Complying, transforming or resisting in the new austerity? Realigning social welfare and independent action among English voluntary organisations

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Abstract

This paper considers implications for the English voluntary sector of recent shifts in the terms of engagement with the state following rapid political and policy changes under the UK Coalition government. It explores how ideas of what constitutes the voluntary sector are being reconstructed in policy and practical settings, examining processes contributing to re-shaping the voluntary sector's conception of itself and beliefs about legitimate activities and aspirations. It draws on theories of institutional isomorphism and governmentality to explore these changes which appear to be modifying and restricting the voluntary sector's role in social welfare, limiting its influence and its ability to act simultaneously within and against the state. The paper argues the integral role of the state in recasting the roles of different sectors but also discusses the extent to which voluntary sector compliance is necessary to ensure organisational survival, asking what spaces exist for independent activity and resistance.

Introduction: Realigning social welfare and the emphasis for voluntary organisations
As governments across Europe counter economic crises by restricting welfare services and resources, the emphasis on non-state provision and community-based solutions to growing socio-economic problems increases. Over several decades, a neo-liberal economic approach has pervaded political thought in the UK and elsewhere, privileging markets and New

Public Management arrangements in public services (Clarke *et al.*, 2000). Accordingly, outsourcing public services to both for-profit and non-profit providers has steadily expanded. Simultaneously, significant reductions to public welfare spending have provoked growing concerns about maintaining provision in poorer areas (Taylor, 2011).

Historically, voluntary organisations (VOs) have addressed significant gaps in state welfare and, indeed, Beveridge (1948) argued for their importance alongside new state welfare services in the 1950s to maintain an innovative influence. Under New Labour, the sector gained more prominence, presenting an ideological alternative to address both market and state failures in service delivery, and expertise in tackling intractable social problems (Milbourne, 2013). Outsourced services and diverse community initiatives produced considerable growth and development among VOs, underpinned by rising income to the sector (NCVO, 2013). VOs were also recognised as offering comparative advantages over both private and public sectors in terms of costs and flexibility in providing marginal and specialist services (Billis and Glennerster, 1998).

Under the Coalition policy, perceptions around VOs and welfare are transforming, representing a 'paradigm shift' in how the voluntary sector (VS) is understood (Macmillan, 2013a: 186). In material terms, the income growth from which many VOs benefited for nearly a decade has reversed; corporate contractors are being favoured; and local infrastructure support organisations remodelled (BLF, 2011) and decimated. Market competition and private enterprise are now positioned as necessary ways of resolving service problems, and VOs have been relegated to largely unpaid community work or corporate sub-contractors. Since 2009–10, income to the voluntary sector overall has dropped significantly due to reductions in grants and philanthropy, and loss of service contracts and remaining income has been eroded by rising inflation (NCVO, 2013).

The paper initially discusses recent policy transformations in relation to the VS. It then considers the influence of dominant organisational cultures and governmental powers on shifts in VS values and arrangements, drawing on new institutional theory, in particular isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983), and governmentality (Rose, 1999). Subsequent sections consider the application of these theoretical perspectives to empirical examples drawn from several welfare fields, offering insights into the kinds of future roles

that VOs can expect to play, and examining the government's claimed commitment to involve the VS. There is still limited empirical data on the effects of recent changes on VOs; and the fieldwork illuminates how, despite perspectives shaped through processes of governmentality and isomorphism, VOs can also regain agency to assert their own agendas within and against the contemporary policy and political landscape.

Contemporary policy shifts: realigned roles for voluntary organisations

The UK voluntary sector has a long history of providing social and humanitarian welfare, adapting to the demands and funding vagaries of governments and addressing gaps in state provision (Lewis, 2005). The continually shifting boundaries around the sector's status, prompt questions about the extent to which we are witnessing a fundamental shift rather than further incremental changes.

New Labour's collaboration with the VS depended increasingly on its adoption of managerial behaviours copied from the corporate sector and competitive practices (Harris and Rochester, 2001; Harris 2010) and, later, a willingness by VOs to build capacity, collaborate or merge to undertake larger service contracts (Milbourne, 2013). However, a continuing service delivery role under the Coalition may depend less on adaption and more on compliance with inflexible and harsh terms of service sub-contracting. Engagement with this new 'public' services agenda also implies complicity in the shift towards the longer term privatisation of welfare services, prompting questions about whether this signals a demise of approaches and values for which, hitherto, VOs have been sought as service contributors (Buckingham, 2011).

As service contracts are scaled up and rolled out, excluding many VOs as principal contractors, the Coalition commitment to a crucial, continuing role in funded service delivery is proving hollow for most VOs (Marsden, 2011). It is also clear that risks are increasingly being shifted to small sub-contractors lacking adequate financial reserves to manage these (Horton, 2013), belying the rationale for the scale and financial criteria characterising recent contracts. Paradoxically, the failures and poor practices of corporate contractors (Rees *et al.*, 2013; Wright, 2013) emphasise other risks in new arrangements – delivering inadequate services – but have done little to curb government enthusiasm for privatisation. However, as Murray (2012: 63) indicates, the rhetorical inclusion of VOs as

providers, 'confuses the public and leaves the VS compromised as a "Trojan horse"'; while corporates include VOs as 'bid candy', subsequently discarded. This discussion problematises VOs' involvement, illustrating how more than a decade of dependence on government resources has exacerbated their current vulnerability, potentially compromising independent purposes and activities, notably those concerned with social change and justice.

