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Distancing and limited resourcefulness: Third sector service provision under austerity localism in the North East of England

Abstract

Drawing on the concept of 'austerity localism', (Featherstone et al, 2012) this paper explores the impact of recent spending cuts and a revitalisation of the localism agenda on the work of locally embedded third sector organisations who work with marginal communities in the North East of England. In three key areas there exists a problematic relationship between the progressive language of empowerment, as set out in contemporary localist discourse, and the experiences and perceptions of service providers and service users. These relate to involvement in decision-making processes about the allocation of squeezed funding; the ability and desirability of voluntary groups to become autonomous; and the restricted resourcefulness of third sector organisations in a context of austerity. What comes through our data in all these cases are forms of social and spatial distancing; between third sector organisations and local decision makers, between organisations and their service users and also across the sector itself. Such distancing is facilitated by contexts in which resources, trust and empathy are undermined. The paper concludes that understanding the challenges faced by marginalised communities, and the third sector agencies

working with them, requires recognition of the existing capacities within places, the importance of situated power relationships as well as wider connections of dependence and responsibility.

Introduction

The UK Coalition Government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) of October 2010 announced the biggest public spending cuts since 1945. Over the period until 2014/15, £81billion worth of savings were outlined, including £18billion in welfare benefits and tax credits and £53billion passed onto government departments and local authorities. In late 2012 the announcement of an additional £10billion cut to the welfare budget indicated that reductions would continue until at least 2018. The UK therefore finds itself in the midst of severe and prolonged public expenditure reductions, characterised by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, as an 'age of austerity' (Cameron, 2009).

In this paper we assess the empowering potential of localism in such an era and point towards the employment of this discourse as a key delivery tool of spending cuts; providing an ideological rationale for shifting political and economic responsibility away from central to local Government and to communities themselves. While localism emphasises democratic principles, responsiveness to local need and the

role of non-governmental agencies in delivering public services, questions remain concerning the continuation of such services with dramatically reduced resources. Drawing upon a study of the impacts of funding cuts on third sector organisations in North East England, this paper explores the relationship between localism and austerity through experiences of service providers and service users, in a region where reliance on the public sector and deprivation have been amongst the highest in the UK.

Our study indicates how, despite the resourcefulness of struggling third sector organisations, there is a discernable gap between the rhetoric and reality of the localism agenda. This is seen in relation to three key areas; funding decisions which are perceived as unfair and unaccountable; a sense of abandonment felt by organisations encouraged to become autonomous under the 'Big Society'; and constraints on practices of resourcefulness. We understand these issues through the relationship between forms of *distancing* to argue that the promise of empowerment in marginalised places appears empty without the resource, commitment and political will to fully realise the potential in the rhetoric.

(Austerity) Localism and the Big Society

The time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain

today (HM Government, 2010)

Localism in the UK is not new (Lodge and Muir, 2010) and there is a sense of continuity with New Labour in the Coalition Government's commitment to decentralisation (Painter et al 2012). However, the replacement of the 'region' with the 'local' as the primary scale of economic development (Bentley et al, 2010), the demise of regulatory functions of central government (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011), a shift away from partnership governance models (Macmillan, 2013) and a context of unprecedented funding cuts (particularly for local authorities) (Hastings et al, 2013), have led to what Lowndes and Pratchett (2012:22) call 'a decisive break with the past'.

Within the policy rhetoric there are three central elements to this latest incarnation of localism, which entail an inter-play between forms of (non)-intervention. The first of these: 'empowering local communities' is presented as a break from centrally directed spending and the transfer of power to local authorities in order to more effectively respond to local concerns. This includes such measures as giving local councils a 'general power of competence', the abolition of the Standards Board and the ability to set business rates (Localism Act, 2011). Prior to

taking up office, Cameron (2009) saw this as a 'radical' devolution of decision making; a response to the portrayal of central government as a bureaucratic obstacle, yet one in which the state retains control over localities (Smith and Wistrich, 2014). Whilst local authorities are positioned as having greater control, and therefore increasingly responsible for meeting local need, they are subject to budgets cuts. Local authorities rather than central government are therefore increasingly susceptible to blame for diminishing local services and not managing their budgets effectively.

Whilst promoting greater autonomy for local authorities, localism also focuses upon increased accountability to local residents, what Hildreth (2011) refers to as 'community localism'. The Localism Act (2011) covers a number of areas on this theme, including the liberalisation of planning regulations, the right for local communities to run their own services and 'the freedom to spend money on the things that matter to local people' (Conservative Party, 2009:3). The balance of power between local authorities and interest groups is then contested. Indeed, Jones (2010) argues that this is actually 'sub-localism', which undermines democratically elected local authorities. Apparent sensitivity to the local does then raise concerns about definitions of democracy, empowerment and constructions of 'community'. The

extent to which localism concerns narrow self-interest or broader community development is questionable (Painter et al, 2012), as is the extent to which a sense of control is a reality for those most adversely impacted by changes in public spending and welfare reforms.

