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Local government partnership working : a space odyssey or journeys through the dilemmas of public and private sector boundary-spanning actors

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP WORKING: A SPACE ODYSSEY. OR, JOURNEYS THROUGH THE DILEMMAS OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR BOUNDARY-SPANNING ACTORS.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present an account of the disruption, transformation and reproduction of public sector traditions through the agential influence of boundary spanning actors. Boundary spanners operate in odd spaces - complex and heterogeneous spaces between traditions, contexts requiring constant exploration and navigation. Growing scholarly interest in the idea of governmental traditions has added much to our appreciation of the complexity of public sector organizations. One limitation of a focus on traditions has been the tendency to look at public organizations in isolation from their wider interdependent contexts. However, the acknowledgement of the permeability of organizational boundaries, as well as the intellectual acceptance of meta-governance mechanisms (Fenwick et al., 2012), suggest the importance of examining the interactions of public actors with their private sector counterparts. In this article we provide one way of doing so, focusing on the space odysseys – journeys fraught with dilemmas of interdependency, trust and reciprocity – undertaken by actors involved in regional development partnerships in northern England.

We use the lens of traditions to explore the interactions of boundary spanning actors (Aldrich and Herker, 1977), and we do so at the local level in one English region that is so "pivotal to joining-up" (Davies, 2009: p. 81). Our boundary spanners are both those who are involved in day to day partnership working, and those who

occupy positions in their own organisations as project champions − in the terms used by Noble & Jones (2006) (though we find that these roles, at a senior level, are often conflated). Our participants include senior public managers, politicians, local entrepreneurs and private sector executives of local, national and multinational companies. We seek to illustrate how boundary spanners deal with the dilemmas caused by contrasting, and sometimes competing, traditions and how this unique form of meditation disrupts, transforms and reproduces such traditions. One danger with research focusing on traditions is an innate conservatism in the analysis of action, practice and context. The concept itself can imply stasis and in sketches and explanations of how traditions evolve and scholars, may end up over-emphasizing their constancy over time (Wagenaar, 2012). Because we are interested in the challenge and disruption of traditions – as much as their reproduction over time - we turn to Giddens' (1979) concept of *sanctioning* as a means of acknowledging the tensions between traditions. Our approach recognizes partnership working as a process which implicates boundary spanning actors as operating in the face of a complexity of interacting traditions, rules and resources. We take process to mean "a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context" (Pettigrew, 1997 p.338).

Drawing upon the historical narratives of boundary spanners from public, private and arms-length agencies, sometimes with up to 50 years of experience in the focal locality, we provide a reading of their accounts which we set in the context of an emerging tradition of interdependency. To do so, we utilize three of Orr and Vince's (2009) speculative traditions of local government - *localism*, *governance* and *partnership*. Rather than proposing neat lifecycle models, we focus instead on evolutionary enactments of partnership working – how the action unfolds - and try to

illuminate the fluid and messy nature of practices which take place in the *spaces between* (Skelcher et al., 2005). By using structuration theory to inform our approach, we highlight how local *rules and resources* which actors use to navigate are capable of both constraining and enabling the agency of boundary spanning actors.

Our article is novel in providing a processual examination of how boundary spanning actors disrupt, transform and reproduce public sector traditions. The findings add to a limited body of empirical work exploring public sector traditions (Wagenaar, 2012) and boundary spanning actors (Cameron and Lloyd, 2011). The findings break with the tendancy in both bodies of work to explore process in neat lifecycle models (cf Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Noble and Jones, 2006; Jones and Noble, 2008) and to rely on respondents from only one side of public-private sector dyads.

Our paper progresses as follows. First, we present a brief review of traditions and of the literature discussing boundary spanning roles within management, policy and politics scholarship. The theory of structuration is then briefly outlined and we explain the methodological potential of structuration for our study. In the second half of the paper, we present our fieldwork and deploy both narrative and visual process mapping strategies to develop a processual account that suggest some constraining and enabling forces which influence local traditions. We explore the interplay of practices and traditions and illustrate how sanctioning behaviours play out in the *spaces between*.

SITTING IN A TIN CAN: TRADITIONS OF LOCAL PRACTICES

The concept of traditions is a useful way of illuminating the colours, contours and textures of the foldings and unfoldings of organisational life (Clegg, et al. 2005). The

last fifteen years have seen an increasing interest in the concept of traditions to understand practices in public sector settings (Orr and Vince, 2009). This developing work, which helps us to think about public sector cultures as multi-faceted and multi-layered, stems in part from Bevir and Rhodes' (2003, 2004, 2010, 2012) interpretive approach to the study of governance in organizations. Bevir and Rhodes' focus on central government institutions has been supplemented by Orr and Vince (2009) who apply the concept to UK local government, constructing a set of traditions to appreciate cultural polyphony in local government organizations. In this paper we focus on three of these traditions, *partnership*, *localism* and *governance*.

