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Title

Local Government and Practice Ontologies: sector speaks in housing and homelessness services

Abstract

Present accounts of local government under neoliberalism risk poorly characterising and conceptualising forms of resistance by local actors. Institutional actors, and statutory agents in particular, have long been subject to analyses in order to appraise their complicity with, and resistance to oppressive political rationalities. Debates have gathered pace under 'austerity' and swingeing fiscal cuts to local budgets, consistent with the action of post-industrial nation states after the 2008 financial crash. The article argues that at the heart of existing accounts is the failure to engage with how institutional structures come to formation and how human agents come to action. Informed by relational and ontological approaches to the 'making-of' state formations, the 'sector speaks' concept is introduced. The concept draws on local actors' narratives from an empirical study of housing and homelessness practices, demonstrating these as a governance-action interface, 'lived' through day-to-day actions and social practices. This approach provides an alternative insight into human agents' actions, behaviours and capacities for resistance, and how these may be captured through local government research.

Key Words

Relationality, Ontology, Neoliberalism, Agency, Resistance, Governance

Introduction

Investigating the resistance of local actors to neoliberalism and 'austerity' is an established feature of policy debates (Beveridge and Koch, 2017). However, a limitation of existing accounts is that they risk poorly characterising and conceptualising resistance because of a lack of engagement with how institutional structures come to formation and local actors come to action. The present article argues that relational and ontological approaches provide alternative insight. Informed by qualitative findings from the author's doctoral study of housing and homelessness organisations in the north of England, carried out over a decade ago (2006-10), regularities in data (continuities, repetitions, intensifications) show that practitioners think they are 'doing more' for service users via fresh, professional and proactive interventions. These narratives, conceptualised as 'sector speaks', constitute institutional space at the level of the local-state, demonstrating a governance-action interface, enacted through, but not reducible to, the discursive.

This argument is informed by a body of empirically grounded scholarship from across critical policy, (Law and Singleton, 2014; Law and Mol, 2008), anthropological (Lea, 2008), urban (Hilbrandt, 2019; Lacione, 2014) and organisational studies (Hultin and Mähring, 2017), and critical social policy (Fortier, 2017; Hunter, 2015; Clarke et al., 2015; Durnova, 2013;

McDermont, 2012). Broadly, these researches understand governance phenomena in spatial and temporal terms to theorise the 'making of' governing formations, rationalities, processes, actors and practices (Jessop, 2013; Larner, 2003; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Shore and Wright, 1997). The state, public policy, local government and social welfare organisations are theorised as multiple and sentient, constituted beyond 'formalised' institutional structures and in constant and dynamic states of becoming, as opposed to monolithic or networked entities that exist, disembodied and outside of human experience as pre-social fixed entities or the end product of socio-political forces.

In terms of structure, to clarify the utility of these approaches, the article first critiques how existing accounts construct human agency, state structures and resistance. The second section then explains sector speaks using extended data excerpts, setting up an agenda for 'practice ontologies'.

Constructing Governance Phenomena

The evolving trajectory of neoliberalism, coupled with its effects for public services, has sustained intellectual focus on local actors and resistance (Brady, 2017). Today, this is sharpened through 'austerity'; swingeing cutbacks under a Conservative-Liberal coalition (2010-2015) and then Conservative government (2015-present), consistent with choices of post-industrial nation states after the 2008 financial crash (Bailey, Bramley and Hastings, 2015). The Local Government Association (2018) calculate that by 2020, councils will have lost 60p out of every £1 the Government provides for services, resulting in cuts to local provision with impacts for vulnerable social groups. For example, cuts are linked to a 165% increase in 'rough sleepers' between 2010-2018 (Homeless Link, 2019).

Dramatic cuts dovetail with the neoliberalisation of public service cultures. Broadly, this refers to impacts of deregulatory market logics, which limit structural responses to human need, instead responsabilising citizen-subjects as agents of their '*welfare destiny*' (Williams, 2000, p. 3). These individualising discourses manifest through forms of identification and consciousness on the part of local actors operating in policy and welfare institutions (Newman, 2014, Baines, 2004). For example, marketisation and attendant principles managerialism and modernisation construct provision as a rational, technical and administrative exercise, best delivered via performance managed, mixed-economy regimes (Carmel and Harlock, 2008, p. 164). Such provision is cast as dynamic, innovative, flexible, responsive and outcomes focused in contrast to past slow-moving, 'old-school' and defensive state delivered services. This, despite empirical studies that consistently demonstrate how audit cultures risk superficial responses because practitioners 'tick-box' system directives instead of engaging with welfare users' needs (see Dobson, 2019, pp. 11-12; Milbourne and Cushman, 2015; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007). The effects of this climate are wide-ranging and damning. For example, Mills (2019) argues that neoliberal austerity discourses stigmatise receipt of social welfare, intensify punitive welfare retrenchment and conflate human productivity with paid work, resulting in incidents of suicide amongst unemployed and disabled welfare users.