The second key principle follows on from this, yet contradicts certain versions of empowerment. This is the further opening up of public services to competition from the third sector, but also increasingly, the private sector (Milborne and Murray, 2014). The rationale presented draws on classical economic theory to argue that improvements in efficiency emerge when there is sufficient competition to push up performance (Le Grand, 2007). However, this benefits those better equipped to cope with the requirements of funding applications and those able to hold down costs, sometimes temporarily, in order to secure contracts; an approach that prioritises cost over quality or efficiency of service. It is also suggested that introducing this level of competition may potentially be damaging to local control, expertise, accountability, established relationships and undermine efforts at collaboration – potentially a valuable survival strategy (TUC, 2012).

The third key element, the promotion of social action, is articulated through the 'Big Society', what Levitas (2012: 330) calls an 'asset

transfer from the state, and especially local state to community groups'. This idea, adopted and adapted from New Labour's agenda for mobilising 'active citizens' (Raco and Imrie, 2000), encourages individuals to take charge of their communities through philanthropy, civic participation and social enterprise. The 'Big Society' has been subjected to numerous critiques and has been promoted and/or hidden from sight accordingly. These include the need for funding to support such policy (Slocock, 2012); ignorance of the well-established community and voluntary sector (Parker, 2011); neglect of the politics of community activism (Erfani-Ghettani, 2012); and the promotion of unpaid labour in a low-paid labour market (Coote, 2010). Yet the policy remains (see Watts, 2013) and asks people to 'get involved' in dealing with problems exacerbated by the economic crisis. In particular, it suggests that community and voluntary organisations are able to supplement gaps left by the withdrawal of the state, through which such organisations may thrive (Manville and Greatbanks, 2013). However, as is illustrated in other contexts, such as that explored by Davies and Pill (2012) in Baltimore, USA, promoting voluntary activity over and above state-supported intervention, does not always result in positive outcomes for marginalised communities.

In the context of funding cuts and the re-positioning of the state, we find what Featherstone et al (2012) call 'austerity localism', a useful way of thinking through localism in its latest form. They also highlight shared concerns about the way in which issues of power are over-looked, as well as the contradictory role of an absent-present government in enacting an agenda that portrays state support for local communities as threatening. In its current guise austerity localism is seen as an anti-statist/anti-public discourse (Featherstone et al, 2012: 1-2) that forms:

> '...part of a broader repertoire of practices through which the government has constructed the local as antagonistic to the state and invoked it to restructure the public sector.'

According to Featherstone et al (2012: 2) austerity localism continues to present localities simplistically as 'discrete and unitary entities that are somehow awaiting governance' through initiatives that emphasise volunteerism, social responsibility and market based solutions – exemplified in the principles outlined above. This is contrasted against an intrusive state from which local communities should be set free to attend to their own priorities and interests.

This interpretation of the policy context raises important issues that require further examination in relation to the third sector. Firstly, the extent to which progressive rhetoric surrounding localism has resulted in the empowerment of organisations that are most exposed to economic fluctuations and political decisions. Secondly, whether all third sector organisations have the capacity to cope in an environment in which their work is championed, but not necessarily supported by those controlling resources. And thirdly, how third sector groups are able to cope and respond in a context of austerity.

Distancing and limited resourcefulness

Conceptually, such questions point to the significance of connection and dis-connection between the range of actors and institutions involved in public service provision and community development. While the third sector is rightly proud of its independence (Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector, 2014), and some distance from state power is necessary for the exercise of this, increasing isolation from sources of funding and support may also compromise the ability to act resourcefully. The role that a sense of social distance or proximity may play between these actors in stifling or allowing for successful service provision is therefore crucial.

The concept of *social distance* has emerged from divergent traditions. Firstly, dating back to the work of George Simmel (Simmel, 1921), it has been employed to examine the relations between individuals and social groups within urban contexts, where physical proximity and strangerness play out. Simmel variously explored the importance of faithfulness, trust and confidence in the other as the basis for social interaction. This has been developed in psychological and attitudinal terms through, for example, the measurement of acceptance and prejudice (Borgardus, 1924), but more recently in relation to the perpetuation of socio-spatial distances from 'others', such as gypsies and travellers (Sibley, 1995) and everyday communal practices of inclusion/exclusion towards marginalised groups such as the homeless (Hodgetts, 2012). In this sense there has been increasing recognition of *distancing* as an evolving, affective and active process - concerning the strength of feelings towards, with or against 'others', which are enacted and performed (Ahmed, 2004).

