Agency, Sustainability and Organizational Change

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses how agency is emergent from the asymmetrical power interactions of multiple social actors and organizations. Agency, contingent and relational, is creative even when interpreted by people as unsuccessful. I employ ethnographic research from within a local authority sustainability team who were threatened with redundancy because of funding cuts imposed during the implementation of British Prime Minister David Cameron’s Big Society project. In order to manage their situation, possible futures had to be re-imagined and appropriately contained through processes of self-assessment and self-management. The ability to enable self-directing action was often evident but was frequently interpreted by people as unsuccessful. This stemmed from misrecognition, scarcity and the lack of capacity to bring about full and substantial changes. Both the sustainability team and their work emerge from this process reduced and reformed through the competing tensions of systems of political governance and technologies of the self.

KEYWORDS: agency, austerity, Big Society, local authority, sustainability, work

Introduction

Local government provision in the U.K. has undergone systematic change (Rose 2005; Raco et al. 2006) since the late 1970s, under neoliberal visions of governance. A ‘rolled back’ state (Kelsey 1993), with increased market involvement has resulted in the outsourcing of many local government functions (Peck and Tickell 2002). Prime Minister David Cameron’s vision of the Big Society (Cameron 2010a) includes deeper reductions in public services coupled with a more sharply pronounced rise in personal responsibility, growth of the third (voluntary) sector and private enterprise (Alcock 2010; Kisby 2010). At the same time as central government has given local authorities (councils) more power, discretion and autonomy through the localism bill, they have reduced council funding. This has been described in terms of ‘cutting middle management waste’ with an emphasis on efficiency, or ‘more for less’ (CIPFA 2011: 1; Cameron 2010b: 1). Recent declarations of the death of the Big Society (Dunt 2013), however, have not dampened effects of the successive rounds of funding reductions (Richardson 2010) and have led Sir Merrick Cockell, chair of the Local Government Association, to warn of the consequences for vulnerable people that these deep funding cuts will force (Helm 2013; Cockell 2013).

In response to the funding cuts, one local authority announced a reduction of approximately one third of its workforce, in order, the senior management announced, to protect the provision of their statutory obligations. This staffing reduction was considerably more than the one in seven predicted by the Chartered
The Institute of Personnel and Development (2012: 1). The first round of redundancies coincided with my participant observation within this local authority during the summer of 2010 and the first nine months of 2011. My research investigated how sustainability becomes shaped by the conditions under which it is conceptualized and materialized, and I researched with the sustainability team within the housing directorate of the local authority. During June 2010, the sustainability team was identified as ‘middle management waste’ and was subject to redundancy.

Valuable research will undoubtedly emerge after the effects of the reduction of public services become known. However, it is also important to trace out how identifying a group of people as ‘middle management waste’ affects their lives. This article traces the ‘dance of agency’ which emerges between the team, the government, acting through funding reductions, the senior management and the local authority as an organization (Pickering 2010: 21). Often described as ‘freedom to act in the world’, agency tends to be presented in top-down or grass roots-up arguments (Knappett and Malafouris 2008: x). This tension is reflective of the way Foucauldian notions of power and governmental technologies can de-centre the subject by describing organizations as non-human agents which exhibit a powerful, unchallenged agency, described as structure. Anthropological studies of everyday practices expressed as process relocate the subject, but often ignore the large-scale structuring forces which can overwhelm people. Within this debate, human agency is still often regarded as the only true or real agency (Giddens 2009) and this does not reconcile the multiple agentive positions (Knappett and Malafouris 2008). To reconcile and describe the emerging situation the sustainability officers faced, I use Cruikshank’s (1999) description of agency as shifting, reciprocal and emergent from the interaction of humans in the world where techniques of governance become productive of processes of self-assessment, regulation and management. Rising and falling tensions at and between different scales became visible during the process of identification of officers as middle management waste. These shaped, directed and enabled officers personally and professionally as ‘the political has been reconstituted at the level of the self’ (Cruikshank 1996: 88). Here, I start by introducing the interactions between the senior management and the sustainability team to show how agency emerges as asymmetrical, shifting and messy but always productive and creative even when people identify the results as unsuccessful. These results come out of processes of misrecognition, scarcity and lack of capacity to bring about full and substantial changes. Further, the organizational and personal changes described here are not just a site for action. Sustainability emerges, like the officers, equally transformed through the competing tensions of systems of political governance and technologies of the self (Foucault 1998; Read 2009).