These destructive contexts and impacts help explain contemporary interest in establishing the role local institutions and actors play in resisting oppressive political rationalities. Empirical focus on the behaviour and actions of human agents has potential to identify opportunities for, and barriers to, social change at a range of governance scales. There is evidence of dismay however, at the lack of radical resistance given the effects of austerity (Beveridge and Koch, 2017).

Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) are sympathetic, finding the lack of overt conflict '*surprising*', but celebrate local government's '*remarkable capacity to reinvent its institutional forms to weather the storm*' (p. 534). They conceptualise local actors as '*institutional bricoleurs*' whose responsiveness and creativity, resourcefulness and pragmatism make local authorities function in contexts of fiscal constraints. In claiming local actors' capacities for getting by, making the untenable workable, their argument reflects a broader pattern within existing debates about the nature and form of resistance as it relates to neoliberal social welfare.

For instance, Baker and Davis's (2018) empirical study of a New Zealand Welfare Beneficiary Advocacy service identifies quiet resistance through local actors' adoption of emancipatory languages. They argue that absence of spectacular resistance does not mean neoliberalism is accommodated. Elsewhere, Marston and McDonald (2012) argue that overt resistance is '*precluded by the realities of power*'. Analysing social work in Australia, they argue political agency is achieved through practitioners' reflective practice and ordinary actions; non-heroic, practical and tentative resistance. The authors understand this as an appropriate form of political struggle given the forces at play; while 'humble', it has potential to disrupt neoliberal hegemonic and disciplining power (Marston and McDonald, 2012, p. 1035). Overall, while local actors' frustrations with the present climate are conveyed in powerful terms (see Clayton, Donovan and Marchant, 2015), resistance is nonetheless observed as necessarily covert, hidden and mundane negotiative actions as opposed to radical and spectacular (see also Barnes and Prior, 2011, p. 276-77; Muñoz Arce and Pantazis, 2019, pp. 141-2).

Significantly, there is an affective component to these accounts; good actors doing what they can in difficult circumstances. By way of contrast, actors may be cast more passively, and less positively, where they demonstrate complicity, with distinctive impacts for those contracted or directly employed by government institutions, who become constructed as doing the state's 'dirty work' (Dobson, 2017). For instance, unemployment policy actors are observed as exercising human capacities for '*malevolence*' by occupying structures that bring harm to vulnerable welfare users (Wright, 2012, pp. 324-5). Elsewhere, statutory actors are cast as institutional automatons who fail to resist because they don't or can't know any better given the saturating power of hegemonic neoliberal governmentalities (see Dubois, 2009).

Across these accounts there is a split with 'good agency' conflated with resistance to oppressive political rationalities, and 'bad agency' with compliance. Regarding the latter, agency is constructed in rather cynical or collapsed terms. One impact is that how and why institutional actors behave and act as they do remains under-developed, narrowed to conclusions about socio-political forces that bear down and shape agency's form/limits, or individualising critiques

that focus on '*choice, intentionality and projective agency*' (Smets and Jarzabkowski, 2013, p. 1283). For example, Bartel's (2017) study of local government practitioners in Amsterdam working with social innovators in neighbourhood governance summarises that workers should divest from '*hegemonic institutions such as rationalistic evaluation, defensive behaviour and experiential detachment*' (p. 3802). Articulations of good agency are similarly framed; back to Lowndes and McCaughie who call for exploration of the passions and commitments, resilience and reflexivity of '*special people*' who make local government function given '*the truism that personality and passion and individual qualities matter*' (Lowndes and McCaughie's, 2017, p. 545).

In the fight for social justice, empirical focus on behaviours and actions that highlight human capacities for destructive and constructive agency is important (Hunter, 2003; Hoggett, 2001). But the 'ways in' matter to achieve a theoretically robust and appropriately complex appraisal of institutional structures and human agents *in order to* identify realistic possibilities for social change. A starting point is to account for local actors' more ambivalent and alienated experiences of existing in institutional sites, challenging the notion that agents are primarily invested in, fixed to, and motivated by positions of institutional domination, with (in)action restricted to their role in formalised institutional sites (Dobson, 2017; Fortier, 2017; Neal and McGlaughlin, 2009; Lea, 2008; Puwar, 2004; Hunter, 2003). The next section identifies the role of theoretical and methodological foundations for this work.

(Re)configuring governance phenomena

One explanation for the limits of existing accounts is *over-reliance* on the cognitive and discourse (Hunter, 2003). Methodologically, the discursive is frequently used to observe links between oppressive political rationalities and what happens 'on the ground', observable through language practices in policy texts, political agenda and everyday talk (see Gaffney and Millar, 2019; Fairclough, 2013; Milbourne and Cushman, 2015). How far local actors internalise, are subjectified through and (re)produce 'mainstream' discourses provides one way to appraise their resistance/complicity (see Gazso, 2019, pp. 15-16; Muñoz Arce and Pantazis, 2019, p. 141; Meriluoto, 2019).