Secondly, there exists a contemporary literature around urban governance which considers the nature of the distance between actors and institutions within networks of power (Jones and Evans, 2006). Such a focus has been particularly evident in scholarship around partnership working under New Labour (Lewis, 2005), through an

emphasis on 'participatory democracy', the re-positioning of the state and changing relationships across less hierarchical networks (Rhodes, 1997; Daly, 2003). For those critiquing such an apparent shift, the rhetoric of closer relationships between the state and communities did little to alter established power relations in the period up to 2010 (Rummery, 2002). Arguably what resulted was often the management, rather than empowerment of community based stakeholders (Davies, 2011). On the other hand, some such as Jones and Evans (2006) have complicated this picture by highlighting the strategic manipulation of proximity and distance between non-state and state actors through the process of urban regeneration in Birmingham.

The sector is not then portrayed here as solely a victim of wider changes. There is also a need to consider the responses of organisations operating in this context as a means of coping – often seen in terms of 'resilience'. This language has been adopted in a range of fields from the management of environmental risk (Folke, 2006) to the adaptability of regional economies (Pike et al, 2010) in order to highlight the manner in which people and places may be able to respond to crises. However, in relation to community activism MacKinnon and Driscoll-Derickson (2013) critique resilience, referring rather to *resourcefulness* in recognition of responses that are often resistant and creative rather

than accommodating and passive. Drawing these ideas together, our paper also then points to some of the limits of resourcefulness; in particular how distancing may also be an issue for the relationships between third sector organisations themselves.

The recent UK policy context, through which the third sector and state have been increasingly 'de-coupled' (Macmillan, 2013) and marginalised regions have suffered disproportionately, allows us to re-assess the character of both affective and institutional proximities and distances. Following an outline of the methodology, this is considered through our empirical material.

Methodology

Due to a combination of the public spending formulae; the primacy of the public sector as an employer; and existing levels of deprivation, local authorities across North East England have been disproportionally affected by funding cuts (Hastings et al, 2012). Whilst some diversity is apparent, the region has also been identified as amongst the least resilient to respond positively to the cuts (Wells, 2009). It has also been established that these cuts have had a disproportionate effect on social groups already characterised by their marginal position. This inter-play is illustrated by research showing that impacts on employment, welfare

and support groups for women has been more severe here than for other parts of the UK (North East Women's Network, 2012).

This paper draws on data from a two year project assessing the impact of the 2010 CSR and changes to funding for partner organisations of a Social Sciences Department in the region. These primarily include public and third sector organisations providing placements for students studying a range of Social Sciences degrees.

The study initially involved the use of questionnaires in order to assess the scale and influence of funding changes (n=76) as well as qualitative interviews with staff and service users from 15 of these organisations. In the second year, in addition to further interviews with those working in the public sector, 12 interviews with practitioners working in organisations in the third sector and six focus groups were conducted (see Table 1). Our specific focus here on relatively small, locally embedded, third sector organisations, was based upon those groups who, according to the literature (Joy and Headley, 2012) and our initial findings from year one, appeared most vulnerable. Research conducted in 2010 (Northern Rock Foundation, 2010) suggests third sector organisations in the region are overwhelmingly small in size, with an average income of £153,400. A fifth of groups in the region provide

social services and there is an over-representation of charities working in economic and community development. Organisations in the region are also more reliant on funding from statutory sources than other parts of the UK (VONNE, 2011).

Both the interviews and focus groups looked to explore the perceptions and experiences of changing funding regimes for those closely involved with the life of their organisations. In depth semi-structured interviews of at least one hour and took place with practitioners including chairs and managers of projects, as well as finance officers and frontline support workers. In all but one case these were on a one-to-one basis. The focus groups included management, frontline workers, volunteers and service users of third sector services. Together, this qualitative data was gathered across 14 locally embedded third sector organisations (see Table 1). The sample was drawn from across the region including Middlesbrough, Sunderland, County Durham, North Tyneside, Newcastle and Gateshead. The identity of these organisations remains anonymous, but their basic details and the methods by which data was collected is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Organisations and methods of data collection

Organisation	Methods	
	Interview	**Focus group**
Resident led Community Centre	Interview with finance officer Interview with community development worker	
Women and Girl's Project	Interview with project manager	Focus group with manager, group worker and young adult service users
Women's Education Centre	Interview with project manager	
Survivors of Domestic Violence Self-Help Group		Focus group with group members and ex-worker
Youth project attached to School	Interview with community youth worker	
Older People's Charity	Interview with finance officer	
Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Organisation		Focus group with management, volunteers (who were also or had been service users) and service users
Healthy Living Centre		Focus group with management and volunteers
Children's Centre	Interview with former manager	
Youth Project	Interview with two youth workers	Focus group with service users

Disability Support Self-Help Organisation	Interview with project chair	Focus group with group members
Hospice	Interview with manager	
Carers Association	Interview with manager	
Volunteer Centre	Interview with manager	

The discussion which follows is structured around three of the key themes identified in relation to the impact of funding cuts for participants.