Service providers comprise one segment of a diverse non-profit sector: effectively a loose alliance of differing interest groups. Large charities delivering services have been among the most visible and prominent actors, while many small community based VOs remain under the radar (McCabe and Phillimore, 2010), receiving little or no state funding. *Open Public Services*, *Localism* and *Big Society* rhetoric proposes other roles for the VS, including in community organising (Taylor, 2012), supporting voluntary activities (Rochester, 2013) and, increasingly, providing a volunteer-led welfare safety-net where funded services are inadequate. These roles are historically familiar but also illustrate a re-shaping of community action alongside welfare provision (Milbourne, 2013). While some VOs have engaged enthusiastically in local community action plans, criticism has emerged about top-down rhetoric stifling local empowerment (Padley, 2013) and around the burdens and growing geographic inequalities arising from over-stretched voluntary resources in poorer areas (Lindsey, 2013).

Government policy has effectively blurred the lines between funded services and unfunded community activities, promoting 'people doing things for themselves' as a virtue, integral to repairing a broken, state-dependent British society (Blond, 2010). However, the increasing restrictions on community voice and advocacy activities since 2010 (Baring Foundation, 2014) tell a different story, with the recent 'Lobbying Act' further constraining how VOs can engage independently. Further contradictions are also visible: dispersed service arrangements, and a decoupling of the state and VOs, offer apparently increased freedoms for civil society organisations; yet VOs are further restricted, both in service delivery and community activities. Despite inherent contradictions, these changes illustrate a recasting of state-voluntary sector relationships signalling that, alongside transformation in perceptions of welfare, new understandings of the VS are needed.

Framing the debates: isomorphism and governmentality

Discussing the history of the UK voluntary sector, Kendall and Knapp (1996) underline the complex balance of state and VS welfare through the last two centuries, illustrating the state's influence on arrangements in voluntary services . However, with the progressive promotion of outsourcing during the 1990s, the visible VS domain increased, as did the state's influence in shaping its activities. By 2010 this domain encompassed diverse organisations, from small community service providers and campaigning organisations to large charities with trading arms and social enterprises, drawing a wider range of organisations within the state's governable terrain (Carmel and Harlock, 2008). The Coalition's rebranding of the Office of the Third Sector as the Office for Civil Society (OCS) signals this extension of its remit and policy influence to wider civil society – to informal community groups and citizens – alongside explicit policy to direct individual welfare behaviours (Brown, 2012). As Alcock and Kendall (2011) argue, the process of mainstreaming under New Labour encouraged decontested spaces within which many VOs concurred with hegemonic discourse and behaviours, anticipating gains in legitimacy and resources. Many VOs assumed these new cultures apparently by choice (Harris, 2010), or in an isomorphic process of imitating, or conforming to, the norms of surrounding organisational arrangements. There were, conversely, spaces which remained contested (Milbourne, 2013) and, as resources become scarcer and requirements more stringent, these may become more widespread. It is to explore the extension of supposedly consensual spaces and coerced arrangements, and their scope and effects, that the paper draws on the two aspects of theory below.

The effects of isomorphism

The process of organisations conforming to dominant arrangements in the surrounding organisational environment has been analysed as isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983), with legitimacy granted to those displaying approved characteristics. While pressures towards homogeneity among VOs have been largely state driven, they often operate most powerfully through expectations within similar service fields (Aberg, 2013), and are also advanced through resource dependency (Pfeffer, 2003) and competitive funding arrangements. Thus the growth of competitive markets, as more public services are

outsourced, alongside the loss of grants and special projects affecting VOs, intensifies coercive isomorphic pressures. The consequence of isomorphism is a gradual homogenisation of organisations working within similar fields, producing contexts where the rational outcome of efforts to deal with both uncertainties and performance controls constructs overall similarities in organisational cultures and arrangements.

These arguments are familiar to scholars of organisational and VS research, and we discuss only briefly how these pressures become operationalised through funding and monitoring mechanisms; inter-agency relationships; professional standards; resource dependency; and, especially, dominant understandings of what counts as legitimate action and arrangements.

In summary, the spread of public services outsourcing since the 1990s, with associated managerial and monitoring cultures (Baines *et al.*, 2011), prompted needs among VOs for professional management skills which became integral to their changing practices (Harris, 2010). Resource dependency and contract requirements produce enforced modifications to activities (coercive isomorphism) which, in the longer term, limit alternative practices and aspirations and slowly transform self-definition. These trends of professionalisation and commercialisation are also mirrored in processes re-shaping civil society organisations internationally (Eikenberry, 2009).

Not all isomorphic pressures are coercive. As Aberg (2013) argues, there may be significant incentives for choosing closer co-operation with the state or private sector; for adopting what appear as normative mainstream arrangements; and for becoming more market-oriented. Tensions arise when disparate meanings collide internally and at organisational boundaries producing questions about the consensual or contested nature of changes. If VOs internalise discourses and operational practices which bestow external legitimacy, while continuing to claim cultural credibility through former goals, conflicting narratives may emerge around how purposes are understood, with some organisational actors adhering to the former mission and others focusing on activities determined by new arrangements.

The dangers are that, in striving for greater external legitimacy, a VO decouples from its civil society origins and from the meanings and purposes that ground it with members, service users or community stakeholders; and ensuing tensions and ambiguities weaken

organisational identity. For example, Hucklesby and Corcoran's (2013) study shows that as VOs have engaged in large-scale criminal justice contracts involving prison services, they have increasingly been drawn into administering sanctions. The extended scope of their service delivery roles has thus undermined previous roles in supporting prisoners and advocating reforms, deterring former sponsors.