One problem is that political rationalities (e.g., neoliberalism) and myriad state institutions (e.g., the central-state, commissioning teams) become constructed as bearing down on local actors who willfully or unknowingly reproduce their edicts unless they happen to refuse these (Dobson, 2015). Despite the Foucauldian argument that disciplinary power is *not* imposed by top-down sovereign systems, but is instead diffuse and subjectless, exercised through all human relations and interactions, the social and the state become (implicitly or explicitly) constructed as disembodied driving forces. Institutional structures in particular are inappropriately materialised with cohered form, imagined as entities existing outside of human agency that make things move and happen (Williams, 2000, p. 21, Lea, 2008; Larner, 2003). And this construction of top-down/bottom-up power provides conceptual foundation for the splits identified in the previous section: resistant/complicit local actors, hidden/spectacular resistance.

There are certainly accounts that confront these dynamics. Specifically, critical hegemonic studies yield complex empirical analyses of governance phenomena, which resist fixing power in a specific entity or actor, identifying instead its multi-directional operation (see Schmidt, 2011, p. 122). For example, Davies et al.'s (2018) Gramscian analysis of a politically leftist local council understands practitioners as encultured but active '*austrian realists*'. Their lack of radical resistance to austerity is attributed to a balance of forces - historic local-central state conflict, practical and political pressures - that coalesce around the needs of actors/entities (government agencies, business leaders, and organised civil society), producing governing subjects opposed to fiscal cutbacks, but who nonetheless deliver these. Elsewhere, Muñoz Arce and Pantazis's (2019) Chile-based study finds 'concrete expressions' of neoliberal rationalities in social workers' views about service users but interprets these as effects of fear, depoliticisation and distrust borne of the dictatorial Pinochet era. Imposition of neoliberalism and violent repression of Marxian social work practice/workers from the 1980s leaves a legacy of diminished welfare systems and social rights, rising inequalities and precarious labour conditions and reliance on marketised provision that dictates practitioners work rapidly with clients. These dynamics compress space and time, limiting workers' capacities to engage in liberatory '*projects for society*' (p. 142) as well as practical grassroots organising.

Across these studies, complicit local actors are demonstrated as *effects* of socio-cultural, political and historic interdependencies. However, two issues remain. First, conclusions identify where resistant power is potentially temporally and spatially located, with consistent emphasis on the bottom-up by grassroots actors (Geddes and Sullivan, 2011, p. 409). Second, with local actors' caught up in the swirl or '*caldron*' (Lippert, 2017, p. 55, Li, 2017, p. 43) of heterogeneous hegemonic forces, there is risk of a '*haste to move beyond the micro level of individual identities and their associated practices to uncover and explain the apparent regularities in the articulation of those practices*' (West, 2011, p. 421). Arguably, critical poststructuralist approaches respond to that critique through engagement with the non-hegemonic and non-discursive (Brady, 2017). For example, McKee (2009) calls for research methods that render visible the '*concrete activity*' of governing (p. 473). Howarth, Glynos and Griggs (2016) explore how '*particular practices and regimes 'grip' subjects*', through '*fantasmatic logics*' (p. 100). Going back further, critical social policy scholarship has long engaged with questions of power, resistance and state structures, through relational and psychosocial approaches to identity, agency and the emotions (Hoggett, 2001; Williams, 2000). It is beyond the scope of the present article to fully detail these, but briefly, their contribution has been to theorise what constitutes human experience to understand the *potential* for social change in institutional sites.

Critical governance scholar Shona Hunter (2003) regards these approaches as central to a developing a theoretically robust, empirically grounded and rounded understanding of institutional actors and their capacities for resistance. A starting point is policy scholars' lack of engagement with those in positions of institutional domination (policy actors) as it relates to their identity, agency and resistance. Hunter argues that this gap means that policy actors are assumed to be motivated by an identification imputed to them in poststructural terms by history, society and culture; investments in maintaining positions of institutional power. The

author contrasts this to established debates about the identity, agency and resistance of those in positions of institutional subordination which, drawing on historic 'grassroots' struggles and new social movements, conceptualise welfare users' capacities for action with oppressed others on the basis of shared categorical identity (i.e., similarly classed, gendered and racialised people) and ontological (unique) experience. Hunter builds into these approaches, introducing concept 'relational identity' to theorise how policy actors might work in support of those they apparently have nothing in common with through *felt* connection.

Hunter's temporal, spatial, intersectional and affective argument is informed in particular by critical policy and race scholar Gail Lewis's (2000) postcolonial study of Black female social workers. Lewis demonstrates how social workers' actions are grounded in shifting, lived experiences structured through processes of identification, subjectification and positioning and felt connection to self and others (client, community, family, colleagues). This means workers occupy positions of institutional domination *and* subordination in different times and spaces and their agency *and* the social work department are constituted by and through these dynamics (Hunter, 2015, pp. 25-28). What is especially important about Lewis's argument, for Hunter, is that it demonstrates potential for '*less strategic social action*' via exploration of non-normative experience and the formation and disruption of relationships between different actors over time (p. 29). Brought to the present article, these relational and psychosocial accounts are significant for two interrelated reasons. First they keep the disaggregation and formation of human agency and institutional space dynamically 'in frame'. This challenges binaries that construct local actors as existing in *or* outside of institutional structures by understanding their agentic experiences as not just representative of a world 'out there', but constituted by and of it (Lewis, 2000). Second, they question what constitutes resistance in empirical and conceptual terms, favouring more expansive focus on potential for action and social change in an everyday, lived and felt sense. The next section demonstrates how these approaches resonate with relational and ontological approaches.