Central Government, Local Authority and the Senior Management

The landscape of the local authority is composed of contrasting, competing and aligning processes. It is created and maintained by agenteive actors with different access to power and levels of effectiveness. The organization coalesces through multiple agencies, policies, financial and planning departments, systems of bureaucracy and circulating emails. Core values for this local authority are expressed in terms of fairness to borough residents and the senior management spend considerable time and effort describing how this is achieved by the flat management structure. In fact, this flat structure is separated into two: the small team of senior management and the multiple teams of middle managers who manage the day-to-day operations of the local authority. Separation is maintained physically by senior
management who work in a separate office. Personal communication between senior management and the rest of the organization is vigorously discouraged. Official communication is delivered from the senior level through letters, newsletters and occasional informational seminars, which are carefully crafted to manage interaction.

Many officers noted that there seemed to be very little senior management resistance to the Government’s austerity and small government measures. Several senior managers stated that they wanted to emulate ‘modern working practices’ and centralize services within contemporary new offices built of glass and steel, which reflected what they described as transparent and flexible working practices (pers. comms.). While they regretted job losses, their priority was to preserve statutory obligations and services by quickening the shift away from their role of provider to enabler (Harrison and Davis 2001). The senior management indicated that to protect statutory services they needed to ‘cut middle management waste’ and this would produce a leaner, fitter organization, better able to respond to the needs of the borough (pers. comm.). During this first stage of restructuring, most redundancies were voluntary and they say so proudly in seminars and online. There appeared to be little opposition to the funding cuts imposed by the government because the senior management believed they could make these changes align with the vision they had for the organization (pers. comm.).

**Misrecognizing the Sustainability Team**

In June 2010 the sustainability team consisted of eight officers. They worked on many and varied projects which defined sustainability largely through energy conservation in social housing. They linked this to fuel poverty alleviation and recognized that health issues due to fuel poverty (Marmot 2010) are higher in the social housing sector because of less efficient housing stock (HM Government 2010; Jenkins 2010). Much of their work had been to focus on finding the most materially and monetarily efficient actions. While officers had disciplinary specialities and were assigned multiple projects, in reality there was a practice of information and project sharing. They all felt that the team was successfully implementing sustainability through the borough, reducing fuel poverty and saving energy and carbon through their projects. Their innovative work won many awards over the years and their trophies gleamed on the windowsill.

During one of the fortnightly meetings the sustainability team held, the team leader handed out the new organizational chart. This was to come into effect after Christmas and was the first tangible evidence of the organizational changes the team had been hearing about. Everyone shuffled through the pages trying to find their place. Then one officer said ‘we’re not in here’ and everyone suddenly fell silent. This was one of those stunning, deafening silences, the kind that is so overwhelming that no one can speak. After what seemed like an eternity, it was broken by expressions of disbelief, questions, *very* heated discussion and strategizing.

As the team was aware that staff reduction was widespread within their organization and all over the country, why then did they not realize it might affect them? The answer is a problem of recognition in two parts. First, the physical and communicative separation created by the senior management had resulted in a misaligned understanding between the team’s collective professional identity and the senior management’s conception of the team. The way the management team recognize what is going on within the organization is through the production of policy recommendations, assessments, reports and targets. An examination of content showed that a vocabulary of sustainability is now central to these documents with targets shown to be met or an-
anticipated to be met. Senior management, looking at these documents, could reasonably be expected to believe that everyone was working to high standards of sustainability throughout the organization. However, the team believed that this was not the case and that the housing sector had ‘a long way to go’ before sustainability was mainstreamed (pers. comm.). They illustrated their case with statistics which circulate widely but which were taken from the Retrofit for the Future Challenge that in order to achieve the U.K. national target of carbon reduction of 80% by 2050 at least one building every two minutes will have to be retrofitted to a high standard (Jenkins 2010; Moorhouse and Littlewood 2012). The team saw little evidence that retrofitting was widespread, so they believed their role as housing, energy and sustainability experts was essential.