Research also illustrates that VOs that have resisted external pressures to retain core missions and sustain grassroots connections (Harris and Young, 2009; Milbourne, 2013). This may result from recognising internal tensions or contesting unwanted external pressures to change. Such contested spaces may be sustained to some degree through mimetic isomorphism where clusters of similar VOs exist within an organisational field or locality, and peer behaviours exert greater influence than hierarchical pressures. Organisations may also choose to imitate apparently successful local models, especially if these appear to confer increased status within their fields or to enhance growth or survival related to their goals. However, within such clusters, larger organisations and those with longer established practices often dominate arrangements, effectively suppressing alternative approaches. This can be construed as normative isomorphic pressure: adopting what is widely considered as 'the way things are done' Hoggett (2004: 196).

With austerity and public sector budget reductions, pressures towards mergers and entrepreneurial activities became integral to New Labour's stage directions for VOs (Rochester, 2013), and were echoed in the Coalition's exhortations to seize entrepreneurial opportunities (OCS, 2010). The emphasis on business links and entrepreneurialism has now pervaded sections of the VS to the extent that some VOs have rebranded as 'social enterprises'; and many acknowledge choosing to adopt particular models, language or behaviours, which enable them to gain a competitive edge. However, as the adoption of behaviours spreads, there is also a reflexive process which constructs a culture of expectation that these changes are necessary to underpin legitimacy and success. While useful in understanding how powerful cultures of arrangements induce shifts in organisational models more widely, isomorphic tendencies are insufficient, by themselves, to explain the fundamental recasting of VS roles discussed above, nor the contested spaces; and we examine governmentality to explore these questions further.

Governmentality and the integral role of the state

With increased outsourcing of public services over some 25 years, VS relationships with the state have significantly re-shaped the nature of its activities, remodelling its contributions to welfare and society through marketisation, managerialism and associated monitoring regimes (Milbourne, 2013). Arguably, as VOs delivered more state services and projects, their influence and mainstream legitimacy grew, while independent activities and criticism of government agencies became more inhibited. However, until recently, VOs have maintained their ability to operate within public agencies and also to criticise them: both *in and against* the state (Holloway, 2005).

Managerialism (Clarke *et al.*, 2000), criticised for importing excessive command and control structures into public service management (Brown, 2010), subsequently pervaded the VS. Equally, the spread of marketisation has distorted service goals and approaches through imposing contract criteria and performance targets (Milbourne and Cushman, 2013). However, the recent scaling-up of contracts and intensification of competition, justified as a means to deliver more efficient and effective services, has constructed a fundamental realignment of publicly funded activities and ideas about welfare purposes and beneficiaries (Hoggett *et al.*, 2013).

Miller and Rose (1990: 3–4) examine the expansion of governed spaces achieved through policy (and associated cultures of arrangements), applying Foucault's concept of governmentality. They explain that, 'policies always appear surrounded by more or less systematised attempts to adjudicate on their vices and virtues' and may be superseded by others promising improvements or 'advocating something different'. Therefore policies and the mechanisms for their implementation, appear as harmless programmatic means to achieving desired outcomes but are ways of implanting and ensuring changes of a highly political nature. Similarly, arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, while seeming to assess effective implementation, are integral to the powers of change embedded in policy systems and to understanding how processes of governmentality operate.

It is therefore not simply overt technologies or financial threats which enforce policy compliance in managerial and contractual arrangements but also the related implementation mechanisms – schemas, templates and associated discourse – which together institute the

necessary discipline through knowable, calculable and administrable objects. Within the VS, these schemas manifest themselves through contract criteria; increasingly detailed specifications and targets; required performance data; and the language and means through which they are communicated – ultimately the cultures of arrangements and behaviours through which organisational actors conform (Milbourne and Cushman, 2013). Such requirements demand forms of professionalisation, and standardisation and homogenisation of approaches, denominating activities in the currency of those governing rather than the governed. However, they also have the effect of significantly changing the focus of activities and ultimately purposes, gradually transforming organisational meanings and perceptions of successful work. Effectively governmentality ensures receptivity to policy instruments and their underlying logics.

Rational choice theory and critiques of state bureaucracies opened the way for market denominated reforms and, subsequently, a quest for more flexible forms of governance in public services (Bevir, 2011), visible in partnership working and the Coalition's localism strategies. Such models are purportedly better suited to modern and consensual forms of governance than hierarchical management (Davies, 2011). However, new public management cultures persistently dominate collaborative community projects and associated arrangements (Lever, 2011), showing how hierarchical power habitually reasserts itself, defining the rules of play (Clegg, 1989). Moreover, as Davies (2011) argues, masking these persistent hierarchies and the hegemonic powers of the state and allied agencies within apparently more open governance forms serves dominant neo-liberal political interests, deceptively communicating norms and consensus.

VOs have had limited discussion in debates around governmentality. Carmel and Harlock (2008) illustrate ways that New Labour established and extended its influence through outsourcing public services and use of cross-sector partnerships and planning fora. Many VOs were complicit in extending the reach of this governable terrain through participation in these arrangements, conveying government priorities into previously more autonomous community-based work. By positioning themselves within these spaces, VOs have facilitated compliance with governmentally driven projects and reduced the room for independent challenges, seeking legitimacy and influence through insider tactics while contributing to marginalising those pursuing alternatives. As Hoggett (2004) argues, an

assumed culture of consensus invariably prevails in such settings, suppressing alternative arrangements. Consequently, the creative welfare solutions which VOs have often contributed, become excluded, belying any purported aims of openness to service innovation.