Funding process and distancing from local authorities and service users

Recent changes in policy and procurement procedures potentially offer a greater role for the third sector in the provision of public services (Joy and Headley, 2012). This particularly relates to the 'right to challenge' and the extension of competition enshrined in the Localism Act (2011), with invitations to compete for contracts circulated beyond local councils. However, attracting funding in this region can be seen as a long-standing problem associated with the mobility of capital and the fragility of local fortunes (Hudson, 1998). According to our data, for the third sector, this has been further compromised due to the financial

constraints facing local authorities, perceptions of a breakdown in communication with local decision makers and funding processes which appear to favour organisations that are not locally embedded..

Prior to the arrival of the Coalition Government, funding had increasingly been 'underpinned by competitive contracts' that makes access to funds increasingly complex, time-consuming and exclusive (Milbourne, 2009: 278). However, most participants in our study believed that during the recent round of cuts, local decision-making had become more disconnected from local communities and localised provision. What can be observed is the extended reach of governmental practices (Allen and Cochrane, 2010) including budget negotiations, prioritisation and competitive tendering, underpinned by discourses of technical and extrinsic value (Davies, 2014). From the perspectives of our participants, these have resulted in what Hodgetts et al (2011:12) refer to as forms of social distancing; processes 'through which estrangement is cultivated'. There was evidence that participants felt as though they, their work and those they worked with were being *pushed away* from established positions in local networks of service provision and *under-valued* in terms of expertise and contribution to community life.

In order to capture this we outline here two vignettes which are illustrative of developments in funding for youth work provision and women's education in two urban areas in the region.

One local authority had responded to cuts by terminating established contracts for 'early intervention' work with vulnerable young people, drawing back funds and reallocating a reduced amount on the basis of competitive tendering. According to participants, the window for the submission of applications was two weeks. Organisations in a deprived part of this city, who had previously worked in partnership to deliver this work, formed a consortium to improve their chances of success. Two organisations in our study; a resident led community centre and a women and girls project, were part of this. The procedure was seen by both organisations as differing markedly from the renewal of contracts on the basis of ability to work effectively with young people. Alongside their partners, they had historically worked with relative success and had gained a level of trust with the community, establishing long-term local bases since 1994 and 1981 respectively. However, the final decision resulted in the allocation of funding to a large national charity with no established base in the area. For our participants, given their increasingly strained relationship with the local authority, this organisation was seen as 'easier to deal with' and allowed responsibility

to be passed over to what was described in one interview as a 'corporate body'. The final frustration came when the charity approached them for information regarding the young people in question and to potentially deliver some of the work as sub-contractors, as they lacked the required social and cultural capital.

This led to considerable pressures for the unsuccessful applicants. For the larger resident-led community centre, approximately half their funding disappeared overnight, forcing them to halve staff hours and cease youth work in some of its bases. Additional consequences included the turning away of young people who had, over time, established a rapport with youth workers. This represented a considerable shift in orientations of trust (Weber and Carter, 2003), not just between third sector organisations and local authorities, but also between these organisations and service users, where relations formed through long-term and everyday emotional work were damaged (Author, xxxx).

> So [name of centre] has been closed down. So we've lost a family support worker and three youth workers which are based up there… So there's nothing there. So that's been wiped out…I sometimes get a youth worker down to come

and speak to [the service users] and they're disheartened. 'Why is the Tuesday Group not on anymore?' 'Sorry. We've got no funding.' They can't understand that. (Resident led Community Centre, Finance Officer)

Reflections on this process by participants revolved around several themes. These included: the short timescale to develop a bid; the lack of consultation or evaluation of need; the lack of transparency around the tendering process; confusion over the criteria used for the final allocation of funding; a lack of local accountability reflected in the successful charity with no stake in the local community; nor any value recognised in local expertise and relationships forged.

As is expressed here by a community development worker involved in the failed bid, the process marked a change in direction and contradicted the local authority's language of community engagement and of an inclusive definition of localism more generally.

And that's been the way it's ran has been all about, you know, community engagement, community participation, community involvement. If you pick up all the local authority's brochures, that's what they say throughout.