Second, the team were so used to thinking of others as objects of policy (Shore and Wright 1997) that they did not recognize themselves as the primary targets of the Government’s smaller public sector programme. This speaks to the way that large-scale processes are often invisible to those working day-to-day jobs. One officer, faced with redundancy, responded: ‘they can’t do that’ (pers. comm.). However, it became clear to them through the organizational chart that the senior management thought differently. While some officers agreed that getting rid of middle management waste would lead to efficiency and effectiveness, they did not recognize themselves or their work in these terms. They did not consider themselves as ‘middle to anything’ but described themselves as ‘the front line’ because they often met with social housing residents (pers. comm.). They did not recognize, at this point, that the ongoing process of outsourcing local government work to the private sector (Peck and Tickell 2002) over the last few decades has left a flattened structure of only middle and senior managers.

The team did not recognize themselves as management because they think of themselves as directors of projects, not managers of staff. They do not regard managing external contractors as managing staff. This lack of recognition is strengthened by the insistence from all members of the team that ‘we do not make decisions, management make decisions’ (pers. comm.). They defined and understood these as ‘important’ and as determinations only the senior management committee are authorized to make. Whether to undertake a project or not is a decision the senior management makes but how to carry out a project cannot be decision-making because the team control the details of implementation. Lastly, the team do not recognize the term ‘wastage’ in relation to their work. They always have more projects than they have time for and thus cannot be surplus to requirements. The dissolution of the entire team was shocking, as they explained, because the local authority has a huge verbal and written commitment to sustainability. They saw their roles as both expert and vital in relation to these commitments and simply did not recognize their role as ‘middle’ ‘management’ or ‘waste’.

Managing Scarcity through Reinvention

Shocked by their own misinterpretation, the team began to examine organizational statements and intentions regarding sustainability for ‘foreseeable “organizational futures”’ in minute detail (Gilboy 1992: 287). They started realigning themselves towards the targets and goals they believed senior management held and constructed a portfolio of their work which argued that sustainability in the social housing sector could be, but was not currently, in a position to be mainstreamed. It was therefore still dependent on an expert set of knowledge and practices and in particular, their technical expertise. This was defended in a subsequent meeting with the senior management committee. They found that this first phase of redun-
dancy was malleable enough that the team was reprieved, albeit in a reduced form. They went from eight to four officers and no one in the team believed their job would exist after the next round of redundancies (due spring 2013).

Over the course of two months, a total of two hundred and fifty officers became redundant or retired. The atmosphere was extremely tense for some time as most of the officers had their contracts cancelled and each remaining position was advertised. Some believed their jobs would disappear, others chose to leave and most reapplied for their own positions but keep silent about applying for other colleague's jobs. One or two threatened the local authority with legal action but in the end chose to leave quietly. The process involving CV (résumé) production, application completion, speculation about interviewers and their requirements, reference to core values and past performance was carefully orchestrated by deadlines. These structured the process and each stage was discussed among the team who assisted each other in processes of self-assessment: the measurement and calculation of one's place in the process of self-regulation (Cruikshank 1996). Everything was examined in minute detail for indications of intent and possible strategies, the anticipation of reaction to certain past events and the mitigation of risk around one's own action. They attempted to plan accordingly.