As the Coalition restricts the powers and scope of local government, and corporations increase their share of 'public' service delivery, power over shaping service conditions and activities is shifting, with VOs increasingly excluded. Many VOs lack the financial credentials to be eligible as contractors; have insufficient reserves to survive under the terms of sub-contracts; and have suffered significant financial losses, as corporations maximise profits at the expense of effective frontline delivery (Rees *et al.*, 2013). While this describes the effects of changes, it also speaks to a supposed consensus that finds the exclusion and potential demise of many community providers acceptable, and believes new, scaled-up contracts and the associated costs of procurement and supply-chain transactions generate better services.

Power appears to have shifted towards corporate contractors. However, it would be erroneous to disregard the integral role of the state in engineering the environment encompassing the different sectors. To make sense of these changes requires examining the hegemonic processes underpinning and sustaining beliefs in the state's apparent withdrawal and the appropriateness of markets and neo-liberal economic prescriptions to deliver effective services. The growing gaps in services demonstrate that these changes flow from political ideas rather than being rationally justified; as do the poor service reputations and misreporting of profit-led contractors (Wright, 2013) and the evident failures of corporations heavily engaged in provision of which they have little experience (Long, 2012). To mask these defects, the focus has shifted instead to expecting individuals and communities to fill the welfare gaps created. Residual welfare, passed to voluntary activity, is heralded positively as a means to promote a more responsible, less welfare-dependent citizenship (Brown, 2012).

Thus the Coalition government has promoted attitudinal shifts, alongside rationing and conditionality in welfare, and a massive upheaval in delivery mechanisms; and these address moral judgements about what is fair or who is deserving of public support.

Tackling presumed welfare dependency forcefully and representing it as substantially responsible for public debts, has allowed the Coalition to exploit existing social fractures (Hogget *et al.*, 2013) and advance and justify a stronger rhetoric around dismantling the public sector.

Thus, within this new service framework, VOs are somewhat incidental, encouraged both to participate in the supply chain and to concentrate on local associational (voluntary) activities. Campaigning charities are criticised (DCLG, 2012) and the most entrepreneurial VOs are lauded (OCS, 2010). The re-engineering of the public sphere might be slowed if alternative altruistic approaches or potentially subversive VOs were more welcome; but new frameworks have been constructed largely to restrict or exclude them and silence dissenting voices. However, the decline in state funding to VOs for outsourced services and community projects suggests an unintended opportunity to reclaim independence: a freeing up from the influence and powers of the state. However, this space is debatable, not least because of the recent dispersal of governable terrain through *Localism* and *Open Public Services*; and much depends on how VOs confront the dilemmas of changing arrangements.

The consensual assumptions embedded in political messages around norms and expectations are integral to strategies aimed to shift both individual and organisational behaviours in desired directions.The creation of a unit drawing on nudge theory (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) is a concrete sign of the Coalition government extending its reach to the behaviours of welfare users. Nudge theory, based on behavioural economics and cognitive psychology, has informed both US and UK government strategies intended to re-shape behaviours and deter those deemed discordant with dominant views and economic needs. Agents of local communities, VOs and civil society actors become crucial components in a 'civilising' role – constructed rhetorically as *Big Society* or *Localism* – intended to reinforce consensually driven processes of civilising welfare (Lever, 2011) that are instituted as norms but there are alternatives. There are also punitive measures for dissenters, enforced through harsher controls. Thus nudging behaviour can be construed as disciplining groups and individuals, and punishments as the outcome of failures to adapt. However, as controls and disciplines become more exacting, there is greater potential for triggering resistance and re-assertion of alternative meanings (Foucault, 1977). The government's attitude to food banks offers a striking example. As largely faith-based

groups, independent of public funds, they seem to encapsulate the *Big Society* but are censured for their powerful, if implicit, critique of austerity policies, defying hegemonic discourse.

Isomorphism and governmentality can both be interpreted over-deterministically. Conceptualising the power of governmentality as the temporal resolution of a relational network of forces in society, embedded in predominant values, rituals, assumed beliefs and institutional practices (Foucault, 1977), is helpful in understanding the intersection of agency with these influences. In other words, while the discussion above has considered macro-level trends, everyday practical examples also demonstrate ways that VOs, their staff and user groups, adopt and also resist influences. For example, the pressures to survive, which may mean entering an underfunded supply-chain and complicity with poor services, are already leading to demise for some VOs (Bawden, 2013), prompting reflection on other options. There is therefore the potential to withdraw from the state's projects in realigning public services, to decouple from state funding dependency and strengthen alternatives; and the next part of the paper explores dilemmas being played out through examples from different contexts.

Study of everyday experiences

Empirical research on changes among voluntary organisations, since Coalition policies began to take effect, is limited but examples are emerging. Below we discuss findings from several recent studies. Our examples are drawn from three area-based case studies in relatively deprived inner-city areas of England, focused on experiences and outcomes of recent changes. Most VOs in these studies were small service providers, many working with young people, some also involved in campaigning and advocacy. Case studies have the advantage of enabling detailed study (Stake, 2000) which can examine situated experiences of changing social policies. In parallel, wider social forces influence the actors involved, and our analysis also reconnects examples with wider contexts and meanings, recognising the interlinked nature of institutions, governmental strategies and agency in accounting for local experiences and outcomes (Barnes and Prior, 2009).

Our research also includes data from a further qualitative study (2011–13) in which participants from larger charities discussed recent experiences related to the work

programme. Most data were gathered between 2010 and 2013 but in one case, Horizons, the organisation formed part of an ongoing study commenced in 1999, supplemented by follow up interviews. Further detail on these studies is available in (Milbourne,2013). All names of people, organisations and places are pseudonyms.

