailed discussions was that while participants learnt a great deal about how child welfare is handled in other countries, they also learnt a great deal about their own countries as a result of looking at the familiar through the eyes of others. The ultimate aim of Icarus is to promote good communication and co-operation between all professionals and service systems which are involved with children of mentally ill parents, while at the same time acknowledging and welcoming cultural diversity. The researchers were anxious to avoid having Icarus degenerate into a child welfare version of the Eurovision Song Contest, with league tables, winners and losers. The final report promises to be interesting and helpful, and it is to be assumed that there will be many spin-off publications from this imaginative project.

Watch this space!

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