A localism tradition

During the ten year period of the field research for this study, the localism tradition has found different expressions: in the modernization narrative of New Labour and in calls for the revitalisation of local government and communities; through the concept of *new localism*, advocates of which have emphasized community leadership rather than service-delivery role for local government (Stoker, 2004); and more recently the construct of the *Big Society* which champions a mobilization of action and resources and empowerment of grass roots individuals and groups. Localism provides a way of framing political-spatiality that is neither neutral nor transparent – as Jones (1998: p. 27) argues "every trope carries with it its own rhetoric, its own ability to shape the meaning". The force of this tradition is the extent to which it presumes the primacy of local government actors over other stakeholders, or implies how the boundaries of place should be imagined. The priorities for action which this tradition highlights are the needs to nurture the local economy, environment, culture and communities.

A governance tradition

The governance tradition implies "a shift from government by a unitary state to governance by and through networks" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: p. 6). Networks hold an intermediate position between the poles of governance through hierarchy and governance by the market (McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; Agranoff, 2006). The priorities for action suggested by this tradition include the need to embrace the diffusion of power among different local organizations, whilst maintaining direction and public accountability (Orr and Vince 2009). Power in this tradition is seen as dispersed among a network of interacting spaces of organizing.

A partnership tradition

Partnership working - and, particularly in recent years, public-private partnership – is firmly established as a prominent part of the local government landscape (Skelcher, et al. 2005). The significance given to partnerships reflects the influence of intellectual positions which describe organizations as embedded within complex systems and exhibiting interdependencies which need to be appreciated and managed. Cross-sectoral partnership arrangements have been situated by some commentators as part of a trend towards *multi-level governance*, alongside the suggestion that otherwise-fragmented organizational boundaries, disjointed relationships, and decision-making processes, may all be managed more successfully through (formal or informal) partnership working, based upon an articulation of shared goals and an integration of organizational resources (Vangen and Huxham 2003). In our study, we focus on one example of these kinds of partnerships – regional development partnerships in England.

IT'S TIME TO LEAVE THE CAPSULE IF YOU DARE: BOUNDARY SPANNING ACTORS AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The role of boundary-spanning actors working in the spaces between public and private sectors has been identified as a significant force in the effective functioning of modern public sector operations. These boundary spanning agents can be both those senior figures who champion partnerships and those who make them function at a more micro level (Noble & Jones, 2006). Such, boundary spanners therefore perform a fuzzy role (Jeannot and Goodchild, 2011) where dynamic capabilities are required (Cabanelas et al., 2013) and possession of which aids them in taking decisions beyond clearly defined role definitions (Perrone et al., 2003; Williams, 2002). These actors are required to make sense of, and transmit context rich communication and process both tacit and explicit knowledge flowing across such boundaries (Williams, 2013; Zhao & Anand, 2013). As Vafeas (2011 p. 265) notes "a boundary spanner represents the perceptions, expectations, needs, and ideas of each organization to the other". Consequently boundary spanners occupy a pivotal position in organizational change processes but as yet, only a limited body of work has examined the practices of these actors in such change processes (Cameron and Lloyd, 2011; Williams, 2013; Zhao & Anand, 2013) or has incorporated Bevir and Rhodes' work on dilemmas, pradoxes and ambiguities in accouting for the activities of these change agents . Indeed, the space that boundary spanners occupy has been argued to be an almost impenetrable a *black box* (Thomson and Perry, 2006). Whilst empirical progress has been made (cf O'Leary and Choi, 2012; Noble and Jones, 2006; Jones and Noble, 2008), processual contributions have tended to be in the form of neat lifecycle models (cf Noble and Jones, 2006; Jones and Noble, 2008). We note the comments of Thomson and Perry (2006: p. 25) who suggest that "governance in collaboration is not static, nor is there

one universal way to go." In our study we therefore examine the interplay between boundary spanning actors and their unique context in a more eclectic and messy sense. We examine how traditions both constrain and enable the actions of boundary spanners - which in turn are disrupted and reproduced by their actions, thus shining some light into the *black box* of inter-sectoral partnerships.

RESEARCH APPROACH: COMMENCING COUNTDOWN, ENGINES ON

Williamson (2013) has recently highlighted that the dilemmas experienced by boundary spanners have both structural and agential elements. Therefore, in enlisting structuration theory to explore beliefs, traditions and dilemmas, we are experimenting with an approach capable of exploring dimensions of agency and structure. Bevir and Rhodes' approach to interpretivism has been described by Finlayson (2004: p. 150) as being "not unlike Giddens' theory of structuration" and our study harnesses both as complementary rather than competing approaches to understanding local situated practices (though he acknowledges that proponents of the interpretative approach may take issue with this approach). For Bevir and Rhodes perhaps such talk of structuration risks reifying structure. Structure is, after all, a term which they eschew. However, we see potential for teasing out aspects of context which are structured into the setting of boundary spanning practices. In this approach, assumptive worlds are important; but context is not reducible to the ideational. We see this as an appropriate step as Bevir (2006: p. 5) states that "it is in the concepts of tradition and dilemma, and in the gap between actions and their consequences, that we leave room for concepts akin to that of structure." In this article we are interested in the conditional and volitional actions at the intersections of traditions. We engage with the stories and

experiences of boundary-spanning actors from both sides of the boundary to think about the ideas and assumptions which inform their practices, and examine ways in which these ideas represent resources and constraints upon their everyday choices. The choices made by agents may be heterogeneous and context specific. We find precedence for the deployment of Giddens' theory of structuration to analyse public administration phenomena (see for instance Mcleod, 1999; Yun, 2009; Jochoms and Rutgers, 2006), and indeed structuration is used by Kroeger (2011) in his recent examination of interorganizational trust. Whilst maintaining a foundationalist element in its treatment of structure, structuration is an attempt to "bridge the gap between deterministic, objective and static notions of structure on the one hand, and voluntaristic, subjective, and dynamic views on the other" (Ellis and Mayer, 2001: p. 193). For Giddens (1979: p. 69), the structural properties of social systems are emergent, and are "both mediums and outcomes of practices that constitute these systems." We therefore embrace an approach to public administration scholarship which sees that, "the mutation of administrative culture is rendered by the roles of structure and agents which transform and reproduce the structure in a process of continuous interaction between structure and agents" (Yun, 2009: p. 901).