Here, the normally maintained regulated and contained illusions of the boundary between public and private collapsed. Personal realizations became palpable and the world unstable, unsettled. Jimenez suggests such moments contain 'excess, surplus and indeterminacy' (2007: 21). They allow fear and uncertainty to be explored, the self to be reassembled and new futures imagined, at least in front of co-workers. This was as true for those who retained their jobs as for those who left. The management of a public self became crucial under difficult and trying circumstances. Personal details, normally kept hidden, became drawn into the semi-public arena of work. One redundant officer redefined her position as freedom to leave to become her ageing mother’s caregiver. Many anticipated early retirement although one or two were not happy about being pushed into this decision. One officer judged that during this round of redundancies he would receive a better retirement offer than any future round. He decided to take early retirement, although he did not want to. The officer who had ‘always wanted to live in the country’ now could, since he failed to retain his job and one officer who found a position in the private sector qualified this with, ‘I’m bored here anyway’ (pers. comms.). These changes were managed through constant reinterpretation of unfolding events which allowed for assessment of future plans, lack of success and balancing life choices with what people believed might happen. They re-cast and emphasized choice as theirs alone. However, the assumption that there will be a straight and unproblematic transfer of workers from the public to the private sector implied in Cameron’s strategy (Brinkley 2012) is not the case. Some officers took jobs they did not want, secured only part-time jobs or became unemployed. Despite the personal claims for self-management and agency, which can be noted at the individual level, these officers had little choice but to respond to the conditions of reduced funding and smaller government imposed on them.

Reducing Capacity, Reducing Sustainability

The expectations and developing tensions within individual careers may seem, initially, to have little impact on how the team might define sustainability or how it becomes materialized through their projects. However, sustainability was directly shaped by the losses due to redundancies. The team lost officers with their expertise and connections and ca-
pacity in the form of time. The reduction of the team meant that they had lost two long-career officers who were well networked and qualified. One was a long-career project manager who was responsible for coordinating borough-wide insulation installations. The other was the team leader who had a masters degree in sustainability and a decade of service with local authorities. He was replaced by a project manager, who by his own admission knew nothing about sustainability. The other two officers who left were well qualified and had worked for the local authority for three to four years. One officer emigrated and the other took an unsatisfactory job, which she later resigned from. This represented a real emptying or ‘hollowing out’ (Jessop 2004) of experience, capacity, qualifications, technical and historical knowledge.

With the team reduced by half, the officers did not possess the capacity to continue with all their previous projects or to do ‘more for less’ as Cameron had suggested (2010b: 1). They dropped the community vegetable gardening and information projects which took up too much officer time. Long-term projects which improve existing local authority infrastructure have also been discontinued. These often also required significant technical expertise, such as the solar photovoltaic installations. Securing tenant agreement, funding and managing contractors became too difficult to manage before more organizational changes came into effect. Many of the considerations and discussions with officers about risk and responsibility over the twenty-five year life time of solar panels concluded with: ‘well I won’t be here to worry about that’ (pers. comm.). This short-term view of work means that responsibility for the long-term consequences of projects has been effectively outsourced to future officers.

Research partnerships with local universities have disappeared too. One example is the ‘flange project’, which resulted from a study of domestic heating boiler efficiency. By testing energy loss at all points in the system, they discovered that replacing one inexpensive flange on each boiler (at a very small cost) would save many times that in boiler replacement, as well as energy and carbon (embedded and on-going). Now they do not have time to work with local universities on further inexpensive solutions to energy problems. Creative thinking will now, theoretically, relocate to the private sector and be subject to a different set of knowledges about profit and loss, responsibility to shareholders, social housing, sustainability and the welfare of vulnerable clients. The team gradually ceased to use ‘discretion in the management of resources’ and have become administrators, ordering ‘resources to follow previously defined procedures and rules’ (Flynn 2012: 2). Just as they recognized their role as managers, this capacity has diminished. Projects which survived the changes focus on simple, short-term projects and interventions, often those funded and running from year to year.

Managing Reinvention through Sustainability

Having justified their continued existence by arguing that sustainability could be mainstreamed, the team orientated all projects towards this goal. Defined by Berger et al. as the deliberate strategy of ‘taking what has been a peripheral issue and making it central to the organization by the embedding of attention’, mainstreaming involves the creation of new criteria for decision-making, procurement and policies (2007: 132). Mainstreaming was to be accomplished in three ways: by offering it as a problem-solving strategy; by embedding the concept in materials and through policy-making. First, the new team manager charged his officers with inserting themselves into other team’s meetings and positioning sustainability as a way for them to solve problems. However, the loss of networking knowledge with disappearing colleagues was devastating to this
process and had to be rebuilt. This technique met with varying levels of enthusiasm from the sustainability team who argued that they did not have time to do this. In addition, other teams were reluctant to allow sustainability officers into their meetings, or take on what they regarded as extra work at a time when they too were facing similar conditions of reduced staff numbers, increased work-load and the continual threat of redundancy.

