FRONT-LINE WORKERS AND ‘LOCAL KNOWLEDGE’: NEIGHBOURHOOD STORIES IN CONTEMPORARY UK LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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One of the aims of this special issue is to ‘decentre’ a key facet of governance, namely networks. This article considers in particular the concept ‘networked community governance’, a key part of New Labour’s reforms in local governance and, in particular, around neighbourhood-based working. This article draws on interpretive methods and analysis to explore the everyday work of front-line workers in contemporary local governance through their own stories. The article is based on empirical work in the neighbourhood management system developed in Salford, a local authority in the North West of England. Key to facilitating ‘networked community governance’, is front-line workers’ own ‘local knowledge’, understood as the mundane, yet expert, understanding front-line workers develop from their own contextual experiences. The article explores the difficulties that front-line workers perceive themselves to face in their everyday work and how they use their ‘local knowledge’ to develop responsive, entrepreneurial strategies.

INTRODUCTION

A shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ has been identified by many commentators (see Pierre and Peters 2000; Kooiman 2003). ‘Goverance’ can be used as a blanket term to represent a change in the nature or meaning of government (March and Olsen 1989). A scan of the UK ‘governance’ literature will show that most tackles the changing role of the state after the various public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. ‘Goverance’ is used here as a reference to the specific public sector reforms introduced by New Labour. However, the term ‘governance’ continues to avoid succinct definition (see Bevir and Rhodes 2003). As explicated in the Introduction to this special issue several authors identify the link between ‘governance’ and ‘networks’. This article focuses more specifically on the concept of ‘networked community governance’ (Stoker 2004). Networked community governance was a key concept in New Labour’s reforms of local governance and gives emphasis to engaging the community in decision making on policy and service delivery.

The shift towards governance, both empirically and analytically, is characterized and marked by complexity (Newman 2001; Stoker 2002). Further, we can raise questions about the extent to which administrations have moved towards governance and, indeed, the commitment of the current UK administration to work in this way. Complexity and ambiguity about the meaning and impact of reform is felt keenly at the front line. Frontline workers are defined as public sector staff with some responsibility for delivering policy and services together with engaging with communities as part of their everyday work. New Labour has charged front-line workers with reconciling the rhetoric of their own empowerment (Cabinet Office 1999) with an ongoing tendency towards centralization (6 and Peck 2004; Hood 2006). Stoker (2004), importantly, has argued that complexity can be seen to create space and opportunity for innovation in the public sector.
Interpretive approaches – notably the approach associated with Bevir and Rhodes (2003) – have sought to ‘decentre’ governance, exploring and emphasizing its contingent and variously constructed nature. This article will contribute to the decentring task undertaken in this special issue by considering how front-line workers draw upon their ‘local knowledge’, a concept identified in interpretive policy analysis that was initiated in the work of Geertz (1983) and has been revived in the work of Yanow (2004). Yanow defines ‘local knowledge’ as a ‘kind of non-verbal knowing that evolves from seeing, interacting with someone (or some place or something) over time’ (Yanow 2004, p. 12). As implied, this ‘knowing’ is contextual and refers to a specific setting and reflects ‘very mundane yet expert understanding from lived experience’ (Yanow 2004, p. 12). Front-line workers develop their ‘local knowledge’ from their own subjective interpretations or ‘readings’ of a situation. The resource of ‘local knowledge’, however, has not yet been acknowledged in ‘mainstream’ political science and public administration and only marginally in interpretive accounts of the importance of ‘street smarts’ to front-line work (see Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

This article provides an empirical explication of the relevance of, and argues the increasing prominence of, local knowledge to front-line work in local governance. The article asserts that the ‘local knowledge’ is important in understanding the role of front-line workers in contemporary local governance. As has been said, this article draws on primary research in such a setting: the neighbourhood management system in the English city of Salford. ‘Neighbourhood’ has re-emerged under New Labour as an important site for governance and policy action (Power 2004; Taylor and Wilson 2006; Lowndes and Sullivan 2008). Front-line workers in the neighbourhood management structures developed in Salford provide a useful interpretation of the impact of New Labour’s reforms on how policy is delivered at the local level. As Goss notes, a central dynamic of governance is how it is ‘being worked by the men and women within it’ (2001, p. 201; original italics).