The sampled respondents in our fieldwork are senior members of co-located organizations in one region of England. In determining the sample, we used a geographical boundary within which to identify respondents. We included appropriately mandated public sector actors and boundary spanning private sector actors; and actors within arms-length agencies operating specifically at organizational intersections.

TABLE 1: *Scope, duration and focus of each phase of research*

	Date/Duration	Scope and focus of fieldwork
Phase One	2002	63 structured interviews with public private and arms-length organizations.
		Focus: Investigation into stakeholder interaction with a development agency.
Phase Two	2004-2009	28 semi-structured interviews.
		Focus: Public-private partnership formation development and disruption.
Phase Three	2012-	49 semi-structured interviews.
		Focus: Public-private partnership preparedness and function in relation to a significant inward investment opportunity in the region.

The focal region is the Humber region in the North of England, spanning four local authority remits in North Lincolnshire and East Yorkshire. Data was collected in three phases between 2002 and 2012 (See Table 1) and consisted of formal interviewing amounting to 140 individual interviews of between 30 minutes and 2 hours in duration. Across these phases, we interviewed 97 individual respondents in 90 co-located companies and organizations, retired grandees and elected representatives. In addition, we undertook a critical review of corporate documentation focusing on partnership discourses.

Depth interviews were used to home in on emerging themes until a point of saturation was achieved in each phase (as per Glaser and Strauss, 1970). Coding focussed specifically on times when respondents spoke of facing dilemmas (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003), feeling unsettled (Cunliffe, 2003), or when they deployed sanctioning language (Giddens, 1979; Gordon et al., 2009). By dilemmas we mean "any experience or idea that conflicts with someone's beliefs, and so forces them to alter the beliefs they inherit from a tradition" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010: p. 79). Through

this approach, we present an account that moves beyond voluntaristic assumptions, to the situated practices of our respondents, alive to traditions and to the interplay of structure and agency.

Bevir and Rhodes (2010) note the need to treat history as a mode of explanation. Retrospective accounts, and historical narratives, are appropriate research approaches to reconstruct the past in organizational studies research (Golden, 1992, 1997). McLeod (1999: p. 248) advocates the establishment of a "diachronic historical, geographic and sociological reading of institutional formation" in order to "explore the ideology of place and region in the structuration of regional governance." Our approach follows the advice of Langley (1999) in respect of process theory building and the later work of Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2005) who develop Langley's theorizing strategies in the context structuration theory. We deploy a narrative strategy to construct a coherent pathway through the data that suggests the foldings and unfoldings of traditions. Coding was performed manually for the early interviews and later interviews were coded using NVIVO.

To further the authenticity and richness of our findings, we provide verbatim quotations in the respondents' own words (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). To aid clarity in the presentation of the data, we also deploy a visual process mapping strategy. The keys tenets of that process are detailed below in Figure 1
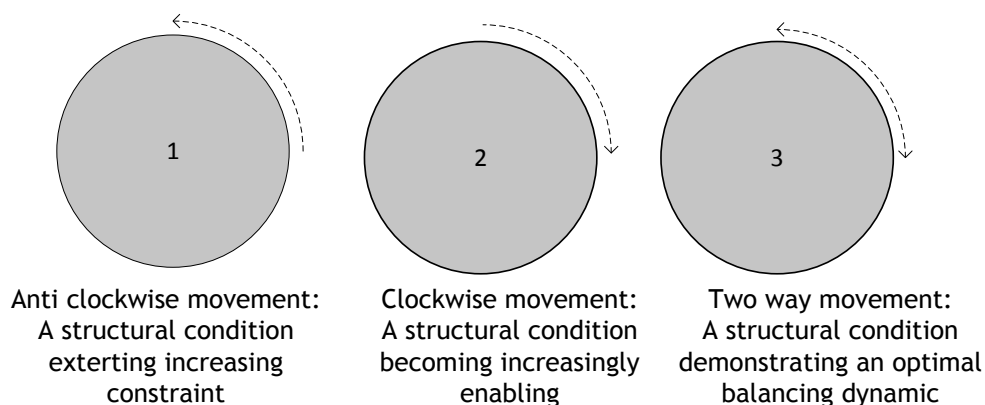

Anti clockwise movement:
A structural condition
exterting increasing
constraint

Clockwise movement:
A structural condition
becoming increasingly
enabling

Two way movement:
A structural condition
demonstrating an optimal
balancing dynamic