In what follows, we have organised our examples thematically, initially considering the effects on VOs of scaled-up and progressively more restrictive contracts in an increasingly competitive environment. We then examine examples of constraints on independent expression and, thirdly, the space for resistance. Our examples demonstrate isomorphic pressures, often visible through more concrete phenomena, while illustrating governmentality at work in the broader re-shaping processes and restrictions on independent activities and voice over time.

Contracts as discipline: working in the Work Programme

This case concerns the remodelling of service provision, with increasing controls on VOs' activities. It focuses on Network Plus (NP), an example from our research in 2011–13. NP is a large, national VO working with the unemployed across England and Wales, established some 35 years ago in neighbourhood centres in an English urban area. NP grew steadily over 10 years up to 2010, developing regional centres and delivering advice and support, diversifying with collaboratively funded community centre projects, while still concentrating on the unemployed. NP gained a reputation locally and nationally for successfully sustaining people in work, with previously unemployed people contributing to voluntary advice work, and also creating non-profit enterprises like a drop-in cafe. The last few years has seen NP become more overtly enterprising, extending projects, bidding for larger contracts, establishing trading ventures and professional fund-raising schemes, and adapting to normative isomorphic pressures.

NP bid for contracts under the Work Programme in several regions, collaborating with private contractors but was mainly unsuccessful, and, like many other VOs, experienced wide-scale loss of direct contracts and difficulty in gaining adequately funded sub-contracts (Marsden, 2011). The rapid shifts in control over provision for the unemployed reflect the extent of changes engineered through scaling-up contracts, and the use of financial criteria

and business reputation to determine contract allocations in preference to service expertise or experience. Several consequences of this re-engineering are described below.

VOs seeking greater engagement in new service programmes often anticipate increased legitimacy and therefore greater influence over the shape of services by assuming new requirements. This may have succeeded in the pre-Coalition years but, as VOs enter this intensified service market alongside or under private sector competitors, the more flexible ethos and approaches that they aspire to bring to services are progressively becoming submerged by contract priorities and complex arrangements. A locally based NP manager, running schemes for unemployed youth, highlighted the intensely competitive environment 'producing bidding wars among us, so we forget why we're here – we've been reprogrammed simply to win'. This growing culture exacerbated divisions amongst VOs previously allied locally as advocates for better services.

Discussing her experience of recent changes, a regional NP manager, Shelley, described the extent to which the risks of payment by results were flowing downwards to sub-contractors as a 'pretty brutal awakening'. The harsh contract culture was threatening NP's financial survival and also their underlying, successful approaches to work with the unemployed. Stringent contract conditions and the effects of payment by results serve to restrict flexibility and induce mission drift, shifting priorities, and activities closer to centrally controlled agendas and arrangements to the detriment of proven service models. A local co-ordinator commented, 'never mind the informal work...we can't afford not to meet the targets'. She also conceded that: 'Survival now, may depend on limiting vision and creativity in projects, narrowing approaches, "parking" clients or restricting activities to those most likely to succeed.' Thus this contract regime impacts on service quality and beneficiaries, and examples illustrate how well-meaning providers are led to neglect some of the hardest to help groups in society. Additionally, contract compliance draws VOs into administering sanctions, such as reducing benefits for claimants who miss interviews and, in a complex extension of state-led agency to non-state actors, re-locates the dilemmas and contradictions of punitive frameworks.

Pressures to narrow the focus of activities and to administer sanctions can be read as coercive isomorphism but also discourage innovative developments, gradually generating a

culture and meanings among workers and agencies focused on meeting prescribed outcomes within a restricted range. Accordingly, changes to activities and focus become assimilated and embedded as the way things are done, exemplifying the pervasiveness of governmentality and its distorting effects, and gradually eroding expectations of services for both workers and beneficiaries.

Scaled-up contracting within a professional service field also presses organisations to move from more specialist or locally responsive provision to more generic services. New contracting processes, as Shelley emphasised, partly involved covert compliance: 'fitting in with the …culture', including expectations of 'doing more for less'. The Work Programme, with just 18 contract areas across the UK and two to three prime contractors controlling funded provision in each area, reveals stark examples of technologies of governmentality promoting service homogenisation: providers controlled through schemas ensured by harsh contract terms; payment by results; and gagging clauses around financial information and performance. Inevitably local provision varies, and specified activities and performance controls may be unwittingly or deliberately subverted, as examples below demonstrate, but regimes of restrictive practices have undoubtedly multiplied, instilling a culture of compliance.

The Work Programme is not a unique example, and recent studies in criminal justice indicate similar findings (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2013). Our examples show both normative and coercive isomorphic pressures: the assimilation of competitive and new contracting cultures; the narrowing of activities and approaches; and imposition of sanctions. However, it is the longer term restructuring of welfare programmes and re-engineering of service cultures – together with the encompassing of activities such as supplementary support services that were previously the independent province of VOs – into composite contracts that demonstrates the spread of the governable terrain to previously independent VS spheres of expertise. Within this terrain, the activities that VOs can contemplate are controlled.

Constraining dissenting voices in Wharton

Our second set of examples concern constraints on spaces for independent expression because of service contracts which encroach on VOs' freedoms to campaign and advocate

for service users and around underfunded and deteriorating provision; and also because of restrictions on speaking truth to power more widely.