The article uses a set of stories from health improvement and community development workers who work in the neighbourhood management structures developed in Salford and these workers’ reconciliation of community concerns about financial exclusion and government concerns about public health. The stories illustrate how front-line workers ‘read’ particular situations. Front-line workers often articulate difficulties and ambiguities concerning how they should act to balance the demands of policy implementation with the priorities of the communities they work within. However, front-line workers face an ‘action imperative’ (Hill and Hupe 2007) and need to respond to these difficulties. The responsive strategies that front-line workers develop are shaped by the ‘local knowledge’ they develop from their ‘readings’ of their often micro level context and articulated in stories about their everyday work.

The narrative of front-line work that emerges from the set of stories presented here is one of ‘civic entrepreneurialism’. This term reflects that local governance is a contested site for policy action where front-line workers are ‘situated agents’ using their ‘readings’ and ‘local knowledge’ to act entrepreneurially in order to both deliver policy and build networks and relationships with the community. These stories provide a decentred narrative of front-line work. This narrative reflects the complexity of contemporary local governance. The article concludes by situating this narrative of front-line work in the broader historical traditions that have shaped New Labour’s reforms of the public sector and the ‘top down/bottom up’ traditions that have previously shaped studies of front-line work.
The article will first provide a brief overview of New Labour’s reform of the public sector before focusing specifically on the modernization of local governance and the re-emergence of neighbourhoods as a site for policy action and governance. The empirical case study of neighbourhood management in Salford will be discussed and the article will then explicate the interpretive underpinnings for this research and the methodology and analytical framework used in collecting and interpreting front-line workers’ everyday work stories. The article then draws on these stories to explore the ‘readings’ that front-line workers have of a particular example of their everyday work and how their own ‘local knowledge’ shapes their particular responses. The article will conclude by relating the stories articulated by front-line workers to a broader narrative and situating this in the wider, differentiated traditions of governance.

NEW LABOUR, PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM AND THE TURN TO NEIGHBOURHOODS

New Labour came to power in 1997 espousing a dynamic of reform in the public sector which saw the state as a facilitator for change in the wider society. The specific role of the state in the delivery of public services, however, is unclear (see Gains 1999) and New Labour’s reform of the public sector has been notably complex. As a means of legitimating change in the public sector, the term ‘modernization’ has been used (Newman 2001). Yet the term evades easy definition and explanation (6 and Peck 2004). New Labour’s reform agenda has been seen by some commentators as a task in reconciliation, re-appropriating terms traditionally used to signify opposition to indicate a new conciliatory relationship (Fairclough 2000). Newman has commented:

Governments do not rely just on one kind of policy approach but typically draw on several, not all of them readily compatible with each other...the interaction between centralisation and decentralisation; ‘enabling’ and ‘controlling’ strategies, produced tensions and disjunctures as different sets of norms and assumptions were overlaid on each other. (2001, pp. 4–5)

This tension between the rhetoric of ‘enabling’ – the empowerment of public sector staff as part of the development of an inclusive, networked policy process (Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions 1998, Cabinet Office 1999) and ‘controlling’ – the extensive performance management regimes developed for public sector staff – is a key characteristic of New Labour’s reforms of the public sector (Newman 2001; 6 and Peck 2004).

Under New Labour in the UK, local government reform is indicative of the dynamic of change in the public sector. Since the 1980s, Local government has undergone its own process of reform, emerging after the Thatcher administrations without a ‘coherent role’ (Stoker 2004, p. 47). This lack of clarity about the role of local government has continued under New Labour: modernization has ranged from initiatives to improve service delivery and a wider package of reforms aimed at ‘democratic renewal’.

A key change within local governance has been the re-emergence of the neighbourhood as a site for policy action and governance. ‘Neighbourhood’ is a concept of long-standing resonance in public policy, with policies dating back to the early 1970s. ‘Neighbourhood’ is differentiated from ‘community’ on the basis of a spatial aspect to its definition. Nevertheless, the definition of a neighbourhood is also seen to rest on its social construction and as such it is a highly complex and contested concept.
Thus the ‘neighbourhood’ became a central part of New Labour’s response to policy challenges: how to move towards a more inclusive form of governance through networks; how to improve public services; and how to tackle social exclusion. These issues are seen to be most clearly manifested and open to response at the neighbourhood level. As such the ‘neighbourhood’ has become an important site for both governance and policy action. The neighbourhood is seen as an appropriate and effective level at which to engage local communities and key stakeholders in decision making and the level at which agencies and services should seek to ‘join up’ and work holistically. The turn to neighbourhood is underpinned by the rhetoric of ‘double devolution’ which refers to the decentralization of policy and decision making, together with service delivery, from the centre to the local level and then from elected local government to a range of actors below the local authority level (Miliband 2006).