Relational & ontological approaches

Relational approaches, frequently grounded in ontological frameworks, underpin contemporary theories of policy (Law and Singleton, 2014; McDermont, 2012; Law and Mol, 2008; Hunter, 2008), institutional (Hultin and Mähring, 2017; Lacione, 2014; Durnova, 2013) and state enactment (Hilbrandt, 2019; Fortier, 2017; Hunter, 2015). While there are significant methodological and conceptual variations, binding these works is an understanding of state formations and institutional structures as constituted by and through multiple regimes, sites and practices in ways that refuse temporal or spatial boundaries around space, place, scale, human agency and identity (Clarke et al., 2015). Social reality is recognised as fundamentally unstable and multiple, with no singular reality that exists independently of what we do (Mol, 2002). That phenomena *appear* as if singular is the effect of *cohering* multiplicity via social, cultural, symbolic, affective, material, relational and performative practices (Hunter, 2015).

Linked to ontological arguments are specific methodologies such as Latour's (2005) Actor Network Theory. Briefly, 'ANT' collapses the split between ontology and epistemology, claiming

that realities are done with representations. For Latour (2005, p. 180), an actor-network is made to exist by its many ties; the more durable attachments something has, the more it exists. This troubles spatial and temporal scales because it understands social reality as flat, without the sort of macro-top or a micro-bottom associated with 'mainstream' studies of the social and political. Rather, everything has a local quality and subjectivity, because '*subjectivity is not the property of human souls but of the gathering itself*' (Latour, 2005, p. 245). This means that all phenomena are temporaneous, shifting and uncertain. Objects/subjects are never finished or completed; rather, they are 'assembled' through different elements that are always in the process of being newly reassembled, constituted through ongoing negotiation with variously positioned human and non-human objects/subjects (Law and Singleton, 2014, see pp. 385-6).

Relational and ontological arguments are variably applied across governance scholarship. For example, ANT is adopted to empirically unpick the 'making of' local institutional sites, tracing dense contingencies that (re)configure possibilities for actors to act/become enacted in certain ways (Hultin and Mähring, 2017, p. 571; Lacione, 2014; Smets and Jarzabkowski, 2013). In contrast, less an intricate study of everyday practices, sociology of translation perspectives investigate how and why policy takes particular and global form through the study of 'its' formulation, movement and travel, human and non-human component parts, in critical and cultural terms (Clarke et al., 2015).

Most relevant to the present article are empirical studies that observe practices of state enactment beyond 'formalised' institutional sites, identifying how local actors co-construct and rework the state through everyday (in)action and power dynamics. For example, Hanna Hilbrant's (2018) analysis of the regulation of allotment dwelling in Berlin demonstrates how allotment holders' take-up of local bureaucratic codes produce particular experiences and imaginings of governance phenomena. These reproduce the state and enact institutional structures *and* social orders insofar as *who* is subjected to codes, and thereby included/excluded, is shown as racialised. A related but deepened account returns to Shona Hunter (2015) whose psychoanalytic and postcolonial study of policy actors delivering equalities and diversities policies argues that the state comes into being through 'relational politics'; everyday processes and power relations at the level of identity and agency. The emotions are central to this approach, operating as connecting devices that bring together the individual and social, constituting '*multiple acts and objects into the reasonably temporarily coherent form we think of as the state*'. Conceptualised as 'feeling work', policy actors' feelings and internal ambivalence/anxieties frame investments in ideas (e.g., equality, social justice), social categories (e.g., race, gender) or sets of ideas/practices that constitute a welfare institution (e.g., the National Health Service). This is theorised as 'relational contestation' at the level of everyday,

'actions, investments and practices of the multiple and shifting range of people and other material and symbolic objects that make up the state; actions that bring personal histories, biographies, structural tendencies and cultural orderings into

one frame' (p. 15)

These dynamics drive the congealing/solidifying of singular reality and experience, enacting '*a topography of an institutional space*' (p. 34). With direct reference to ontological frameworks, Hunter demonstrates relational contestation through *oscillation* between singularity and multiplicity; between cognitive simplification and emotional multiplicity, at the level of identity and agency. Crucially, this approach regards governance as an interdependent and ethical practice insofar as the distribution of power and emotion are connected. This is because relational contestation is a process of creating social difference through 'good' and 'bad' orders producing gendered and raced orderings in and through state structures (p. 22).

Significant to the present article is how both Hilbrant and Hunter focus on everyday agency and action, across actors and sites, to demonstrate the shaping and making of institutional structures, observing varying effects that both contribute to and disrupt normative governmentalities over time. The next section operationalises these insights through the sector speaks concept. It starts by introducing empirical data that underpins the approach.