The networking strategy became coupled with examples of how sustainability can be embodied within material objects. Instead of further flange projects, which would have been innovative, nonintrusive and inexpensive, the scope of sustainability has become reduced and redirected to the physical qualities of objects placed into social housing. Replacing faucets with aerating taps and fitting new low-flush toilets which save water can be argued to be effective resource management. However, social housing residents, as Marmot (2010) demonstrates, often require more, not less, in the way of resources including energy. So, by restricting people’s use of electricity and water through replacing home heating boilers with smaller models, residents are governed directly through restrictive practices of resource management.

Sustainability, redefined as a process of swapping one material or object for another, hollows out the creative, technical and investigatory processes of sustainability just as the job losses hollow out the qualified and experienced teams. This kind of sustainability becomes easier to outsource to other teams, as there is no new technical knowledge to acquire, only different versions of regularly sourced products to procure and install. Research (Wilhite et al. 2010) shows that social housing residents are becoming increasingly subject to accusations of inappropriate and non-sustainable energy consumption (U.K. Cabinet Office 2011). This has lead to attempts to control consumption by ‘nudging’, defined as non-pecuniary incentives (Dolan and Metcalfe 2011). Nudging aims to encourage residents to reduce their energy consumption by showing them a comparison of their household bills to an average of their neighbour’s bills (U.K. Cabinet Office 2011). Residents in social housing become governable through a reduction of available energy and resources, a quality embedded within material objects and a regulation of their behaviours. However, by encouraging resident personal responsibility this leaves local authority infrastructure, where the largest energy and carbon-savings are to be found, largely untouched.

The third mainstreaming strategy was policy-making and this was directly applied to the team’s work on green (vegetated) roof projects. This was to follow the borough-wide insulation project example. This was managed as a separate project by two sustainability team officers and it was continued under the regeneration team as a routine aspect of their work, hence the justification for making these officers redundant. The team recommended outsourcing green (vegetated) roof projects through policy and this became accepted by senior management in early 2013. The policy now requires any flat social housing roof in the borough, under replacement, to be considered for greening, unless mitigating circumstances can be argued. Responsibility for future green roofs now rests with a team who may accept that they are a valuable resource for biodiversity and energy-saving but have little team capacity to fund, design or lay them.

Mainstreaming sustainability became a process of outsourcing knowledge and process. This involved shifting responsibility from current to future officers; to other teams through materials, practices and policy or to social housing tenants through material interventions and a reframing of personal energy consumption. Ironically, the more flexible workers are expected to become, the more rigid, prescribed and administrative sustainability becomes. Sustainability, in this local authority, has become less creative, more instrumental
and ultimately less effective. The wider irony, that the more successful the mainstreaming strategy is the less the team will be required, has not escaped anyone’s notice.

Conclusion

Agency, thought about as the ‘freedom to act in the world’, is a creative process (Knappett and Malafouris 2008: x). However, the results are contingent, messy and not always interpreted as successful. Forced to confront redundancies brought about by the Cameron government’s desire to see a small public sector, officers identified as ‘middle management waste’ began to deal with a destabilizing situation which made visible a disparity between themselves and the senior management. This had to be reimagined, appropriately contained and managed through processes of self-assessment and self-management. The ability to enable self-directing action is evident on some occasions when officers successfully reprieved their team or redefined their futures. Others did not have the opportunity to be self-determining and relied on reinvention to accommodate what they perceived as their reduced circumstances. The effects were messy as subjectivity is ongoing, never complete. Under the competing tensions of systems of political governance and technologies of the self (Foucault 1998), sustainability emerges as equally transformed, reduced and hollowed out.

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