The turn towards ‘neighbourhood’ is further evidenced in the numerous and varied examples of neighbourhood-based working (Power 2004; Smith et al. 2007). This research draws on the case study of the neighbourhood management system developed in Salford. Salford is a city in the North West of England, adjunct to Manchester. In the 1960s and 1970s, the city was significantly affected by the decline of heavy industry and has since suffered from marked socio-economic deprivation and physical dereliction. Salford is in receipt of extensive area-based intervention from central government aimed at regenerating and reducing inequality in the city (SEU 2001). This area-based intervention from government was an important influence on the development of a strategic regeneration framework for the city together with neighbourhood-based plans developed by community committees in each area. Salford has a long history of area-based working and was given Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder status by the government in 1998. The wide ranging themes of the regeneration – improving health, education, and skills, for example – are shared by the neighbourhood management system that has developed in parallel. In evaluating this scheme, Meegan commented, ‘Neighbourhood management is seen by Salford City Council and its partners as a means of engaging effectively with local communities, meeting the needs of communities and improving neighbourhoods and closing the gap between the best and worst performing areas’ (Meegan 2006, p. i). These developments are widely recognized to have contributed to the dynamic of change within both the authority and in the wider area.

In the evaluation for Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, Meegan further acknowledged that the Salford model ‘already appears to demonstrating capacity for delivery and sustainable renewal’ (2006, p. x). The Salford model has been running in its current form for approximately five years and how been ‘rolled out’ city wide across eight service delivery areas (termed ‘neighbourhoods’). These ‘neighbourhoods’ are combinations of two or three wards and range in population size from 14,000 to 39,000. Neighbourhood management currently costs Salford City Council approximately £1.5 million annually. Each neighbourhood has a team of front-line workers from a wide range of local authority directorates and public partner organizations with responsibility for service delivery and community engagement in that locality. Front-line roles are both numerous and varied: for example, community development, health improvement and street environment work. In the five years since its inception, the structures of neighbourhood management, in particular the neighbourhood teams, have been developed and are becoming embedded. There is now evidence of neighbourhood-based project activity happening on the ground across the city.

The city of Salford lends itself to neighbourhood-based working due to the lack of correlation between Salford as a local authority and the social identities of many residents which
are more neighbourhood based. Neighbourhood-based working, however, is complicated by issues of definition and identity within the ‘neighbourhoods’; the extent of and access to resources; and the demands of partners. Thus the neighbourhood management system developed in Salford provides a rich empirical insight into the difficulties and opportunities in moving towards neighbourhood-based working.

INTERPRETING FRONT-LINE GOVERNANCE: DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY

Interpretive approaches to research rely upon an epistemology that stresses the socially constructed nature of any claims to knowledge (Yanow 1996). These approaches have an extensive and rich multi-disciplinary grounding, but are relatively new in the field of UK public policy analysis (Richards and Smith 2004; Sullivan 2007; Clarke and Gains 2007). The interpretive turn within this discipline asserts policy analysis to be, ‘a process of inquiry that seeks to ask questions, rather than as a collection of tools and techniques designed to provide the right answer’ (Dunn 1981, p. 3). ‘Decentring’ – drawing out the social construction of a practice through considering how individuals create and act on meanings – is an important tool of interpretivism (Bevir and Rhodes 2003).

A focus here on ‘governance’ rather than ‘government’ reflects the broadening and blurring of traditional sectoral demarcations both vertically and horizontally. A noted characteristic of governance is the prominence of networks which provide a means of collaboration between different actors and an opportunity to coordinate and allocate resources. Decentred theory arose out of an attempt to consider networks of governance from an interpretive perspective. The theory emphasizes agency but does not consider agency to be autonomous; rather, it is situated (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006, p. 72). The concept of ‘situated agency’ is one that has clearly been understood and expressed, even if not explicitly, in Lipsky’s analysis of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ (1971, 1980) and in Bang and Sorensen’s work on the ‘everyday maker’ (1999).

This article will provide a contemporary empirical explication of how front-line workers develop and use their ‘local knowledge’, the ‘knowing’ that front-line workers develop from their situated experiences in their, often micro level, context. Front-line workers develop and use ‘local knowledge’ through ‘readings’ of particular situations. ‘Reading’ refers to how an individual makes sense and meaning in relation to their context. As a situated actor (Bevir and Rhodes 2003), an individual is in a constant dialogue with this environment; such ‘meaning making’ is a dialectical social process that occurs based upon the environment in which the situated actor is located (Yanow 2000). The research reported here sought to collect and explore the ‘readings’ of front-line workers about their everyday work in contemporary local governance settings through using ethnographic and interview-based methods to obtain front-line workers’ own stories.