Self-censorship is growing often because of fears of losing funding. Our study in Wharton, a deprived inner-city area, conducted between 2011 and 2013, illustrates, as in the previous example, the increasing need to demonstrate competitive advantage – such as by adopting the discourse and modes of operation of funders – in order to win contracts. Chris, from a VS infrastructure organisation, underlined that VOs needed to 'change their expectations and sell themselves better', while Deena running a small social enterprise, similarly, talked about telling 'the story funders want to hear…for current times' rather than exposing unwelcome problems. Deena had successfully gained one of the recently scaled-up youth contracts, at the expense of existing providers, describing her entrepreneurial attitude as key to her success.

Other examples illustrate how self-censorship silences discussion of service failures, posing barriers to mutual organisational learning. Dan, responsible for provision for young teenage fathers, highlighted ways that the nature of what can be discussed – the whole discourse for exchange of information – had changed. Failures or limited progress made with young men in the targeted time frame, 'are things you just can't talk about now. Funders ... want success factors; they're not interested in what we do as such ... though that's crucial to success'. Discussion of other similar cases (Milbourne, 2013) alongside Deena's description of her successful mode of operation, shows that this culture of 'things that can't be talked about' encourages gaming in bids and performance reporting and restricts public knowledge about service problems.

Both examples reveal the underlying pressures which shape discourse and reporting activities and suppress openness about service performance. Whether receptive to gaming (Deena) – mimetic isomorphism – or succumbing to pressures from necessity (Dan) – coercive isomorphism – the outcomes exacerbate the effects of competition, undermining collaboration among small VOs and shared learning from service failures. These elements of self-censorship also surrender considerable power for shaping service narratives to dominant agencies – governments and corporations – who thus instil and extend their rules of play, generating more frequent examples of lack of integrity in services and performance

reporting (Long, 2012)

Suppressing more direct forms of advocacy is a further example of self-censorship, promoted through isomorphic pressures and induced through acceptance of the way things work. For some time now, research has identified a tension for a sector which attempts to provide services on behalf of government and advocacy on behalf of its users (Cairns *et al.*, 2010), seeking to influence policy-making and decisions but hesitating to 'bite the hand that feeds it'. This tension around operating both *in* and *against* the state is evident in trends towards increased use of insider tactics (Mosley, 2011; Milbourne, 2013): adopting mainstream discourse and modes of operation to gain legitimacy and influence. Speaking the language of funders may offer advantages in greater influence over service and resource decisions but this kind of 'cosy campaigning' marginalises diverse voices and excludes less comfortable issues. Shifting discourse and modes of operation, as many VOs have over time, provide good examples of both mimetic and coercive isomorphism, depending on the extent to which these have been 'freely' adopted, or resulted from coercive pressures, such as those related to financial survival. However, as these 'freely' adopted practices become established, the room for VOs to operate independently and with alternative models and meanings, is visibly diminished, showing how governmentality has successfully embedded and is dominating cultures and routines.

This successful dominance of cultures and routines was also evident in undermining the development of responsive young people's services. Despite the policy focus on use of local experience, our findings from young people's projects illustrate feelings of mistrust and that their knowledge was granted little legitimacy. Engaged in research on a large housing estate, a group of young people wanted to 'make a difference' and 'create changes' in their area but reported that 'no action, not even a response' resulted. They concluded that their recommendations were uncomfortable and would not be pursued. While they reported positive experiences from their collective endeavour, their abilities to pursue and realise change were thwarted because of the persistence of powerful institutional norms and arrangements which discounted alternative interests and approaches.

If self-censorship fails, those presenting alternative models, such as the young people above, are increasingly being sidelined. However, direct censorship, often emanating from

government, is also growing, with more VOs highlighting 'gagging clauses' in contracts and other restrictions on freedom of expression. Our examples indicate that contracts increasingly prevent providers not only from disclosing financial information but also from publicly revealing service problems as they emerge'. Management and performance data for the Work Programme can only be published via the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) unless, as is starting to happen, frustrated workers or service users speak out about unprofessional practices (Wright, 2013). Government advice to local authorities to withdraw funding from charities that lobby for improved service funding or to alleviate the negative service experiences of recent contracts (DCLG, 2012) adds to examples of constraints on whistle-blowing. Further, the legitimacy of charities campaigning has been directly challenged; for example, Save the Children was publicly criticised for the alleged political nature of its anti-poverty campaign (CESI, 2012).

The growing restrictions on sharing service information and proposing improvements, alongside the political attack on the right to advocate and campaign, conflict with traditional assumptions about the role of autonomous VOs and civil society to make information public and to ensure diverse voices are heard. This threat was recently amplified in the 2014 Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act. While examples of self-censorship and suppression of advocacy and alternatives show how governmentality operates through assumed consensus, and tacit threats to funding and legitimacy, silencing freedom of expression through direct censorship signifies a worrying progression in state powers.

Contested spaces: Horizons' work in youth justice

There may be alternatives, and Foucault (1977) argues that harsh disciplinary regimes breed resistance. Horizons, a small inner-city VO, with a 30-year history of work with disengaged young people in the youth justice system, illustrates an organisation that initially accommodated normative isomorphic influences but, more recently, has resisted and rebuffed pressures to conform to external expectations.

Since 1999, Horizons has moved from local government social services grant funding to a riskier education services contract, accepting the need to conform to a problematic monitoring regime and accommodating normative isomorphic pressures as a necessity in a

changing climate, in exchange for funding continuity. However, with a history in youth work, tensions emerged when growing performance demands, and an extended range of young people referred to the project, became unmanageable and diverted resources and activities, triggering mission drift. Horizons reviewed its goals and resolved to re-emphasise its specialist focus on young people 'in trouble'. It re-negotiated funding, securing a more flexible contract with the local Youth Offending Service (YOS), thus resisting governmental incursions into its autonomous domain.