Figure 1: Visual process maps: Key to process types

We identify three dynamic structuration processes, all of which can demonstrate an enabling or constraining force. We see 1 and 2 as linear forces, in that increasing prevalence of a norm reproduces and strengthens the impact of the prevailing structures either as a constraining (1) or enabling (2) structure. We visualize a third process (3) as having an optimal level which is constantly in balance, yet on the brink of providing either constraining or enabling influence.
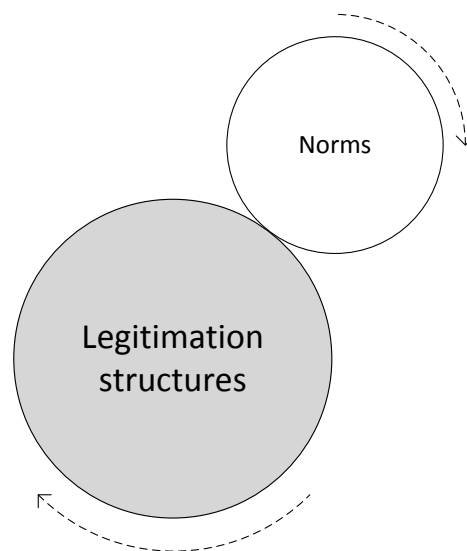

Figure 2: Visual process maps: The interplay between legitimation and norms

We therefore visualize structural reproduction and transformation as the interplay between modalities (such as norms, interpretive schemes and facilities) and structures (such as legitimation, domination and signification). We offer particular insight into the dynamics between legitimation and norms and build our narrative strategy around these process maps (fig. 2) to explain the agential influence of boundary spanning actors. Through this approach we re-cast traditions and dilemmas as structuration processes.

FLOATING IN A MOST PECULIAR WAY: TRADITIONS IN THE SPACES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ACTORS

We begin our space odyssey by looking at the dilemmas faced by two actors in a particular dyad – one a senior public sector manager (let us call her Jill), the other a private sector director (Jack) – who, at the time of writing, have had a fifteen-year professional relationship. The quotations below illustrate the (self- and reciprocally-ascribed) beliefs that they held at the beginning of their professional journey. The early phase was marked by an unpromising set of antagonistic perceptions of each other. For example, the director described the public sector manager in what for him are pejorative terms, saying "fifteen years ago, he would be symbolic of the left wing of old Labour". Mirroring this negative perception, Jill summed up for us her view of the director she held twenty years previously: "I thought that if you drive a big, flash car, wear a suit and a Rolex – you can't possibly have a public conscience". So the relationship appeared to begin with both actors having a strong sense of each other's *alterity*, and holding assumptions that they occupied spaces which were worlds' apart – one a domain of acquisitive, amoral materialism, the other a primordial soup of political extremism and backwardness.

Jack offered a commentary on how Jill started to change through her closer interaction with private sector actors. Jack felt a transition occurring on the part of Jill who came to see her role differently. Jack recalls that as a result of this change her assumptions about the legitimacy and motivations of private sector actors appreciably altered, saying that:

> "When she [Jill] became a portfolio holder for the economy […] she soon had a cohort of business people around her and over five years I saw a metamorphosis".

Jill had a similar recollection of a shaky start, citing the first meeting between them in which:

> "….we talked through a third party – like a divorcing couple talking through their kids. Crazy! I thought... yes, I am the left-winger and I am not getting sucked in by some git with a big car…"

However Jill recalled how Jack came to impress her with his commitment to the city and what she found to be his "engaging manner". As this happened Jill describes encountering a dilemma. Recalling her thoughts at that time she tells us: "I really liked him and thought: Oh, dear. This is going to be difficult. I can't like this man. I am not allowed to".

The reflections of both Jack and Jill therefore suggest a process which began with suspicion and hostility – a clash of assumptions about each other's beliefs, and a clash of traditions that underpinned them. After that, as the relationship developed, their sense of antagonism lessened and yet some further awkward dilemmas began to emerge. As a new view of him developed, Jill came to question her original expectations and her assumptions about private sector actors and how these relationships *ought* to be managed. Her more recent reflections on such assumptions included that they were "so unbelievably old-fashioned and stupid, but I hear it all the time... out of the mouths of politicians, regardless of [political] party". She is rueful about her previous views but also suggests that such tradition-laden views retain a contemporary resonance for her colleagues, hinting that suspicion of the private sector and faith in the independent primacy of local municipalism - remain at play among local politicians. However, the negative sanction of such views highlights a newer normative regulatory force at play.

For Giddens, structures of legitimation are institutionalized norms of practice that are used to communicate what are legitimate and illegitimate acts in any given

time and space context. Norms represent notions of right and wrong and may trigger

sanction. The changes between the two interlocutors over a period of fifteen years

indicate a normative regulative force at play which initially allowed views such as "oh

dear I'm not allowed to like this guy" to be positively sanctioned – views which later

are negatively sanctioned by the same actor as being "unbelievably old-fashioned and

stupid". Sanctioning is an indicator of agency being exercised in the spaces between

to modify or break from a particular local tradition, suggesting that a public sector

actor is now approaching the management of a partnership interaction from within a

different web of belief, one which appreciates the idea of interdependency in contrast