Sector Speaks

As noted in the introduction, the sector speaks concept is informed by findings from the author's doctoral research. That study investigated social regulation in housing and homelessness practices in the context of disciplining policies introduced by the 'New Labour' government (e.g., 'Anti-Social Behaviour Orders'); measures consistent with the intensified and punitive neoliberal governance of poor and marginalised people across countries in the global West (Waquant, 2001; Rose, 2000). At the time of the study, there was limited empirical evidence about that climate's relationship to everyday practices. Thus, research involved observation and 30 interviews (N=6 per organisation) with practitioners in five services across voluntary and statutory sectors, which offered varying provision. A voluntary Resource Centre and a Day Centre/Night Shelter provided advocacy and support, advice and information, and food, washing and changing facilities. A voluntary Supported Housing Organisation provided accommodation and resettlement support. The statutory Homelessness Assessment Unit established entitlement to resources through a Housing Act 1996 (as amended 2002) part VII homelessness assessment, and the Social Landlord Organisation delivered tenancy management services.

Findings demonstrated that all participating organisations engaged in regulatory practices in different ways. There was however a trope that cut across organisations where practitioners claimed to be 'doing more' via fresh, proactive and professional interventions, summarised below in simplified author-written scripts. Narratives and practices varied in relation to sector, with voluntary organisations moving into more structured provision and statutory agencies shifting away from legalistic methods.

Table 1: 'Doing more'

Organisation	'Doing more'	Interventions
Day Centre/Night Shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>We're going beyond tea and sympathy now.</i> ● <i>We're doing more for clients to get an outcome for them.</i> ● <i>We want to encourage a different mindset amongst clients. They can do more.</i> 	<p>Nominal charge for toiletries and lunch meal (evening meal remains free).</p> <p>Employment in social enterprise catering scheme.</p>
Resource Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>What are we doing to move people on?</i> ● <i>Rather than just letting people sit around and do nothing, we think, how can we support you?</i> ● <i>We hire on basis of support skills and professionalism.</i> 	<p>Specific opening and closing times restrict when clients can access the service.</p>
Supported Housing Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>We need to recruit people with the right attitude.</i> 	<p>Fresh recruitment strategies.</p>
Social Landlord Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>We need to ask, why are you behaving like that?</i> ● <i>We won't give up on customers.</i> ● <i>Going down the legal route of evicting tenants is an easy option. It doesn't resolve underlying issues.</i> 	<p>Tenancy Support Team focuses on tenancy sustainment and tenant need.</p>
Homelessness Assessment Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Going down the legal route is an easy option. It doesn't help customers.</i> ● <i>Preventing homelessness is harder but more rewarding work.</i> 	<p>Prevention of homelessness activities</p>

In the Resource and Day centres, structured approaches - opening services for specific periods, charges for food and toiletries - changed organisations from places where clients could hang-out and socialise to now being targeted and 'worked with'. For Homelessness Assessment Unit and Social Housing organisations, methods to 'support' customers were taken up because legalistic methods - assessing entitlement or enforcement practices like warnings and eviction - failed to tackle underlying needs. Elsewhere, the majority of Supported Housing Organisation practitioners, primarily front-line workers, were anxious that they could not meaningfully support clients because a new funding model audited and limited the time available to 'work with' service users (Dobson, 2019). However, managers applied languages of 'doing more' to staff. Narratives are articulated through explanations of previously 'doing nothing'. For example, this quotation from Robert, a Homelessness Assessment Unit practitioner, demonstrates the perceived limits of establishing 'vulnerability' ('priority need') under a homelessness assessment;

"It's more positive decisions we're interested in. It's quite easy to just bash out a Not In Priority Need decision. It's not really going to be getting anything for the

customer though ... If they are going to be homeless, I'd rather us work with them into some sort of positive outcome. I mean, 30 Not In Priority Need decisions; I'm not too interested in that. We're not going to be recording that in any sort of meaningful way ... for the BV213, the prevention agenda." (White British male, 27 years old, 5 years experience)

Here, the impassivity and stasis of past practices are pitted against present-future approaches. Establishing 'priority need' would secure entitlement to statutory resources, but this does not represent 'positive decisions', instead reflecting poor outcomes and lack of professional care ('bash out', 'it's quite easy'). The aggressive quantity of legalistic methods ('30 Not In Priority Need decisions') is contrasted to the quality associated with emerging government policy to prevent homelessness ('I'd rather us work with them into some sort of positive outcome'). Audit cultures shape Robert's views insofar as what counts is what may be institutionally recorded (through 'BV213, the prevention agenda'). But Robert is assertive about the scope of fresh interventions to improve customer outcomes as present-future practices require that staff 'work with them' and reparatively 'do something'. That temporal and relational trope is also evident in Resource and Day Centres. Here, practitioners recount why services moved to structured provision:

"... anybody could access the service, they needn't necessarily engage in appointment based support work or any particular activity, it's was just somewhere that they could come. And a lot of those people came in day in day out, and were still using the service year after year perhaps. At that stage it was recognised that actually; what are we doing to move people on? We're still seeing the same core of people that we were seeing ten years ago. Maybe we need a different approach. And that was the thought behind actually developing more structured appointments with people. And not structured in the way that some services are very structured, but just people actually having to book in time with the support worker, and being able to record work done with them. But also in terms of offering groups; rather than somebody sitting around doing nothing, that actually they'd be engaging in something – some meaningful activity rather than being in the same situation day after day." (Lianne, Resource Centre Deputy Manager, White British woman, 27 years old, 6 years sector experience)

Suzie: *"It's moved beyond opening up the building and providing tea and coffee and setting out tables, and maybe encouraging people to have a shower, to giving advice, maybe listening to someone who needs listening to. Or obviously more advocacy for people within the organisation. So whereas before we would maybe make a couple of phone calls to someone about a couple of appointments, we're now ringing their probation officer, we're ringing somewhere they've been banned from [a local support service] and saying, 'will you look into this'. Doing just a little bit more really.*

Researcher: *What's the motivation for that change?*

Suzie: *To try and see people move on in a positive recovery process."* (Day

Centre/Night Shelter manager, White British woman, 24 years old, 2 years sector experience)

Across these excerpts, clients are constructed as at risk of stagnating, resulting in failure to 'move on' from services (Lianne's *'core group'* in the *'same situation day after day'*). Former practices have an inactive, inert and depleted quality to them, which weighs on *all* actors: the most practitioners can do is 'just' open a building and set out chairs and tables, the most clients can do is 'just' sit in these. In contrast, present practices have a dynamic quality; *'moved beyond'*, *'engaging in something'*, *'meaningful activity'*. Across excerpts, narratives construct institutional phenomena and give meaning to the social relations of housing and homelessness organisations. Constructions matter not because they reflect a reality that contemporary organisations/practitioners *in fact* do more, nor that in the past they *in fact* did nothing. Rather, these dynamics are a point of interest because articulation of a failed past represents a way of relationally constructing a successful present-future, through a trope that foregrounds the power of institutional actors and interventions.

Denigrating the old and valorising the new is consistent with the neoliberalisation of public service cultures, outlined at the start of this article. Some additional context is useful at this juncture. At the time of the study the marketisation of housing support had recently developed under (now closed) funding model 'Supporting People' (see Dobson, 2016, pp. 116-122). Under the model, local authorities commissioned services to support homeless people towards independent living within a rapid and audited timeframe. While only the Night Shelter and Supported Housing Organisation were in receipt of that funding, all were affected by the rationalities it engendered. The programme brought housing and homelessness sectors into the institutional support of vulnerable adults, contributing to a broader pattern of voluntary organisations becoming 'governable terrain' through marketisation and associated practices (Carmel and Harlock, 2008). Programme discourses, along with other policy (e.g., preventing homelessness), responsibilised local services to create human and social change through the 'right' sort of institutional response (Dobson, 2019). Service users are thus 'activated'; you can't *just* sit around, you can't *just* receive a legal assessment.

Following this, excerpts can be analysed as demonstrating flashing compliance with neoliberal rationalities and negotiative resistances to these, via a back-and-forth between momentary assertions and more ruminatory passages. Lianne's *'rather than somebody sitting around doing nothing'* and Suzie's *'To try and see people move on in a positive recovery process'*, bookend passages that contain hesitancy (*'perhaps'*, *'maybe'*, *'actually'*) and set limits and caveat interventions, revealing expressions of doubt and uncertainty; Lianne's *'And not structured in the way that some services are very structured'*, and Suzie's, *'Doing just a little bit more really'*. This movement between surety and ambivalence can be read poststructurally as discursive struggles over meaning (Fischer, 2003, p. 13). However, following relational and ontological approaches, and drawing on further extended excerpts, there is an alternative analysis.

Housing manager Gareth links past-practices to professional failing, with institutions and practitioners constructed as impassive onlookers to tenant vulnerability. This is presented in full

to demonstrate an unfolding 'atrocious story' (Dingwall, 1977) and to demonstrate how Gareth's recollections work through emotions, specifically shame;

"I think some of the cases we've experienced ... They are living in squalid conditions and I mean squalid conditions. And it's that they're not aware of it. They haven't got the capacity to do anything about it. They haven't got the financial means to deal with it. Maybe their physical well-being doesn't allow them to deal with it. Or maybe it's just got to such a degree that they're not able to actually resolve it because it's too big a task for them. And I think in certain circumstances we've got an obligation to go in and try and resolve that for them. I can quote cases now where one of the most recent ones is we've got a couple of guys living in a tenancy. They lived there with their parents, all their life. Their parents have passed away. They've just continued living in the tenancy. They've not used the upstairs for 20 odd years. And they've not changed any furnishings, nothing's been washed. So everything's completely worn out. It's just a tip. There's rubbish, there's a dog in there. The dog's using it as a toilet. When you speak to the guy, one of the guys, you can clearly see that he hasn't got the capacity to deal with what he's got his life. And so that's impacting massively on the neighbours at each side. You've got two properties at each side that are purchased, that are own occupied. Lovely, lovely properties. And then you've got this property in the middle of them where you've got privets that have grown as high as the house. The garden's full of rubbish. Clearly when you look at the property the curtains are all down, the windows are filthy. As a housing officer, I have to say to my staff, how has that been allowed to get to that condition? How have they slipped through the net? Is it our responsibility? Is it Social Services responsibility? There must have been a housing officer walking past that house as the privets got to two foot, five foot, ten foot, fifteen foot? Does that not, in that person's mind, say privet's got to ten foot, the curtains are all down, it's not been cleaned, the garden's full of rubbish. Should have been knocking on the door doing something about it. And in the past I think we've probably just walked past and said, 'they're not causing me a problem, I won't go and cause them a problem'. Whereas now what we're actively saying to people, 'if there's anything out there that gives you a concern, no matter how small it might be, refer it through to us and let us go and have a look'." (Paul, White British man, 50 years old, 22 years experience)