However external pressures to increase capacity intensified. The neighbouring YOS pursued Horizons to take on a contract which would have doubled their places. Again, internal tensions ensued; the co-ordinator's comments, reflecting considerable discussion, disclose the reasons for their decision:

> There's such strong pressure towards big is best and Riverdon YOS wants us to sign up ... there'd be gains. But … there's always hidden catches. So ... we've said we'll take a few extra young people if we have space ... but we won't have a whole new contract.

The pressures continued with Horizons staff funded to participate as advisors in a pilot youth crime prevention project, involving outreach work on local social housing estates. Their advice helped the local council to gain Home Office funding for a large project but once the contract specifications emerged, the terms looked problematic. Funding was loaded heavily towards successful outcomes but required meeting unrealistic performance targets involving young people moving from potentially crime-related activities into training and work within short timescales. These laid Horizons open to significant risks, both financial and reputational. A trustee explained their reasons for not pursuing the funds, despite significant pressure to do so, including their need for income.

> We got involved because it's prevention work ... But how they wanted it run ... it's not worth it ... They invited us to pilot activities because they recognised our expertise and it helped access Home Office money. But now it's a big risk ... so no. They're puzzled why we're not going forward. But chasing the money, survival at any price, isn't right.

When VOs have withstood normative pressures, it is often the financial need to survive and maintain badly needed services that produces coercive isomorphic pressure towards conformity. As a surrounding organisational culture of compliance spreads and becomes more dominant, additional organisations mimic or adopt assumed norms, enabling insidious arrangements to permeate further, shoring up governmental controls. Resistant VOs, such as Horizons, risk becoming exiles.

Horizons is now facing hard times and a vulnerable future, with funding cuts, and rising demands and costs. However, taking on the crime prevention contract may not have protected it, despite normative assumptions about the advantages of growth and diversification. Similar youth work projects in adjacent areas have lost contracts, suffering large funding reductions, and some have closed. Horizons has survived past crises and its niche position as a specialist 'youth justice' provider, alongside its reputation for successful practice, still works in its favour, as do its clarity and coherence of purpose and relative organisational stability over time. While bucking mainstream trends and maintaining independent purposes, rather than becoming subsumed into governmental agendas, its survival may still depend on elements of accommodation and resistance. This dual path is one that Horizons has negotiated effectively until recently but, as earlier discussion suggests, this is rapidly becoming impossible.

Resisting mainstream arrangements carries risks. Non-compliance is potentially a signal of untrustworthiness to government, threatening reputation and funding, distinguishing a VO from others Lost favour with local government agencies also damages external legitimacy and influence over local services. Organisations are thus disciplined to conform and assume specified activities and agendas and, contrary to government rhetoric around extending locally responsive approaches, such arrangements diminish both local providers' and service users' influence. This paradox underlies the potential spaces for taking back power for those VOs committed to alternatives.

Discussion: re-locating power and the integral role of the state

Little has prepared VOs for either the rapidity of change or the extent of financial losses recently experienced, or for the devaluing and subsequent realignment of VS roles in public services. While the preference now being granted to corporate contractors suggests that

closer scrutiny of relationships with business is necessary, our research emphasises that we should keep sight of the state's integral role in engineering this new environment. Recent changes are not just about discounting the value previously ascribed to the VS and ushering in corporations though, of course, that is happening. These governmentally driven arrangements are rapidly opening up public services and shedding state responsibilities for welfare provision, prompting a fundamental change in public understanding of the state's role. The incursion of the state into independent VS terrain is not new but among other contemporary changes – severe welfare cuts and re-engineering of public services – this growing encroachment has made VOs more susceptible to external pressures and restrictions. The scale and rapidity of current changes similarly exacerbates this susceptibility.

Contrary to their rhetoric of curbing 'big government', central government has taken considerable power while ostensibly ceding it to 'communities' under the guise of localism, and to corporate contractors through widespread outsourcing of public services. Both strategies have extended the governable terrain into previously autonomous domains of civil society. Paradoxically, localism has reallocated controls from local government to central government, while devolving responsibility for welfare failures, but not power, to local groups of people. As our research shows, voluntary support work, previously the province of independent VOs, has also been subject to governmental controls and, in some cases, inclusion in marketised government programmes.

New Public Management (and new VS management) prescribes routines for activities, which have spread isomorphically. However, domination of VS cultures and arrangements are more deeply embedded through processes of governmentality. It is assumed that neo-liberalism enables a retreat of state power; but more fluid arrangements ensure that actors internalise the virtues of arrangements and approaches of powerful agencies, and suppress others, securing actors' complicity while they are apparently acting independently. Negotiating, securing and maintaining the regulatory and legal infrastructure for market arrangements requires continual state activity (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001: 141) contesting the claim that markets and contracts are self-regulating and need no government intrusion.

Isomorphic changes are not particular to one field of welfare, and homogenised service contracts are becoming widespread (Rees *et al.*, 2013), although pressures within particular services, such as in the Work Programme, may be more exacting. Engaging in these new contracts, as our example shows, draws VOs further into the disciplines of administering sanctions, such as benefit reductions – previously the remit of the state – and extends contractual controls to previously independent VS activities. Work Programme providers describe a contractual regime controlled through harsh terms and punitive financial conditions, forcing them to limit activities and more meaningful approaches, and to shed claimants unlikely to achieve short-term targets. Consequently structural barriers to employment and institutional service failures, such as poor quality support, are both obscured and reinforced, categorising some groups in society as disposable or outside safety-nets of projects, a Work Programme outcome reported more widely (Horton, 2013).