Then suddenly … the procurement idea they came out [with] in terms of the vulnerable young people is they said 'right, well you need to put bids in for this procurement process', which we'd no qualms in doing, but you had two weeks to do it in. It just totally flew in the face of the whole history of what neighbourhood services were about (Resident led Community Centre, Development Worker).

This difference between the rhetoric of empowerment and the reality experienced on the ground is not new (Atkinson, 1999). However, in this case there was also an impression that locally embedded organisations were being not just over-looked because of the rushed process, but that they were being intentionally undermined and even 'destroyed'. The use of this term as well as articulations of disgust, worry and injustice below illustrate the strength of feeling about the declining relationship with the local authority and their political representatives and may be contrasted with at least an aspiration for community participation that previously existed (Powell and Glendinning, 2002). Whilst these changes may be a result of practices adopted by local authorities over which they themselves have little control, the distancing taking place here is perceived not just as a result of the reduced capacity of the local state, but as a purposeful means of exclusion.

All of the local councillors talk about commissioning, tendering, going to tender for this contract. Their rhetoric doesn't match their processes and I don't understand why, because it looks like they want to destroy us and that's what it feels like.

(Manager of Women and Girls Youth Project).

But it's just diabolical how bad that's been. I can't express how absolutely disgusted and lost I am about that. I really worry about where it's going and the idea now… is there's no sense of justice in it…They've actually destroyed about the last ten years in that decision they've made. They've just swept away Compact Agreements. Whatever partnerships they kept talking about, there isn't any. They've just done it in…We got onto our local councillors. Got in touch with the MP. The MP was getting in touch. Never got a word back. Nothing. Nothing at all until I think it was just over a week ago when somebody came out to see us.

(Resident led Community Centre, Development Worker).

As with the findings of Milbourne's (2009) study, accelerated forms of competition for resources within the third sector appear to favour larger, national organisations and discourage the development of positive relationships between local public and third sector organisations. In this sense competition may be viewed as anti-localist. This also chimes with more recent work conducted in Northern Ireland by Acheson (2012) where third sector organisations have been used instrumentally by local authorities (themselves subject to various pressures) to achieve efficiency objectives, rather than to form sustainable partnerships.

The sense of being taken in by promises of fair, open tendering processes that are sensitive to local need is tangible. This brief example illustrates the ramifications of a policy agenda that appeals to empowerment and localist rhetoric but which demands budgetary cuts: the perceptions of local agencies are that needs remain inadequately addressed, established expertise has been bypassed and that communication and possibilities of partnership are breaking down.

The second vignette, of an established women's education centre with a number of bases in another part of the region, speaks to similar

experiences. Here there is an explicit appeal to geographies of the local, which is starkly contradicted by practices that demonstrate a breaking of ties with local providers. This organisation applied for funding which clearly prioritized those organisations already operating within the immediate area. However, due to increased competition and the absence of regional restrictions on eligibility, the result has been the perception of an unfair playing field – one where recognition of long-term successes are not acknowledged and where the value attached to the 'local' is questionable.

> We went for a pot of money and the [name of] Council have this thing where you have to be on, like, a preferred provider list and it was called *'[name of city] First'.* So you think, 'Oh well we're a preferred provider, you know we'll have a good chance'. One of the organisations that got the money was from [another part of the region]. And you think, 'Well what's that about? They say one thing… (Manager, Women's Education Centre)

Again, here is a reference to the theme of a growing distance between local decision makers and providers. The account speaks of a sense of betrayal that a local provider has not been preferred in funding

allocation and illustrates a growing sense of distance because of a lack of trust in the local authority. As Milbourne and Cushman (2012) explain, mis-trust between third sector organisations and those in more dominant positions emerges where shared meanings are absent, and where such meanings are managed in ways which re-produce power differentials. What is particularly apparent is the damaging contradictions of advocating increased competitiveness on the one hand through loosening geographical boundaries, and support for the welfare and work of locally embedded socially orientated third sector organisations on the other (Gough, 2004). Shortly after the interview above and as a consequence of a lack of funds, this organisation closed, thus severing ties with, and educational opportunities for, marginalized women in the city.

The decision made above appears to be on the basis of 'value for money', which in practice seems to mean the cheapest bid rather than explicit commitment to support existing work which has demonstrated effectiveness and commitment to local communities. The concept of distancing under austerity localism in this case therefore can be applied not only socially, but also spatially in terms of the distanciated character of service provision. Featherstone et al (2012) argue that the market logic adopted under austerity localism is not compatible with a sustained commitment to social needs, but neither it seems is it

compatible with supporting those organisations with existing capacity embedded within communities.