There is an anxious, searching quality to this excerpt as Gareth thinks about the tenants' experiences: their consciousness ('*And it's that they're not aware of it*'), 'capacity' (a term borrowed from English mental health legislation) and isolation ('*a couple of guys*', '*parents have passed away*'). The description of living conditions is intensified by appeal to disgust (repetition of '*squalid*', '*The dog's using it as a toilet*') alongside references to '*lovely, lovely properties*' surrounding the house. This asserts professional failing as Gareth asks where responsibility lies for the tenants - with institutional neglect or practitioner disregard - articulated as rhetorical questioning shifts between masculinised and individualised blame ('*As a housing officer, I have*

to say to my staff, how has that been allowed to get to that condition?') and collective inquiry ('How have they slipped through the net? Is it our responsibility? Is it Social Services responsibility?').

Gareth links an absence of professional care to past-practices. He mimics staff attitudes, indicating that they are self-interested ('And in the past I think we've probably just walked past and said, 'they're not causing me a problem, I won't go and cause them a problem'.'). Rather than becoming mired in anxious deliberation, shame works relationally to assert reparative desires for intervention ('Should have been knocking on the door doing something about it', 'actively saying to people') (Probyn, 2005). These provide neat conclusion to an overall more brooding story. Like earlier excerpts, specific words ('maybe') and caveats for interventions ('in certain circumstances') demonstrate a sense of uncertainty underpinning Gareth's perspective. There is also a lot of guesswork based on bits and pieces of observable phenomena alongside conjecture about tenants' inner worlds; the texture of their lives. This messy bricolage of events is brought together in a final emphatic call for institutional intervention, which blends 'social' concerns with historic paternalistic orientations and modernising impulses about responsiveness and accountability ('we've got an obligation to go in and try and resolve that for them').

This next excerpt recalls how 'doing more' narratives were reflected in responses from Supported Housing Organisation managers, pertaining to views about staff. Here, Faye (White British woman, 60 years old, 25 years sector experience) comments on problems of tired workers 'churning' within the local supported housing sector - moving from one agency to the next - providing rationale to recruit practitioners with no sector experience but rather the right 'attitude';

"We attract quite highly qualified people. In this organisation the wages are quite decent. And yet we have altered our recruitment procedures over the last year. Drastically. Because we no longer ask for two years experience in the field. Because we decided that we were sick of getting tired, burnt out workers. That were kind of burnt out, and wanted a change. But what they did was not do a change but went to another organisation. So we thought we'd try another thing. And also, we recognised that the skills that we required were very generic skills and given that our training is very good we thought we'd try something different. So we had in our heads this idea of the woman at Marks and Spencers, or the man at Marks and Spencers who desperately wanted to change occupation and do something different and get into the sector, which without two years work experience, would bar them from it. So we changed everything and had an open day, an open evening instead of just going out to recruitment. And we really really publicised it, said to people to come along. And our perspective was that we would allow everybody that came in that way, and agree flexibility at the beginning of their employment for training. And we'd put more training in. And we would buy in attitude rather than the whole kind of, 'well you've done this before'... So we were looking more for the kind of attitude towards the work that

we were wanting rather than a specific experience.”

As for previous excerpts, momentary assertions book-end this passage. Faye wants to ‘*buy in attitude*’; they are ‘*sick of getting tired, burnt out workers*’. Depleted and stagnating descriptions of practitioners construct the present-future professional in modernisingly dynamic terms. However, there is an under-the-surface quality to Faye’s thoughts, which as for Gareth, are more ruminatory, structured through feeling. References to English retailer *Marks & Spencers* are noteworthy because the manager’s co-option of ‘business’ principles is mediated through brand identity. Culturally iconic in the English national imaginary, ‘M&S’ offers wide-ranging services, including food, fashion and lifestyle and historically has retained a loyal, feminised and ageing customer base (Twigg, 2012). Across the retail landscape it represents quality, utility, reliability and capability; trusted, safe and serious as compared to uncaring, trivial and frivolous.