Taking an ethnographic approach

An interpretive framework is useful because of its emphasis and sensitivity to how front-line workers themselves understand and articulate their roles (Yanow 2006). Interpretive approaches allow for and reflect the complexity of governance; in addition, they do not pre-empt or curtail the richness and contingency of findings.

This article aims to contribute to the ‘decentring’ of governance by exploring a dynamic of front-line work: ‘local knowledge’ (Yanow 2004), drawing on ethnographic work within the neighbourhood management system in Salford. The criticism of ‘cultural parochialism’ (Munro 2007, p. 12), often raised about single site work, becomes an advantage in
the context of this specific research. This focused ethnographic approach seeks to reconstruct the meanings of social actors by recovering other people’s stories (Geertz 1973). The ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) obtained from this sort of research approach is able to identify and explore important, yet often mundane, dynamics of front-line work which may be ignored or missed when using other research methodologies; in addition, this allows the reader to experience the context of the research (Erlandson 1993).

Collecting data
The ethnographic work was conducted in two stages, preliminary work over a 3-month period in 2005, which involved informal meetings and attending events, together with gathering data from a range of secondary sources. The main ethnographic work took place over a 6-month period in 2006. Everyday work stories were collected in interviews with over 45 front-line workers from varying positions within the neighbourhood teams across Salford; including, for example, health improvement officers, community development workers, youth workers and sports development officers.

Front-line workers were defined as individuals within the public sector who interact daily with the wider public and hold some responsibility for the delivery of public policy and public services (Lipsky 1980). Front-line workers were selected ‘contingently’ through existing contacts – for example, partner organizations – and also ‘serially’ through identification from preliminary documentary based research (Erlandson 1993). This meant that the front-line workers participating were both internally and externally recognizable (Nepstad and Bob 2006); the identification and sampling of front-line workers within this research was based on ‘position’ and ‘reputation’ (Bonjean and Olsen 1964). Stories detailed front-line workers’ specific roles, as follows: (1) their employment and background; (2) the neighbourhood they worked in; (3) the neighbourhood management system; (4) their perception of its impact; (5) any difficulties they perceived themselves as facing in their work; (6) the responses they provided to these difficulties; (7) any recent examples of projects or initiatives they worked on; and (8) their perspectives on wider public sector reform.

Maynard-Moody and Musheno emphasize the importance of examining these contextual details since it ‘allows the researcher to anchor their interpretations in the storyteller’s interpretations’ (2003, p.19). Indeed, several front-line workers shared different versions of the same stories or were aware of particular well-known stories. The relatively substantive period of this research, taking place over several months, also worked to provide a more engaged and deeper understanding of the role of these workers. Extensive notes and recordings were taken throughout the period of research and these were subsequently written up and transcribed. Though time consuming, transcription can be seen as a useful part of the research analysis, reflecting Wolcott’s comment that ‘writing is thinking’ (1990, p. 21; original emphasis).

Stories and narratives
The research became in part a collection of everyday work stories from front-line workers, reflecting that stories and narratives are ‘simply there, like life itself’ (Barthes 1977). It was found that front-line workers offered stories in order to answer questions, indicating that stories are ‘a basic tool that individuals use to communicate and create understanding with other people and for themselves’ (Feldman et al. 2004). As Maynard-Moody and Musheno note, stories and narratives are tools that are ‘at once a microscope for examining minute details and a telescope for scanning the intellectual horizon for themes and
patterns’ (2006, p. 26). The terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ are often used interchangeably, but here they will be differentiated: with ‘story’ being seen as ‘microscope’ and ‘narrative’ as the ‘horizon’, the aggregated broader level.

Story-based analysis was also seen as providing an appropriate and effective means of obtaining a ‘centred’ account. As Bevir and Rhodes have noted, ‘a centred approach should provide thick descriptions using the accounts or texts of participants’, in this case front-line workers (2003, p. 63). This sort of description can be found through listening, transcribing, reading and re-reading stories that front-line workers articulate. Thick description is required to acknowledge the ‘convoluted, intertwined and overlapping webs of meaning that are significant to the actors in the situation described’ (Yanow 1996, p. 20). Narratives are useful data because individuals often make sense of the world and their place in it through narrative form (Feldman et al. 2004); ‘storytelling and understanding are functionally the same thing’ (Schrank, cited in Maynard et al. 2003, p. 22).