Elsewhere in our study, decisions about the distribution of scarce funds was understood to be carried out by inexperienced officers within local councils, filling posts vacated by experienced colleagues through voluntary and forced redundancies. As a volunteer centre manager noted in relation to the disappearance of local authority staff: *'there is absolutely no support from local government for some organisations...Who's going to be left?'* Given that nationally, local government has lost 380,000 jobs since 2011 (CLES Consulting, 2013), these kind of pressures do not come as a surprise, but even for those organisations in our study who were not so directly dependent on public funding, there were issues raised concerning indirect imapcts of the funding crisis as well as a lack of concern for the work they were involved in.

Working at a distance? The false autonomy of the Big Society

The vignettes above, point to the experiences of organisations whose operations rely on considerable local authority funding to deliver specialist services at the core of their missions. However, members of self-help and small community groups were in no less doubt about the

impact of new funding regimes on their ability to sustain services, even when the consequences of funding cuts have not been so direct. The independence of third sector organisations and their ability to stay afloat outside of public funding streams is key to understanding the Big Society. However, participants found that complete independence was never a realistic prospect.

One of the smaller groups involved in the research that relied upon volunteers and self-financing included a disability support group. On the face of it, this group could be seen to characterize a model of the Big Society. The group was not reliant upon public funds, but was supported through small charitable donations. The group met once a month in council facilities thus overheads were low. Yet this group was adversely affected for several reasons. More generally because charitable giving has suffered (NCVO/CAF, 2012), but also because the local authority is seeking to income generate (Jones et al, 2011) and so has increased the room hire costs. Budget cuts within the council have also meant that the building in which the group meets has more restricted opening hours. There were also wider impacts on members of this group such as withdrawal of benefit payments, lack of support with medical conditions and the nature of 'fitness to work' assessments under recent welfare reform (Patrick, 2012). At the same time some

are not able to hold down employment and this has led to further health problems and, for some, disinterest in the group. Thus the fortunes of such groups, in less overt ways, are subject to both localized networks of public sector support as well as the broader political landscape.

The 'trial separation' (Macmillan, 2013) of the third and public sectors was also evident in discussions with some groups in terms of a sense of abandonment and lack of recognition by local politicians of the experiences of small community groups. We refer to this as a form of 'affective social distancing' (Borgardus, 1924). The distancing outlined below by a group of women who had experienced domestic violence is, cultivated through a perceived lack of empathy. They were trying to continue as a self-help group after the funding for their project had come to an end. They were particularly experiencing difficulties paying for the venue hire for their weekly two-hour lunch club. While national politicians did not appear in the frame of their argument, their feelings about local politicians (proximate, yet distant and ineffective) and their part in this narrative of decline were clear:

> When I sit and listen to the politicians and the councillors
> and things like that, I think are they on drugs? ...You know
> what I mean? Their brains are in their backside, all

councillors, because they haven't experienced domestic abuse. They haven't been through it. They don't know how much it hurts… They don't think 'oh well this woman's been through domestic abuse…' They don't care. They just don't care. (Focus group, Survivors of Domestic Violence Self Help Group).

As Ahmed (2004) suggests in her analysis of 'fellow feeling' and empathy, it is not that these politicians can necessarily ever *feel* the pain of what is being expressed here by these women. However, what these women draw attention to is the apparent lack of what Ahmed (2004: 39) calls 'attentive hearing' to their needs.

Localism, in theory is characterised by open and democratic governance principles (Filkin et al, 2000), but also increasingly by a spirit of civic obligation and self-reliance. For some small organisations in our study this dynamic seems problematic, glossing over the power relations which exist between those who appear to wield power and those on the receiving end. In this group of women it is possible to see the exemplification of politically dispossessed local people wanting to challenge the priorities of their elected representatives. However, they express frustration with seemingly remote politicians. From their

perspective 'politicians' have little understanding of and sympathy for the pressures faced by marginalized groups with implications for prioritization. As Borgardus (1941: 146) states: "Where there is little sympathetic understanding, social farness exists." The following excerpt emphasized feelings of anger and perceptions of a council who made decisions entirely unconnected with their needs:

> Ex-worker: It was a three year contract and it ended this year on the 31st March....
>
> W1: And we've got flowers and we've got boulders in the middle of the roundabouts and we got big Christmas trees [reference to street furniture and landscaping the women noticed]...
>
> W2: This is what the Council don't understand what they're doing to people. I mean when we found out that we weren't going to have [the project] anymore, there was a lot of ladies who haven't turned up and they've turned to drink problems (Focus group, Survivors of Domestic Violence Self Help Group).

This raises the question of what, in a period of public funding crisis, constitutes local public investment. While, the feelings expressed here present this as a fairly simplistic choice between different priorities,

whether this is the case or not, the conclusion reached by the group is that local decision makers do not seem to know or care about the challenges faced by people like them.