This positioning is in keeping with Faye’s articulation of the Supported Housing Organisation’s credibility and desirability (‘*We attract quite highly qualified people*’, ‘*the wages are quite decent*’) such that a person could feel stuck at somewhere with the sensibility of M&S but ‘*desperately*’ want to get into their line of work. The challenges of finding ‘the one’ quality worker remain emphasised (‘*And we really really publicised it, said to people to come along*’) yet this figure remains a blank canvas (‘*we would ... agree flexibility at the beginning of their employment for training. And we’d put more training in*). In short, the organisation is M&S’s match, but the former stands to gain from the latter’s orientation. Faye’s articulation of the ideal practitioner via M&S analogy is symbolic fantasy. It doesn’t account for the problems of retail work that, as for welfare practice, results in employees’ emotional and physical exhaustion (Smith and Elliot, 2012). And the construction of the experienced practitioner as ‘problem’ is interesting coming from the most qualified participant; Faye is social work trained with professional experiences across probation and homelessness practice.

Taken together, these two excerpts demonstrate how ‘doing more’ narratives are articulated through shifts between felt, assertive clarity and surety, which claim the transformative power of the institution, practitioner and practices, and ruminatory passages, which point to ambivalence and complexity, uncertainty and caution. Two implications for the ‘sector speaks’ concept follow.

Conceptualising narratives

First, practitioners’ rationales and motivations for practices are structured through what Janet Newman (2014) describes as ‘*multiple scalar projects and regimes*’, such as funding, audit, policies, historic/current local politics, professional histories (of actors and organisations), family and community, beliefs and values. These multiple and interconnecting past, present and future phenomena constitute different components of practitioners’ ‘social worlds’, structuring their actions and behaviours (Dobson, 2015). This shifts analysis away from tracking resistance/complicity to an already-known, a-priori rationality/object (the neoliberal state), towards an approach that keeps governing rationalities, structures, actors and practices

relationally in frame. This is not to abandon governing logics as conceptual devices. Beyond neoliberal dynamics already outlined, practitioners' conceptions of 'the right thing to do' demonstrate liberal beneficent governmentalities and bio-political tendencies (Lewis, 2000), 'psy' therapeutic logics (Pykett, 2013) and neo-colonialist interventionary desires (Li, 2017; Lea, 2008). However, empirical and theoretical complexity push against 'master narrative' analyses (Lippert, 2017; Brady, 2017), which imply that logics 'drive' local actors. Rather than understanding actors' actions and behaviours as a result of neoliberalism's unified project, these can instead be used to *disaggregate* processes of neoliberalisation in a specific locale as part of demonstrating the tensions and variations of a loose, shifting and unpredictable framework (Larner, 2003, p. 510; Peck, 2004, p. 403).

Second, excerpts demonstrate moral and ethical feeling about the 'right thing to do' (Williams, 2000), with narratives highlighting local actors' capacities for reflective and unreflective, constructive and destructive, conscious and unconscious experience, thought and action (Hoggett, 2001). These dynamics constitute 'affective movement', with present-future-practices/practitioners attached to action, responsiveness and good feeling (e.g., optimism, hope, productivity), and past-practices/practitioners attached to inaction, professional failing and bad feeling (e.g., shame, weariness, frustration). Movement can be understood as a 'grappling' activity, which relationally enacts institutional space through process flows - sector speaks - that centralise but are not reducible to the discursive.

Recalling Hunter's 'relational contestation', 'speaks' position human and non-human subjects/objects, demonstrating how everyday actions, investments and practices shape and make local-state space over time. They represent a type of governance/action interface, 'lived' through everyday relational, performative, material, socio-cultural, symbolic and affective practices. Impacts for human agents' resistance follow. Affective movement does not represent contradiction as if local actors (mindlessly or confusedly) think one way in one moment and another way the next, in a back-and-forth between resistance and complicity. Rather, they sit together as *contested and emergent realities*, in 'coalition' (Hunter, 2015, p. 37) and productive of institutional space. Exploration of coalition is central to understanding *potential* for, as opposed to the intrinsic existence of, resistance via less strategic action. This places focus on tracing different versionings of realities and contingent possibilities for thinking and doing, identifying effects for normative governmentalities that '*depend on longer-term relations to other practices and sites*' as opposed to '*instant change or easy gains*' (Hilbrandt, 2019, p. 364).

Conclusion

This article argues that existing accounts of local actors' under neoliberalism and austerity demonstrate narrowed constructions of human agency and state structures and rationalities, which produce polarising and a-social constructions of governance phenomena. Conceptual splits divide up statutory and non-statutory sites and construct human actors in positions of vulnerable subordination or destructive domination and there is a preoccupation with where and with whom oppressive and resistant power is physically located. Such accounts fail to capture a more rounded and sentient sense of both human agency and institutional structures

and their interdependencies, leaving little room to explore how and why human agents act and behave as they do. Following relational and ontological approaches, what it means to *become* a welfare worker, do welfare practice and be drawn to (in)action are not completed and knowable things; they are worked out in the everyday, constituted by and of institutional space. Disaggregating the everyday formation of the local-state through focus on how that space is enacted via social practices offers an alternative way to think about possibilities for social change. Understanding how governance phenomena are formed through ‘practice ontologies’, informed by different ways of looking, here sector speaks, is necessary to *realistically* fathom how they may be intervened with.

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