to their earlier commitment to independence. The dilemma arises from a clash of

assumptions and different competing normative commitments. We visualize this
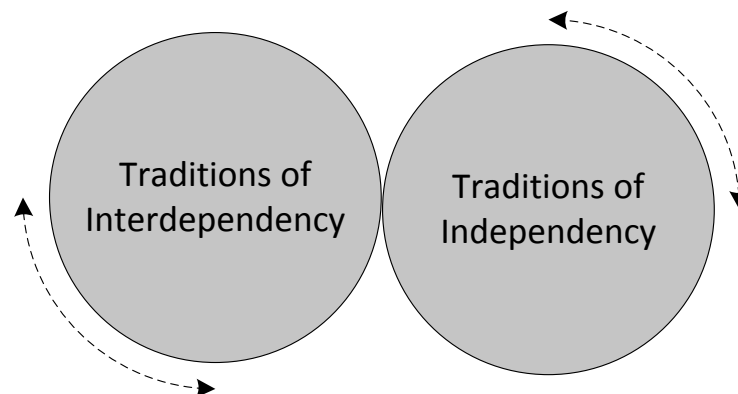
tension in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Interplay between traditions

We conceptualize an emerging but distinct tradition of interdependency with

its own regulatory norms and see such interdependency as a legitimation structure (in

Giddens' terms) which both constrains and enables partnership activities of these

boundary-spanning actors. Interdependency constrains the sense of go-it-alone

autonomy; but it enables a commitment to cooperation or joint efforts.

Both Jack and Jill had a high profile in the region and are identified by other participants as being leading and influential figures. Both became known as *champions* of public-private partnerships in the region and became key agents of forming change in the region. Their journey from adversaries to allies forms, in our account, a temporal bracket around the experiences of other co-located respondents, the experiences of whom we next examine. In doing so we provide an appreciation of the complexity of normative dilemmas faced by a diverse set of boundary spanning co-located actors and who, in line with the example just presented, have become active in forming a shared sense of interdependency.

At an early stage of the field interviews, a dilemma of independence versus interdependence emerged as a theme amongst all respondents and we converged on this concept in later phases of our field work. The following indicative fragments represent the reflections of some private sector boundary spanning actors on this theme. Their elaborations suggest a view of the public sector as needy, grasping and populated by complacent actors with an overblown sense of entitlement:

> "I think it is a cultural thing, I think the public sector likes to take and not necessarily to give".
>
> > Alex, private sector manager

> "You don't see the same appetite to sort out our problems; we are there to sort out their problems".
>
> > Jo, private sector manager

> "Local politicians... [are] one of the big, big problems… 'I have got elected, therefore I have got the right to do it and you lot you will help me to do it".
>
> > Mo, private sector manager

Such comments indicate a perception amongst our private sector boundary-spanning actors of the prevalence of an exchange posture on the part of public managers underpinned by the predominance of norms of independence, competition,

transactional exchange and short-termist self-interest. However, at the other pole in the dilemma lie perceptions of a complacent private sector.

> "…but a lot of the conversations [with the private sector] are, "show me, give me some evidence"… and they actually aren't investing themselves in making it a reality themselves, they're waiting for somebody else to put it on a plate".
>
> Darren, public sector manager

Alex describes this mode of interaction as a "distress activity" – in other words he felt that some public sector actors engaged with the private sector only transactionally and with a sense of discomfort:

> "... you ended with businesses having to engage with the public sector... as a distress activity, people got tapped… 'Can we have a suite of computers?' The private sector firm says 'well all right that's my corporate social responsibility taken care of, there you are, go away".

However, we found examples of boundary-spanning managers negatively sanctioning these kinds of beliefs whenever they encountered them:

> "I sometimes cringe when I hear some of my colleagues [in the public sector] talking to a private sector company, saying "you need to do this, you need to do that".
>
> Stef, arms-length agency CEO

"Cringing" indicates a different sense of unease amongst those at the institutional intersection expressed to those public sector actors further from it. Such actors describe how they use negative sanctioning behaviour when they become aware of "distress postures" on the part of their public sector colleagues. However, this kind of sanctioning behaviour is not apparent to many of the private sector interlocutors - it is off-stage and therefore not appreciated. We can see these public boundary spanning actors as occupying a difficult space, a brokerage position in which they negatively sanction their immediate colleagues elsewhere in their own organization, and yet where their attempts to challenge traditions and introduce new assumptions about the

role and value of the private sector are not always observable to, and credited by, private sector partners.

Several studies have examined the skills bases of boundary spanning actors (O'Leary and Choi, 2012; McGuire, 2006). A key boundary spanning skill identified in this study is the ability to discern and deliver mutual satisfaction within the relationship. Ahmed, for instance, comments:

> "You can actually 'benefit-focus', and the company gets something out of it… that is a genuine warm glow rather than distress activity".

Over time many other private sector respondents also described this shift in public sector norms. This transformation was described in another example when a "warm glow" was seen as being a decisive factor in a major investment decision in the area, one which then created significant employment opportunities.

The preceding passages suggest an evolving process through which structures of legitimation and independence were disrupted through sanctioning, leading to new norms of interdependence. Such evolution did not exhibit a linear lifecycle progression; rather it was more redolent of Clegg et al.'s (2005) idea of the folding and unfolding of organisational life, in which believers clash with unbelievers and advocates coexist uneasily with opposition. Interactions are mediated by the emergence of nascent traditions of practice infused with norms through which boundary spanning actors work cooperatively with each other. Many actors from both public and private sectors told us how they came increasingly to see their relationships in terms of ethical relations with, or duties to, others (prisms of partnership, fellowship or mutuality). In other words, over time when confronted by a dilemma between either maintaining independence or adopting an understanding of relations which enshrines reciprocity, we can see ideas of interdependence and its

benefits coming to the fore in our respondents' accounts of how they approached their boundary-spanning roles.