A story-based methodology has several advantages for this research. Stories give prominence to human agency and the voice of individuals and reveal the ‘speaker’s sense of self, for it is the self that is located at the centre of the narrative’ (Patterson and Monroe 1998, p. 325). As Maynard-Moody and Musheno note,

Stories give research a pungency and vitality absent from mainstream social science because they give such prominence to individual actions and motives and the human condition . . .. Stories illustrate the consequences of following, bending or ignoring rules and practices. They bring institutions to life; they provide a glimpse of what it is like to [work there] . . .. (2003, p. 30)

The process of identifying story-based narratives began in the transcription and writing up process, ‘the human mind finds patterns so quickly and easily that it needs no how-to advice… patterns just “happen” almost too quickly’ (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 246). These patterns were used to consider how different actors interpreted these themes and where differences and disjunctures occurred. The process of analysis is both ongoing and iterative, moving between transcripts and initial analyses. Such ‘systematicity’ and the re-examination and questioning of research findings is seen as crucial to the analysis (Lynch 2006) and helps to maintain a ‘scientific attitude’ (Soss 2006, p. 101).

All transcripts and notes were read, re-read and coded according to a framework determined by the earlier academic literature review, documentary analysis and the key themes identified during the research. In addition, Erlandson (1993) identifies the processes of ‘peer de-briefing’ and ‘member checking’ to ensure that the stories offered by the researcher have both internal and external validity. Peer de-briefing takes place with fellow researchers whereby findings are discussed in academic communities. Member checking with participants helps to ensure that the researcher’s interpretation accurately reflects the meanings of the stories involved. In reflecting on the member checking process, Maynard-Moody and Musheno observe, ‘perhaps the most humbling experience of all is telling someone in the field… of some hard earned insight and being met with a polite, “that’s obvious” stare’ (2006, p. 318). These processes of clarification show a methodological commitment to ‘get it right’ from the perspective of situated actors’ ‘lived experience’ (Schwartz-Shea 2006, p. 105). Research findings were shared with practitioner networks and with colleagues at a number of academic conferences. This was supplemented by sharing findings with strategic level managers within neighbourhood management in Salford along with the front-line workers involved in the research. In addition, interpretations made by the researcher were correlated with those
of other interviewees and wider documentary analysis to draw out themes, patterns and contradictions.

EXPLORING FRONT-LINE ‘READINGS’

A now extensive literature on neighbourhood-based working evidences and reflects on the complexity of policy drivers and initiatives (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008). It discusses not only the opportunities but also the practical difficulties and barriers to participation and delivery at the neighbourhood level. Front-line workers are now charged with responding to the inherent complexities and differing demands of working in contemporary local governance. This complexity presents difficulties and dilemmas for front-line workers’ everyday work. Front-line workers in neighbourhood management in Salford have articulated numerous stories about these concerns. Front-line workers are often left to reconcile the emergent demands of governance – notably those from the communities they work within – with the remnants of the public sector’s earlier structures. The turn to governance has implied that front-line workers should now be less influenced by the ‘rules’ of the public sector and guided more by the ‘relationships’ they form within their organization, across organizations in partnership and, notably, with the community (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Indeed, the ‘rules’ of the public sector in its traditional form have been undermined; however, they have not yet been clearly replaced.

It is, of course, inherently difficult for policy-makers at the centre to reconstitute everyday work at the local or neighbourhood level. As one front-line worker commented,

The way that people can respond to that [current government reform] is if they have more flexibility within their roles to do what is the right thing within that setting… so… what we [in neighbourhood management] are asking them to do is to step out of that mould and make it up as they go along a bit more.

We now turn to a specific set of stories articulated by health improvement and community development workers on the front line of neighbourhood-based work in Ordsall and Langworthy, two separate neighbourhoods which the council has designated as one, in Salford. The stories focus on tackling financial exclusion as an entrepreneurial means of responding to both community priorities and government demands around improving public health. These stories indicate the ‘readings’ of front-line workers and illustrate the ‘local knowledge’ this develops.

Ordsall and Langworthy is one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the city. As such, it has received intensive intervention from government in the forms of area-based regeneration schemes such as SureStart, Health and Education Action Zoning, New Deal for Communities and more than one round of Single Regeneration Budget Funding. The neighbourhood is also subject to a regeneration framework developed by the local strategic partnership, Partners in Salford.

These focused interventions have given front-line workers the opportunity to engage with issues specific to the neighbourhood and that reflect community concerns. In public health, this opportunity has been taken to mean considering the wider social determinants of health. As one health improvement worker commented, ‘so it’s not just about focusing on medical issues or traditional public health issues, but it’s trying to take account of what’s happening in the area…”.