Issues of measuring outcomes and the dominance of managerial arrangements have shaped and constrained VOs across varied service fields for some time. However, the recent scale of contracts and resulting take-overs to meet turnover criteria are producing a contractual and sub-contracting environment of increasingly exacting specifications embedded in assumptions that market arrangements, of themselves, 'deliver value'. Yet both the Work Programme and Wharton examples identify potentially impoverished activities and destructive cultures of self-censorship around emerging service problems, sometimes provoking gaming around performance reporting.

For many years, the VS has acted as a critical friend to the state, highlighting shortfalls in welfare and providing additional services, while increasingly during the New Labour years, being drawn into delivering outsourced public services. However, our examples illustrate ways that VOs are now being silenced both because of tacit threats to funding and through direct censorship. These growing threats to freedom of expression speak of powerful governmental controls at work, concealing service failures and injustices. Such silencing denotes a constraint, not only on civil society organisations – in terms of what they can and can't do – but, worse, a broader re-shaping of democratic freedoms. Restraining VOs from 'speaking truth to power' restricts a crucial role for civil society organisations in a healthy democracy.

Horizons shows that not all VOs have assumed compliance. While some may have conformed to normative expectations during earlier political periods, those adaptions have often been tempered by overriding missions while political regimes permitted, and, in parallel with examples discussed elsewhere (Milbourne, 2013), have combined elements of accommodation with resistance. Contemporary changes are posing harsher choices; while some VOs have complied with dominant trends in this new environment, working increasingly hard to adapt and survive, others are choosing to decouple in the hope of sustaining alternative models and creating spaces for better services.

A fragmenting voluntary sector?

We would argue with others (Macmillan, 2013a) that the VS can no longer be viewed as a single entity and divisions are increasingly visible; and finding spaces for resistance and to operate with alternative models is posing new dilemmas. Analysis and sense-making for different segments of the sector may mean building new bridges and strengthening interest-based alliances with other congruent groups and organisations or previously neglected partners. The common political and campaigning interests that VOs share locally with public sector workers, trade unions and wider social movements are therefore important for those VOs seeking to resist the prevailing governmental zeitgeist. Whatever new alliances are made, extending analysis of recent VS changes is crucial in constructing a stronger narrative for its present and future, which must take account of the radically changing welfare landscape emerging in the Coalition government's later years.

However, our findings indicate that re-alignment of VS roles in welfare requires critical reflection on the limitations internalised through processes of governmentality but the agency of VOs to re-imagine their role is often severely restricted. With localism and the opening up of public services, complexity and fragmentation in relationships surrounding VOs have also increased as public services become privatised. Local and national government agencies are mutating; and the locus of power is shifting. This makes it harder for VOs to navigate governmental relationships, weakening potential for resistance. If the VS is simply marginalised, it may open the door to the most powerful players determining the outcomes whereas the kinds of cross-sector alliances identified above may help to counter neo-liberal ideas of VOs and civil society organisations and their purposes, and

establish and strengthen an alternative discourse. The VS has become disputed territory, involving, as Macmillan (2013b: 50) identifies, a 'struggle for hegemony in which some voices, interests and alliances prevail and may achieve partial and temporary influence and domination'. The territory remains contested.

Constructing a different future?

Davies (2011) argues that governmentality, as a part of the neo-liberal project to enrol and transform civil society, invariably dominates attempts to foster an egalitarian ethos, suppressing contested spaces and divergent models. However, a better understanding of the ways in which power is enacted and reinforced can also be used to challenge and sometimes redefine the terms of engagement. VOs committed to sharing power with service users and sustaining grassroots connections provide examples of resisting the pressures of dominant cultures and normative assumptions about arrangements.

The 'invited spaces' for influence are insufficient (Taylor, 2011: 305) and shrinking. Neither political nor business leaders have an interest in sharing power, resources or privileges; resistance and constructive changes for poorer communities will need to be pursued by those concerned to counter their growing hegemony.

Institutional theory used to explain organisational transitions has been criticised for being applied uncritically, and for neglecting the role of agency (Willmott, 2013). Instead, we have considered isomorphism and governmentality from a critical perspective to shed light on ways that VOs are drawn into problematic compromises but may also refuse and subvert hegemonic pressures. The resistance illustrated above and elsewhere (NCIA, 2014) demonstrates individual actors and VOs asserting alternatives to pervasive forces shaping action and communications in the interests of powerful institutions. An overly deterministic interpretation of governmentality, focusing only on ways that conformity is being realised, risks discounting the significant role of such agency, whether used intentionally or unwittingly. From Foucault's (1977) work, it is also clear that we should not discount agency in understanding governmentality: the power and discipline of harsh regimes also triggers resistance, potentially shifting the provisional balance of arrangements in contested spaces.

In conclusion, isomorphism and governmentality provide valuable frameworks for examining broad changes affecting VOs, both overall transitions and increased VS fragmentation. However, they offer limited explanation for the complexity of responses visible at the level of everyday organisational dilemmas and activities. This highlights the value of micro- as well as macro-level research and argues for attending to agency while seeking to understand and critique the bigger picture. Patterns of change examined here are inevitably the focus of ongoing research necessary to map the aspirations and activities of VOs and their contribution to maintaining critical alternatives in the future.

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