A further important theme which emerged from our interviews involves dilemmas of trust and reciprocity. Trust is central to a relational form of governance based on norms of mutuality (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Gouldner, 1960) and was often described by our respondents as necessary for partnerships to function effectively. Indeed the absence of trust has often been identified as a significant barrier to partnership working (see also Fenwick et al., 2012; Kroeger, 2011). As one of our public sector managers remarked:

> "I think there have been different reasons for the lack of engagement on the part of the private sector…in them wanting to engage with the public sector. One of these is a lack of trust".
> Steve, public sector manager

We can construct the idea of a trust-based dilemma with reference to an antithesis to trust, opportunism. By opportunism we mean short-termist, ad hoc and self-interested behaviours and views of opportunity – attempts to gain benefit without reciprocity. We argue that over time, both trust and opportunism are normative. Both trust and opportunism are normative in as much as they influence actors' choices about how to orientate their practices. We represent this dynamic in Figure 4.
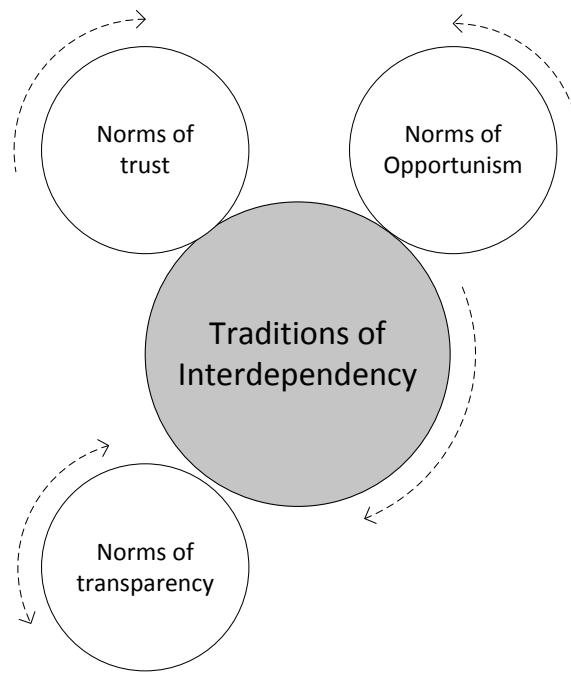
Figure 4: Trust based dilemmas

Opportunism can be regulated by hierarchies and by the law; but we suggest that trust

has a linear relationship with effective partnership operations and therefore constrains

opportunism. A further dynamic we observe is the link between norms of trust and

transparency - which is usually related to good governance, ethics and talked of in

terms of government transparency (see for instance Relly and Sabharwal, 2009). We

extend this to mean reciprocal transparency. The experience of these dynamics

coming together to form a complex set of dilemmas is described by Liz (a public

sector manager) who told us:

> "You can have a relationship where the private sector will say to
> us, this is commercially sensitive, we say "fine". They trust
> us…we will respect that and we do, because in fairness, you only
> let them down once. Not only do they not take you into their
> confidence they tell everyone else – don't touch the council we
> don't trust it".

Other respondents mention that private sector boundary spanning actors in PPP

arrangements need to have declared what they're after, or been clear about their

intentions:

> "So if a private sector organisation is looking for business directly from a relationship [with the public sector] that's fine as long as you know that at the start."
>
> Darren, public sector manager

We see no constraint to effective partnerships through ever increasing trust and ever decreasing opportunism. These types of processes we defined as type 1 in Fig 1. However, the following quote in respect of transparency suggests a different dynamic process.

> "Commercial considerations and competitive advantage which sometimes relies on keeping the cards close to the chest is a complicating factor."
>
> Jane, Public Sector Manager

We therefore envisage a balancing dynamic with an optimal level of transparency, too much of which can damage public sector independence and possibly private sector competitive advantage, too little of which can constrain trust and interdependence. We offer a visualization of the processual dynamics between trust, opportunism and transparency in fig 4.

We suggest that the dilemma of trust and opportunism are strongly related to different *exchange ideologies* (Eisenberger et al., 1986), embedded in historical traditions of independence, that is, how relations should be thought about and exchanges managed. A move to norms of interdependency therefore presents a further dilemma for boundary spanning public sector actors due to differing or conflicting exchange ideologies. Olberding (2002) argue that within enabling exchange ideologies, the establishment of norms of reciprocity is an important element in partnership. However, within the group of quotes we coded under a heading of reciprocity were two distinct sub-factors, intrinsic and extrinsic - and within this distinction lie important implications for the governance of satisfactory relationships.