Public health has become an increasing concern of the New Labour government (Wanless 2004). However, the wider social perspective on health is seen by front-line workers to have been undermined by a more targeted approach from the government,
as indicated in the ‘Choosing Health’ White Paper (Department of Health 2004). The government has introduced directives and targets around specified health indicators such as ‘nutrition, physical activity, smoking, sexual health, mental health, drug and alcohol use’. Many local front-line workers commented on the difficulties of fitting this steer from the government into their work, ‘I feel it does constrain some of the work that we are doing’. Another front-line worker based in the community commented,

it’s very frustrating [for us] because I know we’re not providing the type of service that we need to be delivering…other partners have this as well because they have government targets too and they’re driven by performance indicators that don’t always fall in line with ours and don’t always fall in line with what the community want . . ..

Front-line workers in Ordsall and Langworthy engage with the community as part of their everyday work; as part of the study reported here, they also undertook a more formal consultation around health and its social determinants. Financial exclusion was an issue that arose both anecdotally and from the more formal consultation. As one health improvement worker noted,

[Financial exclusion] was something that we had been aware of as a team and there had been issues in our area from anecdotal evidence and statistics about social indices, likelihood of being in debt, etc. related to ill health and mental health and physical and mental well being, so we had been talking about this for a while.

Financial exclusion is understood as a form of social exclusion centring on a lack of access to mainstream financial support and debt relief. The issue is often linked to poor financial literacy and numeracy. Financial exclusion, while outside the targeted definition of public health increasingly articulated by the government, can be seen to instrumentally address these more clearly demarcated issues of public health. As another health improvement worker commented,

financial exclusion and low self confidence are much more that sort of wider determinants [of public health]… the reason that we thought they were important from a public health issue was that we’ve got high levels of poverty and debt in our areas and unless we can do something around tackling those issues we’re not going to get them interested in some of the others, like eating better and getting exercise… and doing programmes around things we want them to do to improve their health.

Front-line workers based in the neighbourhood of Ordsall and Langworthy set up a number of projects to address issues of financial exclusion in those areas. It was seen as important to develop a local partnership around the issue. As one community development worker explained:

… [we] thought let’s open this up wider so we just made a list of all the partners that we have worked with and that we thought would bring something useful to the table so made a list of about twenty agencies: Citizens’ Advice Bureau, Welfare Rights, City Council welfare rights, the local training providers, the local trusts, New Deal for Communities, credit unions, Salford MoneyLine and we got this task group together . . ..

Partner agencies responded positively ‘…everyone said yes… we want to be involved in this because it’s not a very sexy issue; it’s a bit of a hidden one’. The first project was aimed at reaching out to excluded and marginalized groups that may have concerns about financial exclusion and signposting them to community resources and service
providers. A local school was used for a day of activities; as a community development worker involved commented,

with stuff on learning and training in the community, stuff on literacy and then also advice surgeries available from Citizens’ Advice Bureau, from Moneyline, from legitimate money lenders in the area. And from that we provided a leaflet for everyone who attended, detailing confidential phone lines, information about who they could go to for advice if they felt a bit nervous on the day.

The information sharing and signposting was sustained after the initial event,

We acknowledged that it would be very difficult to get that audience [concerned about financial exclusion] and so we circulated information to our providers and said if you’ve got anyone that’s struggling with benefits or welfare issues or financial literacy, so you can refer them to this.

The road show was seen as a ‘learning curve’ for many of the partners, as one community development worker commented,

there were some barriers there that we needed to learn about, about it being in a school, a public building and people are not going to come into a building and say I’ve got £30,000 worth of debt, they will want to be discreet and we were hoping they would come in and do an accessible thing, but financial exclusion is such a tricky and sensitive topic so in future we are going to think more about how to do those sort of things . . .

It was seen as important to look at how to embed this focus on financial exclusion in the community. One way this focus on financial exclusion is aiming to be sustainable is through the development of a credit union. A community development worker involved in the project was a member of a credit union on her own housing estate in East Salford and so used the skills from being involved in that union to set up a further one in Ordsall and Langworthy. As she explains,

I want to mention the credit union . . .. We used to have loan companies here and when we did the initial research and consultation one of the things was that people had a level of depression because of debt and that had a knock on effect in families. I’ve been a member of a credit union for about seventeen years and I’ve been trying to get it into Ordsall… we started it last Easter and we’ve now got about 250 members… it actually works on a loan system for adults where you borrow but you actually save, so your savings are your guarantee, so your savings still grow whilst your loan is being paid off and it’s that incentive, most people have never ever saved . . ..