In contrast to one of the earlier cases presented above, there was a recognition amongst some participants that the consequences of funding decisions were not always intentional or purposefully damaging – but did still often demonstrate a lack of attention to the impact 'on the ground'.

> I don't really think it's, like, thought through by the people who distribute, the decision-makers...that actually it hits on the ground. Then you realise 'oh golly!', I see what's happened here. So sometimes [it's] not even deliberate. (Youth worker)

Limited resourcefulness and intra-sector distancing

Despite the forms of distancing outlined above, Bradley (2014:1) argues that the recent revitalisation of localism may still allow marginalised communities to 'challenge the limitations of their socio-spatial positioning'. Many of our participants did evoke positive outlooks focusing on 'the fight' that was to be had to win over funders,

protect the interests of service users and promote public sector funding for the third sector. All participants were engaged in survival strategies for their groups, which for some had been honed over decades as they routinely fought for funding and learnt to adapt to shifting political climates (Author, 20xx). In this sense there was a requirement and effort to position themselves in greater proximity to funders – not necessarily just to achieve their priorities (Jones and Evans, 2006), but often just to survive.

Thus, the portrayal of the region as 'not-resilient' (Wells, 2009) needs some qualification and consideration through a range of scales and contexts. We recognise here practices of limited everyday resourcefulness amongst our participants - the manner in which they attempted to continue their work in adversity, which included a defiant outlook. However, we also recognise aspects of resilience critiqued by MacKinnon and Driscoll-Derickson (2012) and Harrison (2013) in these accounts which demonstrate that agencies have variously survived by succumbing to pressures of responsibilisation and squeezed budgets with implications for the distance between regional organisations in the sector.

In overt political terms this can be seen through the manner in which some participants and their organisations fed into local campaigns to protect specific threatened services, as well as broader campaigning networks evolving into movements such as the 'People's Assembly Against Austerity'. However, it was often in the everyday practices, those things over which participants *felt* they had greater control, that they attempted to cope and resist (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013). This is seen, for example, in the willingness of staff, such as the manager below, to do more hours and more work with fewer resources or to adapt in relation to available resources so that the service is sustained in some format.

> Even if we have to leave the building and move back into the swimming pool or the pavilion in the park where we used to be based, then we will and what I'll run is the Tuesday Club for the juniors. I'll run the women's groups by myself and we'll still keep services open but that'll be it. We'll shrink back to what we originally were thirty-one years ago. So that's kind of my exit strategy (Manager of Women and Girls Youth Project).

All participants exhibited creativity to weather the changing funding context, including the use of volunteers, income generation, diversifying

funding and forms of collaboration. On occasions the outcomes were viewed positively. For example, the use of volunteers was viewed positively when volunteers were engaged in ways that were mutually beneficial. As we have seen above in the case of self-help groups, active volunteers, in the absence of any paid staff to support the work of the group, was the difference between the group surviving or not.

However, when training and supervisory support was not provided and volunteers were treated as free labour to cover posts that have been cut it was not viewed in this light (Evans, 2011). Where the role of volunteers is misunderstood there is the risk of exploitation and of jeopardizing the quality of the service provided to service users; and in extreme cases, putting service users and/or volunteers at risk.

> So we've always had volunteers and we couldn't survive without volunteers. But I can't run youth clubs with volunteers because I think and maybe I'm wrong and maybe it'll change, but the work that we do, I think, is really high quality work and I'm not saying that volunteers can't do high quality work, but my staff are all trained. .
>
> (Manager of Women and Girls Youth Project)

Charging for services was also seen as a useful way to supplement funds

for projects, for example, charging for room hire and courses. However, negative outcomes accrued when charging a self-help group for room hire meant that they can no longer afford to meet; or when numbers attending courses dropped because potential participants could not afford the course costs. In terms of diversifying funding streams so that agencies are not reliant on one big funder, there are also negative factors including compromises made in following funders' agendas and the often unrealistic requirement of dedicated fund-raisers. Organisations in this study did not have this kind of resource. As one youth worker explained:

> ...it is down to one person who has to spend all of their time
> constantly fund-raising which is soul-destroying when your
> local authority turns round and hands it to someone else.
> (Youth worker)

Co-operation and partnership building can be a useful way of constructing local strategies about need and the provision of services. As Lowndes and Squires (2012) illustrate with reference to their study of local strategic partnerships in Sheffield, UK, in certain forms they perform a 'buffering' role through the pooling of resources and opening up new spaces for creativity. However, as has been suggested above,

changing procedures are having an impact on the ethos of partnership working that has grown across the statutory and third sectors (Milbourne, 2009). Instead of seeing each other as partners and drawing strength from collective working, there appears to be a growing suspicion and lack of trust between agencies and a commodification of what hitherto would have been shared as best practice. Despite the potential to de-link enterprise from profit-driven motives (Williams, 2007), we see evidence of the need for agencies to become more entrepreneurial, more independent and potentially more inward looking. In this way the distancing that we identify is not restricted to the relationship with local decision makers and service users, but also across networks of third sector organisations themselves. The 'dog eat dog' atmosphere discussed below illustrates the extent of the challenge facing organisations looking to work together for mutual benefit.