The receipt of goods, money, information, and services are examples of *extrinsic* benefits (Foa, 1974). Many of our public sector respondents identified that in the past they had found it unsettling when private sector actors have sought extrinsic benefits through partnership. Partly this feeling has been contingent on the extent to which private sector actors were "upfront" about their expectations.
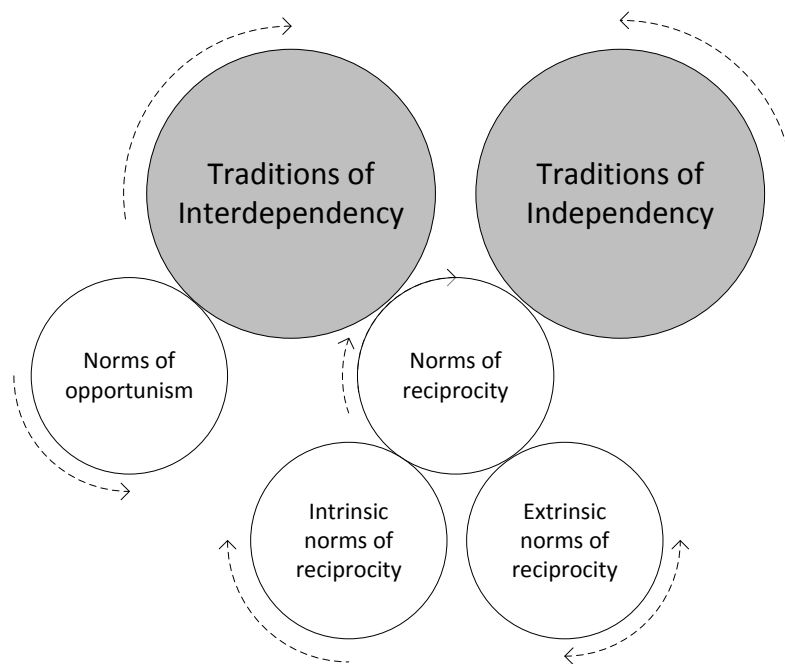

Figure 5: Reciprocity based dilemmas.

Boundary spanning public sector actors experience non-mutualistic (opportunistic) behaviour to be unsettling. Examples of opportunism given by several respondents were situations where *"grant hopping"* was perceived to have taken place, where incentives were given through (ring-fenced, time-limited) central government regional development funding, or where other incentives had been given but later the firm closes down when the funding runs out. Such behaviour was negatively sanctioned by both private and public sector respondents for being an example of discreet, rather than reciprocal exchange. Several public sector actors in our sample also refer

critically to what they call a "branch plant mentality" through which firms locate in a region but have no relational interaction with other co-located actors.

Commercial considerations and competitive advantage, which sometimes rely on keeping the cards close to the chest and not fully declaring the company's intentions, are a complicating factor which can mitigate against transparency. Yet, extrinsic reciprocation often relies on a norm of transparency, which for local public sector actors is bound up with ideas of good governance, ethics, accountability and legality. In contrast, the exchange of *intrinsic* benefits (Foa, 1974), seems to give rise to less tension than when reciprocity involves exchange of extrinsic benefits. Intrinsic benefits can include social and psychological gains accrued at an individual level. According to many of our public sector respondents, an intrinsic and reciprocal benefit focus has come to form part of the evolving norms of reciprocity in the region, and their delivery a key element in the boundary spanners toolbox. Likewise, it seems that many private sector actors no longer see exchange reciprocity simply in terms of extrinsic benefits and negatively sanction those business actors who have a narrower and more instrumental focus:

> "There are some that are doing it because they are being… not quite being altruistic… they are doing it on the basis of… I don't expect that if I give a thousand pounds to [an agency] I am going to get a thousand pounds back, of images, of help, of copy of whatever, I trust them, they are good organisation, I believe in what they are doing and I want [the] City to move on and I will support that. If along the way I get a bit of positive PR great, then I suppose I've got some justification."
> Dave, private sector manager

Identity salience and prestige (Arnett et al., 2003) are examples of social benefits, and therefore part of a "warm glow", that can accrue as the result of participating in an exchange:

> "People get involved on the basis that there has to be something they get out of it, even if it is just emotional... "I am pleased I did that, I feel

better about that as a result"… so that is reciprocal isn't it? But it is at a personal level".

Hans, private sector manager

Other individual "self agendas" were discussed as being part of "the great and good" or of "wearing the badge", "doing it because they're called Councillor Smith" or "getting their name attached to it". Such motives were frequently described as selfish but such criticism was often qualified with a recognition that these actors, though benefiting socially, were also showing a desire to "put something back in, or contribute to their local scene", hence were not seen in entirely opportunistic terms.

Emerging from the narratives of our respondents is a sense that the "warm glow" created in successful partnership interactions can be fuelled by the accrual of intrinsic benefits by private sector actors. We observe that intrinsic reciprocity has a linear relationship with effective partnership functioning, whereas norms based on extrinsic reciprocity again displays an optimal balancing dynamic (visualised in fig. 5).