Initial work around tackling financial exclusion was seen by front-line workers as having a significant and broad impact in local communities, ‘it makes a massive difference, the well being effect [but], we can train people up locally, they’re getting trained up in banking and accounting’.

This set of stories illustrate how front-line workers can respond holistically to issues, allowing them to be responsive to both national policy agendas and the priorities of the communities they work within. However, the guidance on how to do this does not emanate from the centre but rather from the local knowledge and understanding and the informal and personal resources that front-line workers can bring to their jobs. This knowledge and resource allows front-line workers to ‘bend’ the rules of policy to the...
relationships that front-line workers have to negotiate in their day-to-day work. As one front-line worker commented,

I’m always trying to twist things if I can… and say yes, we’ve got to do that, maybe it’s not something that I would want to do… if I feel it’s not in my remit, but if I can learn from it, then if I can bring that skill to something else that I do [then I’ll do it].

The stories told by front-line workers in neighbourhood-based work in Salford indicate a narrative of front-line work that relies on a ‘reading’ of their micro context. These readings produce ‘local knowledge’ which assists front-line workers in developing strategies for their everyday work. These strategies, indicated here through the example of public health and financial exclusion, involve reaching out to and engaging with marginalized and excluded parts of the community; building local thematic partnerships; reconciling policy demands with community priorities through developing particular initiatives; and working to make outcomes sustainable in the community. The set of stories discussed here suggest a broader narrative of front-line work as ‘networked community governance’, but also as ‘civic entrepreneurialism’ in describing the ways in which front-line workers act ‘so as to interpret, make, and subvert institutional norms and rules in a particular case’ (Bevir 2005, p. 3).

RE-MAKING ‘TRADITION’: NEW LABOUR AND FRONT-LINE WORK

The emphasis given in this networked, community focused, entrepreneurial narrative of front-line work to reconciling differential demands – from both within government and across government and the community – reflects the contested nature of contemporary local governance and implies the differential traditions that may have shaped New Labour’s broader reforms of the public sector. The framework of ‘tradition’ and ‘narrative’ is used in the work of Bevir and Rhodes to explore a decentred account of governance, arguing that, ‘governance is created and recreated as a meaningful practice through beliefs informed by traditions and modified in response to dilemmas’ (2003, p. 4). This framework acknowledges the complexity of governance and recognizes that governance is composed of multiple, overlapping, interacting and reforming traditions that change through individual narratives formed in response to dilemmas (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). This framework is useful in exploring both New Labour’s policy reform and also its impact on front-line work.

Interpreting New Labour

Bevir has commented that New Labour has promoted scope for central government to steer networks while promoting a culture of trust associated with diplomacy and negotiation (2005, p. 50). According to Bevir (2005) this characterization reflects how New Labour have drawn on differentiated strands of political thought and political science. Bevir argues that New Labour’s emphasis on networks derives from its interest in ‘institutionalism’. New Labour’s vision of ‘joined-up governance’ relies on networks and this allows New Labour to counter the New Right and its preoccupation with marketization in the public sector (Bevir 2005, p. 30). The ‘culture of trust’, that Bevir also refers to, acknowledges the influence of ‘communitarianism’ on New Labour. ‘Communitarianism’ gives emphasis to trust and responsibility, particularly within the contexts of the community, family and work. Bevir further argues that New Labour’s approach in using these two strands of thought reworks the Labour Party’s dominant tradition of social democracy.
New Labour’s approach to public sector reform has in part been marked with ‘institutionalism’ and ‘communitarianism’ and the ‘letting go’ these themes imply: influencing more participative policy-making by empowering public sector staff to draw on their localized experience and engagement with the community in making and delivering policy (Cabinet Office 1999). New Labour have also continued a tendency on behalf of government to centralize or at the least to ‘steer networks’: perpetuating, and arguably intensifying, performance management targets as a means of maintaining control over front-line work (6 and Peck 2004; Hood 2006).

Re-interpreting front-line work: ‘civic entrepreneurialism’?

The conflation of themes of trust and empowerment with an ongoing tendency to ‘steer’ and centralize are keenly felt at the front-line of public services. Front-line workers do see themselves as ‘situated agents’, able to develop strategies which reflect their own ‘local knowledge’ together with the differentiated demands of government. Front-line workers do also acknowledge that at times it can be difficult to reconcile the two. As a front-line worker, also based in inner city Salford, notes:

the public are frustrated, because we are dictated to by targets... it’s very frustrating [for us too]...other partners have this as well because they have government targets too and they’re driven by performance indicators that don’t always fall in line with ours and don’t always fall in line with what the community want.