> Communities are running by themselves because it's dog-eat-dog and they all want to retain their own things that are going on. So much so that I think they're worried that if they go with another organisation, [their money] will be diluted and they'll take half their bits. So they've actually gone more insular. It's gone the opposite direction to the way the Big Society is trying to make them go I think.

(Older people charity worker)

The organisations involved in this research were not experiencing austerity localism passively. They were actively adapting to the circumstances they found themselves in. However, there are clearly also limits to the ability to adapt. As Alcock (2010) predicted, the implications of a shift from the third sector to a broader definition of civil society has compromised the 'strategic unity' of the sector. This has not only compromised efforts to challenge the power imbalance between the centre and periphery, and collective attempts to ''reach in' and 're-imbed' demands in government agendas' (Allen and Cochrane, 2010:1088), but also to work collaboratively and creatively.

Conclusion: Politics of the local and uneven geographies

This paper illustrates some of the experiences and perspectives of locally embedded third sector groups providing public services in the North East of England and dealing with challenges around funding, communication, relationships and ultimately, power. While the funding crisis presents a potentially enhanced role for the third sector, this does not necessarily coincide with a progressive form of local revitalization in this marginalised region. The rhetoric of empowerment surrounding

new forms of 'localism' is challenged by this study which suggest that amongst our participants there is a sense of increased disconnect, distrust and distancing from local authorities. This is perceived by some as intentional, and others as a result of an affective distancing through their lack of knowledge, understanding or empathy in a context of mouting pressure and declining capacity. We have also seen how the contemporary funding context has resulted in distancing through enhanced competiveness between some third sector organisations.

Changes to funding arrangements combined with a geographically uneven recession, continues to have a substantial impact. Much of the anger expressed by participants was directed towards local authorities because in the North East they have been a relatively big provider of funding for public services. However, it must also be remembered that local authorities themselves have borne the brunt of spending cuts designed and passed on from central government (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013). New funding arrangements that are little understood have been introduced quickly by staff that may themselves be inexperienced and/or performing multiple roles. Whilst the blame may not ultimately lie within local authorities, this appears to be the perception, and may, in the light of the repositioning of the state (Peck, 2010), be an effective means of transferring political responsibility

from the centre. The experiences of those based within local government would therefore clearly add an important dimension to this work.

Experiences of 'austerity localism' also indicate how inequalities within and between places have a crucial bearing on the effectiveness of community empowerment and definitions of the local. There seems to be little acceptance in policy rhetoric of the uneven connections of dependence that organisations have both beyond and within the immediate bounds of their locality. In this sense we have not been so concerned here with the local as an isolated scale of analysis, but with the relations between a range of agendas, decisions and experiences. This brings to the fore what Mohan and Stokke (2000) call a 'politics of the local' whereby attention is paid not to the inherent positive nature of the local, but how the local is used for specific hegemonic and counter-hegemonic purposes. Rather than protecting the local as a sacred scale, what needs to be protected are the interests and needs of those who are increasingly excluded in the current climate and this includes those who help address those needs on the front line.

Despite, rather than because of localism, there is also evidence that participants in this study are resourceful, even though there are

sometimes unintended, negative consequences. In addition there is only so much that can be achieved without putting the quality of services and the well-being of practitioners and service users at risk. If localism is meant to engage local communities in developing their own solutions, we need to re-think definitions of 'community' to include both service users and providers who are locally embedded and historically connected (Macmillan, 2011). Those who have the tools and trust to deliver public services at a time when such services are in greater demand than ever, must be at the centre of attempts to engage in what Featherstone et al (2012) calls 'progressive localism'.

The experiences and perceptions explored here demonstrate that 'austerity localism' has cumulatively worked to sever relationships and trust, creating forms of disconnect between those in power and those who feel on the receiving end of damaging decisions. With this in mind, we suggest that future research should focus on the long-term consequences of changing funding regimes in places hit hardest by austerity; the role of local authorities in translating and enforcing cuts and their relations with the third sector; the development of reliable ways of evidencing the impact of locally embedded agencies and examination of the possibilities for progressive civic politics which

protect the interests and needs of marginal communities, whilst avoiding atomisation.

Acknowledgements

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