Fenwick, et al. (2012) recently warned as to the risks of meta-governance structures merely becoming extensions of government bureaucracy. However, we propose that the establishment of legitimation structures and the regulatory norms that instantiate them significantly mitigate against this risk. However, such a trust-based *warm glow* seems not just to be underpinned by normative regulation or simply damaged by hierarchies. The deployment of power and sanction by actors seem to be constantly in a state of flux, leading to periods of partnership disruption and transformation not necessarily based on the synchronic singular influence of one or the other. Similar to the warnings from O'Toole and Meier (2004) and Ramarajan et al., 2011, we note that partnerships do have a dark side. For example, perceptions of opportunism were spoken about by public sector actors, citing cases where large

private sector actors leverage their power as major employers. Large co-located

private sector firms can utilize their status as a significant local employer and enable

them to exert considerable power. Private sector respondents also recognize the

asymmetry of power at these private-public boundaries. As Eddie (a former

Divisional Multinational CEO) explained to us:

> "When I have the backing of a large private employer in the region […]
> everyone has to listen to what [the firm] are saying. If the firm says…
> "this is ridiculous we need this"… it's a brave man who ignores it
> completely. I looked the councillor in the eye and said… that's very
> interesting and if you want to play that game then you will be the ones
> who ultimately pay the price when [the firm] pulls out of this region, so
> you go ahead, if you want to save yourself x thousand pounds, go
> ahead".

However, Charlie, a senior local government manager, speaking of another large local

employer suggested an alternative approach to relationships:

> "I mean they are a very large company and we're a pretty large local
> authority as well and so we're not a small district council, [...] so if they
> do something we don't like, we tell them but in a proper fashion. I go
> and see them and say "What are you doing in [a particular locality] on
> that?" Nine times out of ten, they back off actually. Then the tenth time
> you have a row and everyone feels better afterwards"!

The flavour of his comment is that managing the tension between power and sanction

(in Giddens' terms) is a further part of the repertoire of public sector boundary

spanning actors – and that the deployment of power does not automatically negate a

"warm glow" where a tradition of interdependence exists. It seems that a degree of

functional conflict is expected and accepted. Indeed Charlie seems to suggest quite the

opposite might sometimes be true – "everyone feels better afterwards". However, the

fragments in this section suggest the significance of understanding and appreciating

the flux between power and sanction which mediate relationships in partnership

working in order to avoid a dark side of such traditions emerging. Behaviours which

prize and advocate an appreciation of a relational based tradition of interdependence

therefore also seem to mitigate against the forming of more hierarchy-based meta-bureaucracy structures.

CONCLUSION: TAKE YOUR PROTEIN PILLS AND PUT YOUR HELMET ON

Partnership working has been a feature of central government policy since the 1940s, and our article explores a feature of public policy that remains high on the political agenda. Williams (2013) has recently counselled as to burgeoning significance of boundary spanning activity in light of the unprecedented cuts in UK government spending. Our central contribution is to illustrate the multi-dimensional dilemmas faced by boundary spanning actors and how these are entwined with the interaction of local traditions of practice. Such dilemmas are faced by actors who are occupying difficult and heterogonous spaces between the public and private sectors. Focusing on the practices of boundary spanning actors enables us to appreciate the complexity of these interstitial spaces and helps bring to life the concept of traditions which otherwise might imply stasis. Our paper prevents traditions of practice – such as *localism*, *partnership* and *governance* - becoming a set of ontological cages into which we place practitioners. Our study enables an understanding of how boundary spanning actors both maintain and disrupt contemporary traditions of practice, and highlights the dynamism of this arena. An appreciation of partnership working as a practice characterized by disorderliness and flux is of relevance to the ever-increasing number of managers operating in at organizational boundaries. We see cross-sectoral partnership working as an ongoing relational accomplishment, carried off in the context of competing and evolving assumptions about context, goals and the legitimacy of different interests or practices. For instance, the findings in respect of the interplay between trust, transparency, and a benefit focus that takes into account

intrinsic reciprocity, may help to avoid such partnership arrangements irrevocably becoming meta-bureaucracies (as Fenwick, et al. 2012, caution). We also confirm the value inherent in examining the experiences of boundary spanning actors. Their space odyssey often sees them caught not only between competing traditions of their own organizations, but also finds them having to navigate the assumptive worlds of their partners. We present dilemmas not as simple dichotomies but as involving a complexity of webs of belief. We therefore also highlight the significance of gaining access to narratives from both sides of the public-private sector dyads in order to better appreciate the spaces between and unpack the *black box* of boundary spanning activity.

The value of illuminating such complexity stems from the (inter-) organisational-level focus of our study. Front-line actors occupy a liminal space between policy and implementation, grand manifestos for change and improvement and life on the ground, rhetoric and reality. Turning the research gaze to the organisational level helps us to understand the plethora of local contingencies involved in this arena, and highlights what is at stake for the individuals involved in these processes. Policy and politics research is excellent at capturing the political, strategic, and material aspects of transformation and change initiatives. Attending to actors' experiences is worthwhile as doing so alerts us to the personal, ethical and developmental dilemmas involved. Locating these multi-dimensional dilemmas in the context of local traditions adds to our appreciation of complexity by emphasising the deep-seated assumptions and practices which those involved in partnership working have to navigate. Our argument for heterogeneity and contingency means that each local setting will present its own space oddities – each representing an odyssey of exploration. Whilst we have focussed on traditions of *localism*, *governance* and

partnership, further work may identify how the beliefs of boundary-spanning actors affect an alternative construction or set of local traditions; or how beliefs and practices of boundary-spanning practitioners impact on the assumptions of other public sector actors operating further away from the public-private interface. Nonetheless, we offer a language or set of concepts that actors may find useful in their own unique journeys.

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