This article has indicated that in response to an ‘action imperative’ (Hill and Hupe 2007), front-line workers have, through their ‘readings’ of the situation, developed and drawn upon their own ‘local knowledge’ in order to develop locally appropriate strategies. The example of the contextual, perhaps mundane, understanding that front-line workers develop is articulated here in a set of stories about responding to community concerns about financial exclusion and reconciling this with government priorities about public health. The strategy articulated by health and community development workers indicates a re-constituted narrative of front-line work, one that is community facing and entrepreneurial. This is indicative of what Leadbeater and Goss call a ‘civic enterprise culture’. The term ‘civic entrepreneur’ (DEMOS 1998) acknowledges public sector staff who ‘realise how a public sector organisation needs to be innovative to meet changing demands’ (Leadbeater and Goss 1998, p. 10). ‘Civic entrepreneurialism’ is an attractive, but underdeveloped, concept that the research reported as part of this special issue has begun to provide an empirical exemplification for.

Studies of front-line work have traditionally been shaped by the twin epistemological traditions of ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’. The ‘top down’ approach emphasizes a rational, hierarchical notion of policy-making separation, which makes a clear distinction between politics and administration (Weber 1947; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Front-line workers are here seen as being responsible simply for the ‘delivery’ of policy, with any deviation from policy as set out by policy-makers being seen as ‘subversive’. This tradition has been widely criticized as both empirically outdated and normatively biased, but it is persistent. A strong and sustained challenge to this tradition has come from the ‘bottom-up’ approach, and particularly the work of Lipsky and the concept of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ (1971, 1976, 1980). This analysis emphasized the discretionary, policy-making role of front-line workers and the influence of professional values and personal norms. However, this sort of discretionary policy-making can be seen to amount to little more than developing ‘coping mechanisms’ or a form of bureaucratic rationing (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).
Although contested, many commentators argue that the bureaucratic context assumed in both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ analyses of front-line work has changed in the extensive reforms of the public sector since the 1980s. In the move from ‘government’ towards ‘governance’, the assumptions about the basis, use and extent of discretion at the front line have changed. Front-line workers now no longer simply ‘cope’ with the overwhelming demands of delivering public policy while responding to the community; they now use their contextual understanding to actively engage with ‘hard to reach’ groups in the community; as shown here, those who are financially excluded, for example; they work to signpost such people to services: for example, debt management, citizen’s advice; they work to build networks across organizations to respond to these issues, drawing in a range of partners; they work with these partners to engage with these groups in order to build skills and capacity, for example, developing a credit union, involving members of the community in accountancy and financial management; and they reconcile this example of networked community governance with the often complex priorities of government. These strategies indicate that front-line workers are ‘situated agents’ who rely on their own ‘readings’ of the local situation and on an understanding of how to respond to varied demands using their own ‘local knowledge’. This narrative of front-line work, constituted by the stories of front-line workers in a contemporary local governance setting, is reflective also of the ‘civic enterprise culture’ that New Labour have sought to introduce into the public sector more broadly.

CONCLUSION

This special issue is framed by a decentring of policy networks; this article has focused on explicating a narrative of ‘networked community governance’ (Stoker 2004). Stoker asserts the concept of ‘networked community governance’ as a framing for New Labour’s modernization of local governance. However, as with reforms across the public sector, New Labour’s reform programme is marked by its complexity and lack of clarity. Such complexity is felt keenly at the front line and demands responsive strategies from front-line workers who hold some responsibility for delivering policy and for engaging with communities.

This article has drawn on an interpretive methodology and ethnographic techniques to explore the ‘readings’ that front-line workers make of the context of local governance. These ‘readings’ produce ‘local knowledge’, a ‘mundane yet expert’ understanding of a situation. This research engaged with the stories that front-line workers themselves articulated about their everyday work to consider how local knowledge is used in local governance. The article drew on a set of stories from health and community development workers in a deprived urban neighbourhood in Salford. The stories illustrated how front-line workers were able to act to reconcile policy demands – around public health – with community priorities – about tackling financial exclusion – through their understanding of the micro context of the neighbourhood they worked within.

The strategies that these stories explicate present a narrative of front-line work that responds to the complexities of New Labour’s reform agenda. In seeking to improve public service provision and revitalize the public sector, New Labour have drawn on different traditions of political thought. Looking to the front line of public services, this article has illustrated how front-line workers play a key role in making local governance work by reconciling conflicting strands of thought and policy into workable everyday strategies. This ‘entrepreneurial’ narrative of front-line work could usefully be explored further using both neighbourhood contexts and differing public sector settings and with different public sector actors.
REFERENCES


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